



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Chuck Close, 1987
May 14-September 30**

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

Contact Information

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Chuck Close on May 14, 1987. The interview took place at the artist's studio on 75 Spring Street, New York City, and was conducted by Judd Tully for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

JUDD TULLY: According to published information, you were born in the state of Washington in 1940. What was your actual birthdate and tell me a little bit about Monroe, Washington?

CHUCK CLOSE: July 5, 1940. Monroe, Washington, was a smelly little town halfway up the Cascade Mountains, northeast of Seattle. I didn't live there very long, actually. I was born at home -- not in a hospital -- of humble beginnings. Actually, I want to go back and photograph the house, because if I were a politician it would be great to have a picture of the shack that I was born in. [They laugh.]

MR. TULLY: Was it really a shack?

MR. CLOSE: Well, it wasn't a real shack, but it was a very modest little cottage. "Cottage" is giving it all the benefit of the doubt. It was definitely on the wrong side of the tracks -- about thirty five feet from the tracks. My father at the time was a sheet metal man and was also working in a hardware store. He was sort of an itinerant inventor, a jack of all trades. Probably basically unemployable. He had a lot of skills and seemed to -- coming out of the Depression -- had just had a whole string of handyman kind of jobs. My mother was a trained pianist, but the Depression pretty much screwed up her chances of any kind of a career, although she did teach piano at home.

MR. TULLY: So what were their names?

MR. CLOSE: My father was Leslie Durward Close and my mother was Mildred Wagner Close.

MR. TULLY: About how old were your parents when you were born?

MR. CLOSE: My father was born in 1903 so in 1940 he would have been 37. My mother was 10 years younger so she was 27. I was an only child. I recently found out that my father had been previously married and had another child, but I didn't find that out until I was 40 years old.

MR. TULLY: How did that come up?

MR. CLOSE: I got a call on the phone. My mother never told me. Even on her deathbed she never told me.

MR. TULLY: She obviously knew?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. It's strange. I guess there was tremendous embarrassment about all that stuff. My aunt claims that my father didn't really think the child was his, and married her because it was a small town and somebody had to or something like that. But I don't know. I've since met the man. He says he's my half brother and I assume he is. But I was raised my whole life as an only child and my mother was an only child and my father was virtually an only child. He had a half brother who was much older. So it's like a lot of solitary souls.

MR. TULLY: And you said you weren't there very long in Monroe?

MR. CLOSE: No. I think when I was just a year or so old we moved to Everett, Washington, which is an even smellier town. It's on the bay. It's a poor, whitetrash mill town. It is the smelliest city in the world, I think. It was all paper mills with that process where they break down the wood and it produces an incredible smell. I lived there until I was in the first grade and we moved to Carmel. My father started working for the Army Air Corps. First he worked in the air force base in Everett, and then was transferred to one in Tacoma, so we moved there. I stayed there until he died when I was 11.

MR. TULLY: So he died very young.

MR. CLOSE: He was 47 when he died -- almost 48. My mother and I moved back to Everett. My grandparents were living in the house that I had grown up in and then we bought the house next door to them, so my grandparents could help take care of me. My mother who had never worked -- other than teach piano -- had to go to work.

MR. TULLY: So by that time when you moved back you were --

MR. CLOSE: I guess I was 12 when we moved back.

MR. TULLY: I meant to ask you before -- you were Charles?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. There were only a few names in my family. People were not too inventive. Everybody was Charles Thomas or Thomas Charles or whatever -- my grandfather was Charles -- so all the names were taken. I was little Charlie. There was Big Charlie and Little Charlie. To my relatives I'm always still Charles, although I have only one relative left. I guess it was some attempt at individuation that in high school I started to go by Chuck. I always hated the name. But it's a total accident that Chuck is my professional name. I didn't intend that to happen which, skipping ahead, but it's anecdotal. Everybody knew me as Chuck, but I had intended to use Charles as a more formal name. Very early in my career Cindy Nemser did an interview which was used in ArtForum. Actually she did two. She did an article for Art in America which says, "Introducing Charles Close," she titled that. Then in the interview she didn't title it and it just said "Chuck Close" and "CM." The photographer, who was a student of mine, took the photographs for ArtForum and he'd just written "Chuck Close" on the envelope, so it went down as an interview with Chuck Close. I don't know if a similar thing happened with Red Grooms or not, but the whole kind of informality of it was not -- I regret it. Hardly a day goes by that I don't regret having that as my professional name.

MR. TULLY: When did this ArtForum piece and Art in America piece come out?

MR. CLOSE: That must have been about 1968 or 1969, I guess.

MR. TULLY: So when you said one of your students you were teaching--

MR. CLOSE: I was teaching at the School of Visual Arts.

MR. TULLY: Okay.

MR. CLOSE: Now do you want to go back to the early years?

MR. TULLY: Yes. You had moved back to Everett. You were living at home with your mother and she was working and your grandparents were next door. What was the school atmosphere like?

What was going on around then?

MR. CLOSE: Now I realize -- or I found out later in life--that I am dyslexic. In the '40s and '50s of course nobody knew from or gave a shit about something like that, so I had a lot of difficulty in school. I don't have a typical kind of learning disability. Although I did just find a drawing that I made when I must have been about three or four -- I was already writing, so I was probably around four -- in which I wrote my name all in mirror writing so probably there were indications that now somebody would see immediately as an indication of something, but at the time it didn't. I still can write mirror writing as fast as I can write forward. I can write backwards and upside down as fast as I can write forward.

MR. TULLY: That sounds quite something. And then you can read it also as easily?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. And, also, making prints was very easy for me. I immediately have no trouble imaging what something looks like the other way. I did a self-portrait etching a while ago in which it was reversed -- of course -- and it was a negative because the bright copper plate had a dark ground. As I was sketching the lines they were going to be black and I was white, so in a sense I made the equivalent of a photographic negative reversed and negative. Everyone seemed to think that was kind of amazing that I could do it and it seemed not at all a difficult problem to me. [Laughs.] But at any rate, one of the characteristics of the kind of learning disability I have is a problem with facial recognition. Everyone I've ever seen or people I look at all look immediately familiar to me, but I have tremendous difficulty figuring out who it is and where I've seen them before. I never can memorize. To memorize something was unbelievably complicated and I developed my own systems to be able to remember which are now are very similar to the kinds of things that they try to teach learning-disabled children. It's something I evolved on my own, which I guess is probably the basis for--I'm sure I'm not the only person to have evolved systems like this. These systems have probably become the basis for how to teach other people.

MR. TULLY: Like what though? What did you do to prompt you? What is an example?

MR. CLOSE: There was no sense in trying to memorize anything very far in advance because I could only -- I used sensory deprivation. I would go into the bathroom where I would -- in the dark -- put a strong light on a plank that I had across the bathtub with a book stand to hold the book and in hot water -- in total silence in the dark -- I would go over, and over, and over whatever it was I was supposed to be memorizing all night long before an exam. Just the very last minute that I possible could go over the stuff. I was a virtual prune I was so wrinkled from studying. But it was like I had to get rid of all the other distractions and everything else that was going on in order to focus and concentrate and stare at these things. Then in order to remember it I would take a word and I would break it down into letters. Then I would make a sentence. If I had to remember the name of a biological species or something like that-- say the word was -- I don't know what it would be--now, of course, I can't think of anything. [Laughs.] But if it were "plankton" or something like that, then I would put "please leave" da, da, da, and I would have a sentence. Then I would have a visual image of that sentence or it would be pink, long, or something that would be visual. So then when I'd need to recall this I would get the mental image, the mental image would feed me the sentence, then I would extract from the sentence the appropriate letters and rebuild the word. This worked reasonably well, but it of course ate up a lot of time. So typically on my exams if there were 20 questions, I would have the first 15 questions correct and then of course the last five I didn't have time to do. Now if you are a learning disabled person you can choose to take exams in an untimed way. For instance, you can take SATs and things untimed for people who have this kind of a problem.

MR. TULLY: When you are giving this example of that board in the bathroom--when did that start?

MR. CLOSE: I remember it around that time that exams started. I guess probably in junior high school. What I really would like to explain is how art really saved my life because art is how I proved that I wasn't a malingerer and how I proved that I was interested in the course material. Even in grade school, when I had trouble memorizing names and dates and anything that would be an indication that I had paid attention in class or read the material I had trouble recalling it and I was immediately seen as a malingerer. Art was the thing that I used. I remember making a 10-foot-long map of the Lewis and Clark expedition, all illustrated--as an extra credit project--it showed my junior high school history teacher that I was interested in the material. And if I had a sympathetic teacher, that would make up for other things. English class I would make poetry books in which every poem was illustrated, et cetera. So I think early on my art ability was something that separated me from everybody else. It was an area in which I felt competent and it was something that I could fall back on. Similarly, I also have a neurological condition which does not allow me to run or to use my arms in certain ways. So not only was I a screwed up student, but I wasn't able to excel in sports or even to just participate. So as a kid when we were playing tag and everybody would run, they would run off and leave me. I'd run 25 or 30 feet and my legs would lock up and I would fall down.

So I think I learned early on that if I was going to have friendships -- and as an only child I had no built-in playmates -- that I was going to have to find a reason to get them to stay with me because I was not going to be able to keep up with them. So I got into what I would call sort of entertaining the troops and I became very theatrical. I'd make puppets. I'd do magic acts. I did everything that I could do and I became very skilled at organization. I would convince the other children that what we should be doing was something that I could do. Art was definitely --or things that might be considered artistic or something about manipulation of materials in some way -- became--and my parents were also very sympathetic and also helped in that. They helped me make puppet stages and helped me make magic. My father, as an inventor, would make all kinds of magic props, as he made almost all my toys from scratch. So I definitely had an unusual childhood.

MR. TULLY: You were mentioning your father. So you would be around him when he would be working?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. My father was very sickly -- had been sick his whole life. My mother was told several times before he actually died that he was going to die of something else, so there was a lot of role reversal stuff, which was for the '40s very unusual. My mother mowed the lawn and my father would bake. I remember my mother overhauling the car -- putting in rings and valves, et cetera. My father would tell her how to do it and she would. He was very skilled at that sort of thing, but he was unable to do a lot of it. She would keep running into the house and say, "What's this?" And he'd say, "You've got to do--" And she'd go back out and do it. So he was around a lot. He was home a lot, which most fathers weren't.

MR. TULLY: I just think of this image when you said this "10 foot-long map of Lewis and Clark." So in other words you blew up --

MR. CLOSE: Oh, yes. Somehow, visual stuff -- It's like nature or God or whoever if you believe in God. It's a convenient metaphor. It seems almost like if they take something away from you over here they give you something else over there. Or nature does. I am more comfortable with that. But at any rate, certain skills seem to have come easily for me and of course the more I depended on them, probably the more I developed them. But I knew at a very early age how to read things. I remember it must have been somewhere between the first and third grades I lived in a housing project and everybody in the school lived in the same housing project. We made a map of the

housing project in which everybody made a drawing of their own house and colored it the color their house was, et cetera. I made a drawing of our house in perspective. The teacher wanted it to be like wrong. She didn't know how to draw in perspective, so she kept telling me that mine was wrong and wanted me to make the ends of the house straight instead of sloped to be in perspective. I had the sense of outrage even as a very small child. I couldn't have been more than seven or eight. The fact that here is something which is unbelievably clear and that I knew that I could do it and I knew that I was right and that somebody else who did not understand the system could force me to do it the wrong way.

MR. TULLY: So what happened then? Were you rebellious in a sense or resistant to--

MR. CLOSE: I couldn't be too rebellious, because they already thought -- mostly, I was trying not to draw too much attention to myself. Although I always was articulate, I think. And I think that I made up by participating a lot in class. My daughter is also dyslexic and she's been that way. When somebody asks a question, she's the first one to raise her hand and to show that you care -- that you're interested. As soon as I got into college, I could do a little research into what each instructor would require and try never to take a course that would require me to do something that I wasn't good at. So I'd find things where I could write a paper. Of course I can't spell or do anything like that, but I could take it to a typist who could. So I could -- in my own way, at my own speed -- write a research paper, have the spelling and stuff corrected and I was an excellent student -- finally. In junior high school I had an 8th grade homeroom teacher who was a stickler for doing it by the book. If I could get this woman in an alley, I would murder her today. I had her for English, history, math. I had her for, like, four of the subjects. I had always managed to do pretty well. Oh, I had nephritis and I was in bed for nine months so I missed most of a year of school. It was the year my father died.

MR. TULLY: What's nephritis?

MR. CLOSE: It's a kidney disease. So I missed a year of school. My father died and we moved to Everett. My seventh grade was fine. Coming out of the disease, I couldn't do a lot. I stayed in the classroom. I couldn't go to gym or anything. I had a very good relationship with my seventh grade teacher and she was pleased with my work and I got good grades. Then in the eighth grade I had this stickler for doing it by the book.

MR. TULLY: Do you remember her name?

MR. CLOSE: Ruth Packard. I would love to get my hands on her throat. At any rate, she gave me like straight Ds. She couldn't fail me because I did enough extra credit stuff to keep from failing, but I never could please her. She became my advisor for high school, and she so totally trashed me, and through the course of the year of failing me on this and failing me on that, I was just destroyed. She told me that I would never get into any college and I might as well not take any college preparatory courses. I should think about going to body and fender school or something, and that I wouldn't be able to take algebra and geometry, and I wouldn't be able to take physics and chemistry, so I'd better take general math and general science and whatever, which is what I did. Then when I was getting out of high school, I realized that I could not get into any college because I didn't have the stuff. After I had gotten out of her class I had done very well and good decent grades, but I was taking basically bonehead kinds of courses and I was in there with all the troubled kids. But I always did the yearbook and the art and all that kind of stuff. I had things which made me feel good about myself, art always made me feel good about myself. When I did graduate from high school, luckily, in my hometown there was a junior college that had to take any taxpayer's child who was a high school graduate. They could not not take them. So I got in to this college and made up all the -- I had to make up an extra 15 hours in the way of science -- algebra and geometry-- for no credit. But

at least I was able to do it and I distinguished myself in college very quickly. I was an excellent student. I ended up with the highest average when I transferred to the University of Washington. But I still had this image of myself as a failure and as not an academic. As I graduated, I was shocked to find that I had the highest grade point average of anyone in the art school and they gave me an award. I graduated summi cum laude and all that stuff without realizing it.

MR. TULLY: You were still driven by this Mrs. Packard?

MR. CLOSE: That's right. To make an analogy, I was very late in maturing. I was very short. I'm now 6'3", but then I was -- I kept growing in college. My mental image of myself is still as a short person, because all through the formative years I was the shortest of all my friends. So even though I know I'm tall I think of myself as short. In the same way that while I distinguished myself academically, it was like I ignored it all and still had an image of myself as being a failure as an academic.

MR. TULLY: When all this stuff was going on -- I was just trying to think about that -- you were on the one hand being persecuted in a way by this teacher, but you were getting some positive things from your mother?

MR. CLOSE: Oh, yes. Actually, I left out that when I was about eight my parents enrolled me in a private art class with a person that I later figured out probably supported herself as a prostitute. So it was sort of an art class in a brothel, which is kind of amazing, too.

MR. TULLY: It sounds exciting.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. But the nude models were probably other women of the night. At any rate, I was at age eight or nine studying drawing from live models and painting with professional oil paints and all that stuff. Again it was something that I had tremendous support in from my family. Thank God they were not particularly concerned with me being successful at things I couldn't be successful at like sports. They were very supportive. Considering the kind of poor whitetrash environment in which we lived and the very humble things -- we were always lower, lower middle class I guess -- it was unusual, I think, for them as parents to be supportive of that sort of thing. They were always very supportive of me. My mother was very active. Too much so. She was always head of the Parent Teachers Association. She was always there at school fighting for me, which was an embarrassment. I felt wimpish sometimes, because my mother was there taking on the administration. But I'm sure she made it possible for me to be as successful as I was. She was a little too involved. In Cub Scouts she was a den mother. Whatever it was, she was always there.

MR. TULLY: Was it your mother who found this private art--we're not talking about Everett?

MR. CLOSE: No, this is Tacoma. My father stopped at a restaurant on the way to work and it was across the street from where this woman lived. She was a trained painter. She was very skilled.

MR. TULLY: What was her name?

MR. CLOSE: I don't remember. He had breakfast there every morning. He may have very well done more than have breakfast. [They laugh.] At any rate, he knew her. How her knew her I don't know. Somehow she had paintings hanging in this restaurant or whatever and he made arrangements for her to teach me privately. I have some of the paintings that I did.

MR. TULLY: That would be great. So you went there would it be after school or on the weekends?

MR. CLOSE: I don't remember what it was. I suppose it must have been on weekends. I know I went

every week. I've lost all the drawing notebooks and things that I did then. She had me doing very interesting stuff. It was academic. It was how many heads high people were, et cetera, but she taught me a lot about the conventions -- perspective and all that sort of stuff. Also I painted directly in the landscape. We would go out and set up an easel in front of a church or something and we would paint it -- or in the mountains. Also I guess we probably also worked with photographs come to think of it. Still lifes and stuff and from models.

MR. TULLY: And it was just you?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: That is amazing. Your parents -- was it a sacrifice for them?

MR. CLOSE: I suppose it was. But you know the thing is that my father was not -- if I'd wanted to go out in the front yard and throw the ball around they would have done that, and I didn't want to do that. They always got me lots of art materials and all I did was draw. I think because my mother was a pianist and my father was interested in -- they had both followed very quirky routes to where they were.

MR. TULLY: Did you pick up anything from the piano?

MR. CLOSE: I couldn't let my mother teach me anything. That was a big problem. I think I learned one piece which I can still play and that's that. Then I wanted to do something she couldn't do, so I started studying the saxophone. I played a sax all the way through college in dance bands and stuff. I was always first chair. It was another area in which I excelled and made up for the fact that I was having so much trouble in other areas.

MR. TULLY: So it doesn't sound to me like you spent a lot of time say at home watching television.

MR. CLOSE: We had no television. No one in my neighborhood had one until I was probably -- I think the first television that showed up in our area was 1951 or so so I would have been 11. But I didn't have a television until I went to college. My grandparents had a television.

MR. TULLY: But I mean it sounds like you were working all the time. Not working, but you were --

MR. CLOSE: Radio was very good. Radio fantasy stuff was very good and I can still tell you the exact order of shows as they came on the radio. Especially the year that I spent in bed, I listened to all the radio soap operas too. "Young Dr. Malone" and "Helen Trent" and all of those radio soaps -- "One Man's Family" and all that stuff. And then of course all the evening ones. "Sergeant Preston of the Yukon", and "Inner Sanctum", and "FBI", and "Kings of War", and all those. I was really into them. And I drew. I had the professional 80-color Mongol colored pencil set, that I loved.

MR. TULLY: And this again was something that you had picked up in terms of mixing colors, learning how to do it?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. I don't know. I think I had that stuff very early. But I remember the Sears Roebuck catalogue. Everybody looked through the Sears Roebuck catalogue. The first thing that I can ever remember asking for out of the catalogue was a professional oil paint set that they sold. Not only that, I can still smell those paints. In fact, I opened a tube of paint recently that had the same smell that that Sears Roebuck paint had. I guess maybe it was cheap oil. God! A sort of waft of this smell hit me and it was the smell of my childhood. But I had also very elaborate puppet show things where we made our own puppets and staging and backgrounds. My father helped me. I had a model

railroad thing -- first a Lionel and then HO -- in which I made all the mountains. My mother sewed costumes. I did a lot of theatre stuff. I had a top hat and tails that they got at the Salvation Army for my magic act. So they were very supportive of anything that I wanted to do that -- a lot of it was the kind of fantasy play-- all the children get into.

MR. TULLY: So mixed in with this was there occasion for you to go to a museum?

MR. CLOSE: We would go to the Tacoma Museum, which was pretty much a historical museum. I remember I loved the Saturday Evening Post covers and I really was very interested in illustration. I don't think I discriminated that much between -- there was a lot of illustration that was painting at the time. Whether it was Boy's Life covers or Saturday Evening Post covers. I remember the Jack the Dripper issue of Life.

MR. TULLY: Jack the Dripper is Pollock?

MR. CLOSE: It was on the New York School and what an outrage it was. I remember that very well. I remember at age--my father was dead so I was probably 13 --when I saw my first Jackson Pollock in the Seattle Art Museum. At first, I was outraged by it. It didn't look like anything. It totally eluded whatever I thought what painting would look like. I remember feeling outraged, but later -- probably even later the same day -- I was dribbling paint all over my canvas.

MR. TULLY: You went on a trip to Seattle?

MR. CLOSE: Yes and I think we were already living in Everett. My mother took me to the Seattle Art Museum.

MR. TULLY: So Everett's close to Seattle?

MR. CLOSE: 30 or 40 miles.

MR. TULLY: Yes, you said that. So I wonder if that Pollock--for instance--

MR. CLOSE: They didn't buy it, I found out later. It was one that was lent them and they could have bought it and they didn't.

MR. TULLY: I was just wondering, because there was just a show at the Guggenheim from Peggy Guggenheim paintings that she dumped on all these regional museums where she couldn't sell them from Art of This Century [Gallery, New York].

MR. CLOSE: This would have been probably 1952 or 1953. I don't know what piece it was, although I think it was offered to them for sale and they didn't buy it. I saw all the local Seattle people who were of the Northwest -- [Morris] Graves, [Mark] Tobey. There was lots of that stuff around, most of which I didn't like. I liked Mark Tobey's white writing, but I didn't like it.

MR. TULLY: At that time?

MR. CLOSE: I think by the time I was in high school. Like I say, I came home and dribbled Jackson Pollocks when I was 12 or 13.

MR. TULLY: So the idea formed then about being an artist?

MR. CLOSE: Always wanted to be an artist since I was four. Always wanted to be an artist. Now

around high school, I also got interested in things like sportscars and stuff like that, so I thought I'd better be a commercial artist. Practicality reared its ugly head. All the way through high school I was doing the yearbook and all the other stuff. When somebody would run for senior class president or whatever I always did the posters and so forth. So I was already interested in doing things that had a purpose and I liked illustration. MAD magazine had come out. I have all the early MAD magazines from when it came out, I think in 1957. So I wanted to be like a cartoonist -- an illustrator. Actually what I really wanted to do was Time magazine covers. Later in life I've been asked to do Time magazine covers and I just don't want to do them. But at the time that's what I saw as a sort of pinnacle of painting. So when I actually entered college I wanted to be a commercial artist, but you have the same foundation courses for painting as for commercial art.

[End Tape 1, Side A.][Begin Tape 1, Side B.]

MR. TULLY: Before you talk about these foundation courses in college, what was the name of the high school you went to?

MR. CLOSE: Everett High School.

MR. TULLY: And elementary school?

MR. CLOSE: I grew up in Lincoln Heights. I'm not sure what that grade school was -- probably Lincoln. Then I lived at Oakland, which is a district of Tacoma, and I went to Oakland Grade School. Then I moved to Everett and I went to South Junior High School and then on to Everett High School and then Everett Junior College, which is now Everett Community College. Then I transferred to the University of Washington at the end of my sophomore year. Then in the middle of my junior year I was given a scholarship to go to the Yale Summer School of Music and Art. I spent the summer between my junior and senior year of college there. On the basis of that, I was encouraged to apply to graduate school at Yale, which I really didn't intend to do, but the Cuban missile crisis came along. As soon as my student deferment ran out from college, they called me down for a physical which I had been told I would never pass, that I would be 4-F because of my medical problems. But they lowered the standards enough to make me 1-A, so since I wasn't going to be 4-F and I was now 1-A, I had to get into a graduate school fast. I called Yale and the chairman of the art school -- Bernie Chaet -- had been the head of the summer program and he had me quickly apply and moved me to the head of the waiting list. I managed to get into graduate school in just a matter of a week before graduate school started. I know we're jumping way ahead. I just thought I would finish the education while we're at it.

MR. TULLY: No, that's good. So what year was that? You said the Cuban missile crisis.

MR. CLOSE: That was 1961 that I was at Yale and then I came back for this academic year of 1961-62. I guess that was when the Cuban missile crisis was --right?

MR. TULLY: I think so, yes. It sounds right.

MR. CLOSE: What ever it was, I remember sitting there looking at the nudes and thinking, "well at least I won't have to go. I'm going to be 4-F." [Laughs.] And it didn't work out.

MR. TULLY: So just going back to Seattle and this idea about going into art school, your idea was commercial art. You knew already probably that artists would have a hard time supporting themselves?

MR. CLOSE: Well, I guess I was beginning to see the sort of Playboy magazine idea of what an artist

was. I wanted to be an artist who also drove a sportscar. Whoever that was -- those people who were doing cartoons and doing illustrations and whatever-- who had that kind of lifestyle interested me. Then, of course, the minute I got into college and started taking painting and drawing and whatever, then I realized that was what I really wanted to do. I took one commercial art course and hated it -- dropped out. So I would say it was a momentary lapse of practicality which went by the board.

MR. TULLY: Who was there at the school in Seattle?

