



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with John Outterbridge,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with John Outterbridge on January 3, 1973. The interview took place in Compton, California, and was conducted by Allen Bassing for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ALLEN BASSING: This is Allen Bassing for the Archives of American Art. The date is January 3, 1973. I am talking with John Outterbridge, of the Compton Communicative Arts Academy. John, tell me something about yourself. How did you happen to get started in the arts? Or even before then, tell me a little about your background.

JOHN OUTTERBRIDGE: First of all, I think I received a great influence from my mother and father. I was born in Greenville, North Carolina. My father was a man who had great creative potential. I think if he had been born at a different time he would have been a very successful musician and possibly an artist. But he was married early and had a very large family, which he cared very much for. My mother as well was a very creative woman. I think that their lifestyle at that particular time, in order for them to survive, must have been very creative; and they still are today. They're still living. But what I'm saying is that my father was a man who always refused work for anyone else but himself. So he devised a means of making a living by hauling things, he was a junk collector somewhat. He built things, he constantly added additions to the house, which had started out as a shack, that kind of thing, you know. He just accumulated things. Also he had a strong interest in music. After the long hard days he used to have, he would have always come in at night and play a French horn. I don't know if he's still doing that. I haven't lived with my parents for a long time. But as a result of a large family, a very close family, all of us leaned toward music and arts somewhat. I was born in 1933 in Greenville, and I finished high school there. Then I left because it was difficult for me to find the kind of school that I wanted to go to. When I graduated from high school, I didn't want to ask my father to send me to college because he had just finished schooling my older sister and that was quite difficult. And there were so many other brothers and sisters after me who wanted to go to school. During high school, I worked during the summers, each summer. I saved my money. For my first year of college, I went to A & T College in Greensboro, North Carolina.

MR. BASSING: What does A & T stand for?

MR. OUTTERBRIDGE: Agricultural and Technical University. That's where the sit-ins started, I think, at that school. A very famous school, A & T College. I went there for one year to study engineering. My grades were good. But I was trying to be as practical as possible in choosing an occupation. I had some interest in engineering because, as I said, my father was always building things. When I was a kid, I built toys and sold them. I was a model airplane fanatic. I built very technical things just from watching my father. I became interested in model building and that kind of thing. I still do some of that when I have time. So I went to school to study engineering. I thought that artists don't get jobs, you know, but I really wanted to be an artist. There were art students at A & T. I was already painting at that time very well-or I thought very well anyway. After seeing some of my work, the art students always encouraged me. Various students from the art department would always invite me over to sessions and that kind of thing. They wanted me to just become affiliated with them. But, as I say, I was an engineering student. I was having a difficult time staying in school. I think the Korean conflict was at its peak at this particular time. You'd read in the newspapers about some controversy that the G.I. Bill might be cut off. Because I had been somewhat close to airplanes, when I went to A & T, I joined the Air Force R.O.T.C. I was in uniform. I was being trained as a cadet and all that. Every time you read a newspaper there seemed to be this thing about the discontinuance of the G.I. Bill. And I knew that in order for me to finish school I was going to need to get that Bill somehow. In R.O.T.C., I was aware of that fact that there was a deferment. But what's the use of being deferred if you can't stay in school? So I thought about joining the Air Force in order to go through it and come out with the G.I. Bill so I could comfortably go to school, and choose the school of my choice somewhat. So after a year of college, I went down to volunteer for the Air Force. I took some examinations and seemingly had every qualification in the world to become a pilot, which was what I wanted to be. At the time they told me there was a quota for blacks.

MR. BASSING: You mean just for pilots or in the Air Force?

MR. OUTTERBRIDGE: In the Air Force.

MR. BASSING: This was when?

MR. OUTTERBRIDGE: Nineteen fifty-two. 1953. There was a quota for blacks in joining the Air Force. I passed

these examinations, but I still couldn't get in because of the quota was filled at this time. So I ended up going into the Army. I thought I had to go in order to get the G.I. Bill. I went into the Army, went through the routine, basic training and all that. And fortunately [I] ended up in a Germany rather than in Korea. In Germany, I became an ammunition specialist. I got lucky. They sent me to various schools in Germany, ammunition and weapon specialist schools, chemical, radiological, and biological warfare schools. Every time I got a chance to go to any school I went.

MR. BASSING: This was for three years?

