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Oral history interview with Red Grooms,
1974 Mar. 4-18

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Red Grooms on 1974 March 4-18. The interview was conducted at Grooms' studio by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

PC: March 4, 1974, Paul Cummings talking to Red Grooms in his studio at 85 Walker Street. You were born in Nashville, Tennessee on June first, 1937.

RG: No, on June second. This is getting to be ridiculous. Somebody has got to get this straight.

PC: So it is June second?

RG: Yes. But now the date is beginning to wander all over the place. I've seen it given as the seventeenth. You see, what happened is that the damn birth certificate—I finally had to get a passport and looked up my birth certificate and it had June first on there. Which I guess is a mistake unless my parents are goofy. So the birth certificate actually showed June first and they really make you put that on the passport even if it's wrong. You have to put it on official documents. But I always celebrate June second.

PC: I kept finding all these different dates and I thought it's got to be one or the other; it just can't be so many.

RG: Yes, it's goofy.

PC: For some general family background, do you have brothers and sisters?

RG: Yes, I have two brothers. I'm the oldest. The brother next to me is named Roger. Gosh, I don't even know his age; I don't know when he was born. The youngest brother is named Spencer. I'm seven years older than one and ten years older than the other. So they're getting old now. I've thought of them as kids but they will be thirty before you know it. One brother must be twenty-nine. And the other one must be twenty-five, twenty-six.

PC: They're getting there.

RG: Yes.

PC: And you have no sisters?

RG: No sisters. My mother and father still live in Nashville. My father works for the Tennessee State Highway Department. He's equipment engineer. He purchases big equipment for the State Highway Department and so forth.

PC: You mean trucks and trailers and all those machines?

RG: Yes, all the machines. He oversees the inventory of all the equipment. He's due to retire this next year, I believe. He has about a year to go. He's worked there since before I was born, which was in 1937. During the war he worked for the National Bridge Company that made minesweepers and barges. Then he got fired in a sort of strike. They had a strike. Something happened and he lost his job. Then—and this is kind of interesting—he worked at home as a coppersmith making bowls and ashtrays and stuff that he sold to antique stores.

PC: So this would have been toward the end of the war in the mid-forties?

RG: This was about 1946 and 1947, I would guess, or 1947, '48. It might have been just for about a year or two that he was at home working, But I think this could have been an influence on me that my father actually was making something and selling it from home like a—

PC: Like a studio.

RG: Yes. You know, I kind of got—it seemed okay that he did that. But it probably was for a short period of time.

PC: Did you play in the workshop when you were a child? Did you make things? Or was that his territory?

RG: No. My brothers worked around with him more than I did. I never did it. I don't know why. I never made a bowl or anything like that. He hammered these things out of copper and would raise it up on just a simple form so there was a lot of hammering involved just beating things. He was getting a pretty good reputation in Nashville. I think what happened was he finally took on a job—I can remember my mother helping him polish these things—he made five hundred ashtrays for a dealer. And I think that was enough, that was what killed it, you know, it's like you take on to do a multiple or something. It's too many.

PC: Assembly line.

RG: And after that I don't remember. He went back to the Highway Department and he's worked there since about 1949. That's been over twenty-five years. I worked there one summer. I worked there as a clerk in the summer of 1955.

PC: Filling out all the forms.

RG: Yes.

PC: How did you like that?

RG: I didn't like it but it gave me a sort of appreciation of that type of job, that type of life.

PC: What was life like in Nashville growing up there? You really kind of got into it when the war started.

RG: Well, you know, people have always thought I was a country kid but I'm not, I'm really a suburban kid. We lived in about walking distance of Nashville proper; it was about two-and-a-half miles from downtown Nashville, which isn't very far. That was a big influence on me. I think really one of the biggest influences in my life was going from home into town, making that trip. When I was real young they just had a trolley track that would take us. After that it would just be a bus. But it was a sort of transition through the different areas of town into the town itself that I liked very much. I liked the removal, the abstraction of leaving home, getting away, being by myself. That was one reason I wanted to come to New York because I had this great love of downtown in the city. I loved the atmosphere.

PC: The buildings and the business area, the stores?

RG: Yes. The abstraction. It was sort of neutral territory. You could get lost in it.

PC: In terms of what? What do you mean "neutral territory?"

RG: Well, there were no ties. It's transit I guess. And in a certain way that's the way Manhattan is. And that's why I like it. That's why I came here; I think everybody has like crazy thoughts about living in Manhattan. They can't understand why you do it.

PC: It always seems to be different when you get here than when you see it from another point in the country.

RG: Yes. But I had this personality where I was interested in this urban.... The first big northern city I went to was Chicago. From Nashville I went to the Art Institute in Chicago.

PC: What year was that?

RG: I went as soon as I got out of high school. You see, that summer I worked for the State Highway Department with my father. Then in the early fall I went to Chicago with a big trunk. I was going to go in for a degree course. I suppose I was going in for a B.F.A. or something. This was in 1955. I graduated from high school on my birthday—on June 2, the day I became eighteen. Then, you see, I had the summer. And in the fall I took off for art school in Chicago.

PC: How did you decide on Chicago?

RG: In Nashville there was a guy named Tommy Allen who is quite a well-known illustrator professionally now. He does a lot of stuff; you see his stuff around. He was the hottest kind of young artist who came out of the town.

PC: How did you know about him?

RG: Well, you see, I had a whole career in Nashville before I left,

PC: That's what I want to get into before we get to Chicago.

RG: I had a whole art career there, you know. I had sort of a reputation and everything.

PC: When did you start doing things? Did you draw as a child? Did you start drawing in school?

RG: Yes, I started in about the third or fourth grade, something like that. I started taking private courses, which my parents encouraged me to do.

PC: They did? That's interesting. Had you started drawing at home or in school?

RG: Both, I guess. I don't have a lot of work from the period. I don't really know how much I drew. I don't remember. I think I have a sort of —

PC: Oh, were you making objects?

RG: No, I didn't make objects—well, yes, I made objects later. But that was later and they were like model stuff. I made a carnival —

PC: A little model or a big one?

RG: It was when I was in the eighth grade. I made a carnival about as big as that tabletop. I made it for a boys' hobby class. You see, they had these boys' hobby periods. That was a big influence too.

PC: What were they?

RG: Oh, didn't you ever have one?

PC: No.

RG: They're great. It's like everything, you know; there was everything anybody made. It could be any kind of thing you could imagine.

PC: You mean model airplanes and so on?

RG: From model airplanes to like really kind of personal inventions or even large constructions or furniture or doghouses or clay models or art, you know, paint straight pictures.

PC: That's fantastic. Who sponsored it?

RG: I don't know who sponsored it. You know how it is when you're a kid—

PC: It just happened every year.

RG: Yes. And it was in this wonderful old—The Tennessee State Fair is held in Nashville and they have this terrific fair grounds. They have these big, crazy Victorian buildings that are really from the turn of the century, wooden buildings. One of these where they had the show was called the Women's Building.

PC: Oh, right.

RG: Did you ever hear of it?

PC: No, but I've seen those in other cities.

RG: Later I've heard of people who had been around to other places and they were knocked out by that fair; they said it was a fantastic fair. I grew up there and I thought it was fantastic. But anyway that's where they had these exhibitions every year for the boys' hobby class, there were

a lot of awards given; there was like a grand prize. I mean whoever won the grand prize was a big shot. That was a very big deal. It was in the papers and all that.

PC: So you won all the awards?

RG: No, I didn't. There was a lot of competition. Finally with my carnival I won first prize, but I don't think anyone else was in my category. But I didn't win the grand prize.

PC: What was that? What was the carnival?

RG: Well, you see, that was another thing. This is a long story. But I had practically a fixation for carnivals and circuses that would come into town. At the State Fair there would be this big Cavalcade of Amusement that would come in and have a very large midway. It was a terrific thing, a very raunchy kind of wonderful atmosphere. They had a mile track that went around it and the midway was in the middle. They had dirt car racers on Saturday. And they had trotters. It was like an agricultural fair plus this sort of carnival atmosphere.

PC: Do you remember the carnival?

RG: Oh, yes.

PC: Which one was it?

RG: The Cavalcade of Amusement.

PC: I don't know that one.

RG: That was a big one.

PC: That must have been when, in the forties?

RG: Yes—well, and the fifties. Well, I went, say probably from after the war—1947, until the last time I was there which would have been in the mid-fifties. About a ten-year period.

PC: I thought I knew them all at one time,

RG: Really? You were interested in carnivals?

PC: Well, I worked for one one time.

RG: Really! No kidding?

PC: Yes. I had a great uncle who owned one.

RG: Is that right?

PC: The Royal American Show.

RG: Oh the Royal American came too. That's another one. Royal American was one.

PC: He lived in this huge trailer.

RG: No kidding?

PC: Huh trailer, yes. He did. I didn't. I worked for a little carnival.

RG: My great ambition was to make rides. I wanted to make rides, you know.

PC: Oh, that would be fantastic.

RG: And, you know, the fun houses. That's what I really liked.

PC: What appealed to you about the carnivals?

RG: Well, this was a real formative influence. I mean, you know, if you really want to get into it —

PC: I'm very curious because, you know, it does follow through so many of the things that you've done.

RG: Yes. You know, I was really taken with it. I don't know what it was, like the whole theater aspect of it. And also the Ringling Brothers Circus came, you know, had the Big Tent there. The forties were a good period for all that. I guess it was a rich period when they were traveling and before its demise.

PC: And they did very well. There were lots of good people involved. The acts were great, and the rides too.

RG: Yes. And it was huge. It was really a big thing. It was incredible.

PC: Well, that would come for what, only a week or ten days or something?

RG: Yes. That was the whole thing. Every year it was waiting for the State Fair and the circus and you had to wait the whole year for each one of them.

PC: That was it. What age were you then, about ten or eleven, say, or something like that when you started going to these? Or had you been interested before? Or weren't you allowed to go before that?

RG: I remember my parents took me to hear some pianist, a fancy pianist and that was like a concert. I didn't like that too much because this was in a different type of auditorium and right away I decided between what I considered theatrical and what wasn't. And this atmosphere wasn't theatrical and I didn't like it.

PC: Too cold and formal.

RG: But I think I did a lot of pictures from that. Somehow it stuck in my mind.

PC: You mean you did paintings or drawings or watercolors or —

RG: Yes, probably drawings, I didn't do any oil paintings until—actually I was slow starting to do oil painting—I didn't start until I was about eighteen. But I worked with watercolors before that,

PC: Who was Van Sickle?

RG: That's a good one. He's this great guy. Maybe he's a discovery possibly, He was a sophisticated guy—at least he was to me, and of course I haven't seen him since

PC: But where does he come into the story? I just found the name somewhere.

RG: He was a northerner from some place like Ohio or somewhere like that. He had a—I can't remember exactly—I guess it was a private school. He had an old brownstone house that was kind of in town but not quite, you know, but sort of close. He had classes, adult classes and children's classes. I studied with him when I was in high school for about two or three years. I can't remember how much, you know on Saturdays.

PC: He was kind of the local art teacher?

RG: Exactly. Exactly. Well, you know the scene in small towns how there are local —

PC: All these people who do these things.

RG: It's like a whole establishment. It actually has some power structure to it only, you know, it's on a local level.

PC: How did you get to him? Was he the one, and you drew, and your parents said, "Well, let's..."

RG: Well, he really wasn't as big an influence as was Juanita Green Williams who was my teacher and I studied with her longer.

PC: She was where?

RG: I studied with her from when I was about, oh, in the fifth or sixth grade until I was in first year high school. In downtown Nashville there was a night school called Watkins Institute where they had adult art classes. She taught there—and this is crazy—this was another brownstone, a whole house, a spooky old house. Nashville is absolutely threadbare—it still is—as far as any

paintings are concerned.

PC: I've never been there so I don't know.

RG: It's just absolutely threadbare. The two sources of culture were the Parthenon—do you know about the Parthenon?

PC: No. What's that? It's fantastic—a Parthenon?

RG: The Parthenon is a life-size replica of the Parthenon in Greece. It was built for some sort of centennial. I don't know, quite the date, but it was 1900 or a little before, it could have been even 1890, something early like that. It's in a park called Central Park and it's still in beautiful, perfect condition.

PC: And it's there?

RG: Yes, it's there. And you go in and the whole upper part has a lot of casts from fragments. And there are Victorian paintings.

PC: In the Parthenon?

RG: Yes. Real Victorian stuff. I mean, really heavy Victorian. It looks awful,

PC: You mean interiors filled up with —

RG: Yes. Looking back now with a little more hindsight they did actually have a Ryder, or what was attributed to Ryder. They had a Blakelock. They had Inness. They had a Jerome Myers. It would be interesting to go back now and see what they actually did have. But the effect was awful. You know, to a kid it was just terrible. And that was like the first kind of fine art that I saw. And then I was going to say that also this Juanita Green Williams taught in this brownstone where there was another collection of Victorian art, bigger painting, absolutely no light in the room, just these dark, spooky paintings on the walls. Her art classes were held on the third floor. You had to walk up this very Victorian type of interior.

PC: Was this a public schoolroom building?

RG: It was some sort of a public place but I don't know what. To this day I don't know what it was. It was either somebody's collection—Nobody was ever there. I mean, no public ever came in. Well, anyway, Juanita Green Williams had a studio upstairs, kind of like a real artist's studio, sort of an attic. It had a nice atmosphere. She had adults' classes and children's classes. She probably was a very conventional artist. She had studied with [Robert] Brackman at the Art Students League. He was like a really big shot in a certain kind of way, in a strange kind of—I guess a twenties painter or something that had brought this kind of antiquated style. And she was a big disciple of his. But there was a sort of professionalism. I had this certain feeling that there was a professional quality about her seriousness after studying with him. She was quite serious about her work. And she had a sort of eccentric, wacky personality. She was a big factor. Then I studied with [Joseph] Van Sickle after I had studied with her.

PC: What did she give you to do?

RG: It was very traditional. Just still life work in pastels, you know, working from models. All the regular bit. I did very bad work while I was there; very bad. Because I wasn't doing children's work and it was very, very clumsy kind of work. It was the clumsiest work you could possibly imagine. And I did bad work with Van Sickle, too.

PC: How long were you with Van Sickle?

RG: Well, as far as I can remember, I guess it was a couple of years, I studied with Juanita Green Williams maybe a couple of days a week but with Van Sickle it was just on Saturdays, but doing it outside like this was an influence. And the thing about Van Sickle which is interesting, and I was going to tell you about him being a discovery, is that he was doing sort of cubistic paintings on the Grand Ole Opry, big paintings, kind of ambitious paintings.

PC: Oh, yes, that's right.

RG: It was like a strange—I was very curious, you know, here was a person that was an adult and he was really a sort of serious painter in a way. I mean, that's what he did. I didn't really

put it all together but it was a sort of thread.

PC: He was different from the other adults you knew?

RG: I didn't know too many adults. But I guess I got the seriousness and the competition of it from both her and him. They both had this quality.

PC: Where did Grand Ole Opry and Ryman Auditorium and all those things come in here? That's next to the Parthenon?

RG: Well, you see, I am not a musician so I just had a peripheral interest in that. I had friends who were very involved with Grand Ole Opry. The Ryman Auditorium, if it's still there—it's probably going down right at this minute—they've moved out to this other place that I haven't even seen, but that was quite a building. I saw some traveling productions there and that was kind of exciting,

PC: Was there any theater around that interested you besides —

RG: Yes, there was a children's theater there that I liked very much. Yes. It was terrific. That was a very big influence too. I don't know how good it was. My mother took me to that.

PC: Was it part of a school, or a separate little entity?

RG: It would seem to be separate. That, too, had a sort of professional quality.

PC: Was it performed by children or by adults?

RG: I don't know. You know, that's the thing. As a kid a teenager looks like an adult; you don't know. I really don't know. That's a good question.

PC: But it was someplace to go and it had appeal?

RG: Yes, it had a lot of appeal. It had an atmosphere.

PC: In the things you did outside, the work that you were doing outside these two teachers would you draw things that came from the circus or the carnival or the fair?

RG: Yes. I drew and I did a lot of work, you know, I was always one of the class artists so I did a lot of work on the blackboard for all the holidays. I did a lot of that.

PC: It always intrigues me that almost all of those people somehow end up wandering around in the art world somewhere.

RG: You mean the class artist?

PC: Yes. It's fascinating how many people have gone through that period.

RG: You probably have a real study by these interviews by really going into that.

PC: It's amazing.

RG: It's true. It would have some sort of theory about the breakdown of the talent being, or at least the inclination being established quite early, which I think it probably is. The eccentric quality that is required is probably somehow an early part of the person's character no matter what kind of situation they're in.

PC: You said your parents encouraged all of this. How did they do that?

RG: Well, they paid for me going to these private classes, plus the fact that my father really is an artistic person. He has a lot of feeling for materials. Both my mother and father were very interested in antiques and things like that plus his own copper work.

PC: Did you have books at home about the arts or art history and things like that? Did you read?

RG: Well, in high school, you see— let's see, I can't remember quite when it started. I started getting the art magazines. I started reading *American Artist*. You see, I was interested in commercial art. My only exposure to fine art had been those terrible Victorian paintings. That,

to me, was fine art. Whereas commercial art was, you know, Norman Rockwell and all the stuff in the magazines. That stuff was so much more lively.

PC: Lively in what sense?

RG: Well, it was contemporary. You see, nobody else was doing contemporary stuff. Like these Victorian paintings and then ladies making still lifes and stuff just didn't have any kind of...I was really interested in seeing what was actually happening, what I was seeing. You know, I was interested in that subject matter. And it seemed—and it is still the case—that nobody is actually interested too much in subject matter. You know what I mean?

PC: Well, you'd be surprised these days.

RG: Well, a lot of people—most people do abstract stuff.

PC: The Tokyo Biennial this year is going to be all realism.

RG: Really!

PC: Yes. The theme of it.

RG: It still may be pretty abstract, though; or abstract in a certain way; a certain involvement.

PC: I don't think so. I was told the other day that it's going to be all rather representational and realistic and figurative and not

RG: That's what I mean. I don't mean figurative as opposed to abstraction. I mean, you know, something about—I guess it's like daily life or something. That's what has always fascinated me.

PC: You mean the translation? Or the subject matter

RG: Well, I don't know, it somehow filters through and becomes—the subject is also the philosophy and also the form of the thing to some degree, also the excitement. Anyway, that all started with this interest in commercial art and also with the techniques in commercial art. I mean I remember that one thing was the idea that you were supposed to remember everything. That was one of the techniques: to have a great memory, to be able to remember anything you saw. And that always fascinated me all my life.

PC: You mean objects and places?

RG: Everything. Everything you see. And I would see, well, again, this would be the carnival thing. I would go to the carnival where there would be such an absolutely fantastic array of characters and life, and I would have almost a panic, this feeling that I wouldn't be able to remember, and wanting to remember. And I still have some of that.

PC: Where did that idea come from, from reading *American Artist*, or from something else?

RG: No. Well, you see, the commercial artists at the time were called on to do all sorts of material. So that a commercial artist was almost like, say, a film director who is supposed to have had a lot of experiences. He's called on all of a sudden, he's supposed to be directing some wacky scene. Maybe he never really did it or anything but he puts everything together and all the explanation and all these techniques and he knows how to do it. And I liked all that.

PC: Where does the Famous Artists course come into all of this?

RG: I think when I was a sophomore in high school I enrolled in that. That was kind of ridiculous. That was very hokey. It was supposed to be based on talent. I remember that one night a salesman came and visited with my parents —

PC: It proved you had talent.

RG: It was just awful. So I had the course. Have you ever seen one? It's going to be quite a collector's item some day. I still have the whole thing.

PC: Oh, really?

RG: Not here; I have it down there. It was like a whole bunch of books, or notebooks, with your name on them, and assignments. I think there were twenty-four assignments or something like that.

PC: You had to do something and send it in and get a criticism?

RG: Right. You sent it in to someplace like Westport, Connecticut, which was a very foreign place to me at the time. They would do a correction drawing over your drawing in red pencil and stuff, and send it back. It was real limited; what you were supposed to do was all set up in the book. I couldn't do it. It was awful. It was so stiff. Well, they weren't stiff, I was stiff, you know. They did these wonderful, facile things. I mean the teachers were good. They were real facile people. And of course they were just figureheads. They really didn't have anything to do with the school. I don't know if Famous Artists is still in existence,

PC: Oh, sure, it is. They've got that great board of—

RG: And also they have a course for writers. And now they also have a fine arts course besides the commercial one.

PC: Oh, you took the commercial one?

RG: Yes, I took the commercial, you see. You see, I was still interested in commercial art. What stopped my being interested in commercial art was when I saw the small paperback books by Harry Abrams which I think was probably a breakthrough in book publishing at the time, the little pocketbooks of European masters, primarily the book on Picasso. When I saw that —

PC: Yes, because they started coming out in the late forties.

RG: That totally captured my imagination—Picasso, and also really I had seen from libraries and so forth I had really seen a lot of stuff. I saw as much as I could.

PC: Did you have books at home? I mean, did you buy art books?

RG: Yes. And also saw a lot at the library.

PC: What kind of schools had you gone to?

RG: I went through the eight grades of grammar school and then to the county high school for four years.

PC: Were there any important teachers in those years?

RG: Oh, here's another thing. My art teacher in high school turned out to be William Inge's sister. So she was a pretty sophisticated woman. She used to come up to New York and everything. She was very encouraging and nice to me. Through her—she showed me books from the Modern. You see, I think what happens—influence is like a forest fire: if a person is interested, boy, you just ignite off anything, off everything, you see. That's why an artist can come from anyplace really. In fact, maybe even better because it makes you hungrier, you know.

PC: That's true. It's fascinating how many artists come from, you know, distant places

RG: They come from anyplace,

PC: Yes. But they all come to certain places though. That's what's fascinating, from all around the world. But to go back to the teachers in high school or grammar school, were there any that were particularly interesting to you whether they were history teachers or English teachers or art.

RG: I never liked school too much basically,

PC: It wasn't your thing.

RG: I was a moderately good student. I wasn't like a troublemaker or anything but I really didn't like it too much. That's one reason why I liked the art stuff because it was kind of extracurricular. Most everything was so boring. I was really interested in sports too.

PC: What kind?

RG: Football. That was my biggest thing. That kept me from doing my artwork for three years when I was in high school. That was one big reason why I didn't do a whole lot of stuff.

PC: Because you were playing football?

RG: Yes, and it took a lot of time. Three months in the winter and then in the spring and starting in the summer. And I played football in grammar school also.

PC: Were you on any teams?

RG: Yes.

PC: High school team?

RG: Yes. I was on the team,

PC: So you were really busy then?

RG: Yes. I just put myself into it completely; I was completely involved.

PC: What did you like about it? The game aspect, or the physical action? Or that it was something different to do than read books?

RG: Body contact. I think probably that was what it was. Well, it was just an outlet, you know. I mean I liked it, I liked the game pretty much, and I did like the contact sport pretty much. I guess I really did like the contact sport. And let's see what else. It was a good way also—and art is the same thing—it has something to do with the mating—you know, if you can be a big hero or star or do something you can attract attention on that kind of primitive level.

