Oral history interview with Betty Parsons, 1981 June 11

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Interview

GERALD SILK: The first question about Rothko is, do you recall when you first met him?

BETTY PARSONS: I was introduced to Mark Rothko I think by Peggy Guggenheim. I would say...

MR. SILK: Was she handling his art then?

MS. PARSONS: She knew him then. He was in a group show with her. I think it must have been around - I would say around...it must have been around '44.

MR. SILK: So it was Peggy Guggenheim who introduced you?

MS. PARSONS: She introduced me to Rothko.

MR. SILK: And then, of course, you met him many times after that?

MS. PARSONS: Well, we became friends and eventually he said he'd like to have a show with me.

MR. SILK: When was the first show?

MS. PARSONS: Well, I'm terrible - I'm the worst document.

MR. SILK: I know there was a fairly successful one in '50.

MS. PARSONS: I can't remember. It was '47? No, I think maybe it was '50.

MS. PARSONS: '50...

MR. SILK: Or that was a little bit later - and Tom Hess wrote a very nice review.

MS. PARSONS: I can't remember. It was '47? No, I think maybe it was '50.

MR. SILK: When was the last time you saw Rothko?

MS. PARSONS: He had a show with me I think in '54.

MR. SILK: Well, did you see him afterwards? I mean around?

MS. PARSONS: Oh, we were always friends. We cried on each other's shoulders when we parted company because as he said, "I'm doing you no good. You're doing me no good." I couldn't sell any...I sold some, a few, but very few. When we went over to Sidney Janis for two years he never sold a thing. He told me afterwards.

MR. SILK: Did you visit the studio often?

MS. PARSONS: Yes, I used to go to his studio. We were friends.

MR. SILK: Can you describe it?

MS. PARSONS: Well, it had a fairly high ceiling and he used to have quite a few canvases up at once, and tables with masses of paint everywhere, and he was very active. He was always painting.

MR. SILK: When you would meet him, was there...you said you cried on each other's shoulders. What was often the nature of the conversation?

MS. PARSONS: Oh, no, no. We finally both realized this was the situation and there it was. As a matter of fact, before he left I borrowed $6,000 to try to help him. And I think I bought a picture and I tried to pay some bills for him and I tried very hard to help him, because I had hoped with that it would start the ball rolling. But it didn't.
MR. SILK: So you owned several Rothkos?

MS. PARSONS: Oh, yes. I still do.

MR. SILK: Some you bought and were there any that he gave you?

MS. PARSONS: Oh, yes. He gave me one. He gave me some beautiful early drawings.

MR. SILK: These are the...

MS. PARSONS: Surrealist.

MR. SILK: Surrealist ones.

MS. PARSONS: Very beautiful. I have them at home.

MR. SILK: What did you think about the later work when it got darker and more brooding?

MS. PARSONS: When he went black and gray?

MR. SILK: That's right.

MS. PARSONS: Well, I'll tell you. He invited me to his studio I remember. It was about a year before he died. I walked into the studio and I looked at them. And you know what I said just spontaneously? I said these pictures have a farewell.

MR. SILK: A farewell?

MS. PARSONS: A farewell. I wasn't thinking in terms of death, just thinking he was painting something to say goodbye to someone. But he was saying goodbye to himself.

MR. SILK: Do you remember the last time you talked before he died?

MS. PARSONS: Yes, he came for dinner. He came to dinner with me. He had a very bad memory. I had to remind him about five times that he was coming. You know, he couldn't remember anything at that point. The alcohol I think was starting to....

MR. SILK: Wasn't he reluctant to attend certain social functions on occasion as well?

MS. PARSONS: Well, yes. But he liked everyone who was coming so he came.

MR. SILK: Okay, because I know he was resistant if critics or so on were around.

MS. PARSONS: Very resistant. But to me, you know, he was a very brilliant man. I think he would have been a fantastic lawyer. Incredible sophistry. He could make white black, black white at the drop of a hat.

MR. SILK: What kind of things would you talk about? Art? Philosophy?

MS. PARSONS: Well, the condition of the art world and the public response or public opposition, what was going on in the museums and so forth.

MR. SILK: Did he discuss technique with you at all, the nature of...

MS. PARSONS: No, he never discussed technique.

