



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Richard
Eugene Fuller, 1965 June 9

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Richard Fuller on June 9, 1965. The interview took place in Seattle, Washington, and was conducted by Dorothy Bestor for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

DOROTHY BESTOR: Testing. Let's see whether this is on loud enough. I have it at seven. Now I'm turning it up to eight. Now, I think I'll play it back and see what it is we'll pick up for sound loudly enough without having any hum.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

Now I'm recording again. Testing, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, 10. I think this is going to be all right, and in a few minutes, I hope I will be interviewing Dr. Richard Fuller of the Seattle Art Museum and his secretary, Mrs. [inaudible] Malone.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

RICHARD FULLER: All right, you can—[Cross talk.] I don't know if my voice is on the low side. Is that [inaudible]—

DOROTHY BESTOR: I think it is a bit on the low side.

RICHARD FULLER: Yes, well, it is.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I find most men's voices are.

RICHARD FULLER: Yes. [Inaudible.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: We women are sort of shrill. We can record at any level. Now I'll turn it back. You might just say one more sentence, about the Art Project or anything.

RICHARD FULLER: Well, the Art Project, I think, was exceedingly successful, because it happened to coincide with an important stage in the career of many of our very good artists.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Thank you. I'll just turn that back, now, and see how it sounds.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

Now, Dr. Fuller, I suppose what we're most interested in is your overall picture of the various government art projects in Seattle and their weaknesses and strengths. And then, secondly, what you remember, either in general, or as I ask you specific questions, about the very considerable part that the museum played in cooperating with the Federal Art Project and the Washington state-wide Art Project during its duration here.

RICHARD FULLER: Well, I wasn't a part—as I remember, a member of the advisory committee. I think that possibly Kenneth Callahan may have served in that capacity. I was very conscious of the WPA, and I was very conscious of what it meant to many of the artists. We have, as you probably know, taken more of an interest in our local artists than most museums.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, you certainly have.

RICHARD FULLER: And we've been always very active in trying to support them, and it has been very gratifying, especially now, in retrospect, to see what prominence—and some of the ones that are not so prominent now, still were very good artists, and they were very

deserving of support, and it was just remarkable that this Project happened to coincide with important stages in the development of many good artists.

I know you mentioned about sketches Mark Tobey. I know he did do a sketch of a wall mural, which was offered to us, but we had no place to hang it, and we didn't accept it. But it was—I know you mentioned in here or something that, you know, Mark was not happy with it. I don't quite know why, but I know he was always a little bit difficult on that score. So that might have just, coincidentally—the Art Project, I had Mark on a stipend for many, many months.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh.

RICHARD FULLER: Which was a very rewarding thing for me, for that matter, because it gave us a selection of some of the products that he did at that time.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, that's very interesting. What exactly did you have him doing?

RICHARD FULLER: Well, just—he was doing whatever he wanted, and I just had a selection of his paintings.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, I see.

RICHARD FULLER: And so they—we are rich in that field.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, that's a very interesting thing. Well, then, you were really a small art project all your own—[Cross talk.]

RICHARD FULLER: Yes.

DOROTHY BESTOR: —concurrently.

RICHARD FULLER: We were a small WPA ourselves, 'cause you can look over our accessions at that time, and you'd find that that are many artists that we've purchased—the local artists. As far as contemporary art is concerned, I've confined our purchases for the museum, which are my personal purchases, usually, almost exclusively to the Northwest art. And otherwise, we go out into ancient history or other things. And except for some notable people that show marked trends. We have a good many of examples of a good many of noted names in our—

[00:05:16]

But I think it came out in spite of the fact that there were grumblings from the administration, that thing I'd put as inevitable, working with a group of artists, but I think in general, people here for what I—I never visited Spokane, but from what I heard about Spokane, I know Hilda and Carl Morris were both very active over there. And I know Bill Cumming was active over there, and we've had a great deal of respect for him and for them. But all these artists—and really, it's a wonderful thing that you had such a satisfactory thing, and now, that, 20-odd years later, they're still thriving, many of them.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, they certainly are. Well, you said several things there that I'd like to explore just a little bit. You have, for one thing, mentioned the Spokane Project, and as you remember, there were other galleries, though not art centers, around the state. There was one at Chehalis and one at Fort Lewis and one at Wenatchee and one at Pullman. Those were exhibition galleries for traveling exhibits. Did you ever have a chance to see any of those?

