Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Alice Wengrow, 1973

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Alice Wengrow in 1973. The interview was conducted by Lynn Katzmann for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Alice Wengrow and Lynn Katzmann have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

LYNN KATZMANN: I'm Lynn Katzmann. This is part of the documentation project for The Art World in Transition under the Archives of American Art. I'm interviewing Alice Wengrow.

ALICE WENGROW: I was born Alice Sellincoff. I married, I guess, relatively late in life. My name then became Alice Hirsch, at which point I got involved in painting and exhibiting and illustrating children's books. I was widowed in 1953 and remarried in August 1969. So my name is now Alice Hirsch Wengrow. I went to Brooklyn College where I started out first as an English and French major. But I had always done drawings since I was an infant. My father drew; my brother drew. But it was implied to me by my family that becoming an artist was not a realistic occupation. But, since I was always in the art department at Brooklyn College, I had to discover for myself that it was something I wanted to do, that it had meaning, that it was not a lesser occupation. It didn't mean that I was less smart. But the implication that being an artist, I think, came through in all kinds of body language not directly told to me, that I was not really doing it well. But I had been a good student.

MS. KATZMANN: Do you think that had anything to do with the economy of the times?

MS. WENGROW: I think it had to do with people's attitudes towards art and towards women. One should do something practical, become a teacher. A teacher I had at Brooklyn College whose name was Gertrudis Brenner, who was then chairman of the department at that time, said, when questioned, "What would people in that Depression era do with art?" She clapped her hands and sat on a stool and said, "Oh, a war would be very great thing." I remember goose flesh going up my spine as this perky little lesbian lady sat there and said, "Oh, I think a war would be marvelous. Then we could teach remedial arts and crafts to shell-shocked soldiers. We would have all sorts of craftsy jobs." While at that time not super-militant, it certainly didn't sit right with me. I think I admired in her perception. She was a person who was sensitive to shape and form, to the deeper meaning of art rather than feeling, as many students and teachers I knew at school felt, that if you painted the still-life that was good enough. It seemed to me there must be more to art than reproducing just what you see. It didn't come through completely, though she was very into Eastern art and the mysticism of it.

MS. KATZMANN: So you felt there was some connection with communication?

MS. WENGROW: With communication. And this has been my life search for myself. And I think it's a discovery, though it was always there, that I made. And I was telling somebody today that I feel that in life I have gone like Hesse's "league," that wherever I go, I have found people who have shared this feeling and with them I tune in very quickly and it has been the basis of my being, I think,

successful in work with the New School. And that is that art is really a communication of feeling. It is often prophetic, not only something that happens because it's a hand-eye coordinated skill that one happens to have and which I had. I used to remember asking myself if that was enough; if I wasn't just scratching them where they itch; if I wasn't regurgitating things; and what was the whole point if I would learn to paint like a Pointillist or I would learn to be an Impressionist. Was that what being an artist was? And how did one know from deep down inside that one had to do something? That was a very great search; I decided that I really didn't have that much inside me at that time.

MS. KATZMANN: You were young, perhaps?

MS. WENGROW: I was young. And I didn't feel that I had enough of the dedication. I was involved enough in middle-class structures; going to dances, playing tennis, parties, that kind of thing. I lived a kind of dual life. One was the conventional living in Bensonhurst. And the other was the Depression, which was a tremendous education.

MS. KATZMANN: Were you affected by it?

MS. WENGROW: Of course. My family lost money. The house was lost. I think I got a good number of things from my grandmother. I remember her saying, "God is an old man. One can't depend on Him. One must depend on oneself."

MS. KATZMANN: That's great.

MS. WENGROW: She didn't believe in free loaders, you know; people who eat without working. And that work ethic is something that I admire. Her hands were always occupied. Though she was not an artist, she was always observing, "Look at the little chick. Look at the cows. Look at the grass. Look at the sky."

MS. KATZMANN: I could see how that attitude would tie into seeing artists as workers, and your involvement with the union.

