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Oral history interview with Mildred
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Transcript

Interview

HP: HARLAN PHILLIPS

MC: MILDRED CONSTANTINE

HP: Perhaps since this period has to be recreated I know of no document that would give us insight into the sensory things that are in the air. Perhaps a good way to begin is to get you back in the late 20s by way of what alternative presented, where interests lay as life sort of sprawls and unfolds. Where were you headed at the time? What sort of luggage had you picked up along the way in the way of interest, skill, idea. This could be related to almost anything you can think of. I don't mean it as a curve ball, it's a tough . . .

MC: I think if I try to tell it to you as it broke in on my own particular horizon that you'll get the flavor of it's beginnings. But I was working as Mrs. McMahon's secretary. It was my first job, the College Art Association, which was as far removed from contemporary art as Zanzibar is from New York.

HP: Yes.

MC: And it seemed to me that pretty soon it wasn't just professors of art that were knocking on our door asking for certain things, but somehow somewhere artists began coming around and the reason being that amongst the two or three people involved with the College Art Association were people like Mrs. McMahon, who were aware of the fact that we had a problem with living American artists and had just begun through Mrs. Gibson and people like that to become aware of the fact that this was a community problem and not just an esoteric problem of the arts.

HP: Is that the origin of the Gibson Committee?

MC: Yes.

HP: It is?

MC: It is. Mrs. McMahon sat in on the Committee before it became the Mayor's Committee, you see --

HP: Yes.

MC: And because of this, as I said, artists began to appear in the offices of the College Art Association, and this was marvelous, because I wasn't dealing in little Dutch masters where the artists were named, but suddenly people came in with works of art under their arms, or shoe boxes full of sculpture and asking for information, help, direction, you see, and pretty soon the Gibson Committee grew into the Mayor's Committee where it took a more formal and a more civic kind of a character. Pretty soon there was an organization, I should have said an organized method of interviewing the artists and finding out that their problems were aside from money, what the capabilities were until it began to take shape as to what, how, we could help them.

HP: Yes.

MC: And this was really the beginning. Before there were such things as organized projects for the artists.

HP: Yes.

MC: But it grew into this, and I must confess that Mrs. McMahon was one of the great, great leaders and thinkers in that direction along with people on the regular committee. I mean it was later that Juliana Force and all those people became more active and things got divided up into the Public Works of Art Project and the Mayor's Committee and . . .

HP: In short, the College Art Association fulfilled the function of serving a theme in order to deal with it more rationally.

MC: That's right, a role, a character, an activity which I don't think would have occurred to them for a hundred years.

HP: Yes.

MC: If it were not for the fact that it burst on the scene, that there was a responsive person like Mrs. McMahon there, and that our door was fairly easy to knock on. And it started when we were on East 57th Street in small offices. And this is the way it burst in on my consciousness, so that one day, it was the day that Smith who came in with a shoe box full of models of sculpture that I had never seen the likes of in my life and he would explain to me while he was sitting outside waiting to see Mrs. McMahon why he worked the way he worked and brought into my consciousness a facet of art that I had never dreamt existed. And I remember walking in and saying, "Mrs. McMahon, there s a marvelous person outside with sculpture, but it s not like sculpture that we have standing around the country." In my lovely, naive way and this is certainly a man we must help. Or else I became involved in the Shahn-Riker Island dispute. I mean I m jumping, I admit, but these are facets of consciousness that were not just social consciousness, but the role of the contemporary artist and how it evolved. Of course when Shahn and Bloch were working on the Riker s Island.

HP:

MC: And we had all the trouble where we got the penologist on our side, and the other people on the other side, I mean all these things suddenly began to come into focus.

HP: Well, did that come through the College Art Association? He wasn t quite sure at the time.

MC: Well, you see, here s what happened. Mrs. McMahon was Executive Secretary of the College Art Association until she had a formal job and a formal title with the Project. And therefore our offices at the time were used as a base of operation until they had their own base of operations, so that one that . . . I myself was never on the Project, but as Mrs. McMahon s secretary and then later in charge of the College Art Association exhibition program and all that, I was very close tot he entire evolvment of the Project and with all the people who were part of the Project, you see. And then the offices of the WPA art project were in the same building on the second floor of 137 East 57th Street, and we were on the fourth floor so inter-communication between the two was often, simple, and very constant.

HP: In, I think, it s December of '33.

MC: Ummhumm.

HP: And I think the Gibson Committee was long before this . . .

MC: Long before this.

HP: And if I m not mistaken, the Riker s Island mural was something which was sustained largely by the city . . .

MC: By the City, that was the Mayor . . .

HP: . . . as distinct from some national . . .

MC: Right. You see it was the Gibson Committee, the Mayor s Committee, the City Committee, and then became the Federal. Now I do not know whether the other cities in the United States had not by that time evolved in some form or shape help for artists. But I do know that the Gibson Committee was our first real conscious attempt here in the United States. And that Eddie Cahill and Audrey and all those other people did not formulate the Federal Art Projects -- and Edward Bruce and all those other people -- until later.

HP: Yes. Well, I knew there were antecedents, I hadn t realized it had gone, you know, back quite so far because PWAP is December of 33.

MC: Well, it certainly did go back that far.

HP: And well, that s . . .

MC: I m just trying to think. I started working with the College Art Association, I think, in '30, 1930, and it wasn t too long after that. I mean it must have been in the beginning of '32 that these other projects, and I use the word, "project" now with a small "p", you see, came into being because we had just fairly recently moved from our house on 20 West 58th Street where the College Art Association was to larger headquarters on East 57th Street when this all started.

HP: But this, as you remember the orientation of this early period it was a design to help the artists? I m thinking of . . .

MC: I m not so sure I understand your question.

HP: Well I m trying to distinguish it, if it can be distinguished, form PWAP, which was also a help thing but they were name artists who were employed . . .

MC: Oh, no . . .

HP: . . . if only a short period of time.

MC: Yes. No, no, no this was --I mean this was a crash measure . . .

HP: Catch as catch can.

MC: We didn t use that term at that time.

HP: Yes.

MC: But this was a crash measure. As a matter of fact, if my memory will serve me correctly, the word Emergency Committee is used, and I think you can check this certainly with Mrs. McMahon, Emergency Committee was used for relief, you see. There was your first sense of relief. What happens if I interrupt? [telephone call]

HP: There was an agency set up national which I think controlled on the state level, the FERA, Federal Emergency Relief Administration . . .

MC: I remember that. I remember that.

HP: Now were funds . . . it s possible that . . .

MC: I don t think when Mrs. Gibson started all this that there was any Federal or city or state. HP; Right.

MC: She began it as a kind of emergency measure because she was both a civic-minded woman as well as a woman interested in the arts, and she -- I mean this was for her a real emergency measure to start something, organize something, and it was later that the Mayor, of course, came into the picture with a city project. But it neither had an connection with the FERA nor with the PWAP, nor the WPA.

HP: No. This was all strictly antecedents to . . .

MC: That s right, and what I believe -- I may be wrong -- is that in no other state in the country was there any such organized measure.

HP: There s only one faint hint that I had which is in the Cincinnati Museum. There were people who were concerned about certain local artists. This was on an individual basis as distinct from an effort to collect evidence, collate material. I think Mrs. McMahon if I remember correctly, and I saw her over a year ago, indicated that it wasn t very long before this aspect of her job simply turned the College Art Association virtually around.

MC: Exactly. Because we found ourselves involved in an activity that by the very force of its being, and the fact that it was alive, demanded more attention from us than perhaps sending out exhibitions to colleges, or editing Parnassus, or reading abstractions of current periodicals, which I used to do right into the night with Charles Rufus Morey and people like that, and being young enough at that time naturally I responded to this with my whole heart. And I was with the College Art Association until 1937, from ;29- 37, so you see my involvement with that whole group, and even though later when the Federal Art Project -- WPA -- had its own offices down on 42nd Street and Kind Street and all those places, we really never lost touch. AS a matter of fact, I think Hattis Walcott and I were among the few people who had organized at that time the Friends of the Federal Art Project when we were trying desperately to, you know, stir up again a different kind of civic interest.

HP: Yes.

MC: And certainly the artists -- I sort of grew up with the artists on the Project, a different kind of master s degree.

HP: Was this growing expertise in this field tapped by Edward Bruce and the PWAP, or was that wholly spawned in Washington.

MC: No. By that time you see. . .

HP: It was in the air.

MC: Everybody knew about everybody else, and in effect, for example we lent people to one program, or we borrowed people from a program where their experience and their contacts would best be helped. I'm sure, for example, that somebody must have mentioned to you Harry Knight who was Audrey's first assistant and who also was involved with Juliana down at the Whitney on the PWAP . . .

HP: Yes.

MC: . . . under Bruce and -- did you talk by any chance with Cook Glassgold?

HP: Yes, I did.

MC: Yes, well we're all still around.

HP: Yes.

MC: but they were involved with the PWAP with Vernon Porter, Cook Glassgold, Harry for a long time was with the Juliana Force project down at the Whitney, and we were Federal Art Project, Harry came back to us at the Federal Arts Project, and there was enough of give and take, you see, so as you say, it was in the air and everybody became very conscious.

HP: Well, did these things run parallel? I may be wrong but I understood that this nation-wide, seventeen districts under the PWAP had Treasury Department support . . .

MC: That's right.

