



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Paul Henry Brach,
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Transcript

Interview

BS: BARRY SCHWARTZ

PB: PAUL BRACH

BS: For the Archives of American Art on their project "The Art World in Transition." I am now sitting in a luxurious conference room minus one door at the California Institute of the Arts and talking with artists Paul Branch. Paul, maybe you could start by giving us a little bit of background about yourself.

PB: I was born and raised in New York City. Both my parents were children of immigrants. My mother was one of seven children, all of whom went to college. She got a Master of Arts degree in literature sometime around 1920 at a time when women weren't doing that. My father went to night school and became a CPA. They are both alive and both are very intelligent people, but not intellectuals. I think that the comparative economic security that I grew up in ♦ we weren't even wiped out in the depression, my father being a very successful accountant ♦ in a certain sense removed any pressure from me to make it in any one of the professions or business. Plus, I have a brother a bit younger than me who had gone into my Dad's firm and that took care of all dynastic aspirations. So, I was very free in growing up. I had the most privileged kind of education. I went to the Ethical Culture School and Fieldston. And, I guess the first break with that pattern was when my folks wanted me to go to either Yale or Cornell. In those days, Yale had a very bad art department. It was long before Albers came back from Black Mountain. I wanted to go to Black Mountain. We ended up with a kind of compromise. I went to the University of Iowa which was one of the first places to give a degree for creative work. So that whole development just before, during and after World War II of the Master of Fine Arts artist, which is a rather standard way a lot of people come along today in our field as compared with the sort of professional art school artist plus WPA, etc., which was the generation older than me, was just getting formed in those years when I went to school. One break from the sort of upper middle-class Jewish, New York privilege was that I spent my summers working on ranches in Arizona during my teen years. I had this whole fantasy about the west which meant freedom and getting away from a kind of constriction. After a year and a half at Iowa, I was drafted and spent three years in the service, some of it in combat in Europe. I came back, returned to school on the GI Bill, went through and got a M.P.A. and married a painter from New York, Miriam Schapiro, who I had met in Iowa. I spent two years teaching in the midwest at the University of Missouri. I couldn't take it. I arrived back in New York City in the early 1950's, made the scene at the Cedar Bar and at the Artists' Club. In those years my friends were Mike Goldberg, Joan Mitchell, Larry Rivers, Bob Rauschenberg, etc., etc., etc., the whole second generation of abstract expressionist thing. I wrote an article for Artforum about this, or at least a very short piece about my memory of the 1950's. The talk was very pure, but everyone wanted to make it. It wasn't even a question of doubting in those days a dealer, curator, critic, collector situation in the 1950's, you know. The abstract expressionist rhetoric was extraordinarily idealistic and had a kind of meta-Marxist flavor that Harold Rosenberg gave it, and a kind of crypto-Marxist flavor that Clem Greenberg gave it. But essentially everyone was out to make it. And it was very, very hard to be deeply, deeply critical about the social world around one in the fifties. It was the Eisenhower years, you know, so you voted for Stevenson. And then what did the artists do at the beginning of the civil rights period? We got together and had a big auction. We made about fifteen grand, and we gave it to C.O.R.E., and they sent the first bus down. There were no artists on that bus, that's for sure. And I think that a lot of us have been semi-radicalized by our students, you know, coming back in the middle years.

BS: In the sixties.

PB: Well, yes, mid to late sixties. I never got rich enough or famous enough; that is, a string of international dealers and selling a great deal of work, etc., although during the fifties I helped Leo Castelli start his gallery. I was part of the art establishment; there was no doubt about that. At any rate, the way one survived was that one kept hoping for the big coup which didn't mean any sellout in the work itself. The work was always done on the highest, most elitist and most extraordinary level of self demand. The situation in New York was that you were testing yourself against the best young artists of your generation. I taught. I was trained to teach. I'm very verbal. I communicate well. But what happened to me was that after a while, teaching studio got to be like group therapy and I didn't feel trained as a therapist. I got to the point where rather than say to some diachrom girl, "use red rather than blue," or "why are you that kind of a schmuck that whether you use red or blue it still makes no meaning?" And it seemed to me the most promiscuous kind of messing up of people's lives. So I started teaching art history. I didn't have a doctorate in it, but I invented ways of teaching art history to artists. I taught at Cooper Union and at the Parsons School. I worked in the Adult Education School at NYU. So I did a whole collage of teaching jobs, none of which I ever took totally seriously. I could always do it very well, but that's not what I wanted the world to reward me for. Although I knew perfectly well that my teaching took care of certain needs to relate and to communicate socially, I always thought it was morally perhaps the most defensible thing I did. In the meantime, the game went on, including a summer house in East Hampton. You're a New Yorker, and whether or not you're actually in the art world, I think you know that whole 1950's, 1960's