MS. WENGROW: That's right. The union was a tremendous revelation and education for me. The word "proletarian" then was used a great deal so it made me evaluate my own middle-class values even though we were then going through a Depression. My mother had to work. She became a practical nurse. They sent my brother though medical school, through his balking and complaints. In a sense I was kind of left alone by my parents. I think my father decided that my brother was the genius in music and he plagued him. And, while I was doing well in school, I was a girl. And that very negative attitude psychologically I think worked to my benefit. Sometimes people complain that they don't have enough attention. So I went my merry way. I met all kinds of people and always have enjoyed people. I remember being very fascinated by people's faces, but mostly by what I felt were the personalities of communities that reflected people. I worked on WPA; I got on WPA on the non-relief quota.

MS. KATZMANN: What did that mean?

MS. WENGROW: Well, in order to be on the Art Project, you had to be on relief. However, I got onto the silkscreen project where I learned to cut stencils, design posters, and so on. And I liked it because it was communication. It was with people. And we were also working with touché and experimenting with making graphics that people could buy. That's silkscreen.

MS. KATZMANN: Were you trying to get any political attitudes across?

MS. WENGROW: At the time I was learning, and I don't think I did. They were posters; they were stylized things. Cassandra was a great model for me. I studied the English posters. We all did. It was like a course for me, to tell you the truth. I was very young. We had a very fine director; his name was Richard Floethe. I worked with Tony Velonis and Ted Egri and other people who, while not very much older than I, were sufficiently more mature as artists and who seemed to know their own thing. I always had the feeling that either because it's me, and I have a built-in inferiority feeling, or because I was so intelligent, I realized these people knew a heck of a lot more than I. All the people I dealt with were artists and I had the feeling that I was an art student, that I didn't have a statement to make. When someone asked me to make illustrations for a magazine--it was China today or something like that--I was amazed. I made these little calligraphic drawings. And that's how I began. And apparently lots of people liked them. They said, "You say it so fast." I used to do them at meetings in sketchbooks. Well, make a couple for that. Or I'd make funny little cards for people. And that's when I discovered that that was my thing. I also made juxtapositions of people, like a cartoon. I remember making a guy in a very poor-looking apartment looking at an advertisement and saying, "You know, we could save $5,000 on this. Here's an ad that says 'Mink coat reduced from $10,00 to $5,000.'" I was intrigued with the kind of things that Gropper did and I guess indirectly that influenced me. I think that Soriano influenced me. I think the Japanese artists did.

MS. KATZMANN: Did you find yourself involved with the problem of style versus content?

MS. WENGROW: Yes. That's what I'm talking about now. All along, working on the WPA, I was taking my masters degree at City College. I was doing these things the company way for my mother, like "You should get your degree. You should finish." So I finished. It was like schizophrenic. You're going to school and you're learning all these things and you're making portraits of old men with beards. I have stacks and stacks of things. That's why I used to take some of them and slash them. "What am I doing?" I'd think. When you brought up the question, you got answers like, "Well, you should be into art history." And I found some of the dullest people who were getting A's. There was one person--I won't mention the name, who's like head of City College or something--who was just a repository for lots of bits of information. He was an art historian. I then met an art historian who was very exciting to me. And then I understood art history in terms of a person. That was Meyer Schapiro. And there I found a person who made sense to me. But there were all these mediocre people. And that's what I was constantly meeting, the nice, professional types.

MS. KATZMANN: Do you think the WPA did something to give respectability to artist as professionals?

MS. WENGROW: Oh, yes. I remember the project we were on--the silkscreen project, the poster project. We were all so excited. The biggest learning was having dinner in different people's houses, having different meetings, and learning to live beautifully no matter how poor we were. Dinner was just a delight, whether it was spaghetti and wine or learning about different ethnic groups. You know, The Velonis' were a Greek family. I met his father, the late Egri, who was a playwright. Subsequently his mother babysat for my children.

MS. KATZMANN: So it was a very communal kind of thing, too?

MS. WENGROW: Yes, right. I think I was more resistant than I could have been, or should have been, to a lot of newer life styles because of the influence of my family, despite the fact that I fought with my family (I was a great radical at home). Deep imprints are made psychologically. And I think it took me a long time to really undo them and not to feel guilty so much. It's a fantastic thing. Telling you this from the point of view of a woman. And I think what happened to women at the time. On the other hand, I met many women who fought this and did much. Or so it seemed to me; it always

seems that the other guy is freer.

MS. KATZMANN: It seems to me that the period between the union and, say, the early Sixties was a very vacuous one in terms of political art, in terms of women. What did you do during that time?

