



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Olga
Burroughs, 1964 October 25

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Olga Burroughs on October 25, 1964. The interview took place in Sacramento, California, and was conducted by Mary Fuller McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2021 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: —one of the few here in the area.

OLGA BURROUGHS: Well, there were many on the project.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: This is Mary Fuller McChesney interviewing Mrs. Spencer Burroughs. B-U-R-R-O-U-G-H-S. Who lives at 2748 Curtis Way in Sacramento, California. Present also this evening is Robert McChesney. The date is October 25, 1964. Mrs. Burroughs, could you tell us how you first made any connection with the Sacramento Art Center?

OLGA BURROUGHS: I happened to be the president of the Kingsley Art Club and Mr. Defenbacher came from Washington to organize the art center, and he contacted me because I was president of that art group.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What year was that? Do you remember?

OLGA BURROUGHS: 1938 or '39, I'm not sure.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What was the next step in setting up the art center here?

OLGA BURROUGHS: Oh, I believe I was the one who got a group of persons together. I tried to get all the main people in the community together to luncheon at the Senator Hotel, and we got a really wonderful group. And from there, we organized and elected officers, and started the art center. I mean, started the idea of the art center.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. This was the citizen's committee?

OLGA BURROUGHS: A citizens committee. We had one of our prominent judges for president, and one of our bankers for treasurer, and then we involved, mostly otherwise, persons who were interested in the Kingsley Art Club or painters or teachers. People who were interested in art.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Were many of the artists active at the beginning? You were an artist yourself.

OLGA BURROUGHS: Yes. I was painting at the time.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

OLGA BURROUGHS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, it was mostly—the beginning, of course, was organizational. That was the job.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

OLGA BURROUGHS: Getting the organization set up and to find the proper place was another very difficult task. But the greatest task of all, and one that we never really succeeded at, I think we succeeded in the others, really, as I look back on it, was collecting funds for it. And that I think was the stumbling block of the whole thing. I would—if I were

government, I would never suggest again that money be raised in a community to support something of this sort.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: How much did you—what was the portion of—

OLGA BURROUGHS: I had forgotten exactly. John didn't tell you what it was? It was a good size. I mean, it seemed to us because when you have [cross talk] a staff, when you have a staff that has to be paid when you have to pay rent, and light, and heat, and all the necessary equipment. Now I don't know how much of the equipment was supplied. Of course, I know that the greater amount of money came from the government, but I do know that we had to collect every year, a large amount of money, and in the—in the end, that was the discouraging factor. Because though a community might be very happy and delighted that you have an art center, and even something to brag about, not a large proportion of the community takes part in anything of that sort.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They like to have it but they don't want to support it, financially.

OLGA BURROUGHS: No, it isn't that they don't want to support it financially, no. That, that wasn't it at all. It's simply that they don't—it's a small part of the community that takes part, really. That benefits by it. The others benefit by going to the exhibits, a vicarious sort of a benefit, and sometimes it's not easy for the person who has the money to see how that—well, in the first enthusiasm they give, but the second year they don't give as freely, and so forth.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did the WPA pay for the teacher's salary or did you have to pay them, too? The staff?

[00:04:57]

OLGA BURROUGHS: I, well we didn't—I don't know whether we paid a half or a quarter of the amount of money that went into the organization. But I do think that the amount of money you collect has nothing to do with the benefit that a group of that sort, or an institution of that sort [laughs]—the benefit it gives to the community. And if the government is going to go all out as they did really in every other way, why not go the whole way? So everything would be easy and insured. We gave a lot of time to raising money that should have gone into the organization. To reaching the community with our product.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Your response, though, from the community here in Sacramento was very good.

OLGA BURROUGHS: It was good. It was excellent. It was excellent, but still I felt at the time, and I think I feel very strongly now, that if the government wanted to support a project in every large city that they should go the whole way. You know there are very few things that the government requests support for this projects. If you give your time, your energy, your enthusiasm, and those who were actively interested didn't mind giving. It was just those who mearily said, Well now we have an art center here and this is fine, and we're delighted, and we're back of it, but we can just give so much because we—everyday somebody knocks on the door and wants us to give something.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

OLGA BURROUGHS: And of course, if you fall down in the—in the collection from the community, the whole project is ruined, so. I suppose John has told you what fine artists we had from San Francisco and the number of persons who took part and the number of persons who went to the exhibit. It could have continued on forever, I mean, we could have a very big and growing thing here if it weren't for having to support it, financially, with large amounts of money. Salaries mount up, you know? Even a very moderate salary, month after month. And so do rents when you pay a large amount.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: We had the same problem in San Francisco. We could hardly keep the opera going.

