



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Ruth Gikow, 1964

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ruth Gikow in 1964. The interview was conducted by Harlan Phillips for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

RG:: Ruth Gikow

HP:: Harlan Phillips

HP:: I think probably a good way to get into it is to find out what it is you were doing, what the alternatives were, what sort of luggage you picked up in the late 20's. What were you doing? Where were you headed? It's like bypassing the whole depression period back before in the 20's.

RG:: Yes.

HP:: Where were you? In the city?

RG:: Yes. Yes. Well, I was always interested in art. I was born in Russia, and I came here as a little girl, and we moved over on the East Side. And when I was a child, it was obvious this was going to be the direction I was going to take, mostly. But, you know, coming from a poor family, mostly the family was very interested in finding a way that I could make a living at it and not, and, you know, none of this free art business. My father was a photographer, and there was, you know, it was a kind of a, you know, a kind of a sympathy toward art. It wasn't a completely alien form, and the fact that some of the teachers at school thought I was gifted, and I was encouraged at school, and so on and so on. This in a sense encouraged the family. So when I went to Washington Irving to high school, I took the art course, and it was kind of logical. And, it seemed, you know, that this was -- there was no question as to the direction I was going to go.

HP:: Did your dad have a good eye?

RG:: Yes. He now claims -- my father now is 83, he started painting about three years ago, he does very charming, primitive stuff -- now he claims that what he always wanted to do was to be an artist and, you know, to be a painter.

HP:: That's marvelous.

RG:: And that he got misguided by, you know, by photography, and this was his trap, and that was a big mistake and so on, and so his whole life was a mistake. And judging from his stuff, he's a real primitive; he's got a very innocent eye. His stuff is really charming.

HP:: Is it?

RG:: Yes, really charming. And judging from his stuff, maybe - I don't know, you know, I don't know what would have happened.

HP:: But he had no quarrel with what you were doing?

RG:: He had no quarrel as long as he felt that in some way it could go in the direction of making a good living.

HP:: Yes.

RG:: This was it. And, the only way that they could think I was making a living, you know, was as a designer or commercial artist or something like that. And I never had any kind of aptitude for sewing, and I wasn't interested in it. And when I got out of -- and I was supposed to do some kind of fashion illustrating or something that had to do with commercial art - and when I got out of high school - what! Right in the depression. It was impossible to find a job.

HP:: Was there an art teacher in high school who was helpful?

RG:: Nobody was particularly helpful, not in high school. No. No, it was really, it was a jungle, you know, Washington Irving High School. No, I would say there wasn't anybody that was -- in elementary school I had a couple of teachers who were very, very encouraging, very helpful, very concerned about me. They tried to arrange for a kind of scholarship, they wanted to pay -- they had arranged, it was my English teacher and my art teacher -- they had arranged for some kind of stipend for me to be supported through high school, but my father

wouldn't, you know, wouldn't have any part of it, he was too proud and all that. But in any case, when I got out of high school, that was really right plunk in the depression. And I went around looking for a job, and there was absolutely nothing available. Yes, there was one job available. They wanted -- it was an ad that I answered in the newspaper -- they wanted girls with art training.

HP: Whatever that is.

RG: Yes. And it was painting mouths on rubber dolls.

HP: Oh no!

RG: Yes. And it paid something like \$9.00 a week working full-time from, you know, really I don't remember what - nine till six every day, I think six days a week. I worked in Woolworth's at night when I went to high school for my third year and my last year. And then inasmuch as there wasn't anything for me to do, out of sheer, you know, nothing, I took the exam for Cooper Union, and I passed it, and I entered Cooper Union. And most of the girls were just sort of keeping time. I entered Cooper Union till the depression would lift, you see.

HP: What were you going to do there?

RG: Where? At Cooper Union?

HP: Yes.

RG: I was just going to just brush up on my drawing, and I was going to brush up on my commercial technique, and I was going to do all these things in order to make me a better commercial artist. I was a very difficult student. Some of my teachers remember me, they thought I was crazy, you know, because I would have nothing to do with any of them. I studied with John Steuart Curry, but by then, and he thought I was, well, by then -- this was already my third year -- by then I had given up the idea of becoming a commercial artist, I really wanted to be a painter. But in my first year, I did some wild things. We had a very interesting instructor who was very interested in life, you know, with a capital L, and he gave us all kinds of projects. Like at one point, he told us to go to Kline's basement and to sketch in Kline's basement. Kline's basement was a madhouse!

HP: The human story.

RG: Yes. Madhouse. A girl sitting on top of a ladder seeing that nobody steals. And there's a poster on the wall with, you know, with somebody, a little face peering out from behind bars and the three languages -- English and Italian and Yiddish -- told you what would happen to you if you steal, you know. Ladies are ripping, you know, dresses off and on, you know, really. And I did a fashion salon!

HP: Did you?

RG: I turned my back on it completely. I didn't want to have anything to do with it. I mean, I knew Kline's very well, and I thought it was madness to send me into that sweat box. I wasn't having any of it. And I did it, I came back with a drawing of a fashion salon. This kept up for about, oh, I don't know, almost six months I kept on doing that. I was doing life drawing, and I elongated it the way you would for fashion, you know, making it ten heads, twelve. And finally, I broke.

HP: What was the disenchanting thing about commercial art?

RG: No, no, no. Do you know I remember what made me suddenly decide to really, really be an artist. I had - actually I was a lot better than most of the kids in the class because I did know how to draw. I started drawing from a model since I was about thirteen, and I was, you know, I was pretty good actually. And I had a kind of snooty attitude, some of the kids were just beginning. But one of the assignments we had was to go to the zoo and there was one girl in the class who was doing very, very badly, but she did a kind of, I think it was a fox or some kind of trapped animal and with the eyes very close together, and suddenly that really -- I decided it had something. That did it.

HP: Did you get much from the other students? This one girl in particular?

RG: No. Then I began to, yes. Then I began to be friendly with a group of students that were really very interested in art. And I began to get some, you know, completely different notions about it. And then I got very influenced, I became very interested in people like Picasso, like Matisse on my own because the school wasn't particularly geared that way. And I became fascinated by the Mexicans, mostly the mural and the fresco painters. And I decided that I wanted to be a mural artist, and I studied mural painting. And also what had happened was that I got some kind of scholarship from Cooper Union because I was working at Woolworth's at night, and it was awfully rough and all that, and they arranged for me to get some kind of stipend, and I took that money, and I signed up for the weekend painting class with Raphael Soyer.

HP: Oh, did you?

RG: Yes. Because I wasn't happy in Cooper Union. I was studying with John Steuart Curry who was too much of a regionalist for me and very, I thought -- it was, you know, there's a Yiddish word for it, "multic," you know. You know it too, it didn't have any zest or any guts to it. And I studied with Raphael, and he was a good influence on me in a lot of ways.

HP: Well this, you know, this disenchantment with regionalism, was it articulate at the time?

RG: Yes, it was at its height, you know - Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry and Benton and all those people, and I hated them.

HP: But I mean your own aversion to it. Was it articulate? Among the other students and so on?

RG: Yes, yes, yes. I was - actually, you know, I say that recently, I saw that painting of John Steuart Curry's at the Metropolitan, and it's not too bad, that landscape that they have there.

