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Oral history interview with Nicholas Wilder, 1988 July 18

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape–recorded interview with Nicholas Wilder on July 18, 1988. The interview was conducted by Ruth Bowman 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

BOWMAN: I am interviewing, for the Archives of American Art, Nicholas Wilder, an old acquaintance. We may sidetrack a bit, but we'll get down the basic facts of Nicholas' enormous contribution to the art world, if I may be so flip.

Nicholas, you are a graduate of Stanford?

WILDER: No, not exactly. I'm a graduate of Amherst College. I went to law school at Stanford and switched, knew after a semester or two that I wasn't going to be a lawyer. Yet, I had grades enough to stay in Stanford, so I took my law exams and took the other route, which was into the arts.

I had been interested in art history and realized, when I was uncommitted or non–committed, as an undergraduate that it was easier to go to law school from Amherst, to find that route out and then switch out of that than the reverse. It would have been very hard––to try art history and then switch into law with the way the academics are set up. So I went to Stanford Law School, and then switched into the art department, which was happy for me and unhappy for the department because they weren't ready for M.A.–type students in art history at the time. This was in 1961.

It was before [Albert]Elsen and [Lorenz] Eitner.

RB: Oh, it was before Elsen?

NW: Yes. Elsen had just come in from Indiana a year later for his first turnaround or––second––I can't remember. He came to Stanford for awhile, and then went back to Indiana, and then came back when Eitner was brought in as the head of the department.

Stanford's art department was dismal academically. Stanford is an overrated school which was good from department to department. The art department, in those years, wasn't one of those departments. It is now.

RB: Of course, Eitner made an enormous difference.

NW: Look, there was no professor with a Ph.D. in art history, in the department, when I went into it.

RBI: It's amazing, less than thirty years ago, that things were that way.

NW: Well, Stanford was very oriented toward the establishment, science end of things. I actually studied under a professor in the classics department, Hazel Hansen. I think she was paid eighty–nine hundred dollars a year and the head of the department was paid eleven thousand in the classics department, while an engineering professor made thirty–five thousand. It was that era. They just didn't have an art department. They had a studio program.

RB: So you were studying art history at a sort of undergraduate graduate level?

NW: I wanted to pick up undergraduate credits I didn't get at Amherst in order to go East to a Ph.D. program. I wanted NYU, I mean, I wanted the Institute here [Institute of Fine Arts, New York University] or Columbia or Harvard. Actually, I got in those places, but it's a complicated story.

My advisor, who was in the classics department, I actually worked under. They devised that. I worked on part of the di Cesnola Collection, the Cypriot collection.

[Luigi Palma di Cesnola (1834–1904) formed an immense personal collection of antiquities while he was U.S. consul in Cyprus. He sold the entire collection to the Metropolitan in 1874–1876, then became the museum's first director in 1879, remaining until his death in 1904. In the 1880s, large portions of the collection were sold to other institutions, including Stanford, Harvard and Bryn Mawr; over 6,000 Cypriot objects remain at the Metropolitan.]

RB: Part of which is here at the Met.

NW: And part at Bryn Mawr.

RB: And part at Bryn Mawr, my school.

NW: Yes. I guess Senator Stanford bought the residue of that collection after the Met got theirs and Bryn Mawr got theirs. They made an instant university at the turn of the century. Evidently, it all fell down when the earthquake came in 1906. They literally bulldozed the museum. So generations of Stanford students excavated at Stanford.

RB: Yes, it was that whole wing that they never rebuilt.

NW: They never rebuilt. By the time I got there in the early 1960s! the material had all been brought up above ground, but there were large areas where work hadn't been done.

RB: The Cantor Garden is right over the old wing [The Rodin Sculpture Garden at the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for the Visual Arts at Stanford].

NW: I guess so. Anyway, they had a great selection of lamps running from fourth century B.C. to fourth century A.D.

RB: Roman lamps?

NW: Roman lamps. They had two to three hundred–– two hundred and eighty or three hundred and thirty, depending on how you selected them out. They had no chronology for them, but they had a great typology. So I just correlated our typology with that done by the Danes in their Cypriot digs in the 1950s. Therefore, attained a chronology for the Stanford collection. I did that only as a task in order to use it as a springboard to get East.

RB: Did you?

NW: No, I didn't because Hazel died during an operation in Christmas of 1961 or 1962. I can't remember. She went in for a minor operation, had a heart attack, and died. That, as you know, took all–– She was going to bat for me for the scholarships I needed. I got in the schools, but I didn't get any of the support. You know how those things are allocated out. At the same time, I started to have a student job in an art gallery.

RB: Where was this?

NW: It's at Stanford in the shopping center. There

was this big shopping complex.

RB: The shopping mall which is still there.

NW: Yes, with Saks Fifth Avenue and all that stuff.

RB: Walking distance from the campus.

NW: Right. There was a Stanford barn that had

restaurants in it.

RB: It's still there.

NW: Upstairs was a gallery called the Lanyon Art Gallery.

RB: Lanyon, L A N Y 0 N?

NW: Yes. It was run by a surgeon at Stanford and his wife, Bill and Louise Fielder. Their name is familiar in the Bay Area. They've been active in the arts since that time. They initially opened this gallery, a year or two before I came along, in order to, I guess, enrich their lives. Fly to Paris, buy art, bring it back, sell it there. It was an école de Paris gallery. And it hadn't worked. So rather than close it –– These were very active and interesting people. They had taken their [Bernard] Buffets and [Jean Claude] Sardous and things to the museums and found out there was no interest, that there was another game in town. They started getting interested in that, the contemporary artists in the Bay Area. Rather than close the gallery, they decided to change its direction. I came to work for them literally the week of their first contemporary show.

RB: Which was?

NW: Karl Kasten.

RB: Oh, really? With a K?

NW: K.K. So they'd obviously been into the [University of California] Berkeley department and into the Hofmann second generation there. [Second generation Abstract Expressionists, students of Hans Hofmann] They did many interesting things. The first artist that was coming for an interview the first week I worked there was Tom Holland, who they ended up showing. They'd gotten Tom's name from Rudy Turk.

RB: Who was Rudy Turk?

NW: Rudy Turk ran the Richmond Art Center and then ended up in Arizona somewhere [Director, Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe]––one of those wonderful, energetic souls who was really interested in art and loved art and knew what was going on there and showed [John] McCracken for the first time and Holland for the first time and knew all the young people. That Richmond Art Center was very active.

RB: Richmond County? Was that what it was?

NW: Richmond, California, where the naval yards were during the Second World War––north of Berkeley. If you take the Richmond Bridge to go back over to Marin County, you cut across that way.

Rudy was one of those types that really knew if there was a Simon Rodia type in the area.

RB: You mean Simon Rodia in the Watts Towers?

NW: Yes. There was a comparable guy up there, and he ended up showing him [John Roeder]. He did all of those things. The Richmond Art Center was one of those wonderful places. I believe when I came along, it was winding down or it had its time or something. The Bay Area was interesting then.

The reason I was interested in going into art goes back a bit further. It goes back to the Amherst years. I was a guard in the museum there and got very interested in the art department, and ended up hiring the other guards and projecting slides for the courses. My education literally started as a slide projectionist––not as a student. I didn't take the exams; I gave them, I guess. You know how you had to hand out things and select the slides in the slide library––things like that. So it was actually an unencumbered learning process.

RB: In Amherst, were they talking about contemporary art at that time?

NW: The first artist I ever met was [Marcel] Duchamp.

RB: Oh, you met Duchamp?

NW: Duchamp came to give a lecture. There was an American studies program set up by Henry [Steele] Commager called Problems in American History. They were two–week cycles through the year where you solved progressively, chronologically, different problems in American history, starting with the founding of the [Massachusetts] Bay Company through the funding of the national debt through the Civil War problem, through trust busting, through League of Nations. I mean, you went through your sophomore year learning how to make decisions with ever increasing amounts of material to draw upon. You had to express your opinion or make a decision and express why in seven hundred and fifty words, and be able to back that up. Teaching you how to think as a student.

Toward the end of this program, they did a reconstruction of the Armory Show prior to the Munson–[Williams]–Proctor [Arts Institute] doing. It was 1956 or 1957. They brought in various people to lecture. They thought they'd bring in a participating artist, and it was Duchamp.

He arrived a day early, and I was the guard on duty when he started wandering around in the building, looking for the people that were supposed to meet him, who were off somewhere giving a lecture. So I met him and showed him around campus.

Anyway, the interest went back there. I even attempted to get a summer job once in Boston at an art gallery, and it didn't work. All of those kinds of things had gone on. There was an inclination toward getting in proximity to art and art historical settings at that point.

RB: Putting the past together?

NW: No. I didn't think of it as far as––I mean, I hadn't dreamt of being a dealer. I fiddled with making art, but that was mainly at Stanford because I was required to do something.

RB: To learn the materials or to learn the problems?

NW: Since their courses weren't set up very well––

There were required courses, and some of them were studio. So I made them into interesting projects like looking at how, if you can put color down, it changes in certain ways over a short period of time. So I could actually compose a design or a painting by using older swatches of color. And then I could proceed to make it and then let it turn into what I wanted it to become. Things like that. Professors didn't like it.

RB: Because it was process instead of product?

NW: Well, it wasn't process so much in my mind. I was just curious about how you arrived at the visual experience that you were going to be stuck with. I don't think that ether of the 1970s pervaded in those years yet. I don't think so.

RB: But you were thinking about what made art effective or made art function?

NW: Art was a visual process back then. [chuckles] It still is now, despite all of the drum–beating that goes on.

RB: You're not a Marxist.

NW: I'm not a Marxist. I don't think the social nineteenth–century thinkers are addressing the thrust of our biological history when they try to make it a non–visual enterprise. Our eye developed over ten million years on the planet, specially. custom–made to sense and communicate, not to deny the role of the viewer as they imply, by denying the role of the artist. Now we're in 1988. We're in T.J. Clark on. [Wilder's shorthand for the postmodern era of art history, whose beginning he dates to the publication of Clark's first books, in the 1970s.] I'm not one of those people that hates art like those people seem to hate art. The art historians and the critics today do not like art and, therefore, try to make it into something other than it is through philosophy or their theories or codes. They don't interest me very much. It wasn't so prevalent back then. You had camps in the early 1960s, but they were people that loved art. You had people that liked Leonard Baskin. You might not share their interest in Leonard Baskin, but you couldn't deny the human need that was being fulfilled and the proximity it gave them to a learning experience. We could get into the philosophy of art, but we're jumping way, way ahead.

RB: So here we are, back at college. Your professor,Hazel Hansen, has died, and you are––

NW: Put on hold, as far as getting into an eastern program with a scholarship. I'm accepted at Fogg [Harvard] and at NYU, but I'm not supported. In the meantime, I've gone to work for this art gallery which is far more interesting.

In order to read my paper at Stanford, they asked me to wait a couple of quarters until––Emily Richardson from Yale, the Etruscologist, was coming in to do something. She would have read the M.A. paper. So I got tied up into that type of bureaucratic thing which just put it on a siding forever. The paper and the M.A. and everything still resides somewhere in a dusty

drawer in the art department at Stanford.

RB: You never got the M.A.?

NW: No. We had a falling out, and then I wasn't interested. And then they re–approached me at one point after I had another role in the world and wondered if I was still interested, because they'd be interested in me having it. I wasn't interested.

RB: They should send it to you.

NW: At that point, the art department realized that a group of us were lending things to the new law school. By happenstance, I was one of four lenders of large numbers of paintings to the new school. The other three were Ed Janss, Robert Rowan, and Norton Simon, which put it all out of perspective. But it was just simply my contacts with [John Henry] Merryman and some people at the law school that it stayed viable.

RB: Ed Janss and––

NW: Bob Rowan.

RB: Oh, yes––Bob Rowan.

NW: And the big [Barbara] Hepworth outside was from

Norton.

RB: This was all related to the law school?

NW: Yes, when they built their new building there.

RB: How many years later was that that you were lending?

NW: Oh, that must have been–– When did they build that building? Late 1960s, early 1970s? 1969, 1970?

RB: So in less than a decade, you were absolutely somewhere else.

NW: I was somewhere else.

RB: You left Stanford.

NW: I lived in the community, working at that Lanyon Art Gallery for two or three years. Like most art galleries in the Bay Area at that time––it's a very interesting situation––they had their cycles, their lives of being interesting and viable in the community. You had the Bolles Gallery.

