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Oral history interview with Richard
Stankiewicz, 1979 June 26

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Richard Stankiewicz on June 6, 1979. The interview took place in Worthington, MA, and was conducted by Robert Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT BROWN: This is an interview with Richard Stankiewicz in Worthington-actually-Massachusetts; it's June 26, 1979. We-the Archives last talked to you actually in the mid-Sixties and perhaps we could catch up with you, so to speak, not only in your work, but you could give some-to begin with perhaps what was going on in '63, '64 were you making a move? Were you-what was going on in your life at that time?

RICHARD STANKIEWICZ: Well, in 1963 I had been up in the country here for two years, or a year anyway. And I was still associated with the Stable Gallery in New York, but things in a business way were slowing own considerably and it was shortly after-I don't remember the exact date-perhaps '64, '65, uh-nothing was happening with the Stable Gallery and so I withdrew from it.

MR. BROWN: Feeling that they were partly responsible for that?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Oh, yes, sure, oh yeah, I think it was a case of out of sight, out of mind or something similar. And so for quite a few years, I wasn't showing with any gallery at all, and did not until I became connected with the Zabriskie Gallery. I'm trying to remember the date when I joined the Zabriskie; it doesn't come to me. I would imagine it would be eight or nine years now.

MR. BROWN: Early '70's or late '60's?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: I would say 1970, as a guess.

MR. BROWN: Were you frankly rather turned off with dealers for a while; is that why you pulled out of Stable, or you wanted to just get yourself together more, or what?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: No, I wasn't really turned off by dealers. As a matter of fact I did go into New York one time and solicit, but the few dealers I did go to seemed to be full up, or to pretend they really didn't know who I was. This was rather a numbing kind of experience, and I wasn't being very happy at home, and I just sort of was depressed. It was a dull period.

MR. BROWN: This had followed quite a lot of activity and acclaim in the Fifties?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, uh huh [Affirmative].

MR. BROWN: Did you continue to produce, though, nevertheless?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: I did but at a reduced level.

MR. BROWN: But by and large your decision to go to the country, come up here, you felt good about even during that period?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes I think so. I don't know if I spoke to the Archives about the Loft Living Program. The A.I.R. struggle in New York. And how I was involved with that, trying to get it made legal for an artist to live in those loft buildings, which had been until then strictly commercial zoning. And the city, with whom we were struggling, played some dirty tricks and even after we arrived at a situation where they would make loft living legal, artists could proceed from there, they couldn't concede in any decent way. I began to be harassed by the fire department and so on, and I had a legal leg to stand on but I didn't want to spend all my time in court or struggling politically and besides I took it rather personally, and I thought, what the hell, if the city doesn't want me, I'll do without the city.

MR. BROWN: It really got rather down to your case too, didn't it? You had some unpleasant experiences with-?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, oh, yeah. And, as I said, I could struggle against it and I might even prevail but that isn't how I wanted to spend all my time. I had spent enough time on the A.I.R. effort and, not being political by nature anyway, that just about exhausted me, and then after victory to be hounded was just too much, and as I said I

tend to take those things personally. I can stand back and try to be objective but say to myself it does no good to have personal feelings about these things-they are part of the government machinery and politics and all the rest of that-but I can't help it. I really feel that it's somebody else and me, and if the somebody else is the city it makes no difference.

MR. BROWN: You had been a leader of the tenants' group trying to turn this around?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, not actually the leader. Jim Gehagen I think was the captain of the company but I did offer some effort. And Mark Lane toward the end gave us a hand too; I think that helped.

MR. BROWN: He was a very persistent attorney?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah. It's amazing when you come up against all of these city Hall types, and the police department, fire department, buildings department, and people. It's a shock to see that they are really like the stereotypes that you read about in fiction and partisan political pieces. Reading about people like that-it's not very convincing because it's so easy to make a paper devil and all that-but when you come up against them and see that they are real, it's too astonishing-

MR. BROWN: What, what-how would you characterize them? As you dealt with them?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, what do you call it in city politics? The machine kind of thing and bought-people and people who expect to buy and warped logic. I remember one of them was quoted-I think it was the fire chief although it might have been a lesser official-he was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying, "These old buildings-there's nothing in them except rats and artists, and the artists have to go." [Laughter] So, yeah.

MR. BROWN: You didn't then-you artists didn't represent then any kind of important economic element either, did you? At that time.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, we weren't perceived as doing so but I think actually we were. And I do think that the cooperation that the city has given and the promotion the city has made of the arts has come about as belated recognition of the fact that art in New York City is big business. Many, many millions of dollars. And when you talk about that many millions of dollars, then they notice. But in the Sixties-I think it was just the beginning of the-well actually the middle Fifties maybe-the beginning of the respectability of modern art in America. There was something you might call modern art in America before that. People like Morris Graves, Mark Toby, Arthur Dove, Stuart Davies, you know, these were the pre-Fifties modern American artists, but the category hadn't had any respectability. I remember going to a function at the Art Institute in Chicago in 1959 or '60; it was a big thing and I found myself in a crowded taxi cab carrying a group of New York art people and one of them was a collector, whom I don't remember. And even as late as that, '59 or '60, he was a man who couldn't be convinced that American art had any stature, that the only thing worth buying was European. And the fame or notoriety of people like the action painters, DeKooning, Kline, all of that as legitimate geniuses, if you want to use the word, they were not generally believed. Their following was actually quite small and it was only later that the legitimacy and, as I call it, respectability of American modern art, was achieved. Even in 1960, I don't think New York City had a clue of the importance of what was going on or had gone on for a decade.