HP: Had a man by the name of Roberts, Chip Roberts, I believe, in the Treasury Department, assistant secretary in charge of something or other . . .

MC: Yes.

HP: But this was short-lived because it came out under an agency which was called the Civil Works Administration . . .

MC: That's right.

HP: And I think the administrator, Mr. Baker . . .

MC: Yes.

HP: Had worked into the memorandum or the resolution a minimum wage of twenty-five cents an hour for the Civil Works Administration and unhappily for the artistic program sharecroppers in the South began leaving their share crop farms and went to the city because they could earn more wages thus undermining the Southern senators and President Roosevelt at the time demanded not a little on the Northern senators to sustain whatever momentum his administration had. The CWA was quite quickly scuttled, and the PWAP with it. That is, it existed from December through April maybe, March, four months.

MC: I believe the arts program went on longer than that.

HP: Well, some of the people who worked on it with whom I've talked were continued but not under the CWA-PWAP.

MC: Not under the PWAP.

HP: They must have gone back on the FERA under some arrangement for -- what is it? -- "to conclude murals in progress" something like that, or "work in progress."

MC: In progress, yes. But still at the same time some form of artists project existed.

HP: Yes. And I should think in this sense probably New York is the state that had the art project.

MC: Exactly.

HP: Because this was left largely to local discretion and momentum . . .

MC: That's right.

HP: There was leadership national in nature provided by PWAP . . .

MC: Yes.

HP: But once that was terminated . . .

MC: Yes, you see . . .

HP: There were certain continuing things but the bulk of them were in New York.

MC: That s right. The bulk of them -- well, it s interesting, for example, that Eddie Cahill went down to Washington, but originally was involved with the New York project.

HP: Yes, yes.

MC: So I believe that the impetus and the form of it was at least conceived right in New York City and then fed out, branched out. Certainly the Utah project I visited in 1938, I believe it was, or '37. I can t remember. I did a little bit of traveling so I got to see the Minnesota project at work and I got to see the Utah project at work and I got out to California. I saw a few -- of course, I d seen the Chicago project because Chicago was a place I got to fairly often in those years, and I used to see the workings of the project, then of course the same thing is true of sculptors like George Thorpe who was in our sculpture project in New York went out and became head of the sculpture division of the Chicago Project. When they began to have a little bit more flexibility and one could move from one place to another.

HP: Well, there were any number, I say any number, I can t tell you how many, but there were people sent out from New York, for example, to manage Art Centers, the whole Art Center movement. Teachers were sent out from New York to Seattle, West Coast . . .

MC: That s right. The people working on the Index of American Design were sent to New Mexico because they didn t have sufficient craftsmen of the kind who could record some of the American Indian artifacts. Yes, they moved around a good deal.

HP: Well how, when, let s see, I think while there was a continu ation, I don t know how many projects were originated. That s a statistical game in support of which I have nothing to risk, and I don t know that there s a shred of tissue paper which would sustain one way or another, but I think there were continuing projects all through this period. How many more were initiated I don t know. I think the President turned to Harold Ickes.

MC: Ummhumm.

HP: On a public building program, but Ickes was mired in a problem of contract development to keep politicos fingers out of the funds that were going to be made available for public buildings. Unhappily, he never came up with an ironclad contract . . .

MC: Right.

HP: So that Hopkins was pressed into service but I always understood he was going to be an overall coordinator and it turned out that he was going to run the shop as of June '35, and there was a sudden effort, real effort to put people to work in all kinds of ways, also on a Federal art project, which is unique in a way because it was the only Federal project in the WPA.

MC: That s right.

HP: Where quotas were established in Washington which could not be interfered with by the state agency which had continuity under and so on.

MC: That s right.

HP: They simply changed the name, but they apparently thought that a state person perhaps had to be first educated in the Field of art, or the arts, and therefore they excluded them from having anything to do with quotas establishment, or even program development. Which I think is a great novelty really.

MC: Well, I think perhaps the greatest novelty was the involvement at the level of our federal government in any educational thing particularly that aspect of the federal projects which were devoted to education. Since we don t have that control today over education on the general level, think of the influence we were able to bring because of the Federal Arts projects educational program.

HP: Yes.

MC: This is fascinating of course and they have the course of that I am sure would be most valuable in trying to

indicate art responses today to the contemporary artists. The development of museums in those areas is easily traceable to that very early art education, exposure and influence.

HP: Yes. There is certainly a kind of sesmographic response even if it s only cataloging local, historical records, which once catalogued you had to find a place to put them . . .

MC: That s right.

HP: So you created country historical societies. It s a great mushrooming movement and, you know, a response this way also means museums grew, the whole movement grew.

MC: That s right.

HP: Now the relationship between that was spawned in Washington as the federal project and the popular response is hard to gauge, but I m sure it s there.

MC: Well, of course, it s hard to gauge because like everything else at that time it was the flat criticism from the ordinary layman to the reactionary senator but I think that actually it really filtered into the lifestreat of the community.

HP: Yes.

MC: Because it functioned on a community level.

HP: Yes.

MC: And this is, of course, what is utterly fascinating that a federal program should have at that time in our lives begun to function at a community level and have an impact. I mean I know a sufficient number of young artists, designers, people who come and see me who say that they attended classes of the federal art projects when they were youngsters in their communities. I m quite sure that has happened nationally and not just locally.

HP: Well, it s surprising in the sense that I don t think Congress itself was ever convinced that the WPA was the proper agency or means to meet what was generally thought to be a problem, a feeding problem, a hunger problem.

MC: That s right.

HP: Congress kept the WPA , in particular the Federal Art Projects, on a financial snaffle bit almost all the time.

MC: That s right.

HP: It was a question of reeling form inefficiency appropriation to deficiency appropriation which made it very difficult sitting in an administrative spot to slice what melon was available in terms of the needs as you found them.

MC: That s right.

HP: Almost everyone has responded with the fact that the quota reduction problem, the periodic slaughter in a way, was about the worst thing because there wasn t any guide to separate one from another, there wasn t any standard that could be applied. The only standard being that Congress had held back and there was a question as to how much money there was going to be, so it had to struggle behind itself.

MC: That s right.

HP: And administrative way. And yet it had leadership in Washington which was able, I guess, Harry Hopkins, who had a kind of -- I was going to say flippant air with Congress -- maybe that s too strong. Probably part social worker part politician who saw a certain value to the whole picture of it and just working to do a job, you know.

MC: I would think so because I don t believe that there was every any conscious cultural response . . .

HP: Oh.

MC: . . . from Hopkins as such. I mean certainly he didn t go around making remarks like La Guardia did -- "If that s art, I m Tammany Hall." Has everybody quoted that to you?

HP: This was the mural, the photographic mural?

MC: No. When the Federal Art Project opened its gallery here in New York, on that opening day LaGuardia was

there, Gorky -- as a matter of fact, Art in America published one photograph, I have the other.

HP: Yes.

MC: That s it.

HP: And he asked questions of Harry Knight, and I have a photograph of Harry Knight and LaGuardia and Gorky, the three of them standing together, because he said to Harry, "If that s art, I m Tammany Hall." Then he asked a very pointed question and Harry said, "I think that in this instance we ll ask Mr. Gorky to answer it since he s the artist," you see, and that was the historic meeting of the three of them. But this is the kind of statement LaGuardia made. I don t believe that Hopkins ever said anything either as telling in his lack of knowledge of the arts because I think he didn t approach it from that position at all.

MC: No. I think he was met once by reporters who attended some function in Washington who used the word "boondogglin" to him and his reply to their question which lurks only in inference was simply the fact that the federal government has discovered that the artists also have stomachs. Well, it was just on that level which is a social worker s level.

HP: Yes.

MC: One can understand Harry Hopkins. And yet he gave great discretion about the people. Ellon Woodward, she had -- what -- a courthouse background. Her husband was a judge, and yet she had an enormous zest and apparently a great loyalty to Hopkins. So that whatever he generated . . . He generated something and it s all right because at that time whatever it was, we needed it. Of course, you know there was something subtle happening even at the beginning when you knew you were not just filling stomachs and you knew that somewhere the culture of America was involved and you had people saying, "Well, there ll come a time when they ll have eaten but we still need them to work. We still have to give them the opportunity to work." And it s interesting when Mr. Roosevelt in his famous speech talked about "one-third of a nation" that it was the artists who responded and we did an exhibition called Roofs for Forty Million." Did anybody ever tell you about that?

HP: No.

MC: We did, and we showed it at Rockefeller Center. We got it free, for nothing. We fought like demons to do it, and these were mostly artists involved in the project who did an exhibition called Rooftops for Forty Million, and some place in my archives I have a catalogue of it, and I know several people who participated in it, you know, and we worked, and during all this time, you see, it was the artist who was growing and becoming a social being . . .

HP: Oh, yes.

MC: . . . who was being accepted. Well, I don t know which member of your staff is going back into the reports, but, for example, the New York Times art critic, Edwin Olin Jewell himself emerged as a very, very exciting person because of his own involvement with what was happening in our own country and of course specifically in New York. One of the great lectures he gave one time was "Art and the Lonely ." which was of course the European concept of how an artist lives and works, and here was living proof that the American artist was a different kind of a human being and was becoming a social one.