RICHARD FULLER: No, I didn't. I'm sorry to say I didn't visit any of them. And I noticed that one exhibit that we had planned to have of WPA coincided with December 1941, and that had to be canceled. I don't know whether we had anything of that later. I was off in the service then for a year or so—

DOROTHY BESTOR: I see.

RICHARD FULLER: —and I'm not quite sure what happened.

DOROTHY BESTOR: That's another thing I wanted to ask you about. From the correspondence in the file that I'm returning to you, I gathered that, although it did have to

be postponed two or three times, it was, in fact, held from December 10th to January 4th, 1941 to '42. And I was going to ask whether you remembered it as being successful and well attended?

RICHARD FULLER: I don't remember. That came, of course, just after Pearl Harbor.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

RICHARD FULLER: And it was—I see I wrote a letter to Bruce Inverarity at that time. I have no idea—I don't remember that. There's too much in your mind, otherwise.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, of course. Well, I can find out from other sources some record of it being held and of the attendance. I was told by Mrs. Liston [ph] that Mrs. Molitor [ph] on the staff—out at the desk, keeps a scrapbook of museum clippings. Does it go back as far as this period?

RICHARD FULLER: I think, I'm sure it doesn't. No, she wasn't with us at that time, and I'm sure it doesn't go back. There have been clippings kept. I've never seen those clipping books, but I know we have archives.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, perhaps they're out in the library.

RICHARD FULLER: We have lots of clippings that are retained.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I'll check the library on that, because it would be interesting to see what finally happened to that exhibit. Then, another point you made, you said there were a few rumblings with the administration throughout this Project. Are you thinking of the overall administration in Washington, D.C., or with the local administration of the Project?

RICHARD FULLER: I think that was probably with the local. But whether that was justified at all, I don't know. It was just one of those things.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, I suppose it's inevitable when there are from 30 to 50 high individualized artists who are working on a government project, which does have a lot of red tape involved with it. They have some of the files of correspondence in the university library, in the manuscript collection, and the amount of forms in triplicate and permission for everything, even the smallest quota of supplies, and the amount of correspondence needed to reclassify a worker from group one to group three was really fantastic. So I expect it's a wonder that they did get as much done as they did. But from your impression of the workings of the Project, would you think that the individual painters' and sculptors' talents were well-used on the whole?

[00:10:05]

RICHARD FULLER: Well, a lot of the—well-used, just the fact that they sustained their lives during a very difficult period. And I don't know precisely—we only have a few things in our own collection that come from the WPA, and I think those are not frightfully notable. I don't remember what they are. I didn't see them.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, that list was given to me by Mrs. Malone, and there are perhaps others.

RICHARD FULLER: Oh, yes, these are—they're all very good. Those are all very good people. Yes. There was some sculpture that we accepted as well, which we haven't used much. I've forgotten who that artist is. Yes.

No, that—it—I think the whole matter, just the fact that list of people that worked for you, I might know, Fay Chong, Kenneth Callahan, Ernest Norling, Jacob Elshin, and Guy Anderson, and Harry Bonath, and Sarah Spurgeon, they've all been such good artists, and then Carl Morris and Louis Bunce and Lubin Petric is still doing well. We bought one just the other day.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, did you?

RICHARD FULLER: I mean, a year or so ago.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, good.

RICHARD FULLER: It's a very decent and promising painting. I don't know why he's been up and down. He hasn't been this constant producer. But they—[inaudible]still run the school, and done very well with it. Guy Anderson is fine. Andrew Chinn still is a very good artist. Ray Hill is excellent at the university. So—and the Fitzgeralds, Margaret Tomkins and Jim Fitzgerald, and of course, Graves, Morris Graves, was later on our staff. He came to our staff in the late '30s. Then, of course, Guy Anderson was on our staff for a number of years.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Oh, I didn't know that Anderson was.

RICHARD FULLER: Yes, yes. And Kenneth Callahan was on the—

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, I knew that.

RICHARD FULLER: —staff for 20 years. Anderson. But it did get people who have achieved name and fame to really a remarkable degree for—considering they come from one community.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes.