MR. CLOSE: This was in Everett -- this was Everett Community College-- and it was unbelievably fortunate that I happened to live in this town with this incredible art program in a junior college. I mean, it's unheard of. This junior college -- the only thing that distinguished it was its art program. Russell Day, who was chairman of the art department, was probably the most respected and powerful faculty member on campus. It was just this odd thing that happened. They had a wonderful art program. I got a much better first two years of art education than I would have had I gone to the University of Washington and essentially been taught by the TAs. This was a very incredibly rigorous, competitive, demanding program taught by these extremely -- there were three members of the faculty -- Russ Day, Donald Tompkins, who was my mentor and who since has died, and Larry Bakke, who was the painting teacher. I've always been at the right place at the right time. Art schools especially have golden periods and then periods when the chemistry does not work. I've been very fortunate to always be someplace when it was the--all of that. I think that I've always worked hard. But a number of things have conspired to make things happen -- being, I think, essentially driven into art in the first place. Probably more because of what I couldn't do drove me further and further into art. Then excelling at it --if I had also been good at other things, perhaps it wouldn't have meant as much to me. Just fortuitous things --like the fact that my father ate breakfast in a diner where this woman also ate breakfast that I ended up studying art. All these things just seem very coincidental and lucky.

MR. TULLY: You mentioned the three faculty people -- Russell Day --

MR. CLOSE: Donald Tompkins, and Larry Bakke -- were terrific. All three were wonderful. Then when I transferred the University of Washington it also had some wonderful people -- terrific people -- some of whom are still my friends today. Probably the most important one at the University of Washington was a man by the name of Alden Mason, who is a wonderful painter and a wonderful painting teacher. I have some of his paintings in my studio right now which I'm showing to dealers in New York.

MR. TULLY: What's his work like? What was his work like then?

MR. CLOSE: It's always been sort of personal monster kind of imagery that's painted in a very expressionist way.

MR. TULLY: You must have been quite sophisticated in comparison to other people that were around in terms of being exposed to a lot of art.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. And I was a great student. I was exactly what everybody had in mind. I knew what art looked like and I could make something. Being a good student is a double-edged sword, I guess, because I got lots of pats on the head, I got lots of scholarships, I got grants and stuff -- Fulbrights and all that sort of stuff -- because I was a good student and because of the relative ease with which I could make things that looked like art. The trouble is, if it looks like art, it must look like someone else's art or it wouldn't look like art. When I met de Kooning I said, "How do you do? My

name is Chuck Close. I'm the person who's made almost as many de Koonings as you've made." [Laughs.] It's true. I was de Kooning or I was Hans Hofmann or I was whoever it was.

MR. TULLY: This would be familiarity from magazines, from --

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Growing up in Everett and Seattle and going to college there was a real cultural backwater. And the mountains are a kind of emotional distancing device. Seattle was not like other cities in America -- or wasn't then. It really drew the wagons into the circle. They loved themselves and they always referred to it as "God's country" and they hate everywhere else even though they've never been there. The whole culture -- if there is an interest in culture, which there's very little, or was in the '50s, at least -- they looked towards the Orient. The art history courses were on Japanese art or were interested in American. They did American Indian art and Eskimo -- Alaskan. There was virtually no interest in Western culture. Everybody who traveled had been to Japan. I never knew anybody who had been to Europe. New York was viewed with great suspicion. The heroes -- the gods -- were the people like Mark Tobey, who had gone to live in a Zen Buddhist monastery in Japan. Of course they overlooked the fact that he then went to live in Ireland or wherever the hell he was. Or was that Morris Graves? But there was tremendous suspicion of New York and those things. I immediately wanted to make stuff that was about New York. Alden Mason was very supportive. He was somebody who would not make great Northwest mystic paintings. To paraphrase Gertrude Stein, as soon as I discovered there was a there there, I went to it. I got out of Seattle, which I saw as an intellectual and cultural backwater, and wanted to go where it really was happening. The other part of being a good student is that it's very hard then to develop any kind of personal idiosyncratic vision because your hand moves in art ways. It wants to make art shapes. I supposedly had a good sense of color. As far as that's concerned, I think I had discovered that certain color combinations look more like art than other color combinations. So there were many, many habits and many skills which were developed in school that had served me very well as a student which later became a big problem in terms of differentiating myself from everyone else and trying to find out who I was, different from other artists.

MR. TULLY: So would you say in that period of time when you were transferring over to Seattle -- if you were going to bring a portfolio of work -- would it be across the board examples?

MR. CLOSE: It's really funny. One of the reasons that I was sent by the University of Washington to Yale Summer School was that I was -- in a sense -- a kind of compromise candidate. There were various factions in the school, and I had transferred there recently and I wasn't identified with any one of those factions. As I studied with a member of each one of those factions, I could do whatever it was that person had in mind. So each camp thought I was theirs. I hadn't been around long enough to be contaminated in some way by having been identified with any one of those factions. Since none of the factions could send the one that they particularly wanted to send -- [they laugh].

MR. TULLY: "I've got the perfect candidate."

MR. CLOSE: That's right. So it always served me. It wasn't that I was a whore, I don't think. It was just that I had pretty good ability to function in many different ways.

MR. TULLY: So what would the range be from one faction to another?

MR. CLOSE: I would paint hard-edge paintings with masking tape, hard-edged paintings with Spencer Moseley. It depended on whose class I was in, I guess.

MR. TULLY: But Moseley was at the University of Washington?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: I was going to ask you before and maybe again if we could just digress for a moment.

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: In terms of your childhood friends, did you have contemporaries of yours that were also interested in art or that you talked about -- you know, "Gee, did you see that Jackson Pollock?"

MR. CLOSE: I had friends in the art department in high school. I went to a pretty good size high school. We had 2000 students, I think -- 500 in the graduating class.

MR. TULLY: Oh, that is big, yes.

MR. CLOSE: So we had a big art program. In fact, the art teacher ran off with my girlfriend. [Laughs.] I was dating this other girl in the art program, and all of a sudden one day she didn't come in, and neither did the art teacher. [Laughs.] He was like in his 40s and she was of course 16 or 17. Something like that. When I say "poor whitetrash," I mean poor whitetrash. [Laughs.] This was America. This is out there in this little mill town. It was a real scandal.

I was just thinking that I must sound like this really weird kid. Driven to this. Couldn't do all these things. The thing that I was always very good at was disguising all of it. Most of my friends didn't know that I had -- a lot of my teachers never knew that I had as much trouble with material as I did because I'd find ways to give them -- luckily, back then, people didn't know about learning disability. I wasn't pegged. I wasn't pigeonholed the way a kid would be today. If you're not destroyed by it, you're often stronger, I think, because of it. I developed ways of beating the system. I don't think I was pathetic. Do you know what I mean? I don't want to create the notion that I'm some weird, pathetic, nerdy kid that nobody wanted to play with. I was very popular. I wasn't Mr. Popularity, but I don't think people would have thought of me as being particularly out of the ordinary. People didn't notice that I didn't go out for sports and stuff. I just managed to not do it. I did have some sadistic gym teachers, though, who would make me run until I'd fall down and make me get up and run again. There were taunts that were very difficult. But, basically, I think I always managed to make it work for me. I think that if you're not beaten down by it and if you can beat the system, it gives you a sense of power. It gives you the sense that your destiny is in your own hands -- that you just have to find your own way of doing it. It's just not the way that other people are doing it. And that ultimately nobody else is going to do it for you. You've got to find your own solution to each individual problem.

MR. TULLY: I was wondering, for instance, what you had said about these factions and how you wound up being a candidate for the summer school really because of all this crazy politicking, probably. What I was wondering -- at that time were you aware of that? That you were sort of able to do these things or was it more of like a kind of naïveté?

MR. CLOSE: I think it was naive, except that one of the members of the faculty pointed out why it was that I was chosen. He was very pleased that I had gotten it, and he told me how I had gotten it. So that's how I'm aware of the fact. Otherwise I wouldn't have known what happened in the faculty meeting and why I was the chosen one.

MR. TULLY: Was this the same person that you've mentioned--Alden Mason?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: I didn't ask you where you were living at this point. You were in Everett?

MR. CLOSE: While I put two years in junior college there.

MR. TULLY: Living at home?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Then I went to Seattle to the University of Washington. We had a number of people in my high school who were interested in art who are still artists who I still see. We went to junior college and transferred to the University of Washington together. I lived in a wonderfully bizarre house full of artists in Seattle -- as many as eight or nine of us. Not all artists. We had some other people. We had wonderful parties.

MR. TULLY: What part of Seattle would this be?

MR. CLOSE: In the university district within a few blocks of the university.

MR. TULLY: Do you remember any of these -- in terms of names--of someone from Everett that went over with you to Seattle?

MR. CLOSE: Students?

MR. TULLY: Yes.

MR. CLOSE: Oh sure. Two of my closest friends are Larry Stair and Don Trethewey. There are a lot of artists. Michael Monahan is still an artist. Joe Aiken is still an artist. There was a whole bunch of us. Even for people to graduate in art -- as you know--very few finally end up practicing it -- at least after 15 or 20 years. I was in junior high school with these people. I've known most of those people since I was 12 years old and we're all still artists. There are several others if you want more.

MR. TULLY: Sure. Why not?

MR. CLOSE: Of course, I have to think of them now. Oh gosh. Gee, I'm trying to think of the skinny kid with the pipe. Well--

MR. TULLY: This house sounds very much like in the Playboy tradition.

MR. CLOSE: See, at the time, too, you have to remember that when I got interested in art in the late '50s, early '60s, it was a very straight time in America. Art and music school and art and music were a couple of the only areas in which anybody who was not gray flannel butt down went. I really fell in love with the idea of being an artist almost as much as I fell in love with art. It was a license to dress differently. If you wanted to live with a girl -- people in the art school were the only people that were doing that --and use drugs. In the late '50s and early '60s, if you smoked pot, you were in the art school. That's it. Art and music. That was it. Everyone else was so there was a whole lifestyle in the sense that you sort of bought into when you started out to be an artist that certainly -- compared to what it was like to be a student a generation later, or now. The only people I know who are still using drugs are people on Wall Street.

MR. TULLY: It's true. A bizarre twist, really.

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: It's funny, just when you said that about dressing differently. Right then I was trying to get a mental picture. What would be your--

MR. CLOSE: At that time everybody looked sort of like the Kingston Trio. The Lettermen -- crew cuts and stuff. Buttondown everything. Buttondown shirts. The pants with the little buckles in the back.

MR. TULLY: Ivy League.

MR. CLOSE: Right. In art school you had late bohemian, pre-beatnik. Of course pre-hippie. Sort of beatnik. What was considered beatnik. Growing up on the West Coast, we spent a lot of time in San Francisco, we spent a lot of time in North Beach. We'd think nothing of driving to San Francisco--over 1000 miles -- to see a play. And then while you were down there, you'd spend two or three days camping out on the roof of the San Francisco Institute of Art. It was either the San Francisco Institute of Art and now it's the California School of Fine Arts or it was the other way around. I'm not sure what it was.

MR. TULLY: Camping out on the roof?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: The people who knew knew about it and did it?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. It was sort of the thing to do. [Jack] Kerouac and all those people were big. Actually, Al Leslie was out there doing "Pull My Daisy" with Gregory and all those people. And Larry Rivers was doing that. It was interesting. William Wiley and Joan Brown were students. This was the late '50s. They were like the big star students who were going to carry the torch of Abstract Expressionism. The young bucks -- and buckettes in the case of Joan Brown -- were going to keep the tradition alive. Of course they did it in a different way. But it was a very exciting time. It was all connected with poetry and the Hungry Eye and all these places where young comedians were coming up and lots of Beat poets. Poetry readings and folk music. In Seattle we used to go to poetry readings and folk things all the time. And a lot of jazz. Great jazz in California.

MR. TULLY: And you read the Beats?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: On The Road?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: Did you have a car then?

MR. CLOSE: Oh sure. If you grew up on the West Coast you had to have several cars. All junkers, but you had a car for all occasions.

MR. TULLY: How many did you have?

MR. CLOSE: Probably by the time I graduated from college I had had 10 or 12 cars. 15 cars. I had a 1926 Model T. I had -- oh God, I had all kinds of cars. Motorcycles. Everybody had. You can't be so poor that you don't have a car. Or two. You'd buy a car for fifty bucks. You didn't have to have insurance. If that thing broke down, it would sit in the front yard and you'd get another one. It was

absolutely so different from my friends who grew up in New York. It was like -- you might not have food on your table, but you had a car.

MR. TULLY: And so would you drive? Like go that 1000 miles--

MR. CLOSE: We'd get a bunch of people in the car and just head out. I remember at one point we went down to the play *The Balcony*. Who wrote that?

MR. TULLY: Was that [Jean] Genet?

MR. CLOSE: I'm not sure who wrote that, but I remember making the trip for that. I can't remember -- I saw some plays when I first came to New York and I can't remember whether I saw them -- I saw *The Iceman Cometh* either in California or in New York. I saw *Rhinoceros*, I guess, in New York, so it was about early '60s -- late '50s.

MR. TULLY: So you were then part of that -- as you describe--the beat scene in North Beach and Citylights bookstore?

MR. CLOSE: Oh yes.

MR. TULLY: So you were riding that--

MR. CLOSE: I was a student at the same time. We definitely were like hangers-on. Larry Rivers is enough older than me that he was actually there, as was Alfred Leslie, and he knows all those people. We knew of them. We saw every foreign movie that came out, and we went to every poetry reading that we could. But it was a very interesting time because being an artist set you apart from everybody. Unless you were a writer or a musician or an artist -- America seemed to be -- Eisenhower was president. Then Kennedy was elected just as I was getting out of college, and was assassinated while I was in graduate school. The effect that Kennedy had was almost more afterwards than during. Kennedy was an incredible breath of fresh air, but America was still Eisenhower's America. It was very conservative. You had to almost to be surrounded by a group that would support anything out of the ordinary. It was a very difficult time. I've had a beard since 1958. I would go years before I would see somebody else with a beard. People would roll down the window of their cars -- and this was even true in New York and in New Haven when I came to New Haven to go to graduate school. Nobody had beards. People would roll down their windows and scream, "Hey, Castro!" or if it was near Christmas say, "Santa Claus." It was that unusual that anybody would have a beard. It's hard to remember. Now when I get on a subway and I'll look around and every male in a car will have some facial hair. Then so I said, "Well, I'd better shave my beard." If I weren't so lazy I would shave. But at that point I literally could go a year or more without seeing a beard. And if you did see somebody with a beard, it might be some old man or some bum -- the equivalent of a Bowery bum. It's hard to remember now just how straight America was and how little room there was for individuation in terms of clothing. I started wearing very bizarre clothing in the '60s. I wore ruffled shirts with lavender paisley vests my mother made me. I wore bowlers. I went out in costumes. I essentially wore costumes in the street.

MR. TULLY: In Seattle?

MR. CLOSE: In Seattle, in New Haven, in Europe when I was on a Fulbright. Then -- of course -- when the hippie thing came along, all of a sudden I would discover while I was walking down the street 12 more people more bizarre than I was. So then there was no reason to do it anymore, and I became very conservative in my clothing. But there was a time when being an artist was a license. It

was a very interesting time, I think. It's hard to remember now how unusual you could be.

MR. TULLY: You said in 1958 you grew a beard. You just wanted to see what it would look like?

MR. CLOSE: I really wanted to separate myself. Wore gray. I walked around with books that I hadn't read because I always had trouble reading.

MR. TULLY: It would be difficult being dyslexic. Isn't that a major problem?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Very difficult. I read with great difficulty. One of the reasons that I like poems, as I like magazine articles, is that they're short. I can get through something short. And also a poem often -- because it cuts through time -- doesn't require remembering the names of characters. I still don't read novels because I cannot remember the names of the characters. I always have to go back and see -- but a poem cuts across time and often makes an image that I can relate to as a visual thing.

MR. TULLY: That kind of atmosphere you're setting in terms of being in Seattle, being free enough to take off for a couple of days -- or more probably -- to go to San Francisco and then jazz and poetry and all that -- did that start to effect the kind of work that you were making?

MR. CLOSE: I was pretty much making weak, fourth generation, junior Abstract Expressionist paintings. I studied from people who had seen something once. [Laughs.] When I went to Yale Summer School is the first time I actually met an artist who had been in a book and that was very exciting. People I had read about in art magazines.

MR. TULLY: Before that -- I don't want to interrupt you -- but I was going to ask you before you went to this summer school did everyone have a studio in Seattle in the art school? Was it like a cubicle?

MR. CLOSE: No. Oh, the graduate students, but I wasn't a graduate student. I always found space because I worked so big. See, the faculty was very supportive of me. I had faculty members who gave me their old paintings. Really wonderful people. They would find space for me. I also worked at home. We had a big house. We had a six-bedroom house that we rented. I was ambitious. I would make eight by 10 foot paintings -- 10 by 12 foot paintings. I was very ambitious.

MR. TULLY: Can you describe one of those from that period of time?

MR. CLOSE: In 1959 and 1960 I started painting flags. I guess I had seen Jasper Johns. I started doing things like that. I got in a lot of trouble. I was involved with some local censorship and stuff. I was in an exhibition and the work would be thrown out. I saw myself as railing against the establishment. To make art that offended. The American Legion would come with a couple of axes and chop down the door and things -- was very exciting.

MR. TULLY: So it was the American Legion that you got in trouble with?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. I got in trouble with them -- with other groups.

MR. TULLY: When the work was exhibited?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: I guess that would be a question I haven't asked you, in terms of your exhibition history.

MR. CLOSE: As a talented student, it was possible to show in the same exhibitions as the faculty. I was in the Northwest Annuals at the Seattle Art Museum. I won prizes and got money and blue ribbons and all this stuff and all these things. One of the paintings was a flag in the Northwest Annual-- which is the biggest exhibition in the Northwest -- at the Seattle Art Museum. Charles Fuller -- who was the founder/owner of the family of the chairman of the board of the Seattle Art Museum -- came after the jury had awarded me third prize and I think \$1,000 and threw the painting out of the show. Some of the jurors left in protest. But I was always interested in provoking. Now I see it as very sophomoric and whatever, but in a local, regional way it was always possible to provoke controversy. I had a painting in a show in Pulliam that the American Legion literally came and chopped the door down.

MR. TULLY: Where is that?

MR. CLOSE: It's near Tacoma. It was a big regional show.

MR. TULLY: You're not exaggerating when you say the American Legion had chopped the door down?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Well, there was a Pulliam Fair. It was a big state fair and they had a regional art exhibition. This guy -- Don Scott, a friend of mine -- was involved with that. He was on the State Arts Council or something like that at the time and he literally saved the painting by stopping them.

MR. TULLY: And they came during the --

MR. CLOSE: I don't remember now what the specific--

MR. TULLY: And what were you doing exactly with the flags?

MR. CLOSE: I was cutting them up and sewing them together as a kind of -- it was "ban the bomb" kind of stuff. I would take a flag, cut it up --

MR. TULLY: An American flag?

MR. CLOSE: An American flag. Cut it up, sew it back together in the shape of a kind of mushroom cloud, paint on it with words like "e pluribus unum" and all this sort of stuff, and December 7, and all these other things. So they were vaguely against military, against nuclear -- the Korean War was over. We were in the heart of the Cold War.

MR. TULLY: Now where did you learn how to sew? That was something you picked up?

MR. CLOSE: Oh, just big stitches. I would take like a five by eight foot flag, and cut it up, and then sew it back together and it would be in a canvas that would be eight by 10. Let me see if I can find a slide.

MR. TULLY: Okay.

MR. CLOSE: Here's one.

MR. TULLY: From the slide it looks like a very painterly.

MR. CLOSE: Oh yes, very painterly.

MR. TULLY: Do you have any idea what happened to the painting?

MR. CLOSE: Yes, it's in my mother's husband's house. My mother's dead.

MR. TULLY: When would she have remarried?

MR. CLOSE: Not until after I married. This is a very dark slide, but this is the kind of painting that I was doing at Yale. This is basically a seated figure, but a very kind of --

MR. TULLY: So it's a, kind of, side view?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: And very large.

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: Is that you sitting next --

MR. CLOSE: Yes. This was about as figurative as the work got at Yale. This is a reclining figure with one leg in the air. This is an unfinished painting. This is a huge painting.

MR. TULLY: 59 by 90!

MR. CLOSE: This one -- this was not at all the way the painting looked at the end -- which became almost monochromatic at the end, but it was basically the pink angel combined with [Arshile] Gorky and all kinds of other stuff.

MR. TULLY: You're not kidding! Wow.

MR. CLOSE: There are a couple more of the general kind of figurative -- I can show you what I was doing at the University of Washington.

MR. TULLY: It sounds like you really have held onto a lot of work.

MR. CLOSE: I don't have very many of the paintings.

[End of tape.]

[May 27, 1987, second part of interview with Chuck Close.]

MR. CLOSE: We always went to whatever Protestant church was just down the street. We were Methodists, Presbyterian and Baptists. My mother got quite involved in the church after my -- before my father died they were as well, but then after my father died we moved back to Everett, and my mother became very involved in the church, and was on the Board of Trustees and the choir director and the organist and the Sunday School teacher and all that sort of stuff. I actually taught Sunday School for a while myself when I was in high school.

MR. TULLY: What was that like?

MR. CLOSE: I think finally the hypocrisy of organized religion in America became just sort of unbearable. It was a very narrow community full of prejudices and hatreds, so there was this conflict between the stated intentions and the piety and whatever. I remember in my high school Baptist youth group, my girlfriend and I were the only two kids that didn't have to get married. Virtually the entire group had shotgun weddings. Not that that's so surprising, I suppose, except that it was the -

-

MR. TULLY: It depends on how big the group was.

MR. CLOSE: [Laughs.] Yes. It was just the difference between the stated moral or ethical position than what in fact was going on. My mother left the church when after all those years of service -- she was selling real estate at the time -- and she tried to put a Mexican American family into the parsonage. The church had an empty parsonage, and they thought it was fine that it be rented until they found out that it was a Mexican American family and then they refused. So my mother left the church at that point.

MR. TULLY: And would that go kind of unreported? Was she outraged?

MR. CLOSE: I guess anyone watching the Jim and Tammy Bakker thing on television unfold -- there's a real connection between repressed, very narrow parameters of how one is supposed to live -- remember that there was no smoking and no drinking, no dancing and no anything. So for everyone to be screwing around in an environment in which you weren't supposed to even smoke or drink or dance is--anyhow, it always had a big effect, I think, on --I am very moralistic and I'm not religious, but I think I tend to see things in a black and white way. I think that probably is an outgrowth of that kind of thinking. It's taken me years to find the grays -- to find any pleasure -- for somebody who makes black and white paintings - in the middle ground. I've always found extreme positions interesting. Frankly, I think the art world is an interesting place for extreme positions to come up. I remember once -- I don't remember if I mentioned this last time you were here -- were we talking about when I was working with Richard building sculptures?

MR. TULLY: No.

MR. CLOSE: Because at one point when we came to New York I used to help Richard Serra build his lead sculptures -- prop them up and stuff. He used to come to my studio and look at my paintings and I would go up and look at his stuff. It was -- at least for me -- an important time in my life as a young artist. I remember something Richard said about how to end up making work that didn't look like anybody else's work, which even now seems kind of curiously out of date with today's interest in appropriation and the ease with which one raids the cultural icebox. But at the time, I think everyone wanted to separate himself or herself from everybody else and not have the stuff look like art. That was the whole appeal of going to Canal Street and finding materials that have never been used to make art before, so that they came without any art world association and no particular way to use them. Nobody wanted to make bronze. Now everyone's making bronze sculptures. Then, anybody who was making bronze was considered just hopelessly lost. So they would try to find rubber and you would see what it could do. You bounce it, you lean it, you stack it, you scrunch it -- whatever you can do to it. So at any rate, I remember once (in terms of this notion of extremism or whatever) that when Richard was in my studio he was talking to me about my work and he said, "You know, if you really want to separate yourself from everyone else, it's very easy. You don't even have to think. Every time you come to a fork in the road, automatically one of those two routes is going to be a harder route to take than the other. So automatically take the hardest route, because everybody else was taking the easiest route. If you take that least likely, most extreme, most bizarre, hair shirt, rocks in your shoes kind of position -- since everyone else is doing the kind of proof of what is the prevailing wisdom -- you will make idiosyncratic work. You will push yourself into a particular corner which no one else occupies." I think that was very much about what the times were like.

MR. TULLY: How did you take that at the time when you first heard it?

MR. CLOSE: I thought it was interesting advice for somebody who was now making paintings that

took months and months just putting thinned down, watery black paint on canvases and slowly building this imagery in a sort of odd, somewhat mechanical way.

MR. TULLY: Describing your work?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. I think that extreme positions -- Barry Goldwater not withstanding [laughs] -- are what changes what art looks like. It seems to me that the art world -- I know this is a digression from talking about where I was -- is that okay?

MR. TULLY: Yes, that's fine.

MR. CLOSE: When I was a kid, I was outraged when I saw my first Pollock because it didn't look like art. I remember the same sense of outrage the first time I saw Frank Stella's black paintings and to a lesser extent the first show I saw of Warhol's at the Stable Gallery. It's still possible to have that feeling when you see a [Jeff] Koons show or something like that now perhaps. I'm not particularly outraged, but some people are, I guess.

MR. TULLY: Are these like the submerged basketballs in the aquarium or something like that?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Right.