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: Yes, this was a three-year stint in the service. In the meantime, I was painting in the barracks; I stacked up on watercolors. Germany is a very beautiful country. I managed to get a little car. I used to go to isolated little villages and paint. I concentrated on learning the language. I went to school at night, so I could learn the language and rap with people and all, you know. After a year and a half, I was speaking pretty fluent German. I started to sell a lot of little watercolors and things like that.

MR. BASSING: What's the Army policy on something like that? They don't encourage it?

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: I don't know, man. I think it depends on the person. You know, like they didn't care about my painting in the barracks.

MR. BASSING: Oh, sure enough. I mean to them it's just a hobby, you know, just something you do.

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: Yes, it was a hobby then. It might have been a hobby to others but it was a very necessary thing for me, you know, just to paint. I had always painted. I don't know when I started being an artist. To me that was just a feeling, just a thing I had to do. I painted on the train going into Germany. It is such a beautiful country. It was a place I had never been to. I had never been to Europe. All the traditions there just had some effect on me. So I accumulated quite a few paintings that way. One day, we were having barracks inspection. The company commander came in. He was Captain Cook from New York. He was sort of an art connoisseur. He rummaged through my locker and found all these things. He said, "Hey, who did these?," I said, "Well I did, Captain." He became fond of them and bought about five. He said, "Have you been doing this all the time?" I told him I had. He said, "Why don't you let me get you a studio on the post?" So he got me a studio; this was the division headquarters.

MR. BASSING: I must say he was a very unusual captain.

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: Yes. Yes. He was a great guy. He found space for me to work in. He set me up, gave me a jeep. And I did assignments. I painted signs. I painted murals in American high schools in Germany. I started to paint large murals in officers' clubs, that kind of thing. It became like a full-time thing. I became sort of a military artist with the help of Captain Cook. Then just before I got ready to leave Germany-when I had only a few months left in the service-I decided that I would go to school in Chicago. I went to the Chicago Academy of Art for a time. Then I ended up at the American Academy of Art, which I thought was a better school.

MR. BASSING: That's in Chicago?

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: Yes, both schools are in Chicago. I wanted to go to the Art Institute, but I need to work also. The schedule at the Art Institute at that time was not convenient for me to work. Shortly after I arrived in Chicago, I got a job with a graphic arts firm as an errand boy. The firm was located in an area where most of the studios were concentrated. It was quite exciting to go from studio to studio picking up and delivering works and all, and going to school at the same time. I went there for a couple of years or more. Even with the G.I. Bill. It was still difficult to stay in school, paying rent in a very unfamiliar area. After a time I quit that job and applied for a job with the Chicago Transit Authority as a bus driver. In that job, you should be familiar with the city. I've always had a way of orienting myself with a city. All I need to do is find out which way is east and which is west and which is north and south, and I get around pretty well. I went through a strenuous training period with the Chicago Transit Authority and became a bus driver. I remained a bus driver for eight years or more. I went to school. I painted. I started to show in galleries and that kind of thing. I developed some popularity as an artist in Chicago. But those were crude years. The background comes from a lot of sources. Influences come from a lot of places. So I think, like I said at the beginning, art was always a way of life with me because of my parents, because of the environment I grew up in. One of my high school teachers, a Mrs. Allen, came from Boston; she was also a strong influence early in my life. She was a very competent artist and she always related very closely to my family. She considered us a family of artists. I have two brothers who are very fine artists today. They work and teach in the South. Freddy Outerbridge and Marvin Outerbridge. And also I have a third brother who is quite a genius, a creative individual. Warren, the brother next to me, is a very fine artist also. He works in sort of an architectural affiliation. Out of our family came musicians and artists.

MR. BASSING: What happened after your eight years with the Chicago Transit Authority?

