



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview of Hansel Hagel, 1964
Oct. 8

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Hansel Hagel on October 8, 1964. The interview took place in Santa Rosa, California, and was conducted by Mary McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

OCTOBER 8, 1964

MARY MCCHESENEY: First I'd like to ask you Hansel, where were you born and what year?

HANSEL HAGEL: I was born in 1909 in Germany. Near Stuttgart in Western Germany.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where did you get your training as a photographer?

HANSEL HAGEL: By doing it. I didn't go to any photography school or to any school that I was to take photographs.

MARY MCCHESENEY: When did you begin doing that?

HANSEL HAGEL: Oh, I can't remember. I guess I was a child, way back.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You were still in Germany?

HANSEL HAGEL: Oh, yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: When you have your photographs printed professionally, (I've seen some in Time Magazine) you use your maiden name, Mieth.

HANSEL HAGEL: Yes, I use that because that's when I started before I was married and to un-complicate things I just kept it.

MARY MCCHESENEY: So, you were already a photographer before you came to the United States?

HANSEL HAGEL: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What year did you come here?

HANSEL HAGEL: 1931.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How did you first come in contact with any of the government sponsored projects?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, I guess we were broke, didn't have a job and I applied for a job with the W.P.A. and got on the Sewing Project and I kept sitting on the Sewing Project for God knows how long. I guess I would have been there all the time if ... well ...

MARY MCCHESENEY: What year was that?

HANSEL HAGEL: Gee, I don't know the year.

MARY MCCHESENEY: '37? '38?

HANSEL HAGEL: No, no much earlier than that. 1935, '36 or '34, I don't know.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was this in San Francisco?

HANSEL HAGEL: In San Francisco.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What did you do on the Sewing Project?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, we did hand sewing. All kinds of things that took stitches and stitches. I think a machine could have done it. Like the men who pushed wheelbarrows and we made stitches.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What kind of clothing did you turn out is what I meant to ask.

HANSEL HAGEL: I don't even know anymore, I guess, anything from towels and diapers or aprons and war clothes, just anything that was useful or wasn't useful, just to keep you busy.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was on the W.P.A.?

HANSEL HAGEL: Yes. Then somebody told me, well, if you are doing photography, why don't you apply to the art project? We had been making pictures on our own of conditions in Chinatown. I had a Chinese friend. Some of the girls and women on the sewing project were Negroes, some were Puerto Ricans, some were Chinese, some were Japanese. So, I was taking pictures of the conditions of the Negro parts of town and Chinatown. Chinatown really was the worst. TB was rampant. Ten or fifteen people sleeping in one tiny room, sleeping in relays. Some slept at night. Others slept while others go look for work and others kept going out in the open, sitting around, and the next relay slept. So, we photographed these things. These women working on the project took me along to their homes. We worked on the waterfront photographing the strike.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was that the 1934 general strike?

HANSEL HAGEL: Yeah. '34 and '36. It must have been around that time that I approached the Art Project. Anyhow, I had friends who liked these photographs. I mounted them and brought them to the Art Project in a nice folio. They told me to leave them there and a few days later I came back and I ran into a barbed wire of ridicule. That's not art, that's social conditions. That's literary, story telling. Everything but art and we cannot use anybody with an outlook like that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who were these people who told you that?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, by the time I came back to get the answer there was quite a bunch of people there that were quite enraged about what I was doing. I think the spokesman of them, as I remember, was a man called Bates.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Bates? That's a new name to me.

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, he seems to have done the hiring of photographers on the Art Project as I remember.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh.

HANSEL HAGEL: And there were some artists and I really don't know all the ... ?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: What do you mean some artists?

HANSEL HAGEL: I mean some painters.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who had to make a decision about whether you'd go on the Art Project?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, who didn't have to exactly make a decision but, I guess, they just put in their .05 worth of what was art and what wasn't art, that's all. They thought they were connoisseurs of art.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Could that be somebody like Gaskin? Or ...

HANSEL HAGEL: Gaskin, that's right. That's the name. He was there and ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Allen?