PC: Right. It opens up all sorts of possibilities.

RG: I think art is the same way. It's about the same thing. It's just about on the same level, because people pay attention to you, you know, if you do good, if you start to be a little more than ordinary.... I was certainly swamped in the mediocre; I mean both as a person and more or less in the environment. Just like everybody else. Certainly very much a native person,

PC: A native person?

RG: Yes.

PC: What about in high school? Did you have any friends who were interested in the arts?

RG: Yes, I did. One guy was Walter Knestrick. He also studied with Van Sickle. He was quite good. And another friend has become an architect, has come to New York and is doing very well. His name is Bill Woods, I see him just briefly but he's around, He was really one of my best friends. Actually, Walter Knestrick bought a large piece from me a couple of years ago. You know, we hadn't seen each other for twelve years. He bought—I don't know if you've seen it—this Rembrandt, *Mr. and Mrs. Rembrandt*.

PC: Oh, yes.

RG: He was one of the purchasers. I don't think he's doing any art because he's a contractor now. But I've always been fascinated in this kind of, you know, the isolation of the beginning, which is very difficult to explain to anybody. I have the feeling that you have some idea about other places besides New York. But you can't explain all this to a New Yorker. It's completely impossible. They've got you out there as a hillbilly, you know, and there's just no way —

PC: Yes, they don't believe anything

RG: A hillbilly would have been just as strange to me as it would have been to a New Yorker. I never saw any hillbillies.

PC: And a lot of things happen in Nashville,

RG: It's a different thing altogether. The influences are so completely different.

PC: Well, what did you think of the world? I mean, I'm curious about, for example, Chicago as the first large city, or had you traveled around in the South or various other places, or had you really lived in Nashville and its environs until you went to Chicago?

RG: I had gone to Memphis a couple of times. But Chicago was the first big city I went to.

PC: How did you pick the Art Institute then?

RG: Well, to go back a bit, this fellow Tommy Allen had been a scholarship student there and he suggested that I go there. And that's when I got onto that I had a career. I had some reputation.

PC: Right, because of what you'd been doing.

RG: So I was advised to go to this other place.

PC: I see. Advised in terms of what?—school?—or?

RG: That it was a good school. And, you see, I was always into this professional thing: I was either going to be a teacher or a commercial artist. My parents had this idea too. But, you see, just about that point is where I deviated and decided to be a painter.

PC: And give up the teaching?

RG: Yes. You see, I was lousy at the academic stuff and even at the Art Institute you had to take academic courses.

PC: How long did you spend there in Chicago?

RG: Just two months.

PC: Two months?

RG: Yes, I dropped out. I left my stuff in my locker and left.

PC: Why?

RG: I don't know. I just was an eccentric person. You know, I had a lot of ideas; I had a lot of work to do; and I had to start my work. And I was doing their work so that's why I dropped out. I already had the feeling that—I already had a complete ego as an artist. Completely. And there I was in an art school.

PC: It was going backwards.

RG: It was like a nightmare. I didn't realize this at the time. I wasn't quite sure myself. The school was nothing. It was absolutely zero as far as any kind of influence at all. As an atmosphere of a school it was kind of fun.

PC: What about the Museum?

RG: The Museum was terrific. That was a great influence. The school was right in the Museum. They have a terrific library. That was very exciting. That was just terrific.

PC: How did you like the city?

RG: I loved the city. I just loved the city.

PC: Do you still like it?

RG: You see, I was there only for the two months' period. But in 1968 when Allan Frumkin asked me to do the *City of Chicago*, well, he didn't ask me to do the *City of Chicago*—he asked me to go and do a piece in Chicago. I was very happy and immediately wanted to do the city.

PC: You hadn't been there in fourteen years or something?

RG: No, I hadn't been there at all since 1955. I had passed through there maybe.

PC: You had just spent those two months at the school?

RG: Right. Then my wife, Mimi [Gross], and I went back and we stayed seven months. That was really my only experience in Chicago. Now people think I'm from Chicago.

PC: Yes, that's Chicago too. Where did you live when you were there in school?

RG: At the Y. Let's see, I could tell you where it was. You'd walk down Michigan Avenue and take a left turn at the water tower and go down a couple of more blocks and there was the Y. Which was it, Sloan House?

PC: No, that's the one here. I can't think what they call it there. Yes, I know where it is,

RG: You see, I was doing a lot of drawing all the time by myself. I had these dopey school assignments, which were driving me crazy, because I was really turned on to.... I was very—I was real excited.

PC: What kind of drawings were you doing? Of what and with what kind of materials?

RG: Well, I had a lot of influences. I was influenced by just everything at once. They were very personal. Some were psychological. But my real psychological period came a little later. You see, my parents came to Chicago after two months, which would have been sometime in November. They took me back to Nashville, where I stayed over Christmas, maybe a couple of months, something like that. My mother was great. She very definitely wanted me to do something. I guess all mothers are this way. She was in a panic about what I was going to do. She kept asking: what was I going to do? I don't know why she was so worried about it. It was really like a monetary thing, you know. My family really wasn't exactly what you'd call wealthy. I mean, I really had to do something quickly to support myself. It was like a practical thing. But that really sets the stage for the break. It was really a serious kind of desperate situation about what a person is going to do.

PC: Right. So you spent a few months in Nashville then till after the first of the year?

RG: A couple of months. Then I had seen some of [Gregorio] Prestopino's work in Nashville and I liked it. Do you know his work?

PC: Yes.

RG: He was a sort of very painterly social realist type of painter. I liked his work a lot. So I got set up to come to New York and study with him once a week at The New School on Twelfth Street. I came to New York probably in—I don't know whether it was January or February of 1956. I stayed for three-and-a-half months at McBurney [YMCA] on Twenty-Third Street. That was my first living in New York.

PC: I want to go back to one thing that I find interesting. You said that by the time you had gone to the Art Institute in Chicago you had already formed an artist's ego. Is that an after-the-fact observation? Or did you realize at that point that this is what you had?

RG: I don't even know if I've ever said it before. I mean, this may be the first time I've said that. But, you know, I've seen a lot of students and I sort of work through their problems, kind of try to help because I know this situation. But I also see people who don't quite have that ego, you know, which is this crazy thing that's going to make you do it no matter what. It's like you're really sort of possessed by this desire to make stuff on your own. And I think that is what you call developing artistic ego that's not caused from outside circumstances; you know, it's an inner thing.

PC: When do you think you realized that you had that? Was it in Chicago, or before?

RG: I had just a revelation one day. In fact, I was with Walter Knestruck, I can remember we were in a doughnut shop. You know, this is real Americana. All my friends were dopes. Nobody had any ideas at all. And nobody ever talked about any philosophy or anything. There were no ideas. It was like driving around in cars and this just awful —

PC: Killing time,

RG: That was the real time of the squares. Everybody was a square. Over ninety-nine percent of the population were squares.

PC: Still.

RG: No. I think things have changed. Well, they probably still are but in a different way. This was in a very clear-cut kind of way. So in that doughnut shop I said, "I'm going to be a painter." I just said it, "I'm going to be a painter." And I said it because I had seen these Jackson Pollocks and I had thought about them a lot and I didn't get them.

PC: Where had you seen those?

RG: They had come to Nashville in a traveling show. I thought about them, I thought about what they were. I was trying to figure out what they were. And it was like this great enigma between, you know, what I had known, the commercial art, and what these strange things were. And something in me, you know, the mystery and whatever clicked. And that was like the influence. And after that point there was never once any doubt. I was about eighteen when that happened.

PC: But you never had any desire to follow the patterns of Pollock or that kind of painting, had you?

RG: Well, I think an artist doesn't want to follow anybody. I mean, that's one of the great problems: you have terrific blocks by the people you like, you can't get around them, [and] they're all over the place. You know, they're blocking up every idea you've got, every direction you want to go in. I think it's just actually a matter of time to sift through the influences and absorb them so much you forget you've got them. And then, you know, the fallacies in one's personality begin to come out and that sort of almost — well, whatever makes up a person, becomes their work. And then from that point on it's original to a degree. But the stimulus from other artists I know in my case was terrific. I mean, a hundred percent came from other people's work, being excited by other people's stuff, you know, getting a terrific kick out of it.

PC: But it was really when you were a teenager that you started seeing real paintings as opposed to Victorian —

RG: Yes. But, you see, I was already deep into the commercial art scene. I knew all the commercial artists and I could pick out their work in the magazines. So it was just a shift in philosophy sort of. You know, I just started thinking about it. But it was like—

PC: Oh, but there's a great deal of difference in what happens. I recently had an argument with a friend of mine who was a very successful commercial artist in the forties—well, from, say, the late forties through the sixties.

RG: The great period.

PC: Yes. He made a fortune. Now he's a middle-aged man and he paints (in quotes). He paints about seven different people. We were talking about it one day. He said, "Well, you know, there really isn't any difference." So we got into this disastrous argument.

RG: You mean difference in the seven people, or between the two fields?

PC: Between the commercial art and, you know, real painting. He can't see the difference.

RG: It's gotten closer.

PC: Yes, but in his painting you don't see him in his painting. You see all the other artists that he's interested in. And that's the point he can't see. He can do anything. He's one of those fabulously skillful people. But he's like an art director.

RG: You see, that's the trouble. An artist isn't necessarily a technician at all. You see, inside an artist is a person that has visions and all the artist tries to do is try to do them. And that's why anybody else could do them too. You could tell somebody else to do them. I mean, I work with other people a lot. I'm not that hung up about whether I do them or not. Well, I mean, sometimes I am but generally I'm not.

PC: Well, does that mean you're more into it than—

RG: So it's sort of philosophical to the point where the work is a thought. It's a thought. It has a life of some sort.

PC: But don't you think the quality of its manufacture, you know, and the end result influences how people see the thought, or read it, or apprehend it?

RG: Well, yes, but it's a tricky system because, say, this person probably is a wonderful technician like you said, but if he doesn't—I guess it's sort of the way he thinks about it.

PC: He doesn't have any of his own ideas about it.

RG: That's the problem. You see, I think it's translating life into visual terms. That's why all these things sort of come together, because you think that way. You know, your mind works that way. It's easy; it's not hard at all. Your mind somehow works in a certain kind of way that's easy. And it has something to do with collecting visual stimuli. Everything you see has something to do with it.

PC: So it fills up and then things transpire?

RG: Yes. That's what's so fantastic. It's like that's what was so fantastic about the abstract expressionists because it was like these older painters who had assimilated and assimilated and suddenly they burst into this incredibly fantastic stuff that was like—I don't know—just like from Mars or something. I think it has to do with that assimilation of experience.

PC: Did you find them exciting as a student in your teens?

RG: Yes. I was lucky because abstract expressionism was so exciting. And you know, I came right out into that. That was terrific. That was very good, very exciting.

PC: Did you have any interest in being an abstract painter?

RG: Oh, yes, I tried to do abstract stuff. Definitely. Even to this day I know people that actually have political feelings about figurative painting. I have none whatsoever. I'd never know where to stop if I painted abstract. I didn't know where I was. It's like all arbitrary or something.

PC: How do you mean it was arbitrary?

RG: Well, what I tried.... Also, it's slow to realize like, say, a fantastic painter like Picasso, his career is very structured in a way. I mean, when you see a guy's mature paintings they are very different than when—even if he was wonderfully talented when he was young, it's very different. And there is almost like a craft; there is sort of a craft underneath it all; there's sort of an understanding of what one is doing. And, of course, as a teenager it was tough trying to paint abstract expressionist paintings, I was painting from the surface, you know. And you have to go right back to the thing you feel and do that and keep working and working.

PC: And you haven't had time by the time you're a teenager to do that,

RG: Yes. It's so confusing. But that's what I was trying to do. I was trying to paint like [Philip] Guston.

PC: You know, it's fascinating that you say people keep assimilating visual input and then the abstract expressionists kind of burst forth. Do you think that you at some point had that same kind of thing? Did that happen in Chicago or after Chicago, or at some point when it just happened and you knew that was where it was going to go?

RG: Yes. Well, you see, I did performances starting in about 1958. The first one I did was in Provincetown. It was called the *Walking Man*. I had the sense that—I knew it was something. I knew it was something because I didn't know what it was. I think that's when you're at your best point: When you're really doing something, you're doing it all out, but you don't know what it is. And that's terrific. That's a great point to arrive at.

PC: You had made up a play the year before, in 1958, right?

RG: Yes. That was different. This friend of mine, Dominic Falcone, suggested it. With his wife I made a double painting. We put sacks over our heads and we painted together. He watched it and he thought it was very theatrical and he said, why don't you do this by yourself. And I had this gallery—the Sun Gallery, which was a terrific, wonderful gallery and very influential on a lot of people. It was just a tiny place. You can't believe how small it was. So I did the painting. And then the next summer —

PC: How did you decide on that problem of painting with the sacks?

RG: I think that was her idea. As far as I remember she wanted to do it. We took the sacks off

after a while because we couldn't see so good.

PC: Did you know what you were doing in terms of —

RG: Oh, yes. We had holes. We could see. I think she had the idea that we would lose our identity and we wouldn't mind painting on each other's stuff.

PC: Oh, I see. You both worked on the same surface?

RG: Yes. Oh, they're great. We did a lot of stuff together. We made big billboards that we put out in the parking lot in Salisbury, Massachusetts. And, you know, these screwy projects that were terrific. And they had this very open attitude, you know, which encompassed doing something theatrical. But anyway I had that feeling that suddenly by doing something that sounds like a collage but wasn't a literary thing and yet somehow I had some literary thing in me and I needed doing it like a collage and having it live. I knew it was a good idea. I didn't know what it was but I had this feeling, it was like opening up. And that was that type of feeling.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

PC: This is Side 2. You know, we jumped ahead here a bit. I'd like to go back to Prestopino and the time you spent with him, what that was like, and what you did when you were living in New York.

RG: Yes. Well, coming to New York was a big shock. Coming from Chicago it just felt so completely different. I was disappointed. New York didn't have a shape. You know, Chicago has a shape; you can see it or you can feel it. New York doesn't have a shape. It's all people. I mean, you see people but you don't see shapes except for the long vistas down the streets.

PC: How do you mean shapes in Chicago?

RG: You have rivers and bridges and then you can see that the buildings sort of form like mountain ranges. Very clear. It's big. I was going to the Art Institute and so I was mainly on Michigan Boulevard, which is extremely clear and you had the parks, you know. It's like the city is laid out like a toy almost. And New York is so frantic or unplanned or something. Anyway, I was disappointed in New York. My very first night in New York I found my way down Seventh Avenue to the Greenwich Theater and saw *Othello* with Orson Welles and loved it. I still think it's a terrific movie. It was a big influence. I did drawings on it during the three months that I was in New York. They were quite psychological and so one of the influences was that film.

PC: How do you mean psychological? In terms of what?

RG: Just psychological. They're psychological drawings.

PC: You mean in terms of images? Or what they were saying?

RG: Well, my experience as a teenager was sort of like you go through a death period where you leave your childhood and everything. At that time you're terribly concerned with death, and the death of your family, which, in a way, is actually happening. And, you know, all the sex problems and everything that arise. All those incredible difficulties. And I was trying to—I was doing these drawings that were like, oh, some were made up, and some were, oh, bums and people like that but very isolated on the page and it would be like trying to focus all its intensity into a sort of a character, a made-up character. So they were kind of heavy drawings.

PC: Yes. Well, how did Prestopino react to these? Or were these not done in class?

RG: I did these out of class. You see, I had this tiny room at the Y, which I liked really. It was wonderful. It was like a cell and I'd come back to it. It was fun, you know. Although depressing in some ways. I didn't know anybody. I knew only about two people in the city. I didn't meet anybody.

PC: Really? I mean, didn't you go anywhere in the Village?

RG: Yes. But, you see, somehow I didn't know how to meet anybody. I was mute or something. I didn't speak.

PC: You must have met people at The New School. Or didn't they interest you?

RG: You see, I wanted to meet people. My main interest was to meet some peers. But it turned out—and this was very disappointing—that it was kind of a bunch of ladies. And I thought it was the same bit that I had gone through in Nashville. I was disappointed because I really wanted to go ahead and get to a professional, creative level with an exchange of ideas and all the excitement. Which did happen later, I was lucky that it did happen, but not at this particular period. So I was very isolated but this gave it a sort of intensity. I saw a lot of wonderful shows. I saw, oh, the de Kooning show, the show that he had at Janis after he did the *Woman* painting, the one that's up at the Metropolitan now, that series of paintings. I saw that show. I saw the Guston show that had the images in the middle, the clustered, impressionistic images, I saw Kline. I saw a lot of wonderful shows. I saw movies. You know, I had a good time. So the influence was just going and seeing, and not so much school. School again was zero.

PC: How did you find Prestopino as a teacher? Did he talk to you? Did anything happen as far as give and take between the two of you?

RG: Well, no, not really. I wouldn't say so, but you see it wasn't his fault. I don't think I was able to communicate. I really wasn't able to appreciate him or to exploit him as a teacher in any way. And I really wanted to. Actually I didn't want to be criticized. I wasn't interested in any kind of criticism at all. I mean, I really didn't want to be told what to do.

PC: Or even commentary? I mean, there was no dialogue or anything?

RG: I liked him though. I liked him as a person. And I liked his work. But, I mean, there was nothing that could happen.

PC: It was the wrong thing to be doing ultimately?

RG: Yes, because I was learning from seeing these things. Like the dialogue was just between the actual work.

PC: Did you go to the Cedar Bar or anything?

RG: No, not at the time. I did go later. I did in 1957, '58, '59. I knew some artists but I didn't know any of the heavy abstract expressionists at all.

PC: Well, they were a different generation.

RG: Right. It was a different generation. And they were very successful.

PC: Yes. Who were the first artists that you met in New York then?

RG: Well, all this is so complicated. It's a long story. Everyone is a tangent. After this period in New York, I went back to Nashville and stayed there through the summer and I did work. I worked at home for a year. Then I went to Peabody College.

PC: Oh, that's where that comes in.

RG: And that was like a backtracking year. I was there for 1956 and 1957. In the summer of 1957, I went to Provincetown. Again, my mother had seen an article in *Time* magazine about Hans Hofmann's school. So she thought that that's what I should do: that I should go to Provincetown.

PC: What did you do at Peabody College?

RG: I studied—I was going through the teacher bit. That was kind of just a lost year,

PC: Did you work at home? Did you really do anything? Did you make drawings or paintings, or just kind of fumbling around?

RG: fumbling. I worked. I did work. I continued to work. I have some of the stuff. I can't quite remember what I did do.

PC: Did you see people like Van Sickle again?

RG: No, not really,

PC: Was there anybody to see in Nashville then?

RG: Not much, I was mostly by myself. I just stayed with my family. When I left high school I was really sick of that whole scene. You see, that's interesting because in a way I was really receptive to a sort of Bohemian life because I had been brought up in Squaresville, you know. For instance, I met Jews for the first time when I came to New York. That was terrific. It was great.

PC: It changed the whole thing.

RG: It did, yes. It was really like a revelation. Suddenly I found it was really no problem for me. I felt much more at home.

PC: There are other ways of living.

RG: Yes.

PC: Well, was that one of the things that intrigued you about New York? Or was that one of the problems about New York that it did offer this great variety, you know, the potential.

RG: You see, at first I was intrigued by the myth of the city. Like I told you, that was the first thing. But after that and after I was actually in New York it just became the place. You know, I never even thought about it, I still don't, I don't think about it much. It's just that this is the place where I am. I mean, I'm not that much involved in the personality of this place as something outside of me. Although now almost as a joke I can see it better. As a foreigner, it takes years, a lifetime even to understand New York, it seems.

PC: Well, most New Yorkers are foreigners too.

RG: No, they're special people. New Yorkers are a certain kind of people. It has taken me years and years to sort of begin to see that.

PC: Yes. But, you know, it's fascinating that of the many interviews I've done, I would say that at most maybe five or six percent of the artists are native New Yorkers. They're from everywhere.

RG: Yes, right. Absolutely. I'm thinking about doing a big piece on New York. I'm slowly, slowly getting ready.

PC: What intrigued you about the Bohemian life of the city? Did you find it when you were here the first time?

RG: Well, you see, also this was the time the beatniks came in. And the beatniks were sort of Bohemians really. I think they were Bohemians.

PC: Do you mean the beatniks or the beat poets? Because there is a difference.

RG: Well, you see, there were beatnik artists. I was a beatnik artist. There weren't very many beatniks. There were just a few. It was a very small movement. You were probably a beatnik. Were you a beatnik?

PC: Well, all the beat poets were friends of mine.

RG: Yes, you were a beatnik. And I was a beatnik. I'll tell you who I met. Well, let me go back because I've gotten off the track. I'll try to pick it up. You see, after I had gone back to Nashville the second time and had gone to Peabody my mother sent me off to study with Hans Hofmann.

PC: So that was what, in 1958?

RG: No, this was in the summer of 1957. Really, probably the person who was most influential on my development that I ever met was Dominic Falcone. I met him about four days later. He ran the Sun Gallery with his wife Yvonne [Andersen]. Somebody told me to go to the Moors Restaurant because they had a job there as a dishwasher. I went there and this guy Falcone was washing pots. He was a wonderful guy. And right away he called me Red. I had never been called Red before. He was the first person to call me Red, which he did immediately. He had this wonderful sort of like a sailor, you know, wonderful characteristics, he was real smart and interesting and he was a poet himself. And he said: come over to the house, I'd like you to meet my wife Yvonne. So I went over to their house. She was doing these really wonderful paintings, fantastic paintings, very peculiar things. They had this great little gallery—the Sun Gallery—and

they lived in the back. They were so warm and it was immediately like a family for me. So they just became my adopted family. I studied with Hofmann for only about two more weeks and then I quit.

PC: Oh, really?

RG: Yes, because that was another big drag. I believe this was the last year that Hofmann had his big public classes. For one more year he had a few students and then he quit it altogether. And I really didn't know how to appreciate him.

PC: Did you know him? Had you seen his paintings before?

RG: Yes, I had seen his paintings, and I liked them okay. I liked him okay, but it was like an academic scene.

PC: There you were back with classes.

RG: It was completely academic. I had these elaborate ideas. There was a certain way of doing everything. It wasn't his fault, I mean, by then there were all these dopey students who had been going there for years, these has-beens, you know. But they were like adults, you know, serious artists, they smoked pipes and they squinted. But my friends, the Falcones, had this wonderful kind of thing, which was like the beginning of what Pop Art thought it was. It was a magical kind of art that you couldn't describe. They were showing the work of Lester Johnson and I loved those paintings of his. He was a big influence. I met him that summer. And I met Allan Kaprow. They were showing his work. And they showed the work of Jan Müller. It was just a very lively place. It was the opposite of the abstract people. Again, it wasn't that I didn't like abstraction as such; it was just that I really responded to this sort of magical stuff that was going on at that gallery. I just blossomed under their influence. From Provincetown we decided to come to New York together in the fall. That would have been in the fall of 1957. We got a loft on Twenty-fourth Street and Sixth Avenue and lived there for nine months. During that period I worked at the Roxy as an usher, and I painted. We saw Lester Johnson a lot. I met Alex Katz then. I met George Segal. And I met other people.

