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Oral history interview with Joel Shapiro, 1988  
July 15-December 14

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Joel Elias Shapiro on July 15-December 14, 1988. The interview took place in Westport, New York, and was conducted by Lewis Kachur for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

[JULY 15, 1988]

LEWIS KACHUR: We'll start out by asking you your full name.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Joel Elias Shapiro.

LEWIS KACHUR: And you were born . . .

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: September 27, 1941.

LEWIS KACHUR: In New York?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: In Manhattan. Where was I born? The French Hospital.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you have brothers and sisters?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: One sister who was a year older -- Joan.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you were the youngest child?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Two in the family.

LEWIS KACHUR: And you were born during the second world war?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Not really. I guess right before the war started in December, but actually during World War II.

LEWIS KACHUR: Do you remember anything?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Of the war?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes -- as a kid.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh no. Well, my father was stationed at an army base and he was a physician -- Joseph. And my mother Anna and we lived . . . I don't remember. We lived in Manhattan. I guess then my parents moved to Sunnyside, Queens [N.Y.]. Then my father enlisted and we moved to Texas. I absolutely remember living -- I have distinct memories of living on this army base.

LEWIS KACHUR: So that was during the war?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: So he was in the service's medical corp?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. He was a physician.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did he go overseas at all?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, he didn't.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you were on the army base in Texas. Do you remember where?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Actually I went back there a couple of years ago just as a lark. It was in Weatherford, Texas, which I think is sort of due west of Fort Worth. Kind of arid, dry. It's no longer an army base. In fact, I went back there looking around. I don't know why. I was curious. I mean, I don't know if I had any real recollections. Maybe it was from home movies that I had seen when I was a teenager. But I remember German P.O.W.'s and swimming in the Officer's Club and stuff like that. I had a good time, as I recall.

LEWIS KACHUR: So your father was an officer in the sense that he would be like a medical officer?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, he was a captain and then a major.

LEWIS KACHUR: But the whole family was there?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right.

LEWIS KACHUR: What do you remember about it or recall from the movies?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Living in a house with a backyard and playing with my sister, swimming in the Brazos River. Quicksand. I mean, various things. Dangers. And a huge ant colony in the back. My mother could tell you more. She set up a nursery school, which may have been one of the first nursery schools in the whole area. She liked it. I think they were happy there.

LEWIS KACHUR: She ran the nursery school?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: She organized it and established it.

LEWIS KACHUR: It was like a cooperative with different people?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Possibly.

LEWIS KACHUR: She was really running it?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't think she ran it. I think she sort of initiated it. But my memories are just so vague -- I think that their reference to it after we moved back to the city after the war caused me to have more real recollection than I normally would. But I can vaguely remember the terrain in the area.

LEWIS KACHUR: Pretty flat?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Flat and dusty. Tumbleweeds and stuff like that. Now it's very depressed. I think it was the peach capital of Texas, where Mary Martin was born. So I did take this drive. I had an afternoon to kill. I had a show at the Dallas Museum so I drove to Fort Worth and then drove out and reinvestigated the whole thing. Maybe I had less recollection than I thought I did.

LEWIS KACHUR: It didn't look familiar?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: It looked familiar, actually. I mean, surprisingly.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were you with a lot of other children in this kind of group?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think there were other kids around to play with. I think my sister and I mostly, but there were definitely other kids.

LEWIS KACHUR: When your mother set up this kind of daycare thing --

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't know much about that.

LEWIS KACHUR: I wondered if she was taking care of you and also looking after other kids too.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: There were other kids. The Sparks. Maybe one came to visit us subsequently -- a friend of my father's, another doctor.

LEWIS KACHUR: And there actually were prisoners of war at that camp in Texas?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: German P.O.W.'s.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did your father look after them medically at all?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, sure.

LEWIS KACHUR: What is your parents' ancestry? I should have asked that before.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well my paternal grandfather was Russian, educated. He immigrated late. I don't exactly know the date. My maternal grandfather was not educated. He immigrated as a young man, at age thirteen. Came to New York and established a leather business and he was kind of -- I would say -- upper middle class. He prospered. My father's father had tremendous difficulty and my father was orphaned.

