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**Oral history interview with David Avalos, 1988
June 16-July 5**

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Contact Information

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

Transcript

Interview

Interview with David Avalos

Conducted by Margarita Nieto

At the Southern California Research Center in San Diego, CA

June 16 & July 5, 1988

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with David Avalos on June 16 & July 5, 1988. The interview took place in San Diego, CA, and was conducted by Margarita Nieto for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[Note: This is being taped in a restaurant. There are some interruptions by waitresses and customers as they converse--Ed.]

MARGARITA NIETO: Archives of American Art, interview number one, artist David Avalos, interviewer Margarita Nieto, San Diego, California, June 16th, 1988, 12:20.

David, I'd like to start out with the preliminaries: where were you born? Something about your family life . . . ?

DAVID AVALOS: I was born in San Diego at what was then called the county Hospital in 1947 on September 12th. My mother is Maria Torres Avalos. She was born in Guadalajara, Mexico, in 1911 on June 8th. My father is Santos Urquizo Avalos, and he was born in Durango on November 1, 1911, also. [child's screaming interrupts--Ed.]

They traveled . . . my mother's family brought her to the United States as a child -- as a small infant actually. I think she probably crossed over within a couple of years after her birth, and eventually her family made its way to National City, California. My father left Mexico when he was about eight or nine years old, and his father, Gregorio Avalos, my grandfather, followed the railroads, crossed in El Paso, went to Kansas City with the railroads, then was in Arizona for a while and finally settled in National City where there was a railroad-tie curing yard.

MARGARITA NIETO: And so they ended up here about what year, would you say?

DAVID AVALOS: My mother's family was here in the teens, and my father's family would have arrived probably in the twenties.

MARGARITA NIETO: So you really are a founding family of San Diego to a degree, at least in terms of a modern city.

DAVID AVALOS: Well, we're not in San Diego in National City, but National City was founded in 1887, I believe it was, and so there wasn't very many people here. It's probably one of the oldest families in National City. My folks have been . . . my Mom's been living in the same house for like sixty years or more now. You know, they're one of the older families of National City.

MARGARITA NIETO: And you had a large family?

DAVID AVALOS: There were six children in the family, four girls and two boys.

MARGARITA NIETO: And you were toward the end?

DAVID AVALOS: I was number Let's see, there was Matilda, Paul, Monica, and then myself. I'm number four.

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you ever go to Mexico with your parents as a child?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, my mother's sister, my tia Rosie, lived in Tijuana, so I would visit them with the family on any number of occasions when I was growing up, and I still, still see her once in a while. Like we have, we saw her last year for example and we took her out to Rosarito's for some fish, tacos. And my grandfather, Papa Goyo [nickname for Gregorio Avalos--DA], lived in Tijuana for a time as well, had property there, and my father used to visit him regularly and take me along with him. so Tijuana being Mexico, I visited Mexico constantly throughout my childhood, but beyond that never ventured into the interior.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's an interesting point, though. Did you see Tijuana as Mexico or did you think of a difference? Or was it all part of the same landscape, part of the same world?

DAVID AVALOS: Well

MARGARITA NIETO: As a child . . . ?

DAVID AVALOS: No, I think my inclination in answering the question was to say first of all, "No, I've never been to Mexico; I used to go to Tijuana," so there is, there is a kind of separation, on my part, of being a difference when you talk about Mexico that Tijuana's not representative of that. There's a separation between this idea of what Mexico is and what Tijuana, what Mexico is as a myth and what Tijuana is as a reality.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: But in fact Tijuana is Mexico.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm. Now, I'd like to get back to that idea of myth and reality in a little bit, but before I do, what . . . ? You went to school in National City; for instance, the elementary school . .

DAVID AVALOS: Yes.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . . was in National City.

DAVID AVALOS: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And did you speak both languages or did you just speak English?

DAVID AVALOS: I think I might have been able to comprehend both languages until I entered school, and then once I entered school I became monolingual in English.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: Spanish was spoken in the home, but my parents were not insistent that we speak only Spanish in the home. And about the time I was eight years old, we were one of the first

people in the neighborhood to have a television set and that was another influence of the English language in the home.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hum.

DAVID AVALOS: So I've always since I can remember spoken only English. I understand Spanish in a minimal way.

MARGARITA NIETO: _____. Your. . . . As an artist, did you have any inclination toward art in elementary school, anything visual that you remember? You obviously would have a visual memory. You mentioned television, language?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, when I was in school, there was no formal art education. I just have a facility for it. People used to say that I was an artist. I used to like drawing cartoons. But I never considered myself an artist or never had ambitions of being an artist and I've never, to this day, been the type of image maker that is compulsive. And I know some artists -- and it amazes me -- they can buy a notebook and by Wednesday it's full of images. And I've never been that way. I think that when I first began considering the possibility of myself as an artist it was, I was already in my, in my twenties and lived for a time with a woman who was an artist and in fact attended graduate school at UCSD [University of California at San Diego]. At that time I was also a student at UCSD and I was involved with a student newspaper called Voz Fronteriza, which was a Chicano newspaper put out by a group that was affiliated with [Mech] in a loose kind of way. And I used to do graphics for them. I'd do cartoons. I'd do editorial cartoons and illustrations and so forth. And I was very much interested in art. I was a communication major. I received a B.A. degree in communication, but I took a number of courses in the history of film and the analysis of the image of women in film, for example, but I didn't consider myself an artist until, I would say, the early Eighties. About Eighty-three, at the encouragement of people like Tere Romo, I began making objects . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . with the idea of taking myself seriously as an art maker. I don't really have that much of a perception of myself as an artist, as though that's some sort of a lifestyle in which it's preordained that as an artist you do A, B, C, D. I'm someone that does a lot of things that I've been doing for all my life and things that I've just started doing recently, but . . .

[Interruption by waitress]

DAVID AVALOS: . . . but artmaking is just one of the things I happen to do, you know; it's one of the creative, one creative area of my life. There's other creative areas of my life. I have three children.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: I think that's more creative than anything I've been able to produce otherwise.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah. But we're sort of getting ahead of ourselves. Elementary school was what kind of an experience? Junior high, high school . . . ?

DAVID AVALOS: I went to a catholic school, and the . . . [interruption to adjust microphone] Okay, that lapse was due to a technical breakdown. We're back now.

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs) You were talking about . . . ?

DAVID AVALOS: Elementary school was not a kind of experience where I had to deal with a broken-down educational system. There was strong discipline and I think pretty sound education I received at this Catholic elementary school called St. Mary's in National City. There was a mixture of children of various backgrounds, but there wasn't as many Chicanos in the classes as you would have found at the elementary school in my neighborhood, Kimball. I think that, that . . . [sound of dishes falling] I look back on elementary school and I don't, I don't see it as a necessarily troubling or inspirational kind of a time. I was, you know, just a kid and I just went to it.

MARGARITA NIETO: The reason I ask that is because obviously you ____ UCSD and to get a degree there meant that you had to have a fairly positive relationship with education.

DAVID AVALOS: Well, I had a more positive relationship with education in elementary school than I did in high school. In elementary school, especially in the middle grades, sometimes I would get straight A's in my courses, and when I left the school in the eighth grade I was considered to be one of the top students in the school. But in high school, I was, I was not as active or as alert, I think, as I was in elementary school. I was almost semicomatose and . . . I've never gone to a high school reunion. I've never looked on my high school years with any particular amount of affection. There's a couple of people I would be interested in seeing again, a couple of friends I had in high school, but . . . I went to an all-male Catholic boy's school here in San Diego called St. Augustin, and I think that there I learned some basics. You know, I learned algebra; I learned how to diagram a sentence, I read some of the classics like Macbeth and so forth. And I was around a student body that included the sons of a number of professionals -- judges, attorneys, doctors and other kinds -- and for them it was a kind of expectation that they would go on to college. And I did. I went to college straight out of high school and flunked out the first semester at San Diego State University, so then I joined the military.

I guess in 1966, January of 1966, is when I enlisted, with the foolish idea that I would be sent to Vietnam and become part of history. Because at that time my understanding of, of those people who were creative -- such as the Norman Mailers of the world, and you read about in magazines like *Newsweek* and *Time* -- these people had all begun their artistic careers . . . There was another guy who wrote *Thin Red Line*, I think, which was another war novel. Jones, Jim Jones. And at this time it seemed to me that there was an example of Hemingway and his involvement with the Spanish War. There was this idea in my mind that to be part of the creative life of a society one had to undergo this initiation of battle. Evelyn Waugh, for example, had written a number of his novels, if my recollection is correct, based on his war experiences. That's the first thing that he began writing about. So to me it seemed that if you, to become part of history, one had to be initiated into the historical process through war, through combat. So I had this vague notion that if I was ever going to be the kind of person that was quoted, or talked about, or able to say anything insightful about this society that it was, that, you know, if there ever was an article about me in *Newsweek*, it was going to be preceded by the fact that David Avalos wrote his first novel after his experience in Vietnam or whatever.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's interesting that your models came from literature. That's very, very interesting.

DAVID AVALOS: Now that's not to say that I read all their books.

MARGARITA NIETO: No, no . . .

DAVID AVALOS: But I read *Newsweek*, you know, and I was aware that this was social currents, you know, this is what were talked about in the art section of *Newsweek* and *Time* magazine.

MARGARITA NIETO: That in order to make a commentary on it, _____ . to have, to be able to be a spokesman for one's times . . . ?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, it was never implicitly laid out in these articles that I read; it was just an inference on my part that it seemed to me more than coincidental that all people who had something worth, had something to say worth listening to, had this war background.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: So I enlisted in the Army, and I volunteered for Vietnam, and every time they asked me if I wanted to go I kept saying, yeah, I want to go, and by the time I was done with my advanced individual training -- I'd been in the service about six months by then -- I received my orders and, in typical U.S. Army fashion, I was sent to West Germany, which . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: (chuckles) My goodness!

DAVID AVALOS: . . . which I am thankful for, and I have been thankful for. My cousin enlisted not long after I did and was sent to Germany for a while and eventually volunteered to go to Vietnam and was killed there. And most of the Chicanos that I've come in contact with, in my experience, who are Vietnam veterans, have been either killed, wounded, or damaged in deep and profound ways that . . . that are there, you know, perceptibly there. So, as you say, I was fortunate not to have been sent to Vietnam.

MARGARITA NIETO: How long were you in Germany?

DAVID AVALOS: I was there for about thirty, thirty months, thirty-two months. Then I was discharged in Europe and traveled around Europe for another year and a half -- about another year and a half. I was in Greece, Italy, Germany, England, France a little bit, Spain, Morocco.

MARGARITA NIETO: What were you doing there?

DAVID AVALOS: Just traveling.

MARGARITA NIETO: Just traveling and absorbing?

DAVID AVALOS: No, living a self-indulgent life of a drug-user. You know, which got, after a while became very boring.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: It seemed to me . . . I knew I wanted to go home when I realized, well, there's got to be more than just hanging around getting high. And so I returned to the United States in May of 1970.

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you do any writing _____ at this time, or any drawing?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, I did some. I would do Basically I would do cartoons of the *Mad Magazine* variety to amuse friends.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: And there were people I encountered in my travels who used to make drawings and keep them and consider themselves artists, but

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh. When did you start cartooning?

DAVID AVALOS: Oh, when I was in grade school. You know, I would do it in, in class just on the lined paper, just to have something to do when I wasn't particularly interested in what the teacher was talking about at that time.

MARGARITA NIETO: Let's take a short break and finish eating and then we'll go back.

DAVID AVALOS: Okay.

[Interruption in taping]

MARGARITA NIETO: How long were you in Europe, David?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, both in the service and out, I guess about -- let's see -- about 50 months, over four years.

MARGARITA NIETO: Over four years. Looking back on that experience, would you say it was a rite of passage? Did it influence in any way what you're doing now? Positively or negatively?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, I think . . . One of the big things that I realized when I was over there was the, the media as a separate reality. Because when I was in the service I would see films like What's New Pussycat, and in there there's a scene in which they show East and West Berlin, and they show American GIs, and it's this surreal, this surreal scene with theatrical staging and lighting, and I looked at it and it was funny, and I realized that it didn't have anything to do with me or the people that I knew that were in the service, or it didn't have anything to do with, you know, with doing time in West Germany -- realizing that Berlin had it's own, you know, has it's own cosmopolitan apocalyptic ambience that makes it a unique place, you know, that Nuremburg, Germany, was not the same thing, but still there was that sense. And then when I started traveling around as part of the drug culture in Europe and reading about what was being said about the drug culture, it was laughable, you know, because most of what we were reading was being directed not at people that were using drugs but people that weren't, you know, about something that was alien and foreign to them, and that left a big impression on me. I went to a few museums when I was there. I went to a museum in Stockholm when they had a big show of American artists. Claes Oldenburg was there. Well, no, it wasn't a show of American art; it was a show of contemporary artists, because there was Claes Oldenburg there. Dubuffet was represented by some of his pieces. And other folks were in the exhibition; I can't remember any others in particular. But enjoyed the show. It didn't make me want to become an artist or anything, but I thought it was an interesting and enjoyable show. I think what was a big influence over there too was living in a situation where people from all over the United States were gathered together.

MARGARITA NIETO: How were you stationed? In Nuremburg? Where were you stationed? In Nuremburg?

DAVID AVALOS: Actually a little town outside of Nuremburg called Zirndorf. A real small town, but it was, you know, Nuremburg's just ten, twenty minute away. I became . . . It was interesting that I identified with blacks when I was in the service. There weren't that many Chicanos around in the unit I was in, so I identified with the blacks. I had known some when I was in Lawton, Oklahoma, receiving my training, and they had, they had shipped out to Europe with me. It was interesting to experience racism in the service in the very naked and brutal way that I hadn't really experienced in my life in National City.

MARGARITA NIETO: You mentioned Berlin. The reason I'm picking this up is because a lot of your work has to do with this conflicting reality idea, your questioning our idea of nationalism and our idea of order and _____. Did you, did being in Berlin . . . ?

DAVID AVALOS: No, I wasn't in Berlin.

MARGARITA NIETO: You weren't in Berlin?

DAVID AVALOS: No.

MARGARITA NIETO: Ever?

DAVID AVALOS: No.

MARGARITA NIETO: But the idea of the divided Germany. Did that _____?

DAVID AVALOS: Not really. I thought it was I knew that Berlin was an incredibly powerful spot geographically and also historically. You know, Kennedy had gone when I was in high school to Berlin, ["Ich Bin Ein Berliner, Ich bin ein Berliner"], and I was an avid reader about the Second World War, read *The Rise and the Fall of the Third Reich*, and fascinated by all that history and I was aware of the Berlin airlift and the importance of the city, but I didn't You know, now that I'm talking, it was like there was I didn't have a consciousness.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hum.

DAVID AVALOS: I had a conscience, because my mother was very devout and strict. She was a very devout Catholic and a very strict disciplinarian, and I had a sense of right and wrong, and I also -- which was also pretty clearly articulated -- I also had a sense of what it was to be around people who cared about you, because in my family everybody cared about everybody else. [It] was not articulated, and it was only until years later, after having been in the drug culture, that I realized that there was something in my upbringing that I hadn't found within that drug culture and that was people who cared about you in the way that your family cares about you. Not in a honey-dripping way, but in a real way where there's real concerns as well as real disagreements and annoyances and so forth. But I didn't have a consciousness, and I think that that consciousness came only with my involvement with the civil rights organization in my home town, National City, the Committee on Chicano Rights, at the real, at the real end. Now most people would agree that by 1975 the Chicano movement was running out of gas. It was dead in its tracks. I got involved with the Committee on Chicano Rights in '75 or '76, '77, '78, some stuff in the early Eighties. Didn't start working at the Centro [Cultural de la Raza--MN] till '78. So there was this anachronistic quality to what was going on in San Diego.

MARGARITA NIETO: When you came back, what _____?

DAVID AVALOS: To?

MARGARITA NIETO: The movement.

DAVID AVALOS: When I came back, I went to trade school; I started working in a shipyard, set up an apartment with a woman who was an artist and also worked at the Chicano Federation and through her I became acquainted with some of the things that were happening, you know, within that sector of the community. And then went to San Diego, transferred to UCSD. And the whole time I was at San Diego State I never took one Chicano studies course. I visited one because my

sister-in-law's brother, Rene Nunez, was teaching the course. But I didn't see him as Rene Nunez, you know, one of the

This thing's [the tape recorder--Ed.] been on this whole time?

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

DAVID AVALOS: I didn't see him as Rene Nunez the, one of the shapers and developers of the movement, you know, especially in the field of education. I saw him as someone that had always been around in my family, and so I went just to check out one of his classes. But I was never really interested in Chicano studies classes. I wasn't drawn to them. There was a sense of . . . I don't know if the word alienation is too strong, but there was a sense of, "Hey, it's not really my thing. I don't really fit in." So I transferred to UCSD, and there I met some people in some of my communications classes who invited me to a meeting, stating that they were going to start a Chicano newspaper at UCSD called Voz Fronteriza. This was in 1975. And I said, "Yeah, you know, I'll go." I thought maybe I could contribute some drawings and things, I could do that, because I had developed an interest in graphics when I was at San Diego State, just the year before I left San Diego State. So we started a newspaper, and one of the first issues of the newspaper, a guy by the name of Arnulfo Casillas from Santa Barbara went down and did a story on a police brutality incident in National City, and a young man by the name of Tato Rivera had been shot in the back by a policemen by the name of Craig Short. He'd been shot in the back by a .357 Magnum and killed, and there was immediate uprising and protest and a movement that eventually grew into an effort to recall some of the councilmen who refused to do anything about the case. Eventually the district attorney refused to the district attorney did call for an indictment, but in a preliminary hearing, a judge -- I think his name was Iredale -- declared that there was no basis for continuing with court procedures, and the guy is still with the National City Police Department. He's a lieutenant now, Craig Short. But Arnulfo came back one time and he said, "You know, we're writing about this and we're writing about that, these things that are going on in different parts of the world, like Angola. You guys should be more aware of what's going on in your own backyard." So I read his article and I decided to go down and do an interview of the leader of this organization, which at that time was called the Ad Hoc Committee on Chicano Rights, a guy by the name of Herman Baca. And one of the people that was working with him was a high school teacher by the name of Ralph Inzunza, who was my cousin's brother-in-law, my cousin Helen's brother-in-law, so I began to see people that had grown up in old town National City like myself and who were familiar to me or part of the family, related in various ways, and I felt really comfortable with the group. So after the interview I began doing volunteer work with

[Tape 1, Side B]

MARGARITA NIETO: I feel like _____ you're really feeling comfortable.

DAVID AVALOS: Um hmm. I think the thing I liked most about the organization was their sense of humor. On campus there were a number of Marxist/Leninist organizations in which you, in which there were any number of well-intentioned students who were so dour, you know, and so sanctimonious and so serious about what they were doing, you know, and this

MARGARITA NIETO: _____.

DAVID AVALOS: Hmm?

MARGARITA NIETO: Rosaura Sanchez?

DAVID AVALOS: No, it was, it was . . . I didn't have that much contact with her. It was other students.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: And it was a situation where, you know, to me, it just . . . I instinctively responded to the organization that had a sense of humor. And I began working with them more and more, and a number of things happened. I think that here is where I began to develop a sense of myself as connected in ways I had never thought of. Developed a sense of myself as connected in ways I had never thought of. Developed a sense of myself as operating within a context of history and of society, of politics and economics, of culture and of art. And I began to see that, that what we were doing in this one little town in Southern California around this one case of an individual being killed by a police officer connected us to the entire Chicano movement. It connected us to the history of Mexico. And it connected us to the black civil rights movement. It connected us to U.S. history. And it connected us to people from around the world at various times in history who were faced with these same sorts of things. And it was a tremendous feeling. It was a tremendous feeling to feel that I was truly part of history by virtue of doing something in my own home town.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: And the, the real driving force behind the committee was Herman Baca, and he had a tremendous sense of understanding when it came to the media, so that in 1977 there was an announcement by the Ku Klux Klan that, that they were going to patrol the border, and they were going to stop so-called illegal aliens at the border. And Herman . . . At that time, I had graduated from UCSD and was at Stanford in their PhD. program in communications. Herman and the committee began organizing a march to protest the announcement of the Klan and essentially to protest the immigration plan that had been put together by the Carter administration. People forget that the recent Immigration Reform and Control Act, which was passed in 1986, is essentially the same thing that Carter was proposing back in '76. So we, I left Stanford, I just dropped out of the program. I left in good standing; I'd only been there about 11 weeks. And I came back to National City to be, to participate in this, in this march, this demonstration. And the committee was just a tremendous place to apply the things I had learned in the Communications Department at UCSD, because the committee was not only dealing with local media, it was dealing with Mexican media. Herman would travel to Mexico City on occasion, gave news conferences in Tijuana. He was, there was a feature on him in the New York Times back in the Seventies. There was national television news coverage of the march and so on and so forth. And there was this tremendous, there was this tremendous intersection at the march on October 29, 1977. There was, there was an incredible cross section of the community of San Diego. There were Chicano groups, including student groups, including Jess Haro, who at that time was a councilman, the city council, the city of San Diego. There was Leon Williams, also a councilman. He's now a supervisor with the county, but at that time he was a councilman with the city of San Diego, a black man. There were representatives of the Jewish community, of unions, labor unions. There were young people; there were old people. And there was this tremendous sense that through this vehicle of a civil rights organization, I as an individual was becoming part of U.S. society, something that perhaps I didn't feel before, something that -- getting back to the ideas I had leaving high school and enlisting in the military -- my idea at that time, which I did not articulate until years later, but at that time I had this instinctive feeling that the history of the United States was a history of war. The way I put it now is we live in a male-dominated war culture. The . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: So it got to that first impulse that you had about the way to become something in the world was . . . ?