OLGA BURROUGHS: Yes, and they make—you know, that has snob appeal. The opera has snob appeal. And by that, it draws big money into it but an art center doesn't. There wasn't anything really, you know, that we could—we had one or two parties at the art center where people dressed and it was quite exciting and the newspaper gave us whole pages, and that

sort of thing, but an art center can't live on that.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Artist's ball. [They laugh.]

OLGA BURROUGHS: No, no, you can't, so.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Once the art center was established did the artist community of Sacramento become involved in it? You were a practicing—[Cross talk.]

OLGA BURROUGHS: [Inaudible.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: —artist yourself, and so I was curious—

OLGA BURROUGHS: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: —to know what the other artists did.

OLGA BURROUGHS: Yes, they did.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Who are some of those people?

OLGA BURROUGHS: Oh, I'm sorry. John and I were talking about it last night and he named —he was a teacher at the junior college, you know.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

OLGA BURROUGHS: And he named a number of them. I can name a few who were studying with me from the Kingsley Art Club. A number of well-known artists. Gertrude Michfeld [ph], Mrs. Kemper [ph]. I'd rather get a list, though, I hate to mention just a few because there were a number from the Kingsley Art Club, and I know John can give you a number of names of persons that became very fine artists.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: They'll probably be in the materials that he will give us, then.

OLGA BURROUGHS: Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

OLGA BURROUGHS: It will be. You will get all this information. He has all the minutes, and he has all the publicity, and we had lots of publicity. Press releases and all sorts of things that you can easily check—

[00:10:14]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

OLGA BURROUGHS: —on those names. No, I think it made a real impression on the community. Now, this is the second thing that I—I [laughs] got from that sort of thing that I had never of until that time, and I didn't realize that at that the time. As matter of fact, I didn't know how successful it would be, but it is possible for the government to go into a community to create a successful art project. If the government decided it wanted to make our people more aware of what we call "the finer things in life," I know that aspect of it, painting, an art center, getting the artists together, promoting painting, and discussion, and lectures, and all the things I understand that it takes to make a good artist. I studied for a short time with one of our very finest California artists, and that's Otis Oldfield of San Francisco, and I do hope you see him and talk to him. He's a very fine artist. He studied in Paris for 19 years and knew the famous artists at that time. And he was one of the artists who was chosen to exhibit a painting at the World's Fair in 1939 and one of the stalwarts of the California School of Fine Arts when it had that particular name.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What is your background as an artist? Where were you trained?

OLGA BURROUGHS: Otis Oldfield was my only teacher and he taught me for about five years. First, I took private lessons. I met him at a tea. I'd always wanted to paint ever since I had been a small child and I had married and really never had done any painting, and then suddenly after my third child was born, I decided I must be an artist [laughs]. I must paint and for five years I could think of nothing else. And after I painted my first oil, I met Otis

Oldfield at a tea here in Sacramento and I liked what he said so much that I asked him if he wouldn't give me lessons. And for a short time he gave me private lessons, and then, because I thought others would benefit too, I got up a class here. Perhaps of between 15 and —around 15, I think, would be accurate, and he came up once a month. And then we would go to San Francisco too, to see the phase of the art done down there and sort of get in touch what we thought was big-time then in San Francisco.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What kind of work were the painters and other artists in Sacramento doing at the time that the art center was established? What styles were they working in?

OLGA BURROUGHS: Well, I think, generally speaking, Sacramento was very conservative. I don't think there's any doubt about that. When Otis returned from Paris and exhibited his work at the Kingsley Art Club, the art critic on one of the newspapers here panned him most horribly, and Otis was heartbroken so he packed up his—[laughs] his easel and his paint box, and he went to San Francisco where he was received very much—well, where he was received with open arms. All Otis had to do when he went down there was to sit at a coffee table and drink coffee and talk, and he soon has the whole art community around him, and then they ask him to teach at the school down there. Now that was the feeling in San Francisco at the time and that was the feeling—the reception he got here at the time, so.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Was Otis originally from Sacramento?

OLGA BURROUGHS: Yes, he was. He was born here, then he went to San Francisco. I don't know whether Otis ran away from home, or—but he was one of those young men who was in a hurry, you know? And he went down to San Francisco and became a bellhop, and managed somehow, to save enough money to buy his steerage to France, and he stepped out on the French shore with \$60 in his pocket and knowing not one word of French at the age of 17. And said he was utterly shocked and astounded that these people spoke a foreign language.