PC: Was that the time of the City Gallery?

RG: No.

PC: That was later.

RG: Then we went back to Provincetown. We did the billboards at the end of that summer. We saved our money. Dominic's father had a parking lot in Salisbury, Massachusetts and we put up the billboards in the parking lot and did the paintings, Lester did one, Yvonne did one, and I did one,

PC: I didn't know about these. What were they?

RG: We made these big billboards. You see, Yvonne had this idea—it was like some sort of wonderful proletarian idea about getting art to the people, and one of them was to have the billboards up and not to advertise anything but just to have paintings. And that's what we did. We made these big billboard paintings and put three of them up.

PC: That's fantastic. What were they? I mean, what did look like?

RG: It was terrific. Lester did one of his Men and Plants, a really beautiful thing, a great big hand with big plants coming out; it was a beautiful silhouette all dark in his colors. Yvonne did a great big kind of a clown face; she had like egg yolks for the eyes, and a great big mouth that went across the whole thing so the whole board was like a big face. And I did two very large, long-legged figures walking in front of the parking lot on roller coasters. It was kind of a scene of a scene, which you were looking at. This was exciting stuff. That was exciting.

PC: How long were they up there?

RG: Oh, for years; about five or six years; they just fell down a few years ago.

PC: Really? What happened to the paintings? They got worn out by the weather or something?

RG: I think they disintegrated. There might be a few shreds left but basically they were destroyed.

PC: The billboards just were there all those years?

RG: Yes. And it was just free. We just did it. You know, we did it with our own money. We built them and everything. So anyway then I went back to Provincetown. And we were still close all the time but I lived by myself. And then they sort of kicked me out. We had a sort of falling out. It was like a harsh thing. Then I was on my own. I came back to New York and got a very small loft—it didn't even have a bathroom—across the street on Twenty-fourth Street and Sixth Avenue. It was on the west side of the street. There's just a parking lot there now. Actually, all three places where I lived in New York have been torn down. Anyway, I was there for about a month or a month and a half. I was still by myself. Then one night I walked down to Tenth Street. Oh, during that time we went to Tenth Street and all that.

PC: To the galleries?

RG: Yes. We did that the year before too. That was such a scene then.

PC: Right.

RG: There was a gallery there called the Phoenix Gallery, which is still in operation. So this night I walked in off the street. I was having its inaugural meeting. They were collecting artists. I met this guy Jay Milder. We became great friends right from that moment. He was dating Mimi at the time. He was a wonderful catalyst. He had all the personality and ability to meet people, which I seemed to lack and had not been able to do. So my life really opened up after that. With the Falcons, I sort of had the experience of being independent and opening up your own gallery, they were very independent-minded people, almost hostile to—well, not really hostile—but, again, it was almost like the carnival thing, you know, that kind of transit people that are very insulated on purpose from real society. And I kind of always liked that myself. Even today I have a certain feeling of separation. Then I moved next door to this very nice loft. Did you ever hear of a guy named Sam Feinstein? Do you know him?

PC: Yes, years ago,

RG: He was a lively guy. He was teaching an art class. He had this beautiful little loft on the corner of Twenty-fourth and Sixth Avenue, which was right next door to where I was staying. For some reason he moved out and I took his place. It was a sweet little loft. It was really nice. It had a little back room and a kind of bigger area in front and it had these big plate glass windows on the corner. It was above an Army-Navy surplus store. It was just a three-story building and I was on the top floor. Jay was from Omaha, and he was new in town too. He had this wonderful kind of personality and a lot of talent, and was a sexy guy. He was great with the girls and everything.

PC: Those were wild days.

RG: Yes. And he was very Bohemian. He has a sort of Bohemian personality that was unusual even then. I think it affected people.

PC: Well, but there were a lot of people around Tenth Street.

RG: I know. But he was sort of more so than anybody practically. He had a crazy kind of flair. And he knew this guy Bob Thompson. So anyway Jay and I started the gallery together and we showed Lester Johnson. We had a show of Lester Johnson's very early work. He and I had a show together. And Thompson I believe had a show. And Peter Passuntino. These guys now are still together. They have this thing called the Rhino [Rhino Horn, an artists group]. They're still doing their stuff.

PC: I vaguely remember going to a show there where you had some mural on the stairwell.

RG: Right. That's it. That's right. And you know who did one of those murals? It was Jim Dine. He did a whole big wall. I did a wall. Did you ever meet Steve Durkee?

PC: Yes.

RG: He did some. He was a very lively guy on the scene too. And Jay did something. And we

met Oldenburg and Dine and—this is very funny—I thought they were sort of squares. I liked them but they seemed separate. They were sort of squares. They had like families and they lived—I think Dine actually lived in the suburbs. They weren't urban kind of people. But Oldenburg wasn't square because he lived on Sixth Street, but still he had some sort of strange outside quality. Somehow we suggested that Oldenburg show at the Phoenix Gallery but they wouldn't accept him. They wouldn't take him. And then Jay and I, I think partly because of that, we just dropped out of there almost immediately. It didn't have the style we were looking for.

PC: Oldenburg and Dine then were involved with the Judson.

RG: But that was a year later. I think that was 1959. I think 1958 was an amorphic year for them. And I also met Bob Whitman. We became friends and I've been closer to him than to anybody else practically.

PC: Oh, really?

RG: I mean, not real close but I felt that somehow we —

PC: You mean in those days or still?

RG: Still. I mean, sort of as a character.

PC: It's interesting. I so often realize, you know, that there has to be a milieu at one time. Everybody is shaken up.

RG: Oh, yes, that's the most important thing. That's the thing. It's just a magical moment when the personalities congeal. It's like a romantic moment I think. You know, that's Cubism. Pop Art is that way. Those guys knew each other. They knew what they were doing.

PC: But, you know, I'm curious about what happened at the Loft Gallery — living space, social, everything.

RG: Well, you see, we were sort of rebels. We had this gallery way off from Tenth Street. We were rebelling against the Tenth Street scene. And we would do very well at the openings. You must have come to an opening. Because during the regular week there wouldn't be two people at the gallery. Nobody came. And I met Naomi Levine there.

PC: Really?

RG: Yes.

PC: Really? Was she one of those?

RG: Yes. She was a beautiful girl. A wonderful kid. You know who she was going with? She was going with Sam Francis and Al Held. She was like an ingénue. She was going with the big guys, the old guys.

PC: Sam's studio was on Twenty-third Street at one time.

RG: Yes. She was involved with the older guys.

PC: That's right. All these days start catching up to one.

RG: Sure, You could put it all back together if you really tried,

PC: In this group of people did you talk about things?

RG: Oh, yes, absolutely. We were existentialists. You see, that was what was so exciting: we came out of the suburbs and suddenly we were in this Bohemian situation. And, you see, things were bad. There was absolutely nothing. We had no freedom, no personal freedom at all. I mean, you know, social —

PC: In what way?

RG: I mean, for instance, things like hair length. If you had hair a quarter of an inch longer, even less, I mean it was murder; people would murder you. It was terrible. Or another thing: we were dirty. We were quite dirty. That was another thing.

PC: Well, nobody had any money,

RG: We were ill kept, you might say. It was sort of the style. I think both Jay and I carried that to quite an extreme.

PC: In what way? I mean, it sounds like it was obviously done at one point.

RG: No, it was not with me. You see, I was really involved with emotionalism in painting. I really believed in a sort of emotional approach that I had sort of mistakenly gotten from abstract expressionism and action painting.

PC: Well, that's possible, yes.

RG: Well, I mean now I see kind of where I thought I was doing what they did. But it was different. And that's another thing that you sort of forget: that people got so messed up painting that actually you were literally filthy all the time and covered with paint.

PC: Right. It's a messy job.

RG: Another thing was that we had the Army hanging over our heads. And this kind of put us out of a real quality of facing.... You see, we had like this little society where we lived in this hovel that was almost European, you know, yet we had to face the draft. I think because of all these things we formulated a kind of philosophy at the time and we talked about it quite a lot. I remember that after that we stopped talking about art, after a certain period. You know, this lasted only about a year, a short period of time. It was a sort of romance, a sort of love affair with friends. It was just a moment and it breaks up.

PC: What do you mean—you discussed art a great deal at that point and then it stopped?

RG: Oh, yes. I remember that guys, these squares, would come in and we would stay up all night and stuff like that. We could sleep all day. You see, we didn't have to do anything. We would get money from our folks, a little bit; but we were very poor, very poor indeed.

PC: But what about the existentialist ideas? Did they drift in formally through Sartre?

RG: No, not formally. I didn't know too much about it. Just what I picked up. And the excitement of the beatniks, the writers.

PC: Did you know any of the poets?

RG: Yes, well, sort of. I didn't actually know any of them but they were around everywhere though and you felt you knew them. I mean, they were right there. I guess I knew some of them. And jazz too. Poetry and Jazz was good because that was like some sort of made-up theater form too. It was made up. It wasn't like—it was just completely—

PC: Spontaneous. It was put together but you never knew if they worked or not.

RG: Yes.

PC: Did you go to the jazz and poetry readings that they used to give?

RG: A little bit, yes.

PC: And did you go to the coffee shops that used to do that? Or didn't you frequent those much?

RG: A little bit. You see, did work all the time. Actually we did work a lot. All through this period I always worked all the time even when I was an usher at the Roxy. Which was quite a hassle because, again, I was sloppy. You had to have clean hands. You had to have white gloves on for the inspection and you'd go down and show your gloves. But I liked that job. I had a good time there. I wouldn't complain about that job.

PC: How long did you do that?

RG: For seven months, which was a long time for that job. It's a very transitory job. I was the oldest guy there. I was a supervisor; I worked myself up into quite a position. Then I'll tell you the reason I lost the job: They did that windjammer; the windjammer came in; they threw out all

the old ushers, changed the theater around, got union usherettes. Actually that didn't work out and they tried to change it back to a regular theater. And that was the end of it. That was the end. What a shame! A beautiful place.

PC: How did you like working in such an immense place?

RG: I loved it. I liked it very much.

PC: Hordes of people running around.

RG: Oh, it was scary. It was really a kind of scary job because—and generally I don't like to do the kind of job where you're supposed to tell people what to do. It was a lurking responsibility. If somebody faints, or a seat catches on fire or something, you're supposed to do something; or purse snatchers,

PC: You had thousands of people going in and out of there every day, didn't you?

RG: Oh, yes. The weekends. That's what I was going to say, that I was responsible for the balcony, which probably seated three thousand people, or maybe two thousand anyway. And those huge lines. There were, say, 5,000 people in the theater and there must have been damn near 5,000 more waiting in line. There were so many people it was scary. And at most there were only about two dozen ushers. It was really something. And I remember I had these very odd hours. I would work, say, in the morning. Then I would have like three hours off. And then I'd be back on. And it wouldn't be regular at all. Every day it would change completely one way or the other. And I'd come back and see that line out there. I just dreaded it.

PC: And you'd see the same show over and over and over. How did you like that?

RG: It had an atmosphere; a real atmosphere seeing those films over and over.

PC: Do you think that seeing films over and over like that influenced your ideas about film? Or did you just not notice them after a while?

RG: I don't know. I haven't mentioned that during my childhood I was very interested in movies, I used to go uptown to see movies and that was a big deal during my childhood in Nashville. I had some sort of Hollywood—I loved those pictures, the big spectacle pictures.

PC: Because it's very different to go and see a film and to be an usher and see it over and over and fragmented and piecemeal and see the same thing over and over day after day.

RG: Yes. It didn't do anything intellectually.

PC: It didn't register.

RG: I sort of liked the atmosphere of the theater because it was like big time. You know, sometimes institutions are fun like that. The thing is an institution. It's like being in something bigger than yourself.

PC: Everybody had heard of the Roxy.

RG: Yes.

PC: Didn't they have great uniforms at that time?

RG: Oh, yes. Short gray jacket very formally cut with stiff dickey, bow tie, false collar, the whole bit, gloves, suspenders, high-waisted pants that came up quite high, black shoes. And then I got the silver straps—what do you call those things?

PC: Oh, the epaulets. Still, to kind of go back to the gallery and what happened with the artists. You said that for that year you talked about things. What kind of things did you talk about with them? I mean with painters, not with anybody who would drift in and out.

RG: Well, we were formulating like our taste for painting, you know, like what a painting should be, what made it real. For a long time because I was into this emotionalism anything that didn't look truly emotional I put down, I didn't like.

PC: How do you mean emotional?

RG: Well, action. If it wasn't done in a frenzy it wasn't real, I mean in a real kind of psychological frenzy. Which is the way I worked. Actually I worked in a frenzy during this period.

PC: You mean everything got wound up when you started?

RG: Yes. I would paint till there was no paint left, and stuff like that. Also, I always had this terrible desire to finish everything. So I would work way into the night or stick with a painting for great long periods of time past exhaustion because I wanted to finish it.

PC: Kind of in one shot?

RG: In one shot, yes. You see, that was the whole thing: that if it was legit, it was one emotion; the painting represented a pure emotion from beginning to end and was found in that emotion.

PC: So did that mean that you couldn't go back and work on it again at some later time?

RG: No, it did- of course literally, naturally I'd have to stop, but it was always very, very frustrating. I think it was a real good painting experience, I learned a lot about painting because I really painted a lot.

PC: In terms of —

RG: Just handling the paint. Just painting. I just painted and painted.

PC: How to get it on and mix it and do what you wanted it to do?

RG: I also ran the gamut of total frustration a lot; you know, I got to terrific points of frustration.

PC: Caused by what?

RG: Well, just by not being able to pull it off; not being able to climax something, you might say. And one technique that became an important technique was a kind of collage technique where the painting would get so muddy and wrecked that I couldn't work with it anymore. So I started sticking stuff onto it.

PC: What kind of things?

RG: Cardboard or anything; sometimes cardboard, sometimes canvas. Suddenly it was like a real kind of what I think collage is; you know, suddenly this change. Suddenly I was like grabbing, I had a foothold again, I think what happens—and you learn as you paint—is that all the conventional impulses are always at work on you and it's very difficult to find an original composition. I've read someplace that Picasso said that when they discovered collage it was so tremendously exciting because they were almost in a new realm of the real, it was real again. And I think when you work on a painting it's like art, it's lousy, it's not what you want. You want to make something that isn't art, but something else. And when I put the collage element in it would suddenly bring in something clear and real and not like art.

PC: What do you mean, "not like art?"

RG: Well, what art really is at best is the thing, it's on a high plane of reality. But it's difficult to get there because it's very hard to get there consciously. You almost have to do some sort of a trick, either a mental trick or a physical trick or a trick of facility. All these different ways. And it's quite exhausting I think. That's why art is actually physically exhausting. Yet I think it's always something that everybody is looking for, you know, to suddenly break out, to find something that seems real and is new.

PC: Where along the line did you get the sense that that was going to happen? Or did it happen? How could you tell it was going to work?

RG: Well, whenever I did a good one. When I did one that I knew was good. And that's what I was working for: to come off with a good one. The one that felt good to me, that I was happy with. Anyway, because I started the collage stuff I also had this outside but latent interest in sculpture. And then in the year 1959 I broke away from Jay Milder and Bob Thompson and the guys like that whom I knew because they remained painters, and have remained so to this day. And, you see, because of the interest in theater that I always had I got away from the painting,

just plain painting. It had always been a sort of frustration for me. I was trying to get away from this kind of conventional art thing into some new area.

PC: You mean just beyond the flat surface, dimension or object or atmosphere?

RG: Yes. I mean for myself. I'm not saying that somebody else couldn't find it in straight painting. It was just a path that I somehow by temperament was forced to take.

PC: Had you had any interest in theater, in becoming involved with theater in any way before that?

RG: Oh, yes.

PC: Chicago also has the Goodman School right there.

RG: Well, you see, that was the thing: I didn't have any talent for theater at all. I mean, I couldn't do anything, I had no talent whatsoever. And yet I still wanted to do something. So as a painter or a sculptor, you see, that's how I entered into theater. As a writer would go into theater, I went in as a painter and sculptor. Except nobody was asking me to do it. Which was great, a kind of terrific blessing. That's why it was original.

PC: Did you go to the theater when you came to New York ever? I mean, to see Off Broadway, for example, or Broadway?

RG: Oh, yes. I saw Broadway. I've always been interested in conventional theater too and conventional movie making. As I've always been interested in conventional painting to some extent.

PC: Right. But it always seems to be something that you work against.

RG: Well, sometimes I work with it.

PC: Yes. You utilize aspects of it but I mean you have not become, say, a traditional Broadway set designer.

RG: No. I don't think I could even if I wanted to. I'd be back to the commercial art thing again, I mean, the correspondence course. I couldn't do it. You know, it takes a certain kind of facility.

PC: That's true. And that's one of the problems with the theater the play called *Fire* that you did in 1958 at the Sun Gallery? What was that about? How did it evolve?

RG: Well, I had a canvas stretched. It was about a seven by three foot canvas, or maybe three-and-a-half feet, a sort of horizontal shape. That was out in the gallery. The gallery was quite small, I think, oh gosh, it was probably about twenty-five feet by sixteen, something like that, maybe smaller, and about a six-foot ceiling. It was really low, no kidding; or maybe a seven-foot ceiling. So it was right on your head. The gallery was right on the street, on Commercial Street in Provincetown. Outside we just had this sign, "A Play Called Fire." On the gallery floor I think was just brown paper or something and people sat on the floor. Nobody knew what it was going to be. I just came out and made a painting in front of the audience. Which took about forty-five minutes. When I was about half way through a couple of sailors came up to the window, which was right along the side where I was. I don't think the audience could see them or in any event could only partially see them if at all. The sailors started making wisecracks. And I was getting mad. I was starting to threaten. I wanted to go outside. Yvonne told me to keep going. She went out and talked to them and told them to go away. That kind of gave a sort of finish to it so I did something and finished it. It sounds silly now. You see, I didn't know what I was going to do. That was like my version of existentialism, plunging out into the unknown and letting that find itself whatever it was,

PC: Did you have any idea what you were going to paint? I mean, any plans?

RG: No.

PC: It was just that everybody turned up at a certain time and you —

RG: I don't know how much idea I had. I don't think I had a lot of ideas. I didn't know how I would do it.

PC: Does that work still exist?

RG: Yes, It's in Nashville. I'm going to get it back. But, you see, I think that the interesting point is that it was like theater but it was just the opposite from literary theater.

PC: Well, it was a performance.

RG: And it wasn't like actor's theater. I mean, an artist isn't much of a performer. You know, it's hardly ever used as an act, I mean, it was a crude, rough, idea but it was sort of stimulating at the time. I've heard people who saw it say that it was kind of an experience. I guess I had worked myself up into. I'll tell you the influence: do you remember the French guy, Mathieu or whatever his name was?

PC: Oh, right.

RG: Do you remember he used to dress himself up and make a painting?

PC: Right.

RG: Well, I didn't particularly like the paintings but that had sort of a quality of the times and it had something to do with that. And then Allan Kaprow. Kaprow was wonderful. I just met him briefly but even now he's a kind of wonderfully inspiring guy if you get around him. He gives you ideas; he makes you feel that you can do anything. He was quite good. The next year when I did this performance which was really like a real theater thing with actors and a set and involved action, it had some sort of continued structure, I did that. But I knew that he also was going to do one in New York and I was inspired by the fact that he was doing one. It's scary to do something like that in front of an audience when you really don't know what you're doing. You just go out on your urge, you know —

PC: It's like improvising but in a way it's somewhat different.

RG: I just say it was an urge to do theater without any kind of means to do it. Even now it's very interesting because....Have you seen Bob Wilson's stuff?

PC: No.

RG: Or Bert Hoffman's?

PC: No.

RG: Well, he's doing some fantastic stuff. I think he's done one of the most exciting things that I've seen in a great while. I think what he does is a kind of subconscious theater. I mean, it's not relying on the contrivances of the past, which are wonderful in themselves, but this is also quite something else. At that time I sort of liked the danger in a certain act like that. The failure aspect was exciting. It makes you become a little bit more of a legitimate performer if you take the risk. It was, for instance, like a sort of dare devil stunt or something like that. I know I lost it myself. I did just three performances. I did the *Walking Man*, the *Burning Building*, and I did one called *Magic Train Ride*. Those were all done within six months. The *Burning Building* was probably by far the most developed and the best. With the *Magic Train Ride*, I was beginning to lose this kind of weird, this thing where I didn't know what I was doing. I started to begin to rely a little bit on literature. I started to think about writing a little bit. And so I got on very shaky ground. I got into a time thing. You see, these pieces were very short, they were only about ten minutes long. I mean, they were like an act on a structure, like a rig or something like that. I mean, I was interested in real theater for the longest period of time but didn't know how to do it. And so I kind of lost the thread of what I was doing myself. And therefore I didn't do any more until two years ago when I did a live performance here. Well, actually, I also did one in Berkeley.

PC: Oh, really?

RG: Which was great. Nobody ever saw it though. It was terrific.

PC: A secret performance.

RG: I did it with George Cukor in 1968. It was wonderful. But anyway from that thread there, you see, because I was lost in the live theater, I backtracked to movies in a way because they were conventional and I could rely on sort of known stories. You see, in 1962 with Rudy

Burckhardt I did a remake of [George] Méliè's film, or what I thought was a remake,

PC: *Shoot the Moon*.

RG: But it was more like a confection. It wasn't as personal as his performances.

PC: To go back to the whole Provincetown thing, I'm curious about Kaprow. Those years, those summers in Provincetown seem to have been great catalysts for a whole group of people.

RG: Oh, yes. Provincetown was a great place for lots of people. It was wonderful.

PC: What was going on there that

RG: Well, I don't know, it had been an artists' colony for a long time. My father-in-law [Chaim Gross] had been there for, God, since the forties. And I guess I just was lucky that I lucked into the place. Mimi had been there from when she was a little girl.

PC: But in terms of what Kaprow would spend time doing

RG: He was not a Provincetown person. I think he just came to visit. And he had the show at the Sun Gallery. He was just there for a short time. And Bob Whitman came for just a short time. Lucas Samaras was there for just a short time. But that was exciting. We all felt that we were about to do something. In the summer of 1959, I did quite a lot of work there.

PC: This was painting still?

RG: It was collages and sculpture, quasi-sculpture.

PC: When did you really start making sculpture as opposed to —

RG: I made my first sculpture when we were working on the billboards in Salisbury. I made like a figure about this high out of junk. Which was very exciting and I liked doing it. Then I started doing it again in 1958.

PC: This figure was - what - about four feet high?

RG: Yes.

PC: Did it go on the billboard? Or was it a separate entity? Or how did it come about?

RG: It was separate. It was just an impulse. I started doing it. I just had the impulse to start doing it.

PC: Does it still exist?

RG: No. But really my first piece of sculpture I made in the YMCA in Chicago the year before. I made a crazy kind of figure.

PC: What kind of figure was that?

RG: A standing figure. Like at the time I liked all those mannerist sculptures like Reg Butler and [Kenneth] Armitage were doing. Do you remember the mannerism—little figures with big bodies sticking out like this?

PC: Right.

