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**Oral history interview with Robert Sperry, 1983  
August 11**

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Robert Sperry on August 11, 1983. The interview took place in Seattle, Washington, and was conducted by Lamar Harrington for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

## Interview

[Tape 1; Side 1]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You say August 11th. [to test the tape recorder--Ed.]

ROBERT SPERRY: August the 11th.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Okay. Bob, we're sitting here today in your house, in which you've lived for quite a lot of years, and I understand that you're going to be moving to a new studio before long. So this will be our last hurrah in your \_\_\_\_\_ house.

ROBERT SPERRY: (chuckles) Ah, it'll be nice to move.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I think we should start with your early years so that we get a lot of information in this tape. Some of these things may seem rather mundane to you and unnecessary, but it is important for the interview. We'll get into talking about your art and other a little bit later on. I understand that you were born in Bushnell, Illinois, on March 12, 1927?

ROBERT SPERRY: Right.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That's right. I'm a little hazy about your associations, then, and in Canada, and when you left Illinois. How did that happen?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh well, my parents had gone to Canada in 1914 or '15 and they used to go back to Illinois every winter. I happened to be born on the last trip south before the Depression. I was born in March and then went back up to Canada in April or May -- went into Canada, I should say, in April or May. And my parents were never Canadians; they always remained American citizens, so I always identified as being an American. But I lived up there and took all my schooling there.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And probably the Depression, then, had something to do with -- perhaps you didn't travel back and forth as much then. Is that right?

ROBERT SPERRY: Right. There was no travel then until 1941. I was 13 years old and we then went down to Illinois; it was the year the war with Japan broke out.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So you went to grade school in Canada.

ROBERT SPERRY: Grade school and high school. And then I dropped out of high school and went

down to Illinois, and tried to get in the Navy and the Marines and anything to do with water, because I hated the prairie so; it was so dull and dry up there. (chuckles) I always loved, I always thought I loved the water. So I tried to get in the Navy and all these things and couldn't do it because of my eyes. So then I finally waited around and got drafted in the Army.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So you had some problem with your eyes? Is that what you said, eyes?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I'm nearsighted and I have a blind spot in the one eye.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, yeah. You had to be perfect for the U.S. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: (chuckles) It was good enough for the Army; there was no problem there.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see. What about your early family? I've never heard you talk about them, to think of. Were there any artists in your background, or what . . . ?

ROBERT SPERRY: No. They're all dirt farmers, from Illinois, and then of course my father farmed up in Saskatchewan, from 1914 until 1967, I think it was.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: In the service you mean?

ROBERT SPERRY: No. He farmed.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, he farmed. I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. Until, during that period, before he died. And stayed up there all his life. He had an eighth-grade education, and he was a very independent man -- never tried to push his views on me too much, you know. I can remember one of his favorite words was hussle; you know, get a hussle on. (chuckles)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Um hmm.

ROBERT SPERRY: Move your ass, in other words.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: (Chuckles)

ROBERT SPERRY: But when I -- and I was the only boy in the family; I had three older sisters, and so I grew up in this very female-dominated house. But he would like to have seen me take over the family farm, but when I decided I wanted to go to college and be an artist, I remember his saying, "Well, I don't know what the hell you're doing, but if you want to do it, go ahead." You know. Because he felt that he'd always had, he'd always been able to do whatever he wanted to do. And he never wanted to do anything but be a farmer, so . . .

[Fairly long pause]

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I guess, I mean, I've always kind of had his independence. I've never liked to be dependent on something too far outside myself.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now, let's see. I have a record that you got your B.A. in 1950 from the University of Saskatchewan and that you had studied art history and studio art at that time. So somewhere between your early years in school and that, you'd become interested in art. How'd you do that?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. Well, all the way through high school, I was interested in science. I wanted to be a chemist, and I had a laboratory and just about blew the house up one time. This was a very small town I grew up in: Like there were eight grades in the school, most of the time with one teacher. Sometimes it went up to ten grades with one teacher, depending on how many students happened to be there. You know, there were maybe 15, 20 students in the whole school. It was really country, about as country as you could get. There was no electricity; there was no plumbing. We put some electricity on the farm; it was a power plant that you ran on a gas motor, and it would run lightbulbs, so we had lights in the house in 1936, I think. But we didn't get any real electricity, enough to have appliances and that kind of thing, until after the second world war. And it was 1943 that we put plumbing in, and before that it was an outside that [trickled]?. When I look at a Western movie, it's closer to the way I grew up than I am to that today, you know. It's just incredible how slow changes were. And then suddenly how fast the changes came.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What was the name of your town?

ROBERT SPERRY: Druid, Saskatchewan.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Druid?

ROBERT SPERRY: Druid, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That was close to -- what's the big city in Saskatchewan?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, the big city was Saskatoon; it's about 125 miles from Saskatoon.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Which is where you went to the university, then?

ROBERT SPERRY: That's where I went to university, the University of Saskatchewan there.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Okay. I dropped out of high school, went to. . . What I was starting to say, I guess, about these small schools, was that I was kind of wild when I was a kid, and around those small towns, you know, you start to smoke and drink when you're twelve years old. . . There isn't much to get wild at, you know; nothing happened there. Well, you grew up in that kind of town, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I know about that.

ROBERT SPERRY: Eighty people in the town. . . (chuckles) But my mother sent me to a Lutheran boarding school in Regina, Saskatchewan, when I was 15. Let's see, I was tenth grade, and so I took tenth grade there. No, it was eleventh grade. I took tenth grade in Druid, Saskatchewan, with a teacher I remember -- Walt Churchman, I think his name was.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Churchman?

ROBERT SPERRY: Churchman. And he was a terrible, conservative, British loyalist, and of course I hated Britain at the time. I was so prejudiced against Britain. And I can remember, I would never salute the flag. I also considered myself an American, and so I would never salute the flag or sing God Save the King. I had a showdown with him one time about this, and he kept me after school until I would salute the flag. And he kept me after school for a whole month! Finally (chuckles) he let me go; I never did give in.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You never saluted the flag?

ROBERT SPERRY: I would never salute the flag.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Did your parents know this was going on, at that time?

ROBERT SPERRY: Not really, you know. In those days, you never -- I never -- told your parents anything, or as little as possible, you know. (chuckles) I can't believe my kids now; they tell me everything. I don't want to know half of it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: So, I was at Luther College, and in the middle of the final year, at Christmas time I dropped out, went down to Illinois and got a job working at an aunt, uncle's dry-cleaning plant. And then I got drafted, went in the Army, had orders to sail to Japan for the invasion on the day they dropped the bomb. My orders were cancelled, and I was sent back to communications school -- I was a radio operator -- and then was sent over to Europe for six months. Spent a couple years in the Army and got out. And I went back to Luther College to finish my high school degree.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That's academy?

ROBERT SPERRY: I got out of the army at Christmas time, and I went back just to finish my twelfth grade. About half way through I got kicked out of there and had to go back to Druid to finish my high-school degree. I was the only student in school that the teacher gave a smoke break to. (chuckles)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: A smoke break?

ROBERT SPERRY: Because I was a veteran. (laughter) I could get up and go out in the middle of school hours and smoke.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And you were fairly elderly then?

ROBERT SPERRY: I was elderly; I was 20.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Twenty or so.

ROBERT SPERRY: Nineteen or something. Funny.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: All right, now, during that time you still hadn't become interested in art?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, while I was in the Army, I got interested in art.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, um hmm.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. That was what, yeah. I'm still not sure, really, how I got started. I started just drawing portraits, and probably at the U.S.O., maybe, might have been where I got started. I can't remember. When I was over in Germany, I met this artist who had been in India all his life, and he did these terrible kind of black velvet paintings of, with gold and silver and always beautiful, exotic, nude women, you know, with all the gold and jewels dripping from everything. (chuckles) He used to come into the club and draw portraits for a cigarette. The cigarette was the medium of exchange in Germany at that time. So I would pay him cigarettes to give me art lessons. Finally I wrote home and got 20 cartons of cigarettes and he built a house with those, literally. That's how

valuable they were.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: How many cartons?

ROBERT SPERRY: Twenty cartons.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Twenty cartons, wow. Well, I have this scenario all built up that the way you started in art, or at least in clay, was because you'd been a dirt farmer, or your father had been a dirt farmer. And it's all clay, see!

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I used to love to make mudpies, and I've always loved to make things. And another kid and I, my best friend, named Ed Vaverick, who committed suicide when he was in his twenties -- we lost contact. But he and I used to draw a little comic strip when we were in grade school. It was always dirty; it always had to do with defecation and urination and skunks and all kinds of stuff, and we drew these things, all these little cartoons, I can remember. And I used to kind of like to draw. I never knew anything about it; I'd never seen a painting until I got in the Army, you know. I didn't know what a painting was; I'd never seen one.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Did you go to any museums when you were in Europe in the Army?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I started going and... There wasn't much up then; the war had just ended...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see. It was all put away.

ROBERT SPERRY: ...and everything was shattered, you know. So there wasn't hardly anything, a few contemporary shows, and I used to go to some of those. But this guy kind of really got me interested in that. I got home and finally decided, after exploring a lot of different things like going to Alaska and homesteading and weird things, I got home and decided that I would be a painter. I would farm in the summertime, then paint in the wintertime, because wheat farming -- nothing happens there in the wintertime. It's colder than hell, so it'd be a good thing to do, I thought.

I had finished high school and I was ready to go to college. I was going to sign up for agriculture, and I went to the University of Saskatchewan -- this is literally true, but nobody believes me -- A small school; all registration took place in one big room. And lines; there was arts, which was a separate college up there, and agriculture, line one and line two.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Alphabetical.

ROBERT SPERRY: I was standing in line to sign up for agriculture and I was reading through a catalogue. I find out it was the first year they had offered a degree in art, I guess you got a bachelor degree in art, with a major in art history, I guess is what it was. But you could take studio classes, because they offered studio classes. And so I walked from agriculture to art and signed up for art instead of agriculture. (chuckles)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And, of course -- I've heard this story before, and you flippantly have told about how the art line was shorter than the agriculture line, so that's why you went over, but it really wasn't all that ephemeral a reason. You had become interested in art.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I was quite... And I can remember reading a cheap novel on the troop ship over to Europe about some artists in Kansas City -- you know, we used to get all these paperback novels -- and I can remember reading this novel and I think that that influenced me a

great deal, because it looked, I think I bought the lifestyle.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, so then you got your B.A. from that same University of Saskatchewan?

ROBERT SPERRY: Right, right.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And I was also reading in your resume that by 1949, which would be the year before you graduated, that you'd even shown at the Saskatchewan Art Center. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . .and something called the. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: The Saskatoon Art Center.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, I see. And something called the Fourth Provincial Federation of Canadian Artists in Saskatoon.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now perhaps they are both the same thing?

ROBERT SPERRY: No, they were two local shows.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see. So you were already an exhibiting artist?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Then you decided to go back.

ROBERT SPERRY: There's no use in screwing around; you gotta do it. (laughter)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You went back to the United States.

ROBERT SPERRY: I can remember the paintings I exhibited.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Can you really? What were they like?

ROBERT SPERRY: They were really wierd. One was very abstract; it was mostly red, quite a tall, thin painting of a figure, strongly influenced by Picasso.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Would you say that most of the studio courses that you had were influenced more from realism and cubism and some of those earlier things. See we weren't in, really into abstract expressionism yet.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. Abstract expressionism was barely known outside of New York.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Even in New York, yeah.

ROBERT SPERRY: But my teacher up there was a guy who graduated from the University of Wisconsin in Madison, so he was an American teacher. Nick Bjelbjac was his name, and he, you know, was a modernist at least.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Did you ever see him afterwards? In years after. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: I've never run into Nick, no. I really got so I liked him and I knew him fairly well for quite a while, but, no I never have run into him. He taught up at Banff at times, but I just never made contact with him.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You've seen reference to him, then?

ROBERT SPERRY: No, I haven't. Nick was Slavic; he was probably Yugoslavian or Czechoslovakian, I'm not sure, one of the ethnic groups. And he was writing the great Serbian novel -- yeah, he was Serbian, that was it -- and he was writing this great Serbian novel, historical novel. I don't know whether anything ever came of it or not; I never did hear.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Do you know how to spell it, do you remember how to spell his name?

ROBERT SPERRY: Bu-gee-li-jack. B-J-E-L-B-J-A-C.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: B-J-E-L-B-J-A-C?

ROBERT SPERRY: Be-geel. . . No, E-L, B-J-E-L, E.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Bjelejac. Yeah, okay.

ROBERT SPERRY: But he pronounced it Bu-lie-us. [Rhymes with Elias--Ed.]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Okay, so then you came back to Illinois, to the United States?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I graduated from school. I had gotten married the year before. And our son was born in 1950. Edith [changed spelling to Edythe at some indefinite time--Ed.] and I moved to Chicago to. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Was that in Canada that you were married?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, we were married up there.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So Edith was Canadian?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, she was from Quebec. And then we moved to Chicago and I started at the Art Institute there. I had this marvelous, romantic idea of artists living in garrets and all this stuff, and I went ahead into Chicago and got an apartment up on -- I can remember where it was, in fact I walked past the street not too long ago. There's a skyscraper there now, but it was on State and Ontario -- and I found this marvelous, decrepit little one-room apartment that just had all the character in the world. And then Edith arrived with the baby and cried for about the first two days. (laughs) So, I was immediately on the street looking for another apartment.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I know that Edith is a nurse -- was she a nurse at that time?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, she worked part time.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: She'd been through school.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.



LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see. I noticed also that when you got to Illinois, let's see now, you got your B.F.A. at the School of the Art Institute [Chicago--Ed.] in 1953 and I noticed that sometime in there, maybe as early as 1950, you had a couple of solo shows, one at the Katherine Lord Studio, and one at La Boutique Fantastique Chic.

ROBERT SPERRY: (laughs) Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now, also you mentioned, in an interview that I read the other day, that you met, while you were in Chicago, a doctor who was active at the Archie Bray Foundation in Montana.

ROBERT SPERRY: Right. Rod Kendall.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: How did you meet him?

ROBERT SPERRY: Rod came into the Art Institute one day -- and he was being a potter, and he came back to visit the ceramics department.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, he was a potter?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. He potted.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Would you spell his last name?

ROBERT SPERRY: Kendall. K-E-N-D-A-L-L.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So, was that the first you heard of Archie Bray Foundation?

ROBERT SPERRY: No, it wasn't the first I'd heard of it because -- or was it? I'm not sure the sequence, but there was a show, I think it was the first designer-craftsman show. Would it be? About 1953 or '54? The National Designer-Craftsmen Show?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yeah, '53 and '54 I think it traveled.

ROBERT SPERRY: It was in Chicago, and we went to see it; I remember Edith and I drove down to see it, and we were amazed that all of the nice things that we liked came from Montana. There was Pete [Voukos--Ed.] and Rudy [Autio--Ed.] and, I don't know, maybe. . . I can't remember who else was in it, but there were other people from Montana. I can't remember whether we saw that show before I met Rod or we saw it afterwards, but I have a feeling it was afterwards. So maybe that's why we were familiar with Archie Bray Foundation.

[Pause in taping; fairly long silence follows while clock chimes]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Did you mention that you had, in that show -- did you see, for instance, Wildenhain or some people like that, some of the Germans?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I had seen, when I was a student in Chicago, there was at La Boutique Fantastique. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Chic.

ROBERT SPERRY: . . .which was up on Rush Street, I think, or up that way, they had pottery of Carlton Ball and Marguerite Wildenhain. Frans [Wildenhain--Ed.] was just over, I don't think probably he was doing very much at that time.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Wildenhain?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, they would have been Marguerite's probably.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Did you see other work for instance, during those days -- I'm thinking now about ceramic work, clay work, by people like Maija Grotell, or...?