[00:15:34]

[Mary Fuller McChesney laughs.] After three years he didn't speak a word, and then when he —of course, when he came home he spoke like a Frenchman, gestured, talked like one when he talked French and still does. And meanwhile with all his painting, won the Croix de Guerre over there during the war. You must interview him.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: The man that I work with, Lewis Ferbrache, is either going to interview him or already has, I'm not sure which.

OLGA BURROUGHS: He's an extraordinary person.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Who did he study with in France, do you know?

OLGA BURROUGHS: No, I don't. I know he mentioned all the great names who are contemporaries at the time, but I don't know his teacher. The only thing [laughs] I remember about his comment was it was a very formal and exacting education. They had to grind their own colors and wear white kid gloves when they began to paint in order to not [to be sloppy (ph)]. And they had to learn to draw. Otis can draw. He's a—his lithographs and his drawings are wonderful.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: You taught at the art center yourself, didn't you?

OLGA BURROUGHS: No.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, I thought you had.

OLGA BURROUGHS: No. No, I was on the Board all the time and helped get the community together and helped with raising the money and arranging any sort of party down there, or evening that seemed necessary to draw people in, and generally encouraged, but I didn't teach, no. I never thought of such a thing. I didn't feel qualified to. We had some of the very finest teachers, Dong Kingman, and—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Who set up the program for the art center? Did you do it? Did the Board do it? Did you decide [cross talk, inaudible]—

OLGA BURROUGHS: The Board did it. The Board did it. John Matthews [ph] actually was the

workhorse of the organization, but the Board set up the program. We had an excellent Board and we met regularly and we took it seriously.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you have much contact with the WPA people from San Francisco? Did they come—

OLGA BURROUGHS: Yes, we did. They came up, they encouraged us, they gave us everything that we needed or required. They supplied the personnel, in other words, they supplied the—well, the staff of the art school—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

OLGA BURROUGHS: —was selected by the government organization.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: It was selected by the headquarters in San Francisco.

OLGA BURROUGHS: Yes, headquarters in San Francisco—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible.][Cross talk.]

OLGA BURROUGHS: And I don't know how headquarters in San Francisco was connected with Washington. I don't know just what the set up was, but. No, they aided us in every way and they would have given us the whole amount of money if they could have, but there was that restriction. But the point I'm making about the money must be raised in a community, is the fact that it doesn't ensure that the community is interested, neither does it—if you can't raise it, neither does it in any way say that the community isn't interested. It's just a job that shouldn't have to be done. We, we have a—I feel the same way about education television station here. It's a wonderful station. They do a marvelous job, they are constantly harassed by having to raise money, and I don't think it's right. I think they're—the things are entirely separate. They should not be a part of the same project and the burden shouldn't be on the people that are running that station out there. They give so much of their time and thought to raising money, and that is only a—that's just, sort of a work job, that there's no elevation in that.

I mean I went out and [laughs] raised money for the art center and I guess I was fairly successful, but I didn't learn anything about painting by raising money for the art center and neither anybody else.

[00:20:27]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's right.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yep.

OLGA BURROUGHS: It doesn't have anything to do with an art group. If you're a salesman and you want to learn how to collect money that's one thing. [They laugh.] Yes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How long was the art center in existence here, about three years, wasn't it?

OLGA BURROUGHS: Three or a little more, I think.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. There was never an easel project established here in Sacramento for the painters here.

OLGA BURROUGHS: What do you mean, an easel—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Well, they had one in San Francisco where painters worked in their studio and they were paid by WPA, they were on [inaudible].

OLGA BURROUGHS: Oh no, no. I never heard of anything of that sort.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And were there any murals done in this area? WPA murals?

OLGA BURROUGHS: There—I'm not sure. I don't believe there were. There was some done a little later, but—perhaps were stimulated by the WPA, but I don't recall. No, nothing like Coit Tower, or anything—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

OLGA BURROUGHS: —of that sort in San Francisco.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Who were some of the—the artists who came up from San Francisco that you remember best?

OLGA BURROUGHS: Well, Kingman came, and Bufano. [Inaudible.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: To lecture or to teach?

