



Smithsonian  
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**Oral history interview with Shirley Staschen  
Triest, 1964 April 12-23**

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Shirley Staschen Triest on April 21-23, 1964. The interview took place in Sebastopol, CA, and was conducted by Mary McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

MARY MCCHESENEY: First of all Shirley, I'd like to get a little bit of background information. Are you a native Californian or did you come out here from somewhere else?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: I was born in Oakland.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What year was that?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: 1914.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where did you get your art training? Where did you go to school?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: I didn't go to an art school.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You went right to a high school?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: I went through high school and took what art courses were available and worked as best I could on it myself.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And then after high school?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: After high school, very shortly after high school, I was on WPA on the art project.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I see. How did you first get on the project? What year was that?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: I believe it was 1937.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And that was in Oakland?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: No, in San Francisco.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How did you get on the project? Were you on relief? What was the first project you were on?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: The first project I was on was the lithographic project which was down on Turk Street, at that time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: On Church Street?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Turk Street. And, I was coloring lithographs that had been done of flowers by Alberte Spratt.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What technique did you use to color them?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Watercolor pencils.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Watercolor pencils?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And was he the only artist that you did coloring?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It was a she.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh! I forget that name. What was it again?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Alberte Spratt and she did a long series of wild flowers.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Of just California wild flowers?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. She had previously done, I believe for WPA, a series of marine biology drawings for Ed Ricketts in Carmel.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Ricketts was the head marine biologist stationed there. Did you work on those, too, or just on the other one?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No. Just on the flowers.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How long were you working on this project?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, I assume it was close to a year.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Where did you actually do the work? Did you do it at home?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, I had a desk in the lithographic room and another table where people were working on different projects. A number of them were not creative. They were doing portraits of historical California figures.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You mean working from photographs?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Working from photographs. They had old time commercial lithographers on the project and that kind of thing.

MARY MCCHESENEY: About how many people were on the litho project at that time?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Possibly twelve lithographers and a printing staff of perhaps five or more. I don't remember too well.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And did you actually print there, too, at the building on Turk Street?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What was done with the lithographs of the flowers that you colored? Were they made into a book?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: They were made into portfolios and I don't know what the use for

them was.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How did they arrange things on the lithography project when you first went there? What was the relationship between the designer like Alberte Spratt and the people who did the coloring? How was that set up? Do you know? I mean, who chose the artist who was going to be the designer and who chose the person who would be the colorer? Was this on the basis of your qualifications as an artist?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, it was. I believe that people were given jobs at that time according to what their past experience had been and one would tend to have an assistants job if one had not done too much before. The people who had considerable reputations were given more to do.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was WPA not PWA.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: That's correct.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And, who were some of the other people? Who were the supervisors of the project? Do you remember?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, the head of the WPA lithographic project, always as nearly as I know, was Ray Bertrand.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Would you tell us something about Ray Bertrand. You knew him personally. Could you tell us something about him? How did he happen to get his position?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I had known him previously. He had done a mural at Coit Tower but he had always specialized in lithography which he loved and wanted to preserve. He was a very good printer. I've never seen anyone who printed better. He trained people very well. He was able to give a great deal of help to artists, most of whom had never had the opportunity to do lithographs before and he was able to see that the technicians working under him, grinding the stones and so on, did good work. We produced a number of extremely fine lithographs. We did a lot of historical series and documentary type things but also a lot of creative material.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did he design any of the work? Was part of the rationale of the lithographic project, when it was set up, to revive lithography as an art form? Or was this ever discussed? The reason I think of this was that I had read about Tamarind down in Los Angeles and part of their reason for setting up the project there was because some people were alarmed that lithography as a fine art was disappearing. I was wondering if this might have been part of the thinking of that period.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I believe that it was Ray Bertrand's thinking and he convinced some of the administrators that it would be worth while. It would be a method of reproducing a number of things, such as the flower prints and an Indian artifact series that they did and the portrait type of thing. I think that this was his sustainer in a way, that he could do all these useful things, and along the edges there could be the creative lithographs.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Now these were done on the lithograph stone, printed and then you colored them.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Most of them were just done on stone. Occasionally there was someone who wanted to do work on a zinc plate, primarily for the experimental value. There were

also people who wanted to do work for which the stone would be cumbersome. They used transfer paper but this was not particularly successful effort. It was usually stones that we used.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you remember the names of any of the other people, who worked around the litho project when you did? What year was it that you began there? Or did we already get that?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: I think I said it was around 1938 when I started on the project but I began doing my own lithographs toward the end of '39, I suppose.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Then you began doing them by yourself and so your position on the project had been changed. You'd been promoted really.

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was this the regular policy with the supervisor? I mean, was that part of the plan for people to begin as assistants and then after they'd learned the technique and if they'd shown talent or initiative, they'd go ahead?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Yes. It would depend upon the ability of the individual because certainly the technicians that started out grinding lithographic stones ended up grinding lithographic stones. The photographers jobs didn't change very much. Then, too, the commercial lithographers, who were reproducing the drawings of others, continued to do exactly the same sort of thing. But, it was necessary for the individual to have a desire to do creative things and then to convince the administrators that he was able. Oftener than not this came about. But you were given your opportunity to do this.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I asked you earlier, do you remember any other people, any other artists who were on the project in San Francisco at the time that you were?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Yes. Ted Polos was on, doing creative work, and Jack Moxom.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Moxom also did a mural at Coit Tower, isn't that right?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: No. I don't believe he had a mural there. He had one at State College in San Francisco, on Haight Street.

MARY MCCHESENEY: On Haight Street in San Francisco?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Yes. There were quite a number of people who worked on the easel project who wanted from time to time, to do a lithograph and they would be given the opportunity. There were a great many of those who did not stay on the lithograph project.

MARY MCCHESENEY: There was a free working relationship between the easel people and the litho people.

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Yes. If anyone from the easel project wanted to do a lithograph particularly, they were usually able to obtain permission to do this.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How long did you stay on the project in San Francisco?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Well, the period during which I colored the flowers went on for something like a year. It was followed by a period during which I taught art for the art project in the

community centers in San Francisco.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What were these community centers? Could you give some details about how they were set up, where some of them were and what their function was?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, it was an idea that originated with a person by the name of Mary Dakin. She had, before she came on the art project, done work in a little ward in the Childrens Hospital and the city and county hospitals. She brought this plan to the project and expanded it. The work was done with children who were ill for very long periods of time, bedridden for a matter of many months or years. And with the TB children in the city and county hospitals providing them with some kind of occupational therapy, of which they didn't have much. Then it was broadened to include classes at the Potrero Hill Neighborhood Center, the annex to the Telegraph Hill Neighborhood House, the Boy's Club which was toward the end of Potrero Street and the Booker T. Washington Center. I think there were two others but those were the ones where most of the time was spent. The classes were given once a week. There were three people giving the classes. It was at the same time that we helped with the work at the San Francisco Museum when they first started their children's classes there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You mean WPA teachers were also teaching at the museum?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: That's right.

MARY MCCHESENEY: These were all childrens classes, no adult?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: All children's classes. And exhibits were made. It was part of our job to mount the paintings, to sort them out, file them and exhibit them. They were exhibited in the centers where the work had been done and they exchanged exhibits among the centers. They were also distributed by the exhibition department of the WPA.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How many teachers were involved, do you think, during this time? Teaching children on the project?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Just three.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Just three people. Then you went around from one place to another in San Francisco?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: That's right.

MARY MCCHESENEY: So that your schedule probably would be a full weeks teaching, a day at one place, a day at another.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No. I believe I had something more like three or four days of teaching, then a day just to handle the materials, prepare the materials, purchase them, file the work and mount the work, paperwork.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How many children would you have in a class on the average?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Oh, from eight to thirty, in that range.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What subjects did you teach? Clay work or just painting? How did you go about organizing that?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It was Mary Dakin's idea that it would be good for children to work with oil paints because the colors were much more true than the tempera to which they were usually exposed. So we gave them oil paints with kerosene and paper. The result was very good, very satisfying to the children because the oil paint had a plastic quality.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Cleaning up must have been a problem, wasn't it?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, no, it all worked out.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, good.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: If they threw the paint back and forth, it was a bit messy. The difference was surprising between the children at the different centers. I venture to say that there are such things as cultural characteristics. Because the paintings of the little Sicilian children at Cumio Flat and the Russian Children on Potrero Hill and the Negro children at Booker T. Washington were very different. The difference in their work was tremendous.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Cumio Flat, that's a name for an area in San Francisco. Where is it located?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, that's a very old name. I don't think anybody uses it anymore but it is from lower Columbus Avenue down towards Fisherman's Wharf.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: The flat area in there after Columbus flattens out at the bottom of the hill going North.