RB: BOLLES?

NW: I believe so. Which had initially been directed by Phil Lieder before he went to *Artforum*. You had the Dilexi Gallery that was run by––My mind isn't working. [James Newman]

[off/on tape]

We were discussing things in the Bay Area. Lanyon Gallery had its moment in the sun, its

two– or three–year thing. I was very active in it with the Fielders. After I left and the gallery went down in its activity a bit, people immediately gave me more credit for its success and more credit for its demise than was warranted. It actually had run its course. We had great numbers of sales.

RB: Were you selling only Bay Area art?

NW: Yes. But if you sold forty–five Tom Hollands, other artists knew about it.

RB: Really? To whom did you sell all this art?

NW: Everybody.

RB: It wasn't expensive?

NW: No. They were fifty, a hundred and fifty dollars. An eighty–inch painting might have been $450; big construction six hundred. It was all this activity immediately, and everybody–– We had then Robert Hudson. And then we showed a group show of younger artists that included Ron Davis, Clark Murray, Robert Graham. It was a very active gallery and a very interesting time, but it also attracted outside interest and I got offers of backing from various places and thought of opening my own gallery in Los Angeles. That's what I left to do because I also realized it had its limits on what it could do in the Bay Area. It's a very interesting time.

To be art historically inclined here, and stepping back a second, the *Artforum* magazine resided in the Bay Area in those years.

RB: Was Charlie Cowles the––

NW: No.

RB: It was someone else.

NW: It was prior to Charlie. The backer was––I'm drawing a blank on the name again. An old man that lives in Cleveland now. I don't even know if he's alive.

Artforum magazine had been formed and had an original board that had people like Coplans and stuff on it.

RB: John Coplans?

NW: But it also had financial problems and they had sought help from people like Virginia Wright. I'm just drawing a blank on the guy's name. His last name was Irwin––John Irwin. Not Bob Irwin, John Irwin.

Anyway, it was published in San Francisco. When you analyze its impact, let's say, on my life, you have to do it the following way: I went to work for this doctor and his wife. They were getting interested in the action in the Bay Area. What they thumped down on their desk was the latest issue of *Artforum* and went through it to get the list of the galleries and ads for L.A. When they went there, they walked in and wanted to see the Dwan Gallery or the Ferus Gallery. The topography was set by that magazine and its agenda. It was very influential. I don't mean that Phil Lieder or John Coplans called up and said, "Handle so–and–so." I'm not talking about that kind of influence. It was part of the ether, part of the hope. It set the tone. Karl Kasten got an awful review of his show. They were very upset. It was their first attempt. Why did Jim Monte, who was a bartender at that time in the No Name Bar in Sausalito––"Why did Jim come in?" And a painter.

RB: Yes, who ended up at the Whitney briefly.

NW: Yes. He had a great saga. I still see him. He's still here. [unclear]

And he paints.

RB: He gave a bad review of the Kasten show?

NW: Oh, yes. But the point I'm trying to make isn't so much that. It was that my initiation, without knowing––The greatest influences are the influences you don't detect, the ones that set the basic water table thing. I remember going and meeting Paul Mills at Oakland right away. He was doing the Ten More how, which was the West Coast version of Alloway's Ten Pop Artists that had been at the Guggenheim. This must have been 1962 or 1963.

RB: Ten More – M O R E?

NW: Yes, which had Billy [Al] Bengston and [Llyn] Foulkes and Joe Goode and those people in it. Kenny Price probably. I don't know why they think they're Pop artists. Anyway, that show was going on.

It was an interesting time, the Bay Area, in that it was a struggle. *Artforum* was in the throes of collapsing due to its financial woes at that point. And that was when Charlie [Cowles] came along. Initially, the Fielders, the people that ran the Lanyon Gallery, had been trying to help them. They'd been approached for money and couldn't do it themselves because they were doing the gallery. But they were looking around for backers to help the magazine because they thought it was important, which it was. Nothing worked out. I mentioned it to Charlie. Charlie got interested, met with the people, and then that whole saga started, which is a story in itself and a very interesting one and distorted one, I think. I think Charlie's role has been underestimated.

RB: Underestimated?

NW: Way underestimated. His patience–– Patience that has ended up moving a feat in those year, what he did to help who, where, why, and when, or what he did––has never been clearly explained, particularly in the face of the other people's behavior, particularly Lieder, who I think behaved very badly as a man, and Phil is a very moral and good man. But Coplans' trouble with Charlie should be spoken of sometime and put into the Archives [of American Art].

RB: I think it's important now. Those who are close to it have somewhat of––I won't say an "obligation," but it would be very good because there is distortion certainly.

NW: Charlie was brought in–– They needed money. Charlie was the son of Mike [Gardner] Cowles who had Cowles Communications and *Look* magazine, who was still a viable entity and was a powerful person in the publishing world. So Charlie was immediately interested in the magazine or the proposition of being involved in some way. He put up the money that bailed them out, which got him a small percentage of the stock. The magazine went merrily on its way. He obviously did this with the okay of his dad. Right? Well, the requisite number of months, six months, go by and the magazine's almost in receivership again. The printer isn't paid and this and that. They have great meetings and powwows on how to bail themselves out, but they don't include Charlie in those meetings–– didn't even ask him to them. So they decide they're going to have to close. Woe is me. The magazine is going to close. Charlie says, "Why didn't you ask me? I will bail you out again." with a measly ten or fifteen thousand, like he did the first time to pay the bill, he came up with substantially more, like fifty or sixty, and really put them on their feet. They accepted. They were happy. They were glad. Charlie leaves the meeting––this is all done, I'm sure, with his father––goes home, and they call him back and say they don't want his offer; they only want ten percent of the offer. They didn't want him in the magazine. They wanted his help only to the extent of––

RB: They didn't want him editorially involved?

NW: Never was editorially involved. They didn't want him as a publisher. They, like so many people, always

presupposed that he would try to influence, would try to do this, try to do all those bad things that capitalists do. Charlie never did any of those things.

The first thing they did was they decided that they wanted to move the magazine to L.A. Of course, "Charlie wouldn't want to pay for it," said Phil. Charlie was dying to move to L.A. and move the magazine. He did. A year or so later after they were all set up there, Charlie had his house. This disgusted them because how could he go and just buy––I mean, they got into all these other issues with him.

RB: Anti–capitalist, but they needed the capital?

NW: Yes. And they thought that Charlie was living off the magazine and the parents were funneling money through the magazine, all of which was probably true to a degree and all of which was [a] perfect trade–off. They were totally independent of this thing.

Then they said they wanted to move to New York and Charlie had set up his life in Southern California, so "Oh, woe is me. He'll never want to do that."

I said, "Ask him."

They asked him and he said, "Move it to New York." He paid for it. Constantly Charlie did; if you watched the way his feet moved, didn't get involved in his lifestyle or his personality or all that seemed to gum up a Phil Lieder; I respect Phil, and I

think Phil was very important. The magazine never would have been what it was. Of course, it's nothing today. But when it was an influential, important part of Southern California and then the New York scene, it was due to Phil essentially. There's no question about that. But Charlie provided glue, grease for that and never, never stepped on their toes. They behaved badly as men to him, I think.

RB: It's a whole other discussion, really, to talk about what happens when the haves and the havenots have to work together.

NW: Especially when they have political notions that they think are moral and correct, the have–nots, and they have to judge what's going on here with someone else. Their various phobias rule the day. I think they behaved badly.

Coplans, of course, until this point in his life, where he's having a happy time, was always an angry man. His history of breaking situations and pushing them to the point, whether it be at Pasadena or whether it be in San Francisco or wherever––

RB: Ohio.

NW: Ohio was later. Akron. It's all a pattern with John. I like John.

RB: He's enjoying his work in photography certainly.

NW: Yes. The *Artforum* as an influence wasn't that these people–called up and told you what to do.

It was that they set the tone for those. In fact, my run–ins with them, as far as influencing me, were absolutely counter. I had meetings with them where they weren't going to support me if I didn't get rid of Tom Holland or Bruce [Nauman].

RB: Wait a minute. We're ahead of ourselves.

NW: We'll get to that later. That's years later. We're still at Stanford and still working at an art gallery. I'm thinking of leaving the art gallery and accepting an offer backing and opening a gallery in Los Angeles.

RB: Where the backers are––

NW: This is the spring of 1964, summer of 1964, fall of 1964, what I'm talking about. I was approached by Katie Bishop, who is presently Katie Crum, who runs the gallery at Baruch College here.

RB: Katie Crum?

NW: C R U M. She's a graduate of the Institute here. She went back and got her degree [Ph.D., Columbia]. She's doing a Bradley Walker Tomlin show. She runs the program at Baruch there on 22nd Street. She did the Women's Surrealist Show. She's good.

She came and wanted to get involved, and got her father, who had substantial backing, to say he would put together a package and I could go open a gallery. It never worked out that way. He reneged, essentially, and came up with something later. But by that point, I had already set up the gallery and it was about to never open. I'm jumping ahead, but I went to Moses Lasky, who is president of the Board of Trustees of the museum in San Francisco. He helped me write a limited partnership agreement. I sold shares of stock to Stanford friends. Charlie was the first one to write out a check. They were two thousand dollar shares of stock. This is before his *Artforum* relay. Oh, no, it was actually after. He got several people. It was just a matter of keeping it from sinking at that point. I started out very under–capitalized. I bought all the shares back eventually from these people, from certain people for a dollar, who were very, very helpful.

See, here's a perfect instance of Charlie. I had set up this thing, this idea, and it collapsed. Then, I'd set up a general partnership and was trying to organize and get the gallery going at the same time I was trying to raise money. No one would make the first step. Who was going to write out the first check? Charlie said, "You need a first check," and he wrote it out. He said, "I think you have a problem." If you watched the people's feet––who moved and who didn't––you learned in those years very early.

RB: It's a lovely phrase, "Watch the people's feet."

NW: You could hear what they talk about, but see where they move. It's like our friend, André Emmerich. His feet move in the right direction all the time, don't they?

RB: Yes.

NW: Without a lot of fanfare. That's what always impressed me.

RB: And with immense loyalty.

NW: Exactly. And you just don't see that these days. We're living in a different time where you're a fool if you call a press conference and say you're happy with something because something's been done. You're a fool if you've actually done it, you know? [chuckles]

RB: When did the gallery open?

NW: I opened up the first of April, 1965. I moved down to L.A. in late 1964 and got the space. I arranged for the space actually before moving there. I did a couple of visits. L.A. was an interesting topography at that point.

I have to back up a second. The people that were very influential early on allowed this to happen. I worked for the Fielders. They didn't like it then when I moved, but they were very instrumental in helping me. Moses Lasky came to my rescue when Katie Bishop's father didn't come through. But Katie initially had ignited my interest and let me see that it was possible. So she was very instrumental and actually, later, did come through with quite a bit [of money]. And the encouragement from people like Charlie–– So it was an exciting time. You could go to L.A. and with six thousand dollars––all I had in my pocket that day––and open a gallery. Rents were four hundred dollars or three hundred and seventy–five dollars. I called up André in New York and bought the big diamond Noland over the phone [*Color Temperature*], got it out there, and sold it and paid him for it. It was a record price of six thousand dollars or something.

RB: This was on Melrose –

NW: La Cienega. When I moved there, the dealers––Rolf Nelson had a gallery–– R O L F. It was an enthusiast's scene. The tenor for Los Angeles at that point wasn't based on the aesthetic, but they had an agenda. The agenda was to make an art scene, to be important. The art from those years, strangely enough, is very good and is only now being recognized in some kind of perspective of how good it really is, I think, nationally, internationally. I think you're just seeing––as distorted as the articles are on those people today, the interest in the work that make someone want to do the article or the survey of the area shows there's some value in it. The people are detecting the quality of the work. They don't understand it here in the Media Center in New York. They don't understand Billy Al Bengston's influence which was all pervasive at a certain

point. They're still looking to Robert Irwin and Larry Bell there. They try to award

influence to John McLaughlin. McLaughlin was a great artist in those years, but not an influential one. It's a generation later that he influenced strong–– Anyway, again I jump ahead.

RB: So there we were, opening a gallery on April 1, 1965, on La Cienega Boulevard.