mentality, sort of presided over by a Prince Rainer and Princess Grace, in the persons of Helen and Bob Motherwell who are no longer together, and relating to the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, the Jewish Museum, ten important galleries, fifteen important collectors, and a whole bunch of artists scrambling for crumbs. I went through a kind of forty-year old crisis maybe a few years later than forty. The result was an arduous and painful and expensive psychoanalytic period, and a decision to accept that I was a very good teacher and to realize that the life I was leading in New York was very destructive. During all these years I was exhibiting regularly, always selling from five thousand to fifteen thousand dollars of work a year, etc., and living in a big apartment on the West Side for very little rent. My wife and I at the studio and our kids in private schools. That New York life. And a house in East Hampton.

BS: Openings, parties?

PB: All that. And a very good regular poker game which helped supplement my income. The people we hung out with were essentially family people. Most of them were married; they were the people who go to bars on Sunday, you know to buy breakfast. You know it was the whole West Side scene. And then, we had a lot of friends in other parts of the world other than just the art world. In the literary world, there was Jack Gelber and people like that from East Hampton. And it was a kind of meritocracy; that is, almost everybody I knew was very good at what they did. It seems that the people who were stumbling never found themselves. Downtown loft life was accessible. But sort of East Village drug life was not accessible, nor did I want it. And most of my friends were a little too old to be involved with a heavy drug scene although there was and remains a good deal of alcoholism.

BS: So, what you've been describing is really for most artists the achievement of relative success?

PB: Right. In comparison with some of my very good friends like Lichtenstein and Bob Rauschenberg, etc., my success has not been that much.

BS: But still for an artist growing up in New York, you made it.

PB: Right, I made it. So that leaving New York was not a sour grapes situation. Although, if your friends are selling a quarter of a million dollars a year and buying buildings downtown and taking off to Europe at the drop of a hat to have another show, etc., you begin to feel a little stuck. And you begin to wonder how corrosive a competitive mentality becomes anyway. In California, I remember I was driving around in the back country of La Jolla where the University of San Diego is, and they were trying to sell me on the job. They were talking health insurance and retirement benefits, and I was looking at the mountains. And the mountains were Arizona to me, where I had fled an over-protective family. So I did get to California. We rented a modest, but big house on the cliffs, with the Pacific Ocean shining in when I had breakfast. I found sailboats and horses, and I bought a racing car. The university gave me a studio, and I started to recruit a small faculty. I went out of my mind with boredom. It was a tight little company town. You'd go to parties, and everyone would be a full professor or over. And I just went out of my mind. Also, they had very strong nepotism rules. My wife is one of the best women painters in the country. They allowed her to keep a disguised lectureship or something when she would have been a full professor if you do it on teaching experience, how many shows, age, experience, name, rank, and serial number, you know. La Jolla just got boring. So I decided to come to California Institute of the Arts because Los Angeles was more fun, and I could find my peers here. I mean there are artists like Bob Irwin, and Ed Kienholz, and Larry Bell, and people who I think are doing good work. And Cal Art seems goofy enough. What really knocked me out was that the makers of Mary Poppins are inadvertently funding something that's going to make Easy Rider. And they blew my mind. And the whole level of large ironic culture joke in Cal Arts is fascinating. I mean, the school is nowhere, nowhere in these beautiful hills. We just finished a year in a converted convent school. With minor modifications, the architect had planned the whole building long before Corrigan, Blau, myself, Mel Powell, any of the top management, were hired.

BS: Paul, during that period of change out of the New York scene into another scene that was more personally satisfying, did you come to evaluate the scene itself, the game, the competitiveness? Did you come to question the way the whole thing has been set up? Did your art change any during that time?