MR. TULLY: It's Jeff Koons?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Or the Jim Beam decanters that all our fathers had over the bar. My family didn't drink, but friends' families that had a bar. My family was a firm contributor to the Washington State Temperance Society. At any rate, it seems to me that the art world -- if it can be seen almost like from flying above it -- if you were to look down at the art world it's an amoeba-like shape. Sort of a boundary of what art at any one time looks like. It encompasses like a wing out here and it juts out a little peninsula in another section, which covers a certain group of people. And everything that is within that boundary -- I think the thing's a sort of national outline or whatever -- is art. Everybody knows what it looks like, accepts that it is art and once you know what art looks like, it's not hard to make some of it. But it must look like somebody else's art or it wouldn't look like art. So everything that's inside that shape is known and to one degree or another tolerated -- or if not loved. You can choose your area. You can go take an area that's not been very heavily trafficked and work in that area. Or you can go off in some other corner where everyone seems to have congregated, because that's the prevailing sensibility at the moment and everybody's mining the same area. At that particular moment -- when that's what art looks like -- everyone is solving problems. But the problem was not defined by them. The problem was defined by the art world, so that in the '60s or in the '70s or in the '80s everybody knows what art should look like. It should be this big, it should have an active surface or it should have a non-surface -- a virtually no hand, or no gesture, or it should be expressionist or it should be systematic -- whatever the kind of thing at the moment is. For whatever time that shape is different than it's going to be 10 years earlier or 10 years later. But at any given time outside of this shape, some individual makes something and for a wonderful, brief moment in time that stuff doesn't look like art. It doesn't look like anything that's going on inside the amoeba-like shape. It seems outrageous and it seems to question everything that we held to be true about art and whatever. There's that wonderful brief time when you can look at it almost as if it were an alien species or something -- not art. Then within a very short time -- this is the wonderful thing about the art world -- it seems to me as opposed to other professions where the parameters are set and imposed and you always must work within them and everybody agrees that this is how it's done -- the art world is this totally flexible, organic entity that now sort of -- again to use the amoeba metaphor -- sort of goes out and envelopes this foreign body, digests it, incorporates it into

its own living matter and tugs it more closely to the mainstream, tames it, makes it more acceptable in some way -- changes it because of its acceptance. Of course, everyone will run to it, and copy it, and work out of it, and it has influence. So now the resultant outside shape of the art world is changed because that individual existed. And from now on, that area that was formally outside of the shape is now captured territory that also looks like art and also is an acceptable area for people to mess around in. But the important thing is that the art world is capable of incorporating it and not keeping it outside. I suppose it could be said that the true outsider of what we consider to be primitive cultures or the insane or whatever can sometimes stay outside, but then you have a [Pablo] Picasso working from African sources or a [Jean] Dubuffet working from children or the insane. So it gets incorporated in one way or the other. I guess that was what the late sixties and early seventies were really about for me. There were people out there attempting to operate outside of what the conventions were dictating and what the prevailing wisdom and preferred sensibility of the moment dictated. Like I said, that's why people were looking for materials that didn't have associations -- you didn't bring that baggage with you into the studio -- and why I was interested in trying to back myself into my own corner. And the other people I came to New York with by and large were doing the same thing. I suppose we will talk about that more when we talk about --

MR. TULLY: Yes. Because what you're bringing up now, it's maybe that baggage as you speak of it that you left behind at some point, but that you certainly accumulated in art school. May we should bridge that point when you first went to the Yale Summer School.

MR. CLOSE: Right. Like I think I said last time, I sat in Seattle not knowing what New York art looked like. Occasionally a piece would come through. The Seattle World's Fair happened in 1961 or something like that. Sam Hunter did the "Art Since 1945" show and that was one of the first opportunities we had in Seattle to see not only Hofmann, but de Kooning and Pollock and all those people, but also all the Europeans, because it was a very inclusive show. I remember Skira did a book called Current Trends or something like that.

MR. TULLY: Current Trends? I'm not sure.

MR. CLOSE: It was a big blue -- Contemporary Trends. And it had [Roger] Bissière, [Pierre] Soulages, Europeans who were making stuff that most of us had no knowledge of in Seattle. The first time we had seen any of that in color. Looking at black and white reproductions in art and you'd need a magnifying glass -- that is my recollection of what it was like to be an artist in Seattle. Trying to figure out what the hell the surface must have looked like. Trying to imagine what color these things came in. Because at that point -- and it really was a service that art museums used to do -- they used to review every first one-man show, along with eight hundred people that you've never heard of since. But there often were these little teeny black and white reproductions of what was the cutting edge of the most difficult work. There'd be a full-page color reproduction of a Titian, but I wanted to know what color the de Kooning was -- not the Titian. So I think there was a lot of misunderstanding. When I first saw some of those things in the paint I was struck by how different they were -- how much smaller they seemed. Also the first color things I saw in the Skira and other European books had very heightened color. The actual paintings were -- in some cases -- kind of disappointing to find that they were much more drab than it had appeared in reproduction. So when I came out in the summer of 1962 to go to Yale Summer School I came first to New York City, where I spent about two or three weeks. God, I was a real Midwest or Western hick kid, so naive, so trusting. I remember that I got out at Penn Station. Well, just to go into Penn Station --

MR. TULLY: This is the old Penn Station? The one they tore down?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. And standing there with my suitcase looking up at this cavernous iron structure was just mindboggling. And going out on the street not knowing -- of course, being dyslexic, I had never read a book so I had never read a guidebook. [Laughs.] Anyone else who was coming to New York for the first time might have done a little research and figured out where they might want to stay or where --

MR. TULLY: Just cold?

MR. CLOSE: Just cold. Out on the street. So then I realized I didn't have any place to go. I had my suitcase. So I stopped a cab and I threw myself on the guy's mercy. I said, "I know that you can drive me around the same block for 10 minutes and I wouldn't know the difference and you could let me off exactly where I got on. Please don't do that to me and please take me to a hotel that I can afford that's safe." The cab driver was terrific and he said, "Well, where do you want to go?" I said, "I want to go to museums so try to find a hotel that's convenient." I guess the only museum he knew was the Museum of Natural History because he put me in the Upper West Side in the -- what's that incredible hotel on Broadway?

MR. TULLY: The Ansonia?

MR. CLOSE: The Ansonia. At any rate --

MR. TULLY: So he dropped you off at the Ansonia?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. So I saw a lot of plays, museums, galleries. It was summer, so a lot of galleries weren't open. The shows I got to were fine. I got to see a lot of them. It was incredibly exciting for a kid from the Northwest.

MR. TULLY: And this was really the first time? You took a train from Seattle to New York?

MR. CLOSE: No. For that trip, a guy who worked with my mother was going to visit his dying mother in Boston, so I guess I took a train from Boston to New York.

MR. TULLY: What was the Ansonia charging in those days? Do you remember?

MR. CLOSE: I had a really crummy little room. It was quite cheap. I don't remember. I know it was very cheap. Tiny.

MR. TULLY: And dark probably.

MR. CLOSE: Dark and filthy. But the thing that really amazed me -- I said this recently in an interview and somebody was saying that it was their recollection, too, of what it was like to be in New York. I think that for a lot of America, class distinctions really limit what you are exposed to. If you don't go to certain schools or your family doesn't have a certain kind of position in the community, certain things aren't open to you. You're never going to see them. You're never going to hear them. One of the things I found really amazing about New York and about coming here that seems so wonderful to me was that I could see the same art for free that anybody else could. That nothing was going to keep me from having as much exposure and the galleries tremendous service. These places were open and they were available. I could go in and ask to see the work of somebody who wasn't showing that month, and clearly I was not a customer. I was never going to buy one of these paintings. They would take me into the back room and they would drag out paintings of somebody I was interested in seeing. I could see them. I could go to museums. I could go to libraries and reading rooms where I could go into the print room and I could sit and -- I don't

think you can do this anymore, but you could go through a stack of Rembrandt etchings and you could look at them. It was an incredible opportunity like that, and I think that people who've grown up in the East take what's available for granted. But boy! When you're coming here from someplace where this stuff doesn't exist -- so anyhow, I felt so privileged. I didn't have to be a person of means, a prep school kind of kid, to have this laid at my feet. So it was really thrilling. I saw great theater. Wonderful stuff. Then I went up to Yale Summer School, and it was the first time that I had ever met in the flesh artists that I had read about in books or magazines.

MR. TULLY: So who were some of those?

MR. CLOSE: Elmer Bischoff. The regular faculty was Bernie Chaet, who ran the school and Richard Wydal was one of Sixteen Young Americans that year or the year before.

MR. TULLY: Richard Wydal?

MR. CLOSE: He had a promising, but truncated career. I'm trying to think who else was there. Phil Guston. It was a wonderful summer. 35 kids who were big ducks in their various puddles from all over the country came together and were painting in this barn.

MR. TULLY: Where was it exactly?

MR. CLOSE: It's in Norfolk, Connecticut. It's near Litchfield. Beautiful part of the state on this wonderful old estate with a music shed, which was a wonderful wooden concert hall. The music school had the Guinari String Quartet and things like that there that summer.

MR. TULLY: We're talking about 1961?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. I went back to teach there in 1971 and 1972. It was a great place. At any rate, the other classmates -- Brice Marden was there from BU [Boston University]. There would be hundreds of reviews. Each one was 10 or 12 words long. It wasn't much of a review, but when you're out in the boondocks and the new names each month--I love art magazines. They're my passion. I go back over them all the time. Rauschenberg had [Boston University]. David Norcross was there from someplace in California -- U.C.L.A. or something. A number of interesting people. Vija Celmins. Do you know her work? She's from L.A. She shows at McKee [Gallery, New York].

MR. TULLY: I think I know her.

MR. CLOSE: She has drawn water with pencil. Just the waves. Lately she's been doing sort of fake rocks. A very interesting artist. She's Latvian. A number of other interesting people.

MR. TULLY: And you took numerous courses or was it one studio course?

MR. CLOSE: I took photography, painting, drawing and print making for I think eight weeks. Just lived and breathed art. It was great. Had a wonderful film series and a lot of visiting artists and lecturers. John Ciardi came over to do poetry and Morton Feldman came over to talk about musical composition. John Sheuler taught there. At any rate, Yale Summer School has functioned in the past. I think less so today than it used to. Yale Graduate School has no undergraduate art program to speak of, so unlike other graduate schools that depend on its undergraduate school feeding the graduating class into the graduate program, Yale has always had to go out and recruit from around the country. That's what makes it so successful as a graduate program. It's never had a school style particularly and you get all these different attitudes. Somebody can come in being very influenced by somebody and perhaps in their own school their work was very typical, but in that

situation they would be the only person doing that sort of thing. So they offered another alternative or a breath of fresh air. There were a lot of fights and a lot of arguments, both at Yale Summer School and at Yale itself later. Tremendous passion over a particular point of view. It was a very electric time.

MR. TULLY: So you had just been in New York for the first time?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: Now you're in this other super atmosphere?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: Your head must have been swimming.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. It was terrific. It's kind of a long and involved thing for no particular reason, but I'm tempted to tell you about this incredible experience that occurred at that summer school. I don't know if you want it or not.

MR. TULLY: Sure.

MR. CLOSE: It's 1961 and I don't know what was happening in terms of "Happenings" and things at that time. We weren't really aware of much, but there was a girl -- Peggy. I can't remember Peggy's last name. She came, I think, from Philadelphia or something like that. She got a call or a telegram that her aunt was coming to visit. This was an aunt that she had barely ever met and I guess was quite wealthy. But she couldn't figure out why the visit. So the whole thing was that she was going to have this woman to entertain coming to this summer school. The director of the program-- Bernie Chaet -- suggested that we do a "Happening" -- sort of a put-on for this woman in a sense. And the most incredible thing happened. Allen Blagden -- now a very successful realist painter in conservative galleries an Andrew Wyeth-y kind of -- he had an old Chrysler or something -- without a backseat. But it was like a limousine style. There is a mansion on the estate. It's incredible with paintings and all the Hudson River paintings and full of priceless antiques and this huge beautiful estate. So Peggy got some paint overalls and all covered with dirt and she put some paint over that. Allen got into some kind of a chauffeur's uniform that was about 10 sizes too small for him and they drove to pick this woman up. They got her into the backseat. There was no back seat, but it was just like a crate. Peggy just rambled on crazily about anything. There was a prep school guy from Wesleyan who actually had a polo pony in real life, and he had his riding stuff on. He talked endlessly. He was also in the car and he talked in stream of consciousness -- art-historical gibberish -- about every building they passed and who supposedly was the architect or whatever. Just total nonsense. When the car got to the school and drove up this big circular drive, this very elaborate theater thing began to evolve as everybody sort of extemporaneously put together various pieces of it. At the time I was wearing very bizarre clothing. I was wearing ruffled shirts and bowlers and stuff like that, so I wore some kind of costume. I happened to know something about Greek archaeology and art, and so I was just talking about that stuff. I had just finished a course. Someone else went on about God knows what. Someone else was up in a tree overhead playing a banjo. This woman was first taken into the house, where this very voluptuous student from Mississippi who was very amply endowed was just smoking a big cigar. She went in and as the woman sat down on the toilet, she stayed in there with her smoking this cigar. [They laugh.] Finally she came out and by now things are getting more and more bizarre. She sat down at the table underneath the tree where we were all sitting and a guy's going around and around the tree on a motor scooter. Just around and around and around. One guy on the faculty who was, I think, in his wife's bikini bottom

and hip boots was throwing a fishing line and reeling in imaginary fish and scooping them up. Somebody else was bringing people in bathing sorts by in a wheelbarrow and dumping them. We had a huge pile of flesh of people passed out in this huge pile of meat. The musicians got involved, and they started walking single file out of the house down a path to the gazebo and turning around and going back like zombies. After a while they got tired of doing that, so they started carrying the [George] Inness paintings and marble sculptures out of the house and they started bringing junk from the storage garages, like old parts of carburetors and fenders of cars back into the house. This string quartet of all bass viols came and sat down and played. Just incredible stuff like this. I don't know really why I'm telling you this except that it was-- we got very worried that we had put the woman on, and that she was the brunt of this joke and that she would be humiliated or hurt by it. It turned out that she had been in the theater when she was young, and she thought this was the most wonderful thing she had ever experienced. The fact that this extemporaneous play was put on for an audience of one and she happened to be the one who was lucky enough to have it done for. It's much more elaborate, but I'm abridging it. It got incredibly elaborate. Anything that anybody could think of -- oh, the director of the school said, "Would you like to see the greenhouse? It's beautiful this time of year." So they took her into the greenhouse and it was just a frame. All the glass was missing and in the beds where the dirt was where the plants used to be were people sitting in the dirt. He would point to one person and say, "This is an nasturtium and this is a carnation." Whatever. So she really thought that she was visiting Willowbrook [State School, Staten Island, NY, closed in 1987] or Creedmoor [Psychiatric Center, Queens Village, NY] or something like that.

MR. TULLY: Lucky she had been in the theater.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. But the reason that I'm telling it is that it's like part of the time. The '60s had been a very formulaic time to be an art student. Abstract Expressionism was the prevailing sensibility. What everybody did was high art. Everything else was low art. Everybody was essentially operating within the very narrow range of what was possible. You could be more like Hofmann than you were like a de Kooning or choose biomorphic Gorky shapes instead of something else, but essentially it was pretty proscribed. We were talking about it last time in terms of San Francisco and the beats and whatever. Within this time that produced button down, gray flannel, stamped-out-of-mold people there were also the comics like Shelley Berman and Mort Sahl and it was that kind of irreverence. It's the start of -- I think -- what happened in the later '60s when people were really pushing at the parameters of what art could look like. That event at a time when we were all in a sense painting the same kind of paintings and painting very conventional, art school, junior Abstract Expressionist versions of that, that sort of early happening theater event or performance piece was in a way something that was pent up inside the spirit of the times and erupted from time to time in unlikely ways and then later manifested itself in a different kind of art.

MR. TULLY: We are still at the summer at Yale Summer School.

MR. CLOSE: We haven't gotten very far.

MR. TULLY: Well, actually, we have, but --

MR. CLOSE: You were just asking about the comment about junior Abstract Expressionists and whether or not we thought that's what we were. It's a good point, because a lot of revisionism takes place and when you look back you don't remember why you were doing something, but at the time Abstract Expressionism was the first truly American thing. Even the government was out circulating this work around the world, and in Iron Curtain countries as a symbol for America -- freedom and what people without restrictions on what they can make will produce -- and against

Socialist Realism, et cetera. So this was not seen as a brief golden moment in art history that would later be where the young world would move onto something else. No one saw Pop Art coming. No one saw minimal stuff coming. This was something that was going to last forever, like a thousand year life or something. This was going to be America's art forever. I remember that the debates in art school as an undergraduate -- certainly at Yale Summer School. By the time I was in graduate school already you could see other things happening. [Robert] Rauschenberg and Johns and people like that were -- Warhol was beginning to show when I was in graduate school. But prior to that, the discussion was who were going to be the people to keep this alive. It was like, here's the fallen lance. Who's going to pick it up and carry the torch on? The young bucks and buckettes who were anointed were people like Joan Mitchell. On the West Coast people like William Wiley, Joan Brown out there. And in New York Joan Mitchell, Michael Goldberg, Al Leslie. Michael Goldberg has managed to be an emerging artist for about 30 years. It's amazing. [They laugh.] But you know, when he was a kid, he was in all those parties in the Springs and East Hampton. He was always the person that somebody said, "Who's going to keep the tradition alive? Michael Goldberg." So it was seen as something that when you bought into it, it was like a lifetime hitch. You were going to be like signing up for the Army and be a lifer. That was it. These were the values and the issues that one expected to have serve you and you were to serve them indefinitely. With the kind of organic nature of the art world gobbling up art and moving on, I don't know what art students feel like today, but I would imagine that they feel that they're trying to get on to a moving train. They either get into one car or they get into another, but it's trying to get up to speed with something that's already constantly moving in a flux. That was not the sense that we had. So it seemed that we had lots of time. Didn't expect anything. If anything were ever to happen in our careers -- if we even thought of it as a career -- it wasn't going to be for many decades from now.

MR. TULLY: That was your feeling?

MR. CLOSE: Oh, yes. Very definitely. In fact, we had such lowered sense of expectations that it made the art world a much less scary place to be. Everything wasn't a strategy. It didn't feel like if you made the wrong move at age 21 that you were going to be screwed for the rest of your life. You listened to your elders and they told you what to think. You could question it a little bit, but you didn't really have to leave home.

MR. TULLY: It sounds like that summer in a sense you were almost joining this order.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. And I knew that it had to be in New York, so I went back to Seattle and finished my senior year. Then I was going to just come to New York and paint. Then the Cuban missile crisis or something like that came along I think in 1961. Invasion, Blockade, or the Bay of Pigs. Whatever it was, to get into graduate school. Because Bernie Chaet had run the summer program, he was able to move me to the top of the waiting list. I put my application in in the summer. I think it was in July that I applied. They had already accepted the class, but I applied in the summer and he went around to the rest of the faculty -- most of whom had known me at Norfolk -and apparently moved me to the top of the waiting list so that the first person who didn't come to graduate school for whatever reason, I could have their position. That happened I think at the end of August. I had something like seven or eight days before school started. I came East and I went to Yale, which was incredibly fortuitous, because I had that kind of arrogance that a lot of kids have at that point where you think you know it all. I thought I painted better than my teachers in Seattle -- or most of them at least. When I was in Seattle, I was showing in the same exhibitions that my teachers were and I thought, "Gee, I'm a painter already. I seem to be reasonably good at making that stuff that got prizes and stuff." So I thought I would just be a painter. But having to go to graduate school was the best thing that ever happened to me. I think luck has a lot to do with it. I think you put yourself into the position where you are more or less likely to have something happen, but there are at schools

golden moments and if you are lucky enough to be at a school when it's the right time to be there, it can be incredibly exciting. A few years later when it's not a place to work and everybody's screwing around, and it's a downer to be there then no matter how excited you are about being there, it's hard to -- I remember David Pease, who's now the dean at Yale, telling me that when Martin Puryear was at Yale, it happened to be at a time when there was a lot of dissent and turmoil at Yale, and they were blowing the place up and burning the school down. They were all like civil rights activists. Everybody was not making art -- they were manning the barricades. And here he was -- one of the only black students at Yale -- and he just wanted to paint. He wanted them to calm down. "Come on guys, let's get serious. I came here to make art!" So if you're not at some place at the right time, you can be out of sync with whatever is happening.

MR. TULLY: I can just hear him saying that too. So that's what I was going to ask you when you said that it was so fortuitous.

MR. CLOSE: We knew we were students, see. There was no way that you could take your student work and come to New York and show it. It was clearly student work. Clearly out of somebody, very, very derivative, self-consciously studenty kind of work. Actually, Janet Fish -- for a lecture that she gave on art education -- just borrowed some slides of my student work and other student work of our classmates at Yale to show what people whose work we all know looked like when they were in graduate school. Honest to God nobody would ever figure out which was Richard Serra's work, which was Brice Marden's work. Well, Brice Marden's work always looked like Brice's. He's probably maintained the closest -- he was very advanced as a student anyhow. He had a very personal attitude and look to his work, even then.

MR. TULLY: So some of the same people that were in the summer school then went on to Yale?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Brice went to Yale. David Novros didn't. There were several people at the summer school that went.

MR. TULLY: Janet Fish was also in your class?

MR. CLOSE: Yes, but it's hard because it supposedly took three years to get a master's degree. Sometimes it took two, but if you didn't have a bachelor's degree -- if you had a B.A., but didn't have a B.F.A. then you spent another year to do that. So it was never clear who was in what class. Brice Marden was in a class ahead of mine. He went directly from Yale Summer School to Yale. I went back and finished my senior year in Seattle and so I came a year later. Brice and Bob Mangold were a year ahead of me and all kinds of interesting people were in the class. Richard Serra and Nancy Graves and Janet Fish, Rackstraw Downes. Those first four were married to each other.

MR. TULLY: Were what?

MR. CLOSE: Richard and Nancy became married later and so did Janet Fish and Rackstraw Downes.

MR. TULLY: Are you kidding? I didn't know that.

MR. CLOSE: Let's see. Steve Posen and Don Nice. Harriet Shore. Newton Harrison. Oh, I'm leaving out tons of people. Then in the class after mine, people like Jennifer Bartlett. I'm thinking of all my friends that I'm not mentioning. I could list right now probably 30 people in my class -- and there probably weren't more than about 40 -- who are in New York and who are showing right now. So it's very hard unless you go down the class list in a very inclusive way.

MR. TULLY: You would have to have it in front of you.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. If you mention some you should mention others.

MR. TULLY: Go ahead if there are other names that pop up.

MR. CLOSE: Okay. I remember a lecture that Bernie Chaet gave the very first day of summer school. He said, "You 35 kids think you're all hotshots, and you're all going to be artists, and you're going to set the world on fire. Statistically, if more than two out of the 35 of you are still making art 10 years from now, you'll be doing better than the national average for art school graduates." He said in past years, 10 years later almost none of the people from Yale Summer School were still making art. So you all look around. It's like when you find out that two out of 10 people are going to get cancer. You look around trying to figure out which one of you--

MR. TULLY: Who's not going to be here for the reunion?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. So we'd sit and look at this room full of hotshots and trying to figure out which two will still be making art. The thing that's so amazing I think is that just virtually everybody is showing. At one point we all lived within about 10 blocks of each other. It was like "Graduate School South."

MR. TULLY: Do you account for that in the sense of it being that golden moment? Everyone was so taken by it? Not only are they -- just, by saying that they're all showing in New York -- but including you, they're all in that in terms of occupying a certain positions. Those names from Richard Serra to Janet Fish, which would be one of the wider in terms of aesthetics. Have you thought about that or do you think that's just one of those quirks?

MR. CLOSE: I attribute some of it to Jack Tworkov, who became the chairman the second year that I was there. One of the things that's interesting is that the position that the faculty held at Yale was not what one might assume. In some ways the faculty was not that important. The faculty was very important for taking the students and bringing them together and setting up the situation. It's a little bit like a therapist who puts together a great group therapy session. Then in a way the clients start doing all the work, and the therapist sort of sits back and lets it all happen. If the therapists weren't there the whole thing would fall apart, but they don't have to play a very active role. In fact, they were pretty much ignored and sometimes ridiculed. It wasn't like we were waiting for them to tell us what to do. I didn't study with them, but Alex Katz was teaching there. Philip Pearlstein was teaching there. There were very few of us who were working figuratively. Janet Fish was about the only one who was working figuratively. Nancy was making Matissey kind of paintings. Richard was pretty much working out of Hans Hofmann. Rackstraw Downes was making AI Helds. If you couldn't afford a real AI Helds you could buy a cut-rate Rackstraw Downes. Don Nice was working very similarly to the way he is working today.

MR. TULLY: What about you?

MR. CLOSE: I was making something that was a combination of the de Kooning and Gorky and other Abstract Expressionists.

MR. TULLY: So you were still going by this notion that you were a foot soldier?

MR. CLOSE: Oh yes. Carried right through graduate school. We were very suspicious of everyone. When Rauschenberg came up my roommate -- Bill Hokkis and I -- went to a chicken store and bought a chicken because he had done a combine which there was a stuffed chicken. So

Rauschenberg was giving a group crit and we took this chicken and in the sculpture crit we put this chicken underneath a box on top of a pedestal and tied its foot to the box. So Rauschenberg came along and then Hokkis took the box off and everybody laughed. Rauschenberg laughed and then he started to give it a crit -- regular standard art crit. The chicken woke up because it had been asleep in the box. So it stood up, looked around, and just as Rauschenberg started to give it a crit the chicken made an unbelievable streak of shit -- spurted across the room in this sort of almost comment on what Rauschenberg was saying. [Laughs.] It was incredibly funny, but we were very suspicious of people like Rauschenberg.