MS. WENGROW: Well, I simmered. Simmered with anger. I did a lot of personal painting. Did a tremendous quantity of watercolors. I did those protest paintings on my own. And I got to the point where I didn't care if I didn't exhibit. I didn't want to go to any classes. Who the hell cares?

MS. KATZMANN: Yes. They weren't received.

MS. WENGROW: You know, I never showed these things at first. I'd paint. I didn't think they were that great. They weren't architectonically the way they should be. They were just outpourings of my feelings. And I always had the feeling that women were down, and that it downed men at the same time. I saw that it was so destructive. I saw the McCarthy era. I saw the fear in people.

MS. KATZMANN: Yes. So destructive to creativity, too.

MS. WENGROW: Yes. So what I thought was: "I'm going to bring my children up to have greater freedom and openness and sensitivity." I don't know that I was so successful. But I hear it now in my son who says, "You know, one thing you can never say about you is that you're not dull." My kids and I went through a period of alienation. And that was a very hard period to go through. But I think they're struggling through and returning to me.

MS. KATZMANN: That's probably part of a cycle of parent and child.

MS. WENGROW: Well, one of the things is my own personality. Billy said that I came on very strong, that I was an overwhelming person. I then began to proselytize to my kids. Diane said, "I don't know that you did me a favor. You were always telling us that we're different, that we didn't have to have a television set, that we didn't have to be wealthy. We had to enjoy beauty. You were always pointing things out. You never gave me a chance to see for myself." Now that's bad. That's really bad medicine if I had done that. But apparently I didn't do it that badly if you look at the paintings.

MS. KATZMANN: When did you first get involved with the Art Workers?

MS. WENGROW: Through fate. You mean recently?

MS. KATZMANN: Yes.

MS. WENGROW: I became vice-president of the Art Educators Association. I didn't start to teach until 1962. I thought the Board of Education and I were not really friends. I taught at Moore Institute in Philadelphia. I taught textile design. That was a craftsy thing. Along the way I designed costume jewelry. "If it's a good design, it's selling." That was the name I used as an abbreviation of Alice Sellincoff. I worked in Providence, Rhode Island--that was a big breakaway from home--for Blaker Brothers. I learned about other kinds of people. I saw the racism which pained me all the time. I don't know what I really did except complain to people who had like feelings. And then I ran back to the city.

MS. KATZMANN: Yes. And then you found a group of a lot of people who had like feelings?

MS. WENGROW: Yes. That was a very important thing. All along I painted watercolors which some people bought. Sometimes I had an exhibit. I taught at the Jewish community House in

Bensonhurst. I had a one-man show there. I showed that spring in Bensonhurst. To my surprise I won a prize when I was called up. And suddenly I began to find what I am. I did copper when Billy was born. I experimented with craftsy things and "found" things before it was a popular thing to do.

MS. KATZMANN: Before it was what they call multimedia.

MS. WENGROW: I'll show you some things that students of mine have done and I think you'll get excited about them. I think that I communicate this at least to students. The thing that I had gotten into was visual communication. And I became quite a Bauhaus enthusiast. I went to visit Gyorgy Kepes when I was in Boston and found that: "Shucks, I had never had the right education." I had gone to Brooklyn College and here I was discovering everybody through books. And I suddenly got to the point of a certain kind of nerve to talk to people who I liked because I liked them. And I found that it was a very good introduction.

MS. KATZMANN: Education in itself.

MS. WENGROW: So, if I thought a physicist sounded exciting I would be able to talk to the physicist because what he was saying was exciting about the vibrations.

MS. KATZMANN: Yes. That seems to be the approach of the All Day Learning Center.

MS. WENGROW: Yes.

MS. KATZMANN: So you incorporated that? And you're giving it to your students?

MS. WENGROW: Right. And the Met is also working on through that traveling exhibit where they have the helical, the spiral.

MS. KATZMANN: Yes, what do you think about that?