But my mother grew up in a more conventional manner. I wouldn't call it "bourgeois," but a house with some money, of the middle class, although my maternal grandfather Sam was not at all educated. He was quite a primitive guy.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did your parents speak any foreign languages?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. Well, they speak Yiddish. They would communicate to each other as a way of excluding my sister and myself from any sort of information, but that was the extent of it.

But they're both educated. My mother is still doing research. She's connected with Haston's Laboratory at Pace College.

LEWIS KACHUR: As a biologist?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: So they both were professional?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: In science.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, medicine, science, went to medical school.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did they go to the same medical school?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. My mother has a doctorate. She went to N.Y.U. She went back and got her doctorate later on.

LEWIS KACHUR: They met in college?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: They met in college.

LEWIS KACHUR: Which was?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Washington Square N.Y.U. My father went to City College and then he switched. Then he went to N.Y.U. Medical School.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you had a very New York background except for this interlude in the Wild West?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right -- which I don't really think had a particularly profound effect on me. But as I recall -- in fact if one talks to my mother she really enjoyed it. She thought it was a great adventure, but she's very adventurous and outgoing. And my father said that it was good for him because he saw all sorts of medical cases that he'd never see in one region. You know, this tremendous influx of soldiers with all various diseases and complications.

LEWIS KACHUR: American soldiers too?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Well, I think there were German P.O.W.s, but it was basically -- I don't know what it was. I think it was a basic training camp. Now it's an airport. I think it was an Air Force base. I don't think there's much there. What I saw looked pretty destitute -- all these migrant work conditions -- what I thought may have been this officer's club that I went back to.

LEWIS KACHUR: And how old were you when they moved out there?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: They must have gone out when I was not even a toddler. I could find out. Do you really want this factual?

LEWIS KACHUR: Some idea, yes.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I mean I can go in the next room and get it.

LEWIS KACHUR: And you came back --

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: We came back I guess in 1945.

LEWIS KACHUR: After the war was over.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right. My parents bought a house in Sunnyside on 47th Street. Do you know those sort of semi-attached garden apartments?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: They're in the Scully book on architecture. And it was sort of Sunnyside -- you know all Queens -- Lake Success, Utopia Boulevard. Bliss Street was the station -- there was sort of this utopian ideal and it was kind of leftist, well-educated group community. There were common courts so you have row houses and then in the back there was a common court.

I think actually it's been changed now. Somebody told me the common area has kind of been separated so people have their own separate little backyards. It was nice because you did have this park with trees and rocks to play in.

LEWIS KACHUR: About how many houses would be together like that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Gosh. That's a good question. I don't know. I'd have to look at a plan. Maybe eight on each side and then there were alleys or walkways going across the street so you really became friendly with your neighbors. The kids did, anyway.

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes, right. Were there a lot of children?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh yes. A tremendous amount.

LEWIS KACHUR: And so you played together mostly with people in your community?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: What kind of games?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: War. [both laugh] Burn the house of Hitler and all these little anti-Nazi stuff. War games. I think World War II was the profound concept.

LEWIS KACHUR: Right. Shooting?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Shooting guns, shooting rocket ships. We were very into Buck Rogers, too, as I recall. My friend Michael and I had a rocket ship. Plus actually there were quite a few artists who lived in that area who my parents were friendly with. I think Sunnyside had quite a number of artists -- the W.P.A. people and whatnot -- so they had a strong interest in the arts. I mean not strong. Strong enough so it wasn't some alien concept.

LEWIS KACHUR: It was around?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. They had both gone to the Museum of Modern Art since its inception. There was one guy -- Nat Schwartzberg. Is his son Peter Schwartzberg? Does that ring a bell?

LEWIS KACHUR: No.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well he was an artist and he actually taught art classes in our basement for a period of time. And there were ceramic workshops. I did all that sort of stuff as a kid and loved doing it.

LEWIS KACHUR: So your family actually kind of sublet your basement for classes?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, they didn't sublet it.