MR. BROWN: And yet your own work had been favorably reviewed, or at least had quite a lot of interest in it, and it was, if not quite analogous to action painting, was made of found objects; was very abstract-

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: You think people came to look at it simply out of curiosity? Did you have a band of brave, a small band of collectors of your work?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, collectors. But I think you have to keep a proportion about things because in the whole world very, very few people, a minute fraction of the people in the world, go to art galleries or did. And very few of them were interested in avant-garde art. To which I think I belong. And so even if you had a following and if you had enthusiasts and collectors, they were such a tiny little group and in a place as big as the City of New York, even if you go two columns on the art page in the *Sunday Times*, that is not very much compared to the poundage of that big edition so you can't quite feel grand about it-a place in the art world.

MR. BROWN: Because the art world itself seemed rather small in those days, I mean the attention given it.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, and I think that, although it is much bigger now, it is still in proportion small.

MR. BROWN: So you felt you had done your battles in New York. Is that one reason or the principal reason that you looked for a place up here?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Things like that aren't always reasoned out.

MR. BROWN: How'd you happen to get up here? In this region, at all?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: I found my house in the New York *Times*. I really did. There was an advertisement in the real estate section and the agent who wrote it had the sense to be a little bit poetic about it and it attracted my attention and I called him up on the moment. And then came up and saw it and I liked it very much. Oh, you have to think about what you need even if it's in retrospect. I'm not good at thinking about what I'm doing or what I'm going to do because-but later on I see a few things that I have done and before I came to New York I was in Hawaii and on the West Coast and at the time I was painting more than I was sculpting and I was self-taught, but wasn't satisfied with reproduction of images, but had thought up the idea of the boundary of a rectangular canvas as being a universe unto itself and that everything in that rectangle should relate somehow and I wanted to make something coherent out of this general notion. And was having a hard time doing it. And it surprised me to read about Hans Hofmann in the commentary Clement Greenberg was writing about the Hofmann school. And so it seemed to me that that was the place to go.

MR. BROWN: What was it that surprised you? It must have done more-

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, if you live in your own world and you and you invent everything yourself and I never had any connection with the art world in any way; I thought that was a privilege for the special group and I was just outside and maybe I never did really get over that feeling but, so I invented in my own head this idea of the universe of a picture, being bounded and self-contained and all that and seeing that somebody else was teaching that-it surprised me, the way I suppose any sort of obsessive idea grabs you and you think it's-maybe you don't even think it but you tend to feel that it's unique, and when you find that it's not-

MR. BROWN: Was that exciting or demoralizing or-?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Exciting, yeah, it attracted me so I made the determination to go to New York to go to the Hofmann School. And it was not really going to New York that I did, but going to Hofmann. New York is where he happened to be. I had never been imbued with the glamour of the big city or the glamour of New York and what it meant-Broadway, the Metropolitan, any of that, perhaps just out of plain ignorance, I simply wasn't exposed to it. You know notions about New York and so it meant nothing to me; it was just a dot on the map. But I did go to Hofmann and I did find New York exciting once I was there and all that, so I spent the time learning and I went to France and I came back to New York and got involved in the Hansa Gallery and it was a very active time and it was-I learned a lot. And I sort of consolidated my ideas; a general notion of a synthesis of form and expression. I had my work cut out for me and then I wasn't young anymore as an artist. I didn't need to be eclectic to try this and try that, experiment with this, that, and the other thing because I had a direction and I was going; I had momentum. I didn't need the city.

MR. BROWN: This would be by the early '60's?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: The late Fifties, and Sixty, yes.

MR. BROWN: You felt you had gotten together. You had within you-you knew what you wanted to do.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes. I think this must be true generally of many artists; after all, after a certain period Picasso did not live in Paris; nor did any number of important French painters; they all went to the south of France, to the center of France or something. And they didn't need the stimulation, the excitement, the distractions of a busy city, intellectually, inspirationally busy. They knew they had work to do and they knew what the work was and all they had to do was do it and they didn't need the city to do it in. And I think something like that is what I experienced. I don't need it in exactly the same way; I miss being able to see the museum shows in a way and the galleries and quite a number of old friends, and I try to get back to the city quite a lot, but I don't need it to know what I ought to do.

MR. BROWN: What is it that you thought you wanted to do when you were ready to make the break from New York?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Just to continue what I was doing because I felt I was on a track and it was a good track-all I had to do was do it.

MR. BROWN: When you look back at the time before that, though, you still felt a need for external stimuli of one sort or another?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: You say before that?

MR. BROWN: Uh huh [Affirmative]. You were still in a-

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, it's not a question of-

MR. BROWN: You weren't consciously perhaps-

MR. STANKIEWICZ: It's not a question of thinking about needing the stimuli but I was certainly getting it and-

MR. BROWN: You were head of the group at Hansa Gallery, weren't you? Or at least you were very active in the Hansa Gallery.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes.

MR. BROWN: In a way you were synthesizing even then, weren't you? And yet you welcomed at the time the argument, the discussion, with all these other artists.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, it wasn't something I sought out as what was desirable. It was just, it was there. We had a gallery and these were processes that seemed necessary to make it run. And as one of the Huxley's said, "You can't argue with necessity."

MR. BROWN: You were really pretty underway by then, weren't you, yourself? Were there particularly close colleagues or very good friends at that time?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Mostly the Hansa group. Fairfield Porter I felt pretty close although we didn't see each other very much. I felt that we understood each other pretty well.