MS. WENGROW: Oh, I think that's an exciting approach. You know, coming to the Museum and not seeing it just as dead things. I remember going to the Met with a colleague of mine, an Italian fellow that I met at Brooklyn College, and we saw the Museum in our own way. We saw the little figurines in a way that we felt what the people who made them were feeling and thinking at the time. So life has been a matter of constantly learning in whatever I've ever read and what I'm into--and I'm into a number of things because my curiosity is stronger I think even that my ability to put it down. I'm now in a program with the American Institute of Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy. Not that I think I want to be a therapist. But I've been teaching human relations to teachers for the Board of Education in the office of Inter-group Education. And in the Board of Education I have found this center, my resuscitation. It's like finding the artists union; like finding people who are saying, "Every group has something to offer; everybody has something special and that we can all really enrich each other. And that we can live together and maybe stop war." War has been a terrible shame, disruption, destruction. Just as looking at a blade of grass is beautiful to me. Or a shell is beautiful. So how have I reconciled my incurable optimism and celebration of what is beautiful and the terrible feeling that comes from up here that this is a world of many pains?

MS. KATZMANN: Well, you're continuing that when you're with young people and giving this back to them.

MS. WENGROW: Yes. And I think one of the things I do for young people is not only to give them a philosophy, but give them concrete excitement and learning. They do for yourself and take responsibility for themselves. I have had run-ins with black students in which I've said to them, "Look

I didn't make this world. And neither did you. And we have to deal with each other the way we are. You view me as a middle-class white lady. I don't blame you. But I didn't make this world. And I can help you. There must be something I have to offer you if you'll pay attention. And I'll be glad to help you and then we can become better friends because I'll be attentive to you." And one kid said, "Well, why don't you learn my kind of English?" I said, "I'll be glad to." So I began to learn hip English from one of my students. He thought that was very funny. But it was very instructive to me because it's like poetry. So I got into a whole thing. I thought, "Oh, I'm going to write a book about hip English, and the reasons for it." I was given an NDEA scholarship to Columbia and I was taking linguistics. I thought, "Oh, my God, I'll have to go through this thing. It's so self-evident that people change." And there's hardly a pure strain today. There was an article in the Times about the people who have one drop of black blood whether it's Dumas or Commander Perry; you know, all of these people have a drop of black blood. How terrible it is that we have denied people and made them different because they've been mixed when we're all mixed. One of my experiments with black kids was when we were all going to draw portraits just with crayons: "Let's match the crayons before we begin. So let's take out the box of crayons. What color would you draw me? I'm a white person. What would you do? Pick a white crayon? No, not really that white; I have some brown spots, too." So we had to start matching, which is really color theory. And they discovered that nobody was just black, no one needed a back crayon that black. And we were mixing and scribbling and rubbing in colors together. And there was a painting later that I saw by Faith Ringgold, a long painting of the different colors of people ranging from tan through dark. And I have learned--this has been part of my experiment for the past four years--how to translate my academic language so that it's understandable to inner city kids. Sometimes I'm very successful. I've learned a lot of ways of doing it. And sometimes I repeat myself. Like when they start getting giggly about the body, I say, "Well, gee, everybody I know was born naked, and an interest in the body is hardly a unique thing. Like what else is new?" And I find that that is a kind of human relations, humanity, approach which allows us to get to the central thing. On the other hand, I think that it's a disservice to anybody who's learning to play them short and accept less than the best they can do. So on the one hand I may sound like somebody who accepts everybody but I'm really a strong teacher and get people to set their own standards. They're putting together pieces of paper and "Oh, that's lovely; that's lovely!" Then you say, "Could you make it a little bit more what you're were trying to do." That can be a tough thing as a teacher. Many years ago the Artists Union started a group within the organization called The Public Use of Art committee in which we were trying to determine how art could be brought more to the people through the outdoor murals on walls, public festivals. All of which is done now. But that was part of our brain child. And when I say "our brain child," I think that one of the things I have is a very fertile mind with all kinds of ideas. And I was attended to by people like Stuart Davis who listened. Now these are people with far more skill to do. But this apparently turns out to be an area in which I am sure and strong, that is, seeing relationships and how things can be done.

MS. KATZMANN: And anticipating the need that was there, too.

MS. WENGROW: Right. And judging.

MS. KATZMANN: Do you think that this Learning Center serves those needs now?

MS. WENGROW: For me? Or for the kids?

MS. KATZMANN: Well, both.