LEWIS KACHUR: What was the arrangement?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I have no idea what the arrangement was. It was just sort of out of friendship. They were friends of my parents, probably patients of my father. And that's what he did there for a period of time.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you take those classes then?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I think. I mean, I know I did.

LEWIS KACHUR: Doing drawing?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Drawing, painting.

LEWIS KACHUR: Any particular kind of things you remember?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: That I did?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: My mother has a good record in case they're wanted by some serious archive. [laughs] And my sister. We both did. I was probably more persistent than my sister in terms of sticking to things. I remember particularly enjoying some ceramic workshop.

LEWIS KACHUR: At school?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. Outside of school. I have this sphinx that I made like in 1949. I still have it. I made cups, various things out of clay.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did they have a kiln and a fire and everything, glazing?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I don't recall studying art in elementary school. It was a very progressive school -- P.S.150. It was a politically active time. I guess after not really being involved with politics -- not that my parents were necessarily left wing, but needless to say they got caught up in the whole feeling of the community because of their sort of liberal leanings. It was quite anti-Semitic, too.

LEWIS KACHUR: It wasn't a Jewish neighborhood?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. Sunnyside Gardens itself was sort of liberal, kind of leftist, but the surrounding area was sort of working-class Catholic. I think at that time the Archdiocese in the city was deeply anti-Semitic, very right wing. So school teachers were pulled out in the middle of the year.

LEWIS KACHUR: This was in the early '50s?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I remember Bob Thompson, who was the Secretary of the Communist Party, was stabbed. They came to my father's office and my father cleaned the wound, sutured it. The F.B.I. was there within a day. [chuckles] They asked, "Why did you do that?" Well my dad said, "Well, the guy was bleeding to death." [chuckles] But we knew a lot of those people. I think it was a kind of politically very active time.

LEWIS KACHUR: Your father had a general practice?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: In the neighborhood?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: He wasn't a G.P. His specialty was internal medicine, but he did have a pretty big practice.

LEWIS KACHUR: And did your mother work?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: She wasn't working then. It was only when I was in high school that she really got back and got involved in her work. She had studied some sculpture. I remember she had some plaster sculptures in the basement.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did she do that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't know whether she did. I think she must have done it in college or before. So she was interested. And my father had a patient who was a primitive art dealer.

LEWIS KACHUR: Who was that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Carlebach. He had a gallery. He had good stuff so my parents had quite a nice collection.

LEWIS KACHUR: You mean he would get it as payment?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. I think he would just buy it because he liked the guy.

LEWIS KACHUR: African art?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: African, Northwest Indian stuff, New Guinea. He'd buy the odd piece. It was never sort of an obsessive collection. It was just things that he liked.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you like them?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, I loved them. It excited me. Actually most of the time we spent together we would

visit museums.

LEWIS KACHUR: The time you spent with your father?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Of course I would go to the Metropolitan Museum where I wanted to look at only the Egyptian stuff and the armor. I didn't give a shit about the paintings.

LEWIS KACHUR: Arms and armor I think --

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Arms and armor and Egyptian stuff. That I was keen on.

LEWIS KACHUR: You went to the Met fairly regularly?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. And the Museum of Natural History. I was always interested in art, but I didn't pursue it. I mean, I had this sort of idea that I was supposed to become a physician. It was tough to come to the realization that in fact what I really was good at, and what interested me, and what satisfied me, was doing art work. That came much later. Am I going into enough detail?

LEWIS KACHUR: No, that's fine. What you started to say is I guess getting a bit ahead.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Okay. You'd better guide because I'm not sure what pace or how much detail you want to go into. I mean, my recollection of the people who were more interesting to me were not the physicians, but the various artists. One guy was a ceramicist -- this guy named Soriano who we spent a lot of time with and this guy Carlebach. It seemed to me that the people who were more exciting to me --

Now this may have had to do with somehow that I had some sense that I could participate. It was some kind of real access with my own involvement. It had nothing to do with medicine, but what was interesting is that my parents were interested in the arts.

LEWIS KACHUR: But your mother in this period wasn't really so active?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think she was. Both of them.