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: After eight years with the Chicago Transit Authority, I got married. We decided that before we'd have any kids, we'd like to come to the West Coast. Neither of us had ever been out this way. We wanted to see what it was like out here. We had friends from Chicago who used to come to Los Angeles and San Francisco quite often. They used to say, "Hey, man, there are artists out there, a lot of cats, a lot of things for artists to do." And I always wanted to work as an artist, you know, to support my family as such. I knew it would be difficult, but it was always my aim to support my family as an artist. At that time, we didn't have any kids. We came to Los Angeles in the latter part of 1963. It took me about three months to get a job. I could have gotten a job here as a bus driver again because of my record in Chicago was good. But, I looked for three months before I found a job in a production studio. I went through that for about three years. This was quite a unique studio; they worked with contemporary trends in art. They always tried to border what was being done in world art. They did things for interior decorators. They did things for quite a number of sources. I worked with them for three years. I enjoyed the job in the sense that there was quite a contrast between my working in the studio and at home. Materials were scarce at home. I was always concerned about a tube of paint running out, that kind of thing. But at the studio, a tube grew to be a can, like a gallon can of paint, and the palette knives extended into really big spatulas. The diversification of the tools that I worked with extended. And also color theory-you can study color theory, but until you get into a work situation where you have deadlines to meet and that kind of thing, does color theory become a truth; it really unbends itself. So there were a lot of disciplines that came about in working in the studio situation, and working with so many other artists from all over the world more or less. After two years there, I worked my way into the design department of this studio. And then, I got an offer from another studio to become its art director. I took that job because the money increased, and also the responsibility. I wanted to know what that was all about-to sort of direct other artists and so on. Let me see, I think I worked in studio environments for maybe five years. From that, I started to work my way into sculpture. Painting eight hours a day got to be more like a job rather than an enjoyable kind of thing. I found myself coming home at night with the same feeling I had in the studio to do my own work. And I didn't like that. So I decided that I'd stop painting, man, like I'll just work my way right into sculpture. I always was very close to sculpture anyway, in terms of feeling. So I quit the directorship at this studio. My wife got a job. She said, "I think you ought to stay home and think some, just work some." I really thank her today for that. For two years, I stayed home, worked in the back yard, concentrated on nothing but sculpture-just building and building and building. I started with stone and worked my way into metal and wood; I worked with those three elements. It gave me time to establish myself in various shows, to compete in museum shows, etc. I never had shown that much before that time. I found out how competitive it was to get into shows. I think that period gave me the opportunity to stretch out and see just what I had. I started to get into some pretty good shows. It gave me a chance to move around, to see what other people in various parts of the city were doing. One day, I stumbled down to the Pasadena Art Museum with my little girl. She was about three years old then. I was looking for a part-time job in the area of art. I talked around. I met Eric Benick, who is installation chief at the Pasadena Art Museum. We met and talked for a time. He said, "If you want to give it a try, I think I have a position in installation that you might apply for." He saw some of my work. He seemed to like me as a person. He gave me a job right away. I started to work in the Pasadena Art Museum.

MR. BASSING: This is the old one or new one?

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: This was the old one, before they moved. The atmosphere was so beautiful because here I was right in the middle of history. I always had a difficult time with history, with dates and that kind of thing. I found out that working in the Museum you could do a lot of research, you met and worked with a lot of contemporary artists, you helped them install their things. I met people like Andy Warhol, Peter Alexander, Richard Serra, Robert Rauschenberg, all the guys, Mark di Suvero. I used to help Rauschenberg install shows. It was a very exciting thing to me. Rap sessions used to take place. I met John Coplans. These were people, who actually were right here in the museum. After I was at the Museum for two or three months, I got another job teaching a class in sculpture in the education department. Again, that was a great help. I always thought the workshops at the Pasadena Museum were progressive, even though I didn't go down there that much. When they started to analyze my work and what have you, I got a position in the workshops through Debbie Brewer and Nancy Watts. The class was a very exciting thing. It was a mixed class-adults, young adults, and some very, very young people. The age range varied considerably. My sculpture had always developed from scrap materials, found objects, and that kind of thing; I couldn't afford many of the sophisticated materials to work with. So, in the class, I tried to stick to my background and philosophy about using anything that you have at hand to express yourself with and getting people into not walking past so many things, but picking up a lot of things, just accumulating elements around oneself to work with. I don't know that I can actually express all the transitions-many of them are so mental, you know. As I said, the museum offered me an opportunity to get into some history, to see just what a system that was, how controlled it was how political it was. It wasn't all aesthetics, man.

MR. BASSING: Right.

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: I mean, I didn't know that before.

MR. BASSING: No, nobody does unless they get involved.