NW: Right. My first show was Edward Avedisian. See,

I'd started coming to New York. What I decided to do was make a gallery that used what I knew of the Bay Area

and what I knew of New York City. I actually had only one L.A. artist when I opened. He was an artist that had been very well–known, actually on the cover of *Artforum* magazine and everything, had been with Rolf Nelson and left him. It was Joe Goode. So actually, what I did is I had a group of artists from Northern California, which included Tom Holland, Bob Graham, Ron Davis, Clark Murray, John McCracken, Bruce Nauman. There were more, but I'm just giving you an idea. With that I combined some New Yorkers. At that point, the ones I was taking were the ones whose work was available to me, that didn't have shows out there already or had connections. Roy Lichtenstein and all those people, Frank Stella, all had shows already lined up with Irving Blum. So I had an interest in some of the other artists, like Ken Noland, Helen Frankenthaler, and Jules Olitski, and people like that, that didn't have that. I showed Agnes Martin.

Anyway, I put together a combination of New Yorkers and some Northern Californians and a couple of Europeans like David Hockney.

RB: What kind of space did you have?

NW: I had a storefront like they all did, right on La Cienega. Of course, when I got it, I was told it was on the wrong side of the street and it was fifty yards up too far.

RB: Where were you in relation to Jake Zeitlin's barn? [Zeitlin and Ver Brugge, booksellers]

NW: I was 814 and Jake was 811, I think.

RB: So you were across the street.

NW: Maybe he was ten or twenty feet below me. But I was told that I was too far north of him.

RB: You were too far north of Melrose?

NW: No – too far north of Jake. Honestly, at that point, it was such a small scene that to cross at the Waring light, to cross over to my gallery, people wondered if I'd picked the wrong side of the street. However, Feingarten and Landau were on my side of the street, but they were at least almost a hundred yards south of me. It was that funny.

They said, "Oh, you'll never get space." I moved to town already having space. They didn't know. I'd, seen a "For Rent" sign and I'd gone and gotten it the first time I visited.

RB: You were opening then at about the same time that the County Museum moved.

NW: Just after.

RB: Just after they opened. The College Art Association had met there about that same a lot of art historians had come out.

NW: I think so. I don't really know.

RB: I remember you, I think, from then – that you were around.

NW: I really don't know because I was coming from the––There's a tradition in the avant–garde––let's not use that word––in the contemporary scene––of being enthusiastic, being an enthusiast. I don't think I was aware of the College Art Association that much at that point or those groups of people because I was running to studios and going to Barney's Beanery and getting set up. L.A. was in the throes of making a scene. I'm not talking about its second city agonies that it has from time to time.

RB: No. [Ed] Kienholz was there.

NW: Kienholz was there up on the mountain. The

Dwan Gallery was there where Kienholz––

He'd long since left there. Ferus had–

RB: How do you spell "Ferus?"

NW: F E R U S. When I moved, Irving [Blum]was running it by himself. Walter Hopps had gone over to Pasadena. Virginia Dwan had the Dwan Gallery that was directed by John Weber. Rolf Nelson, David Stuart had interesting galleries.

[Felix Landau] had a more traditional gallery, but had people like Tony DeLap and [John] McLaughlin at that

point.

If you reread the history, or let's say you have a person writing an article in New York on those years––I read one recently by one of the more interesting critics. They had it all backwards with the Ferus Gallery and nothing else existed. And then there was a little bit of Dwan and then Ace Gallery comes along or something.

RB: Who was running Virginia's gallery?

NW: John Weber. Everett Ellin had been there [in Los Angeles] and left. People forget that Perls had a gallery––Frank, not Klaus.

RB: Well, Frank Perls was a force.

NW: Yes, absolutely. Paul Kantor had been active since 1950 or late 1940s. They forget that Landau started in the late 1940s. They forget that whole––You never hear them mention Sylvan Simone, who handled [Howard] Warshaw and Rico Lebrun and those people.

RB: What was his name? I don't know that.

NW: Sylvan Simone. He was on Olympic Boulevard.

[end of side one, tape one]

See, I don't know those people really well, but there was a whole scene going on in L.A. that has been sanitized at this point, historically, which doesn't do it any service. It was much more bubbling. And people forget that Henry Hopkins had a gallery called the Huysmans Gallery. H U Y S––Probably after that Huysmans. [Joris–Karl Huysmans, author of *A Rebours*] Maybe not. Maybe it's not a Y. I've never been a speller.

RB: This was before Henry Hopkins went to work at the L.A. County.

NW: Yes. Jim Elliot was at the County then also. Maurice [Tuchman] was just there, coming. Walter Hopps was at Pasadena. Jim Demetrion was at Pasadena. [Tom] Leavitt had just left Pasadena for Santa Barbara.

RB: Tom Leavitt. Jim Elliot, Maurice Tuchman. There were a lot of people who ended up in the East who started out there.

NW: Yes. It was very funny. The residue of the Ferus group of artists that were very interested when *Artforum* came. A person like [Robert] Irwin was very smart and knew that to have a viable magazine like that would help the scene a lot. It was, in a way, more important than the museums at that point for them, I think. They came around and used to try to pass on people's shows or things. I didn't realize or pay any attention to them very much about that. But I remember them coming in and getting a ladder. Don Factor, who was Max Factor's son [in fact, Max Factor's grandson], got up on a ladder with him –– he was a reviewer for *Artforum*––and looked at a splat on an Olitski, and then they decided that it was intended. Yet a drip in a Noland was polluting the air.

[telephone ringing – off/on tape]

It was an interesting time. Little incidents. It was those years that the Vietnam protests were starting–– early. There was the L.A. Tower, [Mark] di Suvero, and [John] Chamberlain. Those people got involved in it.

RB: That was done on a hillside.

NW: It was at the top of La Cienega. There was a big used car lot or something. It *was* a car lot. Now it's probably an apartment building. But it was a dirt patch at the top.

RB: I have black and white slides of it.

NW: Everybody was very supportive of this. I remember I was just opening. It was that same April. Of course, I was sympathetic to the issue involved. Charlie Mattox, who was the kinetic artist that had shown at the gallery up north, was going to show with me. He was very involved in this. He came around with Irving Petlin and some of the people that worked in and around L.A. Petlin was an artist then that showed at Rolf Nelson. They came to me and asked me if I would drape all the paintings by the artists in black. They were going to have a program where dealers were going to close on certain days as protests, and they were going to drape these paintings and they were going to do this, that, and the other thing.I, of course, said I'd comply as far as closing on certain days because it was my decision as a dealer to do that. But as far as putting black drapery over a Noland, I thought they ought to ask him because it was a statement that he was being asked to make––or a Ron Davis or whatever I had. I remember that Petlin looked at me and said, "You do as we tell you to do or I'll get you. I'm a reviewer from *Artforum* magazine. I'll bomb you," or something like that. I said, "Get the hell out of my gallery."

Mattox came back and tried to smooth things over and said, "Look, you're new. You can't do things like that."

I said I would comply with anything. I just wouldn't [relent] under that kind of pressure. And sure enough, my fourth show was Barney [Barnett] Newman. Barney wanted me to show that *EighteenCantos*. I did a vitrine and everything. Look up the review in *Artforum.* "No amount of pompous display will save this art and this artist from the triviality they're destined to be considered," and on and on, Irving Petlin. He got me. He tried to get me. And he told me that.

RB: Yes. History has changed that.

NW: History has changed. I don't think he's a Marxist anymore. He was very much then. He was the kind of guy that you saw in high school that wanted to be on a committee to protest. He didn't care what it was. It was that steamroller kind of thing.

RB: But the di Suvero Tower went up and was a peace tower.

NW: Wonderful. Yes, it was a peace tower. It was a wonderful idea.

RB: How long was it up, would you guess?

NW: Through the spring then, wasn't it? I can't remember.

RB: I just have this documentation.

NW: It was funny years. I learned a lot in those years, made a lot of mistakes. People remember the great art as such. That was when Nauman had his first shows. You still read that Nauman had his first show in New York at Castelli, but he had two shows with me.

RB: I'm going to say something trivial. When did you start wearing white suits? I remember you in a white suit.

NW: I probably wore white suits from high school on.

RB: You cut quite a figure, as I remember. You had a nice car and people knew you were coming.

NW: I loved cars. I have had wonderful cars in my

life.

RB: It fits with the art in a way.

NW: I love travel; I love cars. Somehow, maybe that was part of the attraction to the art world also because I was required to travel and I was required to go around and do things.

RB: You also love ideas. I hear from others that you read an enormous amount.

NW: I did that privately and in isolation in Los Angeles. I remember Josine Starrels coming to my house one time and saying, "My God, you have books." [laughs] I also had many people, not Josine, come––and want to know what I did with the books. Well, what do you do with books? If it's in German and you don't read German, you look at the pictures and you look at the size of the Tafeln [German for plates or illustrations], and you figure out [the dimensions]. The ideas about art have always intrigued me and I've followed them impulsively. I have a library that is––I don't mean this in the perjorative [sense]––but it's a dilettante's library. I buy books on what I'm interested in and, therefore, stick them on the shelves. So if you want an area of art that interests me, like art in Ferrara from 1450 to 1520, I'll have the books on it. Most people have that. It's not because I have a comprehensive library. I'm interested in Lorenzo Costa or Ercole di Roberti or [Lorenzo] Ghiberti or somebody.

RB: Running parallel to your work in the contemporary art field, you kept up, to a degree, in the things that caught your interest as an undergraduate and as a graduate student?

NW: Actually, I don't think it's that––it's more simple than that and more complicated in a way. I don't see the difference visually. I was never academically inclined. I was a dyslexic kid and I never did well. As I learned about art history, I realized they were teaching me evolution of styles. I don't think that's what happened out there. I think that, as art history really is some kind of overview on an activity of artists and for many, many different reasons, they stand in front of blocks of marble or canvases or big walls or ceilings and make these things over the years. It's a visual process. I'm much more interested in the intent behind that. I find that, for instance, someone wouldn't equate Sam Francis and McLaughlin stylistically, but their intentions and interests and the way they went about achieving and what they wanted to achieve were very similar, very sympathetic, very harmonious, derived from some of the same origins, and leave you, as a viewer, contemplating some of the

same things, which I think is more to the matter. So I would say they were competent, similar artists.

RB: Do you find that the artists that you worked with were interested in the same kinds of things? I mean, did they read?

NW: No. Let's say you take a great artist like Joe Goode. Joe Goode is quite well aware of his American traditions. He understands [William] Harnett and [John Frederick] Peto and he understands Jasper Johns and things in between. He doesn't speculate on the notion that Harnett and Peto, as trompe l'oeil painters, or image, object, word things in Johns, are thresholds for an art experience. He's aware that Peto exists, but he doesn't understand the tradition that Peto is part of. He doesn't know who Pieter Claesz is. That's okay. He doesn't understand that his art can be traced easily back to Leonardo da Vinci, because the intents are similar. He doesn't understand the *vanitas* tradition which he's part of. This didn't make him any less interesting or less informed or less a good artist. See, I think the ideas that he played with that intrigued me so much –– Ideas are a different enterprise. What we're doing today is a different enterprise than the art enterprise. The art enterprise is nonverbal and visual, essentially. The power of art is the power to communicate understanding and meaning that defies verbalization. It's a tradition. The eye is used to do this. This is when I made my anti–Marxist crack earlier. The eye rules there. The philosophers––of art, the idea people––Look at Kirk Varnadoe's problems at the Museum of Modern Art. Idea precedes the art. He'll shoehorn art into an idea. Not that it's not interesting, not that he's not talented, not that he won't be really good there, not that it won't be a great relief to have Bill Rubin gone from this museum, as able a thinker as he is, and as good an eye as he is. Let's not get into Rubin.I could tell you stories and would be willing to tell the Archives things about those people.

RB: I suppose this is an Archives of American Art point of view. Ask someone who's interviewed for them a lot of times. How did running the business of a gallery, of the Nicholas Wilder Gallery, drive you into a particular group of artists or a particular style?

NW: Two things. I wasn't a very good businessman. I got into all kinds of trouble. As the name of the game changed in the 1970s, that's when I decided I wanted to get out because it became a viable business situation, which isn't why I got into it. Even though I survived and it succeeded, it's kind of like that was the last thing I had in mind.