MR. TULLY: At that time, he would be red hot?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. 1962. 1963, maybe. Frank Stella came up in 1963, I believe. If you can imagine this--Richard Serra, in Frank Stella's lecture, got up and was so outraged by him. Called him a fake -- a fraud. Stormed out of the lecture. So you can see that we were very conservative. We were not, as an art school, the cutting edge. We were not making the stuff that was the equivalent of what was going on in New York at the time. The faculty brought up Rauschenberg and Stella. When we were asked who we wanted, we wanted Edwin Dickinson.

MR. TULLY: Oh! God!

MR. CLOSE: Paul Burlin. Remember Paul Burlin?

MR. TULLY: I think so, yes.

MR. CLOSE: And people like that. Guston was one of the art faculty's choices. I think Louis Finkelstein brought him up. So the faculty in a sense was bringing the names up. We were more conservative than they were. We kept wanting people of "the old time religion."

MR. TULLY: So in terms of what Serra heard, do you think you felt threatened?

MR. CLOSE: Oh yes. There was outrage. I was very enamored of the Pop artists. You've got to remember what the times were like. It's hard for kids today to understand. Something wasn't greeted with as much enthusiasm as quickly. There wasn't the equivalent of the Schwartzes [Mr. and Mrs. Eugene] taking art tours to people's studios while looking for the Meyer Vaismans of the moment. When somebody like Warhol was showing at Stable, it attracted very little attention. It wasn't the big media event. But a number of people were just quietly outraged by it. I remember liking that stuff and feeling guilty about liking it. I remember I bought Roy Lichtenstein. In fact I have it right here. I just got it back from my mother. I bought this for five dollars from Leo Castelli at Lichtenstein's first show. I brought it back to Yale and I was attacked unmercifully for -- how could I do that? It was infatuation with it, it was repulsion/attraction.

MR. TULLY: So what we're looking at is one of his cartoon women with kind of blond hair with tears and fingers in the mouth.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. It was his first print. One just sold in an auction, I think, for seven or eight thousand dollars and I paid five dollars for it -- signed.

MR. TULLY: Is that a silkscreen or a lithograph?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. I think it's a silkscreen.

MR. TULLY: So even if you were conservative you were still aware enough that you would go to

New York --

MR. CLOSE: Oh yes. We saw everything. You didn't rule anything out without seeing it, and we made pilgrimages to New York every couple of weeks. You could do every gallery in a day. Start at 86th Street and there was nothing below 52nd Street or so.

MR. TULLY: Do you remember what it was or what you think it might have been that so outraged Serra in that talk?

MR. CLOSE: No, and I'm not singling out Serra as being more reactionary than anyone else. It's just that now to think about who he is and the work he makes and perhaps the reputation art world was coming unglued. The appearance of a monolith was greater than it was in reality. Clearly Barney Newman and Ad Reinhardt were not Abstract Expressionists, yet the need to see the New York art world as one family with one set of issues was so great that they were awarded an Abstract Expressionist badge to wear and were included in shows in which their work was clearly antithetical to what was going on. Yet because they liked them and they clearly were making interesting work they were included. But the need to see it as one monolithic-eyed art was very great. Now at the time, there were conservative influences within the museum world et cetera -- who were screaming, "Return to the figure! Return to the figure!" And people like Leonard Baskin and Rico Lebrun were being hailed out as the alternative, the loyal opposition, the hope for the future, et cetera. The first time a museum didn't record history, but attempted to make it was the Museum of Modern Art's ill-founded attempt to build a movement out of thin air. That was the New Images of Man show, which brought together such disparate people as H.C. Westermann and Rico Lebrun ["New Images of Man," Museum of Modern Art, New York, September - November, 1959]. But you have to remember that people like Leon Golub were on more art magazine covers than he has for antagonizing an audience, it's interesting how outraged he was by what he saw as Stella's intention. But again, it was a time in which the monolithic nature of the Frank Stella or de Kooning. So there was an interest in fostering a new kind of figuration. The art world did not take too well to the Museum of Modern Art trying to build a movement out of thin air and cram it down its throat. It was pretty uniformly rejected and, actually, it was hard on a number of individual artists within that group because they got trashed with the effort. But what did the art world immediately get? It got a figurative movement. It got Pop Art. But it didn't get the figurative movement it wanted. It was a reaction against the previous work, but it didn't come through the route that the conservative critics and the museum people thought it would take. But it was emerging out there, and it was a time in which people were clinging to the old values, yet infatuated, I think, with these glimpses we were getting of the alternatives. The foundations of the old started unraveling and we sort of knew it. You could sort of sense it.

MR. TULLY: And you were seeing it too? You saw that show New Images of Man?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: What did you think of some of those people? Did you feel it was interesting?

MR. CLOSE: Some of the people, yes.

MR. TULLY: Because now that you mention it, I was reading an interview -- I think it was in one of those catalogs that [Arnie] Glimcher interviewed you and you had brought up the Family of Man show. Was that at the same time?

MR. CLOSE: No, it was earlier.

MR. TULLY: Right. So you've got the catalogue, then, of New Images of Man?

MR. CLOSE: I was just in the Strand [bookstore] the other day and it was \$3.50.

MR. TULLY: And this cover of the [Alberto] Giacometti -- isn't this one of the big ones that just sold for three million?

MR. CLOSE: Oh yes. Maybe so. Yes.

MR. TULLY: I bet it is.

MR. CLOSE: People like this -- Nathan Oliveira was as hot as can be. There were a lot of people who were looking at -- here, even Jackson Pollock's late psychological, figurative stuff. Look at these people. Boy, is it bad.

MR. TULLY: Westermann looks great.

MR. CLOSE: Jim McGarrell still has a tremendous influence on millions of figurative artists. And of course then here's de Kooning. Look at what a spread, huh? From de Kooning's Woman to Balcomb Greene. Look at all this stuff. Leon Golub monster stuff. It was too close to the stuff that I grew up with in Seattle -- the kind of notion of humanism that was flying birds and Morris Graves stuff. And of course then Giacometti again. And Dubuffet was very interesting at the time. I did a lot of working straight out of Dubuffet. It was very exciting for me to later be in the same gallery with him. [Richard] Diebenkorn was still painting figuratively then. I remember his last show at -- What the hell is that name of that? It's on 53rd.

MR. TULLY: Oh you're talking about then?

MR. CLOSE: Yes, early '60s.

MR. TULLY: He showed mostly sculpture?

MR. CLOSE: No. Radich was a sculpture gallery. Sugarman and those people showed there. What the hell is the name of that gallery? Oh, well.

MR. TULLY: It's one that I assume is not around anymore?

MR. CLOSE: No. Look at this.

MR. TULLY: Oh, that's the Baskin.

MR. CLOSE: Baskin and Reg Butler. The sculpture was always more conservative. And then Bacon. Kenneth, Armitage. I looked at Karel Appel. But anyhow, it's an interesting group of people. But this show was done in --

MR. TULLY: It's always tough to find dates on these things.

MR. CLOSE: 1959. So it was just prior to Warhol, Lichtenstein, and stuff emerging.

MR. TULLY: And it was in the air in that sense.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. And they knew that configuration was lurking out there. They just didn't know how it was going to --

MR. TULLY: Because really I'm fascinated by this. It's an icon -- this Roy Lichtenstein thing that you saw and you got it for five dollars out the Castelli Gallery when you were a student. It must have seemed really crazy to you at the time in terms of what it looked like.

MR. CLOSE: I was laying on paint an inch thick throwing it from 30 feet practically, yet there was something about that. There were tremendous arguments about Larry Rivers. Larry Rivers's work at the time seemed like [Jean-Auguste-Dominique] Ingres. That's what it seemed like. Now when you look at those, they don't look that way at all. They look very much like the Expressionist work of the time, only it happened to end up looking like an--but at the time out of what was going on it seemed like nobody had drawn like that since Ingres. I remember seeing his early cut-out show on Washington crossing the Delaware and all those things that were later burned, I think.

MR. TULLY: Burned deliberately?

MR. CLOSE: No.

MR. TULLY: Just in a fire?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. The Museum of Modern Art's fire? I'm trying to think what else we saw at that time. Clearly the poles were still in the emerging minimal stuff and figuration by pops with occasional forays into the West Coast stuff -- like Diebenkorn, David Park and [Elmer] Bischoff, people like that were doing. That was held in very high esteem, I think.

MR. TULLY: You had mentioned when you started talking about this time the painter Jack Tworkov as being --

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Jack was very important because here was a guy who had had a retrospective at the Whitney and had been the fall guy for Abstract Expressionism in some respects. When there was a desire to kill off the movement, he happened to be the guy who was having a show at the Whitney at the time and became the person around which some of the issues were drawn. Here was a guy who had been de Kooning's roommate on Tenth Street. He clearly didn't want to be there [at Yale], but he wasn't like a teacher. He didn't make any pretense at being a teacher in some respects, but he knew that you were impressed with somebody who was an artist. Guston had a tremendous influence on me as a critic when he came up. Al Held probably more than anybody else is responsible for so many of us going to New York. Most of us had violent arguments with him all the time that we were in school. There were times when I locked him out of my studio. He was very intrusive and wanted to suggest solutions to your paintings that you didn't want to hear, and often would try to paint on the stuff. Once I remember he stapled some paper to one of my paintings to show me what a white area in there would look like and I found that kind of outrageous. But Al talked about coming to New York, talked about laying your neck on the line, talked about being measured by the only yardstick that mattered. That you can go back to your small town wherever it was and be a provincial success, show in be a local exhibits, but that if you really wanted to be an artist, go where the work will be measured against the highest standards. He would talk about what it was like. He would talk about what it was like to find a loft. He would talk about how you would support yourself.

MR. TULLY: So it was very practical?

MR. CLOSE: Practical and encouraging -- yes. I talked to him recently and the last years that he taught, he argued essentially the opposite and he got very cynical about the art world. I think he would admit that he got somewhat surly. Also what he was doing was beginning to emerge as what

was later called Post Painterly Abstraction. Another younger generation. Al Held was another one of the young guys who was going to keep Abstract Expressionism alive who -- if you saw his show, The Taxi show [Robert Miller Gallery, New York, 1987], which I thought was a really wonderful show -- and the paintings like Ivan the Terrible [1961] -- things that he painted at that time in the early '60s. He did Genesis -- that long painting that was part of Art News, "Al Held Paints a Painting." But here he was -- when you go to art galleries you see his work, he was in Art News, and he was encouraging us. Telling us that we had what it took, or if we thought we had what it took, we should go test it out. Although I didn't study with him, for some people Louis Finkelstein had that influence, as did Alex Katz and Phil Pearlstein.

MR. TULLY: Was there any reason why you didn't study with Katz or Pearlstein? You weren't interested in their painting? or it didn't come up?

MR. CLOSE: Depending on when you entered the school, you got in a certain track and certain people taught in certain years and it just never came up. I remember Brice Marden taking figure drawing with Philip Pearlstein and I think Brice Marden is one of the great draftsmen ever. Great hand. The guy makes the most beautiful, luscious drawings, but the guy could not draw a figure to save his soul. Thank god it's not a test that you have to take --because it has nothing to do with how great a draftsman he is. But I remember him struggling in there with Philip. Being a year ahead of me, somehow Brice got Philip and my class basically didn't. Somehow Janet's group got Alex and I didn't.

MR. TULLY: It's interesting in terms of context that right now where we're sitting in your studio -- we are 30 feet away -- there's a gigantic portrait of Alex Katz looking right at us, just straight ahead.

MR. CLOSE: I didn't know Alex at all then.

MR. TULLY: And just that whole idea of coming around and again how --

[End Tape Two, Side B.] [Tape Three, Side A.]

MR. TULLY: We were at Brice Marden having a tough time trying to perhaps draw like Philip Pearlstein who, I believe, even has a videotaped series on how to do that. Then we were talking with the tape off about -- I think that would be very funny if you could do a Chuck Close finishing up of this Roy Lichtenstein print which has lost some of its color.

MR. CLOSE: Now I can't do it, now that you've said this on tape.

MR. TULLY: Maybe we should erase it and start over.

MR. CLOSE: [They laugh.]

MR. TULLY: So you were saying that it's very difficult without talking about the context of the time to get a sense of what young art students like yourself were thinking.

MR. CLOSE: Well, the faculty like Esteban Vicente and people like that were teaching there at the time. Alex had his followers. Leland Bell. It was a pretty heavily figurative group.

MR. TULLY: That's interesting because Tworkov -- although he started out as -- was certainly not figurative.

MR. CLOSE: Later, when Bailey came in, the school became even more figurative and Al was finally just the last remnant -- a kind of loyal opposition, I think. But at that time, it seemed relatively evenly balanced. There were people like Jimmy Rosati teaching sculpture. I was Gabor Peterdi's assistant in printmaking. But again, the effect that the faculty had on the students in many ways was not as great as one would assume. We were very hard on each other. We were relentless with each other. There were many all night sessions in which we would scream at each other. I remember loaded brushes full of paint being thrown at each other. You didn't have to attack the person because the work was so virtually plagiarized from whoever it was that they were working on at the moment that to attack a person you just had to attack the source. So if you were arguing with Richard Serra you would say, "Hans Hofmann sucks," or something like that and you would be off and running. We were really working out of other people's art. Richard was such a slob, and you could always tell who he was working out of because when you'd go into the library all the books that -- he did his [Chaim] Soutine period, he did his Matisse -- all those pages would be glued shut with paint. We'd literally be painting with books open on the floor. But there was nothing like today's cynical attitude towards appropriation. We didn't see it as a radical gesture to be painting out of those books. [Laughs.] We were simply art students plowing the same earth again, hoping that through mimicking the moves of the masters, we would see what it felt like to make art. It's almost like being a performance artist, in a sense, like a dancer performing someone else's choreography. You made all the right moves.

MR. TULLY: So would you say then in this atmosphere of liberal attacking one another through your teachers or your influences -- would it be more intimidating in terms of having a crit if you were attacked by Richard Serra or would it be more intimidating if someone from the outside came in and did it. Could you give an example?

MR. CLOSE: Isabel Bishop was another one that we wanted to have -- isn't that interesting?

MR. TULLY: Sure.

MR. CLOSE: I remember when Guston came I had made a painting that, at the time, I liked quite a bit. I was just finishing it. There was a big open group crit -- the whole school -- and I had brought my painting. It was quite a large painting. It was like six by eight feet. Something like that. I brought it up to the crit room. This was before the new building was built, old Street Hall, and left it leaning against the wall and went across the street to have a beer. When I came back, everybody else had brought their paintings into the room and somebody's even bigger painting was covering my painting. The paintings were all overlapped and Guston was ranting and raving and walking back and forth and giving this big crit in which he was saying that there wasn't anything to look at, and the work was all terrible, and he was trashing everything. He really had nothing good to say. I thought, "Thank God my painting is covered up!" [They laugh.] So as the crit got over and people took their work out of the room and my painting got uncovered, Guston loved it! Went on and on about how wonderful -- he came over to my studio and saw the rest of my work because I painted in a different building. He came over to my studio to see what I was doing. Very, very supportive. Took me very seriously, and it really had a tremendous influence and impact on me in a very negative way. It made that particular effort stand out as some kind of masterpiece or something -- that in this particular work I had managed to keep all the balls in the air. Whereas all the other works were in some basic way fatally flawed. I realized years later -- and actually I told him about it when we taught together later -- that he practically had crippled me by liking that painting so much. Certainly not his fault, but the net effect was that I think I spent the next four years trying to repaint that painting.

MR. TULLY: What was the painting, by the way? Is that one of the ones that you had shown me and that you still--

MR. CLOSE: Yes. A seated nude with the arms raised. This looks to me now like a pretty much standard work at the time. But at any particular moment, nuance is everything. Later, everything gets grouped together and it all seems to be of the same cloth, but subtle differences at any given time seem to be incredibly important. I was going through the '70s the other night talking with somebody about people who used to show at Bykert with me. Or actually I had lunch with Brice yesterday, and we were talking about people we were showing with. There were a number of people who showed dust on the floor. [Laughs.] The differences between the intentionality behind the way one person put the dust on the floor and the way the other -- and all this stuff that at the moment seemed so incredibly important. Nobody gives a shit about it anymore.

MR. TULLY: So how did you finally get out of that --

MR. CLOSE: Finally I got out of it by totally abandoning that way of working. By just doing something very, very different.

MR. TULLY: And what was that way of working? Are you talking more traditionally in terms of that kind of painting?

MR. CLOSE: See that was about 1964 -- 1963 maybe. I think in some ways I never got over it until about 1966 when I started working from photographs. I started to impose all kinds of limitations on myself that would guarantee that I wouldn't make that painting Guston liked anymore. [Laughs.] In a way I got rid of all the things that that painting was about. I got rid of the expressionist paint handling, and the color, and the art shapes, and all that stuff. Got rid of the tools.

MR. TULLY: Did you get rid of the painting too?

MR. CLOSE: It was just burned. One of the only paintings that I had of that period and I had lent it to a college that I went to and the school burned to the ground with the painting in it.

MR. TULLY: Which school is this?

MR. CLOSE: Everett.

MR. TULLY: When did this happen?

MR. CLOSE: Just this year. They just sent me a photograph of the painting in the building before it burned.

MR. TULLY: God, wasn't it kind of a scary -- so this was the gallery?

MR. CLOSE: This is in the administration building or the library or something.

MR. TULLY: Definitely expressionist -- your painting here -- and it's figurative.

MR. CLOSE: Sort of. In a way, yes. What I was doing was sort of biomorphi kinds of shapes in an architectural setting, although that's probably more recognizable than most of them. In a way I was very influenced by De Kooning's pink angel period stuff. The way fragments or lines would be extracted from the edge of a breast, or part of an arm, or would just sort of be something that you would know was organic and then stuck into the structure of some kind of a box-like thing in space. I was influenced by Miro. The figures that were not recognizable in and of themselves, but they behaved like people? Like a shape that would kick a rock or weird creatures that would become a farm. Gorky's work out of Miro. Pretty standard stuff for art school at the time. One of the things

that's hard to figure out when you look back at that time is how it was recognized that any of us were any better students than the others because we were all so clearly not distinguishing ourselves as artists at all. I guess some people were better students than others. In a way there was also a kind of troublemaker category. Most of the people who went on to have some kind of reputation were the sort of difficult students in some ways.

MR. TULLY: Who were some of the others? Was Rackstraw Downes a troublemaker?

MR. CLOSE: In a sense, yes. Argumentative, questioning authority. Something like that.

MR. TULLY: And you yourself?

MR. CLOSE: I probably fit in a little easier than some others. Serra was definitely aggressive and confrontational. It's an interesting time too, because women -- people like Nancy Graves and Janet Fish -- there was the notion that the art world was basically a man's world. Grace Hartigan had been showing at one point under the name George Hartigan. Nancy Graves first showed under Andrew Stevenson Graves because she did not want to be dealt with as a woman. We used to joke that the women had more balls than the men. It was a much harder row to hoe, so they had to make bigger paintings. They had to be more aggressive and stronger. But the school was about 50/50 women and men, and the female students were certainly a force that you dealt with. Many of them wanted to take the same route and be professionals. It wasn't something they were doing while they were waiting to meet a man. Except for Jennifer. Jennifer married a doctor.

MR. TULLY: So you spent three years at Yale?

MR. CLOSE: No, only two. I got a Bachelor's degree in one year and a Master's degree the next. I was just going to leave and I was surprised to find out that they had decided to give me a degree anyhow. It was very nebulous as to how long you had to be there. Some people were forced to come back year after year. I think Bob Marigold had to come back. Some other people. It was never clear as to why. Clearly people who were vastly inferior would be granted a degree. Then somebody else -- the jury would decide they weren't ready to graduate. They would have to go out of residence for a year, pay some minimal tuition, and come in twice during that year for another jury in which it would be decided whether or not they would be given degree. If they didn't get it at the end of that one then they would have to go out of residence for another year and paint on their own. It was a real power trip. But the faculty also did an interesting thing. They always had one outside person on that final jury who did not go to school or did not teach at the school -- had no connection with the people. So you would have someone looking at your work who had never been involved with you before. So sometimes when there was somebody that the faculty was particularly enamored of somebody from outside could say, "Why this shit? Why is this person getting a degree?" Or, conversely, they would defend somebody that the faculty was sort of down on. It was sort of like a fresh eye.

MR. TULLY: Did you know, for instance, who was your jury?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. I can't remember who it was now. I forget who it was.

MR. TULLY: When did you make up your mind -- or did you make up your mind definitely -- about once you got out of Yale you were definitely going to go to New York? Was there any question?

MR. CLOSE: I didn't intend to move to New York. I didn't have the guts to move to New York. I had a Fulbright to Vienna. Steven Posen got one to Florence. Kent Floeter got one to Barcelona. Nancy

got one to Paris and Richard got the Yale traveling grant to go to Paris. I think there may have been a couple more. So we all went en masse to Europe together and traveled around and visited together, which was very nice. After the year that they spent in Paris, Richard then got a Fulbright to Florence and they moved to Florence for the next year. I had a friend from Seattle who had a Prix de Rome, so I visited him in Rome. We spent a lot of time doing that. I remember sitting on the beach in Barcelona with my friend Kent Ploeter trying to figure out what we were going to do when our Fulbrights ran out. We didn't have the guts to go to New York. We felt we'd better have some kind of teaching job. At that point Yale had a very good track record with finding people teaching jobs within a reasonable commuting distance to New York City. Art schools were expanding like crazy and there were shiploads of teaching jobs. Yale just about could guarantee to place you someplace on the eastern seaboard. So they got me a job at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and Kent went to Ithaca and was the chairman of the art department at Ithaca College.

MR. TULLY: So from the beach to the chair?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. I don't know if they still do, but when you went on a Fulbright they used to send you by ship. So we got off the ship together in New York around the first of September from our Fulbright with our suitcases and our trunks.

MR. TULLY: What year is this?

MR. CLOSE: This is 1965 I guess. I think I was in Europe 1964/1965. So it would be fall, 1965. So then I saw all my friends were in New York and I said, "Oh, shit, I should be doing this." They said, "Oh, it's not so hard. Try this loft." I saw the way people were living -- \$50 a month for a 2,500 foot loft on Chambers Street. "Oh, my God, look at this!" A friend of mine said, "I can get you a job in this air conditioner factory." They used to take air conditioners out, and hose them down, and spray them with aluminum paint, and shove them back in, and say that they were reconditioned. A number of people were doing this sort of thing. It was so inexpensive to live in New York at the time that you could work for a day or two a week doing something like that and survive. So then I realized that my paranoia about what I was going to do while I was sitting in Europe was ill-founded, but now I had a commitment to go and teach. So I went to the University of Massachusetts, where the first year I was a painter who also taught. By the second year I was a teacher who sometimes painted. I got involved in some political shit -- anti-war and stuff (the Vietnam War was just beginning to heat up) and got involved in some unpopular causes on campus, and did some work, which was considered pornographic, and managed to get myself fired so then I could leave and go to New York. But I always thought the advantage to that was that my friends who came straight to New York always wondered if they wouldn't perhaps have been happier going out and having some cushy teaching job in the country. I had done that, and I knew that it wasn't something that I wanted to do. I pretty much made sure that I couldn't get hired again [laughs], so I sort of slammed the door on the option which made it easier then to come to New York.

MR. TULLY: So you had two years of teaching?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: What was this pornographic work?

MR. CLOSE: It's like the provincial problem of a state school where the state legislature is very conservative in western Massachusetts. The work was just simply this first stuff that I was making, working from photographs -- sort of transitional work, but some of it included some male nudity. The campus police came over there one night and took the show down. There ended up being a lawsuit

and ACLU defended me. Actually, it was a landmark decision in extending freedom of speech to the visual arts. I occasionally met a lawyer who recognized the name from the court case as opposed to the works. Close vs. the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. I had the judge who sent Spock up -- the world's oldest living State Supreme Court judge. He was stone deaf, but it was an interesting case. But that's the kind of bullshit that you can get into teaching. I think it was anything to keep from working. I was desperately unhappy and I knew I really didn't want to be there. I wanted to be in New York. I think now looking back over it --although I didn't see it at the time -- what I was doing was slamming the door on teaching as an alternative perhaps to cement my resolve to go to New York and try and compete in the marketplace.

MR. TULLY: Were you living alone at that time?

MR. CLOSE: I met my wife, who was a student of mine at the time, and we moved to New York together and got married the middle of the first year that we were here.

MR. TULLY: So she, at the time, was also painting.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Then she became a sculptor. Finished her B.F.A. at Hunter. Studied with Bob Morris.

MR. TULLY: What was her maiden name?

MR. CLOSE: Leslie Rose. Then she later gave up art and went into horticulture and landscape design and is now a gardening historian.

MR. TULLY: So you packed your bags and they rode you out on a rail?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Pretty much. [Laughs.]