MR. SILK: One question which has been a controversial one over the past few years is did he ever talk to you about how he wanted his works exhibited, especially after...

MS. PARSONS: Oh, he certainly was very, very fastidious about that. You know, you heard about the...he refused to go into the Whitney Museum in the end there.

MR. SILK: That's right, because it wasn't...

MS. PARSONS: Because he didn't want to be surrounded by such mediocrity. He said it just drags you down; you don't drag them up.

MR. SILK: So he was very specific to you about wanting his works to be shown as a group.

MS. PARSONS: He always wanted to know who he was showing with to see if he approved of them or not.
MR. SILK: You were ideal for that in terms of selling; you were very particular about who you sold to.

MS. PARSONS: Very particular. Oh, I was all for that. I was all for being particular.

MR. SILK: There's a famous story about you going to visit Stieglitz and wanting to buy a Marin and he quoted you this very high price.

MS. PARSONS: I was very young, you know. I was just married. I was about 22 I think. And I fell in love with this Marin and I had about $300 to buy a watercolor. He asked $6000! I never went near a gallery for years after that.

MR. SILK: Do you think that some of that rubbed off on you? That you were careful about who you sold to because you were more interested in the art than in the money? This was Stieglitz's approach.

MS. PARSONS: Stieglitz used to take kind of instantaneous dislikes to people. He just didn't like me. He thought I was a silly little ass I suppose. Or he thought I had a lot of money. I can't remember what I had on. And, you know, he was all wrong about that. We were friends in the end. Georgia O'Keeffe is quite a good friend of mine.

MR. SILK: Yes. Are you still in contact with her?

MS. PARSONS: Oh, yes, whenever I got to New Mexico.

MR. SILK: Have you seen her here?

MS. PARSONS: She usually comes in here to see me when she's in New York. Oh, yes, we're good friends. We've always been good friends. I admire her very much.

MR. SILK: Now you're very particular about who you sell to. Was this the case with Rothko? I mean I've heard that certain of his works that you felt were important, you didn't want to go to a minor collection or a minor collector. Is this something that Stieglitz might have inspired?

MS. PARSONS: Well, no, I don't think so. I'm too dependent. Anyway, Stieglitz scared the life out of me. He scared me to death there. You know, I just couldn't understand...I said, my God, if a watercolor is $6000, what in the hell do you pay for a...I'll never own a painting. Then I went abroad for 10 or 11 years and forgot all about it.

MR. SILK: Did Rothko talk about other artists to you who he admired?

MS. PARSONS: Oh, yes. He had opinions.

MR. SILK: Can you recall who he...

MS. PARSONS: Well, I know he admired Pollock very much. He admired Barney very much.

MR. SILK: Right.

MS. PARSONS: He admired Reinhardt. And they all loved Clyfford Still because Clyfford Still in those days was much nicer. He grew into a monster, but he was very nice in those days.

MR. SILK: Well, you called I guess it was Still, Rothko, Newman, and Pollock the 'four horsemen.'

MS. PARSONS: Yes.

MR. SILK: How did the four horsemen get along?

MS. PARSONS: They got on...they'd hang each other's shows.

MR. SILK: Right.

MS. PARSONS: Because Still was teaching out in California and Rothko and Barney would come in and hang his show when he was out there. No, they got on very well. They all got on till Reinhardt made fun of Barney, you know, in the College Art Journal.

MR. SILK: That's right.

MS. PARSONS: Barney claimed that he lost a job due to The Club, and he sued him for $100,000.

MR. SILK: How did you feel about that?
MS. PARSONS: I thought it was just awful. And from that time on there was no more harmony.

MR. SILK: What did you think about Reinhardt's cartoons of those things, those satiric things?

MS. PARSONS: I thought they were terrific. He made fun of me too. I thought it was very funny. He said, "Oh, Betty Parsons, she has too many birds on her tree."

MR. SILK: That's right.

MS. PARSONS: And he was dead right and I quite agree.

MR. SILK: But there are some nice birds on those trees for sure.

MS. PARSONS: Oh, some beautiful birds.

MR. SILK: There was rivalry among the group, wasn't there, and jealousy?

MS. PARSONS: After that, it became rivalry. Before that, they all loved each other.

MR. SILK: How about Newman and Rothko?