LEWIS KACHUR: I mean in terms of doing sculpture herself and showing you anything about clay modeling or anything like that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. Gifts would always be art supplies -- paper and paint and crayons and pastels. So I think both of them were encouraging in terms of an interest in art. I think the only thing I ever really ended up collecting -- actually my father had some things he had bought at auction when they were raising funds for the Lincoln Brigade.

LEWIS KACHUR: In the late '30s?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right. Harrington was a patient. Right now he's dead and my father is dead, but I think the widow may have been a patient for years.

LEWIS KACHUR: Harrington?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Harrington was a socialist.

LEWIS KACHUR: But they didn't buy it? Miro posters, for example --

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't think they ever had posters. The only real stuff they had was the African stuff. We used to play with it, too, so this wasn't treated precious. I mean, I recall these sort of physical wrestling with my father and whatnot and we would utilize these objects --

LEWIS KACHUR: Like props?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Like weapons and props or they really became part of certain rituals [laughter] that were rapidly incorporated into the family. They weren't put up as precious objects of value.

LEWIS KACHUR: With light on them and labels?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: With light on them. I think the fact any number of -- an African stool broke and I still have this thing here, a piece of Eskimo scrimshaw. One of those sort of folk carvings on a walrus rib or whatever the hell it is. Then on the end it was busted off because we threw it at each other. [laughs] This is not a kind of sedate family where things were elevated. It was not a formal atmosphere at all. If anything, it was quite a wild household.

LEWIS KACHUR: And your sister too participated in this?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: My sister was wilder.

LEWIS KACHUR: She was older. But you're both around the same age so I guess you must have played a lot together?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, we did, and I had lots of cousins. I mean, I have my cousin Bobby in Borough Park and none of them had any real kind of interest in culture, I don't think, which is not true of my parents. I mean, they really were open to ideas. Much more progressive. I think my mother's sister's kids were kind of -- and still are -- sort of stiff and rigid and have shitty taste. I don't think my cousin Ann would know, you know, anything from anything else. She would really have response to sentimental things rather than anything of any substance, so that was not something that was shared in the family.

Although that is not entirely true because I think one cousin who I was particularly fond of -- actually they were both cousins. She was a voice coach and I guess he was an intellectual. He just wanted to be an intellectual. He was promoted as being an intellectual or presented as being intellectual at least in terms of --

LEWIS KACHUR: Did that seem attractive to you?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Well he was worldly and he had come over from Russia and studied at the Sorbonne. He was in charge of German war reparation funds. Actually, he did a lot of work -- Leon Shapiro -- getting Jews out of Europe. He was a lively guy and so was his wife. Who recently died. I'm the executor of the estate. So I mean it was a house with real values. I mean, it wasn't value in money, although money was of course important.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you have any contact with woodworking? Any relatives that were cabinet makers or something?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. My cousin was a machinist. My uncle Jerrod Jerome was a machinist, so he was very much involved with making things. If something had to be done in the house Jerry would come over and do it. My father was hopeless.

LEWIS KACHUR: He wasn't very manual?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. So Jerome was the manual one, so he would do all that. And that was interesting too. I always liked making things. I remember carving something. If somebody carved something -- we had a housekeeper, Ann Schultz, and her boyfriend. This was after the war. This must be like in the early '40s -- late '40s. She took care of us. I remember her boyfriend carved some object for me -- I think it was a knife or something -- out of wood and I thought that was fabulous. I thought it was great.

LEWIS KACHUR: You kept that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I kept that. That was something that was important to me. Much more important than some manufactured object. I just think as I look back in retrospect there are lots of keys why I would end up moving towards what I do rather than the medical profession.

LEWIS KACHUR: Although there was some pressure towards that, I gather?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Sure.

LEWIS KACHUR: How about in terms of things like going to camp and doing crafts?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, I did all that. I went to camp. I think I went to camp when I was five. I was very, very young. Where the hell did I go? I forget the name of the camp. It was very left wing. It was very progressive. I hated it. I was much too young to go. Then I proceeded to go to camps after that. You know, my memory of camp is much more -- I mean I sort of got into fishing. We fished a lot and I remember one camp -- this is at an early age. I don't know how old I was. Rowing around and trying to catch fish and not participating. I was never one for participatory sports. You know, baseball. Maybe I was too inherently competitive and felt that I wasn't skilled enough -- or competitive and lazy, I'm not sure what combination. So I really did not participate too much.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you go to upstate New York?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. You want to know the name?

