



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with George Rickey,
1968 June 11

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

Contact Information

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with George Rickey on June 11, 1968. The interview was conducted at in East Chatham, New York by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's June 11, 1968, Paul Cummings talking to George Rickey in East Chatham, New York. By the way, George, how'd you pick East Chatham?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, partly chance. I'd been living in New Orleans where summer's impossible, and we wanted a place to come in the summer. We rented from a friend about two miles from here. We liked it - we liked the country, the neighborhood -, and so we began looking. Everyday going down to swim in a little creek near here, we had driven past this derelict house which had been empty for years, with grass high around it and brambles. Then one day, a "for sale" sign went up. That started a sort of chain reaction of circumstances, and here we are. We've had this ten years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really! Because I know you've taught and traveled so many places.

GEORGE RICKEY: I know. There are some other thoughts about the neighborhood. My mother was living in Schenectady, which was her hometown. And my father came from Athol, Massachusetts, which is a couple of hours east. A grandfather came from Salisbury, Connecticut, which is an hour south. Although I never lived here, I had sort of ties.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How is it that you were born in South Bend, Indiana? If they're all from here, how'd they get out there?

GEORGE RICKEY: My father, born in Athol, Massachusetts, was an engineer, went to MIT, got a job with Singer Sewing Machine Company, which had a big factory in South Bend, and went out there. It must have been around 1905 or something like that. Then after having worked with that factory for several years, in 1913 he was sent to a Singer factory in Scotland. I was five years old then. That was 1913. So we all went over. There were five children. There were eventually six, but we went over with five. So I had this British upbringing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It wasn't a place just to work; you went to live there.

GEORGE RICKEY: Oh yes. The whole family just uprooted itself from South Bend and moved over. I can remember it. I can remember landing in Glasgow. I thought the sun would shine the next day, but it didn't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Tell me a little bit about what you remember about South Bend.

GEORGE RICKEY: Oh, South Bend. Very indistinct recollections. I can remember winters. I can remember skating. I can remember snow piled high. I can remember little incidents. I can remember being terribly annoyed that I couldn't write the way my older sisters could.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are you the third child?

GEORGE RICKEY: I'm the third. I can remember an incident on a bridge in South Bend where, I think, I was being taken in a car. There was a tremendous crowd on a bridge looking over into the river, and I was told later than a man had been drowning. Little things like that. Then we moved from South Bend, and I was deposited at that time with my grandparents in Athol. I must have lived with them through the winter. It was probably the winter before this March when we sailed to Scotland. There was also some moment in Schenectady because I could remember all through my childhood a building on the campus at Union College, which was across the street from my grandparents' home. My grandfather was a judge in Schenectady and a trustee of Union College. Also there was a kind of stone idol at that campus, you see. I went back to Schenectady when I was about eighteen or nineteen and I was able to check this recollection. There it was, so it was an authentic recollection. It wasn't through having been told and so forth, you see. I had this cut-off at five, so anything I remembered before five was a genuine recollection. I think one never knows about such recollections because they have been sort of revived or refed from a later time. So that was South Bend, Athol, Schenectady and then off we went to Scotland. My recollections of that pre-five-year-old time - I had my sixth birthday in Scotland the June after we got there - are faint and scattered, but there are some.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You weren't doing any drawing, were you? Those child-like drawings or did that start later?

GEORGE RICKEY: All my family drew.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. All six of us got the drawing prizes in school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A family tradition.

GEORGE RICKEY: We've speculated a little about where that came from.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were your parents interested?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, my father was an engineer and did not show any signs that we could recognize of any sort of talent in this direction. My mother didn't draw in the ordinary sense as one would have fifty years ago – making drawing from nature. However her mother had been a drawing teacher, and two of my cousins on that side went to art school. So there apparently was a strain on that side. My mother was interested in literature. She was a great reader and had almost total recall of what she'd read. But she also always put mustaches on pictures in magazines right up into her sixties and seventies.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Giving Duchamp competition.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, and long before collage was invented she pasted cutouts of flowers onto books. Cut out from flower magazines and so on. I don't know where that comes from.

PAUL CUMMINGS: People used to do that.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, I think that this was more related to these stickers you get now that you stick on, the flowers and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Decals.

GEORGE RICKEY: She continued to do this right up to the end – she lived until ninety. She never heard of collages. We still have some of these books around that are decorated, as a matter of fact. And always flowers. So if there is a strain of talent of any sort, it certainly comes through my mother, maybe from her mother. It has appeared, you see, in every one of my siblings and in these cousins.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have any of your brothers or sister carried on with art?

GEORGE RICKEY: I have one sister who paints. She's in New York. And I have another sister who went to art school and worked a bit in sculpture. My two older sisters drew and painted, and I thought it was miraculous how well they did it. I think I learned from them. In a way they were my first teachers. It was there, you see. They were so skilled. I remember the first oil painting that my oldest sister did and brought home. I thought it was something miraculous that she had the skill.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was almost like growing up in a studio, in a sense.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, although it was somewhat alien to my parents. My father was a very practical man, and he could draw diagrams. I can't remember anything, for example, drawn in perspective. But he had some concern about the way things looked, and in Scotland he took up as a sort of hobby antique furniture, of which there are some examples here that I've inherited. He bought very good furniture and rugs, but that was as close as he came. I think if I got anything from my father it was this interest in mechanical things, which is probably my strongest direction.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How about music? Because music was always a big thing in those days.

GEORGE RICKEY: We were not a musical family. We went to concerts; we were interested in it. My mother knew a good deal about opera. She knew the stories; she knew the melodies. She could play the piano and played children's songs and so on. Then my two older sisters had music lessons. They both learned to play the piano but never with tremendous enthusiasm. I was never given piano lessons, but I was interested in going to concerts and listening. I think I got that rather from contacts in school than from my family. But I can remember my father – about 1915 or so – bringing home a Victrola. A new Victrola with a crank.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the big horn.

GEORGE RICKEY: No. It was already advanced enough so that it came out the side. He brought some records with it. There was *Il Trovatore*, *Carmen*, I think with Caruso. This sort of thing, you see. It was quite an adventure. I would have been seven or eight at the time. You see, I can remember that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had no schooling in this country then?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, I went to a school in South Bend. The Colfax School, and it must have been kindergarten. I can't remember how long I stayed; it may have been only a semester. I wouldn't have gone before five, would I? So, since I would have been five in June and we went to Europe the following March, it may have been that fall that I went to the Colfax School, and I would have been put into kindergarten, wouldn't I? I think it was all just play. There was no learning to read. But I remember the other children around, and I remember vividly one boy, somewhat older, who had long hair. I remember the ribbons in it. This is a great curiosity. Our mother told us that this wretched boy's mother had wanted a daughter and had simply dressed this boy as a girl. And he was there in school. Of course since, I've speculated about this – I mean, really, this atrocious cruelty on the part of a parent. But I can remember that boy walking in a dress and with long hair and with ribbons in it, and he was a boy. And my mother explained it. So I know I went to Colfax School. And then in Scotland, of course, I was put into kindergarten at once. I went into kindergarten, and I think it would have been the following year that I began to learn to read. I think in the kindergarten I went into coloring and basket weaving, you know, a lot of...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sort of play and activity and things.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. But I was beginning to draw. You see by that time we were all drawing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But your education really started in Scotland.

GEORGE RICKEY: In Scotland, yes. I had a European education completely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have any spiritual education?

GEORGE RICKEY: Oh, well, we were a church-going family. I went to Sunday School I think, in South Bend. I certainly went to Sunday School in Scotland. Let me think now. We didn't have religious exercises of any sort at home except there was always Grace before lunch or dinner. I think we dispensed with it at breakfast. My father and mother had been married in the Dutch Reformed Church in Schenectady which is, I think, a sort of Lutheranism. In Scotland they thought the Congregational Church in the town was the nearest to what they were used to. So we went to that church, and we went to Sunday School, not at that church but at a privately run Sunday School. High thinking ladies, and a rather wealthy lady who had a big house. She even built a house on her grounds to house this Sunday School. Every year or two a Rickey was old enough to go. At one time there were at least five Rickets walking to this Sunday School on Sunday morning. Then after Sunday School we walked down to the church where our parents were and went to church in addition. I think it was a little much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Took care of your day, didn't it?

GEORGE RICKEY: We got out of church about twelve or twelve-thirty and immediately fell on the Sunday papers. Then, just to continue the religious training or exposure, I went off to boarding school when I was fourteen, and it was an Episcopal school. I was there for five years and developed a kind of religious commitment. I was confirmed in the Episcopal Church at the late age of about seventeen at that school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What school was it?

GEORGE RICKEY: It was called Trinity College, Glenalmond. A boys' boarding school in the center of Scotland. It was founded by Gladstone for the religious secondary education of Scottish boys. So at the time I went there in 1921, it was then, I suppose, fifty or seventy-five years old. Very isolated, gothic buildings of red sandstone. And I think scholastically of medium quality. The quality rose very much while I was there, which was my good luck. I think that's where I really got my education. Just to finish the religious aspect, I went from there on to college, and I was still rather committed and maybe expected a lot out of religion I didn't get. While I was in college I went to a chapel all the time – you see, I really was quite faithful. Nevertheless I think a certain disenchantment set in, and by the time I was teaching in this country in Massachusetts in a church school, although I was still committed, I think I'd begun to be a bit disillusioned, disenchanted, skeptical. Probably by the time I was twenty-five, twenty-six, I'd begun to be a kind of agnostic, although rather interested in the -- what should I say? -- the effect, the power of religious in history and in the history of art. I still think that. You see, even if it's a human invention, it's been one of tremendous importance.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's true.

GEORGE RICKEY: I'm quite happy that my children grow up as church-goers. This is the influence of my wife, and they chide me a little about it. That's the answer to the question about the spiritual side.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of family background do you come from? What is Rickey, English?

GEORGE RICKEY: Rickey is a name which is not very common. My mother though it was probably Irish because

there are lots of “ey” names, like Rooney and so on, that are Irish. It’s a common Irish ending. She even thought that in old Irish spelling it might have been Richeagh or something. You know there are a lot of words like that in Ireland still – places and names and so forth. But my father’s forebears were in Athol. His mother’s name was Flint and I think the forebears there came from England. I still don’t know where the Rickey came from, you see, but I think the Flints could be traced back to early in this country, too. I was told that in Concord, Massachusetts, in the church archives or something, the earliest recorded document is a deed of some land to the church by Sir Thomas Flint, who was an ancestor. This was in the 1600’s. So that is the background there genealogically. My grandfather Rickey was a watch and clock maker and I think very good at it in this little town. Good with his hands. He was able to build a house, and he could certainly build clocks. And he at one time made a cello or a double bass – I’m not sure which it was – and was able to play it. He made the whole thing himself. Now on my mother’s side, her mother’s name was Pierce and was from Connecticut. And her father was Judson Landon. He was born in Salisbury, Connecticut. I’ve been down there, and on the campus of Hotchkiss School there is a graveyard, and in it are several Landon gravestones, you see. I think that this would be a great grandfather that’s buried in there in what is now a part of Hotchkiss School. Grandfather Landon was not at all well-to-do. Circumstances were modest, but it would probably still be what one would call middleclass. My mother used to tell us that the Landons were Tories during the Revolution. So it all goes way, way, back. I’ve never been much interested in the DAR and all that stuff, but I think the family qualifies over and over again. My father-in-law is very interested in this, and he’s had my two sons registered here and there. My grandmother Landon taught school in Schenectady, and I think she taught drawing. My grandfather also taught school and then trained himself somehow as a lawyer in Schenectady. He practiced law and became a judge and was elected a judge in the State Supreme Court for term after term. My mother told us that he was elected even by the opposite party, and that he survived changes of party. He became a sort of pillar of the community and was a trustee of the college and at one time was acting president. So that is the background on that side. Rather literate, you see. I think that my grandfather wrote a constitutional history of the U.S. They were all great readers. One of the anecdotes my mother told about him (I can remember my grandmother, but I can’t remember him), was when the children would be in the dining room – there were about five children in that family, too, and one of the children would start on something and get mixed up, and he would say, “Don’t tell us what you can’t remember.” That’s a good line, I’ve used it. So there was a kind of intellectual discipline there. My father’s family were economically on a much more modest scale. They were not public figures at all. My grandfather the watchmaker – what would that be, a sort of upper artisan?

PAUL CUMMINGS: It’s interesting that there’s a craft strain, you know, of making things.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I can see where things come from. You see, I didn’t invent the idea that I do things with my hands, nor did I invent the idea that I should write a book. It was standard in the family to have these pursuits. But in our generation it was my mother who was the reader, and she read to us all kinds of things. She was really extremely well informed. She didn’t read the Russians in Russian, but she read the Russians. She could read French. She had been taken to Europe as a child by my grandmother on a tour. Something that on my father’s side would have been unthinkable.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It’s interesting that they got together.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. Here was my mother, the youngest daughter of a judge in Schenectady who was already a pillar of the community, and my father, a young engineer coming to work for GE, and they paired off and got married there. I think he must have seemed promising but a little unpolished.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That’s interesting. You said she spoke French.

GEORGE RICKEY: She was taught French in school, and when she went to France she was able to speak it. I think not fluently, but in travel later on she could always manage with the hotel and meals and so on. And she could read French.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You didn’t have any languages at home?

GEORGE RICKEY: No, no. We were all English speaking. But she was very concerned that we speak with clarity and precision, and she was the one who disciplined us in that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It’s funny about that because I was talking to a teacher the other day. And he said, “Oh, my school is starting a new thing. We’re going to start teaching phonetics.” I said, “Oh, my God.” You know, thirty years later.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, right. A new thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They just discovered it. I thought it was very funny. You sound like a very, very close-knit family. When you moved to Scotland, did that change your family relationships very much? You know, the fact that it was a new country.

GEORGE RICKEY: I don't know that we were so close-knit. It's hard to know exactly what that means. Some families are very interdependent, you see, and very intimate with each other, but I don't think we were exactly intimate. I think we had very much a family life. But I think that we were perhaps even a little shy with each other. That as far as temperament – we were not demonstrative with each other. We did a lot of things together, but then at a certain point everybody just went off. I think we were never, any of us, homesick. We didn't have that kind of emotional bond.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You could go off and become individuals.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, and in fact I think we were all eager to go off.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that happened early with you? Becoming aware of your own individuality?

GEORGE RICKEY: I think we were always encouraged to do things on our own.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you went to boarding school early.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. Although I was the only one that went off to boarding school at that time. There was a very good school in the town just across the street. An excellent school, which was a boarding school. All the Rickey girls went there. You see, I was the only boy of six. The girls went to this really very good school. One of the good schools in the west of Scotland. And the first three in turn each became the head girl. So they were substantial figures in their school. My second sister was the scientific one. She went off to Cambridge and got a degree in biology, bacteriology and so on at Cambridge University.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's pretty early, wasn't it, for that? For girls?

GEORGE RICKEY: No, they had two women's colleges there at that time. They had a provision for women. Both universities – Oxford as well. They had three women's colleges at Oxford that had been going from some time. So education for women wasn't unknown. Isn't this enough on the family background?

PAUL CUMMINGS: As a preliminary, yes.