HANSEL HAGEL: Allen was there. I don't know if Danysh was there. Anyhow, I was rejected with flying colors. So, I picked up and went again into my Sewing Project and I stayed until somebody else told me, "My God you have to try and get acquainted with some artists with pull and they will get you in." But I didn't like pull. I never did like pull and I never like to get in through somebody else. I always wanted to get in through my own work and my own efforts. I don't know how word came to me. I think the supervisor of one of the Sewing Projects told me that there was a Recreation Project that doesn't have any photography section but I just as well look into that because with the work I'm doing, I just shouldn't stay in the Sewing Project. So, I again packed up my folio and went to see Morris. What was his name? Morris Mendell. He was head of the Recreation Project.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And he was head of the Recreation Department in San Francisco?

HANSEL HAGEL: Yeah. Well, I put my work before him and he practically fell around my neck. He said, "I never have seen anything like it. It is just what we are needing. We are going to open up a photograph section in opposition to the art project." And so we did. He said, "You set it up and you tell me whom you need, how many photographers and so on." So, we had in a short time an art project going.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have a headquarters? Did you have a building where you worked?

HANSEL HAGEL: Headquarters, I think it was on Harrison Street in the Mission District. We photographed anything we wanted to photograph. The recreation idea was just kind of a name. We went down and photographed youth that had nowhere to go, that were lost. We photographed them on the freight trains. We photographed playgrounds. We photographed children in sub-standard playgrounds which later on got appropriations to get better playgrounds. We went all over the city and wherever the playgrounds were poorest, there we would photograph. We did the youth that came to San Francisco. We did the soup kitchens. We did architecture over at Hunters Point, the old architecture and we practically could do anything we wanted. Evidently, it didn't do any harm. Nobody was hurt by it. As a matter of fact, some of the film did eventually get used. Some for the playgrounds did get made bigger and had more facilities for the children. I don't know if some of the photographs helped to bring it about but I don't think they were indifferent to them.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have exhibitions of your photographs?

HANSEL HAGEL: We had exhibitions and we had some in various papers. We got quite a bit of exposure.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where would you have the exhibitions? At your headquarters?

HANSEL HAGEL: At the headquarters and at the various playgrounds and at the international houses in San Francisco. But mainly on the various playgrounds and I think ... I forget now but they called us whenever they wanted an exhibition. Anyhow, we felt that we were doing something and it made us feel good and we had a very good feeling amongst the people that were doing it.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who were some of the people working with you? Do you remember some of their names?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, I only remember two off hand. One of the most active ones was Leonard Stark who is now a photographer in New York and the other one who did some shooting but a great deal of dark room work, Lolli Dobbs. I think that was her married name at the time. I don't know what her name is now.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have a dark room there at the headquarters?

HANSEL HAGEL: We had a dark room at headquarters. We got all the supplies we needed. We just wrote out requisitions. We had a real active time of it.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did they supply your camera too?

HANSEL HAGEL: No, we had our own cameras.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How did you actually work? Did you go there every day to the headquarters? Or, did you just go out on your own?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, we appeared at least once a day at headquarters. But it wasn't necessary because we'd meet out a week's work among the people there. We weren't many. I think there were about a half a dozen of us photographers. We usually meet out the work -- who goes where and does what and then we met at headquarters with our finished work or with our exposed film. Then we usually developed and printed them at headquarters.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Altogether it was a cooperative venture?

HANSEL HAGEL: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How long did this project continue?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, the project most likely continued much longer than I stayed there because from there I went on Time and Life magazine from the project. So, moving away from San Francisco, I don't know how long the project actually continued.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What year was it when you left?

HANSEL HAGEL: 1937, I think.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, you were on the Recreation Photography Project for a year or more?

HANSEL HAGEL: I think, it was better than two years, a year and a half or two years.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What were some of the things you photographed yourself especially? I was wondering if you ever had a series of your things put in book form?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Or didn't they print up books?

HANSEL HAGEL: The kids on the road was a series. Some young boys, homeless people, that came to San Francisco, stayed there for a while, then went on again. Some by foot, some by freight train, by various means, and we followed them around....down the valley, up to Sacramento and wherever they went. We didn't go out of the state. We mainly showed them around San Francisco and how they were spending their time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: But, you did go out of San Francisco to the outlying areas?

HANSEL HAGEL: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you photograph any of the migrant worker camps or was it too early for that? They were Hoovervilles then, weren't they?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, we didn't actually do the migrant worker camps because that was outside of our absolute jurisdiction. It was mainly what happened in San Francisco and whatever went out of San Francisco. We did some of the employment agencies for migratory workers and we did go out a few times as far as Stockton or Marysville but we mainly were concerned with children and with young people, what happened to them.