RG: All that sort of manneristic stuff. I used to think it was great. I loved it.

PC: They were very popular then too.

RG: Oh, right. Yes, sure. It was fashionable. So I made like a big body and sticky legs and a head. And I still like to make, you know, the scale of the big body and the small head or big head.

PC: But that Chicago sculpture was just an isolated experience?

RG: It was isolated. It really was isolated. But then I picked up on it again with another isolated experience. That's the crazy thing: when somebody starts doing something I think the first

things are very vague, embryo —

PC: Yes. You do them and then advance and go back.

RG: Right. Yes. I just let it lie around for years and years. They can lay around for as long as it's legitimate to use them.

PC: How long does that take?

RG: God, I guess your whole life. If you're lucky your career lasts, say, sixty years long. I was looking through this book on Picasso and the theater. Have you seen that? It's a nice book— Picasso's Theater [Douglas Cooper, *Picasso Theatre*, 1968].

PC: Yes. Right.

RG: He's got drawings that— I'm sure he was influenced years and years later the style comes back, like forty years later.

PC: Well, you never forget anything really.

RG: How much can you do, you know? Anyway, it's your stuff.

PC: Right. Why was there the break between Milder and that group and yourself? What do you think precipitated that?

RG: Oh, it's painters. I had nothing personal against them. We've remained friends. You see, I'm really like a bastardized version of a painter; I'm neither (quote) a "painter" or a "sculptor," either one. I don't think that most straight painters like sculpture at all, or even can see it. I have almost no feeling for it whatsoever. And vice versa. In fact, sometimes it's heartbreaking in a way that your old friends, your buddies, you just know that they can't enjoy your work at all. They have no feeling for it.

PC: Well, they've got to follow their own road.

RG: You feel like it's the same stuff. You can't understand why they don't like it. And yet they don't like it. But if it was flat and made out of paint they could see it. Even if it was bad they'd like it.

PC: Do you find this a problem on your part that you're sort of halfway one way and halfway another way? Or does that kind of keep you active in a sense?

RG: Well, yes, it keeps me active. I guess it is sort of a problem. I mean, sometimes I get so confused. I could be right on the spur of making a painting or a movie or making a sculpture or —

PC: Do things start out as one and evolve into another?

RG: Yes, it has.

PC: It goes back and forth.

RG: Yes. It's not clear in my mind at all sometimes what a thing is or what it might end up as. At this point I'm even starting to do stuff that might even be like a sculpture but it might also be part of a movie. It might even be a literary idea, or it might even start something that I thought was going to be something three-dimensional and I might even keep it flat.

PC: So it happens as you work?

RG: Yes, it does.

[END TAPE 1, Side 2]

PC: This is Side 3, March 11, 1974, Paul Cummings talking to Red Grooms in his studio again.

RG: I think I'm giving too much detail.

PC: The detail is fine. But you had come into New York that fall, right?

RG: Yes, right. And that year Jay Milder and I started the City Gallery on Twenty-fourth Street,

PC: Right. Which we have talked about.

RG: Right. I can't remember. But just to pick up from there, the next year I had moved to a place on Delancey Street.

PC: Right. Now that became the famous museum right?

RG: The Delancey Street Museum, right. I intended to open that with Jay but somehow he really didn't want to be exactly a partner so it was my place more than a partnership.

PC: Right. But when did you find that place? You did the *Burning Building* there in December.

RG: Yes. I had gotten it only a few months before. I came back from Provincetown and I got that place I guess in September. It's right at the entrance to the Williamsburg Bridge on Delancey Street on the corner of, I think it's Suffolk. Loew's movie theater is right across the little street, the side street. It's still there. It looks good. Of all my places that one looks, it looks better than when I was there before,

PC: Has the neighborhood changed or something? Or not?

RG: I don't go over there much. It's sort of out of the way. I don't live near there. But I do drive down Delancey Street sometimes and I see it and it looks good. When I moved in it had been a boxing gym, I mean, a professional training gym. It was a tiny place. The back room where I slept was full of lockers. I inherited a whole lot of those yellow boxing posters with all the writing and the pictures of the two guys in an oval format. Also, I inherited a whole lot of poker chips, a great pile of poker chips; and a table that had underneath pushpins with rubber bands strung across them; actually it looked like a place to hold cards. When I had the performance I did there—the *Burning Building*—on the eve of the performance I was terribly nervous. The main part of the studio space, of the room, was taken up with the set and the seats. Just at the worst moment these gangsters, these two white guys and two black guys came in—the white guys were small and the black guys were big—and they wanted their furniture back. And the furniture was all incorporated in this really wacky set, really strange looking thing. I had incorporated all this stuff and used it all. Somehow, I don't know, how I talked them out of tearing the thing apart. They retreated.

PC: Did they come back for it eventually?

RG: The guy was going to say, "I've got to tell so and so," you know, like the big man. I think I was so crazy getting ready for that performance that they thought maybe it was scary.

PC: How did the idea for the *Burning Building* come about? What did it evolve out of?

RG: Well, very much it evolved out of the performance, the *Walking Man*, that I did at the Sun Gallery in September of that year, which was only two-and-a-half, or maybe three months before. When I did the first one I had the idea that it wasn't so much a literary idea as a kind of collage idea, and that I could just reset it up and perform it again. And that's kind of what I did from the *Walking Man* to the *Burning Building*. But the *Burning Building* really was more elaborate, more defined.

PC: Where did the *Walking Man* idea come from?

RG: The ideas were, you know, just floating around in my head and I just picked them up from there.

PC: Picked one out of the air.

RG: That's right.

PC: Why didn't you pursue the whole business of happenings and events? They were going on and on and on and a lot of people were doing them in those years.

RG: Yes. After I did the *Walking Man* I did the *Magic Train Ride*. As I remember, it was only maybe a month later, something like that. Anyway, it was quite soon afterward. The *Magic Train Ride* was done at the Reuben Gallery. I was actually showing my work at the Reuben Gallery, Anita Baker had seen my work in Provincetown and she wanted me to show. I liked the

gallery and the people in it. And even though I had this gallery of my own, I showed with her. I didn't show at the Delancey Street Museum except doing this performance. The performance was sort of like my show.

PC: But you gave exhibitions to other people and did all sorts of projects on Delancey Street, didn't you?

RG: Yes. I continued the idea of showing other people. It was exciting and I enjoyed doing that. Most of the studio space was taken up by the gallery. I had only a small working area. And, again, not many people came. You did ask me why I stopped. I think I've touched on this a little bit before, but I got a little self-conscious.

PC: You mean at being an actor?

RG: No, not being an actor so much. I had always called mine "plays," but the word "happening" caught on so vehemently that in that three-, four- or five-month period that this had occurred, the magazines had been notified and from a sort of intimate, you know, underground type of operation, it became something that captured the imagination of the media. You know, it was like one of those moments in life when everything was there, it was the time to do them, but somehow I personally was too confused to continue to do them. So that's why I stopped.

PC: Well, I know they used to hold them sometimes in places where you could get fifty people and 200 would show up, and they'd do performance after performance to use the audience up.

RG: I remember specifically we did the *Burning Building* nine times. One time we did it in the middle of the week and the only person in the audience was Jim Dine. It must have been a Wednesday night because they played cards downstairs on Wednesday and at that time all these guys would come up from downstairs.

PC: Was there a gym below too?

RG: No. It was some kind of a club.

PC: Oh, I see. One of those little social clubs.

RG: Although I don't think it was the same people who had come to ask for their furniture back. It was another card club. They said, "You've got to cut the noise out." So we had to quit the performance. We were just doing it for Jim anyway.

PC: How did you find the people that you were showing, that did have exhibitions with you?

RG: They were all intimates. Marcia Marcus had a show with us. And Bob Thompson had a show. And Jay Milder had a show. And Peter Passuntino had a show. And I'm sure there were a couple of group shows. And I did my performance of the *Burning Building*. And Marcia did an unheralded ballet called *A Garden*.

PC: Oh, really? I didn't know about that.

RG: Which was very nice. I had encouraged her to do a performance and she did this ballet.

PC: What was it like?

RG: Well, I was in it. You know how it is when you're in something you don't really know

PC: But were there a lot of people in it?

RG: Yes, it was quite ceremonial. There was a lot of candle lighting. Dick Bellamy had on a long flowing gown. There were so many candles around that his robe caught on fire. Somebody jumped out of the audience and put it out. That was memorable. And then Jay came in drunk. He was supposed to light these candles and he was horsing around. It took him too long to light the candles.

PC: I didn't know about that ever.

RG: Yes. It was called *A Garden*, I think it's *A Garden*. That was an unusual performance. That was down there right at that period. Back to your question about why I quit, you see, I also went

to Europe in the summer of 1960. I went around a lot and traveled for six months and then I stayed in Italy for a year. So I was gone for a year and a half.

PC: That was your first trip there, wasn't it?

RG: Yes, that was my first to Europe,

PC: How did that come about?

RG: Well, you see, I guess my life was pretty unstable actually and I was ready to travel, but consequently, the next year when the Reuben Gallery really concentrated only on performances, I wasn't there at all. So I missed out on all that.

PC: Where did you go in Europe? What was the sequence of places?

RG: I landed in Edinburgh. The very first person I met was this beautiful girl who I stayed with for three days in Edinburgh. That was terrific. Then I went to London and was there for just one day. Then went on to Paris. I was in Paris for quite a while; it seems like a long time; it was probably only about three weeks. I bought a motorcycle from a guy while I was there. I was going to try to ride from Paris to Florence. I had friends in Florence, including Mimi who was stationed there and we had been in contact. She had been in Europe already for half a year, or a year, I'm not sure which.

PC: Because you had met her where?

RG: We were friends in New York. I was very much wanting to see her and other people I knew there. Then I crashed my motorcycle the very first thing after leaving Paris. So I took a train down to Florence. I met Mimi through Bob Beauchamp. Bob Beauchamp and Jackie Ferrar were staying in a small town outside of Florence. I had this feeling that I couldn't find anybody; I felt that I was in such foreign territory that I simply just wouldn't be able to look up somebody or call them or find where they lived. But anyway somehow I found Bob and Jackie. And Mimi came out there. And we got together. And she had made this crazy date with a Greek friend of hers that she had gone to Bard College with. They were going to meet another friend in Athens for a wedding. They were to rendezvous in Venice. So Mimi and I went to Venice. Sure enough they were there. Also this guy Rudy Stern who has the fluorescent light shop.

PC: Right.

RG: — he was also there. And we all took off in a Volkswagen to go to Greece, to Athens. We were going to go through Yugoslavia, and the guy who was driving, who I didn't know very well—I don't even remember his name, he had gotten an Army induction slip. I guess he had gotten it in Venice and started out, but then he decided he'd better turn back. The others also turned back. Mimi and I took a boat from somewhere in Yugoslavia—I think it was from Split—and arrived in Athens. We didn't go to the wedding but we did meet the people who were getting married. Mimi and I stayed in Athens for a few weeks; well I guess we stayed in Greece for about six weeks traveling around. We went to some of the islands; we went to Rhodes, to Crete, and to Mykonos. We went to the Peloponnesus. It was very beautiful. Then we went to Egypt, Which was quite a time. We were there for about a month.

PC: Where did you go there?

RG: From Athens we went to Alexandria and stayed there a very short time. Then we went to Cairo and stayed there for several weeks. Then we went on down to Luxor. This was in 1960 and they were going to flood that area —

PC: Oh, yes, for the dam.

RG: We wanted to go down to see the sculptures further down. We got to Luxor and saw a lot there. But it was just too much for me. I was just absolutely.... The sun and the Arabs and everything was getting to be too heavy. I had to turn back. Mimi would have gone on.

PC: In what way?

RG: I don't know what it was. We just caused so much attention everywhere we went, you know, just as foreigners. Everywhere we went it was a big scene. Mimi was wearing this very short dress at the time, It was pretty unconventional and it just started a—there was just a trauma everywhere we went.

PC: Really?

RG: Yes. I couldn't take it. And then the Arabs were so wild. For instance, when we were at Luxor we would go out into the desert. Somehow we would be with Arabs that were like friendly Arabs. But then they would suddenly suggest that I take a long walk right in the middle of the desert and that Mimi go along with them. Stuff like that. They were pulling this hijack stuff all the time. They were driving me crazy.

PC: Did you make sketches or take photographs?

RG: Yes, right. We drew the whole time. That's another reason we got into a lot of trouble. In fact, probably that was the real reason. In Egypt naturally we liked to draw the people with robes, which turned out to be to them the lower class people to the student types. Politically they thought it was bad that as tourists we were drawing the poor people and stuff. So they made a big stink. They'd take us to the police station. Just ridiculous stuff to force the situation,

PC: What would happen to you at the police station?

RG: Nothing. I mean, it was just ridiculous. A lot of shouting. It was just ridiculous stuff. But it was an experience being there, I had never seen such an absolutely incredible but it was so alive too.

PC: In terms of what?

RG: Well, just the life. I guess New York is that way too. Just the life.

PC: Cairo is a large city, isn't it?

RG: It's big, yes; really big. And I have never seen so much real violence on the streets. I mean, despite all the talk here, you rarely see actual violence in New York; I mean, somebody actually hitting somebody else and so on. But in Cairo many times I saw fist fights, fights in cafes with chairs being knocked over, cops clubbing people in bus doorways, all kind of stuff like that....

PC: Exciting.

RG: Yes. It was too much. I have never seen such a live place, incredibly alive. Anyway, from there we flew to Jordan and Jerusalem. Mimi is Jewish and they sort of suspected that she was. She had to claim that she wasn't or somehow get around it. They suspected and were going to send us back to Cairo. They gave us some list of places to stay and she picked out some place called the Jesus Christ Hostel. That sounded good to them so they let us stay. We were there for a few days. Then we went into Israel and stayed there for about a month and traveled around for quite a while. It was interesting. Then we went on back to Italy and stayed there. Then another episode was that we lived in Florence in the city. In the summer a friend of ours named Steve Pepper had a villa in a very small town outside of Florence called Bagno a Ripoli. It was really Mimi's show. She had been doing puppet shows in that place in town during the winter, shadow shows, just for fun. And in the summer she and this other friend of ours called KK [Katharine Kean], who is a fantastic, colorful person, decided to go on the road. Her idea was to do like the *La Strada* bit and go out with a horse and a carriage with the puppet shows. And they did it. They got the horse and this terrific old carriage. Mimi and KK and myself and an English guy by the name of Peter Stanley who played banjo, and a Florentine named Paperino [Nello Falteri], went on this trip. We went from Florence north to Verona, Parma, well, we went to Modena and Parma and Verona and then across to Venice. We almost made it to the Lido; we were just on the verge of getting across but the ferryman wouldn't let us take the horse. He called his boss and he was hemming and hawing, there was a lot of haggling and he decided not to. So we stayed not in Venice but in the industrial town across from Venice with the horse and would come into Venice. Then we went on down to Ravenna and then across back to Florence. It was really quite a long trip, about seven weeks,

PC: Did you do performances and things?

RG: Yes, we gave performances almost every night, not quite every night.

PC: Where did you do them? How did you —

RG: It was like a very simple operation. We had a screen in the back of the carriage with

curtains around that. Mimi and I operated the puppets. Peter Stanley played the banjo up front. There weren't any words. We had oil lamps for light. It was a fantastic experience. It was really Mimi's show. She and KK engineered the whole thing. It kind of seemed like a wild scheme to me. I was a little scared. You know, Italy is pretty much like the States. I mean, it's not that rustic. You had to go down the highways and stuff.

PC: How did you find a place to do this? Where did you find an audience?

RG: It would depend on circumstances. Since we were going with the horse it would depend on where the horse got to be at the right time of day. Another problem was it couldn't be completely dark because we had to find a field to sleep in. We always had to go out and scout around, reconnoiter. It was difficult to engineer the proper time to give the show but somehow it usually worked out.

PC: How did people find out about you? Did they just see you wandering around?

RG: Yes, well, that's interesting because when you travel by horse you travel so slowly that it's sort of like being in a rowboat or a boat drifting along. You know, if you were traveling by car you'd shoot by stuff that you'd see absolutely nothing. But going this way every little *trattoria* or cafe or bar was a landmark, was a big deal. So we would stop usually in front of a *trattoria* or a bar or somewhere where there was a little cluster of houses or something and just pick up whoever was going to watch. It was free. I mean, virtually no money was exchanged. We passed the hat but they never put anything in it, I think one time some tourist put in a dollar. That was by far the most we ever made—like a thousand lira.

PC: That's fantastic. What kind of stories did she do?

RG: It was always the same show. It was a very romantic show that she made up. It was like a medieval tale that was sort of sad.

PC: Did children like it, or adults?

RG: Yes, hopefully there would be kids. But unfortunately what really happened was that if we'd hit a bar there'd be all these older teenage guys and men hanging out at the bar and that would be our audience. So the audience was a little heavy for the show. In fact, the first time we did the show was in a town not far from Florence, I can't remember the name of the town, it was a bad audience; those guys wanted a strip show or something; they were a bunch of thugs. And we had this delicate little show to give them.

PC: Oh, fantastic. What kind of music did he play?

RG: He was English but he knew all the American stuff. He played bluegrass and stuff like that. He was very good. One episode was when I've hit this really nice town, a beautiful town on a hill. We got there early like at about four o'clock. Everybody was enthusiastic. There was a wonderful little courtyard to present the show, an ideal spot. We were very happy. We made promises that we'd be back; we told them we had to go out to get feed for the horse. So we went out. The town was on a hill going down. So we started down the hill and there was no place to pull off. We went mile after mile and got farther and farther away from the town. Finally we were too far to turn back; we couldn't go back.

PC: That was terrible.

RG: So instead of that beautiful town we hit a town that had been bombed very badly. There had been a horrible kind of massacre there in World War II, very bad; a lot of people were killed. It was one of those rough spots. The people were just the opposite of those in the other town; they were very hard. They thought we were gypsies or something. They had a kind of hostile attitude. It was just the opposite experience—the towns were probably not more than four miles apart. But it was wonderful—traveling that very slow way because we did see the strange characteristics of the towns and the changes in them,

PC: Rather than driving through at sixty miles an hour.

RG: Yes, right. At one point I think we were in Parma. I don't know how far away that is from Florence. But, you know, it's maybe sixty miles, maybe it's more, maybe a hundred miles. And we needed to go back; we had to get money or something. We had to refurbish ourselves or something. So Mimi and I went back; we hitchhiked and got a lift in a big, fancy car. We shot

back over the territory that had taken us several weeks to cover. It was a strange experience, you know, just shooting right by everything.

PC: That must have been incredible. Time collapsing.

RG: Yes,

PC: Did you take photographs and things?

RG: We didn't take any. Well, we drew; you see, again, Mimi and I were drawing all the time. I have a lot of drawings from that time. So does she.

PC: Somewhere I read that that horse was called Ruckus. Is that right?

RG: That's right, yes,

PC: That's a strange name for a horse there, isn't it?

RG: Yes. Well, you see, I took the name Ruckus for my film company. I can't exactly remember—it's kind of a word that is used in the South. I mean, people use it to describe a commotion or something. And I like it as a word.

PC: Oh, and it was your name for the horse?

RG: Yes. And that's how it got to be called Ruckus. But also our film company is called Ruckus Films.

PC: How did you pick that word?

RG: I thought it was a good word for the kind of stuff that I'd like to do over a long period of time. It stands for what I want to do,

PC: Shake things up a little bit.

RG: Yes.

PC: Oh, good, good. Well, all the time that you moved around in Italy and various other places do you think that you picked up much of what you saw that you've used later? Do you use drawings and sketches and ideas? Or were they kind of European, as opposed to the American?

RG: Yes. You know, seeing another culture was very informative, you know, cultures different from ours sort of clarified the peculiarities of our culture more. Also, it gives you a sort of sense of the fantastic accomplishments of the past, you know, what's been done and what can be achieved. Also the architecture. There were many, many things about the architecture that I loved.

PC: Did you see the original Parthenon?

RG: Yes. And like the towns, you know, well, churches too, Mimi and I both love Romanesque architecture. Generally medieval architecture has a big influence on me. I love to think about it.

PC: Did you go to all the museums and do all the cultural activities?

RG: Yes. Mimi is wonderful. She escorts me around. She's a culture vulture. She snoops into every single museum. So we really did everything. Each place we went to we would go to see everything we could. And that was another good excuse for going. Parma and Modena are small towns but they have fantastic stuff, and great cathedrals. Also there again, like I was saying, the closeness of their location but the different styles in their own local culture was interesting.

PC: The different personalities,

RG: Yes, I like that.

PC: Do you notice that in this country as you travel around?

RG: Gee, I just went down Route Number One or whatever it is in New Jersey, and it looked like

Germany or something. I have never been to Germany but it gave me that idea. And it felt different. It sure was different than being here,

PC: That's fascinating. A friend of mine went to the Book Fair in Frankfurt last year and she said, "It's just like Queens. Why go all the way to Germany?" The houses are all lined up, you know.

RG: This was out there in Johnson and Johnson territory and the Boy Scouts of America. And it's the bowling world. Mimi and I stopped at a bowling alley to make a phone call. It was twelve o'clock noon and it was full of men bowling. They must bowl on their lunch hour or something. Of course, they work different shifts. You know that's a different, a crazy world out there, no kidding. Those corporations. Those little factories up on the hill and they have moats and stuff around them. Some have very snazzy architecture. Oh, gee, it's a strange world.

PC: You spent—what—a year and a half did you say traveling around that time?

RG: Yes, a year and a half. Just to go back a little, I am real interested in society and in history and it's in my work. A large part of my work is taken up with that. In Egypt the artwork is fantastic. The thing is we went to see the artwork of the ancient Egyptians, which was done probably by a completely different type of culture than the Arab culture that's there. And I was so sort of engulfed literally by the Arab world. That was a real shock. It really was a shock.

PC: In what way besides the physical aspects of it? What other qualities struck you?

RG: They have a different moral structure than the Arabs for one thing. It's like encountering a whole world of people that are really very different. I liked them a lot and yet I disliked them. It was both. It was like a real kind of battle.

PC: What did you do for languages?

RG: Unfortunately, I'm lousy at languages. I wish I was better. I'm terrible. I have no aptitude at all. I can barely speak any Italian; I should be able to speak it; I lived in Italy for two years, I know only a few words. I can't speak it.

PC: It just doesn't stick,

RG: I'm a damn inland American. I didn't even have the confidence that I could even possibly learn a language until I lived in a country over a year and a half. I had no confidence at all. But, anyway, you know, visually there was no problem. I didn't feel like a foreigner, I really felt very close to a lot of the stuff.

PC: You mean the artwork?

RG: Yes, No matter of what period.

PC: What about the more contemporary things, though, as opposed to older —

RG: That's interesting, In Florence at that time there wasn't much of a contemporary scene; or we missed out on it completely if there was. We knew Americans there. Mimi and KK knew some Italian painters and maybe a few other people but generally it was American people that we knew. So I didn't really meet Italian artists. I don't know why. I just didn't meet any that I felt close to,

PC: You didn't see anything in the galleries in Venice or elsewhere?

RG: They only had schlock galleries in Florence at that time. I think maybe it's changed. Maybe it's a little better now.