MS. WENGROW: Well, the All Day Learning Center is hardly off the ground. We have to structure it because it's within the Board of Education to give them a variety of choices of things to do. It's a

great idea. But I think it does have to have a structure to spin off "What did I learn?" You can take anybody anyplace and they don't have to perceive anything at all. And sometimes we do things and we don't even know what we've done them. We have to learn what we've done. I took a whole bunch of kids to the Schomburg Collection. Part of that trip was an arrangement for lunch at the Y at 135th Street. Some of the things I had set up to look at the Collection were some of the African sculpture. Some of the kids themselves perceived with embarrassment their cultural heritage as being primitive, plain because taste is developed here in a variety of ways, through media, etc. And so I realized you have to do an educational job in making people value themselves. So when I came back and asked them, "What was the greatest part of the trip?" some of them said, "The nicest thing I had was lunch." I did feel a kind of sinking feeling, "After all the things I'd said, and I showed, why lunch?" Then it came out. The nicest thing was lunch because we all ate together, the students and teachers. And I was so glad I proceeded; that was the nicest part, that we were all together. So that, no matter what they saw, it had to be put into place in this jigsaw of how they felt about themselves. So I'm learning. I'd do things and then I would learn that there was a right thing to do. And sometimes you discover it's the wrong thing to do. You run around like crazy and nothing happens and you think that you've given people an experience and all they got was that they ate lunch or that they got out of school or that they didn't have to do something structured. And I think feedback is important. And I think support is also. And I think also to help people communicate their feelings, to encourage them to open up. So I have been learning techniques--group process techniques--to help people open up. I do humanistic storytelling. And I did it before there were names for it. There's a lady by the name of Grace Nelson Lacey who is head of another CUE project--Culture Understanding in Education of the State Department. We became fast friends. And Jane Norman who did the helican project. And so it goes. Now how do you convince the gatekeepers, the principals? I still have a thing with my supervisor. So if you don't have cameras, you can use pictures they say. How to cut them up, what's near and what's far, what's rhythmic repetition, and how do we perceive? What are you going to have them look out when they go out on a trip?

MS. KATZMANN: Yes. Would you give me some information about how the Alternative Learning Centers are set up in relationship to the Board of Ed?

MS. WENGROW: Well, we are tax levied funds--I'm speaking of PM school. Our salaries are paid by the Board of Education. We're attached to the Westinghouse High School and my checks come through them. And we're given a certain amount of time to write up the curriculum and organize the programs; that is what outside experiences they will have, like seminars. And that's a hard thing to do. There's no money for materials, so I use found materials. No place to store anything. Part of it is Catch 22. You can do it but you can't do it. Now, the city as school has already been set up. They have 61 kids already. And they have all this fantastic book of outside things where everybody is going to let the kids come and do things. I spoke to Professor Owens of Brooklyn College today and he predicts failure. Why? Because it isn't structured enough. We hope we will have less of that. And again we will have programming problems; like my boss says, "Not everybody is going to be Alice Wengrow who doesn't mind running around in the morning and afternoon and who doesn't measure the day or the evening." That isn't to say that I don't like my time off or visits with my son or whatever.

MS. KATZMANN: Do you have any friction with the board of Ed or do they let you do what you want to do?

MS. WENGROW: In this program?

MS. KATZMANN: Yes.

MS. WENGROW: I deal with my boss. He has the friction. And he stops me. For example, I wanted to go to the Public Education Association and he thought the union would be upset at the time so he curtailed that visit. But I'm going to see them on Wednesday. Since I'm not dealing with that directly I find him listening. We have a good setup where he says, "I miss an argument with you." So he looks forward to my soaring and bringing ideas to him. I've gotten old enough to say, "Don't kid yourself. Those gatekeepers will take away everything. I'd rather have something, and get it started." As a matter of fact, there is a model in Las Vegas, It was done in a very structured way; they took one high school and they just ran it day and night, and people had alternative times. And that would be very great. And that's what Harry Schnell would like to do.

MS. KATZMANN: Who is he?