HP: This is the striking departure because -- that is, I think the -- I was going to say caricature -- it s not the word I want of an artist is an independent, cussed, unique sense of vision and yet in the thirties whether event or the fact of the common employer, they were hiring lofts and arguing over the problems of sick pay, sick benefits. Of course, this is the period of the Popular Front. There were a lot of ideas loose in the land. For example, we never finally decided until the Jones and Laughlin Steal Company case in 1937 that men had the right to organize.

MC: That s right.

HP: So that organization was in the air.

MC: Well, the Artists Union -- I mean -- starting wit the John Reed Club and the Artists Union, you see, and then finally the United American Artists, which gave us the position on the CIO and we too, by the way, had an exhibition at Rockefeller Center which we organized. I have photographs of that too in my files. But this has the same kind of progression as the projects themselves and is the work of the committees themselves starting from the relief -- I mean you know the salvation from death with Mrs. Gibson going straight up to the organization of the Federal Arts projects, and the subtle moment when it changed from just sheer relief to saving the culture, saving the creative people, spreading the word. This was all part of the excitement of the period.

HP: Yes.

MC: And I don't think that we've duplicated it. Not yet.

HP: No. I'm not so sure it's possible.

MC: In 1938 when we were organizing American Art Today at the New York World's Fair the committees that were used to select and to bring together the arts from which sections would be made for the building were the very committees that had already been in existence because of the Federal Art Projects.

HP: Yes.

MC: And you only need to look into the official catalogue to find all the listings. Do you have that catalogue?

HP: I think they do.

MC: You should. I designed it, in 1939.

HP: Oh, did you?

MC: It was the first book I designed, but I'm not terrible proud of it. It's just that again I just kept being involved no matter what in the growth and development.

HP: Yes. When I talked with Mrs. McMahon she's still very much a firebrand about this.

MC: But here's no one who knows as much.

HP: No. And she confronted not a little difficult problem which is not duplicated I think anywhere else in the country. You see, once you get a collective voice of artists on one side nibbling and you have to deal effectively with a man who probably had no artistic temperament at all, General Somervell, or Colonel Somervell, the position in which she found herself was frightful, it was like walking a tight rope most of the time, buying time . . .

MC: That's right.

HP: Or trying to keep a ball in the air with potshots from both sides. Washington, the administrators down there looked upon New York, you know, as, oh, man, Hallie Flanagan -- deliver me from, you know --

MC: Exactly.

HP: Well, this is part of the difficulty that congress confronted really because it could not compete by creating a new steel industry. It couldn't compete with vested interests but it could sustain a public building program and the non-competitive fields allegedly which are the volatile new where all the ideas are.

MC: That's right.

HP: Where the people are sensitive to what coming over the horizon

MC: Exactly.

HP: Because I found the I think the Artists Union is first on record against Hitler and Mussolini.

MC: Of course.

HP: And this is '35, and maybe even earlier.

MC: The John Reed Club earlier.

HP: Even earlier.

MC: Yes. Because I remember, I mean at that point of my life there was nothing I missed.

HP: But poor Somervell whatever greatness --

MC: Don't say "poor Somervell."

HP: Well, I'm saying "poor Somervell" only in this sense -- he tried to do a simple statistic hatchet job, you know, in keeping with his military vision to which left out the human quality.

MC: Well, this was what was so extraordinary. Now I'm sorry but I think that fairly soon you can get to talk to Harry Knight.

HP: Good.

MC: He has recovered sufficiently . . .

HP: I have talked to him on the phone just recently.

MC: Phone, yes. He has recovered sufficiently and I see him all the time . . .

HP: Oh, good.

MC: . . . and I believe particularly, you know, how it is people who have undergone breakdowns here and there very often have better recall about the past than they do about the immediate present. Of course it was Colonel Somervell that made many demands on Harry, and he finally resigned, but he can tell you more about Somervell and the relationship because he and Diller, Burgoyne Diller . . .

HP: I also talked to him.

MC: Yes.

HP: Thank God. They were after all deputies of Mrs. McMahon's and as such in many ways found it easier to deal with Somervell simply because they were male, you know.

MC: Yes.

HP: And yet the tensions and the impossibilities and the judgments that Somervell threw at them were hard to sustain, and I'm sure that Harry will give you a good deal of that. I'd rather not quote him secondhand but you can get that from him.

MC: But his again is a flavor, what do you do when a man publishes "we're going to knock off thirty percent tomorrow," or he's "going to send a major around to see who qualifies," well, you know, I can see a collective voice, that is, artists who have come to recognize each other, even though they differed violently on style and everything else, as you always expect they would . . .

HP: Of course.

MC: But this almost to a man, and I think they even, the teachers, some of the art teachers invaded Somervell's office and had the first sit-in.

HP: Sit-in. Exactly. They sent in a grievance committee. Oh, I just remember this.

MC: But this play of forces, I suppose, was a chorus here, less so in Kentucky, Iowa, and so on. It was a different flavor, a different variety, partly I'm upset because there were so many artists here in New York.

HP: Well, I think the artists were here in New York. I also think that we -- a whole batch of young people came back from Europe at that time, and they came back to their native country with ideas you see, that somehow through some osmosis crept into their consciousness about what they wanted out of life in their country.

MC: Yes. I talked to a sculptor who arrived in '29, Theodore Rosak.

HP: Exactly.

MC: Two years abroad on a fellowship and whamo.

HP: Whamo.

MC: Stark reality, yes. Stark reality something in them so that they could so they could have a feeling about government support of arts. Imagine, for example, one of the reasons the Mexicans who worked here in the city. And some of whom were on the project for a short time and of course very controversial murals, but one of the great reasons they made such an impact was not just that they were producing an art that had strength and virility and very Mexican, but they were working under a government which by virtue of its revolution immediately gave the artists the right to work, the right to organize way before ours did. This goes way back.

HP: They also saw the virtue of utilizing artists on public buildings -- decoration.

MC: Of course. Decoration.

HP: And great stuff too.

MC: Some of it is fabulous.

HP: Oh, some of it is marvelous.

MC: By the way, I believe that the caption on the recent Stuart Davis that was removed from NYC to the Metropolitan Museum on loan -- I think the caption is wrong because I think if we dig somewhere we'll find that that was done not on the PWAP, but I'm not sure. I think Rosalie will be able to tell you -- Stuart's widow -- exactly how that was done.

HP: I found a whole, complete file of papers and work that was done by the artist, each artist on PWAP. It's now out in Detroit. They've got a complete file.

MC: Oh, good.

HP: I don't recall on Stuart Davis. I talked with him for, I don't know, about forty hours. What a marvelous school.

MC: Have you . . .

HP: Have you talked to . . . I found myself having a talk with Harold Rosenberg and Phil Guston . . .

MC: Phil Guston I haven't seen him. Someone else wanted to do him . . .

HP: Why?

MC: Because of the Abstract Expressionists.

HP: All right. You know . . .

MC: Yes. Someone else had some basic interest.

HP: Some interest and I guess an evolution of that just as Jack Pollock and the other people had evolved a style, I suppose. But I think all these things are very pertinent to what we're talking about, the flavor, the kind of thing that . . .

MC: Sure. You know I can see the sects of the Abstract Expressionists right in the thirties.

HP: Of course.

MC: Because this was a vast period for experimentation particularly for young artists.

HP: Ummhumm.

MC: They suddenly had opportunity with continuity to do the thing they loved most.

HP: That's right.

MC: And with available materials. They didn't have to -- what is it? -- work in a bash house, slinging hash, do something in order to do the thing they wanted to do. And of course this led to experimentation, led to peaking over each other's shoulder, led to that kind of sharing of ideas. That plus the political, social ferment which was going on everywhere -- we were all in the same boat, particularly the young . . . We were all in the same boat, sure. But of course think of twenty artists being involved in a mural. This was a very exciting thing, you know. The Belle Hospital murals and all the people, all the different personalities, and art talent. And the murals down on 18th Street in the high school there, which . . .

HP: What's that? The Needle Trades?

MC: No, that's not the Needle Trade School. My heavens, I lived right next door to it for years. It's right on 18th Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues. But they have still -- Lord knows what condition they're in -- they have some great murals of that period. But the interesting part was that twenty or thirty men were involved in one series of murals. They not only talked together, and peeked over one another's shoulders, but they worked together.

HP: Yes. Yes.

MC: Which was again another fabulous development for us.

HP: Well, in many ways I think our preparation for doing murals was quite slim.

MC: I don't think we had any, which is why when the Mexicans came up both technically . . .

HP: Yes.

MC: I remember Jose Gutierrez teaching everybody how to mix material.

HP: Yes. But even extensions on that as to how to make it permanent.

MC: Ummhumm.

HP: What to do, and there were endless experiments along this line because youngsters came along who suddenly had opportunity to do something, which perhaps left to their own devices they wouldn't have had the opportunity to do at all. And Collective working -- I think that's part of the whole period, that is, the whole sense of social conversation, just gathering together with like-situated people.

MC: That's right.

HP: The Jumbo Shop . . .

MC: Yes.

HP: You know, if nothing more than that, it's . . .

MC: Yes. I spent a good part of my youth there.

HP: Did you?

MC: Well . . .

HP: Sure, that's where they . . .

MC: It was McGilliouddy's on 42nd Street. It was the Jumbo Shop on 8th Street. It was Horiarity's on 57th Street, I can give you the names of the bars depending upon the locations, but it's true, we met there to talk, you. Well, it was just like what happened when the Artists Club stared down at the -- you know just in the last ten years downtown at Cedar Tavern.

HP: Yes.