DAVID AVALOS: The way to become a man was to go through the ordeal of war and to come out the other side, and it was this idea that it was only in the midst of war that we experience our full human potential. That's a very critical concept. If you look at the heroes that are held up to us in this society, they are all people who have exhibited qualities that led to successful completion of military campaigns. Or have exhibited heroism -- so-called heroism -- in the face of, in the midst of military conflicts. So with the movement I felt like here was another way to become part of history, to become part of society, to connect in a way that was not about individual heroism, but a way of community self-actualization, self-determination, self-definition. I think it's important to go back. I think that, my four years at Well, when I was at UCSD for three years My three years at UCSD I felt were always an incredible luxury. I think it's an incredible luxury that we have, when we can put people on college campuses and give them the opportunity to study and analyze and to reflect about their own lives, about history and how they connect with the same. I took courses there with people like Martha Rosler, who was teaching a course on the image of women in film. I took courses on Soviet film makers. I took courses with Herb Schiller in Communications who talked about the communications industry and the control of information within U.S. society, the economic basis for information. And I took other courses with historians and sociologists and others. And the beauty of my education was that I was simultaneously able to work as a volunteer with the Centro Cultural de la Raza. In '74 I painted a mural there. In '76 they asked me to organize a mural project in a junior high school. From '75 on I was working with the Committee on Chicano Rights. And I was able to read texts like Jacques Ellul's book, Total Propaganda, and then go out into other circumstances, get off campus, and see how those theories applied and where they were adequate, where they were inadequate. And one of the real joys in the Committee on Chicano Rights was to be able to sit down with people like Herman and people like Ralph and just discuss the ideas that I was being exposed to on campus and how they felt about it -- what their experience told them -- and applying ideas in the writing of a news release and in the organizing of a new conference and so forth. And I think that it was that combination that has informed all of my work since.

In 1977 there was the big march at the border on October 29th. And then in '78 we spent the year traveling around the country spreading our ideas about Carter's immigration plan. That was a very mind-expanding experience and it was, for me it was very gratifying to be part of an organization that was coming up with concepts, ideas, arguments. It was kind of a think tank that was funded by, you know, a six-pack of Budweiser. We'd sit around with a six-pack, and we'd say, well, this is what the government is saying.

What can we tell people? Or this is what this research, this researcher has found. How does that relate to our own experience? I would do drawings and cartoons to try and illustrate the points we were making in other ways, and I would see them reproduced across the country by other organizations.

In '79 we had a march on February 11th at the border again and that was in protest of the Carter Curtain, because at that time the Carter administration had proposed that there was going . . . they were going to build this fence. It was a twelve-mile stretch of fence; it was entirely symbolic. But it was this idea of creating some sort of physical barrier between the United States and Mexico.

In '80 we had in the month of May a three-day conference. Well, there was, let me see, there was two days of conference, and then on the third day people went to the border and marched in memory of those who had been killed and brutalized by border-patrol agents.

Now this is, this is something that I should probably talk about a little bit more. One of the, one of the things that has had the most impact on me when I look at the way, the process, of the Chicano

movement, was this fact that everyone was accepted into the movement within, more or less within the confines of the Chicano community. But at this conference we had workshops that were being conducted by the clergy, workshops that were being conducted by lawyers, workshops that were being conducted by educators, workshops that were being conducted by artists, workshops that were being conducted by community activists, social service agency functionaries, Mechistas. There was this, just this, there was, there was youth groups there that were acting as security. There was groups within our organization that were working with youth groups at that time. There was just this across-the-board understanding that everyone within our community -- whether it be a cholo or guadaloupana, or a Ph.D., a lawyer, a community activist, or an artist -- had something to contribute, something creative to contribute, to making our own future, to developing our own community.

That Saturday evening of the conference I had been given the responsibility of putting together the cultural program, so that program included I wanted the program to be as much focused on the issues of immigration as possible, so Teatro de la Esperanza came down and for a hundred dollars they brought their whole troupe down from Santa Barbara and they performed La Victima.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: Jose Luis Valenzuela was one of the performers that night, and he eventually went on to direct it at the Los Angeles Theater Center just a couple of years ago. And I was moved by both performances -- back in May of 1980 as well as the one at the Los Angeles Theater Center -- in completely different ways. But I thought La Victima was such a strong piece of Chicano theater because it pointed, you know I was talking with a, with a non-Chicano, a so-called political activist, who was telling me that what they liked about La Victima was that it was anti-border patrol. And I said, "Well, you've missed the point of the play because it's not really anti-border patrol. It's talking about what happens to us when we refuse to embrace our own history." And I said, "It's shown when this man refuses to acknowledge, even though he has the deepest suspicions that he's interrogating his mother, he refuses to accept and acknowledge his own history." And it's just like, it's about what happens to us when we feel that we have to buy into society by giving up our birthright, by giving up our history, by giving up our historical consciousness. It's just like was reported in the Los Angeles Times this last week. They were talking to undocumented workers in North County, and they were saying that the worst exploiters were Chicanos and that the most brutal border-patrol agents are Chicanos. And that, I have heard that consistently over and over again and what you find among chickens where there's a pecking order, the chickens at the top of the pecking order who have the least harassment don't really spend a lot of time pecking other chickens. But the ones at the lower middle end who have so many different chickens pecking on them take it out with a vengeance so that the ones at the bottom of the pecking order are really brutalized. The ones at the lower middle end of the pecking order spend much more time pecking, you know. And this is the situation of the Chicano border-patrol agent -- or Hispanic maybe would be a better word -- border-patrol agent.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: But I thought that that was very insightful play because it speaks to the experience of every immigrant group that has come to the United States and has allowed themselves to be set adrift from their history, from their historical moorings.

There was Los Alacranes Mojados, who, along with the Enrique sisters, Veronica Enrique and Viviana Enrique, who that night billed themselves as Las Nortenas, sang Norteno music of the border region. Jose Antonio Burciaga was there, and he did some of his poetry and some of his

humor and it was very . . . it was terrific; it was very infectious. Dennis Banks was there and spoke. Corky Gonzales was not on the stage that evening, but he was there. And it was just, it was a very emotional, a very emotional evening, and it was real lesson to me that it is, in the crowd . . . the program went on for three uninterrupted hours. At one point I had to make a decision as to whether or not there was going to be an intermission, and Jose Luis Valenzuela asked me, "Well, should we break? Because one we go on, we're going to go on for an hour and a half." I said, "No, if we break, we're going to lose the crowd," because it was late already. They had been there all day for the conference and now they'd been, you know . . ." And so we went straight through and we didn't lose anybody in the crowd. There was about five hundred people, four hundred, five hundred people in the auditorium. Very charged. Very emotional. And it was a real lesson to me that you can make, not that we can make, that we have already an art and a culture that is integrated with all the other layers of our being, all the other layers of our experience. And then the next day we went to the border and we marched on the border in protest of the border patrol.

In '81, I forget exactly what the organization was doing. I think by '83, in '83 we did this thing called a tribunal in which we tried the U.S. government As a citizen's group, we tried the U.S. government for its crimes against the people at the border, and then took testimony. We actually had a tribunal. We had people sitting there who were listening to testimony, and it all duly recorded and it was put together and taken to Mexico City and also taken to Washington, D.C. That may have been '81. When was Reagan elected? He's been with us eight years.

MARGARITA NIETO: '81.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: _____.

DAVID AVALOS: And so it was, the tribunal was probably '83. In '81 we went to Washington, D.C., because Reagan was considering a new immigration proposal and we went to Washington, D.C., to be at an immigration conference and also to present to the media in Washington, D.C., our ideas about immigration. These were But by this time I was becoming less and less involved with the committee. At one time I was there in the office every day. By

MARGARITA NIETO: Just back up a moment. You said that you worked on a mural in '74 and in '76 you directed a community mural project?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: You had talked about cartooning up to this point, and all of a sudden here you are involved in visual art. Could you elaborate on what happened?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, when I was going to San Diego State, I used to, my friend was in the art department, so I used to, I met some people, other people that were in the Art Department as well, a guy by the name of Arturo Roman --his brother, Phil, is the guy who does the Garfield cartoons on TV, and Arturo's worked on some of those projects too -- and Salvadore Barajas. And we became friends and then one day they asked me if I wanted to come and help out on this mural project that they were getting involved with -- and this was in 1973 and was the actual beginning of the murals in Chicano Park. And I didn't do much. I showed up and talked to them, but they were doing all the painting. Well, in '74 they had another project going at the Centro Cultural de la Raza, and they asked me if I wanted to come by again and help out. And I had this idea that I'd be going by and, you know, washing paint brushes and doing things like that. They had divided up the space around the

walls in a way that didn't take into account for the doors, and they had actually miss-measured when they divided up, so they had extra spaces on the walls to paint, and they asked me if I wanted to do something. And I had this pencil, colored pencil drawing, and they asked me if I'd like to do something. I said, "Sure." So I did that. It's the first time I'd ever painted. And I think this is, I'm glad that you asked me to backtrack because I think this is a real important element, real important thing to consider when we consider the Chicano movement, is that it's always been an open The Chicano art movement has always been open invitation to the community to express themselves creatively. There's always been this understanding, this acceptance that our community is creative if given an opportunity. So I wasn't asked for a resume. I wasn't asked who's shown me recently or so on. I just _____, I just showed me this drawing, they liked it, and they said go ahead and try it. And it took me three months to paint it. It's not that big, but I had, I had a lot of struggling in the middle of it. I thought I wouldn't complete it. I just hated it. But finally I finished it. And it was reproduced in a number of places, in some magazines, and Jack in the Box did a calendar and reproduced it on their calendar. Well, what's curious is that it was also reproduced in Eva Cockcroft's Towards a People's Art . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: [Yeah, ___].

DAVID AVALOS: . . . as well as being reproduced in other books. so in a strange sense And at that time, I had no sense of what it meant to have a work reproduced in a book on art.

MARGARITA NIETO: Most people die for that.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah! You know, I realize that that Can you get that? [The tape recorder--Ed.]

MARGARITA NIETO: It's all right.

DAVID AVALOS: I realized that . . . I realize now that something I took for granted was in fact felt to be noteworthy by other people. So I, since I was known then at the Centro Cultural, in '76 some of the people asked me back to direct this mural project at a junior high school in east San Diego, Woodrow Wilson Junior High School. And I did. I worked on that project with some of the people from Voz Fronteriza.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: And with a woman that, a woman artist, Yolanda Lopez, who was from San Diego originally but was, is now in San Francisco. So That project was also an educational project, because at one point there was a discussion as to whether or not those of us who felt that we were more accomplished artists should talk to the children, should talk to these junior high school children, or young adults and get their ideas from them and then come up with a design or if they should be allowed not only to conceptualize but to design and execute. And I was . . . I had already actually Myself and another artist, Raul Jaquez, had begun to sketch out their ideas and what we thought was a pretty competent design, and Yolanda Lopez pointed out that, you know, this wasn't . . . it wasn't going to be their mural then. It was going to be their ideas interpreted by us, and, you know, I can say to my credit is that I had enough sense to realize that she was right, so we decided to just go with what they wanted to do, and they became very much involved and very inspired by the project, which unfortunately had a tragic ending. It was scheduled to be completed the day before their graduation from junior high school, and which it was, and that night it was vandalized.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh.

DAVID AVALOS: And I wasn't around. I can't remember; I wasn't around and I wasn't made aware of the vandalization for a couple of days. But the school principal decided that since the Chicanos, the young men and the young women who had worked on the project, were so upset by what had happened that they should be sent home because they might create problems in the school. So not only did they, you know And I was told that the young men cried openly when they saw what happened to their mural. So not only did they suffer this incredible insult of having their mural defaced on the day that their parents were there to see them graduate, on a day which should have been of great pride, but then they were punished for being the victims of this insult . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Horrible.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . and sent home. Eventually they negotiated with the school administration to repaint the mural, which we did over the summer, but it was vandalized again and whitewashed by the school. And it was, it was

MARGARITA NIETO: [_____. Disgusting].

DAVID AVALOS: It was, it was At that time I

MARGARITA NIETO: Talk about lack of communication.

DAVID AVALOS: It was, it was disgusting, but one of the things it did for me is it helped to shape some ideas about the preciousness of an art work. I think in the case of murals especially they're so vulnerable to so many different elements: vandalism, developers, the changing of tenants, not to mention the sun, the rain, and other natural forces, earthquakes as well. So I, in talking to the students as we were working on restoring the mural, I found it necessary to talk to them in terms of, "What's happened here with you is not that you painted a mural but that you've learned you have within yourselves the possibility of painting a mural. Now people can come, and they can take the mural away from you. They can destroy the mural. But they cannot destroy the possibility within you that you can create a mural, cannot destroy your creativity unless you let them do that" And to me that was a very important lesson, that our art and our culture does not reside in artifacts, does not reside on objects, but resides within our attitudes, our ideas, our value systems. And it's very, it was a very important lesson for me, because when you look at, when you go from that direct experience kind of a situation to the intellectual plane, the purely theoretical plane, you see over and over again our culture being presented as a sombrero. And somehow that is a total beginning and end of what we're all about. You put a sombrero on your head, or you put a sombrero on somebody's head, and that says something about what we're all about. It says nothing about what we're all about. It deflects attention away from what we're really all about. Because what we're really all about is a, a people that has, not only has looked into the face of tragedy, but has embraced those tragedies and refused to be heroes and die in the face of that tragedy and instead has chosen to be human and to persevere despite those tragedies. And I think in that sense we have a very great lesson to teach U.S. society because U.S. society does not have a heroic sense other than the sense of unequalled military might. We don't have the sense of being able to embrace tragedy and persevere in the face of it.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, we've never been tested, and we've made quite certain that we'd never be tested.

DAVID AVALOS: That's true. We've

MARGARITA NIETO: We've avoided.

DAVID AVALOS: We've avoided it. I think that there has been situations where, for example, southerners . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . have been tested and have had to learn to embrace tragedy. I think for the rest of U.S. society, that hasn't occurred, and if you look at our myths, our myths are such that the happy ending is nothing but a deus ex machina that relieves the hero of the ordeal.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah, it's a relief, almost like a justification, rather than a natural . . .

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . . catharsis or

DAVID AVALOS: . . . transformation. Yeah, it's not a transformation. Anyway, by, I guess, by the late Seventies I was beginning to have questions about my ability to take care of very basic personal needs, to earn a living, to provide for myself, to see myself as an individual with a life independent from a group. And I think that this is a constant balancing act that all of us are involved with. Where, how do we relate, how do we balance as an individual and as a society? So I began, I began looking to my art as a way of realizing who I was as an individual without this organization, this Committee on Chicano Rights, without the Chicano movement, but at the same time I felt a very strong sense of not wanting to repudiate or to deny what had been a hothouse that nurtured my growth and development, the growth and development of my consciousness. So I began doing work in which, rather than dealing with political issues, I was dealing with personal feelings. There was some kind of self portraits in what i was doing and so forth. Mostly graphic kind of work, work with color Xerox. And then

Tape 2, Side A

MARGARITA NIETO: . . . American Art interview, David Avalos, artist, Margarita Nieto, interviewer, San Diego, California, June 16, 1988.

DAVID AVALOS: So I began doing work that, that was more self reflective I guess. I think that You know you asked earlier what, what, what were the effects of traveling in Europe on me, and I think that one of the effects of traveling in Europe, since I was part of a group of Americans that were traveling in Europe at the time, a group that was part of the American drug culture and a group that was predominantly non-Chicano. You know, I was the only Chicano that I encountered when I was traveling with these folks. They primarily of European ethnic groups -- you know, German, English and so forth -- what's usually called in the lump phrase "Anglos," you know, although they're not necessarily all Anglos.

But I saw that there were alternatives to the value system that were presented in TV series like Donna Reed Show and Father knows Best, and that the people, the kind of kids that could have played those roles -- now brownskinned kids could not have played those roles -- but the kind of kids that could have played those roles, who were now traveling around Europe smoking dope, did not buy into that system either. And I think that there was a lot of valuable I think that by the time I left high school, I had what would probably be considered a middle class consciousness, you know, a middle class value system. And so I think it important to see that system, that system's values questioned. And I think it was also important to, to I did reading at that time when I was traveling in Europe about this European longing and this American longing for a soul, for a search of

self, for a search of what it means to be alive. Not what it means to be alive A search that is not so much about finding a meaning in life, but a search that was more about finding the experience of life.

MARGARITA NIETO: _____.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, finding, you know, what is it to be alive? What is it to, what is it to experience life? Regardless of what we think it means, what is it to experience it directly? And out of that period I developed a lot of attitudes, and one of the attitudes I developed was I went through a period in which I would have liked very much to have not been responsible for myself, to have been able to pretend that I could say to somebody, "Here, let me take your hand. Let me give you the responsibility for me." And I found it's just not possible. You can get into some very strange S & M [sado-masochism--Ed.] situations, situations of dominance the submission -- not necessarily sexual -- but dominant/submissive situations, but that you can't succeed. Ultimately, you cannot succeed. And I learned that it was better to take responsibility for everything that happened to you than to pretend you had no responsibility for anything. And what I began telling myself was that I only do what I want to do. I only do exactly what I what to do. So even if I was in an automobile accident I would tell myself, well, some way, somehow, this is exactly what I wanted to do . And, as strange as that seems, the consequence is that, you know, I feel responsible for everything that happens to me. So I feel I'm capable of getting our of any situation I get into. And I think that by the early Eighties I became aware that, after about 10 years of doing exactly what I wanted to do, I didn't have a job, I didn't have a trade (chuckles), I didn't have a home, I -- You know, I had nothing. I had nothing. I was absolutely at square one. So when I began working at the Centro Cultural, I worked there because I felt I had something to contribute, because I felt that it was an organization in San Diego that I could work with and not have to compromise my beliefs and my principles. And over a period of years when people started suggesting that I did have talent and I should be more serious and more consistent in the creating of objects, they also suggested to me that there was money to be made doing it.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: And I think that one of the motives for me in making objects was this idea that, "Hey, there's a way to make a living here somehow." Which could be interpreted in one way as, "Well, what this guy's all about is making things that sell." I've never really sold that much work. What I've been able to do because of the creation of my work is get grants as an artist-in-residence, get grants, for example, NEA [National Endowment for the Arts--Ed.] fellowships . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . and so forth, based on my work without having to sell my work. And I think that that's a very important point. There's a lot of pragmatic reasons why I'm doing what I'm doing. I think that I'm not suited to do a lot of other things psychologically or in terms of my personality. I have what somebody told me the other day was an uncompromising personality. And it's, and I think that being an artist is a way to enjoy that kind of a personality and yet still connect socially with other people in other ways. So I began making work on a more consistent basis. I began working at the Centro. And [aside to waitress: Thank you.] And there's just a tremendous advantage to working with an organization that has resources and working with them consistently over a period of time and working with them in a way that puts you in touch with other elements of the cultural arena and art arena in, within U.S. society. Working at the Centro, for example, required having some understanding of how city government worked, because we're a city building on city land, Balboa Park. There was a need to know how to deal with the city council members. We receive money from

the California Arts Council. There was a need to learn how to deal with state government. We receive money from the National Endowment for the Arts. There was a need to learn how to deal with that where we're part of a number of organizations like the Intermuseum Promotional Council of San Diego.

MARGARITA NIETO: Networking with other organizations like BAW/TAF?

DAVID AVALOS: Well

MARGARITA NIETO: Because that gives you an international

DAVID AVALOS: Well, the Border Art Workshop/Taller de Arte Fronterizo [BAW/TAF--Ed.] was actually created in the Centro Cultural. It was, it's been sponsored by the Centro since 1984, and we can get into that in a little bit . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . but what I want to say is that working with the Centro from '78 until the present, till 1988, has been how I have educated as an artist. I had a stunted development, if you will. For some reason I didn't begin to develop a consciousness until, you know, my late twenties.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: But that consciousness occurred in a wonderful way in that there was, there was constant theory and practice rubbing up against each other because of my studies at UCSD and my work with the Committee on Chicano Rights. Within the Centro I was able to develop ideas, further develop my ideas about Chicano art, not so much through reading as through interaction, direct interaction with other Chicano artists seeing the practice, seeing what it meant to go to Chicano Park and look at the projects that were taking place there, seeing what it meant to work with the Centro Cultural, looking at what happened in the late Seventies when ail was discovered in Mexico and Mexico began this big push, as did the United States, for binational cultural exchange. Analyzing what that meant. Looking at how that was done. There were a lot of, at lot of people that felt instinctively, "Well, this is where the money's gonna be now, so let's develop these kind of programs. We can get money for it right now." With us at the Centro at that time we were, we were always skeptical about anybody who wanted to help us that wasn't Chicano. There was always that what strings are attached, what it's gonna cost us. I think we were perhaps overly skeptical, but we didn't have the skills and confidence to deal at a table as equals, to really negotiate, so when we were offered opportunities to be involved with binational programs we began thinking about what the ramifications were. We began looking at our understanding of what binationalism mean here in this border area, and in my own mind I began seeing things based on a number of sources.