MS. PARSONS: Newman and Rothko - well, they were great friends up till all of this started to brew. Once that opposition and antagonism started, you know, God, it became...I always said it went from love to hate.

MR. SILK: You had a close relationship with Newman. He was an advisor in a sense.

MS. PARSONS: He was a great friend.

MR. SILK: I've been told that Newman often thought of himself first as a writer or a musician before a painter. Is that true or is this just a rumor?

MS. PARSONS: Newman was such a rounded man, you know. Newman's the urban one. All the others were country, the far west. But Newman was really a definition of the urban man - God, everything about him. I called him the Great Statesman. I had the names for all of them. And Newman I always called the Great Statesman.

MR. SILK: What was your name for Rothko?

MS. PARSONS: The Painter of the Sublime. I remember saying that to Barney. It should be the Painter of the Establishment he said.

[Laughter]

MR. SILK: That's wonderful. How about Pollock?

MS. PARSONS: They all liked Pollock.

MR. SILK: And what was your name for him?

MS. PARSONS: Pollock was Nature. I used to say to Pollock, what are you? He said, "I'm Nature."

MR. SILK: That's right. That's the famous quotation.

MS. PARSONS: I couldn't improve on that. He was nature.

MR. SILK: And Still?

MS. PARSONS: He was the Stallion and the Eagle - Eagle and the Stallion.

MR. SILK: Eagle, that's right, because the bald eagles....

MS. PARSONS: All those things up there and he was always racing across the prairies. He was brought up in the Dakotas, you know. He was a marvelous writer.

MR. SILK: Outside of Newman, they all...Rothko was from Oregon.

MS. PARSONS: All from the west.

MR. SILK: I'm curious about this because in an earlier interview you talked about your American issue. Your roots go way, way back. And it's interesting that you're one of the first to have pioneered this great American....
MS. PARSONS: My roots do go way, way, way back.

MR. SILK: You were really one of the first to champion true American art.

MS. PARSONS: Yes, that's right. I'm really an American. You know, I've just been paid the great honor by Mayor Koch of winning an award next week.

MR. SILK: Wonderful. What is the nature of the...what's the award?

MS. PARSONS: The award is for improving the culture of the city.

MR. SILK: Well, you have. Not just the city but...

MS. PARSONS: I had no idea I deserved that.

MR. SILK: Much too modest just for the city. It's funny that you think of those four artists as the four horsemen. I think of your Gallery along with I guess Egan, Kootz and Peggy Guggenheim. You're the four horsemen of the galleries, the American galleries. Were there any personal traits about Rothko that struck you?

MS. PARSONS: He was a typical Russian in the sense that - I read all the great Russian writers and they were always melancholy to me. They never could be happy. They would say we might be happy here; but they never could be. They never were. He had a melancholy streak always to me. I think that's a Russian thing.

MR. SILK: What about his work did you admire most?

MS. PARSONS: What about his work?

MR. SILK: What did you admire most in his work?

MS. PARSONS: The light, fantastic light.

MR. SILK: You've always been interested in light in your own work too.

MS. PARSONS: Yes. Light to me is the secret of the power of the work. [Pointing to a painting] This guy here was light.

MR. SILK: Sure.

MS. PARSONS: He has light. And when the day changes, that picture changes with the light. It picks up the light or the light picks it up - I don't know. But it's a fantastic quality.

MR. SILK: What was Stamos's relationship to this group? Was he involved with it?

MS. PARSONS: Stamos had much more to do with earth than to do with light. He had light; but he was very, very intrigued with everything that came out of the earth or went into the earth. I think he's kind of lost now, too much like too many other people. But at one time he really had his own image.

MR. SILK: Any final thoughts on Rothko before we go on to you?

MS. PARSONS: Any what?

MR. SILK: Any final thoughts on Rothko before we go on to you?

MS. PARSONS: Yes. Let me think. I would say I was very fond of him. He was a lovable guy. I loved them all. They were all fantastic guys. Except he was melancholy, difficult. But that brain of his, you know, just ran around his head all the time, gave him a lot of trouble I think.

MR. SILK: And you once said, "There's lots of talent around but no more giants." Is that how you feel?

MS. PARSONS: Yes, that's right.

MR. SILK: You don't see any giants on the horizon right now?