OLGA BURROUGHS: To lecture, and he may have taught some, too. I remember having had dinner with him one day, and having attended one of his lectures. He didn't teach any great period of time, but I think he taught a few classes.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: This was Bufano—

OLGA BURROUGHS: I'm sure that they had a number of persons who came up sort of as a treat [laughs]. A rare treat, they get a glimpse. You know, if they couldn't do better, to get a glimpse of somebody who nobody was doing. It's—if you're, if you've never painted you don't know what a rare privilege it is to have a real artist lecture or give you instruction. It's a wonderful thing, because sometimes the words are halting, but what they say comes from knowledge and you know it and recognize it immediately that, that it's not a critic's point of view or anything superficial, it comes from the heart and from experience. And of course, he was—Otis was that kind of person and so was Bufano. I [inaudible] in the dining room.

[Recorder restarts.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: We were just talking about Benny Bufano's visit to Sacramento, to the art center here, and you were saying what a privilege it was to be able to talk with and to hear a lecture from somebody who was actually involved in the art field. I wonder if you remember what he was doing at that time? Was he on the WPA Project then?

OLGA BURROUGHS: Oh, he probably was. Yes, he probably was.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh, he must have been.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

OLGA BURROUGHS: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: He was on quite early.

OLGA BURROUGHS: Yes, I'm sure he was or he wouldn't have been up here. Though he did come to the Kingsley Art Club, too, but I'm sure that in connection with the Art Project, he was part of it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: I was wondering if he had talked to you about some of the projects that he was involved in?

OLGA BURROUGHS: Yes. He talked a great deal about them. He—I don't—I don't know anything specific that he said. I just remember feeling—getting such a deep response to his depth of feeling for painting and for art. It's—the great artists have an awareness that other people don't have, and they have an emotional reaction, and he—he's a very religious man. He—I think he lives very close to Christ, really. And I think at that time he had painted that. I mean, he had that immense statue of Christ and he was talking, or Saint Francis, wasn't it?

[00:25:05]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Saint Francis.

OLGA BURROUGHS: And he was talking about it and how he hoped to have it on a hill somewhere in San Francisco so it would dominate San Francisco.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Was there much activity and sculpture here at the art center?

OLGA BURROUGHS: No.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you have a sculpture teacher?

OLGA BURROUGHS: I don't think we had a class in it. No, well—yes. There was a class. Yes, I remember, but it's something that I never did and so I—I couldn't answer any of the questions at all about that class. And there has always been—the Kingsley Art Club has an exhibit every—every year of the local artists and there have always been—there are always some—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

OLGA BURROUGHS: —sculpture, but I suppose in the same proportion, you know, that sculpture is to painting in every community.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

OLGA BURROUGHS: And this, after all, was a small art community.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you take painting classes yourself at the Art Center?

OLGA BURROUGHS: No, I didn't. I wasn't—I really didn't have the leisure to paint at that moment. I had a—I had a baby. I was then the President of the Kingsley Art Club and I was assisting with this project and at that point, I wasn't attempting to paint.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

OLGA BURROUGHS: Otherwise, I would have.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Do remember any of the other artists who came up from San Francisco who made an impression on you or the other members of the artist community?

OLGA BURROUGHS: Well, I sup—Dong Kingman, and there was another artist and I can't recall his name who is so well-known now. I think that all of them were well-qualified.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

OLGA BURROUGHS: It's just that every teacher isn't a Bufano or every teacher isn't an Oldfield, but that is true no matter where you go. An art school can't be staffed necessarily with teachers who were all geniuses [laughs] or from my point of view. Those men are. No, I think it was a very successful school, and well done, well managed. It drew lots of interest. We got pages and pages of photographs in the newspapers. So that's why I believe that if the government ever felt that it would elevate the whole tone of the country to set up art centers throughout the land, they could—they could so.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: And it should be done.

OLGA BURROUGHS: I think it should be done.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Do you think there's a need for it in a town like Sacramento now?

OLGA BURROUGHS: Well, I haven't been painting for so long, that at this point, I'm out of touch with the art world. I should think that at any time, in any community, or any city, added funds, interest, and enthusiasm, and an overall program would be an excellent thing for any city. I don't think you ever—any city ever quite fulfilled its potential, do you?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Not most.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No.

OLGA BURROUGHS: No, and I think they could be stimulated to do so, or greater. Stimulated to a greater degree.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Aside from the problem of raising money to support the art center, do you have any other suggestions about how it could have been improved?

[00:29:34]

OLGA BURROUGHS: No, I think we did a very good job. When I say we, I mean, everybody. I mean the government, the Project, and the local citizens, and artists. I think I don't—I wouldn't be able at this point—I suppose if we started all over again, we certainly would encounter problems, and—but I'm sure there wouldn't be any problems that couldn't be worked out if one,—if teachers were available, good teachers were available, and money was available, there would be nothing that a community couldn't do, in an art center.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]