ROBERT SPERRY: The occasional piece by Maija.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: In Chicago.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I think. But essentially the only two I really remember was Carlton Ball and Marguerite.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: While you were still... .

ROBERT SPERRY: Lots of historical stuff.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, in clay?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, oh yeah. At the Art Institute.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So while you were still there, and before, for instance, you went across the country to... .

ROBERT SPERRY: Montana.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...Montana, were you then majoring in clay or had you started majoring in clay? What was your major really at Chicago?

ROBERT SPERRY: Uh, no, I was majoring in painting when I went there, and I was a painting major for the year or year and a half, I think. Then I took a class in ceramics.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh you did? While you were in Illinois?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. One summer I took a class in ceramics.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Who, do you remember who the teacher was?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, Myrtle French. Although the first class may have been Lea Balsham; I think the first class was probably Lea Balsham.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Is that B-A... .?

ROBERT SPERRY: B-A-L-S-H-A-M.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And the other is French?

ROBERT SPERRY: French, Myrtle French. Myrtle French was a graduate of Alfred [Alfred University, New York--Ed.]; she had been Charles Binn's student. Now Charles Binn was the Englishman that came over and really got throwing going here in in the schools, I guess.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now was she teaching Oriental forms and glazes as did Binn's... .?

ROBERT SPERRY: She was a great glaze technologist. We spent tremendous amounts of time making glazes and glaze formulating and empirical formulas and things like that. She didn't throw at all, hardly. She never did throw; I never did see her throw. Lea would demonstrate a little bit; Lea could throw about six inches high; nobody really could throw around there and so you got very proficient with your own mistakes. It was incredible, I mean. . . When Rod Kendall came through I learned things from him just in one afternoon, you know, that we hadn't learned there. But I did get a good background in glaze theory.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And probably, Kendall was able to bring -- Voulkos was at Archie Bray, while Kendall was. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, Rod Kendall was on the board of the foundation. He was a dermatologist and he had palsy! And he would, you couldn't believe that he could throw, but he somehow, when he'd sit down to a wheel, suddenly his hands would quit shaking. It was really weird. But he made some really nice things. Finally moved out of Montana and moved to California. But then I think that maybe he came back through Chicago, and I may have met him twice; I can't recall. But when the -- or maybe it was just through letters -- when in '54, I had graduated from the Art Institute at Christmastime, and I worked at the post office, University of Illinois, the substation there, until I left for Montana. But Pete was going to move to California, and somebody. . . that job was open. So Rod suggested that I apply for it, and I applied for that job and got it. Then, while I was out there that summer, working, I got a chance to come out here and do a master's degree.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see. Well now, going back to Chicago, before you'd ever left there, you were mainly interested in painting, up to a certain point; I suppose Kendall -- and seeing these things in the 1953 show, and having that course from French and the other. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh no, as soon as I took that course, I majored then in ceramics.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You knew, I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: I changed my major immediately.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And the Archie Bray Foundation job, that was Peter Voulkos. You applied for that, probably then went there for an interview, and that was the time when you knew that you could stay there if you wanted to.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I can't, well, I'm not sure; I think I may have even applied for the job by letter before I left.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: I'm not quite sure how that worked out. But I do know that we took off from Chicago that spring in the rain, with all our worldly belongings in a trailer, and got to Montana and spent the summer there, with Pete.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, the whole summer?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, about three months.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What can you remember about that summer there with. . . ?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, it was the most valuable experience of my life as far as ceramics go.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Most valuable?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, yeah! I learned more in three months than I'd learned in eight years of school, I think. Just when I was ready to learn, you know. Obviously I needed the eight years of school to be ready to learn, but it was just a . . . First of all Voulkos is one of the most inspirational people in the country I think to be around, just because, not because he tries to be inspirational, not because he tries to teach -- he doesn't. But just to be in the presence of somebody with that kind of energy and with that kind of creative flow. You can't help but be influenced, you know. Plus, he was such a great technician. He simplified the techniques of ceramics so incredibly that . . . I think it's one of the things that Pete's not given credit for, enough, is his technical contributions to the field of ceramics. That . . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That's true. You see, his energy is so great that it's overpowering in your thoughts about him, I think. I suppose you don't think so much about those other things. You know, I did an interview with him about eight years ago and I talked to him about . . .

[Tape 1; Side 2]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I talked to him about that period, at Montana, about what I saw as his tremendous energy, this aura that seems to be around him all the time, and he said, not in any egotistical kind of way at all, but he said he seemed to have been surrounded by this all his life. It seemed to draw people to him, whether he wanted it that way or not; it just did it.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And of course, we've seen other people that that happens with too.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, it's, I mean, it's the classic definition of charisma, I guess, or something like that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Probably that's a very, very important aspect of teaching, don't you feel? That quality is very important. Or is it?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, Pete -- I don't know how well Pete taught in a university situation always. I mean, I think he did at times, there were great. But often it wasn't the right vehicle, you know, because . . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: For him?

ROBERT SPERRY: For him. But, you know, that's just a matter of vehicle, I think, you know, that there are certain people that just can project by osmosis almost, this kind of . . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And of course being around a person like that, whether it's in a formal school situation or not, one can . . .

ROBERT SPERRY: It doesn't matter.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . .one can be boosted tremendously.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah. Probably it's better that it isn't a formal situation, a \_\_\_\_\_ situation.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Perhaps so.

ROBERT SPERRY: That usually inhibits that sort of learning, I think.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What one could get out of that could be even greater than being several years with a bad teacher [in a formal situation--LAMAR HARRINGTON]

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh yeah. I mean, that three months, the amount I learned was incredible; I couldn't believe it, you know. Then I had to come out here and work with Paul Bonifas. (chuckles)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: (chuckles)

ROBERT SPERRY: That's why Paul and I didn't get along very well, I think. It was such a shock, you know, to have come from Voulkos with the vitality, come out here and Paul had suffered from asthma so bad, sitting in his office, you know, twisting little girls' -- no, I better not say it. (laughter) I forgot that that's on. It was different.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, it was; maybe we can get to that in a minute. Going back to Archie Bray, can you remember what kinds of things Pete was doing at that time?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh sure. He was doing the big round bottles and the big covered jars on pedestals -- a lot of those, and then a lot of big tall bottles -- three-foot bottles.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh really? That tall?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. And, oh what else?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Mostly vessels?

ROBERT SPERRY: All vessels. Oh, all vessels, you see, he didn't start any of that [sculptural--LAMAR HARRINGTON] stuff until. . . I remember when he was cleaning out the studio there was one -- he had made a mask, you know, Rudy [Autio--Ed.] was always into sculpture and was working clay sculpture all the time. He was the one that did all the clay sculpture there at the Bray Foundation; Pete didn't. But when he was cleaning out his shop there was this one mask that Pete had made, and it was kind of nice, you know, but I can remember him breaking it up, I mean, as though he just couldn't relate to it. But he had made some big hand-built vessel forms, but he had worked -- he essentially worked with vessels, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And he was working, by that time, with high-fired stoneware, at Archie Bray because of the gas high-fired stoneware, do you think? And with brushwork, and. . . ?

ROBERT SPERRY: With what?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: High-fired stoneware.

ROBERT SPERRY: He was working it, yeah. It was all stoneware. Because he and Archie built that kiln there, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So they could fire at a very high temperature.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, it was all stoneware, and that was, certainly wasn't the first, because Carlton had been working that way for quite a number of years, and Marguerite, certainly. So it wasn't. . . And Tony Prieto, and so it wasn't new, but it wasn't. . . Working in reduction was maybe more unusual, I think. I think that it wasn't as common then, and it just wasn't, I don't know. He just

began to make all these, publicized them in a way, and just got this whole thing going, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: At Archie Bray?

ROBERT SPERRY: At Archie Bray and across the country.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh yes. How about -- did you say that Carlton was there, Carlton Ball, at that time?

ROBERT SPERRY: Carlton was there the summer that I was, and I think maybe he'd been there some before that too, but I know he was there the summer of '54.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And how about the McKinnells [Jim and Nan--Ed.]? Were they there?

ROBERT SPERRY: The McKinnells were there, because Jim, you see, when I didn't take that job, then Jim and Nan took it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see. Nan McKinnell, his wife.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Can you remember anything about any of them that seems of interest to you today? Who else was there besides Ball and McKinnell?

ROBERT SPERRY: A guy named Paul Volkening.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, Volkening?

ROBERT SPERRY: Volkening, who moved to Seattle here a couple years ago; I saw him a couple of times when he came to town, but I haven't seen him for quite a while. I don't know whether he's still here or not.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He was in New Mexico, for a few years.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, for a long time.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And I didn't know that he was here now.

ROBERT SPERRY: Right. Oh, Gibb Strawn from Northern Illinois [University--Ed.]. He still teaches there, and his brother Dean, who was from California, they were there. Doris Strahn, totally different, in fact that name, I think, was spelled differently. She was from Montana. Bernice Boone, who was related to Daniel Boone. (chuckles)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Was she really? She was from Montana, wasn't she?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah. Who else? Of course, Rudy.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And then, Oh! Were there people from Seattle there yet at that time?

ROBERT SPERRY: They had been, yeah, I think so.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Some of the people from Clay Club?

ROBERT SPERRY: I think so. I think Ivarose [Bovingdon--Ed.], I believe they had been pretty sure they had.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I think perhaps by 1954, yes, because Peter was gone by the next year, so they would have had to have been there before that.

ROBERT SPERRY: Right, right. That's right, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So you came to the University of Washington, and you must have finished . . . Did you finish your ceramic education there?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I got a master's degree here, in a year. And finished in '55.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And at that point, what kinds of things were you doing?

ROBERT SPERRY: Vessels, mostly. Oh, I was doing some sort of wheel-thrown sculpture. In fact, I've still got one out there in the studio; I'm amazed.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Have you really?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. From 1955. They were just very simple sort of primitive looking \_\_\_\_\_.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But these were before what you called garden sculptures?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That was more like 1959, possibly?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, '58 and '9, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Okay, these that you're talking about must have been plainer, not quite as ornamental as the garden sculpture?

ROBERT SPERRY: Very, yeah, much more simple, much more simple. And I was working in stoneware and porcelain, when I first came here. And they were mostly vessels. . . At that time I can remember having some reproductions made, because there were no slides, and there was nothing available for visual material for teaching, you know. And I can remember having some prints made of things from Domus magazine and from, mostly Domus magazine. But they were like prints of people like Gamboni, the Italian guy, you know, who did the . . . They were very decorative but they were quite different than anything that was happening, in a way. They were livelier, a little livelier. And then a lot of the Scandinavian things, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Which were very big in 1955.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, in the fifties, very big. And so I was kind of into a lot of little sculptural things, too, playing around. A lot of different stuff.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I believe you were made acting instructor at the University of Washington in 1954 and '55, and instructor between '55 and '57. And during that time I also noticed that your exhibition record really began to boom.

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, yeah. I started exhibiting clay, then; you see I hadn't exhibited clay up until that time.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see. I noticed that the list of places that you showed is very, very long.

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, compared to Patti's [Warashina, Sperry's wife since July 9, 1976--Ed. -- because when Patti got started there were a lot more shows, you know -- it isn't.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, that's true, too; I think it's a measure, though, of the energy that you must have put into what you were doing, because just to do that much work, to supply all of these shows, was a tremendous accomplishment, it seems to me. And I think that until the end of that decade you probably were working, still, pretty much in vessels, in the fifties.

ROBERT SPERRY: Most, I would say that my work has always been predominantly vessels, I think. You know, with side excursions off into other things, but predominantly it's been vessels, I think, from the very beginning.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I noticed that there were a lot of those shows that were competitive shows.

ROBERT SPERRY: Most of them were in those days. You see, there was the Wichita show, and the Miami show, and the Everson [Museum of Art--Ed.] show -- Syracuse show.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: The Fiber, Clay and Metal Show [St. Paul, Ed.].

ROBERT SPERRY: The Fiber, Clay and Metal Show.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: The American Crafts Council shows.

ROBERT SPERRY: The American Crafts Council shows.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Some of which were competitive. The Henry Gallery shows.

ROBERT SPERRY: The Northwest Craft shows, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And you did enter the watercolor. . . ?

ROBERT SPERRY: And then there were the odd ones. Yeah, I've always done a few paintings.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Which was also a competitive show.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And the fair in Bellevue [Bellevue Arts and Crafts Fair--Ed.] was another competitive exhibition. Well, a lot of them were competitive exhibitions.

ROBERT SPERRY: Do you remember the year I won the first prize in painting and clay?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes, I do. In Bellevue.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oooh, was I unpopular among the painters. (laughter) It sure did my heart good, though.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And you know, I think that painting is still in the collection at Bellevue. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Is that right?



LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . .and it would be fun to look at it some time. It's a very good painting.

ROBERT SPERRY: Max Sullivan was the juror.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, was he? From Syracuse?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, at that time he was from Portland, I think.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes, and you also won at Bellevue the Craftsman of the Year award, in there someplace, which was. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I was very lucky at Bellevue; that's. . . I never sold a lot there, but I was always lucky with the prizes.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Of course, you talk about luck. The power that was going into your work then just couldn't be denied. I just think that there was no doubt about it, and it was. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: I worked hard at it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You did work hard at it; you worked hard, but it also came out of you. There didn't seem to be any blocks and it was just pouring out of you, it seemed like. And there was no way to discount that, when a jury would meet and look at it, I think. But I wondered, just as a short comment here, what you think about competitive shows and what they've done over the years? If anything?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, you know, at that time, it was the only, I mean, that was how you made a reputation, through the competitive shows. And so it was excellent for young people because it allowed anybody, anyplace, to be exposed to a national jury, and I think that was invaluable. The numbers have just defeated it today, you know; you can't have a show without having five, four or five thousand entries. Well, there's no possible way that anybody can stand out, really, in that, you know. And the prize system, with the numbers of people involved, the prize system, in a way -- it's very difficult for one person to repeat his record, you know, and therefore build up a reputation. And so I think it's gotta be, I think it's harder today for a young person to get established because of that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And there's probably a greater responsibility on the teacher and the curator to do a better job of seeing that people with talent get to be known.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I think maybe the mechanisms are different today; I don't know how you'd, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, I think it just takes hard work, searching all the time.

ROBERT SPERRY: It takes hard, sticking to it, that's half the battle. I think there's a tremendous dropout rate; I've noticed this in observing students over the years that there's a huge dropout rate within the first two years after people graduate, probably the biggest. But then I think there's another big dropout rate when people get to be their late thirties and forties. Particularly in our field where most of them, so many of them are teachers, or were at least. And at that age an awful lot of

people, they don't really quit calling themselves artists, but they essentially drop it, they quit working, you know. I mean, you've observed this phenomenon.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Um hmm.

ROBERT SPERRY: It's characteristic around universities; we see it happen there a lot. But to have the -- as Louie Hafermehl made the great comment, I think, one time, that the main requisite for an artist is dumb determination. You gotta just hang, you do it because you don't know what else to do, I guess. (chuckles)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But the other sad part of it is. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: You'd drive yourself and everybody else crazy if you didn't do it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: The sad part of it that I see, though, is that even with determination, you know that there are literally hundreds of people with tremendous talent who just never, never get discovered.

ROBERT SPERRY: I doubt that there's too many in our society today with the communications system there is.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You think so?

ROBERT SPERRY: I doubt that there are too many, unless they really hibernate, you know. Because there are so many art bureaucrats out there trying to make a strike and a finding.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh yeah. (laughter) Well, okay.