MS. PARSONS: No.

MR. SILK: Okay. Let's go on here. One of the things that you showed in your gallery and some of the things that you have in your own collection and even your own work suggest a great affinity for the primitive. You had a show at Wakefield, I think it was...
MS. PARSONS: I had three primitive shows. When I opened my first show, my first gallery at the Wakefield, I had a primitive show and Barney wrote three forwards for it, you know.

MR. SILK: Right.

MS. PARSONS: A great authority on the primitive. And he suggested, he gave me the idea that the primitive world was a free world and this world that I was now in was a free world. It was no longer under the pressure of the academic world or the rules and regulations that I was brought up by. I had to draw bones out of...

MR. SILK: Bones out of other people's sketch books.

MS. PARSONS: Yes, that's right. So the idea was they were free and introduced this idea that there was a relationship between the primitive world and the present world. So every time I moved...when I moved from Wakefield to East 57th Street, I had the Northwest Coast show in East 57th Street.

MR. SILK: Right.

MS. PARSONS: And I borrowed a lot of things from the Museum of Natural History. When I moved in here, I was a great friend of a guy called Sam Dubinoff who had this great Northwest Indian collection. And he loaned me his whole collection. He let me sell half of it. Which I did.

MR. SILK: Do you think these shows had influence on the artists because so much is talked about in their relationship to....

MS. PARSONS: Well, I think they were so marvelous you know. They were so powerful, so beautiful. I think they all....yes, I think it helped their standard.

MR. SILK: And particularly Gottlieb was very interested in all those...How about your own work because your own work certainly has that direct....

MS. PARSONS: I have two of them in there in the office.

MR. SILK: The directness, of course, of your work suggests the primitive and also "found" materials. This is something that you've always...

MS. PARSONS: Yes.

MR. SILK: And you have in your own collection also.

MS. PARSONS: Yes. I have a big collection here.

MR. SILK: Even some of your own artists have the love of the material and the like, I guess Francisco and Porter and so on.

MS. PARSONS: Well, you see, these things all some day materialize for you, you know. All this beautiful wood on this beach that I live on. God, it's terrible. Something ought to be done about it. And that's what's happened.

MR. SILK: There's a controversy now developing in the art magazines about the role of Jung among these artists.

MS. PARSONS: He's my favorite.

MR. SILK: He's your favorite?

MS. PARSONS: Well, he's the artist of all the psychologists.

MR. SILK: Did they talk about him a lot?

MS. PARSONS: Not too much.

MR. SILK: Did Rothko at all?

MS. PARSONS: Pollock. Pollock did go to a psychologist.

MR. SILK: Right.

MS. PARSONS: I went with him once to this doctor uptown somewhere. I can't remember his name. He tried to cure his drinking.
MR. SILK: Well, you know Martha Graham?

MS. PARSONS: Yes.

MR. SILK: Didn't her dance contain things that related to Jung? Or not? Do you recall?

MS. PARSONS: Well, I was a great admirer of Martha Graham. I always wanted to do a head of her. She thought she'd like to do a...an exchange of something. But she was a pioneer too in her own field.

MR. SILK: Sure, of course. So many of the pioneers were women too, which is interesting, at the time. Now in the '60s or in the late '50s, you took on a somewhat different generation of artists - Youngerman, Lieberman, Feeley, Kelly and so on. Work that's been described as minimal or hard edge something. What did you find interesting about this different look?

MS. PARSONS: Kelly to me always had a fantastic balance. He could balance his forms, his shapes. And he was a great, a wonderful draftsman.

MR. SILK: You liked his drawings of the flowers and the plants?

MS. PARSONS: Yes, they're terrific. Well, I just thought he...I found him in Paris, you know.

MR. SILK: I thought he was...he was a constructivist then?

MS. PARSONS: He was working in Paris. I don't know. He was just working in a studio there. And Youngerman also. They were both working in Paris. And I went over to find some Europeans because I didn't want to be a national gallery. I don't like nationalism. And I couldn't find anybody.

MR. SILK: Do you feel today more interest......

MS. PARSONS: Well, I felt that they were free and had balanced and light and I just loved what they were doing. It was a whole other scene than the abstract because these were much less complicated you know. They were purer. They had a purity in them.