GEORGE RICKEY: This local school, boys only, was a kind of pre-prep. It took them up to fourteen, fifteen, and it was I think, fairly good, but at any rate that is where I got my first grounding in arithmetic, algebra, science, which I loved.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you remember the name of the school?

GEORGE RICKEY: Larchfield School in Helensburgh. Helensburgh was the name of this residential town twenty miles from Glasgow. What else did we have, well, languages, Latin and French.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have art classes there?

GEORGE RICKEY: There was an art class, and I drew daffodils and narcissus in little jars very faithfully and got prizes for them. A little work with color but the emphasis was clearly on absolutely faithful reproduction. Very, extremely academic. The drawing teacher, Miss Baxter, you see I can remember her name. And it was a kind of obedience exercise.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now we all draw lines.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I think it wasn't quite that straight put. I think we did hold the pencil up, you know. We weren't given a plumb line the way they were in the Beaux-Arts, but we held the pencil up, and we measured for proportion and that sort of thing. But I had facility in it. I think at that time it was just something that was assumed that in our family we did fairly well by the prevalent standards. But my real interest was in science. We had physics and chemistry in that little school, taught I think in a fairly sensible, basic way. Then at fourteen I went off by entrance examination to a boarding school. I had five years there. And the same studies continued, languages and history, bible, but much more rigorous. That culminated in the equivalent of college board exams. It goes on longer there than here, you see. I was in that school until I was nineteen and had passed exams, also competitive, into Oxford University. Let me see, did we have a – yes, we had a drawing class there taught by a visiting drawing master who came up from Edinburgh, Mr. Daniel. We drew from casts – that sort of thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A little more professional kind of art instruction.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I remember drawing from these casts, but I also did landscapes – I took extra drawing. You see, in the afternoons that he was there, two days a week, I would do things that were not the class work. It was mostly landscape with watercolor and pastel.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you had some kind of art interest already by that time?

GEORGE RICKEY: Oh, yes, very definitely. I was, I think, beginning to be interested in something more expressive than these faithful renderings of plaster casts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have art history classes there?

GEORGE RICKEY: No, I knew nothing about history then. At that time -- it was fifty years ago --, art history didn't exist except in a few places in Germany. I'd heard of Rembrandt and Michelangelo and this sort of thing through my mother and through having traveled and been to museums. I ought to note in connection with that that Glasgow was twenty miles away and had an art gallery. In that were Rembrandt, and I've forgotten what the Whistler was in that...

PAUL CUMMINGS: The portrait of Carlyle?

GEORGE RICKEY: That's right, that's right with the butterfly. And I think the man in the helmet of Rembrandt, the Gold Helmet, is in Germany, but there is a man in a different kind of helmet, you see. It was quite a remarkable collection of old masters there. This was my first exposure to art of this order. I went there a great deal. I think that whenever I went to Glasgow I would go to the art gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you go by yourself or with your mother?

GEORGE RICKEY: At first I'd go with my mother, but later by myself. You see, I would take the tramcar and go down to the art gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you ever make drawings or sketches of things?

GEORGE RICKEY: You mean in the art gallery? No, I think I just looked. But I would go home and draw and do landscapes and so on. And, of course, I think I was very much impressed by verisimilitude, by skill in that. Because that was still the standard, although I was deeply impressed by Rembrandt, and I can remember Whistler. I can remember landscapes, sea pictures. I was very much interested in content, too. But in that same museum were the models of ships and a kind of history of ships and machinery, and of course I liked that, too. I had that five years of boarding school, passed by entrance exam into Oxford, and went to Oxford when I was nineteen.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you do outside reading? Did you have favorite authors?

GEORGE RICKEY: Oh, I read a lot. We all read a lot. I was self-propelled as a reader. By the time I was nineteen, I had read most of Shakespeare. I had read a great deal besides what we had to read in school. I'd read Thomas Hardy, I'd read Tolstoy, I'd read Victor Hugo. I'd read very widely. I had read a lot of travel books, sea books. I was interested in that. And I read poetry. I read Keats' "Endymion." I think I was probably sixteen the first time I read that. I'd read Thomas Carlyle. I think I read Carlyle's *The French Revolution* before I went to college. I'd read Scott, I'd read some Dickens. I'd read, probably, half of Conrad by that time. I can't even remember what I had read. I'd read or seen virtually every play of Shaw's before I got to college. I tried things like Cooper and found it very dull. I probably read Galsworthy or things like that. I probably had read some biography, but I just don't remember exactly what it would have been. And of course this was simply expected of somebody with this kind of education, too. In Oxford one is already specialized. I went there to read history, as they call it, and it is assumed that you've had an education before you start. They don't ask you if you can read French; you just get the French to read. I had to read Medieval French in my first year there. Documents. They don't ask you if you can read Latin; it's assumed. And you just start straight in with your specialty, and I had history for three years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What languages did you know when you got out of school?

GEORGE RICKEY: I'd had nine years of French and nine years of Latin before I went to the university. I'd had one year of German. I could read and write French with facility, but I still hadn't had enough exposure in speaking French to be able to speak with ease. I got that later. In college we had to read all the basic documents of English constitutional history in Latin and be able to not only translate them but to explain them. This was the beginning of my history studies.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you active in any kind of school activities prior to college?

GEORGE RICKEY: Oh, I played games. I played rugby football; I played cricket and that sort of thing. That went without saying, too. And I was reasonably good. I boxed. At that boarding school, I think I was the boxing champion for about three years. In college I dropped that. I played rugby football in college, too. That was just kind of normal, you see, I think average. I was just a sort of normal British-type schoolboy and college man. I think the thing that was not normal was this interest in art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you select history as a topic to pursue?

GEORGE RICKEY: I think it was the influence of a teacher in this secondary school who taught English and history. I had been pushed in math. I'd shown some promise, and I got in the hands of a rather ambitious math teacher when I was, I think, seventeen. He thought he saw in me promising material. I passed off rather early my required exams, sort of college entrance exams – not the competitive part but the qualifying part, so for the last two years in the boarding school I really had a rather free hand. I could almost pick the subject that I wanted. He pressed me into taking a great deal of math. I had math for two or three hours a day and got into fairly advanced math, calculus, advanced algebra, and conic sections, and that sort of thing. He just pushed me too hard, and I revolted against it. I just gave it up completely. I wasn't that good, you see. In reaction I concentrated in my last year on history.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You said there was a history teacher who...

GEORGE RICKEY: You see, he was teaching me well, and the other was teaching me badly. He was a much more sympathetic person. Also I think he had a strong bias towards a kind of humanistic education. I thought history seemed to be the thing. You see it is absolutely basic, and it's either literature or objective studies. It covers both, and I just decided to concentrate on that in my last year in this boarding school. Then I tried to get a scholarship into Oxford in history, but I wasn't good enough for that. But on that scholarship program I was admitted to the college. By that time, I didn't think in terms of any alternative. Earlier I had thought, and my father had expected, that I would go to Cambridge and into science. If I'd stayed with that math teacher, I'd probably have gone to Cambridge and into science because Cambridge was the sort of place you went to, but instead of that I switched and went to Oxford and into history. I had three years of history in the university.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which college were you at?

GEORGE RICKEY: Balliol. That was full of historians, and it was very much a kind of intellectual-type college. It was noted for its scholarship and well, still is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you compare that school to your experience here as an instructor, a professor in a university.

GEORGE RICKEY: It's a different world. Even from Harvard and Yale. It is so completely permissive. It assumes so much before you even go.

PAUL CUMMINGS: For which you wouldn't be prepared for through our normal system.

GEORGE RICKEY: I think not. I think that here you wouldn't normally have the languages. I think you would not have the facility in writing. One already had years of writing essays and summaries and précis. So anybody going to Oxford or Cambridge, especially at that time, could write in a disciplined way and marshal ideas in writing or he couldn't get in. Then it is assumed that you are in complete control of your own methods of studying. There is no structure at all, no courses, no quizzing – nothing of this sort. You just go there, and you work if you want to, and you don't work if you don't want to. If you don't want to work, then they get rid of you. But there's no structure to keep you in. No bookkeeping.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No class attendance.

GEORGE RICKEY: Nothing of this sort. It is more like graduate school. But I'm not sure that it's even as structured as graduate school here where you do have to take certain courses. And you have to get "B's." I think that one could probably in Oxford then, and it's probably true now: never attend a lecture, and still get a degree with honors. You'd have to do it in another way. The all-important things were the exams. We were examined during the school year usually after the vacation. You came back for something called collections. The terms were very short – three to eight weeks. That's all. But it was assumed you studied all year round. In a way the pattern was almost that you came up to the university and had a rather good time during those eight weeks and then you disappeared during the vacation to get your work done. You were examined when you came back from vacation, you see. The exams were always very general, where they give you ten questions and you do three.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And they were essay type?

GEORGE RICKEY: Essay type. There wasn't any other type. And then you got graded on these collections. You would have them on each subject that you were working in. Which would probably be three. I think to begin with, it was probably English constitutional history, European history, and economic history or something like that. And then the next year it would be something a little bit difference, you see. And you would get a collection on each one of these, having done certain areas of reading.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do they give you reading lists and things like that?

GEORGE RICKEY: In a sort of way. It was all tutorial system. There were lectures which you could go to or not as you pleased. It made no difference. Then you saw your tutor once a week or once in two weeks, occasionally alone, sometimes in twos, sometimes in fours. In general you wrote an essay a week for each tutor. If you were four you'd all do one on different topics. They would suggest reading. These would be certain standard things. A tutor might say, "Well, so and so has just written a book on such and such. I haven't read it yet myself, but you might try it and let me know what you think." That's how it went for three years, and at the end of three years you had a week's exams, and you'd stand or fall on that. Well, half through this I began going to art school. That's where my break really came, you see. Up to that time art had been something that I was interested in but didn't feel I could take seriously as far as my own personal performance was concerned, although I continued to draw all this time and read about art and begun to acquire some knowledge of art history. Without being taught it. I can remember when I was still in boarding school I read Walter Pater on Botticelli. You know, there wasn't much available. Then I found that in Oxford there was an art school that had a special course for undergraduates, very cheap, and part-time. You could go in the afternoons. It was the Ruskin School of Drawing, right near my cottage. I suddenly had this mad idea that since this was set up for undergraduates, that I would go and learn to draw. I thought that I would quickly learn an awful lot that I couldn't learn any other way. I began in the middle of my second year. It meant that I had to give up football. I'd played for my college, and so this was really quite a decision. Once again it was rather academic drawing by standards now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you remember who instructed you?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. The school was run by Sydney Carline. He died when I was there, and the school closed down for a time. I was very unhappy about that because here I had started, and suddenly my source of this information was turned off. It was a little time before they picked a successor. But he had a younger brother Richard, Dick Carline, who was in London. I can't remember exactly how he engineered it, but he took me in hand and gave me private instruction. Sometimes coming up to Oxford, and sometimes I went to London. He gave me problems, and I did them, and then he would criticize. Then the school opened up again under a man called Rothenstein. He was appointed the Ruskin Master of Drawing, and it turned out that he was the brother of Sir William Rothenstein, who was the head of the Slade School and the father of the Rothenstein who was until fairly recently the Director of the Tate. I was taught also by various visiting artists from London. Amongst those were Stanley Spencer, Gilbert Spencer, John Nash, Paul Nash. They are the ones I remember. And they were avant-garde in England at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Nash was maybe the most, wasn't he?

GEORGE RICKEY: Or Stanley Spencer. Stanley Spencer was already becoming famous with these paintings of somewhat mystical character. Sort of like Peter Blume, I thought -- that sort of thing. You know, with violent alteration of perspective and things happening that couldn't really happen. Resurrections and that sort. There was a younger brother, Gilbert. This was the new English art crowd, the London group - what was it? Eustin Road.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Eustin Road, right.

GEORGE RICKEY: And so on, you see, this was the crowd - it was anti-academy. Well, that was what I was thrown into without knowing what it was all about, except that they were interested in people like Cézanne whom I'd never heard of at that time. It was a vigorous and bright world and Dick Carline continued in a way to advise me because I think he wasn't exactly sympathetic with the man who had succeeded his brother. These other people were rather more vigorous, and probably Wyndham Lewis was part of that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was after the Vortis?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. Dick Carline urged me -- well, I should say that I was very much tempted to give up my university career. He encouraged me very much to go into art. I had a little flurry with my tutors about this. I was kind of disillusioned with the college at this time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: For what reason?

GEORGE RICKEY: I thought it was terribly artificial and out of context with my - sounds a little familiar now doesn't it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Education always is at that level.

GEORGE RICKEY: Exactly, and I think it has to be, you see. I think academies have to be academic. I decided to stick it out and get my degree, but I continued to go to art school at the same time. Actually my grades improved. I worked much less. You see, I think I had been studying with a stupid application. I decided to give my studies less time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You could relax and enjoy it.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. Relax and use it. I think that I became much more skillful in reading and in writing essays and so on. Actually I began to do better. But I continued going to art school, and I finished and took my degree. Dick Carlin had urged me to go to Paris. My family didn't even know I was going to art school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Much less getting ready to go to Paris.

GEORGE RICKEY: No. So I had a confrontation with the family.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you go into London frequently while you were at Oxford?

GEORGE RICKEY: Fairly frequently. I remember going to exhibitions of Dutch masters, Italian masters, and so on at -

PAUL CUMMINGS: The National Gallery and British Museum, and places like that?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I was by this time really in it quite deeply and trying to learn. I had traveled on the continent and been to the Louvre, and I'd been to museums in Germany.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When were those trips?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, my first contact with Italy was when I was about sixteen or seventeen, and I went on a tramp steamer from Glasgow on a trip in the Mediterranean. I was signed off for ten days in Italy. I got off in Genoa and went to Milan and Florence, Venice, Pisa and then rejoined the ship in Naples. I was seventeen, and of course I didn't know what to look for or anything. But at least I went and looked. I was probably twenty when I first went to Paris. I went to Germany, also, when I was about twenty. I think I spent a couple of months in Germany one summer while I was still a student. I worked in the library in Heidelberg. When I finished my degree, I had this confrontation with my family and just took off for Paris. I had a little money - sixty pounds. I went to Paris to see how long this sixty pounds would last. Carline had urged me to go to the Academie Lhote, which was the great thing in that time. There was cubism. I knew what cubism was; I'd heard about it, and I thought it was a little odd. But it was talked about, and here I was in this school. That was September, 1929, and Dick Carline gave me an introduction to another English artist that he knew was there. I went almost at once and saw him. It was Bill Hayter. I can remember Hayter in this studio getting ready for an exhibition, and he had a huge canvas on the floor and he was painting it on the floor. I'd never seen that before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was doing abstract painting then wasn't he?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes I think he already had started on this business. I lived in a little hotel in the back of Montparnasee and began going to school, trying to make this little bit of money last as long as I could. You see, I just walked out on the family. I got myself a job teaching English in a language school using the Berlitz method. It was the Gardner School of Languages on the Grand Boulevard. It's still running. Miss Gardner was quite sympathetic, and I worked there teaching English every evening for about three hours.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find the school?