To answer your question about the artists, they were provided to me by the topography, in that if I looked at the art that was out there, available, unaffiliated artists, artists that were not at galleries, I was young enough and pigheaded enough or stubborn enough to think that I saw the obvious, it couldn't be seen any other way, and that Joe Goode and Bruce Nauman were great artists. People share my assessment of Nauman. Fewer share my assessment of Goode. Twenty years from now, Goode will be right up there with him. I'm still totally convinced. If you want to say, "How? Demonstrate you're convinced," I still buy them. I own thirty–seven Joe Goodes. I buy them for ten and twenty thousand each when they cost me that much. I don't care. They're great, great art. That side of me still exists, is what I'm saying. Olitski's another artist. So Color Field painting's in disrepute now. Olitski's the giant of the movement. If I had to say, "Who do you own a thousand paintings by or two hundred or whatever it is, for posterity" or something like that, you're given some outlandish, hypothetical filthville, you write Jules's name in if you want to. Not because he's a Greenbergian Color Field artist. It's because he's more than that. He goes beyond that. He goes beyond the idea. He goes beyond the limits of that. His art draws from the power of the possibility of making those kind of paintings universally powerful. And he's wonderful. The last Olitski I bought was six or eight weeks ago. The one prior to that was again three months before that. I keep doing it.

RB: Where do you put all this art?

NW: Oh, it's in warehouses or at my place or friends. If you see an Olitski that sold for six thousand dollars at Christie's, which seemed outlandishly low when everything else was going at twenty and thirty because it was so big and huge, you best believe I bought it. I did, and home it goes. I wasn't trying to get into that end of things. I was talking about how I got the artists back then.

Dealers get artists from hearing about them from other artists. That's essentially it. Given that, when I saw a Ron Davis or Clark Murray or a Tom Holland or a Bob Hudson, it was just obvious those were the ones. I never thought twice about it. What I think is funny today is that nobody else wanted them. They'll rewrite the history. You'll hear someone–– Someone told me or I overheard someone say that Irving Blum would have handled Nauman, but I needed a young artist, and he thought it would be better for him to mature at my place, and then he could handle him. Not true. John Coplans and those people came to me and told me I couldn't be taken credibly as a dealer until I got rid of Bruce Nauman and Tom Holland and people like that, that they were a discredit; they weren't helping the scene; they weren't worthy artists.

RB: So what you're telling me is that these critics or these writers were really looking to wield a great deal of power.

NW: They were interested in making a scene. I don't think they're as bad as some of the critics. I don't think Coplans really hates art. I think some of the critics today do. Don't you?

RB: There certainly is a need to build an entire linguistic structure around art, which is the opposite of what you're saying. You're saying it's in the eye.

NW: The eye was formed as a sensing device eight million years before language was invented. If you get a good philosopher like [Arthur] Danto, or someone and sit him down––To put it into linguistics terms is to drain the power out of art. That's precisely what the whole enterprise of philosophy of art––is to take the power away from it, I think.

RB: I heard Danto speak about [Anselm] Kiefer and I guess it was quite draining. Interesting.

NW: I think that when you get the bright critics and the bright philosophers–– I mean, I don't have to agree with [Erwin] Panofsky and iconologists and all those kinds of things, but I can read *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art* and all of those things. T. J. Clark's insightful. But if you read his book on Manet, you find out he hates Manet. [*The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*, 1985] I don't. I go to Munich and I look at that "Luncheon" painting. [*The Luncheon in the Studio*, 1868, Munich, Neue Pinakothek] I think it's wonderful. There's a big difference.

I don't think Duchamp's a very good artist. I have that problem. "The Shovel" is just as good an idea to me with my back to it. I only have to address by looking at Duchamp "The Broken Glass,"

"The Bride," "The Measured Piece of String," a few things like that. I would much rather see a rendering of that snow shovel or that urinal by [Giorgio] Morandi, who's a contemporary. I really think there is, today, to get to 1988––I think there is an advanced group of artists working at the edge. But they're the visual ones. I think you'll find it in a Brice Marden or Jake Berthot or David Reed. There are many, many, really good––The difference between the possibilities; take a look at the catalogue for the Corcoran Biennial and compare it to the Whitney Biennial last year. I mean, there's the difference. Not that there aren't good artists. There are weaker ones in both. I'm talking about believing in what the enterprise is.

To get back to it, the critical enterprise is simply––Let's do more important––The enterprise of making art is the non–verbal branch of speculative thought, which is the highest kind of enterprise that people can get involved in. Art is that way. And I mean music and I mean visual arts and things like that, to play the game that some of the critics do. Maybe it's good to get this out. This is the prejudice I've carried all the way through my years.

When you have a cab driver outside La Scala about to see that art one more time, that same opera for the forty–seventh time, what that person's doing in line is a lot of things. I use the word "taste," which Marxists don't like. I think it's informed expectation. He's taking his information, his informed expectation, based on all the operas he's seen, receiving these operas based on his talent or his aptitudes to hear and vary from person to person, which a lot of these people don't think happens, but it does––he's seen that opera forty–seven times. He's seen other operas by the same performers and by the same composers. He's seen it in various opera houses. All this experience is brought together. What the hell's he going in there for the forty–seventh time for? He wants that expectation to be met and exceeded. He'll have an art experience. And an art experience will be some type of sensing or revelation to an answer to a bigger––There will be a harmony achieved.

I'm not one of those––you know, if you go back to the early part of the century to the Suprematist writers and things like that, I don't think you, by contemplation, rise up to a level.

I think the level exists throughout. I'm a little different there. I actually think that the great art of any kind is–– And it doesn't have to be the full range. It has to just get in harmony with a greater truth, therefore connecting you to it and revealing it to you.

I understand when I talk to some of my East Coast friends, they say, "You're sounding very West Coast or Oriental about this." I don't believe so. I think that that's maybe why it's just clear to me when I see––I don't see the difference between older art and newer art on that.

RB: That's why I brought up the library and the thinking and the reading. It seems to me that what I knew of you before this interview began had to do with the fact that you had a gallery and you don't have a gallery now, that you showed artists who became or had been familiar in the New York scene. So I was sort of interested to put together your ideas with your behavior.

NW: This is what it is. I remember once being in

Bologna in the Pinacoteca [Nazionale] looking at the Raphael, "Saint Catherine." [*Saint Cecilia with Saints Paul, John, Augustine and Mary Magdalene,* 1513, from San Giovanni in Monte]

RB: Raphael's "Saint Catherine"?

NW: The Allegory paintings. What is? 1578? [sic] Kind of on the edge? Just early Rome? There's a Perugino across from it. It's not the best Perugino, but I like the Perugino. [*Madonna and Child in Glory with Saints,* c. 1500, from San Giovanni in Monte] Let me put it this way. This is my prejudice in this. Raphael, the drawings aside, isn't that good, based on having looked at him, to me. I prefer many artists from that

period. I like [Mariotto] Albertinelli better. I like Fra Bartolommeo better, certain ones...

I must say I'm loading the gun.

I'm going too far in there. I certainly think [Andrea] del Sarto's a superior artist. I think the whole Mannerist movement––If we want to get into, let's say, a decade or two of that century, if you want to do that––See, I never believed Frank Trapp when I was projecting slides at Amherst College when he said that the art went into a crisis, and it was a neurotic time and figures elongated and went to the edge of the canvas. I think they're drawn over there. When [Domenico] Beccafumi put a figure on the edge or, later, El Greco put a figure on the edge of a painting, they were drawn over there very carefully.

RB: There was a reason that the painting ended where it ended.

NW: I think it ended because of a belief possibility. I think the artist wanted to create a vehicle that would transport the viewer to a greater understanding and the idealizing and the idealistic perfection that Raphael has been awarded–– This gets in the way of that. I think that Rosso Fiorentino and Beccafumi and del Sarto and those people, to [Federico] Barrocci are providing better liftoff.

RB: Do you bring these same attitudes about the liftoff to the decisions, or did you, that you made in choosing artists and building relationships with one artists which led to relationships with other artists? This involved, of course, working with other dealers.

NW: That's two questions. The first one is yes. I believe art's an enterprise about seeing, using the eye. So, therefore, Bruce Nauman was a very intriguing artist to me because the earlier pieces, they were front and back. I was never sure on Bruce. He moves your body through things. What I read about Bruce now and what I read about Jasper Johns, the critics don't seem to––It's all about seeing. Isn't Jasper all about what you, as the viewer, the spectator, the he himself as the spectator, the position they're putting you in?

I have to clarify with Duchamp a second. I didn't mean to put him down too much. He's a very influential, important figure in twentieth–century art. But I have a problem today. I suppose you can't blame Jules Olitski for all the bad spray painters that came after him. You can't blame Duchamp for all the bad followers––not that all of them are. But I have trouble standing in front of a work of art and trying to think of something or say something that isn't generated by me seeing something in that art. I have that problem. I've always stuck to something I can see or sense or feel in the art. And it's not that you don't figure out allegorical things. I don't think that all of these linguistic–oriented or language–system artists, art criticism things, lack insight. It's a way of understanding what went on, but it's essentially all on the denominator of it being a visual experience.

If you go back to the artists I was inclined to, like a Joe Goode or someone like that, or McCracken or Barnett Newman or a John McLaughlin or a Sam Francis, it has to do with seeing and sensing and changing your––

RB: Nicholas, doesn't this bring you to a very different attitude about the viewer, the person who comes to your gallery, or the collector than most dealers?

NW: Well, there are very few dealers that have overviews. You can go through our scene here and be very surprised, when you seen one of those interview articles, who's thought about whatever the question is. I might not share a personality or a philosophical interest with, let's say, Joe Helman, because Joe's brutal and pushy and does all these kinds of things. But he does have an overview. I give him that. I might not agree with it.

RB: He has a point of view.

NW: Point of view. A lot of people simply don't.

RB: But if you think of the casual visitor to a gallery, it seems to me, by your commitment to the visual experience, you are not talking about selling pictures. You're talking about opening up a new––well, a scene.

NW: Well, in those years, it was. I could take it out of my gallery simply. I was intrigued. You approached a Larry Bell box at your competitor's. You walk up to this cube that's forty inches of smoked glass, and you start inspecting it. And then what happens? In the refractions of the light, the object is extended several meters out––and you. Your body is physically inside the parameters of the object you're viewing. What has that done to you?

Okay, in the same year, you're looking at a Joe Goode of a sky that's been slashed and revealing another sky behind it that's in a container box that also reflects the environment of the room you're in. All of a sudden, unlike Courbet, where you have a retrievable experience, looking at a seascape, or a grotto, you're retrieving an experience that's impossible to have had––shooting a shotgun through a sky or cutting a sky with a knife or something like that.

Take the same year. You're looking at a Sam Francis edge painting of the most sparse variety.

RB: With the center with no paint at all.

NW: With just that white with the most subtle tints. He actually would tint the grounds to the point where they're not detectable until you're in a room with varying ones. And then, you could see there were sympathies. These were actually for him to paint on, I think. I talked to him about that. Or if you had a black and white McLaughlin, the most sparse thing of those years––I found similarities in all that work. To look at an Ed Ruscha drawing where the mass of the building depicted was brought into question because of the diffused atmospheric light around it. These are the L.A. experiences. Or McCracken.

I admired Irving Blum for showing the Bell box, because I thought he was showing the Bell to the client who was either going to buy it for the right or wrong reason, or not buy it for the right or wrong reason. He was showing art that was involved in the issue of the possibilities for transporting that viewer somewhere, as I was doing with showing my Joe Goodes. So whether I got people to buy them or not, that problem, the salability, the economic feasibility of the thing, came after.

RB: So you really weren't in business just. You were doing something quite different.

NW: No. Absolutely. In fact, I think that I did do some shows for salability. No one remembers my Masatoyo Kishi show.

RB: Who?

NW: An artist that showed at the Lanyon Gallery, a Japanese national moved to San Francisco. A very nice man. I believe he still paints there. He painted wonderful abstract gestural paintings in the Japanese screen tradition, landscape tradition. We sold many of them at Lanyon Gallery. I thought, "I'll do a show of those. Because I won't sell any Naumans, I'll sell Kishis." I sold no Kishis, sold out my Nauman show. So I've learned very early that I wasn't very good at faking––Well, not that I wasn't believing in Kishi, but I had it there to sell. My Nauman was very intriguing. People came and bought them. I just didn't think someone was going to buy a tape loop or a thing like that in those years.

This is interesting. How did I end up showing Bruce Nauman? Let me tell you about a belief I had. If I was not Bruce Nauman's dealer and I was the first one to show him, if I didn't show him, if I didn't do what I'm just about to tell you I did, which is the story of how I got him, if I hadn't of done all that, Bruce Nauman would be right where he is today. I firmly believe that. I'm not being modest or anything because.I don't think I did anything more than grab the obvious guy and do with him what anybody in their right mind that wanted to do what I wanted to do would have done. Do you understand what I'm saying?