MARY MCCHESENEY: It is very curious to me that the art project, that the photography department of the art project, wouldn't be interested in this kind of work since it seems so important, really, looking back on it. What were they doing? What were they engaged in doing?

HANSEL HAGEL: I really don't know. But the photography end of the Art Project, I think they made beautiful photographs.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Then they weren't doing any documentary work at all?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, they might have been I really don't know. Because I think I was mad and I disassociated myself completely. I really was busy. I didn't have any time to see what they were doing. I think a great deal was ... (of what the artist was doing, didn't they?)

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Not that I know of. You mean just photographing paintings?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Maybe the murals, they might have done that.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They did work for these guides, you know, the W.P.A. guides.

HANSEL HAGEL: No, I'm sure they worked all right. I know one photographer, Mr. Abbenseth who does beautiful photographs, who did very beautiful photographs on the project, but I don't know about the others.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You didn't have very much contact with them?

HANSEL HAGEL: None whatsoever.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have any contact with people from other parts of the United States who were working as photographers on the project? I was curious about whether people from New York ever came out who were photographing.

HANSEL HAGEL: No, we did not have connection anyhow with other photographers.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was any of your work sent from San Francisco to other areas to be exhibited?

HANSEL HAGEL: It must have from what we hear but I wouldn't know. I didn't go anywhere else. Except to the Valley and up to Sacramento but I don't know if it went out of the state.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You mentioned that some of the photographs that you did on the recreation project were used by the local newspapers.

HANSEL HAGEL: The Chronicle at the time and I think the News.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were you paid for those? Or, how was it done? What kind of arrangement did you make with the newspaper?

HANSEL HAGEL: That wasn't done individually. That was done through the project, or through the city, since it was a city project. None of the photographers had anything to do with giving anything to the newspapers or selling anything.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How much were you paid on this project? Do you remember?

HANSEL HAGEL: \$90 per month, I think. I ended up with \$90. On the Sewing Project, I got sixty and I think I started at sixty and eventually got up to \$90, if I am not mistaken. I think on the project they made me a supervisor or anyhow they asked me to start the project and I didn't want any title so I know I got \$90 or whatever it was.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What about starting the project? Did that mean you had to organize getting all the equipment for the headquarters?

HANSEL HAGEL: I had to organize the dark room and whatever equipment we needed and make requisitions for film and paper and small things - lens shades and filters and so on. We got those but the cameras and larger equipment like tripods and so on, we had to have our own.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you keep the completed photographs on file there in your headquarters?

HANSEL HAGEL: Yah. They had them there and I don't know what eventually happened to them. I know that Mr. Mendell went on from this project, I think he went onto the Youth Project. I think they made him regional director or something of the Youth Project. anyhow, he didn't lose by opening the Photographic Project.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Didn't they at the Fair (I may be mistaken) but I was under the impression that in the Federal Building, particularly they had tremendous blow-ups of some of the photographs.

HANSEL HAGEL: I don't know. I wasn't here then. We were in New York and I don't know what they had done.

MARY MCCHESENEY: When you went to New York, you didn't have any connection with W.P.A.?

HANSEL HAGEL: No.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What are your general impressions of government sponsorship of that kind of activity? Do you think it was a good thing?

HANSEL HAGEL: Oh yes! Definitely, because without the government sponsorship, you wouldn't have had a job at the time. We lived in a tent. We were traveling around doing migratory labor and ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Both of you?

HANSEL HAGEL: Yes. And only through W.P.A. could we stay in one town and rent a little place for \$8.25 per month but it was a place, one or two rooms, and we put a tent on top of the roof and ...

OTTO HAGEL: I think Mary means the quality of the work produced. Was that what you meant?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, the results were spotty like even in private industry but I think everybody learned and did his best.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you train any photographers on the project? Or were they already trained?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, they all were photographers but we had meetings and discussions and criticism and certainly you learn, everybody learns.

OTTO HAGEL: We worked out the approach.

HANSEL HAGEL: We worked out the approach and we worked out ... well, we talked about our feelings, talked of what we were doing.

OTTO HAGEL: This was before the appearance of the big magazines, Life was not in existence then. And some of the method of their journalism was developed during that time.