MARY MCCHESENEY: On this teaching project then, there were three of you: yourself, Mary Dakin, and who was the third person?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. Alberta Martin.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How did you divide the work between you for teaching your classes? Were all three of you at one class at the same time?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, we were given different centers to take care of. I usually went to the same center. To the Telegraph Hill annex center and the Potrero Hill center. I spent most of my time in those two places or occasionally at the Booker T. Washington, unless there was a new class added or a change or a substitution.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How long did this project continue?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I think it may have been a year and a half. I'm really not sure.

MARY MCCHESENEY: So that would bring it up from '38 into '39.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. Then I was more interested in doing my own work than I was in teaching and I was trying very hard to convince the administrator that I should do that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You wanted to transfer to the easel project?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: To the lithographic project. I wanted to go back there and do my own work.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did they realize this?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Yes, yes, they allowed me to teach and do one stone to see how it came out. It came out all right. Then after that initial stone I was able to do my own work.

MARY MCCHESENEY: So you left the teaching project, and went back to the lithography project on Turk Street in the same building?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: No, this was on Potrero, 901 Potrero.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, so they had moved during the time that you were teaching? And they were now located at 901 Potrero. Who was the supervisor of the project? Was Mr. Bartrand still in charge?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Of the lithography, yes, he was.

MARY MCCHESENEY: They just moved to a new building?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Had the lithography project changed very much during the time you were away? Were there more people on it? Were they doing different kinds of work?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: No, it was about the same. I think that possibly there were more people interested in it as a medium of doing creative work and there was more of that type of thing being done and less of the documentary series.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What did you begin on, when you began doing your own work? What sort of thing were you doing yourself?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Well, if you need a label for it I guess you'd call it a surrealistic type.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, what was the subject of your first stone for example?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Oh, a picture of a grand piano with a disintegrating background.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh...um hum...

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Which was supposed to constitute a warning to the lying and placid people of the earth that they were in considerable danger in as much as this was 1939 and anything that looked good at that particular moment was only superficially so.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who were the painters that you were influenced by in this period? You said your work was sort of surrealistic. Whose work were you following or paying attention to?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: I think I was open to almost every influence that was around at the time whether it was someone working close by me or any exhibit that I attended. I think this is possibly true for most people, they are influenced by everything that they see. I don't think that I could single out a particular individual.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was there much of a pardon...

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: I don't believe there was any single individual that I felt I was



following.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yes. Was there much interest among the artists in general in San Francisco in surrealism during this time?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes, it was rather dominant, it was a dominant type of technique. Not all the things I did were like that but it seemed a very nice vehicle for expressing thought and a step away from realism.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who were some other painters that you can think of who were working in that direction at the time? I think Reuben Kadish has a mural at the San Francisco State College which has elements of surrealism. Was he very influenced by surrealism?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes, definitely and then here and there you could see it in some of Clay Spohn's work. It wasn't Herman Volz's style to do a surrealist type thing. He was more of a Cubist. No one else comes to mind at the moment. I'm sure there were others but I don't know.

MARY MCCHESENEY: There seems to be rather a division of the artists thinking during that period between people who were more interested in the things Diego Rivera was doing and people like you who were more interested in surrealism, or do you think these things were connected?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, Diego Rivera had been in San Francisco teaching at the art school in the early thirties I believe. His influence must have lasted the entire decade, because anyone who goes to Coit Tower today can see the strength of his influence on muralists and a tremendous number of the people who had studied with him had to work for a long time before any other influence took its place. But there was certainly Picasso's influence rising up. It seems to me that simply because of the historical conditions of the world the quietness of Rivera's drawings and paintings was supplanted by the rather violent power of Picasso's. Not Picasso necessarily but more of that group and not that Picasso was new to us.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yes. Had you seen paintings of his before that time or was most of his influence carried on through photographs and that sort of thing?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Of Picasso?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yes, Picasso.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: He did have a show in San Francisco.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: He has an enormous retrospective. But I don't remember what year that was but it must have somewhere in those years. Somewhere around 1940 or '41. I don't recall, but it was somewhere in that area.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was that retrospective at the San Francisco museum of art?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes, in the civic center.

MARY MCCHESENEY: So you had gone back from teaching to the lithography project which was now located on Potrero Hill and you mentioned that your first stone had been a rather surrealist piece of work. What did you do after that and in what direction did you go. What kind of things did

you make?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, after I had done a number of lithographs I did a few tempera panels which I did at home. Most of the easel work was done at home. That was in a period of a new months. Then I designed several murals. It was arranged that one could design but they were not necessarily executed. There were a great many murals that were designed and were never executed because they had to please or satisfy the administrators. They also had to be submitted to the keepers of the wall on which they were going to be placed.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You mean the people who actually owned the building had to approve the design?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. They did have a say. If they couldn't stand the design, it wasn't very likely to go up because at that time public relations were beginning to count. The supervisors wanted very much to use the work of their people and murals seemed a very good way to do it. They were developing a concern as to what they were going to do with all the easel pictures they had accumulated. They felt perhaps that building decoration might be better.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did the murals then actually begin sometime later than the easel project?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, the mural project was going right along but I believe that the emphasis on murals increased. It was given quite an importance during the World's Fair where there was a lot of work done and demonstrations and so on and so forth. I demonstrated glass mosaic...or no, that was tile mosaic.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That was at the fair, the Golden Gate Exhibition at Treasure Island in ...

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: 1939.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And you were demonstrating tile mosaic? Where were you doing this? What building?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: In the Art Building.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And how did you go about it? Did you do a small demonstrative thing or work on a big wall?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I had a very large table and two assistants working with me, cutting tile and arranging it on the pattern, a paper pattern. I explained to people as they went by how this was done and how we eventually managed to get all these little pieces together on the wall.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was there a great deal of interest from the public?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Mostly from growing boys I'd say. The adults didn't seem to have any feeling about it except that it looked just like a jig-saw puzzle and beyond that they ...

MARY MCCHESENEY: How large was the panel that you worked on?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Probably about four and one half by ten.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Feet that is?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Feet.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What sort of tile did you use? Did you manufacture your own tile or did you buy?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: This was a glassed tile. It was a commercially produced tile and there were, of course, a number of things that were available. One could have used encaustic tile or hand-made tile. I had used glass but for this particular one it was not suitable to the subject matter at hand.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you actually complete this panel and did you actually set the tile? Were you working against a wood surface? A plywood surface?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: No, the pieces of tile were being glued face down to the paper and they were going to be reversed and set in the wall.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yes.

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: I didn't do this. I didn't install the panel and I was only told that it was installed in a school in Oakland and I never did see it installed.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I see. This was a panel that you actually designed yourself.

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: That's right.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What was the design? What subject did you use?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Peter and the wolf.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, can you describe the drawing? What did it look like?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Well, it was the scene of Peter at the moment when he is attempting to catch the wolf with the grandfather appearing and the duck in the wolf - the moment of great chaos.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And you had two assistants at that time who were cutting the tile and helping to place it?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who were those people? Do you remember their names?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: I don't remember. They came from an Oakland project and I can't recall their names now.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were you still on the lithography project at the time you were doing this job?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: No, I had moved over to the mural project.

MARY MCCHESENEY: When did this happen?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Well, it was a rather ....