MC: Cedar Tavern took its whole form and shape from what had started in the project.

HP: Oh, sure.

MC: The postwar period producing still another jump ahead.

HP: It must have been hard to keep all these steeds within reasonable bounds. Talking with Davis, Stuart Davis said with almost anguish in his voice something to the effect that, "Meetings!meetings!meetings!meetings! I was walking around with bales of paper under my arm."

MC: Well, for those artists who were involved in a combination of creative and administrative roles, sure, it was something they weren't accustomed to, but the kind of response was enormous. I mean who would have expected Burgoyne Diller to be a top administrator, you see? And he was. Who would have expected Harry Knight, Lou Block, any one of the people who were involved?

HP: That's something else that comes out of this and I think that comes out nation-wide.

MC: Ummhumm.

HP: That is, artists locally that were pressed into service suddenly emerged as administrators.

MC: Very practical human beings.

HP: Very practical, very practical.

MC: Yes.

HP: Even to the point of thinking in terms of acceptability, as Burgoyne Diller did, for example.

MC: That s right.

HP: Because his heart and soul was off in the clouds somewhere . . .

MC: That s right.

HP: . . . and while he was able form time to time to get something done which was more in keeping with what it is he wanted done, nonetheless he saw the value of sustaining the whole movement . . .

MC: That s right.

HP: . . . by making more acceptable things.

MC: Yes. As a matter of fact, the other night when I was with Harry Knight we were looking at that issue of Art in America and they quoted Diller pretty much in that context, and we agreed how very apt this was a reaction of Diller s and indeed most of the people who were involved.

HP: Yes, it one wouldn t have anticipated it from him.

MC: Why, you know, you never know how to anticipate a phenomenon and, let s fact it . . .

HP: Till it comes up.

MC: . . . this was a phenomenon in our lives, and I suppose onlya catastrophe like the depression could yield a phenomenon. I mean look today we face a disaster whether it s a town being wiped out because of floods in our own country, or a Skopje being ruined by earthquake. We face a disaster by producing a phenomenon that we never would have produced. And I look upon the projects and the things that grew out of the depression the same way.

HP: Yes.

MC: Shaping our lives. Yes, it s interesting, Jewell again as an art critic and an art critic whose void, you know, for the New York Times might not have been expected to understand this saw this so clearly that it excited him and he was one of the few people who had a column in which to voice opinion who ought us all out, worked with us, questioned us, came to every protest meeting that we organized.

HP: Well, have them.

MC: They do?

HP: I know, what I have done is have copy negatives made and deposited everything I could in our own library, but I feel you should have it too.

MC: Oh, sure.

HP: Our library has it.

MC: A marvelous library.

HP: Indeed it is. I just wonder if they have the catalogue of Roofs for Forty Million. Of course, that should be a part of it.

MC: Well this is a response to an item an idea.

HP: This is a response to a social consciousness. Our President makes a speech which stirs the nation. Elmer Rice writes, "One third of a nation," and the artist translated it into Roofs for Forty Million.

MC: Yes. And the Senate screamed because it quoted senators correctly on the subject of housing.

HP: It was great.

MC: Well, that s the aliveness that filled everything. It has great power, it s a marvelous . . .

HP: Have you found Lloyd Rollins?

MC: No.

HP: You haven t?

MC: I have his name. Someone said he s in California.

HP: Yes. Well, we believe, you know, that he s in California. I m thinking of all the supervisors and where they might be that you really should talk to Tony Velonis and Hy Warsage were both on the graphics project.

MC: Yes.

HP: I remember the introduction of this whole silk screen movement into the project at that time. Used to come into the College Art Association to review the exhibitions that we had on view or were sending out, and we got to know him fairly well as a critic, but never as the kind of person who emerged when suddenly 1930 burst in on the scene.

MC: Yes. Yes. But he was a rather elderly man, wasn t he?

HP: No.

MC: Wasn t he, in the 30s?

HP: No, no. You know, he did quite young, I mean relatively young. I think he died only in his 50s.

MC: Perhaps I m thinking of the amount of time he had spent on The Times.

HP: On The Times, yes. I mean, you know, he was . . .

MC: Had continuity.

HP: . . . successor to Elizabeth Luther Corey and to Ruth Green

MC: Yes.

HP: Ruth Green Earris. He was their junior. But he was a very staid, kind of sober guy which made everybody feel that he was older than he was.

MC: I ve seen a caricature of him . . .

HP: Yes. I m sure . . .

MC: Who did it? A woman . . .

HP: I ll see if I can remember . . .

MC: She did a whole series of caricatures, he was one of them.

HP: Ummhumm.

MC: may even have been in the paper.

HP: Yes, may have been. By the way, would you like to have whatever photographs we have for the Archives?

MC: Yes. Oh, yes. Well, the Archives and I -- we sometimes differ on this. I like it preserved somewhere it s useable. Now I don t -- I m not a monopolist. Now there s a library here that is a good library.

HP: You mean ours? Well, they have them.

MC: That surprised me out through the hinterlands is the relationship that springs up between the various Federal Art Projects . . .

HP: Ummhumm.

MC: That is, the silk screen, or poster making, the writers project, book design, all kind so things suddenly emerged, you know, one hand helping the other. Or like run design.

HP: Well, I think it was -- look, we here in New York, I believe had access to more what we no call public relations channels than the others did, and the minute anybody got wind of the fact that we were doing something here, naturally they wanted to try it.

MC: Sure.

HP: And one thing about it is that would say generally speaking that there were no jealousies that one city did

better than the other, or had more. I mean there was a willingness to share knowledge, information.

MC: Moreover there was just too much to do to bother with . . .

HP: There was too much to do precisely.

MC: It's like -- who was it? -- someone on the West Coast I think after the shift was made in '39, turning the administrative functions back to the states because . . .

HP: Yes.

MC: Which raised a little problem. Suddenly they had to put more people to work, and they had to -- well they ran an educational program on rugs, for example, and the artists would design the rugs and women who were working on hooked rugs would do those rugs. But, you know, this depends on how alive you are locally, how imaginative you are locally . . .

HP: That's right.

MC: . . . to tie two and two together. But as far as I'm aware, the more populated states where there were artists, like the West Coast and the East Coast and Chicago are the strong areas. In Iowa and in Michigan there's more of a kind of craft . . .

HP: Did he?

MC: Oh, yes, he came to meetings. I remember one wonderful one when J.D. Newman, who was a great art dealer, who was again one of our strong friends who spoke most eloquently in saying that if only we realized that by supporting thousand and thousands of artists on the Federal Art Project we might find two or three brilliant great men, what a contribution it would be. And Jewell responded to this like no one else.

HP: Well, I was surprised to see in his columns in The Times in those days controversy emerge and contributions from Eddie Cahill, who wrote well, and from Stuart Davis who wrote the way he painted, like a blockbuster . . .

MC: Blockbuster with a knife.

HP: He told me he worked three or four days over some of his letters. I'm sure that's so.

MC: I'm sure of it.

HP: They're -- well, they're explosive --

MC: That's right.

HP: And there's no answer by the time he puts it on paper, but Jewell allowed this in his column.

MC: He was the only one that did.

HP: Yes.

MC: He had enormous respect and affection because he was the only one that did really, and it's important in the light of the development of our writers of the postwar period -- I should say the forties and fifties -- that Jewell who might have been thought to be an old fuss budget was really one for the most revolutionary thinkers. At least he was able to recognize what was happening and be willing to be eloquent about it.

HP: Yes. He wasn't a scoffer, he was open to conviction.

MC: And I'm sure Mrs. McMahon found a great deal of support in him because -- well, he . . .

HP: Craft. That's right.

MC: In Kentucky there's a little each. In every state there was some effort at uniformity would be only national project they had, which was the Index of American Design.

HP: That's right.

MC: It had to become that.

HP: That's right.

MC: This is where Cook Glassgold came in, he gave a sort of clearing house . . .

HP: Ummhumm.

MC: As to what was available and what was being done. but did you remain -- well, close at hand when the shift came to the states?

HP: In 1939, I was really seriously traveling. So I was more aware of what was happening around, you know. In 1940, I went to work in Washington in that strange moment of the New Deal when interest in Latin-America was being manifested, and I being sort of old Latin American hand went to work on that project, you see. I had by that time left the College Art Association.

MC: Was this the Office of Inter-American Affairs?

HP: It became that. Again I almost always seem to be in on the beginning. But we had a committee established under the auspices of the Library of Congress and the Council for Learned Societies.

MC: Yes.

HP: And it was created at about the same time that the State Department without knowing about us, created the Office of Inter-American Affairs. So we were short-lived. But then I went to work for the coordinator of Inter-American Affairs and then went back to the Library of Congress in the Archive of Hispanic Culture and became involved in all Latin American problems, and then came back here to the Museum.

MC: You said something earlier about being involved in the tour program which was established. Is this a sharing of . . . ?

HP: No. You see, because I was with the College Art Association, it was just that while I was traveling and doing certain things which had to be done for the College Art Association, when I came into a particular city it was almost natural and normal for me to find the arts projects, so, for example, Clem Harper in Minnesota become very, very good friends.

MC: A marvelous, witty guy. I spent a day with him.

HP: Yes. I didn't know quite who to look up in Iowa -- I mean in Utah, but of course Vardis Fisher was there, and I had been a student of his at NYU in night classes so, you know, this was a kind of meshing of interests so that, as I said, I never lost track of what was happening in the projects because if I came into a strange city it was easier for me to find my way and find out what was happening in the world of art through the artists and the projects then it was just through there museum or the colleges and things of that nature.