First of all, throughout the Seventies Herman Baca had consistently told me the story of how Bert Corona walked into his office, his printing shop, back in 1970 and said, "Herman, the issue of the Eighties is going to be immigration." Not in the 1970s. In 1970 --eighteen years ago -- Bert walks into Herman's office and says, "The issue of the Eighties is going to be immigration.." Herman says he almost fell out of his chair; he said, because you know everybody else was talking about other things, bilingual education, police review boards, jobs, so on and so forth. He said, "What are you talking about, Bert?" But it didn't take Bert long to convert him, and when I was working with the Committee in the late Seventies, Herman We would look at the kind of activity that was taking place in other parts of the country, in Washington, D.C., and L.A., and San Antonio and so forth.

Carter, one of the last things Carter did at the end of his presidency was appoint a two-year commission to study the whole question of immigration. That was his way of getting rid of this hot potato. One of the people on that committee was Alan Simpson who went on to author the Immigration Reform and Control Act. They never came to the border. That committee spent two years researching the subject and they never visited a border town. They had a hearing in San Francisco. They had a hearing I think it was in either Houston or San Antonio. They never came to the border. And Herman was always insistent. He said, "Eventually they have to come to us, because this is where it's happening." He said, "This is the most transited border in the world. This is the . . . where the greatest number of undocumented workers are apprehended. This is where it's happening."

When, while I was working with the paper, *Voz Fronteriza*, I always felt that, in the mid-Seventies I felt that, you know, "Over the next 25 years this is going to be an incredible place to be alive. There's just going to be so much happening." And I used to look at the students who were bilingual and came from different backgrounds than I did, whose parents were farm workers or who had grown up in L.A., east L.A., and in a real strong gang influence, barrios, and I would look at them and I would say, I would tell them . . . You know, they were younger than me. I would tell them, you know, "There's just going to be tremendous opportunities for you. You're bilingual. You understand both cultures."

And you begin to see the development of research centers on various campuses. San Diego State University had a research center on the border. Then Wayne Cornelius was brought in from MIT to start the U.S.-Mexico research center at UCSD.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: Or it might be the U.S.-Mexican Study Center; I forget exactly what it's called. Jorge Bustamante moved from Mexico City to Tijuana; set up a research center there. You saw this happening in the Seventies and there was a sense that, you know, something's going on here: Populations of both cities growing more and more, increase in immigration.

And then I looked at situations like the situation of Teatro Campesino. I'm very critical of a lot of the things that Luis Valdez says in public and a lot of aspects of the work that he does, but one of the things that really impressed me about him was that he maintained this connection with his roots. As a farm worker, he had a cultural center located in a farm-worker area, and that cultural center focused on the history of that region. For example, the horrible play *Rosa of the Rancho* . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . as bad as it was, was still about the history of that part of the world. He was developing works about the part of the world that he was in. And I looked at that and I just . . . And he was succeeding at it! He was succeeding. And to me it just reinforced this idea that, hey, you start where you're at. You accept that wherever it is you're at has a history, has stories that need to be told, that need to be brought out, that need to be recontextualized. Shifra Goldman was doing writing at that time about how the discovery of petroleum was leading to a reevaluation of the relationship of the United States and Mexico, and how cultural was being used . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . to, to grease, if you will, the skids so that, so that this thing could happen, that this promotion could take place, but that there was no real substance to it. And out of all of this

thinking And we also at that time had a guy on our board of directors by the name of Jose Cuellar, an anthropologist, and

MARGARITA NIETO: _____ to work on the gangs.

DAVID AVALOS: Jose was doing research on youth groups . . .

DAVID AVALOS: . . . south of the border.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . and demonstrating how much alike they were to the groups on this side of the border, and showing how in fact it was a youth culture that transcended the border. Looking at, at all these, looking at all these kinds of things, we began thinking at the Centro Cultural about what does it mean, now? What does it mean . . . ? Do we embrace the idea of bicultural exchange in terms of San Diego takes down the symphony? Mexico brings up the Ballet Folklorico Nacional. Or is there something else happening here? And that something else, as we formulated it back in the late Seventies and early Eighties, was this idea that we do not have two distinct cultural entities, separated by this line of political demarcation. It's one thing. It's interlinked, it's cross-pollinating, it's constantly being influenced. I came up, years later I came up with this Well, not that many years later, I guess. During this period I came up with this metaphor that the San Diego/Tijuana border region is like a plantation society. now within a plantation society you have the field hand as well as a master on his horse, the southern belle waving a handkerchief from the second story window. Everybody has their place; everybody has their role. But it's one thing. Okay? It's one thing. It's one world view -- both good, bad, and ugly. So I began seeing the border that way, and in fact that thinking in terms of plantation emerged in the phrase, "Welcome to America's Finest Tourist Plantation," the bus poster that happened earlier this year.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: So

MARGARITA NIETO: That was funny; I was thinking that that was a perfect lead-in to that. That created quite a commotion at the LACE [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibition gallery--MN], you know.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, and I'd like to get into that, but before that, I just want to talk about this development of the idea that, you know This goes back to the idea that culture is not a static, monolithic thing that exists in its artifacts. It's a living thing. It's a constantly unfolding thing that lives in the attitudes, ideas, and feelings of the people. Back in 1982, 1983, it might have been . . . I think it was 1982, there was a, there's this commission, the U.S.-Mexico Border Governor's Conference, the four American border states and the six Mexican border states. The governors of these states get together annually and have a conference. Well, in 1892, I believe it was -- and I can get you that information if I look at my files, exactly when it happened -- there was a conference. And there was a preliminary meeting put together about whether or not there should be a cultural component. And at that meeting, there were a number of people from various cultural organizations in San Diego including myself and Alurista. Now, from the very beginning the Centro has been One of the principal slogans of the Centro has been in Spanish, "One continent, one culture," the idea that both Americas constitute one continent and one culture. So what we did was got them to go for this idea that there should be a seminar or a workshop within the conference on border culture. Okay, not on binational cultural exchange, but on the idea of border culture. And the

consequence of it was that they issued There were a number of people [that] delivered papers. I was co-chairman of the steering committee of this whole project, and people delivered papers -- not artists so much as academicians, social scientists, although there were artists involved such as myself. And the consequence of it was they issued a statement that there was something unique to the border, culturally, that was different from the national cultures of both Mexico and the United States. And prior to this, when they talked about border culture, they always in terms of, when they talked about the border they always talked about it in terms of, "It's a great place to communicate, for the two national cultures to communicate." It was never discussed in terms of "Hey, there's something here that's happening that's different."

MARGARITA NIETO: As an entity unto itself.

DAVID AVALOS: Right. Now, that report was buried. I just mentioned it as an example of the kind of thinking that was being done, the kind of influences we were trying to have. By 1984, in 19 Sometime in the early Eighties, I think, I was asked to do a show on immigration by the people like SPARC [Social and Public Art Resource Center-DA], and I was never able to get it together. My idea was to have photography, to have artwork, and to also have non-artists involved in some sort of a panel, people like Peter [Schey, Shey] who successfully tried the court case of the Texas school children

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . before the U.S. Supreme Court. The court said that the state of Texas has to educate the children of undocumented workers regardless of their legal status. So that [the lecture series--Ed.] never materialized.

In 1984 Rene [Yanes, Yanez] at the Galeria de la Raza asked me if I would put together a Chicano exhibit of Chicano artists. He said he was very impressed with what was happening in San Diego. The Chicano artists seemed to be coming alive, so to speak. And I, of course, I went to Victor Ochoa first of all and talked to him about it, and then we set up a meeting with some of the veteranos here in San Diego. And what was amazing was that they were more interested in what could be done to get them into galleries, to get them commercial sales -- with that aspect of the art world, which is just as legitimate as any other aspect. We were more interested as a nonprofit organization in putting together a show that was about defining cultural parameters. And as a consequence, I made the decision to put the show together not with, exclusively with Chicano artists but around the theme of the border. And I invited, after Victor Ochoa I invited Michael Schnorr, who's a teacher at Southwestern College, which has an enormous number of Spanish-speaking students from Mexico that go there. I invited Isaac Artenstein and Jude Eberhard, who were Isaac's a filmmaker, and Jude works with him at Cinewest, their film production company. And then Guillermo Gomez Pena and Sara Jo Berman who were at that time working together as Poyesis Genetica.

So we had this group. And it was difficult for me, because there's a lot of the cultural nationalist in me. And it was difficult for me to justify in my mind how a Chicano cultural organization and a Chicano artist could be putting together a show that included non-Chicanos. And what But at the same time I felt that it was absolutely the right thing to do. I just didn't have a conceptual framework for it. The group included Mexican citizens as well as U.S. citizens, Chicano and non-Chicano. And the way I came to grips with it was by saying "Well, the border is not a Chicano issue. It's not a Mexican issue. It affects everyone who lives here in this region. If you believe that it's one region then everybody in the region is about making that culture and that we shouldn't be making it in isolation." So the workshop I called people together in June, I think, for our first meeting, in June of 1984. We had a number of meetings and then in November of that year the people I had

brought together and myself decided to call ourselves a border workshop, Taller de Arte Fronterizo, and our first show was in the Galeria in February of 1985. And since then we've had a number of projects and a number of exhibitions and events and so forth.

But essentially, the idea, the ideas behind the group are, first of all, viewing art -- and viewing art as something other than the reflection of society. We do not see art as a reflection of society. We see art as making society. We do not see the artist as an entertainer or decorator. We see the artist as someone who, in most cases, had the benefit of a university education, someone who has intellectual training, background, and someone who has as much to contribute to the making of society's future as a physician or a businessman or a politician or a clergyman. And these are ideas that go back to what I saw in the Chicano movement, but now in a larger context, the idea that the artist should be there shoulder-to-shoulder with everyone else within the community making society. Not there to entertain, not there to decorate.

MARGARITA NIETO: Or simply to comment.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, yeah. That we're active participants in the making of our own culture, and that this presupposes the idea that culture is a living thing, it's an unfolding thing, and that when we talk about art culture, we're talking about exploration and experimentation whichever direction we're moving in. If we go back to study our traditions, it's as much an exploration as it is to move forward and create new forms.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: If you talk to people in Ballet Folklorico who really study, their minds are always getting blown by what they're finding out: assumptions that they had. Finding out, you know, it's always been amazing to me at how recent some of the things that I thought were Mexican traditions for hundreds of years are. Some of the, for example, some examples of so-called folk art that were begun in 1940. The little devils?

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: They're very recent.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: Other things do go back farther, but even when you go back

MARGARITA NIETO: Actually, some of the popular art of the, some of what we now consider Mexican popular art is derived from the actual art movements of the Thirties and Forties in Mexico, you know, the so-called [fine-art, prime-art] movement.

DAVID AVALOS: So there's this constant

MARGARITA NIETO: _____ doing _____ see it.

DAVID AVALOS: There's this constant back and forth pollenization with all aspects of creativity within the society. It just gets compartmentalized by intellectuals in a way that I think obscures realities.

MARGARITA NIETO: Could I ask you something? How do you see your work making society?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, I see my work making society, and the first way is because of its social aspects. A lot of the work involves collaboration. I think that when we're talking about the Border Art Workshop, for example -- of which I'm no longer a member, since November of 1987. But as, when we talk about the Border Art Workshop people are as much impressed by the idea of Chicanos and non-Chicanos. Another group includes this wonderful mixture that Richard Lous, for example, who's a border phenomenon. His father is Chinese. His mother is Mexican. He speaks Spanish; he speaks English. His father, [I assume], speaks Chinese as well. You go to their home at Imperial Beach, and there's a pagoda instead of a gazebo -- you know? Out in the yard. There's this mixture that speaks to the reality of California. You know, we're getting to the point where white males are not going to be the majority in California -- if they are now -- and we're going to have to learn how to live together in a way other than this pluralistic model.

Pluralism is a culturally refined word for separate but equal. And everybody knows that separate but equal is nothing but racism and segregation and differentiation in the distribution of resources.

But, you know, you can't, societies don't survive if they're pluralistic, You know, there has to be something that holds them together. You can't have all these different cultures running around forever. There's got to be a way that they connect. There's got to be a way that they connect. And what, I think that one of the ways that my work helps contribute to making society is by insisting that we need to redefine U.S. culture. If you can go back . . . Border art and border culture . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: In other words, in something like your bus poster . . .

DAVID AVALOS: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: . . . or in something like the donkey cart. What you're actually doing is, is stabbing at that sort of inert consciousness definition of what American culture is.

DAVID AVALOS: And what U.S. society is. With the bus poster, I think the strongest message I was trying to say was, "Hey, wake up America, open your eyes. These are not illegal aliens from another planet. This is contemporary U.S. society. They're here. They're an integral part. They're creating profits. They're not going to go away because nobody wants them to go away." Just like the southern society and U.S. society had to wake up the fact that, "Hey, those blacks on the plantation are part of your society. You can pretend that they don't have souls. You can pretend that they're just cattle. But they're human beings; they're part of your society and there's going to be a price to be paid. The sooner you face it and embrace that tragedy and find a way of persevering despite it, the better off for everyone." So that's one of the things I'm doing with those works. This idea of the border, you know. The border is not a line at the edge of a map. The border is a central component of U.S. cultural consciousness. From the very beginning this has been a nation whose cultural consciousness has revolved around the idea of borders.

Tape 2, Side B

DAVID AVALOS: . . . the border as something central to U.S. culture. You can see it in the idea of our being a nation of immigrants, people who cross from outside that border to inside. As I said earlier, the only people who believe in the American dream are immigrants. Americans don't believe in it anymore. That's what fuels some of the greatest myths. That's the price that you have to pay to enter this country. You've got to announce as soon as you cross that border, "Hey, I believe in the American dream." The other, the other aspect of our culture is this idea of the frontier, the constantly expanding frontier, the idea of a border constantly changing, constantly moving outward. You can look at the novels of James Fenimore Cooper written in the, you know, 1820 to 1840, the

period prior to the Mexican War, in which he's talking about the American past. It's the frontier that existed in, you know, the 1850s. I mean, in the 1750s. And what you see there is people are not left out. There is the frontiersman who is the quintessential American. There's the Indian -- the good Indian and the bad Indian. There's the legacy of Europe. There's the French and English fighting each other. There's a value system. There's women. In one of the, one of his novels there's a whole question, that they address a whole question of miscegenation. Should people of different races interbreed, you know? Should they fall in love? Should they do what comes naturally to human beings? Should they fall in love? Should they have families? And his position is very clear. No. You know in *The Last of the Mohicans*, Chingachgook's son falls in love with a woman who is part European and part black, and they both die. Their love is never consummated. The lesson is: That's the way it should be.

MARGARITA NIETO: Ramona.

DAVID AVALOS: And there's this idea that is absolutely different than the idea in Mexico, which is rather than fearing the mixing of blood, the mixing of cultural heritages, the mixing of races, we should embrace it and survive through it, because it's enriching. That's what the Mexican culture is all about. That's what the *mestizaje* is all about. And I think that that's something that, that as sick to death as every Chicano artist, any self-respecting Chicano artist, is of the *mestizo* [head], we should be thinking about ways of recontextualizing it and re-presenting it, because the concept behind it, the attitude and the idea behind it is a message that the United States needs to understand. We can no longer pretend that it's not going to happen, that that mixing is not going to happen. It's happening. In my family I've got a niece who has a black son, you know. She fell in love with a black man. Her son's got kinky hair; it's very black. You know, obviously, you know, his heritage is there in his face. I have other nieces and nephews . . . [aside to waitress: No, no. Thank you.] . . . that are marrying people of western European extraction. And then there's my family, my own children! My daughter Xima is *cafe con leche*. My daughter Tonatzopelic is, you know, *cara de pan cruda*. and my son Chano is very dark. Right there all the . . . We get together, all the kids get together for family reunions, it's like the United Nations.

MARGARITA NIETO: (chuckles)

DAVID AVALOS: You know, you see . . . I go to grade schools, to elementary schools, to give lectures, and I talk to kids, and I'll say, "Have any of you ever heard the word *mestizo*?" They'll go, "no." Maybe in a class of thirty one kid will raise his hand. "Yeah, have you ever heard it?" "Yeah, my mommy calls me her little *mestizo*." Say, "Do you know what it means." "No." I said, "You know, in my family . . . I run down how my kids are the three shades. I say, "Do any of you come from families like that?" "Yeah, yeah! That's the way it is in my family. Yeah, my sister's real *guerita*, And everybody understands it." I say, "That's what being a *mestizo* is all about. We're a mixture. We have the European. We have the Indian in us. And that's the way it comes out." People can see it in their lives, but they don't understand how it got there, and they don't understand . . .

But you know, as artists I think that we're very insistent, we should be very insistent as Chicano artists, that it is not something to recoil from or be afraid of.

And unfortunately, that model of the frontiersman and that model that was established then essentially says that the border equals war. The border equals war. Whenever you're talking about a border in U.S. history you're talking about war. And you've got the Mexican War following Cooper's novels, not as a consequence necessarily, but it happens within that cultural context. You have Texas first being annexed. And who's the hero on Texas? Davy Crockett. Davy Crockett. A frontiersman. That cultural connection is made from the conquest of nature -- and the Indian being

seen as part of nature --to the establishment of the United States as an imperial power that conquered, that goes to conquer another sovereign nation. And when they go to do that, they point out to people that the Mexican is part Indian. Until the Fifties in Los Angeles, the police department classified Chicanos as Indian. You know that. I mean there's a reason for that. There's a reason for that, because in this country the idea of the Indian as savage, as nature, as something to be dominated, controlled, eliminated. "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" is so clear. And what we have to do is say, "Hey, no! No! There's another way of looking at that intermarriage, or that mestizaje."

MARGARITA NIETO: Would you say, too, that this frontier spirit that the United States in some aspects has been so proud of is a _____ial and anti-intellectual _____?

DAVID AVALOS: I think it's, I think it's virulent. You know, I think it's cancerous. I think it is anti-historical. I think it is anti-factual. So in that sense I think it is anti-intellectual. I think that what we're trying to do here in San Diego as artists who accept our location in space and time as a source of inspiration -- not as something to be overcome so that we can create universal messages, but as something that can inspire, something that speaks to everyone's reality. For us there's, there's an enormous task to overcome. First of all, the pigeonholing of our work as ethnic -- or as merely social and political -- or as didactic and more interested in preaching history lessons than in making transcendent, than creating transcendent experiences for audiences. And I think that we have to understand that all art is ethnic. All art is ethnic based. Okay, all art is political. When they say our art is ethnic, it's to It's not so much It does two things. It castigates us, and it hides the fact that their art is ethnic. When they say our art is political, it does two things: It denigrates the value of our aesthetic expressions, and it hides the fact that all their work is political. And when, when the criticize our work as being historically connected, it allows them to glamorize and sanctify the kind of work, kind of post-modern work that's being done now that refers to history only in the most superficial ways as something to be cannibalized. History is something to be created by each generation, to be redefined, to be explored, just as I said all traditions have to be explored. It's not something to be cannibalized.

MARGARITA NIETO: What do you mean by that?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, you can go back in art history and you can take a Picasso and re-do it, or you can take a photograph and rephotograph it or . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: _____ think about it _____.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . you know, and it seems to smack of some historical reference, but it doesn't really, because you're not really exploring history. You're just cannibalizing it.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: And I think that we have to understand that art

MARGARITA NIETO: That show at the Newport Museum of Art, the other day?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah. We have to understand that art, the art world no longer occupies -- if it ever did -- a central spot in the creation of consciousness within U.S. society. U.S. culture, U.S. art and culture, the U.S. attitude and value system is found in advertising. That is the ultimate cultural expression of our society, and that's why we're beginning to see the emergence of artists who are more about marketing than about creating their own work. Like

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, _____ the irony of using advertising, the case of [Andy--Ed.] Warhol

DAVID AVALOS: Right. It's a recognition. It's a recognition on the one hand that that is where consciousness resides, and secondly it's a last-ditch effort to hide that fact so that you can continue to make money within the commercial gallery scene. And now you have artists that are taking works that are mass-produced like inflatable bunnies, they're taking these reproducible objects, and they're struggling to make of them precious objects. So they cast them in stainless steel and they put them in galleries. And when a collector buys them and puts it in his house, you can say "Yeah, I beat mass marketing because I've got the only one. Everybody else can have their pink inflatable bunny, but I've got the only stainless steel one." You know. And in a sense, when we look at what

You know, we've already seen that in the Chicano movement. That is what the low-rider owner is all about. The low-rider owner is an artist as producer. 'I'm gonna go to this guy. He does the best body work in town. I'm gonna pay him to do the body work according to my specifications, to my vision. I'm gonna go to this painter, and I'm gonna have him give me the best metal-flake paint job according to my specifications. Then I'm gonna go to this mural painter and have him paint what I . . . the images I want on my hood and on my trunk. Then I'm gonna go to the best interior man, and he's gonna do that, and the best hydraulic man" And it's, it's accepted within our community that that's an artform. The problem is that the commercial galleries want to pretend that the same thing isn't happening there.