LEWIS KACHUR: No. Did you spend a lot of summers away?



JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, but I don't recall how many. And of course, my sister would go to the same camp. That was always a problem. I mean to get away from your older sister who is so dominating to you. That would be enough to -- I felt somehow limited by that.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were you quiet?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think more introverted than extroverted. This was at an early age. I think things changed as I got older. Then my parents moved. They moved from Sunnyside. I don't know why they did. My father moved his practice to Forest Hills and they rented an apartment in Beechhurst. Whitestone. Do you know the area?

LEWIS KACHUR: You mean the Whitestone Bridge?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, sort of where the Frog's Neck Bridge is now. They had a nice modern apartment. It was kind of an interesting apartment with great stuff, who knows if it was great. It was all sort of very modern furniture. You know, real '50s stuff. Really high tech -- Eames.

LEWIS KACHUR: That came with it?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. They bought it.

LEWIS KACHUR: That was moving up from Sunnyside?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I'm not sure it was moving up. Yes, it was moving up. Sunnyside really was just sort of a proletariat place. Sort of odd ideas. Bliss Street.

LEWIS KACHUR: [chuckles] Look on the "sunny side"?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right. Well, I mean all these various pleasant names.

LEWIS KACHUR: Joseph Cornell lived on Utopia Parkway.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right. Well, that must have been how the real estate developers lured people in.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you went to a different school when you moved?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right. I moved when I was junior high school age. I was going to Junior High School 125. It was really a shitty school. Tough and rotten. Then I went to a school in Beachhurst for one year and then after that I went to Bayside High School.

LEWIS KACHUR: What kind of subjects did you study? What subjects did you like best, let's say?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I didn't study much art. The only thing I did well in was one art class. Actually I got a "D" in the first art class I took. I got either a "D" or an "F." I didn't fail the course. I know that. I think I received a "D." Many of my friends were involved. They had a strong art department so a lot of them were involved in the art department.

LEWIS KACHUR: In high school?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, but I wasn't doing that. I really avoided it. Maybe my junior year I took some art classes. I was a terrible student. I was never a good student. B-.

LEWIS KACHUR: Any subject you particularly like?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. Well, I mean I liked history and economics and I guess I hated the sciences. Hated math. Despised math and science, which I was taking a lot of with this notion of becoming a doctor.

LEWIS KACHUR: So already in high school you had some kind of idea?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't think I had the idea, but I don't think I had the idea of it clearly -- in my mind I didn't know it. But I did a lot. I took classes at the Museum of Modern Art.

LEWIS KACHUR: When you were in high school?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: That was on weekends?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't remember. I think I was feeling sort of depressed. I don't know why I did that. I must have been like in the ninth grade or something. So I took some class. They had a school at the Modern years ago. They don't anymore. They had an education department. They still do, I think, but at that point they actually had teachers. You could take sculpture, painting.

LEWIS KACHUR: What did you take?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I had a painting class. I have work from that.

LEWIS KACHUR: What kind of things were you assigned? Do you remember the teacher?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. I have no idea who she was. I don't think she liked me. That was my distinct recollection.

LEWIS KACHUR: Well, whose idea was it to take painting?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: It was mine.

LEWIS KACHUR: Because some of your friends, you said, were taking art.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, I just did it on my own. It must have been very early because if it was later on I would be aware of it. As I recall, it was like a children's class. Maybe the eighth grade. It must have been eighth or ninth grade that I did that. I enjoyed it. I'd hang out at the library across the street and then go to the museum.

LEWIS KACHUR: The Museum of Modern Art?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right. It was still attached to the Whitney. Do you remember that?

LEWIS KACHUR: From 53rd you could go through?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: Anything you liked?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I remember seeing a Morris Graves show. As a kid I liked it.