MR. BROWN: Did you keep up such contacts when you came up here?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: No, they pretty much lapsed.

MR. BROWN: What contacts did you develop here or what new kinds of connections with people or otherwise?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Not much. After a time I accepted a teaching position over at the University at Albany, and to a restrained degree I had to be involved somewhat with the people there, the faculty and students, the students particularly, because it's interesting to see how they react and what they invent, but I mean-have you seen Hilton Kramer's piece in the *New York Times* last Sunday on the Russian School?

MR. BROWN: Yes.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, I've had two or three students re-invent that whole school. [Laughter]

MR. BROWN: You have?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes. Giving them the figure to draw which they would do and then trying to break the figure down into spatial equivalents, which were not any part of a figure, and then simplify that and they all end up as Malevich. [Laughter] Not all of them; it happened two or three times. But there's some sort of inevitability in a process, sort of a recapitulation of the development of twentieth century art.

MR. BROWN: You find by and large that students are imitative, or in this case it was simply coincidental that they reached that same point?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, I'm sure that I steered them somewhat. [Laughter] Whether I meant to or not.

MR. BROWN: In your teaching, has teaching become very important to you? That's what, been 10, 12 years you've been there?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah. Yes, but at the same time I look forward to leaving it. I guess that's ambivalence, isn't it? Well, I think of medieval woodcuts, you see a figure and out of the side of his ribs comes a wisp that develops into a cloud and that's the figure of the soul; teaching is something like having a leak in you. You are really sort of draining something for somebody else's benefit. And I'm sure I get something for it, too, but oh, one day I'll plug the leak.

MR. BROWN: What ever you do get out of it is probably fairly small.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: No, the satisfaction is considerable, it really is.

MR. BROWN: You mean in seeing the students progress?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes and when you are able to get them to be enthusiastic and to sustain that sort of thing. They're not just plodding and doing assignments, but when they get fired up and they leap ahead, that's-it's a great pleasure.

MR. BROWN: As a teacher, how far can you carry them? Do you find, in practice? I mean, let's say those that do leap ahead, what is your role at that point?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Stand aside.

MR. BROWN: You take them through their paces? I mean the basics of design, construction-?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, there are several people teaching in the sculpture program. And we share the teaching of techniques and so on. I don't teach design. I've stayed out of it because I don't approve of it; I don't like the design idea.

MR. BROWN: Why is that?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: There is a little bit of the artsy-craftsy in it. There's a little bit of formula in it. Although the design idea I think purports to aim at structure and so on, I get the impression from the design projects I have seen that it's pretty superficial, and decorative, that composition or the lack of composition is much more serious and should hardly ever be divorced from what it's carrying; I mean if I were designing a truck to carry 10,000 gallons of milk, it wouldn't be the same kind of truck that I would design to carry 10,000 pounds of coal. And so the freight determines the form, a great deal. And if I were the kind of artist who would think to paint a tragic message, I think I would surely use a different kind of composition than I would use if I were going to paint some frolicsome idea. And to take a bunch of students into a classroom and say now I'm going to teach you design, or design, seems too easy and too, well, kindergarten.

MR. BROWN: One thing, it rather constricts the student, or can.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, I think he should be using his time for better things.

MR. BROWN: What is your role then at that point when he's using his time for better things? What are some of the better things? Are you simply available; are you quite an active participant? With the student?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: It depends upon the student. Uh, I don't have a method of-I try to be in tune with what a particular student-except in elementary procedures. If I have a group of people who are interested in welding, then I can line them up and say this is oxygen; this is acetylene; the character of that is this and the character of this is that. And you connect the hose this way-on these elementary levels you treat everybody alike but when they are capable with tools and they begin to produce some kind of idea, then I have to take them one by one.

MR. BROWN: Do you enjoy this at all, to a point at least?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, I get involved in it.

MR. BROWN: How do you reckon though that all that activity drains from your side, drains from you. What does it drain? Is it some of your energy, or-?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: It's not energy; I guess partly it's time, and partly an occupation with myself-I'm very concerned with myself, not in a greedy, or materialistic, or even I think egotistical way, but I'm interested in what I am, what I've been and what I'm becoming. And maybe involvement with numbers of other people makes me feel I'm being strangled. But this is probably the consequence of feeling all my life that I'm not one of the gang, you know, rather solitary really and so it's just an individual quirk.

MR. BROWN: Yet wasn't it in the mid-Sixties that you got a family, was that all up here?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: So you did have that distraction; how did that come about? Will you go into that a little bit? Does that mark quite a change in your life, or-?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah. I think it took a lot away from it.

MR. BROWN: You didn't see them as extensions or enrichments of yourself, your children?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Not much, no, I'm not interested in reproductions of myself in that way, and as in teaching, most of my students don't know what my work looks like, at the moment, and I don't usually display what I'm doing or even what I have done. I want them to work from principle and not have any temptation to copy the teacher. And at the end of a school year, I'm always proud if every one of the students is different. I remember how good I felt the first year I taught drawing. And I had about thirty students; and in the beginning of the semester, they were drawing a figure and we just had shelves where they were told to store their works for review at the end of the year. They'd sometimes get mixed up and they'd have great quarrels about this is mine-

no it's mine-I did this last month-no I did it. But by the end of the semester, there were no more of these grumbles because Smith knew what his looked like; Jones knew what his looked like; and Johnson knew what his looked like and there was no confusion between them and I was so proud of that. And I feel that way with the children and they are not junior editions of me; they are their own people.