MR. OTTERBRIDGE: Yes, Right. I found out that museums are strange places. I started to feel that museums were kind of tombs. Being a black artist, I'll never forget how hard we worked to hang the show that opened the new Pasadena Art Museum. I think that show illustrated what had happened on the West Coast in art form 1944 to 1968, and what had happened on the East Coast from 1945 to 1969. It was a fantastic show. It really took a lot of work to install it. A lot did happen in California from 1944 through 1968. But nothing happened with black artists or with any black individual, who was an artist, according to what was installed in that show.

MR. BASSING: Were there any black artists in the show?

MR. OTTERBRIDGE: No, no, no. Not in the whole show. This was the East Coast segment, too. So I started to think about things like that.

MR. BASSING: What year was this now? This is 1969?

MR. OTTERBRIDGE: That was about 1968, I think.

MR. BASSING: Were you working only part time for the Museum?

MR. OTTERBRIDGE: Yes, I was working part time, which still gave me the opportunity to work at home. I enjoyed the way I worked there. I made some money and it wasn't the kind of thing that kept me constantly busy-it wasn't an eight-hour-a-day job. I wanted to work at home. I was doing pretty good. I was selling things. I never worked to sell, but in shows all my work always sold, which did help. But anyway, it disturbed me that there wasn't a single black artist all across the country whose work was represented in that show. I knew there must have been some artist who should have been included. Romare Bearden in New York might be a good example. He worked during the period in the concepts that were included in the show. There were several artists who might have been included. There were many young artists from both the West Coast and East Coast that were included. Now I realize that a lot of white artists were not included. Motherwell wasn't even in the show. You know, it was a funny kind of thing.

MR. BASSING: Was it one curator who was deciding what kind of work was included?

MR. OTTERBRIDGE: Yes, it was.

MR. BASSING: Well, people have personal preferences.

MR. OTTERBRIDGE: Yes, Right. Well, all that you learn. You know what I mean. So this started a whole lot of things. About this time, I think it was that protests were developing across the country from black artists. The definition of the term "black art" was constantly surfacing. I don't know if I want to get into that so much. To define what the black artist has done in the past would be a very difficult thing. History would have to be somewhat revamped. So many people were over-looked during various periods because they weren't considered to be men really. History did a sloppy job on that. I think that we as a people were not responsible for a great number of historians in the past. So nothing was accounted for in terms of the artists on what was done. Anyway, this was the time that black artists all across the country had developed a keen awareness of how much on the outside they were as artists. You become aware of how much political control, how much social control was involved in this whole scheme of world art-the fine art system, you might call it. Personally, I've always been a person who's felt that an artist might have a special sensitivity; he might be a person who's placed into the environment like any other person, but with a gift to receive and take in some of the vibrations around him. But over a period of time, in my way of speaking, this has changed. I think that all people have very individual sensitivities in given areas, so I'm never sure about definitions as related to fine art. I don't know any more what fine art is. And I'm glad for that, too. I think art is made by many even though it might not be recognized when it is made. I can say that over a period of years I did, and still do, get into my own personal discipline, I get into myself. You have to get into yourself before you relate to anyone else. But, I think that most of the work and the feeling to work has always developed from the things around me, people around me, situations around me, conditions in the world, and so on. For a period of time, I did things that might have fallen in the category of social commentary without even being aware of it. But, anyway, whatever I did came from some outside influence. I'm skipping a lot of little areas here to talk to a point. I'd always been very confused as to what art was. I think art can be a thousand things. I had difficulty in school for one thing. At school, there are specific ways to do things, which was good. It develops discipline. But you see, there is something unique about each of us as individuals. Individualism, the self is a very important thing. And sometimes you develop certain attitudes within yourself that you treasure. And, you know, schools sometimes have a way of breaking those down, your own strengths, in order to relate to their thing. And I have trouble in the classroom sometimes, especially art schools, in that way. But, I've stayed with it. I never yet have worked to my capacity because I never have been facilitated to. But, that does not stop you from working. You still continue to produce. In constantly trying to project your own thoughts over a long period of time, I've come to understand that with

conditions as I feel them to be today, you have to sneak out of yourself. And I think that what I'm doing now offers me an opportunity to come out of myself, to come out of the studio, and extend that studio, extend my concepts. I can't say what it is that I'm involved in right now, except that I feel it is a very necessary kind of thing. It's much more important to me than producing one stagnant piece of work. At this point in my life, I'm more interested in concepts that involve great numbers of people, that involve institutions and organizations. It's like just before I came here I was working on some things, or on some thoughts that would bring artists together like musicians come together. I've always been very close to music. I could go that way easily. You know, I've been into music to a degree, and I understand music like this: a musician writes a composition from himself and he delivers that composition to an audience. It's received from him and given to them. The visual artist doesn't always necessarily do this in his work. For example, a good chorale-and I've been in many and I dig good choral music-is several soloists that make aggregation. Each is a soloist, but each of those soloists singing in a body produces another thing altogether. So I've always thought in terms of concepts that would bring any number of visual artists together in order to make a statement or several statements all in one.