HP: Yes, yes.

RG: And it really has something. Now I don't know why I hated it as much as I did. I was looking at it, and it really isn't bad. I think there was something that he had, he was a very nice man, and a very sympathetic man. I felt he had absolutely nothing to give me. And every time he would walk into the class I'd slip out because I didn't even want to listen to his criticism, you know. He knew that I did that because he talked to a friend of mine about it, he said, "She's avoiding me," but it was very, very funny.

HP: But it is unrelated to Kline's.

RG: Yes.

HP: Kline's was much more -- what? -- certainly much more of a facsimile of what was going on on the East Side of New York than John Steuart Curry ever dreamed of.

RG: Yes. That's right. It had nothing to do with my life, I guess.

HP: Yes. Outside of --. Lovely sure, but the absence of zest.

RG: Yes. And the interesting thing about it was that the teacher who was interested in all this, in the supplies and the fish market, a man by the name of Austin Purvis, Jr. who was a mural painter from Pennsylvania and himself a very interesting man, a very conservative man, and yet he had this other side to him. He was a very good teacher and as a -- he was a mural painter who did, I think he did, I think I saw several reproductions of some of his work that he did in murals that were I think a little influenced by Fra Angelico, and very kind of pale, sort of Italianate kind of things, light but actually quite bloodless in a way. It's interesting where you have this other side. An interesting man. Well, in Cooper Union, what had happened was that the school seemed so dead, and the WPA by then had opened up the WPA project. And I was in my third year, I had gotten out of my third year, and I was entering my fourth year, and people said, "Art school is ridiculous. Why don't you get on the project? It's better than art school, and you get paid." And so --

HP: It made sense.

RG: Yes. And I was so broke, and so I did that, and I got on as a muralist. I got on the mural - no, my first job was teaching kids. This is what they usually did. But I wanted to do murals.

HP: Who did you see? Who had charge of the teaching program?

RG: I don't remember. I wasn't on the teaching program for a very long time, for a short time. I don't remember who that was.

HP: Was this the settlement house approach?

RG: Yes. I worked at Christ Church, and I was very good at it. I was one of the very, very young ones on the project. I was I think about 20. I don't know, did they allow you to get on at 20 or 21? I just made it. And I was teaching a bunch of kids over at Christ Church, very tough kids. They were wonderful. And I really, I was very good at it. I really got those kids going. I had this little class in the kitchen of this church, and it started out with nobody in it, finally I had to break it up, divide it into three classes, you know - little ones, and bigger ones, and big ones.

HP: You were a success.

RG: I was a success. I was so close to age, you know, some of the bigger boys, you know, were fifteen, sixteen, and I was a pretty tough kid myself, and I really understood these kids.

HP: That helps.

RG: It really helped. Yes. I was very good at it, but I wasn't happy. I didn't like doing it, I wasn't happy, I wanted to get on a mural. And so I did.

HP: Well, was that just a matter of accommodation? Burgoyne Diller was --

RG: Diller.

HP: And Lou Block.

RG: Diller and Lou Block, yes, and Harry Knight.

HP: Harry Knight, yes.

RG: Yes. And then I got on as an assistant for a while, and then I got my own job.

HP: Well, in the -- there's a whole new approach in mural painting as an assistant, you know, where it represents a kind of consensus. Where were you an assistant?

RG: I was an assistant to Eugene Morley who was -- yes, I was Gene's assistant for several months. And then I got my own job. And I turned in my sketches, and I passed, and then I did the murals for the Bronx Hospital for the children's ward. And then I did, I demonstrated mural painting at the World's Fair, and actually what I was doing, the panel that I was demonstrating was supposed to go into the nurse's home at Ryker's Island. It had already been passed, I was halfway through the job, and they were pretty sure that it was, you know, and it had already been passed by the committee on the project, but there was a subject and approval committee that was set up by the mayor with a couple of people with an architect - what was his name? - Dean Rockwell, I remember, a very conservative painter, and they turned the mural down for some very kooky reasons. Mr. Rockwell said that, he said, "The color is too Freudian." This is the term he used.

HP: In the late 30's that was. He read a book.

RG: He said, "We find it very disturbing, it's too Freudian." But you know something, you know later on during the War, I got a job working in, I was hired to do murals in Macy's display department, and I had the exact same experience. The committee there who were buyers and people like that - I did a mural for the music department, and the committee there said they found it very disturbing. They said it was decadent. It's in a sense I suppose a little like saying it's Freudian.

HP: Well, let's see. I think talking with Lou Block, he and Shahn did at least some sketches and some research for murals at Ryker's Island, which were turned down because they were alleged to be psychologically unfit.

RG: Well, this is sort of the same thing. Yes.

HP: And the term is meaningless, you know. It's just meaningless unless it's related to a kind of expertise and even then it's doubtful use, but this was one of the ways in which it was turned down for reasons which no one wishes to risk, you know. It could be, "I don't like the way Ben Shahn combs his hair." That would be more reasonable, you know. But you mentioned Gene Morley.

RG: Yes.

HP: What did you learn from him? Was he a different person than the teachers that you'd had?

RG: Gene?

HP: Yes.

RG: Very, very tasteful, you know. I mean, he had beautiful taste, very excellent taste. He went off into a kind of abstract direction, and I think in a way, yes, I think I learned a couple of things, but I think in a funny kind of way I think he did me more harm than good, too.

HP: Did he?

RG: Yes.

HP: What were they?

RG:: Not my cup of tea, you know. It wasn't me. I tried to, in a sense, sort of emulate him and sort of - there was - I really I mean at this stage of the game I really do think that good taste is murder to art. I really think that if you become involved with taste I think it's the end of creativity. I think it is very, very dangerous.

HP:: You know, it's like saying, "This is it." But he did play with colors very well.

RG:: Yes, yes, yes. He played with colors, and he did it quite -- he once told me that he had a painting all arranged in his head before he put it down, and that the act of painting was a bore.

HP:: Maybe. I mean, sometimes the paintings you see on the back of your eyelids.

RG:: Yes. And that just, and which is completely, which is certainly not my approach at all because painting is -- it can be very painful, you know, it can be a terrible, it can be annoying, you know, all kinds of things but also it can be a kind of excitement. But you see Morley never felt that, not painting, and I remember discussing that with him at the time, and he said no, he never, never felt -- it was just doing it, you know, carrying through, and you could tell, you know, if you really, I mean, after you knew that if you looked at his work tactile-y, it had that kind of sense -- his painting -- although he was interested in texture. He was a very bright guy; he learned how to sail a boat by reading a book and became a very good sailor. He was very, very good with his hands, and he was very, very bright. But there was that other quality, you know, that kind of coldness.

HP:: Yes. Well, in personal terms, I suspect he must have felt that even deeper, too, because he died very young.

RG:: Yes.

HP:: Didn't spare himself particularly. While he could play with color, as you put it, and I've never heard this before, the notion that he could see it before it happened and the actual task of doing it was a bore, you know. It's a pain for him.

RG:: Yes. It's a different kind of thing, you know, it's as if he were executing something.

HP:: Sure. Yesterday's newspapers.

RG:: Yesterday's newspapers, yes.

HP:: Yes. It's no longer exciting because the original vision probably was the excitement.