MR. BROWN: Were you doing the-until you resumed with the New York Gallery Zabriskie, in about 1970-were you-you said you did go down to New York to see whether certain dealers would take you. Were you despondent then about that sort of thing? Or was it-were you merely despondent because of the traffic on the East End? Survive?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: No, it depressed me. Wouldn't it you? [Laughter]

MR. BROWN: Yes. A slap in the face? Or did you think perhaps that they were shrewd businessmen and-

MR. STANKIEWICZ: I think they were cynical; by acting that way they could manipulate me or, if we did make a business connection, then I would be at a disadvantage. I don't know, but it wasn't a very nice feeling whatever the reason.

MR. BROWN: But something told you to pull back? Not to enter a disadvantageous liaison?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Right.

MR. BROWN: How did you then finally link up with a dealer? Who would promote you and resume the momentum you had in the early Sixties?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, as a friend, Arthur Mungus [?], was quite friendly with Virginia Zabriskie and she spoke to her about me, spontaneously. I didn't ask him to and nor did he ask me if he might; he just did and then when she reacted in a positive way, they got in contact with me and I went to see her and we made a deal.

MR. BROWN: Is she a dealer who was quite close to your work or quite close to her artists' work in general? How would you characterize the relationship?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: I think she sees my work very well but she has quite a catholic sensitivity because she has quite a number of artists in her gallery whose work is rather different from mine. And she seems to be able to accept and to read all of these people, all of these different kinds, in a good way, which I think is extremely unusual. She's a good dealer and a good person; I have a tremendous respect for her.

MR. BROWN: When were you first re-notified, when you were back in her gallery or-?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, when I began to show again.

MR. BROWN: You recall some of the changes that came about then when you were reviewed and the like?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: No, the work then was different from what it had been previously and so the comments couldn't be exactly the same, but they were generally favorable, which was very gratifying. But the work being different, the commentary had to stand on a different footing. But it was satisfactory.

MR. BROWN: Did you find it pretty sensible comment?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Some, yeah, generally; I think the better critics speak a better language than they used to. Not quite as opaque and serious as the old way or the lesser critics do.

MR. BROWN: What effect then does that have on your own will to work? The fact that you are getting reviewed, you have a steady dealer, presumably a growing number of collectors, does this affect the whole pace of your life? Your self esteem, no doubt?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, self esteem, encouragement, it can't be anything but good.

MR. BROWN: I wanted to-maybe we can look at some of the photographs at least, of some of the works, over the last fifteen or ten years-I don't know if you want to cast back any further than that?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Whatever you want.

MR. BROWN: The works have been discussed quite thoroughly of the Forties and the Fifties, ranging from welded pieces, to welded pieces using the so-called found objects and the like which titles were given or weren't. You have any general comments you want to make on these works into the late Fifties which get quite complex and various pieces partly fabricated by yourself or wholly, plus pieces of machinery and other scraps of metal objects

put together-rather complicated, a good number of them. Here's an exhibit at the Stable Gallery in 1959 or '60, and shows quite an array of things-from flowing, rhythmical things to this object enclosed in a mesh-

MR. STANKIEWICZ: It's sort of a cocoon.

MR. BROWN: -of steel. Yeah, cocoon-like. Were you striking out in various directions, exploring a good many things at that time? Can you look back on it?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: No, I think it was pretty consistent, even if you have these open spatial sculptures like that and then a few paces from it this cocoon-like thing which is called *Natural History*[1960], which is not in the modern [MOMA, Ed.]-the general intention was the same and the fact that one is open and the other is very compact and closed doesn't make any difference. The spirit is there and as I said about designing the trucks, this idea demands a certain kind of form and that idea demands another kind of form and I don't see that as a basic inconsistency. I would rather call it variety, than inconsistency. [Laughter]

MR. BROWN: Did it partly depend on the materials at hand, or mainly your ideas, you are saying?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, I think the idea or the feeling at the moment. When I was feeling a certain way, I would select these materials and feeling another way, I would select another kind of material. And get a different totality in the end.

MR. BROWN: In the Sixties did you continue with a great variety of things, as far as you know?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: No, it was pretty much a continuation of the same thing.

MR. BROWN: You could switch-having you talk about some things you've done since you've come to Huntington, this piece from 1963, and does this sort of thing constitute continuity simply of what you had been doing, in your estimation? Is it bigger or-fairly few pieces have come of the work of the Fifties.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah, actually, I think this is misdated. Probably my own fault somehow; I'm pretty sure it's the piece I had trouble moving up and down the stairs in my Broadway studio; it would be in the Fifties or '60 at the latest. It's about 6 feet high, and its part of a series built on the letter C. I did some small C's and some big C's. It shows you the desperate lengths you can go to to dredge up material to keep you working. And-

MR. BROWN: What do you mean, literally material or ideas?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Either one. But if you are determined to keep working, you have to think of something to keep working on and I got the notion of going through the letters of the alphabet, making sculpture of an A, a B, a C, and the A's and the B's were failures-nothing came out of it-and I got to C. Somehow that was very productive and I did six or eight C's. This is one of them it's very big and it's made from angle irons and off-cuts of large tubing and segments of tubing. Trying to keep some semblance of the letter c and at the same time making a special sculpture, something belonging to it, and that composition is very interesting. So that's what that is.