GEORGE RICKEY: I can't remember. I think I just walked in, and said, "Do you need a language teacher?" The pay was twenty-five cents an hour. I remember she was very nice to me and said, "Now, there's a woman who wants a private teacher. She's working in a hotel." She was sort of the housekeeper in a rather big hotel on the Grand Boulevard somewhere. She was in charge of the linen, the servants, and so on, and for her job she felt she had to improve her English. I had this private lesson with her in her apartment, and for that I got paid probably seventy-five cents an hour. I was living on forty dollars a month, so this all helped. Then I got one other job that was seasonal but very profitable in relations to these standards - that was doing mimeographing and messenger service for an American woman in the fashion business who went to the Paris dress openings, the Haut Couture, and could remember thirty or forty dresses down to every stitch and button. She would come out and draw them and she had a Swiss girl who could transfer those to mimeograph sheets. Then I ran the mimeograph machine. She had clients from all the Seventh Avenue dress houses and they sort of subscribed to it as a service. I can remember working with the mimeograph machine all night. This would be in hotel rooms the Swiss girl would have already prepared. Sketches - the outline of a figure, and this woman could sit down with that figure, and she could draw in everything. She had a fantastic visual memory. Then the Swiss girl, who had been trained in coutoure, could sometimes correct her and say, "Now this had to be made this way." I ran the mimeograph machines, stuffed them in envelopes, and made deliveries in Paris to some of these people in their hotels or take packages of them to the boat train. Timing was very important. This then became the feeder for the popular dress trade in New York - what was the latest thing in Paris. I can remember sometimes amusing things with these deliveries. I once had to make a delivery to Hattie Carnegie, who was in bed in the Ritz or somewhere. I just handed her this package and there she was all fluffy in bed, and she tipped me ten francs. I

thought that was all just great.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was where the profit was.

GEORGE RICKEY: That was my third job in Paris. So with those jobs and my little nest egg, I held out in Paris for a year. Towards the end of the year, my father relented and decided I was serious, and as I recall he matched what I had earned or something like that, and he came over to see me, and it was all rather nice. I took him out to dinner, and I was able to speak French, and he couldn't. Just one other little footnote to that which I ought to put in there is -- having had nine years of French in school, you would think that I would be able to speak French. But when I got there, although I could read easily, write with facility, I really had a good deal of trouble speaking. I decided I should have some conversation lessons. Through friends I was put in touch with a woman who could not speak English -- a woman about forty-nine. She taught Americans just by conversation and correcting their pronunciation and so on. I went to her I think for several months in Montparnasse. I remember her teaching me how to say "pen." She worked on how one actually moved one's mouth to get certain sounds. She was a great help to me. When she found out I was an artist, she was very interested in what my views were and who I liked and so on. So there was always something to talk about, you see. I was going to Lhote at that time. Her name was Madame Oliver, and it was only much later that I learned that this was Picasso's mistress, you know, who later wrote a book. She was by that time a middle aged woman married to and separated from some sort of philosopher. Much time had passed. Well, so I had this year in Paris. I got tired of or suspicious of Lhote after a certain time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were the classes like there? I've heard strange stories from other people who knew people there or had some vague association with his studio. He had a lot of Americans.

GEORGE RICKEY: He had a lot of Americans, but he had French and others, too. One of my classmates was Stravinsky's son who painted surrealism. Here was this class really based on a kind of academic cubism, and here was this young Stravinsky painting academic surrealism. But Lhote loved it. He criticized him, too. He didn't try to turn him into a cubist at all. But it got very crowded. When I started there were maybe only ten or fifteen students, but by December there were seventy in his class. Lhote would come in on Monday and pose a model. Then about Thursday, Friday, he'd come in and give criticism. It was that old atelier system.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was all models and still life.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. But he would lecture. He would talk about Rubens and so on. Always references, illusion to the masters, you see. He would do an analysis of their structure, and that was when I first began to realize that there was a geometric structure in Rubens or El Greco and so on. I learned that from him. I think that much of it was mistaken in the way it was applied in his own painting and in what he taught. It became very systematic. But he was brilliant, very clear, and rather witty. And the clearer it was in a way, the more dangerous it was because it became so absolutely fixed. Then there was a man there who sort of took the money. You paid him by the month. He took the money, and he posed the model every morning and generally supervised. His name was Poliakoff, and he used to paint in this little room that they had as an office. For a time when Poliakoff became a very famous name in painting, I wondered if it were the same man. But I'm sure not. At some point, after I had been there maybe six or eight months, I decided to try something else. I went to the Academie Moderne, and there I was taught briefly by Leger and Ozenfant. That was rather different, and I'd hoped for great things there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because of those instructors?

GEORGE RICKEY: Because of those instructors. I think I had really learned what Lhote had to teach. I'm not sure that I applied it, but I knew what the message was. I was looking for something that was different and maybe a little deeper. And Leger was very brusque and a terrible disappointment.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, he just said, "Go and study the model." (laughter)

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see. It's like go and conquer the world, right?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. Ozenfant was much more sympathetic, and I was really rather attracted to him. He was a man of ideas.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I have always had the feeling that Ozenfant liked to teach.

GEORGE RICKEY: I think so. I think he was a teacher, and he either had or was about to produce that book of his.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Put aside from the book and from other essays and things, I've always had the feeling he liked

the teaching business.

GEORGE RICKEY: I think he did. And I think he was a good teacher and not a very good painter, or a limited painter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Leger always rebelled against it.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, well, he was not communicative. I think he was a withdrawn person. Probably he was just teaching for the money. You can be famous and still not have any money. Then that came to an end, that year. This must have been the summer of 1930, and I had already got a job in America teaching. As I left my college I had realized that even if this walking out on my family, going to art school proved to be a success, I still would have to earn a living. So there I was with a college degree in history, and I was interested in teaching. This was the influence of that teacher in the boarding school still. You see, I went to Oxford intending to be a teacher, not intending to be an artist. I still had that idea and I thought, I will go and teach in America. So as I left my college I told the Master of Balliol everything was rather intimate you know, that I was interested in this. He said, "Well, we'll keep this in mind." Before I left to go to Paris, I think it was perhaps very soon after I took my degree, the master had told me that he had set up an appointment for me in London with an American professor from Harvard who knew a lot about schools, and even was a trustee of one. So I went and had breakfast with him, and he proved to be very friendly and genial and so on and told me a little bit about America that I hadn't heard before. We had a conversation of an hour or two and as we parted he said, "Now write to me and send me your life history." I being all of twenty-two! Then he said, "Don't be too modest." So I sent him the life history. Then I went off to Paris and got a letter from the Master of Balliol saying, "There is a school in America interested in hiring you as a history teacher, but they're a little scared about your being an artist for fear you won't take it seriously or something. I suggest that you write them." So I wrote a letter to this school, which I had never heard of. It was called Groton. I got back not a letter, but a cable. I was hired. This was probably something like April. So I knew I had a job for \$2,000 a year in America the next fall. Well that kind of eased my last days in Paris. I think that I must have left Paris perhaps in July, spent August at home, and became reconciled with my family now that I had a job and now that they saw that I was serious about art, and took a ship to New York in early September - it must have been 1930. Landed in New York where I had ten days, I remember. I went up to Boston. I took a trip to Boston and Albany and to Ayre, Massachusetts, took a taxi to Groton, and started three years of teaching there. Apart from the Gardner School of Languages, that was the beginning of my teaching career.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the art scene in Paris when you were at these two academies? Did you meet a lot of other painters? Go to galleries and museums and things?

GEORGE RICKEY: Quite a few of them. We visited galleries. I went a great deal to the Louvre and to exhibitions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you do copying or painting in the museums like some of them do?

GEORGE RICKEY: At the Met I once copied El Greco's View of Toledo. But I can't remember. I don't think I ever copied in the Louvre. I looked at the copies of some - not too impressed, you see. I thought that was rather dull. But the art scene - Othon Friesz was a great name. I was there when Pascin killed himself. That was a great sensation. Picasso and Braque were, of course, big names but not yet successes. You see they were still very avant-garde. I'm trying to think of other indications of the climate.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well those were really kind of early years of surrealism, I think. Did you know any of those people, Breton?

GEORGE RICKEY: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you ever get involved in that manifestation?

GEORGE RICKEY: No, not a bit. I can't remember where Dalí was at that time. I can't remember when I first heard of that. I can remember there was an exhibition. It must have been at the Grand Palais, of the Independents or something like that. And somebody had a painting with buttons. Everybody talked about this.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Real buttons?

GEORGE RICKEY: Real buttons. And I can remember an exhibition in a temporary sort of structure on the Boulevard Raspail by a group that called themselves Populistes. It was pop art. It was common imagery with a good deal of overtones of sex and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I never heard about them.

GEORGE RICKEY: The Populistes I remember quite vividly. It would be quite interesting now to look that up. But

it was anti-establishment art, you see. It was definitely away from the academies, away even from cubism and so on, towards folk images, popular images, advertising and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: This I never heard of.

GEORGE RICKEY: I ought sometime to try and look up the newspapers of that time and see what it really was. That's a long time ago, you see - thirty-five years ago.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fascinating. So there's always nothing new.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, one doesn't know until one looks again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You came back to this country then in 1930 to start teaching and this was your first adult view of New York.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I could start out with one experience which was quite interesting. This was early September and I had had a letter from my tutor at Balliol - my principal history tutor, a man called Humphrey Sumner - that he was in New York. We had lunch together or something like that, and he said, "Would it interest you to go and see a new museum they've just opened here? It's a museum of contemporary things." It was in a skyscraper, which was a little unusual. And we went up in the Heckscher Building to I forget what floor, and here was the Museum of Modern Art, which my history tutor from Oxford knew all about, and I knew nothing. I think it was on one floor, and it was largely the Lillie Bliss collection. That was a very pleasant beginning. Later I took the train up to Boston. On my vacations I came to New York and would rent a room or apartment, and I'd paint. Sometimes I'd go to the Art Students' League and draw from the model and so on. So I was already, although teaching to earn a living, I was already...

PAUL CUMMINGS: More and more committed to the arts. Well, this was also the beginning of the Depression problems and the Projects in the thirties. Did you have any involvement with any of those projects?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I saw the Depression coming. In '29 I'd just heard about it. But in 1930, '31, the people involved in Groton - the parents mostly were bankers, stockbrokers that sort of thing - they were taking a terrible beating. I can remember the plunging of prices. I can remember people being put out of work - parents of kids at Groton. When General Motors or something would close down a whole division everybody from the top to the bottom was out on the street. I felt rather secure with my two thousand dollars and the room in the dorm, and free laundry and free meals. I was there when Roosevelt, who had sons in the school, was elected. I remember being up there both before and after the election. He gave a commencement address there when he was Governor of New York. I remember at the time everybody saying some people think he is going to be the next president. Then came 1932, and I was on vacation in New York, it must have been Easter time, when the banks closed. You're too young to remember that. Nobody had any money. Even if they had money in the bank, they couldn't get at it. For some reason I had enough so that I could get along. They eventually re-opened. Then came the emergency measures to get people some kind of employment, the WPA and the NRA and that sort of thing. I was really rather curious in Groton, and it all seemed very remote. Or, at any rate, one stage removed. It was a kind of haven but I also felt that there was something a little bit wrong with this, too. In fact I think that was involved partly in my interest of leaving. That Groton was too isolated for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a very good school, isn't it though?

GEORGE RICKEY: Academically, very good. I think it still is. But it had this reputation for snobbism, partly justified. But the academic standards were extremely good. I really got a lot out of it, and I think from my introduction to America that was rather nice. I quit in 1933. I wonder now how I was foolish enough to do that because everything was falling apart. But I had these two thousand dollars saved and off I went to Europe. I didn't want to go back to the Academie Lhote. I just wanted to paint in Paris. That's what I did for a year and tried almost systematically to get over the Lhote infection. I went back to painting after nature and I think in a really more and more expressionist way. I was also affected a little I think by the social realism and what the Mexicans were doing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, they were big internationally.

GEORGE RICKEY: Orozco and Rivera. I painted there for a year and a half, came back to New York towards the end of 1934 and painted in New York. Still trying to find a style and that sort of thing. That was when I first had contact with the WPA art project.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you work on a project?

GEORGE RICKEY: No. Because I still had some money in the bank, and I didn't qualify (or wasn't prepared to lie enough to qualify) on that. I mean at that time, you really had to have no resources whatsoever. I still had some

resources – I can't remember quite how I kept them. Life was pretty cheap – I mean, for forty bucks a month you had a nice apartment. I continued to paint, not knowing exactly where it would all come to, but I was prepared to give myself several years, feeling I could always go back to teaching. Then I got a temporary job on Newsweek that paid quite well, sort of editorial work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you get involved with Newsweek? Was it just a job that appeared?

GEORGE RICKEY: No, a former student of mine at Groton had gone to Yale and was working on Newsweek, which was then in its relative infancy as a sort of imitation of Time. I used to see him quite often, and I used to chide him for the awful quality of his magazine, how poorly written it was, how poorly edited and that they should really try to do better. Once in exasperation I sat down and blue-penciled the whole thing as though it had been a school theme, and I gave this to him. He took it in to his boss, and the boss offered me a job.

PAUL CUMMINGS: As what?

GEORGE RICKEY: Sort of like a copy reader or something. I read all the copy, and I made other proposals. It was just when the Spanish Civil War was breaking out. I remember the dispatches were coming in, and they were treating it very badly, and I told them that there was a guy called Goya who had treated all this material before. Why don't they try running a spread of Goya across the bottom and their atrocity photographs across the top? The next week they did it. I suppose that's in the archives somewhere, that particular issue. And that must have been 1934, isn't that right?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Summer of '36, I think.

GEORGE RICKEY: '36, maybe, yes. And then the next year Newsweek folded and was bought by Vincent Astor. I was just put out. I was lost in the re-shuffle, which disappointed me at the time. It thought this seems to be rather well-paid for the time you put into it, and maybe I should go on. But luckily I didn't. Then negotiations started for an artist in residence with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation at a little college in Michigan called Olivet. I had known some people at Carnegie, and I had taught the son of the president. They knew I was an artist, and my name came up, and I was offered this. So in the fall of 1937, I went out to Michigan with a job. The grant was for a year, and then it was renewed for a second year to paint a mural in the college. No teaching requirements, just to be present and to do this painting. That's what got me into college teaching.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's an interesting idea.

GEORGE RICKEY: It was the first grant of that sort made by Carnegie. It was really almost the beginning of artists in colleges. You see at that time I think you could count on one hand any practicing artist in America on college faculties. There was Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry in Wisconsin; I think there were one or two others, and myself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, Wood. That's funny because the man who was responsible for that is Stoddard who's at NYU. He was out there.

GEORGE RICKEY: Was he president of Iowa then? Or was he a dean or something?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I don't know if he was president, but something very high. Wood was a family friend of his for years and years, and all his kids had been painted and drawn by Wood.