MR. TULLY: So you got to New York. Did you scout ahead?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. All my friends were here. In fact, I had the sense that they had started. They knew the lay of the land or whatever, they were very helpful. A friend of mine at UMass the same time I did -- Keith Hollingworth (who's the Keith that I painted) --came to New York at the same time. He already had a loft and he helped us find our loft. Our first loft was on Greene Street between Canal and Grant. 2,000 square feet. That was \$150 a month and that was considered highway robbery. People laughed when they heard that we were paying that! It was like the most outrageous thing anybody had ever heard of -- that anybody that was considered paying more than a hundred dollars -- which was considered top dollar for loft space. When I left UMass I went from about \$11,000 a year to \$3,000 a year when we were first living in New York. The first two years I think we lived on less than \$4,000 a year. We had no heat. Water would freeze in the toilet.

MR. TULLY: Oh, brother.

MR. CLOSE: But when I was in graduate school, Don Nice was dean of the School of Visual Arts at the same time that he was a graduate student at Yale. When I came to New York I was lucky enough to have Don find me a part-time teaching position by the hour at the School of Visual Arts, where I originally taught in the Photography Department. Not knowing much about photography. But it kept the wolf from the door.

MR. TULLY: So this time all the artists you knew were living in SoHo, even though SoHo was not something referred to as SoHo?

MR. CLOSE: No.

MR. TULLY: Was it just downtown?

MR. CLOSE: There were a lot of people in what's now Tribeca as well. There were probably almost more people living down there in some ways. Lower Broadway and Greenwich. That whole area has been torn down for the World Trade Center and Battery Park City. Those were a lot of cheap lofts. But at night you could walk through SoHo and you'd see one light on in every block or two and say, "Gee, someone else is living here." You weren't supposed to live there and you'd have to hide your garbage. Everybody had a model stand, which was pretty amazing since nobody ever worked from models. The model stand was the thing that hid your bed, because when inspectors came or Con Ed or anybody came in, you had to pretend that you didn't live there. There was no trash pickup, because you weren't supposed to be using an industrial area. So we found creative ways of getting rid of garbage. We'd put it in a box and leave it on the subway -- things like that. [They laugh.] Sort of gift wrap it and leave it places. But it was an interesting time. Everyone had holes bored in the walls so that they could see out into the stairwell to see who was knocking on the door -- whether it was an inspector or not.

MR. TULLY: Rather than the modern convenience of a peephole in an apartment door?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: So artists were being harassed in other words?

MR. CLOSE: Oh yes.

MR. TULLY: Aggressively?

MR. CLOSE: Industry had really dried up. The sweatshops and things had gone out of business and landlords had all these buildings. I remember fighting for art and pleading with the owner of the building on the corner of Canal and Greene, which is now where that parking lot is where they have the flea markets on the weekend. That was the most spectacular cast iron building in New York. It had an interior court. It was an L-shaped building, which was virtually entirely glass with this huge interior court. You drove through an arched park on the inside. It was beautiful. All copper cornices and stuff. Alan Saret did a number of sculptures from the fragments of the building as it was being torn down. The guy could not afford to keep the building. He said, "I'd love to keep the building. The building has been in my family for decades, but can't rent it for enough to pay the property taxes. I've got to tear it down and make it a parking lot." If you had a five or six story building and you could only rent each floor for a hundred dollars, there was no way for them to pay the taxes. The city later realized that artists moving into these areas was good for the neighborhoods and changed their minds.

MR. TULLY: That was [John V.] Lindsay when he was mayor?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Originally they were very antagonistic about people living in commercial buildings. This was considered to be the saddle of the city -- the lowest thing -- and they wanted high-rise buildings to be built here. During the week there were sweatshops with rats and rags and all kinds of stuff, but on the weekends it was absolutely a morgue. You could literally -- if one wanted to -- lie down in Greene Street all day long and a car would never run over you. There just was nothing. It was like a no-man's land down here. People say the first gallery to open up was Paula [Cooper], but it wasn't. Actually, Richard Feigen opened a space on Greene Street first.

MR. TULLY: I never heard that before.

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: I've heard of Richard Feigen certainly.

MR. CLOSE: He had his space one building in on Greene Street from Houston where that weird organization has its headquarters. Do you know that --

MR. TULLY: Aesthetic Realism. With the flag. Victim of the press.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. That was the first space that was set up. Paula [Cooper] then opened her gallery on Prince Street over where Anina Nosei is now. I guess Ivan [Karp] opened next on West Broadway on that area where that weird California Gallery is now.

MR. TULLY: Where they show M.C. Escher?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: What year was that?

MR. CLOSE: 1970? Then what's his name -- the bone birds guy from New Jersey -- opened his gallery opposite Paula's. Remember him?

MR. TULLY: No.

MR. CLOSE: Oh, God. He did bone birds. His fortune was made selling bone birds in Atlantic City. He drove a white Rolls Royce, which was always parked opposite Fanelli's. Oh, God, everybody showed there. John Walker used to show there. He showed what we called the short stick school. Alan Cody and people like that. What the hell was his name? Oh, God, was he crazy!

MR. TULLY: That probably was before I got here, but that would be an interesting name to look up.

MR. CLOSE: Then Joel Jinski [?] -- he had a show called Rectal Art. Do you remember that? The guy painted with a brush up his asshole. Looked through his legs to see what he was painting. [They laugh.] God, it was a zoo, but it was an interesting time.

MR. TULLY: Were you then thinking, "I'm making work that should be seen in galleries and I'm going out there and look for a gallery" at that point when you moved back and got your first loft? How was that transition made?

MR. CLOSE: You knew you were going to have to spend a few years -- or if you had been spending a few years since you got out of graduate school, you would be spending a few more -- trying to figure out who you were. Do you know the slant step, for instance?

MR. TULLY: No.

MR. CLOSE: Slant step was something that somebody in California found with in a dump. It was an object of no particular possible use. It was covered with linoleum and it was like a stepstool except that the treads where you would step were sloped so you wouldn't step on it. Somebody out there found this thing and started making pieces about it. It had object status, but no particular use. Then it became this whole thing. People would steal it. I remember Richard Serra stole it for a while and it would be in his studio. He made pieces about it. These things sort of went around. Things were in

the air. It was like groping in the dark trying to find things to make work about. There was a "slant step" show a while ago. But things that didn't have any art historical association. It was at that time that I started helping Richard build his sculptures. Richard was very smart. He needed bodies to move material. If you're going to have somebody standing around, you don't want them to be dummies. You want them to be able to contribute, but you don't want them to be sculptors because if they're sculptors, they're not going to want to make your work. They're going to have ego problems involved in helping you make your stuff. So he surrounded himself with people who were trying to figure out why they were making work of their own at this particular time and what made this time peculiar for them. So he had composers -- Phil Glass and Steve Reich. Phil Glass was his main assistant, working with him most of the time. Phil was a plumber. Phil plumbed our loft. Drove a cab. The ceiling of our loft on Prince Street was put up by Tony Shafrazi. He defaced our ceiling before he defaced Guernica. Did the worst ceiling I've ever seen in my life.

MR. TULLY: I believe it.

MR. CLOSE: But of course, long before he had the successful gallery that he has now. In between he was an art buyer for the Shah of Iran. Talk about checkered career!

MR. TULLY: And also was something involved in that land art thing too at some point, I think.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. He was a friend of [Robert] Smithson's. And Serra's. Okay, so the other people working for Serra were that novelist Rudy Wurlitzer, photographers, moviemakers.

[End Tape 2.]

[June 5, 1987, third part of interview with Chuck Close.]

MR. TULLY: Last evening at Sotheby's there was a preview of a gala evening benefit for Art Against AIDS. Chuck Close and his wife were there, and I was there, and it just seemed like an interesting point to bring us up to 1987 for a minute, before we go back to the late '60s and pick up where we were last time on May 27. What are some of your thoughts about AIDS as a modern day plague? Why were you there last night?

MR. CLOSE: Everyone knows somebody or a few people who died and it is having, and will continue to have, a tremendous impact on the arts. We were having an interesting conversation at dinner afterwards. Some people were very angry about the necessity for the private sector incurring this expense, raising the money. Even though it's a lot of money if they raised four or five million dollars from the art world, it's nothing in a research budget and clearly the federal government should be underwriting the expense. Instead of some of us as artists and artist collectors paying for it, all of us as citizens should pay for it as taxpayers. You do what you can. It's not the way it ought to be done, but you do what you can.

MR. TULLY: And in this case what you've done is that you contributed against the future sales of --

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Everybody who's in the catalogue at least gave a work. Some people are giving 50% of the sale price. Our gallery and Leo's gallery and a few other galleries are giving the entire sale price -- the artist and the gallery are giving up the commission. The works will be in the galleries for, I think, six months or something like that. It isn't like an auction, where it all has to happen in one night. There's that kind of hysteria involved in moving mass amounts of work. But people can go to the various galleries. How many galleries were there?

MR. TULLY: 60 to 70 galleries, I think, are participating. Something like 400 artists.

MR. CLOSE: So I have put in a piece. I was in a big AIDS benefit in Los Angeles last year, and one of my pieces raised quite a bit of money out there.

MR. TULLY: Which piece was it last year?

MR. CLOSE: It was a self-portrait.

MR. TULLY: Would you care to say how much it raised? Or you don't know?

MR. CLOSE: I don't know. I think this time the piece is \$28,000.

MR. TULLY: What is the piece in the catalogue for the Art Against AIDS at Pace?

MR. CLOSE: It's a drawing about five feet long. It's one of the color finger print series. I think it's \$28,000 or \$32,000, or something like that. If it sells, it will all go to AMFAR, which is terrific.

MR. TULLY: To AMFAR, which is the American Foundation for AIDS Research.

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: Okay. And Mayor Koch was there last night and all that.

MR. CLOSE: Elizabeth Taylor looking very thin. Must have had her stomach stapled.

MR. TULLY: You're probably right. Jumping around, I guess, the last two times I've been here, there have been two large paintings up. One a very large head of Alex Katz and the other one a very large head of Lucas Samaras. Now there's third canvas that's on an easel by the window.

MR. CLOSE: Guess whose head that is. [Laughs.] There's no hair. It must be mine.

MR. TULLY: I thought I could ask you since I'm sure I won't see this again at this state. Maybe you could talk a little bit about the piece if you feel like it.

MR. CLOSE: This is a series of oil paintings that I'm doing that are a continuation of a series that I started several years ago. If I talk about how they happened, then it seems like I'm always in the process stage, which is not the issue. No painting ever got made without a process, but the process you choose influences the kinds of decisions that are made all the way along, and ultimately what it looks like and what it means. What I've always tried to do is keep moving, keep engaged in what I'm doing by changing my experience in the studio as much as possible. So I often make little games for myself or other ways to feel differently about the paintings that I did from the previous series and to guarantee that the kinds of decision making and problem solving will have to be different. The original pieces in this series were based upon the idea of golf. Did I ever tell you about this?

MR. TULLY: No.

MR. CLOSE: Golf is kind of interesting. It's a stupid sport, but I like it because it's the only sport that I can think of in which you move from general to specific. When you're standing at the tee, you often can't even see the green or the hole where you're going to ultimately end up. So the first stroke is just out there somewhere, and the second stroke attempts to correct and refine the direction. On a par four course, by the third stroke, you should be on the green. You're now getting very close to what you want, and then you hopefully can putt out on the fourth stroke. Now you're someplace very specific --this very small circle. I like the idea of having a certain number of steps to take to

move from general to specific, and I like the idea of building a painting rather than painting it. So I conceived of each one of the squares in the original oil paintings as a kind of par four course. But just to make things more interesting, I would tee off in the opposite direction. So if I knew that the final color I was going to want is a sort of dull orangeish brown, the first stroke might be blue or green or purple --something that was very wrong -- so that the second subsequent stroke would have to correct like crazy. Of course, some of the first color would peek through, or little chunks of it would show. Then working wet into wet, the third stroke would be an attempt to move it even closer. So, say the first color was blue. Then I might put an orange on for a second one, but the orange is not red enough, so in the middle of the orange I might make a red stroke. Now I've moved it into the right generic area, but it's still too intense -- still too bright -- so the final fourth stroke would be some blue, the complementary color, or some other correcting color that would drop the VAMOV intensity in the optical mix of all those colors in the area, hopefully down to the dull brownish orange range. Of course, whenever you have that, you always have the possibility of coming in a stroke early with a birdie. [They laugh.] Clearly I'm not going to stop until it's right. I'll put on as many strokes as necessary, just as in playing golf you've got to keep making strokes until you find the green. [Laughs.] So you could get a bogey or a double bogey or you can have the aesthetic equivalent of being mired down in the sand trap, where you keep making stroke after stroke after stroke and not getting anywhere. So that was the original idea. This one is an extension of that, where I'm now also painting where the lines of the grid cross. I have both the space within the square or the choice to also put a stroke on the inter--whatever it is.

MR. TULLY: I know what you mean. I don't know how to say that.

MR. CLOSE: Whatever.

MR. TULLY: We weren't advanced --

MR. CLOSE: Scientists? [Laughs.]

MR. TULLY: Yes.

MR. CLOSE: This is probably a little bit more like the notion of a colored chord. As in a musical chord, you don't hear necessarily any one of the single notes that makes up the chord, but the combination of notes makes a sound. Sometimes there's even overtones where you begin to hear something that isn't even at all related to the notes that go into those. That's sort of what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to make the kind of complex color manipulations that I've always been involved with in my color paintings, but they used to be superimposed on top of each other. When I was working with three colors, I had a very indirect route to the full color. First it would be red, and then I would put blue on it, so it would be purple. Then I'd put yellow on it, and it would be full color. So it was an indirect way of building color. On the other hand, it was also very direct. It's the least amount of color necessary to make a full color painting. But that kind of color complexity and slowly arriving at a final color -- which I always was involved with -- was not obvious to anyone because the paintings were so thin that there was very little physicality. The way the colors were superimposed on each other disguised how it happened. I feel like I'm building the same kind of complex colors, but now I'm spreading them out next to each other so that the building blocks are part of what the piece is about -- the component color chords or whatever it can be dissected into. I hope people walk up to these paintings and look at them where I paint them -- which is up close -- because I think one of the primary experiences to be had as far as I'm concerned in the works is that intimate experience. For, the self-portrait's being made now, I go down and I make a decision looking at the photograph. I arrive at some color so that I have something to react to or against -- something to move away from. Instead of moving away from the same white canvas all the time or

tinting that whole canvas orange or something so that I would always be moving away from the same orange, now one time I'm moving away from a blue. The next time I'm moving from away from a green.

MR. TULLY: Just in terms of visual impact -- even from the considerable distance where we're sitting right now -- you're saying that the different strokes and the colors because they are not literally on top of one another like before --

MR. CLOSE: Well, they are, but there's still evidence of the other stuff.

MR. TULLY: So you get that combination together in a different--

MR. CLOSE: There's some physical mix, too, because clearly I'm mixing the colors on a palette. Also, I'm painting wet into wet, so I often drag up the color that I need. But there's also optical mix with all the clusters of colors in an area mixing in the retina.

MR. TULLY: As far as this series goes, did it start with the Alex Katz?

MR. CLOSE: No. The first of this series was the self-portrait that I did last summer.

MR. TULLY: Now you're holding up the book jacket of your new book, which is a Rizzoli book that's apparently coming out any minute?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: By Lisa Lyons and Robert Storr -- essays by both [Lisa Lyons and Robert Storr. Chuck Close. New York: Rizzoli, 1988].

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: So you showed one of the self-portraits in that?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: We are looking at your painting right now. Where are we in terms of you working on this? What are we looking at in terms of work time?

MR. CLOSE: You're looking at essentially nine months. I came back from the country last summer with a first painting.

MR. TULLY: Now the size of the Katz painting and the Samaras--that's what?

MR. CLOSE: Seven feet wide, eight feet, six inches high. Something like that.

MR. TULLY: So this painting -- a self-portrait -- is that a Polaroid color faith, a special Polaroid camera?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. That's a 20/24 Polaroid camera. I work with color separations, so I never work with Polaroid. I do work with transparencies. But these oil paintings can be made from Polaroid. That's what I prefer shooting. Mainly because they own the equipment. [Laughs.] I don't have to own cameras and worry about the equipment being stolen and stuff.

MR. TULLY: Do you do that here? Is the equipment brought here or do you go to a separate studio?

MR. CLOSE: No, I go to the Polaroid. The 20/20 studio is on Prince and Broadway. In the past I've always gone to Boston, and I still go to Boston to do 40/80 projects because that's where the 40/80 camera is.

MR. TULLY: Maybe we can talk about that part a little later. I was saying before we started the tape that it seems we're now in the late '60s in terms of chronology. I guess this last part was maybe a brief aside into things that are going on now. Can I ask you on the painting just one more question? The canvas is gridded, which you've laid down and then along the right hand edge on a vertical way there are numbers and going across horizontally there are also numbers. It looks almost like a yardstick or something like that. Could you talk about that?

MR. CLOSE: It's just like a mapping device. It locates the area that you're going to make decisions about. Think about if there were no state divisions in the United States. How would you describe where Salt Lake City is? It's sort of in the lower, left, middle -- It becomes very difficult. The minute you say that it's Illinois you now know which section of the map you're thinking about. All my work has been incremental from the very start. The various units were necessary for me to be able to isolate certain things to be dealt with. No matter how I've worked I've always pretty much finished an area before I've moved on. Make the decisions, try to figure out how to say it, do it. In a way, perhaps the way a writer might have -- you have to keep in mind the whole thing you're going to be telling, but you finish each sentence as you go. You build one unit on another until eventually you have a chapter. You might rearrange them later, but essentially it's that way of working rather than bringing the whole painting along at one time. In the earliest black and white acrylic paintings or in some of the other color paintings, et cetera -- the increments never showed, but they were still there. I would work on a piece six or eight inches square, but the edges would be very soft. I would mesh the soft edges of one square together with the soft edges of the next square to camouflage the seam until it was seamless. But they were in fact always made that way. Then at a certain point I started making pieces in which the incremental nature of the work showed. I would leave grid lines on the paper. I would spray dots inside, or put fingerprints inside each one, or any one of a number of mark-making methods that were in a sense brick wall-like. Regular moving from left to right -- from top to bottom. More recently, I've been working randomly, but also incrementally by the increment being my fingerprint. Now they were not in regular rows. The distribution pattern was random, but since I had nothing bigger than the size of my finger, I was still building the image in an incremental way. I guess the thing that I've always liked about working incrementally is it's a way to think about something without having to have a way to address it that was specific to what was being painted. For instance, in a lot of traditional portraits you see hair strokes. Then there would be glazing to make skin, or any one of a number of different ways of approaching different aspects of someone's face. I like the fact that working incrementally there's nothing about the unit that says anything about what it's describing. It's a little bit like an architect taking a brick as a unit. There's nothing about a brick which says anything about what kind of building that's going to be built out of it. You stack them up one way and you build a cathedral. You stack them up another way and you build a gas station. There's nothing about the unit itself which is loaded or has anything symbolic about it. That's the appeal to me.

MR. TULLY: Earlier, when you started talking about strokes and this strange sport of golf, I was going to ask, do you yourself play the game?

MR. CLOSE: No. I used to. I was a caddy when I was a kid. It's a funny kind of almost non-sport. Any kind of sport where you hit a little ball and you drive in a little cart to the next time you get out and hit a ball can hardly be considered a sport. I'm talking about the weekend duffer kind of approach.

MR. TULLY: Sure, but were you more serious than a weekend duffer at any point?

MR. CLOSE: No. Probably not.

MR. TULLY: Do you think maybe this is a point where we could go back?

MR. CLOSE: Sure.

MR. TULLY: I guess what we're heading towards now is when you first showed in New York after your experience in the teaching profession at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. You got involved politically, one thing led to another, and you found yourself in New York, where you had considered going to before, and you had friends here.

MR. CLOSE: When we first came to New York, we had no idea how we were going to support ourselves, but it was a much easier existence. I feel very sorry for kids straight out of graduate school trying to come to this town now. It was possible to have a part-time job working maybe two or two-and-a-half days a week, and afford to rent a 2,000 or 2,500 square foot loft, and actually still have money left over to buy meat. We lived on less than \$4,000 a year the first few years we were in New York -- \$3,000 and something. Which is -- considering it was only 20 years ago -- kind of amazing, considering what things cost today and how much money somebody would have to have to live in the city. Luckily, I was able to pick up some part-time teaching, six dollars an hour at the School Of Visual Arts. I taught there two days a week. My wife did medical illustrations for an orthopedist and went to work on finishing her B.F.A. at Hunter, where she studied with Bob Morris and some of those people.

MR. TULLY: In painting?

MR. CLOSE: Sculpture. She started in painting and ended up in sculpture. We had this loft on Greene Street between Canal and Grand owned by the Mafia Lumber Company.

MR. TULLY: Is this the one that you were talking about that was torn down that had an inner court yard?

MR. CLOSE: No. That building was on the corner of Greene and Canal. No, this was a shitty little building. It was a very old building, but it had no architectural details left in it. We lived with no heat, with plastic on the windows so you couldn't see out. Actually we had a nice view of that church that they tore down.

MR. TULLY: Oh yes. That's right. That was the famous Catholic church that was supposedly sinking. It was very controversial when they tore it down. It's still an empty lot isn't it?

MR. CLOSE: I think they wanted to build some huge complex on it, but they weren't able to.

MR. TULLY: So that was a view when you were looking west?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. It was a very exciting time in the art world. I don't know that we talked last time about the difference between a kind of more monolithic art world of the '50s and early '60s. I think the way it's almost more monolithic again today in the '80s -- certainly was during the kind of Neo-expressionism period of the '80s, at least -- when one kind of attitude seemed to predominate so much. But it was an exciting time because it was -- and this is, I think, antithetical to what it's like now -- there was a tremendous desire or drive to make your work different from everyone else's. You wanted a purging of all associations of art historical associations as much as possible and as much as possible separate yourself from what was being made in the loft next door. So this diversity or pluralism of the time allowed for both minimal painting and Pop art to in a sense reign

simultaneously, at the same time, conceptual works, and earthworks, and various kinds of realism -- what is called by some people "eyeball realism" -- and works that are photo-generated -- all this stuff -- went on. It didn't mean that everybody loved everything that was going on, but it was all tolerated and there was no clear focus. Now, a lot of people didn't like that about the '70s. People kept saying, "Where are the art stars? Where are the Jasper Johnses and the Rauschenbergs of the '70s?" To a certain extent that was true. You didn't have the equivalent of a [Julian] Schnabel and [David] Salle. But I think it was a very healthy art world. A very interesting time, a very exciting time to be an artist. Everybody was backing himself or herself into their own particular little corners to carve out a niche for themselves and to arrive at some kind of set of -- there was no way to impose a larger art world criteria or judgment on things. You had to figure out what somebody was doing and assess the work by his or her own terms what the person was trying to do. So the job of the critic, or the collector, or the curator, or just another artist looking at people's art was to define quality wherever you found it. Clearly, it was spread all over the place. It wasn't a convenient sort of vein of quality in a sea of junk where all you could do was identify the mother lode and then you were guaranteed to know where all the great stuff was. It just wasn't that kind of art world. There was probably the same amount of quality, but it seemed to me to be spread all over the place. It was a more tolerant time, I think. The prejudices seemed to be more pronounced. Everyone seemed to be looking at everything. Now part of the problem is there's so damn many galleries now that you can't see everything. So when you start making a choice about what you are going to see and it conveniently fits your prejudices, you're going to go to the galleries that tend to show the kind of art work that you're interested in and exclude the rest of the galleries. But it's a sort of self fulfilling prophecy in the sense that it continues the narrowness. But thinking of the way the Whitney Biennial -- or Annual (it used to be an annual at that point in the sixties) -- used to look hanging cheek by jowl were some truly different kinds of work. I thought it was very instructive as an artist for me to hang next to a Jo Baer for instance or hang next to an Agnes Martin or someone.

MR. TULLY: So this would be when you were in one of those Whitney Annuals which would be when?

MR. CLOSE: I think the first one I was in was 1968 or 1969.

MR. TULLY: Who would have been the curator at the Whitney then?

MR. CLOSE: Marcia Tucker and Jim Monte, now a bartender at Fanelli's and the curator with Marcia Isabel. Each of the Twenty-Two Realists show.

MR. TULLY: Is he that slightly built guy with sort of light hair?

MR. CLOSE: Gray hair and sort of gray beard.

MR. TULLY: Is that Jim? That's amazing.

MR. CLOSE: I was in there the other day having lunch, and he was wearing a tee shirt from the Max's Kansas City Softball Team. That brought back a rush of memories. That was also very much what the time was about. There was a bar scene. There were no bars in SoHo other than Fanelli's. There was a place where the Broome Street Bar now is that was a sort of sleazy, Italian, Little Italy-style bar. Then the Spring Street Bar was the first bar in SoHo to open. I guess it must have been somewhere around 1970. But Max's was on Lower Park Avenue. Then across the street from Max's, I think, he opened a bar called the Lower Manhattan Expressway. Remington's Bar, which was in the Broadway Central Hotel that fell down. There was a big John Clark painting over the bar and one of the great jukeboxes of all time. Essentially depending upon your faction of this pluralist art

world located where you sat at Max's. The back room underneath the [Dan] Flavin sculpture, which cast an eerie green glow. But Warhol and those people held court under the Flavin in the back room. Marden and all of those people who were out of the Brice Marden line of work and worked for Rauschenberg and Dorothea [Rockburne] had tended to hang out in the back room with that generation. The front tables and the banquettes near the bar with the big Chamberlain -- Richard Serra, and Smithson, and Mel Bochner, and Dorothea Rockburne and a few other people would regularly hold court up front. There were some wonderful, passionate arguments essentially calling into question every aspect of someone's work. [Laughs.] It really almost didn't matter whether the someone was there or not. The dialogue would be just as frank if the person was there. It was an interesting time. It was in a way a kind of extension of the kind of thing that went on in graduate school in which you were forced to defend your position. It tended to clarify the issues in people's minds. There was an interesting piece recently in the [Village] Voice. Gary Indiana wrote a piece comparing the critical styles of the '70s and the '80s.