END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1  
SIDE 2, TAPE 1

MARY MCCHESENEY: We are continuing the interview with Shirley Staschon Triest which began on April 21 and was interrupted because of mechanical difficulty. It is now April 23, 1964 and we are at her home in Sebastopol, California. Present also this evening is Robert McChesney who was on the WPA project at the same time that Shirley Triest was. At the end of the first part of the tape we were discussing a different project that you had been on in San Francisco. And I think there was some lack of clarity about your moving from one project to another. Perhaps you can straighten that up and tell us the projects you were on and perhaps the locations of the buildings. You began on the lithography project. Where was that building?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: On WPA proper. I began on the lithography project on Turk Street and it was a condemned building as many of those occupied by WPA were. The offices were moved from there to 901 Potrero and they were housed at that location for quite a long time until after the building was considered unfit.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was that the building you told me had been the reform school for girls?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's where the new hospital is?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I believe there is a new building of the San Francisco Hospital Wing there.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: There is an awful red, big brick building there.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Both of these buildings were where the lithography project originally was and the second is no longer in existence.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, neither of them are. Both of those buildings had many things besides the lithography project in them. There were offices and the exhibition department and on Turk Street there was the weaving project where the dyes were made and the wool was dyed. Tapestries were made there. At 901 Potrero the photography project was also housed and a great deal of the mural projects and the teaching project. In another wing of the building, I believe there was some clerical section of the WPA also.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Where was this?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: 901 Potrero. And we went from there to an old school in the Sunset district.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you remember what street that was on?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: 42nd and Judah and it was there for quite a long time. Then, I believe the last headquarters that I recall were on Jackson and Montgomery. Do you remember those?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were there only offices there with no work coming in?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That was 473 Jackson Street, wasn't it?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, I think they moved down there after I had been removed, kicked off, retired from the project. At that time I was working as a warehouseman or a steel worker or something.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Before you went on the WPA project you were on PWA projects. Can you tell us how you first got on and what you did, where you worked and who you worked with?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, I heard that there were jobs available by going out to the DeYoung Museum and seeing Dr. Walter Heil and I so did and obtained a job going out to Sutro Forrest sketching. The job lasted two weeks for which I was given \$90.00, a very handsome sum.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: It really was.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: This was the end of that arrangement. I assume that someone was making a very quick re-evaluation about what they were going to do and everything shut down for a while until they opened up the projects, one of which was Coit Tower.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Earlier you spoke to me and described the shovel brigade at Sutro Park. What was it you told me about that period?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, it was very impressive. I was fairly well aware of the results of the depression but I don't recall any single impact that was quite as strong on me as seeing bankers (At least, I judged them to be so because of their black coats with velvet collars and fine black silk hats, hamburg hats) trying to manipulate shovels.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: What for?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: They were just attempting to make some kind of work for these men and these men looked absolutely ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You mean they were showing the ditch diggers how to work?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It was the first thing after apples being sold on the corner. It was an effort and I guess you would call it a hysterical effort to do something. And these people had nothing. I assume they had nothing to eat and nothing was being doled out at that time.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You mean people were wearing their formal coats and so forth?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: They had nothing. They had been completely wiped out by the fluctuations of the market. They had nothing at all but they did have these ... the only clothes they had left over was this finery.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I thought they were up there showing the people who were sort of backing the PWA.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No. They were destitute.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh. My God, that's something.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: They were so pathetic in as much as they weren't too sure which end of the shovel was which. They really couldn't work. They were hopelessly inept. Yet, they stood

there. Long lines of men trying to do this work.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: They were just hand laboring?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. I don't know what they were doing in Sutro Forrest as a matter of fact. Perhaps it was a drainage project or some really make-work effort.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Of course, at this time there were the relief projects. There was the ... what was the youth project where they put all the kids out in the forest? Was was it called?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh. CCC, but that was quite a bit earlier. That was only for very young people between seventeen and twenty-one.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, this was the winter of 1933.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Winter of 1933. What age group were these people, these men who where trying to do the shovel work?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I recollect them as being in their fifties and upward.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were there a great many of them?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. It was a large crew.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Ah ... you did many sketches, did you? In a two week period you did many sketches of this project in Sutro Park?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. Yes, I went out there those two weeks, ten days and sketched for ten days and turned in my sketches.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: This was the PWA.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes, it was.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: The ending of it.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: That was the first thing they did.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, then what year did they do that Coit Tower.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Coit Tower was done very shortly after that because it was well in progress in the beginning of '34.

MARY MCCHESENEY: The next year.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's amazing to hear. I always assumed that the Coit Tower job was done prior to the WPA, but evidently it wasn't.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, there was quite a gap in there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What happened to the sketches that you did? What became of them? Were

they turned in to Walter Heil?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes, and I don't know what became of the work. They were receiving, at that time also, cartoons for murals. I believe they thought they would decorate all the libraries with murals. I turned in sketches for that purpose but I don't believe that there was ever any mural done under that specific piece of administration.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How many other artists were along with you doing this kind of sketching work? Do you know?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I have no idea.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You don't know who any of them were?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Ah .... no, I don't.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Could you tell us anything more about Walter Heil. later, after this period, he became director of the DeYoung Museum of San Francisco.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: He was director at that time I believe.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, he was?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: But his job was ...

TAPE TURNED OFF

MARY MCCHESENEY: We were just discussing the PWA project that you were on for a short period of time, two weeks and the telephone rang and then you also mentioned the SRA. Can you tell us more about that?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: This was another make-work effort to remove people from relief roles, to give them something to do and I don't know how many of them there were or the nature of the projects, except the one that I'm acquainted with. I didn't work on it but my husband worked on it and this was SRA or SERA. I'm not sure what the initials were. The people were allocated to the department of forestry and they made pictures of redwood trees.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: This was just redwood trees?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Just redwood trees.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Stumps, cross sections, or what?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Stumps and cross sections and historical little huts that were among the redwood trees.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Is that where Reuben Kadish got some of his ideas? Stumps that he did in those lithographs?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I believe that Reuben was still in Los Angeles at that time.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh. Yes, that's right.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: There were a great many of these pictures done and I think they must have had fifteen artists working on it. Of whom I remember Val Julian and Larry Holmberg. I don't remember anyone else working on that at the time.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's a name we don't have - Val Julian. That's spoken of quite often but I didn't know whether he was on the project or not.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: He must have been on the easel project.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: He worked in the exhibition department, I believe. I think the only job he held with WPA was in the exhibition department.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Then he lined up shows and that sort of thing?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, he was doing matting and framing.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh, yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you know what the initials stood for? The reason I ask is that I thought SRA was Surplus Relief Authority.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I don't know. I'm not sure.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you know any other people who were on this particular project?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well...

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, just those two people. I don't remember others. I don't remember their names.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How long did this one last? What period of time?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It lasted a few months.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And the artists who were working on it, did they go out of the San Francisco area up to the redwood country to do the sketches and drawings?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, they went down to the Santa Cruz Mountains to Big Basin to do this on one particular field trip and I don't believe there were others.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What became of the work on this project. Do you know?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I don't know what the use was for it. Perhaps the forestry department wanted it for a certain type of record or to illuminate their activities.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you remember any other things like that were going on at this time?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, I know that there was a steady effort to create projects to remove people from relief roles and this took different forms and there would be sort of a condition of rumor. You would hear that there was a project starting up or something was being organized and that if you were eligible and you wanted to do the work you would hustle out and see if you



could go to work on that project.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who was in charge of organizing these projects? Do you have any idea? Or what governmental agency was handling it?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, I don't.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You may have heard of it then by word of mouth from other artists.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. There was always kind of a grapevine as to where there might be work to be done.

MARY MCCHESENEY: After this period you spent on PWA and drawing the sketches in Sutro Forest, you then went to work on Coit Towers as an assistant.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: And who were you working for then?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I was assisting Bernard Zakheim.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you know when you began?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: In the Spring of 1934. I took the place of Julia Hopper Rogers.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What kind of work did you do for him?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I took care of his palette every day and I did the work that he didn't like to do like the lettering and so on.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Like what?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Lettering. He did a library and there were lots of books in that fresco which I believe is still there and the background.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's the usual job of the assistant, doing the dirty work of lettering ...