LEWIS KACHUR: Right. Like animals and stuff?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I mean, as a kid I guess it was very attractive work. Mysterious. Romantic. Enigmatic. Everything you thought you wanted to be. I listened to a lot of music. As soon as I was old enough I used to go to jazz places -- Five Spot.

LEWIS KACHUR: In New York?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. John Coltrane and we would sneak in. Actually my sister took me. She took me to Birdland once. I thought that was great. That was life. That was really exciting.

LEWIS KACHUR: Just getting into the mid-'50s? Later '50s?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. You had to be eighteen so it was kind of tough. As a sixteen year old you had to sneak your way in, but that was pretty lenient. Some places you could go and they didn't care. Maybe actually Birdland had a place where you could sit and listen and then the back part had ten tables and booths. So I spent a lot of time doing that. That interested me.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you ever want to be a musician?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No.

LEWIS KACHUR: But you liked jazz?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I may have tried some piano lessons once or something. I had some friends who played. Like John Spingarn played saxophone and friends in high school were pretty into it. What else can I tell you?

LEWIS KACHUR: It sounds like you had a lot of friends? I mean you were sociable?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I wasn't anti-social. It was a pretty social school. I was always sociable. I don't see any of them anymore. One -- I got invited to a party of his last year and I didn't go. And then I stood an old friend of mine up for lunch and that was the end of maintaining those relationships that I tried to maintain for years.

There was a good art teacher -- guy named Henriques -- who was good. He was good because it was a painting class and I made sculpture.

LEWIS KACHUR: That's what you said in the interview.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: If you want to get an "A" or "A+" --

LEWIS KACHUR: You kept handing in sculpture for your assignments?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right. And he wanted to keep my work. He really was very encouraging. At that point I think --- by the time of my junior year in high school I was doing a lot of work. These huge figure drawings -- you know ten/twelve foot high. Charcoal and very kind of expressive. I think they were very primitive.

LEWIS KACHUR: This is part of the curriculum or you just did it?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. I never studied anything in the curriculum. I just did them on my own.

LEWIS KACHUR: And what kind of things were you making that you were turning in to this class? Were you modeling clay?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Plaster. I did a lot of drawings. I enjoyed it.

LEWIS KACHUR: Figures, basically?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I did a lot of figures. A lot of the stuff was pretty abstract, but I mean it was really jivey. You know -- phswu! A slash here and very Tasheest. Kid stuff, but some real ideas.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was that part of your interest in jazz? In terms of art?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't think any of my interests were articulated in that form. It was really sort of much more intuitive. That was something that I found real pleasant to work with. And had a certain applause . . .

LEWIS KACHUR: Because of this teacher, you mean?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, no. Also peers.

LEWIS KACHUR: That was cool?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I was the artist. Not so much cool. It had nothing to do with cool. It was just I knew that I was better than -- it's disgusting to say, but I felt that I was clearly infinitely more talented. I had a girlfriend, Jane Scholtz. She was seriously involved with the school magazine and all this art stuff. She was very chirpy and perky and a real participator. I, on the other hand, was sort of sullen, smoking cigarettes and generally not a hoodlum, but nastier than nice. I had lots of bum friends too. You know, guys who were kind of assholes and troublemakers. I also had friends who were much brighter than I who were Arista students -- that was the honor society in high school -- who were much more serious about their studies. Then I knew the kind of guys who were sort of troublesome, drinkers and not such well-educated ones.

LEWIS KACHUR: As you were?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, as I and the other group of friends I had -- so really sort of two -- to some extent I think I compartmentalized them, too. So I did have this high school girlfriend who was involved and I hung out with all of those people. I always felt that I had a kind of raw, expressive talent. [laughs]

LEWIS KACHUR: And they liked your --

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I think so. Jim Merriweather had a big thing of mine in his house and other people had something tacked up. Sure, I was caught up with beatnikism and in general what one saw as "hip" at that age.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were the James Dean movies out at the time?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, they were out, but I was never that absorbed in James Dean.

LEWIS KACHUR: What kind of things did you like of popular culture?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Good question. That was the late '50s. There wasn't much that I liked.