PC: Milan has more modern galleries.

RG: But at that time literally, honestly, there really wasn't a good contemporary art gallery as far as I can remember. I don't think there was even one. It was all schlock.

PC: That's fantastic. And it's not that long ago when you think in terms of time.

RG: No.

PC: What brought you back to this country? Could you have stayed in Europe longer?

RG: I think it was because I didn't register with the police. I felt doomed. I felt like I was. . . . I won't go into this but I had gotten into some trouble with the police in Paris. Which was a big trauma. It was a bad experience for me. And when I came down to Italy, KK had just gotten into a lot of trouble in Rome for swimming in the Trevi Fountain or something like that. She had an accident and she hit a cop. And a guy that was with her had to go to jail for a month or something like that. He was in pretty long for an offense like that. So I had this bad. . . . You know, when you're in a foreign country you are a foreigner. I mean, you don't feel completely self-sufficient.

PC: Well, you don't know what all the rules are for one thing.

RG: No. It's scary in a certain way. And I just hadn't had the experience. And that first traumatic experience in Paris set me up. And then everybody was kind of wild; I mean, sort of youngish and everybody was wild and tended to get into trouble. There was a lot of drinking and stuff. The Italians that we knew did a lot of drinking. These young guys were wild men. It's true that I hadn't registered with the police and I really felt nervous about getting apprehended. I didn't want to go to jail or anything like that.

PC: Here you are walking around with a horse and a cart.

RG: Yes, we were doing stuff like that. That caused, a lot of police surveillance when we did that.

PC: Really? Would they come and ask you questions?

RG: Yes. But it was such a nice, innocent thing. It was absolutely so straight. It was just so what it was that there was never anything they could pin on us. We were always clean. Which was nice.

PC: That must have been very strange to be walking around like that and doing these little things and everybody else was driving —

RG: Well, it did turn out that Italy is just kind of rural enough that, for instance, they still have blacksmiths and we needed a blacksmith it seems to me about every three days or so. Our Italian Paperino was a great guy, a fantastic guy. He was really terrific. He was a Florentine and was very proud. He didn't want to sleep on the ground. He had never done that. You know, Italians don't like to travel too much anyhow. They're not real tourist types. I don't think they think much of travel. Marco Polo was the only.... Just as a test he went out with us the first night and decided to stay with us; he was taking us at least that far. He knew a lot about horses; three of us didn't know anything. KK knew something about horses; but Mimi and Peter and I knew nothing. There was a lot to do; there was a lot of harnessing and taking care of the harness. The horse had to be really taken care of, pampered. She was doing, all the work. After the first night he started loving it. He really fell in love with the road.

PC: What did he do? Was he a painter, an artist?

RG: He's like a market guy, he sold things, he deals. He's a great cook. His folks would pickle orange peels and stuff like that and sell it. All these crazy things that Italians seem to do, you know: they get little jobs, or little businesses selling some crazy thing. You know, they're all living at home and all that. He was also a kind of a Bohemian. In Italy it's not like in France. Or Italy is not like the United States where there's a lot of intellectual life that's different from normal society. As it turned out, in Florence there were these guys, a lot of men that were like characters that hang out, they're not exactly drunks, but they would be just on the fringe of crime. Like several of them would have been in jail. But they'd be great guys. They would do these oddball things like selling stuff.

PC: Living by their wits.

RG: Right.

PC: You made a film there, right?

RG: Yes. That was the summer we did the horse and carriage trip. We made an 8mm film with this guy Steve Pepper. Mimi also was involved,

PC: How did that happen? Where did the film and the camera and everything come from?

RG: Steve and I bought a cheap camera and made the film. Very seriously of course; we were completely involved. It was just a home production. It had sets and costumes. It was called *The Unwelcome Guests*. It was about seven or eight minutes long. It's like a cardboard set. It's about a man sleeping. Mosquitoes come in but they're alive in mosquito suits and have big striped heads. They chase him around. They do sort of like a dance. He has a great big flit gun that he chases them with. They jump out the window and run off into this beautiful landscape and jump into a lake. That's the end. It was like a sort of dance idea that I had. That was really the first film I did. It was great fun doing it. It was very exciting doing it.

PC: Did you make it like a film with script and planning and shooting?

RG: Yes, well, very rough. But, yes, it was made like a film.

PC: And that got you into films?

RG: That got me into films.

PC: Had you thought of making one before that? Or did it just sort of come up in

RG: Well, I remember this is the sort of thing like kids do and I've seen kids since that do it. We pretended to make films, you know, and I have a memory of that atmosphere. It was terrific. And in doing it, it was more or less exactly the same. I had the same feeling. When you're making a film, especially the way we do it, it's kind of like a live event. And the camera is almost like a silly thing, that it's all going into the camera.

PC: Yes. A giant prop all by itself.

RG: Yes. So much is done that somehow doesn't register on the film.

PC: But you had made plays and things before, hadn't you, at home I mean as a child?

RG: Yes, I did. And also in high school I did skits and stuff.

PC: You wrote them? Or acted in them? Or put them together?

RG: There was a pretty talented group of guys that had a band. At the time it was called a hillbilly band but it was just guys with banjo and guitar. I would do like skits, you know, like a diversionary type of deal which could be kind of surreal. We were influenced by—they were especially, and I was through them—those two crazy guys on radio—what are their names? Oh, Bob and Ray were the guys. And the thing about them was that they were sort of surreal; they had a sort of surreal thing. And that was exciting; kind of subversive.

PC: In what way—because that was when—

RG: Well, let's see, I was in high school in the early fifties, 1951-55. That was strictly squaresville. And Bob and Ray were a little surreal, or it seemed so at least. And we had fun with this group. We made up stuff, like we'd do little violent things and stuff like that. A lot of the stuff is based on surprise and violence. My big deal would be to take some kind of pummeling or be stomped on in some way, and I developed a character. It was kind of a minor thing but I think personally I had a lot of pride in it. It gave me a good feeling. I liked being on the stage. You see, I could never do speaking parts; I don't think I could ever do that. I could never be a speaking actor.

PC: So you were gymnastic.

RG: I liked this kind of like a clown or this non-verbal type of acting. I took a lot of pride in doing the things. I had this character built and I would do things that would be surprising.

PC: Oh, I see. For example?

RG: It was a very horribly primitive thing. Like, say, I would be called on to give a public announcement of some sort and on the way up to do it I would take a horrible fall and that would be it. It was just this kind of subversive—it was like a little subversion to doing things straight. And you know, minor as it all was, it was to me like the thread that made me want to continue doing it. It was fun. It was like a release.

PC: There's a great sense of comedy though and humor in what you do rather than, say,

tragedy or a kind of dark drama of some sort. At least the things I've seen in your films and whatnot tend to have that.

RG: Yes. But I think even then I never—maybe I'm too primitive even to aim my stuff in the direction of being humorous. Actually, it takes a lot of nerve and some know-how consciously to be humorous. And I think I don't particularly try to do that. As, for instance, I don't really aim my stuff to children. I've never done that. And yet people invariably make the comment that children respond to my stuff.

PC: Oh, really?

RG: Also, my work has changed a lot. I've done different things. I didn't draw much conclusion from that. I guess the humor is just a sort of release. I think most of the kind of humor I come up with—I don't think about it but at the last moment it sort of occurs to me sort of out of desperation. Which is certainly a kind of release to me. To continue with the humor bit, I never can tell a prepared joke. The only time I think of something that's funny is just at the last moment and it occurs to me to twist it in a sort of subversive way.

PC: It's kind of contemporaneous rather than—

RG: Yes. But it's like a moment when you can do it and somehow it eases the tension like if a situation is strained and you just give up on it. I guess it's like giving up on it.

PC: We talked a little bit before about the films and movies. But were you interested in things like the fan magazines, and characters, and all that?

RG: No, I wasn't. Not at that time. I was interested in production. I read a lot about movie making. That fascinated me. In a sense I had gotten the idea of Hollywood filmmaking from reading about it, which always stuck with me. That kind of filmmaking, the sets and everything was the kind that appealed to me. More than sort of photographic filmmaking, you know. I like the artificial kind. That's the kind I like.

PC: Where it's all controlled and put together.

RG: Right. Completely contrived.

PC: So you really didn't like documentary type films then?

RG: I do like them. But just for myself to do, more than to see the film I want to be in that sort of atmosphere. I want to make it so I can be around it. That's the fun of it.

PC: I see. You want to build a world that you can work in and do something,

RG: Yes. Exactly. The movies were a pretext for it almost, for having that situation, you know.

PC: You have mentioned literary ideas and I guess one could say literary affinities, and some of the things you have done have related to particular literary situations, like the Douanier Rousseau piece [*La Banquet pour le Douanier Rousseau*, 1963] that's been written about and all those people. Have you always had an interest in this history or literature? Or has that developed recently? Or is that just kind of another source?

RG: Well, if you do a performance you have a responsibility to the audience and that is sort of time, the fact that they come and spend the time being there and in order to take some time or to encompass time you almost need—if it's dance that's one thing, but if it's theater something almost has to happen. I suppose there has to be some sort of movement or change. Or even, say, for instance, I could think of sculpture as theater but then it's totally static. It is sort of theater if you think of it that way but it's completely static. But if you move out from that still staying with the visual object or sort of visual theater, then you have slowly like a sort of monolithic responsibility of variety.

PC: What about the pieces you made that you walk through and move around in, you know, like *Supermarket* or *City of Chicago*?

RG: That's kind of theater I think. It's some sort of theater.

PC: It's different from sculpture. You kind of look at it from three feet away or something.

RG: Right. You see, there's like a tradition of that. For instance, they used to do big scroll paintings. You know, a guy would float down the Mississippi and make a painting—

PC: Oh, they used to do those great panoramas.

RG: Yes. And they would take them around as a show.

PC: Right. And people would walk around.

RG: Right. People would pay to come in. And that was like a sort of spectacle or a show or an attraction. And then also the dioramas would be the same thing. People would come in to see a big picture, which was kind of extra magical because it had these lighting effects and stuff, kind of like 3-D. It was like big and people would come to see it. And I think that that's the area that I like to think about. I like to think about starting from that point of view. I think basically I have a sort of intuition that art is a little dull for me. I mean, just formal art is dull to me.

PC: You mean formal in the sort of standard things?

RG: I mean painting. I mean, I'm glad people do it but to me personally—

PC: You want more dimension to it?

RG: Yes. I just feel I would like to have more dimensions. I want more activity.

PC: You mean in terms of what you see? Or what you can do with it? Or how you have to look at it? Or what it demands that you do to see what it's all about?

RG: Actually, what really gets complex is that some artists that I admire very much, for instance, de Kooning or even Pollock, American artists, there is a great sense of spectacle and something special. You know, like intellectually they did such a show. It was a show, you know, it was really exciting. It was like rock and roll. You see those abstract expressionist paintings as like a big rock and roll band out there. It was exciting. And I guess I was just trying to get that type of excitement somehow into my work.

PC: Well, do you read much? I mean, I see you have all these marvelous old issues of *Popular Science* and things around.

RG: I'm a slow reader. But I like books very much. I have a lot of books. I'm real lucky. I don't know why—I don't know who else likes these books, but they're coming out with all those great picture books.

PC: What kind?

RG: All the ones on the movies, and the camp books. God, they're making them on everything I like—trolley cars, even subways—and they're mostly pictures. The writing is pretty dumb basically. All kinds of colorful stuff like carousels and so on. The next thing there'll be one on the history of roller coasters.

PC: Well, there's a great one—*The Index of American Design*. Have you seen that? A two-volume thing of all the folk art and stuff, mechanical banks, everything.

RG: No! Really?

PC: Yes. They just brought it out in a new version recently,

RG: Actually, one of the latest things that Mimi and I are getting very interested in is collecting tin toys. We've done it slowly. Do you have—you don't happen to have a collection of tin toys do you?

PC: No, but I know what they are. That's fantastic. When did you start that?

RG: We collect a lot of the kind of stuff we like, all kinds of stuff on our travels. The first time we were in Italy we picked up three nice big pieces of Sicilian carts, the wrought iron pieces on wood and lots of panels from the carts. I don't know if you've seen those. Very nice ones. And some other Sicilian folk stuff. You know, we were getting stuff like that. Maybe it was about three or four years ago that we suddenly started getting more and more of these tin toys. Now we have quite a few of those and we're really getting more interested in them.

PC: Are you interested in the activity of collecting, or are these just objects that interest you and you accumulate them?

RG: I like the activity of collecting, yes.

PC: You don't collect art, though, of any kind, do you?

RG: Yes, I like to collect art too, I do.

PC: Do you exchange things with people?

RG: Yes. Plus I've actually bought stuff. It's fun to buy something. Like all of a sudden you get this idea that you can have it. It's just an idea that comes over me. It's a crazy concept. All you have to do is exchange money for this object.

PC: That's all. It's always money. What kind of things do you read besides the magazines that are around?

RG: Let me see what I do read. Gosh, it's embarrassing—you wouldn't believe that I have all these reading projects. I have several reading projects. In fact, right this minute I'm supposed to be reading a three-hundred-page new novel by Michael Brownstein. I'm going to illustrate the cover for it. It's just going to be published. I have to read that. And, you know, we are in contact with a lot of the New York poets especially the ones that read around St. Marks. And they send us all these publications. I don't know if you've seen them,

PC: Oh, yes,

RG: They're very prolific. We have their publications so I read their stuff. Which is good. I think it's terrific stuff.

PC: Who do you like in that group? That's Anne Waldman and all those people.

RG: Yes. I like her. Actually, she and Michael Brownstein live together. I've liked Kenneth Koch's work for a long time. I've worked with him. And who else do I like? There's a great guy—I wish I could recall his name—just recently I was reading his work. But it's almost interchangeable to me. Poetry is not that clear to me. I can't really see it clearly stylistically. And I can't really define the personalities between different writers.

PC: It's very hard sometimes because they write—

RG: Yes. Well, that's it. But then I can't clearly see where they copy each other either. It's unfortunate. But that's all right. But at periods I enjoy reading them.

PC: Do, you ever go to the readings there at St. Marks Place?

RG: Yes. It's nice. Actually, they are very encouraging to us. And also through working with Rudy Burckhardt because he's always been very committed to the poets. And they've helped him; they showed his movie at the church. And I've sort of found out that in New York the different disciplines in art don't really crossbreed too much. I gather that a guy who makes 16mm films would never go to see an art show.

PC: Hardly ever. That's true.

RG: Never! And vice versa. I don't think that a painter would ever go to one of these film places unless there was a real personal reason.

PC: You see more painters and artists at films than you do the other way.

RG: Well—they might go to three-dollar films, but I don't know if they would go a 16mm film.

PC: Oh, sometimes they do. It's amazing. Do you think though that there should be more integration between, say, painters and writers and poets and sculptors and filmmakers?

RG: Well, sometimes I wish there was because like with the films every time you meet somebody new it's like you've got to start all over, because they don't know what you're doing. At a certain point you really wish you were communicating more because it's so much trouble to explain what you've already done. It wastes time. Whereas if you had a body of audience and

people that were with you, you know, like maybe that's the good culture that's like more simplified and more in unison that way. It would be nice.

PC: I don't know—it fascinates me because I see all these different cells usually unrelated. Every once in a while somebody jumps through to another one.

RG: Yes. We sometimes joke with Rudy Burckhardt that the poets probably think he's the only person who makes films.

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE1]

PC: This is Side 4. Where did you meet Rudy Burckhardt? Where does he come into all this?

RG: He comes in right on cue here because I met him just when we came back from Europe. I had met him briefly before through Alex Katz and I really admired.... You see, there's a whole underground theater thing that's so different than the uptown theater or Broadway and it's hard to describe it even.

PC: Well, it's private theater.

RG: But Alex had talked to me about Rudy and how he was making these home movies except that they were like real movies. Right away I sensed what a terrific idea that was. He's a terrific painter and I saw, some of his paintings. It was nice meeting him but we didn't really get to know each other until later. Somehow we met right at the beginning of 1962 and he just said, "Let's make a film together." And I was very up to doing it. We started in on this project. I had done what I called paper movies—[interruption]

PC: You did make a film with him quite soon after you met him though, didn't you?

RG: Yes. We made *Shoot the Moon* [1962]. The idea of *Shoot the Moon* wasn't specifically a remake of [Georges] Méliès's *Journey to the Moon*, or *A Trip to the Moon*, but that's exactly what I had in the back of my mind that it was a remake.

PC: Kind of updating and changing.

RG: Yes. I had three people—three friends: Mimi, and this guy Steve Pepper, and Joan Herbst who I pictured in the role of the Moononauts. And I wanted them to have these characters.

PC: Do you think of particular people as characters when you make films?

RG: Yes, absolutely.

PC: I mean, you conceive of so-and-so being a character in the film?

RG: Right. Yes, that's kind of the collage bit. I'd rather try to have the character come out of the person.

PC: So you just kind of provide the story and direction and give them the place and the costumes?

RG: Yes. Right. It's fun you know. It's a wonderful idea thinking of a character.

PC: It's like improvisation. You give them the problem and they solve it. That's fun. How long did it take you to make a film like that?

RG: Boy, it was a lot more to chew than I expected. Well, it took a whole year. It took actually nine months of filming time. I had this small loft on Twenty-sixth Street and I was living there by myself. Mimi was living with her folks. The first set was a rocket. I built the interior of a rocket ship. It took me two months. Everything I started would take me six weeks. You know, when you first start out as an artist you really don't know how long a thing is going to take.

PC: You start it and do it and when it's done it's done.

RG: After a while you start getting the idea that it takes a certain amount of time no matter what it is. Now I start to think of ideas like loading a truck; like okay every idea, like making a print, say, that's like unloading a boxcar of a hundred-pound sacks of flour; that's about how much effort it's going to take; do you want to do it? You know, it's so easy to talk about—it's one

thing to talk about it and it's another thing to do it. It's hard to get those two things together. Anyway, I built the set by myself. At that time I hadn't worked with anybody. That's the thing that slowed things up. Since then I've worked a lot with people. But I did all the work myself then. Then Rudy would come over. We'd get the actors together. Quite elaborate costumes were made. Rudy's wife, Yvonne [Jacquette] did the costumes. She worked very hard and did a wonderful job. One trouble we had was because we made the costumes out of sort of cardboard and paper and they would just get wrecked between each scene. They were in horrible shape and she'd have to rework them. And, for instance, we would arrive at the set and not really have too much of an idea of what we were going to shoot. We'd have to kind of improvise the story or the action. Basically the film is kind of a bunch of vignettes and it's like a silent film. It has titles. Of course, there is no dialogue so it's broken up into scenes. Building the sets with each thing taking six weeks and then shooting and then waiting another week for everybody to come back for retakes, that all took nine months. It ended up being about twenty-seven minutes long. Everybody loves it now. At the time it came out it wasn't as popular as I had hoped. I thought it would be a popular film. You know, it was really my intention that—

PC: You mean that it could be shown around and would do things?

RG: Yes. I had a very naive idea that if you did the best you could it would come out good and would be accepted. But with that film I found out that that is not so. You can't guarantee ahead with movies. They're too tricky. They're really a tricky thing. Very tricky.

PC: Did you do a lot of work as far as lighting and filming or camera ideas, projection?

RG: You see, I'm not a cameraman; I'm not a cameraperson. Actually, the only filming I've done was through some kind of dire necessity when nobody else was available.

PC: So Rudy really did all the camera work?

RG: He did all the camera work. So it was a collaboration in the sense that the initial idea was mine, the general idea of the film was mine, and the visuals are mine; we would sort of work on the action a little bit together. Basically I kind of directed it but Rudy directed also.

PC: You've made quite a few films since then, haven't you?

RG: Yes. That was made in 1962. I didn't make another film, except for a couple of short things, until 1966, which was *Fat Feet*. *Fat Feet* was made with Yvonne Andersen and Dominic Falcone the people who had had the Sun Gallery. So we had a separation from working together from, oh, 1959, a period of about six years. Then we got back together on this film.

PC: What got you together again?

RG: They would come to New York periodically. And they would stay with us. They would always bring the camera. It would just be so much fun to have the camera around that we concocted a short film called *Apollinaire Unexpected*. Which was shot in one day and never really finished; it was sort of finished but not quite. It was so much fun working together again. The next year when they came back to New York they were going to be around for three days, I had this whole vision for *Fat Feet*, of what it would be. I got the idea for the film in the middle of the night. I thought we could do it in three days. We started building the feet and we built a couple of cars. Then of course they had to leave. They were living in Lexington, Massachusetts. They called and said, "We can rent a studio in Arlington, Massachusetts. Do you want to do the film? Shall we take it?" Mimi and I said, "Okay, we'll do it." So suddenly it was a much bigger project. We went up there and worked for about six weeks on the sets and props and costumes and everything. Then we shot the film in two weeks. We had a terrible schedule because they wanted the space back. We did the animation afterwards. We worked on it for about four months altogether. Then Yvonne did the final cutting and put on the sound.

PC: You'd made sound films before that though, hadn't you?

RG: Well, you see *Shoot the Moon* is sound but it has an original score by Seymour Barab that's put over. The 8mm film—*Unwelcome Guests* was silent. Then after *Fat Feet* we did *Tappy Toes*. Mimi and I went to Chicago and I built the environment *Chicago* for the Allan Frumkin Gallery. Then I had the bright idea to make a film around that. We got all Chicago artists and friends we knew and made this campy type Busby Berkeley type film using that piece as a background. We shot it in the gallery under terrible working conditions; just awful.

PC: In the Frumkin Gallery in Chicago?

RG: Yes.

PC: It's so tiny.

RG: Oh, it was awful. It was tiny. And we had to shoot like from five o'clock to three in the morning,

PC: Oh, right. All night.

RG: Do you know Richard Hunt?

PC: Yes.

RG: He's just going to have a show tomorrow. He's in it. And Ellen Lanyon. Ed Flood was the cameraman. We shot the film but didn't finish it. We brought it back to New York. So it was started in 1968 and not finished until 1970 because we spent several months working on the animation and adding that. So it was a long drawn out project. Then we didn't make another movie until we made *Hippodrome Hardware* in 1972.

PC: I haven't seen that.

RG: Which took nine months to make.

PC: What's that one about?

RG: You see, I did a play here called *Hippodrome Hardware* in the spring of 1972. It was part of an evening of seven events which we called the Big Seven Unit Show. Involved in that were Bob Whitman, Charles Atlas, Douglas Kelly, Jim Anderson, and a couple of other guys. We had the idea to shoot the play as a film just as a sort of record. Then we got very hung up on trying to really translate it. It got much more complicated. That was almost our Waterloo for films.

PC: In what way?

RG: The last two films have almost been Waterloos—*Hippodrome Hardware* and *Tappy Toes*. Both of these were difficult projects to pull off.

PC: Have some of the pieces like *Chicago* been—as you thought of them—has a film evolved concurrently? Is that in the back of your head? Or does that just come out of somewhere after the fact? Like the *Supermarket*?

RG: I think one thing that happens in my work—I think that I have a style, but I don't really have like an image. My images are so kind of spread out.

PC: How do you mean "spread out?"