MC: How much of what Eddie Cahill was seeped into this?

HP: Oh, very much. Very much.

MC: He was a man with enormous vision. Yes.

HP: I mean the two key people, in my mind, and I have no doubt about this, were Eddie Cahill and Audrey McMahon. They aided and abetted each other in amazing ways. And Eddie by virtue of such a long devotion to American art, such a recognition of -- Eddie was a man of his time, very much a man of his time. I was devoted to him.

MC: I see him -- I didn't know him, but from what I've gathered, what might be called the overall philosophical approach to what we were really doing a distinct form the daily detail was his strength.

HP: Exactly.

MC: The administrative wrangles which would come up may not have been his cup of tea. I don't know.

HP: Oh, no, he handled them beautifully. I mean because there was a part of Eddie that was a two-fisted guy.

MC: That's interesting.

HP: Well, I mean it. Eddie would take a whole batch of artists and they would go watch the fights because he was a regular guy.

MC: Yes, he had that common touch.

HP: He had that wonderful common touch and it made it easier for him to be in Washington where he had to

meet people who thought that artists had a special set of horns because Eddie could meet them on that basis, you know, and still communicate what was really important about the philosophy or concept.

MC: Well, how did he view the developing organizations? They -- you know, the artists all kind of . . .

HP: You mean the Artists Union and . . .

MC: Yes.

HP: Just as Eddie would, just as Audrey would with a combination of sympathy, understanding, biting of nails, chewing with , pulling of hair. I mean this was not difficult for him to recognize. He was a social man himself.

MC: Yes.

HP: And I m using the word "social" now in terms of human involvement in society.

MC: Yes. I think he had perhaps -- what? -- a deeper historical perspective, you know, for an overall sense of what was going on than a person who was perhaps not narrow minded, but bought within the confines of his own geographical limit.

HP: I think this is why it made it so much easier for him, for example, to work with Harry Hopkins.

MC: Yes.

HP: You see, there would have been a meeting ground where one did not look down upon or resent the other, there was a meeting ground of these two personalities.

MC: You know it s a funny thing when you talk to administrators like Julius Schmidt who was the finance man, and who had to explain these ugly ducklings tot he old line civil service groups, he plucked from the four leaders, you know, Eddie Cahill as the man who was most persuasive a deux, not in a crowd, but a deux.

HP: Yes.

MC: Well, you know, that s a very important lever that one has. Making speeches are for someone else with the power of a persuasive presence. An overall dedication to an idea as it unfolds, even though he might not like some of the ideas, nonetheless, was hi major thinking, which Hallie Flanagan didn t have . . .

HP: Yes.

MC: . . . though she burned like an enormous flame. I love her for the enemies she created.

HP: That s right.

MC: But that particular aspect was scuttles, whereas Eddie Cahill could see the whole thing keep going despite the assaults on it, like The Mirror.

HP: That s right.

MC: Which was terrifying. Stuart Davis describes going up to The Mirror offices with a group of Artists Union members.

HP: Artists Union members.

MC: He didn t know what he was going to do. He just had a vested interest, a suddenly discovered vested interest which, you know -- it was a great period. I ll have to come back and talk to you again.

HP: I m afraid, yes. I must call a halt now. I didn t know that we were going to be doing this.

MC: Well you are a guide . . . [TAPE TWO]

HP: Last time we mentioned and you re, in fact only one other person has every mentioned this to me -- Jacob Baker, and I don t know why particularly. It was just in passing, but the emergence, the evolution of the Gibson Committee, Mrs. Gibson. She s part of this back of which the whole thing sprung.

MC: Ummhumm.

HP: I don t know anything about her except what you said last time and this was simply the relationship of the College Art Association to the things that were going on.

MC: That s right.

HP: Now, who was Mrs. Gibson? How did she come into the picture? What is her background so far as art is concerned? Her interests?

MC: Well, frankly, I couldn t answer that without doing a little brushing up on her background. I believe that I would not be wrong that hers was more of a social conscience rather than a specific interest in the arts, that at that time the problem was hardly thought of only in terms of art, but rather in terms of the saving of human beings. And that as a philanthropic person -- of course, she was wealthy -- she felt the need of some activity, and I believe that it was she who originally went to the Mayor, because you remember, and I believe other people have used the term "The Mayor s committee," you see.

HP: Yes.

MC: That I believe that it was she who originally went tot he Mayor to talk about this and that there were a sort of informal meeting called, which brought Mrs. McMahon into the picture. but it actually started as the Gibson Committee, which is why it bore that name.

HP: Yes.

MC: I do not remember her as a collector in the terms that we use it today, and in fact I doubt very much whether there were many of that collector type certainly interested in American art. But I do remember her, and I did meet her several times. I do remember that hers was a more philanthropic, social position and therefore socially conscious at a very important moment in history. Certainly Audrey should have known more about her than almost anyone. Didn t she bring this up?

HP: She, well, by the time we got ready to talk we had already exposed so many, you know, tender points where her furnace was turned on and just, you know, champing at the bit to get started . . .

MC: I see.

HP: So some of the seeds of the background, she did talk about the College Art Association and how it almost reversed itself, got itself involved . . .

MC: Completely.

HP: . . . in a sort of sociological study of the condition of artists in New York.

MC: But it was more than that.

HP: Yes.

MC: It was more that that because, you see, no committee, neither the Gibson Committee nor the Mayor s Committee, had an office out of which they functioned, so the first interviewing of any nature whatsoever was done right in the offices of the College Art Association at 137 East 57th Street . . .

HP: I see. So that Mrs. Gibson s route was tot he Mayor and through the Mayor . . .

MC: And through the mayor to the College Art Association and Audrey, you see.

HP: I see, yes. Which the floated an idea like -- for example, Velonis yesterday spoke of the Mayor s Poster committee.

MC: That s right.

HP: Was this an outgrowth of . . . ?

MC: This was an outgrowth of that. You see nobody was quite clear at that time about how you helped the artists. Obviously, relief checks were given to people who needed them, but it became very obvious to people like Audrey and like Mrs. Gibson that these people were capable of work, and it was not only the process of giving relief, and not only were they capable of work, but that these were American artists and that there were certain activities, certain functions that had to be filled. If there was a poster that was needed, why not use the artists, you see?

HP: Yes.

MC: There was no other center. They couldn t go to the Mayor, whatever things Mrs. Gibson was doing had no

office, and so the College Art Association's office became that funny center.

HP: In a sense while the impulse of social nature was Mrs. Gibson, the scope and dimension was Mrs. McMahon?

MC: I believe so.

HP: Yes. That is if one was to -- what? It's a cruel word -- take advantage of an impulse that might be useful for a purpose not yet clearly identified . . .

MC: Yes.

HP: Mrs. McMahon's purpose was to make it more clearly identified?

MC: That's right.

HP: Yes.

MC: That's right. It was, I think, one of those rare happy meetings of people, each awoke in the other some consciousness that perhaps had not existed before.

HP: Yes.

MC: And I think that this was the thing that was so interesting, you see. In the lives of art historians, in the lives of the art world at the time the living artist who was not already old and famous, you see, was of really little concern. And somehow this was a very magical moment of history when, as I say, the interaction one upon the other of these people brought out certain aspects the other had not quite been conscious of.

HP: Yes.

MC: I do not, I repeat, I do not believe that Mrs. Gibson was in any way involved in culture except on that broad social level and not specifically the arts, but here my memory might . . .

HP: It's possible to be fired by a general purpose . . .

MC: Quite, of course.

HP: . . . where the scope of it, the deal is, is someone else who has the detail.

MC: That's right.

HP: Mrs. McMahon, she could fill that kind of void and help give it shape along the line which were of interest to her and still satisfy Mrs. Gibson at the same time.

MC: Well, the reverse is true, I think at the same time Mrs. Gibson gave Mrs. McMahon a kind of area in which she could function that she never felt before, the opportunity, the need, or the road in which she could function.

HP: Right.

MC: And I think this was very important.

HP: So that the College Art Association filled the void by being a place where . . .

MC: By being a place where by having on its staff -- and she was on its staff -- a woman whose imagination, whose conscience, and whose energies immediately responded to this particular fact.

HP: Internally, in the College Art Association how receptive were they, to . . . ? This is like getting ready to meet a much larger danger to which one is not necessarily equipped. It had certain functions, provided certain services, it would seem to me -- she did indicate that there was some difficulty.

MC: Did she?

HP: Yes.

MC: Did she go into it at depth?

HP: No, she didn't at all. She was trying to fence in a line of development and jump to what for her were the bete noires in the whole scene.

MC: Yes.

HP: And this was just sort of like momentary irritation in retrospect, but, you know . . .

MC: No, it was more than that. It was a very, very complicated emergence of open warfare at times, because the people involved in the College Art Association -- now I'm talking about the Board of Directors --

HP: Yes.

MC: represented groups that would not admit perhaps of the need of social action -- and we have to put it under those terms from the moment -- and certainly not the idea that the College Art Association should play any part in it. So there were quite difficult moments in the Board, and quite difficult moments for Audrey, and I can only say that she stuck to her guns. And she did it very well indeed. And it had all kind of aspects, if we remember what those days were like. There were overtones of class objection, overtones of political objection, overtones of religious objection -- there was hardly an area that was not eventually brought quite thoroughly out into the open. So when I say "open warfare" that's really what I mean.