RG:: Yes. Hopper once told me -- you know we were talking about the creative urge, you know. And have you ever met Edward Hopper?

HP:: No.

RG:: It's awfully hard to get him talking, he's like a rock, you know, or something. He sits there, you know, and he's a friend of ours, and he once told me that - I asked him what he, I said, how do you analyze it, the whole business of creative urge? Is it a sort of kind of itch, that no matter how much you scratch maybe you're satisfied momentarily but never really, and then it starts itching again? He said, "Well, not quite, it may be a little bit like that" -- but he hates to mention the fact that he's old -- but he said, "You know, I've discovered one thing, and that is that it can't be done." And I said, "What do you mean it can't be done?" He said, "Whatever it is up there, I keep on trying to do it," you know. "Up there" he meant up in his brain, up there he pointed. He said, "I keep on trying to do it, and I can't do it." And he was very sort of sad about it, you know. Which I think is part of the sense of the itch that never gets - it's a kind of a sense of not really being satisfied.

HP:: Yes. I think in essence it's a dissatisfaction because it's impossible to reconcile hot and cold in that way. Or the polarities, whatever they may be. One constantly in that business of trying to and with Morley apparently excitement came quite apart from the actual job of doing it.

RG:: Yes. The job of doing it was just rendering as far as he was concerned.

HP:: Yes. He could reconcile whatever the imponderables were in his mind and the rest was of no particular interest.

RG:: Well, actually, I don't really think he was a painter. You know, he tried a little bit of scenic designing, he did some backdrops now and then, he did some in summer stock things, tried his hand at it, and so forth and so on. And I think this is probably what he should have done. I think he should have been involved with either the scenic designing or architecture or something where he did the planning and where he could use the different parts of his mind and his different skills. I don't think that he was a painter.

HP: No. No. I didn't think so either, except the sense of color.

RG: He was an artist, but not a painter.

HP: Yes, yes, yes. Well, then, you said that you got off into your own mural, and this was the Bronx children's ward.

RG: Yes.

HP: Now from the point of view of content and idea --

RG: Well, you see that was very decorative, that was Morley's influence, you know. I mean, and then I discovered that I could do a very light thing in a kind of a light touch. It was very tasteful, it was very decorative, and they liked it very much, and everyone was very pleased. And I could have just gone on, you know, and done things like that. But I didn't. When I did the Ryker's Island mural for the nurses' home, I tried to get a little more involved. It did become a little -- there was something -- I took on a little more. And after that was turned down, I decided that I wanted to do some graphics, and I was a little tired of having to go through committees, you know, and that.

HP: That's the whole process of the mural was the negotiation to make it acceptable.

RG: Yes, and I got bored having to do that, and I thought well --

HP: Yes. Well, did you have the sense that the committee approach was a stall or was putting thumbs on your creative eyeballs, or what?

RG: I felt that there wasn't much I could do about it, I could never -- first of all, the excuse they gave me, the reason they gave me for turning it down -- the Freudian thing -- it was something -- I said, "Couldn't you articulate a little better?" And he said, "No, I'm sorry, I can't," and he said, "The fact that I'm taking the trouble of talking to you at all indicates that we take your work very seriously, but I don't know what to tell you." He said, "There's something about your work that we find disturbing. And we rather would not see it put up on a public wall." And so he said, "I'll just put it to you that way." So I decided that the only thing for me to do was to get into something a little more personal. And at that time, the graphics seemed like the most interesting and the most personal. There was something about it, I thought, at the time which is funny about the easel painting division, which was a little sort of stuffy and old-fashioned during that time, which is very, very odd -- that was true in New York, and certainly it wasn't true in Boston. You know, I'm married to Jack Levine, and the stories I hear from Jack about, you know, the really aristocratic part of the project in Boston was the easel division, and they didn't take their graphics or their murals very seriously. But at one point, the really aristocratic part of the New York project was first the mural, and then after a while the graphic, and a lot of people switched over when they became disillusioned with the mural part, you know. And there was something, I don't know, it's odd, something a little stuffy about the easel painters at that point, I thought. The more interesting, and more flamboyant painters were doing murals and then graphics.

HP: Well, do you suppose this is because the 30's set a tone, or the WPA set a tone for experimentation?

RG: Yes.

HP: And that the basic urge was to try something, try something new, because we were doing it as a nation, re-examining what had happened to us --

RG: Yes.

HP: -- and putting rude hands on our machinery to wonder why it got high-centered, and maybe the flavor in the nation itself was one for re-examining something new, trying this and trying that, and an urge for experimentation and not trying to fix yourself as a muralist forever and a day. You said that you could have been, I mean, it was acceptable for the children's ward and -- but for whatever it was, you could have still been painting children's wards.

RG: Yes.

HP: But you move on. It's an almost a self-critical self-criticism then.

RG: I think it's a little more than that. I think the interest in the mural and the graphic had to do with the fact that there was a mass basis to it. And I think that initially, I think that we were influenced by the Mexican artists and the fact that they have, the Mexican artists were so respected and admired in Mexico and had a real sense of belonging, a sense of roots --

HP: Sure.

RG: -- with the Mexican people, you know, they were so admired and loved, and so forth and so on - in a sense I think inspired certainly the artists in New York. And then after that came the graphics. That, too, had a kind of a mass base to it. And we were very interested, in some way we were very interested in, you know, the social 30's, we were very interested in reaching the masses, and I think this was one of the reasons why it seemed so exciting. And the reason why easel painting seemed so stuffy was because, you know, who would see it? -- so let's say, you know. And not only that -- the idea even seemed a little old-fashioned, you know, going back to the original icon, you know, putting it into a frame, and so forth and so on. And one of the reasons why I got interested in the whole serigraph thing was because I felt that it sort of answered the bill in two ways -- one was that you reached the masses, and the masses, in their turn, would buy and pay you back, you see. Because nobody could afford to buy an easel painting, and so they would buy it, and so we put out prints and sell them for \$10, \$20 apiece, and then in turn they could, you know, buy them and in that way could support us. That was one of the reasons why I got interested in the serigraph business and by then, you know, rumbles of war - the project, it looked like the project was going to close down and so forth and so on. You know, it was like looking for a trade, finding some way of making a living, and I really thought that this was one of the ways to do it.

HP: It's interesting that you hit upon the depression as an urge, or as a spur -- had great continuity even quite apart from the WPA. I mean, this effort to, as you put it, learn a trade, find something that one could market.

RG: That's right.

HP: And seizing upon graphics as a closer or a better way, perhaps, given the masses than some other way, some, you know, ivory tower approach.

RG: That's right. It's precisely this. And believe me, you know, this idea you know is a very avant garde idea. Who's doing it now? Vincent Price through --

HP: Sears & Roebuck.

RG: Sears-Roebuck. And they're selling art nouveau and all, and this is our idea. When we formed that Serigraph Society, when we started the group, we got ourselves a salesman you went around, you know, doing precisely this. He went around from store to store, and some of this stuff was sold through department stores. But again, what happened was that we -- my demands weren't very much, but I think I made a living out of prints for about, I think, almost a year - from six months to a year. And making enough money to be able to sort of pay my little rent and so forth and so on. And then the whole thing kind of, kind of filtered out and disappeared because people who bought from department stores weren't interested in that kind of art. And the audience -- and then I discovered something else, that the same audience that bought my prints had enough money to buy my gouaches, or to buy my oil paintings which I eventually began doing, and it was the same audience. And the business of the masses was just, it was a dream, they weren't ready.