You know, when you talk about conceptual art, what's more conceptual than a pet rock? I mean it's happening where consciousness is happening in this society is within marketing, within public relations, within advertising. And you see trends in advertising now that are very frightening to me. For example, one of the consequences of the, of mass media, one of the consequences of being able to reach millions of people simultaneously is not that we've become homogenized, not that we've been drawn together, but that we have been compartmentalized. There are between forty and fifty different demographic niches known to marketers, known to advertisers. If they want to get women of a certain educational background who are making a certain amount of money and live in certain kind of neighborhoods, they know how to get a message to them and to them alone.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right.

DAVID AVALOS: And it's only possible because of mass marketing, mass-media techniques. So we've been told that mass media brings us together. It doesn't. It's cutting us up into even smaller and smaller groups than have ever existed. It's cutting our own community up. The other thing is, that I think is very insidious, is you now see the Association of American Advertisers putting out ads that have appeared recently here in San Diego in the _____ newspapers, about how advertising is freedom of choice. When I go get gas over here at a gas station -- I forget what kind it is, I think it might be Arco or Chevron -- there's a little picture on top of the pump, a little tiny billboard, miniature billboard, with a big ball and a chain and a car breaking the chain, and it says, "Fuel your Freedom." Now that image of the broken chain is a classic traditional image of liberation. And now we're being told that consumption is liberation.

I mean it's come full circle. Our rights of liberty and freedom are now being protected by advertisers. That's what they want us to believe.

MARGARITA NIETO: So, as a conceptual artist, which is what you are to a great degree, you use these elements in order to question and to create a society?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, yeah, I think in the case of the bus poster One of the targets of the bus poster was the nature of advertising, the nature of public messages, the nature of public space.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: Public space doesn't really exist anymore. I go back to the lowriders: When someone goes out onto a public street and starts acting like it's an actual space to be filled -- to be filled with human activity, to be filled with social intercourse -- it's an opportunity to go out and see and be seen and talk to young women and talk to young men and show your stuff. People freak out! "Hey, man, that's a public street!" That's that doesn't exist as a space to be filled with human activity. It exists as a way to get from point A to point B. Two different concepts of public space are at work there. We don't, I think that in general, it can be said that within U.S. society we do not view public space as a place for social intercourse. Public space is horrifying to us. "Hey, leaving it to the police and their war on the drug pushers, on prostitutes, on gangs, on the homeless. But we don't want any part of it." So what is our sense of public? Our sense of public is the mass media, which is all privately owned.

You can see it very clearly in what happened with our movement. From '65 to '75, you see a strong insistence that our movement is about self-definition and self-determination. "We'll call the shots. We'll say who we are. And we'll realize ourselves. We'll actualize ourselves based on our own dreams and aspirations and hopes and desires." Once we become Hispanics we're no longer a community acting on political and economic ways for our own benefit. We're an audience. We're a market. And the measure of our success is no longer our commitment to democratic principles. The measure of our success is now measured in terms of how many consumer items we can acquire. "Are we moving up? Are we driving BMWs? Do we have a Volvo in the garage?" You know, "Do we have a VCR?" And so on and so forth. And I'm not saying these things are bad per se, but the concept that what, how do we achieve self-realization, self-actualization is, is a hideous one to me,

MARGARITA NIETO: Mass consumerism.

DAVID AVALOS: Right! And your guiding light shall be the

MARGARITA NIETO: . . . and the _____ in of the [making] of any kind of viable cultural form.

DAVID AVALOS: Well, it becomes cultural expression.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah.

DAVID AVALOS: There was a time when You know, why is it that people don't ask for a discount when they buy a T-shirt that says Coors on it? They're acting as a human billboard.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah.

DAVID AVALOS: Why don't they get a rebate from Coors? In stead, they pay more because the image has been silkscreened onto the T-shirt.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah, I know.

DAVID AVALOS: And nobody thinks anything of it.

MARGARITA NIETO: But that goes along with everything, with Gucci It began with Gucci actually: the whole idea of a status purse.

DAVID AVALOS: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: Which became an advertising vehicle for the products.

DAVID AVALOS: So I think a lot of artists today and a lot of art criticism does not take into account the all-pervasive role of advertising, public relations, and marketing in U.S. consciousness and culture. And, you know, I'd love to see somebody writing along those lines who, who's able to create a conceptual framework that encompasses not only the product of so-called fine-art practitioners, but the things that people do on the street and the thing that's being done through the mass media as advertising.

So, you know, my work is informed by the experiences I've had on college campuses, with Chicano civil rights organizations, and a Chicano cultural center like the Centro. I'm a product of Chicano culture.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: You know, I didn't consider myself an artists till after . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . years at the Centro and I still don't consider myself an artist. I consider myself someone who makes art when I feel a need to . And I am capable of making objects that could be sold in galleries, and have done so on a number of occasions, but I think that what excites me the most -- and I have no problem with doing that . . . I need money to live just like anybody else. I need money for myself and for my family. So I have nothing against making money, but I think what excites me the most is the kind of projects like the bus poster where you see that your perceptions of society and how it works are verified by how much of a commotion you can create. You know, you say, "Well, let's . . ." You know, it's just like anything else. "Well, let's see what happens if we touch this nerve end." Nothing. "Oh, man, how boring."

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

DAVID AVALOS: I mean, it doesn't get me excited, doesn't get anybody else excited. "Well, let's see what happens if you touch this nerve end?" And kaboom!

MARGARITA NIETO: And you really touched a nerve end with that one?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, I think so. I think we touched a nerve end within the community -- and by community I mean the whole San Diego/Tijuana border region -- I think we touched a nerve end in the art world too.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: Because the sense I get from the art . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: I think that's obvious. The reviews of that LACE show focus a great deal on that.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, because I think that, that in the art world there's a sense of suffocation and, "How do we get out of these free-speech ghettos?" Sure, you can say anything you want in a gallery or a museum, because who goes there? The big questions are, "Hey, should artists have

access to the advertising space that is sold on subways? On buses?" Now there's a recent controversy in New York about artists using the ads on subways, and one particular piece that was critical of the Contra aid policies of the Reagan government, and they were refused. The artists were refused space, and the subway, the transit authorities said, "It's too disruptive. It works against the atmosphere we're trying to create for all advertisers." But that's not true. Because a number of years ago -- may be ten, maybe fifteen years ago -- there was a real change in advertising, and that occurred when advertisers began naming their competitors and denigrating their competitors. And now, you know, Pepsi Cola-Coca Cola taste test is something common. But there's constant, you know . . . there's a constant combat taking place there, and there's a constant environment of competition, of ideas, competition of products. So how can they say that that isn't conducive to a billboard that deals with ideas and the competition of ideas?

MARGARITA NIETO: You know, Robby Conal recently went around L.A. putting up a poster that said, "Contra [Booking]," pulling together the two aspects, almost like an ad. I saw one. Unfortunately, I was driving and I didn't pick it up. I would have loved to have it. And that comes to mind. And I was also thinking that in a sense as you've been talking, most artists are traditional. Even the nontraditional artist talks about public art versus studio art, whatever. I don't think those terms have any real meaning with what you're talking about, because your art, your modus operandi, your definition of what you do goes beyond the division between what has been considered to be the private, internal world and public world.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: Am I right in saying that?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, I think there's a need to redefine what we mean by public and private is disintegrated. We can go downtown San Diego and you can see, on any night you can see people using the streets as someone in the suburb would use their bathroom. You can see them using the streets as someone in the suburbs would use their bedroom. You can see them using the streets as somebody in the suburbs would use their kitchen. They're sleeping, they're eating, they're shitting on the streets. Now this is an area You know, they're doing all these private acts in public places. You can drive through neighborhood after neighborhood in which you see homes covered with bars. These people are acting You know when you call up an iron foundry or an iron workshop and say, "Bring the bars over," you're acting on the assumption that your home is a public place. You're acting on the assumption that, "Hey, there's a whole population out there that assumes my home is public and they can come in and take anything they want anytime they want and I've got to fight that idea by putting these bars up to keep them out." If we had a concept of the home as a private place, would people have to put up bars? You know

MARGARITA NIETO: Very interesting thought.

D: And I think that we have the idea that we're engaging in public information exchange when we sit in our livingroom in our underwear watching TV. Or when we read the newspaper on the pot, in the bathroom. Hey, there's no exchange. You can't talk back to the TV. You can't immediately respond to what you've seen in the newspaper. And not only is it privately consumed; it's privately created. Virtually all the news media in this country is run for profit. Their slogan is not "Serve the People." Their slogan is "Make a Profit or Go Out of Business." And people don't understand that. We're sold You know, Playboy magazine has a page in the magazine in which it says, "Our Readers," talks about our readers. That page is for their advertisers, because what Playboy does -- just like everything else -- they sell their audience to their advertisers. "We're packaged and sold. How are we packaged? Well, you get the audience you want based on the kind of stories you run,"

Okay, if you want men of a college age that can be expected to make such and such amount of money, or you want men from the ages of 20 and 30 who have such and such an income, then you're going to go to Playboy to advertise. That audience is sold. People don't understand the media. They think that everything has arrived at a point where it's very difficult for us to understand what is private and what is public. And some of the great controversies of our time are, you know, can you require that people take urine tests? You know. Does . . . are we moving in the direction of having an internal passport in the United States? Is it, you know, what is public art? What is the nature of public art? Whatever can be said about these strengths or weaknesses of the community mural movement, I'll say this: In most of the cases that I know of, community groups came to the artists and said we want a mural.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: That's what happened at Woodrow Wilson Junior High School. They came to the Centro and said, "Hey, we want a mural." And I've seen it with community after community come to Victor Ochoa, say, "Hey, we would like to have a mural." You don't see that in public art. You don't see the public getting together and saying, "Hey, we want . . ." What you see . . . We just had a Vito Acconci piece that was recommence by the Arts Advisory Committee to the San Diego Port Commissioners. The Arts Commission included people like Hugh Davies, the Director of the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. Gerald Hirshberg, Director of Designing for Nissan here in San Diego. And others. They recommended that the Acconci piece . . . The Port Commissioners didn't like it. The public didn't like it. Didn't happen. You know. There was, the people that were there -- and I was among them -- speaking in favor of the sculpture, could all be classified as art professionals. It's very much in our interests as arts professionals to go out and advocate public art, but we're not going to get very far until the public feels that they've got something to do besides sit around and be an audience to this stuff. And it's very strange because usually the public does not have any sense that they have any say about the ads that appear on billboards as they drive to work.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: Or the commercials that they see on TV. I stopped watching TV for a while and then I went back to watching TV, some of the shows on prime time, and was watching the ads and the content of the shows and I was going, "Man, this is soft porn!"

MARGARITA NIETO: Truly.

DAVID AVALOS: It blew my mind. I said, "Wow, what a change," you know.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right. I was thinking of an ad some time ago for the California Council on Eggs or the Egg Council. They've done some terribly, terribly suggestive soft-porn billboards. The one with the two eggs and the bottle of champagne, for example.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, I've seen ads, you know, that were ostensibly about milk and . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

DAVID AVALOS: . . . and was basically, you know, about this woman in this white bathing suit that was, you know . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

DAVID AVALOS: I think it was, in one sense it was, you know, it was a lift. In another sense it was,

"What're we getting at here?"

MARGARITA NIETO: (chuckles)

DAVID AVALOS: "What are we getting at here?" But the public has a sense that their role is to be passive in the face of all these visual onslaughts. You know, people don't complain about the design of Coke machines that are located on public spaces like a federal building, city buildings, community colleges. People don't complain about that. But when you have a situation with public art, people feel, "Hey, well, now I can put my two cents worth in!" And it's a very negative attitude towards the arts, because there's an instinctive understanding of how elite those arts are.

MARGARITA NIETO: And also the fear of not understanding, that sense of suspicion and defensiveness.

DAVID AVALOS: Which, which, but see the

Tape 3, Side A

DAVID AVALOS: . . . you know, I go back At one point, we had a guy working at the Centro Cultural, Philip Brookman, and he once asked me, he said, "Who do you think's the best Chicano artist in San Diego?" And I said, "Herman Baca." And Because I think that he's, you know, he's about consciousness in many ways. I think Aztlan, the concept of Aztlan, is absolutely essential, was absolutely essential at the time that it was invented, because it rooted us in the soil of this continent, because it justified a demand, it justified political demands. Hey, we were here first! Now, it may be that as a goal it has much more value to our people than as a reality.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: Because the people talked about the establishment of a separate nation state that would be ruled by Mexicanos never clearly delineated what they would do about those people that had even a prior claim to the land than Mexicans. What about the Papago, about the so-called Mission Indians, about the Apaches, about the Yaquis, about the pureblood tribal groups that have maintained their oral traditions even to this day? What role would they have? Or would they be relegated to the same status that exists now, in which they exist now, in which other powers would determine how the land was controlled? There was never any discussion that I was aware of, of what do you do about the black population within this state? What do you do about the European population within this state? And I think as a reality, Aztlan is horrifying. As potentially as Israel, the state of Israel, right now. What do you do about the fact that the numbers, the fastest growing population in Israel is Arab? What do you do about all these people in

MARGARITA NIETO: [Kill them]. (laughs)

DAVID AVALOS: What do you do about all these people that have a prior claim, you know? So I think that perhaps as a goal it has served our people much better than as a reality, and it exists today, I think, as a goal rather than as a reality. I don't see anybody raising an urban guerilla army anywhere. So I don't know if it serves us in any other way than as a myth.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah. Yeah, I think I would agree with you. I think that's an interesting analogy that you raised, because I you're talking about the encroachment of a so-called quote-Unquote "alien population" within a group in terms of the mainstream of the dominant. There's always that fear of shaking the status quo, and it brings out some very irrational behavior on behalf of those who are threatened. We see it in our educational system in California [constant] struggle going on

right now with the UC system, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, and what's interesting is that your art is in that mainstream, is that it's hooked into it, hooked into the problematic realities of the moment.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, I think that one of the, one of the biggest mistakes that could be made right now is to assume that somewhere outside of this planet there exists a ground upon which we can stand and claim purity. We're not going to, no one's in a position to claim purity. We're all corrupted, we're all walking contradictions to lesser or greater degrees, and the question becomes one, not, the question becomes on of using judgment, rather than passing judgment. To declare that Luis Valdez is a sellout, for example, when Luis himself is befuddled, and ask the question, "Who's paying me? Where's the money for my next film, if I've sold out? Where's the money coming from?" You know, in a sense it becomes, like I say, a question of using judgment and determining, having a real clear understanding of what our goals are and measuring success based on actions, not on rhetoric. To me, there's no dishonor in having one of my sculptures owned as a part of the permanent collection of the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, you know. In fact, it was kind of, in a way it's very instructive of how important that is, because the money that was spent by the La Jolla Museum to purchase that piece was immediately put into the rental of the space on the back of buses . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh!

DAVID AVALOS: . . . for the bus poster piece. It was contributed for that project. So my, my individual object work was able to support my more ephemeral public art work, if you will. Also, I got a kick out of the way that their tag, the identification tag read You know how they'll have the name of the artist and then whether it's American or French or whatever, and when he was born, and mine said, "David Avalos, Chicano, born 1947." And I know that among some, I guess within the last five to ten years, some artists who used to be called Chicano artists have stated publicly, "Don't call me a Chicano artist; I just want to be known as an artist." I think my attitude in response to that is, "Don't call me a Chicano artist; I just want to be known as a Chicano."

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm. (chuckles)

DAVID AVALOS: But I feel no dishonor in being recognized by them, any more than I feel any dishonor in being recognized by so-called revolutionary Marxist-Leninist groups, who responded to the bus poster in very positive ways as well. I think . . . I think the question is not whether or not we can maintain a purity and separation from society; the question for me is how we can become so involved in society that it's impossible to distinguish Because that's what it's all about right now: it's distinguishing, it's cutting up into those forty to fifty demographic niches for marketing purposes into folk art and ethnic art, political art, and fine art, for economic purposes.

MARGARITA NIETO: Socio-political-ethnic art.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, you know, it's all these things. That's not to say that we blur into come indistinguishable bowl of jello, but that ,you know, we are able to continue to explore our history and tradition, but that we're accepted as equals, you know. This country, in the Sixties and Seventies, was willing to say, "Right. We're all equal." And let the powers that be define or determine exactly what that means. We've got to go beyond that and say, "Hey, everybody should have say in . . ."

MARGARITA NIETO: By the way, one question: what piece did La Jolla Museum purchase?

DAVID AVALOS: Umm, Hubcap Milagro, Number Six, was what they purchased.

MARGARITA NIETO: Okay. Do you want to take a break, and are we through with this _____?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, I think I'm starting to repeat myself.

MARGARITA NIETO: Okay, let's set up another session?

DAVID AVALOS: If that's agreeable with you, fine.

MARGARITA NIETO: Great.

Tape 3, Side B

[There is a note written on the original draft by "EMN" (Margarita Nieto?) that pages 69 to 84 of the draft probably come between pages 98 and 99, suggesting that this tape side (now pages 47 to 57) was probably recorded after Tape 4, Side A (now starting on page 58--Ed.)

MARGARITA NIETO: This is Margarita Nieto, Archives of American Art, tape three.

DAVID AVALOS: I've been invited to lecture on various occasions -- colleges and universities -- and . . . I'd delivered a number of lectures, I guess, where I left the lecture with this incredible sense of not having connected with the students in any way, with this sense that, based on their responses, that even those who wanted to respond in a positive way to what I was saying were really missing the point. I can remember giving a lecture about my work and people saying, "Well, what can we do to become better people so that we can change things here on the border?" And I began reevaluating how I was approaching my discussions. Because I think that art is wonderful by virtue of being whatever you can get away with. It's so wide open; it's so open to definition; it's so open to exploration. what I resent the most about some critics and theoreticians of modernism is their insistence that you can only do it one way.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

DAVID AVALOS: That there's only one right way to do it. And I would feel bad about falling into their footsteps and insisting that there's only one other way to do art. I think for purposes of discourse and dialogue there's a need to take strong positions and to sharpen one's ideas based on those debates, but I am not someone who insists that there's only one way to make art. I also feel that . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: That's the Canons again.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: And I don't think . . . I don't think post-modernism is really a [rupturing] of those canons. I think it's just an establishment of new canons.

DAVID AVALOS: I think that there's also something about, about art that has to do with the creativity within everyone, and it has to do with about everyone's need to have . . . [Something scraped across microphone] Sounds of apple pie being served, here in San Diego.

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

DAVID AVALOS: Anyway, everyone has a need to watch their life unfold according to some, some inner principle. And, you know, there comes a time when you're . . . the art racket can seem just that,

a racket. It's a matter of making sure you get the right photographer to make your work look better in a slide than it does in real life; having the art language down so that you can write a proposal or a grant that, regardless of what your work looks like, it's going to impress a panel; getting your work reviewed in the right publications and making sure you have good xeroxes of those to send around to people. It becomes a matter of calculation, a matter of predictable outcome based on drudgery, you know, just a commitment to drudgery. And at some point you have to ask yourself, "Well, wasn't this whole thing supposed to be about transcendence?" You know, about getting beyond the surface characteristics of existence and getting at something more profound? I think that one of the, at one time, in the Centro, painted over the large door, was, were the . . . it was the poem, "In La Kech," you know. "Tu eres mi otro yo," the idea that we are all part of each other; we should be able to see each other in ourselves, should be able to see ourselves in others. This is something -- you know, getting back to the concept of the *mestisaje* -- that it's a physical parallel to this idea of seeing ourselves in others. I don't know if we need it. But it's there, why not use it? I think that the idea of art should allow for the possibility that we don't have to like it, that maybe we don't need it. Maybe some people have other ways of achieving transcendence, of achieving that understanding of the connection with everything. It's one way; it's not the only way. I think that a lot of times this is contradictory for this balance kind of relationship that I'm aware of. On the one hand, my work seems to be very much about creating sense of community, creating definitions for society. On the other hand, I very much cherish my individuality. And sometimes my work is about testing my ability to be apart from society by going against the grain. The surprise with the bus poster was that where I set out with Louis Hock and Elizabeth Sisco to go against that grain and to kind of defy this marketing concept of what the San Diego community was all about, you know, a great home for the Super Bowl . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

DAVID AVALOS: . . . that in going against that what I felt was a consensus, there was so much support for what we were doing. I had never thought that the kind of work that I did was the kind of work that people would want to hang in their homes or the kind of work that made people feel good, such as a painting of flowers might make someone feel good. But in fact a lot of people did feel good about what the bus poster was getting at. And I think that there's something to art that allows us to simultaneously feel connected, feel community, feel that we're making society. And at the same time allow us to get away from it all. The thing about a democratic society is that it respects those who do not agree with the majority. The . . . you know, what is the value of a democratic society if everybody has to vote? If everybody has to listen to the President's address to the nation? If everybody has to put out a flag on Flag Day? Then there's no evidence that we have democracy at work. You know. We have a totalitarian state at work. So there's this . . . there's these contradictory notions at work, and maybe they're not so contradictory; maybe they're just paired notions that need to be balanced. And that's the notion of how, through art-making, that sees itself as society-making, one gets a sense of self at the same time that one gets a sense of community. And the irony is that I . . . that the times that I have the greatest sense of self is when I'm surrounded by community and have feelings different than that community. And the time that I have the greatest sense of community is when I'm alone, and I can feel the absence of that community. You know. And I can feel the need to make connections. And it's not one or the other. I think that we have been taught to believe in the notion of the artist as genius, the artist as someone apart from community. But ultimately it's a social act. I don't know . . . We haven't a way of knowing about those people who have created art and successfully kept it from society.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's a very good point.