LEWIS KACHUR: Elvis Presley?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I was much more involved with listening to the Monk and Coltrane stuff, Miles Davis. I was much more interested in jazz. No, the popular stuff was great, but I never thought about it. And I never listened to a lyric. It went beyond me. Where my wife Ellen Phelan -- she's a painter, she'll be here soon -- Ellen knows every lyric. Her whole high school was involved in music. She was musical-drama where I was sort of musical. I mean, I liked to listen to jazz. I think I liked more its abstract qualities, much more.

LEWIS KACHUR: I was going to say, what kind of jazz? Was it really this pretty experimental jazz?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Be-bop. Yes. Well, it was post-be-bop. It wasn't experimental. That was what was going on. So that was high school. Then it was time for me to go to college. Of course I had to go to college so I went to the University of Colorado for a year. Flunked out.

LEWIS KACHUR: I was wondering about that because in the Hirshhorn catalog they said you studied at the University of Colorado. I hadn't seen that in any other catalog.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I wouldn't say I studied. [both laugh] I never went to classes.

LEWIS KACHUR: What schools did you apply to? Did you want to go somewhere away?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, that's where I wanted to go. I mean, I liked it except I actually never went to class.

LEWIS KACHUR: This was in Denver? Boulder?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Boulder. It was great. It was wonderful to get out of New York and get into this Western space. Lots of space, lots of girls. You know, I really should have been studying art and I think if I was I would have been focused. But instead I think I was very crazy and tried to struggle with this idea of becoming a doctor which is the antithesis of my interest.

LEWIS KACHUR: You declared yourself as a pre-med or you applied as someone going into medicine?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, but it was sort of a joke. I did a lot of horseback riding. We used to ride into the mountains and stuff. I did rock climbing. What else? That was about it. Guns. I was heavy into guns.

LEWIS KACHUR: Hunting?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, just shooting. Shooting pistols. And the people around me were pretty nuts. I maintained one relationship with one guy but it dissipated. Steve Woodard. His father was an architect. That sort of fell apart. So I think I was pretty confused throughout school.

LEWIS KACHUR: Why did you choose to go there? Did you have any friends going to that school?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you visit the place before?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I thought it looked great.

LEWIS KACHUR: You liked it?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: That was great, but I was not a conscientious student. Then I went back to New York and I took some classes at Queens College at night and I did well. Then I switched to N.Y.U. and did well.

LEWIS KACHUR: What were you studying?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I was again supposed to be a pre-medical student. I mean this hadn't gone. And my father was a very dominant kind of strong character and the idea of being an artist didn't seem possible.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you ever talk about it? Did you have it formulated as a goal to go to college to study art?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Did I talk about it? No. It was never even a possibility. Then I still worked. I probably didn't do much after high school for a long time.

LEWIS KACHUR: What kind of work did you do?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, when I say "worked" -- worked in art. Then what happened? Oh, then in my senior year of college I decided to apply to the Peace Corp.

LEWIS KACHUR: So what had you been majoring in at N.Y.U.?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I was supposed to go to medical school. There was no chance I'd ever be accepted in medical school because I had zero interest.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you had pre-med courses? Chemistry and biology?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Mostly biology, which I really dislike. I mean, I truly wanted to go to art school.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you weren't very happy?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were you doing anything else at the time?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. What did I do? Did I have a job? No. I finished college, I took this Peace Corps test. That really intrigued me. I thought, god, this is great. I took the test and I figured with whatever one had to do to get in and I was accepted. Then I was assigned to go to India and I was ecstatic that I had something to do that I thought I would like and could participate in. I think from entering college to the end of college was an absolute ordeal. I don't think I had any fun. I had a few romances which didn't amount to much.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you didn't choose to go to India?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, I did. You had a choice. My sister married an Indian, see? This is Dhirha Motiwala. They were living in Bombay.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I had applied.

LEWIS KACHUR: And you could list places you were interested in?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. You could say you were interested in going to southeast Asia or Africa. I think India was one place that I put down. India was my first choice actually. Then I think there was a delay. You were accepted and then you had to wait. They had to check you out. Run you through evaluations and check into your background.