HANSEL HAGEL: As a matter of fact, through the pictures done on the project, Life Magazine came for us. They wanted us on their staff. I did not ask. They came to us. So, it must have sufficiently interested them, the approach to a story and to a situation.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where had they seen your photographs?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, most likely in the papers. Or at exhibitions, I don't know.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They may have seen some stuff back East. I know a lot of watercolors and paintings and stuff, you know, traveled all over the country and one of the artists we interviewed said when he was back East and in one of these big buildings in Washington, he saw his own works hanging. So, I imagine they would have used photographs wherever they could.

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, they must have used them. Anyhow, the man that they had on the West Coast ...

OTTO HAGEL: Who is that?

HANSEL HAGEL: The old manager of Life Magazine when they started out on the West Coast. He asked if he could see the pictures taken during that time and on the strength of that, he asked if I would join the staff.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were you allowed to keep prints of the photographs that you did on the project? Did they have any regulations about that?

HANSEL HAGEL: They all belonged to the project except on your own time you could take photographs and make something of it and kept some. I have maybe a dozen negatives, that's all. We didn't want many of them but ...

MARY MCCHESENEY: I wondered because on the lithography project they would print a series of lithographs and the artists were allowed to keep three copies for their own use.

HANSEL HAGEL: We had a very loose arrangement.

OTTO HAGEL: I think you could have kept them.

HANSEL HAGEL: I think you could have kept many more, except we took so many thousands and thousands of photographs and you plainly didn't want to keep them and if you had something that really interested you, you just made a shot with a second camera, something that you wanted to keep a record of for yourself.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, it is not like turning out lithographs.

HANSEL HAGEL: No.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You turn out 20 lithographs and they leave you three, but you could take 500 photographs on one field trip.

OTTO HAGEL: We used the dualistic approach. I mean, to get broad coverage and later on edit out the important things. I mean, the same method used now. I feel this was the essential difference between the project Hansel worked on and the Art Project. The art project was always for producing one photograph.

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, if you were in the art project, you wanted to make a master piece of a photograph. To us, masterpieces didn't mean very much. What we wanted more was human emotion in situations and conditions.

OTTO HAGEL: A reflection of life.

HANSEL HAGEL: But it had to be also a good photograph. A masterpiece? Fine! If it wasn't a masterpiece, nobody cried. We tried to do as good as we possibly could. Only people meant more to us and the conditions they were in meant more to us than still life and plain masterpieces.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Did you make any attempt to get on the project, Otto?

OTTO HAGEL: No. I was working as a house painter, window washer and things like that. I was a free spirit. Ha ha.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You don't recall whether any of these photographs were used as illustrations in any publications?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I imagine some of them were.

HANSEL HAGEL: Yes.

OTTO HAGEL: They may well have been. We never kept track.

HANSEL HAGEL: Some of them we'd run in Life magazine and some ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I mean in federal art publications.

HANSEL HAGEL: Oh ... this I don't know. I've never visited any federal projects because I always kept my nose to the grindstone all the time.

OTTO HAGEL: In a journalistic fashion, you always work for the next job. When you are done, the job is forgotten.

HANSEL HAGEL: See, when you are finished with one story, you have your nose in another story that's in your mind and you don't care what happens to work you have done, what is behind you. It is the same with a magazine. Many times I don't give a darn if it gets printed or not, if I did a story to my satisfaction. And more than satisfaction, so that it does something to you, you feel that, "I loved to do that and I did it good, then you don't care what happens to it." Naturally you like to see it but it doesn't get printed, well ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: It doesn't break your heart but you do kind of like to see it in print?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well ...

OTTO HAGEL: Yes, you work for publication in that sense. I mean, if you are working and it doesn't make the grade for some reason or another, you forget about it. You don't worry.

HANSEL HAGEL: Many times a story does not get printed ... not because you did a poor job but because something else happened that puts it off til later. It may be scheduled for a few weeks from now and then something else happens, like somebody murders somebody or some catastrophe happens and your story just blows over. You may never get it printed.

OTTO HAGEL: You're talking now about magazines

HANSEL HAGEL: About magazines, yeah.

OTTO HAGEL: And the Art Project was the same?

HANSEL HAGEL: The Art Project ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That was no different from the Easel Project.

OTTO HAGEL: In a sense the Recreation Project was a small FSA Project. It was used on a local level to show what was going on among the young, among the unemployed and to use this method to influence legislature, local politicians and whatnot on improved conditions for that.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: FSA.

OTTO HAGEL: Farm Security Administration.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh, I see.