DAVID AVALOS: (chuckling) The only art that we know about is socially grounded.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: It's part It's an act of communication; it's a part of a discourse. So

MARGARITA NIETO: Do you think that that's become our definition of it?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, and we have no way of knowing about the stuff that's kept from us successfully, you know. Someone who writes poetry in their diary and you never have any sense of that person as living that kind of existence. Because usually, even our desire to explore our inner realities -- we talk to people about it. We communicate to each other about how it's achieved, what methods we use to achieve it, and so forth.

So I think that in talking about my work, that in superficial ways, it's about slogans, it's about politics, it's about advertisement, it's about marketing, about some very crass, vulgar, and powerful things. But in other ways it also needs to be understood as my means of developing a sense of connection with community and transcendence. You know a sense of how urgently I need community and how just as urgently I need to accept the fact that, you know, I came into this world as an individual and will leave as an individual. I won't be able to take everybody with me -- to bring everybody with me.

MARGARITA NIETO: You come in essentially alone and leave alone.

I have a question . . . I have a comment, rather than a question. In hearing you talk, so many artists that I talk to see an idea _____ the idea _____ you mentioned either a Basically they're people artists or something and they've been working in three-dimensional media -- assemblage, collage, whatever -- and they see that as another expression of a particular image or feeling or perception, space, et cetera. And in talking to you I see, rather than that kind of a conscious evolution, it was just, your art had been a response to the elements that you _____ just spoke about -- advertising -- and that your technique, so to speak the _____, came naturally out of the need to find expression for those particular images or ideas.

DAVID AVALOS: Right. I think, yeah, the work is determined more by concerns with content and subject than by concerns, formal concerns. So I don't have a signature style.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: You can look at one kind of work that I have done and say, "How does that relate in any way to the look of this other work?" And you won't find much of a relationship, but if you look at the attitudes, you will. You know, a book that had tremendous impact on me was *Blues People*, by Leroy Jones, who is known as Amiri Baraka.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

DAVID AVALOS: And in reading that book, you know, the lessons I came away from that book with were first of all, that black music has not been intended as a means of isolating the black community, but rather as a means for the black community to come to grips with a society of which it is a part. It also . . . you know, one of the big lessons I learned from reading the book was this idea that black musicians are to be understood in terms of their attitude. Not merely in terms of their form. The fact that Paul Whiteman could have a big swing band does not make him black, or does not invest him with that attitude of the black musician. And I think that it was one of the first really . . . it was one of the first books I read about art and culture that contextualized in a way that expanded and enriched the understanding of the art form. And I think that You know, I thought a lot about that book when I saw the film *Hail, Hail, Rock and Roll*.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: The film on Chuck Berry. And that whole relationship between Chuck Berry and Keith Richards in the film I don't know if you've seen the film?

MARGARITA NIETO: No, I've heard of it. I haven't seen it.

DAVID AVALOS: Well, Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones had this idea that he wanted to make a film and document, capture, Chuck Berry, what he was all about. And so they did this sixtieth anniversary tour of Chuck Berry, and Richards organized this backup group and he was complaining in the film, he goes, [imitating speech mannerisms] "Well, you know, every time I heard Chuck He's got this backup group and they're playing out of tune. It's just horrible, you know. I just wanted to present him at his best, at his best." And you get this idea, you get this attitude, real clear attitude, that Keith Richards believes that he knows how to do Chuck Berry better than Chuck Berry.

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

DAVID AVALOS: And there's this tremendous, there's so many things to be read into the film that this idea of a white musician, an English musician, and Anglo musician, who understands who his cultural father is, understands that it's a black man and does not have any role models within Western civilization by which a white man could play homage to a black man. And so the film has this strange tension. At one point, Chuck Berry is playing his guitar and just stops and says, "Hey, Man! Don't touch my amplifier." And Keith Richards goes, "Hey, Chuck Berry. I was just trying to get the best sound possible for the film, you know." Chuck says, "I don't care about the film. I want it to sound right for me right now, and I adjusted it; I don't want him to touch it." "Well, Chuck, you know, we're thinking not just about right now. We're thinking about history, you know, history." And Chuck Berry goes, "I don't care about history, see. I've been playing this way for sixty years, you know, I've been living history for sixty years. Don't touch that amplifier." There's this real interesting idea, ideas in conflict. One is the archival sensibility of the Western European that something isn't great until it's been hermetically sealed in formaldehyde, okay? -- that it's gotta be preserved, it's gotta be captured, it's gotta be documented -- and this, this other idea that, hey, as long as I'm alive, you know

MARGARITA NIETO: And I'm flattened, because that's what we're doing today _____.
(chuckles)

DAVID AVALOS: Huh? Yeah, well Yeah, but you're catching my thoughts at this particular moment, you know.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, yes.

DAVID AVALOS: But the other idea is Well, yeah, it is, there's a lot, it's complex, it's not that simple. But the other idea that's embodied by Chuck Berry who knows he's making a film, but yet insists that, "Hey, the film is important. I'm willing to participate in the making of it. But there's something more important here. And that is living life!" That is playing the music so that it can be understood in terms right now, so that it's the best that we can get right now. And I think a lot of . . . that some post-Modernist thinkers talk about the precession of simulacra, the idea that the model precedes the reality. I don't know if that's the case so much as that, often, in living, we're more preoccupied with what the document's going to be like than we are with living. We spend a lot of our time living concerned with documentation so that we rip ourself out of the moment.

But the film was also instructive in one other way. And that was, at one point, Berry is talking to the interviewer and he's saying, you know, "I used to go work in people's yards with my Daddy, and they weren't listening to Elmo James; they weren't listening to Muddy Waters. They were listening to Frank Sinatra." He says, "So when it came time to make my kind of music, I wanted to include some of that. I want to include a little bit of this, I want to include a little bit of rock and roll, I want to include blues, but I want to include Jimmy Dorsey, too." And, you know, he's considered to be one of the inventors of rock and roll. Eric Clapton is in the film and says that, "Hey, once Chuck Berry invented the way to play rock and roll guitar, there's really no other way to get that sound except his way, through the door that he opened." What's amazing to me about rock and roll is that it's a form that was able to incorporate the traditions of Mexican folk music -- what did Richie Valens do with "La Bamba?" It was able to incorporate the traditions of country-western music -- what's rock-a-billy all about? -- as well as incorporate the traditions of black music. And I think that it's important to understand that here's an artist who was able to create, able to participate in the invention of a new form that had societal implications. When you look at the film of kids at early rock and roll concerts, you look into those audiences, you see black kids and white kids sitting next to each other, and it scared the shit out of this society. Rock and roll lasted from about '54-'55 to '57-'58, and then what happened was municipalities were refusing to allow rock concerts to take place. You had the U.S. Congress investigating the industry for their so-called payola, and went through the payola hearings.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: And then you had Chuck Berry put in jail because of the Mann Act. You had Jerry Lee Lewis hounded because he married his twelve-year-old cousin or whatever. (both chuckle) And, you know, you have Little Richard being born again. There was this incredible pressure, and I think it was important to understand that this was during the Fifties., this was during the conservative Fifties. There was a phenomenon in the United States where a new art form was created that brought people together, that brought cultural traditions together, was able to incorporate And those cultural traditions didn't get lost. You didn't lose the country-western tradition by singing rock-a-billy. You were able to maintain that and also contribute to something new And I maintain that that And it scared the hell out of people, politically and economically. And it wasn't accepted until it had gone to England and then come back as the Beatles. I think that we have to look at the possibility that that's . . . that's what I mean by making society by making culture.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's a type of microcosm, a microculture.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah. And I think that as Chicanos are someone who have the tradition of the mestizo and who understand the principles behind it, we have something to contribute to this redefinition of U.S. culture and this, you know, reinvention of cultural forms. Now, exactly how it's going to happen who knows; maybe it's already happening and I'm too blind to see it. But

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, it probably is happening; it's just that it's very hard to perceive it -- how shall I say? -- when one is in the midst of . . . I mean, I _____.

DAVID AVALOS: But Chuck Berry perceived it. You know. Roll over Beethoven and tell Tchaikovsky the news! "Hail, hail, rock and roll," you know. It's amazing those guys had a sense of "Hey, this is something unlike anything that's ever existed before." Anyway.

MARGARITA NIETO: But I don't know Since my visit here a year ago, when I came to the La Jolla Museum, the Centro Cultural that day . . . I was literally blown way that day because I saw an interaction between two seemingly very, very different organizations working together and then

your work with the BAW/TAF, that was incredible that all of this functioned. There was communication. There were differences, obviously, and [great] things are not always [good, group]. But there was sense of, "We are going together toward one issue. We're all involved in art. And this is our community. And this is what we're doing."

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: And I think in Los Angeles we still have lessons to learn about that. But the fact that you're already doing that

DAVID AVALOS: Maybe it's a model?

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: I don't know. It would be wonderful to think that it was. It's interesting when I was working with Louis Hock and Elizabeth Sisco on the bus poster, Robert Pincus, critic for the San Diego Union, interviewed us at one point, then said, "How did you guys come together?" Said, "I would have never thought that the three of you would work together." He had done a review of the Border Realities III exhibition, in which he talked about my work, and he compared it to two other exhibits that were happening simultaneously. One was an exhibition of Elizabeth Sisco's photographs . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: [Yeah.]

DAVID AVALOS: . . . and he was critical, in a negative way about Liz's photographs, and it surprised him that we were working together. But what I found in working together, you know, that, "Hey, the border belongs to all of us, so if we're going to make this society here, we can't do it in isolation." There's . . . we live in a racist society. We live in a sexist society. We live in a very harsh society. And one of the results of working with a group the way we do is that there's so much, there's such diversity in the group that it had. People bring their own networks. They bring their own audiences. And they bring their own ways of being perceived outside the group. I can remember once standing outside the Centro Cultural with Michael Schnorr and members of the Border Art Workshop. It was about one o'clock in the morning, and this drunk came by, and he was asking us for directions. And he was talking to both of us, but he wasn't really talking to both of us. He situated himself where he was talking only to Michael Schnorr, and he wasn't talking to me. It was very clear. You know, we didn't make any big deal out of it, but Michael and I talked about it afterwards. Very clear that this guy felt that he could talk to the white man, but he could not talk to the brown man, you know. And you see it with men and women, and you see it in many other ways. And I think that that connection you talk about between the La Jolla Museum and the Central Cultural was, you know, I have to believe that part of it was just the different levels of accessibility that curators have to certain groups. That's something that actually had to be worked against, too, you know. "Hey, just because you're more acceptable to, you're more acceptable culturally to certain cultural gatekeepers doesn't mean that you'll be the spokesperson." You know, that has to be worked out too, and that's part of the tension of working with the group. but I agree with you. You know, I'm working on a project now, another collaboration with a woman, Deborah Small, and a man, James Luna, who's a Luisena Indian from North County, and we're working on a project around the beatification of Junipero Serra.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: We're trying to go back and read the history, you know, the Catholic Church wants

to make a saint out of him.

MARGARITA NIETO: I know, uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: And there's very many . . . there's Indian tribes all up and down the state and around the country that are opposed to it.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

DAVID AVALOS: And we're trying to create work that looks at what that reality is, that questions, "Why now?" Because what we see it as is a sanctification not of an individual man but a sanctification of the conquest, a sanctification of the relegation of the native peoples of this continent to savagery, a justification . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: And for the destruction of that society.

[Starting about here, the conversation is masked by restaurant noise. Confidence in the accuracy of the transcription is therefore diminished--Trans.]

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah. . . . a justification for that destruction. Once again, an inability to embrace a tragedy. And to have the confidence that we'll persevere, even though we embrace the horrors of this tragedy. And we also have working with us William Weeks, who's a historian. So I'm thinking that, you know, these collaborations have to continue in which you understand that we've all come to this society from our own perspectives. If your tradition is country-western music, you don't have to pretend you're a soul singer. You can make rock-a-billy. If your tradition is Mexican, you know, you don't have to pretend that you're Buddy Holly. You can turn "La Bamba" into a rock-and-roll song.

With these collaborations, we're not expecting people to go native. You know, if you come from a European Background, then tell us what you see about art history in the border society from that perspective. We'll talk about art as this dialogue. And [let's communicate, this community]. And let's understand that, you know, that when we talk about interdisciplinary, this does not mean interdisciplinary art, I mean across the board of intellectual inquiry, an exploration, you know. Again going back to 1980, that idea of shoulder to shoulder, where everybody was interested in remaking society. Let's not cut ourselves off. And if we don't do that, if we don't, in our own immediate small way, insist that this society is not what it seems, if we don't insist on pretending that this society is really capable of allowing a context where people from different backgrounds, different heritages, different races, to get together, if we don't pretend that's possible, then it's never going to be possible. And we're going to be left with a sense of what life is all about based on, you know, the advertisements on Cheers, the commercials we see while we're watching Cheers [a television sitcom--Ed.]

MARGARITA NIETO: Or living by the expectations of a _____sen.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, that's another thing, too. I think that's really important. Another way of pigeonholing us as same. "Okay, you guys can be allowed your role, and your role is to be gatekeepers to the past. You preserve traditions, and when we want to take a trip into the foggy, fog-shrouded source of culture on this continent, we'll go to the Centro Cultural and you can tell us what it was like a thousand years ago." How the hell do we know what it was like a thousand years ago? (laughing) You know? I mean, working with traditions is just as much a matter of exploration as making the future.

MARGARITA NIETO: [No, you know], in a sense what you're saying is that Chicanos have as much

relationship in reality with Native American myth and Columbian _____ as any Anglo _____. On one hand we can [romance] it, and say, "Oh, yes, we do!" Part of our tradition. But on a very harsh and real level, we're twentieth-century, late twentieth-century people.

DAVID AVALOS: Exactly. You know, I read all three of Well, at that time he had three books, Carlos Castenada's books. I read them in one weekend, went out and tried to talk to pigeons. You know, I was just going to will myself into being able to telepathically communicate with pigeons. (laughing) Doesn't work that way at all.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, his other books, I think . . . well, I think he widens the perspective, but I'm talking about even the David Carrasco type of situation, or . . .

DAVID AVALOS: The what?

MARGARITA NIETO: David Carrasco. The whole . . .

Tape 4, Side A

MARGARITA NIETO: Archives of American Art, interview number two, David Avalos, Margarita Nieto, San Diego, California, July 5th 1988, 12:45. [This tape side may have been recorded before the previous side; see note on page 47--Ed.]

David, since our last meeting I've been thinking about some of the things we talked about, and in the car, as you were taking me to the station, you were talking about artists, paintings, painters that you liked and that in a sense have influenced you. Could you talk a little bit about that?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah. I could talk about that. As far as I'll talk about artists that I like; as far as whether or not they've influenced me I don't know if I want to put the blame on them.

MARGARITA NIETO: (chuckles)

DAVID AVALOS: But when I was growing up we had this illustrated Bible at home, and it had colored plates or color process with these paintings by the masters, Renaissance masters, religious paintings and so forth. I was always knocked out by the sense of drama that was conveyed in these, but these were reproductions and a lot of the art that I have seen has been in reproduction, which is a comment on and of itself.

I've always been drawn to the work of someone like Picasso. I don't necessarily look to him as an influence, but it's something that, you know, I always found worth my while just to try and look at his work -- mostly in reproduction, although I've seen originals as well -- and try and make sense of my reaction to his work. And the aura that has been created about his work I like Jackson Pollack, the action paintings. Even before I understood what supposedly he intended or how other people saw them in terms of a meaning, I just liked the look of the work.

But then I've liked the work of Robert Crumb. In fact, the Border Art Workshop, our first exhibition was in San Francisco at the Galeria de la Raza back in February '85, and for me one of the big highlights of that exhibition was that I got to meet Robert Crumb. Spain Rodriguez happened to be passing by the gallery. I believe it was Rene Yanez introduced me to Spain and Robert Crumb.

DAVID AVALOS: So, you know, my influences as far as artists have been great. I've always found myself drawn to it. I've enjoyed going to museums. I never necessarily sought them out.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: But I've always been drawn to the idea of art, to the idea of paintings having special buildings created for them and hanging in these buildings. But I think in terms of the kind of work I do, it's generated more by the mind, than by some aesthetic sense, if you will, and where I could go down any number of artists -- Dubuffet. I like Dubuffet -- and any list, any particular list of works.

I don't think that it would really be very instructive in terms of trying to get at my influences, because I don't think that my influences are formal so much as in terms of ideas and there my influences go beyond the art world, and I'm influenced by I'm influenced by social thinkers. I'm influenced by social action. I'm influenced by scientific thinkers and the process of discovery, the process of acquiring knowledge. And I see my work as dealing with the everyday mysteries that each of us encounter as we make our way through our lives. So, you know, I think as far as artistic influences, probably [I'm--Ed.] more influenced by film --and not necessarily as a student of film, but someone who's seen a good number of films, both in a university setting and in commercial theaters, and influenced by graphics to a great extent, cartoons, editorial cartoons

MARGARITA NIETO: I wanted to ask you You mentioned _____.

DAVID AVALOS: I'm sorry, just to finish up . . . ?

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: Also, I think my work is, in terms of form, my work is much more influenced by Mexican folk art.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: At least there's a certain body of my work that's much more influenced by Mexican folk art than anything else.

MARGARITA NIETO: You're making a strong distinction between then works that you like _____, that are pleasing to you, artists whose work is pleasing to you, and things that influence you. And I think it's very interesting that the artists that you mentioned, Pablo Picasso, are artists who are two-dimensional -- for the most part -- and who tend toward abstraction. And yet your work is very visionary, isn't it?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, well, I don't know. I don't think anyone's ever put the word visionary on it. I don't know exactly what you mean by visionary. Well, I don't know how curious

MARGARITA NIETO: What I mean by that -- and perhaps I'm using the word in a rather loose way -- is work that talks about something that is but with an, but with a reflection of something more to it, an irony, a satire, or a condemnation.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, see, I guess the To try and encapsulate my thoughts about all this, there's very little in the way of art that I've seen that I feel adamantly opposed to, in terms of visual arts. There's the stable that is usually presented in the history books as the Moderns, whether it be the Cubists or the Abstract Expressionists or the Surrealists, or whatever, I find all their work intriguing. I like looking at things.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: I like looking at things that are, that are different . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . than what we see in real life, or presented in ways that are startling such as Surrealist paintings. But in terms of the ideas behind my work, I'm less aware of Surrealist manifestos, although I know they had them . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . and although I know that there is a political context to their work -- excuse me [sneezing? coughing?--Trans.] -- than I am, let's say of the manifestos of the Chicano movement and writings by various people about political freedom and so forth. And in that sense, I think that . . . I tend to think that I share something with artists from other ages in that way, in that their work is not necessarily work about art. It's work about the times that they lived in, and the societies that they lived in, and the aspirations that they had, and the tensions and contradictions that they saw around them. I think that And in that sense it makes, it's much more logical to expect artists to be, to have a broad range of influences, societal influences, rather than Because someone happens to work in a particular discipline to be able to point to that discipline and say, "Well, who are your influences within that discipline?"

I think that as far as painters, you know, the Mexican muralists where artists whose work I look at again in reproduction very closely.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: And who, about whom I read [past tense--Ed.] relatively much more than about other artists. I started out by, by finding Diego Rivera the most appealing, I think because he's like most accessible -- by intention; he wanted to be the most accessible. I think that he's probably the greatest political cartoonist that ever lived, and I moved on from him to find myself being very intrigued by what Siqueiros was all about and what he was trying to do, his insistence on developing new forms in conjunction with the development of new ideas. I don't know if he succeeded. I think that in a sense he was caught at a very interesting time in history where his ideas may have been much better served in medium such as film than in, with mural painting.

MARGARITA NIETO: That's an interesting statement. Why do you say that?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, because I think his ideas were very much caught up with the general notion of social change. I think that his ideas were about redefining society, restructuring society. And when he talked about the creation of new forms, ultimately what he came up with was a kind of mural architecture, or an architecture that became a frame for these mural sculptures. And in a sense I think he defeated himself. The Polyforum is in one sense one man's monument to hideousness. There's the fact that the floor in the Polyforum is designed to move, rendering the viewer entirely passive in the face of this depiction of human life in motion through struggle to come to grips with its own destiny is a contradiction and it's not easy to overlook. So I think that if he had worked in other mediums, mass mediums, film, radio . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Video?

DAVID AVALOS: . . . newspapers or whatever. Yeah, television was around when Certainly I don't know how, what kind of an influence it was in Mexico up to the Sixties, but When did he die? '72?

MARGARITA NIETO: Something like that.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, yeah, I think that he could have worked in that medium as well. So it's a situation of someone who is caught at a particular moment in history, and I think that his work made much more sense in the Twenties and Thirties, but

MARGARITA NIETO: You mentioned film as being important, an important influence in your work.