MR. BROWN: Well, the letter c gave you all sorts of room to maneuver, didn't it? You dealt with a rather minimal ingredient, wasn't it?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Were you conscious at that time of things going on in sculpture, in sculpture itself, of at least the part that was so widely reported at that time-minimal sculpture-coming along?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, I wasn't aware that there was minimal sculpture at the time that I had had the notions of it myself but put them aside. Sometimes less is less and yeah, I was aware of lots of things that were going on. Sam Kootz had his gallery up there on Madison Avenue and many of his sculptors were reviewed often and were considered important and I knew what they were doing; I knew what David Smith was doing and Lipchitz and all; but I don't think I took from them very much. People have asked me if I was much influenced by David Smith, and I honestly didn't think so; I don't think so now and once in a while a resemblance crops up but I think this would be inevitable in the material.

MR. BROWN: Just a coincidence?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, the material dictates certain kinds of forms or tends toward certain kinds of forms and so different people with the same material will do that and this confirmed to me after people began to ask me if I was influenced by Gonzales. And that seemed a silly question to me because-oh, I'm trying to think of the date when the Modern Museum put on a big exhibition of Julio Gonzales-

MR. BROWN: In the Fifties?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, mid or early Fifties. But the point is that I had never heard the name Gonzales before that exhibition and nobody I knew did either; he was an unknown person in this country. I wouldn't be surprised if even David Smith never heard of him. And then the Modern Museum exhibited the works of Gonzales and people were swarming on me saying I was an imitator of Gonzales, a person I had never known before. Again, it's a matter of two different people working with the same kind of material which naturally would produce certain forms.

MR. BROWN: You said earlier that you are unto yourself; you were then and you are now; therefore, it is highly unlikely, or very unconsciously, or around about way that you would be directly or even heavily, or partly influenced by Gonzales? Or somebody.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, yes and no.

MR. BROWN: For example, you had seen Smith?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Sure. Course I did; I went to see everybody's work. Nutrition nuts are fond of saying you are what you eat, which is only figurative; but I am what I see, as a sculpture-I am what I see. Partly. In the way that I am what I eat. I eat cabbage, but I don't look like a cabbage, I hope. [Laughter] And I see stuff in galleries and museums and that nourishes me. But that isn't what I am.

MR. BROWN: When you came up here, a little after this time, then you were less and less seeing, going out to look at, weren't you? Or did you deliberately go down occasionally?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Oh, sure I did go down. I always have gone.

MR. BROWN: Did you keep up some contacts with some of the sculptors? Smith, for example, or some of the others?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well I never knew Smith closely; we would meet accidentally and we would have conversations and so on but we weren't pals. I've never been to Bolton's Landing, even yet. But I knew what he was about, I think. And I certainly knew what his work looked like.

MR. BROWN: Did you on this variation on the letter c, you did six or so of these, you said; did you then continue in the alphabet?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: No, by that time other things interested me. Much later I felt or I was again wanting for ideas and I felt like doing the numbers 123456-it didn't work; I couldn't find a number that was good for sculpture. [Laughter]

MR. BROWN: Unlike some of the painters who have put them whole into their paintings.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah, or in serial, and infinitum. [Laughter]

MR. BROWN: In your wanting for ideas, you still have an overall urge and impulsion to be working-?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Oh yes, yeah.

MR. BROWN: What frame of mind are you in at such a point? Rather desperate?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Not really desperate. I try to be relaxed about it but just keep working and I think things will arise. It's in the way of having these nights when you can't sleep. I know some people get desperate about insomnia and they pace the floor, they get pills, or they worry about it, and then they can't get to sleep and on nights when I can't sleep I just lie down and don't sleep. I figure if I really need it, I'll fall asleep; if I stay awake all night, it's because I don't need it and I can just be there and that and it's that way with not having a real red hot idea to make a sculpture of or with. I'll just start constructing something in some sensible compositional way and maybe something will come out. It's an idea of something like this: When I have lazy students, they say, oh well I haven't got any inspiration; I don't have an idea. I say well you'll have lots of ideas but if you don't have your tools in your hands at the time, they will evaporate. You keep working and when you've got your tools in your hands, the ideas will come. And I believe in that, so you don't wait for the muses.

MR. BROWN: So in a way there's a program in your work through the years simply in a sense that you try to have your tools in your hands; there's continuity there.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: And B.-Building.

MR. BROWN: But the ideas themselves can come from unexpected corners.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Oh yes, sure, and they needn't be profound. The Virgin Mary to me isn't any more important than a pussy cat. A good pussy cat is better than a bad Virgin Mary. [Laughter]

MR. BROWN: In other words sometimes when you practice your idea, ideas will come in the night or in the day, have been rather minor things to do with a certain kind of fabrication or problem that you have been wrestling with.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Sure.

MR. BROWN: It's in the process then, whatever develops, develops.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: That's right.

MR. BROWN: You've said earlier it's not knowledge; it's not deliberately planning something, is it?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah, and it's not imposition; if you impose an idea you are apt to be very, very wrong.

MR. BROWN: Excuse me?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Wrong. And the wronger you are the worse it is. There is a certain willingness to let whatever comes up to come up. And use it. I think I would never be a very political artist. And as a matter of fact, I think maybe 99 times out of a hundred when an artist gets caught up with a cause, like being against a dictator or being anti-war or whatever, it makes his art deteriorate. He's so involved in that outside idea that he becomes less an artist.