PB: My art did not change. I had another show in New York during the time I was in La Jolla. Mimi and I had something we would not have done in New York, a joint mini-retrospective in two little museums here. I have not been satisfied that the school here could provide the total ambience for an artist, the school in not giving our faculty studios. It wasn't built into the original plan. The idea of a working community, which exists in some of our rhetoric, just doesn't exist, so that it becomes a kind of a gig. I also think I have a whole year or more of my life during the first planning year and this year to Cal Arts during which time my work in my own studio was minimal. I have not found in either New York or in Los Angeles a meaningful, coherent alternative to me, to making luxury goods for the rich, although there have been a lot of promises. During this time I've been very moved by two of my friends who last year during the Cambodia business swore off elitist criticism. One of them I didn't believe for a minute, Barbara Rose, who was just doing a radical chic number. Max Kozloff, who is a more thoughtful, less facile man, has been writing articles about prisons, reviewing films, even though he has an elitist

mentality, is a very raffine nineteenth century gentleman.

Let me tell you what I think is the most interesting alternative I've seen. It's the connection between working female artists and the Women's Liberation Movement here in Los Angeles. I think it's taking hold in more intense ways than what Lucy [Lippard] and Marcia Tucker and the girls are doing back in New York. My wife is very into it, Judy Chicago is very into it. They're starting consciousness-raising groups. A lot of the women have said, "Why do it just with women artists? Why not do it with all women and get together? Why be elitist?" And the women artists say, "Yes, but we have certain special kinds of problems. We want to talk with our own people." Then, with the old idea of picketing, for example, they go do a number on the County Museum and say, "Why aren't we in the Art and Technology Show? Why not question the \$400,000 ripoff that the Art and Technology Show is anyway, you know, in which artists work for firm advertising building up the prestige of these corporations and all of that?" So that some of the more sophisticated women, who say the revolution starts with self, don't want to pressure the corrupt institutions. There's been some tension within the group. Mimi, for example, who came to this later in life ♦ also like myself not out of a sour grapes thing, she shows at Andre Emmerich, has played the game and profits from it ♦ is very aware of how wiped out you can become. She and Judy are developing a feminist art program for young women students which freaks all the liberals around here in exactly the same way other liberals were freaked by the black power thing, you know, the idea of black nationalism. The idea that women might want to get away from us in order to get themselves together, to come back to us on different terms, is very disturbing to a lot of people who are saying, "Look, we're letting you into our game, we're going to let you become men. We're going to give you men's education and all of that." I don't know where you're at on the whole Women's Lib thing, but I'm fascinated by it. You know, I can be nothing but a bystander. Well, you know, when you're winning, you don't have to be political. White, middle-class American men don't have to be political, whereas white, middle-class American women have to be political. And black men have to be political. I think American men get political out of conscience. They see themselves going along with a system which is debasing other people. But it's not the kind of being political, let's say, that the student in India knows that when he gets out of his university there are no jobs. Maybe another two years with no jobs, American students will be a little less involved with nobility and a little more involved with self-interest. And that will be interesting. I don't know where you stand on this.

BS: I'm with you personally a hundred percent.

PB: You know, so far all through the 1950's and the 1960's, the politics of the American middle-class kids has been nobility. It's like Norodnicks, you know, the people of Tolstoy's time where the children of the aristocrats went around and started a revolution.

BS: Or played at starting a revolution.

PB: Well, for instance, the Weathermen ♦ I think the whole thing is political. I think white, middle-class kids are playing revolution out of guilt for being on the wrong side. And guilt isn't a strong enough motivation.

BS: Right. I wholly agree with you on that. I've written much about it.

PB: I feel we've met, and I don't know where. Or maybe you're just a New York type of guy that I'm very familiar with.

BS: I get around a lot. The women's group is name what?

PB: It's called Feminist Art Program. The group of women artists at Cal Art has no name. It's really a series of consciousness-raising groups that are starting to get together. As yet, it's only about three or four months old. I think they're starting to examine their situations collectively and personally. And whether that will lead to social action or not, I don't know. The elitist, competitive, status, luxury, investment, etc., thing we now have is working less well than it did ten years ago because more and more people are buying the work of less and less artists through organizations like Multiples, and Gemini, and all of these parasite operations. On the other hand, why shouldn't Jasper Johns make lithographs? I'm not against that. But the possibilities of getting the status feedback of a superstar artist are widespread. Now, you can lay out just a few hundred dollars and get a print or some little commercial artwork.

BS: And there's a movement toward public art now also.

PB: Yes, I'm for that. But now, you can have all the prestige of having in your home the work of the right names by spending less and less money. And fewer and fewer artists have more and more work around.

