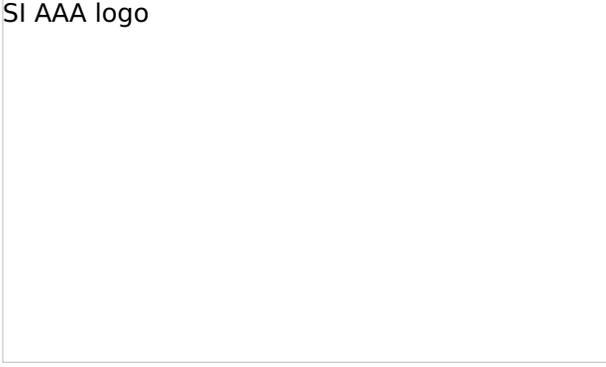


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Oral history interview with Herman Cherry, 1965 September

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Herman Cherry in September 1965. The interview was conducted by Harlan B. Phillips 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.

Poor audio throughout some of the interview led to some words being inaudible; however, the original transcript was used to clarify some names and words. These names and words are given an -Ed. attribution. The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was also added in brackets and given an -Ed. attribution. 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

HERMAN CHERRY: —role in this.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What is my what?

HERMAN CHERRY: Your role in this. What is the project?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: The project is centered at the Archives of American Art in Detroit.

HERMAN CHERRY: Oh, [inaudible]—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Art Institute.

HERMAN CHERRY: I know about that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: They have received a grant to study the arts in the '30s, and the government's relation to the arts in the '30s. And we found that while there is records available, you know, they don't speak. No color. No subjective feeling with—about the atmosphere. This is a period that has to be recreated [inaudible]. For example, are you a West Coast person?

HERMAN CHERRY: I was West Coast then, yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Born in the West Coast?

HERMAN CHERRY: No, I wasn't born in the West Coast. But I lived there in my formative years.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You did?

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What took you out there?

HERMAN CHERRY: My parents.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: They did?

HERMAN CHERRY: When I was 14.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Now, was this to San Francisco?

HERMAN CHERRY: No, Los Angeles.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you go to school in Los Angeles?

HERMAN CHERRY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Art school?

HERMAN CHERRY: For a short time. Otis Art Institute, there. I left just before Phil Guston and Rube Kadish went in. I mean, they are also from there.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And we all knew each other at that time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What's the interest that projected you into the arts? Was it a family thing?

HERMAN CHERRY: Oh, no. They were utterly against it. And it was—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: They were?

HERMAN CHERRY: —all done on the sleek—sneak—on the sly, any the interest I had in it. That is a—that, of course, had nothing to do with WPA.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's a—it's sort of flooring which will help explain why you were on the West Coast, what the interest was, how interest was projected, what happened to it when society, people and whatnot, begin to shape a person's thinking. And if you had to do it on the sly, it's a—you know, it's a reached for thing then. Besides action is a function of interest, isn't it?

HERMAN CHERRY: Yes, of course. I mean, you can't just talk about WPA—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No.

HERMAN CHERRY: —in itself. I mean, the people that came in are already adults and had already been touched by the art world. I mean, they couldn't get in otherwise.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: But the interesting—one of the interesting things about the project was how people who came in as artists found, somewhere along the line, other expressions that made them function much better as a painter—than as painters. Like a lot of them that came in as artists went into the American Index of Design, and were extremely good at it and found a way for themselves. I think that was extremely important too. What happens is sort of a way of finding yourself. It might have taken years before you discovered you had that quality. And so, people went in various directions, in the pottery art, like Al King, for instance. He started out as a painter and then ended up as a potter.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. What were you doing in the '30s—the early '30s? Still in school?

HERMAN CHERRY: No. I didn't go to high school. I mean, those were the bad days. And there were no—I had to earn my own living. And I did many things. I was a seaman, a cab driver. Well, the usual things that you go through.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: Then I worked in a bookstore, in the Stanley Rose Bookstore on Vine Street, half a day. And it was there that I suggested that he started a little art gallery on the second floor of the room we hardly ever used. And he went along with it, and I started a little gallery there. And I showed Fletcher Martin and Philip Guston and Reuben Kadish when they were doing the big murals on the Project at that time. And Lorser Feitelson, a lot of young people who had no way out, you know. There's no place to show. There were no galleries there at that time.

[00:05:24]

And the students of MacDonald-Wright who had a school down in 231 Spring Street, I think it was 231. Close enough. And he used to meet on Thursdays and Saturdays and had that group. That was the closest thing to what you might call a group of artists.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERMAN CHERRY: Nothing like that has existed since in Los Angeles. Unless an individual just had a few people around him, this was actually a meeting place at definite times when artists, writers, or anybody could come, something like a New York club.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, were you painting at the time?

HERMAN CHERRY: Oh, I was trying to paint. There was no—hardly any possibility to paint. I mean, it was a struggle to keep alive at that time. And when the Art Project started, we couldn't believe it. I mean, at first. And, of course, we resented the fact that it had the connotation of a—based on poverty. But one usually doesn't care if one is able to paint, you know, find some way of painting—getting to it. And it gave us a—the freedom that we never had before. That is an economic freedom, which is what's terribly important.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you get in on the ground floor once it was—

HERMAN CHERRY: Yes. I was in it, I think, seven years or eight years. And I became an assistant on murals and things like that. I was not much of a mural painter.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Now, how was the WPA set up in the Los Angeles area? Was it MacDonald-Wright, the—

HERMAN CHERRY: MacDonald-Wright was the head of it. And Lorser Feitelson was the assistant to MacDonald-Wright. He was the sort of go-between between, say, the proletarian and the commissar up there.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: But the—like all organizations like that, there were always sort of factions and likes and dislikes and so on. And there was always squawking about how it was run. Of course, MacDonald-Wright, I don't know whether you know him, was a fabulously dominant man. And peculiarly enough, he disliked Roosevelt and anything that he did. But nevertheless, he's the head of it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And—but he was a very, very close friend of—what's his name? [Holger] Cahill.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: I think it had to do with the time they were in Europe—they knew each other. But he was a fabulous man in many ways. And, of course, he favored painters who were painting along his style at that time, who were interested in the Orient.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And he gave them mural commissions and the jobs with the other artists who presented at that time. And he took an awful lot of them himself, as a matter of fact.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: However, beside—that was beside the point. They did give you an enormous amount of freedom, if you were an easel painter, and you had to bring in your paintings every once in a while. And I think you know all that, [inaudible].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. But when you—did you go in for an interview or what?

HERMAN CHERRY: Yes. Well, the thing is that most of us were as more or less established, not as painters in the community, but as people who had been painting because there is no yardstick you could go by—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —at that time.

Nowadays, I mean, they say, what gallery do you belong to? Where have you exhibited, et cetera. Since there was no possibility of that, you might have shown it in the local shows like the Los Angeles County Museum show or something like that.

[00:10:12]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERMAN CHERRY: If you did that, you are more or less accepted. And then there were artist groups. I can't remember the names of them, but they were all based on some social concept too, or sociological concept. And—like an artists' union or something like that. And that was all in the air in the early '30s, as you very well know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: And if you belonged to something like that, then you knew the other artists, and you were more or less accepted. It was really on the very loose basis.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: There was no way of telling whether you were an artist or not. They didn't have the IBM machine at that time to—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

HERMAN CHERRY: —work out your human possibilities.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: But probably, half of them would have been told that they shouldn't be artists, they should be something else [laughs].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah, [inaudible]—

HERMAN CHERRY: Any of those forms. Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What did they let you do? That is, did they send you home with materials to paint or what?

HERMAN CHERRY: They gave me a certain amount of materials. And I just brought in, every week or two weeks, what I had done. They didn't expect all the paintings that you did.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERMAN CHERRY: They just wanted a certain amount, what they assumed—since artists were the head of it, they more or less knew what you were doing, I mean, what—the amount of work, the way you work. Some people work very slowly. And of course—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: —they couldn't bring in the same amount of work. Some work very fast. And so, they more or less just figured it out.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But you didn't have to go to any collection place, except to bring your work in? You could paint wherever you go?

HERMAN CHERRY: I could paint wherever I wanted to be—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —in the Los Angeles area. They—as I remember, someone did come around. I don't think it was an artist. He was just the—one of the workers on the WPA who would check to see if you were home, that is if you are painting. That, of course, is very annoying, but it didn't happen very often. And if you brought in the work, there wasn't any squawk about it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: It's very loosely done. And I thought very, very well, as a matter of fact, considering as a first attempt at something like that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And moreover, art isn't a nine-to-five affair anyway.

HERMAN CHERRY: No, it isn't, because every artist works differently, has different working habits.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: You might not work for weeks, and then suddenly just—it'll all come out, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And some people work steadily all day long, and maybe nothing comes out, as a matter of fact.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: So, that's hard to say.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's a gamble. But there's the widest disparity in variety in what was being done. Was any attempt to—or how about themes, ideas?