RB: Oh, absolutely.

NW: I went to Tony DeLap to try to get him to show in my gallery in the spring of 1965. He was one of the hot Bay Area artists at that time. And Irving had been to him. I didn't realize it.

RB: He was selling here at the Elkon Gallery, I think.

NW: Yes. I don't know if he was at Robert's yet. He was at the Dilexi Gallery. Jim Newman's the guy's name at Dilexi. There goes the mind. It takes a while. He was showing with Jim Newman, who was a jazz pianist also. The big Bay Area artists were [Bruce] Conner and DeLap. [Robert] Hudson was young and just coming up. It was that kind of thing. [Richard] Diebenkorn. [Tom] Holland was young and just coming up.

Tony had been approached by Irving Blum at Ferus to show, and I think Coplans had tried to arrange that. Tony turned him down and turned me down, and showed at Landau, which is fine. On my visit to Tony–I knew him. He couldn't have been nicer or more gracious. He was teaching at Davis [University of California] at that point. There was an artwork he had on the wall of his apartment on California Street. He had this on the wall and told me who did it. He told me Nauman did it. Of course, I didn't remember Nauman's name by the time I got home. It was like a rancid piece of toothpaste on the wall. It was about forty–six inches wide, a kind of khakicolored thing that was cast plastic that dropped forty or so inches down the wall.

I had just taken McCracken on and it just didn't look–– It wasn't quite clean. I was interested in Dick Tuttle, who I

ended up showing in New York. It didn't quite fit the wall. He didn't have it quite down, I thought. Well, I was all wrong. I wasn't getting it. But I got home and I couldn't forget it. So I called Tony, who was going out of town. He had gone out of town on a hiking trip in the Cascades. I made a casual call to find out who the guy was. Tony wasn't there. He'd be back in two weeks. I called in two weeks, and he wasn't back. And then I got more and more intrigued, not even knowing who the person was. I got agitated. Finally, when Tony got back in early summer or mid summer

[off/on tape]

Tony got back. I called him. He gave me Bruce's name and number in Davis, where he was a student. He happened to be there. He said he thought he was going away. I called on the phone and Bruce Nauman answers the phone in this studio, some quonset hut at the University of California at Davis. Joe Goode and I are sitting there. I had a little Volkswagen. We decide to drive from Los Angeles to Davis. What is it? Four hundred miles in the August heat or the end of July.

RB: Up Route 5.

NW: Up Route 5. We drive up there because he's going away in a couple of days. I go in, and there are those cast rubber pieces and some plastic. Nothing makes sense to me. I'm now given great credit for being insightful. I look at the thing. I just know something very weird's going on. We spend a very short period of time, put a bunch of them in the car, and drive home. Hang them up and––I wasn't sure which way one went, so I went to the phone to call the guy and he wasn't home. He'd gone away. I called a few days later. I called a few days later. He still wasn't back. By the time I got him, a couple of weeks later, Nauman was on the phone, and I forgot what I wanted to say. I said, "Bruce, what month do you want? You can have any show you want." At a certain point, when things baffled me––Robert Elkon, as eccentric as he was, but much to his credit, really knew the value of Agnes Martin.

"You must show her. You must show her." I wasn't sure. I had the luxury of having a gallery in Los Angeles in those years. If I saw Horacio Torres at Noah Goldowsky's or an Agnes Martin or a Dick Tuttle at Betty's [Parsons], I could take that artist and show the person and see what I liked, learn from it, live with it, get along. I mean Dick Tuttle showed up with a suitcase with those folded cloth things wadded up in it, stayed on my couch for a few days, pinned up the show, and it went on its merry way. That's the way we did things in those years.

RB: Where was Tuttle showing in New York?

NW: Betty Parsons. See, I'd gone in to Betty to find Ellsworth Kelly. Kelly had already left her for Sidney [Janis]. It was at the very rough time for Betty there. I looked at [Jack] Youngerman for a while, and then all of a sudden, it was Tuttle that worried me or bothered me when I kept thinking of it.

RB: So the bother factor's important.

NW: Well, the non–forgetting, the agitation. This is the same thing about the Perugino and the Raphael. I remember going into like the Borghese [Gallery] in Rome or the Louvre...

[end of side two, tape one]

Going into those European galleries and passing the exam. Going in and saying, "Vecellio" [Titian's surname] then going over to the painting and seeing "Vecellio" on it and going, "Ah–ha, I was right." Doing those kinds of things.

Then I realized that that was encumbering, that you couldn't tell why you liked or didn't like something or why you kept going back to this weird, convoluted painting that was to be a Correggio next to it, and you weren't sure who that person was because it was [Antonio] Allegri or some name on it. [Allegri was Correggio's surname.] I found that very, very interesting. I stopped looking at labels in museums. It's again, I guess, to rely on the visual.

See, the art experience––Let's say you collect antiquities; you collect contemporary art. It's a very interesting and similar thing. You're ignorant all the time. You're ignorant of who made it maybe. You certainly don't know an awful lot about it. You don't have any guidelines to go for. That nineteenth–century notion of connoisseurship doesn't rule. There's no exam to be passed. You're on your own. The first thing you have to do is be comfortable with the fact that you're not on firm ground. That's a delightful situation. I can tell–– Do I like the Calder? I've been sitting across from it now. Will it travel with me? It looks like a self–portrait. Is it?

RB: The whole wall is.

NW: It goes on and on and on and on. It's an interesting thing. You're making judgments in choices. You're

making commitments. As a dealer, your commitment is to pay the rent and to do this, that, and the other thing. But you have a lot less at risk than the young artist you're asking to show. The ball's in their court. Today, I'm often asked by dealer friends who are about to show this person or that person, they say, "Gee, I wish I could be a little more certain." Why be more certain? What the hell is this "be certain" about? You can't always be certain or you're going to––

RB: You were in the game, if you'll excuse it, for at least a decade, weren't you?

NW: Sixteen years.

RB: You started in –

NW: 1965 and closed the last day of 1979.

RB: That's a long time and that's a lot of shows.

NW: It's an awful lot of shows. I can go in my liquor store in L.A. tomorrow, which I haven't been in in four years, and I can walk in and they'll all smile and look at me, because there was an opening every four weeks for sixteen years, and I ordered from the same store. They made a hundred thousand dollars off me. Do you know what I mean? There were an awful lot of openings, an awful lot of

shows.

RB: And at that time, they served wine or liquor, which they don't do anymore.

NW: Full bar.

RB: Full bar?

NW: And it had to be Johnny Walker Black.

RB: And it was free.

NW: Free. I made sure it wasn't cheap at my place.

The artist could choose whether––Did they prefer Bombay or did they like Tanqueray? What gin did they want? I didn't care.

RB: That's two hundred shows, right? Almost.

NW: Probably. I don't know.

RB: Do you have records of all this?

NW: No. I'm sure the *Artforum* ads were monthly for the number of years.

RB: *Artforum* ads? That's the only record you have?

NW: Oh, I don't know. I know that Bruce and I are missing. a show. There's a new book coming out on Nauman that Coosje did.[Coosje van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman*, 1988] We know we're missing a show. We've got seven shows, and we think there are eight shows in those years. I almost missed Agnes Martin's show. Sometimes you forget. It blurs.

RB: You didn't save the correspondence, the contracts, for instance? Did you have contracts?

NW: No. Never had contracts. I think a couple times I did when the artist asked for them. Usually, if an artist had a business manager or a lawyer friend, they wanted a contract. I said, "Write one up and I'll sign it." You can't get artists to work under––See, the money thing hadn't come in in the 1960s yet. I don't think the money thing's come in yet. I think it's just coming in. But in the early 1970s, the game changed, the business changed. The business changed abruptly. At the same time we hit that recession, the use of paintings as an economic vehicle changed, I think.

Remember when Leslie Waddington bought thirty Morris Louises?

RB: I remember him well.

NW: Leslie bought thirty Morris Louises once.

RB: I didn't know that.

NW: I think I could have some of this story wrong.

But the general story was that Marcella Louis had to re–open her settlement of her husband's estate of due to the other relatives coming and saying, "There was a lot more money here. We didn't get our fair share," whenever it divided up, in the early 1960s. She is a generous, non–greedy person.

RB: A lovely woman.

NW: A very, very lovely woman. She willingly, I

guess, accommodated these people. But it took raising some money. I think Clem [Greenberg] went to the estate and selected thirty paintings that wouldn't denude the estate, and a sale was made of these thirty paintings to Leslie Waddington. I think the sale went roughly along the following lines. The paintings were fifty thousand dollars each retail, being that if you and I went in off the street to André Emmerich, we could have gotten them for forty–five thousand dollars––fifty less ten percent. Leslie, at the forty–five thousand dollars rate, got a third off. So he bought thirty paintings for thirty thousand each, or nine hundred thousand dollars. He bought them with money that came from a loan from an American bank. It was a signature loan. The American bank required a co–signer. The person that co–signed, co–signed the income from– a quarter of an American corporation, or somehow an American corporation was the underwriter of this loan. The paintings were crated up and sent to Leslie.

RB: In London.

NW: In London. Leslie received the paintings. They were all sold immediately to a corporation, a holding company in Liechtenstein that re–consigned them to Leslie. So they were owned outside of Great Britain, but consigned to the London dealer. The loan came due in the United States. It was paid off by the American corporation. It was a very short–term loan. Therefore, that American corporation was out nine hundred thousand dollars plus interest. That American corporation had a parent corporation which was an English corporation, McHale Pines Construction Company, that big construction company. That construction company also owned the Liechtensteinian corporation. Anyway, what they'd done is they'd gotten nine hundred thousand dollars out from underneath the English tax law, which is, what, a ninety–some odd percent tax bite. So they got thirty paintings for a fraction, an infinitesimal amount of money. They were consigned to Leslie and sold at some deal with Leslie that benefited everybody. Okay.

That's not the interesting part of the story. The interesting part of the story is that [it] changed the name of the game. No longer could I wander into a Helen Frankenthaler or decide to do a show. Those paintings were always committed in advance to something. The Europeans wanted to do these kinds of deals.

RB: Whitechapel [Art Gallery, London].

NW: She did do Whitechapel in 1968 or 1967 or something like that. They wanted all of these things to go on. That's when I flew around. I flew in for the opening. I. can remember doing that. Instead of doing a show––You see, in the 1960s, you did a show. In the 1970s, you waited your turn and got your paintings. You paid for them in advance. You fronted the money to artists. A dealer like André in New York, in order to keep his selection at home, or a gallery like [David] Mirvish's, you had to front money. We took our turns. The game changed.

When the game changed, it became less interesting to my instincts and it became less fun. I had designed a rather costly, large outfit that no longer had enough paintings to run it. There wasn't enough fuel for the tank. It was an interesting time in Los Angeles, because you had the recession. You had the Los Angeles museum scene shrinking and not expanding. Pasadena was going through its collapse. The raising of the money and the building of the new building had over–extended. The few people that were asked to contribute had to contribute much, much more than they had originally planned. A lot of the people that had promised money didn't come through with it, like the Weismans [Frederick and Marcia] and stuff. A lot of the people didn't come through. Therefore, [Robert] Rowan or Gifford Phillips or someone was asked yet again to give even more. They hadn't planned on giving that much to begin with. Their discretionary money dried up. What happens when an art scene, when its collectors, their enthusiasts, are oversubscribed to a museum? They still want to collect, right?

RB: Right.

NW: So they buy a Frank Stella for nine thousand dollars or whatever they were then, which was a lot of money. They don't buy the thousand dollar young artist or the two thousand dollar young artist. They still buy the big, expensive thing, but they don't go into someone's show and say, "Oh, that's really lovely. I like young Andy Smith's. I'll buy two. They're only twelve hundred dollars each." In fact, they stopped coming to those shows because they can't do that. They feel badly. So all of a sudden, those of us who had a platform for showing

young, experimental art, lost our attendance. What happened to the young collector that came up? This was the year of the thousand dollar Gemini prints. You could buy a Kelly or a Johns or a Rauschenberg for twelve hundred dollars or nine hundred dollars or whatever it was. So a lot of the young monied people were coming in and being told, "Buy a Kelly. Buy a Rauschenberg. Don't buy a nobody." So you had an awful lot of people going into that market. They were lost in the market, by the way. They got in; it was supposed to be speculative and went up. A lot of them went back to sailing boats in the marina a few years later. The young collector that bought unique works of art, at that point, stayed with it longer. The excitement was there. It was a very bad time.