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: And I did sketches of things that he didn't particularly care to sketch. When I was not too busy with Bernard, I would do sketches for other people.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Research work.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Go home and draw a cat and bring it in tomorrow so we can put a cat on the wall. There were quite a number of assistants there but I think that there were more muralists than there were assistants. They didn't have a great swarm of assistants on that job.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Would you describe the mural that you worked on for us? What did it look like?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It was a library scene depicting a number of people reaching for books, sitting at tables, a group of people, I believe ... it went around the windows in the Southwest corner and the window was incorporated as part of the library. It was one of eight corner murals. There wasn't any other particular content.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I think this would be interesting to bring in at the present time. I wonder why even at that time they were doing these extremely pictorial, almost illustrative sort of murals. It took a long time for something to happen in San Francisco, you know, when they finally broke away from this thing. Even Diego Rivera, when he came up, he was doing the same thing. He didn't do them any good in my opinion.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, his influence was so extremely strong. I mean anyone who looks at the Coit Tower is impressed by this.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Is this after Diego that you are speaking of?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. This is after he had been at the art school and the influence was still very dominant. It was not visible in Zakheim's work or in people who had a well defined style prior to that time but it was evident in the work of the younger people.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: What were we doing before Rivera came then?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I don't remember what.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Ha ha ha

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It's before me.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: When did Rivera come up here anyway?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I think that he was probably at the school in ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That was before '33?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. I think he was there in '31, '32, '33, around in there somewhere. It was shortly previous to the time that the murals were done. Two or three years, I'm sure. But LaBaudt's work doesn't show any particular style of Rivera, or Boynton's work, or Del Pino's work ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Ray Boynton?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Ray Boynton.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yes, I thought so. What did he do? What was some of his work? Did he do some stuff in the California School of Fine Arts Library?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I think he did, yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were you working on the Coit Tower during the time that there was a strike?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes, I was.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I wonder if you could tell us something about that?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: The strike - there was a hammer and sickle that had been painted by someone up on one of the rafters. If my memory serves me it was Clifford Wight who had put it there. Someone saw it and decided - there were many visitors who came into the building and one of the visitors saw it and decided that it simply must not stay there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was not a part of a mural? It was up on the rafter.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, that was part of the decoration because the rafters were also decorated. There were beams going toward the side of the building and there were several decorations on them and one of them was the hammer and sickle.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Was this at the School of Fine Arts, that thing Rivera did?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, this was at Coit Tower.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh, I was ... lost. Ah, you mean he painted the beams in the mural?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, they were structural, they were part of the structure but they were being decorated. This was his area to decorate. There were the walls and then the beams across the ceiling and then on the sides of the beams were these several symbols. Sort of a series of symbols. I think there were probably four of these. Four corners or something like that which had decorations on both sides.

MARY MCCHESENEY: So, a group came in and observed this hammer and sickle on the beam, then what happened?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: There was a big noise about the necessity for removing this and the artistic integrity of the people working there insisted that it should stay. It was painted and it should stay. It came to a stalemate which meant that we were picketing outside and nobody went in and everything came to a halt.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: This was the Coit Tower?

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was a disagreement, then, between the artist and the administration of the project? Were they the ones who wanted the symbol removed?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I don't think they were so much concerned as a board that had control of the building. Now, it could have been the San Francisco Recreation Department for all I know, but some group of this sort. It wasn't the WPA in particular that object to this, but they were told that this must go by the administrators of the building.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I think the Park Commission had control.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It could have been the Park Commission that controls the building.

MARY MCCHESENEY: So then you all went out on strike.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: We went out on strike.

MARY MCCHESENEY: With your picket signs?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes, we got photographers, publicity, everything we could ... but I also believe that the hammer and sickle came down.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How long did you cease work on the project?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I think it was probably two or three days. Not more than that and it could very well have been less.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I don't remember where the beams were. Were they on the first floor?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: What did they do later? Did they lower the ceiling and cover the beams? I don't know. I don't recall any beams in there at all.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, if there aren't any beams, then it was a decoration that was above the other murals and right up by the ceiling because they were just small symbols. About twelve inches square and there was a series of them.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What painters who were working on the Coit Tower Project were involved in this? Do you remember the people by name?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Nobody went in and anybody who felt like being in the picket line was in it.

MARY MCCHESENEY: As I understand it there were about 27 murals in that tower. Were they all being painted at the same time or were these done at different periods of time.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: They were all being done at the same time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: So there would have been twenty-seven people, artists working. Designers and then the assistants too.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: And the plasterers, and the custodian of the building.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: As far as the strike is concerned, the picketing and so forth, well, you wouldn't call it a strike....did the artists stop work?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Did they? Crazy! But at the same time all over this area there was a labor struggle. This was probably close to the big '34 strike, the general strike of San Francisco, wasn't it?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes, it was very close because the '34 strike was, it seems to me, towards the second week of June, something like that. So this was just prior to that, I'd say; it wasn't after it. It was just before.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, the thing that I'm getting at is that it was much easier for the artist at that time to protest. With all the background of activity the artist could protest, make picket signs and march up and down. It was easier than it is today. Of course, last week we were down in front of the museum of art protesting against the San Francisco Art Association Show. But I do think that was very important as far as the artist was concerned - the fact that there was this background of upheaval in the labor movement during this time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: We were just discussing the artists strike on the Coit Tower PWA project, Shirley. Were there any other strikes that you recall while you were either on WPA or PWA projects in San Francisco?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. I can remember an attempted or a discussed strike by the Government Employees union to which quite a number of people belonged. Do you know anything

about that, Mac?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, I was trying to remember the other evening. I seem to recall that there was a big walk-out and a demonstration on towards the end of the project, it seems to me. I remember going over with some other fellows to Bennie Bufano's (this has been recorded before incidently) and asking Bennie to go out, if he was going out with us and he said, "No, but I've got my own program. Now, if you fellows follow me, why we'll make it." And I said, "Bennie, everybody else has got it all lined up, you know, everybody is out. There are thousands of people and you are only one. And how are we going to follow you if everything is all planned?" He says "Well, I've got it all lined up. If you don't go with me, I don't go with you." So we said good-bye to Bufano. But I don't know why exactly they were going out at that time. Unless there was a big cut in the project. They were trying to reduce the number of people on the project. I can't recall just what it was. But I'd like to know. I can't remember what the hell it was.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: The earlier one of the government employees union, (I don't remember the proper initials of that) had to do with a wage or salary condition type thing. But it had to do with pay or layoffs; it was one or the other and it was pointed out very eloquently and with some pressure, that you couldn't strike against yourself. In as much as you were the government and you were going to strike against the government and therefore you could just forget about it and at that point, that particular attempt was forgotten.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What people were involved in this besides WPA artists? Were there other government employees?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes, yes, this didn't have to do only with the artists and I don't remember the people because I had not too much to do with the Union. At that time there was an Artists and Writers Union in which I was considerably more interested and I didn't pay too much attention to the Government Employees Union.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: This was the Artists and Writers Union?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Would you talk some more about that?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, that was a group that had been running concurrently with the project. A good many of the people were artists who were on the project or members of it but I don't remember that it ever had any specific relationship to the project.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I remember the Artists Union but I don't know when the Writers came into the thing. Yes, where the writers came in, that's the question. I don't know. Right after I got on the Federal Art Project, I joined the Artists Union. I remember going out to the headquarters there and they had a big paint store. There were selling paints ...

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Was that Ray Strong's place on Geary Street or Maiden Lane?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yes, Ray Strong ... what was he? He was just ....

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It was a sensation, his paint shop.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: It was his paint shop? He was making about a five percent profit on the thing because the paints were very cheap.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: But I think the union headquarters was the same place. The writers weren't there. I can't remember Rexroth entering this scene at all.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, I remember the first meeting that I attended of the Artist and Writers Union which was in the late fall of 1933 down on the ... oh ... what is it? The main block where the Black Cat is on Montgomery Street? One of the stores down below is where Mr. Melvin Belli has his offices now, I believe, in the same place, and there was this gathering of artists and writers and Kenneth Rexroth was very instrumental in organizing it. Everybody you could think of was there. Ralph Stackpole and Moya Del Pino and Cunio.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Remember the big black Spanish hat he wore?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: His cape ... wonderful looking.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Even Piazzoni (Gottardo) came to a couple of the meetings.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Piazzoni? Was he .. maybe it was he ...

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: He was the one who wore the ... he was a short man with a black hat and a black tie you know, he had a cape ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh, yes.