GEORGE RICKEY: And he got him on the faculty?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

GEORGE RICKEY: And then later Lester Longman went there as head of the department. There was a feud, you see, between Longman and Wood, and Wood I think left rather soon. There was already a division between regionalism, which was a tag, and real art which was what Longman thought he was classifying.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like the year just doing the mural?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I enjoyed it very much. And I liked this college life. It was my first intimate contact with an American college. It was quite a civilized college. The president was a man called Brewer, a Dartmouth graduate who had gone to Paris at the same time as Alfred Barr, Henry-Russell Hitchcock – a whole group of young college boys in the first post-war generation. He had this exposure to Europe and came back and did something with it. He came back and went into publishing. It was a firm called, I think, Brewer, Warren, and Putnam. He had inherited some money, and in the course of that he became acquainted with a lot of writers including Sandburg, Sherwood Anderson – who else? Gertrude Stein. And when he became president of the college, he began inviting these writers to come through. Oh! Ford Madox Ford was another. Ford Madox Ford became writer in residence with a Carnegie Grant at the same moment I became painter in residence. We were

colleagues there for a couple of years. So at one time I had quite long intimate talks with Sherwood Anderson. Not quite as intimate with Sandburg, but I saw quite a lot of him. Various others like that. He also started a writers' conference. I think it was one of the first of these writers' conferences they now have so often everywhere. You see, this was '37, '38, '39. I painted my mural and inevitably, because I think I was a teacher by volition and by instinct, I got into some drawing and painting classes. The other art person there was teaching art history. Harris Prior, whom you may know. We went there at the same time. He said, "Would you mind teaching a drawing-painting class?" I said, "Not at all." So I began teaching.

PAUL CUMMINGS: This was your first studio course?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. After two years of that I took a year off and stayed in Michigan. Got a little cottage near the shore of Lake Michigan and just lived more or less in solitude that winter – thinking, drawing, painting. Then because of circumstances – somebody had to leave – I taught in Kalamazoo College and also ran the Kalamazoo Art Institute for about six months.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was that like? A new kind of adventure, wasn't it?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well it was a little sort of civic enterprise running on a shoestring with exhibitions and art classes. I taught the painting class. They had exhibitions, some were quite interesting. The person whom I replaced temporarily was Wilke, who was having immigration trouble and had to leave the country and return in order to get an immigration visa. I took over these operations until he got that all arranged – I think it was six or eight months. He had to set up some exhibitions there, so that part of it wasn't too arduous. I had to add to it, but there were some very interesting ones he had set up, one of which I remember was Feininger. Then I was unemployed and once again living on what I'd saved.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's an interesting sequence you had.

GEORGE RICKEY: I lived very modestly. I rented this cottage for eight dollars a month. It was a summer cottage I rented through the winter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Man, it must have gotten cold.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I had a little stove, and I had half a ton of coal outside. I look back on it as a very pleasant time. Then I was asked to be artist in residence again at another college. This time in Galesburg, Illinois – Knox College –, again with a Carnegie Grant. I went there in the fall of '39 and again to paint a mural. I was there one year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But didn't you do a post office mural at one point?

GEORGE RICKEY: While I was at Olivet I did a WPA – whatever it was – post office mural. But that was simultaneous. When it got to the point where I actually had to get it on the wall, I took a leave of a few weeks from Olivet and went down to Pennsylvania and finished it and adhered it to the wall.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is it still there, do you know?

GEORGE RICKEY: I believe it's still there. Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania. Then Galesburg, and there again I taught as well as doing painting. As that drew to an end, still another Carnegie grant proposal came to start an art department in Muhlenberg College in Allentown, Pennsylvania. I took that job, and by this time I'd had quite a bit of experience of college and of college teaching.

PAUL CUMMINGS: well, this was getting into the forties?

GEORGE RICKEY: This was 1940. So having finished Groton in 1933, some time in Paris, some time in New York, two years at Olivet, a year off, a year in Galesburg, you see, it brings us up to 1940. How the pattern was college teaching, but continuing all the time to paint. But this was supporting me all the time – not in wealth, but it supported me all the same. I had contact with New York, but I was not part of it as the WPA people were. I'm trying to think whether I had a studio in New York while I was at Olivet. Yes, I did. A studio in Union Square on Fourteenth Street that I must have got about 1935 or '36 and kept until, I think, '41, '42. It was in a building just off Union Square on Fourteenth Street upstairs over a clothing store. It had one other artist in it when I rented the space. It may have been 1935. I had that studio a long time. Kept it all through these other travels. Thirty East Fourteenth Street. When I was there, the only other tenant was Kenneth Hayes Miller. And then it began to fill up Arnold Blanch, Doris Lee, Kuniyoshi, Morris Kantor, Harry Sternberg.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All the League people.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, and pretty soon it was full. Whitney Darrow, Jr., also. I kept that until the time I went into the Army, and then I gave it up. I sublet it or something at one time to Lily Harmon. Does that name mean

anything?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

GEORGE RICKEY: Who married Hirshhorn. I went in the Army from Muhlenberg, and I think I kept it all that time until the boom came down. So I always had a place a'terre in New York - even when I was at Muhlenberg.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how much use did you really get out of it?

GEORGE RICKEY: Vacations. You see, I'd return to New York for summers, vacations, and I had it when the war broke out. So I had this New York life from 1934 until 1942. Eight years. All these expeditions out into the Middle West or to Pennsylvania, but always keeping my foothold here, seeing people, but never being in the main stream, which at that time was the Project. Another person that had his studio in this building was Rico Lebrun.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Gosh, they were all there weren't they? How well did you get to know the people from the League who had studios there?

GEORGE RICKEY: Arnold Blanch and Doris Lee I got to know very well. Kuniyoshi I knew pretty well. And at that time I rented a house in Woodstock. This was 1934. That's where they all went in the summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were still in Paris in '34, weren't you?

GEORGE RICKEY: It must have been '35. I think I got the studio in '35, and I think I rented my house in Woodstock in '35 and had it in '35 and '36, and then went off to Olivet. That's how it must have been. Some of those people I still know. My sister lived in Woodstock - my younger sister who paints -, so whenever I go there I see Doris and Arnold. That's that pattern, you see. Now that's not very intimate, it's a kind of sketch of how the geography went. I was painting all this time, quite seriously and more and more with an interest in a kind of expressionist statement having, I think, sort of expunged most of the traces of Lhote. When I went in the Army, I prepared a shoe box with paints in it, and after I was in I got somebody - it may even have been my mother - to mail it to me. I had it in the barracks as soon as I got settled. After a shift here, a shift there, I finally got into a situation in Denver that I knew was going to last for several weeks, so I had this shoe box sent to me, and I began painting right there in the barracks. I'd already been very much interested in portrait painting, and I painted a number of portraits here and there and did quite a bit of painting on paper, on pastel paper, which goes very fast. I began doing that because I thought, "I will keep painting as long as I can no matter what." I found that perfectly possible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do in the Army? You know, I think it's wild that you could continue painting there.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, in a way I was very determined. This little shoe box I could pack away in my barracks bag. Nobody cared. I could always pin up my charcoal paper on the door, and I'd get some soldier to sit for me, and I'd paint. What did I do in the Army? I got high scores in the mechanical aptitude tests, and I was shunted into gunnery maintenance, aircraft, for turrets, machine guns on aircraft.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's amazing how many artists were in that.

GEORGE RICKEY: It was full of artists. They all got high scores in these mathematical things because many of the problems were fundamentally visual. This was unskilled without their realizing it. You know, they thought they were testing one thing, and actually they were testing another.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've talked to two or three people who went in the Army, and that's exactly what happened, the same kind of aptitude.

GEORGE RICKEY: A great many of the tests were such things as showing you a pile of boxes, some of which are hidden, and you have to count how many are really there. Or they'd show you a flat diagram and then a folded up figure made by folding up the sides of that diagram, and you had to match them letter for letter. You see, artists are really already trained.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They do it subconsciously.

GEORGE RICKEY: They can visualize. Also a lot of artists are mechanical; it was not just Leonardo who was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. That's very interesting. So you did that for how long?

GEORGE RICKEY: Three and a half years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where? In this country?

GEORGE RICKEY: All in this country, although I was on the point of being shipped out once or twice. But chance plays a very large part, and I was sent to Denver to this gunnery school. After having been taken to the train to be shipped overseas, they lost the papers, and so I was held back and became an instructor. I remained an instructor for the next three years or so. Actually in the end I became a computer specialist. You see, I went further and further in these rather highly specialized mechanical and electronic things. I was quite good at it, teaching maintenance and operation and trouble shooting. Then the last year of the war, I was in Laredo as a specialist on a gunnery air field. In '45 came the end, and they got rid of me pretty fast because by this time I was already thirty-eight years old. You see there was a point system for discharges, and I think that age was a factor. By October of that year I was discharged, and I went straight back to New York. I had wanted for some time to try a little academic art history to see what it was like. I had friends who were in the Institute of Fine Arts at NYU, and I enrolled there for a year on the GI Bill as an art history student. That was the first art history I'd ever studied, but I had taught it. By this time I'd read a lot, and I had a lot of books.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was it, going to art history after you've been there in a sense?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, there were these Germans. I was very interested in their method. Some of it was good; some of it was terribly disillusioning because they were so ignorant about certain things. They were terribly ignorant of technical matters and sometimes drew impossible conclusions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well you had years of experience as a painter.

GEORGE RICKEY: I can remember a man called Weinberger who taught a museum course, and we were looking at Titian's Reclining Venus at the Met. Somebody asked him about this line that runs right across the middle, and Weinberger said something about it once having been cut or something like that and repaired. I said "No, I don't think so. That's as wide as the looms were." Which is the answer. I knew that, you see. He didn't. This sort of thing appalled me - that they should give answers. If he said he didn't know, that's all right. But to give an answer which is wrong shocked me a bit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's very hard for them to say, "I don't know."

GEORGE RICKEY: I took a nineteenth century course with - let's see, the man who went to the Albertina - Benesch, and this bothered me a lot because I really knew a lot about the nineteenth century by that time. I realized that if I hadn't known a lot already, that it would have ruined it for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

GEORGE RICKEY: He made it so dull. Here was all this marvelous stuff, and he talked about it in such a way that it lost all its luster. But I did note one thing which amused me very much. That there was a kind of subconscious Freudian response in his discussion of paintings between prominences and recessions in the configuration of pictures. Once I got on to this, it was terribly amusing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think he ever realized that that was what he was doing?

GEORGE RICKEY: No. That was the conclusion I came to, you see, I suppose a kind of gestalt. That was that brief time at the Institute, but I came in contact with a lot of art historians then. Many of whom I still know, many of whom are my friends. It was a very valuable exposure, really.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think it is that art historians tend to pour lead over so many things? Lack excitement.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well I think a lot of them don't like art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do they become art historians?

GEORGE RICKEY: Because they like that particular kind of digging. Of course it was. It still is relatively virgin territory. It hasn't been picked over like English history for a hundred years. Art history is such a recent invention. I think it was invented by the Germans and brought to this country really at the time of war. They were refugees and they were all at the Institute. They go at it in this methodical, scientific way, often trying to avoid value judgments, quality, responses.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I think ultimately that trips up your scholarship, doesn't it?

GEORGE RICKEY: I think this was one of the good things about Berenson - that his principle was: you must absolutely soak yourself in the undisputed works of the master until you feel how it is, and then it is connoisseurship, you see. Then you begin to know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know. You really don't get it from compiling statistics, which is the Germanic style.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. They wanted always to trace influence, you see. So and so couldn't have thought this up himself; he must have gotten it from somewhere else. Well, of course it must begin somewhere.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's true. So you had a year there, and then you went back into teaching?

GEORGE RICKEY: I was back in Muhlenberg. I was there one more year, and then I took a leave of absence to pursue another interest, which was the Bauhaus. The Institute of Design in Chicago. I had already seen it before the war during a College Art Association meeting in Chicago. I would think perhaps it was the winter of 1940. I can't remember when I first heard of the Bauhaus, but I already knew about it. I went to visit the school, which was then on East Pearson in Chicago, and Moholy-Nagy was there. I met him, and I was very much impressed with the school because all this time I had been very mechanically inclined, but it didn't come out in my painting. There was no avenue for that, no channel in painting. It had come out in this work in the Army where I was really one of a small group of very highly specialized technicians. It not only came easily to me, but I took a certain delight in it, and I became after that very much interested in any aspect of art which was related to mechanical configuration which, of course, included Calder and movement and so on. Not only that, but also in design, product design and so on, not as industry but as art. First it influenced the teaching I did at Muhlenberg. I was in a position to hire some faculty, and I tried to hire somebody who had been at the institute of Design, and I found that there was a fantastic shortage of people with any training of this sort. That made me think that if I can't hire people to do this, I'll go to the school myself. So I took this leave of absence, and I had in the meantime married my present wife. I'd been married once before, and that didn't work very well. I kind of skimmed over that. But I married Edie in the spring of 1947. Then we went off to Chicago. I still had the GI Bill and she went to work as a secretary. I quit Muhlenberg. I took a leave of absence first, and then I quit. We had this really very interesting part of a year in Chicago - we had already decided that we would go to Europe in the early spring. Once again we had just a little money in the bank. Not enough to justify this trip, and we committed other follies. Max Beckmann was in St. Louis at that time, and Perry Rathbone was director at St. Louis, and I'd known him since he was in college. We visited now and then. I liked Beckmann very much and had bought a painting of his the year before. He was doing portraits then, and I thought, "Well, you know, we should really get him to paint Edie." So here we were without a job, going to Europe, and I got Beckmann to paint Edie and to let me pay for it on time. So in April of '49 we went off to Europe. She had never been to Europe before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mention the College Art Association. Had you been active in that or a member for a long time?

GEORGE RICKEY: I'd been a member. I must be one of the oldest members because I first went to meeting before the war. I can't remember the very beginning, but it must have been '39 or '40. Could even have been '38. I know I was already a member when I went from Galesburg over to Iowa City and visited Lester Longman in the art department there. In fact I may have become a member as soon as I began teaching at Olivet. I may very well have gone to a meeting in Chicago or somewhere in the winter of '38. I can remember the big fights between Lester Longman and all the rest of the art historians and their resentment at having artist members. You see Lester Longman was already committed to an artist-populated department in Iowa long before the war and had begun hiring artists. Also he captured from the College Art Association their magazine called Parnassus and took it out to Iowa and edited it. All this was going on then. I wasn't any power or anything like that, but I was going to meeting and there were of course people I knew because it was a small world. This meeting in Chicago before the war when I visited the Institute of Design got me out of Muhlenberg and to Chicago. Then came this adventure of going to Europe and I was trying desperately to get a job for the fall. By this time I was a college teacher and was quite well known.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But doesn't the College Art Association help in this?

GEORGE RICKEY: They now have a placement bureau, but they didn't then. All this was churning around at the meetings. Before 1945 this was all terribly small and meager. It was only after the GI Bill that it got to be so tremendously expanded. I had known Henry Pope from Indiana for two or three years - I think we had been on committees together. He was looking for a design teacher, and somebody had proposed that he hire me. I got a telegram on the boat hiring me for next fall term, so I was able to go to Europe knowing that I had a job to come back to. That was a very happy circumstance.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let's talk a second about the Institute of Design in Chicago. What did you do?