MR. BROWN: Does the work just simply serve the idea and it shows?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah, right. I remember when I was a student I was in Paris and I went to an exhibition and I think it was in the Petit Palais. And I've forgotten what the point of the exhibition was; but I do remember-oh, it wasn't when I was a student-it was during the Korean War. Anyway, Picasso had painted an anti-American painting and it wasn't very big; it was about 18 inches by 12, but it had a fairly realistic picture of robot-like American uniformed soldiers with strange outer space helmets. Aiming futuristic guns at poor tattered women and children who were all suffocating and it was the worst painting I have ever seen Picasso paint. The more explicit the propaganda was the more degenerate the art quality becomes. So I think the conscious mind has got to be kept on a pretty strong rein if you are going to do any good work.

MR. BROWN: You feel the best part of the artist working is unconscious.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, I think so.

MR. BROWN: The process of doing?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Right. Because conscious painting is too hedged in by ideas of what's right and what's wrong, what's respectable and what's not respectable and there's a certain sentimentality and an influence to make you do what's right which often is wrong. And so I think if you can remove yourself from all considerations and just do it pure; this is an ideal kind of thing; you are better off.

MR. BROWN: Do you feel that quite often you have been able to do it pure?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: A few times, yes.

MR. BROWN: A few times?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: It's wrong-you said it's wrong a while ago-to let outside ideas prevail, prevailing is wrong. You meant it doesn't work or you think it's just a wrong approach?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Say that again. I don't remember what I said.

MR. BROWN: You said that the work was wrong if it was too heavily laden with what are called any kind of literary or topical meanings.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, in my point of view. When I talk about-in my last statement when I said something about something being wrong I meant in the public view and, you know, I've used the word respectability a lot and that's what I mean. If you feel that your work is going to be shaped somewhat by other people thinking

something is wrong, you are not free.

MR. BROWN: I see. For you there is a certain, there is a sense of wrongness in a work of art for you.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Oh yes, but that has nothing to do with the world's idea-

MR. BROWN: No, but that sense of wrongness that you have about a work of art-what do you mean, what is something that's wrong to a work of art for you? What do you mean by the word wrong? Is Picasso doing the anti-American piece?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: I think he betrays himself.

MR. BROWN: That's what you mean by wrong?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah. He surrenders himself to some outside idea. Actually I think that he and a lot of the French school were very, very much half-baked in their political thinking if you could call it thinking. Fernand Leger was Communist and anti-American; Picasso was somewhat that way and anti-American, and it's rather silly because I don't think they were political thinkers. I think that they thought that that was a respectable stand for an artist to have, to be for the people. Not thinking beyond the slogan. But that's politics again which is entirely different from the question of art.

MR. BROWN: You've fortunately for yourself not had to be tied up in that quite often, have you?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: No, I stay away from it. Even the Vietnam War I never came right out as being anti the war, because there are two sides and I'm not going to use my art for either side. I have my opinions about the war but that's like having opinions about abortion or the Republican Party or vivisection or-it's another world from the art.

MR. BROWN: In all of much of what you said your art has an apartness or an autonomy of its own.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: I hope so. Right. Listen, I expose myself to so many things-I read the *Natural History* magazine, the *Smithsonian*, and *Newsweek*, and I get the *New York Times* and the local newspaper and I have school publications; my head is full of all kinds of trash and interesting things and gems too and all that, but that's all in the house. My art is in the workshop out behind the house.

MR. BROWN: Or in you wherever you are.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, uh yes. [Laughter] My mansion has many houses. [Laughter]

[The tape lapses here shortly.]

MR. BROWN: ...it's a cylinder with angle iron brought into it from the top on a diagonal and then supported on yet another one which is on a point set onto a small pedestal. A fairly simple piece compared with the earlier, most of the earlier work; it seems to be essentially three parts, the angle iron coming into it from the top then seeming to protrude mid-way along one side this tank, this cylindrical piece, a rather short central piece.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, I said it was '68, but you know it must be a little after that because I took a summer off and went to Australia in '69, and that marked a turning point in my way of working. Because until that time I had been using an awful lot of found objects which-as everybody called it-and I can't think-I went to Australia in '69 and I had wired a friend of mine, Malcolm Campbell [?], a sculptor that I was coming and without letting me know he arranged my visit there. He arranged an exhibition in the gallery, the Walters [?] Gallery in Sydney, and he arranged that I should be able to work in a steel cavacation plant in a place called Seven Hills. So what was to be a three months vacation turned out to be a working stay.

MR. BROWN: You had gone there for vacation, just for the-

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, my ex-wife was Australian; she hadn't seen her family for a long time, so I left them in Brisbane for a good part of the time and worked in Sydney and produced an exhibition which came off pretty well but it would be interesting for you I think that when I got to the factory there they were quite good about giving me space and a helper; the only materials at hand were mill materials: I-beams, angle irons, steel tubing-stock shapes which were very straight, very geometric, very regular-antithetic to the rough junk, aesthetic. Well I was committed to an exhibition by this time and there was nothing to do but do it with whatever was at hand. And I did. The Australian pieces came out looking very different from what had gone before. And by the time I had finished making that exhibition, there were sixteen pieces in it, I was pretty well accustomed to working with that kind of material and when I came back this thing that you describe with the I-beam penetrating cylindrical on more or less horizontal axis balanced on a steel bar was a continuation of the Australian development. In the Australian, uh, trip turns out to be extremely important because I have worked that way for

quite a few years afterwards and I am coming out of that now and going back hesitantly at first to rougher, scruffier materials and who knows what the future will be. I may flip-flop again-

MR. BROWN: Does this involve an element of-were you rather panicked at first when you got there and saw all of that available?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Oh, yeah, I work very well in a state of panic. [Laughter]

MR. BROWN: It must have required quite a lot of restraint, didn't it? Very little to select-you simply couldn't put in the complexity of forms-

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, I could have contrived it but it wouldn't have worked, I think. Or it would have been something else. It led to a refinement and an economy in the number of elements that go into it, which is discipline and doesn't hurt.