MS. WENGROW: He's the director, my supervisor. Did I have a chance to do everything I wanted? No. I want it reported that, while I was at Clara Barton, my principal thought I was crazy, thought me unsatisfactory, and, as a matter of fact, sent in an unsatisfactory rating for me. This was because I did things like talk to the kids about bringing related junk, and they had to be related by virtue of size, shape, color, source or origin. When he talked with me, he said, "If I didn't know what you're talking about, how will all those kids?" Those kids, meaning black Puerto Rican kids. "But they're with me longer, Mr. So and So." But he couldn't see it. He couldn't see the movement. I had three or four different kinds of projects going. Most touching is the kid who said she couldn't do anything; she couldn't even shellac it, she barely painted it. Most of the newspaper shows. So everybody can do something, and feel good about doing it. We did gigantic murals on paper. Everybody's into astrology so we did research. I took a very straight face. I brought in books. We did the signs of the Zodiac. And I said, "Everybody's good, everybody's great no matter what sign you're in. You're the smartest, the most sensitive, the sexiest." And little by little we also got to talk about maybe there are contradictions, and what is the difference between this and some religions. Sometimes we got into heavy philosophic talking with those "so-called" girls. And I had them group up so the stronger helped the weaker. Each one had to do a layout and we did it very gigantic.

MS. KATZMANN: Are the murals still there?

MS. WENGROW: No. The girls took them home. They wanted them very desperately. And we did abstract shapes. We did beach and bird farms. I went to the beach and I brought back bits of shells and sand. And the kids blew them up using clothes hangers and mache. They got so excited! They did the inside of shells, and somebody sees a sexual symbol. "Okay, so you saw it. So do it." "You're kidding." " No, do it." Of course it becomes so abstract that nobody is going to really see it. There are so many beautiful things that I've done with kids that I feel very proud of. That kind of exposure. But dealing with that principal who could not see was something else. I had little fixed desks. Part of the reason I was put on the carpet was that I brought in a poster by Faith Ringgold called "The United States of Attica." He picked that up and that did it. I was told never to bring in any more curriculum materials without consulting him, whether the material was issued by the Board of Education or anyone else. This was his school and he was pastor. But he put it in writing and I brought it to the New York Civil Liberties Union and we wrote a ream of rebuttal. But really it was too much for me, you know. You begin to doubt yourself. Of course, you're never perfect; you're a human being. So he can fault you if, per chance, he walks in at any given moment and you're not doing it his way he gives you dictum; it must be a developmental lesson. And, you know, you can't do a developmental lesson every day; it's an on-going thing. And it's still a kind of painful experience. But I learned so much that one could only say that I paid a big price for a fantastic graduate education. I really should have taken a doctorate in this and written it all up. I think it would have been very valuable. I was not specific about the artists' union memories. I remember a meeting where Stuart Davis was like the main speaker. We were talking about bringing the WPA out of relief

where it should be part of the on-going experience of people. There were so many wonderful panels and I remember feeling that excitement of complete fascination and attention. And I remember being shocked and surprised when Stuart Davis got up. He was wearing a business suit, he was smoking a cigar, he was the very model of a Gropper caricature.

MS. KATZMANN: All he needed was a derby.