RG: I think I have a style that one could recognize generally; or even several styles. But so many artists produce a product that is sort of logical like there are big ones and small ones, this size and that size, but they all look like the artist's work. Whereas with my stuff generally each thing is kind of like jumping off all over again. And more recently I've sort of been thinking along the line that in order to find the real—what the work is about—eventually you start wondering. It's like we've been talking that our life and our work and our life style and all that stuff are pretty much enmeshed. I often think, what am I really trying to get at? And then I start thinking I'm interested in so many different things. I start thinking that the people that are closest to me—my family, my friends, and so forth, okay they're the closest thing, they're the most real thing; and then through that, that the work itself is what I'm closest to, so that the work starts getting like a history or a mythology that becomes its own subject in a way. I thought there's almost something incestuous about my work. I will do work in one medium and then try to exploit it in another. Maybe it's a mistake. It has caused problems.

PC: What kind of problems?

RG: Well, it makes a sort of bastard work. It's pure in one form but if you try to translate it to another you run into some tricky—

PC: Which one becomes the bastard form then?

RG: Well, for instance, the play. I wanted to do a play. I made up the play from the people who were working on it; I made it up as we worked on it.

PC: Like Eisenstein used to do his films that way.

RG: Possibly.

PC: Yes. Stanislavsky was the whole thing.

RG: Yes? Is that "the method? "

PC: Sure, because they all lived together and worked together and somebody would write a play. Between his writing of the play and the actual play could be a year and it would be a different thing.

RG: No kidding?

PC: Oh, yes, sure.

RG: Well then, that's sort of it. It's kind of like using—trying to find out something I guess from the work. It has a sort of ritual quality I think. And sort of schitzy too a little bit I guess if you're not quite sure of one thing one way or another.

PC: But what intrigues me is the fact that you do have these images that sometimes appear flat like on the door or in prints which are flat, but then they also appear in three-dimensional objects, or, you know, like the painting of the gun and bicycle there almost turn up as a three-dimensional character at some point. Do those things evolve consciously? Or do they kind of happen as things go on?

RG: Well, specifically, let's take the *Discount Store* [1970-71], for instance. I think at that time I had a very definite idea to take sort of like the fun house idea, to take a person and put him in a situation that was so disorienting that he would sort of be cast away from the normal world, would really be in an abnormal world.

PC: But still it's all the things from the (quote) "real world." But you change everything.

RG: You see, I kind of think—and that's going back to the experience I had in seeing other places—that it isn't so real. What's interesting about it, it's like doing the *Discount Store* out in Minneapolis. I would draw in the store and people were completely unaware of me because they were so totally unselfconscious. But actually they're sort of natives, sort of funny natives walking around doing their daily activities. You could make an anthropological film about them and it would be funny, it would look exotic in some other kind of culture. And I like that sort of unreal—possibly it has a sort of religious quality too.

PC: In what way?

RG: Well, religion is sort of philosophy; it's like a sort of life raft you might say. I guess that I wanted to create.... Well, another image I always had was the Noah's Ark image, I mean the idea of Noah making this compact thing. He built it and then he sort of saved himself by work, by building this thing and floating away. And it was like man triumphing through hard work and a kind of simple mechanical ingenuity.

PC: But he doesn't come out looking like John Huston though, does he?

RG: No.

PC: Did you see him in the film?

RG: No, I didn't see that.

PC: Oh, he's incredible. He's got all the animals walking into the Ark. An incredible piece of production.

RG: But I was conscious of the idea of making stuff that sort of bleeps you up, like really busy. It was supposed to be busy.

PC: You mean active and angular and —

RG: And in a way was partly—the idea was supposed to be a joke on Minimal.

PC: Oh, really?

RG: Yes. You see it's a little bit cooler than everybody expected because the whole idea was like one great big. . . . You see, my real idea of the *Store* was to have the store itself like in a box that you would walk into a store and that it would all be in there. So the *Store* is almost like a minimal piece. It's a contained piece of sculpture and then you walk in and it's like fractured, you know, because that's the way the places are.

PC: Right. With the bright lights and everything. Oh, that's marvelous.

RG: So it was partly conscious. But then a lot of things happened that I wasn't conscious of. In some ways it worked better than I expected. For instance, people really seemed to get a kick out of the jump between a real person and the sculpture. They would constantly say what a kick they got out of that and thinking that somebody was part of the show and all that stuff. And I wasn't that interested in that particular effect.

PC: Are there a lot of things that happen as you start building something as complex as that? , Do you make drawings? Do you make sketches? What kind of procedure do you follow?

RG: On the *Discount Store* I did start to make a mock-up. But, you see, it was built in two months; we had two months flat start. It was made at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Mimi and I went up there. They had a carpenter and a couple of hippies lying around. That was supposed to be our staff. And it wasn't enough. One problem we have is that because the stuff we do requires a tremendous amount of time and also money and energy a lot of times the institutions really aren't quite up to this kind of thing. It puts a big strain on them. They really aren't.

PC: You mean, what, financing something like that? And getting space for it?

RG: Well, they just don't work that hard. One thing about being an artist is you are self-employed and you work a lot. It's very common to work ten or twelve hours a day and work seven days a week with no breaks or anything. I mean, you don't have to get up so early in the morning but you do work all that time. And I found that, gee, there just weren't enough people to work on it. They gave me this big space. I always wondered what Martin Friedman of the Walker Art Center had in his mind, what he thought I was going to make. I wouldn't have done it if I had known what it was.

PC: What did he say? "Here's some space. Do something."

RG: He wanted me to make this discount store and he took me out there and showed me this place. It was vast, vast. It's overwhelming. He had seen my Chicago piece and liked it. He knew—saw—that I was a detail person, that I did go into detail. All I could think of was, he must want the store, he wants the real thing. He gave me this great big space. It was for a show called *Figures in Environment* [*Figures/Environments*, 1970]. It was a good show, a very good show and had good people in it. My piece was the only one that was customized for the show, built especially for the show.

PC: What was that, one of those big shopping centers around Minneapolis?

RG: Target. It was a specific one. We went out specifically. It's quite a store. But anyway it was such an emergency type of operation. Mimi was painting like crazy. She found out she was pregnant on the job but worked like a dog anyway all through the whole thing. Rusty Morgan was commuting from Wisconsin about two hundred miles away. He was the key man on the Chicago piece so I called him in because we worked so well together. And I got my brother Spencer Grooms to come from San Francisco to work. I met two sculptors from Minneapolis—Archie Peltier and Dave Brown; they were working on it. There was one professional carpenter there that worked on it. And there must have been maybe half a dozen other peripheral people working on it. There was one day when I think there were fifteen people working on it in two different areas. I was just so spread out.

PC: How would you do things with all these people? What would you have to do to set up the activity so they could carry it on?

RG: The thing is when you're making instructions there's so much work. Like if you make a

drawing, okay, first somebody has to solve that out. Okay, that takes some time. So you can start thinking of the next thing you're going to do. It's scary, you know, thinking what you're going to do. When I hadn't done it too much I would worry about giving people jobs, how I'd keep them busy. But I found out it's not so hard.

PC: Because they all take time.

RG: Right. So generally it's kind of held together by the drawing. And I've always just been real lucky to get people that were nice to me; they would cooperate and do my style. My style, especially my broadest, comic strip style, which is the *Discount Store* style more than any other, is kind of public knowledge anyway. Everybody kind of knows about it. So I sort of contrived it in a way that everybody—

PC: Could work on it.

RG: Yes. It's pretty simplified. Then when we did the *Astronaut* we had a large group. Archie Peltier was really like co-author of the work. It was my conception in a way, but he realized so much of the engineering and so forth.... That was made in a month. That was incredibly fast. But anyway the *Astronaut* was like making one big man. And it was almost like a tactile thing. And with so many people it gets into a very interesting kind of tribal thing.

PC: When did you start using so many people?

RG: It was just necessity. It wasn't planned. It started with the movies. Like I said, I always liked movies with lots of people. I like the big spectacles. I just dug the idea it was like sort of physical or something to have so many people, it was a sign of quality, how many extras they had made for a good movie.

PC: Five armies coming over—

RG: Last night we were watching the *Knights of the Round Table* and I always thought it was bad if you saw any green behind the extras. That meant that they had run out of extras.

PC: So the using of a lot of other people just grew naturally along with the general activity?

RG: Yes. And then when I went to Chicago to do *Chicago*, I was doing it by myself. Off and on all the time I've worked by myself. Right today I'm working by myself even though I've just recently been working with a lot of people. I keep going back and forth.

PC: You don't make any of these large projects by yourself? They're really all commissions, aren't they?

RG: It's usually something like that. Like *Chicago* was commissioned by Frumkin. The *Discount Store* was commissioned by Martin Friedman at the Walker Art Center. The *Astronaut* was really for a show at the Guggenheim that was a bunch of artists. Irving Kriesberg was the key guy. It was the damndest thing. I was willing to put in just lithographs or something, but these guys really wanted a showboat piece; they wanted a big piece.

PC: So they got it.

RG: I kind of got my back pushed to the wall. The only thing I could think of was to do something really spectacular. At least that was fun.

PC: What was the idea of that exhibition? The one at the Guggenheim?

RG: They had an idea it was supposed to be artists—it was kind of a political idea that the artists would —

PC: Fill their own space or something, wasn't it?

RG: Frankly I don't really think it works. Kriesberg was virtually the curator. You know how the most political person always takes over; or one that's good at that type of organization, or who is conscientious about that type of thing. So I wasn't real impressed. I don't know.

PC: Do you think Friedman was happy with what you ended up building there? Did you get a response?

RG: I don't know. That's a good question. They never called me back. And I never showed anything else there. But he's a cool guy. You see, he's a very sophisticated person, you know, and he loves cool art. I think he just has a streak of show biz. And he liked *Chicago*. He saw it at the Venice Biennale. It had drawn very well there. I mean, it got a lot of attention and crowds and so on.

PC: How did you like being in the Venice Biennale?

RG: Oh, it was fun.

PC: Did you go over for it and do all that

RG: Yes. Actually, it was kind of a drag. But it was fun. You see, that was 1968, that was a real political year when the students were picketing, that was the year of the riots in Paris. So that, in fact, you felt like a bum or something for showing there. And then there was Vietnam and the question whether we should show at all and all that kind of stuff. My feeling was that we should show. It seemed positive to me; I felt positive about showing. The funny thing that happened was that because of the political upheaval the artists from all the pavilions had to get together. You know, like somehow you think that here were all these artists who were selected to show and that it would look like something if we all got together. When we got together it was the scruffiest looking bunch of people. There was absolutely no homogeneous look or anything. There were tall, short, old, young. They were just a very ineffectual-looking force. Almost invisible, you might say.

PC: But, you know, that is, or was, until then or a little after, one of the great international exhibitions.

RG: Oh yes, right. There was a lot of sentimentality about it. Actually, I thought it might rub off on me. You know, a lot of people used to go there all the time from America. I mean, you know, gallery-going types, and collectors and dealers and so forth. It was like a political scene. Someone said to me—I can't quite remember the exact words—"You'll never forget this no matter what happens." It was like pretty fraternal, like being a Mason or something. And I felt maybe they were right; maybe I won't forget. And also, you know you'll never go again, that no matter who you become that's your only shot at Venice. It was pretty stupid and bureaucratic, I mean, we could hardly go in ourselves. Every day at the gate nobody ever recognized us, the guards and so on. It was ridiculous. And it was very snobbish and all that crap.

PC: Oh, yes, it is. I want to talk about your going to Cape Kennedy and doing all of that business. How did that come about and who was involved with that? It was the *Astronaut* again, I guess?

RG: Well, you see, I'd done the *Discount Store* and I had this idea: look, I've been successful; I've done these big subjects. I was kind of on the look [out] for another big subject. Like the guy that does the movie, he's kind of checking out other scripts that might fit in this category? You see, I hadn't even picked the *Discount Store*, Martin Friedman picked that. It was his subject. And, like, you know, I'll take on anything in the society. I was getting that kind of attitude in a way. I was working at the Bank Street Lithograph atelier and lo and behold, one day Walter Cunningham, a real astronaut, came by. I met the guy and he was terrific. I was really impressed with him. My original concept of the project would be to make a sort of portrait like a real portrait thing studying these astronauts. I was fascinated by his actual person and the sort of myth around him and so forth.

PC: What qualities? How would you describe them?

RG: Alex Katz was there and he said Cunningham was like a dancer, like an old man in a young man's body. His face looked old and grayish but he had an athletic body. And he looked good, you know. He was an interesting guy. He's kind of small and interestingly scaled physically.

PC: That's because what's his name at Bank Street used to be involved with the astronauts.

RG: Right. You mean George. He was a PR guy for NASA and so he had a lot of contacts with NASA. And it was through him and an astronomer we know (who happened to be Mimi's mother's tenant at the time) who had been working uptown around Columbia in the brain center up there where there's a lot of astronomy and computer stuff. So it just dawned on me to do like a space program thing. But my original idea was not what I did. What I actually did was my last idea. I wanted to do more like the production, like all the people who work on the program, the

factories, the training, and all that.

PC: But that would be enormous, wouldn't it?

RG: I know. It would be an enormous kind of thing, a World's Fair type of thing. So we got in touch with Washington. It turned out that they have an art program and have always had and have always asked artists down. They were real nice. This guy down there, Jim Dean, is a very nice man and showed us around. They set it up for us. We went down to Cape Kennedy. We were drawing the rocket from a quarter of a mile away and great stuff like that. We never actually got on the rocket. It's real tight security stuff. You really can't get in too close for the kind of thing I was after at the time. I really don't know where the idea of just doing him on the moon came from. It was the most common idea I could think of. That became the idea.

PC: Well, at that time also it was the kind of thing that everybody around wanted to see.

RG: Yes. And now it seems better than my other idea. I don't know what form that other idea would have taken.

PC: Do you have any of those immense projects in the works now?

RG: Well, this Picasso thing. This is really a study for it. I want it to be pretty big. It will be big. If it's realized it will be a kind of deep diorama type of thing.

PC: What, like *Mr. and Mrs. Rembrandt*?

RG: Yes, right. It would be closer to *Mr. and Mrs. Rembrandt* than, say, to the *Discount Store*, but on this large-scale like the picture over there.

PC: How did that Rembrandt piece grow? I've read various things about it. What interested you in him as a subject? Is he a painter you like?

RG: Yes. I've always liked Rembrandt; I've looked at him a lot. I always liked him. He's so psychological and emotional. And, I don't know, they're so sentimental or something, so rich; there's like some sort of real rich sentiment in them. Then I didn't look at them for a long time. One thing about doing the piece, I didn't even want to look at Rembrandts while I was doing it. I didn't want it to be a Rembrandt. I wanted it to be my piece. And I was just thinking about him. So it was modern in that sense.

PC: It's not a rebuilt Rembrandt.

RG: Yes, it's not like that at all. I wanted it to be completely like the humor and the textures and so forth to definitely allude to the present, I mean sort of our sensibility. Just throw me back into any period. I just love history. I like periods of time and trying to get involved in those textures and so on of any period. The way that piece was started was I had been making some flat paintings. People would come around and wouldn't even look at them. I'd get kind of bugged. So I wanted to do something a little more aggressive that would cause a little attention. You have to do these things. Generally people won't look at art anyway. That's why you have to do something grandstandish to even make them turn around just for a second. So I had this idea to do a self-portrait in a suit of armor. But that had that period idea. Then I had this brown pillow and I was just going to do Rembrandt's head as a different idea; then I was going to do Rembrandt's bust, just the bust. Mimi looked at it and thought that I should do the whole figure. So I then did Rembrandt and the chair. Then of course it occurred to me to do Mrs. Rembrandt.

PC: And it grew and it grew and it grew.

RG: Yes, That's an interesting thing. I find that when you do something right off the bat usually it's sort of like conventional art. But then if you take what you've done and try to go out away from its edges then it sort of becomes not like art. I mean, it changes the scale of it.

PC: How do you mean?

RG: Well, what you originally do—unfortunately what you carry around a lot of times your first realization is dull and very common. But then if you start to get into that and really say, "Oh, well, what is it? I'll try to make it more of what it is, I'll make it bigger, make the edges out further," then that suddenly changes the scale and it gives it a kind of originality. And in doing that it becomes real and not like art. Which I think is good. I mean, it's more vital; it has a

vitality which art should have, which it does have. It becomes art instead and not like art. I know what it is: when you try to make art you fall way short; that's what it is. You fall way short of the mark. You're up against a lot of stiff competition. But then you start expanding this original attempt and say, "What is it? Let's make it completely that. Let's do it all the way," then it begins to make itself, it just starts doing itself. Like if I did a portrait of you and if I just did your portrait and it was isolated on the canvas it's kind of conventional. But then if I thought, well, if I put your body, well, it would probably be scaled to your head and it wouldn't be like you because it would be a funny shape. It would be already a different shape. And all those things have formal interest too. It becomes kind of more formally interesting. That's the fun stuff.

PC: That's fascinating. You've mentioned one thing I want to ask you about. And that was Mimi's comment on the Rembrandt. Does she talk about things? Do you discuss work in progress or ideas?

RG: Oh, yes, definitely. Oh, sure. I'm definitely open to change. That's what's nice. There isn't that ego and all that stuff when you're actually working. And also when we're working on a big project everybody kind of gets the general idea and tries to do a good job. And usually that really requires everybody's commitment and concentration. So ego problems are lost.

PC: But, say, on something like the *Department Store*, do you paint certain parts of it? Or do other people paint parts of it? Do you do something that ties it together?

RG: I do most of the painting. Mimi and I do the painting. She's a wonderful painter and really I've conceived my stuff in a lot of ways in the way she paints. I've picked up a style from her in a way especially when I work with her. I have an idea how it's going to come out. And I like it. It's like a "found" object almost. I was going to say that the original drawing especially of wooden stuff, sets it up and then the final painting.... Usually that's how the style is fairly compatible since I cover almost all of the surface.

PC: Right. I'm curious about Picasso over there since he already has turned up in other things you've done, like the banquet Douanier Rousseau business. Is he an important character for you?

RG: Oh, absolutely, yes.

PC: In what way though?

RG: I don't know, just a great inspirational leader. I've just gotten so much pleasure out of his work. Possibly I said earlier that I was terribly blocked out by him. I couldn't think of anything except what he did. You know, you get through that period somehow; you just kind of muddle through and I do think you can get through it. So that now it's nice for me to go back, especially since his death, and look at his stuff again and to like re-digest what he was doing in both his life and his work. He was a sensational man. He was fantastic. Also I don't like cliché characters. I don't know why. I like guys that seem to be completely, you know, figured out, gone over. And then you go back and they haven't been at all really, you know, because it's all a mistake. I guess my interest in history makes me want to do that, to look at it again.

PC: So, in other words, he's a lot more than you might think from normal looking at, you know, cursory observation?

RG: Also, too, actually you live different experiences in your life. You can kind of see more of what he must have been going through. Like at first you think it's one way and you figure out, well, gee, the kind of responsibility. Then finally it seemed rather nightmarish. His life became sort of horrible. I think. He became sort of a prisoner.

PC: You mean of the world he built around him and the dealers and the women and the children?

RG: Yes, It was kind of fiendish. His fame. He was all alone in fact. Because, you know, I think for an artist to work basically it's just pretty humble work. First of all, you have to be almost humble and relaxed to do it. The most frightening thing is to realize that it's not working, that you're not doing it, that it's not coming out good. That certainly is a very frightening realization. So that you have to be kind of basic to do it. But if a person becomes such a celebrity.... Well, he handled it very well. I don't think he ever got out of position; I don't think they ever got him out of position; I mean, away from his work. He always stayed right in there; he kept working right up to the last. And I was very fascinated the way he didn't come to those last

commemorative banquets and stuff. You know they wanted him to come. And I think that final one just right before he died the whole town was like Picassoville. And he didn't come down. And I think that was terrific that he wouldn't bow. And I think in a good way that was like his subversion. In a way he really believed in an artist as a subversive.

PC: Why do you think that's such a popular idea these days?

RG: Well, I'm afraid it's because the general society is so mediocre, I mean, at least visually. I'm afraid people really are on a pretty mediocre plane. You know, their intellect as far as the visual arts are concerned is so low it's frightening. And real art is on such a high place and it has been such an incredible tradition of it. It actually requires a sort of technology and science to do it. I don't talk about this much, but I mean there is a certain formalism that you have to take into consideration. It's almost like it won't hold together if it isn't there somewhere. You know, it's not good unless it's in there.

PC: You mean the concept?

RG: Yes, the formal structure of it. You know, the bones of it are in there no matter how you disguise them. Whether you want to show them is one thing; whether you don't is another, if you want to fool around it. And I guess that's why.... Mostly I kind of live just now out in New Jersey. You know, I was talking to a guy with a TV program and I just kind of realize how different probably our lives are. It seems the same on the surface but probably it isn't at all. And he has to deal with these people at a television station. Doing crazy stuff is so natural to me it's just a normal route to me, I don't think twice about it. But for somebody who's got to prove it and talk in it and really react in it that's a different world. I just don't know how they ever deal with it. And of course Picasso had it very bad. People thought he was nuts. Almost all his life, for forty years, they kept saying, "the guy is a phony, he's a nut." So he must have been very conscious of that and conscious of this kind of mediocre level.

PC: Do you think it's possible to improve that generally? Or do you think it's always going to be with us that way?

RG: Yes. I think so on a personal level, like on a small level the thing that's frightening is that you go out and you see these vast cities, vast subdivisions, and you just realize the enormous number of people there are. And art is such a personal thing. It's just one person, one ego, almost singly envisioning the world to his or her own size. It's so small it's sort of ridiculous; old-fashioned really.

PC: Have you ever thought of doing large outdoor pieces?

RG: Oh, yes. I'd like to very much. Converse to this, and like the show I had—the Rutgers World Show [*The Ruckus World of Red Grooms*, 1973]—has been so really popular, like people are always talking about Walt Disney and all that stuff. And it's tempting, you know. This idea of being popular is tempting. Like I say, you don't try to do it but if it somehow comes off it's great. I definitely work for an audience. It's just a small audience; I think it's rather small.

PC: Do you know what the audience is? Or who they are?

RG: At various times I've thought I knew what it was, but at other times I've lost contact. For instance in 1968 and thereabouts when there was so much activity in the universities and the whole hippie thing I felt that was the kind of audience I felt close to. But then that went so sour it became the worst imaginable scene and I kind of lost touch with it. I don't really know what happened. So then when I went to Rutgers and set up there on a university campus it was crazy. Everybody was kind of conservative and they just didn't know anything about art; they didn't know a thing. They had never seen any art at all.

PC: Really? That's fantastic. Ten years ago they had Kaprow and all those people.