MR. BASSING: Does this way of thinking have anything to do with the way this particular Academy got started? I mean, were you here at the beginning of it?

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: No, I wasn't. Judson Powell, an artist, a man of unselfish discipline and expression, is the founder of Compton Communicative Arts Academy. In 1970, I was invited to work with him. This was about the time that it was founded.

MR. BASSING: Oh, I see. You came in at the beginning.

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: Yes. Judson Powell is an artist, who has worked very closely with people like Noel Puerefoy; they're old, good friends. Their heads have been in this area for a long time, questioning things like: how is it that art becomes a tool and very useful tool to motivate; why does it have to be a selfish thing that comes from me alone; I understand now what it is, it's been so good to me. So how can I share this goodness with somebody else? This is where these cats' heads are, you know. So on coming to Los Angeles, I met them very early and this introduced me to a way of thinking that I greatly appreciated. I didn't break into it right away, but I jumped at the opportunity to come here on the invitation of Judson Powell. At that time, I was teaching a class at Cal State-Dominguez. I had an adult extension class at Pasadena City College. I was teaching at Pasadena Art Museum and was working in installation. All of these jobs were part-time situations that amounted to a comfortable monthly salary and still allowed me enough to do my own work. And each of these jobs afforded me an opportunity to learn, too. I always had to pick up on things. In the class at Cal State, I never saw it as being "I-the instructor" and "they-the students"; everybody in that classroom, always brought something with them. It was a beautiful thing. And the same thing happened at the Pasadena Art Museum. Kids are the greatest people to work with; they're so open and free. I never got into that so closely until I worked at the Pasadena Art Museum. Another person who had a lot of influence on my thinking, and still does, is Debbie Brewer at the Pasadena Art Museum. She's a person who has an open head and who is very innovative in tearing down stale concepts and so on. The Communicative Arts Academy started because there was a need. It was a very necessary development in the City of Compton. Compton is a unique city in its own way. The percentage of blacks in the population is something like seventy-eight percent or more. It's part of Los Angeles County. It's an isolated city that has its own local government somewhat. It has the kind of City Hall that is not a foreign place. You can see how the machinery works. I mean, you can go into the City Hall at Compton and talk to the city manager, that kind of thing. And I think that political leverage has a way of influencing the head, the political atmospheres and all. But, they have been on the outside of me. But working in a situation like this, you begin to understand not what politics is, but how it works. It's still strange, you know, because although there is a lot of talking, there are a lot of papers, there are a lot of rallies and committees and that kind of thing, a lot of times, things don't get done. For example, when a group of artists involves themselves in a situation like the Communicative Arts Academy, it offers you an opportunity, first of all, to see if you can work together, and then, to see if you can use the same energy that you use in your studio to motivate some things in the community. And this community has one of the highest crime rates in the country, even though it's a small city. And it tells you that there are a lot of gangs; there are gangs of youths in the streets and it makes you see that the Senate is a gang, and the House is a gang. You know, there are gangs everywhere. And you begin to understand that what might appear to be a derogatory term related to street gangs is not so different from the organizations that might criticize that street gang, because that's a gang, too. It might be positive or it might be negative, but it's still a gang, because they're together. The concept we're trying to develop is that there's a place for everyone, that everyone is creative, that groups of artists can come into a community and use that creative energy to get a lot of things done. I don't know if I could ever leave this, and go back to the loneliness of producing my own work.

MR. BASSING: Could you?