DAVID AVALOS: Well, I think yeah, visually. I think also in terms of the sense of time, what it does to time, and the idea that you don't have to have a linear narrative, that you can bounce back and forth, or you can compress things and extend things through editing and slow motion. But also besides those characteristics of the medium, the essential characteristics of mass media in which you're able to present an image simultaneously around the world.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: To hundreds of thousands of millions of people.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: That kind of power.

MARGARITA NIETO: That kind of public appeal, um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah. I think that finally with the Mexican mural masters, with Los Tres Grandes, I wound up I have come to the conclusion that I think Orozco was probably the greatest painter, although

Yeah, I think, you know, it's not necessary to put qualifications. I think that he was, I think they all did something that was particularly unique, particularly important, particularly valuable. But, you know, if you want to make a beauty contest out of it, I guess that Orozco would be the artist that appeals to me the most. so it He wrote something that I read, you know, "Art is not about telling stories. Art is about ideas." I can remember when I first read that in the early Seventies, I didn't quite understand what it was, what he meant by that . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . and I think over time I've come to understand that art is a, that in one sense art, this thing we call art, is a kind of abstracted passion. It's a passion of the mind that refers to other passions, but ultimately for it to work it becomes abstracted, it becomes an abstract passion. And I'm not talking, his [interview] wasn't necessarily abstract, I mean . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . just the fact that you're working with ideas. You're not trying to tell a story. You're not even working with emotions; you're working with ideas.

MARGARITA NIETO: A lot of your work -- well, not a lot of your work -- but a good deal of your work has been in the assemblage medium. Why? How did you get to that media after working in murals?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, you know, I was I began working at the Centro Cultural in 1978, I guess.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: And I was working primarily as a program coordinator, as an administrator, as a contract monitor, and it was suggested to me in the early Eighties that I begin making my own work, that if I developed a body of work I could actually submit to the California Arts Council as an artist-in-residence, that I could receive money for working in community situations as well as making my own work.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: So I accepted the challenge, if you will, and began making pieces like the Dia de los Muertos mask, 1982. And essentially the idea was just to make work that looks something like art. And when I felt, you know, I found myself in a situation, well, what do I fall back on as far as some sort of a tradition? And I looked to Mexican folk art, I looked to the popular mass media, the cultures of the Chicano here in the United States, and I began making pieces that reflected that kind of reality. And they were essentially painted constructions that included found objects in them.

I did a piece . . . that mask was done in '83. I did another piece in '83 which was a . . . It was supposed to be a mural, a portable mural, four feet by eight feet, and it was called Loteria Chicana. And actually it became a piece that was, that had three-dimensional qualities, and again included carved wooden features as well as objects such as barbed wire and chain link fence and broken bottles, dice and so forth. And the piece had movable parts, and so on. And I found that at this period that it was, it was very difficult for me to work two-dimensionally. I hadn't done that much two-dimensional work before, but it now became impossible. It just didn't interest me at all. I wanted the pieces to be dynamic, I wanted them to move. I wanted them to have, I wanted them to project out; I wanted them to involve the viewer. So you actually, the viewer actually spun the wheel on the Loteria Chicana. And again, you know, I'm falling back on popular forms of Mexican culture -- the loteria game -- blended with Chicano realities. There's an image of a cholo and having political overtones. I painted this cholo holding this decoupage that said, "Asi era Mexico, antes del Robo." And this was a . . . this painting was based on a photograph that had been taken in 1980 at a border march organized by the Committee on Chicano Rights, of which I was and still am a member. Now, that piece I did because I was interested at that time, in 1983, in trying to come to grips with what seemed to be two completely different aspects of myself: myself as an image creator and myself as a community activist. and I was trying to create work that enabled me to do both, to deal with the ideas and concerns that I dealt with as a community activist and to also deal with materials and with the visual art language that was expected in the arts. I think that in . . . IN subsequent years, I began working on the Hubcap series.

And there's a certain amount of calculation in what I was doing. You know, I saw it as an opportunity, on the one hand, as I've already mentioned, to create a body of work that would enable me to make some money.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: I really didn't expect the work to sell. (chuckles) It did, but the idea was to create a body of work so that I could have some slides . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

DAVID AVALOS: . . . and the slides would make me money.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: And eventually as my interest focused on the kind of work that was not, for which there was not a receptive audience that was cheering me on enthusiastically, work that involved strong political content and strong social reference, I felt that it was important to make things that looked like art -- and I enjoyed doing them. I've enjoyed making every one of the hubcaps, but at the same time, there's always been this sense that, "Hey, this is kind of what it's supposed to look like, yet it's different enough to occupy its own niche. And this should help establish that I'm an artist."

MARGARITA NIETO: What's interesting is that you move from You say one of your first pieces is Dia de los Muertos Mask, which has its counterpart in Mexican popular art.

DAVID AVALOS: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: And then you talk about the portable mural -- and already you're moving in [Tomes to Tavlop] types of situation, Loteria and the idea of participation -- the relationship between the work and the viewer actually, the participatory link between the two.

DAVID AVALOS: Um Hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: Between the object and viewer. And you talk about using found objects, and all of a sudden you move into the Hubcap series. And it seems to me that you've taken a big leap in another direction -- or shall I say in a very modern direction, a very contemporary direction -- by taking something that's sort of there an utilitarian, but making it, putting it in the context of social reality and art?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, you know, when I first started making the hubcaps actually it was in '84, and I had been invited to be in this exhibition at a commercial gallery. It was the first time that I was going to show my work at a commercial gallery.

MARGARITA NIETO: What gallery was that?

DAVID AVALOS: Called Maple Gallery, here in San Diego, and it no longer exists.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: But my, my feeling was that if I was gonna show my work in a gallery, the only reason for doing it was to make some money, so I began working on some pieces based in a, on a newspaper ad I had seen for the Stray Cats, which was this semi-New Wave rock-a-billy group. And I had seen an ad for them in which they're very much trying to convey this image of the Fifties, and one of the guys is there in his, you know, Fifties haircut and he's wearing a T-shirt with rolled up sleeves and he's got a tattoo on his arm of a heart . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Hm hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . and he's sitting down and he's holding a hubcap, just a plain hubcap, and in my mind that tattoo just kept sliding off of his arm right into the center of the hubcap. So the inspiration for the original hubcap was from a Stray Cats newspaper ad, if you will. And the wherewithal came from the fact that all my life I had watched my Dad work with a variety of materials in the garage at home, whether it be cement work or carpentry or plumbing. I'd seen him melt lead in the garage so he could make fittings for a plumbing job he was doing, and seen him work with his table saw and so on and so forth.

MARGARITA NIETO: What did your Dad do?

DAVID AVALOS: My Dad worked as a wharf builder here in San Diego Harbor all his life, or most of his adult life. You know, he was there for about thirty years working with the Naval Repair Facility. But, you know, like a lot of Chicanos, he was constantly doing things around the house, repairing, adding, remodeling, and so forth, and had all these tools from every . . . you know, pipe fitting tools, masonry tools., shipfitting tools, and just this wild assortment. So when it came time for me to make things, there was a lot of things I was not familiar with because I had not, you know, I had not been through a formal art department anywhere. But I was familiar with the kind of [materials, tools] my Dad used, so was able to, you know, work with metal, work with wood, work with the kind of junk that I saw around the garage all the time: circular table saw blades, which, you know, were incorporated into that first Hubcap Milagro.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: But I, you know, I think the point that needs to be made is that, while I took a great deal of joy in manipulating these materials and making things, making objects, there was always an understanding while I was doing them that there was a purpose for doing it and the purpose was two fold: One was to try and sell these things to make some money, and two was to establish the kind of credibility as an artist within the art arena that would allow me, having been recognized as an artist, to say, "Okay, if what I do over here is regarded as art, 'cause you can hang it up on a wall, what about what I'm doing over here?" Which is where, I wouldn't say my real interest lies because I'm just as interested in the hubcaps as I am in the bus poster, for example . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . but where I feel I'm taking greater risks, where I feel I'm doing things that are in a sense not more important, but more interesting. So there's this, there's a situation where I see everything I make as having, as being made within a certain context for a certain reason for a certain audience to fit some sort of overall game plan. You know, Hans Haacke was here at the Lo Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Right.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . and I got a chance to do a lot of studying about the man, had a chance to meet him and talk to him and so forth. And in one of his interviews he had said that . . . It was pointed out to him that he had been accepted as a conceptual artist and then began doing work that was considered much more political. And he . . . it was pointed out to him that he had the advantage of having been accepted by the art world as an artist before he began doing these other things. And he was asked, "What would you recommend younger artists that want to start out doing these sorts of things?" And he didn't have any ready answer. He was very frank. He said, "I don't know what to tell them." He said, "But I know it's, it does help to have established your credibility as artist." And I don't know if credibility is the word. "To establish your acceptance as an artist before you begin dealing with tougher material that is not seen as traditionally part of that arena."

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: So when I saw that, which was, you know, recently, '87 I think, it in a way helped to make sense out of the way that I approached my work, because some of my work is temporary work. It's intended to go up and come down like installations of the bus poster. Some of it is more involving mass media than galleries. Some of it is outside in unexpected places on a temporary basis, too, like the San Diego Donkey Cart. But some of it is very traditional kind of work: objects that you can hang on the wall. And to me it's pretty much, it can all be looked at differently, but as

far as I'm concerned, as far as the guy who's making them, they all benefit me as I try and make my way every day though life.

MARGARITA NIETO: When you began making this, when you took the step into communicating with your viewer, pulling in the participant, and seeing the work as a phenomena that goes beyond observation, did you have any, was there anything conscious . . . ?

Tape 4, Side B

[Accompanying the interview are voices that are nearly as loud as the artist's and the interviewer's--Ed.]

DAVID AVALOS: Okay, so you just confused yourself. [Speaking of the aping procedures?--Ed.]

Oh, was I aware of the assemblage of the Sixties and Seventies?

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm. And did you have a consciousness about the fact that you were doing something that was akin to what other people were doing or . . . ?

DAVID AVALOS: [thinking] Well, I think that by the time, by the 1980s I don't know how you could escape, I don't know how anyone in this country could escape not being exposed at some, in some way, shape or form to various currents in the arts. I mean, they might not be able to tell you by looking at something that they know what movement it's part of or what artist created it or when it was created. It might not be that they seek it out, but it's just there. You know, it seems to me it's just there. So I've been exposed to a lot of images, I've gone to museums, I've seen catalogues, and so forth.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: When I began doing the hubcaps, it wasn't with the feeling that I was part of a tradition or that I was consciously trying to fit myself into a tradition. I think that what gave me the confidence and encouragement to begin creating things was what I had seen happen within the Chicano art movement.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: And much of the visual language that was being used within the Chicano visual art movement was a language I was conversant with. It was a language I had grown up with. The colors are the colors I'd seen in people's homes, you know, Tur[quoise] . . . I lived next to a guy who's got a turquoise house. Going to Tijuana and seeing the way the shops are painted there.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: The muffler shops and the poster shops and so on and so forth, and being exposed to folk art and so on, and then seeing what Chicanos were doing here in San Diego and elsewhere. It was, it was a matter of if I had any tradition it was a popular tradition, and if I had any teachers it was the Chicano artists who were making art out of everything -- and anything.

MARGARITA NIETO: And very much in the tradition of the Mexican popular artist.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, yeah. But with a sensibility that was very much informed by mass-mediated images and also very much informed by the consumer culture, but as the essence of U.S. culture.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, because in a sense we can say, "Oh yes, [Claes--Ed.] Oldenburg, Billy Al Bengston, or whatever, but actually Disneyland, say the mechanical toys, or the kind of mechanical animation that you have in Disneyland is probably just important, as important an influence on us on the west coast as anything else.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, and I think probably true of, this is true for non-Chicano artists as for Chicano artists.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right. Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: So, you know, I did, it was a tradition that I was aware of. There's an artist in San Diego, called Salvador Torres, who was very influential in the establishment of the Centro Cultural de la Raza and has been very much involved since the beginning with Chicano Park and so forth. And I knew that, from a conversation I had with him, that he had attended the California College of Arts and Crafts along with Jose Montoya and Esteban Villa and others, were very, others who were very much involved in that particular impulse within Chicano art, the barrio sensibility. And I had occasion to ask him what kind of things influenced him when he was at California College of Arts and Crafts, and he talked about the assemblage show that had been in San Francisco, that originated in New York, and there was a catalog for that show. I went to the library and got the catalog and xeroxed every page in the catalog because I couldn't find it anywhere. I sent back to the museum. I think it was the Museum of Modern Art that had originally put the show together back in the Sixties, and they didn't have any catalogues that they could sell.

But I was amazed looking through the work in that show how contemporary it seemed and how much I loved that sensibility.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: And how free and wonderful it was. Just the idea that art is whatever happens to be within arm's reach at any particular moment, so those chicken bones . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: . . . are just as fair game as Liquitex acrylic paint, you know. It's . . . but I really didn't get a sense that I was an assemblage artist or that I was part of any tradition till the Santa Barbara -- what is it? -- the Contemporary Arts Forum.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: And Santa Barbara put this show together called Southern California Assemblage and I was invited to have one of my hubcaps in the show. I think Hubcap Miladro No. 6, which was recently purchased by the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: And, you know, it's one of those situations where somebody came to town, and an artist introduced me to this somebody, and said, "You know, this woman's curating a show for the Contemporary Arts Forum in Santa Barbara and would like to see some of your work, and I said, "Sure, you know, here's what I've got around right now," and, "Well, why don't you, would you be interested in being in the show?: And I said, "Why not." And, you know, there was a catalog. I didn't even realize there was going to be a catalog for this show, and I read the catalog essay and I saw some of the other people in the show, and I realized, "Well, these were people who are taken very seriously in terms of the work that they do. They are considered assemblage artists." And I was touched. I was touched by the fact that, for whatever reason, I had been invited to be in this show

and that I was in that company that I was. I felt, for the first time, I felt that there was a connection between myself and this strain within the art tradition, this strain of assemblage.

And I was humbled by it. You know, there was some, there was some wonderful work in the show and I was very glad to be part of it, and I think that that's probably why I got into the Forty Years of California Assemblage show -- which I am embarrassed to admit that the piece that's been selected for that show is probably more of a painted wood construction with found objects than an assemblage per se. If you're looking in terms of assemblage sensibility, my hubcaps have much more of that sensibility that someone threw a pile of junk into a corner and the way it landed is what is hanging on the wall.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: But the Donkey Cart . . . , the San Diego, or the Donkey Cart Caper. I guess it's No, it's the Donkey Cart Altar is the piece that's gonna be in the show.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

DAVID AVALOS: In the Forty Years of California Assemblage.

MARGARITA NIETO: Talk a little bit about the Donkey Cart Altar and how . . . it's genesis, so to speak?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, when I completed the, the Loteria Chicana, I felt that I had found a kind of, a means of working, a way of working that, that enabled me to fall back on popular traditions of Mexico and invest them with contemporary political ideas. I entered it in a competition here in San Diego, and I won first prize in this competition. And I was very encouraged and pleased by that, and one of the benefits of winning the prize in this competition was that myself and the second and third place winner were given a three-person show. So, in the course of preparing for that three-person show, I decided that I would continue working in the vein of taking something from popular Mexican culture and trying to invest it with content that appealed to my sensibility as a community activist. And what I focused on was a Tijuana donkey cart, which is really more tourist art than popular art. And I did a small piece about ten inches by -- about ten inches square, maybe eleven, twelve inches square. And that piece was in the show, and I began working on an intermediate-size piece. Eventually I wanted to do a full-scale piece.

MARGARITA NIETO: Talk a little bit about, for the sake of those who are uninitiated, what a Tijuana donkey cart is.

DAVID AVALOS: Well, I guess it's a tradition going back at least to the Forties, of being able to go to Tijuana and have your photograph taken in this border town sitting on a cart that is tied to a burro. And I guess, you know, maybe it was, maybe the first photographs were done in the Thirties. During the Thirties, Tijuana was a very popular attraction for the Hollywood crowd. It had a gambling casino during Prohibition. It was, of course, a wet city, and it had a race track and a golf course. My dad used to caddy at the golf course in Tijuana.

MARGARITA NIETO: They had a very famous film with Betty Davis, Border Town?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, and

MARGARITA NIETO: Is that Betty Davis or . . . ?

DAVID AVALOS: I think it might have been Betty Davis and Paul Muni.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: So anyway, the idea of leaving the United States and going down to this -- what at that time would have been a very sleep and small town -- and being able to sit on this symbol of rural, agrarian preindustrial Mexico.

MARGARITA NIETO: Creating this marvelous stereotype.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, yeah. So eventually And I've seen photographs of the early carts, and they were actual carts that could have been used for any number of, you know -- transporting corn from the field to market for example. And they were actual functional carts. But over a period of time they became more and more stylized, and eventually lost any function except that of serving as a photographic backdrop for tourist souvenirs. And so in the Eighties, what you have are these, I think magnificently designed and decorated carts which are, are all pretty much standard. They are all two-wheeled. They have a place where you sit on them -- a bench where you can sit on them -- and then they have a scene, a Mexican cultural scene behind where you sit. It might be the discovery of the Tenochtitlan, or it might be a charro singing to a senorita in a second-story window, or it might be some other image associated

MARGARITA NIETO: La Virgin de Guadalupe.

DAVID AVALOS: I don't know if I've ever seen La Virgin de Guadalupe. I've seen the other images that you associate with Mexican calendar art.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: Like the La Mujer Dormida.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: And those images. But the amazing thing about these, about these carts, is that they're so dysfunctional now that they have to be propped up on wooden horses, so the wheels don't even touch the ground, and instead of the burro being in the middle where you would expect the animal to be -- a single animal if it was going to pull the cart -- the rails that guide the burro are over to one side so that the burro doesn't get in the middle of the photograph -- allows a better angle for taking a photograph -- and the burro itself is painted as a zebra, black and white. Even though these carts are wonderfully colorful, they're, the photographs they take are black and white, so that for the burro to stand out better they paint him with black and white stripes.

So you have this incredible absurdity. You know, Tijuana is the second largest city on the west coast of North America. It's bigger than San Diego. It's second only to Los Angeles. And you have tourists from all over the United States and all over the world really. I've seen tourists that seem to be from Japan. You have these folks from Tokyo who are suspended above the pavement in this very stereotypical, as you said earlier, image of Mexico. There's serapes. There's sombreros. It's very colorful, gaily painted. It's very festive. There's the image of the Indian, the prehistoric Indian behind the tourists, and this reference to the rural. There's a, there's a fake cactus plant and you have this sense of Mexico as stopped in time: the land of the ancient Aztec, colorful, gay, rural, propelled still by the burro, that, you know, hasn't entered the rocket age at all. And it's a complete suspension of reality and these folks then go back to their neighborhoods in Tokyo or Muncie, Indiana, and it's proof that they have been to Mexico and know what Mexico is all about. They pull out these little

black and white photographs and say, "See, it's just like we always thought it was."

And, you know, so I decided to take this altar to, this stereotypical altar, this altar to this fantasy version of Mexico and invest it with an image that really gets at the relationship between the United States and Mexico here in this border region.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: And so I depicted an undocumented worker being apprehended by a border patrol agent and surrounded it with references to law enforcement and to Mexican popular art, milagros and so forth. The middle version, the Donkey Cart Altar, which is going to be part of the Forty Years of . . . or is it Eighty Years?

MARGARITA NIETO: Forty.

DAVID AVALOS: Forty Years of California Assemblage show.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . went through a number of changes. It was originally in the show at Galeria de la Raza in February 1985, and then I continued working on it and painting it, and it was in a number of subsequent shows. And it was intended to be a, to give me some sense of what this piece would look like when it went full scale.

I had been invited by Lynn Schuette of Suchi, which is a gallery and performance space here in San Diego, to be in this exhibit that she was going to have in which temporary work was going to be placed in downtown San Diego as a way of showing alternatives to the presentation of public art. And she'd seen my piece, the Loteria Chicana, and on that basis of that had asked me to be in this show, so when I had an early conversation with her, she asked me if I had anything that would be appropriate for a public space and I said, "Well, really, the only thing that I've got is this, you know, right now . . . [Aside to waitress or MN:--Ed.] Oh, excuse me . . . I've got some slides of this, this maquette of a donkey cart, but I've always wanted to make it full scale. So, as things worked out, I was given permission to place a full-scale version of the Donkey Cart in front of the federal courthouse in downtown San Diego for a two-week period in January, 1986.

MARGARITA NIETO: This was in front of the courthouse?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, in front of the federal courthouse, which I thought . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: [Oh my!] (laughs)

DAVID AVALOS: . . . was a most appropriate place for it, and it was really a great opportunity for me, because it forced me to begin thinking about what is the nature . . . No, why is art public art? What is the nature of public art? And what is the context in which I'm showing this work? What is the nature of public space? So I approached the work with these ideas. I thought that it was, it was a reversing of the polarities, bringing this Tijuana donkey cart north of the border to downtown San Diego. And it was also a reversing of the polarities in terms of instead of making an image that reinforced status quo ideas about the relationship between the United States and Mexico, this is something that was intended to provoke thought and provoke questions about that relationship.