RG: I know. That's what I thought. They didn't know a thing. The students there were like Rip van Winkle. So I started with a lot of trepidation. In fact, also the original comments like people would come in and say, "Hey, what's this supposed to be? What is this stuff?" The whole bit like it was abstract art; you know, just like it was abstract. I'm not kidding. There was a walk way and they could go by the art history classes. And even the teachers would say, "What is this?" Halloween or something?" In other words, they weren't seeing the style of the thing at all. And I thought, oh, my God! I was actually getting kind of pissed off. It was a drag, you know. It was getting to be an insult. But then when the show was set up it just went over terrifically. There

was no problem from then on. Once it was formally there they liked it. I've always felt that it's good to have the art context because it gives you something to go against. You see, if it wasn't art what would it be? It would be some sort of display. Display isn't very interesting. It's just flat; somehow it's flat. It just doesn't have vitality. There's nothing wrong with the way it's made. It's just that it doesn't have intelligence somehow. I think art is a wonderful technique as communication. It has an edge. It's something sharp. Maybe that's part of the subversive thing too: that it has an effect; it's political in many ways just because it can represent intelligence.

PC: Do you think that there is the idea of communication behind what you do? I mean, is there an intent of making statements that are obvious to you, or are not obvious that people have to ferret out? I mean, do you intend a kind of communication in the work?

RG: Well, I sort of grew up with the form versus content bit. So I was attracted to the abstraction of things because I felt it was much more open. The abstract approach was a much more open approach, you know, instead of, oh, let's say, for instance, if you're trying to make a point it becomes so closed off that it's not organic or it's not natural or something. You know, like you hear things on television where on the narration the guy is chopping away at the same point. Like I saw something on China the other night and he was harping on some point that he thought he had to get. I'd have to agree that it's senseless. I don't want to try to do that. I don't know what the point would be because I would say that art is a sort of mystical experience that I'm also interested in, that I've never really figured out and it's just a way of living and trying to transmit ideas and visions and stuff.

PC: Do you think that mystical experience is why you're making things after the fact, when it's installed, now and then?

RG: You see, you think about things for years, years. I mean, I may have been working an idea over for ten years, plus I may have done part of it and want to re-transfer it in a way. It's just amazing how long you think about things. And then suddenly you do them. It's just the craziest thing. So I did think about them all the time. I've told you that originally I felt very emotional while I worked and I've really gotten totally away from that and I now artificially induce it, you might say.

PC: What caused the change do you think?

RG: I think it's just an age thing. If you're an adolescent you're really sort of free, you know, have a very narrow viewpoint. And also there's so much work to do and so much to find out. I think you really find out. I think there's a purpose to it all. One does find out what they are doing. Even with a guy like Picasso, somehow the later works even if they're bad, even if they're awful, somehow they're really like him. He suddenly became Picasso. It almost looks like the way he wrote his name. Now maybe that's not good.

PC: Well, he became his own idea man.

RG: Yes. It becomes the essence. And I guess it is like a whole career thing. But it's all interlocked. I think it's all interlocked.

PC: Yes.

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 2]

PC: This is Side 5 - March 18, 1974. [Does] anyone call you Charles any more? Paul Cummings talking to Red Grooms. Or does everybody call you Red?

RG: My mother does. And people in Nashville.

PC: A few peers.

RG: I don't blame them. It's kind of awful for somebody to change his name. It's sort of awkward.

PC: I have friends who have changed their name two or three times and I always get them confused.

RG: I always want to stick with the regular name.

PC: There are various little things I want to talk about. One thing is where and when you met

Mimi. We haven't gotten that kind of straight.

RG: Okay. Good. I met her in Provincetown just by chance. Provincetown has this blessing of the fleet every year. It's a Portuguese tradition. Somehow we got on the same fishing boat. We didn't actually meet but I remembered her very distinctly from that time and she says she remembers me. So that would be in 1957. I saw her in Provincetown until we officially met, I guess in 1958 at this Phoenix Gallery. They had the first opening. We met outside. So that would be 1958. We were good friends until she left for Europe, which was probably in the fall of 1959. I went to Europe in the summer of 1960. We met again in Florence. We've been together ever since, that's since about 1959.

PC: That's fantastic. I didn't know it was that many years.

RG: Yes. We went together for five years—I'm sorry—it would be from 1960 and we got married in 1964 in Maine.

PC: In Maine? Where were you, at Skowhegan?

RG: No, in Belfast, Maine. We were up there; we shared a place with Rudy Burckhardt for one summer. That was our only Maine experience. It was nice there but Mimi thought it was too much green. I liked it a lot actually.

PC: Too green?

RG: Too much green.

PC: Well she's a city girl.

RG: Well, she's Provincetown, you see, which is the ocean. Belfast is strictly inland. She missed the ocean and the swimming.

PC: How much work do you do together on projects? I mean, is there sort of feedback? Do you talk about things with her?

RG: Oh, yes, there's a feedback all the time. Then when a big project comes up either through a commission or something like that I just naturally fall back on her for help and so far she has always been generous in giving it. It just feels natural when we're working on a big project because we've had the feedback before.

PC: So it works back and forth.

RG: Yes.

PC: That's terrific. I read one place that you did a mural with her in Florence somewhere.

RG: That's right.

PC: What was that all about? We haven't touched on that.

RG: Yes. That was like the shadow, puppet show. That was more her project than mine. Let me see if I can get this straight. There was an Italian who lived out in the country. He had this sort of soiree—I don't know how it was—once a week or something, maybe once a month. The intelligentsia of Florence would come out for these. I think they were mostly writers. I kind of think he was a defrocked priest. He had been some sort of underground character during World War II.

PC: Do you remember his name?

RG: Wait a minute—I'll get it after a while. You see, I never knew him very well. I was just on the periphery of knowing him through Mimi. I just can't remember his name right this minute. I guess Mimi went to some of these meetings or something. Anyway, he had a large library. It was a sort of gloomy Italian house really in the country. He stayed in bed all the time. He wanted us to paint—first it was going to be the kitchen. The farm family that worked the land lived—or this was also their kitchen. It was a big, old-fashioned Italian kitchen. We went in there to paint. I remember the first day we started out very big on the walls. I was painting a kind of procession with horses. Mimi was doing a sort of circus parade type thing. Big, though, and kind of colorful.

PC: Were they high walls like ten or twelve feet?

RG: Yes. They were ten or twelve feet; yes, that's the way I remember it. Fairly large. It was fun and I thought it was going well. It wasn't that sinister. It was kind of nice, you know, kind of light subject matter. It was okay while we were there. But after we left we found out that the farm family was just absolutely freaking out on it. They were very superstitious and they were threatening—

PC: You had the wrong kind of animals or some strange thing going on.

RG: Something, yes. They were threatening the boss of leaving or something, some kind of mutiny. So he transferred the job to his library where we painted this kind of—then we picked on this hell scene. I can't remember, I guess we finished it. I really don't know what it looks like. I just can't remember it.

PC: There are no photographs of it or anything?

RG: There are no photographs. It's possible that it's still there. I don't know. I could check with Mimi on his name. Do you want me to call up and find out?

PC: We may come back to it.

RG: I don't think I'm going to remember it. It may be there; maybe it can be looked up for posterity. He's probably buried it behind more bookshelves or something. It would be fun to dig it out.

PC: You've mentioned Hans Hofmann in Provincetown and you sort of went to a couple of classes but not really.

RG: Yes. Well, I went. Again, I went intending to be serious, but I just kind of lost interest. My mind drifted off.

PC: But did you see him around there in the summers after that?

RG: No, not really.

PC: So it was just that short period?

RG: Yes, it was that short period.

PC: Did you see him in New York ever?

RG: No. He was actually intended to be a father figure I suppose but it didn't work out in my case, although now I like his work very much. I really was turned on to his work in something like the 1961 Venice Biennale. I saw it out of context there and thought it was just terrific. I've liked it very much ever since. But at the time I was studying there I guess I was involved in what I wanted to do.

PC: It was the wrong place to be.

RG: Yes.

PC: It happens sometimes. There are also some small films you made like: *Spaghetti*, [*Spaghetti Trouble*, 1963] and *Big Sneeze* [*The Big Sneeze*, 1962], and *Umbrella*, *Umbrella* what?

RG: Oh, *Umbrella Bar*. That's these paper movies that are just like scrolls which are turned in a small box. I've made those just off and on

PC: Did you film them?

RG: Rudy has filmed some of them. He filmed some of them straight out. One of them was the basis for *Shoot the Moon*. I did the paper movie and then just took it literally straight out from there and we did the film. They varied in size. I did one long one about Yugoslavia.

PC: Oh, right, the travel—

RG: Yes. They were in the Rutgers World Show. They're in Venezuela now. I collected back as

many as I could, about a dozen I think. They're all down there.

PC: Do you think you'll continue making films? I mean, you seem to like going in and out of them every so often.

RG: Yes. I hope so. Mimi and I have a couple of projects that are sort of long-range projects. At least one I'd like to complete. So I hope so.

PC: Do they support themselves? I mean, eventually?

RG: I think that this kind of film hasn't really come into their own yet. I think someday they'll be much.... I have faith in them. But I think now it's sort of gosh, what can I say? What would it be like? Like the baby product that you have to nourish along through the other activities that are more profitable.

PC: Are these new projects for longer films, more elaborate ones?

RG: I don't know. I really don't know. The ones we made were as elaborate as we could make them at the time; I mean, the bigger one of the three or whatever it is, three or four large ones; it would be four. They run from about twenty to forty-five minutes. The way they're made is almost like a full film in some ways. Also the amount of time, since two of them have taken almost a year to make. And one stretched over two years.

PC: How do you find working back and forth on things like that? Because you obviously work on other things in between. Is it easy to jump from film into, you know, building something, or doing prints and then back?

RG: No, I don't think it's so easy. I mean, it's sort of sloppy, it's sort of messy. Some things are sort of clean work, I mean, just in a physical sense some things are dirty. This studio is good since it's permanent. Slowly I'm trying to get it on a better basis for what does seem like a good pattern of work. But that's all sort of in the air.

PC: You mean a better basis in terms of—

RG: Well, you know, just better shaped up, better equipped. You know, some of the work areas for more stationary work. It would be nice to have an area for film editing, an area for drawing. Those are two sort of clean type work things.

PC: Do you make drawings?

RG: Yes, sometimes I have periods. I'd like to make more but it all takes so much time. I can't keep up with it all fortunately, or unfortunately. Maybe unfortunately.

PC: How do you mean, it takes time for the drawings?

RG: Just recently I started making some gouaches just to have some pictures around because there's this big demand for prints. I really need to have some pictures for people to look at. Besides I want to do it. But they take about four or five hours' work every day. So it's hard to take them lightly. You know, that's the main body of the workday—about five hours I would say. So in theory I would like to carry on everything at once. But there are the limitations of energy and just ability. The success of different kinds of projects runs amuck. There are some sloppy edges all right about this changing of mediums.

PC: From one thing into another.

RG: Yes, definitely. Also I bite off more than I can chew. Like you can think things through so easily but to accomplish them is such a different project.

PC: But do you find, say, in doing the gouaches that you work kind of in a series of ideas? Or are they all quite unrelated?

RG: Well, not too much of a series, but a little bit. I would say not as much as I think some people seem to work in series. Actually I would like to work in a series more because it's kind of fun to see how it's developing.

PC: How did you get involved with John Myers and the Tiber de Nagy Gallery? They've shown you for years and years and years now.

RG: Yes. I started showing with John in 1963, and I think I had actually worked with him before. In 1962 I was in a group show or something like that.

PC: Where did you meet him? How did that come about?

RG: Really through Alex Katz and Fairfield Porter. They had been very encouraging to me before from an earlier time.

PC: Where does Fairfield come into it? He's one of those people who drifts in and then disappears.

RG: He's been very supportive to my work for some odd reason. Possibly you might not think that he would be. I've always appreciated that. The most recent experience was that when I did *No Gas* lithographs in 1970, he was working at Bank Street doing a lot of lithographs and we saw each other then. We exchanged gouaches at the time. It was a nice kind of feeling.

PC: Yes. Where did you meet him? Was that through Alex Katz?

RG: It probably was through Alex. It probably was. I'm pretty sure it was through Alex. I can't remember exactly.

PC: How do you like John as a dealer, since you've been there all those years?

RG: Uh, let's see, to me he's like a natural dealer. He is a dealer, you know, and he's a professional. And that's kind of reassuring. And also he is an artist himself. I mean, he is a personality on the scene and he's a writer. Another thing that I feel makes him compatible is that he's theatrical. He's a personality now, but in practice he was a puppeteer before he got into being a dealer. Also I appreciate that he's been a dealer for at least twenty years that I know of. As far as I can figure out he had been with Tiber for eighteen years. And he's had his own gallery for three years.

PC: How did you like Tiber?

RG: I thought they were a good partnership. In some ways it was too bad they broke up because somehow they made a kind of solid partnership.

PC: It was a strange combination, you know.

RG: Well, it didn't seem strange until they broke up. Actually it was one of those things, I didn't question it too much at the time. Also they were partners for so long. They broke up pretty violently. I mean, they can't get in the same room together any more.

PC: It was a real explosion. But from your point of view as someone whose work he's handled have you been able to get it out into museum shows and collections and things like that?

RG: He disliked Pop art a lot. I don't think he disliked some of the artists; I think it was the pushing of a particular style that he disliked. When he took me on I was like a borderline case, possibly a borderline Pop artist. Since I had been in that Reuben Gallery with all the first line Pop artists I guess I was considered one. He didn't know what to expect. But then I got bypassed from Pop either at the time I went with John, or because of the actual work I was doing, or because I worked on *Shoot the Moon* in 1962 (which in a way was like a backwards-type project since I was making an old-fashioned movie), and also because of the experience I'd had of painting kind of naturalistic paintings in Florence in 1961. It's like I got completely out of sync. I was going to say that's the thing I liked most about John as a dealer: his taste is catholic; and it's been very open. I mean, he has both figurative and abstract painters. And I guess I'm about the funkiest person he's shown. At least I'm in the gallery, you know, and it's balanced off by a much different type of work. And I like that. That seems like a sort of true open picture of the scene, which is now kind of the way it is. Since there is no particular style everything is sort of cooking along.

PC: How did you like being associated with the Pop art people in that nebulous way for a while? Did it mean anything to you?

RG: No, it was kind of sad. I wasn't really a big time Pop artist and I missed out on all the fun and the glamour. I did sort of miss out on that, Even though basically I always felt that was kind of my natural bent. At least part of my natural inclination was toward what that word sounds like.

PC: Do you feel part of any particular group now?

RG: No, because, you see, at that time I just drifted away. I just felt eccentric. Like that's part of the way I am. That's the way I've felt ever since. Plus the initial breaking with the painter friends that I had in those early galleries, you know, the galleries we had together. When I broke away from them I started being a collagist or something of that order. I just realized: well, it's every man for himself or something like that. And that was okay, that was honest and that was the way things are.

PC: What about the idea of collage though? So many things you've done are kind of built up and built up and built up. Did it come from that? Or would you say the derivations are elsewhere?

RG: I guess I do like collage as a medium. I do like it. And I think my use of people in the theater is sort of the same thing. I think the idea of using people is an element in a work.

PC: Kinetic collage.

RG: Yes. Just for their own "found" value. It was fun. And I've always liked that.

PC: You like the idea of found objects?

RG: Yes. It's a super-real kind of super-alive kind of thing. Souped up. You see, that's another thing: I always like custom-made stuff. I mean, that's why I got into doing the big environmental pieces; I was trying to customize something for a given space or a kind of show.

PC: What do you mean "customize?"

RG: It's built specifically for a particular situation or a particular space. And also I like architecture a lot. I've always liked architecture. It's very exciting to me. And I think doing the films, again, like I said, getting interested in having the set and building stuff gets kind of architectural. It gets into the possibilities of architecture. I think in the future in the films that I foresee that we will make we will go pretty heavy into that kind of structure.

PC: More lavish and complex effects in the visual —

RG: Yes. Very much so. And also probably work more outdoors. In general in my work that's a direction I haven't gone into, but I would like to.

PC: Do you like movies that are very over-produced like that, like, say, *2001* or some of those things that have so much technical stuff and so much set and so much of everything?

RG: Oh, yes, I like them. But I do feel there's a sort of new literature and a new way of approaching it. I think very few commercial movies get anywhere near even the possibilities of this, because they rely on the old literary formulas especially. They have to.

PC: You mean storytelling and—

RG: Yes. Although I think [Stanley] Kubrick is a very interesting filmmaker and he is somewhat of an—artist I think.

PC: Why do you qualify that? I mean, do you think filmmakers have problems fitting into that category?

RG: Yes, well, I think there's a certain kind of moral position where art is and that's different in a certain way from the commercial literature. In a certain way.

PC: How do you mean?

RG: Well, I would say the violence now is somewhat immoral from an artistic point of view. Whereas this book by Michael Brownstein is a very violent book but it's true psychological violence, the way things really are. And it's justified through his ability as a writer; it's morally justified. And it's very ambivalent in a way. I think some underground films I've seen are that way: they have a sort of philosophy that is different from that of commercial films. And I think all this is yet to be developed.

PC: Do you think it will eventually grow up?

RG: It's still growing, yes. I think it's growing, because there must be a new audience for it. I think there is a new kind of people.... Of course, there is a new big commercial audience.

PC: Right. That's the whole next step in a way.

RG: Yes. So maybe art will always remain art. Probably that is the case. Although it's true there's been this big interest in fusing them. I mean, like we were talking about—what do you call the big companies

PC: Oh, conglomerates?

RG: Conglomerates and corporations are trying to get into the print business in some mysterious way, trying to get hold of artists. And primarily I think it's because artists do interesting work and people are excited by it for some reason even maybe more than by schlock art.

PC: But they're still scared by it. The bad —

RG: Oh, yes. If it really got loose they would be plenty scared.

PC: Yes. But it's really funny. I've done lots of projects for corporations and usually they're very scared of getting out of, you know, pussy cats in the window kind of art, real bad stuff, or velour, those terrible old things in velour. And then they get better and better and better. And all of a sudden they get very scared, very frightened by what they see happening.

RG: Yes. Well, that's what we sort of touched on before, I think. We talked about why an artist is subversive in a way is that he's sort of a prophet of doom in a sort of religious sense almost, that because the work is intelligent it's philosophical. I mean, it has intelligence. And I guess just a functioning intelligence; an operating intelligence is a little bit too much for anybody—for society to take, because it's out of line.

PC: In what way though?

RG: It's too alive.

PC: It keeps moving.

RG: Yes, something like that. I guess you can kind of sneak a project past. I think our experience with NASA was very exciting to see that wonderful large scale that they work on. And I think that in some cases artists could profit by being more ambitious. That's what excites me: the idea of being more ambitious and thinking of the potential large audience.

PC: How did you find working with those people in terms of being an artist? Did they treat you differently? Were you kind of led around or were you given places? Was there anything apparent to you that was different?

RG: They were very civil but I think there was a general distrust. Which in my opinion was entirely unnecessary, completely unnecessary. If people would just realize that artists are somewhat chained to their own kind of criteria of what they're trying to do, their own ambitions in a way. You know, you're trying to do something good, not something bad. In a way I think they were very nervous, I believe in what we did we never got any further sponsorship and any apparent interest from NASA about the big *Astronaut*. I felt finally that they just felt suspicious and that they really thought we were trying to do something satirical or in a bad way. Which wasn't the case really,

PC: Did George Gustad ever see it when it was completed?

RG: Oh, yes. George was straight. He was terrific. He did a lot. He was really pushing it. He pushed it on the Smithsonian like crazy. We didn't show the third astronaut, the one that didn't get on the moon. I think it was Collins. Maybe he was mad because he didn't get to go on the moon. But we heard that he was mad. He didn't want to hear about that any more.

PC: Oh, really?

RG: Yes. And the same was true when we did the *Discount Store* and worked with Target. That was supposed to be a sort of tie-in type of project. And they were very suspicious and kind of cheap about the whole thing.

PC: In what way?

RG: Well, they just didn't utilize it—they got a lot of free publicity out of it. What they gave us was they kind of let us do research in the store. And we could take anything from the store that we wanted.

PC: You mean walk around and do drawings or sketches?

RG: Yes. And I could actually take merchandise out. And with my Protestant ethic or something I couldn't do it. I'd rather buy the stuff. I couldn't stand just being able to take anything out of the store. It really bothered me. It wasn't the game, you know. It was like being able to cheat at a game and suddenly it loses interest.

PC: You can get away with it so why do it.

RG: You know, just to be able to take anything you want out of a store is gruesome.

PC: It's the great American dream in some ways.

RG: Not mine!

PC: Did they supply you with any of the materials or anything else? Or was it just kind of —

RG: Yes. We could use their hardware and paint and stuff but it was such lousy quality that I didn't want any. We did use some stuff but that wasn't the point. That was okay. They were generous enough in that way. But as for further using or perpetuating the life of the piece, we had to do that ourselves and are still doing it. We've had to maintain the piece everywhere it went. We've had to take care of repairs constantly over these four years.

PC: That doesn't have a home yet, does it?

RG: No. I still own it. Now there was another project I did with Foster and Kleiser, the big billboard concern. I painted a big billboard in Chicago in 1968 [*Magic City of the West*], after I finished the *Chicago* piece, The Contemporary Art Museum, and really a guy by the name of Bernie Rogers—it was his brainchild to do this billboard. That was definitely a tie-in between the art community and this commercial concern, which needed the political clout to continue putting up the billboard because everybody was against eye pollution and stuff. Maybe more then than now. I don't know. It doesn't seem that anybody is talking about that so much now. But maybe they've gotten rid of the billboard.

PC: Where was the billboard?

RG: On LaSalle Street going close to the river. On the main thoroughfare there. It was up during the 1968 Democratic Convention. We had left so I don't really know what came of it.

PC: I didn't know about that. Was it up for a long time, do you know?

RG: It was up for about three months.

PC: Did you just make a design and then they —

RG: No. I painted it with Rusty Morgan. We actually painted it in their shop. That was a good experience for us because it gave us the scale that they work on, which is terrific.

PC: Oh, yes. How large was it?

RG: Fifty-five feet by twenty-two I think, something like that. It was maximum size, the biggest billboard that is painted indoors and shipped out; they come apart in panels, I would say that it was a good experience. The bad part came.... This is a funny thing. In almost everything I've done I find that the artist is both sort of administrative personnel and also a workman at the same time. So that you see the two worlds. Like in the museums it's always the same damn thing. The museum directors and the curators are like office people and the workmen are workmen. And it's very much divided. In very few instances is there any kind of a good go-between type person. Sometimes there is, but I've seen some bad cases where there isn't at all. And then as kind of people who come in to work temporarily are the artists and who are in a way sort of like—I always say we treat artists as royal idiots or something like that; we have sort of the stamp of royalty as artists, but we're also treated as sort of dolts, or nuts, or cranks, or

something like that.

PC: Why do you think so many people in society characterize artists that way? I mean, you've done a lot of projects with many people so that I'm curious. I mean, do you see that as a general tendency or something that crops up usually?

RG: Yes, sort of. Yes, I guess it's probably a worse tendency than I expect. There was a period when I thought things were getting better. Then I thought they were getting worse. And now I really don't know.

PC: It's come all the way around.

RG: But anyway let me tell you about the billboard experience. Which was a big example of this. We were working with the men who do the painting. They were terrific guys. To us they were like Pop heroes. Here were those guys who could actually paint the billboards, the original, on-going type Pop artists, you know. At the end they decided to throw a big party. Naturally we expected all the workmen to come. I thought everybody else would get a big kick out of being included. But, no, they weren't invited at all.