GEORGE RICKEY: A sort of cram course. They have what is called the group studies, and this is what interested me. I'd read everything there was written about it and had observed it a little and had talked to people who'd had contact with it. I wanted to see how they did it, very much with the idea of translating it into terms of college teaching. But also because I was interested in it as a kind of outlet for myself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, also it was a quest towards a solution to your own problems.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, which were there. I had mechanical drives but n mechanical outlet. This seemed to be an

area in which art and sort of mechanical configuration overlapped. So I enrolled as a student but with all kinds of special privileges. They let me overlap a lot of courses. I really was taking two years in one or something like that. I was older than a lot of the teachers, much older than most of the students, and often was a sort of confidant of some of the faculty when they had terrible rows.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've talked to some of the students there, and they said it got to be quite exciting at times.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. So although enrolled I think everybody knew I was there as an observer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you were a part of it but still –

GEORGE RICKEY: Detached from it. I wasn't looking for a degree or anything like that. It was a very interesting time. Chicago has always interested me as a city, and some of the students were really very, very bright. In fact kind of the pick in this country of the people with that sort of inclination. Some have gone on into architecture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you find it an exciting place to be, the surrounding and the people?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well partly exciting, partly a disappointment. Just like Oxford you see because it wasn't as good as I'd hoped. I thought some of the level of criticism was appalling, and some of the teaching was very bad. But it didn't prevent me getting a great deal out of it. I learned a great deal about Bauhaus methods, strengths and weaknesses, etc. Moholy had died, and he had been replaced by Serge Chermayeff, a White Russian who had gone to England. He'd gone to Eaton and in many ways out-Englished the English. He had done one or two rather interesting buildings in England.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was an architect, wasn't he?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. He then had come to Brooklyn College and then been given this appointment. He was brilliant but a terrible administrator I think as far as relations with people were concerned a disaster, very vain and terribly snobbish. I was British enough so that he never tried to snob me, but he was ruthless with these Middle-Westerners. Shocking sometimes. He had tremendous verbal facilities, and he could just talk circles around the poor kids. He got into one row after another, and the place really just began falling apart. I don't think I ought to go into the gory details of this, but –

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've gotten all those from someone else with their interview.

GEORGE RICKEY: This marred it a bit, but it made it lively, too. I think that it raised questions in my mind about the whole method and how effective it was. Of course I couldn't compare it with what actually had gone on at the Bauhaus, but I'm not sure that at that time it was so different. In the Bauhaus they had rows all the time, too. I still think that the foundation course is the best part of it and was probably the best part in Germany under Albers and Moholy, under Moholy here, and then under these second generation teachers that were American trained but had really a rather good understanding of some of these things. But the transfer after the foundation course to the particular disciplines – to architecture, product design, visual design, and so on – was terrible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well it just didn't transfer. You see here were all these marvelous Bauhaus exercises, some of them were really lovely problems and producing very interesting work. Yet students forgot all that as soon as they went into printing or product design. There didn't seem to be the master intelligence to make use of the first four semesters, or three semesters in the later studies. It seemed as though they forgot all of that and then started over learning architecture or something. I have a feeling it was the same in Germany.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because all their head masters were quite individualistic, and some were great.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. You see, what you learned from Kandinsky or Klee didn't really affect at all what you did in stained glass later. I've just seen the great Bauhaus exhibitions in Stuttgart.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's going to be in New York.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. There again the studies and the foundation forms are brilliant and what came after is – a lot of it – pretty ordinary, and they have an exhibition of the work of Bauhaus students. It is appalling.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the Bauhaus didn't really produce anybody, did it?

GEORGE RICKEY: There are about three. Max Bill is probably the most notable. He was a student. Albers was briefly a student, but he was already thirty-two years old when he went there. I think Herbert Bayer was a student for a short time. Or was it Breuer? I think it was Herbert Bayer who was briefly a student. Fritz Winter the painter. To my astonishment Wols had two little picture on the wall, so he must have been there briefly. I don't

know what connection there was between Wols and Klee. But in general, this sample of student work was terrible. And no sculpture at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

GEORGE RICKEY: You see, they had Gerhard Marcks who taught. There wasn't any sculpture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do they have of Max Bill? Painting?

GEORGE RICKEY: Oh, no. Pardon me, apart from Max Bill. Max Bill they gave a room to. And, oh yes, Max Bill was sculpture. But apart from that there wasn't any. It's really quite interesting that all the art education in the world has been affected by the Bauhaus, but it hasn't produced any artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think it has produced commercial artists though.

GEORGE RICKEY: It has affected commercial art, but I don't know of any commercial artist apart from Herbert Bayer - if he was one - and one or two in Germany who were Bauhaus trained.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened to all those people then?

GEORGE RICKEY: They just went back into the woodwork.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's extraordinary.

GEORGE RICKEY: In this respect I think that the Institute of Design probably has a better record. I believe Moholy made some comments about the United States being the natural climate for the Bauhaus because of the higher industrialization, and the raw materials, and mass production, and so on. There may be something in this. But under Chermayeff this all fell apart again. He left after terrible rows, with the faculty resigning, and people insulting people, and so on. It was taken over by the Illinois Institute of Technology - where Mies Van der Rohe was - which was across on the other side of Chicago and where they got the sheltering umbrella of a degree-giving institution. That apparently is where it still is but I think immensely diluted or so I've heard. I was there in a moment of crisis, and for me it was very interesting. I think it was an important moment for me because I was out of teaching into observing teaching, and I was in this sort of art/ design/mechanics climate for a year or so. It was when I got back from Europe in 1949 that I began working with movement, and I think that all that timing was in some ways just right for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Then after Chicago you went to Europe?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, for about eight or nine months.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do? Just travel around?

GEORGE RICKEY: I traveled around. It was very soon after the war; everything was rationed still. The important thing there really was that I spent a month in Florence. I just went and looked at Florence every day. This was a kind of pay-off for my time at the Institute in New York because I'd had these courses with Friedlander and Offner on the Renaissance. So I could see Florence now with a great deal of knowledge and a kind of connoisseurship that I hadn't had before. I just loved it, and I still do and find not the slightest conflict between that and what I do now. It was immensely nourishing to me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the painting at this point? Were you doing less painting?

GEORGE RICKEY: I decided for those six or eight months just to look. I didn't try to do anything. When I went back to Indiana in the fall to teach, I was painting. I was still painting in the expressionist style, but three months later I was already making mobiles. That was something transitional, you see. I didn't renounce painting; I just began doing something else as well. And for a time there was quite an overlap between the constructions I was making and the painting. I used color a lot.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the constructions?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So they started in '49?

GEORGE RICKEY: '49.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you think they started?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well partly the explanation could be the grandfather who was a watchmaker and the father who was a mechanical engineer. I got high mechanical aptitude scores in the Army and was interested in the Bauhaus and went to the Institute of Design. I had tried to institute courses at Muhlenberg, which combined design with aesthetics in a way and then got a job teaching design at Indiana. I was hired there not as a painting teacher but as a design teacher.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you really hadn't made three-dimensional objects until then.

GEORGE RICKEY: I did at the Institute of Design, you see. That was part of the course. But before that just a few little odds and ends. Maybe as part of teaching or as demonstrations or something like that, although I had quite an understanding of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But nothing that you kept?

GEORGE RICKEY: No, I have no relics from that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were the first mobile objects then?

GEORGE RICKEY: Structures of glass of which, so far as I know, only one survived? It's out in Indiana and, I think, was fairly directly a kind of recollection or a reminiscence of Japanese windmills. I'd done one or two things earlier with that while I was still at Muhlenberg. So there were a few inclinations before '49. This would have been probably '47 when I'd made some thing with glass using sound - they could hang and blow in the wind. I don't have any of those though. Then I went to do it much more systematically in Indiana. I cut glass in shapes and hung them up on metal wire linkages - but using color too, using paint. They were articulated and also with sound - that was late in '49. I'd already made some before Christmas and the next spring I'd made enough so that I had an exhibition in Chicago. I can't remember the gallery. I showed with Reggie Neal, who is now Chairman of the art department at Rutgers. He was then in South Bend running the South Bend Art Association. I think that he showed paintings, and I showed probably six or eight because that was really my first public exhibition of those things. I should look that up because if you're going to have an archive, I should have that date. I can't remember the name of the gallery, but Reggie Neal would be able to remember. There may be a catalog, but I don't think I have a copy of it. Then I made one or two quite large ones. I showed one of these in Louisville in the Junior Museum, and I've got a photo of that somewhere. It was a phoenix, a great big bird - six, seven feet across the wing span. All articulated and all of glass. Maybe you've seen a photo of it. When I left Bloomington that was hanging in the basement, and I just left it there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It must still be there.

GEORGE RICKEY: I doubt it. I made those by just taking window glass. I taught myself to cut that glass in curves.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's very difficult in a curve, isn't it?

GEORGE RICKEY: It's just come to me now where I'd first seen that done. When I was at Muhlenberg, I visited in Philadelphia a show where they made not cut but stained glass windows for churches. I remember seeing the men cutting around curves over paper patterns with a drawing. I tried that and I began cutting these shapes out of glass and related them to each other and began making these structures with curves pieces of glass hanging in mid-air that could move in relation to each other and occasionally touch and make a sound. I did that for a couple of years, but of course I had some disasters, you know. One false move, and there's a month's work. Although I sold one or two, people were - and quite rightly - terribly worried about this fragility.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you pick glass to work with?

GEORGE RICKEY: I don't know. Maybe because I didn't know what I was doing. Just to see. It's substantial material, you know. I at one point tried to do the same sort of thing in plastic, and it just wasn't the same thing at all. Didn't have the substance, didn't have the weight. I began balancing these things. I learned how to hook on to them a little bit the way you fasten a gem in a ring. Using devices like that, I got things so that they could move. I began to control the movement right from the start. Then I began trying other materials. I tried plastic, and it wasn't satisfactory at all. I worked a little with brass and copper, which were easy to join and so on. Then in the university dump, I found a piece of stainless steel, and I thought I would try that. It was a brilliant material, and I began to work with it and learned how to join it. I made several pieces, and I've been with stainless steel ever since.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting. So in a way there's been a light color thing all the way through the sculpture.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I think that probably comes out of having been a painter, so I don't think all those painting years were thrown away. And although I think the visual configuration is still secondary to the ordering of movement, I don't ignore it either.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now you went to Europe for nine months at this point about now in your life. You spent time in Italy, and you came back, and you went to teach at – where? You were at the University of Washington at one point.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, that was just for a summer when I was still at Muhlenberg. That's when I met Tobey. I guess it was '48 when I met him. I taught there that summer. I bought the watercolor two or three years later, probably 1950 when I went back there again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You went then to Indiana and to Tulane. All these places?

GEORGE RICKEY: I left Indiana in January, 1955, having been seduced into accepting the Chairmanship of the art department at Tulane. I was there in residence until 1960, but I didn't actually resign I think until '61 or '62.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like that? That was sort of a new academic situation wasn't it?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I was an administrator. It went pretty well. The art department was a mess. Its previous chairman had been John Canaday. He had been there one year and took a leave of absence. He said to me once that he just didn't make any friends, or he couldn't find anybody friendly or something like that... took his leave of absence and never came back.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that was a new kind of scene for you to live in because all the other schools you'd been to were in the Northwest or the East.

GEORGE RICKEY: My first experience of the Deep South except for an occasional visit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like that?

GEORGE RICKEY: Oh, I liked it in a way, but it was hard on me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

GEORGE RICKEY: I got ulcers.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? Trouble with administration or the life there?

GEORGE RICKEY: I ran into terrible difficulties. I was perhaps too conscientious about the administration, worked very hard at it, and at the same time being a sculptor made it a double life because it was while I was at Tulane that I began to arrive as a sculptor. The art department was fairly large and terribly disorganized when I got there. I tried to make some sense out of it, and I introduced a graduate program. I was able to get money for it, and the graduate program became very flourishing and with some success. I mean several Fulbrights and this sort of thing. I had passed up a sabbatical in order to go there, and they promised me a sabbatical in two years. So in two years Edie and I went off to Europe again. I came back to find that the university had decided to spend a lot of its endowments on rehabilitating these moth-eaten buildings, and without consulting anybody, had decided to start with the art department. It was just the most terrible, terrible mess. I arrived back from Europe to find that the building was just torn to pieces. No light, no water. Workmen streaming through everywhere. Probably less than a third of the classrooms usable and the students were expected next week. There weren't even office telephones.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

GEORGE RICKEY: This is the way they had planned it. Well, the sensible thing to do would have been just to walk out and say, "Let me know when the building is ready, and I'll come back, and we'll get some students." But instead of that, stupidly I worked sixteen hours a day getting improvised classrooms, improvised lighting, improvised water, having the office in my own home and dealing with the architects and the engineers who were making fantastic mistakes, blunders. Like misreading their blueprints and filling in where there's supposed to be a space. Things like this were happening every day. It went on for a year and a half. They never did finish. Finally they just got them out of there. Old men drunk on the job, workmen pawing the girls. Just everything. And I presided over this and kept the thing going. I endured about a year of it and then resigned the Chairmanship but stayed on for a year just teaching. I got a Guggenheim in 1960 and left. I got a renewal of the Guggenheim in 1961 and never went back. But in the five years that I was active, it became – if this isn't too modest – a substantial school which good students were coming to and were being recognized after they got out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you get the Guggenheim for?

GEORGE RICKEY: Kinetic sculpture. I was astonished at the renewal, but I'd already had this house, and we came up here. Instead of traipsing off to Europe for four months, I just got right down to work here. It's just gone a bit better ever since. I'd already had a show in New York – I think I may have had two shows in New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start teaching at Rensselaer then?

GEORGE RICKEY: I was on leave, and I had the Guggenheim, and they asked me if I'd come over and teach. I taught just one little stint for three weeks or something. It was a special project for architects. Then they asked me if I'd come back and teach one course, three days a week. I did that for several years half-time, and that was very nice. It was only forty minutes from here. I quit that at the time I went to Dartmouth about two and a half years ago as just a resident artist for a while. So that's the academic career.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Since you have had an enormous variety of teaching experiences on all kinds of levels and different academic situations, have you developed any kind of idea or theory or plan of what one can teach in art and what one cannot teach?

GEORGE RICKEY: I've never systematized it. You know, I've never drawn up a credo or anything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean are there things that you feel you can teach and things you can't teach, or what is your general philosophy or idea about it?

GEORGE RICKEY: In a way I think I've taught without a philosophy. I mean without any stated philosophy or any systematic conclusions. I think I have some ideas or instincts about dealing with students who are trying to become artists, and it has a lot to do with sympathetic response, trying to identify somewhat with what they are trying to do. Trying to help them do what they are trying to do, rather than give them something to do that is separate from that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But don't you try and apply a formula any place, or there's no particular kind of pattern that you always would give preference to?

GEORGE RICKEY: No, I don't have a system. That would be especially the case with more advanced students. Now with beginning students, like my students at RPI, I had plans. I had planned a sort of progression of problems, but I don't think I ever gave them the same twice.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of problems, for example?