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, at that time, they encouraged, and it was in the air, the American scene sort of thing. I mean, I think they preferred that, because they found that the things that were out of the general run of accepted art were harder to get rid of, for public buildings and things like that, because those pictures were lent to public buildings and to schools, administration buildings, and things like that. And, of course, the preference at that time was something that had to do with a scene or something like that. Otherwise, the paintings were just stored and put away hoping that someone would take them eventually.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What's the artists' view about this decoration of public buildings? How did you feel about this?

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, I see nothing wrong in the—the situation being what it was that the public buildings did have them, right? The only thing that I might argue about was that they had some say about it, you know, because then they more or less indirectly are telling you which way art would go.

[00:15:10]

In other words, it's like a business. If it—if one product doesn't sell, well, then they try to get the product that does sell. And in the way it's sort of influenced the trends, and some of the artists became very important because their work was always being taken by some public official—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —and others were not being taken by public officials. It's like a gallery will very rarely handle you if your work doesn't sell. You know. I mean, it just isn't popular.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: So, something like that occurred. Although at that time, we didn't think too much about it, since we didn't know the other end of it, popular or not popular.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. And moreover, they may have had the notion that it would be better for artists to paint something quote "acceptable" in terms of the total program to keep it alive. And they're simply—

HERMAN CHERRY: Well—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: —you know.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yes. Well, they did it in the murals.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

HERMAN CHERRY: The murals generally were based on a theme given to them.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERMAN CHERRY: A priori. And the artists didn't mind doing it, because they were all floundering around finding a way to create an American idea about painting. It was—they were very formative years, and it might have taken 20 years longer for 'em to reach the stage they've

reached now.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And there would have been fewer artists, because a lot of artists would have fallen by the wayside, if there hadn't been. I mean, I'm positive about that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: If they hadn't been supportive at that time, it would have been too difficult.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: Whether that was good or bad, I don't know. I mean, there were more artists than there have ever been, I think, in the history of the world. [Laughs.]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. But the mural was a negotiated thing, wasn't it, with reference to a school or a—

HERMAN CHERRY: A post office or something like that?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah, where it was a question of the sponsoring outfit defraying some of the costs in terms of materials.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yes. I don't remember the exact situation, how much the local people had to give in relationship to what the government gave—the WPA gave.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But if it's my wall, you know, it's my wall, I'm very much interested in what's going to happen. It may work to the disadvantage of idea from the artistic—from the artists' point of view. Your notion was that it was an acceptable thing so far as murals were concerned. You know, like a marketing thing.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. Well, there was a—there was also an idea that painting and architecture could be brought back into a new Renaissance.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

HERMAN CHERRY: I mean, a collaboration which had existed once in the 14th and the 15th century.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: So, they didn't feel bad about it. There were very few artists who refused to do murals and just wanted to do easel paintings. I mean, they would [ph] accept the mural, and—even for the challenge. And they would work more or less the way they had always worked at that time. And it was just merely accepting the theme.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: Now, I know that the locality had something to do with it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: So that if someone were doing a mural down in Roswell, New Mexico, it would be a cowboy theme or a ranch theme or an Indian theme or an early-American history theme at that locale.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERMAN CHERRY: So, the townspeople were really interested in it, and so were the post office people. And if you had a man getting on a horse from the right side, I mean, they'd be upset about it. I mean, those things had to be taken into consideration.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: Because you would always get these historians, as it were, local historians or local people who wanted—who looked at it from a very practical standpoint.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Not only that. It may have been the first art they had ever, you know, come up against.

[00:20:00]

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, that's true. But still, it had to be correct. I mean, they didn't argue so much about the shape or form or something like that. I mean, I saw some instances of that, in which they were terribly upset about certain mistakes. The way the saddle would go on the horse, or what kind of saddle it was, et cetera. You couldn't put an English saddle on a cowboy horse. So, [laughs] these things had the—some research had to be made—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERMAN CHERRY: —and they were all fairly well documented. I was in St. Louis at the time when Edward Millman and Mitch Siporin were doing their mural, which was, I understand, the biggest mural done in United States. And they had done an enormous amount of research. And, of course, they were under the influence, as everyone was at that time, of Siqueiros and of Orozco and Diego Rivera. And the shapes and forms and approach to composing was very much along that line, with social comments and things like that, that were more or less immediate. And they were—as they're lithographs and paintings of the time, a test, they were working more or less that way anyway, you see.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: So, they weren't really going far off. Now, I think the situation would be different, that the artists would resent anyone telling them what theme to paint. And that is—anything for that matter, because they might not have any.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: It would be, for instance, very difficult for de Kooning to get on a project with any theme unless they gave him a theme which he happens to be working on at the moment, like women, or something like that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, how much experience did you have in the mural field?

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, my talent didn't go along that direction. I just simply didn't have that type of talent. So, I was—when I worked, I usually worked as an assistant. An assistant meant that you generally made the drawings and the putting together. Sometimes, as a matter of fact, you collaborated on the composing of it and things like that, in which the artists who had the job would use all the ideas that he got from other people, including his own. He has more or less a general idea, and then use the drawings that you made, generally very careful drawings, which he didn't have time to do, or something like that. These things were done as fast as possible.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And so, it was really more of a collaboration than anything else.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But that in itself is a new departure, isn't it?

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, it couldn't be the system of the Renaissance where you had your young boys working with you, and they actually ground the paint and did the—all the tough work on it. And then you were—then you merely enlarged the composition onto the larger frame, because you were considered a professional artist. And so—many times, we all knew each other, you see. And the murals were given out also on a favoritism basis, too. They weren't going to take—for instance, they weren't going to take chances. I mean, they knew that somebody had done a mural, and he could do the mural, and it would be very difficult for someone who hasn't had any experience. It's very possible, if they'd given me one, I would have done it. But at that time, I really wasn't interested in murals. I was more interested—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But it is—

HERMAN CHERRY: —easel, yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. From the point of view of size, shape, sizing the wall—walls, generally. The fact that not a single mind participated in it, but it became a kind of collective approach, which was sort of symptomatic [ph] of the period too.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. It was a—there were, of course, egos in the field in which they wanted just their own name perpetuated.

[00:25:13]

But that was a—that was very rare. I think in New York, they were—certain artists were given murals to do, like Brooks' mural out at the LaGuardia Airfield. And he had artists who were friends of his who worked with him. But I doubt whether there was so much collaboration on it. But they really helped him paint it, of course. And—but they had to learn his style of painting, his way of handling the forms and so on.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Do you look upon this period as an experimental period?

HERMAN CHERRY: I think it was experimental for the government. I don't think it was experimental for the artists, because they didn't—all the individual artists, of course, had the time to work and make mistakes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: That time is only so that you can fail to—you can fail so that you can rise again.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: And if you're working under pressure, you can't fail, you know. I mean, at least you don't think you're—you have the time to. And I think it was a great experiment—a social experiment. But it opened the way—because I don't—well, I'll finish that. It opened the way for the artists to develop slowly along certain lines and see what's going on. It gave them time, actually. It gave them time to breathe. And the work of the day shows that there wasn't much experimentation. There were a few artists who were working in abstract forms mostly along the—Picasso's area. And anyone who worked at that time, like Gorky, for instance, and a couple of artists who worked that way in Los Angeles, were considered avant-garde at that time. And it was a little harder for them.

But the—most of the other artists—I mean, if you had seen the paintings of Gottlieb or Rothko or—and any people at that time, they were doing scenes in Provincetown, folk scenes, and so on. I mean, there was really no experimentation going on. But that doesn't mean that things weren't simmering. Because once they'd gotten all that stuff out of their system—like Pollock really didn't begin to do any of his abstract things until after the Project really, he was still working in the—under the influence of the Mexican painters or Thomas Benton in a sort of a funny way, and traditional painting like Tintoretto.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: So, it wasn't until after that that things began to happen. And that's a phenomenon that's hard to explain, why it happens and why it happens all of a sudden it seems like that all of the artists seem to come at that certain given point, and start moving out in many directions.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I've often thought that it may have been the limitations imposed on the artists in the '30s, that as you talked about the American scene. Well, that was an idea, and the people were adjusting to it, perhaps not comfortably. But when the time came, it just—

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. Well, there were—I studied with Benton for a short while in 1930. And he seemed to be the only artist that was saying anything that, or had something to say about art. [Inaudible.] Pardon me. Would you like a cigar?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No, no, thank you. Well, this wasn't on the West Coast.

HERMAN CHERRY: No. This was on the East Coast. I was—I just got off a ship, and I came to New York and stayed here a year at that time. And it was right after the crash, and I was running an elevator on 63rd Street. I was lucky to get a job.