MR. BROWN: In fact the quality of discipline is in these, isn't it? I mean are any of these pieces at all lyrical?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Oh, I think so.

MR. BROWN: As some of your earlier work was?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Oh, I think so. But not so obviously so.

MR. BROWN: Would you consider this particular piece in terms of music? [or moving-unclear]

MR. STANKIEWICZ: No, not particularly, no. I'm not sure, I may have destroyed this piece. I said something about working in a state of panic and I think that's sort of important because almost none of my work is premeditated or planned out; I don't know how it's going to turn out. So, you know, a common procedure for me is to make a pedestal, a base and stick something to it, like a post or a tube or something, and then I don't know what I'm going to do, and I have to get nervous, panicky and eventually I have to make a move and I don't know what that leads to, so the whole thing is improvised. It's not a careless lack of thought; it's that I don't have an image to begin with and it has to grow out of the first move, and that's a very panicky procedure. I've got a little story. It may sound very egotistical, but it's not really. At one of the exhibitions at the Zabriskie Gallery I had these quite big heavy cylindrical things, they were pitted in certain ways around the bases. I was visiting the gallery during the exhibition and one man came in and he looked around and was very interested in how these things held themselves and he saw me watching him and he asked me if I was the artist. I said yes and he said well how do you get these angles right, how do they balance they way that they do? And I said well you just do it. You saw how the first piece will be and then you weld it on securely and then you go on to the next piece until you are finished. He said-obviously he expected that there would be a blue print beforehand because there was so much work fitting these together-so he was surprised at the improvisation and said suppose you make a mistake? And there was nothing I could say to him; I said you just don't make a mistake. [Laughter] And you know as egotistical as that sounds, I really do feel that really all you can do when the situation is so loaded with responsibility you just don't make a mistake.

MR. BROWN: But you didn't mean in that that the options are very limited then? You've got yourself out on a limb.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: That's right.

MR. BROWN: So you have very few ways that you can go, maybe only one. And you do it.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, that may be.

MR. BROWN: I don't think that's what you meant to say but-The pieces here, these are the '70's here-a very large one here.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes. It's about 13 feet high.

MR. BROWN: This is what? About early '70's?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Uh huh [Affirmative].

MR. BROWN: A large cylinder, tipped up on a great cubicle pedestal by a smaller cylinder, or very thick rod.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: It's very simple, even simpler than the piece from the late '60's, the post-Australian thing.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, well this comes out of the Australian series. There was a piece that I did in Australia; it was rather small, about as big as a bread box, as they say. And yes, this was a number; it was the number 2. I did get into numbers in Australia. I did 2's and 4's O.K., so it was a number 2 that was done with a cylinder tipped and a connecting rod to a box-like form underneath. And the general idea was the 2. And this is an example of feedback from the spectator. One of the people who saw the show said he felt menaced by this piece. That it was a very frightening image-the gap between the two very heavy and solid forms, and that stayed with me and, let's see, this piece is from '74, so five years later I decided to redo it on a size that would be really frightening. So there it is.

MR. BROWN: You have done it on a very much larger scale?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, this is the larger one; it's thirteen feet. As a matter of fact, it's on loan to the University at Albany and they have it in a little quadrangle and every once in a while, in the student newspaper, there's a letter complaining about it; apparently it does have a malign message for a lot of people. [Laughter]

MR. BROWN: Rather ominous that it's so heavy seemingly.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah. Well, I like strong reactions, positive or negative; at least somebody's getting something.

MR. BROWN: And the one we see here, this is what, a small piece?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, that's '75.

MR. BROWN: That's a variation, I'd say. The rod is on, well, it's like a chisel practically, the rod and then a chisel separating the cylinder at the top and the cube down below.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, well, this is part of an exhibition of eleven pieces that were identical in the size, the box form and the size of the cylinder and the angle between them; the only difference in the eleven pieces being what's inside, in the space between the cylinder and the box. They stood about two feet high.

MR. BROWN: You were working on minor variations to see what the effect might be?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes.

MR. BROWN: Did you discover there was in fact quite a lot of difference?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Oh, yes.

MR. BROWN: Depending on what you inserted?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Right. Yes.

MR. BROWN: It must have been a very refining phase of your work, was it? Interested in very subtle-

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Uh huh [Affirmative].

MR. BROWN: This, we have the last group of things here, the ones from the last year, here, yes-

MR. STANKIEWICZ: I sent it off. [Speaking to something else]

MR. BROWN: And here it's no longer certainly as heavy-it's a great circle bar of iron or steel. And then elements of plates and open cylinders dispersed around it and held up by a rather light base, a circular pedestal and two rods sticking up to the circle. Seems much more open, much lighter, well in the non-literal sense, prettier than this Australian phase.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah, but it's a bit of a throwback to some quite earlier work that I did in the middle Fifties and I made pieces to be hung on the wall and they were planed, let's see, I would make a rectangle of say angle iron or box beam and compose within the frame as you would a drawing or a painting, but the forms that I put within the frame left a lot of space through which you could see the wall, so that the blank wall became the negative space, the white page of the drawing, and I hadn't done this for many, many years now and I thought I would try to revise that idea and this is one of the ways of doing it. This piece, the ring here, is five feet in diameter. And it stands on a couple of legs on a base and it's not the same as being against a blank wall although it could be. And so the past half dozen pieces have been very much like that. In the same size or smaller, and composed as a drawing is composed so that the negative spaces and material forms would work out. It's turning out to be interesting; I'm going to do quote a few more; there's one down on the lawn there, see? There were three others but they have been transported away just last week or so, but they were very

much in this manner. One of them was much deeper; this piece is relatively flat because, although it stands eight feet high and five feet wide, it's only about two feet deep. But one of the more recent things stood about five feet high overall and yet was about three feet deep. I was beginning to expand in depth.