BS: It's the star system finding new markets.

PB: Exactly. It's very close to what happened after World War I in Europe, where cubism leveled out to four or five superstars, and a lot of people fell by the wayside. And the history of art was written based on that. The

question really is ♦ and I would think the Art Worker's Coalition would be interested in what I'm interested is ♦ how can people make art in an ambience where they can feed off each other spiritually, and they can feel that their work is having some effect in their culture, being seen? How effective it is always really questionable anyway. I don't think Guernica affected the course of the Spanish Civil War. And what are the ways that artists can get together and persuade or coerce or threaten or whatever, to help change the society in a way that artists can work in the society? I know as well as the next guy what's wrong with the present society. I suspect I might be too hooked on elitism and have a fear of what happens to quality in art. For example, the relationship of the counter-culture in general to high art has been disastrous. What do you end up with? Fillmore posters? Jewelled brooch clips? I mean, you know, it hasn't made anything. Maybe the best art of the twentieth century is irretrievably bourgeois. I don't know. These are interesting questions.

BS: These are important questions. Paul, you've mentioned the Art Workers Coalition. What do you know about them? How do you know about them?

PB: I started hearing about them from, what's the name of the young critic who died?

BS: Oh, Swenson?

PB: Yes, I heard first about it from Gene Swenson. Was that his name, Gene?

BS: Yes, Gene Swenson.

PB: I heard about it from Gene. I heard about it from Carl Andre. I sort of left New York about the time they were getting going. An amusing interlude was that on one of our trips back East, the last day we were in town, Miriam and I went to the Metropolitan Museum to see a show of nineteenth century art. We found that all our friends were picketing. So we stayed to picket.

BS: That's where we may have met.

PB: We stayed to picket. The hysteria of the rhetoric blew my mind. I don't know the best of the Art Workers Coalition, but I know that my acquaintances ♦ Carl and Bob Morris ♦ have used it to do a hell of a lot of grandstanding, as far as I'm concerned, a hell of a lot of very sleazy grandstanding, coming on as, I don't know what, Che Guevara. It isn't terribly active out here on this coast at the moment. The art world is so feeble here I think everyone feels if you shake the boat it will all go up. I don't mean selling work. The message center aspect of Los Angeles is very feeble. It's so attenuated, it's so spread over a huge area. There really isn't a functioning, lively, intense marketplace situation here to knock over.

BS: Right. It's sort of still. Where it's heavy, it's still New York oriented, isn't it?

PB: Oh, yes. I think one of my problems in relating to the Art Workers Coalition is that sometime in my early twenties I stopped thinking of myself as a worker in any proletariat fantasy. I am an intellectual and not a worker. I am that kind of queen that bourgeois society throws up. I mean, I'm no more a worker than Karl Marx was a worker, than Sigmund Freud was a worker, than Albert Einstein was a worker, etc., or a theologian. And those are the people I relate to. I happen to make images. I happen to do them with my own hands because I don't trust assistants, and I don't like the look of manufactured objects. A manufactured object doesn't happen to correspond to my aesthetic. It could if the aesthetic changed. So that I have a lot of trouble with the name Art Workers Coalition, and again I think it's a lot of middle-class kids playing revolutionary. But what it attacks has to be attacked. And most of the cohesion of the Art Workers Coalition and its activity has come up in the past four or five years, and I've been out of New York for about four years. When we started the school, we started to believe our own rhetoric that there was some hope that we could create a kind of community in which to make art, etc. But you know, when one member of the community has to pay \$2,500 to belong to the community and another person is paid \$15,000 for being part of the community, the rhetoric gets very confused. So it is a school, and it has professors, and it has students. We don't call them professors, we don't have various grades, etc., but we are now wondering about what maximum and minimum teaching hours should be. It's going to be a very good, a very, very lively, terrific art school. But to talk community of the arts with its communitarian implications I think is a metaphor. We're a very good school with first class possibilities.

BS: But a school?

PB: And relatively little hierarchy between faculty and students; relatively little. It's still faculty to faculty and students to students. And in the end if I have to decide who gets the scholarships and who can come, well, then we are a community, but we are an authoritarian community in which I have the authority, or I and three other people, a committee.

BS: Have there been any attempts to bring students in on most of the decision making processes?