[00:30:05]

I was able to save enough to study art in the summer with Benton, whose articles I had read at that time. And he was a big influence at the time, as you very well know. He was a man with

great facility for publicity, and a very, very real sort of person.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERMAN CHERRY: I mean, a type of person that a young man would think was just absolutely wonderful, you know. We all idolized him in a way, because he was—you know, we went out and drank with him and so on. He was not the great master. He was just a sort of a spokesman. He had lived in Europe already, and he had done so many things.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: He's a walking library.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. He was a wonderful—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: —guy. Well—and I had studied with MacDonald-Wright. And they had been, of course, very close friends and, you know, were in constant touch with each other. They lived in Europe together. But they thought entirely differently. Very, very different. And it was—you know, Benton was a product of the Middlewest and so on. He was something quite different than anything I had met before. But anyway, he—his reaction against European painting was a very, very strong influence at that time. Now, his reaction, of course, I think, was—the way he did it—went about it was a bad way. And it just didn't work out. It was just sort of a patriotic mishmash of stuff. But he was able to make us see that America had something to say. And this was the important thing. I think that's what Pollock—that's why Pollock never wanted to go to Europe. One of the reasons. And it made us realize that we had to stand on our own feet. Now that was before WPA so that there was the very strong feeling that we had to find our own way to get away from the European attitude. Now, WPA gave us the chance to explore, in that sense. Yes, we might have experimented a little, but it was mostly on themes rather than in form. Rather than instead of—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: How about the—how about in techniques?

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, the techniques, of course, were picked up since they were doing mural paintings. I mean, they went back to fresco and the secco painting, and so on. It was what they considered should be mural painting. And in Los Angeles at that time, Siqueiros had come and done a mural, and a bunch of artists had gone and worked with him. I don't know whether the mural still exists, it was done on Oliveira Street. I think it was painted over. But he brought in like—things like Duco, airbrush. And the—and those techniques were interesting to the artists up to a certain point, then they dropped them later on. And they rediscovered some of the Renaissance ways of painting, some of them. And then that was all dropped. Nowadays, of course, they don't even experiment with any of the old forms. They just use the newly discovered paints, things like that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And any material, for that matter. But nothing like that was really going on at that time. It was mostly the idea of the theme. I mean, it was accepted that you painted in oil, or you painted—if you were doing murals you did it in fresco. Anyone who worked in fresco was considered—I mean, it was considered a terribly hard medium to work in. It took a certain type of talent. And a lot of the murals, of course, were done in the oil and then—at the studio—and then taken to the place and put up.

[00:35:05]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: But the St. Louis murals were all—were done in fresco. And it was a source of wonder to most of the artists went to visit this, to see this enormous fresco going up. But those techniques, of course, are not applicable to the way of thinking today.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No.

HERMAN CHERRY: But it all had to be done. And it was such a crazy transition period. But—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think you're right. I mean, but for the WPA, in a lot of ways, murals of the size and scale that were done would not have been available to artists.

HERMAN CHERRY: No.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Either as artists or as assistants. So, it's suddenly to confront this kind of problem, a wall, you know, what to do with it. And as you said, as an assistant, you could make suggestions. You could somehow be part of something larger than you. And this is new, because artists are inclined to be individualistic, you know, and not care. Or quarrel over technique, approach, and idea, which is normal, because it's a self-expression.

HERMAN CHERRY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But here they're involved in a big wall, what to do with it.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. Well, there were collaboration in some murals more than, say, in others—than in others. And, of course, some of the young people who worked with the older painters as assistants eventually got their own murals to do.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: And then there were the competitions that occurred later, for which a lot of artists got murals on the basis of competing.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And they were given the chance then to give full scope to their particular talent at that time. Other artists discovered that they were better at printmaking or doing lithographs and things like that and got into those departments. Of course, the WPA did prefer something that was practical, but you'll find that in any official setup. Even the GIs in Europe found out that it would be better for them, if they wanted to paint or sculpt, to take up printmaking, because that meant something to the officials over there, because they probably thought it was just like you're going to become a printer, which was practical, whereas painting wasn't practical. Now, in certain areas in United States, you might have found that in the more sophisticated urban situations there was more understanding of what the artist was trying to do.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Was there an increase of showing of your work on the WPA?

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, there were traveling exhibitions in the WPA. There were—Cahill was very good in that, in realizing that art should not be centralized, that it should be spread out. This was an important function of WPA at that time. And to show the artists' work in the various sections in United States. And there were running exhibitions going on. And as you very well know, there were little art schools and museums that were opened up all over United States which still exist in certain areas, and created a certain interest amongst the people.

And there was a man by the name of Stevens [ph], who was working with Cahill in Boise, Idaho and who worked in Los Angeles a little time. He's still alive. He's a—he's quite an old man now. He lives in Los Angeles. And he knows an awful lot about it. I mean, he was in on it from the beginning and was terribly interested in it. And he used to use a device of having a gallery art school situation set up where a local artist would teach painting to the people who started painting class. And then he would have the traveling shows coming in, but he would show local work in the front room—no, in the back room, and then traveling exhibitions in the front room. And since they were interested in what their local work was or what their—the collections that they had and things like that were in the back room, they had to walk through the front room, so that they were—he was trying by osmosis to get—let some of this stuff seep in, I would say.

[00:40:16]

And he did get them interested. He started all kinds of different projects—within these art projects. It wasn't just art that developed out of that, but a lot of other things, a lot of interest in cultural things in general.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. It looks like an education [inaudible].

HERMAN CHERRY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But from the artists' point of view, the notion that work is being shown somewhere farther than—

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. That was a—that was nice, I mean, to know that your work was thought

up enough to be sent out in the middlewest and sometimes in the east, places like that. And it was, of course, shown locally quite often.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: As I remember, in Los Angeles, they had a—sort of—they opened a little gallery at the office of the WPA. So, that was functioning continuously showing the paintings. But also, I suppose, functioned as a way of having people in the public buildings, and so on, come in and look and see what they like and what they might want. Also, it went to schools, so that students would be around painting and so on, which hadn't happened before. If it did, it was usually a very lousy painting or reproductions or something like that. And they gave courses in art history and things like that, which were interesting to the public. And they had debates and things like that. At the time, I thought it was very alive and—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It was.

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, I didn't know any different, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. What about the—this I always thought, if you look back on it, there's something anachronistic, the development of organizations among artists, the Artists' Union, the Artists' Congress.

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, there wasn't as much going on in Los Angeles as it was in New York. But there were quite a bit of it, because there was a sort of an exchange going back and forth between Los Angeles and New York that wasn't happening in the other areas, because of the movies and a lot of writers, of course, and painters—money, which always attracts the arts. So, they had an Artists' Congress there and an Artists' Union. And all—nearly all of the artists were socially minded at that time. And they were working for the betterment of mankind and things like that. And there were lots of leftist causes then that the artists were interested in. It was all in the air. And also, it was the first time that the artists actually got together and made demands that were not entirely fulfilled but nevertheless had some sort of influence on the museums and art activities in the area. And I can't remember what outfit it was that started it, but they also—one of them rented a place and had the exhibitions of its members and things like that. Now, that had something to do with having met, also, in the WPA. I would say that 50 percent of the artists I saw on the WPA in the beginning I hadn't even met. I mean, it was very rare, and especially in Los Angeles where people live 20, 30, 40, 50 miles apart. And so, it's hard to get together. And so, we began to see each other at least once a week and so on, and, of course, became acquainted and made new friends. And it started the ball rolling. However, it wasn't so much from the aesthetic point of view that we stuck together, but it was more from the social point of view. It's reversed itself now. It's more of the aesthetic. We might be from, the social point of view, miles apart.

[00:45:00]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's interesting. Well, social idea, social reform, reexamination was in the air. This was—

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, it was all there. That was why there's more or less the rediscovery of America—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: —amongst the artists.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And an interest in it.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: A common employer.

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, it wasn't then. It was a—don't forget that Roosevelt himself was a reformer. And they were generally for his program all the way down the line. So that it wasn't a case of saving your job by voting for the man [laughs].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No.

HERMAN CHERRY: It was a very definite belief in himself and in the program and the idea that

his program had accepted the artists on his basis, rather than, say just merely a poverty program, but using the talents that were available at that time to its fullest extent.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: Rather than say putting an artist on a job as a ditch digger, so he can just keep alive. That would have been roughly wasting his talent, his light, the bitterness, and everything else.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: So, it wasn't only in the art field. It was in all the other fields. And I—I'm absolutely sure that the—whatever has happened in the theater, for instance, in America, has come out of WPA. So many of the people who later on were able to do something in the theater started with the Project. I think Orson Welles was one of them, as a matter of fact.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, was there a relationship between the Arts Projects? Writers, Music?

HERMAN CHERRY: Only incidentally. I mean, if—there wasn't—in Los Angeles, there wasn't too much of a theater. But if they needed someone to do sets or anything like that, they knew where to get the artists. And there was a—most of the artists knew or were involved with the other arts somehow or other. I was involved with a theater too at that time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You were?

HERMAN CHERRY: And there were concerts, and you met musicians, and so on. There was not so much collaboration. But, again, I think for the first time they knew they were there and that you could always use those resources, you see.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure. I've run into some areas in the country where the artists design programs.

HERMAN CHERRY: They did that there.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: You know, they were—some artists are very good at certain things. And once it was discovered, well, they used it [inaudible].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: And they were actually available if there had been, say, a slightly different setup. I don't know how to put it. There might have been more of a collaboration between the different arts. They tried—as I remember, very vaguely though—there were areas where they did try to create some sort of collaboration. But it's a little difficult, because each group was jealous of the other groups' power—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —in a way, you see. Because, again, it was involved with money. They got so much money, and they didn't want to waste it on one thing, what they considered wasting, when they could use it within their organization.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: How did the artists look upon the quota reduction problem?