MR. TULLY: I didn't see that.

MR. CLOSE: In which he said words like "issues" and things like that, which my generation tends to use, are anachronistic today. He did a description of someone's work using '70s rhetoric and it really was amazing how much things have changed in the way we criticize and defend and describe.

MR. TULLY: Where were you in this? Maybe in the evening or at Mickey's? Where would you gravitate to?

MR. CLOSE: You'd sort of walk around and you'd spend a little bit of time here and a little bit of time there. It was free floating.

MR. TULLY: When you mentioned the Bykert group were you already then part of the gallery?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. I was starting to show at Bykert.

MR. TULLY: How did that happen?

MR. CLOSE: When I first started making the portraits, I wanted to get them out. I'll tell you the galleries that I wanted to be in. I wanted to be someplace where -- I didn't know about other people who were working from photographs and then while I was making the first of the portraits Malcolm Morley had his first show at Kornblee of the boats at Rotterdam and Amsterdam Harbor. I met Malcolm, and Malcolm supposedly took some of my photographs to Kornblee, but I don't know if he did or not. So that seemed like an interesting situation. Dan Flavin was showing there at the time. Alex Hayes. A number of people I was interested in.

MR. TULLY: And they were located where then?

MR. CLOSE: Kornblee on 79th is a brownstone. It was a very interesting gallery. I think Warhol was still at the Stable. Yes, because Joseph Raffael was still Joe Raffaelli and showing at the Stable. He was the other person I was aware of who was working from photographs at the time. But when I looked around, there were the figurative galleries which I clearly didn't think I'd fit into. I didn't want to be someplace where people went expecting to see images. I wanted it to be unlikely and a surprise where somebody would see the other issues of the work which I thought were as important as the image. Dwan was a very interesting gallery. They were on 57th Street. That's pretty much the stable that then moved on to John Weber when Virginia Dwan went out of business. Virginia Dwan also had a great gallery on LaGuardia Place. What was the name of that

gallery?

MR. TULLY: I don't know.

MR. CLOSE: Park Place Gallery. David Novros and people like that were showing with other people -

[End Tape 3, Side B.]

MR. CLOSE: Bellamy may have been involved with Park Place 137 Gallery with Virginia Dwan. I'm not sure. But he had the Green Gallery on 57th Street, which when he went out of business became the Bykert Gallery. Bellamy started showing work occasionally at the Noah Goldowski Gallery on Madison between 81st and 82nd. Goldowski would show his stuff which was very different from what Bellamy showed. Then Bellamy would work as a kind of talent scout. He showed Al Leslie and people who were established, but Al was changing his work. He showed Sidney Tillim. Strange things. Then he gave Richard Serra his first show. So I very much wanted Bellamy to see my work. It took me a year to get him to come to my studio. Finally, when he did come after a year, he didn't like it, but he was definitely one of the galleries that I wanted. At the time Ivan Karp was still at Castelli. Ivan came to my studio and was very excited to see what I was doing, but thought that heads were too sentimental and that I would never be successful as long as I painted heads. He tried to convince me to paint machines, which he thought were the essential American image. I think there happened to be a machine show up at the Modern that year. I didn't know whether this was in his mind or whatever, but he actually seemed to think that I would take his advice and start to paint machines. He told me that if I painted machines, he would show me at the Castelli.

MR. TULLY: How did you react to that?

MR. CLOSE: [Laughs.] I said goodbye and I went back to making my heads.

MR. TULLY: Did Bellamy say anything to you? I know a little bit about Richard Bellamy and that he seems very quiet. Did you just get the feeling that he wasn't wild about your work?

MR. CLOSE: Oh no. He didn't look at it. He spent a long time in the studio looking at the books I was reading and things, he didn't look at the paintings. This was something that happened a lot. At the time, in the late '60s it was very -- I don't know how to say this without it sounding more arrogant than I want it to sound. I think in some ways I think it was a little bit surprising that somebody was making images that looked like that and a lot of people had trouble figuring out whether or not they should like it. As a matter of fact, when I had Klaus Kertess down I really wanted to show at Bykert because it was the only gallery in New York that had never shown or recognized an image of any kind. Even Dwan which was totally committed to minimal abstraction had shown pieces and others were figurative, that had some recognizable imagery in them. But Bykert was like the purist pure, nonobjective kinds of work. I thought, "Gee wouldn't it be great. Here I am very interested in this stuff anyhow. I love what Klaus is doing and wouldn't it be great if I'm interested in that work and maybe he would be interested in my work. Wouldn't it be great to get the work out in the most unlikely place?" I had met Klaus. Actually we were in graduate school at the same time, but I didn't know him. He was in art history. His roommate in college was Jeff Byers who was the backer, the 'By' of Bykert and the 'Kert' was Kertess.

MR. TULLY: So that would be Jeff Byers?

MR. CLOSE: At any rate, I would see all the shows at Bykert anyhow and I knew Klaus to say hello. But finally -- it took me weeks of going there every Saturday and hanging out. Somehow I really

didn't want to be rejected by him, so I did one of those really negative things where I finally threw my photographs on his desk and said, "You wouldn't be interested in this, would you?" He knew that I knew Brice, and Brice was showing in the gallery. We had known Brice since 1961 when we had met at Yale Summer School, and then in graduate school at Yale and we were friends. So I think he made the trip down to my studio probably more because he knew I was Brice's friend or perhaps out of curiosity. But he did come, and he didn't know what to make of the work at all. He had a couple of drinks and then he thought he was responding. This is what he later told me: He thought, "Gee these works look kind of good, but maybe it's just because I've had a couple of drinks." So he waited a while and then came back. Klaus was often very slow to warm to work, which is probably not a bad way to be if you're going to be a dealer. He did wonderful group shows where he would put people in and live with a work for a month and I guess also see how other people reacted to it. But I think mostly to see how he would react. It was one thing to find something interesting in someone's studio and it's another thing to walk by it every day and have it in your gallery. I was in a group show with Lynda Benglis and Richard Van Buren, who was doing wall pieces and -- who was the fourth person? I can't think who the fourth person was. Lynda Benglis had a poured latex floor piece and I had a painting. It was a really nice show. It was my first group show in New York. Then immediately -- I think almost the same month -- I was in the Whitney Annual. Then I think within the next year I had a one-man show at Bykert of the early black and white paintings. I think I had a film. It may have been that show or the next show. One of occasional forays into making movies.

MR. TULLY: You made the film?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: What was that about?

MR. CLOSE: It was called "Slow Pan For Bob," and it was an image of the painting Robert Israel made which Dickie Landry helped me make. He was also one of Phil Glass's musicians and a sometime helper of Richard Serra as well and a great musician. He supported himself by making films. He was a film maker/musician/everything. He helped me make the movie. It was about scanning an image and knowing everything about it. One little piece of the face would fill the whole frame and you saw every pore and every hair follicle. But because it was continuously scanning from top to bottom, left to right you never saw the whole image. It required you to remember what you had seen and put it all together in your head. It was quite impossible. Even though you knew all this information about a head you couldn't put it together and make a whole until you had seen the movie three or four times. It was about ten minutes long and we had it on a loop so it just played continuously in the back room.

MR. TULLY: In the back room of the gallery where you were --

MR. CLOSE: Yes. It was a two room gallery with a hallway.

MR. TULLY: Which place was this?

MR. CLOSE: It was a brownstone on 81st Street. I never showed on 57th Street.

MR. TULLY: From that they had moved from 57th to --

MR. CLOSE: To the space the Feigen Gallery had on 81st Street.

MR. TULLY: So the date of the first show -- we can look that up or just check it -- but the first Bykert group show was --

MR. CLOSE: 1968 or 1969.

MR. TULLY: Did anyone in that first group show buy the painting that you had?

MR. CLOSE: I had sold my first paintings myself. Don Nice, who I had known in graduate school and had gotten me my teaching job at Visual Arts, had a loft on Broome Street. He was making wonderful paintings of fruit at the time. Big huge fruits. He had sold a painting to the Walker and he asked Martin Freidman to come to my studio. Martin sent Chris Fetch, who was the curator, and Robert Israel, who was working for the Walker, and also set designer for the Guthrie to my studio. They liked the work and then Martin came. They bought the painting for \$1,300. That was my first sale. So my first sale was to a museum which was -- my second sale was to the Minneapolis Art Institute. They saw the painting that the Walker had, and they came and bought one. My third sale was to Gordon Locksley who is a dealer in Minneapolis. Gordon sold that painting to Saatchi. Anyhow all those early paintings all ended up in museums, which was very fortunate.

MR. TULLY: Could you describe a little bit about those paintings? What they looked like?

MR. CLOSE: More just the nine foot high, black and white paintings made in acrylic. Just black acrylic on white canvas sprayed. Very highly manipulated surface. The paint surface was very thin, so it could be erased and scraped or whatever. Is that enough?

MR. TULLY: Yes. Sure.

MR. CLOSE: The other people who were showing at Bykert at the time besides Brice and me -- Klaus showed everybody first, but because he was slow to come in he often would lose the artist to another gallery. I think tons of artists showed. Everyone from Bob Mapplethorpe to -- I'm reluctant to say who they were because I might be wrong, but a lot of artists showed there first. Al Saret was showing there. The gallery did not have to make money, because Jeff Byers was using it as a tax write-off, I think, which suited Klaus very well because he did not like the idea of being in business. He could be a talent scout, which he was great at, put together wonderful shows. He had many, many shows in which the work was made directly on the wall, or pigment or dust on the floor, or someone casting something in the corner, or scraping -- there was virtually nothing to buy. Then at a certain point the gallery had to start making money. Those of us in the gallery -- he later on took on Joe Zucker and some other people, but a few of us -- Brice and Dorothea and David Novros and I -- probably brought in most of the money. But we had a sense that what we were doing was very important. That those of us who happened to make a product that was saleable helped keep an institution alive that also serviced art that wasn't saleable. I got a lot of pleasure out of knowing that we were making this all possible. I continued to show with Klaus until the gallery closed which was -- okay here's the chronology. 1967 to 1971, I taught at the School of Visual Arts. 1968, I began the black and white portrait painting. 1967, I executed the first black and white painting of the nude. 1969, I joined Bykert Gallery, the first museum exposure, the Whitney Annual and the first group show. 1970 was my first solo show at Bykert. I also started the color paintings that year. Taught at New York University from 1970 to 1973. Some other minor summer teaching jobs I'll leave out.

MR. TULLY: You're reading from a rather thick -- what is that?

MR. CLOSE: Vitae?

MR. TULLY: Yes.

MR. CLOSE: Then I began the dark drawings in 1973. I joined Pace in 1977. Bykert must have folded

in 1975 or '76 then. I spent part of a year or a year without a gallery. I was looking around trying to decide where to go. So I was there from 1969 to '76.

MR. TULLY: Now we had mentioned this before. Perhaps one of the great ironies or coincidences of that time or era was that Mary Boone was working at Bykert as what? A secretary?

MR. CLOSE: I thought she was a secretary. She says that she had some position. I don't know. There weren't very many letters to write, so my entire file when the gallery closed was virtually empty. It was a very hang-loose organization. But Mary did do more than one would think of as secretary. If you had a gallery now and somebody was the secretary, they would just be a secretary. They would just be sitting and typing letters. So I think it's fair to say that Mary was not just a secretary, she was involved in a lot of other stuff. I liked -- and still do like -- Mary very much. She was certainly very involved with me and my career and very helpful.

MR. TULLY: Would this include that period when you would be at Max's Kansas City?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: It sounds like a rather big network. You were selling your work, but you weren't making a lot of money?

MR. CLOSE: No. We moved in 1967. 1969 or 1970 we had a chance to buy a loft on Prince Street. Joe Zucker was in that building, and he was buying his loft. They found out the building was being sold. The sale price of the seven-story building with a restaurant on the ground floor was \$100,000. So all the tenants in the building which included Ray Parker, and Jack and Sandy Field, and Peter Dutcher, and Joe and Susan Zucker -- Jack said he had two floors. They could only afford to buy one so the last floor was available and what we needed was \$5,000 down. Each of the six floors had to come up with \$5,000 so that was \$30,000. That was a third of \$100,000. Well raising \$5,000 was like -- you might as well have been robbing a Brink's truck. It was not easy. I was making a couple of paintings a year and even though they were selling at \$1,300 or \$1,500, the gallery takes its cut. Add that together with three or four thousand dollars

MR. TULLY: And now Klaus Kertess is more or less like an independent curator?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. He's a curator at the Parrish Art Museum of Southampton [NY]. But he also does other stuff. Basically, he's a writer and he's doing some art criticism from time to time.

MR. TULLY: So that gallery in a lot of ways was a springboard for an awful lot of people. [Audio break.]

We had turned the tape off for just a minute for a phone call. Not to make this sound overly dramatic, but your book which has been in production --

MR. CLOSE: For years. Years in the making. A cast of thousands and years in the making. It's sitting in customs at Kennedy somewhere. I'll get to see it on Monday.

MR. TULLY: So it was printed in Italy?

MR. CLOSE: No. It was going to be printed in Japan and then there were male nudes, which they refused to print, so we had to print it in China with the Japanese crew being flown in. The Japanese printer went to Hong Kong and printed the thing there.

MR. TULLY: That's wild.

MR. CLOSE: Japan has very strict rules about full frontal nudity -- especially male nudity -- and they won't let anything in or out of the country.

MR. TULLY: Seems incredible. Maybe that's why they're all coming here to buy those Impressionist pictures of --

MR. CLOSE: Well, for domestic consumption they have a lot of dirty stuff. They just don't like anything leaving the country with Japan's name on it.

MR. TULLY: I see. This period of time where you started showing at Bykert --

MR. CLOSE: I was helping Nancy Graves build her camels. She and Richard were still married at the time. She was living in a loft on Mulberry Street -- about a six-floor walk up. She built all these goddamn camels and the early bone pieces, which had to be schlepped up and down all those flights of stairs. And also helping Richard move all his lead. Richard was not an art star. Nobody sent big van trucks to do this. Every time one of those pieces got made every piece of that lead got schlepped by us. When somebody would buy a piece, we ended up taking up flights of stairs to someone's loft. But it was a very exciting time. The kind of music that you now go to BAM [Brooklyn Academy of Music, Brooklyn, NY] to hear was in lofts. There was a set of foam cushions that I think belonged to Paula Cooper that ended up being -- if you were lucky you got a foam cushion in someone's loft to sit on. But it was a time in which Yvonne Rainier, Trisha Brown, all kinds of interesting dance people were doing things. A lot of theatre stuff. Steve Reich -- all those people were doing things all over the place. The interesting thing is that there was no support in the music community for things like that. Art museums and art galleries and people's lofts were the only places stuff got out. That's part of the cross-fertilization of the times which was very nice. When the Walker came to buy a piece of mine, as well as telling Martin to go look at Richard Serra's work and Keith Sonnier's work and people like that, which they also bought at the time, we'd also say, "Well, you've got to go listen to Phil Glass." So the next thing; Phil would be doing a concert in Minneapolis. That's really how that thing got going for him. It wasn't through the traditional music connections, which were essentially closed--teaching, where are you going to get five grand? But we managed to come up with it and to renovate the loft, which we did ourselves with the exception of the ceiling. I got a summer teaching job in renovation at the time. He did our ceiling while I was away, which is the only thing we hired to have done. We tore the roof off the building ourselves and then some hurricane came when there was no roof and the entire building got flooded. Then the maintenance was \$150 a month after we paid our \$5,000 down. Actually the maintenance now is zero in that building, which is not bad. But that made it possible to continue to live and work in the city -- having that possibility. Of course it was illegal to do it. It was illegal even if you owned the building to live in it. The zoning prohibited it and it was before the loft laws allowed artist certification. There were A.I.R.'s [artist-in-residence permits] but only two to a building. If you applied for an A.I.R., that made everybody else in the building illegal on the other floors and so you were reluctant to try to make two floors legal with the rest illegal.

MR. TULLY: So what you were doing was was risky?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Everybody who knew anything about business said don't do it. Like my father-in-law. Now of course he wishes he'd bought a few lofts. But at the time it seemed like a crazy, risky thing to do. Hard as that to believe now. I'm trying to think what other things capture the spirit of the times. Well, there were lot of people who were in the kind of shock theatre with killing animals, and rape, and all this kind of stuff. There were all kinds of things going on out on the street.

Somebody packed a loft on Broadway full of meat that decayed and people would go and look at it. They did this piece on Prince Street right in front of our building. The whole street was blocked off and rats were let loose and pigs. They gave wine to winos and they were throwing up all over the place. It was grotesque. There were mock rapes. You didn't know if they were actually happening or not. There were all these thriller theatre piece things that were going on. Living theatre was happening. A performance garage opened up on Wooster Street with a lot of experimental theatre and stuff. That's how I remember it. I remember the time as being one of real passion for the particular issues of your own work, and an incredible commitment to it, and the ability to defend it. Yet real openness to whatever everybody else was doing and awareness of what else was going on even outside of your own discipline so that you saw the same people everywhere. You saw the same people in the galleries as you saw in someone's loft or dance piece that you would then see in some music performance.

MR. TULLY: At that point you were with Bykert.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. And in Dokumentas and all the Whitney Annuals. Showing a lot in Europe.

MR. TULLY: So were you feeling confident -- for instance -- about your work? Were you worried about selling work or speeding up your --

MR. CLOSE: We never really thought we were going to sell. Nobody was more surprised than me that anybody's going to buy a nine-foot high painting of somebody else. A commission for a portrait is one thing, but these are not necessarily easy things to live with. They don't fit over your couch. They are big, aggressive, kind of confrontational images and we were very surprised. I think the only person who was more surprised than me was Klaus. It never occurred to him that anybody would buy them either. But I had a lot of critical attention and in mass media as well -- Time and Newsweek and all that stuff all the time. I never made enough work to show anywhere other than in one gallery, so I couldn't have dealers all over the world. In a way, that worked to my advantage, because all my early one man shows outside of New York were in museums. In 1971, I had a one man show at the L.A. County Museum. In 1972, one at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, 1973 at Akren Artist and at the Museum of Modern Art Projects Gallery. 1975, in a whole bunch of museums -- Portland Center for Visual Arts, Minneapolis Institute of Art, et cetera. 1976 all over Texas and the San Francisco Museum of Art, the Baltimore Museum of Art. I had so little work I had to recycle it. I had to get a lot of mileage out of each piece. I was showing a lot in Europe in group shows. I got a lot of attention, and I was successful, and the works sold for reasonably high prices. But I never made enough of it that I could get into a kind of -- in a way the slow way in which I worked kept my career on an even keel. There was no possibility to turn out a show quickly for some dealer in Italy or something. I had to just keep working. In many ways, I think it's been to my advantage.

MR. TULLY: You had how many solo shows at Bykert before they closed?

MR. CLOSE: Let's see. One in 1970, one in '71, '73, '75. I guess that's it.

MR. TULLY: So those were four shows. Why did Bykert shut down?

MR. CLOSE: Klaus wanted to write, and there were more and more pressures to sell and make money. I don't think he was very comfortable with that. It's sort of hard to believe now that a dealer wouldn't be comfortable making money. Which is, again, part of the times. That was why Klaus was so respected. Now he'd be considered a damn fool. He was never particularly interested in any attention for himself. He almost made it reasonably difficult for people to buy stuff. He certainly was

not an aggressive salesman.

MR. TULLY: So the gallery closed.

MR. CLOSE: The gallery was sold -- which is a bizarre idea -- to Frank Kolbert. The whole idea of selling a gallery is bizarre and it clearly didn't work, because an artist's loyalty is to the dealer. When that dealer is no longer there, it's not like a new owner for a baseball team. Ultimately all you end up with is a lease and a file cabinet. That's all you can own in a gallery. So when it became clear that that wasn't going to work out, that the people who had been with Klaus were not going to transfer their loyalty easily to someone else, then it just disintegrated. Frank opened Droll-Kolbert with Donald Droll and we started looking around. Brace went to Sperone. Ralph Humphrey was in the gallery. Ralph went to -- where did he go first? I spent some time looking around and trying to decide where to go. We could talk about how I ended up at Pace, which is sort of interesting. I really didn't know where to go. I had luckily to have a number of interesting options, but I couldn't make up my mind. I asked two friends. I asked Marcia Tucker and Amy Baker. Amy Baker is the editor of ArtForum, but at the time she wasn't. At the time she was working at the Museum of Modern Art. I asked them to lunch separately and I said, "Where should I go?" Both of them took the assignment very seriously and gave it a lot of thought. In fact Amy had this incredible system where she gave points to a gallery for certain things and took them away for other things. Especially with how they would deal with my work, whether she thought that they were geared to handle what I was doing. She had this point systems and she said, "You know you'll really be surprised who came out on top." I said, "Who was it?" She said, "Pace." I couldn't believe it. It never occurred to me that I should go to Pace. So that's what really got me to thinking about it. Then Marcia also thought Pace was a good idea. I think she had heard Arnie [Glimcher] say something to the effect that he was interested in my work, so she approached him for me and I went to see him. It's very interesting, because I had been courted by a number of blue-chip galleries, and when I went to see them they all asked me what I wanted. So then I would spend this lunch at some expensive restaurant trying to think of everything that I could think of to ask for. This pattern repeated itself with every gallery that I talked to.

MR. TULLY: Which ones, for instance, if you feel like it?

MR. CLOSE: I'd just as soon not go into it.

MR. TULLY: Okay.

MR. CLOSE: But you can figure out probably which. You know the major blue-chip kind of galleries. When I went to see Arnie, he said, "Let's not go out to lunch. I'll have sandwiches sent in." He said, "If we go out to lunch and somebody needs to get a hold of me, they can't. It might interrupt you, but on the other hand, when you're trying to get a hold of me, you know I'm not going to be out to lunch with somebody else." I always thought that was interesting. So we had some sort of not terrific sandwiches in his office and he said, "Now, I have been thinking about your career and this is what I think has happened." He gave a long, involved reading of exactly how and why each thing had happened, and how he thought it was viewed, and what had been the positive aspects of it, and what had been the down side of each one of these things. When I was just catching my breath from this synopsis of my career to that point, he said, "And now this is what I think should be done and what I think I can do for you," including what he thought the commission ought to be which was very generous, and all of these things. At the end of the thing, my mouth sort of dropped open. He knew the work so well and had seen all my shows. Lucas Samaras had taken him to see my first show. It just became very clear that he had invested a lot more time in thinking about and knew more about my work --

[End Tape 4, Side A.]

MR. TULLY: Chuck Close was just talking about his first meeting with Arnold Glimcher, the head of Pace Gallery. As you were saying you were sitting there with your mouth open -- amazed at his homework -- and interest.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. When I decided to go with Arnie, the gallery had been a partnership with Fred Muehler and I wasn't clear on which was Arnie's taste and which was Fred's taste. The gallery had shown a lot of California art and a lot of other stuff that I wasn't sure who was still in the gallery -- et cetera -- so it took me a little time to figure out just who this guy was. But it was interesting that he had such a handle on me and my work and such a game plan for the future. It's kind of nice because of the fact that Lucas took Arnie to see my first show and had interested Arnie in it early. I took Arnie to see Julian's work very early on. It was the first group show that I ever remember seeing Schnabel in. So there was kind of a nice symmetry in some respects. Arnie got very involved in following Julian's work for a long time and was very passionate about it, and had the opportunity to take him on as well.

MR. TULLY: I was just thinking when you mentioned Malcolm Morley that he has just recently joined Pace.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. And in fact Malcolm was momentarily at Bykert at the very end. He wasn't there long enough to have a show. But Malcolm's had about 37 dealers -- 15 of which he wasn't with long enough to have a show. That's a joke, folks.

MR. TULLY: So how long from the time that you had these separate lunches with Amy Baker and Marcia Tucker and then Marcia made the introduction and then you went to see Arnie. Did you finally call him up and say, "Look Arnie, I've decided." Did you do things on paper? Was it verbal?

MR. CLOSE: No. Nobody had a contract that I know of. It's only as good as everybody's desire to keep doing it. You can't force someone to show you if they don't want to and they can't force an artist to hang their work on the wall if they don't want to -- which is one of the nice things about the art world. The whole process I guess took about a year, which again is part of the leisurely pace at which everything seemed possible at the time. The kind of frenetic quality the art world has today where you're having shows in three galleries simultaneously and you show every single year. I know people who don't think they can let a month go by to go to Europe, that somehow they'll lose out on some career advantage or something. There's this frantic edge of desperation.

MR. TULLY: What's your reaction to that?