MR. SILK: Now your relationship with Kelly is fine now. There was a problem for a while or...

MS. PARSONS: Oh, yes, because he said he was going to Sidney Janis and you know, I had a fight with Janis. I spent a whole summer in court. So when he left Sidney Janis and went to Castelli whom I happen to love very much, I made up.

MR. SILK: Well, no matter what you felt about the artist, the art is almost always in a sense separate. You could still always love the art if not the artist who was associated with it.

MS. PARSONS: Well, it was the work really that got me to like the artist. I never cared about what...It never was personal about whether I liked the, their personalities, or disliked them. If the work was terrific that was enough.

MR. SILK: Now you went to Europe then to try and find European talent and had a difficult time finding it.

MS. PARSONS: Because I couldn't find...

MR. SILK: How about now? You show more Europeans now.

MS. PARSONS: Yes. Well, there's some marvelous European artists now.

MR. SILK: Do you feel that it's shifting back now or that it's just a more international situation?

MS. PARSONS: I don't know. It's a very strange period now. It's in kind of a lull. It's jogging two or three, so many different ways. I don't know quite what's going to happen.

MR. SILK: What are the ways?

MS. PARSONS: I think architecture has had an influence on the painter and the sculptor. Because there's been so many extraordinary buildings. I think Van der Rohe and Pei and all those architects. Corbusier was one, and I think they all admired him very much. And I think it had an influence on a lot of painters and sculptors, the hard edge. But everything is kind of paperwork now. Everybody's fallen in love with all these new materials. You know, they are fascinated by them. And I think what happens is they are so fascinated by the materials, they forget about the content. There's very little content to me. It's just material.

MR. SILK: It's more...too much form and material rather than...
MS. PARSONS: Maybe too much technique and not enough feeling.

MR. SILK: Do you think it's too much education - too much art school?

MS. PARSONS: I don't know, possibly.

MR. SILK: Because we think of the '60s as perhaps a somewhat more coherent period in art and the '70s as much more plural.

MS. PARSONS: Yes, yes, it is.

MR. SILK: Do you like that?

MS. PARSONS: Well, it depends on who it is. I like a lot of them. For example, Agnes Martin is a strange example. She's such an aesthetic. She understands aesthetics better than anybody, which is a sense of beauty which you could make out of your spit if you wanted.

MR. SILK: No doubt, no doubt. What do you feel about critics? I mean they were hostile initially.

MS. PARSONS: Well, I think my criticism of critics is that their knowledge of history dominates so that they can't see the present. They can't see today because they're always trying to relate it to history, and in some cases you just can't.

[Interruption]

MR. SILK: We were talking about critics.

MS. PARSONS: Well, I think that that's been the problem. You know, when they used to come in, when Rothko and Still and all were showing, they started by being antagonistic. Instead of being open-minded about it, they would be antagonistic. And I think it's because they couldn't relate it to anything historical. That's the only way I can think about it.

MR. SILK: Were there critics back then who you admired? Were there any critics who you admired back then? Of course, Greenberg and Rosenberg and Hess were beginning to write about the...

MS. PARSONS: Yes, that's right. Oh, I liked Rosenberg.

MR. SILK: You liked Rosenberg?

MS. PARSONS: Yes, I liked him.

MR. SILK: Was it the poetry side of him that you liked or the direct relation to the art?

MS. PARSONS: Well, he was directly...I felt he was very sincere too in what he was trying to say. You see, I think that Kramer was always assassinating. John...John...

MR. SILK: Russell?

MS. PARSONS: No, I liked John Russell.

MR. SILK: John Perreault?

MS. PARSONS: I like him too. I like Perreault. But John Canady!

MR. SILK: Canady. Oh right.

MS. PARSONS: My God! He's such a good writer too. But he could never get them. Oh he was a bastard.

MR. SILK: He was a food critic too.

MS. PARSONS: Yes.

MR. SILK: And he sounded like he was writing about art when he was writing about food.

MS. PARSONS: That's right.

MR. SILK: So what about Greenberg?

MS. PARSONS: Well, I thought Greenberg...I thought he was very interesting, Greenberg. He had certain
limitations. You know, he only liked a certain kind of drive.

MR. SILK: That was in a specific line and direction which was in a way very historical.