HERMAN CHERRY: What do you mean reduction problem?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, in New York, for example—I don't know whether it was symptomatic in Los Angeles. But in New York, Colonel Somervell periodically said, Cut back 30 percent because of the funds which were available in Congress. Congress itself kept the arts programs on a tight financial grip so that the people who were doing the planning couldn't, you know, [inaudible].

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, there was always that. But I don't remember that anything happened to me about it. I mean, right to the end, I got what I got. I think it was \$21 or something like that. I forget now.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah, or something to—

HERMAN CHERRY: And that was very adequate for me to live on, what with the material they gave me, because—since you didn't have anything to begin with. And it gave me terrific freedom to move around. And it more or less got started, you know, to confirm my feelings about what I wanted to do.

[00:50:15]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Did you go with a sketchbook? Or what?

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, at that time, I was doing figurative painting. But what do you mean with a sketchbook?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, I mean, if you have opportunity to paint, to do the thing you really want to do and you have access to materials, idea becomes important. And you indicated that the social scene, the American scene was in the air. I don't know the extent to which that shaped your thinking at the time, but, you know, the memory memories of memories that you may have walking down the street, it's nice to carry a camera or a—

HERMAN CHERRY: Oh, well, a lot of people took photographs and worked from them and so on. I didn't do that. But I sketched. I mean, I think that was more or less the ordinary thing. I—yeah, I carried a sketchpad with me and even went out into the country and did sketches and drawings. Hundreds of them, as matter of fact, and then more or less used them in some way in the painting.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: But I was in a very formative period at that time. My stuff wasn't popular. And not many people wanted it. A lot of the artists found out that the so-called American scene wasn't for them. You know, it was—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's a good thing to learn.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah, that's right. And something—it was something imposed. It was just the American scene per se. It wasn't that you were against what you saw in America [laughs]. It was just the way it was done, which you got caught in more or less, and then you dropped it eventually.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: It was too, say, sentimental or sort of verging on [inaudible].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. So, I didn't—I dropped that after a while. It wasn't my genre. It wasn't anything that I really felt. It was just that I was interested in the idea of doing something which was, say, closer to my background however which way it went.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: But there is nothing more American than, say, a Pollock painting, and the way he says it. But at the same time, it comes from all sorts of sources that are historical sources, Renaissance, you know, and the modern French painting and so on. Nevertheless, he's made something else into it. We didn't drop that. I mean, this was something that Benton wanted to do. Of course, he didn't succeed entirely, but he really wanted to throw out—for some reason, he hated Europe. I guess he had to hate it to reject it in some way, to be able to accept himself.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. The gist, though, was that the ideas were there, and they were being bent to an American expression, ultimately rejected in terms of the American scene where—

HERMAN CHERRY: That's right.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. [Inaudible] shuffling [inaudible] artistic cards he had—

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: —and come up with a new personal statement that he wanted to make.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yes, finally. Well, some of them didn't come up with a personal statement until years and years later.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: And it was a—even a person like Gorky, who was abstract way back in the early '30s—well, Picasso, of course, and he was—everybody else was doing American scene and figuration and so on, really didn't hit—make a personal statement until toward the end of his life.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: I mean, it wasn't at all personal. It was just abstract. I mean, he just happened to be more interested in that area.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: But the personal statements came later with all of them. And some a little earlier, some a little later. It's according to where you happen to be at the time. If I had stayed in New York, I probably would have gone into abstract painting much earlier.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think so.

HERMAN CHERRY: Everybody—it was in the air. Whereas in Los Angeles, there was no area where you can be influenced. You just didn't see enough.

[00:55:08]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Not even—how about in association with MacDonald-Wright?

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, MacDonald-Wright was not in abstract to begin with. He was against anything like that. He'd already dropped his Synchrony [Synchronism]—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —years before, and was doing Chinese mandarin self-portraits of himself as a mandarin or as Lao Tzu or Confucius or Buddha or something like that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: He was doing figurative painting. And he really wasn't interested in abstraction. He was only interested actually in the Chinese and Renaissance, sort of collaboration [inaudible], which you know are in his paintings [inaudible].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But what about Guston?

HERMAN CHERRY: Guston was doing figurative painting very much under the influence of the—Piera della Francesca and Orozco, and so on. Actually, he didn't become an abstract painter until after 1950. He was already abstracting, but going way out, it was about '51, I think [inaudible].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, what about the seeds of this? Did you find any in the '30s?

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, yeah. There were painters who were trying—working at it, like [Merrill. Merrill -Ed.] in Los Angeles, who was doing a sort of flowing painting. A person like Jenkins today is doing not [ph] as well. But they were. It was in the air. And, of course, you saw some abstract paintings, but it never really penetrated. You never got to it somehow. There were painters coming in from New York, from Europe, who had touches of it, but mostly you found that they were influenced by Cézanne or Gauguin or Van Gogh or something like that. In part, they didn't go past that in their own paintings. And I didn't. I made futile attempts on it. It never quite happened until I came to New York. And I think it's very rare that someone working alone comes up with something which is way in advance of his time, generally it's—a group action of some kind even if it's for a short time. It may not last very long, but—I mean, the group idea may not last very long, but once the idea is implanted, why then, they spread out and work on their own.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: But once that's said—but there was no—there wasn't any of that really going on—and a lot of talk about art amongst a few people, but it was really the—in Los Angeles the Mexican thing had become a tremendous influence. As it was, if you had gone to San Francisco at that time, when Diego Rivera was doing the murals there, you would find that every artist on the project was doing Diego Rivera murals. All you have to do is go to Coit Tower, and you'll see that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But I talked with Ben Cunningham.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. Ben would know all about that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. But he—you know, he was experimenting in a way in those days.

HERMAN CHERRY: I didn't know his work at that time. And he's been slowly developing, slowly developing, along the lines that his work is today—quite a long time. But he was caught in that, at that time too. It wasn't the case of just changing your style to fit the Project. It's just the way it was.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: And there were powerful men who may not have been powerful artists who had a tremendous influence at that time, who had, say, very strong forward ideas about things, but they were ideas and had nothing to do with the influence to your painting. Because everybody dropped Diego Rivera after a while. It just didn't fit somehow. Later on, there is that discovery for themselves. But there were some artists who have remained still under the influence of the Mexican painters. Still paint that way today.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you see much of the Washington people in Los Angeles?

[01:00:02]

HERMAN CHERRY: No. MacDonald-Wright and Feitelson were the only ones that—saw them. I never met Cahill until I came to New York. And the only time we had anything to do with each other was when I wrote a letter to him about something I disliked very much in the Art Project about MacDonald-Wright and Feitelson. And I don't go into that. I mean, that's just like a personal vendetta on my part. And he sent the letter onto MacDonald-Wright [laughs]. Well, I can see his point, because he didn't want to get caught up in local situations, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERMAN CHERRY: And then he might have thought that I was a griper or something like that, you see.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And you get enough of those letters all the time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And from his point of view, he couldn't fight guerrilla warfare—

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: —from 3,000 miles [laughs].

HERMAN CHERRY: And not only that. But he was a terribly close friend of MacDonald-Wright.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: He also was involved with the Chinese situation and idea. And so, [laughs] I mean, he's going to take Wright's word. I don't blame him, against my word or something. I felt it was a Wright project basically, and I didn't like the idea. I thought it should have been more democratic, in a way. But—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But did you have discussions with Wright on this? Or was it difficult to discuss things—

HERMAN CHERRY: You didn't discuss things with Wright. You merely listened. And he wasn't in there very often anyway. He didn't hang around there. He was on—Wright like power and so on.

Now, I saw him last time I was in Los Angeles. I mean, I admire him in so many ways, and I certainly don't in others, you know. But he—I don't think he believed in the Project, you see. He's too much of an aristocrat, too much of an ego, in many ways, for him really to believe in any democratic process at all. And Feitelson, of course, he just—they just wrote little articles about each other. Wright would say Feitelson was the—one of the most learned man in the Renaissance. He came in the Renaissance, and Wright would take the Oriental area. [They laugh.] And it was very, very funny what was going on between the two of them. I don't talk to—I know it's on a recording but I don't care [inaudible]. I still haven't talked to Feitelson since those days [laughs].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You haven't?

HERMAN CHERRY: [Laughs.] And every time I get a message from Los Angeles, I—it was from like Feitelson, and he said something about me [inaudible] something like that. [Inaudible]. [Laughs.]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Inaudible]—

HERMAN CHERRY: It's kind of a—it's funny now. I mean, I don't care one way or the other, as a matter of fact.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But at the time, at least.

HERMAN CHERRY: At the time, yeah. I was very bitter.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, did you see much of Joseph Allen?

HERMAN CHERRY: I don't know Joseph Allen.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: How about Joe Danysh?