HP: Yes. Well, did you, when you were working in the mural division, did you have to go to a specific spot and work, or did you work at home?

RG: I worked at my studio, and I did my murals on canvas which was stretched on frames, and then they were adhered to the wall of the hospital.

HP: Now you already had experience back at Cooper Union?

RG: Yes, I had done, yes, I had some practice at it and --

HP: I should think that doing a mural is different than doing a painting. I may be wrong. But you think in mural terms. This is part of the challenge too? Apart from the fact that the Mexicans were, you know --

RG: Then it was, yes. Then it was, but it certainly isn't now.

HP: Well, if one has never done a mural, I suppose it's the best reason in the world to try one. Isn't it?

RG: Yes.

HP: That, plus the fact that you suddenly get involved in negotiations the nature of which you don't understand and don't care about because it has nothing to do with creativity. This has to do with whatever is called acceptable however diluted that may become. And that gets to be, you know, a monkey on your back after a while so that you would reject that. But in turning to graphics, that particular group, Richard Floethe, I think his name was.

RG: Floethe.

HP: Floethe? F-l-o-e-t-h-e, something like that. Who was the division --

RG: I don't remember him.

HP: Why? You don't remember him at all?

RG: No. I don't remember him, no. He was the graphic?

HP: Yes. The head of the graphics division. He was described as a -- I guess this was probably why --

RG: That's funny, I don't know him.

HP: He was described as a fellow who wouldn't interfere.

RG: The name is vaguely familiar. I don't remember him.

HP: Yes. He must not have carried much in the way of weight, except to allow for experimentation, which I gather was going on. I had to talk to Tony Velonis, there was experimentation going on in the graphics division.

RG: Tremendous amount, yes, they were doing some very exciting things. I did a couple of things that -- and then afterwards, things got to be so awful on the project that I quit. I went off to Yaddo for a summer. And then after that, I got all kinds of jobs in practically everything. I did display, and I did work for Macy's, and I worked in an advertising agency, I did some book illustrations. And I did textile designs. I even sold a couple of things to -- was Harry Knight connected with Tony Velonis? Yes, I sold a couple of things to Harry Knight, designs for some of those stupid classes of theirs.

HP: Well, Harry Knight was the, I guess, broker between artists generally and Audrey McMahan.

RG: Yes. Nice man. He was very nice.

HP: Oh, a marvelous fellow.

RG: Yes.

HP: But you didn't - with the graphics you had to go to the shop?

RG: Yes. Yes.

HP: Where was this?

RG: I guess that was on King Street at the time.

HP: Downtown?

RG: Yes, downtown. King Street. No, but you could do whatever it is -- I did a woodcut for the graphics division. I fooled around with some lithography, but it didn't make me happy. I didn't like it. I didn't like working on a stone, I didn't make too many copies.

HP: Comfortable?

RG: Comfortable with it, no. And then I began to do the silkscreen, and then I got sort of interested. But, you know, the silk screen or the serigraphs, or whatever it was -- I still think they should be called silkscreen prints, I always thought that the serigraph was sort of hifalutin. Do you know who coined that word?

HP: No.

RG: What is her name? -- Elizabeth McCausland.

HP: But did she coin the word?

RG: She was the one, yes, who coined the word, and I remember at the time objecting to it very strongly. I thought it was nonsense.

HP: Does give it tone though, doesn't it?

RG: Haha.

HP: Yes.

RG:: But I have absolutely no respect for the medium.

HP:: None?

RG:: None at all. My early prints, the ones when I first started doing them were the best ones because I did them absolutely directly, used the silk as a pure straight stencil medium, designed it for that purpose, used it absolutely straight and used the stencil. And the more I learned about the medium, the more fancy I got with the transparency and so on, the more elaborate, I think the more, the worse the prints got. The more they got built up, and I really do think in a sense this is what destroyed -- I think some of the artists got so tricky, got so carried away by trying to make it flexible, and trying to make it imitate a gouache actually, which I think was a bad mistake, and after a while it just became a chore, and I think that there's something about the texture when it gets like that, that I find very unpleasant.

HP:: That is in the result?

RG:: Yes. I think it's a limited medium, and I think it should be used as a straight stencil process. I don't think anything fancy should be done with it. I really do think it has its limitations. I think you can't get a good drawing line out of it, the line gets -- it never can get the kind of delicacy that you can get with other graphic mediums. I think the texture of the silk is always in the way. I think that kind of, that film, I mean that sort of little -- the texture, that sort of screen, you know, I think it's not a fine art medium.

HP:: Yes.

RG:: Really I think that whole thing was a --

HP:: Was a response to an idea.

RG:: Was a response to an idea, and I think we all got led down a garden path in some way.

HP:: Yes. But I think it, you know, shows part of the complexities of the 30's -- that artists would have both opportunity to try it, which they wouldn't have before, and a lot of artists had an opportunity to try it, which but for the 30's and the WPA might not have had that opportunity at all, even to discover the limitations. Look at the number of people who got into it that never carried it further, like Morley. Morley did some early prints which were quite good.

RG:: Yes.

HP:: And then because he had a way with color, you know --

RG:: Yes.

HP:: -- you pointed it out that he could see it before he did it and at least could think in those terms, but he never carried it anywhere.

RG:: I don't think it could go anywhere. I really don't think so.

HP:: Some of the others have continued. I don't know how successfully, like Lou Schenker [phon.sp.]. You just don't believe now that it's a fine art medium?

RG:: No, I don't.

HP:: No. No. But then you've got -- what was the disenchantment with the project? Because the war was coming on, or the nonsense that was going on in the city with Somervell and the like?

RG:: Oh, the war, and all kinds -- and it looked like it was going to fold up, and there were all kinds of things that I was doing for them. I was doing posters and designing floats and, you know, practical --

HP:: Jack of all trades.

RG:: Yes, absolutely. And the whole thing seemed -- there was something terribly depressing about it then. That early spirit was gone and . . .

HP:: Was it?

RG:: Yes. Something sick about it really. And although I had no job or anything, I got out because I thought I just couldn't -- there was something very bad about it.

HP:: Did you have the sense that artists had discovered a vested interest they wanted to keep alive? You didn't

in the WPA. There's something to do with -- organization was in the air, for example, unionization of like-minded people. We as a nation didn't resolve the question of organizing to bargain collectively until the steel case of 1937.

RG: Yes.

HP: So this was a big question that was all up for grabs, the answer to which we have yet to discover, and almost like being first on the scene, I mean, the first sit-in.

RG: Mmm.

HP: Or teachers, you know, up in Somervell's office. So that there was a lot of response going on to vested right or vested interests, sick pay benefits, you know, ad infinitum, where artists had a common employer which gave them apparently an interest as a collective group as distinct from individually. Did you have this sense of rude individuality in this period?