MR. CLOSE: I think I've found the slow and methodical way to work so that I don't get crazy, so that I don't get hysterical. If someone offered me a one-man show at the Louvre tomorrow, I couldn't do it because the work isn't there. I think I gravitated towards work like that because of my nature, because I need it to keep from going crazy. But like I say, I spent a year without a gallery kind of leisurely looking around. I also thought it might be nice if I could sell a painting or two out of the studio that year and not pay a commission. Then I got a whole new respect for dealers, because even though I knew who was on the waiting list from Bykert and I just called the next person, my lips would not form the words which would say the price of a painting. I could not do it. So I'd be standing in my studio with somebody and they'd say, "How much is the painting?" and I'd go [inaudible]. So then I'd go over to my desk and say, "Well, maybe I'll write it down on a slip of paper and I'll hand it to them." I couldn't do that. So finally I said, "I can't do this." I waited until I went with Pace and then I told Arnie who were the people who want paintings. I figured, what the hell. If he

can say the words, he deserves the commission. That's why they do what they do and why I do what I do. I can't believe that artists want to be involved in that sort of stuff. I know a lot of artists do, but to me it's just impossible. I can't handle it.

MR. TULLY: Do you remember what some of the negative or down side points that Arnie Glimcher made about how he thought your career was being handled?

MR. CLOSE: No. We talked about to what extent it's an advantage to be lumped together with other people, and at what point it's to your advantage to be separated from them. I always had made a tremendous effort to be seen as an individual and not part of a larger thing, but clearly I had benefited at least sometimes by the association with other people who were working from photographs, and photo-realism, and all of that stuff. One of the problems -- and this is no more true of my work than anyone's work and one of the real problems with categorization or pigeonholing -- is that inevitably whenever a tendency seems to be spotted in the art world, there is this overwhelming desire to look for the common denominators and to lump the work together around those supposed common denominators. Every critic and every museum curator does exhibitions and writes articles around those issues. Then, only years later, does what makes the various artists in that tendency different from each other get noticed. Actually, that's what is the most interesting. What makes them different from each other is usually far more interesting than some shared tendency, which may or may not be an important aspect of the work in the first place. So it was true of the Process people. It was true of Conceptual people as well. At first, all you could see was why they were alike. I objected to being lumped together with the so-called Photorealists, partially because a great deal of the work I didn't like. But then a great deal of any kind of work I don't like. If I made some other kind of work I'm sure I would have felt the same way. And because I really wanted people to see my particular issues and my particular idiosyncratic point of view. We talked about that and we talked about problems of a career in which one or two paintings a year is what you make. When it's an advantage, and when it's a disadvantage, and how to minimize the disadvantages. And real sensitivity on his part on how difficult it is to have a career when you only produce one painting a year. And generosity on his part in extending to me the full gallery's services when -- because of the small number of works I make -- I'd bring a correspondingly smaller amount of money into the gallery than somebody who is far more prolific than I. Yet I get all the things that the gallery this. Part of the thing is that it costs just as much to produce a full-color catalogue for my show in which three or four paintings done over that last four years as someone else's who does tons of work.

MR. TULLY: From looking at it that way, it's obvious too that at the same time he felt strongly enough about your work to want to make that kind of commitment. It probably wasn't stupid on his part.

MR. CLOSE: I hope it wasn't. [They laugh.]

MR. TULLY: But he seems to be that type of dealer. In order to get the kind of artist that he does have in his stable quite --

MR. CLOSE: The thing I like about Arnie is that Arnie has the same kind of broad range of tastes that I do. A lot of dealers come up with and go down with one stylistic point of view and become a conduit to the outside world -- if you will -- of a particular tendency, or attitude, or whatever. They are staunch defenders of that and that's where you go to see that stuff. Arnie's not interested in being that kind of dealer and I'm not interested in being with that kind of dealer.

MR. TULLY: What effect did it have for you when you joined the gallery? Did it have an effect on

your work that you were aware of?

MR. CLOSE: I have been unbelievably fortunate to have had only two dealers and to have both of them be terrific. Klaus was perfect for me at the time that I was with Klaus. He was a talent scout, he was someplace where the work was seen as being on the cutting edge and where the work was not part of a larger package deal. He gave me a certain avant garde cache at that point. He had great museum relations and a lot of respect within the critical community. So the whole first phase of my career, I think I was with the absolutely right kind of dealer. Now Arnie is not the talent scout gallery, not the place where someone goes expecting to see the latest stuff out of the East Village or something like that. He is the preeminent, I think, mid-career management gallery where the people that he shows already have established a substantial career by the time they get there. He's there for the long-term commitment. Really a very important aspect of that is as fashion changes and things come and go, it takes other kinds of skills in a gallery to keep someone's work visible and firm when the wind is blowing in the opposite direction. So I'm lucky to have been in that kind of gallery when that's what I need.

MR. TULLY: So that goes from 1977 at Pace until now, which is 10 years.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. So, essentially, in 20 years I had 10 years in each place. Actually a little more at Pace and a little less at Bykert's.

MR. TULLY: So you were how old when you went to Pace?

MR. CLOSE: I'll have to look it up. What year did I go to Pace? 1977. So I was 37. I wanted to have my first one man show in New York before I was 30 and I just made that. And I wanted to have a retrospective when I was 40 and I did that. What do I need by the time I'm 50? I don't know.

MR. TULLY: What about that first retrospective? That would be 1980 roughly.

MR. CLOSE: The Walker Art Center was the originating institution and it went from the Walker to the St. Louis Museum to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago to the Whitney.

MR. TULLY: This is an aside, but I remember for some reason that there was somewhat of a controversy in Chicago about your show at MCA. Wasn't there also Roger Brown showing?

MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: And there were some Chicago people that were furious that you got more space. You got that beautiful kind of window arcade whatever gallery is called there.

MR. CLOSE: I got all of that space, to tell you the truth. I have to say that in all honesty. It is a shame, but Roger --

MR. TULLY: Just in terms of being the local hero almost--Roger Brown in Chicago. But I remember that because I happened to be in Chicago and I saw that show.

MR. CLOSE: I heard the same thing. I didn't have anything to do with the space I got--

MR. TULLY: No. Of course.

MR. CLOSE: But, frankly, I'm glad I got the space. I'm sorry for him.

MR. TULLY: By fulfilling that private goal that you had or just that maybe in the back of your mind that you wanted to have a retrospective by the time you were 40--did you--

MR. CLOSE: It reminds me of when I was a kid and we had the Sears Roebuck catalogue and called it the "Wish Book." I sort of had a career-ist Sears Roebuck catalogue in which I put down certain wishes. I don't think I would have felt like I was a failure had they not happened. Which is another thing about the times. It was much easier to feel successful. Now with the kind of superstar status of a Schnabel or with all the dinner parties reported in Vogue and -- what's the shitty, trendy, bullshit magazine?

MR. TULLY: Vanity Fair?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. And lofts in Architectural Digest and things. Anything less than that is considered not being successful. So I'm really glad I came up in a time when if you had the support of some of your peers, and a collector or two, and a critic or two, and you sold a painting or two, and maybe one of the peer panel review system grants gave you a National Endowment or a Guggenheim somewhere along the line, you felt like a real success. A lot of very good artists can attain, but if what you're measuring against is the real kind of superstar status then everybody who doesn't attain that feels like a failure somehow. Which is too bad, I think, for the art world.

MR. TULLY: Also it's such an explosive environment to be in, because with that degree of tension, there's also the equal opportunity to just disappear. To just to become stale very quickly.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. I think the pressures in the art world today are phenomenal. Because of the relative lack of expense of survival in the late '60s and early '70s, one had the sense that you had a long time to find out who you were, and what it is you wanted to do, and you didn't rush it. Going public was a very serious decision. "Is this the work that I want to lay my neck on the line for? Can I support this work forever?" People would constantly be putting off their first one-man show-- believe it or not -- because they weren't sure they were ready. They weren't sure if this was the work that they could live with forever. One of the things that I think it is is the tremendous expense. People are saying, "I've got to make it in a few short years and, if I don't, then I'm going to have to get out of the city. I can't afford to stay here." So they say, "Oh, I've got five years to make it." Then the career's pressures are phenomenal. See, you come out of graduate school and you say, "What are the right moves that I can make in the next few years to put me in a position? Who should I meet?" and all of that sort of thing. I think it's the appeal of appropriation -- actually is based on that pressure. There isn't time to find the idiosyncratic, personal point of view. You have to look like a mature artist immediately, so the only way you can look like a mature artist is to go out and appropriate someone else's mature statement. I think it's affecting where the work is going.

MR. TULLY: Now that you mention that, that does really sink in. There is very little work now, because as you were saying before about neo-expressionism -- it had to look a certain way, and so you didn't have to worry about that. But now with the appropriation, it is almost like a gigantic shortcut, or with the philosophical backups to deny that it's a shortcut or something.

MR. CLOSE: Right. [Laughs.]

MR. TULLY: That interpretation makes a lot of sense. Do younger artists come to you and say, "How did you do it? What should I do?"

MR. CLOSE: Oh yes. Sometimes.

MR. TULLY: At this time what would be your -- I'm not saying you're the granddaddy of this or that.

MR. CLOSE: Oh no. My advice is to try and slow it down. Try and not go with the prevailing wisdom, because whatever the prevailing wisdom is, it's only the prevailing wisdom because everybody is agreeing with it. If everybody is agreeing with it, it's ordinary or else it would be -- so if they buy into whatever is going on at the moment, they they're guaranteed an also-ran following of the kind of status and whatever. The best thing that they can do is position themselves somewhere, to find something that they want to do and not worry about where the art world is at that particular moment and what the prevailing sensibility is. Hopefully the art world will cross their path at some point, and then they will have already been there and have credibility. I think it's the only way to approach it. Otherwise you're chasing the ring on the merry-go-round or something where you have one brief moment when you might be able to stick your finger in that ring and get it. If not, you just go on this ride. I think that's a very unhealthy thing for artists. One of the things that's peculiar is that what is good for the art world is not necessarily good for artists. I think the voracious appetite of the art world is by nature healthy. It is moving and we don't have an academy. We don't have something in place defining what the issues are and what they're going to be forever. It should be gobbling up stuff and moving on. But that can be very hard on individual artists as they try and synchronize their moves to somehow get into phase with the way this machinery is moving forward.

MR. TULLY: It's very interesting, because in a way what you're really talking about or what you're speaking to is that short period of time when you were in between galleries and you thought, "Maybe I'll make a few sales myself." Then you found out that you really weren't capable of doing that. You are really quite removed from that, and in a way it's being taken care of for you. Going back now, to that time of when your retrospective was going, is it a problem for you that you don't have a pressing goal? Do you feel like now, "I'm just continuing with my work and I have these paintings to make." There's no terrific pressure on you, is there?

MR. CLOSE: No. I think I feel about as much pressure as I ever did, but it's mostly self-generated. I don't feel external pressure. I feel none from the gallery. That's one of the things that -- both of my galleries have accepted whatever I did. They would talk to me about it and were excited about it. But I never had anyone interfere with anything or make any kind of suggestion that I ought to do something differently, or "if we did it this way, somebody might want it," or "make more color ones and less black and white ones," or anything like that. Never had that. Any pressure that I'm feeling has to do with my own self. I also live off my work. I'm racked from time to time with self-doubt.

[End Third Session.]

[September 30, 1987, fourth session of interview with Chuck Close.]

MR. TULLY: Since it has been a long time since we've met, and to recap the last session, we were talking right at the height of the Contra-gate hearing. When I came in this morning you had the "Bork-gate" or the Supreme Court nominee -- Robert H. Bork -- being hopefully grilled some more. Well, not personally, but his reputation being grilled. So in the midst of all this I was going to ask you about Arnold Glimcher of Pace Gallery -- your second dealer. Over the summer there had been various news accounts and rumors about his big change. That he went off to Hollywood. How are you fitting into this scheme of things?

MR. CLOSE: Well, the summer doldrums in the art world are apparently hard for some people to get through without good rumors to sustain them until the following season starts in September again. Since I've been with Pace, there have been constant rumors about the gallery merging or being bought by other galleries. A few years ago when Arnie did a dual show with Wildenstein, the rumors then were that Wildenstein had bought Pace. I don't know why the constant assumption that Pace

is for sale, or that he could even sell a gallery. I don't know if I talked about this before, but when Bykert closed --

MR. TULLY: Yes. I was just going to say that. Yes.

MR. CLOSE: That Frank Kolbert had tried to buy Bykert. Within a month he had a lease and some empty file cabinets and that was about it. It's an intensely personal relationship -- dealer to artist. I guess the estates have contracts if Arnie were to sell the gallery or try to sell the gallery. They would be forced to stay with the gallery until the term of the contract expired. But it's very hard to force someone to show when they don't want to show. It's always seemed to me to be inconceivable that a gallery could be sold. Arnie has always said it's inconceivable to him that a gallery could be sold, so I pretty much totally discounted it. Arnie was in Africa making a film, which is another passion of his, but one that he scheduled for the summer when the gallery was not exhibiting artists other than the summer shows. Almost all the things were location shots in Africa, but they did do some inside shots in a studio in London. Charles Saatchi is a client of a gallery and Charles and Doris are friends of Arnie's, so he was seen in restaurants, I guess, and that probably fueled the fires of the rumor mill. Saatchi is an acquisitive kind of person. He's acquired virtually every major advertising agency, and I guess people think he will soon run out of advertising agencies so what else can he buy? I can't imagine that Saatchi would want to own a gallery. I would think he would want to move freely through the art world picking and choosing and buying wherever he wants. To have to be involved in promoting the stable of one gallery and all the artists in that gallery I would think would be counter to his own interests. But any rate, rumors survived and I must say the rumors were so persistent that even those of us in the gallery who knew how Arnie felt about it, there were moments of -- I don't know exactly how to put it. You were just worn down by the repetition of the rumor and phone calls. I was in the country. I would get phone calls from Aspen, Colorado, Seattle, and from all over the place. People in the gallery literally got no work done. There wasn't a phone call during any one of those days, I don't think, this summer that no matter what else was supposedly being discussed in the phone conversation that some aspect of the rumor or denial wasn't a good part of the conversation. The other thing was the surprise (to a lot of people) move of Douglas Baxter from Paula Cooper to Pace. I think that fueled the rumor because Douglas is a close friend of Saatchi's and summers with him, et cetera. The other aspect of the rumor besides Saatchi's buying it was that Douglas was going to come in to run Pace for the Saatchis. That was a rumor that just wouldn't die. Finally, I just suggested to the staff that since Arnie had denied it over the phone, but just saying to everybody that Arnie denies it didn't seem to be enough to put out the fire, so I suggested that Arnie write a letter or send a telegram which then could be Xeroxed and handed to everybody, because people tend to believe things that they read with a signature underneath it. But it was a kind of amazingly perseverant rumor if a rumor can persevere. You know what I mean.

MR. TULLY: But as you were saying before we turned this on, there hasn't been any change in the gallery in terms of Douglas being the director?

MR. CLOSE: Douglas is not the director. I don't know who the hell is the director. Renato, I think, is still the director. Clearly Douglas has joined the team, but he's not above Renato. I think that's clear.

MR. TULLY: Renato Dinazi?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Arnie is, I guess, the president and that makes Renato the director. These titles are not particularly important, I don't think.

MR. TULLY: Right. Well, I must admit I was tempted over the summer to ask what is going on.

MR. CLOSE: Well you were about the only person who didn't call me.

MR. TULLY: That clears things up. When we ended last time it was, chronologically speaking, around 1980. It was after you had this traveling retrospective that began at the Walker and went through -- I think -- St. Louis, Chicago--

MR. CLOSE: And the Whitney.

MR. TULLY: Right. You hadn't spent any time -- at least on the tape -- talking about some of your working methods. I just wanted to add to this you made a terrific metaphor in the last session on talking about your work. The only sport you could think of comparing it to was golf.

MR. CLOSE: That particular kind of painting.

MR. TULLY: Yes. Do you want to talk about --

MR. CLOSE: Absolutely. Yes. Actually, it's been pleasant not talking about how the work is made. I would like to say just one thing about the degree to which I may have contributed to a misreading of my work by talking as much as I have over the years about how they're made. The implication, I guess, was that I was more interested in the process in the product or that in some way I thought the conceptual underpinnings and severe limitations, and the altering of all of the technical variables and all these things that I've come up with are the reason for the work. It's actually a misreading that I have probably caused myself. No painting in the history of painting since they first made marks on the walls of Lascaux caves and actually the first spray painting was on Lascaux caves, too, or Altamira. I'm not sure which. Did you know that?

MR. TULLY: No, I didn't.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. The first airbrush painting was in either Lascaux or Altamira. It's also one of the only early human marks that we know of that the artist -- or I'm sure he considered himself more of a religious person than an artist -- put his hand on the wall of the cave and then apparently blew through a reed dust, dirt, soot -- pigment if you will -- and made the impression of his hand in negative.

MR. TULLY: That's a good one.

MR. CLOSE: No painting ever got made without a process or without an activity or even if you called up and ordered it over the phone somebody -- [laughs]. That's part of the process and somebody had to distribute the pigment in some way. I would not want to say that my work hinges, in any way, more on that activity or that process than anybody else's, nor would I want to, in any way, suggest that I am a process artist who's interested in the process and not in the product or would follow the process wherever it would lead without concern for where that final product ends up being. The only thing that interests me is how the final painting looks. Now having said that, how you make it influences the way it looks and what it means? Clearly, anybody who's taught knows that the giving of a project to a class of students where what the piece is supposed to look like is largely determined by the problem that you've given the artist is that there's no guarantee that even pursuing a particular technical path, no matter how many limitations you impose, will guarantee how interesting the solution is going to be, even amongst 30 students. Some people will -- within those limitations -- find an inventive, personal, wonderful way to use those limitations and someone else will just be stymied by them. But I have used limitations and a particular route to take as my way of keeping from being stuck personally. I try and invent ways out of any particular bind that I find

myself in. That bind may not be what we normally think of as a bind. Being stuck is just not meaning being mired down in shit. It can also mean feeling that you're getting too good at it. Feeling that with the ease and perhaps virtuoso brushmanship that comes with having done something for any length of time -- that can be a bind, or a trap, or something you need to erect some roadblocks for. Something to get resistance back into the work. Something to give it some edge that was lost as you stopped becoming engaged on a certain level and became a performer. So over the years I've done everything I can to try and keep myself engaged in the work, keep it interesting and a fresh experience for me, and to alter as much as possible what it feels like to be in the studio. I've found that boredom does not come from the kind of work I make as much as what's going on in the studio -- what it feels like every day. So I try and change the activity, change what I'm looking for. So often I'm using the same photograph. I now want to look for different things in the photograph. I want to see if I can find another body of information buried in that photograph, that the last process and the last attitude that I took with me kept me from seeing. I saw something else. So I'll just run through this litany of things that I've approached over the years and what I was thinking about. The initial interest in the photograph in the first place as a source was the frustration that I had felt as a student in working from my head, which tended to be cluttered with other people's images. Like I said earlier, that was a time in which having someone else's images appear in your work was forbidden. Anything but the cutting edge activity as it appears to be now. Every time I tried to invent a shape or invent an interesting color combination or find some kind of edge -- soft or hard or fuzzy or whatever -- there seemed to be someone else's example. Almost like every time I went to the easel, I had a whole bunch of people standing behind me and as I would start to make a stroke, they'd go, "Tch, tch, tch" or, "Over there." You know? The other thing that came from being a student was that if I wasn't working out of my head I was working from life. If I was working from life, I would have still- life and all that stuff would get moldy and flowers would die. [Laughs.] Or if I had a model, he or she wouldn't take the same pose twice. They'd start the day erect and end the day slumped. I'd be looking at some fold in the drapery and I'd want to go back and check it again, and it was gone -- they'd moved their leg. They were happy, they were sad. They were up, they were down. They would lose weight, they would gain weight. The hair would get long, they would cut it off. I couldn't stand all these -- And that the paintings became the mean average of those differences and there was no specificity. I guess I've always preferred in a sense the poem to the novel in that the at that particular moment, this is what I saw, this cuts across time. The novel -- the long, involved changes in scene and attitude or whatever -- I like a frozen moment in time. So a photograph had tremendous appeal. It didn't change. If I wanted to go back and check to see whether I had in fact seen something it was still there. On the other hand when I said, "Gee this looks funny. I thought I saw something," I could go back and it wasn't there. So that was part of the appeal, and I found myself incredibly liberated by this because I found instead of making the same three, or four, or five dozen shapes over, and over, and over, I found myself making shapes that I had never made. The other aspect of the earliest work -- the black and white work -- that was a break from what I had done -- did I talk about this ever in this thing?

MR. TULLY: I don't believe so.

MR. CLOSE: I had hung my hat -- my beret, if you will -- on the hook of being a great student colorist. Knowing what art looks like is what being an art student is all about. The fact that you can display, the fact that you know what art looks like means you get the scholarships, maybe you can get into graduate school, or a good graduate school, or whatever. I always knew which color combinations looked more like art. But I found this crippling. The minute a painting got into trouble, I would resort to certain color combinations to save the painting. Similarly, I had tremendous habits. I had a good hand. I could make marks that looked like art and that was very much associated with tools. I felt like not only were all these people looking over my shoulder when I went into the studio,

but I brought the baggage of art historical usage of the tradition of brushstroke and mark-making that also I found restrictive, and crippling, and associated with other artists. And with past problem-solving in my own work, tools that were invested with almost divine properties. This is a brush that I once used to pull off a troublesome area of an important painting and know I could count on it whenever I was in trouble. So I got rid of all those tools, got rid of color completely, and decided to make black and white paintings from photographs with only tools that I had no personal history with and really were not fine art tools at all. They were the tools of commercial art and illustration or whatever. Then I tried to use them in a way which had not been used in commercial art or illustration. I didn't want to be an homage to airbrush -- even though I used sponges and rags and other things to get paint on, I didn't want that to be obvious.

MR. TULLY: When you jettisoned all this stuff, when would that have been?

MR. CLOSE: This was the middle '60s. I started to work from photographs around 1965, maybe 1964. I first started started the limitations in 1965 or 1966. I first started using the airbrush and totally gave up brushes around 1967, I guess.

MR. TULLY: That would have placed you geographically --

MR. CLOSE: While I was still in Amherst and when I first came to New York. And I did the second big nude in 1967. I did one version in Massachusetts which was destroyed and that one was still made with traditional brushes, but it was monochromatic.

MR. TULLY: So that's when you were teaching at --

MR. CLOSE: Yes. Now, clearly, with an airbrush I could -- as I started trying to do -- spray both black and white paint and grays and if I didn't like the way something was going I could cover it up and go on again. I had discovered that one of my problems was a real problem with indecision. I had good starts. I never knew when a painting was finished. I would scrape the paint off and start over again. The work was very tentative. There was no sense that anything was taking a position as to making a decision, and doing it, and having to live with it. So the final limitation was to work only with black paint thinned down, so that I built the shapes and forms and the grays and things very slowly. Had time to refine them and locate them and change the edges and things as I gradually made them darker and darker, but basically everything that went on stayed on. There was some removal by scraping and sanding and erasing, but not painting over it. So that black and white paintings were made much as somebody would make a pencil drawing. You have to leave the white areas that you want, and you have draw around them in a sense. By gradually crosshatching or otherwise using only black to build those grays, you would build an image.

So those were the limitations of the early work. One of the interesting byproducts of that, which changed my whole attitude towards making paintings, was that I was now building a painting rather than painting it. It was all additive, essentially. It was very much on one level. Things weren't painted out and painted on top of each other. I got definitely the feeling that I was constructing something rather than painting. Which I liked. The other thing that made it feel that way was the lack of or necessity for a palette. I'm a very lazy person, and I don't allow myself to be lazy. One of the ways that I don't is when I use the palette -- and I am using the palette right now again, but we'll get into that later -- is to make the decisions out of context. So you're going to make green. You mix blue and yellow or you just take green out of the tube and use that. You try to make the right green, but you made this decision over here out of context and now you drop the stroke into the painting, into context. If it's not right, it's still a green. It's not right, but it's close enough. It's still generically the right color. So you say, "It's not right, but I like it anyway," or "I think I'll leave it. It's not wrong enough

to require removing it and doing something else," or painting over it. The black and white paintings all happened on the canvas, so when I started to want to make color paintings -- as I wanted to change what was going on in the studio, alter my experience in the studio -- I didn't want to return to having to make the decisions out of context and I wanted to continue the notion of building. So it occurred to me that one way to approach it would be to find out the fewest number of colors necessary to make what I wanted to make and to do that all on the canvas. Let the colors physically mix on the canvas and to also not need white paint or black paint and to just let the white gessoed canvas and the thin pigment that goes on top of it determine how light the color was. The more densely applied, the darker it would get. So I shot color transparencies and went to a dye transfer color lab where I made the separations myself into the magenta and cyan and yellow, which I'll just refer to as red, yellow and blue since that's the basic family of colors. Then I also made other dye transfers which showed what the painting should look like with two colors on it. Since it was hard to see after I put one color on in an area -- put the red on -- then I couldn't see how much blue I was putting on. I knew where it should go, and approximately how much should be there, but it was very difficult to tell how much I'd put on so I had a dye transfer made to show what the red and the blue together should look like. Then I would add the yellow until it reached the full color statement that I wanted. Again the notion of building an image, in building in context on the canvas all the color mixing occurring there was very important and kept it from feeling like any painting I had made before. Now I found myself making colors that I had never made before. One of the things about limitations is when you're free to do everything, you can do the same thing over and over. When you have very strict limitations, you have to be very often very creative to figure out a way of getting them to work for you. I found that kind of problem-solving very interesting. One of the things that I think students and young artists often accept is the prevailing sense of what the art world problems of the moment are. At any time in history there were problems of the moment that everybody agreed were the problems of the moment. Then once everybody agrees these are the problems and everybody's out there trying to solve them, then problem-solving becomes the whole name of the game. I, however, believe that the people who have bent art history are the people who have made the art world a more interesting place to be, and changed my mind about what art could look like, are the problem creators -- the people who back themselves into a position or a corner. They didn't know even how to frame the question, let alone what the answer was. Then, of course, if you can ask yourself an interesting enough question that other people aren't answering, then your answer is by nature going to be more personal because you're the only one who's grappling with it.