MR. BROWN: These are essentially to be seen from one or a rather limited vanish point? But now you say you are beginning to change it so you can go around to either side?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, in any of these you can go around to the back side, but I do think that the favor is on the front side.

MR. BROWN: You said that these were somewhat throw backs to ones that were framed to be put against a blank wall, but here you have no blank wall; here you have total dependence on where it happens to be placed. This kind of view, et cetera, if it's outdoors.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: True.

MR. BROWN: Well, this space not only becomes an active part, it's a changing-

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, that's right. Of course there's no reason why you couldn't stand it in front of a blank wall.

MR. BROWN: But this is in a way here more risk taking, isn't it? The spaces between the forms are to be a prominent part of your idea.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, but no matter how you work, you are at the mercy of the world once the thing leaves your hands. You get it sold and somebody takes it away and you don't know what in the world's going to happen to it. You know, they may take an open piece like this and hang it on a big flower print wall. [Laughter] And I'll never know.

MR. BROWN: Has it bothered you, having to part with your things, or do you think of it that way? You were some years ago when we talked with you, you said it didn't matter you forgot them practically.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: That's true.

MR. BROWN: Do you still feel that way?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Oh yeah. I guess it's like a turtle laying eggs in the sand. [Laughter] You do it and go off on your way.

MR. BROWN: You said earlier the process of creating that's perhaps the great time for you anyway, isn't it?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Oh yes, it isn't the thing; it's making the thing. Because in making the thing you are making yourself, and after you have made it you are a little bit changed and that's the product, and the thing, it can go into the world.

MR. BROWN: Well, let's get back to where you are and what you're becoming. Let's look at one last variation of recent work and that's this 1978 rather small scale series you did, of relief's.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: I'm still doing it; yes, they are 6" deep.

MR. BROWN: Rather shallow. And they are conjunctions of geometric and soft end shapes and some of the others are more play of diagonals and this particular one we are looking at here-why this? This is sort of wall sculpture, isn't it?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Oh definitely, sure, they hang on the wall. But they are all faces you know. They are masks, faces. And again this is a throw-back to a series-actually what I had done before was not faces but what I call double heads. Actually I called them double boogers. Talking about this I learned that I offended a black student; he said that double boogers was a bad word, but it wasn't meant to be because reading on the Cherokee Indians I found that one of their recreations was making satirical masks of each other and of white men and particular characters. And they called these masks boogers. So I was doing these Janus heads, a face on each side, and they were really inspired by various people who irritated me. So thinking of the connection with the Cherokees, I called them double boogers, and I enjoyed that very much and, though one day I would resume; I haven't yet but I am now doing these flat masks and am very caught up with it. I must have done a couple dozen by now. And I feel I'm just getting started.

MR. BROWN: Is there an element of the grotesque in this?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, and it may be the face aspect of it, it's a little bit secondary because the challenge of making a workable composition with the few elements that a face provides I'm not even going to allow myself more two lines and more than one nose and a mouth so about the number of elements you can count on one hand. I'm trying to come up with different variations, keep it interesting.

MR. BROWN: [Inaudible] -more raggedness and roughness.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah.

MR. BROWN: Is this the most pronounced expression of that so far because in the larger scale pieces there is still an element of finish and the like at least at a distance, the forms are cylinders and rings.

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yes, but if you look at the two pieces on the lawn you will begin to see that they've been tempted away from the hard edge and the flat surface, geometry.

MR. BROWN: No, but clean forms I mean-here we find that because they are so small and you are focused entirely on the rough surfaces. Well, you feel you said a little bit ago that you discovered something or you become something different yourself with each one of these things you do. Again this is unanticipated and uh, well, what are you working on right now and where does that leave you?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Well, I just finished a series of about four or five of these ring things and where does it leave me as a person? In transition as always. Coming away from this clean period of geometrical stuff and obviously I don't want to just repeat what I had done before, but I like the flavor of-the feel, the touch of it, the roughness, and so on, so I may regain some of that, but I don't want to make a determination. I don't want to write it down, make it a resolution. I don't follow directions from myself; I'd rather follow myself.

MR. BROWN: Is there a prescription or self-prescription, you find, fairly common among contemporary artists? Surely with the press and the amount which is written and talked about it, there is a great deal of self consciousness; you find that among other artists? Sort of prescribing or laying out a work formula for the future?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: Yeah, I think sometimes they program their progress or their motion.

MR. BROWN: But you are moving into what we've said already fairly-you are including more forms than you had been before, you are coming back to the roughness; there is less of a tightness, things are opening up more. You could find parallels in yourself of-it sounds like an extremely rich time for you. Is it?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: We'll see.

MR. BROWN: Do you think about that?

MR. STANKIEWICZ: We'll see.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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