GEORGE RICKEY: For the architects?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well the general idea was to try to sensitize them visually, to try to make them more observant and more sensitive. I remember, for example, I would spend perhaps a week on drawing a free form. Architects are always producing free form pools and free form this and that. I would show what you had to think about while you did that and how often it was done in a completely insensitive and mechanical way and how that was different from doing it in a sensitive and sort of dynamic way. I showed how you would draw a circle, a medium circle, and a small circle, and you could join them and have what looks like a free form, but it differs from a form that is drawn so that the curvature of its contour is constantly under change. Because if you do it with circles, there are certain parties of that contour that have a constant rate of curvature. In a very well-drawn free form, the curvature, the direction of the line is constantly responding to the will of the artist and results from this dynamic control of his. And change constantly. Not at a constant rate - at a constantly varying rate, and this produces a completely different sort of curve. If you're sensitive you can see it. That was part of that lesson, you see. I won't give you the whole lesson, but I think that would be a sample of the kind of teaching I was doing. Calling their attention to something like that, working on it until they could see it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How about with the painting students?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, once again, it would depend on whether they were very advanced or beginning students. If they were quite advanced and already had a direction of their own, I would push them further in that direction. Not try to correct their direction. I mean to try to establish - very often by the way of consultation - what it was they were trying to do and then try to get them to proceed towards a sort of excellence in that direction.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it's really a developing of whatever spirit they have.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, and in a way making sure they were deeply enough committed to it. I would draw on my own knowledge of painting - painting I'd seen and, of course, painting I'd done. I would often have suggestions coming out of that experience. For example, the difference between painting a dark color over a light ground and a light color over darker. Of course that has a tremendous effect on the color. And that, of course, has a technical rationale. You get one thing in Cézanne and the opposite in Rouault. You can base a whole color kind of canon on the placement of a light over a dark. It'll be completely different from dark colors over light. But I've always emphasized that there are only means, you see, these don't make it good or bad. I've always taught -

always emphasized in what I've taught and in what I've written that the means are still only means.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you still teach much?

GEORGE RICKEY: I'm out of teaching. It's with great reluctance that I stopped because I've taught all my life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You really like teaching?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, it was my trade. You see if I started in 1930, and I quit in 1966, I had taught for thirty-six years. I even taught in the Army, all the way through my Army experience. All the time I was teaching school, except for that last year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know there are some artists who sort of resent the fact that they had to teach or they did teach.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I was the reverse of the usual. Usually they're artists who have to teach, but I was a teacher who became an artist. My first job here was teaching.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was the only history that you taught, wasn't it?

GEORGE RICKEY: Except for the art history I taught later. Those three years it was world history, mostly European history.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are there any other things in the chronology that you think we should get into or discuss?

GEORGE RICKEY: That's really rather a question of whether I've left out something that is significant.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are there other relevant things, do you think? You traveled a great deal. You were in Mexico at one point.

GEORGE RICKEY: I've been to Mexico several times. I wanted to learn how the Mexicans made fresco. That was not my first visit. It was in 1939 that I did that, and I tried to establish contact with somebody who had worked for Rivera. That was very difficult to do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why? Was it because of politics or something?

GEORGE RICKEY: No, just trying to find these people. I went down, and there was a workshop; it's a kind of lithograph workshop. They were turning out a lot of propaganda, you know, there was always this in lithographs. I inquired and finally got the name of somebody called Pujol, who had worked as an assistant for Rivera. I made contact with him, and then I was very unhappy because it took so long for him to do anything. You know, he'd make a date and not show up and that sort of thing. But I finally got to the point where he would come, help me get the materials, show me how he mixed the plaster, show me how he applied it, show me how he applied the paint. I got him to take me right through their routine. I did this in the course of six weeks one summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you ever do a fresco?

GEORGE RICKEY: I did a fresco on a wall in the apartment. I've never painted fresco since. That was the end of it. You see, I learned how and then quit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've had a number of sculpture commissions. How do you like commission? Everybody seems to have a theory about it.

GEORGE RICKEY: I suppose if I disliked them intensely, I wouldn't take them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, but you've done them for the Singer Company, and Litton, and colleges, and for collections, museums, all kinds of things. Do you find they set you a more interesting problem than just producing work?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, it's a chance to do large pieces that I would only very occasionally undertake if they weren't commissioned. Now I have done very large pieces that were not commissioned, but they are very expensive. You lock up a lot of money, and so sometimes the chance to do something rather large gives you a subsidized opportunity to do something you want to do anyhow. A number of my commissions have been like that. I would never have done them if they hadn't been commissioned. That's the attractive part about it. Now the unattractive part is that it locks up a tremendous amount of time. It's a kind of slavery, contractual basis. Actually I haven't had too much trouble with that. One reason why commissions come - and I'm offered more than I take - is that I have on the whole apparently been pretty straight forward to deal with, and usually finish when I say I will and kind of back it up, you see. I'm not a source of worry to architects. At the same time I've

done pieces that they can't get anybody else to do. In a way I have no competitors in this. There are all kinds of other sculptors, but there's nobody living on this street, you see. Nobody else. And if they happen to want that -

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's you then.

GEORGE RICKEY: That's me. If they don't get me they have to then want some other kind of sculpture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How have you found working with architects?

GEORGE RICKEY: Pretty easy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's amazing. I've never heard anybody else say that.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I just haven't had too much trouble. They've been very compliant. On the Litton piece, they were almost deferential.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who is it that generally acquires your services for this? The owner of these buildings? The architects?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, let me think. I'd have to go through them. With Litton it was the architect. I did a piece for a shopping center in Detroit, it was the architect. For Hirshhorn, of course, it was Hirshhorn. I didn't have anything big enough for him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's funny. He usually likes lots of little things.

GEORGE RICKEY: He came into my show and bought three or four little things. Made everybody mad because they were the cheapest things in the show. But then he said, "Can't you do a big one for me to put in my garden?" I said, "Yes," and described how I would do it, and then about two years passed. I delivered it, you see, but he remembered something completely different. This happens quite often. But that's come out all right, and he's very happy about that piece now. Then he wanted me to do a great big piece that's now in Washington. Bigger than the piece at the Modern Museum. That was, once again, his idea, and that's for his collection. Now I'm doing a piece for the Omaha National Bank, and I think that that is a proposal from the designer of the interior, which is a firm in New York. I'm going to do a piece for the South Mall in Albany. That was a proposal from the committee in charge, which consists of Seymour Knox, Wallace Harrison, and d'Harnoncourt. And so that's not the architects, except that Wallis Harrison is an architect. But he's got a committee. I think my strongest root there is probably Seymour Knox. I did a piece for the State Employment Building in Albany, and the initiative for that I think came entirely from Alfred Green who is the head of that section in the state government. When he approached me about it, I tried to get him to take David Smith. I didn't want to do it. And I thought they should have David Smith for that. They went back up to Bolton Landing, and I think the price was too high. So they came back to me and asked me if I'd do it. So I did. Now I've been approached in Germany.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You did one big commission in Germany, didn't you?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, that was for the director of the museum. But I did another for Siemens. You know, that's like General Electric. I was approached about six weeks ago by a man just calling up from Düsseldorf and saying, "I'm Dr. Hinckel. We're building a building. We're interested in the possibility of your doing a sculpture for us and coming to Berlin. Can I see you?" So this man shows up, and when I mention his name to some colleagues in Berlin, their eyes widened. They said, "Well, he's one of the richest men in Germany." And it turns out he's the head of the equivalent of Lever Brothers. He's a soap man. So he came, and I may do that. He wants me to do one or two pieces. That initiative may have come from his wife who knew my work from I think the previous Documenta. So one doesn't know how it comes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What is this project that you're doing in Germany now that you've been involved with?

GEORGE RICKEY: I'm doing three sculptures for Documenta.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is that for the whole year?

GEORGE RICKEY: Oh, no. You mean, why am I in Germany? I just got invited to come. It's like having a Guggenheim in reverse. They just say, "Would you like to come and reside in Berlin for a year, no duties? We will give you a stipend. We'll give you an apartment. We'll give you a studio. We will pay the fare for all your family." And that's it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who does this?

GEORGE RICKEY: The German government.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really. So you're kind of an artist in residence in Berlin.

GEORGE RICKEY: That's exactly what I am – an artist in residence in Berlin.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do people come to see you and you go places?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, but I've no teaching duties. I get invited to nice parties, you know, a few receptions for this and that. I was interviewed by the press and so on. I've apparently got a kind of position, or the Germans imagine that I am somebody that, you know, that they acknowledge. This has come about through these exhibitions that I had – I think it was 1962 – and then through the last Documenta. Also through having appeared in various other shows since then. My work is quite well-known in Germany. I think in ways it's better known than here, although the circles are smaller.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why is that would you think?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They just liked it.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. The reaction was immediate. I had an exhibition in Düsseldorf and was almost immediately commissioned to do a piece for a park in the city. The Gartenbau director, who is the man in charge of all the gardens, said, "I think we have just been waiting for Rickey." He made a very nice speech. German sculptors apparently wanted this job, but they gave it to me. I can't explain it. But the whole German scene is much smaller than here, and it may be that they tend to be a little bit technical-minded or something. I don't know exactly, but I think that is what led to this invitation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting. When did you start the book on constructivism?

GEORGE RICKEY: '61. Took me seven years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why did you decide to do a book? Because you were busy making sculpture and teaching at that time...

GEORGE RICKEY: The University of California Press had been after me to do a book for some time. I had written one or two things before that they had published.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know you have essays in many, many publications.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, that sort of thing. They said, "Why don't you do a book on your own work?" Well, I didn't want to do that. But now and again, I'd get a letter saying, "How's your book coming?" This non-existent book! So finally I proposed a book because I thought it was a book that was needed. You see, nothing has been written in this area, or nothing systematic. We got up a dummy, my wife and I. I think in the fall of '61. They approved it, and they gave me an advance, and I went ahead and did a draft and sent it in to them. In the meantime the editor I had been working with there had left; somebody new had come in. He had no idea what the book was about and just backed away from it completely. I was tempted to give the whole thing up, but I thought I'd just go ahead and find somebody in New York. I went with it to Abrams, and Abrams I think was interested but wanted very much to see it just as raw material for a book in Abrams style. They proposed Milton Fox – you probably know him – and they said maybe we could collaborate with a European publisher. They put me in touch with agents of theirs who put me in touch with a publisher in Cologne. They looked at the manuscript, but I have a feeling none of these people read it. They looked at it. They offered to publish one volume of what should have been two volumes, letting the other volume wait, including bibliography. I didn't like that much, and they offered me literally peanuts. It was insulting after all this work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, but in Europe the royalties are just unbelievably miniscule.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, well this was even below that, you see. I just wasn't interested. Then I went with Braziller. So it was finally published a long time after it began. This was, if you like, an aberration on my part – I should never have done it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let's talk about some other things before we talk about the development of the pictures and the sculpture. You haven't said anything about politics.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I haven't had any occasion to. We're talking about art. (Laughter) Now what do you want to know about politics?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you had an interest in politics?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I feel it is proper for any adult citizen to have an interest in politics and I hope I have that much interest. But I'm not a political activist. I am an activist elsewhere. It doesn't mean I think I shouldn't vote. It doesn't mean I don't try to inform myself. I do. But I don't believe at all in making art a political instrument. In fact I think that's doomed to failure. I think that I'm just not tempted to go out and try to manipulate political ends except through the ordinary channels of citizenship. Now is that surprising? In a way I'm surprised at the question coming up. I mean you bring it up as though it were almost a standard question to bring up with artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it is. Because there are some who have been very active, you know.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, Rockwell Kent, for example.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, and there are people who've been very active in CORE, and SNICK and things like that. There are people who've been active in some of the ghetto projects, or people who have been active in more conservative political veins, and some who are absolutely nonpolitical, having no interest.

GEORGE RICKEY: I don't think I'm nonpolitical. I'm very interested in politics - after all, I'm trained as a historian, and I've studied political theory. I have some background in this. I'm interested in the election, and I think it's very important that I get an absentee ballot and vote. But I'm not interested in being an active part of the local Democratic Party.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've never been a club member?

GEORGE RICKEY: No, no. You see, I think I wouldn't be very effective in that direction. I think I'd be much more effective in other directions. I contribute. I think that one is free to do that. That is sympathy and support rather than activity, isn't it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. It allows other people to do things.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How about hobbies? I noticed that you've got lots of pictures around. You also have - what are these? Pre-Columbian?

GEORGE RICKEY: Pre-Columbian, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you collect a great deal?

GEORGE RICKEY: I wouldn't at all call myself a collector. I'm not. However in the course of these thirty years, I have acquired quite a good deal because in a way I believe in this regard in playing for money. If I like something maybe I ought to be willing to put some money on it. You know, it's kind of a test of interest. So I've acquired in the course of time quite a lot through just wanting to have an example and being willing to spend money on an example. But I haven't tried to cover any particular field, and I haven't tried to acquire cheap what will later sell, dear! I'm not in the least interested in trading I think it's just that I like to have around me a few examples of things that I like. I sometimes got things that I couldn't afford but got them anyway, like the Beckmann. And then I've acquired a few things through exchange, you see. I'm very flattered if another artist wants to swap with me. I mean, that would be true of Sobel. That would be true of Castellani. So what you see here is a mixture of what has been bought and what has been exchanged. The first thing I ever acquired is that still-life up there, which I got in Paris in 1933. '33 or '34. That's the first thing, first painting. At one point I got interested in primitive art. I'd acquired an Ivory Coast mask. I'll show you something I have in the front room.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The Northwest Indians things, and some of those?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well that comes of having spent that time in Seattle. I was very interested at that time and studied it a bit. And then at Indiana University, I taught a course in primitive art at one point. It was one of the very first. I got the totem from Carlebach when he was still on Third Avenue - you see, I got some of these things very early - for three hundred and fifty dollars.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? Not any more! I saw some gorgeous spoons.

GEORGE RICKEY: Two of those I got in London. You see, I keep looking. I keep my eye open. I'm very much interested in quality, and I have a few things that are very good.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You also said you have some things on loan to Williams College.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, my good ones. These are my left-overs here. They have Beckmann, Feininger, Sullivan. I've forgotten what all. Kirchner and some primitive art and sculptures. A Peruvian shirt that I got from Emmerich. That was something that I wanted, a whole garment. All that in a way comes out of my teaching

primitive art. While teaching it I got into it and had to learn a little bit about it. Then you acquire something, and you try to find out what you've acquired, and you learn a little bit more. I was in on this really quite early, especially with the Northwest Indian things because at the time that I was in Seattle – when was it? In 1948. Nobody wanted it. You could buy things for \$25.00.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Except in Europe. They knew about it, and they collected it.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well people knew, but there was no market demand. There was not enough of a demand to make a shortage. And there were no books. You see the books and the college courses have transformed the whole art market. Nobody writes about the effect of college courses on the art boom.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm doing that.

GEORGE RICKEY: Are you really?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

GEORGE RICKEY: It's just increased the reservoir of informed people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Fantastic, unbelievable.

GEORGE RICKEY: And even if they were only half informed, that still has a tremendous effect on the market.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because there are so many. That's really been your hobby in a sense, hasn't it?

GEORGE RICKEY: I have no hobbies. No, I don't think I have any hobbies because I don't have any spare time. You see if I have some time, I make some art. No, I think that this is an adjunct of my general interest in art. I'm not one of the artists who can't stand to look at anything but his own work, you see. We both know some who are like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. True.

GEORGE RICKEY: And I love having some of these things around. I am so pleased to have that totem.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a lovely one.