HERMAN CHERRY: Yes. I saw Joe Danysh occasionally. As a matter of fact, at that time, I was very close to Fletcher Martin who is very big up there. At that time, he was doing murals and, of course, he was, you know, doing very well as a painter. And he—of course, his—the American scene was just absolutely perfect for him. That's a marvelous example of—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

HERMAN CHERRY: —where it just fit, you see. Whereas had a certain illustrative ability that he has more than the certain—I mean, he has tremendous illustrative ability. And so, we were very, very close, and he was very close to Danysh. And we used to drive up to San Francisco occasionally, and we all go out and have a ball together. So, Danysh was a man who liked the good life. And I don't know how he got the job. I think he had a little gallery in San Francisco, if I remember correctly, and then through that somehow. But he was very free about the way the WPA was run.

[01:05:16]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: As a matter of fact, except for some local egos and so on, I think generally the whole thing was run very well.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And then I saw Kadish up there. He was the head of the mural project at that time, and he, of course, was a firm reliever in the WPA and what it stood for and the possibilities, things like that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you run into William Gaskin, in San Francisco?

HERMAN CHERRY: No. Gaskin? No.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You didn't?

HERMAN CHERRY: I may have. I'm terrible with names. So, it's very possible. I just simply forgotten his name—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —through all these years.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, Danysh was sort of an overall—

HERMAN CHERRY: Yes. He was head of the whole western division, I believe.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. And he used to arrive—or at least he's been described he's arriving pretty much like a cyclone.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. Well, he was a dapper guy. And at that time, he was married to a very wealthy woman. And he was—had taken up horses and so on. He was horseman and a few other things. And he lived high and wide. And I guess he was, for the time, the perfect person for that sort of thing, a lot of energy, and he could meet people. And a little nutty, which was good, you know—[Harlan Phillips laughs]—rather than just being an official—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: Official attitude. Well, he—but through a—maybe through accident or what, or there must have been someone in Washington that had some kind of an idea about it, they put very peculiar guys at the heads of these things that worked out very well sometimes. You know, I don't know how the—I have an idea that Danysh was a good organizer in some way. He sort of kept things together. But it was funny to see him, sort of, head of the project, and MacDonald-Wright just—you know, the western division—MacDonald-Wright just in the Los Angeles area.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: But he seemed to work out really well. But, of course, he won't accept any complaints either [inaudible]—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —which I suppose the way an organization has to be run.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well don't you find it surprising that the artists discovered even administrative talent? Because you're right, this was creating an institution, you know, out of whole cloth. Start it tomorrow.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. That's true. It never did end up into a—in a bureaucracy. It might have, if it had kept on longer. It's possible. But the—it didn't. It was always really quite fluid, except when the Washington people—you know, you couldn't tell whether the Project was going to exist. There was always this talk about, well, it looks like it's going to end, and it's all finished, et cetera. And there was always that Damocles' sword hanging over. So, you never really were set. Maybe that's what kept it sort of floating—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Alive.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: —as it were.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And it never became institutionalized.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: But it might have been. And besides that, I don't see how you can do it with the artists there. You know, it would just be impossible. Each one is more or less an individual. It would have been very difficult to make them conform to anything like that. They simply would have dropped out.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. I think that's, in a way, the reason why the Project was set up initially as Federal Project Number One. Federal control in Cahill's hands as far as the artists were concerned. So, only subsequently, I think in 1939, when they discontinued the Theater Project, Hallie Flanagan had raised hell, and quoting senators correctly in *One-Third of a Nation*, the play about housing—

HERMAN CHERRY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: —you know. Or *Triple-A Plowed Under*. [Laughs.] [Inaudible.] And senators got a little a little sensitive as you—as you—as the—you know, they would with idea. And here the federal government was supporting the most volatile groups where idea is concerned, the arts.

[01:10:01]

HERMAN CHERRY: Absolutely.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right. And so, they turned the administrative control away from the federal government to the state agencies in '39, or '40.

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, it was ending anyway. The war was imminent.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. What impact did the war have? Did anybody attempt to shape the Project in terms of preparedness?

HERMAN CHERRY: Not that I knew of.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: They just suddenly ended. I mean, they're—the war was imminent, and they wanted to use the money, I suppose, for the war effort, for what was coming up, and people's minds actually were spread out now. I mean, it's really hard to work under those circumstances.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: And even if the artists had worked through all the war years, which some did—most of them did as much as possible, they—I don't see how the Project could have existed—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —under those circumstances. Because all—the idea was that—and the Project was to use the manpower that was not being used in the economic system. And the war was taking an awful lot of them. They were going into factories, and they were going into the army, and so on.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: So, there's another reason for the WPA to stop. There was hope that something might come out of it and continue afterwards. You know, there might be something.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: But nothing did happen. But it worked out, however, that a lot of the GIs, a lot of people who'd been on the Project, as a matter of fact, who were in the war, were then given another [two years' surcease -Ed.]. That is, if they survived the war.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And they were able to go to Europe, and able to go do other things and then expand. And at that time, of course, after the war, it was a year when—of experimentation, when every—all our concepts had had to take drastic changes. Our social concepts, our aesthetic concepts, and lots of the people had traveled more, become more sophisticated, less localized, and things began to simmer. At the same time, you got to remember that the—enormous amount of European artists came over here, especially the surrealists, and lived here all during the war years, [Max Ernst, Breton -Ed.]—well, you name 'em, I just can't think of all of them at the moment. And they exerted great, great influence on the artists here. They had never recognized the American artists in Europe, and then they began to see some of the things being done. And they became acquainted. Like Gorky was invited into their group. [Matta was here. -Ed.] There—so that the war had a way of changing and maybe expediting certain things were in the air that were inevitable in the course of art, and moving it ahead that much faster.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, the artists' groups themselves took positions on these foreign, ugly voices long before any other groups did. In New York, the Artists' Congress, for example, and the

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HERMAN CHERRY: Oh, yes. There were—the artists were all involved in the—say, the Spanish Civil War.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right up to their—

HERMAN CHERRY: Oh, yeah. They were all involved with that. That was part, also, of the social scene. I mean, they were just socially conscious. And I think it wasn't just the painters, it was all the people in all the creative fields, you'll find that—if you look at the roster of names of the people at that time who were involved in it, it's just absolutely amazing. I think I have a book on the Writers' Congress I picked up in San Francisco. A sort of historical document. [Inaudible.] [Cherry looks for a book. -Ed.] And the list of names are incredible. Do you know this book at all?

[01:15:01]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. University of Chicago?

HERMAN CHERRY: No, the University of California, I think, put this one out. Let's see.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah, California Press.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. And Wendell Willkie, Wallace [ph] Bentley, Lattimore, Darryl Zanuck. [Laughs]. I mean, the craziest names. And then the writers, Robert Rawson, and director Kenneth Macgowan, [Yarus Ekins -Ed.] who of course fled to the East. [Inaudible], John Hubley, who does fantastic cartoons in New York, won all the prizes. Arch Oboler—I mean, just to go through it is very, very interesting.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But you know, the original impulse of the WPA was to kind of feed them gambit.

HERMAN CHERRY: What kind of—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Feed them.

HERMAN CHERRY: Oh, feed them?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. You know, all the circumstance under which it came about. There were a lot of people and artists or the arts where one group that required some support. They weren't being used in the—

HERMAN CHERRY: No, they weren't being used. I was making seven dollars a week before I got on the Project.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That in the bookstore?

HERMAN CHERRY: That was in the bookstore. I was working half a day and getting seven dollars a week, and I considered myself lucky. Not only that, but a lot of people considered me lucky.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: It was an interesting job.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: And I was able to exist on that seven dollars a week. And I was able to paint in the mornings and whenever other time I had. So that when I got \$21 a week, that was quite a jump [ph], you see.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: But there—most of the people I knew were absolutely broke. I mean, it is—or they were just working 24 hours a day trying to just exist [inaudible]—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —all kinds of jobs [inaudible].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's right. And this is one of the requirements, I think, that you had to have a job to keep yourself together, because there wasn't any market— or what market there was

wasn't interested in local.

HERMAN CHERRY: No, not at all.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And it was very difficult to—

HERMAN CHERRY: At that time, as a matter of fact, the gallery that I had for two years there at—two years—two or three years, Feitelson took it over afterwards and then made a big gallery out of it later, when they moved. But I don't think we ever sold one painting. [Laughs.] We just never sold one painting. The people who were collecting paintings there just went to Europe. That was the big writers and directors and so on, who bought French painting.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: They were not interested in local painting at all. And no, I don't think there was a damn thing sold. Later on, when Feitelson ran that other gallery, Stanley Rose on Hollywood Boulevard, why, they got like a big Renoir show and so on, so, you know, you could sell something out of that. It wasn't so much in local shows. As a matter of fact, I—this—I think the other thing, a little bit romance in it or something, I met my future wife.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: On the Project?

HERMAN CHERRY: On the Project. She just come from Chicago. She got on the Project, Denny Winters. And so, she was on the project quite a while, as I was. She was also on the Chicago Project, I think, earlier. Yeah. So, there was a lot of that, of course, going on.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, in personal terms but for the WPA, where would you have been? I mean, what did it add to you?