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: I don't know. I don't know if that's necessary anymore. I don't know how important that is any more. I'll never stop expressing myself. You know, I'll never stop working. I'll never stop being a creative individual-if I might say that about myself. I've always had a need to get things done, and especially beautiful

things: I like to make beautiful things. I like making things. I like putting things together. So this is a situation where the elements of composition become spirits, souls, people, homes, children, that kind of thing. And the concept just stretches out into being a very positive thing. You see kids coming into the Communicative Arts Academy, who have always had something to say, but no place to say it. And you develop a very open concern for people that you didn't know, but that you get to know very well. So it shows you that art is a basic tool for getting people into themselves and getting people to relate to other people. You know, it's not used enough in the school system. It's always secondary in the school system, and I wonder if it will ever be recognized, if it will ever be recognized by that well-established educational source.

MR. BASSING: Where do you see the Academy going from its present position?

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: We have a lot of problems. Everything that we do is done out of the sheer need to do it. We just don't have that much help now. But, we do have some help, and we're establishing relationships. And this is the composition: if we earnestly make an effort to extend the concept of gathering notions, people, personalities, dispositions of varying natures from the community all under one roof, so to speak, we will meet factors that might support us. They see, for example, a community situation without realizing that one community is tantamount to another. This might be the immediate community. But, there's also the greater community that has influence on this immediate community. And depending on where this immediate community is, it has some influence on that greater community. So there's one community more or less, and that's the American community. But, you have to straighten it out at home first, and that can be a whole creative engagement. So, the Communicative Arts Academy will keep going up if we keep doing what we're doing. We're attracting a very good organization that has given us a lot of help, the Salvation Army. We just got another building from them.

MR. BASSING: You mean you're going to be moving from here?

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: No, we're not going to be moving, but we don't have enough space here. We started in a two-story house that was leased to us for almost nothing by the Salvation Army. That was the Communicative Arts Academy, which is a few blocks from here. We still have that location, which is becoming the visual arts department. When we acquired this building through the help of the sponsoring agency, which is the Compton-Willowbrook Community Action Agency, we used it for some classes and for the presentation of many of the things produced like programs, etc. That's what this building is used for now. Organizations use it. The schools have used it and they still do. And with all this activity, this particular building got to be so active that we ran out of space. We just didn't have enough space to accommodate all the activities, so we had been trying to get some more space. The Salvation Army got into that and let us have another building that has a seating capacity of about two hundred people. That's become like the Communicative Playhouse. The Drama Department is in that building now, and so is the Music Workshop. The individuals in the Music Workshop always have to have rehearsal space-space for band rehearsals and for individual rehearsals; they have to go on. And sometimes, the sound of music might conflict with a lot of other things that have to take place. So, we were glad to get that space. We started with that two-story house, and presently we have five locations.

MR. BASSING: What are the other locations?

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: The Cinema Workshop is over on Alondra. Willie Foy, Junior, is the motivator For the Cinema Workshop. He has about forty-five students now. Some of them are coming from the unified school district. He has some college people and people from the community. He moved from Los Angeles into his Workshop and stays there twenty-four hours a day. And the Workshop is actually open twenty-four hours a day to accommodate the students. It makes you think about the kind of artist that we have devoting time to our organization. Those who are on the staff have gone through training themselves and they're willing to share some of their own development with people. To me, this is just one of the most beautiful things that could happen in this day and time when people need to be close to each other.

MR. BASSING: Yes. And so many people are so selfish and don't give of themselves.

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: Yes. Right. So we don't worry about now having money or proper facilities. If the facility is around us, somehow we make use of it.

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: Oh. There's the Sculptural Workshop. That's over on Rosecrans. That's conducted by Charles Dickson, a very fine, young sculptor. He is not on the staff. He has a family. But, he likes so much what is happening at the Communicative Arts Academy, that he is conducting a very fine Workshop. He's got families caught up in his workshop.

MR. BASSING: Really!

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: Yes. Mother, father, children, that kind of thing. They work in Ultracal, wood, leather, metal. They are producing some very fine things. What we do with him and various other people, who set up workshops

like this and who don't have a salary, is that every time we make an accumulation, we make a donation to them. That's the way we do it. Like we split up our salaries, in order to create other salaries-everyday payday the few paid staff members that we have split up our salaries.

MR. BASSING: Where does that money come from?

MR. OTTERBRIDGE: Well, like I said, the Communicative Arts Academy is sponsored by the Compton-Willowbrook Agency.

MR. BASSING: Do they give a yearly grant?