OTTO HAGEL: That was Roy Stryker's project. That became the arm of the New Deal to bring ...

RH Well, also the local San Francisco supervisors had meetings with photographs in the supervisors chambers. I remember many a times we showed recreation places with poor facilities, or one good example and one bad example, and then the supervisors of the Recreation Department were called in and they were asked what they would like and what they objected to. So, it was to regulate and to build up cities facilities if possible.

OTTO HAGEL: Photographs are hard to contradict when presented as evidence whereas words can always be brushed aside but the photograph is graphic and it pretty well substantiates...and this is what these photographs were used for.

HANSEL HAGEL: Then when we had these young people without places to go and we showed them in the freight yard, begging food and so on, I think there were efforts made so that they did get hot meals somewhere and even ... if it meant through missions, Catholic missions or through the Salvation Army. I think some effort was made to get food through the city soup kitchens. Anyhow, there was an attempt made though the photographs, through the show of the photographs to help ... those completely without help before.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have any direct contact with this man who headed the Farm Security Administration at this time?

HANSEL HAGEL: Roy Stryker? No, I never had any contact with him.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You didn't do any project or work for him?

HANSEL HAGEL: No.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were you ever assigned any specific projects to do?

HANSEL HAGEL: No. We talked it over with Mr. Mendell but he trusted us to go mainly ahead on our own. We had meetings with the district committees of the - I don't know ... not precincts, but school districts. We asked them what their situation was and what they would like to have changed, what they objected to in their set up. Some places were very good and some places were absolutely failing. We tried to bring the failing ones up to the ones that were better ... The schools and preschool age, kindergarten and preschool districts were in on that. Not just with playground but with kids in school and out of school, what they do after school.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were conditions very bad in San Francisco then?

HANSEL HAGEL: In some districts, very bad. Fillmore. Chinatown, I think was one of the poorest and North Beach was very poor. Out Mission Street was a very poor part and South San Francisco, the South Mission District, had some very poor parts, especially in the industrial sections. San Francisco had spots that were very, very poor.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you ever photograph any of the W.P.A. projects, the working projects? Labor doing chores or jobs.

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, I did but not as the project assignment. We did it on our own.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What kinds of things were they doing?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, mostly pushing around wheelbarrows and hacking up the ground and

OTTO HAGEL: The machines were lying idle and the men were pushing wheelbarrows. It looked like Egypt. Hundreds and hundreds of men pushing wheelbarrows and on the other side the idle steam shovel. It provided work.

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, it was too keep up the morale because if you accept money without doing work it is bad for the morale because you wouldn't do anything else with your free time. So it was much better to push around a big wheelbarrow and empty it down a big hole and then have someone dig up the hole again.

OTTO HAGEL: They were leveling it out or something like that for a building. It was not idle. It was useful work.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Speaking of that, Shirley Stascher or Shirley Triest, I don't know whether you know her, but she said when she first got on the project, Art Project, in '34 I believe, she went out to a park and she said that it was the most amazing thing you've ever seen in your life. She assumed they were bankers or something because they were wearing this formal attire (probably the only thing they had left) pushing wheelbarrows and using spades.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was the very beginning, 1933 when they were first starting the different projects around.

OTTO HAGEL: Well, there were many attempts made to ridicule the project but they were a lifesaver.

HANSEL HAGEL: Oh, my gosh, I don't mean to ridicule it. It was a matter of survival, but ...

OTTO HAGEL: It only looks ridiculous in the light of our civilization, of our technology. It is true...I mean the mere physical effort, mere being there did something for the people.

HANSEL HAGEL: And they needed the money anyhow.

OTTO HAGEL: He was working around and not standing around. He was doing something and the doing of something was the most important thing. If man is not doing anything, man decays.

HANSEL HAGEL: But, there is another way to look at it too. If man does work that is not essential, that a machine could do better, and he would have other work that is more to his ability...

OTTO HAGEL: Who is contradicting it?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, I don't know who is contradicting it but there is a contradiction.

MARY MCCHESENEY: There were many contradictions on many different levels during that period. I was going to ask you, what was going on in photography aside from the project at that time? Who were the photographers working? Were there any around and what were they doing? Do you know any of them?