END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1

SIDE 1, TAPE 2 (Evening of April 23, 1964)

MARY MCCHESENEY: We're on the third side. We were just discussing the first meeting, I believe of the Artists and Writers Union. You were describing a painter in San Francisco who dressed in a black cape and a black hat and you weren't sure who that was.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, this was the first meeting that I had attended. There had been meetings prior to that. This organization, or the organization that divided off from it, ran continuously through all the WPA days, as I remember, and the PWA day. It was a source of meeting other people. It was also a source of finding out what other people were doing on other jobs but I can't recollect that there was ever any change between the union and the project or the behalf on any of the members. Or any kind of adjustment. I don't believe the government was in any humor to recognize a union as being an organ that could carry on such business. They just simply did not recognize it and I think it was their method of handling such matters. There certainly were more than one occasion when there was a strike or almost a strike or a walk out.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, except for that last demonstration they had and I'm sure that had some influence because actually it was participated in all over the country, not only in San Francisco, but there was simultaneous strikes - I'm not sure about this - but I do believe it happened all at the same time because they were planning on cutting down on the Federal Art Projects, all the projects in the art field, music, theatre, and the graphic arts. I remember it was big thing. I'm amazed that you don't remember this and I'm amazed that I can't remember exactly why we were out.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It was probably because of layoffs and I think that it is possible that it could have occurred after I left WPA and I shouldn't have been quite so aware of it.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: It was quite late but it wasn't after the Fair was over.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Do you think it was in 1940 perhaps?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Again I have no idea. I'm sure this would be in the newspaper records. That's where we would find out about it, you know. Just check with the newspapers. They are filed and it would be on record. It was big enough because we did march. I remember we did march all the way from Washington Square and what was it? Washington Square at Kearny and Post Streets.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: In front of St. Peter's and Paul's.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No, I can't remember these ... no, it's not Washington Square. These damn Squares in San Francisco.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, was it at the Post St. Square.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Where the open air show was one year, downtown.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Union Square, Union Square. The downtown square.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yes. We started there and I don't know where we walked to.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was just the artists in the Union?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, the thing is that I was green and I was fairly new. I hadn't been here more than a year. Still a green country boy and I remember going with somebody over to Bufano's and saying, "Are you going out with us?" and he said, "No." Not unless we followed his plan which was, of course, all planned for Bufano.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What were the Artists and Writers Union people doing, do you remember, Shirley? Were they ever engaged in collective bargaining with the WPA authorities?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, never.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, what did they actually do at the meetings? Was it more a social group? Or how did it function?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, I think they were very much concerned with the social turmoil of the time and there was a great deal of material in that. They could inform one another and they had attitudes toward their job. They were also interested in the content of their work and what they thought they could put in. They were always attempting to keep things on walls that they thought might be taken off of walls. Although they had no bargaining power, they were, I feel in retrospect, a very strong organization, socially oriented towards a period of considerable strife.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, you must have left it sooner then. How long were you associated with the Artists and Writers Union?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Until it disintegrated. Now, as I talk to you, I feel that it couldn't have done anything except drift off into an Artists Union. I remember all their various meeting places and I remember the one at Ray Strong's at Columbus Avenue and Dawn ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: But you remember that, you were still with the Artists Union even though it was no longer artists and writers.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: That's right.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I know when I joined the Artists Union it had no writers ... that was late ... this was early '38.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Oh, this was quite a number of years later then because this first meeting, as I say, was in '33 and there were many years that they met very steadily. There was no break ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You were really involved in the project.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I started on it early.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's great.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: The only involvement I had - the first thing I knew about any sort of project was back in my home town of Marshall, Missouri and this wonderful guy, head of the PWA at the time, and they were putting in sewage disposal plants, a guy by the name of Bill Thomas, a wonderful guy. He came from Moberly, Missouri and he was very interested in art and writing and so forth. He had made contact with some of us around. We were a hell of a lot younger than he was but he was interested in these kids, you know. He'd invite us over and we'd talk about art and literature and all that sort of thing. Of course, at that time there was an awful lot of proletarian writing. There was a great proletarian writer out in Moberly but I can't remember his name. He wrote some terrific books. But we'd go over to Bill's house and he'd serve us cocktails - ah, that was great, real big time. City time stuff, you know? But he introduced me to literature that I hadn't read, classic sort of thing. That was my first introduction to the projects at the time. Of course, as you can see, it was a cultural thing beginning with sewage disposal plants.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You were saying, Shirley, that as you recall, Kenneth Rexroth, the writer and poet from San Francisco, was quite active in organizing the Artists and Writers Union. Do you know anything more about some of the people who were involved? Do you remember?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, I have a very strong impression of the people that I mentioned little earlier and about those first early meetings and their idea that it would be a good thing to have in San Francisco because there hadn't been anything like it. Subsequently, I remember mostly people with whom I had worked on the project, the art projects, which were very many people. One went around frequently from one project to another. I can recall we were talking considerably earlier about the integration of the mural with the easel and the lithographic project. Anytime the mural project wanted help it would send for people and they always got the help with the result that I worked for a couple of months at Aquatic park with Hilaire Hiler and Dick Ayer. I worked for Raddie (Herman) Volz ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Did Dick Ayer work at the Aquatic Park?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes, he did the designs for the whole upstairs.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: What was this a sculpture or?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It is a rather abstracted ship motif with ropes in relief and things sort



of coming out from the wall. Very quiet colors, very good job. I understood recently from his daughter that it had been closed for quite a while and then reopened again just very recently.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's the reason I've probably never seen it. Dick did a lot of work over in the Federal Building too. He had that fantastic thing, a big abstract sculpture.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. I worked for him on that.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Did you?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That was really amazing because it was one of the most way-out things that was ever done a long time ago in San Francisco in abstract art.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It was all colored with automobile lacquer. The was the pigment for that.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I don't remember that. I just remember the shapes that he had in it. Completely abstract, right?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, they were very art-like, very ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Supposed to represent something?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No. Definitely not.

MARY MCCHESENEY: They were painted with automobile lacquer? What material did you use?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: On plywood, three-quarter inch plywood, jigsawed.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How were the pieces joined together? Were they screwed together or what?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, they were separately imposed in some way or another.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I had the impression it was bent, or it had bends in it.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Coming out from the wall do you mean?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No, this was in the patio.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes, I know where it was. Ha ha ha

MARY MCCHESENEY: Was it a relief panel or was it actually a freestanding sculpture?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It was on the wall and it was relief only to the extend that these plywood pieces were piled up on one another. That was by the Federal Building, wasn't it? By the Volz mural.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, it was behind it there in the patio. Do you remember the columnade? Each column represented a state. Behind the building were these big walls. Actually they were patios or courtyards. On the left side as you went in was the sculpture yard and inside you went into the Indian Museum, North American Indian or was it ...

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Those were Navaho Indians ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: South, South or Northwest Indians. Something like that, which was a beautiful display. God, that was magnificent. That was one of the best things in the show. They had these totems running from the floor to the ceiling.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. I remember.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Louis Siegrist did all the silk screen posters for that show.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Louis Siegrist is a San Francisco painter who was also on the art project for a little while. He did the silk screen posters for the Indian exhibition?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: If I remember correctly but then again it has been quite a long time.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How large was this painted plywood sculpture that you worked on with Dick Ayer?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, you have the side of the building to cover.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, the front of the building was 90 feet high.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It was a tremendous piece of building. It must have been that high and I don't know how wide. Then there were these numerous pieces that were attached to the face of the building.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I thought Dick's was a free standing piece. It wasn't though.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I'll have to ask.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Is Dick still alive?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Oh yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I thought he had died of cirrhosis of the liver. Ha ha ha ha

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, no.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I remember - do you remember that wonderful boat on Treasure Island, the River Queen?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: And Volz had this shop over there. For a while I think the whole project had their shops on the River Queen. Anyway, we'd set out for there after working on the mural and go to have lunch. When we got up to the prow of the boat, there would be Dick with his quart of wine and he never failed, you know. He'd finish off a whole quart of wine, just for lunch. Later on I heard he got to be a gallon for lunch. I don't know.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: He is painting.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's wonderful.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you know where he is now?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. He lives in San Francisco.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, he was at the School of Fine Arts. He took his GI Bill, you know, and went to the School of Fine Arts when I was there teaching. The faculty had free instructions for their wives or whoever was interested in the family. So Mary came over and studied sculpture and Dick was in the same class. I guess he had left before you were there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I don't remember him. You mentioned that you also worked as an assistant on the Aquatic Park project. Did you work for Hilaire Hiler there?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Can you tell us something about the job and what you did.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, I worked under Hilaire Hiler but I was working more specifically for Dick Ayer. Dick Ayer did the designs for the upper floor under Hiler. They were Dick's designs and I was an assistant along with a few other people. But we intermingled fairly freely between these two floors and several rooms and the jobs were occasionally mixed. The palettes were the same. They were all related to Hiler's famous palette..