MR. OTTERBRIDGE: No. This is only part of their overall program. The agency is a well-diversified operation in the city of Compton. So, it was them who gave us an opportunity to start in the first place. We could never afford to pay the rent for this building, but they do. However, it's up to us, then to see what we can do in order to really stretch out and develop. So, the building that we recently got from the Salvation Army helped alleviate some of the crowdedness that we had here this summer. We made that effort ourselves to get that building. You know, it tells you that the resources are there, and if the effort is strenuous enough, you can make contact with some of them. We haven't made contact with that many, but it gives you an idea that things can be done. The number of Workshops is constantly increasing. There's a very fine class in jewelry-making now being conducted by Bobby Gilmore, who has volunteered his time. He uses the lost wax process to do some very, very fine things. Again, here is an artist who has developed a very unique method of jewelry-making. His concept-the lost wax process-is nothing new, but the way he handles it is very unique. And he's teaching other people to do this, at no charge. Bobby Gilmore's [class] is a very good class. He's been with us for only a few months. He's a fine painter, sculptor, [and] ceramist. He wanted to cut out and become affiliated with the Communicative Arts Academy and get a good jewelry making class going. And, that's what he's done. So, we're going to deal with him and just the whole bit. It's like putting all these energies together. You could never do it all yourself. You can only think about it. But, when you invite a lot of other people to become part of a whole, then that whole has a way of stretching out and having some worth. It shows you the importance of people gathering together in order to get a thing done. We're fortunate that we have a group of artists, who all have some common aim in establishing an alternative situation in the community that fits somewhere between the extreme in education and the kind of place that is receptive to great diversification of people and notions. Many of the concepts we think about are in terms of projecting a community point of view. A couple of weeks ago, I was invited to speak to a class at Otis Institute about my own work, and it's sometimes so hard to tell people that you haven't lost interest in working. This will never happen to me, but when you start to speak of concepts that involve artists and community elements and institutions and that kind of thing, it gets to be a little confusing at time. This is actually what we're trying to do here, and are ideas that I've had for quite some time. For example, when we, the black artists, were having a lot of trouble a few years ago with museum shows, we confronted the well-established institutions to open up and just be for real. Museums in many cases just don't relate to the surrounding community.

MR. BASSING: Why do you suppose that is?

MR. OTTERBRIDGE: I don't know. Art has always been a thing for the elite, I guess. All of us do not belong to that elitist group. Art has been placed in so many various categories that we really don't know what it is anymore. Like I said earlier, I don't think it is any special thing, even though it has so much absolutism about it. There are so many expressions of fine art concepts that are around you everyday that are not documented, not included; they never would be channeled into those well-established institutions. And you become very concerned about it, very concerned about little geniuses that you see around you in the community who, if they had some guidance at all, would develop into fantastic calibers, you know. I don't know why museums haven't stretched out a little more to educate people as to how useful art really is.

MR. BASSING: Yes. As the museum is not making any attempt to stretch out to the people, do you think that the people should go to the museum and say, "Look, where are you? You're tax-supported. You're one of our resources. You should be coming to us."

MR. OTTERBRIDGE: I think that effort should be made by the people. And I think it is being made by the people. Another thing that I think will happen with the people is that communities will start developing their own cultural establishments. Like this Communicative Arts Academy has a way of developing into part-museum. You know, that's not ruled out; that can happen. We do have a very fine gallery; it's the first community gallery in the city of Compton. We are planning very interesting shows for the future. We've had some very good shows here. We're going to have some more good shows here. If we can work it right, those shows will come from everywhere. So, if the museums don't prepare themselves to respond to the needs of people, then the people themselves will establish their own museum concepts. One thing we have discussed-this group of artists-was sort of a museum concept. This was an idea that came to me one night during a discussion. I think we had just left a demonstration in front of the Los Angeles County Art Museum, and after it, some guys came to my house. We just talked about some things that we might do. One idea was to go into the community, find warehouses