HANSEL HAGEL: Yes. There were two main trends in photography. There were the purists or the F64 group of which Edward Weston was the father and there was coming into existence the so called candid photography or small camera action photography which means under all light conditions, use your camera right open, if necessary in poor light and catch what is going on and

don't stop down to F64 and have an image that is pure and clear to the enth degree. Those two schools worked, not exactly side by side, but they existed at the same time and even some of the people that did very good at small camera work also kind of were in love with art or the F64 type of work, people like Stackpole, for instance.

OTTO HAGEL: Well, the other one was the accepted thing, the camera with infinite sharpness, infinite definition that was, at that time, the thing. The new one was coming and overthrowing it. F64 presupposed a camera and a tripod, very well composed, composed down to the last degree. And one photograph included all that you wanted to say. And it left life out most of the time, the exposure was long and so if any life object was in, it was maybe a cow, but not a human being.

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, it was very beautiful, the work that was produced under

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Anything that didn't move very much?

HANSEL HAGEL: Yes. But there is the question, are things that move better than things that are still?

OTTO HAGEL: The other, the new school which came into popularity with the Lica, the 35mm camera, and which could catch things spontaneous, candid, a section of life. And this was pushing the tripod aside. Film was slow at the time. It was difficult to do these things and everybody was trying to push the frontier a little farther back and do more impossible things. Photographs in the evenings, photographs in dimly lit rooms.

HANSEL HAGEL: You try to speed up your film by artificial means.

OTTO HAGEL: But, this was the coming thing and there was this rear guard, the F64, the purists, which represented the Art Project.

HANSEL HAGEL: Which now as we talk about it, I think found a way into the Art Project and were accepted there, the F64 people, while we plainly couldn't

OTTO HAGEL: With a small camera.

HANSEL HAGEL: With a small camera and we didn't want to ask our people to pose and to stand still.

OTTO HAGEL: All the people on your project had small cameras?

HANSEL HAGEL: All the people on our project did not only have small cameras, they also had large cameras as I did too, but we did not use them as the camera. We used our cameras practically as a movie camera.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You mean by large cameras, speed graphics.

HANSEL HAGEL: Oh, 5x7, 8x10, eight boxes of camera that usually had a ground glass

OTTO HAGEL: Tripod cameras so the situation had to be around for a long time.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What kind of camera did you use yourself when you were doing the documentary work?

HANSEL HAGEL: I think I started in with a Lica, old second hand Lica, and then finally got a Contax and at my very beginning I think we had a very, very cheap little English camera which was mounted on some kind of a wooden stock which you held in the hand and just held up, shoot over head and catch things as they happened because I'm not very tall so you could hold it over your head and in the direction which everything was going on.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: It was just guess work though, wasn't it? You couldn't see.

HANSEL HAGEL: No, you cannot guess with a camera. You have to know exactly what you are getting because if you do it by guess, you cut off heads and

OTTO HAGEL: The main thing is that it goes where you yourself cannot go and you use the camera as an extension. They still do it when they work with newsreels, you see a photographer holding his camera someplace over somebody's head where he cannot get in.

HANSEL HAGEL: You put - sometimes you jump up and you see what you are getting and from that you put your camera there. This is exceptional. Anyhow, this little cheap camera was on a stock so you could do things like this with it and out of that came my second hand Lica and then a Contax and then finally Rolliflex. You saved up your few dollars to get more and more cameras until you had so many that you didn't know which one to use.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: By that time there wasn't just a few dollars you saved up to get the camera because a Contax and a few of those are expensive.

OTTO HAGEL: Well, they became tools, they were not playthings.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were they very expensive then?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well,

OTTO HAGEL: Terribly expensive in terms of the times.

HANSEL HAGEL: If you haven't got the money, they are terribly expensive. I think we paid \$90 for the second hand Lica. That was like a million dollars. We bought it from a Chinese young man

OTTO HAGEL: Whose father had sent him money to return to China and

HANSEL HAGEL: And he bought a Lica instead and then he got tired of playing Lica....

OTTO HAGEL: Then he went broke and he hocked it. Ha ha ha

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you work with light? Did you ever use lights?

HANSEL HAGEL: Oh yes, yes. We walked around loaded down like burden animals. Three or four lights and reflectors and flash bulbs and three cameras eventually.

OTTO HAGEL: In the beginning we tried to catch the thing with the light that was there whenever possible.