PB: Yes, the major committees of the Institute are made up of members of the student body, the faculty, the trustees and the staff. So that is important. I have students on all my admission committees. I do not have students on the hiring of faculty because I don't think they know enough of who is available. We put aside x amount of course support money, several thousand dollars, and there are students and faculty together on a Special Projects Committee so the students would apply, like to get a grant. So, we ran our own little Guggenheims within the department, if somebody wants to do something that can't be done out of their own money. And they had to make plans, models, write up the proposals to learn how to play those games. I think we have students in on decisions in the Art School, at least, more than certainly the University of California. How could it be less?

BS: Do you find there's a resistance on the part of really professional artists to give of their time teaching?

PB: Yes. Not all. Some people think of teaching, as I did for many years in New York, as something you do to help make a living and as soon as you make it you stop teaching. I also think that there are some teachers who simply need students.

BS: Young people?

PB: Yes, there are certain people who are interested in ideas that need to move away from manufacturing objects. Allan Kaprow is a good example. Allan needs students. He needs to have them. There are other people who like to use students to try out ideas, you know, you sort of promiscuously infect people with an idea, "Hey, how about it?" Let him go off and try it out. He'll say great. Now I don't have to do that. That's not cynical either. I mean some people are turn on people. And then there are some people who never go into schools and are fantastic teachers. The whole American abstract expressionist movement has Matta as a teacher. Gorky would have been nowhere without Matta and Bob Motherwell. And Matta just went around like a Typhoid Mary of surrealism infecting everybody. But there is something terrible about the whole teaching thing, and I want to get into this. We New Yorkers tend to think of the art world as a group of professional artists, some of whom teach, some of whom have wives who have jobs, some of whom have other kinds of jobs, some of whom sell their work, some of who do this, that and the other thing, and divided into many little Mafias and bigger Mafias, all of which relate to each other. In a city like New York, there must be ten thousand or more people who consider themselves to be professional artists, from Washington Square painters to de Kooning. And that's the art world. But the art world in America is not that. The art world in America is the college art world which is one of the most depressing and depressed situations in the world in which, in order to survive, people do the Master of Fine Arts route, until the jobs disappeared two years ago. But all the time from World War Two on, it became tradition that you'd send your best students into that life. And then they end up in Yehookestville, you know, East Podunk Tech Teachers College, Baptist Teachers College. I stopped going to the College Art Association meetings for this reason. Behind their little bravados of their cowboy boots here, a beard, they're a bunch of little scared guys in narrow lapel suits. The art historians at least are a learned profession. I've watched the fellows I went to school with, I say the fellows because college art is so male chauvinist that the number of girls teaching is just infinitesimal; they let them teach crafts or something. Anyway, I've watched these fellows shrivel every year. And the resentment. They've started talking to me again because they see I'm back in the shit of college art. And all the years in New York they really resented it. You know, New York is a message center. It's a powerful situation. Even in New York you can have a justification going against the capitalistic stuff, and still be an artist and relate to other people.

BS: Paul, you said the C.A.A. Do you know about the New Art Association?

PB: Yes, Ed Fry.

BS: Right. Ed Fry is no longer the president.

PB: I know him. I wrote a very groovy letter. A very groovy letter. I did a rap at the College Art Association last year, I don't remember whether it was a three or a five year boycott we ran on Chicago when the police riot went on during the Democratic Convention. At that time I tried to persuade the C.A.A. not to have the meeting in Chicago. They went ahead. And I didn't go. I didn't take out an ad in the trade papers saying I'm boycotting Chicago or anything. I just didn't go. First of all, it was in the middle of the winter. It was fucking cold. It's fucking boring, you know, unless you're an art historian wanting to hear the latest paper on Byzantium. And then all these sad guys. And okay, so I got to be a dean. The dean is really chairman of the art department. I am now a dean. Hooray. Here I 'm the head of the art school. I'm a dean, so all these guys are hitting me up for jobs because we're the hottest thing around. I mean, we are going to be the most lively and most interesting art school next year. And my grandma used to say, I used to say, "take us to the movies," and she'd say, "If I live Wednesday, if not Thursday." So if not the hottest art school, the second hottest, or whatever it is. I mean a good, lively, energy-exchange place, not a miracle, not the new culture, not some marvelous idyllic situation.

BS: Not a total solution.