ROBERT SPERRY: Not many people go uncovered. So I guess the methods are different. You see, during the time of the competitive shows, nobody in the art establishment gave a shit about clay. Nobody paid any attention to it, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: No.

ROBERT SPERRY: There was nothing. And so that, you got a reputation only within clay, and today it's different, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Expanding.

ROBERT SPERRY: And the fact that you've got this huge -- well like, if Harold Balazs' figures are correct, ten years ago, there were 44 artists making their living, with an average salary of \$14,000 a year, and there were 280 art bureaucrats with an average salary of \$22,000 a year. (laughter) So you know, they gotta make a find! They got to strike once in a while, you know! So they're beating the bushes, you know. Sorry, LaMar.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: In those shows that. . . That's all right I'll get it. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: I couldn't resist that one.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I'll get to that pretty soon, about how I used to feel when you came around and we talked about these important matters and your attitudes about museums. We're going to get to that a little bit later. And about my bleeding heart at that time. Anyway, in those years of that fifties decade, it seems to me that your exhibition record just kept growing and growing, and it was

not only locally and not only competitive shows, but then your reputation became known and you began being in a lot of invitational exhibitions in other states and then all around the world. Like, I remember the show in Ostend [Belgium--Ed].

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And in Copenhagen.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And London.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And a number of exhibitions that were circulated, for instance, by the Smithsonian, that traveled internationally.

ROBERT SPERRY: Right.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Those must have been important to you. Were they? How did you feel about that?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh yeah. They were very exciting. They were very exciting. I think maybe that. . . I was so naive; I didn't know how to, and really dumb about a career and how you should handle it. And I think that I was never able to have that add up to make sense, though, and really be able to. . . It just didn't go anyplace.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You didn't know about marketing.

ROBERT SPERRY: Right, right.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Everyone's learned about that, I think, in the eighties.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: In the seventies it was arts administration; in the eighties it's marketing.

ROBERT SPERRY: Marketing.

[Break in taping]

ROBERT SPERRY: And another thing, I think, is that there was never any money. The unit price, the price of a piece of clay was so small that there was no incentive to have a support group of galleries, you know, because there wasn't enough money involved. It's only if you got enough money involved that anybody's going to come along and try to get a commission, you know. A commission on \$20 is hardly worth bothering for.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Like a dealer, for instance.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, who would have provided that kind of support that we never had, you know, at that time. We had a. . . Ceramics grew up so weird, and we've talked about this before, so it's a whole 'nother subject, maybe, but. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: No it isn't; I think it's very important.

ROBERT SPERRY: Ceramics grew up in the university. Painting and sculpture did not. Painting and sculpture had always been, had its own support group outside of the educational institutions, because the educational institutions weren't involved in art until after the Second World War, essentially -- odd exceptions, like here. But, so that I don't think painting and sculpture have ever shown their maximum strength in academic situations. I don't think that's where the strength in painting and sculpture has come from. It's come from outside the academies, usually, outside of the universities, academy. And whereas ceramics, which didn't even get started until after the Second World War when all the universities were getting into art, grew up in the university. So all of the, almost all of the ceramists that you know of in these earlier times were teachers, with again a few exceptions like Marguerite Wildenhain. But she taught privately, in her own school. But most of them were associated with academic institutions and they. . . There wasn't a lot of knowledge about the field. You had a bunch of people on government payroll who could afford to run around the country. If you were making your living making pots, you couldn't possibly do that; you had to be a university teacher to do that. And there wasn't much information; there were no books, essentially, you know, really until 1965 or until [Daniel--Ed.] Rhodes' book came out. A Potter's Book by Leach was 1935, was the most knowledgeable one, sort of. So you had people being interested in ceramics and asking people for workshops. And so you had this whole network of. . . So ceramics never grew up in one spot like painting and sculpture, again; they were in New York. Ceramics was spread around the whole goddamn country, you know, in Seattle, in Minneapolis, in Berkeley, and just you name it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And at Alfred and at Cranbrook and at the University of California, several of the universities of California.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah. And so it, that's the way ceramics was, and it gave it a character, a groupiness, for example, I mean, you've got this -- I hate the word network -- but it is, it's almost an international network of people in clay, who sort of, you know, associated with each other. And that gave us our support, when we weren't getting it from anyplace else.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That really was a very great benefit, wasn't it?

ROBERT SPERRY: At ACC [American Crafts Council--Ed.]. . . Oh it was tremendous. And ACC, of course, Mrs. Webb was the great mother who sort of looked after everybody. (chuckles) Got us all together every year for a cocktail party, you know, at a church camp.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You know, that business of the traveling around and the network, also that was very important to you, and you were very important to the whole field in what I would consider to be your advocacy of -- that's another by-word, buzzword for today, advocacy -- for clay, and the crafts I think, but mostly I think clay, at the conferences around the country.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Not only the network for going around and doing workshops, but also going to the organizational conference to give a talk.

ROBERT SPERRY: Right.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And you did that a lot, didn't you?

ROBERT SPERRY: Several of those things, yeah. And that was ACC, you know, that's the umbrella

organization for those things.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Right. Those are mainly the ones I remember that you participated in, although you may have done some others.

ROBERT SPERRY: No. After '65, you see I kind of dropped out of the clay scene quite a bit, in fact entirely.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes, but you were doing a lot of traveling and talking, it seems to me, in the late fifties and early sixties.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Before you went to Japan.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, more then than ever since.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You won a Tiffany scholarship in 1957. Did you do any particular thing with that?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, I did. I did a lot of work in porcelain. I built a salt kiln here at the university at that time, and then started doing quite a bit of salt-glazed porcelain and stuff. And. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Okay, in 1960 you were named the head of the ceramic division at the School of Art.

ROBERT SPERRY: That was when Bonifas retired.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Right. What kind of work were you doing at that time?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I had just built my big kiln out at my studio in Bothell.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: In Bothell, in your home?

ROBERT SPERRY: In 1960, yeah. And so I was working on those big sculptural pieces a lot then. And you see in '61 I had that big show at Hall Coleman Gallery.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: At the Hall Coleman?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I did a lot of painting and drawing and sculpture and pottery.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I read the number of articles and types of objects that were in that show not too long ago. It was an unbelievable exhibition. You had like. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: A tour de force.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . .200 small vessels, 100 large vessels, 10 completed paintings, maybe more than that?

ROBERT SPERRY: I can't remember.

[Break in taping]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: I think, that I recall.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What about America House then?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I showed at America House for a long time; I can't remember how long, really. From the early sixties. I had a show at America House in '61 or '2, '62 I think.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And you were still working in high-fired, well, I guess you always have.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I remember sending back a bunch of big sculptures and then a bunch of pots for that show.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yeah, about that time, maybe late fifties, you were doing those wonderful so-called garden sculptures. They were highly, a lot of them were highly decorative, I believe, from the standpoint that they were, the surfaces were quite covered with decoration.

ROBERT SPERRY: Some of them were, some of them were.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But then some were simpler.

ROBERT SPERRY: A lot of them were based, a lot of the earlier ones were based on vegetation forms, sort of, of one form, or plant forms a lot. And then the later ones became less that way and more totemic, sort of.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Right. Almost with a kind of ritualistic feeling about it.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, in a way.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And some of them figurative, in a way, almost figurative.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Gene Brandzell [Seattle collector--Ed.] has one of your pieces of that type in his backyard.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh really? Which one?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, it's in the book. I'll show it to you when we finish. If we get out the book, I'll show it to you.

ROBERT SPERRY: I wonder what it is.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And I don't know where he got it, but it's one of the very nice ones. He has it in his backyard.

ROBERT SPERRY: Did you have a piece from Mar Hudson at the show in the museum?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I don't think I did. I can't remember.

ROBERT SPERRY: He's got one that I like really well.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh yes! Borrowed one from him.

ROBERT SPERRY: You did? The square box with a woman's head and cross?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I have a slide of that. I can't remember whether that was in the show or not.

ROBERT SPERRY: I can't remember. Oh no; I think I know the one you had; I think I remember.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I have several slides of the pieces that he owns of yours up there. Wasn't his the one that had the double figure?

ROBERT SPERRY: He inherited all those; they were just things that I left.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What?

ROBERT SPERRY: Those are all just things that I'd left.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh were they really?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, in the house in Bothell? [after divorce from Edythe--LAMAR HARRINGTON]

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Hmm. I think that Marcella Benditt [Seattle collector--Ed.] has one similar to the one. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Right.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: She has a single one. And Mar had one that was sort of a double one.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh yeah, oh yes, right.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Those are all very interesting and large and powerful pieces, I think.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I did quite a bit of sculpture over that period of, say from '57 to '63.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You also had a go at some things then that might have been called, like fountains, or something like that.

ROBERT SPERRY: (laughs) Yeah. No, the only fountain I ever did was an ersatz one, you know that. That's what you're referring to. (laughter) I was making all these pieces with pipes in them.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes.

ROBERT SPERRY: Spouts, looked like spouts, and somebody was doing an article on fountains and they wondered if I'd ever made any fountains, and this looked like a fountain . . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Fountain material.

ROBERT SPERRY: . . .so I put some friction tape and soda straws in the ends of the pipes that, you know, made little squirting nozzles out of them, and then put a garden hose into one of the back pipes out of sight, made a plastic pool with rocks there, and made a fountain.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's see. We've talked about the universities and their importance. Oh, what about the universities right around this area? Can you think of what might have been going on during those years that you would like to talk about? Like University of Oregon or Portland or...?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. You know, at Eugene [University of Oregon--Ed.], Bob James was down there, and there was always a lot going on down there. And then later on -- well no, at the same time -- when Ray Grimm was working down at Portland State and quite a bit happening there. I knew Ray fairly well. In fact that place... Ray was the first one I had seen ever do, well, I got fascinated in raku out of reading Leach's book, you know, that 1940 book. And it was the first year, I think the first year I was at the university here, in '54, '55. And just decided to play around with and mixed up his glazes and stuff and did them with electric kiln, and did some raku. And it was oxidized and it was kind of ugly, you know, it never -- I didn't get turned on by it. And it always, it seemed like an interesting teaching method; it's really what kind of a... But anyway, we dropped it. And then, Ray Grimm came up, and Ray had been introduced to the technique of putting in sawdust, so you make it black, you know, which gives raku now its characteristic, and... [Phone rings]

[Tape 2; Side 1]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You were talking about Ray Grimm.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh yeah. And Ray was making his raku by smoking. And it was about that time that Jean Griffith was in school, and she... I think Ray was up one time, maybe gave a workshop here. And Jean got started at it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's see. And then of course there was Rudy [Autio--Ed.] at University of Montana.

ROBERT SPERRY: Montana, oh gosh, yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And I don't know. This might be...

ROBERT SPERRY: And then the Japanese guy that's over at Idaho, who I really don't know. And then, oh and then George Roberts.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: At Idaho?

ROBERT SPERRY: At Idaho, yeah, yeah. [John--Ed.] Takehara, isn't that who's at...?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He's at Boise State, I think.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, is that Boise State?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yeah, it's in Boise.

ROBERT SPERRY: I don't really know him.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Anyway. I'd like for you to talk about Rudy here someplace, but maybe we can wait a minute. Just a minute; let me think. This is probably a good time to discuss Rudy, for instance. He, I'm sure he's...

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, Rudy, you know, Rudy was working on a lot of -- the summer I was in Montana, the summer I met both Pete and Rudy -- he was working on walls, doing a lot of his



architectural things then, the carved brick walls and stuff like that. And then Rudy was always very, very quiet; I mean, he's really just a super nice guy, but he didn't have that magnetism that Pete had, so that Rudy could be around and you weren't quite aware of it often, you know. But I think Rudy's things -- when he started the sculpture he started to make after Pete went to L.A. -- was the stuff that, I think, influenced me more than any; some of those big, heavy massive, blocky things that he did that were really beautiful. He didn't do too many of them, I don't think.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You mean before he ever came over here to replace you, that was while he was still. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, that was in the sixties, but earlier when he was at the Bray Foundation, I think they were made, or maybe it was the first year or two at Missoula.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Those things that may have been like six feet high, with the big pieces. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Geometric, almost, forms, piled up you mean.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh geometric, yeah, I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: Are those the ones you mean?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yeah, those too.

ROBERT SPERRY: But he, when he, in '56 or '7 he did some things that were just, I don't think they were more than about this [gestures: two feet or so--Ed.] high probably. But they were almost little figure -- they almost looked like figure forms.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I remember.

ROBERT SPERRY: They were made out of real thick slabs, very abstract.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: As a matter of fact, some of them were influenced by Indians, he told me.

ROBERT SPERRY: Probably, probably, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And as a matter of fact, I was able to find one of those for that show down at the Seattle Art Museum. And it seemed to me, almost, I was searching for the earliest abstract sculpture in ceramics in this area. I spent quite a bit of time trying to find what seemed to be the very earliest of that. And after Pete left, and assuming that Pete had done none of that before he left here, which I believe he hadn't and which I think he says he hadn't, someplace in there Rudy started those things. They were partly abstract and partly realistic. And I finally found one in the [Max (deceased) and Florence--Ed.] Weinsteins' garden.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, that white one that one [fells next to]. [Sperry has moved away from the microphone, almost unintelligible for a few seconds.]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, it was lighter; it was a lighter color.

ROBERT SPERRY: You've seen that white one that Max has, didn't you?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Who has? Max.

ROBERT SPERRY: Weinstein. That real white one that, is that the one you're talking about?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I don't know. But I think this was as early as 1955 or maybe '54. And whether they've found any earlier ones than that for the Autio show, which is coming up in Montana, I don't know. But those pieces were important, the ones you're talking about.

[Break in taping -- fairly long pause again]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So Bob, there was all of that tremendous energy going into these exhibitions, all of this work in the early sixties. I know, I wanted to ask you about visitors to the university or to other places around here that may have been influential to you or at least interesting. And I was thinking of Hamada.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, yeah, Hamada's visit here.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Of course, he came when you were gone to Japan, did he not?

ROBERT SPERRY: He, well, he came after the summer I got back, actually.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Had you been here when he was here before or had you missed him?

ROBERT SPERRY: No. He'd been in Montana. I saw the pots, and in fact I helped glaze some of the pots that he and Leach had made.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That he made while he was there?

ROBERT SPERRY: They had sat around all that time, couple years, and they were still there. And I can remember we mixed up this beautiful celadon that Pete used to have, and black glaze and, you know, real Japanese-y glazes and tried to get all these things glazed. But I had never met him and I never met Leach, either.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You know, your work, a lot of people referred to it as being very Oriental looking, in those early years, with the brush work and the -- I don't know whether you ever used any ash glaze.

ROBERT SPERRY: Not really, no.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Okay. But your work did have a rather Oriental look. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh definitely.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . .and I wondered in the first place where that came from. Now I can see how later, but. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, the initial impulse, I think, came from Henry Lin.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: From Henry Lin.

ROBERT SPERRY: When Henry. . . Yeah, because when I came out here, Henry was a graduate student, and he showed me how to use an Oriental brush, one day, you know. And I really liked it. (chuckles)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now that was in the late fifties?

ROBERT SPERRY: That was, no, in '55, when I first came, '54 probably.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: '55. I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: '54, I would imagine. Plus Pete had done a lot of brush work, really, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes.