HP: Well, I suspected as much.

MC: And there was a time, after all, that Audrey left the College Art Association to devote complete energies to this, but by that time she was so completely devoted to what she was doing, and the College Art Association was going on, and on, as indeed it still is. And I don't know, for example, in the archives of the College Art Association just what there is to remind them of the part that they perhaps inadvertently played.

HP: Well, it was, you know, it's opportunity tailor-made for a woman who had ambition in these terms -- ambition isn't quite a good word -- she was also sensitive about artists. I met her just once, and I would hazard a guess that brooking interference from a philosophical approach of whatever kind that preferred to do nothing, or close its eyes to an existing situation, she had facts.

MC: That's right.

HP: She had those harsh, intractable things which you, you know, which ultimately determine what happens. And if people were blind, or didn't want to look, or didn't want to see, or objected because they didn't want to see, that wouldn't have made one difference to her.

MC: No. It also had another kind of importance, I think. But so many of these people, so many of the artists, you see, who were coming in and were lugging their work under their arms -- or I think I told you in shoe boxes, or whatever the case may be -- and while Audrey was an extremely sophisticated woman when it came to the arts, and more perhaps interested in certain expressions that were not quite "popular," she became terribly excited by this. I don't think she quite, again, knew exactly how it had been used, how it could have evolved, but on the other hand her excitement grew as she met the artists. And meeting the artists, you see, was broadening her horizon that before was almost impossible in an organization like ours.

HP: I may be wrong, but I would be surprised if she wouldn't -- what? -- invest all her heart and soul in an idea.

MC: That's right. She did. She did, and she had the courage to fight it, and there were enough people on the Board who were responsible citizens, who perhaps were a little surprised to find themselves so involved, but who responded, you see.

HP: Yes.

MC: And there were letters that we received that were not the kind that we would have liked to have made public, which came in each mail, and of course I was aware of it because I saw the mail, and we talked about it.

HP: But, you know, once you -- what is it? -- once you've launched a ship and it develops momentum going down the quay, wild horses aren't going to hold it back.

MC: Wild horses are not going to hold it back.

HP: No. And it does develop its own momentum.

MC: That's right.

HP: And it becomes a personal investment in part, but it has a, you know, a much larger service function than was entertained by the College Art Association.

MC: Well, interestingly enough, I guess Audrey mentioned to you Dr. McMahon, her husband?

HP: Yes.

MC: Yes.

HP: I wonder how useful he was. He was at NYU, New York University?

MC: Yes. He was professor of history of art, at one time head of the department.

HP: Yes.

MC: And this was not an area -- since his field was aesthetics -- this was not an area that he was aware of, but he became very responsive to what was happening. He became very interested in the people that were brought into his life by virtue of this.

HP: Quite a learning process.

MC: And it was very interesting because there was eventually an interesting give and take. After all, the artists has never been a dullard and has always been interested in aspects of thought, and there was eventually give and take, so that to came an excitement that it would not have without this.

HP: Yes. Yes.

MC: And at the same time refuses began coming in droves, and New York University was full, particularly our Institute of Graduate Studies up there, lots of foreign professors came in and the word, suddenly the whole horizon suddenly expanded for everybody.

HP: Yes.

MC: With the Americans active on one hand and the influx of European though on the other, and all of this interacted a great deal on both Audrey and Philip, and consequently on the College Art Association and on the projects. See, these are all quite curiously intertwined and since I was going to -- I was attending the Graduate Center, New York University evenings, working at the College Art Association days, I was aware of all these strange interactions involved with the project.

HP: Yes. Yes. Well, you know, to what extent was the experience of the College Art Association sampled by the CWA, Ned Bruce s PWAP? Was there a Mayor s group that functioned?

MC: There was a Mayor s Committee, that s what it was called. You see, my memory tells me that Mrs. Gibson sort of helped create it because we knew it at first as the Gibson Committee and then as the Mayor s Committee, you see, and there was no blueprint of any kind in any place in our country for this kind of activity. It just had to develop and grow. I think that it was just the circumstance that College Art Association existed, that we were conscious of American art, that Edward Alden Jewell was still, to my mind, one of the great critics we ve ever had, and he was conscious of American painting as such, and that the opportune moment came for this thing to start. I had to start somewhere.

HP: Well, it would explain the Poster Committee, it would explain the possibility of Riker s Island murals.

MC: That s right.

HP: You know, it depended upon, I mean, the floating of an idea that might conceivably grow into a function . . .

MC: That s right.

HP: . . . within the context of, I guess, what was FERA funds at the time, which came through the states . . .

MC: That s right.

HP: . . . and was shared with the city on some basis.

MC: But that was later.

HP: Was it?

MC: Yes.

HP: Wasn t FERA '33 roughly?

MC: Yes, '33, but wasn't that really later? When did we move to 137 East 57th Street?

HP: Well, Mrs. Force comes into the picture with this.

MC: Mrs. Force comes into the picture.

HP: Yes. But she comes in with the PWAP, which is nationally organized, announced in December of '33.

MC: Yes.

HP: I think the 8th, through the Treasury Department in part. Mrs. Roosevelt, and others.

MC: That's right.

HP: Was, you know, Mrs. McMahon's experience?

MC: I believe -- well, no.

HP: I'm just trying to think.

MC: I think what she was doing was earlier, you see.

HP: Yes, I do, too, because I'm sure -- probably the record world show, that Harry Knight . . .

MC: Well, he'll be able to give you a lot more than this, but what I'm just trying to say is we were at 20 West 58th Street, which was a house that Dean had given to the College Art Association, it was just about two years when we moved to 57th Street. When we were on 57th Street, this thing had just begun, and that had to be '32. It had to be. Because I was graduated from high school in '29 and got my job with Mrs. McMahon in '29, you see. I went straight from high school to work for her, and went to school at night.

HP: Yes. Well, it would help also to explain the desire on the part of Mrs. Force through her own staff, Lloyd Goodrich, to sample the expertise that the College Art Association had.

MC: That's right.

HP: Because Harry Knight . . .

MC: Was lent . . .

HP: Right. so it had to have, that is, a staff for whatever purpose -- relief, or work, or idea, The college Art Association had a developed staff.

MC: Exactly.

HP: Which certainly included Harry Knight if not more . . .

MC: Oh, it was more than just Harry, but Harry was among the first.

HP: So only in a kind of backward way did they sample that experience.

MC: That's right. That's right. How Harry will be much clearer on this, I believe than I am, because he was actually experiencing it.

HP: Well, did the College Art continue even when the PWAP was in existence? That is, its own . . . ?

MC: You mean did it continue in its role?

HP: Yes.

MC: Well, let's put it this way: Audrey continued to have a dual role. She functioned still as Executive Secretary of the College Art Association and in her role with whatever program was going on. Whether the College Art Association actively participated -- well, it did insofar as the staff was participating, and this, of course, was with full knowledge of the Board by that time, you see.

HP: Yes.

MC: And when, as I say, Audrey left and went full time -- when was that?

HP: PWAP didn't last very long.

MC: No. No.

HP: It was scuttled.

MC: Yes.

HP: For political reasons.

MC: Yes.

HP: That had nothing to do with art.

MC: That s right.

HP: It had to do with sharecroppers.

MC: That s right.

HP: But it was short-lived. It went until April roughly.

MC: Roughly, yes.

HP: 34.

MC: 34. No. Audrey was still with us then at College Art.

HP: Yes. But this was -- shortly there was an announcement in New York City itself.

MC: Ummhumm.

HP: For continuing projects under FERA. Is this the way in which . . .? College Art I don t remember in the item in the paper, in the press is indicated . . .

MC: I don t think so, you see, this is what I mean.

HP: Two hats?

MC: It was two hats.

HP: Yes.

MC: Absolutely two hats. They were just given space because Audrey was there.

HP: Yes.

MC: And at the same time as that was going on we were still going on Parnassus, and editing Parnassus and still doing the Art Bulletin and, you know, my life in the college Art Association was going on, even though . .

HP: Irrespective of all the other things.

MC: Well, not just irrespective, but intertwined with all the other . . .

HP: Yes. But the continuity and this is of interest -- from Mrs. Force, however it worked to her own ego, in a way, it didn t resound to the future fortunes of Whitney Museum to be associated with a relief project. They had to close the doors for six weeks ahead at one time.

MC: Yes.

HP: And they had a very stormy session out in front of the Museum.

MC: Yes.

HP: This again is the thinking, the attendants of the various clubs, groups who were socially alive . . .

MC: That s right.

HP: . . . thinking economically, philosophically, and so on.

MC: That s right. Yes.

HP: . . . and couldn't understand why there wasn't more available.

MC: Yes.

HP: And in an early collective way trying to make their voices heard, feeling this with Mrs. Force would constitute a new experience for her.

MC: For her.

HP: Yes. It must have been a terrifying experience for her.

MC: Well, she had some of the same qualities of Mrs. McMahon.

HP: Yes. She was properly named, I am told.

MC: And in a sense this caused their antagonisms, you know.

HP: Well, you know, to make an idea walk and suddenly have it seem to flower, which it didn't . . .

MC: Yes.

HP: But suddenly have it seem to flower in the hands of someone else who had perhaps been on the sidelines, but from the point of view of American painting, while the Whitney Museum was very helpful, Mrs. Force had selective tastes, too -- you know, nine of it instead of spreading . . .