MR. TULLY: Who comes to mind as rule benders?

MR. CLOSE: For me, in my experience, since I was a young artist even going back to my teenage years the people who changed my notion of what art looked like -- I guess the first person to change it for me was Pollock. I was outraged when I saw the first work of his in the early '50s -- in 1951 or 1952. Something like that. I was 11 or 12 or somewhere around there. I was outraged and incredibly blown away at the same time. Maybe I've used this analogy and, if I have, stop me, but I've come to think of the art world as an amorphously shaped kind of almost amoeba-like entity. Its shape is a product of all the art being made at that particular moment. Sometimes it's heavily bulging out in one side. You can think of that side as a figure eight configuration and sometimes that side shrinks and becomes almost like a withered appendix and a whole other side develops as an abstraction or heavily populated and that swells. Basically it's all increasing as more artists are doing more different kinds of things. Inside everything is art. Everything looks like art, everybody agrees that this is art. They might not like it all, but it's all art. Once in a while someone comes along and he or she operates as an isolated island outside of that big shape, and for one brief moment in time in absolute freshness and audaciousness and outreach, this person functions, making

something that does not look like art. Challenges all the assumptions about what art looks like and just shakes everybody. Often pisses everybody off. But for a brief moment, you look at this stuff and it doesn't look like art. Then very quickly the big kind of mother art-shape -- this amoeba -- goes out and envelops it. Sort of nudges it in, tucks it in, and sort of digests it. It somehow becomes changed as it becomes accepted into the body of the mother art world and becomes digested and of course it feeds countless thousands of other artists, as now it looks like art. It looks like art because of its acceptance by other artists who now make clones, work influenced by it. It doesn't take long for the art world to accept it and digest it and make it its own, but now the resultant outside shape of the art world has changed because that person has existed. It now has a boundary that is different. So for me, in the course of my lifetime so far, as an artist there have been a handful of people who really did change for me what those choices are. They're not always my favorite artists. For instance, I much prefer de Kooning, but I cede de Kooning to Pollock as an artist. But I cede de Kooning as being much more out of the conventions and traditions of European art. Through Gorky and through other people, I see a kind of art world route into him that makes him not -- I prefer his work, as I prefer Hans Hofmann to Pollock. Just pound for pound, inch for inch, painting for painting, I'd rather look at their paintings. But Pollock changed for me the shape of the art world and what it could look like. When I first saw Stella's black paintings, I was outraged by them. For a moment. The whole idea of making yardgoods-like painting, where essentially the same thing happened from the left side until you got off the right side just -- of course, there all kinds of historical precedents, and he didn't come from nowhere and certainly looked at everything from rugs to probably Byzantine stuff, mosaics. I don't know what the hell it looked like. But in terms of the unpredictability of that, at that particular moment, or how outrageous it seemed to me, it was -- for that brief moment when I saw it -- not art. Similarly, Warhol. Seeing Brillo boxes or Campbell soup cans. The whole material concerns of the late '60s and early '70s caused artists to try to find materials that didn't have historical usage and go out and bounce them, and prop them, and lean them, and roll them, and do all those things in an attempt to operate outside of the conventions and traditions. By their very choice of materials often almost seemed for a moment not to look like art and then all of a sudden those materials started to look like art even when they weren't art. I remember walking down Greene Street about 1969 or so, and Artschwager owned the Blip. He owned that lozenge shape. A rectangular thing with a half circle and looks sort of like a capsule. He was doing them in peel off little black lips that you could put on your wall. Little fuzzy, lint-like things. They were all over the world, pasted on the sides of buildings and mailboxes, and stenciled. I was walking down the street in Seattle and saw a Blip on the side of a mailbox. It was like a little shape that he owned. So I was walking down Greene Street one day and in the gutter was a black rubber lozenge. I thought, "My God, Artschwager's been here." So I thought I'd pick it up and take it home. Then I thought, "Oh no I can't do this. It's a distribution piece and I've got to leave it. Richard put it there. Wouldn't it be nice if the next person who walks down the street looks down and realizes that it's an Artschwager?" As I get another block, there are two or three more. I thought, "Oh boy. He's really put out a much bigger distribution piece than I thought." As I got three or four blocks, I saw a truck parked on the side of the road totally filled with these things, and this was something that was being stamped out. It was what was left after they stamped what they wanted out of the rubber. It was an industrial by-product being hauled to the dump and they had just fallen on the street.

[End Tape 5, Side A.]

The thing that was nice about it is that it really changed your vision, and you began to see things and materials that had not even been intended or were not actually made by artists [as art]. At any rate, that concern, I think was one of that particular time, which was to try and have the viewer experience in the work of art, see things, experience things, see things in a new way, see materials

in a new way. That's very much what I was trying to do in painting. The next or the concurrent development that happened sometime after I had made a few of the color paintings -- I had thought that with Pollock and with his skein-like ribbons of paint in a kind of all-overness, and then with Stella, that there was an essential Americanism here -- not a European approach to the hierarchy of imagery. When I was in art school, they used to talk about things like centers of interest, and balance, and rhythm. They used to say you had to have a triangle. Like if you had a little orange down, here you had a little orange up there and a little orange down there. The most boring of all concepts about how to make art that came out of a really stupid misinterpretation of Bauhaus design problems. I thought this was a very non-Cubist, non-Post-Impressionist approach to making paintings that was peculiarly American. I grew up in Seattle. Mark Tobey was doing stuff out of Japanese calligraphy, and of course a page of Japanese calligraphy is a surface on which marks are distributed on an even pattern right to left, top to bottom. There was a kind of all-overness and this interested me very much. I wanted to approach painting an image with this lack of hierarchy, doing away with the portraits hierarchy -- that is, the features are important, that the cheeks are less important than the nose and the eyes, and shoulders are less important than the cheek, and the background is less important than the shoulder. I wanted to make everything the same. Now physically that was not possible. Only intellectually could I look at everything and make it of equal importance. Try and care as much about an earlobe as I did about a nostril or a piece of a shirt as much as I did about an eyeball. Physically, the activities of doing these things were very different. Physically, the activity to make a stroke that was a hair -- a long, lyric airbrush stroke -- was very different from fogging on an area that was going to be a cheek. But I tried to make every piece of the painting of equal importance and did not in a judgmental way lobby for the viewer to see one area over another or to try and crank up or editorialize for an image to be seen in a particular way. But I longed for a way to physically make every piece of the painting the same. It was at this time that I started making the dot drawings. In those works -- the earliest of which were done on simple graph paper -- I would start with the airbrush a weak gray down ink solution. The longer I would hold the spray or the more shots I would give it, the darker it would get. There was no way that any one mark was any different from any other mark. It was the same stupid, inarticulate mark. There was no hair mark, there was no skin mark, there was no glass mark, there was no background mark, there was just a fuzzy little dot. So every square inch of the painting was physically the same as well as attitudinally the same. It was only clusters of these marks, which build the situation, which stood for hair or stood for skin or the glass if someone had eyeglasses, or cloth. Again, it was the building on one flat surface of an image. At the same time, my friend, the artist Joe Zucker, was physically putting balls of cotton onto canvas and they were touching each other and laid out like beads. That was a one surface painting. We talked a great deal. I think there was influence back and forth, although I am perfectly willing to admit a tremendous influence on my notions of building a painting were very strongly influenced by Joe's thinking about this as well around the late sixties. He had a profound influence on Jennifer Bartlett, which I'm not sure she's acknowledged, but I will acknowledge for her. I think her dot pieces are very much out of that period of cross-fertilization of ideas. She was also talking to Joe, and I think Joe was very influential on her thinking as well. My dot pieces went from the size of a postage stamp on which there were 120 dots -- about the fewest number of dots in which it is possible to make -- with fewer dots you can make a head, but you can't tell whose head it is. It's just sort of "head". It's about 120 dots -- 10 across, 12 down -- before you can make a head that's recognizable as being one person's or another. The actual day that my first dot drawing show opened at Bykert on the cover of Scientific American was Abraham Lincoln done by a computer. I almost shit in my pants. "Oh my God. What the hell's going on? I've been working for a couple of years getting these dot drawings going, of making these judgments out of my head, and now here's a machine doing what for on a certain surface level seems to be a similar kind of thing." In fact, the computer, in scanning an image and averaging all of the stuff in that square and assigning one tone to it, was doing something very

similar. I had never wanted to pursue any labor-saving device. I'm not interested in saving my labor, and I'm not interested in giving over any of those judgments to any machine other than the camera that does the jotting down for me and the flattening and the two-dimensionalization of a three-dimensional situation. Other than the camera, I'm not interested in giving over any judgments to a machine. But I do see a certain surface similarity, which I have tried to move away from as much as possible and also tried to stay reasonably ignorant of the technology so that I wouldn't be tempted to follow the same path as the technology has followed. In fact, I don't know whether I mentioned this, but a Japanese inventor saw my first color paintings at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1970 and went back to Japan and invented a computer-driven color painting machine, which was later bought by 3-M, which with three airbrushes sprays red, yellow and blue paint. It opens and closes the jets as the computer scanning the photograph tells them that it needs more red or more yellow or more blue. So my laborious 12-month activity of building a painting this way became the impetus for a computer-generated image. One of the advertising agencies in town invited me over to see what this guy's work had produced -- which was a very interesting image -- and then asked me if I wanted to be involved with that, which I did not.

MR. TULLY: What did that make you feel like? That must have been strange. On the one hand someone taking something that you had experimented and figured out in this totally other direction and then taking it to this --

MR. CLOSE: I could almost see the light bulb over his head as he's standing in my exhibition. Oh! He's spraying relatively greater or lesser amounts of three colors. The more you spray, the darker it gets, and the more of one color than another, the more it's orange than a purple or whatever. I could just hear the gears grinding as he says, "Oh, gee. Scan and make these decisions and put them down." There's a big drum on which the canvas rotates and moves from top to bottom, left to right. Same kind of process that I used. I found it kind of interesting and fascinating, and I'm not particularly threatened by it, because I don't think that it makes the same kind of image at all. I was sort of pleased, actually, because you think that painting -- painting hasn't progressed much from the Lascaux caves, and the fact that it's still possible to have a laborious 12- or 14-month painting done by some odd process by some artist using essentially outmoded technology would then be a source of inspiration for a scientist who's a contemporary. It's kind of interesting. Anyhow, the dot pieces went from that postage stamp to a nine-foot high version. The largest one, which is at the Museum of Modern Art, is 106,042 dots or something like that. Each one I hit an average of about 10 times. So it's about 1,600,000 [hits], until I thought I was going to go out of my mind. But I wanted to explore that threshold -- the postage-stamp size being the fewest number in which you could generate a recognizable image, in which one dot stands for a whole area of the face, up to a nine-foot high painting where it takes a cluster of dots to even build the center of the iris of the eye or a string of dots to become the rim of his glasses or a hair or an eyelash and dots standing for pores. I was interested in these thresholds, and there are absolutely finite thresholds below which you cannot comment on certain things and above which you can't. So I played around with scale quite a bit and defined at what point you could begin to comment on certain aspects of the figure and below which you couldn't, and it became interesting. The outgrowth of those dot pieces over the years -- I have altered other variables. I did color dot pieces in which I sprayed red, yellow and blue dots in a similar way to the way I built color paintings with only red, yellow, and blue. Then I thought, "Well, gee. Here I'm making these images out of the same three stupid colors. What material comes in the greatest number of stock standard colors?" Frankly, that was only one reason why I wanted to do it. The other was that I was beginning to make enough money that I now could buy things that I'd only coveted before. I had always gone into the art stores and opened the drawers of these wonderful pastels and drooled on them. Now I could afford to own them. So I actually owned them before I had anything I wanted to do with them. But it did occur to me that it was a way to make a

dot drawing in which instead of making the dots out of these three colors I now would spend all my time sorting through the drawers trying to find the closest appropriate color and building complicated color worlds out of these discrete color marks. So that was a very different activity in the studio.

MR. TULLY: When would that changeover have been?

MR. CLOSE: It must have been the late '70s that I got into the pastels. The color dot pieces that were sprayed were earlier. Around the time I was doing the color paintings, I was doing color dot pieces. That must have been early '70s.

MR. TULLY: So in terms of where they would be exhibited these different--

MR. CLOSE: Bykert had some of the color dot pieces. The color pastels were at Pace. I did diagonal line drawings when I was still at Bykert, some of which were black and white, some of which were color. Diagonal red lines in one direction. Diagonal yellow in another. Diagonal blue in another. The thing about the diagonal line was that just by opening and closing the space between the lines and making the lines thicker or thinner I was able to build an image. Let me just digress for a moment and talk about building an image. I've often thought that one of the most liberating things for me in thinking of it as building an image was to think of it in an analogy of the architect. That it's not the material you use, but it's how you use it. There's nothing about the brick itself that tells you whether it's going to be a Gothic building or a modern building. But you stack the bricks up one way and you build a cathedral or you stack them another way and you build a slaughterhouse. There's nothing about the brick which says anything about the building that's going to be used or how you feel when you're in it. I like the increment and the building block not controlling how we read the image. Similarly I liked the notion of building something over a long period, like the analogy of the writer. In many ways, I felt when I was making these long-term incremental projects, I felt greater affinity to my friends who were writers than I often felt to my friends who were painters. One of the problems with the writing is that you know that you're in there for the long haul and that as much as you want to do the whole thing, you must sit down and slam one word into the next. Everybody has the use of the same words. There's nothing about the word that is going to have anything to do with the story that's told or whether you're moved to cry or laugh or whatever. It's just the way these words are slammed together to build larger and larger thoughts, and sentences, and paragraphs. The other analogy which I think is important was that when I started to make one of these paintings and I'd start at the top -- chapter one, if you will -- I had to develop whatever attitude I was going to have. To see what it felt, and to see how the painting got off the ground, and try to remember how it felt to put those increments together. So that when I am finishing the last page of the last chapter -- the bottom right hand corner of the painting -- that I had maintained the same attitude -- that I feel the same way about the thing so that it doesn't look like someone came in halfway and finished the painting. Just like a writer wouldn't want to change attitudes or styles. You are meant to maintain the same attitude throughout, or inconsistency becomes an important piece of that. So that again seemed to me something which I felt that I had some kind of kinship with writers. This way of building seemed to be a way to distance myself from paintings that I had made and other paintings that were being made. Just because the activity was so different I didn't feel while I was in the studio that it was a bunch of us moving lock step in some big stylistic war in which as a group we were pitted against some other group of ours, which is one of the reluctances that I have to be included in all those realist shows. The effort I made to separate myself from them was that I felt not necessarily superior although I did feel superior to some of them [laughs]. But not because I thought that I had a lock on the only way to do it or that I was the best and that they were all hopelessly lost, but that I did feel like I was marching to my own drum and I did feel that the issues that I had carved out for myself did distance me from a lot of other

people. The only common denominator being that we worked with photographs. What else have I done? I started doing fingerprint pieces, which were an outgrowth of the dot pieces. They started out to be stamped into the spaces of the grid in the same way the dots had been sprayed into the center of each grid --left to right, top to bottom, regular marks. The fingerprint is like the dot around the mark, so then the little corners of each square were blank. So then I started to do things like cut clear plastic masks that I could put over the drawing, see through the clear plastic, see the context in which the mark was made, stamp the square fingerprint so it was like a brick that built the whole space. I did those and then at a certain point I decided that I wanted to abandon the left-to-right grid format and that I would use the fingerprint as the increment in a randomly distributed manner. I started to make random fingerprint drawings in which there was no regular grid, but just the increment of the size of my thumb and my forefinger to determine the building block. I played with these through a lot of both black and white and color fingerprint drawings and then ultimately black and white and color finger paintings in which I stamped my finger. I rolled a color, oil-based ink onto the glass and picking it up with my fingers, feeling the relative surface tension of the ink, feeling how much I was picking up and then feeling how much I'm putting down. Building a very complicated and randomly dispersed image either in black ink on the white canvas to make black finger paintings or the red, yellow and blue to make color finger paintings.

MR. TULLY: It sounds very sensual.

MR. CLOSE: Yes. And very physical. Physicality has had a lot more to do with the paintings than anybody thinks. Part of the problem of understanding the painting is just how physically engaged I was in making them because they appeared to have just happened which is what I wanted. I wanted them to look effortless. I didn't want them to look like I had labored for 12 or 14 months. Because the paint was so thin, the record of my activity was so ethereal it was impossible to tell in many cases where the artist's hand had been. I wanted to get the evidence of the artist's hand out of there. But they always were very physical and manipulated a great deal. I was up to my ears in paint always and very much manhandling and manipulating the surface. Now, with the finger paintings, it was possible for everyone to see just how physical an experience it was. The physicality was very important and the personal mark. This is my actual body. I also didn't have to feel through the tool. One of the reasons that I got brushes the hell out of the paintings in the first place was that it was like taking a shower with a raincoat on. It felt like there was something between me and the activity. You had to feel through the brush. People who feel through the brush the best are the people with the great wrist. I didn't want to make paintings that were about great wrist control. I wanted to make paintings that were about a visual experience and about the head as well as the hands. It was nice to make paintings that were unabashedly personal marks and very physical. Also, by letting the red, yellow, and blue fingerprints stack up, it was probably easier to see how the paintings were built and how they had been built when I sprayed them on. In there also -- which I think I talked about before when I was talking about the golf analogy -- in between the earlier dot pieces and the later finger paintings, around 1980, I did do a few oil paintings with traditional brushes with the palette. I am right now returning to making paintings with brushes and palettes. I just hope that I've put enough miles on me -- enough years of thinking differently about the building of color -- that I don't fall back into the same old color habits and the laziness. I have a new reason to look for color, and therefore I'll find it in a different place. So I'm enjoying the nostalgic smell of oil paint in my studio, and I'm enjoying holding onto the brushes. I'm even enjoying the palette. I still find it problematic making the decisions out of context and I'm still allowing a lot of it to mix on the canvas. Both physically and optically trying to respond to the colors in the canvas and put down a color that isn't what I want and moving from there to where I do want it through an unlikely route and trying to leave that on the canvas for everybody to see.

MR. TULLY: You actually have a canvas on an easel 20 feet from us of a portrait of Lucas Samaras. Is that --

MR. CLOSE: Yes. The first color is just some color that I'm going to later respond to. I let little pieces of the first color peak through so you can see what I moved it from. Then they optically mix and become part of the more complicated color as well.

MR. TULLY: You were saying that you hope that the mileage that you've accumulated over the years that you're able to -- you are concerned about going back to that thing that you originally resisted?

MR. CLOSE: In art there is sort of original sin. [Laughs.] Just like as a parent I don't want to do to my children what was done to me. I will make new mistakes. I may not be an improved version over my parents, but I'm just going to strive very hard not to make the same mistakes that my parents made. I think everybody feels that way about whatever their student work was. One of the problems with teaching is that you're teaching people to do something that they won't want to do later if they've got anything going for them. So all the things that they are in fact learning will be rejected. So is it important to learn them? It's important to learn them because it will be the springboard from which they jump. It positions them. From that somewhere they will be at a different place than they would have if they jumped off from another place. But the best laid plans of schools -- for instance, those schools which have an agenda like teaching configuration as a preferred way of seeing the world -- are the ones that go awry. You get these students in and you teach them how to make figurative paintings along a particular line and then the minute they stop being students, they want to move from there. They're going to go to exactly the opposite kind of painting than the agenda was for them to want to make. So perhaps if you want to produce a generation of figurative artists, the best way to do it is to have all schools teach abstraction. Because there is a perversity and it's healthy. I think what I've always tried to do is deal with my own personal history. You either can deal with contemporary art history and be a weathervane and go with the prevailing winds, or you can take for better or for worse whatever has happened to you and react to it, push away from it, reconstruct it, rewrite it. This seems to me to be for me a far more interesting route to take. It's a protection from the buffeting winds of change that are out there. The things that are good for the art world are bad for artists. The art world must move on, must change regularly to keep being a vital, living force. But those market pressures, those things that are happening because it has to gobble up art and keep moving are not necessarily good for the long-term health of an individual artist who by nature will be pursuing his or her own logical development and extension of where they've been.

MR. TULLY: I was thinking when you were saying this and looking at this Samaras over there and that you had mentioned last time that it was Samaras who took Glimcher to your first show in New York. That you've done portraits of Richard Serra, you've done portraits of Phil Glass. I see there are large portrait heads of Alex Katz and Janet Fish. You were saying before about drapery and the creases weren't right or the models would get kind of saggy. All of these people meant a lot to you, apparently. MR. CLOSE: Yes.

MR. TULLY: I thought that is also very interesting about your work.

MR. CLOSE: Actually, I'm returning to painting artists, which I haven't done for a number of years. Initially, I painted anonymous people. Some of them got famous on me, but basically they were just friends and they were people by and large in the art world. Then for a period, I guess, of a number of years, I began to have friends who were not part of the art world. I thought, "If I want anonymous images, but they have to be important to me, but I don't want it to be recognized as famous folks, I'll

go outside the art world." So I painted friends who were not in the art world. Then my mother died. I never painted my mother or photographed my mother -- I had been angry with her -- and, I think, now looking back the whole last number of years I've been painting my wife, my child, my children, my wife's grandmother, her parents, close friends -- that this was a very cathartic experience for me. I was an only child, my mother was an only child, my father was an only child. I have none of my original family left, so I think I felt orphaned. I think the last period of work that I did, culminating in the last few shows at Pace, have been an attempt to find my new family -- to understand where I am now. The family that I have made rather than the family that I was born into, which doesn't exist anymore. This was a very sentimental journey for me, and these are images that were incredibly important and incredibly moving for me to make and also -- as I say -- cathartic. But I feel like I've moved through the catharsis, and now I see the work I'm painting -- other artists whose work I love. Alex will kick the door open for a kind of configuration when it was absolutely couldn't have been less -- it was the least viable alternative at that moment it seemed. Lucas is somebody who for me represents the absolute pinnacle of the personal artist -- exploring his own body, and vulnerable, and he's idiosyncratic. Winds of change blow and they have no effect on him. I want to do some artists who are younger than me that were my students. Alex wasn't my teacher, but he was at Yale when I was there. And then I feel -- as somebody who kicked the door open for figuration -- I feel he was a kind of teacher in a way, even though he wasn't mine. I had asked Warhol if I could do him before he died because he was so important. We talked about the Modern's attempt to make a figuration in the '60s and how they got it in the form that they didn't want it. They got it in the form of Pop art. He was very important for me, Warhol, very important. I personally don't like the cynicism and I'm not interested in a lot of things he was interested in, but he did kick the door open as well.

MR. TULLY: What was his reaction by the way? Did you get a chance to--

MR. CLOSE: Yes. We talked at the Sydney and Frances Lewis Wing opening in Virginia [Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond]. Unfortunately, he died. Now I see these paintings as a kind of symbolic return to the art world. Having made a certain peace with who I am, and how I fit into the art world, and a certain pleasure with the position that I have. I feel really comfortable with what I do and who I am and the kind of images I make. I don't feel bitter or angry about what's going on in the art world. I'm very interested in what's going on in the art world. It just doesn't affect me. I used to talk about the television set being on as a distancing factor. It was just enough to keep me distracted enough that I couldn't be totally obsessed. It was just enough of a distraction to keep the obsessive nature of what I do from swallowing me up.

MR. TULLY: While you were working?

MR. CLOSE: Yes. I now feel slightly distant from the art world and it feels good. I'm still surrounded by it up here. I see everything. I don't dislike what's going on. I find a lot of it very interesting. But I feel like my age and my generation and in the way the particular work that I have given myself to pursue has distanced me enough that it keeps me from feeling obsessed with the art world. So I'm enjoying making these paintings, dealing with images of other artists whose work interests me.

MR. TULLY: Who are some of these younger artists that you're thinking about that were your students?

MR. CLOSE: I just asked Judy Pfaff if I could do her. I haven't heard whether or not Cindy Sherman will. I would like to do her, because she's somebody whose work I really like. [Robert] Longo once said that both he and Cindy Sherman have been influenced by my work, which I thought was nice. I hope I'm not exploiting these people or it appears that I want to say that she is a follower of mine or if I hadn't been important to her I would never -- I have no idea whether I was important to her. She

is important to me as somebody who has extended certain issues which I find very important and interesting issues about how we see the figure in art today. She certainly has changed a lot about how I think we read photographs of people. I like a lot of young artist's work. Of course the image has to be a compelling one and I have to have some personal connection with them, but I'm not just painting my closest friends. And I always throw a self-portrait or two in there, too, just to remind me that I'm an artist as well.

MR. TULLY: That actually sounds like a perfect moment as this tape is ending.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated... March 28, 2006