ROBERT SPERRY: All of his things were brush decorated. So a lot of that influence, probably, came from Pete, too. I mean the initial input came from Pete, sure.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Was passing through Montana at that time when you were there.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And a lot of that had rubbed off on Pete from Hamada and Leach, or some of it, possibly.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Had you paid much attention to Oriental work in Chicago?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, that was the main kind there was, mainly Chinese work, you know, Chinese and Japanese at the Art Institute.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Chinese, yeah. I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, they had a big collection of that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So you were conscious of that before?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh yeah. Yeah, very much so.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, I guess the next thing we ought to talk about is your sabbatical to Japan in 1963. How long were you gone?

ROBERT SPERRY: Three months.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Three months?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I've heard some people say you were gone a year, and I didn't think that was true.

ROBERT SPERRY: No.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: While you were gone, Rudy came, did he, to kind of take your place?

ROBERT SPERRY: Take my place. Yeah, he filled, he came and taught here for a quarter, a quarter or maybe a quarter and a summer, I'm not sure which. No, a quarter I think. A quarter, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And he had that wonderful show at the Henry Gallery as a result of what he'd done while he was here while you were gone [as well as a few pieces he'd brought from Montana--LAMAR HARRINGTON].

ROBERT SPERRY: I didn't see that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, it was a wonderful show; you've seen some of the pieces from it, I'm

sure. It was good.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. Well, it was really almost about the time that he started, they don't look like any -- I mean, the surfaces aren't like what he's doing now, but it was a beginning of that form. Wasn't it? The evolution of that form that ended up being the one that he does all the figures on.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Right, exactly. That's it. He did that huge, they called it The Fleshpot. It's about four feet in diameter, and has the . . . That was also the beginning of some of the drawing, you see, the female forms.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, that was, that the beginning of the drawing, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But also, in that very same show, he had some of those abstract pieces that are constructed with the various planes, and three or four feet tall.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And actually are very much like the things that he's doing now. So that was the beginning of that. So good things were going on there, with him, while you were gone. How did you decide to go to Japan?

ROBERT SPERRY: The Center for Asian Arts had just gotten their grant, I think, it was the first. . . They had gotten their -- I think in June. In the middle of July, Millard Rogers [professor of art history, University of Washington--Ed.] phoned me up and said, "Would you like to go to Japan next month for a year?" And Edythe couldn't get ready in time to go, so we, so I told them I couldn't do it, and Chuck Smith went then for a year.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh.

ROBERT SPERRY: And I don't know what Chuck did; I'm not sure what he did over there. But so I didn't get that, but I was able to get a quarter grant in the following spring then. In '63, that would have been the summer of '62, and then in the spring of '63, we got a grant to go for a quarter, or got a grant, I guess. And then I, and I had a sabbatical for the quarter, so I had a half salary, and I had just sold a wall or did a fairly big commission for a woman named Mrs. Dwyer, in fact it was. . . Remember the wall that won a prize in Bellevue? This was the next version, the next wall that I did. And it's up near. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Lakeside?

ROBERT SPERRY: . . .University Avenue [means Street--LAMAR HARRINGTON], up on the top of the hill there in a penthouse in a courtyard [Mrs. Dwyer's penthouse--LAMAR HARRINGTON].

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, I see. In a private penthouse?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, and that helped to finance that trip.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Was that the one that was mostly white?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, right.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: The mural?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah, right.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see. And, you also had done the mural for the gas company before you went to Japan, I think.

ROBERT SPERRY: Before that, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And those were probably your main two murals, were they not, in the earlier years?

ROBERT SPERRY: Right, right. I did smaller things and then there's one in my old house, but. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And the one at the gas company in recent years went to Lakeside School, is that right?

ROBERT SPERRY: I think so.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yeah. And it was a very. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: It was black, almost, black and blue, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . .expressionistic kind of thing.

ROBERT SPERRY: Related to some of the free-standing sculpture, by the way.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes. So, you got this grant. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: . . .and decided. . . It was about that time that I, or up to that time, I'd got awfully interested in looking at Bergman films, and thought wouldn't it be fun to make a film. And so I decided to. . . I didn't get the grant, I got the grant to document the village, but I didn't say how I was going to document it. I said "photographically," I guess. So I didn't apply for a grant to make a movie because I didn't know what the hell I was doing; I didn't know anything about making movies, you know. And I had bought a tape recorder, and the tape recorder wouldn't work, and they wouldn't give me my money back, but I traded it in for an eight-millimeter camera. And I did a few little short things, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, but that was when you came back, was it not?

ROBERT SPERRY: No, no. This was before I left.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: And then, before, when we were going to go, I decided that I'd like to try to make a film of this village, because I was looking. . . I really had the village picked out, I think, from Leach's book. It was. . .Onda.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You picked out Onda, from the book?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, more or less, because it had these machines I liked, these clay grinding machines, and it just looked really neat. When I got there, I decided to look around and decide after I looked around, but then everybody said there's no point in looking around; Onda is the place, you know. It was the only one that still retained the sort of really traditional feeling to it, at least.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see, yes.

ROBERT SPERRY: But, to get back earlier, when we were getting ready to go over, I decided I'd make this film. So I went down, I bought a used Bolex, and I was going on the advice of this camera dealer that I bought this thing from, and so I bought a couple rolls of black and white film and went home and I made a little five-minute film of Edith making bread that night. (laughs) Making a loaf of bread! Actually it was quite nice. And then I was shooting a few things, you know, just playing around, with this, trying to learn how to use this camera. And the guy said that if I ever wanted sound on the film I'd have to have a certain kind of film, single-perforation film, I guess it was. So he ordered it for me, and it arrived about a day or two before we left for Japan. And I carried 3,000 feet of film to Japan, which didn't fit the God-damned camera when I got there. It was just awful! It was gross! And I can remember getting to the village and they were firing a kiln, and I thought, "Oh my God, I may not see them fire a kiln again, while I'm here." So I went and grabbed my camera and started shooting, and shot off the half-roll that was in there, and I grabbed a new roll of this new film and shoved it in the camera, and it came to a grinding halt, you know, it wouldn't move, because it had a double-perforation sprocket on it. And so, Edith and the interpreter -- actually it was her and myself -- we jumped on the train and went into Fukoka that night, hoping we could get a camera, because the kiln would be going the next day, hoping we could find a camera dealer and get some film. And we got there and he was closed; he had just closed, but he was still in there. And I'm, I was kind of timid about those things; I wouldn't pound on the door, but Edith and the interpreter started pounding on the door and they got this guy to open up, and we got some film. And I ended up using Japanese film which was faster and ended up a lot better than the crap that this -- I won't mention his name.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So you didn't even use the film that you got from here?

ROBERT SPERRY: No, I carried 3,000 feet of film over there and back! Ridiculous, but anyway, after that we got the film made.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What about your time in Onda, how you felt about it, what you did, what it was like.

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, it was a great high, you know. Making a film is one of the great highs of all time, I think.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, so, did you really consider that the thing you did mainly while you were there was make a film?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, yeah, that was the whole intent.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: And I spent 30 days out of the 90 making the film. And then the other 60 days traveling around to kilns. [phrase obscured]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You didn't make pottery, then, while you were there?

ROBERT SPERRY: I never made any pottery, no. I didn't go for that purpose; I went really to document this primitive village. That's what I was looking for, a traditional village, not a primitive one, a traditional village, pottery.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And I know that while you were there you collected Onda pottery and gave the collection to the Henry Gallery. And did you see some of the pieces in the recent Japanese show down at the Seattle Art Museum?

ROBERT SPERRY: I did, yes!

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Aren't they wonderful? The big ones with. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, that big sake-brewing vessel, that was incredible.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes, beautiful.

ROBERT SPERRY: And that's one of the few pieces that I took from the village, that came out of the kilns when I was there. All the rest I bought from dealers, I think, or almost all the rest.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh I see. I didn't know that.

ROBERT SPERRY: And there were 10,000 pots came out of the kilns while we were there.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Ten thousand pieces?

ROBERT SPERRY: Came out of the kilns. And yet mostly what we found had been selected from a much larger group over a longer period of time, you know. I was amazed at how few good pieces there were in Japan, considering the number of pieces made over there, at that time, anyway. And then how few you really see; it's, there isn't much quality in the work.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Before you went over there, had you given a lot of thought to those kilns and the tradition and the anonymous potter and all of that?

ROBERT SPERRY: Not really. The only thing that fascinates me, the only thing that ever fascinated me. . . I don't like Japanese art in general; I don't relate to it. It's too fascist, you know; it's too -- everything is too controlled. And the part about Japanese society that I like is this one attitude that they have about the fire and about not being in control. I mean it's one of the few areas that they let out of control, you know, but in ceramics they do. They let the fire take its course, and what the fire does to the thing is terribly important, whereas for Europeans it was the other way around -- they hid it partly because they fired with coal, but also it was a tradition, too. They often tried to protect it; they used muffle kilns and saggars and they tried to protect the ware from the fire. Whereas the Japanese wanted the fire there and wanted the idiosyncracies of the fire. The fire was an entity, a real living thing, in Japanese pottery, certain aspects of Japanese. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Did that not. . .?

ROBERT SPERRY: . . .one aspect of Japanese pottery, and really that's what fascinated me.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Did that not have a lot to do with Zen?

ROBERT SPERRY: I don't know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What do you think? Did you learn much about Zen while you were there?

ROBERT SPERRY: I don't know. Zen never interested [me--Ed.]; I'm not a philosopher.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: And I find those things tedious. I really don't know anything about Zen. It has no appeal to me.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But what you were just talking about, their attitude about the flame and the fire and the spontaneity and all, really fit exactly into your philosophy of pottery.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, into my feeling about it. In fact, I think maybe that's one reason I went into pottery instead of painting. In painting, you are totally in control, essentially, you know, and you know exactly, when you put something there, you know exactly what you've got, and everything is terribly predictable. Whereas in ceramics it's not predictable; there's always that element of chance -- which I love. And yet I'm not a gambler, you know. I never gamble; I don't like gambling.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: With money, you mean.

ROBERT SPERRY: With money; I just don't like to gamble with money, but... When it comes to that, I love to gamble. I mean, I lose whole kilns, you know, often. And it's not rare to lose a whole kiln, you know, because that's the nature of it. (chuckles)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: There's a risk involved there, and an excitement always comes with risk, I think.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. And the excitement of not knowing what you've got until you get to that end and open it up. That's like the weather in Seattle. It makes you forget all the shit that you've got to go through to get that one nice day. (laughter)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What about folk art? Do you have any thoughts about folk art that would be relevant to this conversation right now? Especially with Japan?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I had a lot of ideas about folk art. I made that film in the village of Onda, which is a folk art village, when I saw it. It was ceasing to be a folk art village, and I think it's totally ceased to be one now, probably. But folk art, to me, is nothing more really, more or less, than primitive manufacturing. It's pre-assembly line manufacturing, really. It's creating things for the folks, you know, I mean. (laughter) Plates and tools and furniture and religious structures and, you know, dolls. It's just making things that people use in their everyday lives. You're making for your neighbors, essentially. You have an immediate feedback; in folk art there's an immediate feedback between the producer and the consumer. Total, and you cannot get away making a shoddy product for the guy down the street, you know, because he'll come and get you. So it has these built-in, societal standards; it's group aesthetic, I think maybe. It has the aesthetics of the society built into it because it's the product of the whole society; it's not the product of individuals.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And you're talking about an originality of the whole society, in a way. That was one question I wanted to ask.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Folk art does seem to be based on a traditional idea and it just, they just keep making it almost the same all the time, the same as is possible for human hands and not a machine.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah, essentially.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: It does seem to me, then, that it doesn't have a lot of originality for each individual, you see. But you're saying that it's a total societal kind of originality?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.



LAMAR HARRINGTON: That's interesting.

ROBERT SPERRY: It's an invention of the society, I think, and in that case, and maybe that's what all art is, I don't know. But the folk artist is trained to do a specific thing. He's not trained to think about art! Folk art -- I don't know, I always have trouble with that name, I don't know quite what. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, somebody attached that word, "art," to it. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . .who wasn't a folk artist.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, but whereas art, as I know it, as we know it in this country, is the product of an individual and it's -- maybe it's just more entrepreneurial. It's that you make a product and you hope like hell that the society is going to adopt the thing you make, as being an expression of itself. I mean, that's the hope of each artist, I think.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: An expression of the society, you mean?

ROBERT SPERRY: Of the society, yeah. As well the individual; but of the society so that the artist maybe is -- but the artist doesn't have the restraints that the folk artist does, first of all. Because he has no immediate feedback, essentially. He doesn't have, and he's not making a standardized product so that even, you lose, you don't have the standard of comparisons or value judgments either, so that -- I don't quite know what I'm saying.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well in folk art, the people in society have had a long time to accept that particular thing.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, it's been refined over centuries.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So nobody's going to be shocked over it. Where I think the problem -- you said that the artist might not have an immediate feedback, except that I've seen that the immediate feedback to an awful lot of artists, and especially the most original ones, is pretty violent. (laughter)

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. But I don't even know whether that's real feedback, because again usually, or often, that's coming from an uninformed source, whereas the feedback that a folk artist gets is not from an uninformed source.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: No, that's true.

ROBERT SPERRY: From an extremely informed source. And they may get on his ass because he depicted this mythical figure wrong, or something, you know.

[Break in taping]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Every time I think about your trip to Japan, the year that you spent there. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Three months.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Pardon?

ROBERT SPERRY: Three months; not a year, three months.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, three months. I also think a lot about what was happening, well, sometime earlier than that, in California, and the difference between the village that you went to in Japan and what was happening with Peter Voulkos and his group down in California. And we didn't talk about that really, to speak of.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: We've only discussed Pete from the standpoint of his being at Archie Bray Foundation. And I think about -- not the work from Onda so much -- but some of those pots from some other places, like the igaware, I think you call it, and some of those that have that tremendously spontaneous surface. You were talking about that a little while ago, in a way, when you said that they want this spontaneousness, or at least some of them wanted it. [I though about -Ed.] what was happening down in California and the spontaneous things that were happening there. But they're two different things really, aren't they?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, in a way, but I think that that whole basic idea is still essentially Japanese influence. I think it's basically Japanese influence.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Do you think that, you see a lot of people. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Like the \_\_\_\_\_.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . .so many people called it abstract expressionism that Pete was doing. What do you think about that? In retrospect?

ROBERT SPERRY: Pete was calling it abstract expressionism, probably before anybody else did.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He did call it that, did he?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I think so, yeah. I think. Pete was very, very strongly influenced by [Franz--Ed.] Kline, particularly, the abstract expressionist. I mean that was one of Pete's very, very strongest influences.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So he might not find fault. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: But I think the influence might have also come a little bit from -- Because that influence of Kline's probably came from Japan, you know, originally, although that's a loose connection maybe.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But it does seem to me that the spontaneousness of abstract expressionism, has got to be similar, doesn't it, to the spontaneousness of the Japanese.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh sure.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And it didn't seem to me that those two things have been connected a lot over the years. Maybe they are being more connected now.

ROBERT SPERRY: Maybe, yeah, maybe they haven't. I think, I don't know; I've always just assumed that connection, I guess. Abstract expressionism is a little closer connection, maybe. Then maybe it's the Oriental through abstract expressionism, although, again, I think Pete was probably some influenced by the same things that the abstract expressionist painters were, and that obviously, I think, has to be gotten \_\_\_\_\_.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Certainly Pete was. He said himself that he was very much influenced by the whole Hamada thing.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, and Rosanjin, when Rosanjin came through. Very, very influenced by [him,that].

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Do you ever have any thoughts now, in retrospect, as you look back at the Peter Voulkos years in Los Angeles, about his work, about what he was doing there, what you think about it now as compared to what you thought about it then? Or of say, Mason, or Melchert; I guess Melchert came along a little bit later, when he was up at Berkeley.