PB: Yes, not a total solution. We're having money problems like every other school, and we're having to pull back from some of our more idealistic things and spread things a little further. And the hardware doesn't make the solution. Lots of problems. We're in a very hostile environment up here. If the vote from this valley, the valley north of the San Fernando Valley, had been the national vote, Wallace would be president. It's a bad place. They moved up here to get away from the hippies and the niggers. We don't have too many niggers, but we've got a lot of hippies who are bringing them up, or a lot of kids who look like hippies. The sheriff arrests longhairs on sight. So we're going to have our own little war here. It's not anything that the Disney's could have thought about when they decided on this land. They got a good deal. There were things going on.

BS: There was something else you wanted to say about the Art Workers Coalition when you were talking about grandstanding.

PB: Oh, I have a kind of non-joiner mentality, although I was part of the Artists' Club for a long time. But, you know, that was just a club, and we rapped. But I have a kind of existential morality which would be that if the Art Workers Coalition here in Los Angeles or nationally got involved with a particular kind of issue that I thought was a good one, I would do what I had to. You know, I would work with them, within them, parallel, etc. I would use whatever questionable prestige Cal Arts or my position has. I mean, I have two lives, my private life as an artist, and my public life as head of an art school. And I'm willing to swing the public life behind a lot of things I believe in privately. Why not?

BS: Is there an Art Workers Coalition her in Los Angeles?

PB: Not to my knowledge. Or if there is, it's minimal. It's a very strange scene here in which a couple of looks have dominated the scene for a while, along with one or two galleries and bout a dozen artists. The more ambitious younger artists tend to gravitate to that thing. I'm interested in ways, and I don't know how it can be done, by which artists can live without being at the mercy of educational institutions which destroy them; without being at the mercy of the mercantile situation which is very bad; and without being at the mercy of the government as they were in the 1930's.

BS: There is some feeling in fact that we are moving to another WPA. In Washington, I was at the Associated Councils meeting, and, for example, it was the first time that the President ever addressed an arts councils meeting. And we were received at the White House by Mrs. Nixon. There seem to be great forces towards federal investment in the arts.

PB: But it will then be subcontracted, as it was, to the worst example of the Establishment, as it was subcontracted to Henry Geldzahler whose show at the Metropolitan Museum ♦ okay discount ten percent for sour grapes, I wasn't in it ♦ was the most bland review of the accumulated opinion of the front runners, and reinforced the investments that the dealers and the galleries, etc. have. What do you do about that? On the other hand, the Guggenheim singly refuses to fit into the straight Establishment, and you could always count on someone named, say, Anderson from Wisconsin getting a Guggenheim, and then never being heard of again. You see, here's my New York elitist, Establishment snobbism coming in. You know, I can recognize by conflicts. On one hand I say, well, if you turn over federal funding or WPA or things like that, or community action or something and if you handle it all centrally with one of the power brokers from the Establishment, you're going to have a new kind of socialism. Did you read the article Galbraith had about the new socialism? The government will bail our Lockheed, that's socialism. I mean it's very ironic, but it's interesting.

BS: I don't know who wrote it, but someone once indicated that, in terms of corporations in America, you have socialism, and in terms of individuals in American, you have capitalism.

PB: Right, right. For example, I'm interested in an idea, and whether the government does it or the Art Workers Coalition does it, doesn't matter. I think that most of the children in American whether they be in the ghettos or in Beverly Hills are sensorily deprived, and their education deprives them. Now that the colleges are suffering, and now that there's so little money, and now that the highroad to the two-day-a-week teaching deal is drying up, what about getting a lot of good young artists into the public school and high school systems without going through education degrees? Base it just on quality. Have a couple of responsible people in each camp doing really experimental things. And that is starting with kids when they're six, seven, eight, ten, fifteen years old. I'm interested in that.

BS: Right, another idea along the same line ♦ this one I've worked on myself considerably ♦ has to do with getting artists into communities to stimulate grass roots community cultural activity. Is there cultural activity on the community level in this place?

PB: Well, we're just moving in.

BS: I don't mean here on this plant, but I mean when you look at your towns and your population centers here.

PB: You mean in California?

BS: In California.

PB: I think that there are a lot of things going on. The whole Barnsdale Park thing and the whole Los Angeles County art operation.

BS: Do you want to elaborate on those?