MS. WENGROW: And you learn another thing. There are stereotypes and stereotypes and stereotypes. And I remember all the wonderful people who had lofts and living a life style. I thought I'll never have that courage to just go off on my own and do my own thing, and get my own studio. And here were people doing it. There were people going to Spain to fight. So there was a great camaraderie among us. At the same time the young people were very involved and participatory long before that became a word in the new left and that I heard from my children. I found it much more disciplined. Let me say that, as I saw my own children growing up, I saw a new brand that had many wonderful things because it involved many more people in a variety of ways. The lack of discipline seemed to me wouldn't get anybody anyplace, not that we got ourselves all together either. But to have somebody say, after having made a commitment, "No, I don't think I'm going to show up tomorrow," seems to me not too great. And I think that the influence of self-discovery, the psychological revolution "I must find myself and be my own person first" has many good feelings but is destructive, too. I'll tell you why. You see, I'm into psychoanalysis, psychotherapy. I think that we can't always know all about ourselves ever. Had we enough world and time, well, maybe. But we don't have enough world and time. And there are things to be done. A certain amount of therapy occurs in the process of doing. My feeling is that, while you're in a process of touching, or a process of visiting someone, or whatever, you are doing more for yourself. You are learning more no matter how dull or bright you would be than if you just stayed home and contemplated your navel. And this is my feeling that there must be a time for contemplation and a time for doing; but I don't think there must be a time only for self-analysis. This is what I think I have observed: "I have to get myself together" becomes a life-time project. In the manifesto for the Radical Therapists, it states that children should have the right to try out different life styles. Okay, try them out. I think only in an affluent society can all things be tried out. I had to paint birds to make some bread, or the alternative was working at Macy's, or Orbach's. So I had art jobs. What were my art jobs? Decorative birds, which I could pull out of my jewelry box, where you painted enamel. I don't think that fulfilled my highest potentials. I'm not saying I wasn't exploited. What I am saying is that I don't know if it would have done me more good to have done nothing in a Depression. On the other hand, I was invited to teach at Commonwealth College, in the south in Arkansas. At that time, a friend of mien was then teaching there and they began to be harassed by the Ku Klux Klan. It was interracial. I never got there. I did get to the point--and this was my emancipatory step--I was actually going to go and teach silkscreen at this college. So, it was, in a sense, structured and I could rationalize that I was doing the right thing. Friends came and made a party; contributed books to bring down to make my library and paints to bring down. But this was an experiment not only in learning skills in the teaching art, in silkscreen, in teaching sociology, but in helping people learning to deal with themselves. I heard recently at one of my husband's classes a student talk about a project sponsored by the Federal government teaching migrant workers. He started teaching them about economics; how it was better to buy a six-pack of beer than individual cans from a hawker who would charge fifty or seventy-five cents rather than twelve and a half cents. How do I feel about not going to the college? I was terribly disappointed. Personally I made it into an ego trip about this thing I was going to do. But also I was a little relieved; I guess I was scared out of my wits, how I was going to deal with this. So that apparently I was not so courageous. I don't think I ever was. And yet I've done a number of very courageous things. But each time I've done them, I've done them only because I've felt pressured. Nobody else is doing it. I subsequently discovered that that's what

makes people do things. I don't think I would choose to just go up and do something. It's when there's a vacuum. So I'll wait and wait, and if nobody does anything, I'll do it. So how did I find Faith Ringgold? That was interesting. I was at the Art Educator's Association. We were introduced by our then mutual friend--he's no longer our friend--who said we would enjoy each other. We both say that's the nicest thing he's done for both of us. We didn't take immediately. Faith said, "You're white. You don't understand my problems. Boy, you've had it easy." But we fought it out because we really dug each other and we got to the point where we were two people together, to where we could forget we had color, we could forget everything. I love her kids; Michelle is brilliant. Friendship is not something you can legislate; neither is love. And I have to say this. Before I met Faith I took myself in hand and said, "What the hell kind of a liberal are you? Do you count among all your friends a real black friend or a Puerto Rican? Oh, you get along with lots of people, know them professionally." I used to answer myself, you can't do this mechanically. What are you going to do: put an ad in the paper: 'Wanted--one friend?'" I lived on Ocean Parkway at the time. But when I remarried, I deliberately wanted to live here. And I deliberately chose to teach at Clara Barton. Those were my first positive steps; I guess it's like a young person joining Vista. I could have had my choice of any one of the schools. The principal didn't understand this. So I set myself this task. It was three and a half very hard years, not because of the kids, though they gave me many hard times. But they were rewarding. You learn so much, like language. I remember my son saying, "I don't know any dirty words." And I said, "Really, Billy, what's a dirty word?" And he said, "Well, except napalm and war." When he said that, I had goose flesh. He was saying what these kids were saying. I don't care if they say "Fuck this, fuck that." What the hell's the difference if they say, "I shit on this." They're constantly being shit on and destroyed. You have to feel it inside; you have to experience it. It was hard for me to say those words. And I'm not saying them because I think I'm a better person because I say them. It's just no longer a thing. And Billy's having learned that in Ivy League schools; he learned it the hard way too, I'm sure. And when I shared this with these kids, they said, "Hey, you've got a real groovy son. What does he look like?" They're always interested. "Are you married? You remarried! An old bitch like you?" Someone wrote on the blackboard, "Mrs. Wengrow is a middle-aged hippie." On the one hand, you think that they'll accept openness; they perceive you as not going according to the rules either. They know how to deal with the others but you're different. You're supposed to be like the others.

MS. KATZMANN: They have their programming.

MS. WENGROW: Right. They have their stereotypes, too. So we deal with very complicated situations.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Last updated...October 3, 2005