HANSEL HAGEL: Oh, whenever possible in the beginning you try to catch the light. As you went on, you became more and more involved. You went around on the inside like, for instance, in those Chinese small rooms. You needed light. The light was so poor sometimes. Some had a window and some didn't have a window and sometimes it had an electric light and sometimes it didn't have an

electric light and so you had to plug in somewhere from the outside and bring a cable in to light up so that you could at least open up to see what you were getting.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you think the W.P.A. period had much of an effect on your own career as a photographer? Do you think you would have gone into this kind of documentary photography otherwise?

HANSEL HAGEL: Yes, I would have gone into it regardless because we were headed that way. The pictures we had to approach the people in the project with were going that way.

OTTO HAGEL: The approach you had?

HANSEL HAGEL: No, I mean to approach the people in the project with, they were already story telling pictures of things what were going on. They were documentary, and one project looked for documentary and the other project didn't.

OTTO HAGEL: Journalistic more than documentary.

HANSEL HAGEL: Yeah, it actually was more journalistic than documentary. I would say documentary is only as things are but actually we wanted them to change and therefore we treated one thing against the other and in that way they were documentary and still not documentary. They were well, call it propaganda. They were journalistic and I think journalism is propaganda. If you are making a documentary journalism, you have a dead journalism, you have no journalism.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was Dorothea Lange out here then?

HANSEL HAGEL: Dorothea Lange was here, yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What was she doing?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, she was, at the time, still a portrait photographer and she just branched out into documentary photography and from there she got into the other things, the FSA.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who were some of the other well known photographers around?

HANSEL HAGEL: Ansel Adams.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What was he doing?

HANSEL HAGEL: Dorothea Lange? Ansel Adams was doing what he is doing.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Still doing Yosemite? Ha ha ha

HANSEL HAGEL: Well

OTTO HAGEL: That kind of thing - the parks.

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, Ansel Adams was doing very purist photography and I think he is still doing it. He is doing beautiful photography.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: How about Imogene Cunningham?

HANSEL HAGEL: Imogene was here, yes. She always was here. She lived in Berkley near Mills College ... I mean Oakland. She was married then and her husband was teaching art. He was teaching at Mills College, art, and she was photographing and I think during that time she went to New York. Was it that time? She worked up in, she did portraits and also worked at the time here and there, had an assignment for Harpers or whatever those older magazines are. And at one time, she went to New York.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were there any magazines in San Francisco where you, as photographers, worked? Were there any markets out here for you?

HANSEL HAGEL: No, no, there were the Sunday supplements and I think there was only one paper that had a Sunday supplement.

OTTO HAGEL: In those days California was a forgotten place. For a little while, yes.

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, anything West of the Hudson was ... way out West.

OTTO HAGEL: All publications centered in New York. It still does.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Did Abbenseth work on the same project that you worked on?

HANSEL HAGEL: Do, I think Abbenseth was on the Art Project.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Are you certain he was on the Art Project?

HANSEL HAGEL: I'm pretty sure. I think so

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you have any general thoughts about the W.P.A.? Anything that we haven't covered?

HANSEL HAGEL: No, I believe at the time it would have been very bad without the W.P.A. because the unemployed were pretty darn rambunctious by the time and it just couldn't go on. We needed something to funnel their feelings.

OTTO HAGEL: Let's say this, it wasn't good, it wasn't bad.

HANSEL HAGEL: Oh, my God, there is no question, it was good.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you think it might be a good idea for the government of the United States to sponsor the arts or photography again? Do you think we have any need for it again?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well ... ha ha If I look at the artists, how they make their living, I would say "God yes." Ha ha ha Ah

OTTO HAGEL: Judging by the results of what happened, I mean on the merit of W.P.A. would you say yes?

HANSEL HAGEL: I would say that if they, the government should or would sponsor a project for the artist, I would say it should be done more usefully. The artist did do a lot of work but I don't know where it all ended up eventually. Somehow it was lost or it is in cellars or it ... I don't know where it is and to me that is criminal, that the output should not be used and I'm sure many and many an artist must have put his heart in his paintings. He put himself into it. He doesn't even know where it ended up. I feel that at least the good work of it should be kept for posterity. A lot of the stuff put out, I'm

sure, was mediocre or less than mediocre ...

OTTO HAGEL: How do you judge these things?

HANSEL HAGEL: Well

OTTO HAGEL: Art is very ephemeral.

HANSEL HAGEL: Art is not ephemeral. God, we have art that is from the very beginning of thinking men.