MS. PARSONS: Yes, very historical. Pollock was his dream. And Hess was another one I admired very much. DeKooning was his dream. And he also was very open-minded about all the others.

MR. SILK: So you said you liked Perreault and Russell. Are there others today who you like?

MS. PARSONS: Yes. I think Perreault is very good.

MR. SILK: Alloway, Lawrence Alloway?

MS. PARSONS: Oh, very good, very good.

MR. SILK: What makes a good critic? What makes for a good critic? What do you think makes the critic exciting?

MS. PARSONS: Well, being open-minded about it, you know, not trying to put something in it that isn't there. Like Rosenberg - I never knew what Rosenberg was talking about because he's always putting his own ideas into the pictures. They weren't pictures. I know it was brilliant, utterly brilliant. But where in hell were the pictures, I used to say. But a good critic also sees the picture and has enough sensitivity and is open-minded. You know, the creative world is a difficult world. It always has been. Nobody likes anything new.

MR. SILK: But today people are more open, more sensitive.

MS. PARSONS: Oh, yes. There's a whole rash...

MR. SILK: Do you feel it's almost too open and too receptive and nothing can shock, nothing can startle?

MS. PARSONS: I think that they're looking now too much for the new and not to the great.

MR. SILK: Okay, yeah.

MS. PARSONS: Too much for the new.

MR. SILK: How do you feel about this situation with hundreds of galleries, thousands of collectors, tens of thousands of artists?

MS. PARSONS: It's endless mediocrity. I think we're in a terrific mediocre period, in a very depressing period.

MR. SILK: You've been involved with politics a lot?

MS. PARSONS: Yes. Well, I'm interested...I want to know why I have to pay these taxes. [Laughter]

MR. SILK: Do you have a current immersion, a current thing that you're involved in in politics?

MS. PARSONS: Well, yes, because I'm a humanitarian and I'm very interested in how they are running this. After all, it is mankind that we're trying to take care of. It's not how successful you are or how weak you are or strong you are, it's man. And I don't understand. We're run by corporations, you know. That's money.

MR. SILK: How do you feel about government support of the arts, or lack of support?

MS. PARSONS: Well, I think that one has to be very careful because I think politicians don't really know much about the arts so they are apt to make a mess of it. They're apt to have awful mediocrity again in powerful positions.

MR. SILK: So you think that the Endowment and things like the national....

MS. PARSONS: It depends who they select for the endowments. It depends entirely on the people.

MR. SILK: What artists today interest you?

MS. PARSONS: Beg your pardon?

MR. SILK: What artists today interest you, I mean aside from the ones which you show or included in the ones you show in your gallery?

MS. PARSONS: I love Gorky. He's having a marvelous show. I used to work with him.
MR. SILK: I saw you at the opening but didn't have a chance to talk.

MS. PARSONS: I used to work with Gorky. He taught me a hell of a lot.

MR. SILK: At the camouflage school was that?

MS. PARSONS: Yes. I went there. Also, we used to have a little drawing class together.

MR. SILK: John Graham was there too?

MS. PARSONS: Oh, John Graham was a great friend of mine, yes.

MR. SILK: Tell me a little about him because there's going to be a show of his I think.

MS. PARSONS: Oh, yes. He was very fascinating, very eccentric, but an extremely good artist. I think John Graham was a terrific artist, but eccentric.

MR. SILK: He wrote that "Systems and Dialects of Art." Were the artists reading that?

MS. PARSONS: Well, I read it years ago. I've got it somewhere. I think they were reading it at the time quite a lot.

MR. SILK: So you think it may have well had a, you know, fair amount of influence?

MS. PARSONS: Gorky and Graham and let's see who else -

MR. SILK: Gorky and Ossario and Pousette-Dart -

MS. PARSONS: Oh, yes. Well, they were all marvelous artists.

MR. SILK: Who today are young artists that you really feel will...

MS. PARSONS: Well, I think this Tom Stokes is very good that I'm showing right now. And before that I showed Tom George.

MR. SILK: Right.

MS. PARSONS: He's a very good painter. I think before that I showed Taggert.

MR. SILK: Bill Taggert, right.

MS. PARSONS: And before that I was showing Francisco.

MR. SILK: Yes, I saw him. Yes.