In those times is when the seeds for closing were sowed into my little head.

RB: Even though it was 1971, 1972.

NW: Yes. I didn't close for a number of years, but I saw the writing on the wall. I never got screwed. I never got badly handled. You know, all those horror stories about artists and dealer relations. I never really––I had incidents, I could tell stories, but I was not badly handled. I didn't get done in. I didn't get done in by the scene, didn't get done in by certain artists. Sure there was a twenty–five thousand dollar loss here or a hundred and fifty dollar loss there due to somebody's greed or following something, but nothing devastating.

RB: At the time, in those years, between 1965 and 1979, was Margo Leavin, for instance, a dealer?

NW: Yes. Margo was doing what is very hard for a dealer to do. She started out as a less interesting dealer and progressively became the most interesting.

RB: Did she take some of your artists when you closed?

NW: Very few. When I closed, all of my artists were offered shows somewhere. Not all of them took the offers. I knew I was closing over a period of time and, against the advice of my shrink, did it on levels. He wanted me to cut and run. I didn't want to do that. I met all my obligations. Everybody got a chance. Even my crew got a year's advance to know when to leave.

RB: And your preparators and wall painters?

NW: Everybody. Everybody got out. When I hired new people, they were told I was going to not be–When I hired Jack Woody, I let him do the photography things and helped him set [up] [Twin Palms] TwelveTrees Press––told him he could do that. I did it carefully and it was expensive. In those years, I did get taken advantage of a little bit. Jack Woody runs TwelveTrees Press out there [in New Mexico]. He worked for me during the closing years after Patty Faure left to open her own gallery, who was my assistant prior to him.

I can't remember the point I was making except I wasn't––

RB: I think we were talking about the commercial aspects of what it was that you were doing.

NW: Oh, Margo. Let me say something about Margo. Margo made a less good gallery into a better gallery. That's very hard to do. It's always easy to start out. Margo has a gallery in Los Angeles now that is probably more suited to the topography there, collector–wise. She works very hard and it's run as a business. It's not a thing that's there for some lifestyle change or for a tax write–off or something. She's a very good dealer, I think. There are some good dealers there. Los Angeles has six or eight good dealers. She's one of them.

RB: It's hard, as I go from gallery to gallery, to ascertain what the structure is now and what the scene is. But it seems to me that there's a lot more feeding back and forth across country than there used to be.

NW: They're probably, per capita or per gallery viewer, higher quality outside of New York than inside of New York, and that would go for L.A., not that L.A.'s better. I'll get into the L.A. vis–a–vis New York thing. I've never bought any of those arguments between the two. They're two different worlds. In New York, we're parochial, there, they're provincial. Okay? It's nitpicking. But the whole fact is that there's so much crap shown here and it's such a much bigger scene that a lot of that crap's filtered out there.

RB: The distances are farther and the weather is better and there are more distractions.

NW: Oh, in L.A. itself. In fact, that will choke it. I predict L.A. is going to have an awful problem because you're not going to have someone going from Santa Monica to Beverly Hills because they don't want to spend the hour and a half it's going to take to do it.

RB: Just from a casual––my own experience, when you go from East L.A., where a lot of the studios are and some of the galleries are now, all the way to Santa Monica, it takes you four days to just look at the new stuff.

NW: You're going to find dealers that are selling expensive paintings, are only going to sell them to people from

their own neighborhood. Someone's not going to go from Pasadena to Santa Monica to buy a hundred thousand dollar painting. They're going to buy it closer to home.

RB: [Laughs] Even at a hundred thousand?

NW: Even at a hundred thousand.

RB: But the scene has changed totally since the early 1960s again. I mean, the way in which art is financed.

NW: This idea of first in the second city notions are foolish. The reason L.A.'s second city–– You know, they've gone through the throes of that from time to time over the years. *Artforum* tried it. Here are all these articles, "Here, it's going to be the second city." Where the basic flaw there is is that their notion of what a first city is is flawed. They think a first city is a center that's a pre–emptive center like a walled city, which was the model of what art centers were up until the invention of the jet plane. The jet plane has killed that notion off. It's not that New York still isn't the center. But it is a clearing house type center. Cy Twombly's studio can be [in] Rome. It doesn't have to be here.

RB: I remember a panel that Connie Glenn ran, in which Marcia Weisman's curator, or the Weisman curator, was asked where they buy their paintings. They said something like, "From the artist." Somehow there was an imbalance between the commitment to the gallery and the commitment to the market.

NW: Oh, that's very real. The L.A. collector is a dangerous animal. It's a dangerous animal and it's understandable why. The contemporary collector as they developed, as we know them now, is developed along a model of how the collectors developed in the late 1950s, early 1960s. They came into a scene when it was the Dwan Gallery, the Ferus Gallery, Everett Ellin, Rolf Nelson, et al. These were galleries that were very adventuresome and under–subscribed. These were not old collectors getting interested in new art. It was people that were totally new to the scene, people converted. There were lectures and groups in the galleries. People like Walter Hopps and Henry Hopkins and those people really went around and worked very hard to proselytize and get people interested in the things. They were taught very bad habits at that point. They were allowed to put holds on things and get discounts on things and to go to artists' studios directly to rescue the starving artists. There were all kinds of bad habits. Spread payments out, collapsing buyer.

The collector does a couple of things. The collector, if they're a wealthy person who's made new money, brings to their operation of how they behave in a gallery the same modus operandi of how they behaved when they made their milions. That was less the case in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It wasn't a big money deal then. It's much more the case now. But still, it operates with the Weisman type. They couldn't help themselves. I cant' tell you how many times I had a collector that had never been in a gallery before that came in and asked for a collector's discount or "How much would you sell that for?"

I said, "That's an academic question." They'd stamp their feet. "Offer me something and you might–

Write out a check and see if I'll take it."

I mean, they were very badly trained. The late payment, the non–payment, the returning of the work. There's still work I couldn't get paid off from. People flipping things around. David Begelman stole from me. Sue me, David. The bad habits, the "get it for less." The L.A. collector who's that way is no different than any other collector. I'm not putting L.A. down.

RB: But it was in the training, the way in which–

NW: It's understandable. They were trained in a scene

Where they were–

RB: An extension of UCLA

NW: Well, they were a wonderful group. The collector was this enthusiast that was helping out and got great advantages. They still want them. They get on boards and they want deals. I can get into the board of trustees vis–a–vis museum staff problem in the United States. It's a total crisis.

RB: I do know.

NW: Total. When you get a board like the San Francisco Museum's cutting down Joan Mitchell's show to a sampling, less than a third of what her paintings should have been, in order to squeeze in a Starn Twin show so that the trustees could–

RB: A who show?

NW: Starn Twins [Mike and Doug].

RB: Oh, yes.

NW: Which they recently did in San Francisco. I don't know [Jack] Lane at that museum. He should be kicked very hard right in the groin for that one. You don't do that kind of stuff. They want the [Julian] Schnabel. They want all that kind of stuff. I think the museum/fashion world thing–I think the Europeans will blow the whistle on that.

Back in the years that I was a dealer, the museum and the gallery had a symbiotic relationship that I think has changed now. I think the museum now is held hostage through their trustees to the fashion thing. It's no longer a curator coming in from the Stedelijk [Museum] in Amsterdam, wanting to know what goes on. I can remember putting Diane Waldman [then a curator at the Guggenheim Museum, NY] in my Volkswagen and driving her around to all the studios in town, half of which weren't artists from my gallery. That wouldn't happen today. And that's what you did in those years, whether you were Irving Blum or myself or whoever it was. Sure, you slanted it. But this idea now, "You put any Miller Gallery artist in the show, I'm going to withhold my gallery artist." I've heard that in the last few years around here. The critical museum axis thing is in total crisis now. I think because it's formed a fashion front that allows great art to be made underneath that cover. I think we're in a very good time today, as far as making art goes. But it's not the art we hear about. It's not the art the media or these museum people are interested in.

You find a Jake Berthot. I mentioned his name earlier. B – E – R – T –H – O – T. He shows at McKee. He has a show at the [Rose Art Museum], Brandeis [University] right now.

RB: Oh, yes. I've seen his work.

NW: A wonderful painter. I heard that the Contemporary Muesum in Chicago was to take the show, but the trustees wanted a [Jeff] Koons show. I hear that the Museum of Modern Art wants to buy Koons because [Kirk] Varnadoe likes the idea behind it. Now, I understand the idea is titillating, many ideas. One of the ideas that I think is the most brilliant that Koons did–we sit in New York, a heavy month a year ago. You have [Charles] Saatchi flying in from London; you have West Coast collectors like Douglas Cramer flying in from L.A. What are they doing? They're flying here on safari. They want to come back. They're on the hunt. There are only seven Peter Halleys or seven whatevers. They want at least one or two to come home with. They're not going to cruise the galleries to see if anything intrigues them visually. They're here to come home with a trophy. They want to bag something. And they do. So Koons gave them the trophy. Why don't you just have it cast and hand it to them like a big, metal cup? It's true, isn't it?

RB: Yes. It's interesting the way you put it because I guess it is a hunt. Isn't the same thing happening with the collecting in nineteenth–century American painting? I mean, aren't collectors behaving in the same way?

NW: Yes. They're running around and trying to get a [Martin Johnson] Heade that looks like this or a [John F.] Kensett that looks like this and everything like that. I would love a nineteenth–century American painting, but I'd like an Inness.

RB: You're not going to find one.

NW: No. You're not going to find one. And if you do, it's going to be an early one that's more like something–– Inness is a great, great, great artist. He's able to really–– We were talking about the visual thing before. All you have to do is go into–– Pick a room. The Corcoran Gallery. You're looking at *Niagara.* It's a great painting by Inness. [Wilder is probably referring to one of the paintings of Niagara by Inness in the Smithsonian American Art Museum, formerly the National Museum of American Art. The Corcoran owns Frederick Church's *Niagara.*] You're looking at those other paintings in the room. The Inness across the way knocks you dead because of what his belief system was. He wasn't trying to idealize or get a perfect notion of an idealized state, i.e. from nature.. He was trying to visually stimulate you to a plane of understanding or harmony by his arrangement of–– Those were made up, as you know.

Have you ever read [Henry] Ward Beecher on Inness? It's strange. It's really good writing. It's very, very strange. A most unlikely person to have done it, except he was evidently a philanderer. I didn't realize that until I read that Inness catalogue from the Met a couple years ago. But there's some quotes in there–– really good. Again, it's the possibilities that the art holds out.

Those possibilities that the art held out in L.A. in those years, and on the denominator of– a scene made [up] of enthusiasts and everything, were the two levels it worked on. It wasn't fashion at that point––very little. And it wasn't money at that point. I've had people come up to me. I had a guy in L.A. come up to me a couple years ago, visibly shaken, saying that he and his wife––and there she was with lipstick on her teeth, looking up at me from her frizzed hair–– They visibly did not like seeing me. I had let them down. They never bought from me. But

they didn't like me, they said. They were just angry, confronting me at this museum opening. And I said, "Why?" it was that I had not been emphatic enough in my attempts to sell them a Twombly in 1970 or 1969. I said, "Let me recall. Wasn't the painting four thousand dollars?" It was a six–by–eight, blackboard painting.

They said, "Yes."

Didn't I give them twenty percent when they wanted it? "Yes." Didn't I let them take it home and try it out? "Yes." Did they return it? "Yes," they returned it instead of paying thirty–two hundred dollars for it. What upset them was it, at the time of this confrontation, was a half–million dollar painting. Now, it would be a million. They missed the boat. Now, that story could be in London or New York or anywhere. It's not peculiar to L.A.

RB: But that's not the reason you stopped in 1979.

NW: No. The reason I stopped in 1979 was a life decision. I wanted out. I'd had so many close calls. The writing was so clear and legible and on the wall that nothing would get better. I mean, you could get huge more amounts. I could make more money. I could be there longer. I could become more powerful. But the proximity to the art–– I guess that's it. The proximity to art or the art experience. I had used the gallery as a conduit for that. Now, it was getting in the way.

RB: The gallery was in the way.

NW: The art world was in the way.

RB: The art world was in your way.