OTTO HAGEL: Some things have survived, but a lot of it has disappeared.

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, I think the W.P.A. art has too much disappeared.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, there are a few junk dealers back in New York made a pretty good hunk of dough off of that stuff that disappeared.

HANSEL HAGEL: That I do believe.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well

HANSEL HAGEL: But how did it get in the hands of the junk dealers? When it was a government project?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Because the government dumped it. Ha ha They had auctions, I believe.

OTTO HAGEL: Let me ask a question. How would you do it if you had to do it over again? What should be changed? What could be done better? The time may come that it may be needed.

HANSEL HAGEL: Well, if the machine takes over more and more, some projects will have be started by the government. I don't think you can just lay down in five minutes which way you should do it differently.

OTTO HAGEL: No, no I mean what could be done better?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, for one thing, the relief status could be eliminated. Right off, that is the first thing you would demand.

HANSEL HAGEL: That would do.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: It was pretty shameful during a long period there. They were on your back all the time to get you off.

OTTO HAGEL: Yeah, that's right.

HANSEL HAGEL: And that you had to be completely destitute before you could get on.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Unless you went on as a supervisor or a technical person.

HANSEL HAGEL: Oh, yes. But not everybody could be a supervisor because you needed the others too.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I was going to ask you about that. Did you have any trouble getting on the W.P.A. originally? How did you go about getting on relief?

OTTO HAGEL: You swallowed your pride.

HANSEL HAGEL: You swallowed three times very, very hard and

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I didn't have any pride by that time. Ha ha I would have done anything to get on the project.

HANSEL HAGEL: And your belt was about as much tightened as you could make it and then you finally took the step and not wanting to go on relief, you asked for work.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have any difficulty because you were a naturalized citizen?

HANSEL HAGEL: I wasn't a naturalized citizen. I just had applied for my papers. I wasn't a citizen yet.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, you weren't? But, you were still able to get on the project.

HANSEL HAGEL: Yes. I came on a quota to the United States and anyone that was here legally could apply for the project.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Did you and Otto come over together?

HANSEL HAGEL: No.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Did you meet here?

HANSEL HAGEL: He was here before.

OTTO HAGEL: Oh, we knew each other.

HANSEL HAGEL: We come from the same town.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you ever have any difficulty with the social workers once you were on the project?

HANSEL HAGEL: No, not that I can recall. Not in San Francisco.

OTTO HAGEL: What about on the Sewing Project?

HANSEL HAGEL: Oh, well. I mean ... the Sewing Project was a very important project because it took in so many, many people and it funneled in practically all the females and it was a very wonderful experience, if you could get out of it. If you were stuck in it, maybe the experience wasn't so wonderful.

MARY MCCHESENEY: My mother was on it. She made more pajamas that she could count. She used to bring them home for the kids to wear. But, they were making pajamas and work clothing. They made denim things, coveralls and jackets and jeans.

HANSEL HAGEL: Yeah, that's right.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You were allowed a certain quota of these clothes and you could get surplus food. You could also get clothing made by the W.P.A. project, but you didn't make that kind of thing?

HANSEL HAGEL: Yeah, we did pajamas too and work clothes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You say that most of the work was done by hand?

HANSEL HAGEL: Yes, because there were hundreds of women in that one room and they could not ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They had machines.

HANSEL HAGEL: They only had a very, very few, maybe three or four machines there and the whole idea was to make the work last because you could sew up a pajama in half an hour while you needed practically a week to sew it by hand. It was the same as the wheelbarrows. If you had a steam shovel or a truck, you could probably dig a hole in a very short time but the idea was to make the work last.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Right. Before you turn this off you'd better announce the fact that ...

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yes, I didn't announce earlier that there were two other people present at this interview, Otto Hagel. Hansel's wife and he is also a photographer. And, Robert McChesney who was also on the W.P.A. art project.

HANSEL HAGEL: You mean Hansel's husband. Ha ha

MARY MCCHESENEY: Huh? Didn't I say that? Ha ha ha ha ha I'm very sorry Otto, believe me.

ALL: Ha ha ha ha ha

MARY MCCHESENEY: I think we should end the tape there. Have we just about covered it? Or, is there anything else?

HANSEL HAGEL: I think so. I didn't know we talked that much. I think it is much too long as it is.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, thank you very much for giving us the time for an interview.

END OF INTERVIEW

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