PC: Oh, really? Just the executives and—

RG: Everybody knew there was going to be a party. Of course, they may not have cared; maybe they couldn't have cared less about staying at work or anything like that. That may be true. But, on the other hand, I felt bad about it. A lot of times this sort of thing has given me a strong proletarian feeling. In general, I don't have a great love for most administrations because of that.

PC: Do you feel then that in your work there's a manifestation of this attitude, you know, your social attitudes?

RG: On my work?

PC: Yes.

RG: Oh, I was thinking of their work. In a billboard painting I couldn't express it. Maybe that's the difference between me and the artist—I mean, between me and a regular citizen. Artists aren't really consistent. As most people are; most people are terribly consistent; they work in one job for thirty-five or forty years. That's pretty consistent. Where you know I—even though I've stuck with this career—I'm still willing to try all kinds of different stuff. I haven't painted another billboard since then. These guys have probably painted hundreds of billboards. So there is an inconsistency and that makes their views pretty much correct in some ways. I mean, it's a kind of one-night stand. You're always trying different stuff. There's a dilettante quality I use too, I guess.

PC: Yes, because you can try this and try that and move around.

RG: Yes.

PC: And tie it into what you're doing rather than to what they're doing.

RG: Transitory or something. That's another image I like; I like the image of the itinerant artist. I've always liked that. From my guests I've picked up hearing about those colonial painters.

PC: Oh, the ones who traveled around from town to town.

RG: Yes. That's vaguely my image that I could see.

PC: Speaking of images like that, are there particular artists who interest you? I know we talked a little bit about Picasso at one point. But are there particular ones, are there old masters or contemporary artists whose work or ideas interest you or have some special meaning?

RG: Oh, yes, sure, [Georges] Méliès does very much. He has a very special meaning. I think that most people when they see an artist's work and it has a sort of style or strong personality they seem to think that somehow that's the person. But I think in a way you try to create a style or an image that is supposed to work with what you're interested in. In other words, I try to create a sort of proletarian style. At least I started out that way. Maybe now I get mixed up myself. But I would think it would be great to paint, say, like a workingman. If a guy could paint

the same way that a workingman looks, that would be kind of a terrific style. And that's not necessarily the way I am. It could not necessarily be the way I am. Although I think most people get hung up on thinking that you are that work instead of that you're trying to conceive a style that works from the kind of image that you want to create. I've forgotten what the question was. That was supposed to tie in to something. What was it? What was the question?

PC: The particular artists that interest you.

RG: Oh. That's why Méliès is—he picked up on certain personality vibes that I wanted to be or to create an image or that I could see using his manner of creating that it would be valid in the way I see the world, in other words. So he's one of those type of artists that are very pivotal or something.

PC: Did you see a lot of his work?

RG: No. Just seeing one was enough. So I think he kept me going for a long time. I had this very strong baroque feeling all through the sixties. Those big pieces were a kind of culmination of that. The thing about Méliès is that he did something nobody else ever did. He was a painter. So that his figures are sort of enmeshed in the background. We call that a living tapestry effect; it's kind of super-alive; it's over-alive, you might say. That was a very strong influence on me. Like the *Discount Store*; you asked about the way the figures and the painted background and the real people in the store have that kind of crazy combination. That was a specific technical effect I was interested in getting, you know, for various philosophical reasons and so forth that I saw; that that would be a valid way of trying to express something exciting to me.

PC: Exciting in which way, as a philosophical expression?

RG: Having the subject of the *Discount Store* and then taking off from there and, you know, thinking about the store, thinking about people, thinking about society, and then going back and, say, as a source taking Méliès and what he did with the living tapestry, and kind of putting all that back together.

PC: But as you develop a piece like that is there an idea that develops with it, you know, as far as describing it, or talking about it? Or does that come after you've kind of made the object?

RG: No, not too much intellectual talking about it. Well, I don't know, I guess that the talk, like I said, in my career started when I was young; I was interested in talking and talking about things. But then after being sort of estranged from people that I felt close to, I really felt isolated. Although not all the time, I got encouraging factors all the time. But just a general sort of isolation that sets you adrift and then from then on you sort of realize that it's a permanent condition in a way, and that's probably good. So I don't know. One thing about Pop art too is that it was sort of a dumb style. I mean, that was kind of an idea about it that it was dumb.

PC: Oh, yes. But I mean obviously dumb.

RG: Dumb, right! Dumb. You wouldn't want to talk about it it was so obvious. But that was part of it. And of course Warhol kind of embodied that in his linguistic style too. That's the way he talked. He was like a master at it. I didn't really realize it until afterward. I think Marisol also somewhere along the line said that she had never talked about her work.

PC: Hardly ever.

RG: Somewhere I got the idea that she did not communicate. And that was kind of like the work. I mean, it was sort of that many things go through talking periods and intellectual periods and then die down. People just get tired of it.

PC: That's possible. But do you think that, say, a whole work of yours like the *Supermarket* or like *Chicago* make one statement? Or does it make a complex series of statements from your point of view? Because you can't walk around these things and they do look different when you're inside of them or on one side or another side.

RG: Well, I think the *Discount Store*—let's take that one specifically since it's just been shown at Rutgers and at the Cultural Center. I had been through the piece so many times that I was sort of cold on it. You know, just as a sort of professional thing I get myself up to set it up. So it's

kind of interesting now. It definitely has its own life. You know, I'm doing other stuff.

PC: Because that's now, what, four or five years old?

RG: Yes, it was made in 1970, so it's four years old. It sort of communicates with people. It doesn't have anything to do with me. I mean, I'm not even involved.

PC: It has its own life now.

RG: Yes. People write about it. They come up with their whole sort of mythology. You know, it does have its own life. It's just as alive as I am.

PC: But do you think that the commentary that people say about it has anything to do with what your intentions were?

RG: Well, you see, the thing is an artist is trying to kind of create something that's a little magical. It is a little bit of a ritualistic magic object so that you put in a little bit of style, you put in philosophy and some mysterious qualities from your own experiences. And that's it. Then it's on its own. It makes it or fails. It either looks awful to you, or sometimes it looks good. But it's certainly off on its own.

PC: But I mean if you read some criticism about it, if somebody is describing it, do you read that and say, "Oh well, they've missed the whole point," or, "That's a way I never thought of looking at it." Or somebody really got what you were trying to say?

RG: A few times it's been amazing, a few people seem to be just uncannily right—say it right on the button as far as what I was thinking about.

PC: Really? Do you remember?

RG: Well, Hilton Kramer writing about *Mr. and Mrs. Rembrandt*. And Carter Ratcliff actually gave me a very high-class review in *Art International*. You see, I don't get too many high-class reviews. I just get like journalism. I mean, nobody ever talks about my work in a formal way. Never! Except Carter Ratcliff actually did in a certain way.

PC: Yes, because one can do a sort of journalistic description of things.

RG: That's what they always get into. And they get into like, for instance, the *Astronaut*, and, say, *Gloria*, and the *Gunman*, and the *Discount Store* have become almost like mythological characters. It's like a character; it's like Paul Bunyan or something. Which is terrific. And as far as my response is concerned I'm just kind of feeling my way along. I'm kind of learning about that.

PC: I mean, the *Discount Store*, which you've set up now—what, four or five times? —

RG: Yes, I've set it up a lot.

PC: Does it change for you?

RG: I set it up first in Minneapolis, then in Cincinnati, Dallas, Madison Avenue, New York; Cambridge, then Rutgers, the Cultural Center, and next will be Venezuela next month.

PC: Did it change for you in those different situations? I mean, because the buildings it goes into are all very different. Of course, the store on Madison Avenue —

RG: Oh, yes. I take professional pride in setting it up. I told you about my feeling about the Noah's Ark thing and this being a kind of complete entity in itself. Well, because of the hassles with administrations and like sometimes it really bugs me that people are really pretty stingy and cheap and treat you pretty badly even though you're giving them a good show. And there's always this whole bit where museums kind of think that because they're showing you that you should be pleased and so forth like that. Whereas I think that's partly true, but it's an equal partnership, or should be. And that's kind of the way I treat it. I just try to treat it like I have pride as a manufacturer or producer. I'll even go so far as to put my own money into it and so forth just to keep the thing going, instead of like hassling over every penny and all that stuff. So I get into a kind of professional pride thing about setting it up and trying to keep the thing alive and in good shape. And basically that's kind of teaching me about further big projects that I hope to do, you know, giving me techniques, actual practicalities about what a thing is when it

travels like this. So I get into that. So I don't mind that too much. And it is interesting just to have that experience. Because the stuff is big it makes people sort of strain a little bit and you see them sort of exposed in a different sort of way.

PC: How did you like the reaction to the exhibition at the Cultural Center?

RG: Oh, it was terrific. It was real fun. It was great. I will say it is something to have a piece in a museum in New York; it's great. A lot more people see it there than in a gallery. You can have show after show and people don't know what you're doing. I mean, it's the same bit. They still don't know what you're doing. It's kind of nice for people to see publicity so you don't have to explain yourself so much.

PC: So you think the museum show has that advantage?

RG: I think a museum in New York really does have a possibility of a big flow of people.

PC: Did you get any response from the audience that saw that show in any way?

RG: Oh, yes. A lot.

PC: In terms of what?

RG: Well, just personally. Now just about everywhere I go people have seen the show and even people on the street. And school kids have written and big packets of pictures. Like second-graders, third-graders. Some older kids have written fan letters. I have a feeling there's quite a large response from that, which is encouraging.

PC: So you really have a sense now of being involved with a specific populace almost? I mean, people —

RG: Yes. Through this show. Because, you see, I was going into a different kind of mood about what I wanted to do, a kind of more introverted mood almost as a reaction to the partial disaster of still having the *Astronaut* and the *Discount Store* sort of around my neck. It's a big storage problem and stuff. And in a way that's why I wanted to do the three things together to see what they would look like and try to give people really an idea of what those projects were. Because I did sense that they were special projects for me.

PC: So, in other words, that whole business has been fairly successful in some ways?

RG: Yes, I think so. We may break down in South America. I mean, the stuff may never get back. I always have that strong feeling about getting stuck on the road somewhere. That's definitely in the back of my mind.

PC: How long did it take to do that show?—the Cultural Center exhibition.

RG: Well, Dennis Kagy worked on it for about six months getting all the papers, all the paper work. He did a very good job in getting up the catalogue. He was terrific. He took a crew of about six people plus, oh, about four people from the school and two weeks to set it up.

PC: At Rutgers first?

RG: Yes.

PC: And then in New York.

RG: And then take it down again, repack it, send it here, set it up again. That was ten days. Then take it down again, repack it. This time we had to make boxes and containers and so forth for everything.

PC: Oh, yes, because it's being shipped so far.

RG: That took about a solid week, about ten days.

PC: And you go off to Venezuela to film.

RG: Yes, in about a week.

PC: I wonder what will happen with it down there.

RG: I don't know. I really don't know. It's a whole different world.

PC: In some of the happenings there have been kind of various characters like in *Fire* the fireman and the pastry man and various people like that. Have any of them reappeared in other things in different guises in other kinds of images that you use?

RG: Yes, they reappear. I don't think it's too conscious. I mean, I think it's just a terrifically funny thing, the idea of creating characters. You see, Mr. Ruckus in *Hippodrome Hardware* is probably the most complicated character I've done as a live character. And he's the most recent. So I would like to kind of create more complicated characters. That would be interesting to generate a sort of change[d] thing almost like an unconscious type of thing. We were talking about the literature of the films and so forth and that actually all the works have some literary qualities. You know, just to carry on with that and try to make it richer.

PC: But is that obvious? Or is it kind of after the fact that you see that characters become more complicated? I mean, when you work on it do you kind of keep pouring things into the mold?

RG: Yes—so far it's been not too conscious the way a character is created.

PC: It just keeps growing and all of a sudden there it's out in the clear.

RG: Because I didn't even know what it was. I didn't even know what a character was for a while. I didn't know how a character was developed theatrically or anything. But I've had a lot of interest in looking at films on television and stuff and kind of studying the acting. It's kind of exciting to see what acting is. I didn't know what acting was for a long time either. I still don't know what it is.

PC: How do you define it for practical purposes though?

RG: I don't know. It's sort of like the word "form." I don't think you can exactly—I can't define it. You just sort of get to the point where you feel familiar with it. I don't think I could give a description of it.

[END OF TAPE 3, SIDE 1]

PC: This is Side 6. Oh, the Kenneth Koch play, *Guinevere*—right?

RG: Right.

PC: For which you did sets and costumes,

RG: Yes. Diane di Prima and Alan Marlowe were running this theater right across from the Bleecker Street Cinema on Bleecker Street. Upstairs. One flight up. It is now a restaurant. John Herbert McDowell was the director. I don't know when Kenneth wrote the play. It's a terrific play. It's very abstract. It's an abstract play.

PC: I don't think I've ever read it.

RG: I had never done costumes and sets for another person. So I was trying to sort of illustrate the play. He said to do it literally; that that's the way to do it. It says a character is a kangaroo it's a kangaroo. So that's the way we did it. It was fun. It was interesting.

PC: How did you like working with somebody else's structure like that?

RG: Well, you see, I think he should have done the sets. I mean, I just became like some sort of craftsman or something that knows how to work with paper mache or something in a way. In a sort of most limited way when you do an illustration for somebody it's that way as far as being....Another thing I did for Kenneth: he had a certain short poem that was so nice and ambiguous that I could do many drawings from it and it was great. And that was a terrific kind of —

PC: What poem was that?

RG: I can't repeat the poem. It was a short poem about the Greeks discovering the sea and learning logic and so forth. It was really nice. I like his work very much. I mean, I think he's wonderful.

PC: Have you known him for a long time?

RG: Yes—just from that. He wrote the words—the lyrics for a song in *Tappy Toes* later. And I've done some illustrations for other of his poems besides the short one. And we were going to do this book together but when I got the big poems they're so rich, you know, the images are so—and you start wondering really about illustration. You wonder if it's really necessary. The writer makes the images so why should you try to do what he's making in sort of a different.... I don't know. Sometimes it's fun and I like illustrations a lot, But —

PC: Have you done other things besides his?

RG: Yes, I did a lot of limericks last year for someone.

PC: Oh, really?

RG: We haven't got it published or anything. John said that it's going to be in a new edition of the *Paris Review*, that some of them are going to be reproduced.

PC: In there? Good.

RG: But somebody else's literary thing is nice to work from, it's real exciting, but I don't ever seem to quite bring it to fruition. I can't seem to pull it off. It never seems to work. It's better if I just do something myself.

PC: Do you think that's because you control all sides of it then?

RG: I don't know. You get sort of trapped in the other person's vision. You get really trapped. You know they want a certain thing, you know they want something from you and you start thinking what they're trying to figure out from what you know they know that's your work. Stuff like that. You see, like doing Michael Brownstein's book, I almost think he should come over and maybe just sit there with me and I'll say okay, which character do you want me to draw? I'll just be like the hand. Maybe I can draw better than he. I don't know. Maybe I can't. But that's sort of the situation.

PC: One thing that's intrigued me is the fact that you have all these literary friends, you know, that kind of weave in and out of your life as well as the work in some ways. Is that just because you're interested in what they do? Or how do they come to be around so much?

RG: I don't know. I guess I've been lucky. I don't know quite what it is.

PC: I don't know many other artists who have so many literary associations and friends as you have.

RG: Gee, I don't know. I've been lucky. You see, I don't think there are too many people right now who are willing to kind of dicker with literature in painting or sculpture, because there's so much formalism now.

PC: Right. Or impure—

RG: It's kind of just like the opposite, isn't it really? It's kind of non-literary.

PC: Oldenburg always says that he's interested in literary things.

RG: Yes, he is.

PC: He says that makes his work impure. To certain critics it's not pure.

RG: That's what de Kooning says, that his work is impure. And it's true. He has content; he's got philosophy sort of instead of just pure visual display.

PC: But do you feel, you know, associated with other artists who use kind of real images or versions of real images who might be also interested in content in that way? I mean, older generation, George Grosz, or people like that?

RG: Just the other night I saw Ellen Lanyon's work. Do you know her work?

PC: Yes.

RG: Boy, it was terrific! I was surprised. These are very new. She's done something new—I think she's gone further than anything I've seen her do before. She's gotten much more subconscious. She's really letting it come out a lot more. I always liked her work before and I could see that she was very good but I always felt before that there was a certain contrived feeling or something. In these it just is terrific. They are very literary. And I like them.

PC: Where are they?

RG: She said she's going to show some at Brook Alexander's Gallery. You know, she was showing at Zabriskie but she's left there. She's good.

PC: I look forward to seeing those.

RG: Let's see, who else. You mean other artists that are interesting?

PC: Yes. I mean, do you feel any kind of kinship to—

RG: You see, to me the trick is somehow to keep it open, to be literary but still somehow keep it open, to keep the work from jamming up in some way so that it's always open-ended in some way instead of being a force-fed type of thing. Which I think was always the disaster of —

PC: Oh, I see. So you can go anywhere and still do —

RG: For instance, I was looking at a book of Orozco's murals, the great ones in Mexico, which I hadn't seen, or hadn't seen in a long time. And, you know, I was beginning to get a little dubious about Orozco's work even though I used to like him a lot. But when I saw them I could see they were really kind of terrific paintings because they're propaganda paintings but somehow he just gets through there and they really are like paintings too.

PC: What do you mean, in a formal sense?

RG: Yes, in a formal sense. Like it plays in between that area.

PC: Speaking of formal senses, again, have you thought about your work in terms of any specific formal kind of aesthetic? Do you write about your work ever?

RG: God, no!

PC: People are always making statements such as, "My work stands for..." You've never done that?

RG: No. I don't think I'd like to do it because it just seems so dead-ended. As soon as you say it you know it's going.... It's like digging fixed defenses or something like that. I'd rather be mobile I think. I don't have the language to do it anyway. I couldn't do it. I can't even talk about my work unless I can find some area or way of talking that I can feel comfortable with. But I do slightly begrudge the fact that—I do think there is some formal value in there but I just don't think—but I can't understand how it could.... Like we talked about the display thing—I didn't want it to be displayed at all in a way because it's not formal or it's not intelligent. So certainly I'm interested in —

PC: So it comes out in the work rather than through —

RG: And I like shapes and things and stuff like that. I really respond to things like that.

PC: What about the materials and things you've used? You've used so many different kinds of fabric and wood and glass and plaster of Paris and film.

RG: It's fun, yes. I like to use different materials. Also you can take your same old ideas if you use a different material. Like a lot of times what I'm thinking about seems so real to me.... For instance, when I was working on the *Astronaut*, gee, I got so involved with the studying and trying to get the factual stuff that I started to think, gee, it's not even going to be like sculpture, it's going to be like a model of something, you know. But then when you start using, say, wood if it's supposed to be skin, or cloth if it's supposed to be plastic, or something, well, it's great. Because then distortion starts occurring and that's fun. That's like a jump between the art part and the subject. And I like that. That's fun. I enjoy that part. Even though I have a difficulty—it's like a little craziness I guess, that I can't really separate. I start worrying about it—in my mind I can't separate reality from what I'm doing.

PC: They blend into each other.

RG: Yes. If I think about them too long I start getting blocks, getting worried so much that it's not going to be sculpturally exciting or something.

PC: What about this thing that I found somewhere—Groomsville?

RG: That was a good article that the guy from *Newsweek* wrote, a very nice article about the time of *Fat Feet* and I think he called it "Groomsville."

PC: That was his invention though, right?

RG: Yes. But other people have these words. Groomsian and stuff like that. Which is flattering all right. You know. Saul Steinberg has pointed out that his name is actually in the dictionary. Steinbergian or something like that is an actual way of describing something. So it's sort of exciting, you know, if you can actually make that big of an impression.

PC: Are there American cartoon characters that interest you? Or particular cartoonists or style sources?

RG: Yes.

PC: Who would they be?

RG: Like I was saying our tin toy collection is a whole realm of that kind of cartoonism.

PC: What's in that?

RG: A lot of them are actually taken from comic strip characters. But some seem to be sort of made up.... You know, there again is a case of materials, the tin, and the size; and the fact that they're automated gives them a lot of personality. Then there's a whole kind of graphic fantasy type of stuff that I like a lot, that I've always liked. Which is sort of like carnival stuff, certain kinds of animation, a certain kind of cartoonist, a certain kind of cartooning.

PC: Which cartoonists? Any one in particular?

RG: Well, Feininger as a cartoonist is just superb. He's wonderful. I wish he hadn't gotten straight. There's a case where I wish the guy had remained a cartoonist. He's so much more fun than the stiff pictures. They're not stiff, they're nice, but I mean they don't have that magic. I guess I really do have a goofy streak. When it all boils down I do get a charge out of making sort of funny stuff.

PC: What about the sort of Ensor picture back there?

RG: That's Mimi's. That is a copy of Ensor's *Christ's Entry into Brussels*.

PC: Right. That's the name of it.

RG: She copied it. We have the book on Ensor and she was going to put it on the book. It's such a terrific picture I didn't want to put it on the book. It's a fantastic copy.

PC: Does Ensor interest you? Or is it Mimi's interest?

RG: I'm interested in him too. I like Ensor very much. He's wonderful. But I—

PC: He's too straight?

RG: Yes, in a way, basically he is a painter. It's fun to take what he did and to make a movie like he did would be terrific.

PC: I get the feeling that you look for a lot of things outside—I suppose you could say what is the fine art realm for ideas, things to use. You look at popular culture as a kind of warehouse.

RG: Yes. But everybody does, don't you think? I mean, you read about certain abstract guys like Ellsworth Kelly or somebody like that. It turns out that basically they got their inspiration from a doorknob or something like that.

PC: The strangest things, yes. I was just looking at the things you have tacked up on the wall,

the photographs. That's by Beauchamp, isn't it?

RG: Yes.

PC: Do you know him?

RG: Yes. He's been a good friend for a long time.

PC: With his wild critters.

RG: Yes. Have you interviewed him?

PC: No, I haven't.

RG: It would be interesting. He's an ornery guy.

PC: Is he? I don't know him well.

RG: In a way. He'd be fun. He's good. He would be great.

PC: He's got all these creatures jostling their way.

RG: I know. What a fantasy life he's got.

PC: It said somewhere that you also collect trademarks and bottles and all kinds of objects.

RG: That's true. I think I made that remark because Pop art was sort of going to stuff that I didn't care that much for. They always went toward the Mary Worth-type of comics—my least favorite guy; realistic stuff. Lichtenstein was doing that, you know. Instead of like the funny stuff like I always like, like Orphan Annie or, say, Jiggs—that kind of characterization, sort of a warmer type of characterization. They always went to this cold stuff. That was the coolism.

PC: Yes. Where do you think Warhol fits into all that?

RG: I don't know. I don't know where he fits in.

PC: He's kind of like off by himself.

RG: I have no idea. The painting of Dick Tracy. Did you ever see that?

PC: Oh, the early one? Yes.

RG: The early painting of Dick Tracy. I like Rauschenberg's work a lot. I liked him very much.

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[END OF INTERVIEW]

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