RG: No, it isn't that so much. Something very odd happened to -- maybe it is a question of losing individuality, or maybe -- I don't know, I remember when I first got on the project, and I got into -- somebody got me to come to the Artists Union when the Artists Union first started, and it was fascinating because the artists were coming from all over and they were, you know, they were a very colorful group, you know, with red shirts and beards. And when you talked to them, I remember talking to one artist, and he had just come from Africa, and he had been there, and other artists were coming in from Paris, and their money had been stopped, you know, nobody was sending them money any more. The depression had brought them back, and they were a very colorful and very articulate and kind of an interesting group, you know. And there was a lot of cooking, and everyone was very, very active in committees, and there was an excitement in the air. This was the beginning, but you know it's interesting what happened as the \$23.86 -- \$23.86 was the standard wage -- as that kept on coming in, you know, the beards came off, and people got more and more conservative.

HP: Isn't that interesting?

RG: Yes. And they began to, you know, and then people began to be kind of organized and they were all, the committees that people were on, and, you know, the committee for the unemployed artist, and so forth and so on. And then I think one of the things that happened was that the Artists Union became -- and this is a terrible thing to say because this is, in a sense, what organization is for -- it became a little too democratic, and the only basis for getting into the union was need. Now when it was, when it became a union that just dealt with problems that had to do with the project, then that was all right, it was an economically-oriented union, it became one.

HP: Mmhmm.

RG: It hadn't -- in the beginning it wasn't, nobody quite knew what it was going to be. Then when it became an economically-oriented union it still had a kind of function. But after a while even that became a little boring because everything was sort of at a standstill, and you knew darn well that it really didn't make much difference how strong or how weak the union was. There was something bigger that was going on anyhow. And so one became, you know, you began to sort of look at the union with a kind of jaundiced eye. And then the people who were the most active at that point were the unemployed and those were people who sort of came in at the end there, they were a drab little group, and tried to get on this project, you know. And not only that, but the union split in half at one point, and the abstract artists pulled out because they got very -- there was a kind of a class separation, and suddenly the abstractionist became upperclass, and anyone who did the image became lower-class. It was a funny kind of a division, and what did the abstract artists call themselves? I forget. But they formed another organization, and the project changed in character, and the people changed, and I suppose another debit thing was the question of the pink slips, you know, you got bored with getting fired so often, or with the threat of being fired.

HP: Some of the quota reductions --

RG: Yes. You really got bored with the constant - that sword hanging over you. And you got bored with, yes, with those quota reductions, with having to prove yourself on home relief, with the Red baiting, with these committees, you know -- the subject and approval committees, and so forth and so on. And the whole thing just wasn't worth anything any more.

HP: Did you have the sense that -- what is it? -- the organization for whatever reason was a limitation on idea also?

RG: How do you mean "the organization" - the WPA?

HP: That is the whole, the way the whole thing unfolded -- the WPA, the use, the utility that organization was put, you know, part of the whole scene of quota reduction, the \$23.86, the Jumbo Shop, the same faces, problems which you said bored --

RG: Yes, I think so. I don't know, I really --

HP: But where was the idea germinating? Because this was a fluid time, this was a Popular Front day, there were a lot of ideas loose. Were you bored with the American scene, maybe? Maybe the regionalism, you know? What is it? Did you feel that the times, and organization, and the WPA twisted your arm from the point of view of content even if it didn't directly twist your arm?

RG: I really don't know. I think that -- actually, I think the big drama that came along was the war, and I think that's what -- this is really --

HP: Swallowed everything up.

RG: Swallowed everything up. I think this is -- because at the end there, you know, they had some of the artists painting arm bands, painting them by hand, arm bands that had to do with air raid wardens. It was the most stupid thing in the world. And something that it did, and you could -- and some of the artists were holding on tenaciously, you see, because they didn't want to get fired because they wanted that money. Then people began, you know, they did their own paintings at home, but they wanted to hold on to that salary and you know it was fifteen hours a week, so they would come in and they'd sit there and paint arm bands that any machine could print off, you know, by the hundreds like that, and that was a terrible thing to see, too.

HP: Yes.

RG: It was humiliating and it was degrading and you began to get a kind of a contempt for yourself and for your fellow artists because they allowed this to happen, or put themselves, you know --

HP: Yes.

RG: And people began to get jobs in war plants and --

HP: Well, creativity was lost sight of, wasn't it?

RG: Yes. Absolutely. The whole thing disappeared.

HP: It became economic.

RG: It became -- yes.

HP: Yes. And less and less of an idea urge.

RG: Yes.

HP: Because even the Artists Union, which was a local organization, was -- what is it? -- to make the net wider the Artists Congress came in nationwide.

RG: Yes.

HP: But the same problems emerged, that is, the same lack of relevance to what they were doing, to what was really going on.

RG: Yes.

HP: I guess it served its purpose, and then it just left the boards.

RG: Yes. No. But there, yes, but I think also the mistake the Artists Congress made, and I think the mistake that Artists Equity made was the fact that artists were -- I think that if you're going to have an artists organization it can't be done on a broad basis -- which is a terrible lesson.

HP: This is the sad point. And the real point, really, that hasn't been mentioned to me before, that is the collective approach to art through organization is to destroy the art, isn't it? That is, you get to the point where you're protecting something as distinct from reaching for something.

RG: I don't know, you know it's a terrible kind of thing to say, but it seems to me the older I get -- Jack and I talk about it -- it seems like the only way that one can really function artist [inaudible] anarchy.

HP: Yes.

RG: And now that's no good either. I don't know what the answer is, but I must say -- for instance, in the last few years, when the abstract expressionists became completely organized in the field, when it was so difficult -- you know, this is what I'm talking about, the 60's and the late 50's -- it was difficult to get into a show if you worked with the image or if you went off on your own or something like that because it seemed like practically every jury in every museum was rigged with these loaded abstract expressionist people in a really rigid kind of academy had arisen, it was a terrible situation to work in. And now that the whole thing seems to have collapsed, I don't know what's going to happen economically now. I don't think artists are making out as well now because people -- I think that the audience has become a little worried about the whole thing, buying audience. But the atmosphere somehow seems healthier for working.

HP: Yes.

RG: Because by now I gather, and from looking around the galleries, and so forth and so on, and Jack has been the head of the jury inviting shows to the Pennsylvania Academy, and he's seen loads and loads that have been from gallery to gallery, and he knows pretty much what the picture is, and he says it really is anarchy now, it's much better. And it does seem like over-organization is deadening.

HP: Yes. Although at the time it serves a useful purpose.

RG: Yes.

HP: But the -- well, it's like a person who wants to become a master and discovers that he can only be masterful because somebody changes one of the ingredients, and he has to go back and start all over again.

RG: Yes.

HP: And the more he tries to structure his approach and his thinking, the less fluid it becomes. Your argument earlier that funds, that is, the whole concept of funds being available -- a person receiving a check filled pocket books -- apparently we functioned better with empty pocket books than we do with full ones.

RG: No. That's impossible. Now that really can be tragic. No. There has to be something. First of all before I do the WPA any kind of injustice, I don't think I would ever be an artist if it wasn't for the WPA. This is, I mean, because I think that it really -- because, you know, the depression and the possibility of making a living was so remote, you know, I mean the depression was so much with us, and the possibility of making a living was so remote that I couldn't have done it. It would have been -- this is really -- I think that those early years of the WPA really, really made an artist out of me. I don't think the art school did it. I think I learned an awful lot from the artists around me, from the project and so forth and so on. Because I think the years you put into art school aren't that important. I think it's a little later on when you get off on your own.