that were not used, clean them out or just try to occupy them through some means, and make them into pearls on the inside, establishing as community museums. During this whole discussion, an idea was just hanging in my head; it was as if somebody had crammed something in there. I said: "A freight yard and some freight trains, freight boxcars, would possibly be a fantastic museum source." But, how in the world would you get twenty boxcars in order to have a twenty-man group show? And somehow it came to me that maybe we should just try to build a piece of sculpture out of twenty boxcars. I have always built sculpture anyway by just putting things together. And I said: "Now, if I were to build a sculpture out of twenty boxcars, they wouldn't be able to get it into the museum anyway." And then the thought was: "If we could get twenty boxcars, that means that twenty cats could show, each having a boxcar as his gallery environment." I said: "Hey, not only that, but the thing has the possibility of moving from one place to another." So it started a whole lot of things in my head, and we're still going to try to get some boxcars to do a show with. In the process of getting this done, it would be a tremendous thing if we could involve museums in sponsoring a car, if we could involve industries in sponsoring a car, if we could involve schools in sponsoring a car. Then there's that aggregational thing taking place, foreign institutions relating to each other without even being bothered, except to sponsor a car in a thing that brings them altogether. So, this is something that has been discussed from time to time with various individuals and organizations. But in order to get that done, a lot of people are going to have to be involved in it. It would entail a lot of expense. But, it's one way that an artist like myself could work with industry and help me express a thought. Many artists get a chance to go into industrial set-ups to get their concepts out. But, this would be a way of relating to what is almost a dying industry.

MR. BASSING: The railroads, yes.

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: Yes, the railroads. And we would still be working with industry in order to get a fine art concept done. Again, there's something about the railroads that relate to the history of black people, too. Our porters became the most sophisticated cats in our communities years ago. They got a chance to go places. They had decent salaries and so on. And they came back and told you how it was, say, in Chicago. Our redcaps and our porters, and the old legendary thing about John Henry having laid the tracks. And, you know, when you analyze the blues, there's blues after blues after blues about freight trains, and about trains; period. So, there's a whole thing. The history of the railroads is closely related to the history of black people in this country. So, that concept might have a lot of things tied up in it. So, that would be one way to go, and I think this is the way we have to go. We can't do it as individual artists, nor should we try to do it as individual artists. I mean, you're going to maintain your individuality no matter what. But some things have to be done, and you can't just keep talking about them. So, I think community arts situations are ideal situations in which to motivate and organize people with various expressions and ideas. We had discussed doing some other projects before approaching one that big. I know we're not going to be able to get that done right away. As I said earlier, I was down at Otis Art Institute to introduce the idea of a community project to group of students. I talked to them about going to the director of the school and asking him to allow a few students to help get a community project done, which would involve the school and the community. Most of the students were graduate students and we would like to discuss the possibility of their getting some credits for being involved in the community. The idea was to go to a residential area; I had already done that one night. I spent about five hours going from house to house trying to introduce the concept to families. This was a residential block with something like eighteen homes involved, nine houses on each side of the street. Luckily, they had a block club so there was some organization on that block. We discussed the possibility of their letting us do the front door of each house, for an individual artist to take a door and work with it, but doing no damage to the door. We would work on a surface the same size as the door and then apply it to the door. The whole creative process would start with meeting the family, seeing who's in the house, and getting them to relate to a group of artists, which people in communities generally don't do. I mean people have other things to do. They're not into art like the artist is into art. But, this would be a way to take the artist into the community. The idea was to view that show from a street peoples' level. Like they call us street people. So it's getting right down into the streets and getting a fine art show involving artists from strongly orientated institutions, such as Otis Art Institute, and some community artists as well. We would get a group of artists to do a community show on the doors of the homes in a residential area in a given community and let that show run like any fine art show would run in a gallery for a month or so in the community. Then, we would send it to other similar communities from this location and let it tour. And then after it toured, and maybe gained a little publicity, it would come back to the people in the community, who helped get it started, who received it, and give the individual works to them. I bet that would change a lot of attitudes in those homes about artists and their efforts and what not.

MR. BASSING: Have you actually done this?

MR. OUTERBRIDGE: No. Like I said, we started the first stage. I got a ninety-five percent agreement from eighteen homes, which was very good-each family being different. And actually meeting the people and talking with them about the concept, I was surprised at the receptivity. So that's a future project. But, it's another one of those things that a great number of people would have to be involved with in order to get it done. So, this tells you again that an individual piece of work might not do it anymore. Like people have to do things in gangs now, in groups, and what not, in order to know each other. We're becoming so isolated that communication

breaks down. Since the artist is that so-called sensitive individual in the society, I think he has a responsibility to share that sensitivity with others, or to sensitize some of the situations around him. So, the Communicative Arts Academy is developing that kind of leverage to reach out creatively in the community and try to stimulate various things that might help to make the community a better place for all the people in it.

MR. BASSING: Yes. Okay, John Outterbridge, thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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