MC: That's right. You only have to go back and look now.

HP: Yes, I know. But it was personally run, personally managed.

MC: That's right.

HP: And it was with all the limitation inherent in it, it wasn't schooled objectivity, across the board or perhaps they didn't even recognize quite -- well, they couldn't, what background did she have?

MC: Well, this is of course, what, to me, makes the difference between a Juliana and an Audrey, you see.

HP: It makes sense to me.

MC: To one it created and opened up areas of consciousness not just on the social level, but on the aesthetic level.

HP: Yes. Right.

MC: It didn't to the other?

HP: Yes. Yes.

MC: And for this, one must be eternally grateful to Audrey.

HP: Well, she subsumed what was uncompleted under PWAP.

MC: That's right. Well, you see, by that time she had garnered great strength. She had gone through enough to have also become a very deft politician, sometimes a very deft diplomat, and I am sure you saw great evidence of Audrey's charm . . .

HP: She's a dear, and a darling.

MC: . . . when Audrey wanted to be charming.

HP: Right.

MC: And I can assure you by that time she had fully flowered and knew exactly how to use all of this.

HP: How did she look upon -- you know, in those early days when this PWAP was centered elsewhere -- on the growth of organizations among artists?

MC: Inevitable.

HP: It must have been, you know, it must have been . . .

MC: Inevitable.

HP: There s a certain element of Sadism that must creep in that one can derive humor in another person s difficulties.

MC: That s right.

HP: Or their inability to, you know, speak this language, this, you know, that was required.

MC: Yes.

HP: Whereas she had, Mrs. McMahon had been able to by the contact, and continuity of contact through the office at least have gotten some seismographic . . .

MC: Yes.

HP: Which Mrs. Force probably never could understand.

MC: Never could -- no. Audrey, of course, was also to me phenomenal in that, obviously she was a mature woman by the time this came into her life, but still capable of such enormous elasticity in her personality and in her mind, and she would have had to be to have dealt with the problems that she dealt with on every level. I don t think Juliana had that quality.

HP: No. Well, it s a capacity for growth.

MC: Sure.

HP: To both seize and be seized by . . .

MC: And be seized by -- and this is indeed what happened in that case.

HP: Yes.

MC: I don t know -- have you spoken to Vernon Porter?

HP: No. Oh! Vernon Porter?

MC: Yes.

HP: The school?

MC: He s now -- isn t he now at National Academy?

HP: Yes.

MC: Yes. Have you spoken to him at all?

HP: Yes. I went up to see him but he was quite reticent.

MC: Was he really?

HP: Yes. I don t know what his problem is, but he s the one who came up with this package of detailed account of all the work done under PWAP.

MC: Well. Yes. I was just thinking because he and Harry and Cook, Lloyd were all involved at the same time with this.

HP: He was very happy to let me have that batch of material that I was very happy to receive . . .

MC: Yes. But he was reticent about speaking?

HP: He took me into a huge room, and I think it was established in part to disclose the fact that he had this material and that he was willing to let me have it, but that he didn t really want to get back into that period because somehow, some way there were ugly scars carried with it. Well, who am I to pry when a fellow says "No," and the sign comes up, the waltzing just isn t there.

MC: Yes.

HP: He did want to talk about, strangely -- or maybe not strangely -- about the Washington Square.

MC: He did?

HP: Yes. Which was an effort to market things.

MC: Of course, of course.

HP: It was another side of the coin in the late 20s and early 30s also.

MC: That s right. That s right.

HP: So that he was instrumental there, showed, you know a certain zest for attempting to overcome a market for American art.

MC: Well, I think perhaps at that time Vernon was really very much of a socially conscious person and I think that over the years, as is inevitable in certain people, that is something you put into your background.

HP: Somewhere along the line he must have suffered a psychic death. Yes, that s possible. In any even, you know, he was quite willing to take about that, and I told him that some day I would come back to that, I wanted enough time to wait for the taste to get out of his mouth.

MC: You said that Jake Baker was the only other person that mentioned the Gibson Committee.

HP: Yes.

MC: In what context did he mention it?

HP: It s a long time since I ve seen the manuscript, but what I had asked him to talk about was the flavor of New York life in the late 20s and 30s and some of the bizarre things in which he was involved, like the early Viking Press . . .

MC: Ummhumm.

HP: . . . The Garland Fund, the American Civil Liberties Union . . .

MC: Ummhumm.

HP: . . . Leftist influences. . .

MC: Ummhumm.

HP: . . . Ideological excitement all over the lot.

MC: Ummhumm.

HP: And in this sense he mentioned the Gibson Committee as one of those he was interested in.

MC: Uha.

HP: He was interested in cooperatives.

MC: Yes. Yes.

HP: He was a fellow with idea and desperate to convert an idea into something that walked.

MC: Yes.

HP: He was not shy, in that sense.

MC: Yes.

HP: And this, you know, when you ask him to give you some idea of what the atmosphere he moved in, the Carland fund, the Viking Press and other projects that stemmed form the Carland Fund, whether they sponsored it, the New Masses magazine, art and artists were involved, so necessarily it brought him into some idea of what was going on then.

MC: Yes. Of course, I didn t realize that he had known about the Gibson Committee. there were so few people around at the time who realized that this was happening.

HP: I know. Now that you mention it, I m not sure that he volunteered this, I may have mentioned it to him.

MC: You may have mentioned . . .

HP: I may have asked him, you know, "How about the Gibson Committee?"

MC: Yes.

HP: But these other things he did talk about. And, of course, the Carland Fund with the range of members on that Board went into all kinds of lunatic fringe areas.

MC: Ummhumm.

HP: And, you know, it was ideologically centered. Robert Miner -- I don't know, he was an artist at the time of New Masses. And so on.

MC: That's right.

HP: So he had something of it.

MC: I'm trying to recall -- I'm a little dislocated in dates, but I'm trying to remember exactly when the NAACP came into the picture with the College Art Association.

HP: Really?

MC: Oh yes.

HP: Because they, I think, were formed one of the Carland Fund.

MC: Well, I'm bringing this up in an effort, in a sense, to indicate again the kind of person that Audrey was, and was becoming, you see, but at that time the idea of the Negro as an artist, you was not something that was even a thought about. But somewhere, somehow, the NAACP and another organization got involved with the College Art Association and Audrey in developing art exhibitions which they helped sponsor, things of that kind. And it had an effect on the project.

HP: Well, Charles Alston indicated that the -- what? -- that there was an art school established and supported and sustained by the Carnegie Foundation, which was very early, you know.

MC: The Carnegie Foundation or the Carnegie Corporation?

HP: Carnegie -- well, one of the other, I'm not sure.

MC: Carnegie Corporation, I think, because the Carnegie Corporation of New York was the, was one of the first foundations that I have even encountered as having an active interest in the arts.

HP: Yes. Well, there was a series of lawyers, one of them got the most marvelous, or one of them had the most marvelous collection of cleurates, whose name escapes me, but he was an interesting individual. And they floated studies in the South on Negro history, surveys, health surveys . . .

MC: Yes.

HP: But, you know, this was all part of the scene.

MC: It's all part of the scene, which is why I brought it up, you see.

HP: Yes. So that these are influencing factors which Mrs. McMahon was aware of.

MC: Absolutely.

HP: And to the extent possible and where possible she could make part of the troops to support a new approach, one way or another, even if it was floating an idea that didn't seem to have an over-all cover. The cover could wait.

MC: The cover could wait, yes. I'm even remembering when we did the first, Soviet show. I'm talking about the College Art Association, when we did the first Italian show, and all the repercussions of that on the same group in the College Art Association as to where this organization fit into this scheme of 20th century America. And very much, again, Audrey stuck to her guns and fought it through, and always there was some relationship between what she was doing in both organizations.

HP: Yes.

MC: She never functioned on one or the other, she always functioned kind of between the two.

HP: Yes. Well, most of the, I think most of the groups that were active could, you know, could rally around an idea.

MC: Ummhumm.

HP: There were many attempts to organize actors. I was indicating the Carland Fund also sponsored funds to see whether actors could be organized.

MC: Ummhumm.

HP: Lawyers could be organized. The Newspaper Guild, and the Artists Guild. There was an effort, let s see, how the devil do I know this?

MC: When you say the "Artists Guild," What group are you talking about? The Artists Guild?

HP: Well . . .

MC: Because . . .

HP: I m vague on this. Let me tell you the source of it.

MC: Yes.

HP: I went through an attorney s papers, a fabulous attorney in a lot of ways -- Morris Arnost.

MC: Oh, yes indeed!

HP: And I went through his paper, in part, he was counsel for the Carland Fund, and as such the papers included many scraps and snippets about a lot of ideas that were sponsored, or suggested in the meetings of the Board of the Carland Fund, you know -- efforts leading to organize lawyers, efforts leading to organize newspapermen, journalists, Actors Equity . . .

MC: Equity.

HP: I think more probably than artists.

MC: I think so.

HP: Because he had some early clients of theaters in Greenwich Village when he was a young lawyer.

MC: Yes.

HP: And they had developed continuity, his won interest in bizarre and unique people who necessarily, whether they be writers, or actors, or otherwise whetted his interest.

MC: I may be entirely wrong about this, but I don t believe that there was any artists organization that dealt with matters of a social level, or social action before the John Reed Club.