HP: Yes.

RG: And I think -- I don't see how we could possibly have -- not only that, it isn't just a question, you know it makes me think of that old joke where the guy says, you know, "When I was young," he said, "we were very, very poor, and we had nothing to eat, and we were dispossessed and our furniture was on the street, and then came the depression." And this is a little bit my story. Because it was endless, because we were very poor even before the crash and nothing, and it was nothing and nothing and nothing. And then came the depression. Believe me, the depression meant nothing, it was a continuation of the same dreadful, awful poverty. And there absolutely seemed to be no way out. And the WPA did do that. I mean, the poverty was so awful. I remember one time we were living on Fifth Street and I remember I was about twelve years old, and I was looking out of the window and my mother said, "There's a man I'm terribly, terribly worried out, that man who's sitting across the way there, he's been sitting on that step there, I think he's sick." And she said, "Would you," -- this was a Saturday afternoon and I remember my mother baked some coffee cake -- and she said, "Run down, bring him some coffee cake and a glass of milk. I think he's hungry." And I ran down, and this poor soul looked up, and he was shaking, and he said, "Oh, I'm sorry, I'm afraid I can't drink the milk, I can't eat it, I'm afraid to eat it, I haven't eaten in days." And I ran up, and I told my mother. So my mother made some hot coffee, and I brought down the coffee, and he had the coffee, and he stayed there a little longer and then what happened? He died right then and there. And he died of starvation. And I remember also when I was a kid, I remember going down to -- do you remember the oranges floating down the East River?

HP: Oh, boy!

RG: And I remember going down to Hooverville where they built all those shacks. Were you in New York at the time?

HP: Mhmm.

RG: Do you remember seeing Hooverville where they built the shacks? Oh, this was starvation. I mean, this was very, very, very bad. And I think the WPA was a kind of miracle. It was a wonderful thing.

HP: Yes.

RG: But it sort of went the wrong way. Part of it, of course, had to do with the war. Now I still think -- I don't, you know, I talk to some of the younger painters now and they have a really rough time. They wait on tables, they --

HP: They do a hundred and one thousand things.

RG: And they work in frame shops. And it's very difficult, very difficult. And, you know, a lot of these kids are of the age that I was when I got on the project. My God, it's an opportunity for me to do things.

HP: Yes.

RG: And I was a very hard worker, I was very interested, very involved. I wasn't interested in -- I was very ambitious about myself. And these youngsters now, it's rough on them. Really, I don't know. I think it serves a very, very, very good function. Now exactly where it goes wrong I don't know.

HP: But you had the sense -- at least you've voiced it -- of preserving whatever it is you were, you know. You didn't want to work any more as muralist for a children's ward because you couldn't fix a given response, you know, and you wanted to move on to something else.

RG: Well, I was very restless about myself. I didn't quite know what it is I wanted and I wanted to arrive at a kind of, a kind of truth without, you know, really knowing what the truth is. When I quit the project and I went off to Yaddo, I did a lot of painting that summer, and I went off into, oh, about nine different directions. I did surrealistic things, and I did some abstract things, and I did -- I really -- practically everything -- I worked very hard that summer, practically everything I did was different. And then when I came back and the problem of getting a job -- I wasn't going to get back, there was some of the WPA left, but I wasn't -- I was going to save up for a rainy day anyhow -- and I was in a bad way, I really was in a bad way. And I went into analysis because of the work. And then in a sense, I sort of found what it was I wanted to do. But I was so excited, and I really blocked as far as the work was concerned.

HP: Well, that's -- you know, maybe I voiced it in a poor way, but I thought that it's possible for the creative artist to have the organization, and the WPA while it was a kind of holding operation where opportunity for a while turned to the point where it became a direction, push, you know, the safe and sane, the murals, the whole thinking within the artists about the easel crowd being stuffy. Well, I don't know what they were doing behind the scene. They may have been doing something wholly different in their own work but so far as the product that was made for the WPA, this did get a kind of not sameness but safety, acceptability, this kind of thing. So that maybe the excitement was the non-WPA work, the conversations that you had with other artists as to what the devil they were doing no matter what they submitted to the WPA. Because, I don't know, I've always thought that -- and this may be wrong -- that abstract expressionists, which appears in the 40's, you know, with the termination of the war, if one goes back far enough, the seeds are in the 30's somewhere and may be a kind of reaction to the kind of acceptability which the WPA ultimately stood for, you know.

RG: Yes.

HP: And so that this may have been -- what? -- this notion that artists, while it was comforting given the background to receive continuity of income, the very continuity of income made for acceptability which ultimately turned the artists who were creative away from the very thing they were, you know, involved in. It's maybe more complex than that.

RG: I don't think it's the continuity of income. I think something else there that --

HP: Oh, was there?

RG: Yes. I think something else that happened. I don't think it's the continuity of income. Maybe it had to do with all the committees, maybe it had to do with, well, with exactly where does one place work that -- it is very, very hard to find acceptance for work that is sort of off the beaten track. This is it.

HP: Yes.

RG: If you did an easel painting then, for instance, let's say it would go into a hospital or a school, and the superintendents of the schools would have to look at it. It would have to be just too much censorship.

HP: There was?

RG: Yes. What could you do? Then you would have to do all kinds of pretty little things -- flower pieces --

HP: Safe and sane.

RG: Yes. I remember once walking into the allocations division and they had these racks with all the paintings. There were a couple of paintings that were still wet, and they were seascapes, you know the kind, you know those very corny, corny paintings? And the guy there told me, he said, "We don't even rack these, they get taken so quickly."

HP: It tells its own story.

RG: Yes. And if you try to do anything with any little more -- it was difficult.

HP: I could see the pressure, you know, mounting for --

RG: There was no chance for any kind of private life, so to speak.

HP: Right. Right.

RG: But it's not the money, you see, I mean because you --

HP: No. No. I see. That is, from the point of view of an extension or a statement that you wanted to make --

RG: Yes.

HP: -- if you had to think in terms of the rack --

RG: Right. Precisely.

HP: -- and allocation that makes for acceptability somehow or other something does twist your arm even though no one may ever voice the fact that you've got to do something acceptable.

RG: Yes.

HP: Because I wasn't aware - maybe this is the limitation inherent in the English language - that censorship was effective. Now take a fellow like Burgoyne Diller, you know, who worked and was aware of the fact that to keep continuity, to keep the project going, it was necessary to pick the kind of artist that would do an acceptable mural within whatever the subject matter was, and yet with all that he could try to introduce maybe one out of ten who were abstract, more modern. But you know this is a pale kind of thing where his own interest may have been deeply in this stuff. Nonetheless as an administrator, or somebody charged with responsibility, he could see the necessity of keeping the train moving, you know.

RG: Yes.

HP: So I guess the very fact that the WPA did step in, did give opportunity, the more momentum made for the very reverse opportunity, you know.

RG: Yes.

HP: Yes. I've never heard anyone quite voice it the way you have, that is, the whole concept of an allocations division --

RG: Yes.