NW: What I get off about, they'll say, "We're Monday, so we can't do it." But if I wanted to go up and look at the Mantegna at the Met or the [Georges] Braque show at the Guggenheim–– It's closed today or I'd go. I saw the Braque show in Munich, but I'd like to see it here. The Hockney show intrigues me more than I thought it would. The reason it intrigues me more than I thought it would is the New Yorkers are ignoring it. I'm interested in maybe walking down to the Morgan––anything like that. The gallery was not my conduit any longer for getting new proximity to–– I could go to Basel without being there the week of the art fair to get into the museum. If I want to go see that Dead Christ, I can go see [Hans] Holbein's [the Younger] *Dead Christ [in the Tomb,* Kunstmuseum, Basel].

RB: Astounding painting.

NW: Astounding painting. Or I can go see the [Arnold] Böcklins there. Anyhow, if I want to go, I can do it.

RB: But having been in the gallery for sixteen years gave you the freedom to do that.

NW: I came out not rich, but I came out before I

became poor.

RB: That could have happened, too.

NW: It could have happened, too. Absolutely.

RB: Did you ever move the gallery at all?

NW: I moved it from La Cienega to Santa Monica Boulevard after two three–year leases, and I took a ten–year lease. So that was the sixteen–year run.

RB: Where was that? Was that where Paul Kantor was?

NW: On Santa Monica Boulevard, no. I again was told that no one would follow me, and ended up making a building with four other galleries in it.

RB: It's that little building that's set back, with

the tiny parking lot?

NW: Yes.

RB: It's still there.

NW: Yes, it is.

RB: Where the Coupling Gallery is now and Corcoran used to be.

NW: Yes. Corcoran used to be. Betty Asher and Patty

Faure were upstairs. Dagney [Janss] had the

bookstore. That was in my old apartment. See, I made an apartment up there when I initially moved in.

No, I got out because I had too many close

calls. I realized the number would run out unless I changed my behavior. I kind of used up a lot of chips. I think it was time to move. The move to New York was a life decision thing. I'm much happier here. I have much more time to do what I want to do. I'm in proximity to things more here. But L.A. is wonderful. I miss L.A. I miss the weather; I miss my friends. The art scene, I don't think I miss too much. I'm not one to become a party to put it down. I've been asked to be interviewed for a lot of magazines and stuff, but I'd never say the things I've said to you because I didn't want them in interviews or whatever–– used as a club. I think that the problem with being in a parochial center is–– You know, they think they invented skateboarding and French food and things like that. It's a wonderful place, but [here] you've got Penn Station to take you to Philadelphia and Washington to look at art, or to Boston. It's a revelation.

RB: The art corridor, you're talking about?

NW: Yes. People didn't go see the [Jacob van] Ruisdael show. I can't understand that.

RB: Me neither. I've seen a lot of seventeenth–century art this year. Haven't you?

NW: Yes, a lot of it. And it's not bad. I does change the way–– I mean, I was in Chicago the other day and saw the G[iuseppe] M[aria] Crespi, the way they rehung it. It looked beautiful. I'd never remembered seeing that painting. The big banquet scene, a wonderful, picture. [Crespi, *Wedding at Cana*, c. 1686, Art Institute of Chicago]

RB: Did you have collectors that you really had a symbiotic relationship with, who you really helped, that you really felt good about?

NW: No. I had some like [Robert] Rowan and people like that. But I was never asked an art question in sixteen years in L.A.––never. By an "art question," I mean–– I'd be asked what I thought about Morris Louis or having him go up, or should I sell for this, or what's good, or what should I get, or what do you like.

RB: You didn't like being pigeon–holed, is what it sounds like.

NW: No. But I did get asked art questions here. I had a curator from the Museum of Modern Art call up the first week I was here and say, "Look*, [Le] Jockey perdu*."

I said, "Painting by Magritte."

"Yes, but how many versions?"

I said, "I think two."

And they said, "Could you look it up and find

out?"

Now, that's an art question. That's one art person asking another art person what do they know and can we find out. And there is a second version, 1926, of the earlier version. I looked it up and found out. They were being offered, I think, the second version, or borrowing it, and they wanted to document the other version. It had just changed hands, but it was in a Belgian collection. It was actually traceable.

RB: You love doing art history, don't you?

NW: The actual detective work, that end of it, is fun. It is like bird–watching because you have to spot the bird. So you do drive to Foiano della Chiana [near Arezzo] and go in and look at the [Luca da] Cortona painting, *Coronation*, or you're not going to get it. I'm amazed that there are color reproductions in our expensive art books today. If you take an art book, just take one for instance, a famous one that we all have, the [Martin] Davies' book on [Rogier] van der Weyden [London, 1972], which you have in your library if you like Rogier van der Weyden or Netherlandish painting. It's got color reproduction after color reproduction, all details. When you walk into the room in Munich [Alte Pinakothek] and look at the triptych [St. Columba altarpiece], the whole

painting is there. It's an abstract painting that you are never provided even a reduced facsimile experience with through reproduction. Again, it's just visual. The only thing that those books did for me was cognition.

RB: But isn't that why Albert Barnes wouldn't let any color reproductions be done, because they would always lie?

NW: Yes. Well, they always lie. I'm not so much worried about the lying, but I'm very curious about art historians getting it back into

something they can verbalize. I've heard about the iconography or this detail or that detail. I mean, like [their saying] I knew that Durer from the detail they always do up in the corner. It's so rich. I actually think that the abstract nature of art–– I'm not thinking from the formalist critic. I'm just thinking of the way that Piero [della Francesca] looks to you when you look at it. That is what you see when you go look at––

Remember when Frank Stella did his lecture at the Fogg [Museum, Harvard]?

RB: Yes.

NW: And he starts talking about–

RB: About Caravaggio?

NW: Yes, the gobbledegook lecture, where Frank's way off base. He's sweet he did the lecture. I think he's just bad on art history. I was talking to an art historian about that one day. I said, Gee, I just couldn't understand where he's getting Caravaggio influencing Rubens and therefore Rubens setting the standard for the grand painting." If you want to give Rubens that role, Rubens doesn't get it from Caravaggio; he gets it from Barocci. He wrote that he did. *TheDescent From the Cross*–– If you go to Antwerp and read his notes on the 1611 painting, it comes from *The Descent from the Cross* in Perugia [Cathedral] by Barocci. Now, if you bother to look up when Barrocci did that painting, it's 1569. Caravaggio wasn't born yet. [Caravaggio's dates: c. 1571–1610] If you find where Barocci got it, he got it from Rosso [Fiorentino, 1494–1540]. That's 1528 or 1529 or 1527, the painting in Volterra [Cathedral], *The Descent*. It's that funny, that great painting, which is an anachronistic kind of painting.

I was talking to this art historian. Again, all you see are details of these paintings constantly, over and over and over again, if you read books on them. But the thing is, there are very interesting similarities in those paintings. But one thing that this person never talked about–– When you go and look at those pictures, you know what they are? Big. They knock you on your butt because you walk close enough to see them, and they're so big. When you go into the [Church of S.Maria dei] Frari in Venice and look at that *Assunta* [*Assumption of the Virgin,* Titian] from thirty yards away, it's big. I don't want to compare it to Raphael's *Transfiguration*. I don't want to do all that stuff. You sit there, and it goes "Boom"! That abstract quality in that art is what carries it, doesn't it?

RB: Oh, absolutely. There's a force probably that takes over, which is what I refer to as psychokinetic, that really pulls your behavioral experience out of your unconscious and pulls you to certain works of art in a physical way.

NW: Do you think it is genetically part of our mechanism, the conduit? I was talking to a scientist recently who was talking about music to me. He thought that baroque music had to be invented because the circuitry that a friend of his was studying through the brain hit so many pleasure points that it was custom–made for us to enjoy.

RB: So those artists were more in touch, more easily in touch than we are as artists – or if we are?

NW: No. I'm talking about the point you were trying

to make. You called it a psycho–

RB: Kinetic. It's a predisposition, really.

NW: Because of the way we're formed.

RB: The way we're formed, but not just prenatally, but also the way we're formed in our society – that there are certain compelling works. There are pictures that have actually practically kicked me, that I'd been standing next to – sort of "Look at me."

NW: Which ones?

RB: Well, [Picasso's] *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, for instance. The whole left side of the painting––

NW: Goes after you.

RB: I mean, that figure has so many forces working. I don't want to bother the Archives with this. But it seems to me, in your talking about the eye, that it's beyond the eye. It's in the total experience.

NW: Oh, yes. I don't deny, getting back to our criticism, the people that bring all those social things. I think they're insightful and it's revealing. But on a denominator, the denominator being that the eye precedes the idea.

RB: I'll go with that.

NW: It's just that simple – rather than the other way around. Not that people who allow the idea to precede the eye haven't made contributions.

RB: When someone comes into your gallery –– this nine years ago –– and they say, "Explain this art to me," or "Tell me about that painting," or whatever they say –

NW: When you have to use words.

RB: You have to use words. You have to give them some access. You must have been through this experience.

NW: A thousand times. What you usually did, depending on the person, is you tried to break down their resistance to seeing. You tried to disencumber them. They were sometimes uncomfortable because they were in a gallery situation or giddy, in the money situation.

I can remember the first art I was ever shown was a Rembrandt [Rembrandt, *Lucretia,* 1666]. I know the painting today. It's owned at the [George] Eastman House in Rochester, New York, where I grew up. I was taken by a grandparent to see the million dollar painting. I never saw anything. I was too encumbered. I was a six– or seven– or nine–year old, whatever it was, looking at a million dollars which, in the 1940s, was a million dollars. Each generation has their idea of what a million dollars is. Ours is lost forever.

[end of side one, tape two]

RB: The commercial aspects, but the educational part of your commercial experience.

NW: What you did is you broke out. You used any

ruse to get somebody buying. You wanted them to

take it seriously, so they put their guard down. So you show them how the Morris Louis was painted or how Ron Davis arrived at the plastics or you did an analogy. You said, "Oh, gee, we're looking at a [Hans] Hofmann now. I have to tell you my Hofmann experience. I went into Feingarten [Galleries] down the street," and you tell them you'd had a Hofmann, show years ago, "and I walked in and there was an oil painting there left over – a real mud ball, a bad painting. It was only four thousand dollars, so I bought it for investment, took it home, and put it on my wall. It got so good, it killed everything else in the room." I'm actually telling them about a visual experience and a slow one.

RB: And a true one?

NW: And a true one. I said, "It's not clear, these paintings." It was one of those virtuoso ones that hadn't been rescued the way you rescued a lot of wonderful, wonderful paintings, which I wouldn't have detected as wonderful, having been–– You put yourself in that situation. We go through those experiences. We have paintings that creep up on us or types of paintings. You did that threshold thing with them. You did it any way that you had things you could demonstrate at hand. You did it any way you could to get them

interested. If you could get them interested, usually––this is hindsight––on the level you were interested, all of a sudden you had a convert and you could sell them paintings.

RB: I think the business of liking and disliking art–– First of all, they've made some commitment because they've walked into your gallery, even if they're just looking.

NW: Yes. The great thing about L.A. is that, especially when I moved off La Cienega, they drove there to get there. So when they came through the door, they had purpose. They weren't just wandering up from [the restaurant] L'Orangerie only to hear the high price.

RB: Be titillated by the high price?

NW: Yes. I can remember when Sotheby's used to be on Madison Avenue and you'd see young couples go in to a rug sale on a Saturday afternoon just to hear seventy thousand dollars. They don't bother going all over New York to do that. Too far out of their way.

RB: Too far from the restaurant?

NW: Yes.

RB: When we spoke on the telephone, you talked about setting the record straight. You mentioned Paul Kantor's name.

NW: When I was talking to Stella Paul earlier, I said it was very curious how, in the service of what some people want to do today, either an agenda or type of art or a view of art or an interpretation of an account of what went on, you then write a history for Los Angeles that it's inconvenient for them to be rigorous about, either because a New York writer doesn't know a thing about it–– So they call up Peter Plagens. That's not the way to go. They should find out really what went on. What the hell does *he* know? But he knows something, quite obviously. And it's worth hearing what it is. But if he's not going to know that [Felix] Landau made a contribution and Paul Kantor showed de Kooning in 1952–– What the hell's different with Kantor showing de Kooning early on as opposed to Irving Blum showing Warhol early on? You always hear, "Irving showed the soup cans," and la, la, la, la, la, la, la. What about the Gottlieb show and all that stuff that Kantor did?