HP: You indicated that you didn t think there was an Artists Guild, John Reed Club. There are forerunners -- Hamilton Easter Field.

MC: Hamilton Easter Field Foundation.

HP: Ummhumm.

MC: But was their group based on the same reasons for being, or was it more an artists cultural organization?

HP: I think, you know, it s hard to define. I think it was a group of like-minded people who didn t find acceptance in the old order but just gathered together . . .

MC: Well, this is what I mean.

HP: . . . for whatever . . .

MC: For whatever.

HP: . . . for whatever reason, largely showing -- you know Hamilton Easter Field had a gallery over . . .

MC: Certainly.

HP: And it's the arts . . .

MC: But it's like the Society of Independence.

HP: Yes.

MC: It's like that.

HP: Yes.

MC: There their reason for being was more based on the aesthetics . . .

HP: Yes.

MC: . . . of their work than it was as their thinking of themselves as citizens socially involved in society.

HP: Yes.

MC: This is the thing I'm curious about. Now I may be wrong, and it may be that the John Reed Club was the first thing that came into my consciousness . . .

HP: But you know how -- I guess they still do -- you meet at a cafeteria X and you have your group, and that's continuous. The fact that it finally fell under a roof called the John Reed Club is, I suppose, traceable to the astuteness of someone's organizational ability . . .

MC: Precisely.

HP: . . . to provide a large umbrella. And that's about it.

MC: And then, you see, it was the logical step that the artists under the project found the answer -- I mean, of course, trade unionism was having its great day.

HP: Yes.

MC: But it was so logical for this then to happen to the artists. And it took a long time before the artists were part of the CIO, you know.

HP: Oh, yes.

MC: No, I was thinking of even antedates that into the 20s.

HP: Well, frankly I don't know.

MC: Someone she . . .

HP: I don't know beyond . . .

MC: I'll find it because I think where was a place where . . .

HP: Yes. I think this is a very important point.

MC: Well, on the subject of being comfortable in a group one doesn't anticipate necessarily that an artist will even be aware of the group or that he's part of one, you know.

HP: Well, it was popular not to have him be at one time.

MC: That may have been the canard which was cast at him. Davis had his cronies. He wouldn't have to see them every day or every week, but there was a place where the cafeteria where they could sit down.

HP: The Jumbo Shop.

MC: Yes. Later, but I mean this is all -- what's her name? -- that marvelous woman who had the restaurant in Greenwich Village was a . . . ?

HP: Was a place.

MC: Yes.

HP: What is her name?

MC: What the devil was her name?

HP: Harry will know it. I can't remember.

MC: Well, this is another, you know, another place where they were comfortable and welcome.

HP: Yes.

MC: You know, that's not easy.

HP: No.

MC: So that there is a kind of continuity certainly so far as the New York artists were concerned -- at least a growing awareness that there was a community of spirits cast adrift. What exactly did they have? There weren't very many galleries that were taking their work. They had to conspire for a loft here, a loft there, to have a show, to publicize it, hopefully. It wasn't easy. This, I'm sure, grew into a kind of intellectual storehouse, in some areas more deep than others -- John said that . . .

HP: John Reed Club.

MC: . . . seems to be a kind of over-all for, you know, a lot of splinter groups, aesthetic and so on.

HP: Well, that is probably what I'm trying to say, that just as we seek umbrellas now for splinter groups that need -- I mean the Unitarian church has done it for years, let's face it. I think in its own way the John Reed Club provided that at a time when there was no organization.

MC: Right. Right.

HP: And then, of course, the Federal Arts Projects were . . .

MC: But wasn't the Artist Union in the field before the Federal Art Project?

HP: Oh, yes.

MC: Yes. Even at the time of the Mayor's Committee.

HP: Well, that's it, you see -- out of the John Reed club came the Artists Union.

MC: Yes. which is even a larger umbrella.

HP: Which is even a larger umbrella, that's true, but then more consciously became involved with apolitical and social action.

MC: Yes, the Artists Action Committee.

HP: For example?

MC: They had a stake . . .

HP: They had a stake . . .

MC: . . . even before the horizon.

HP: And they found a voice.

MC: Yes. Even before the horizon was rosy with the WPA.

HP: That's right. You see, the thing I wish Audrey would tell, because I can't tell, and that was where and how the artists first began to come. It wasn't just desperation and seeking someone, you know, but there certainly must have been some communication.

MC: She did indicate that the nature of shows, touring show where she would have to be, or the College Art Association had to be aware of work being done, that work was brought in. This was sampled, conversations, you know, over a cup of coffee can go way beyond the immediate problem of well, what is your work and where? Can you hang a show? Can . . . ?

HP: That s true. That s true.

MC: So it was sort of a fuzzy thing.

HP: That s true. And perhaps I m leaving out something kind of important. When we were at 20 West 58th Street the College Art Association had its own gallery.

MC: Yes, that . . .

HP: Now I m remembering something which you reminded me of. We had there, so to speak, previews before a show left for the road for people to come and see in New York City, you see, and for the critics, which is where I first met Edward Alden Jewell. I must confess that my memory tells me that the percentage of non-living American arts was extremely high, but it is true that that brought artists in to find out whether they, too, could show. I think we moved up there in early 30s. We first had a little office down in one of the buildings of New York University, and then Dean Hunn gave us this house at 20 West 58th Street and that was where we first established a gallery. So it was probably there that the possibility of the College Art Association being made aware of the American artists, and we were, after all, right in the depression.

MC: Right. And if one artist would come in and have a hearing . . .

HP: Others would come in, yes.

MC: The cafeteria . . .

HP: Yes.

MC: You know, and it would not around . . .

HP: Yes.

MC: . . . that this was a .

HP: I had almost forgotten that for a moment. Did Audrey bring that up at all?

MC: She indicated that she felt that by holding shows of American artists, it might conceivably be helpful to the. Well, you know, there no way place there . . .

HP: No, it was more than that. It was that they came and sometimes with their work.

MC: Yes, because there was a place available, Yes.

HP: That s right. I now remember very vividly these circumstances. It s a long time ago.

MC: But this allows the get that kind of continuity of knowledge . . .

HP: That s right.

MC: Which but for their coming in she perhaps wouldn t have had.

HP: Would not have had. That s right.

MC: Yes. Yes.

HP: And again I think it was a role that I think that inadvertently the College Art Association played because it was Audrey s idea to have the gallery, and we did show . . .

MC: Well, you know, it s a comforting . . .

HP: There might still be some catalogs on file that should be given to the Archives in that connection.

MC: Well, you know, in New York museums, the door,

HP: Yes, I see. . .

MC: Dozens each week.

HP: Yes, and this was just like a voice to them.

MC: Well, it s these early days that have excited me most of all.

HP: Most, yes.

MC: It's the foundation, you know, it's like the idea that gets launched and moves.

HP: I'm just trying to think how -- am I leaving out any other person you might talk to about that particular period.

MC: A sample, you know, I guess a week ago Sunday I spent all afternoon with Ben Shahn who has some real insight into the period in terms of his, you know -- I don't know how he catalogues some of the things he does catalogue, but to illustrate that, you know, the variety of going to the library with thirty cents in one's pocket, and he can give you a real visual picture of meaning another artist and wondering whether the bite is going to be put on him, and just barbering the thought for a friend, "I can't do it!" and having the fired say, "I've just sold a picture, I've got six dollars coming." This is -- it's humor of the very grave kind, you know.

HP: Yes.

MC: That kind of wrench.

HP: Yes.

MC: It's been a very pleasant period, and yet they survived somehow. Yes.

HP: I think it made them. I think it really made them. I don't think, I honestly do not think that what happened in this country in the 40s would have been at all possible without what had happened to the artists in the 30s. I mean I have seen it in every area of my work ever since.

MC: Were there is this direct relations to the 30s.

HP: Let's take as remote a place from us right now as Salt Lake City, Utah. I have a little girl out there who is my newest secretary. She didn't know there was such a thing as art in Salt Lake City, Utah, until she'd come back from college and sort of wanted to look around. She looked around and began to probe about how it began. She found out that the Art Barn in Salt Lake City began because of the projects, under the Federal Art Projects. When Vardis Fisher came back from New York and went to work on the Writers Project out there, you see, he brought a stimulus to the university, which was more than just sets, and there is hardly any area that I touch, you see, that I fired the roots going straight back to the 30s.

MC: Yes. You see I've often wondered how -- even though in the 40s they go somewhat at right angles to what they'd been doing. Maybe a psychic kind of reaction to it. It's like Henry Varnum Poore saying, "The art of murals for the Treasury Department was writing period to a paragraph." The curtain came down.

HP: Down.

MC: He can't understand it, but he told it with great gusto and a certain amount of mirth, but nonetheless the curtain did come down.

HP: But every period has its own kind of social consciousness, and its own kind of expression.

MC: The very people who are involved in this, the writing of this final paragraph, the discovery of something American, rediscovered something from that period. . .

HP: From that period.

MC: That explodes in the 40s. Right. And it may have been the very thing I think we talked about last time, the fact that what artist were grouped to other, thinking together, and a kind of individual statement.

HP:

MC: Yes.

HP: Well, look at Toney and . These are two excellent examples.

MC: Examples, yes.

HP: I'd better run along.

MC: All right. Fine.

HP: Thank you very much.

MC: Your very welcome. [END OF INTERVIEW]