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, I think it—I would have gone on—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Anyway.

[01:20:00]

HERMAN CHERRY: I think that was inevitable. But a lot of the people who didn't get on the Project went into Walt Disney, for instance, and commercial art, things like that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HERMAN CHERRY: And that was the end. They were finished. And a lot of people who were on the Project, if it hadn't existed, would have gone into commercial art or would have given it up and gone into advertising or would have done something else and maybe painted on Sundays, you see. There were absolutely no opportunities. And it took a certain type of mentality to stick with it. I mean, a really romantic type of mentality where the—you live on bread and water and in an attic. I mean, that's the way. When I think of all the things I did before the Project just to keep alive, and ruin my body in the attempt, certain areas of it. If the WPA had been there earlier, I would have—that wouldn't have occurred. I mean, you destroy—when you're young, of course, you don't know it, but you really hurt yourself physically.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: But we were living under terrible circumstances, now that I think of it. But at the time, of course, I mean, it was just—it seemed like part of life. And we were able to live decently, you know, and maybe have some wine on the table, which was a nice idea.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure. It's like the—it was that one man said, I could afford, after paying the bills, a bottle of beer.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, you know, that's a small thing to look forward.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But nonetheless, in its terms, it was a big thing.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah, absolutely big. I mean, we would say the artists would get together, and everybody brings something, you know, and we'd all sit down and eat. We'd have wine for everybody, I mean, which is something unheard of. We never think of having whiskey, of course. Nowadays, I mean, it doesn't—you know, you bring a bottle, or somebody brings a bottle. But then just to have a bottle of wine was something marvelous. And prior to that, I mean, you know, even artists would collaborate. They would bring whatever they had now, so we'd all put it together and try to make a meal out of it. But I think that it saved a lot of artists who would not have the strength who have stuck with it all that time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: Now, it's different, of course, because a student goes to a university, an art school or something, gets a degree, and there's a possibility of a teaching job, which did not exist at that time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And no artists had a degree at that time. No artists went to college. You look at the artists in the '40s and '50s—late '40s and '50s, and you'll find that none of them have degrees, the ones who have made names for themselves. And that only came later when the artists made some kind of reputation, and it began to impose itself on the historic conscience of America. Then the art departments began to think in other terms about getting artists who were—artists who had come to some conclusions. And that opened the way for the next generation. It made it much easier for them. And these—also, it's much easier for art—young artists to get a gallery. I mean, there are places available, over 300 galleries in New York alone, over 60 in Los Angeles.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I know that changed—the whole market has changed.

HERMAN CHERRY: Completely.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But the market—and the way it's related to the traveling shows, the touring shows in the '30s. That is whatever exposure means to someone who comes to a gallery. I mean, this is our big national pastime, it's not baseball anymore, it's attending gallery—museums.

HERMAN CHERRY: True. [It's a bigger (ph)] thing now.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. So that—however, this kind of awareness grows. Yeah. It's probably in some ways related to the '30s, the touring shows, art [inaudible]—

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, I don't doubt it at all. I couldn't put my finger on where it would be, whether the schools and the galleries and the art activities in the '30s had something to do with it or not. I don't know. I would suspect that it couldn't have existed without it.

[01:25:30]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: I mean, I just don't see how—it would have taken that much longer for the American artists to have gotten rid of that inferiority complex that he had concerning the European art and things like that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah, or just simply finding—

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah, as a man.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Finding a [niche in his own society -Ed].

HERMAN CHERRY: That's right.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. No place—it was a complete neglect and oblivion by society toward the artist, and he was very, very much alone. Now, it's just the reverse, and I don't know whether the other is better. It's—now, the—even this situation here, who would have think that anybody wants to record anything an artist has to say? It just wasn't important enough. And for many

reasons, I don't know which came first, whether the publicity came first, or the artists came first [laughs]. But something has happened now to take away the privacy that the artists always enjoyed and wanted in a way. But, of course, not in such a way that he couldn't eat or couldn't get his paints or didn't have time to paint and so on. But that's a modern phenomenon. That's something else. And that will probably be recorded too.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, have any of the notions that you had in the '30s about art, its technique, had continuing vitality, or you just—do—

HERMAN CHERRY: No, I'm not interested in that. Well, I think when an artist gets older, of course, he's not interested. He finds his technique. He finds his way, and he more or less sticks by it. I mean, technique or methods or new paints or anything. I mean, that has nothing to do with what you're saying. So, I think the artist just merely finally finds his medium and sticks with it, because that seems to work best for what he has to say.

But at that time, the artists were floundering around, and they were all reading Dorner [ph] and trying to find out what the material was. I mean, how artists achieved certain things, they still teach it in colleges and art departments and so on, but you find that the—they drop it all. It just becomes lessons. It's interesting. Of course, if you're going to be an art historian it's interesting so that you can talk about the medium, which would be important if you're talking about the time and the artist. So—but I think generally the artist isn't so interested in that. He discovers his own medium, his own way, but that may have helped to make it easier for him to discover his own medium. It's possible. It's not all down the drain.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I was just thinking that it may well be that—well, that this—if it's true that an artist has to have a set of blinders, to rule out things which seemingly stand in his way or interfere with what he thinks about his own statement and so on, it may be possible that the '30s had side windows in these blinders, to some extent, where you can peek over what else was going on, because there was a more—a greater emphasis upon the camaraderie. You saw a lot artists—

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And you've talked about a lot of ideas and seemingly may have had nothing to do whatsoever with art, but had to do with the idea of what was in the air, whether it was Sacco-Vanzetti or whatever it was. So that, you know, until you get comfortable with the medium, then it doesn't seem to make any difference anymore. You're back on the—your purpose.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Your statement, your notion, and what other people may think doesn't amount to a hill of beans, or what they may be doing may not amount to a hill of beans, because you're comfortable with the medium, discovered or you've—whatever the search is you fumbled away to the point where you are comfortable with it.

[01:30:15]

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, the artist is basically trying to reach some point where he can say best what he has to say.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And he—all he wants from a medium is for it not to get in his way. That's all.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And he certainly doesn't want to be self-conscious about it. When you do that, then you're just really involved with medium and technique and so on, which you see going on now, as a matter of fact. Rather than the expressive force of a painting, it's the—well, you might call it the entertainment value, which has to do with technique, with mediums, with strange objects, things going on. And that's something else. They weren't doing things like that then. It wasn't, say, a means to an end, as they're doing it now. Now, whatever all the plastic materials they use and the glues and God knows what, I mean, they're using their—it—that becomes the sum total of the painting now. And at that time, those techniques were techniques that had been used for centuries, traditional techniques that had really nothing to do with

experimentation. It was just really finding out how certain things were done by certain artists who they admired at the time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And then bending that to perhaps that may not as yet articulated purpose.

HERMAN CHERRY: No, that's right.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: There was a—it wasn't—there had never—there hadn't been, at that time, a summation of anything by any of the artists. They were all fairly young. The older artists just kept painting as they always did anyway. If they were doing still lifes they just kept painting still life. They were already set.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, for example, with this [ph] painting, are there seeds of that in the '30s for you?

HERMAN CHERRY: No. In the '30s, I was more involved with Cézanne actually. But when you say the seeds of that, I mean, I probably could not have done it, or even thought in those terms, if I hadn't been involved with it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: I mean, it's hard to say. When you look at, say, an early Kandinsky in 1906 or 1901, for instance, when he was involved with the folk [ph] painting.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: I mean, you would not think that that had anything to do with—say with his last paintings, like *Boogie Woogie*, you see. I mean, you could ask him the question here and, you know, you'd get a shrug of the shoulder. But if you look at it hard enough and push at it hard enough, you'll know that the same man did it somehow.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What I was thinking of is that whatever else we may be, we're products of all our yesterdays.

HERMAN CHERRY: Oh, yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You know, and when you stand in front of an easel, I would assume that whatever experiences you have is—[you let your fingertips and bet your purpose (ph)] or not depending upon how successful you may be.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's—

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, a sum total of all my failures, I think.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] I didn't mean the success in financial and monetary terms, because I don't think in those terms. But, you know, that's—

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. Well, that—I—that more came out of negation in a way. I mean, like, negating the things that I believed in before.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. That's part of the story too.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. That's in a way what I meant about the '30s may have created a climate which had to be overthrown.

HERMAN CHERRY: Oh, you had to do it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: You had to go through it. You had to go through the American scene. You had to go through that genre of painting.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Even to drown—

HERMAN CHERRY: You had to—yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Ultimately. Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: It drowned itself.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. [Laughs].

HERMAN CHERRY: I mean, there was a—not even any necessity. I don't think it was a great—what do you call it? A great trauma to leave it, you know.

[01:35:01]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No.

HERMAN CHERRY: But I think that a lot of the artists suffered, because they felt somehow that they ought to do it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Their arm was twisted.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: And they thought—not because of WPA.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No.