My idea was that I was going to be there every day of the two weeks that the Donkey Cart was up during the lunch hour so that I could talk to people in public space. I could have conversations with

people about the public issue of immigration, about public art.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah, like Vito Acconci coming up and photographing people from behind.
(laughs)

DAVID AVALOS: Well, the Vito Acconci piece was one where the people really didn't know he was following them. That was the whole thing about the piece.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah.

DAVID AVALOS: But my intention was to actually interact with people on a face-to-face, in a face-to-face kind of way and ask them what they thought about public space, what they thought about public art, and what they thought about the public issue of immigration.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: But I was denied that possibility when the chief Federal District judge, a guy by the name of Gordon Thompson, Jr., ordered the piece removed. It was removed on the sixth of January, 1986.

MARGARITA NIETO: On the day of the kings, the Three Kings, huh?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, I guess so! I guess so. Dia de Los Reyes, yeah. I hadn't made that connection. But then a number of things were set in motion about the piece. My intention in setting up the piece, besides being there physically and talking to people during lunch hour The piece was outside of the offices of the Immigration and Naturalization Service in the federal building, and I figured if I kept my ears open I would be able to get some sense of whether or not they were going to make a move to have the piece removed, or to have the piece censored, or just to protest the placement of the piece there, and I felt that if I was quick to take advantage of that I could take it to the mass media, the newspapers here in San Diego, and get a story out of it. Galleries and museums can be very suffocating because there's always this sense that nobody is coming to look at the work, and there's no way to really engage and get a sense of how people are responding to the work. So I wanted to be there with the work, you know, seeing how people were responding to it and understanding that they were going to be responding as much to my presence as to the work.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: And I also, I've always been interested in getting images out and ideas out through the mass media that relate to the work and actually use the work as a platform. So when this piece was removed -- or prior to the piece being removed -- I had received a letter from the building manager saying that the piece had to be removed, and I called a news conference saying that I wasn't going to remove the piece. I was able to get a hold of ACLU attorney, a man by the name of Greg Marshall, very quickly. And I got a lot of support in the mass media.

MARGARITA NIETO: It was removed in like six days after it went up or something _____. How long was it up?

DAVID AVALOS: It was up for one day.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, one day.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, it was taken down the day after it went up.

MARGARITA NIETO: And what were the reasons given for taking it down?

DAVID AVALOS: That it was a security risk, that somebody could plant a bomb in it. Because I had placed a chain link fence with barbed wire around it, and the security guard says that they, claimed that they couldn't get into the thing and that somebody could get in there and plant a bomb and they had no way of checking it out -- which was pretty nonsensical. There's a lot of better place to put a bomb than, than in that particular piece, because of its location and also because, you know, if it was difficult for them to get in, it would be difficult for a bomb thrower to get in there too.

But it created a lot of consternation. There was a lot of attention paid to it at the time here locally, and also the story was carried on television throughout the state and on the wire services, so that it was covered across the country and eventually even the New York Times did a piece on it. And I think that the media was very much concerned with it because of the question of freedom of expression, which is . . . you know, the First Amendment is their license to make a buck, so they wanted to make sure that the story was covered in a way that benefited them.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: I think that I learned a tremendous amount from that piece. And for any of the works I had created up to that time it was the most successful in creating a connection between myself as an artist and myself as a community activist. Because it was able to bring up questions of freedom of expression. It was able to bring out questions of the nature of the role of the undocumented worker within U.S. society. And I was also able to deal with an art form in a new way: public art. I had painted murals, but it was different than doing this temporary sculpture. And I learned an awful lot about

MARGARITA NIETO: You felt it had much more impact than a mural, did you?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: In terms of making a statement?

DAVID AVALOS: Yes, and I think partly because of its temporary nature.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: I think that you can make much stronger statements if people feel they won't have to live with them for the rest of their lives. You know, if they're going to be up just temporarily.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: But what I I think that the chief lesson that I came away with from the whole experience was that our sense of public space . . . or the sense of public space within U.S. society is dramatically altered from what it was fifty years ago or certainly a hundred years ago. We do not envision public space as a space to linger in, as a space to come in contact with other residents for the purpose of social intercourse. We view it, we view public space as something that you pass through to get from point A to point B. It's not a place where you would engage a, it's not a place where it's encouraged that you engage a stranger in a conversation about a matter of public concern. People don't normally stop each other on the streets and say, "Hey, you know, I've been thinking about this issue that's in the public's mind a lot lately. I just wondered, you seem like an intelligent fellow, you seem like a stupid fellow or whatever, or an intelligent woman or an unintelligent woman, but for whatever reason, I'd like to talk to you about this public issue." You

know, we don't just assume that other people have those issues on their mind. There's not really public forums.

MARGARITA NIETO: Particularly in the United States, you'd say. I mean, for _____ . . .

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, I'm talking about U.S. society.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh. Mexico, for example, Mexico City, large parks, you have that sense of the [place, plaza (pronounced in Spanish)] still. Paris is that way.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, I think that functions that you would find taking place in neighborhood bars or sidewalk cafes or whatever, you don't see that happening. You know, people talk about cocooning, and so our sense of what is public is the sense that is fed to us by the mass media.

It was interesting, one critic stated that the piece received its greatest public exposure after it as removed by order of the judge. Well, there's two senses of public, you know. Once it was removed from public, public space, it had no more public exposure in the sense of actual physical space. The public exposure it had was mass media exposure, which all the mass media in the country is privately owned.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: And for the most part we consume it privately. We watch TV in our homes. We read the newspaper in our homes. And so forth. So it was, the whole thing was very instructive in that sense. And I think it was, that the lawsuit that followed became very fascinating to me. We're still dealing with the lawsuit some two and a half years later. And what's been fascinating to me about the lawsuit is fascinating because it reveals something about what makes me tick, I think.

You know, that image of justice holding the scales upon which all things . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: You mentioned that before, uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: Did I mention that last time we talked?

MARGARITA NIETO: [I know, No] but not in this context.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, you know, you can't . . . justice cannot climb up on its own scales and weigh itself. Every system has a point at which it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, for it to measure itself. And at those points in the system, to avoid it breaking down, people will revert to extraordinary means. So for example in the Catholic Church a hundred years ago the pope was declared to be infallible when speaking ex cathedra, which means when speaking on matters of belief, because essentially in Western religions belief is the essential characteristic, you know. So in matters that involved belief, he wasn't, he wouldn't be speaking as a man; the pope would be speaking infallibly as though the voice of God were speaking directly through him. Now exactly how this is accomplished or how it is carried out, I don't think is as significant as the fact that a device like this had to be created.

So in this situation we took the judge to court, and our contention was that since there was no case before this judge, no one had brought a complaint before the judge, that he had no right to step outside of his courtroom and declare that this thing had to be removed from in front of the courthouse for whatever reasons. Now the lower courts rule that he had conditional immunity -- which is kind of like infallibility, you know. Well, it's, it's another device. It's different than infallibility. In

fallibility says you can't do anything wrong. Immunity says whether you do anything wrong or not you can't be held accountable for it.

Now we've gone to a court of appeals to get them to rule that, in fact, the judge does not have conditional immunity and should be held accountable for the act of forcing the removal of this piece. But what's fascinating, I think, is that for the majority of my adult life what I've been involved in is looking at the contradictions of systems and pointing them out --not strictly for the purpose of destroying those systems, but of showing that those systems are all essentially human, and that its injustices should not be hidden or masked by deus ex machina types of devices. And I think this is certainly the case with modernism, where modernist ideas and modernist principles, the modernist analysis, hold up only if we accept that art is a separate reality, you know. And it's this

Tape 5, Side A

DAVID AVALOS: We're supposed to believe that art has such a profound influence, and such a profound meaning for us and touches and connects with us in the most fundamental ways, yet we have no means of touching or connecting it with it, you know. But it's absolutely essential to society, but somehow society is not essential to it. That it exists in this separate reality which defies gravity, where any reference, any social reference, any political reference, immediately creates a situation where we're not talking about art any longer. You know.

MARGARITA NIETO: It's interesting that you say that in terms of critics and theoreticians creating that belief in terms of modernism. In the readings I've been doing lately -- I was telling you I was reading this book on Monet, and I just read a book, a biography of Richard Wagner -- and it seems to me that the artist [who] was involved in creation --of itself -- doesn't necessarily view art in that manner.

DAVID AVALOS: Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: But it seems to me it's much more the types of canons that are drawn up by those who write about artists and those who write about art movements.

DAVID AVALOS: And then who become the arbiters of that art . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm, um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . if not the writers themselves. It's a very self-serving kind of dogma that they attempt to feed us. So over, you know, over and over wherever I look, I see these situations where systems of thought, systems of control or governance, are established that are incapable or unwilling to allow themselves to be judged by the same standards they use to judge others. Or are unwilling to accept that they are capable of being held accountable.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: So, you know, looking back on the Donkey Cart caper -- as I've called it in some, one writing I did for Community Murals magazine, one article I did for them -- I think that part of what my work is, part of my work is finding those areas of the most intensely absurd contradictions within various systems, social systems, and trying to expose them, trying to undo them using their own dynamics -- trying to get the dog to bite its own tail, so to speak. And in that sense, part of what I am about is being a trickster. By

MARGARITA NIETO: The Devil's advocate, um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah! I guess in a way you could say Devil's advocate, which is funny you mentioned that, because a Devil's advocate is the term given by the Catholic Church to an individual who is supposed to create arguments in opposition to arguments for the canonization of someone.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: So, yeah, I guess in a sense I'm a Devil's advocate, and I think that when you look at other projects that I've been involved with, such as the bus poster -- as a bus passes by outside [accompanied by appropriate bus noise-Trans.] -- the welcome to San Diego's finest tourist plantation that There again, it's the situation with Louis Hock and Elizabeth Sisco, where I've attempted to get the system to bite its tail. ["Welcome to San Diego's Finest Tourist Plantation" was the bus poster--MN] I've attempted to show that, that it's impossible to create a seamless system. And if you think of advertising as a kind of system which is open only to certain kind of messages, if you think of public transportation as a certain kind of system which is only open to certain kind of messages, if you think of public space Again, you know, I think a piece was created with a bus poster that had a lot to say to our sense of what art is, a lot to say about what our sense of community is, a lot to say about what our sense of values are in terms of watching, looking at creativity put at the disposal of a consumer culture, of advertising and public relations.

MARGARITA NIETO: Umm, go back a little bit. [You've, We've] been really, really talking about some fascinating issues here. Would you go back to the hubcaps? [MN or DA seems to be shuffling papers -- perhaps drawings; embarrassed chuckle, indicating something not working properly--Tans.]

DAVID AVALOS: Okay.

MARGARITA NIETO: How do you see them as . . . ? Well, first of all, you see those are two assemblages as compared to a painted wood construction?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: To _____ this [huge] relationship between this seemingly innocent cart (chuckles) and the kind of response that you got from authority.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah. Right.

MARGARITA NIETO: What is the genesis of the hubcap, in contrast to this . . . ?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, I think on the one hand there's this, there's this In contrast to the two I think one comes around, one comes about with a certain level of thought, and a certain kind of thought, that differs, maybe not qualitatively, but maybe quantitatively from the kind of thought that's put into other projects. I think the hubcaps are situations in which I'm not concerned with setting the world on fire politically. There may be some kind of social comment that's being conveyed, whether it's about sexuality, religion, or icons and fetishes, or not, it's a kind of a freer approach, it's a more traditional approach. It's an approach in which I don't worry too much about I'm I guess I recognize that I have different audiences, and that there's different audiences for different types of work that I do. And I recognize that there's not a seamlessness about what I do -- that some things do seem different or odd, you know. ON the one hand I may have what seems to be a strong commitment to works in public places that deal with issues of immediate social concern. On the other hand, I'm making objects that someone may purchase and hang in their home or it's

going to be seen by them only, for the rest of their lives.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: Or they may purchase it and decide they don't like it after a month and keep it in an attic for the rest of their life.

MARGARITA NIETO: How many have you done?

DAVID AVALOS: About ten.

MARGARITA NIETO: So it's sort of series of _____s?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, it's been a series.

MARGARITA NIETO: From what . . . ? What are the dates of the hubcaps?

DAVID AVALOS: About December '84 to . . . I guess the last one I did was . . . '86. Yeah, I think probably '86 was the last one. I'm thinking of doing another one. I'll be working on another one pretty soon. You know, I don't think . . . I don't see myself as having a body of work at this point, you know. I think that I've experimented here, and I've explored there, and I've created some things here and there, but I'm not sure that my ideas have congealed [pronounced it congealed--Trans.] completely. And I don't know if they have to. I think that the work that I'm doing I enjoy doing. It seems to be having some influence and making some sort of difference, not only where I live here in San Diego, but outside of San Diego. And it seems capable of connecting me not only to the community -- and I mean not just the Chicano community but everyone who lives in the border region, San Diego-Tijuana border region . . . And it also seems capable of connecting me to artists in other places of the country and maybe around the world. And I think that my work, beyond that, is capable of connecting me to people throughout time. But, you know, you keep going back to the hubcaps, and I guess in a way I feel a little awkward about discussing it, because I don't see them as major works. You know. The thing is . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: You say the La Jolla Museum just bought one. Right? So . . . ?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, but there again it was like . . . One of the curators had been interested in seeing my work and had asked me a couple of times if he could come by and see my studio, and I never, I never really . . . You know, I was flattered by that, but I never really did anything about it. And then finally when we did the bus poster, we needed some money. So we went to the La Jolla Museum and said, "Lookit, [sic] would you be interested in giving us some money to support this project?" And they said, "No, we can't do that." And they said, "Well," but they said, "But we would be interested in purchasing some of your work." So they purchased a piece that Elizabeth and Louis had worked on, and then they purchased one of my hubcaps from me. And I said, "Great," you know. For me it works out well, you know, there's a hubcap . . . And they showed it recently in their permanent collection. They had two permanent collection exhibitions, part one and part two, and it was in a, it was in the part two exhibition just earlier this year. And that was great, you know, to have a piece shown in the permanent collection of La Jolla Museum, to get the money that enabled us to do the bus poster. You know, you put it on your resume, and it looks good. But I don't, you know, I don't see . . . I'm not trying to be blase about this, but I'm trying to convey some sense of how I . . . I see the work as having a certain value because it works in a certain functional way. To enable me to move about with greater freedom within, within the art world. You know, it helps to be able to say, "Hey, you know, I've got work in museum collections."

MARGARITA NIETO: Let me ask you something else. What has been the critical response to your work?

DAVID AVALOS: [pauses] Well, I think that, I think here in San Diego the critical response -- and that's primarily where I've received my criticism, although I've been criticized, I've been reviewed by writers in Sacramento and throughout the Southwest -- I think in general if we're talking about something like the hubcaps, people are struck by the uniqueness of the work; they're fascinated by the content, and for the most part the response has been favorable.

MARGARITA NIETO: Who has written about you here in San Diego? Robert Pincus?

DAVID AVALOS: Robert Pincus, of the San Diego Union has written about me, Susan Freudenheim at the Tribune has written about me, Mark Elliot Lugo, who used to be at the Tribune, has written about me, Leah [Olman, Ullman], who writes for the San Diego County edition of the [L.A. Times, L.A. Times] has written about me

MARGARITA NIETO: Leah Olman?

DAVID AVALOS: Leah Olman, yeah. Hilliard Harper, at the San Diego edition of L.A. Times has written about me, David Lewinson wrote about me and the Border Art Workshop for San Diego magazine.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: Umm, and there's this

MARGARITA NIETO: Suzanne Muchnic in L.A., right?

DAVID AVALOS: No, she's never written about me. In L.A., I've been written about a couple of times by

MARGARITA NIETO: Marlene Donahue?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, the guy from the Herald Examiner. Christopher Knight.

MARGARITA NIETO: Christopher Knight, yeah. I remember seeing a review in the L.A. Times. That's where I first saw

DAVID AVALOS: Well, the L.A. Times reviewed the installation that I worked on with Louis Hock and Elizabeth Sisco at [LACE, L.A.C.E.] [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions--MN].

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: And that was I guess that was Suzanne Muchnic.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah, I'm pretty sure it was.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: It was a strong review, as I remember.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, I think we were able to accomplish what we sent out to do with that show, which was The whole premise of the show was to question the role of the gallery space, of the

museum space, and what we were able to do was create a piece that talked about the limitations imposed upon work by the gallery, the fact that within that context you can only do certain things. And also we referred to the limitations imposed by mass media. And they we had a table there with video and print documentation of the bus poster and its impact. And essentially what we were implying with the piece was that the only way to overcome the limitations of the gallery is just get out of the gallery. And I think that this is, this is

MARGARITA NIETO: That's been an ongoing polemic, in terms of public art versus studio art.

DAVID AVALOS: Right. And I think that there's You know, for me There was a woman who was doing a piece on public art for High Performance and mentioned in the course of interviewing myself, Louis, and Elizabeth that she had spoken to this one artist who said that the only things that should be done in public space are works that deal with public issues -- or something along those lines. And my response was that I'm not interested in manifestos. As soon as somebody tells me that this is the way it's supposed to be done, or this is the way the system works, something inside my mind goes click, and I say, "Oh yeah? Let's see if you're right about that." And I begin looking for a way to show that the system doesn't work that way, or it can work another way, or that I can get away without having to do what I'm being told to do. And I think that that's something that I share in common with a lot of people that cannot stand the status quo, not because they're opposed to a sense of normalcy or they're, not that U.S. society is normal by any stretch, but because they realize that it's keeping them from achieving things -- to be bound by the traditions of the status quo. But I don't

MARGARITA NIETO: It's another kind of border.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, I've got, is that, let me see. [looking to see if his parking meter has expired?-- Ed.]

MARGARITA NIETO: You should be okay.

DAVID AVALOS: Is it okay?

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah. We got here at 12:45.

DAVID AVALOS: Mm hmm?

MARGARITA NIETO: We got here at 12:45, or 12:30?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah. Okay. So anyway

MARGARITA NIETO: It's only 2:10. [speaking to the tape recorder] Excuse us; we're watching the meter. (chuckles)

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah. You know, I don't think that there's any one way to do it, so far as a polemic between public art or gallery art, I think there's room for both. But I think that if you want to achieve certain things, you know, if you want to drink whiskey, don't buy a bottle of wine, 'cause, like Elton John says, "It's like trying to drink whiskey out of a bottle of wine; you're never going to be satisfied," you know. You've gotta go somewhere else to get it.

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs)

DAVID AVALOS: And I think that there's something that people need to understand, too, is that if

you're critical of the gallery system, maybe the ultimate position to take is one of indifference to it. Because if you spend your time criticizing the gallery system within the gallery system, just for the sake of criticism or for the sake of criticism [sic], you really don't get anywhere, I don't think. Because you're still in the embrace of that system. And the, I think the We have to understand that arts have become extremely professional and organized in our time. And they're in a sense bureaucracies, some people say industries. Now the essential, one of the essential characteristics of a bureaucracy, it doesn't care why you've come to it, just so long as it can embrace you, you know. It makes just as much work for a bureaucracy; it keeps people employed just as much to complain about a bureaucracy as it does to compliment it. In fact, when they do something wrong, they might keep more people employed, because they've got to hire people to clean up the mess that had been made by other people. And it's just the nature of a bureaucracy that it's designed to absorb an incredible amount of criticism. So that when artists go into museums and galleries for the purpose of criticizing museums and galleries, it always seems to me like a jack-off. Because all they're doing by their presence is reaffirming the importance of the museum and galleries.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right.

DAVID AVALOS: So ultimately the only thing you can do, if you don't feel that they're important for the kind of work you're doing, or for a particular piece that you're doing, just be indifferent towards them. And I think that that's what happened with the bus poster. Hey, what we wanted to accomplish couldn't be accomplished in a museum or a gallery, so why even bother criticizing; just go out and do what we want to do. Now, that's going to be increasingly a battle zone -- what you can do in public space. Should we [be] able to see billboards advertising condoms, you know? Should we be able to see bus posters and subway posters that have political content? If we're told that there's nothing wrong with going out into the public space and seeing advertising, because we live in a free market, then why can't we think in terms of free expression and exchange of ideas? And why can't those billboards be used to not only promote certain political agendas, but question them? And I think that more and more, with the commercialization of everything that is associated with our national cultural identity, people are going to ask, "Hey, are we ultimately depending on Coca Cola to maintain the Constitution?" You know, are people, the people who make up this society going to be allowed to use the same formats and the same mediums [sic] to exchange ideas and information? Or are those avenues that have been created only available for Coca Cola? You know, it's More and more advertising is presenting itself to the American public as though it is the ultimate repository of freedom.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: You can look at the bicentennial, the centennial of the Statue of Liberty, the Olympics

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: So, you know, in terms of an area of expression and freedom of expression, the art world is in collision with the commercial world for a piece of public space. And I think that that's good. I think it's one of the exciting things about some of the pieces that I work on.