MS. PARSONS: Very interesting illusions, Francisco. There are a lot of them around. I think young Pousette-Dart, his daughter, is terrific, a very talented young woman. I'm opening next year with a woman called Margo Hoff. Wait until you see her. She's something. I saw it yesterday.

MR. SILK: And you still show Hedda Sterne.

MS. PARSONS: Oh, yes, I still show Hedda Sterne. Yashuda, he's very good. I have Bradley Walker Tomlin who was a marvelous artist, a marvelous artist. I've had Jonathan Thomas.

MR. SILK: And Okada?

MS. PARSONS: And Okada, terrific. Steinberg, terrific.

MR. SILK: What is it you look for in artists? I realize it's hard to...

MS. PARSONS: I'm going to read to you what I look for. Everytime I lecture to students, they ask me that question.

MR. SILK: I know. I've read it before but I want to hear it again.

MS. PARSONS: That's what I look for, and it's subtle. Believe me, I vibrate to it when I find it. This is Willa Cather who I think is one of our great writers: "What is any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mold, in which we imprison for a moment a shining elusive element which is life itself." How do you do that? It's not easy.

MR. SILK: It's intuitive. You have to have the feeling.
MS. PARSONS: But you have to also have a great respect. You see, I think the world stinks, but I think life is marvelous. The world is just beyond worlds...

[END OF SIDE 1]

?......was a very good teacher. He said marvelous things. He was a better teacher really than he was a sculptor.

MR. SILK: You saw the Armory Show. You were in Paris in the '20s. Hollywood in the '30s.

MS. PARSONS: Yes, that's right.

MR. SILK: New York in the '40s when art emerged, and you've been here ever since.

MS. PARSONS: I always was there at the right moment....

MR. SILK: At the right time.

MS. PARSONS: That's right. That was my destiny but I never thought of it.

MR. SILK: Of all those periods, is there one that stands out in your mind as the most significant or exciting?

MS. PARSONS: Well, I suppose the most exciting was the New York period.

MR. SILK: The '40s and the '50s?

MS. PARSONS: Yes, that fantastic period between 1940 and 1960 or '45 to '67.

MR. SILK: It was a period of great drama.

MS. PARSONS: Great drama, God, there was such an excitement going on!

MR. SILK: Where has it gone?

MS. PARSONS: Well, that's one of the mysteries.

MR. SILK: Has it become too democratized, too much art? The issue's not crucial any more? I mean do we need a war or do we need an event?

MS. PARSONS: You know, there is such a thing which I noticed, such a thing as the spirit getting tired. The French were the great painters before we moved into that position. But they got tired. You feel it in France. All the young people that are talking about art, they're always so exhausted. And I think in a way America is beginning to get tired. I think it's because they're so spoiled, Americans. You know, the rich are so rich and the poor are so poor, I don't know - that ambition, that ambition for success. You see, I don't think success or failure necessarily makes you happy. I've seen a lot of people without great success much happier than those that are a success. Now there's something wrong about the philosophy. I don't know what it is. It's not obvious.

MR. SILK: Is your own art making changes?

MS. PARSONS: Oh, yes. I'm always changing. I never know what I'll say or do next.

MR. SILK: The last I saw were the driftwood pieces. Are you doing something new now?

MS. PARSONS: Well, I just did a ten foot high wooden piece, which is something new for me.

MR. SILK: Wonderful. Where is that now?

MS. PARSONS: It's down in the country. You know, Tony Smith built my studio.

MR. SILK: Well, I know that it's a wonderful area.

MS. PARSONS: But I'm also about to start a great big canvas. I have no idea what I'm going to put on it.

MR. SILK: And you're looking forward to that?

MS. PARSONS: Oh, I can't wait. But there's no use starting it until I can stay there at least two weeks. Just two days, you know, is too much for me.

MR. SILK: Is being a dealer and being an artist at the same time helpful or a problem?
MS. PARSONS: Well, it's the way I'm conditioned. And I don't know anything else. I know that I went on being an artist because I had to. It was compulsion with me because trying to do what I do in my painting and sculpture is a rest for me. Business is a terrible sweat. I'm not a natural businesswoman. I hate it. But I've learned a lot and I've become interested in what I know now. But it's always a sweat. It always makes me nervous. So that combination - and anyway, it's exciting being with the creative world and being able to prime them and select them, encourage them, help them. So it counteracts the antagonism I have for business.