MARY MCCHESENEY: What's this? A color system?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: The physical aspects of these two jobs must have been completely different, you know. Over there on the Volz mural we had these great steel scaffolds, you know, pipe scaffolds where you climbed up and down - you know Julian Williams?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Julian never went up the ladder at all, you know. He climbed up hand over hand and he'd go down the same way. It was great up there in the fresh air and all you people, we sort of looked down on you if you were working at the same time over there. And you'd be working on the ... you'd see these cats all working around in the foyer there, sort of squiggling along with little brushes. We were using great slashing painters, thirty-fives as we'd call them. That's doing barn painting.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It wasn't as heroic as the Federal Building but it certainly was pleasant. It was an extremely pleasant job. A wonderful place to work and ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Those jobs were tremendous, you know? Where you could work together. You weren't competing. There was no competition ...

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: The people were extremely compatible.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yes, yes. That's the way with the job over there. We had all these artists working on it. Nobody could possibly compete. Oh, there was some technical competition. Volz could bring that out in any person. It was strictly how you could use a thirty-five. You'd take this house painters brush and if you could cut a neat line you were better than the guy who couldn't do it. Of course, Volz would always tell you, "Say, you cut a real neat line. I'm going to make you my

foremen." Ha ha ha He was always doing this, undermining the morale so he could build himself. I loved Herman Volz. He just kicked me off the project you know. I love him.

MARY MCCHESENEY: He actually fired you from the project. I meant to ask you about that. How could this be done? How much authority .. ?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: He didn't fire me.

MARY MCCHESENEY: He didn't fire you? What I was curious about was where the authority rested on the project. Who had the right or the power to dismiss anybody from the job? If you were hired by somebody as their assistant to work on the mural project, could the person who hired you (if they didn't want you to work) fire you? Did that mean, then, that you were fired from the project or just from his specific job? How did this work out?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: It wasn't a matter of firing. It was a matter of transferring. If you didn't like the person who was working under you, you just had to transfer him if you were the supervisor or the man at the head of the job. For instance, I was working with Volz, he put me on the job eventually as foremen at the ending of the mural and then when I was transferred to the mosaic project there was practically nothing to do because the Italian mosaic workers were doing all the work over there. We had designed the job. Volz had designed it and we had reduced it to the cartoon size. We'd done all the mock-ups. The Italians were cutting the stones and so you know, we were loose, there was nothing to do so Volz expected us to stand around there and take a hammer and go like this all day long and the work just wasn't there. So we'd go over to the building that had the movies.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I never got that far.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I don't know what building but they had these wonderful old movies.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was at the Treasure Island Fair?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yes. So we'd sneak off and go and look at the old movies. We'd see Charlie Chaplin films and learn something about creative work. Of course, we were caught like that but Volz was there himself. But then one day - I don't know, I don't know - I got into an argument with Herman about some stupid little old ridiculous scene. He said something like, "Act like you want to work," or something and I said, "I can't perform if there is not work to do." Coincidentally an hour later all the supervisors, it seems to me, in the state came into the project and Volz said, "I want this man taken off the job immediately!" pointing at me. But this is enough to queer anybody, you know. That's enough to put the hammer on anybody for years.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Well, what was the process? Suppose in this case or in any case that ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: He just simply said that he was the supervisor and he said that he wanted this man eliminated.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you have any appeal from his authority or you had been just transferred or how'd it work out.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I don't know ... if I'd wanted to appeal it perhaps I could have gone to the authorities, the high officials, and said, I resent this man's dictatorial attitude in eliminating me. I didn't waste the time. I knew that the whole thing was folding up anyway.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How would the transfer take place? Who was then in charge of finding you another job?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I do not know. I was transferred to the Pickle Factory which was a receptacle for all of the people being eliminated from the mural job or the mosaic job at that time on the island. All the muralists, I think were over there. There was Tom Hayes, Gaethre (George) and Peter Lowe and gobs of them over there. Even Volz himself wound up down there and Reuben Kadish wound up there and you never saw such a ghastly place in your life. Everybody was fighting everybody else, you know. Everybody was politicalising, trying to beat each other out of who was going to be supervisor. There was nothing left.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was at the very end of the project days?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, it ran a year after that evidently.

MARY MCCHESENEY: We were just discussing some of the problems that arose during the WPA art project in relationship to the supervisors and the people employed on the project. I was curious to find out how authority was actually invested in certain people and who had the power to fire or dismiss any person from a job. Robert McChesney was explaining how he had been dismissed from a job by his supervisor and then was transferred to another position. He didn't remember exactly how this had happened but apparently it was handled through somebody in WPA who was higher up in the hierarchy through the main office, I suppose. Shirley, did you ever have this kind of experience? We're interested in finding out how the project actually worked and these details help.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, on the Coit Tower job I was fired several times by Bernard Zakheim and ...

(Frank Triest, Shirley's husband who joined the group at this point)

FRANK TRIEST: That was emotional, not political.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Then I would go and see Dr. Heil who would send me back the next day to the same man and the same job because actually Mr. Zakheim didn't have the hiring and firing power but it was a pleasure for him to do this and on other jobs I ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Did Zakheim always receive you back?

FRANK TRIEST: With open arms.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: He was always very happy to see me again. Ha ha

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yes. He would be.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Then Walter Heil must have been sort of a director of the Coit Tower project.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, it was in his hands.

MARY MCCHESENEY: So he had the only real power.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: He had an overall boss job on this so that one could appeal to him. In regards to other jobs, it seems to me that one could be moved around and complained bitterly. I remember having been moved when I was working at home on some easel work and having been

sent to do two days work on a cartoon for Volz's mosaic at the city college in San Francisco. But I was very annoyed with this and I didn't want to continue to do it. I wasn't with it long enough to become involved in the job and I just wanted to go back home and do what I had been doing. I think the situation that prevailed frequently would be that certain workers were more desirable than other workers as assistants and there was frequently quite an effort among the muralists, in particular, to obtain the best workers for themselves if they could. That's reasonable enough. Then they'd divide up what was left over. Sometimes the best workers would have ideas as to which project they wanted to work on and this would cause a little fomenting to go on all the time. Those who didn't like the job they were on wanted to be on another one and those who had their mural project wanted workers who were with someone else. This went on quite steadily. But it was ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Impossible to eliminate this sort of thing in that condition, you know.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It was very interesting to see certain individuals collect the very good workers to themselves and keep them somehow or another. I had no idea how they succeeded in that.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Of course, I remember Herman Volz. Man, he played it like mad. He'd line up everybody he possibly could.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Maybe it was ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Herman was more obvious than anybody else. Of course, eventually he and Kadish... whooosh. They were like this. They were fighting each other for material. Right?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Sure.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's the way I felt the whole scene was and of course, it ended up like that over in the Pickle Factory.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, Hiler got very good workers around himself and kept them. He did his best to keep this same group with him as long as he possibly could.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I don't think he fought with anybody. Hiller was a certain type. I don't know. You see, I wasn't involved in that sort of thing. Although that was going on at the same time I was working over at Treasure Island. But I wasn't involved in this and I don't know. I wish I had. I wish I had participated more completely with this thing, you know. I had a place on Telegraph Hill, the top of Telegraph Hill and spent 25 dollars a month for it. I could look over the area towards Oakland and Berkeley and see my job on Treasure Island down below me and I would walk down, all the way down to Columbus and Washington, someplace in there, and catch the cable car or one of those little tiny street cars, you know, that used to run.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: The Union Street cars.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Union Street car, I guess, and it would take me down to the Ferry Building and we would take a ferry over to Oakland and then back to Treasure Island through the fog.

END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 2

SIDE 2, TAPE 2

MARY MCCHESENEY: We've been discussing some of the difficulties that arose between the supervisors and the artists employed on the project. Then we got off on reminiscences of the

happy days in San Francisco when a full course meal cost 25 cents.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yes, indeed, it was twenty-five cents. Twenty-five cents was an expensive meal and a damn good Chinese meal would be around 15 cents.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes, this was enough for a good dinner, fifteen cents.