RICHARD FULLER: In the Northwest.

DOROTHY BESTOR: You might be amused by these two sketches of some of the artists at work in their project studio, which I had reproduced. Hannes Bok drew them for Fay Chong, and Fay Chong lent them to me a few weeks ago when I was interviewing him.

RICHARD FULLER: Nice to have a record of these. That's very—

DOROTHY BESTOR: The original sketches are about twice that size.

RICHARD FULLER: Yes.

DOROTHY BESTOR: And then, here is a photograph of the staff, some of the staff, during the time when the project studio was at the Bailey Gatzert School, under Mr. Inverarity's direction. That may remind you of some of the—

RICHARD FULLER: Yes, that is a lot of people that I know. Ransom Patrick has gone into art history, and he's on the faculty at Princeton University now. [Inaudible.]

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yeah, you won't want to look at these in any detail, but you might be interested in the records that they have at the Seattle Public Library. I had those copied—photocopied the other day, and there are lists of apparently everyone who worked for the Project.

RICHARD FULLER: Now, this whole list, you go right down here, we have in our collection: Stanley Cookson, Ernest Norling, Jacob Elshin, Edgar Forkner, Ziegler [ph], Barney Nestor and Alfred Lemke [ph], and Peter Camfferman, and Theodora Harrison. Then—and[inaudible] and Miro [ph]—and those are almost going down this list, and they all are represented in our collection. And most of these, as you go through—some—a great many paintings, and some are sculptors.

[00:15:10]

It's a very good list of the time, and they did do a great deal to keep the wolf from the door at that time. And if—even if they—I don't what the products of their works are at the moment, but the very fact that they turned out these things and kept going, it was a stimulus. And the mutual association of that whole group, I think, was very important to them.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Have you any suggestions as to how it could have been done even better?

RICHARD FULLER: I don't. I'm sorry to say. Because I just wasn't close enough to it to have a real opinion of my own. I had no direct association. My name may have been used as a masthead somehow or other but—[inaudible].

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes, it was.

RICHARD FULLER: But I wasn't active in it.

DOROTHY BESTOR: I see.

RICHARD FULLER: And I usually am active on things where my name is used.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Yes. I know.

RICHARD FULLER: But in this case, I was not active.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, the Archives office in Detroit has the impression that you were actually on the regional committee at some time, but apparently, that is a misapprehension. Or it may have come at the time when you were about to be in the army, and that may have interrupted things. But at any rate, we do know that the Seattle museum cooperated a great deal with the Project, and it's been interesting to hear some of the things that you did that I hadn't known about.

One or two last questions. For instance, do you think that some governmental control of or— not control, support of or supervision of the arts might well be a continuing thing in America? Or do you think this was just something good for that particular emergency, the Depression?

RICHARD FULLER: I'd be more inclined to think that it was a wonderful ace in the hole. If we got into another depression, I think it would be excellent to keep them going. At the moment, they—I think a good many of our artists are able to scratch along, some of them with much success, and some without, but they're depending often on outside jobs, sometimes related to art, and sometimes not strongly related to art. And yet, they do survive, and I think our artists are still doing well up here. And it's a little bit difficult to know how they'd do if you had a constant government supervision or government stimulus. I wouldn't be too much in favor of it, I think. Just off-hand. I think it's a wonderful thing, and the experience that you had—that if we had another serious depression, I think this type of thing I think is exceedingly valuable.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, fine, thank you very much. Oh, one more thing. Do you have any impression on how the art projects were received by the Seattle public generally? Did they just think, "Well, this is another WPA boondoggle," or did they take them seriously, do you know?

RICHARD FULLER: Oh, I wouldn't be able to answer that. I don't get so close to the general public to be able to know what they thought. And if I grew concerned—and I especially think, in retrospect, just the very list of the artists and knowing what they've accomplished, makes you feel that they—that it very definitely was a valuable Project. And I think I've been more impressed in seeing the record and the people and knowing how much they've accomplished in these last 25 years or less that have gone on since then, to think that it was very definitely a valuable thing, and an excellent thing for the country.

DOROTHY BESTOR: Well, fine, thank you very much indeed, Dr. Fuller.

[00:20:00]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]