GEORGE RICKEY: And I've got something coming from Fontana. He proposed an exchange, and I have to go and collect it now. I'll go to Milan and get something, one of the slashed pieces. And that Castellani there, I think it's the first one in this country. I have a painting over on the wall there by the dining room table, of these little dots.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How were you painting in say, 1933 or '34?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I'd gone through a Cézannesque phase, which I think was in a way a proper study and part of my correction of Lhote.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He seemed to have been quite a strong influence.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, he was my principal teacher. It was a very clear message, and Lhote was very systematic in his structure of a painting in terms of organizing nature. You see, it was the academics of cubism. If a vase has a straight line on one side, it has a curved line on the other. It was like that, you see. And you have a big, a medium, and a small. It was a vocabulary. Very interesting and quite convincing, and not altogether useless, provided you don't submit to it. He had extracted it from his observation of classical painting, Renaissance painting. And this made it even more convincing. But just to geometrize Rubens didn't seem enough, and so I turned to Cézanne, and I read Roger Fry which was the only thing on Cézanne that existed at that time. I think I was probably struck at that time by Roger Fry and Clive Bell. I suppose they were the Greensburg and Rosenberg of that time. I think they were much better because they were better trained both in art and in handling language in a disciplined way, which in my opinion neither Greenberg nor Rosenberg are. I think they are such poor writers, and their meaning is so often terribly murky. But this was a kind of aesthetics of structure that seemed to me to be much more general and much more valid than Lhote's, you see, and was very much involved with Cézanne. And so I went through this Cézannesque time, and then I sought greater and greater freedom. I think I was still very much involved with nature, although I had painted complete abstractions by that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, you had? Because you mentioned landscapes.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, both. Cubist modifications of nature, but also I'd been in something purely geometrical. Then I reversed the procedure and painted completely free distributions of color over a canvas and then

superimposed figures on it, using perhaps – it's a little bit like a Rorschach technique: you see where the configurations of the paint suggest figures, and then I would draw in the figures and arrive at group figures in a landscape based on a completely free and non-objective distribution of color and value over the surface of the painting. This I was doing already in I think 1933, 1934.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had an exhibition of those early pictures in a gallery in New York.

GEORGE RICKEY: The Caz-Delbo. Yes, I sometimes try to forget that, but it's recorded. That's when I was still at Groton. I was reviewed by the Times and the Trib, and these were very much out of the Cézanne time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was your first one-man show?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you feel like?

GEORGE RICKEY: Exposed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Bare, bare before the public.

GEORGE RICKEY: I'm sure it was premature, but I went ahead and did it, and I supposed it has some value for me in the way of the degree of commitment. You see, if you've had a show like that, even if it's over-exposure and premature exposure, it still makes you feel more committed. So it may actually affect your determination to go on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who ran that gallery?

GEORGE RICKEY: A man called Caz-Delbo, long dead since. He was French, actually. It's like a Portuguese name or something, but I think he was French. He ran this slightly miscellaneous gallery and he gave me this show, and it was attended, and it was reviewed. That was sort of that. What was the date of that? '33. Then I went off to Europe. My showing in New York after that was with the Uptown Gallery group after I got back from Europe, which would have been in the winter of '34, '35. I showed with them for two or three years. Philip Evergood showed there; Prestopino; Roszak, then a painter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Leon Smith was with that gallery at one time. A little bit later.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. He wasn't there at that time. Paul Cadmus. I forget who else but quite a lot of those people. It was terribly miscellaneous, but quite a lot of those people in the end came to something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you go from the Cézanne and then the arbitrary color with the figures?

GEORGE RICKEY: More and more towards nature. When I had that studio on Fourteenth Street from '35, '36 on towards '40, I was painting more and more a kind of romantic realism and quite a lot of portraits.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I might even have some slides of them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you do portrait commissions ever?

GEORGE RICKEY: I had one or two commissions that didn't jell. I remember painting a woman in that studio – I've got a slide of it. I may even have the painting still. It was for some terribly modest sum – it may have been even as much as a hundred dollars. She took it home, but she hadn't paid. Later she brought it back because although she had liked it enthusiastically, she said, "I can't explain it to my friends." I didn't make any row, I just took it back. I had some experiences like that. But between 1935 and 1940 when the war came, I think I was painting in general more and more after nature. I think still as a reaction against cubism and abstract art. You see I was going just the opposite way from some other people in New York at the time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you doing still-life painting?

GEORGE RICKEY: I painted still-life, I painted figures, I painted landscapes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You'd set up a still-life and then do it?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the landscapes were from nature or from drawing?

GEORGE RICKEY: I already knew a lot about that at that time. That was Lhote, you see, these contrasts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's nice. You have all the nice strokes laid one next to the other.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, it's not just an imitation either. You see, I was searching for something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, it's not imitation, and there are other things brought into it. That's very interesting.

GEORGE RICKEY: That's 1933's. Now I think that as I went on I got over Cézanne, too. I think that I was trying in a way to find myself through a closer and closer study of – and manipulation of – nature.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I get the idea that the painting became much freer than this later in the thirties.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, it did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mentioned your interest in Beckmann. Did you know about the German Expressionists and those various groups?

GEORGE RICKEY: Oh, I think that by 1940, I knew a lot about it. I mean I knew Beckmann and Kirchner and Nolde probably. I knew about the Bauhaus. I knew Klee. That's a long time ago now, but you see in 1940, I was thirty-three years old. I wasn't a beginner. I'd been going to exhibitions in many places. I knew the Modern Museum. It had been going a long time by 1940.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So in a sense you've always been involved with modern painting.

GEORGE RICKEY: I think since that new English art group when I was just at the beginning. I think that was modern painting through English eyes. But I think that those people were already aware of the Cézanne tradition rather than the Ingres tradition. I think that's why I went to Lhote rather than to something else in Paris. I think almost from that first moment, that was the side of the fence I was on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That side that really wasn't academic painting.

GEORGE RICKEY: And, of course, Van Gogh was already very vivid to me. I can remember when I was an undergraduate in Oxford, I was buying these reproductions. Cézanne, Van Gogh, but I also had some other people, too. In fact I learned about people. Names I didn't know, but I'd buy the reproduction. They were quite cheap, maybe fifty cents. Quite good color reproductions made in Germany. They had people like Marquet and Frenchmen that were not Cubist, you see, and of course Picasso and so on. True, I was beginning to be familiar with them. I was already in that Modern Museum in New York by 1930. So I think that in spite of this English exposure and this conservatism and insularity, I was lucky in being pushed that way rather than this way. Why did I want to go to Leger in the early 1930's? You see, I must have known about Leger. I'm sure I knew of Matisse and Picasso then because I think one would know of them ahead of Leger.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious about your using the term "expressionism." Does that mean that your color changed radically from this? The brush quality changed?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. It's hard without an example. Now I think that distortion of the figure became much more extreme. I think that the quality of the paint became much more emphatic. All this paint, it laid on very tidily. In fact, because of the repetition of the stroke, in a way the laying of the paint is neutral.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because it is a very nice, even texture.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. Now, I would consider the quality of expressionism. One quality is that the laying on of the paint is in itself a value. That's why abstract expressionism is called expressionist, you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because it's all an activity.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I think that the brush work later became a good deal more energetic, distortion of the figure much stronger, and color much less realistic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: During the war you did portraits and small, portable things I suppose.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. Little landscapes, little still-lives. Some of them I wish I had. Still-lives of two or three onions – well, it kept it alive. Also I think that I extended my view of what painting was because I thought about it every day. I painted every day in Denver. I painted in the barracks first – I described that. But then when I came back as a teacher I was on a regular shift – sometimes the daytime shift, sometimes the nighttime shift. But I had time off, and I had a studio in town. We were on expressionism, weren't we?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

GEORGE RICKEY: I use that word, of course, terribly loosely, but I think that after this return to nature where I depended I think very much on observation of the model, but modifying it, then I wanted to modify it much, much more.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you still had to work from a model?

GEORGE RICKEY: I was still working as a point of departure, although also inventing out of my head, you see. But using figures and so on. I remember after the war doing a series of Jacob and the Angel – I did both etchings and paintings –, and I was thinking a little bit of the angel as a bird. You know, the bird and the man and Leda and the swan. There are so many things that are –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mythical.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, of the bird and the man. I modified both the bird and the man so that they were scarcely recognizable and painted very much in swirls and so on, filling the canvas. Who would I think of then? I could even have been thinking of Kirchner or somebody like that. Or Soutine, perhaps. Very free color and free drawing of the forms with allusions to nature rather than descriptions. This is how I would have been painting in maybe 1946, '47, something like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did your studying at the Institute as an art historian change your painting very much?

GEORGE RICKEY: I don't think it made any difference at all. It probably deepened my interest in art generally. I was able to get much more out of the masters, and I think in a way it gave me more resources. But I think it tended to confirm what I had, rather than in any way change my direction.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Then the late forties is when the sculpture began. When did you finally stop painting? Or do you still paint occasionally?

GEORGE RICKEY: I wouldn't say that I stopped. I just don't paint. (Laughter)

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well when did you start to do less painting than you did before?

GEORGE RICKEY: I suppose 1949. I still have unfulfilled commitment to do portraits where maybe I've done a couple of people in a family, and they want me to do the third. I just haven't done it, haven't done it, haven't done it. And I liked doing it. I wonder sometimes how I would do it now since I haven't done it for ten years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you make a lot of drawings when you painted?

GEORGE RICKEY: Oh, yes. I've always drawn. I like to draw.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were they sketches or studies or finished drawings?

GEORGE RICKEY: All kinds.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All kinds of materials?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, pencil, charcoal, ink – a great deal of ink with a pen – and with all degrees of roughness and finish. I still do it. As a matter of fact I've been intending to do it in Germany. At RPI when Eddie Millman's painting class had a model, I'd go in and draw a little, and I enjoyed it enormously.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How about the paintings of the thirties? Did you do drawings and studies?

GEORGE RICKEY: That would just be painting straight. But I did draw.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you draw as the sculpture developed?

GEORGE RICKEY: Well I draw for the sculpture, and also I make drawings. Often of plants and so on, without thinking of any relationship to the sculpture at all. In a way when I think of it, I miss it. I would like to draw more. But the sculpture is so immensely time-consuming, you see. It takes me so long to make a piece that time is always short. In the summer when I get away from home, traveling a little bit, I may draw more. When I was in Rome in '55, I drew quite a lot. I was in the American Academy, and I'd look out across Rome and make drawings. I'd go down to the beach and draw little plants.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You spent a year at the American Academy?

GEORGE RICKEY: No, three or four months. It was about January to August.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How'd you like that?

GEORGE RICKEY: I liked it. It was an interesting life. It's a weird place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I understand it's another kind of world.

GEORGE RICKEY: It's very isolated. It's exactly the contrary of what it is there for. It's not monastic because there are women and men there, but you could be there and not know that Rome existed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Maybe that's why it's not as exciting as the French or German.

GEORGE RICKEY: Of course the French Academy has this long tradition of Poussin. They've got somebody surprising who's head of it now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Balthus.

GEORGE RICKEY: That's it, yes. The American Academy has a different history because it was founded for architects, and it's dominated I think by architects and art historians, rather than by the sculptors and painters. I think they tended to be biased in the jury - probably still are - towards figurative art. But there've been very good people there. I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it a lot as a matter of fact. I've been back there since, occasionally, and stayed a little while. I think if I were offered a year there in residence, not as a fellow but as a kind of resident artist, I'd be awfully tempted. I loved Rome. We had a nice life, and we jazzed around and mixed in Rome, and a lot more than some of the fellows in the Academy did. But I worked hard. I made advances in my thinking. Not because of Rome, I think, but simply because of having the time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One other thing is, as we mentioned before, you've written quite a number of essays for various magazines. The College Art Journal had pieces, I remember, and Art International you mentioned you did a piece for.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I wrote a piece for the journal of the Association of American Colleges on artists in residence, probably around 1938, '39.

PAUL CUMMINGS: About the Carnegie grant?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes it had to do with that. That was probably the first. I wrote some things for The College Art Journal on the economics of the artist. I was quite concerned about that and the hours, and I tried to get the artists' hours down. I was on a committee that drew up standards for this, to try and get them down from the twenty and thirty hours a week the artists were teaching at some places. We did get it down to sort of standard of eighteen hours.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because they could put them in studio classes.

GEORGE RICKEY: Studio classes, and they'd tend to count it in terms of credit hours, you see, three for one. And there would be this poor guy in class for thirty hours a week. I think we got it to be accepted practice that eighteen was the maximum. Eighteen contact hours, which is only six hours of credit in a good place. Now other articles. Well, I mean, what is there to say? Somebody asks you to write, or you have something that you want to say, so you write it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've written it seems more than many of the other artists who write.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, less than Van Gogh, less than Reynolds.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean American artists don't write very much.

GEORGE RICKEY: Many American artists are anti-intellectual. That's one of the characteristics of our scene, isn't it? And claiming that artists shouldn't be verbal, and they talk and talk and talk and talk about not being verbal.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were never involved with The Club, were you, in New York?

GEORGE RICKEY: No. You see, by 1950 I was out in Indiana and making sculpture. I was already making sculpture by the time The Club started, and The Club didn't have anything to do with sculpture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: David Smith use to go once in a while.

GEORGE RICKEY: I think for two reasons: he knew some of the people, and he never got over the idea of being a painter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, those big drawings he did. Thousands of them.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. But he never identified with The Club.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious about the sculpture. I saw some of the pieces in the other room which were wire things and rectangles, but they were painted. Why did you paint the metal panels?

GEORGE RICKEY: Some of those are very old pieces I've kept. At the time the idea going through my head was tachism in four dimensions. Now you see "tach" means a spot. Mis-translated all the time. I was very interested in what was kinetic but not necessarily only sculpture. You see, I've never classified myself as a sculptor. I was interested in movement, whether it was painting or sculpture. I didn't separate them. And for quite some time, I was interested in the possibility of a kind of tachism in space, where you simply had spots that were free to move in relation to each other.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So as the sculpture moves, your color would be here and there and moving.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, and each of those spots is a part of a painting, a four dimensional painting. I did a number of pieces in which parts moved above each other in a plane. I did several in which there were arms with a fulcrum, radially like a star, and in the center, these parts would be movies in relation to each other, and it was very dense and very strongly colored. Then out here there would be spots that would be much less dense, you see. I did several pieces like that having to do with a concept of four dimensional painting, generally accepting the idea of spots.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting that the first sculpture you made moved, the glass things moved. You've never really made traditional, non-moving sculpture?

GEORGE RICKEY: I've done one or two odds and ends, just beating a piece of silver. Making sculpture is not my field. It's movement that's my field. It's just called sculpture for purposes of classification. It's a word not assigned by me or finally accepted by me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Couldn't you find another word that you'd prefer?

GEORGE RICKEY: I don't have to try you see because I'm not required to classify anything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you're a trained art historian in a sense. You just do it and let somebody else --

GEORGE RICKEY: Sure, you don't have to name it to do it. Others name it, but I think that I've tried to keep clear in my mind that my field is ordered movement. Whether it is in two dimensions, three dimensions, four dimensions, whether it is in color or non-color, my primary concern, my province is the movement.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How would you describe non-color?