ROBERT SPERRY: While he was at Berkeley, too; he was part of the Berkeley group, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But one of the advantages of doing a tape at this remove from those years, is that I think we all have different feelings now than we did at that time. And I just wonder what you as a ceramicist...?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I don't really know why I got thinking the way I did, but after I came back from Japan I really felt like the direction that I wanted to go was strictly the vessel, that I wanted to make vessels. And I don't know; I really can't remember why.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: It's hard to talk about that now?

ROBERT SPERRY: I just don't know why I thought that way. Because it was, partly it was the idealism of that -- it was probably disillusionments in my own life, it was, you know, just all kinds of things. In a way, maybe it maybe it was just an escape, too, a withdrawal, of not being ready to move on to a direction, or... I don't know, I don't know. I mean, I don't know why I didn't go in a different direction. But...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, of course, all those things you're talking about right this minute are things that we all struggle with; it's all part of living a life. And struggling through all of these ideas and...

ROBERT SPERRY: Pete was doing that at the time; he was struggling through his ideas.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He was?

ROBERT SPERRY: You know, and some of those things from '57 and '8.

[Tape 2; side 2]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: These things from the early...?

ROBERT SPERRY: '57, '8, '9, early sixties, you know, there's some really horrible pieces in there. I mean he's the first one to admit it, but those are things that you gotta go through, you gotta work those things out. And I think that the stuff that Pete was doing between '75 and '80, '80, '81, or now, are just fabulous because, you know, they're just fabulous.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Fabulous pieces?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. They're the best things that he's done, I think.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Would those include, for instance, the big plates?

ROBERT SPERRY: Those big round plates, that's mainly those, yeah. I think. And the big bottles, the big chimney-pipe-looking things. I think those are the best pieces he's ever done and they're just so strong, they're so powerful, incredible.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And that was after he'd done his metalwork, wasn't it?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. Yeah, after he'd really almost quit throwing.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You know, one thing that we didn't talk about at all, and I think we should do it before we go any further. I'd like to talk about films in a minute, but we didn't talk about your teaching, about some of your colleagues at the University of Washington.

ROBERT SPERRY: (chuckles)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: When you first went there, Bonifas was there. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And he had come from Europe, and of course, there again in retrospect, you can probably see a lot of things about that situation that you were not able to see at the time. But he must have come at an absolutely impossible time for a person who had been in the field that he was in -- designing and not knowing how to throw or to cast. He did [have some of his work-- LAMAR HARRINGTON] cast in bronze in Europe, didn't he?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And you mentioned earlier about how difficult it was, going into a situation like that, as compared for instance with your experience with Pete just before that at Archie Bray. Do you want to comment at all on those Bonifas years?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, yeah, you know, it was all of the problems that one associates with. Paul was in his fifties or early sixties, I think then, or in his fifties, I guess he would be probably. Pete was just a few years older, much more of my age, four or five years older than I am maybe, three or four years older. So there was an age gap. Then there was a cultural gap because Paul came from France, and the aesthetic of the whole craft thing there was just totally different, I think. He was still into art deco. I mean, his place, I think to describe him, would have to be described as art deco, which was really, you know, had just gone out, so it was really looked down upon; I think at that time, anything art deco was. So that became another, you know, difference. The fact that European craftsmen never touched their material. They weren't craftsmen; they were designers.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And thought of themselves as artists, I think, didn't they?

ROBERT SPERRY: As artists.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Quote, "artists."

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah, I guess so. And here it was just the opposite; you did everything yourself. I mean it was just unheard of to let somebody else touch your work, you know, just against everybody's ideals.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: In fact it was almost immoral to think that you'd let anybody. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . .or you had done a terrible thing if you allowed anybody else to touch it.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, essentially. So that was another difference. Plus he was, his health was terrible, so he didn't have a high degree of energy then at that time. And I was young and very energetic. He wanted me to write 500 pages for my thesis. I didn't even write 500 words -- I think I wrote about 50 words -- and made 500 pieces, made a hundred pieces or something, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yeah.

ROBERT SPERRY: Which sort of summarized the difference in our attitudes; he was, old men are into philosophy, you know, and young men are into action. (laughs) And so it created a lot of conflicts, a lot of conflict. You know, the whole idea of about what education was or something.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Who else do you remember when you first came to the university, for instance, in the School of Art -- anybody else you want to mention as we go along fine -- but I was thinking of people like [Walter--Ed.] Isaacs or. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, Isaacs I had no contact with.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: You see, he was, he taught there for a year or two after I came, but Boyer [Gonzales--Ed.] was the head and so I had no connection. Isaacs hired me, but, you see, Boyer and I came the same year so really I didn't have any. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So you probably wouldn't have had a lot of connections then, either, with people like Alden Mason?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, not really, other than just, you know, we associated with each other; we had. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But you were on different committees and in different departments, actually.

ROBERT SPERRY: Department, totally.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Divisions, uh huh.

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, the art school was small, then -- there were only 20 people on the faculty then.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Same with, oh, people like. . .?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, Bill Hixson.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: William Hixson.

ROBERT SPERRY: We used to party together all the time; you know, it was a very small group of people and quite different than it is today. I mean, you didn't have the factionalism. Well, there was a certain amount of factionalism then, I guess too, there always is, but it was small enough that it wasn't. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But actually none of those people apparently had a lot influence over you as teachers or then as colleagues?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh you see, I never studied with any of them; I never studied with anybody here. Well, Paul Bonifas.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Except for Bonifas.

[Break in taping]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's go back to the trip to Onda. I remember that there was an exhibition of your collection at the Henry Gallery at one time or another, and these were the things that you brought back from Japan. There were a lot of pieces.

ROBERT SPERRY: Only about 50 pieces, I think.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I thought you gave the Henry Gallery something like 203 pieces.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh no.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Is that not possible?

ROBERT SPERRY: I don't think so.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Okay. Well anyway, there is a collection of that material at the Henry Gallery. You also took photographs while you were there, as I recall.

ROBERT SPERRY: Right. A lot of photographs.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And it seemed to me that there was an exhibition of these photographs put together in a rather, I guess you can't call it a narrative style, but of the whole village. Didn't you take shots, still shots?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, you mean the panoramic view of the village?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Right.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I did some panoramic views.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But you took still shots and then put them together.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, they were put together, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That was an interesting. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: And Edith was writing a book on the -- in fact the manuscript still exists and was close to publication -- I don't quite know what happened.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now Edith also helped with the film, is that right?

ROBERT SPERRY: She wrote the script.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see, for the film.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So you got back, in 1963, and in 1964, you were made a full professor.

[Break in taping]

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, when I got back, see I was, I can remember the summer. That was the summer that Hamada was here. And I didn't have. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yeah, '63.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I met him in Japan; I went up and spent a day with him.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, did you? In Mashiko?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, in Mashiko. And also at that time met Ken Cook -- met Ken Cook, we met Ken Cook in Tokyo, just by accident. And he was one of -- when Leach, in his book, The Potter's Book, talks about taking some of the local boys as apprentices? Well, Ken was the first local boy he took as an apprentice. He had been, he was 31 when I had known him and he'd been making pots for 17 years. I guess he was 13 or 14 when he went to work for Leach. And he died of a heart attack while he was swimming, while he was over in Japan that summer. But he was staying with Hamada, and we went up and spent a day. And it was nice to have him -- we'd met him before -- and he kind of gave us an intro, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Did he come from the United States?

ROBERT SPERRY: From England.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see. Did he go there with Leach?

ROBERT SPERRY: No, he'd just come over to spend six months with Hamada or something.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So then you met Hamada while you were there, and then when you came back here, like in June?

ROBERT SPERRY: Then he came here in July or August, August I think it was when he came here, and he spent 30 days. He had a 30-day workshop, he and his son. And I didn't have a lot of contact with him while he was here, but some, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So at that time, when he did that six-weeks' workshop, people in your division, at the university, were Fred Bauer -- was Fred there?

ROBERT SPERRY: No no. Fred wasn't there yet. Well, oh, Fred may have been there as a student.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, that's right; he was there, he was there as a student and he worked with Hamada, I remember.

ROBERT SPERRY: He was the assistant.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Technical assistant, or something like that. Okay then. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. And Harry Myers was here then.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Okay. Harry Myers had come up from California and was here for a few years and then went back down.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, about '61 I think he came, '61 or '2.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yeah, I think that's right, because he was here at the time of the ACC conference on the campus.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And in fact, you had considerable part in that conference, as I recall.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That was one of the first major kinds of conferences that had to do with crafts as art. There were a lot of discussions on the agenda that year; in fact, there were a lot of so-called fine artists here.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh really?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes, at the moment. Oh Rudolf Arnheim was here that year, too.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh yeah! Right.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He of course was a historian and a psychologist, I think. There were a lot of things on the agenda that year about this argument about what was art and what was craft.

ROBERT SPERRY: The age-old argument.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Right, yes. And even though it's an age-old argument and I don't know whether there'll ever be any solution to it. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: . . .you want my definition? (laughs)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . .that's on the next page, Bob, we'll talk about that in a minute. Something, though, I've wondered. When you came back from there, you had tremendous energy at that time -- well, you do today, too -- but it was so obvious that you had a lot of energy, and you'd gone out into the world, you'd participated in a lot of conferences, you'd gone to Japan, you were becoming really quite sophisticated as far as your travels in the world and your place in the world of ceramics. And I wondered how all of that tied in with your teaching commitments, when you got back? How you felt when you got back, as far as this. . .

Sometimes when you've gone out into the world and had wonderful experiences like that, then it's hard to settle down, into your. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, no. When I came home I started, I don't know, oh -- it was the summer Hamada was here, I started talking about that -- that when I came home. I remember my schedule was I would get up, and I would -- let's see how did that go? -- yeah, I would get up and I would work from eight until about four in the afternoon, I think it was, on pottery. And then from about, or, no, it wasn't; it was from eight until noon, I guess.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: In your own studio, in the house out in Bothell?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. And then I would spend the afternoon printing photographs, because,



you see I had these 600 photographs that I, and I was printing these up for that exhibition and for a book that we were supposedly going to do and never did. And then in the evening I would edit the film.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And then teach all day?

ROBERT SPERRY: No no, this was summer. And then that went on, sort of, until school started, I guess. And then I prepared that show that I had at the Henry Gallery in '64. And I was really deep into that. During that, that was happening during that summer and the following year until they had that show. No, there was no -- it was stimulating, I mean, I was raring to go.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And that show, again, there were tremendous --

ROBERT SPERRY: I took a leave of absence in '64; that's what I did, I think.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, did you?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yes, I believe I did.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see. But your rate of activity was tremendously high, wasn't it, all the time.

ROBERT SPERRY: Um hmm.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I remember that exhibition that you had at the Henry Gallery. Would that be the one where you had begun to use lusters in your work?

ROBERT SPERRY: No. That was '65.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: That was at Gene Zema's gallery, in '65.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, I remember that.

ROBERT SPERRY: That was the following year. I always thought there was a bigger gap between '64 and '65, but it was just a year.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So that you were producing tremendously then, in order to get enough stuff for each one of these shows.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I think we have a lot of pictures of that show at the Henry Gallery, and I do remember. There was a lot of brushwork?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. That was very, very, a lot of brushwork.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Is that the show where you had started using square plates?

ROBERT SPERRY: Plates, right.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Was that the first one?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I think so.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: We loved those at the gallery because they were so beautiful up on the wall. (laughs) You could make a wonderful display of those square plates.

ROBERT SPERRY: (laughs) That was certainly Japanese influence, those square plates.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: It was?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, because I loved those, you know, those marvelous square plates of the museum over there.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And probably influence from your trip to Japan and having looked at all of those things?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, just the year before, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So, how about your teaching philosophies over those earlier years, and then the fact of having been in Japan, and what changes may have come about?

ROBERT SPERRY: I've always, I don't know, I've always tried to, I've always felt like the university should be a professional art school, because I feel like the universities usurped the role of a professional art school, and didn't really replace it very well. Because you're trying to fit a nonacademic subject into an academic framework. The pressure from academia was that this is not a professional school, this is part of the College of Arts and Sciences; this is for general education, you know. And yet, if it wasn't happening in the university, there was no place for it to happen, really. A few of the academies still existed, but most of them were browbeaten so by the universities that they were giving degrees by then. And so that I think my driving idea about education is that you primarily have to think of your students as going to be professionals and teach them as professionals, and try to run a professional program. And gradually, over the years, you know, when I came back into ceramics in 1970, and we were away from the art school, and away from the university [a new fire arts building had been built a couple of miles from campus-- LAMAR HARRINGTON], we were able to achieve that even more, to the point where we really had a professional school, I think. And it was also small enough that it became what the university has always claimed to be: a community of scholars. We weren't a community of scholars, but I think that we were able to teach in such a way that were a community of artists, for quite a while, you know. That's a hard thing to maintain, and I think if you can maintain that for five or ten years, then probably you're lucky, without changing the faculty.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Now assuming, and I don't know how you feel about this, but assuming that young people don't have a very broad background at home, for the first 20 years or before college, that is -- and it's my belief that in America they don't have a very broad background, cultural background and intellectual background and all that -- that does create a problem, don't you feel, as far as the professional art within the university. And what's the solution to all of that?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I think, I think the solution is, and this is what I've argued for over the years, when we've various times at the university. . . In 30 years of teaching there, there was never one substantive change that I saw, in the university, not one substantive change in 30 years. Other than what was done on an individual basis, you know; but as far as policy goes, I saw no substantive changes. That you could do it by having -- in other words if you believed that the state should support an art school, a professional art school, as I do -- if they're going to support other

education, that's as good a one as any; that you should have a pre-art (and I guess I'm basing it on my own education), you should have a pre-art program, like you have pre-law or pre-science or pre-anything else, in which you take a general education. And then you have a professional school which you go to, and make it a professional school. And it seems it should be administratively separate from academia, because art and academia do not fit. They just do not fit together, because the objectives are different, the ideals are different, the thinking is different, the media is different. It's just different. Creative subjects generally don't do well at universities. The sciences are the major exception. But creative writing programs have never really gotten off too well. Whether this is the nature of the structure of the humanities, as opposed to the sciences, I don't know. But there's something in there that doesn't work, I think. And so my idea is that you have a professional art school on a university campus, so that they can benefit by contact, but they don't have to administratively suffer. Only it's the art that suffers because it's the small entity; the university doesn't really suffer because art suffers, but I think the arts do.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: How long would you say that that pre-period should last?

ROBERT SPERRY: Two or three years.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And that would be enough?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, take a few introductory courses. You know, get your beginning drawing and design out of the way over that period, say, but get a broad education. I feel very fortunate in that I went to school in Canada; I think you get a better background in high school, much better background than you do here. And, at least you did at that time. And I think that when I went to university, I was forced to take a general education, totally general education. I wasn't forced to; I enjoyed it, or sort of. I know I probably would have taken more art if I had the opportunity, but I took everything that was available. But at the same time I was able to take, like, they believed in survey courses, at that time at that university. And I got a tremendous amount out of it, survey of economics, a survey of political science, a survey of philosophy. Whereas when you take an artist and you put him into the structure of the university and they say, "All right, the only way you can know anything about philosophy or get any appreciation of philosophy is to read Kant"? That's ridiculous! But if somebody -- why do they hate popularizers? And yet popularizers are what you need for general education in a sense, to make it, to get some picture of what's going on, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And it's from such a course that you get your inspiration to then read Kant if you want to, or whatever.