MARY MCCHESENEY: It seems, in what you've said so far that the main difficulty as far as cooperation was concerned was that there was a certain amount of competition between the people who were the designers of murals to get better workers to work with them on the project. Were there any other areas of conflict? On the project or within the project, aside from just personality differences? If a new project were organized, do you think there would be any other way. The project could be set up to avoid difficulties? Could difficulties have been eradicated by a different type of organization?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, I believe that there were considerable pressures put on the administrator by the schools, where murals were to be executed. They had to deal with a subject matter so that the subject matter would become unbelievably restricted. This was a rather steady problem. It wasn't too much of a problem in regard to the Fair and some of the larger things where the overall idea had been accepted but there were a great many small murals that were beaten down all the time. They, presumably, had to meet explicit requirements of the school board and the school principal. I was given a job once to design a mural for a school in San Jose and ...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: What was the job? What did the designer choose? I bet it was to keep in consideration the fact that we (California) grew nothing but fruit.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No. It was to be taken from a book that had been written by the principal's sister and it was to illustrate a particular scene in that book which I felt was rather restricted. It worked out but this kind of thing created problems.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What type of book had she written?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It was a story about California and Father Seca's trip up the coast and his building of the missions and how kind he had been to the Indians and so on. There was a particular time when he had defended them against some nasty pirates who were popping a way off the coast.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: This runs into contradiction to Clay Spohn's business. If this cat, Father Seca had been so sharp he would have laid the knowledge on these Indians to apply themselves with this great product of this area of California, which is not (mercury). Particularly the mercury ore which is a beautiful red rock and these cats, these beautiful Indians, were painting themselves with it, decorating themselves with it, like mad. Of course, they killed themselves off. Yes, you know, they didn't find Father Seca. Maybe this was before him, huh?

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did Clay Spohn do a mural regarding this?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yes, Clay Spohn did, saying that the Indians discovered the poison for themselves.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Were there any other instances, Shirley, that you knew of where somebody in this kind of position like the school principal would have the right or would be in a position to dictate to the project and to the artist such specific requirements for a mural? Did this happen quite

frequently?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, it was there in a greater or lesser degree. I felt that that particular situation was rather exaggerated.

MARY MCCHESENEY: But it was a difficulty that many artists you knew on the project mentioned? You said it was discussed.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes, because one was not simply being given a wall. One would be given a wall and it would have to have Jack London and Juquin Marietta running across it. And this wasn't necessarily the thing that one might have a feeling for. Perhaps one could consider it a discipline but then on the other hand, most of the artists preferred greater freedom in choice of subject matter than that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This probably accounts for the fact that many people I've written to and talked with feel a little bit ashamed about some of the work that they did on WPA. They felt that it wasn't true to their best work of the period, that they were influenced and told to do by schools and supervisors on the project certain kinds of work that they wouldn't actually have done otherwise. They feel that they were doing independent work at that time that they would have been happier to be represented by. Clay Spohn mentioned this. He said that he was ashamed of most of the things that he did on the WPA.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I think the condition of the artist was to oppose them. I think it is also amazing that they finally came around to realizing that the artists were the potential cultural assets of the country at the time. He was allowed to do something and they did allow him to do something but it was under heavy cover. I've got that wrong.

MARY MCCHESENEY: By under heavy cover, you mean, some interference with their freedom as artists. Do you think, generally speaking, that these disadvantages were outweighed by the fact that you were given the chance to work on projects that were mainly enjoyable and with people who were compatible to work with?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Looking back on it now, it is an entirely different situation. Shirley, you can say it far better than I can. I know that, when I came out, it would have been impossible for me to have existed. I don't know what would have happened to me if there hadn't been a free Federal Art Project. I don't know. I could have existed. I might have been a ditch digger, a seaman, or a pile driver, or thousands of other things. Economically I could have been driven into any field. Don't you think?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, there were very few fields to be driven into. Unfortunately one of the sorriest lots was to sit on relief without anything in particular to do, on a really minimal existence scale. And it was always much better to be able to get on any kind of a project. To be on the art project was ideal. But these were the points, the dictating of subject matter was constantly there and I assume it would have been there for the commissioned artist a good while prior to the WPA. I imagine that there were commissions hundreds of years ago where artists wondered - did they or did they not want that particular commission to do that particular picture.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Evidently on the easel project, for instance, weren't the painters allowed to do exactly what they wanted to do. For instance, Johnny Saccaro at one time along the line told me he was able to do what he wanted to do. He said, "Man, this is the greatest goddamned thing I ever saw in my life. You get on this project!" And I said, "Well, I'm on the mural project." That's what I like



you know, because I'm associating with people. I'm all hep up on the big scene of the labor movement and so forth. Johnny is out there painting in his studio and he says. "Whenever I can get them to put me on the easel project it will be just great." And he was doing some pretty crazy things but I didn't realize it because I was hep on the other scene.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You were on the easel project for some time Shirley, in San Francisco?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, for a comparatively short period but it was considered, I think, the ideal spot and the concern of the administration was what they were going to do with the products because they had easel pictures stacked up at quite a rate. A number of them went around almost like salesmen. They would go around to public buildings and try to convince public officials that they wanted murals or easel paintings or matted prints or they wanted something so that they could place and utilize these works of art that were being created daily. This was another major problem -- to get them placed. And a great many of them never were placed.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I have a very interesting question to ask you. I remember asking Johnny and a few of these people who were on the easel project about the inspections. They wanted to know how much you were painting all the time. Johnny said that they never came around and then the next time I asked him he said, "Man, they are around all the time." He said, "Man, they caught me several times when I wasn't even home." I said, "Well, there you are." Isn't it nice? You are supposed to be at home but then again you aren't there.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did you feel that this was one of your problems, Shirley, that you were expected to be in your studio?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Oh, definitely! But it didn't bother me. I was there. I mean, it provided me with that little tiny bit of discipline. I had to be sure that I got there, got busy, worked out my day, which I did, and it suited me perfectly.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Did they come around to the studio to check if you were working or not?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Who was this? Who would come to see?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: George Harris and Reuben Kadish. They were supervisors on the easel project. Ha ha

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Two of the best artists in the whole goddamned gang.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Going around spending their time that way instead of painting.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I think that is just wonderful for the supervisors to go around to the artist's studio. Don't you think so? Why should they send some of the jerks around there? I think this was a wonderful part about the WPA. There was integrity. It really was beautiful. There was tremendous respect from ...

MARY MCCHESENEY: Among the artists on the project...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: At that time in the artists field in San Francisco.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Oh yes. I think so.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: It was a beautiful coalition and a feeling of (I hate to use the modern day term - I think it was discovered by the 57th Avenue gang in New York) - togetherness. The artist was, at that time, a what do you call it? Coagulators or good goddamned gang. They made it, you know. They would sit around a bar and talk about things. They'd talk about the murals they did and so forth and what they were working on. But not today. Man, they are so scared.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, there was a common cement of financial need. Everybody was very close to being hungry and this, certainly, put people closer together. They were more involved with one another, more compassionate toward one another than they are now. Now they are too busy and they are not hungry or even close to it, most of them.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: How did you end up on the program?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: How did I start on it? Went down and applied for it.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I was going to ask you. We are talking about the cooperation between the artists of the period and how they got along so well together. I was curious to know whether there was much of a connection between different groups on the WPA, like the writers and the artists. Did the artists have much to do with the writers? Was there any working relationship between the writers and artists? Did they work together on projects or were many of you friends? Did you see a lot of each other?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Well, there were a lot of friends but I don't remember there being any working communication. There may have been. I don't know whether they had illustrations or anything of that sort.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I don't know if they used art work on the other projects.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Ha ha ha ha. Don't mind me if I go take a leak. Excuse me.

MARY MCCHESENEY: But you were friends with many of the writers on the project?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes, yes. A lot of the artists and writers knew one another. More, I'd say, than the mixture of people in the theatre groups which there were a good many and there was a large theatre research group in San Francisco.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How about the musicians project ... did you know any musicians?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I didn't know any musicians. But the artists and writers tended to have a good deal to do with one another.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Charlie Safford who was rather a well known painter in the Bay area, who died last year, was telling me that he was unable to get on the artist project but that he was able to get on the writers project and that he worked on the writers project as a book illustrator. Did you know him or did you know any other artists who did that?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I didn't know him but I knew of him.