PB: I don't know enough about what is going on. I really don't. I've met the guy who is sort of the commissioner. Well, I think very little. But when you say "the community," one of the real problems, in my opinion, is that most of the very good or pretty good artists today are working in such relatively esoteric modes, and what the community wants is a course in portrait painting, or in ceramics so that they can make ash trays, and not ceramic sculpture. And what community often would mean is what the community wants from the artist, and what the community wants from the artist is for the artist to teach them how to paint nice pictures, or to be some sort of entertainer, or to make playground sculpture.

BS: But then again, a lot of artists started years and years ago painting nice pictures and part of what brings you to more esoteric forms or more sophistication is the doing of something that might be considered an improvement.

PB: Our first disagreement.

BS: You don't think that the doing involves an improvement?

PB: No, because I think that by the time somebody is a junior, an art major either in an art school, or an art department in an university, if they're good, they'd be making something that would not be pleasing to most of the people in the community.

BS: Well, I agree with that.

PB: And I think that's a stumbling point. That doesn't mean that there aren't ways around. I think there are very few artists who are lucky enough to do things that are both handsome and good.

BS: Yes, are you still an abstract expressionist in your own work?

PB: No, I haven't worked really in my studio for a year or so. But I was doing pale white paintings with very reduced color and pointillist dots and geometric images close to invisibility. I would say that during the last five years the two artists whose work would be most parallel to mine would be perhaps Ad Reinhardt on one hand, and Robert Irwin on the other. My art was extraordinarily attenuated in its meaning level. One of the things I'm after is to try to reintegrate my art with a much wider part of my own psychic development. In other words, I was a specialist in an extremely thin, fine, almost dog-whistle aesthetic sensation. And that purity is a one way street. I'm questioning all that too, at this point.

BS: Do you think that in any sense an art object can be political or social?

PB: I think it can be. But I think generally in terms of the media today it's one of the less effective ways of being social. I think the handmade object is a non-efficient way of social and political communication. I think it can be, yes, but it's not an effective way. I think the movie and video are effective ways to be political compared with making paintings. I'm reminded of an absolute putz named Goldenson who was the head of ABC (I don't think he is any more). I was called in by somebody to help advise him on doing an art collection. He told me about his big project: he was going to commission the ten top painters in the world to do a painting (I'm sure he would have to spend a thousand to get a board of experts to tell him who the top ten painters of the world are) on the future of communications. I started laughing. He said, "What are you laughing at?" I said, "I think that's a great idea, and I'm going to sell it to Enzo Ferrari to hire the Mennonites to have a buggy race to advertise the Ferrari." He didn't get my point. I think artists become political the way dentists are political, the way pharmacists are political, the way engineers are political, etc., in that you do something. Quite often, the nature of a good deal of contemporary art is simply apolitical. It doesn't deal with those kinds of emotion. But the kind of person you are to have those sensibilities, to be intact, is a person who is also deeply moved and wanting to be effective in the world around you. But you might not be able to take your art with you to be effective. By you're still an artists; so you're functioning politically.

BS: Do you think that a guy like Kienholz has achieved that?

PB: Oh, yes. But I find Ed less interesting as an artist. He's a good artists, and I admire his work, but he's less interesting. He's got a kind of lovely old fashioned kind of wobbly Early American political outrage that I like, you know, early twentieth century. He's got a new piece that's very heavy. Did he tell you about the war memorial

business?

BS: Yes.

PB: That's political art. That's the one piece of political art that I've heard of that's just incredible. I don't know if he'll do it. The idea of giving jobs to people up in Idaho who are for the war, to make the whole feedback thing is interesting. That's a good head.

BS: I must say that part of the reason I spoke to Ed was I'm doing a book for Praeger called Humanism in Twentieth-Century Art.

PB: I hope it doesn't come out like poor Peter Selz's New Images of Man.

BS: It will not.

PB: I think that what one has to do, of course, is to find out what is your measuring definition of humanism. Is it the use of human beings in art? Is Mark Rothko a humanist artist?

BS: Not by my definition, though he is a fine artist.