ROBERT SPERRY: Then, delve into that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I've been amazed at how many professors in art schools I know who are very well read, who are very much interested in a lot of other subjects and whose libraries are full of books or who borrow books all the time, about rather esoteric subjects which have nothing to do with art. I've always been impressed with that. Now where that all comes from for each one of them I wouldn't know. Well, that's all interesting. In the, it may have been in one of the interviews I read, you said. . . Back about this time, and maybe it was before that too, you seemed to have great interest in television, movies, billboards and that -- Oh, a little while ago I was going to tell you about my bleeding heart when we talked one time about the value of museums, when I was very deeply involved in a museum and feeling that what I was doing was very, very important, too. And I know that at that time, you questioned very much the value of museums and of galleries, and believed a great deal in the popular culture. You said that the arts must be vitally connected to society as a whole. Do you remember when you said that?

ROBERT SPERRY: Um hmm.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What have been your thoughts about that since? Now I don't mean for you to champion the museums or galleries, but I was just reminding you about some of our earlier conversations.

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I think I have to go back and tell you maybe what instigated that sort of thinking in the first place. And it was being interested in films, but it was also -- I taught a lecture class for, from 1962, I think it was, until '72, for about ten years, called Art 129. It was an introduction to design, and it was an open-ended, free-wheeling, class, that I had a ball teaching. And it was always a big group of people, two or three hundred people usually. Since I was -- you see, in '66 I quit making pots and just worked in film. I didn't quit making pots; I made a lot of productionware to finance the films, but my main interest was in films from '66 to '70. And so I was very much into McLuhan and. . . as a result of teaching this class, I think. And also very much into communications and movies and T.V. and the whole popular media. This again was the sixties, which I was influenced probably very much by too. The revolution was created on television; it was a terribly powerful medium, that was happening then. And also I was totally sort of alienated to the real art world, to the art world, I think. I just felt totally alienated. I had no connection with it, and I don't know why, quite. And I think that I made that statement during that period sometime.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes, I think that's right, it was during that period. And I listened to that statement.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, and I think there's a certain amount of truth in it too, in that when we look back on the 20th century, from the vantage point of, say, the 21st or the 22nd century, maybe like looking back on the 18th century, when the. . . I'm sure that we're going to see things different than we do now. Like we say the contemporary world, not the contemporary world, but the world that we live in, operates on P.R. [public relations--Ed.], which does weird things with value systems. I mean, it can change values over short periods of time. I don't think it can over long periods of time, but it sure as hell can over short periods.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, that's encouraging. (chuckles)

ROBERT SPERRY: Don't you think so?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, I don't know for sure, because I'm terribly troubled about all of that today, for a number of reasons.

ROBERT SPERRY: I don't think in the long term, because again, and I've referred this before to you, about seeing the old magazine of art one time, and they showed all the winners of the Prix de Rome, for ten years. You haven't heard of a fucking one of them, you know. And yet these were the popular young painters of their day. So, what's going to happen when we start evaluating -- I mean already we're reevaluating Picasso, I think. And reevaluating a lot of people that were either underexploited or overexploited during their time. Yeah, I, Picasso is my favorite artist of all time, and yet I don't think Picasso really had an idea after he did Guernica. I think he just worked on that idea for the rest of his life. And maybe that's what art is; maybe that's what artists are about. But, so that didn't make Picasso much different than Braque. And yet when you examine their lives, they're totally different.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes they are.

ROBERT SPERRY: Picasso took those great, huge jumps all over the map, you know. And Braque was in his little corner just chugging along.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Which has a lot to do with personality, of course.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, personality and P.R.!

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, that's true.

ROBERT SPERRY: It was, I don't know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You see you could sort of compare Voulkos with Picasso, there too.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, right.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I don't know about the P.R., well I guess some P.R., except that. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, P.R. comes to certain personalities.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, that's true. Where some others will continue working in this little corner forever. Well, I believe so much in the arts, you know, and I get awfully serious about it, and I try to philosophize about it all, and try to figure out why it's important, and sometimes lately, I get so tired of thinking about it, and trying to find out what it's all about.

ROBERT SPERRY: You know what I think. When you ask yourself that question, I think to me the best answer is that it's God-damned important because we've been doing it for 30,000 years. Unceasingly, for 30,000 years, we've been making art, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes, we have. And anything. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Unceasingly.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . .that will go that long. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: And we go away beyond any sort of functional necessity, or utilitarian necessity. In everything we do we add those extra values, those extra visual things to them, that art. . . It doesn't matter what anybody says, art is! What art is, that's a different thing. And that, I think is impossible to judge contemporaneously. I just don't think, I mean, all you got to do is look in history and see how many people have been wrong how many times to realize that contemporary judgments are swayed by everything except the art.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You see, I think this is very hard, then, for the artist too, because most artists who are worth their salt would like some recognition, and it's very hard to get it within your lifetime. And most people who have thought about it a lot realize that they are being egotistical if they think that they can say that something is good and it's going to last, because we're not going to know whether it'll last or not until it's lasted.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So it's very tough, I think, on the artist.

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, sure it's tough, but it's tough on anybody that's adding something to the society, as to what the ultimate value is going to be to the society.

[Tape 3; side 1]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: The value to the individual artist, but also the value to society, is what . . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, ultimately, the only value that the art has is what value it has to other people.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You know, something that I've been thinking so much about lately -- and I suppose since I'm retired and I have more time to think about it, these things are coming out -- art has been terribly important to me, and not only the visual arts but music and -- all of them, everything that comes out of the creative mind. And of course there are a lot of things that come out of the creative mind that are very, very destructive. But I think that when you talk about art, as far as I'm concerned, it's almost totally constructive.

ROBERT SPERRY: You mean, coming from the artist?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Right. And science, for instance, I can't say that it's also constructive there, but anyway this is so big that I don't even know whether I can talk about it. But when I look at a composer or even a performer or an artist, and see what's coming from them, and when it's really powerful and it gets to you, it is so overpowering that I can't even describe how wonderful it is to be a human being and to be able to be part of all this and to be able to absorb it. But the thing -- sometimes that I think that's more important to me than the pot or the performance of Mozart or whatever it is -- is the fact that the creative person has worked on this so hard and what that person has done is so constructive in the long range, and how, if that hadn't been going on all these years, I don't think we'd even be here. I mean there's such a constructive aspect to, especially, art creativity, not to science.

ROBERT SPERRY: See I think that, I think that creativity is -- it's not part of us, I don't think that, the creativity is in matter, I mean.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That's right.

ROBERT SPERRY: There's a marvelous book; in fact, there it is there, *The Evolution of Human Nature*, by Judson Herrick. It was my bible when I taught that class, sort of, but he's a biologist and I find that scientists have better things to say about art than most people in the arts do. I mean, you gotta interpret it, but to me the creativity in science is exactly the same as it is in . . . The creativity in human beings is all the same. Creativity is creativity, and it's nothing -- it's this expression of the universe to complexify, to elaborate, and to challenge the unknown, you know, to create the unknown.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Except, don't you feel that a lot of things that are created are so destructive, where others are constructive. . . as far as the human beings go.

ROBERT SPERRY: All right, all right. But look at . . . most of the major art monuments in the world were created at tremendous suffering and expense of people.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yeah, we let . . .

ROBERT SPERRY: The pyramids, for example, are the classic example, I suppose. Or the great architecture of France. Most of it is based on poor peasants, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So that's not constructive?

ROBERT SPERRY: That's not constructive at all, in my opinion. And the weapons that destroyed Hitler? Is that not constructive? Is that destructive?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, I see, the weapons, okay. That's another way to look at it. The weapons that some scientists or engineer created did destroy Hitler.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, I guess all of that shows that it's not easy.

ROBERT SPERRY: I never blame the scientists for our failings as political beings, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, Bob, in 1967 you really began -- after The Village Potters of Onda, then you did a film called Profiles Cast Long Shadows.

ROBERT SPERRY: Long Shadows, what a pretentious title. (laughs)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: A rather surrealist film, wasn't it, wouldn't you say?

ROBERT SPERRY: Uh huh.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And would you say that that was the second major film that you did?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yes. I did a few little things that were never released before that, in between, but, yeah, that was the second one. And that was another great high of my life, was making that film. I guess, to me the great highs are that summer I spent with Voulkos -- that was a great high as a student, and then the next great high, I think, was when I had that Hall Coleman show, probably.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: In '62.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, that was really a good one, and then the Japanese was one, and then making that film.

[ROBERT SPERRY's wife Patti interrupts]

PATTI SPERRY: Bob.

ROBERT SPERRY: Hi!

PATTI SPERRY: Hi!

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Hello!

[Break in taping]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's discuss that surrealist film of 1967 a little more.

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I made up the screenplay; I was going over to Cheney, Washington, and doing a workshop, and I had a tape recorder with me in the car and I did the screenplay on the way over there and back.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Would this be before you shot anything, or after?

ROBERT SPERRY: Before I shot the film. And, yeah, it was totally scripted out, pretty much, pretty tight script on it. Wasn't it? Yeah, it was a pretty tight script. Yeah, it was. And Mickey Gustin was the lead actress in it, and the guy who was here in anthropology. . . [Hollis Mentzer--LAMAR HARRINGTON]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What's his name?

ROBERT SPERRY: What's his name? Charles, oh, I can't remember their names now; I'll have to look it up. Do you want me to look it up?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: An anthropologist, did you say?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, he's down in Louisiana now.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Think his first name is Charles?

ROBERT SPERRY: No, that was the lawyer, Charles [Pasco--LAMAR HARRINGTON]. . . Do you want me to look up the names? Turn your. . . It's not important, I don't care, it's a. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, we can get it later, okay.

ROBERT SPERRY: Okay.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: It would be interesting because I've never heard it before and I think it ought to be documented. Oh, it's probably in the film, in the credits?

ROBERT SPERRY: It's on. . . Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That film was shown nationally and internationally and won. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: It won a prize at Bellevue. We started shooting on the first of May, because I can remember it [was] the first be-in. Do you remember what the be-ins were, when the flower children were having their be-ins?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes.

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, this was the first be-in up in Volunteer Park, and that was the first day we shot. And it ended up, we used quite a bit of it in a part of the film. But, so it's got some documentary things in it that -- like you'll recognize some of the people, I think. Ted Jonssen's there, people that just happened to be sitting around that we just happened to get in there, you know. (laughs) Weird thing. But we shot it and got it finished and edited for Bellevue Fair, which was -- it was the first of May, I think, so it was May, June, July; we had it in the can in July. And got it into that Bellevue Festival.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And it won an award there?

ROBERT SPERRY: Or was that? Or am I dreaming? Maybe it was the year later, but anyway, I can't remember now the sequence. But it won an award there, and then it won an award at the San Francisco International Film Festival. And then it was shown at the New York Film Festival at the Lincoln Center, and then, on an invitational basis. And then it was in a lot of film festivals all over the country, and with a couple of touring circuits. And then it was picked up by a distribution company that did underground films.



LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh. There's like two pages of single-spaced places where that. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Where it was shown.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . .thing has been shown.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, it really had a huge audience, it really did have a huge audience. And it was just, it was just a great time, making that film, I really \_\_\_\_\_.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: It's interesting that that film definitely has surrealist base, wouldn't you say?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: As similar in a way to other, films of the fifties, some of them, like Maya Deren [filmmaker--LAMAR HARRINGTON]

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, Maya Deren and what was the guy, I can't remember, Peterson was his name?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Bob, the one down in the Bay Area -- oh, I'm thinking of Bob Nelsen.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, Bob Nelsen .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So then, what about other films, after that?

ROBERT SPERRY: Then after that, I worked on a couple more films and I started into a feature-length film with about 20, a cast of 20, and I worked on it for two years, and used all these people and, there were some really beautiful, there were some great footage in that film, but I could never make the thing work, never could. And I edited on it for over a year and just never could bring it to a conclusion. And I was going kind of crazy at the time; it was about the time of my divorce, and I was depressed and. . .terrible things happening. One day I burned the film; I guess I thought it would be a catharsis or something. (laughs)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I was just going to ask you where all those. . . How terrible.

ROBERT SPERRY: There were some great scenes. Fred Anderson was a. . . Anyway it was, it really was just a -- I should never have done that, I don't know. I really was going crazy at the time.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I remember in a fit of pique, I burned writing that I had done, like five inches of writing, that had taken a whole year to write, and that had a lot of wonderful things. And one day I just threw it into the fireplace.

ROBERT SPERRY: (laughs)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So you didn't, so after that. . .?

ROBERT SPERRY: So that, and then, then I got divorced. We started shooting that film in late '68 I think or, yeah, I think it was '68 or '69, and it was the summer of '70 I burned it and I got divorced in the fall of '70.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: A kind of ritual, in a way.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, it was a weird time, yeah, and very strange. And then I just floated for a couple of years and didn't do much of anything. And made a few pots to live on, because I was into an alimony situation, and that was devastating.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I said a while ago that we, even though it might seem a little boring to you, you've probably talked about it so many times, but I think we ought to discuss the arts versus crafts thing, just a little.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, arts and crafts? Well, to me it's very simple. Now this comes from being a teacher, I guess; you simplify things. But I think that art is anything that adds something new to the sum total of human aesthetic experience. And craft is a means to art; craft is merely the craft of making something; it's making something. And craft has no more to do with art than it does with wagons. You have to be a craftsman to do either one, but they serve totally different functions. And to call something a craft, to make a noun out of a craft I think is ridiculous; it isn't, it's a verb, as far as I'm concerned.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Except it's gotten all mixed up, I think, with functionalism, utilitarianism, craft as \_\_\_\_\_.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, and it's just stupid use of the word. It has nothing to do with the real meaning of craft.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But it also has caused some really difficult problems for the artist.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, I think it's stupid, dumb problems, yeah. But, you know, a painting doesn't exist without somebody practicing the craft of painting. And to me that's all it can mean. And all this other bullshit is just, you know, just prejudice, really, and prejudicial snobbery of a kind that has no meaning. I can't even bother thinking about it any more, because if people are bothered by it, I'd just as soon not talk about it, you know. I'm getting old. (laughter)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What are...?

ROBERT SPERRY: I have very definite priorities any more. (laughter)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What are your views about how that all started?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, it started with, I think Leonardo. You know, when he got the painters out of the guild system. And put them on a par with the doctors and the lawyers. They've been fucked up ever since, you know. (laughs) If they'd been kept with the tinsmiths it'd probably been better.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You've made a really strong commitment, all of your life, to vessels, and you said once that there are only two reasons to do anything: one is for fun and one is for profit.

ROBERT SPERRY: (laughs)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And that you made pots for profit, and that you might not have made them if you'd been a wealthy person, but I wonder if that's really true.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, I don't... No, I think that's either a misquote or I didn't mean what I said. Because...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I think you were laughing when you said it.

ROBERT SPERRY: I think, no, I've always, I love to make things; I really love to make things, and I've always liked to make things. I like to make furniture, I like to make, you know, anything. And to me that is -- I don't know, why do you like to make things? Why do you like to write? Why do you like to do, you've gotta, it's a curiosity, you're just trying to find out what's going to happen if you try something, you know, see what it's going to look like. And I made pots at times purely for profit; while I was making the film, that was the only reason I made pots then. I didn't make any pretense out of it, and I think that you can still -- like I considered myself a production potter at that time -- but you still, I repeated a few items, you know, but generally most of the pots were still individual pieces.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yeah they were.

ROBERT SPERRY: And so I don't know. It's a dumb question.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Did I tell you about the beautiful pots that I found at Marcella Benditt's of yours, in her cupboard? They're going to be in a show in Bellevue. You don't know about that yet.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh really? Those plates?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Um hmm. The ones that she came to your apartment and bought, I think.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, about 14 plates or something? After Edith and I had split up.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Right, right. And they are so beautiful. I've selected 14 of them for. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: [obscured phrase]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, they're just beautiful. And she has more than 14.