MARGARITA NIETO: David, you're going to be pursuing an MFA this fall?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: Could you talk a little bit about that?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, you know, there again I think it's for a very pragmatic reason. I've, I guess I've achieved a certain level of acceptance by the art world. I've, you know, in 1986 I received an NEA visual artists fellowship. I've got a piece in a, in the museum, and in a lot of ways And, you know, there's been inquiries from commercial galleries about my work and so forth. And in a number of ways, why would I need an MFA at this point? But I think the nature of the work that I do is not one that, which has much of a guarantee of making a livelihood. Also what I enjoy doing as far as work seems to go against the idea that I could make it commercially, although I won't out of hand discount that possibility. But I think that, you know, if an artist is going to show in a commercial space, they have to commit themselves to certain limitations. They have to understand certain limitations; they have to commit themselves to certain realities. And those realities are that you can continue to grow and explore, but you also have to develop a kind of consistent signature style that is going to make it worth while for a commercial gallery to invest money in the work.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: It's a kind of compromise and tradeoff that I don't think necessarily has to destroy one's integrity, but you can pay a hell of a price if you're not cut out for that kind of a work, for that kind of style of work or approach to work. So I think for the approach to work that I have the ideal place for me would be as a teacher. And I'm going

MARGARITA NIETO: Do you want to teach?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, I'm, my intention in getting an MFA is to have that piece of paper that will enable me to get a job at a college or university.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: Because I think that the kind of things that I'm dealing with would benefit from that sort of a context. I think there's a price to be paid for the isolation of the university or college, but I have seen a few -- not very many -- but a few professors who have been able to both teach and continue creating.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: And continue making a difference in their communities.

MARGARITA NIETO: Where will you be doing your work?

DAVID AVALOS: At UCSD.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm. And you're looking forward to it?

DAVID AVALOS: [pauses] Well, I'm I have mixed feelings about it, you know. I think that I'm looking forward to the opportunity; I see it as an opportunity. There's a certain amount of anxiousness about it. I think I'll probably be able to do more work that I have over the last few years.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh,.

DAVID AVALOS: And I will continue working; I will continue showing, both in solo exhibitions and in collaborations and in group shows, and continue lecturing and giving workshops, and so forth. So in that sense I'm not going to act like a student, you know, my world is not going to be confined to the art department and UCSD. But I have certain misgivings -- certain mixed feelings rather than

misgivings -- mixed feelings about it. It's just, I think part of it has to do with leaving the Centro Cultural to go receive and MFA. I was thinking about it the other day; for fifteen years my identity has been defined in terms of various organizations, which I felt strongly committed to, whether it be student groups or the Committee or Chicano Rights, or the Centro Cultural de la Rasa now. [Where, when] I'm finding myself in a situation where I'm going to be this kind of free-floating molecule.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: So there's going to be a period of reevaluation and reassessment and redefinition of what it is I'm about.

MARGARITA NIETO: Do you, have you considered yourself up to this point to be an autodidactic artist?

DAVID AVALOS: Autodidactic? What's, what do you mean by that?

MARGARITA NIETO: Self-taught.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, I've, you know, I never took sculpture class. I, when I was in communications at UCSD, I did take some courses that related to communications as well as to the art history of film, analysis of the image of women in film with Martha Rosler, and so forth.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: But, yeah, I guess, you know, if I've had any teachers as far as how to work with materials, it's been my father, Santos Avalos. And as far as working with ideas, it's been people like Herb Schiller and the communications department at UCSD, and people like Herman Baca at the Committee on Chicano Rights.

MARGARITA NIETO: Did you pick UCSD for any particular reason?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah. It's close.

MARGARITA NIETO: (laughs) I thought you were going to say that.

DAVID AVALOS: also, they're going to be giving me a fellowship.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh. Well, I would think though Irvine or almost any other place would have also.

DAVID AVALOS: Well, my family's here, and

MARGARITA NIETO: Could you tell us a little bit about the family? You've talked about your parents and your siblings. Your wife and your kids?

DAVID AVALOS: Yes, I'm married to Veronica Enrique, who up until June of this year was director of the Centro Cultural de la Rasa. And she comes from a family of artists, dancers primarily. We were married in the early part of this decade, and we have three children: Ximalatl Veronica Avalos, who's going to be six years old this year; Tonazopelic Matilde Avalos, who's going to be four hears old; and then the youngest, our son, Graciano Jose Ignacio Avalos, who will be two years old in a couple of months. Having a family has made a tremendous difference to me, and I think the happiest day of my life was the day I married Veronica and that continued to be the happiest day of my life until the

day that my daughter was born, Xima was born. Just had a tremendous personal impact on me. I think that having children has made me a better person. I've learned patience, I've learned acceptance -- or to be more patient and more accepting -- than I was before. I have this sense of myself as experiencing a personal history. I'm in between my father and in between my children. There's things, there's a whole life that my father lived before I was born that I'll never be able to touch, and when he dies I'll continue living, if things are, go their natural course, and I won't . . . I will be exposed to things he wasn't exposed to, and my children, with my children, I look at them, and just as I, I look at my father and I realize that he saw things years and decades before I was born. My children will go on to see things and experience life decades after I'm gone. And so it gives me a sense of connectedness.

Tape 5, Side B

DAVID AVALOS: . . . my son, I see a stamp of my sister-in-law's face, and I see in him the personality of my father-in-law. I see other connections with the family all the way around in my children, and it's It's pretty amazing, you know, when my daughter was born. It was really a miracle, but it was a kind of a, such a ho-hum miracle that you can't even waste people's time talking about it, although I am going to talk about it. It's like going to the beach and picking up two grains of sand and holding them in your hand and then, as you're looking at these two grains of sand, a third appears. Right there. Concrete. It's physically present. And you know it wasn't there before. And you know it's there now. It's insistent on creating its own space, and it has come into being. But if I were to turn and look for the first person that I could run to and say, "Hey, look! Lookit! [sic] I just discovered a new grain of sand here on the beach." They would say, "Yeah, so what?" You know. "So there's a new grain of sand; you discovered a new . . ." And I think it's the kind of miracle that I understand can't make as much difference to anybody else as it does to me. It's Because, "Okay, you were witness at the creation of another grain of sand."

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: But, you know, I've always felt that I'm the kind of person that does only what I want to do, and I feel that I had I had my first child, I guess when I was in my mid-thirties, which is relatively late, you know, traditionally. If I had done things traditionally, out of high school I would have gotten married, and my children would already be grown. I think they came at a point of my life when I was finally ready to have children, and eager to have children. And I think that they're helping to shape my life, in ways where I want to be responsible to them. And I think that that's something that has to do with the decision to go back to school.

MARGARITA NIETO: Veronica is a performance artist?

DAVID AVALOS: Performing artist, yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: But she really hasn't done much of that since she became director at the Centro about seven years ago.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm. But I think it must be very stimulating to work with someone who has, who has so much affinity with what you're doing.

DAVID AVALOS: Well, I think especially in terms of the ideas. I think we both share similar attitudes in terms of the value of the Chicano movement to our lives, and the sense that we came into being,

we came into consciousness, within the context of that movement. I think in terms of our sense of commitment to it, in terms of our sense of sadness and consternation and anger and confusion, and looking around and realizing that this which was so important in our formation no longer seems to have any tangible profile anymore. That you reach out and you can't seem to touch it anymore. So it's good to be able to sit and talk about the various struggles that we've been thorough, and draw lessons from them, and feel that there's someone who understands, and who cares, and is interested in the same kind of things.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: It's, you know, it's also frightening, I think, having to come to grips with the idea of having a wife. You know, it's, especially once, once you have children, once you have a family, it's You know, I talked earlier about being a trickster, about always finding a way to get out of something. There's really no way to get out of the fact, to get away from the fact, that with another human being you've created or been a vehicle for the creation of three other human beings. And no matter what were to happen to us, whether, you know, divorce, separation or early death, or whatever -- I mean, that's always there, and that's always [carried in] the children. So there's this, there's this incredible sense that, that the only way, that here finally is something that there doesn't seem to be a way out of, you know.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: Except by admitting some sort of defeat. And there's this challenge of recognizing *mi otro yo* in each other. And dealing with that requires a great deal of creativity.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: You know, it's to me, like love is not a feeling. Love is not an expression; love is a commitment. And having made the commitment, then how do you get through the ordeal because it's a struggle. I look at my parents who've been married more than fifty years (chuckling), and I'm amazed. You know. I'm amazed that they've done it. And I guess I'm very traditional in that sense. You know. I think that the greatest gift my parents have given me is the fact that I have a sense of family. And that because they have been willing to slug it out with each other over the last fifty years -- more than fifty years now -- I have a place I can take my children. And they can understand their place in history to, as far as the family's personal history. They can see their grandmother and grandfather and I remember at one point my daughter xIMA, when she was about three years old, began playing this game where she would say, "Okay, Popi, I'm your Momi. I'm Nanna." And I say, "Okay." She goes, "That means you're my son." And then she would go, "Okay, Popi, I'm Momi." I say, "Okay." She goes, "That means you're my husband." And she would go through all these different relationships, and she would just move around and place herself And she understood that she fit into something.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: You know, and It's not easy raising a family in which both the mother and father work, and I've had to depend on my mom and my dad and my sister, Peggy, to an enormous extent. And it's, you know, I want to be able to say fifty years from now that I've done for them what my folks did for me.

MARGARITA NIETO: And Veronica is also planning to go back to grad school?

DAVID AVALOS: Umm, she is planning on getting her A.A., and she's considering the possibility of going back to school.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh. That would be fantastic.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, it's . . . I think once the realization sets in that we both truly have left the Centro Cultural, and that we are embarked on another thing, that it's going to become less and less disconcerting and more and more exciting, you know, as new possibilities open up.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yeah, right now . . .

DAVID AVALOS: Right now, we're one foot on the platform, one foot on the train, kind of a thing.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh. And it's been that point of unity for so long.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, that's another thing. You know, what happens when the context for the relationship changes, what happens?

MARGARITA NIETO: (chuckles)

DAVID AVALOS: You know, that's kind of a stress.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm. What shows do you have planned for the next year?

DAVID AVALOS: Well, in September . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: _____[August]?

DAVID AVALOS: In September I'm going to be in a group exhibition called Tableau Vivant/Mort at Installation Gallery, in San Diego. And I'm going to be working on a collaborative piece with Debra Small, James Luna, and a historian by the name of William Weeks. And we received money from the NEA/Rockefeller Interdisciplinary Initiative through LACE, to do a piece concerning Father Junipero Serra. San Diego, the mission here in San Diego, was the first mission that he founded in California, and what we're looking at is, again, this idea of how a community establishes identity through tourism. The mission, de Alcala, run by the Catholic Church, is a tourist attraction, the Serra Museum is a tourist attraction, and they convey to visitors to San Diego ideas about what the creation of San Diego was all about. Right now, Serra is going, he's going to be beatified in September, so it's great timing for the purposes of the exhibition. And there's many Indians throughout California that are opposed to the canonization of Serra, so I'm very much looking forward to that piece, because it's consistent with the Donkey Cart and the bus poster. And it gets at, it gets at something that we need to understand. It's . . . Deborah Small is a woman of European ethnic background, James Luna is a Luiseno Indian from North County, and William Weeks isn't even an artist, so it gets at this idea that, if we're going to talk, when we talk about interdisciplinary, and we limit ourselves to artists, we're not really talking about interdisciplinary. We have to go outside of it; we have to understand that art connects to society in a vital way. We can't allow ourselves to be hermetically sealed.

MARGARITA NIETO: It's interesting, I have, reading that book on Monet, an artist that we, a movement that we usually associate with the most [pacifistic] and the most unreal, shall we say aspects, of art and society, Impressionism, is basically not that at all. And historically, and in terms of its personality, it was anything but.

DAVID AVALOS: See, and I think you're getting at something very important here. One of the things that I've learned as a Chicano To be a Chicano means that we're responsible for exploring our traditions. The big mistake that non Chicanos make when they see us as artists, or involved with cultural centers, is that somehow we have been handed down a hermetically sealed tradition, and our job is to make sure that the jar of formaldehyde in which this tradition is stored is kept clean so that whenever non-Chicanos come to our centers they can look through the glass and see what has been and what will always be. Well, we're not about timelessness, we're not about being frozen, we're not about being pickled in formaldehyde.

MARGARITA NIETO: Right.

DAVID AVALOS: We're about movement. And when you're about movement, it's as much an exploration to go back into tradition as it is to go forward in the creation of the future. And I think that one of the lessons we have to share to non-Chicano artists in U.S. society is that as artists we all have an obligation and a responsibility to explore our traditions, to find out what Monet was really all about. Not what the Modernists have told us he's all about or not what the commercial gallery people would like us to believe he was all about, but what he

MARGARITA NIETO: Or his marketability. (chuckles)

DAVID AVALOS: Right! What he was truly all about. And what I've found, as a Chicano, whenever I've gone back and read Mexican history, whether it's cultural or political or economic, I can't believe how much I learn about Europe, how much I learn about the United States. I've learned more American history reading the history of Mexico than I have in my high school and college history courses. And that's something that we all need to do, that every artist needs to do, is understand [that] we have to explore our traditions. And that's what's happening with this piece with Debra and William and James, and I'm really excited about it.

In January of '89, I'll be having a solo exhibition at MARS Artists' Space, in Phoenix, Arizona.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, at MARS, uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: And then in June of

MARGARITA NIETO: Will that be at the Guadalupe Gallery? In Guadalupe or right outside of Phoenix? That's the influence, but it's

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, it's their artists' space, it's their art space.

MARGARITA NIETO: _____, that used to be run by Manuel Acuna, the artist I was talking about before.

DAVID AVALOS: Oh, really?

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: Joseph Sanchez, that group>

DAVID AVALOS: Then [Robert--DA] Buitron got ahold of it for a while.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, he did a nice job.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah, the photographer. And right now there's a guy by the name of Rudy Guglielmo.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: I believe is his name, how you pronounce his last name. It's a strange last name.

MARGARITA NIETO: Oh, yes, yes.

DAVID AVALOS: So, and then in June of next year, June of '89, I'll have a solo at the INTAR Latin American Gallery in New York. And those shows will be connected, and basically what I'll be doing with those shows is looking at the period in which the U.S. border was created, that period from, you know, about 1820 to 18 . . . to the Civil War, the American Civil War, and looking not only in terms of what was happening politically and economically, but was happening scientifically, what was happening artistically. This was a period in which ideas of the American frontier were being presented in any number of ways, and especially through the writings of James Fennimore Cooper, whose father established Cooperstown in New York. So the piece is going to be presented in MARS and then added to and expanded for presentation in New York. so the piece is going to be the idea of looking at the border through Cooperstown. Because when you look west from New York City, you have to look through Cooperstown, which is in the western part of New York State, and what I'm trying to get at is this idea that essentially the model for the border was established at that time and has not really changed. Not really changed. You can look at something like the bar scene in Star Wars and see the same kind of idea that adventure, opportunities, the battleground for good and evil is peopled by these superheroes, like Luke Skywalker, and these arch villains, like Darth Vader, with this cast of characters that includes the wacky-looking musicians in the bar scene of Star Wars, these half-creature, half-human, which is us.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: Which is the Indian, which is the Mexican, which is the mestizo, and you can go back and find that. So the work is going to be examining our cultural identity and how it inhibits us from finding new ways.

MARGARITA NIETO: There was a piece in the New Republic a week ago, a piece that was not very favorable to Carols Fuentes, by Enrique Krause, who's also a Mexican writer and historian, and one of the points that he takes issue with Fuentes with, is the fiction of the border, a piece I think you'd be interested in reading.

DAVID AVALOS: What did you think of the piece?

MARGARITA NIETO: I thought it was a superb piece. I think it was extremely well written.

DAVID AVALOS: Because I read the piece.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: I read the piece on the way back from New York, and. . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh. I was surprised because usually that kind of a piece, and particularly about a writer whom I know so much about, and whom I've admired, I was expecting it to have a

certain tone and not to be so tightly structured, as it was. I think some of the points he raises are very, very good -- in terms of extending a stereotype, and the extension of the stereotype of the border and the division between Mexicans and Americans on this very black-and-white issue, that Fuentes does in *Old Gringo*.

DAVID AVALOS: Um hmm.

MARGARITA NIETO: And that he does certain, and the literary licenses that he takes, but the line that really struck me was this idea of the, this is not a line, this is a scar.

DA; Um hmm. Yeah, I think that I found the article very provocative. Unfortunately I'm not that familiar with Fuentes, probably nowhere near as familiar with Fuentes' writing as you are. But I'm interested in your reaction to it, because I find it provocative and I think that one of the benefits that I have in my work, at a time when the border is becoming increasingly important . . .

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: . . . is that I've lived here all my life.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, I think that's what Krause was questioning about Fuentes, his sense of authenticity.

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah. But

MARGARITA NIETO: You might say his sense of membership.

DAVID AVALOS: See, but I think Yeah, I think that that's another thing that we're going to be getting at with this thing on the Serra, Junipero Serra: what's an authentic Indian? We've gone, we went to a number of Indian curio shops, and doing research for this exhibition, you know, we try to hit all the tourist sites, and so there was, in old-town San Diego, there's this number of Mexican curio shops, with cigar-store wooden carved Indians for sale.

MARGARITA NIETO: God, I can't believe it!

DAVID AVALOS: And the Indian artifacts tend to be Navajo, Zuni, Hopi.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: They're Pueblo Indians; they're not the Indians of California.

MARGARITA NIETO: No.

DAVID AVALOS: So you go in there and you get no sense the Indians have vanished! And they vanished within these other tribes, the people that were here in the California. And there's this, there's this whole question of, well, what's an authentic Indian? James Luna would not be recognized as an authentic Indian. We can bring a plains Indian, or an eagle dancer, to San Diego, and stand them in Serra's museum, and people would say, "Oh, that's an Indian." And we could put James Luna there, standing right next to that person, in the clothes that James wears every day, and people would say, "Oh, he's not an Indian; he's a Chicano, or Filipino, or something." Yet his clothing would be authentic Indian clothing, because it's worn by an Indian.

MARGARITA NIETO: [Right. Why?]

DAVID AVALOS: And this whole question then becomes one of, what is authentic? And how do you establish authenticity? And I think that when . . . It's a legitimate question, but it reaches its point of absurdity especially within a culture that has this archival sensibility where authentic is what has been killed and hung up on the wall in a museum.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: And that whatever is living and breathing cannot be authentic. So part of the piece is were going to go to these, we're going to go to these [sic] various tourist sites and take photographs of James and his cousin, Johnny O, and he's gonna, we're gonna have this tamp made that says, "Authentic Indian," He's just going to go around stamping things, you know. Because if he's got the bloodline, whatever he says is authentic is authentic -- or should be. But it isn't. Oftentimes you have these, the people that are most divorced from the experience, who are presenting the idea of what authenticity is. And is he authentic because he continues to make baskets the way they were made in 1850, or is authentic because he's responsible for exploring his traditions and maintaining the attitudes that will allow him, as a member of that Indian tribe, to create the future.

MARGARITA NIETO: You know, I had a student at UCLA who is a Chemehuebe, and . . . Beautiful girl, very, very proud of her background, et cetera, very active in the [Mecha] community at UCLA. The irony is that she's an artists' model for a painter who does the sort of R. C. Gorman-like tableaux of Indian maidens. And he happens to be Ecuadorian or Venezuelan or something, and he uses her for a model! This whole trip is too much. I mean, it's worth, it's worth and essay unto itself!

DAVID AVALOS: And when you've gotten through all of that, I can tell you that the image you're going to have is . . . just reinforces the status quo stereotype.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, yes!

DAVID AVALOS: Right?

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes.

DAVID AVALOS: As the Indian is frozen in time.

MARGARITA NIETO: Yes, uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: And I think that that's one of the things that we're trying to get at with this piece about Serra, and raise question about his canonization, and raise question about, you know, we're . . . We cannot be fully realized as human beings by being placed on a shelf and saying that we represent a tradition. We have to be participants in the creation of U.S. society.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: And that, that's what my work is, is getting at more and more, I think. Besides the exhibitions, I'm also going to be, you know, I'll continue lecturing and participating in various things. Group Material in New York is having a series of town meetings, and they've invited me to go to New York in November of this year to participate in a meeting there. I've already participated in a panel that they had last month.

MARGARITA NIETO: Um hmm, um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: In February of next year, I'll be at Cal Arts, doing a workshop, giving a lecture, critiquing people, critiquing students.

MARGARITA NIETO: Great, um hmm.

DAVID AVALOS: So I'm very happy that I'm going to

MARGARITA NIETO: You're going to, let's see, in May of next year is the Assemblage show, right? No?

DAVID AVALOS: Yeah.

MARGARITA NIETO: Uh huh.

DAVID AVALOS: But that's more something that, you know, I've already gotten the piece; it's just a matter of putting the piece in a create and getting it there. I'm very much looking forward to the show, but it's much less exciting to be in a show in which a piece that you've already done is included versus a show in which you're building pieces from the ground up.

MARGARITA NIETO: Well, do you think there's anything we haven't covered?

DAVID AVALOS: I don't know.

MARGARITA NIETO: I mean, I'm sure there are many things we haven't covered, but

DAVID AVALOS: Oh

MARGARITA NIETO: On this go-around. Well, let's _____

DAVID AVALOS: Let's call it a day.

MARGARITA NIETO: Let's call it at least a pause, and then see where we go from now on.

DAVID AVALOS: Do you want to move? Do you want to change locale?

MARGARITA NIETO: Okay! And Archives of American Art, tape number two, San Diego, July 5, 1988, 2:45, the interview, bye now, David Avalos, Margarita Nieto, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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