RB: So Kantor really is lost to art history, is what you're saying

NW: Yes. Well, you can go talk to him. The Archives

should go and talk to him. He'll tell you. He showed [Richard] Diebenkorn, he showed [Nathan] Oliveira, he showed all those people. And I'm talking about early 1950s.

RB: So what you're saying is, even though you came there in the early to mid–1960s and stayed for what amounts to fifteen years, sixteen years, that there is earlier history that leads into what happened.

NW: Yes. I think I got there at the end of something. I got there when you didn't know every collector in town's birthday. Prior to me, I think they did. The scene was getting just big enough where they didn't want one more person they had to have buy on Christmas. And that was good. I think that made it clearer for me. I never got put down or–– I think I was very well received. L.A.'s a vertical society. I moved in with nothing, and then was able to make a contribution. I was never kept down.

There are great problems there, particularly in the museum world. You hear people put Maurice down [Tuchman, curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at Los Angeles County Museum]. They haven't looked at it the right way. Maurice Tuchman's misunderstood by people there. There are good reasons for it. The museums there haven't helped the local artists enough. You know, it's never enough, and /what have you done for me lately? But they haven't had the programs for that. You'll howl at this. The spiritual and art show that Maurice did last year really is an important show. It's been weakened, internally weakened, by the later parts of the show, as each one of us would have selected other people to represent the point of view.

RB: It should have been two shows, is what I've always said.

NW: The early part of it, the eighteenth century through the first World War, through that revolution, is germane to what we are encountering today as an art community that has to figure out where artists can go and what the possibilities are. If you take–– A friend of mine likes doing this. A friend of mine finds that the–– David Reed'sl a friend of mine. He seems to think that there is a valid analogy between the position the Carracci were in [Lodovico, Agostino and Annibale] and where we are today, in that they looked for their antecedents who made meaningful art in the 1580s and 1590s in Bologna, and that they looked back to Correggio as the great watershed, and [to] Emilian painting between that time and their time. [See David Carrier and David Reed, "Tradition, Eclecticism, Self–Consciousness," *Arts Magazine*, January 1991] I can accept that, given a wobble or two, because I don't know what you do with Venice. But okay, you do that. Maybe the Carracci didn't do enough of that. I think Lodovico did, actually. That's why he's an interesting artist, a much more interesting artist than Annibale for me, again visually. You see, I go off. I much prefer Lodovico. I think he's wonderful. You can see the influence go through [Carlo] Saraceni even to [Hendrick] Terbruggen. It's wonderful art. Anyway, I didn't want to add a little side branch there.

RB: But L.A.

NW: I was talking about today. The Carracci, going

back to the early time–– Today, artists seem to go to the art of the 1940s and 1950s from New York, the New

York School, to find the antecedents, the juice, to pick up the trail on what went on and everything in order to sense–– I think that the New York situation after the War was so unique, so strange, a lot of it coming through the French literary surreal end of things, is not the best place to find a sympathy, even though you might be influenced by Barney [Barnett] Newman or de Kooning.

RB: You mean European surrealism to American abstract expressionism?

NW: Right. That contact. What I'm really saying is, without getting into that area historically, that artists today can go back to from 1870 to 1920 and find the issues still wide open and unresolved and "mineable" for answers to where they go. See, I came up in the 1950s and 1960s. If you analyze what the milieu, what the critical thing was in those times, I don't think any of it's very conducive. I don't think the Greenbergian thing was. As I always said to Andre [Emmerich]–– Andre once defended–– He went to a panel somewhere in Seattle, I think. I think Marcia Tucker or somebody went after him. This was a few years ago. He rose to the occasion and gave a very articulate defense of the situation and it held.

RB: The situation being the kind of gallery people he showed in his gallery

NW: Yes. The Greenbergian answer he gave would have held today. I said, "Congratulations, Andre. Isn't it good they didn't try to attack us where we're vulnerable?"

RB: Which is?

NW: You can make the Greenbergian argument, say I agree, but isn't there more? Does Greenberg go far enough? What are the possibilities? Because he doesn't go far enough. He doesn't want to get off into that area that the possibilities are greater and that there's more power there, that there is more than just that–– He cuts it short I think because of other places that Clem comes from––his political background and stuff like that. I don't think he dares–– He's actually the dilemma we're in today set up by that climate, by the thinking of the 1940s and 1950s. I think Clem's brilliant and articulate.

See, my belief in art critics is very strange. I think they sink or float to the top based on who they've selected to write about. The truth they write, or the non–truth, is less important than the selection of who they picked. So we have a consensus today that Clem was very right in picking Pollock. We don't have the same consensus on Olitski; although I thought Olitski's a great artist myself. It's a very curious thing.

You pick an artist and then you try to graft them into a story. It's the tradition. We've had it from [Giorgio] Vasari on. The story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. Now, that often distorts things. Vasari's distortion is. that you run into an artist like Donatello half way through your story, and you have to diminish him in order to have the great artists come along at the end of the story. So you have Michelangelo inflated and Donatello distorted, don't you, generally?

RB: That's a very interesting theory.

NW: When Clem does it, what he does is he grafts Pollock onto twentieth–century European modernist paintings. He uses Picasso rightly as the limb. So he has to lop the limb off. Picasso didn't cooperate and disappear in 1946 or 1947. He kept making paintings for twenty–three or –four more years, didn't he? So what you do is you say the paintings aren't any good. Not true.

RB: That also has been poked out a bit lately.

NW: Well, it's been poked out lately, but it's been evident since the word go. I think to hear the Greenbergian anti–Picasso argument second–hand– not from Clem's lips, but from his follower's lips––in the 1960s before the late Picassos were resurrected, you heard the weirdest things. I heard one person say, "Well, they only go for three or four hundred thousand each. How could they be any good? I said, yeah, all two hundred of them. "What are you talking about?" I mean, you would hear strange things.

Let's get back. We've slid off.

RB: It's all right to slide off, because I think how you think is as important,– maybe more important than what really happened. My obligation to the Archives is to make sure that we tell enough of the story so that you feel satisfied when you see the transcription. So I don't want to omit, say, the distance between your seeing the handwriting on the wall in the early 1970s and the seven or eight years that you obviously didn't slow down.

I remember when I saw you in Jill Kornblee's

gallery, I guess.

NW: Yes. I would always go there.

RB: You would always go there to see what she had or to talk with her?

NW: Oh, yes. Two things I can say. One is about closing the gallery. You said I continued through the seventies. I knew I was going to close that gallery by 1976. It took me three years. That's answering one question and that's a whole different issue. It was how it had to be done and how it could be done and keep it–– You know, I had commitments.

RB: You had a responsibility.

NW: Responsibility and commitments that I had to spin off and meet. I'm very glad that I went the long route on that because, by and large, everybody was pretty happy. I mean, your first line of defense for people–– Sometimes they don't like you. Maybe I had some of those. But those were not surprises.

Going back to Jill Kornblee or things like

this. There were dealers in places that you could go through New York. There were platforms in New York that new people were being seen on–– dealers that were known for showing art: Tibor [de Nagy], Kornblee, [Robert] Elkon. I mean, if you look at what Elkon had in 1965, he had Friedel Dzubas, Edward Avedisian, Agnes Martin, and probably more. Jill Kornblee showed an interest in a group of people. Tibor showed everybody early on. You went around to those places. Green Gallery was still open when I first came along.

RB: Oh, yes, Green Gallery.

NW: And [Richard] Bellamy had everybody or a lot of people. It was a much smaller scene. You have to understand that if you try to analyze, over–simplify the scene in the 1960s when I came along, over half the people were sympathetic to what I espouse as far as the visual enterprise went, and more or less operated on that within human nature. Sure, they wanted to have nine da Vincis they couldn't afford later by picking the right guy or whatever it was they did.

I still remember the dentist that liked Baskin. He and his wife loved this stuff and thought it was great. I couldn't fault them on their human nature and things. I didn't share their enthusiasm for their choice, right? That's all right. The art world was made up of those types. They ran the whole spectrum––nice people to not nice people. One day, I was walking up the street with Eleanor Saidenberg a few years ago. We looked in a window and there was a [Paul] Klee poster at that horrible poster shop near the Whitney. And she said, "Oh, I sell Klees now to a group of people a lot less interesting than I did back in 1950." It's true. My point is this: If half the people or over half the people subscribed to the same notions as I espouse now, there are more people today than there were twenty–five years ago.

RB: Lots.

NW: Lots more people that believe that. But they're in a minority because the art world's expanded at a much greater rate and has attracted large numbers of people that have not come around to that. You haven't accumulated maybe enough experience. See, I believe in the redemptive power of this art. A lot of converts are going to be made through the art itself. You really do see it happen.

Look, I saw Freddie and Marcia Weisman as a dealer and they were clients. You learn a lot about people when you watch them buy and look. Sorry, Marcia, but Freddie has a much better eye.

RB: Really?

NW: Absolutely. Based on just what he looks–– She would look at a [John] McLaughlin and say, "I like [Barnett] Newman better."

He said, "They have nothing to do with each other. I like that McLaughlin and that McLaughlin."

Then you learn. He, in all of his topsyturvy–nish was right. She was encumbered by personal allegiances to Annalee and Barney [Newman], who she was a friend and ally of, and had loved Barney and admired them and et cetera. Understandable, Marcia's comment. But she'd actually act on it. Freddie, no less committed to Barney and Annalee, knew the difference.

You learn an awful lot when you're in that closed room with people. It's interesting. Watch their feet. Watch certain collectors. You can tell who's a true collector in art. L.A.'s interested in celebrities;` Washington's interested in power; and New York's interested in money, right? I mean, basically, we want to oversimplify the 1980s. But there are certain people with money here that buy interestingly, and other people that don't. It's curious. I'm just thinking of L.A. experiences where you watch a Laura Lee Woods buy. She's a collector.

I don't know. I'm just rambling at this point.

RB: Because we've run several hours here and it's not fair to you. But I was just so fascinated by hearing you do what I'd hoped you'd do, which is to talk about your ideas. I realize that goes beyond the facts and the dates and so forth. But don't you have any papers at all from your years, all those years?

NW: I've given a lot.

RB: To whom?

.NW: Paul Karlstrom [Smithsonian Archives of American Art].

RB: Oh, Paul Karlstrom has your papers?

NW: Have you heard my anti–Archives speech?

RB: No. You can make it here.

NW: It's just that I gave a lot of things of McLaughlin's to them and then was denied access to them when I needed to use them because I was a dealer. I think the Archives' anti–dealer position, as far as on the scholarship level, needs some revision.

RB: [chuckles] This is as good a place as any to make that comment.

NW: I think that it's understandable. When the NEA was formed, it was very anti–dealer.

RB: Right.

NW: It had to be in order to get the bill through Congress. I mean, it's understandable why, if you'd had a seminar on Gris, NEA couldn't finance it if you were going to have Kahnwieler on it. A seminar on Gris without Kahnwieler, had he been available, wouldn't–– You know. You understand the Dealers have funny roles in this thing and the roles changed, I think, a lot.

RB: But you talk about L.A. and dealers. Jake Zeitlin is a perfect example of how you couldn't keep him in that role.

NW: No. He was a great community guy, a great man.

RB: And I think that what this interview has proven to me is that we tend to pigeonhole people and you've done a great service for the Archives. I'm not going to prolong this because it has been ninety minutes plus, forty–five plus thirty minutes that we've been talking. It's a hot day and we've turned off the air conditioner so they can transcribe.

But I just wonder, before I turn off the tape recorder, getting back to your setting the record straight, whether there were any other particular things that you can think of and remember either in the chronology or in the misrepresentation that you might want to comment on now.

NW: I don't think that things get misrepresented. They get more misrepresented by laziness rather than by someone having an agenda to rewrite a history. I really do, don't you think? I think that people take shortcuts all the time. They read somewhere else what somebody said who maybe had an agenda or a point of view that they no longer even share. I made a crack at Irving Petlin, but that was from 1965. Irving's a different man today. It's twenty–five years later.

RB: A good art historian, reading this transcription, will probably be able to figure that out.

NW: Yes. He's gone from…. He's probably a pretty big capitalist now, looking at the way they charge.

RB: While you're riding the subway instead of driving those cars, too.

NW: Yes, but I wanted to get here on time.

RB: [chuckles] No. What I'm saying is that you can read these things in many different ways. You've given us an enormous amount here. For me personally, I think it's been a terrific session. I'm going to turn the tape off, thank you, and find the papers for you to sign.

NW: Okay.

End of Interview

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