GEORGE RICKEY: It's just the color of steel.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But the surfaces have been sanded. I saw in the studio things that come from a mill that have a very dull, lusterless surface. So that you, in effect, bring in light when you --

GEORGE RICKEY: I try to make the surface respond to light by altering the surface. But in a way, I don't care how it's altered. There's no design in its alteration - I want that to be purely chance.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean if you took the same piece with the mill surface it would be very bland in a sense. You would have a line and you would see the line. But when you texturize it you see the change of the light and the color.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, it increases its visibility.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It gives it another dimension in a sense, too, I think.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, I'm chiefly concerned with increasing its visibility. It has no special significance, that surface, other than to simply make it reflect more light.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The red one is the only one that's been colored, or have you painted others?

GEORGE RICKEY: I made three red pieces. This one, which was my first, I learned on. It was the first piece on that scale that I made. One is in Oakland, and one is in Washington.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you used other colors for it?

GEORGE RICKEY: Outside, no. This is possible to use outside. It's very limited, you see. I haven't been interested in the aesthetics of color outside, but in a kind of visibility. If you make it blue, it's wrong, you see, there's the sky.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You make it green, there's the grass and trees.

GEORGE RICKEY: And if you make it purple, it's revolting. So what can you make it? You make it the color of one of those poppies out there. I think that's the end of that, too. Perhaps with some modification between because you learn from one what to do in the next. But sometimes it is a maquette. Now one of the pieces that I have just done in Germany, I jumped from one to about fifteen feet high. The maquette was then really a study to see what was going to develop and also to show the people who were going to work on it what I had in mind when we discussed how to make it. But I don't have a system of making a small piece every time I make a big piece. I may make a small piece and then think, "Well, maybe I'll try and make this big." It depends on the complexity. I think the maquettes and the drawings are steps toward realizing the large piece. There's no fixed number of steps. Sometimes one can go straight from the drawing to the steel. Sometimes I will make a maquette, and then I might make a full-sized working model of one part of the big one that was difficult in order to see how to put it together. It's machinery, and so I will do whatever is necessary to realize the machine. Now one of the pieces I made in Kassel is a larger variation of what I had in the Whitney a year ago last winter when they opened. I drew it meticulously and with calculations to take to this factory. I'd never worked with a factory before. I've always worked right out here with helpers. But I couldn't do this in Berlin because I didn't have the equipment and so forth. So I drew it out meticulously, certain parts full-size, certain parts to scale. And with calculations. I calculated the weight. I calculated how much lead there ought to be, I calculated some of the moments and so on. Then they followed it, and it came out exactly. To their surprise and mine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've noticed that out there you have a square piece. It's vertical and goes back and forth. Is that a study for something?

GEORGE RICKEY: That's a study to see how that goes together and is related to what I have done for Documenta. If you can imagine two of those set so that one is here and the other is along side but half up, so that they're staggered on a yoke and that yoke on a post nine and a half feet high. And each of those squares is six and a half feet a side. And the whole yoke made so that it can rotate like this.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now that's a new thing.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, that's what I have in Documenta.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The fact that the whole thing rotates is new for you, isn't it?

GEORGE RICKEY: No, I've done it before. I've got two or three other pieces.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they're all sort of ceiling panels.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, that's what I had in the Whitney. Now I have for Documenta a very large one that becomes the whole ceiling of a room.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That must be marvelous.

GEORGE RICKEY: This is what I drew out so exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The ceiling for the room?

GEORGE RICKEY: I saw it, but I saw it a yard off the ground. I'll see it for the first time in Kassel next weekend. It's really quite difficult. It's going to be very difficult to hang. It weighs three quarters of a ton and the room is only a foot wider all around. I've got my helpers there with instructions. They've got to drill a hole in the ceiling and get hoisting machinery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And lift it up in its place.

GEORGE RICKEY: Nobody knows about this sort of thing - once it's up it looks as though it didn't weigh anything -, the calculations to make sure that it's strong enough.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You used the word "moments" a couple of times. What do you mean by that?

GEORGE RICKEY: That's a technical term in physics. A moment is the turning force of a weight on the end of an arm, and it's calculated by multiplying the weight by the distance. That is called a moment. The moment of rotation. If you want something in balance about a point, the moments must be equal on both sides.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Like a see-saw.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. It can be short with a heavy weight that will equal a long but a light weight. Of course I'm involved with moments all the time. Sometimes I calculate them, and sometimes I put the two weights on and then find where they balance. But I can calculate them. It's simple arithmetic, or you do it with a little equation. That's also true of the vertical one. It's related not to moments in time but to momentum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. You were in the momentum exhibition in Chicago?

GEORGE RICKEY: Oh, so I was. I'd forgotten about that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the exhibitions. You had so many exhibitions.

GEORGE RICKEY: I'm old.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do they do for you? Or what do they mean?

GEORGE RICKEY: A waste of time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do things ever look different when they're installed?

GEORGE RICKEY: Oh, yes. One learns a lot from that. I tell these kids that they should exhibit because it's not to sell or get publicity; it's in order to see what you've done in a completely neutral and isolated environment. Where you can see it as though it'd been done by somebody else. I think this is immensely valuable. You never quite anticipate how it will look when it is placed in a completely unfamiliar environment with the change of scale in the environment and the different things around it. Also other people's work around it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I was speaking of a one-man show.

GEORGE RICKEY: There, too, you see the whole thing as something completely different from home conditions. I think this is very good. But, of course, you have to do it. If you're in this as a professional, you have to do what the profession requires. I mean, who writes a book and doesn't have it published?

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about these big exhibitions like the Metropolitan Museum Sculpture Show in '51 and '52, Art in Motion in Amsterdam, Documenta? This was the second time you were in Documenta? What do they do for you except show you your work in relationship to other people's?

GEORGE RICKEY: You don't know what they do until you've done it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm talking about the ones that are behind.

GEORGE RICKEY: So the question really is what have they done? I think the one at the Metropolitan didn't really do anything except in a historical way. That was 1951, a long time ago and except for Calder I was the only other one.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

GEORGE RICKEY: In 1951, who else? Name him. Who else was there? You know, I find this all over - people started something in 1957, 1958 and talk about how early they were. You see, all this kinetic business was later. All of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's really post-war.

GEORGE RICKEY: Completely. Not immediately post-war either, you see. Denise Rene had her movement in '55. I think that's all that exhibition did for me. It's in the record that I was doing this then - for whatever that's worth. Now, exhibitions. Well, I suppose one could answer that it is conventional to do it. And that it is one's publication. Sometimes it can do an immense amount of good; sometimes it does no good at all. I had an exhibition two years ago at the Corcoran. It was a tremendous amount of work, and I don't think it did anything except to provide me with a number of copies of quite a nice catalog which was prepared here in this house. Not by them. They didn't lift a finger.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think they did so little? Nobody saw it?

GEORGE RICKEY: A lot of people saw it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is it just a museum where nothing happens if there's an exhibition?

GEORGE RICKEY: That's partly it. That was a big one-man show, a tremendous effort, and it almost killed me.

Almost killed my wife. And they were so laggard in everything and so irresponsible that it was past belief. We had cancelled it once before. It was supposed to have been a year earlier, and they had done nothing, so we said, "We'll cancel now, but get busy and get ready." Well, time passed and time passed and they did nothing. They didn't write out for the loans and made no provisions for shipping. We were doing this all here. My wife is just an unbelievable woman. So we cancelled again. Then against our better judgment we agreed to go ahead with a show half the size of what had originally been scheduled because we knew they couldn't prepare the space. And they still didn't prepare the space. Just to summarize it all, the evening the show opened with a dinner scheduled for 7:30, a kind of state dinner, I was still on a ladder in my work clothes at 6:00 trying to get things ready. And there was not another soul. They'd all gone. That's the Corcoran.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Their director just resigned, you know.

GEORGE RICKEY: Did he? Resigned?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, there was certain political maneuvering.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, when this is turned off I want to hear that! But you see, there's one show that in relation to the effort was just a total loss. Neither fame nor fortune came out of that. The pieces came back all wrecked, they lost parts of things. I still have several pieces that are incomplete because they lost things in the packing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've had experiences with big museums across the country that would curdle your ears. You just can't believe it.

GEORGE RICKEY: Now in contrast with that was the Documenta where I was invited four years ago, not as part of the American contingent at all, but through German proposals. In fact, I was invited to nominate somebody to invite an American contingent because they knew so little about it. I nominated Peter Selz who did it. They asked for three pieces, and I sent them over from here. One was the piece that is now at the Modern Museum and two others - a horizontal piece and another smaller vertical piece. I think I was sort of afterthought, not in invitation, but in placement. When I arrived and unpacked the pieces - this was about five days before the show opened - they still hadn't any assigned places for the sculptures to go. They just walked around and pointed to spots on the grass and said, "Will this do?" That's how it's going to be next Friday, I think. I've never complained about where I was placed. I've made it a principle of a sort. I was never worried that I was being hung behind the door or something like that. I felt if the sculpture is any good, they'll come and look at it wherever it's placed. So I didn't complain about this at all. The reason why they pointed out the spots on the grass is that all the places in the baroque ruin were taken up, and what was left was this enormous lawn. Well, the result of this was that my placement was the most prominent in the exhibition. Just by chance. At the opening ceremonies the crowd was placed in front of one of my sculptures. So everybody had to look at it. Then out on the grass was this very tall piece and then another piece. This was completely unintentional on their part and sort of a windfall on my part, you see. Whether because of that or in spite of it, there was a great deal of publicity. My pieces were mentioned in every paper that wrote about it in Germany and in France. These pieces are still famous; they still remember them. So that exhibitions did me a tremendous amount of good. For one thing, it suddenly jolted the Modern Museum - with whom I'd been on friendly terms for years - into the fact that I existed as an artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It takes them a little time sometimes. How did Germany discover you? You seem to have lots of people there who are interested in your work.

GEORGE RICKEY: In 1961 there was an exhibition of kinetic art, the first great international Movement exhibition, first in the Stedelijk and then in the Modern Museum in Stockholm. I had a piece in that, and I went and reviewed it for ARTS magazine. I had friends in Hamburg where I had several years earlier had a small exhibition at the Amerika Haus, and I was remembered in Hamburg. At that time I had given a talk at the art school, and I was acquainted with the director of the museum, Alfred Henson. So passing through Hamburg on my way to Stockholm I called on some of my friends, and I brought along half a dozen little pieces of sculpture. I showed these to Henson, and he was very much taken with them. He said, "You ought to have an exhibition." So it was arranged that the next year I'd have an exhibition there and in Düsseldorf and Berlin. I had the same exhibitions in those three places, and they got out an extremely handsome catalog with seventy drawings. Well that got a good deal of publicity and it resulted in this commission for the North Park in Düsseldorf. Henson said, "We've got to have a piece of yours here. Can you do a piece for this stairwell?" So that was done. I think a year and a half later I brought that piece back and hung it in the stairwell. And then he said, "Documenta comes up next year. I'm on the committee, and I've told Arnold Bode, the man in charge, that they absolutely ought to have some work of yours. Will you go and see Bode?" It was quite a trip over to Kassel, but I went to see Bode, and he was awfully nice. We all drank a lot of wine, and it was very chummy, and so on. Really a lovely evening. I had some photos with me, and he said, "Would you make us three pieces?" That's how I got into Documenta. In a way it resulted from my having taken these little pieces along, shown them to Henson, and one thing led to another. Since then I have been included through other contacts, personal contacts with artists. After the Stockholm exhibition where I met a lot of them, when I travel around I visit them and talk and see what they've

done. So I've been in a lot of group shows like this shows in the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, and I've been shown in other cities in Germany. One thing leads to another, and that's all there is. I don't have a public relations man or anything. Another circumstance was that the Modern Museum sent to Europe about three years ago an exhibition of American sculpture that was shown at the Musée Rodin in Paris. Then that traveled to Baden-Baden, Berlin, and I think Brussels. I had a piece in that very prominently exhibited in Paris on the lawn at the Musée. All kinds of people saw that exhibition, and when I go to Berlin now people say, "Oh yes, I saw works of yours when that American exhibition was here in Berlin." They remember, and that's how it goes. Unexpected, and it just happened. It's led me to the conclusion that if you're a serious artist, you do your public relations in the studio. That's the way I would summarize it. You don't get out and go to parties and wheel and deal.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's helped some people though.

GEORGE RICKEY: Well, if "help" is the word.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It doesn't necessarily maintain it.

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes. I've never gotten involved in New York in this way and certainly not in Germany.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I remember before those early pieces, there were lots of little rotors, almost related in a way to the one on the corner of the studio.

GEORGE RICKEY: That's just one element of what would be a great tower of these things. Thirty, forty feet high, made almost like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your use of line and the wires in the early drawings, there's a drawing quality involved. I may be reading drawing quality into something which isn't there.

GEORGE RICKEY: No. Those are supports – for me those are supports. For you they're lines. Of course I recognize that they're lines, too, but the reason why they're there is not because they're lines. The reason why they're there is that they have to support something. Later I got into combining the thing supported with the support, and the line disappeared. Then the thing that I'm having moved is the line, and that's how the blades come about. Then my feeling was that the natural extension of the line is the plane, you see. If you move the line sideways it becomes a plane. So what I've done with the line, I will now establish the equivalent of with surfaces, which is what I'm doing now. Then the further extension of that is to combine surfaces and establish volumes which are indeterminate because the surfaces of the volumes are never fixed. I've done that. I'll show you a photo.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The blades all seem to be three-sided. Is there a reason?

GEORGE RICKEY: Yes, that's the most efficient structure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, so this is –?

GEORGE RICKEY: It's an indeterminate cube.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All six faces move. This is a photo of a small piece isn't it?

GEORGE RICKEY: It's about three feet high. But these experiments out here with these single planes are leading towards this, and when I get back to Germany I want to realize that somewhat larger. I've already altered the internal structure. I can do it more simply, and I also want to have complete surfaces on both sides of the plane. Each plane had a good side and a bad side, so to speak.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Inside and the outside.

GEORGE RICKEY: It's like the lining of a jacket. That's really a maquette to find out how it works. It is still incomplete, you see. But they are having an exhibition at the Kroller-Mueller Museum in Holland, which they call The Structure of Silence... of something. The word "silence" appears in it. And they want three pieces of mine, including the cube. So I'm hoping to be able to get that done for July.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You're going to be busy.

GEORGE RICKEY: And I have to go back immediately. But having done that and having done these, if I'm not in trouble over Venice being postponed two weeks or something wild like that, I can get it done. This is really my chief objective in Europe – the thing I want to get done. So in a way I'm in production with these volumes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I have questions I'd like to ask you about people you know and have been involved with.

GEORGE RICKEY: Ask me. I'll think of some guarded answers about people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are there any artists that you've had correspondences with or that you write to a lot? I know that Wilke mentions that you've written.

GEORGE RICKEY: We've had a correspondence that's gone on since 1933. Thirty years!

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is there anyone else?

GEORGE RICKEY: None so extensive as that. I've had sporadic correspondence with some artists, sometimes very meager but quite important. Every now and then I'd write something to Ad Reinhardt and I'd get one of these beautiful little postcards back. Always very witty. Of course I had very extensive correspondence on account of my book, quantities. That goes into the Modern Museum archives. Every now and again I would write a letter to David Smith, but it would be about something in particular where I would hope I'd get an answer. Sometimes I'd wait, and then I'd get a lovely answer. But I think Wilke is probably the only one with whom there had been a really extensive correspondence over a long period of development in both ourselves and in the world we live in. Maybe one in a lifetime's enough.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *August 17, 2005*