HP: -- or a casual comment from somebody who was in it saying, "These are picked up before they are even dry." And, you know, you look at them if you have any feeling at all about what you're doing, or what you want to do, it certainly doesn't have to do with beaches and waves --

RG: That's right.

HP: -- or at least not those.

RG: Yes.

HP: -- however wet they may be, you know. I can see that, so that what you carry away with you and what you in conversation say with some other artist, you know, creates this feeling of after a given point the WPA really

doesn't matter any more, because it is restrictive so that you'd go off in whatever it is, umpteen directions to try to get back perhaps to an impulse that you had earlier, you know.

RG: Yes.

HP: And where you could - so, you know, apart from what --

RG: This seemed to be true in New York. I don't know how true it was in other places.

HP: Well, it varies.

RG: Yes, because I think it does vary on a regional basis.

HP: Well, even in states it varies because there aren't that many artists.

RG: Yes.

HP: New York had a large group of artists, but other states got involved in the manufacture of furniture, or toys, or educational things as in Michigan or in Wisconsin. You know this was tailor-made to fit the local political setup apart -- it wasn't so here because there were a lot of artists, and they did organize and they did, you know, take positions, sort of wrinkled the atmosphere, which is good, I think.

RG: Also, it was interesting the way the artists varied in their personalities. For instance, the division which was really the most comical was the Index of Design.

HP: Oh, was it?

RG: And, you know, it was kind of fuddy-duddy, you know, with a bunch of little old ladies, the china painters.

HP: Yes.

RG: And they did some fantastic rendering. Have you ever seen any of it?

HP: Incredible!

RG: Incredible stuff!

HP: Yes. And nameless. You don't even know who did it.

RG: And you don't even know, and they themselves were sort of nameless, and they were very conservative-looking, you know, they'd wear hats. And they didn't, they weren't particularly interested, they didn't particularly belong to the Artists Union. They were quite out of things. They had very little to do with the rest of the project. It was as if they were in another --

HP: Another world, yes.

RG: Another world, yes.

HP: Yes. But, you know, I guess the technique or the requirements that are necessary for rendering are far different than being creative. They must be. And while some people could render and do this beautifully, they are nameless. And yet some of the things are really marvelous.

RG: Marvelous really.

HP: Incredible.

RG: Yes.

HP: And yet they're nameless. Whereas the exciting people, the people that you can't put into a mold, in a sense, while they enjoyed some continuity of opportunity, income, and so on, nonetheless rebelled against this very thing that sustains them. That's good ultimately. Well, the whole thing got complicated. You would expect artists to be first on the list condemning Hitler and Mussolini, and therefore, you know, taking a position and a stand, you know, sensitive to new ideas coming up over the landscape.

RG: I think the first sit-in strike in New York was the artists.

HP: Yes.

RG: The artists before the teachers, I think.

HP: Was it?

RG: I think so. Wasn't it the arrest of the 219?

HP: Oh yes.

RG: Yes. 219 artists.

HP: They just invaded the --

RG: I was one of those, yes.

HP: Wasn't that the time they kept Harold Stein in his office all night? Wasn't that it?

RG: Yes.

HP: Yes. Well, all right. This shows interest. Action is a function of interest.

RG: But, you know, it was so antic the whole thing, you know, I mean it was like a big joke, and the kind of attitude -- the attitude didn't continue, but it was -- there was a kind of gaiety, actually, in the beginning that everybody had, but they certainly didn't have it afterward.

HP: Yes. I could see that kind of pall after a while. I don't suppose there's really any answer to it at the time. Well, this is perhaps one of the reasons why there are so many views as to what really happened, or what it all adds up to.

RG: I really think that there has to be, in order for us to have any kind of cultural face, cultural program, I think there has to be some kind of subsidy.

HP: Yes.

RG: But how to do it, I wouldn't know. Although now -- which certainly wasn't true during my day -- there are Tiffany's, there are all kinds of -- there are Fulbrights, and there are all kinds of scholarships and fellowships that some of the young, more gifted ones can get that couldn't get. In my day, there was nothing. Guggenheim, yes.

HP: Yes. Yes.

RG: But to get a Guggenheim, you had to be a pretty developed artist.

HP: You had to have quote promises unquote, whatever that meant.

RG: Yes. But more than that you had to sort of go down --

HP: Yes.

RG: -- but there wasn't anything else around during that time, there was absolutely nothing.

HP: But haven't, you know, the college art departments grown too, which put a different cast on it?

RG: Yes.

HP: With their teaching positions which are --

RG: Yes. This is a subject in itself, yes.

HP: Yes. Which didn't obtain in the 30's at all.

RG: Nothing. Absolutely nothing. As a matter of fact, the first time, I think it was the University of Iowa that hired the first artist-in-residence and which meant that he didn't have to be a college graduate, and I think that was Emil Ganso.

HP: Yes.

RG: And that was the first time that that ever happened or there was any kind of breakthrough in that direction because the people who taught were of a completely different caliber than the ones who functioned. And then, the University of Iowa, and Illinois and so forth and so on decided that they wanted to get artists from 57th

Street which was then the boulevard of broken dreams. But, that in a sense has stopped, too, because now I gather -- I don't know -- that Iowa will get the graduates of Illinois and so on and so on, and the whole thing will become very incestuous, and then people just study art, and the security blanket is teaching.

HP: Right. Yes.

RG: And that's no good either.

HP: No.

RG: No. No, it's no good. It does something to them. It's just no good.

HP: Well, you faced the prospect in the 30's, as many did, whether an artist could find a comfortable niche in an industrial society, you know, as a creative artist only to discover in part certainly that Mrs. Murphy and the salesman control design.

RG: Mmhmm.

HP: Which may be creative in a sense, but it's not, you know, in keeping with the artistic --

RG: I have worked I think in practically every one of the allied, practically every one, I even did designs -- at one time I was very broke -- Mexican furniture, I did Mexican designs, I was supposed to have, you know, prepared . . .

HP: Yes.

RG: I even designed shoes. This was when I was still in high school. One summer I had a job for a while; I stenciled picture postcards; I was in advertising; I worked in a sign painter's place; I even did sign painting; I did a display mural; and I did some commercial murals. I did Roger Kent stores, the men's stores.

HP: Mmhmm.

RG: I did some of those. I did do advertising. Practically every field you can think of. I illustrated a couple of books. I illustrated Crown and Punch, I illustrated History of the Jews in America.

HP: That's where I bumped into you.

RG: Where was that? Crown and Punch?

HP: No, no. History of the Jews in America.

RG: It's not a very good job. That was a real for me, you know, a real hack job. The boy -- I got paid nicely, but it was a nuisance. It's not the kind of thing I wanted to do. And practically -- really, it's true -- practically everything, every one of the -- everything -- teaching, I did some teaching. I do some teaching now, I teach at the New School. And that's the least of the evils. You see, this is another thing, all these -- this is one year -- we mentioned people, you know, like Tony Velonis or He what's his name? If you get too good at something, I think it, in a sense, it would become a kind of trap. And that's the end of all, it's the end of doing any kind of creative work any more.

HP: That seems to be the conclusion, that, you know, the seeds of frustration are in the success that one obtains.

RG: Yes.