HERMAN CHERRY: Because of the air circulating at that time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And they just made [inaudible due to sound distortion]. And so, that happens in human relations too. I mean, you try something, and maybe it doesn't work, you know. Or maybe it does. But you simply have to try, or you're not going to ever try anything. That's why I say that the possibility of failure is always present. And along with it, the possibility of success.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: I mean, that's the hope for, possibly.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But it's like reconciling polarities, a straight line and a curve line, hot and cold, love and hate, you know. And that's a continuous thing. I don't know that you ever become a master of that kind of thing. You're always in the process.

HERMAN CHERRY: No, because that's the—that's where the artist is. It's also a pain in the ass, because it puts you in a continual off-balance with your life. I mean, you know—you know that you'll never make it entirely. That—so, that the—and at the same time that it bothers you, it's the one thing that holds you—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: —to it. And—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's an interesting view. So that you never reach the point where you can step back and say, "There it is."

HERMAN CHERRY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Because already it's become the jab for something—

HERMAN CHERRY: No.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: —utterly—

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: It's always the point where you say, "I think."

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] That's marvelous.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. So, yeah, it's very, very difficult. And I think the greatest contribution that WPA gave was the sense of dignity that the artists got, the taking away of the economic pressure that was always behind, and the—and time. Time to develop.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: And to devote full time.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. And to think about it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And, you know, a time for thinking, even if he didn't paint. You know, you can't think, you know, when you're pushed, when you're—say, in a job and so on. I mean, just like trying to be thoughtful a little bit about it [inaudible]. That's right.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And it gave you that somehow. It was the first time I ever had it. And I know that psychologically, I had a very immature thing happened to me in a way. I say immature, but it was so human. That is when this happened, and I had this sort of security, I did all the things that I suddenly—that I had dreamed of when I was a young boy, like playing tennis or having a boat, or something like that. And the things that I never been able to have or time to waste, or things like that, I did it. And—because there was always this intense struggle just to keep alive and to keep my idea alive, what I wanted to be. And so, for a time there, there was a period when I just did it. Got out of my system, all the things that I felt had been neglected as a child.

Because I always worked as a child. And suddenly, there was a period where, I think, I had so much freedom. But I got that out of my system. So, there was no, say, regrets at not having lived in a certain way.

[01:40:04]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. And this came as a consequence of the recognition of artists.

HERMAN CHERRY: The recognition of artists, the economic security and the time. Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And I was able to get all of these things out of my system and not have regrets the rest of my life for not having experienced that or done that or—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: It might have been immature, but at the same time I never regret it, because I had a certain joy in that accomplishment, in saying, Well, I've done it, now that's over [inaudible]. [Laughs.] It's like very much when you're very sad or something like that, and you have a little [inaudible] walking down the street, and you're just, suddenly without any idea, a need or anything like that you're going to buy a new suit. I mean, just doing that, being able to spend the money, you know, and doing something, like, rash. Nothing that was needed. That's another thing that was not understood at that time about the artists, and that is the certain amount of waste that an artist needs.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: I mean, there's a certain amount that you have to do in your life and get that over with and so on.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: That's the polarity again, I think. While we talk about the full dinner pail, you've got to presuppose a full garbage pail as well.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. [They laugh.] The possibility of waste, just a certain period where you sort of need that. I say waste, but, say, being flamboyantly—a flamboyant uselessness—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —at a certain point. [Pause.] Well, it's much easier now for the younger painters.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Different world.

HERMAN CHERRY: That's just an entirely different world. They don't even know anything about it. And then you can't talk to them about it, because they're simply not interested. And they don't understand it, except as a historical note.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right. There was a student who went up to Stuart Davis who was teaching, I guess, at the New School at the time, and asked him, When do you think I can have a show, a one-man show? And Davis said, Well, have you done any work? You know, drawing? Painting? A little. But when do you think I can have a show? Davis responded, which is quite [inaudible] for him, Well, in about 30 years. You know?

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. That's just what I was going to say.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] The kid replied, Go on! You know, this is the new breed in a way.

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, I had a—I wrote a little article while I was in California. I mean, I—you know, I was living in Berkeley, and campus life, I just hated it. I didn't feel like painting about the modern situation. And no one would publish it. It was a little nasty, I guess. So, I told about an incident: I'd come, between semesters, back to New York. A friend of mine had died. And I got a telephone call from a young boy who I've known since he was—the day he was born, practically. . He's the son of a very close friend of mine. And I knew he had been doing—he quit college and so on. I knew that he had been doing ceramics. And he c—he said, I want to talk to you. So he came up. And he said, Did you read my review in the magazine? I said, About your paintings? He said, Yeah. It was a pretty good review. I said, Yeah. I was rather amazed. He said, Why? I said, Because I never knew you painted. Oh, he said, I started six months ago. I said, You started six months ago? I said, You already have an exhibition in [inaudible]? He said, Yeah. I said, Ken, you know better than that. You've been around artists. And I said, You know there are artists who have been painting for 30 years who never had a show in New York. He says, Well, he says, the way I look at it, my painting isn't going to be any better in 30 years.

[01:45:17]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: He missed the whole point. [They laugh.]

HERMAN CHERRY: I thought it was a fantastic answer. I had nothing to say. [They laugh.] Absolutely nothing

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Clever.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And that's the attitude. He'd been painting six months. He's going to have another show. Now, he'll just paint, like, maybe a month or so and get it and have a show. And he gets reviewed. That's how easy it is.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: Now, they don't know him from Adam. And if I had to show—and there was a —say, some young girl from Vassar, art [was her (ph)] major, who has become a critic now. She just graduated and then goes and gets a job as a critic, which happens continuously, until she can get married. Well, she wouldn't know me from Adam, any more that she would know him, she'd go and look at the paintings. And she might even say that he influenced me. I mean, this is possible it happens quite often, as a matter of fact [laughs]. You see, because she has no background.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: I've painted 35 years or something like that, and he painted six months.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: It all looks the same to her very much, because anything goes. This happens very, very often. As a matter of fact, there's a lot of bitterness in the University of California-Berkeley, because all the staff, you know, are people who had painted a long, long time. Good or bad, doesn't make a difference. The point is they have painted a long time. And they—it happened last year, as a matter of fact, well it happens nearly every year. They send paintings into the local museum, and they're turned down by the jury. And their students' work is taken, the students who are just merely copying them. The student's work is taken and very often given a prize. [Laughs] The faculty was rejected. The whole faculty was rejected last year, or a year before that [laughs]. I mean, there's no way of judging—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No.

HERMAN CHERRY: —now, you see. And on the Art Project is—hard to judge, except that they knew there were just so many painters around. They knew that they had been painting, even though they hadn't shown or anything like that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: There was some sort of justification. An art student just can't—couldn't come up and say, you know, I'm going to art school, and this is my painting. It might be a good painting and so on. But still, you haven't proven anything yet, you see. But the situation is entirely, entirely, entirely different now.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I suppose it encourages one to develop a sense of humor. [They laugh.]

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, you laugh with tears in your eyes. [Laughs.] You have to—well, you have to laugh at it. You can't—you really can't do anything about it, because now it's out of the artists' hands in a way. It's in the periphery, in the hands of the periphery. And when stupid collectors who only have one thing, and that is an awful lot of money, can make statements like Groucher [ph] made in *Life* magazine, what can you do? I mean, a power—a tremendous power behind that, because the museums are frothing at the mouth to get his collection. And they're willing to do anything. And the dealers, of course, he can make them eat out of his hands. And the artist who's—who he's buying will come crawling or entertain him in the evening, or do whatever they—he wants them to do. They'll jump to the music, and make a statement that Cézanne is bathroom art—[inaudible] or bedroom [laughs]—I forgot what—it's just so horrible, I can't even remember it. But he's not the only one. I mean, these [inaudible] and these [inaudible], and these people are idiots. And there's an enormous amount of power wrested from the artists. Now at one time artist—getting off the WPA theme, but at one time the—when the artists had their club here and their Abstract Expressionism was just getting started.

[01:50:09]

And they began to wield—it began to wield a certain amount of power, the museums needed it, the galleries needed it, and, you know, it was a need for them, they began to form then around the artists. And the club became a very powerful thing. They could actually dictate the terms that they wanted from the art world on the outside. And that—finally when they—some of them became fat cats and the whole thing sort of fell apart, why, they lost that part, they allowed it to drift, and they just merely use their individual power. Like, if you made a tremendous name for yourself, they always want your paintings, and they'll do anything to get it, and so you can make demands. And so—but there are only individual demands. They won't work as a group [inaudible]. And so, the other artists are really left by the wayside, and there's nothing can be done about it. But then in a way, that's good. I'll be glad for the day when they leave us alone, as it were. You know, and don't intrude into the studio where it's been intruding. I mean, it's all right in the outside world going to cocktail parties and paying for your entertainment—for entertaining them that is. But when they started coming into the studio, then it's just too much. I mean, that's an invasion of privacy, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Stuart Davis told me the story of—he met Glenn Coleman here in the city. And he's sort of teasing Coleman, and he said, Guess what, he said, They just discovered a 13-year-old kid that's been painting modern art for the last five years. And Coleman's reply was, Jesus Christ. Why don't they leave us alone? [Laughs.]