ROBERT SPERRY: They were out of the Henry Gallery show, were they? I think so.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I'm not sure whether they were there or not. We had, at the Henry Gallery, plates like that.

ROBERT SPERRY: You're going to show those are you?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I'm going to show them in Bellevue.

ROBERT SPERRY: John [Olbrantz--Ed.] is mentioning a show over there in '85.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That's right.

ROBERT SPERRY: I'm going to need some historical things for that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He's going to do a retrospective, isn't he? Well, we'll work together on that. Anyway, she had a lot more of these dishes than the ones that I've selected; I just selected the 14 that I liked best.

ROBERT SPERRY: I don't remember how many she has.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, she probably has maybe as many as 20. And the weekend she bought them she was so thrilled with it, and she brought them home and her mother-in-law was there, and she used them for a supper. And put them in the dishwasher, I guess her mother-in-law did, and

broke three of them. And she has them there, they're still there, they are chipped. But Marcella described her sadness over that whole thing; it was quite a trauma for her. This business of classifying various kinds of art and crafts and so forth is always difficult and it changes all the time, I think. But I remember you thought sometime earlier in terms of, one, pottery, and, two, something called ceramics, which I think you were referring perhaps to sculptural kinds of objects.

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, there again, it's another word like craft; ceramic is a broad, if we used the words as they're originally meant to mean, ceramics is the whole field of working with silicates, and it includes glass, it includes cement, it includes clay, it includes enamels, porcelain. All those things are part of ceramics. And I think, at least for a while, it came to mean nonpottery, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Or nonfunctional?

ROBERT SPERRY: Or nonstoneware, nonfunctional \_\_\_\_\_ I suppose.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Uh huh. I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: It came, because nobody could -- they weren't called sculpture.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And you had to have a name for these things.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: They would have probably been works like Robert Shaw and Hudson and those things.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And the kinds of things in your own department that Patti [Warashina--Ed.] and...

ROBERT SPERRY: Yes, Patti and Havard [Kottler--Ed.] did, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I remember we also talked one day, and I always wanted to talk to you more about this -- you may have a few more comments to make about it today -- this business of classifying [one type of ceramic object as--LAMAR HARRINGTON] \_\_\_\_\_, the "vessel as metaphor."

ROBERT SPERRY: (laughs)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And I know you've always...

ROBERT SPERRY: I don't even know what the hell it means!

LAMAR HARRINGTON: ...we've laughed about it! And I've tried to understand your feelings about that. I'm assuming what it means would be a piece that looks like a vessel but really can't be used.

ROBERT SPERRY: That's essentially what it's come to mean, I think.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Is that it? Uh huh.

ROBERT SPERRY: You know, it was Garth Clark, I think that coined it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, he was. I see. I didn't know that.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. . .he's a good phrasemaker.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And, you know, whether you can call it vessel as metaphor or not, there are those kinds of things out there.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So that you've got basically some sculptural things. You've got vessels, real pottery, and you've got these. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: You know, one of the harder, that's one of the hardest categories for me to cope with -- the really non-things, you know, the things that are not sculpture and they're not pottery.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, Rudy's, you probably call Rudy's things sculpture, wouldn't you?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, heaven's no. I call his things pottery.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, pottery? (laughs)

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, definitely.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Okay.

ROBERT SPERRY: They're vessels, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes, they are vessels.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh they're definitely vessels!

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Okay.

ROBERT SPERRY: But I don't see anything metaphorical about it. It's a fuckin' vessel with an image on it, you know!

LAMAR HARRINGTON: (giggles) Of course, also. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: I mean, what's metaphorical about that?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He certainly is working in vessels that you're going to use to put flowers in or. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, I could see, I could see, in Italy they'd put flowers in 'em. Sure they would. You know Betty Woodman? In fact, I've got a picture that you should see. [begins thumbing through a stack of papers and photographs--LAMAR HARRINGTON] Incredible. You know Betty Woodman?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes.

ROBERT SPERRY: Now would you say those are metaphors?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, I can see them on my table.

ROBERT SPERRY: Huh? But would that fit that classification?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, I think it might for some people, but I don't think it would for me, because. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: \_\_\_\_\_ as metaphors?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . . I can see those, I can see use. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: There's one of those Onda kilns.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh yeah. The panorama.

ROBERT SPERRY: That pottery is metaphor? This pottery is vegetable dish.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes it is.

ROBERT SPERRY: (laughs) You know. And certainly Rudy's things, I mean Vogue magazine, would show Rudy's things with the big bouquet of flowers in them?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, I guess you're right. I was just, I was just assuming. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: I just have trouble with that. You know this guy? Nino Caruso?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh no. He's the one from. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: From Italy.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You've been there, haven't you? Recently?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, this is his place over in Italy.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Okay, let's talk about that for just a minute, pretty soon. I didn't ever talk to you about that trip, and I would like to do that. Oh, I know. You said another interesting thing, one time.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, here's Rudy's thing. They're just big flower vases, is all they are.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes. They are vases; there's no doubt about that.

ROBERT SPERRY: And that makes the art! Admit, they're art, though, you know. It's got nothing to do with the fact that they're a vessel or they're a metaphor, or what the hell they are! They're art! And who cares?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And so are Betty Woodman's pieces.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah! And I think, what all we need is an identification; it's a pot, it's a sculpture, it's a painting, it's a this or that; that's all you need. And then it's either art or it isn't art, you know. And nobody can tell that anyway, so. . . (laughs)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: We were talking one time about pottery and these other things that are sculptural kinds of things and you said that -- I think I got this right -- that many of those sculptural things could be made in a lot of other media, they could be made of plastic, they don't have to be

made of clay, and they'd be equally as successful, I think you felt.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I feel that way. I think Patti's work is a good example of that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes.

ROBERT SPERRY: I think Patti's work'd be great in marble, you know, just absolutely fabulous. The ideas I don't think would change one iota.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Where with pottery, it's very different isn't it?

ROBERT SPERRY: The idea changes when you change the medium, because the idea and the medium are the same, essentially. They're more. . .well, I suppose maybe I think that pottery is not a conceptual medium whereas painting and sculpture are more conceptual.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes.

ROBERT SPERRY: Now I don't know whether that's. . .I'd have to think that through. I don't. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, these objects that we're talking about that could be made in some other medium, they're almost all more conceptual, then.

ROBERT SPERRY: It's the concept, yeah. It's the concept that you're selling; it's not, I mean -- the concept of that mug ceases to be that if you take the clay away. Doesn't it?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I think so. I think you're right. But I also think that you're talking about, especially, a thrown piece, more than hand-built?

ROBERT SPERRY: I don't think so. Oh I mean that bowl down there with the newspapers in it, you know. I don't think you can make that bowl -- you could make it out of plastic, and you can probably make it look quite the same, but when you picked it up it would still not be a concept of a pot. It would be, it doesn't have the idea. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Purity. There's a purity that you're talking about; maybe that's the wrong word, I don't know, but there is a purity about the clay, the thing made with the clay, that you wouldn't get otherwise I don't think.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, and you, you've gotta burn that stuff, you've gotta burn it. Otherwise it's not pottery, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's discuss some of your students a little bit. You've had so many students over the years. And there're a lot of them who work in vessel. Now whose is this?

ROBERT SPERRY: Sam Scott's.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Sam Scott.

ROBERT SPERRY: Sam makes catalogue-ware.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: He makes what?

ROBERT SPERRY: Catalogue-ware.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh yes.

ROBERT SPERRY: Really hard to do, to do it well and to do consistently well.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And to continue doing it well. Would you say that Gerry does that too? Gerry Newcomb?

ROBERT SPERRY: Gerry doesn't make catalogue-ware as much as Sam does. No. Gerry's are more. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: One of a kind?

ROBERT SPERRY: . . . individual pieces I think, you know. Which is just a different way of approaching it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Then you take somebody like Anne Hironnelle. She has a different way; it's different I think.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah. I think Anne is still searching. I don't think she's really defined where she's at, quite, maybe. I get that feeling; I haven't talked to her for years.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Is Liza Halvorsen, was she one of your students?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, she was, she was one of Patti and Howard's students, actually.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh.

ROBERT SPERRY: You see, I essentially taught potters, until just the last few years.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And she didn't start as a potter then?

ROBERT SPERRY: Liza didn't, no. She was never in pottery.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh I see. Who were some of the other students you can remember that have been. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, going back, the first one was John -- of course Henry Lin, well he wasn't my student but he was a graduate student. He and I were graduate students together here, and we influenced each other a lot. John Fassbinder was the first student, I suppose, that went on and I remember. And he's been making catalogue-ware for years and years and years. Does a good job of it, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But do you remember his sculpture of, like, 1959?

ROBERT SPERRY: Uh huh, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And from our conversation today, now, I'm assuming that much of that was influenced by your work in three-dimensional things at that time.

ROBERT SPERRY: I'm not sure, because John was into painting more than he ever, I mean, an awful lot, when he first started in school anyway. And, so I don't know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But he has been very successful at what you call the catalogue-ware all



the years, hasn't he?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, and he's, he stuck at it for a good long time. And he's done very well. After John, I suppose the next two people would be Patti and Fred [Bauer--Ed].

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh yes. And that would have been early sixties.

ROBERT SPERRY: In between, there was, well, you see, until 1960 I didn't have much influence around there. John, I did; Bonifas flunked John. (laughs) But I guess it was in the beginning of the sixties that people started going through there and like Ralph Dunham, Dunham blue glaze, I don't know where Ralph is now, but he's got one of these glazes that every once in a while a glaze catches on and sweeps the whole country, you know. Then Patti and Fred. Bruce Kokko was in there.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: When Patti and Fred were working on their degrees, they really did a lot of vessels to start out with, didn't they?

ROBERT SPERRY: Essentially.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And it wasn't 'til the masters show [annual M.F.A. exhibition--Ed.] that they went into all of the objects that were done.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So they were really working with you a lot during those early years.

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, they worked with me all the way through.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: Well Henry, or I mean, Harry [worked with them, when he was here] for a while.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Harry Myers.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, that's right. And then Jean Griffith was also in that group. Hank Rollins, who kind of dropped out.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh yes.

ROBERT SPERRY: But did a lot of sculpture. Ann Johnson, she dropped out, sort of.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Did Ngaire [Hixson] work with you?

ROBERT SPERRY: Ngaire. Ohhhh, who else from that time?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, you mentioned Bruce Kokko.

ROBERT SPERRY: Bruce Kokko, he was a little later. Pat McCormick.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yeah, did he do regular vessels?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, yeah, Bruce made some vessels [too--LAMAR HARRINGTON], yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yeah, I remember that wonderful paint can [with the ceramic paintbrush inside--LAMAR HARRINGTON] that he did; I just loved that piece. I guess that's a vessel as metaphor. (laughter)

ROBERT SPERRY: That's a paint can.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But then, yes, Gerry, no, the one who's at Western Washington, you just mentioned.

ROBERT SPERRY: Pat McCormick.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Pat McCormick.

ROBERT SPERRY: He was there when Patti and Fred were there. Mar Hudson.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yes, and Mar had a wonderful one-man show at one time, I remember, but he may have had more.

ROBERT SPERRY: The guy that does the blue-and-white ware that moved down, Scott McDowell. Scott McDowell? I think that was the name.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I don't remember that name.

ROBERT SPERRY: He used to sell, send stuff up to a crafts center. Oh I'm sure I'm leaving out an awful lot of people \_\_\_\_\_.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I'm thinking of the three people who have done very. . .

[Tape 3; side 2]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I'm thinking of the three students of yours who have the Salty Dog [Pottery--LAMAR HARRINGTON], or maybe it's more than three.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh yeah. Well yeah, there were about five in there, I guess, but Mark Barron and Ernie Hilsenberg and Greg Federighi. And along with them were Carl Kishida and -- of course, I can't claim these people all as my students; they're a product of our school, you know, and so Howard and Patti had just as much influence as I had -- but Kishida and Rob Ho.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Who?

ROBERT SPERRY: Rob Ho.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: H-O?

ROBERT SPERRY: He sort of dropped out.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, I thought. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, but they, they've stuck at it, particularly Greg; he came back and did a master's degree this past year.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh he did? Oh.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah. Did you see that piece in the, did you see the master's degree show?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: No, I didn't.

ROBERT SPERRY: No no.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And of course there were a lot of students who went through your school in the late sixties who may have worked more with Howard.

ROBERT SPERRY: Probably from '67, you see, after we moved down I really didn't work in ceramics.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Right. I'm thinking of students like Joyce Moty and Clair Colquitt.

ROBERT SPERRY: I had practically no contact with them.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh. I'm also thinking of. . . somebody that I think has done very interesting work, who may or may not have worked with you and that is Michael Lucero.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh yeah, Michael, yeah. I, in the last ten years, you see, the way we've organized it down there is that Howard has been in charge of the graduate students, but we all go in for crits and we sort of all have input [every day, on those days].

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Don't you think that Michael Lucero's work is quite original?

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: There's nobody doing anything like that, is there?

ROBERT SPERRY: He's a real genius and he really, you know -- Michael [would--Ed.] probably tell this story. He arrived here in the middle of spring quarter and registered for fall quarter, arrived in the middle of spring quarter. By the time school had started he had done as much work as most people do in two years, you know. (chuckles) He did day and night, and [I--Ed.] mean that's his life. And that's that dumb determination that Louie [Hafermehl--Ed.] talks about. I mean, you go for it. He's really done a. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's, do you want to say anything more about medium and art?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I've always felt that there is something unique in -- this is chauvinism I suppose -- but that there is something unique about ceramics, about pottery -- not ceramics, not sculpture, but about pottery -- that requires a little different aesthetic than some of the other arts. We were briefly talking about painting and sculpture. But [pottery--Ed.], at least I can't conceive of, now maybe you can, that you can have that concept without having clay fired in a kiln. That medium is so interwoven with the ideas that they can't exist separate from that medium essentially.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: It's interesting that certain pieces that we can think of couldn't; but take your work of the late fifties, your sculpture, take the piece for instance that I think Gene. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Now, I said pottery; I didn't say sculpture.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, but I'm thinking now of sculpture.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh, I see.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And take the piece that I think Gene Brandzel owns of yours.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I can't imagine that in any other medium.

ROBERT SPERRY: I can imagine it in bronze, can't you?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, I didn't think about bronze. Yes, I can. In fact, maybe almost any one of those. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: They almost look like bronze. [rest of phrase obscured]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . . garden vessels could be in bronze. So that blows my. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: What we define as pottery, you know, that there is something there that the fire is just part of the idea.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's talk just for a minute about the Northwest and so-called regionalism. I'm beginning to realize as I've thought about it more and studied more about it lately, that regionalism seems to mean a lot of different things to different people. And consequently, arguments arise over it all the time, when if you'd just maybe straightened out your ideas about what it means, it might help. But you discussed Northwest architecture in one of the interviews that I read, and I thought that you made some interesting comments about the Northwest school of architecture in the early days and how that related to pottery and to the crafts. Do you remember making statements about that?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah. I think I still agree with that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And what did you say about it?

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I think there was tremendous Oriental influence in Northwest art and architecture, of course.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oriental, um hmm.

ROBERT SPERRY: What was it, the catch phrase of the fifties, shibui?

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Um hmm.