HP: You know, you wouldn't necessarily think that, but if you have a deeper urge, and to find that you're being successful, and you're being confined in what you can do in order to -- what is it? They have ovens up there which they have to feed, that's all, they become great oven-feeders, you know. Well, all right, so it puts groceries on the table. You know you can justify it in those terms.

RG: Yes.

HP: But in every other respect, it's less than satisfying from an aesthetic point of view because they feel -- what is it? -- I think they both fear that they may have suffered a psychic death. That's terrible, probably the worst thing that can happen, the worst disease they can have.

RG: Yes.

HP: That is, to have nothing to say. Or to feel one has nothing to say, because one is out of touch. How can you

be out of touch seven miles away from New York City? It's incredible, isn't it, that they would say this?

RG:: But then I wonder, you know, and this is a rather cynical attitude, I just wonder whether they ever did have anything to say.

HP:: Well now, that's up for grabs. At least they have the sense of wanting to wrestle with something to say and maybe that's all anyone ultimately has is restlessness to say something.

RG:: Yes.

HP:: Whether it ever comes up, this is it, I hope not, because that's the end, isn't it? -- when you can look at it and say, "Well, this is it." That is really the end, you have nothing more to say.

RG:: Yes. Yes. Except, you know, the art world is such a damn jungle, and there are so many things that have happened in it, and sometimes it really in a sense is like the survival of the fittest. The ones that have ended up by still painting and still exhibiting and so forth and so on have to have a kind of a toughness. And a lot of the others -- everyone has their excuses. With women, well, they say, "I got married," you know, and so on and so on.

HP:: Yes.

RG:: With men, "Well, I got married and had to..." you know, "make a living," and so forth and so on. There were always, always, always excuses.

HP:: Jobs and babies.

RG:: Jobs and babies, yes.

HP:: Right. Or do you want to belong to the club, or don't you?

RG:: Yes.

HP:: Yes.

RG:: And then everybody finds all kinds of very fancy excuses also like, oh, "It's anachronistic" -- is that the word?

HP:: What --

RG:: You know, the whole business of easel painting is -- what is the word I'm looking for -- the whole business of easel painting is nonsense because. . . . I mean architects, for instance, I hear architects saying, "Now why do you want to do easel painting? If I'm going to take the trouble of designing a wall that's, you know, this proportion and that proportion, I'm not going to have an easel painter come along and punch a hole in that wall," you know - "anachronistic," is that the word?

HP:: Anachronistic, yes.

RG:: And that's another thing, you know, that in a sense sort of stopped. I think that the Guggenheim Museum is a very good example of what I mean -- anti-painting.

HP:: Yes. But this, you know, in the early WPA days, the finding of wall space was, you know, they toured the whole town, and they got this, and they got that just for purposes of --

RG:: Yes.

HP:: But then the impulse was different, I think, because they had people who wanted to put in work on something, something which they wanted to do most of all -- paint. And this was an opportunity wholly sub As an educational gambit, it didn't seem to take. That is, architects don't think necessarily in terms of paintings on the wall. They don't.

RG:: No, they don't. They resent it, they compete with it, yes.

HP:: Right. And they're purists in their view.

RG:: Yes.

HP:: So that the kind of, you know, decoration of public buildings -- whatever that was -- someone said that the 30's in effect were simply writing a period to a paragraph in American art rather than a new, exciting approach. I

don't know. You have to find it individually again, as you did. Stuart Davis was unaffected by it, you know. He was already formed what he was going to do even if he strolled around the streets with papers under his arm and attended countless meetings which it didn't affect what it is he wanted to paint anyway. Or didn't seem to. Because he was up to it into the time, up to his ears, you know --

RG: Yes.

HP: I don't know why necessarily, but there he was as the stage required. And others were affected differently, you know. There's richness in variety, too. There's no real answer to wherein, or where support, subsidy should leave off to preserve that nagging sense, that inner sense of not merely being able to do something but having something that you want to do. It may be two different things, I don't know. I'm just a critic on the sidelines.

RG: Yes.

HP: But it intrigues me because -- it has for some time -- because with the more creative people it's really a rough problem, as you point out, the youngsters today, there's been relatively no change from modern art in the 20's, modern American artists in the 20's who were also washing dishes, you know, odd jobs galore to the new ones that are coming on the scene today.

RG: Yes. You see, the big problem is, or the story is that practically -- and this is true not only in America, but I think it's always been true that most of the artists really contrary to what people think come out of the middle class. And usually the classical position that the young artist if he's talented and if his family has confidence in him is that the family subsidizes him for a while after he gets out of art school. And if a kid comes out of a working class environment, or the kid is poor, or if the family wants to have nothing to do with him, then they really are in a tough way.

HP: Sure.

RG: We know a boy like that now whose family doesn't want him to be an artist and so forth and so on and are doing everything to discourage him. So he works as a waiter, and he has to, you know, try and figure out a way of finding a way of painting, and I don't know, he may break under it, I don't know whether he'll make it or not. But artists really come from middle class families. Very, very rarely do you see artists that come from poor families.

HP: Mmm. That is that make some --

RG: This is true of writers also.

HP: Yes, I think so. Yes. That is, there's at least that basis which allows for no compromise for a while, that sustaining support.

RG: That's right.

HP: Yes.

RG: There's a period between, you know - usually what Papa -- you know what Papa usually does is the usual two years -- "I will give you two years, and you can prove yourself," you know this kind of thing, which is nonsense, but at least it's two years more.

HP: Yes.

RG: And maybe something can happen.

HP: Yes.

RG: But during the depression and during the 30's inasmuch as everybody was poor including middle class families, then --

HP: Yes. So far as art was concerned, it was really a classless bit.

RG: Yes. That's right.

HP: Yes. Because I -- and then of course, it allowed for wider acquaintanceship within the art fraternity certainly, I mean with a George Biddle who, you know, shares a platform with a Stuart Davis, although Stuart Davis himself, I guess, his family was not disinterested in his existence in the 20's.

RG: He went to Paris. Who subsidized him? I don't know.

HP: The Whitney Museum, I think.

RG: Did they -- yes?

HP: Yes.

RG: Mrs. Whitney? I didn't know --

HP: Mrs. Force, I think.

RG: Mrs. Force then?

HP: Yes. But, you know, while times were tough they weren't so tough that a -- you know -- they weren't easy.

RG: Well, you see it was a little easier on some of the ones that were already established.

HP: Yes.

RG: For instance, like Kuniyoshi was already, he was -- when he got on the project he got on the non-relief list. And I don't know whether Kuniyoshi was teaching at the League then, or I think he may have been, but he was doing nicely.

HP: Yes.

RG: And the same thing was true of Raphael Soyer. I don't think that Raphael had to get on home relief or anything like that. It was the kids of my age that had a tough time, and this is the kind of kids I'm talking about now.

HP: Yes.

RG: You know the 20-year olds, and 21-year olds, we had a rough time.

HP: Yes.

RG: Because we had absolutely no reputation and we had no -- all we had was art school and that was it -- nothing, you know -- with nobody particularly interested whether you lived or died or anything.

HP: Yes. And your own interest in learning a trade, something to market.

RG: Yes.

HP: Which had nothing to do with creativity.

RG: No.

HP: Well, I can't think of anything else we ought to tear apart. Can you?

RG: No.

HP: Let me throw some names of people at you. You may know where they are. END OF INTERVIEW