PB: Yes, and if the definition is a working one, then it's an interesting thing. I mean, there's something very strange in which, let's say, we are told that Velasquez is not a humanist artist but Kathe Kollwitz is. Kathe Kollwitz is a cornball plemicist, and Velasquez is the peak of the human spirit. Let me tell you where I'm at because it took a nineteen year old kid to tell me where I'm at. During our equivalent of the Cinq de Mai, the people's park riots, which spread to a lot of campuses, etc., and the gassing of kids. We got in San Diego reverberations from Berkeley. So the radical kids wanted to close the campus down, which I've always thought was bullshit; it's like you kick over your mother's kitchen table. Why don't they close down camp Pendleton and take on the Marine Corp? Muck around with those guys? Professors are pushovers. But the closest part of the Establishment they can get to is their own desk. So they were trying to close the school down. One of my students was on a ladder in a painting studio with a spray gun spraying a canvas red and blue or whatever it was. And they came in and said, "On strike! Close it down!" This nineteen year old said, "Fuck off!" They said, "Come on, no more school." He said, "I'm not in school, I'm working." They repeated, "Close it down." He said, "If you get any closer I'm going to turn the spray gun on you." They said, "Don't you believe in the revolution?" He said, "Yes, I'm demonstrating the capacities of the human experience after your fucking revolution and I'm not going to wait." That's what I believe in art. I can't wait until they cure cholera. I will take time out, etc, but I can't put my art at the service of these other things. I'm too far ahead. With all the arrogance, that's what I really mean. In the meantime, what I'm trying to do in my art and in my teaching is to explore the possibilities of the human spirit. And if, in the meantime, some horrible chaos or conspiracy or combination of chaos and conspiracy is going along all around me which is devaluing the human spirit, I will have to take some time off to deal with that. But essentially the message that my art has now is not how to clean up the chaos.

BS: But it does disturb you that this message or this concern with post-societal change stuff is still creating an object?

PB: Yes. It also concerns me that the people who protest so much the nature of the culture as it is become heroes in the same culture. In other words, I mean I have the quarter million dollar fuck you theory of the history of culture, which is that if you are a poet, and you say "Fuck you" loud enough and long enough you will become the Librarian of Congress. I mean, deKooning dealt with existential rage and horror and told the world "Shove it!" so well and so beautifully that the world came around and said, "You can be our official 'tell the world.'" I think he has the strength of character that will keep him doing it. But Allen Ginsberg could be Librarian of Congress in two or three more years. If he holds forth and says "Fuck you" loud enough and well enough, they'll buy him off. I don't think this is a reason not to go on saying "Fuck you," but I think it's the irony of this feedback from the world. My head is full of irony. I don't know if I'm making any sense.

BS: Well, you are.

PB: I mean I feel free enough. You know, maybe I'm being a little more formal but I almost feel like, you know, we could be talking in St. Adrians. I miss that, the bars. I miss the street lights; I miss a place to go where you need a host or a guest and just rap with whoever falls in. I miss people. But I don't miss the physical fight for survival. I mean physical, whether you're an artist or a dentist, or anything in New York City. I quit. I just didn't have the energy for it.

BS: Have you investigated or ever been involved in any alternatives in terms of, say, the gallery system or the museum?

PB: Yes, the Tenth Street Cooperative Gallery. That was years ago. A farm team for the commercial galleries.

We'd run our own farm team. The Hansa Gallery, the Tanager Gallery, the Tenth Street Gallery. This is someone to talk to when you're back in New York: talk to Dick Bellamy or Ivan Karp about the early days of the Hansa Gallery. Talk to Wolf Kahn perhaps. And then talk to maybe Irving Sandler, who is a very accurate social historian of the time.

BS: I know Irv pretty well.

PB: Talk to Irv about Tenth Street and to what degree were artists trying to get into the gallery system or creating a handmade farm team, you know, creating an alternative. Because no one wanted to stay in those collectives. I've thought about alternatives. I don't know what to do. I think my art would have to change. I think if my art changes, in other words, if my art gets less aloof, less iconic, less perhaps idealized and more down in the mud, I'll have to seek situations for it that are less elite. And I expect this is something I'll be dealing with for the next couple of years, if I can get the school going. The school eats up so much of my time. I'd love to stay on, but I feel I'll step out of running it if I can get someone else to do it.

BS: And get back to your studio.

PB: I've got to, yes. That's really what I'm mainly thinking about. So in a certain way really talking about my own work ♦ you know, I'm very on top of it when I talk about social issues but when I talk about my own work ♦ when you haven't been working for a year, you don't like to talk about your work. Have you guys had lunch?

BS: No. Well, I think we're just about done now. Thank you very much.

PB: Thank you. It was a pleasure.

[END OF INTERVIEW]