ROBERT SPERRY: I mean pottery just really fitted Northwest architecture, whereas you go back to the brick houses in Chicago suburbs, pottery didn't look so good with the swags and the bows and the stuff, at least the pottery that was being made in that day. But the pottery that we were making, it was just a natural in this setting, I think, of the wood and the earthiness and the textural qualities, and the pottery just fitted right into it. So I think that the people that supported Northwest architecture to a large extent maybe supported the pottery too.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But actually the word that could probably cover all of that would be the word nature or natural.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Which bears some interesting connections with Northwest mysticism. There's a whole lot of interconnections that could be made I think. I don't know how valid they are, whether it's one of those intellectual house of cards, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I wanted to ask you the question that everybody always asks anybody they're interviewing, that is, about people that you've admired in your life and career. Now that you're at this point in your life, there's a lot of years gone by.

ROBERT SPERRY: Okay, well, I've always had a lot of respect for my father. I think he was probably the big influence in my life. I gotta record this, relate this one little thing. Now I'm an atheist, and I've sort of been an atheist since I've probably about 12 or 13 years old. And day when I was out driving with my dad in the car and I asked him if he believed in God, and he said, "Well, I really don't know." And I said, "Well why do you go to church every Sunday?" And he said, "Well, you never know. They might be right." (laughs) I loved that. He was playing the bets on both sides all they way. I don't know what that relates to, but anyway. But of course, Voulkos was a tremendous influence. I had an eighth-grade teacher named Bog Corrigan who was a great influence in my life.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Corrigan?

ROBERT SPERRY: Corrigan. Corrigan.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Corrigan.

ROBERT SPERRY: His younger brother was my best teenage friend, that was later, but there was a little episode that to me did more I think to acculturate me; we were having a snowball fight, and I threw a snowball at him and he ducked and it broke a window. (laughs) And he didn't take the typical attitude, adult attitude, you know, and it was just something that happened, and everybody went together and paid for it. And it seemed to me it was one of the first times I'd seen an adult act fairly. (laughter) But he, I always, he was one of the first teachers I ever, one of the only teachers I ever had much respect for. Who else has been a big influence in my life? Briggs Dyre at the Art Institute [Chicago--Ed.] was a painter.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Briggs?

ROBERT SPERRY: Briggs Dyre.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Briggs Dyre.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, D-Y-R-E, D-Y-E-R-S, Dyers, D-Y-R-E, I guess it was. Yeah, he was a painting instructor, and a real cynic, gave me my first sort of cynical introduction to the art world. I say a real cynic. [Says it in a sneering tone of voice--Ed.] (laughs)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Uh huh. (laughs)

ROBERT SPERRY: And then I don't know, in this area. . . I've been influenced I guess by tremendous numbers of people, and those have been the highlights. Oh, of course, my brother-in-law who really raised me as a child in a sense, because I used to hang with him all the time.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, your brother-in-law?

ROBERT SPERRY: My brother-in-law; he was much older, he was much older than I was.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That's your sister's husband?

ROBERT SPERRY: My sister's 15 years older. He's about 20 years older than I am.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: And he was a great influence on me when I was a kid growing up.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Do you see him now?

ROBERT SPERRY: Uh huh, yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What was his name, what is his name?

ROBERT SPERRY: Clint Newton.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Clint Newton?

ROBERT SPERRY: Newton, yeah. He ran a hardware store. He used to work for my dad on the farm first, and then he ran a hardware store, and then he went back to farming again. And when he worked, when he ran a hardware store, I used to work for him; I was just a little kid, seven, eight, nine years old, something like that, and I'd go in and help him on Saturdays, you know.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: How about artists?

ROBERT SPERRY: Picasso. Tremendous influence.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yeah? You'd said that already. And you also. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: And the Japanese thing, of course.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Ah hah.

ROBERT SPERRY: And, yeah, somebody I've forgotten about. Alex Salto, the Danish potter from the fifties.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: How do you spell his last name?

ROBERT SPERRY: S-A-L-T-O. He did those very textural things, a lot of additive clay. And that's [when--Ed.] I did an awful lot of that stuff, and that's where a lot of that influence came from. Oh, I used to be influence a lot by New Guinea art, Melanesian.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: New Guinea art, huh?

ROBERT SPERRY: Melanesian art.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Don't you bet that piece of Gene Brandzel's \_\_\_\_\_ out of that?

ROBERT SPERRY: Part of it, yeah, yeah. Partly. It has a similarity to some of those fern-tree sculptures.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Did you collect any of those things?

ROBERT SPERRY: I'm not a collector.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: I never collect anything. I don't like to collect things.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You know, I've known you a long, long time, now, and it's been an interesting career to follow as well an interesting friendship to be part of. And I see your life so full of so much. During all of those years, like say the last 25 years at least, there have been a lot of contradictions, or maybe not contradictions, but at least many, many things happening that need to be balanced all the time, or I think they need to be balanced. Maybe they don't; I may be exaggerating this. But in your art I think about the symmetry and the asymmetry, because that's. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: They fascinate me.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: . . .been working all the way through there.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And I think about the spontaneous [aspect of--Ed.] so many things that you've done, and some other things that aren't so spontaneous.

ROBERT SPERRY: Like the animated film? With 8,000 drawings on 16-millimeter film? (laughs)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Okay. I always felt that that came from, or was a development, after you had done the pots that were covered with decorations.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Small decorations that probably took a long time to do, but that also may have been rather mesmerizing to you while you were doing it. Then I think about your work with three-dimensional things -- sculpture and then the vessel -- and I think of your work with three-dimensional things and painterly kinds of approaches, either to clay or to paintings that went on the wall or whatever. And I also think about abstract kinds of surfaces, that were either geometric or maybe organic kinds of decoration, but abstract, as compared for instance to [things] that seem more landscape or floral or figurative and recently that Matthew [Kangas--Ed.] is calling planetary clay.

ROBERT SPERRY: You're making me sound schizoid. (laughs)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But that's many, many years that you've had to explore all of those various things. And what I'm seeing is today -- see I saw in 1962, I just keep going back to that year for some reason, because it's one of. . .

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, that was a very, that period, the first five years of the sixties were. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That energy was so tremendous, it seems to me, and it did seem perhaps more focused than possibly later on, although there were lots of these things going on at that time too, but I see a kind of repeat of 1962 in your life now, in your art life now. It's as if all of these things that you've been exploring all of these years, it's all coming to some kind of fruition.

ROBERT SPERRY: God, I hope so. (laughs)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And there's a focus!

ROBERT SPERRY: God, I hope so.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Do you see that?

ROBERT SPERRY: I think so, yeah. I agree. I think that is happening.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And I can see it in your face! It isn't like -- we want to come to the end of something, that's for sure, because you probably won't ever come to the end of something -- but there is a strong focus at this point, and I think that all these things are entering into that.

ROBERT SPERRY: I hope so. I hope so, because that, God, that's what one's life is supposed to be about, is that exploration and then. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That's right.

ROBERT SPERRY: . . .making something out of it, getting it together.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And if you hadn't done all of that exploring, it wouldn't be nearly as rich today.

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I say this because I'm old, but I think most people don't do their best work until you've been in the field for 20 years.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Right.

ROBERT SPERRY: Because for the very reason that in art everything takes so long, because you get an idea and you think, okay, this is what it's about, this is what art is, this is what art is about. And then you work on it for a couple of years, and you get there and suddenly one morning you wake up and say this is not what it's about, this is not where I want to be, this is stupid. And you've gotta go back and you've gotta start the whole process over again. Until you gradually narrow down this point of where you're at, and some people can do that. The very odd person can do that; but you don't see it, you don't see it historically either, very often. Look at Rembrandt, look at all the crap that he turned out in his early life, just awful stuff.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And to have the courage to say, "Well this isn't what I thought it was after all." And then to start again.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh yeah, you gotta do that. You gotta do that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: But I think there are many, many artists who don't do that; they keep going in the same rut, don't try out the new things, and consequently don't end up with this rich background that you're able to make something out of then, another thing. And I suppose that goes on, maybe forever.

ROBERT SPERRY: Oh I feel like I really belong making more two-dimensional things, that that's. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You're feeling that more and more?

ROBERT SPERRY: More and more, and yet the other day I was sitting at the easel and I suddenly got an idea of how I could use those tiles in a three-dimensional. . . (laughter)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I was thinking about that very thing today as I was writing down these questions for you, and I thought, "I hope Bob doesn't think that he has to stick to two-dimensional things, now, the rest of his life."

ROBERT SPERRY: (laughs) No, you know what I'm making; what I am going to do in pots?



LAMAR HARRINGTON: No, are you working on it now?

ROBERT SPERRY: Not yet, I haven't got time yet. But I want to do just food vessels.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What kind? Really?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, serving vessels, that have no decoration on them, just black glaze, you know. I'm getting intrigued with those lately. And, because I love to cook, and. . .

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That sounds fantastic. And these would be a glaze that you can use for cooking, really, functional.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, it'd just be, yeah, it's functional stuff. Because, first of all, for doing these big things you need tradeware, and gifts and things, and that would be a natural for it, you know. I don't want to do it; I don't think I want to get into selling the things particularly. But just for fun, you know. Because I'd like to treat pottery like that, just for fun. I'm not doing it just because I need that piece to serve shrimp in.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You see, something that has troubled me about vessels, pottery, is that while I go to the shop -- and I really enjoy these things; I think they're wonderful -- I keep looking for a piece that will just turn me inside out, that you can use.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And maybe I'm expecting too much; I know it's really hard for people who have to make a living to concentrate on things like that.

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, I don't think it has anything to do with having to make a living. You're not having to make a living. I think it has to do only with the imagination of the person who's working. Because you can make 10,000 rice bowls and none of them ever have to be the same.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Yeah, true.

ROBERT SPERRY: You know, there is absolutely no reason why people who -- I mean production pottery is another thing that's come to have bad meanings. And wrong meanings. Because it's become a derogatory term, you know, and I don't think should be. All it means is that you're producing it on a on-going kind of basis mainly for use, or something of this nature.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Except people have taken on the meaning that you keep doing the same thing all the time.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah, that's the distortion of the process.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And that there's no imagination involved with it.

ROBERT SPERRY: And those are the people that have killed that phase of it and \_\_\_\_\_ the meaning I think.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: The good part of production, yeah.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, and have made it into bad words.

[Break in taping]

ROBERT SPERRY: It's like going back to that Onda thing; there were 10,000 pieces produced but I only found one I wanted to buy. I going to, I'm seriously if we -- when we move into the new studio we're going to have space, and I'm not a collector, I'm just not a collector, you know. I've told you my philosophy of collecting, I think, which is if you can't eat it, smoke it, drink it, or screw it, I'd just as soon not own it, you know. (laughs)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh yes.

ROBERT SPERRY: I think I am going to start putting together, sometime, a collection of pottery. I'd love to, you know, because you do see the odd piece that, and you could put together a really nice collection, I think.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, that would be exciting, for the rest of us, for you to do that, I think.

ROBERT SPERRY: I think it'd be fun.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And I can hardly wait 'til you make these black objects for the table.

ROBERT SPERRY: Well, we've got a few upstairs that we...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Have you, already?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Let's see now, I wanted to mention the King County Arts Commission award that you won this year. I thought that was wonderful.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, I'm very excited about that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Partly because it's a wonderful breakthrough for somebody who's working in clay to have won the award, and for the King County Arts Commission to have had the faith in you to give it to you.

ROBERT SPERRY: I must thank Ramona Solberg [former art professor at Central Washington University--Ed.] a great deal; she was very, extremely instrumental in making this...

LAMAR HARRINGTON: In getting that?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: What do you intend to do? The point is that you produce something, don't you, in return for that?

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, yeah. Well, it's gonna be the biggest thing I've ever done. And I think I found a site. If there are no technical problems, I've found a site, as far as hanging it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Did King County Arts Commission give you a list of places that you might use?

ROBERT SPERRY: More or less they just said any county building.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, oh I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: And that would be the site. Do you know it? It's the three cooling towers on the left-hand side of the parking lot at the King Dome as you come in.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, no, I've never seen them.

ROBERT SPERRY: There're just three little towers over there.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: All right, now, are these your sketches on here?

ROBERT SPERRY: Here they are without. Yeah these are just some things I made out. Now I don't think I can afford to cover the whole space. But I want to encompass the whole space, so I'm thinking in terms of, you know, things that might work a little differently, like maybe a band across here, that would be say 10 feet high, so it'd be three bands 10 by 30 feet or something of that sort.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: These are all wonderful ideas, aren't they?

ROBERT SPERRY: I've pasted these up just to take down so they'd have something to look at.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: This really looks like the cosmos, doesn't it?

ROBERT SPERRY: (laughs) Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, that's exciting.

ROBERT SPERRY: These are these little dots, from a photograph, you know; they've been blown up, yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: They're blown up, yeah. You know the cooling towers are wonderful forms, aren't they?

ROBERT SPERRY: I love the form of it. And it's such a great site because it has a chain-link fence around it, and it's got a moat under it, so it can't be, nobody can vandalize it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Violate it. Can you see it from...?

ROBERT SPERRY: Nobody can hurt themselves.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Can you see it from the King Dome?

ROBERT SPERRY: You'll see it from one side of the King Dome, but you don't see anything from inside the King Dome.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: But you see it from the whole parking lot. And you see it from 90 percent of the skyscrapers uptown, look down on it, and will see it.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Oh, that's wonderful.

ROBERT SPERRY: (whispers) It's got something like three million people a year go past it. (laughter) It's exactly what I was looking for. High visibility because I really want to, I hope -- you know, I use George Tsutakawa as my model, because George was 50, 50 years old when he got his first commission to do a fountain.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: A fountain.

ROBERT SPERRY: And he's done 90 since then. So I hope this is my first fountain.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And it could very well be, you know.

ROBERT SPERRY: It's going to be the biggest one in town, I think.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: That's wonderful.

ROBERT SPERRY: I'm really excited about it. [Subsequently it was decided to change sites to fit available funds. The mural will be on the wall of the Fourth Avenue entry to the King County Administration Building -- 10'8" by 29'4"--LAMAR HARRINGTON]

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And you're having a . . .

ROBERT SPERRY: And I'm doing one for IBM, a new IBM building down in Atlanta, too.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: You've already done that?

ROBERT SPERRY: No, it, it'll go up, I'm starting to, I'm doing the sketches on it now, and it'll go up in December.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And of course you know, you're not going to be able to sit around and have interviews with people like me when this really gets going because I think George must be constantly busy.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Is he?

ROBERT SPERRY: I think so, yeah, obviously.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And you're having a, as I understand it, it's your 50th major solo show at the Gordon Woodside/John Braseth Gallery in October.

ROBERT SPERRY: Something like that.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: And you've already worked on that?

ROBERT SPERRY: I've got that pretty well done. I've got all the plates done, and I've got three, two eight- by eight-foot walls, and I've got two five- by five-foot walls, and two, three done and one more to go. So I'm almost done.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: So you have a number of walls, two-dimensional things, and a lot of vessels.

ROBERT SPERRY: Yeah, not many vessels.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: I see.

ROBERT SPERRY: Almost no -- well, the flat plates that I go on the wall with, and so they're still vessels, they're plates.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well Bob, this has been wonderful, and I wonder, is there anything else you'd like to say?

ROBERT SPERRY: (laughter) I've babbled my heart out here. No, I can't think of a thing.

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Can't think of anything else? Well, all right.

ROBERT SPERRY: Other than I couldn't think of a greater interviewer than LaMar Harrington who I've known for 30 years!

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Well, I'll be back in about 10 years, after you've made your first 35 wall pieces.

ROBERT SPERRY: Great! You'll be 90 and I'll be 87. (laughter)

LAMAR HARRINGTON: Goodby, Bob.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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