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. Well, they discovered monkeys, and they discovered old women—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —and they discovered five-year-olds, and they discover kids just starting art school, you know—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —who are clever. And I feel sorry for some of them, because it's inevitable that they're going to be dropped just as fast as they were picked up.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. Sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: And it's going to be a sorry state of affairs when they have to face reality.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But the center has shifted, and it has shifted to the galleries and the museums largely, hasn't it?

HERMAN CHERRY: Oh, yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You know, where they set the tone, set the stage, and change [inaudible], and so on.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yes, it has changed. And I'm not trying to be romantic about it either. But I think that the artist has lost his role as a revolutionary in a certain sense, a malcontent, which was partly his role. It wasn't a malcontent because he was a cynic or unhappy or anything like that. It's just that he refused to accept anything until he discovered it for himself. And when he discovered it usually was quite different than anybody else's discovery.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And I think those values are all down the drain now.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's stage-managed.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. It's not—it's a—it has no meaning, now, to be an artist, actually. There's no particular pride in being—as a matter of fact, you can see by the relationship with the family. I mean, no family would think it bad for their son to become an artist now. Because they know there are all sorts of possibilities. You can become very successful.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: Nor does it make any difference that if you've been seeking security all your life that there—or like you're working in an art department and teaching in the university for years, that you can't make it. You can—many people in the art department—look at Liebermann [ph], he's also head of a big art department, a photographer, and this and that, and he's got New York shows. He's got his cake and eats it. Or somebody like—well, there were quite a few like that, but Lichtenstein, I use him as an example, who has been teaching—or was teaching since the day he got out of the university, raised a family, always had the money, always had a beautiful station wagon, and so on.

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And made it. He finally found the medium for making it, in some way. So, it—you don't have to give up anything anymore. I mean, there's no need for it. You can have it both ways. It doesn't make any difference. It always seemed like you had to give up life, like you had to give up things, and that was during my period. I mean, it was a case of abnegation, and you accepted it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: Not that you should. I don't think that an artist should starve, should live in a dirty garret, and so on. But that if he had something to say, it will be rough on him for quite a while. But most of the students that I've had—I taught last year in the University of California-Berkeley for two semesters. And nearly all the graduate students that I had in my seminar asked me the best way to get a job, and how to go about it, and so on. It was not how to be an artist. But the best way to get a job, and where it would be the best way—a place for them to live outside of New York, that is if they don't want to live in New York, it's too rough—to be able to exhibit and, you know, make a name for themselves as an artist too, but also a job. This was

their main function.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: [Inaudible] a different thing.

HERMAN CHERRY: It's a differently thing, entirely. And you have to accept it in a way. You can't go back to those days. I mean, you can't talk about the grand days when the artists were—because they had something to say that was unusual and different, so it would be very rough sailing for a long time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. That option is still open for the number of people choosing it, maybe, [inaudible].

HERMAN CHERRY: Oh, yes. There are a lot of people choosing it who won't—who don't even have galleries, who won't do anything about it, that just keep working as best as possible. Of course, a lot of the smarter artists married schoolteachers and things like that had supported them for years and years and years. Like Newman [ph], for instance. And then they finally made it. But that was like WPA. [Laughs].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Love. It's love with 10 percent profit.

HERMAN CHERRY: They—you know, the—an artist had to be supported to work some way or another because he simply couldn't—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —make it any other way. Or you're—if you were lucky enough to get a sponsor, you see.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: But then that was very, very rare. And if you look at the roster of painters and sculptors who won, say, awards, the Prix de Rome or Guggenheim or anything like that, so you go back about 30 years, and you might find six that were worth giving it to.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And so, most artists, for instance, the named artists never got anything, Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko, Gottlieb, none of them ever won the prizes or anything, until they made big name for themselves, or got any of these things. Very rare artists would make it, that is like Guston. But then when Guston made all those—won all those prizes and all those grants and all those things, he was doing figurative painting, which is very good for what it was at that time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And—but he was one of the few artists. But if he'd been doing abstract painting all along, I think he wouldn't have made it at all.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: None of them were invited in shows and so on. But—

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HERMAN CHERRY: But the—those—so those grants meant absolutely nothing to what was really going on. It was given to the strangest people.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I don't know that we have adequate criteria even now, you know, to tell. Such a gamble one way or another in making a grant.

HERMAN CHERRY: No, there's no criteria. And—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah. What do you [inaudible]?

HERMAN CHERRY: But I find that, in looking at some of these grants that are given, and most of the people that get them are—were—are teaching in universities now.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And have certain amount of degrees. Bachelor of Fine Arts isn't enough anymore. And you very rarely find, say, someone who is just painting, not teaching any place, not doing anything. I wouldn't teach at all, if I could help it. That's the only way I can exist. But though I might teach, you know, here and there, if I could choose it, you know. But as a steady job, I wouldn't—I just simply wouldn't do it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: But that's even getting harder now, because people with degrees are always first. And students have a better—my students have a better chance gaining jobs than I do. Because now that so many of the artists have, say, made names for themselves and have degrees, they would prefer the ones with the degrees, rather than the others. [Laughs].

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's a funny world.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah, it's a crazy world. It's a strange world.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, I'm grateful to you for talking with me this morning.

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, I got off the track, but—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No, it's part of the—[inaudible].

HERMAN CHERRY: It maybe is part of the—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's a reaction to what really transpired. You know, and what the kids don't understand today is that the advent of the WPA just gave opportunity to do what you wanted to do more than anything else in the world. And we had to—

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: —you know, tie odd jobs together in order to sustain yourself to do it. Suddenly, this was the Elysian Fields really.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. Well, I don't feel like it was a golden age or anything like that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No, but—

HERMAN CHERRY: You know, because I have no sentiment about those things.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No, but just the concept of time to do what you want to do.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah. No, I thought it was absolutely wonderful. And I think that the government ought to have something like that, even if it's not too workable. All these things run by the government are very difficult. I don't go along with—what's the name of—the Whitney Museum is always talking about WPA coming back or something, some form of it. But that's kind of, I think, a romantic concept. But some recognition of the artists and probably the possibility of him being some use in the society. And that is by his work, just his work, no other way.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: I don't see any other way. And so much wasted talent, so much wasted possibilities that people have, that just simply aren't used.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, you know, I think it's one thing to—chance ultimately takes care of it. You know, it's what you do with the opportunity when it comes. It makes a difference. And you have to recognize it when it knocks.

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: A lot of people, you know, they're just not into—

HERMAN CHERRY: Sometimes you're not ready for it, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No. And that's—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's a pity—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —but that's the—chance is all right too.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's harsh.

HERMAN CHERRY: It's harsh. It's lucky.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: I mean, if you're there at the right time, and you never know the chances you miss, it's only what's just—what's there. And if everything works well, then it's fine.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No, and you can't come to the future as it unfolds with the snobbishness that comes with hindsight. [Because it doesn't (ph)] play [laughs].

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You can only look back and, you know, sometimes you see it. And you are fortunate, I would say, to be able [inaudible] all the other people I've talked about the WPA, were able to look back upon a period which gave zest to the step, to the brain, to the tongue, because everybody was talking, meaning, you know, however ideas exchange is the way [inaudible]. It was in that sense quite a renaissance over what [inaudible] gathering together, sharing ideas, exchanging ideas, fighting about ideas.

[00:05:19]

You know, sharpening your rapier on someone else's rapier. All of this is good. It's like going to a continuous seminar, where nothing is final. You're just sort of fumbling and stumbling along trying to master—trying to become a master only to discover that you can only be masterful to a point and start all over again [laughs].

HERMAN CHERRY: Yeah.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, I loved the—I did love the feeling amongst the artists, and the closeness they had that this similar economic situation created. You know, there was—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —this thing in which there was no argument about the aesthetics. There were discussions, of course, and there are people who had their own ideas. And that was great. But something bound them together, that was very beautiful. And I'm sorry, that's gone.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: I mean, I kind of like that. Although I don't like—I'm not a joiner, and I don't like to belong to groups as it were. That's why the club lasted as long as it did. There actually wasn't any club. I mean, there's no naming and no officers, that's the only way a thing could exist amongst artists, but—for any length of time. But there was something—a common fight to project and force their ideas on the people who were recalcitrant about accepting them.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: And they did it. They did it. Well, it was a powerful movement. And it—and there were—there, that again was chance, when a group of very strong, bright, talented people got together.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

HERMAN CHERRY: And they knew the ways of the world. They weren't just kids anymore.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But if your life has been learning how to lack for a little, you know, a situation which allows you a bottle of wine with good friends—

HERMAN CHERRY: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: —is something.

HERMAN CHERRY: Well, that's beautiful. Because the artists always has had a—say a way of life in which the maximum amount of freedom I think exists—

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: —because he has a minimum of it in his work.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

HERMAN CHERRY: [Laughs.] It's just a terrible struggle to just be bound completely to your work and at the same time to want this tremendous freedom.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yeah.

HERMAN CHERRY: It's the dichotomy in it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: It's the polarity [inaudible]. Well, let me turn this off. You must be exhausted.

HERMAN CHERRY: No. But the—I didn't know it was on all this time.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]