MR. SILK: Do you want to tell me a little about...let's see if I pronounce this right...Subud.

MS. PARSONS: Yes, Subud. Well, that's from the Far East. That's from Jakarta, Java actually. And I just found that out in California accidentally.

MR. SILK: Just recently?

MS. PARSONS: Ten years ago. I've been in it. It's sympathetic to me because it's not a contemplation or meditation. It's a surrender. And what you do is you throw the rot of the brain out and you throw your emotions with it, and you empty yourself. And that's exciting to me and I've been able to do that - not always, but sometimes. And it always helps.

MR. SILK: Did you know Tobey, Mark Tobey?

MS. PARSONS: Oh, yes I did.

MR. SILK: Because he was involved in Bahai.

MS. PARSONS: Yes, I loved him. He was a lovely guy. I liked Tobey very much.

MR. SILK: Do people still mistake you for Garbo?

MS. PARSONS: Occasionally. Sailors always used to say, "Hi, G.G." to me. And when I first went out there, I didn't know what in the hell....I said, "Who's G.G.?" [Laughter]

MR. SILK: You don't play tennis any more, do you?

MS. PARSONS: Oh, my. I don't have time and I'm too old.

MR. SILK: Are you still writing poetry?

MS. PARSONS: Oh, yes. There's a poem on the wall about this show. I wish you'd take a look at it.

MR. SILK: Is it something you could read to us for sort of final remarks?

MS. PARSONS: My nephew's doing a book on women over 80. I'm 81.

MR. SILK: I know.

MS. PARSONS: He opens the book with this poem I wrote quite a few years ago. 'When the music flows and no voice is heard, like a plant that grows, like a soundless bird.' I write a lot of that. To nearly every show I write a few lines because they like it. The artists like it.

MR. SILK: I remember a poem you wrote about Agnes Martin.

MS. PARSONS: Oh, yes, yes.

MR. SILK: Lovely. She herself writes poetry also.

MS. PARSONS: Yes. Oh, she's a good writer, a very interesting writer.

MR. SILK: I've heard her speak several times.

MS. PARSONS: And I wrote a very good poem to Tony Smith.

MR. SILK: He just recently died, didn't he?

MS. PARSONS: I know, terrible.

MR. SILK: Do you want to talk a little about him?
MS. PARSONS: I think he's the greatest sculptor. I'm going to exaggerate. Maybe he's the greatest sculptor in the world today. Then they say why? And I say, well, Tony...what's the other Smith?

MR. SILK: David.

MS. PARSONS: David Smith is a marvelous sculptor but David Smith can hold down the walls. Tony smith holds down the horizon. I can prove it.

MR. SILK: In your house, I guess?

MS. PARSONS: I'm a great admirer. A fantastic architect he would have been if they let him be, but they clipped his wings all the time. So he decided to go into sculpture.

MR. SILK: Are there other contemporary architects that interest you?

MS. PARSONS: Pei to me is a great one. He's my favorite. I think Pei's fantastic.


MS. PARSONS: Yes.

MR. SILK: It's sculpture is what it is.

MS. PARSONS: Yes, it's sculpture.

MR. SILK: Beaubourg doesn't do anything like that.

MS. PARSONS: The Beaubourg has something to do with our arrival on the moon. It's a whole other...the end of the Gothic. Pei when he did that right wing in Washington, I think that's the end of the Gothic. Now we're going into something else, which has something to do with our arrival on the moon. Beaubourg fascinates me too, but it doesn't give me aesthetic kick.

MR. SILK: What do you feel is happening here with buildings going up? It's going to be crazy.

MS. PARSONS: Like mad, yes.

MR. SILK: Where are they going to put all the people? I mean how are we going to get here and go home?

MS. PARSONS: I know. How are we going to move on the streets? How are we going to get fed?

MR. SILK: It's hard enough.

MS. PARSONS: Chicago is terrific of course. It's a marvelous city.

MR. SILK: Architecture, oh sure.

MS. PARSONS: Now St. Louis has some good architecture.

MR. SILK: Okay, well thank you.

MS. PARSONS: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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