MARY MCCHESENEY: You didn't know any other artists who couldn't get positions on the artists project so that they went on to other projects?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I was wondering how they actually operated this. Did they have some kind of limit set up for the number of artists they would take on the project at any one time?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: I believe they had some kind of quota. The word comes to me. As I remember it, it means something. I think the quota was allowed by the Federal Government and perhaps it was issued from some far away place like Washington.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Yes.

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: I can't remember. According to the quota, there should be so and so many supervisors, so and so super-supervisors, so and so sub-supervisors and so on down. I believe that if the quota were cut, people were dropped and that meant that they would automatically go back on relief roles and this was something that was present most of the time. Every little while there would be this rumor that there was going to be a cut in the quota and everybody was extremely uncomfortable.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Going back on relief roles, did that mean that your income was cut down or did it just mean that you were no longer employed on the project. The money that you got, was it the same amount?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: No, it was not. It seems to me that the relief, which was handled by a different agency, not quite so tenderly, would allow you a certain amount for rent if you had rent that they considered suitable. A single person would receive something like \$3.50 per week out of which they presumably would pay their rent and their food, plus the surplus groceries that were given. So it was certainly better to stay on WPA at \$18 per week than it was to get \$3.50 per week.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Oh, there was that much of a difference.

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Yes, there was.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Beside the fact that there was the monetary aspect, there was nothing to do on relief.

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Yes, sometimes the relief workers would come to see you constantly or rather you would walk, lacking car fare, several miles to see them. And they would busily try to find where you could go to work somewhere else. As economic conditions in the world improved, that is as war became more imminent and economic conditions improved, the efforts of the social workers to get people off of relief and WPA increased. It became stronger and stronger as there were more and more jobs outside to move people off quickly. I remember, even while I was working on a mural project, being interviewed by a social worker who wanted me to go to school to learn typing because it would fit me for work in the outside world.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Even while you were on the WPA project then, you were sort of under the jurisdiction of a social worker?

SHIRLEY STASCHEM TRIEST: Yes. The social workers were committed to getting people off of WPA and relief roles. This was their mission in life. This is what they were paid for. So they spent all of their time trying to get people off which meant trying to educate them for it or shoving them off or catching them in some unfortunate double dealing that meant they could be pushed off or anyway that it could be done. This was their work.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: It didn't apply to the people that were pushed off Volz murals particularly

and put over in the Pickle Factory. But it was, applied to, of course, everybody. If there had been any decent jobs at the time, we would have been producing but there weren't. I went into the Pickle Factory. Remember the Pickle Factory, remember that?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. I worked there.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Which floor?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Oh...

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: The silk screen? They had everything.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Must have been where Clay Spohn was. Was that the third floor? Or the second floor?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Third floor. Did you work on Clay Spohn's mural?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No. I was working on the cartoon for the mosaic that I demonstrated at the fair.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Clay must have been over there for a long time.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. He was working on his Indians up there.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, I worked on his Indians up there too. Ha ha ha ha Good Lord. How long did he work on those Indians?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Quite a while.

MARY MCCHESENEY: It was at the end of the project when many people had gone and mural jobs were completed and their weren't many other things for them to go to so they gathered together in this place called the Pickle Factory, in San Francisco and it was sort of connected with the fair, I guess. Well, you were working for the fair weren't you?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

MARY MCCHESENEY: What were the other people doing?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: This job was quite late though, wasn't it? It was during the fair.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. That was probably in 1939 when he was working on that.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's right. I was about. I helped along with Phyllis Zakheim. Could that have been possible? Let me just straighten this out now. Clay was working on this Indian thing for Los Gatos High School.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That was during the later part of 1941?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: It was that late?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Do you think so?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I don't think so.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You don't think so?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Because I don't think I would have seen it then.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Where in the hell could it have been then? I'm losing my...damn it. When was it I went with Clay Spohn to revarnish that thing and we got all involved with ... What a scene!

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: There was work in preparation at the Pickle Factory for the fair because they were doing these - I remember having lent a hand to these insignia that were going on the forty-eight columns.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Volz had all his men working over at the Pickle Factory during the fair.

MARY MCCHESENEY: It was sort of where you organized the projects that you were going to work on for demonstrations or murals?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Yes. I think it was a mural plant.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Damn it. Now it must have been when I was kicked off of Volz's project and worked with Clay Spohn.

MARY MCCHESENEY: This was at the Pickle Factory?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Clay was polishing up. He was just finishing off his glass panel, I think. Whoosh and he had all these big long tables. This has already been taped. They were filled with all his formulas, you know. It's repeatable! Because Clay Spohn is a great artist.

MARY MCCHESENEY: I think we can finish up the tape with some sort of evaluation of the period and of the project. Looking back on those times, Shirley, what would you say in general about working on the PWA and WPA? What kind of role did it play in your life as an artist? Did it help in your development, generally speaking? Well, what would you say about it from that point of view?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Oh, I feel that it contributed a great deal to my development and it provided the facilities. It provided the stimulation of working with other people doing the same thing. This was the most important aspect as far as I'm concerned and the fact that there were the difficulties of not always being able to do exactly what you wanted to do. Nevertheless, it was far closer to what a great many people wanted than anyone has come before or since.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you have any idea about what has happened to most of the work that you did on the WPA project?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I have no idea at all what has happened to the work.

MARY MCCHESENEY: How was that handled? You worked on the easel project, and when you completed a painting, did the supervisor then take it from your studio?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: You brought it in to the headquarters and it was put usually in the exhibition department in files. They had tremendous amount of work and they circulated exhibitions but whatever became of the paintings they had I can't - I simply can't answer that.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Someone was saying that the photography project was engaged in

photographing works of art from the WPA period. Did you hear anything about that? Were you aware that this was actually done? I heard from somebody that they thought it might have been done. Did you ever hear about this?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No, I didn't.

MARY MCCHESENEY: That any photographic record was made of the paintings?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: No.

MARY MCCHESENEY: So then as far as you were concerned, when any individual painting was delivered to the headquarters and put in the exhibition files, that was the last you heard of it. Or were you informed about where they were exhibiting?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Occasionally you would hear that something you had done was being exhibited, a lithograph or an easel work. Of course, you didn't always know when a mural was executed or put up if it were a small one because it was quite possible to design a mural and have someone else execute it and have still someone else in some other county install it.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: How about Marion Cunningham? Wasn't she involved in the project?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: I don't recollect whether she was or not. I just can't recall. I was thinking of Marion the other day and I couldn't think whether she was on the project or not.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I was wondering whether she was.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Marion Cunningham was a well-known San Francisco painter who was married to Ben Cunningham, supervisor of mural painting for Northern California up until April 1939.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, if she was married to Ben Cunningham, she wasn't involved in the project particularly.

MARY MCCHESENEY: She may have been excluded because he was a supervisor and only one person in the family was allowed on the project. Is there anything further that you would like to say about the period in general? Either of you?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: We have a slight bit of tape, we might as well say something about it.

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: Can you make a summation?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Summation! No, I can't make a summation. I got in on the short end of things which is unfortunate. I wish I had come straight forwardly to San Francisco instead of going to Los Angeles thinking that I needed some art education from that great movie area.

MARY MCCHESENEY: Do you think I could ask you one thing? One question that might be interesting for some clarification. Speaking generally of the administration of the WPA, how would you evaluate them? What was your opinion of the way the project was administered? Did you have any complaints about the administration. How would you evaluate the administration?

SHIRLEY STASCHEN TRIEST: At the time, I had a kind of running complaint about the administration but I feel, in retrospect, that they did as well as they could because they would receive orders every few days that would come down from above. It was difficult for them to

administer under these circumstances when they would have larger forces, smaller forces, to be sent here and there and cut off. They didn't know whether they would keep their jobs either. There was never anything very sure about it from the beginning of those poor men with the shovels, and the wild effort that was being made there. It never, in a way, got any more sure than that. From one week to another, you would never have the feeling that it was sure. They might close down the mural. They might decide not to finish it. The whole thing might fold. There was never any kind of real security.

END OF INTERVIEWS

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