LEWIS KACHUR: Also in terms of your skills, I guess?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I don't know about skills. I'm not so sure about skills. I mean, I think they were looking for certain individuals they felt would be successful and whatever test they had I clearly did well on. I did speak a little Spanish. "Yo hablo espanol." So I went to Davis.

Now, before that for that semester before I met Amy Snider who -- I met her at a party. The party was at Jim McBride's -- the guy who did *The Big Easy*. Jim was this hot young filmmaker at the time. So it was a party at Jim's house and I knew Jim because he was dating Fern [Tulman McBride] who was my good high school friend.

I think Fern and I really had more similar interests. I mean she was interested in music, she was interested in art, she was more interested in culture or the arts. I'm not sure if I was cultured necessarily because I didn't give shit about many things. I mean, I liked Shakespeare. I liked to read literature like that.

Somehow I had been in this relationship with this girl Barbara. It was not too exciting, but it was probably the first more fully developed sexual relationship. Not that I hadn't had sexual relationships, but I think as a very young kid and adolescent I really knew more about getting laid and less about any kind of dialogue. Dialogue was so immature. That's all it was. And so somehow I had gotten into this relationship with this girl and had taken quite a while to work my way out of it.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was this when you were at N.Y.U.?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. I met her when I was at Queens College. She was actually quite a nice person, but her mind didn't interest me at all. Anyway, so Fern had invited me to this party and I went. I saw this woman who I thought was very attractive and we struck up a friendship. It ended up that she had gone to school with my sister and we had a lot in common. She had studied painting so this was really the first.

LEWIS KACHUR: This was Amy?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Amy Snider. She had studied painting. She is now the Chairwoman at Pratt Institute in art education. I must be her prize pupil. I know I am, but she never gets credited for it. I tried in that Ruth Bass

article to give her credit because she had mentioned to me that she was very upset because here I was quite successful and well considered and she really had encouraged me to work. When I met her I began to work all the time. At that point -- this is before I went to India -- she was very supportive and encouraging.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did she do art then too?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, she was teaching. I forget where. Joan of Arc Junior High School? But she was teaching art and she had never really pursued anything. She had lots of self doubt. Her sister's a painter -- Jenny Snider, but Amy really didn't pursue art. Some reason or somehow she just couldn't bite into it. I mean, I think she did, but she was not a I guess she felt she wasn't talented. She had been to school and graduate school with Bruce Nauman in California. Now Bruce was probably an undergraduate then. She was at the University of Wisconsin doing her Masters and I had met her right after that. She came back and she was teaching.

LEWIS KACHUR: In New York?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, and she had an apartment on 68th Street and I spent a lot of time there.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was she older than you?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: She was one year older. She was my sister's age.

LEWIS KACHUR: And she had gone to --

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: She went to Queen's College.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did she go to high school with your sister?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Elementary school. My sister was much more literary. She's dead. We'll get into that later. She was more involved with poetry. I don't know. But anyway, so they had known each other from school. Anyway there was enough bond there that somehow the relationship evolved. I spent all that time working and then it was time to do to this Peace Corps training. Now what the hell. It's 1964?

LEWIS KACHUR: Well, you graduated in 1964.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: So it must have been like 1964-1965 -- right in the middle -- that I went to the University of California, in Davis. I spent a lot of time at the graduate studios. I mean, at this point I was pretty ambitious and hungry to be an artist. I recall cutting up tin cans and making pieces and making sculptures. Who did I spend time with? Ellen van Fleet, who's an artist. I mean, what the hell. She wrote me a letter a couple of years ago, I wrote her back and never heard from her again. There were good students there. Bruce was doing a Masters. I didn't know him. Stephen Kaltenbach.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you were doing a Masters of Fine Art?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I wasn't. I was in the Peace Corps. I was training in the Peace Corps, but I was busy --

LEWIS KACHUR: At Davis you were training?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. It was right next to the art studios so I was spending all my spare time working. There was another artist in the group. I forget his name. And that was the extent of it. Then I went to India.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was Amy in California too?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, she was in New York. That relationship was dormant at that point. Eventually we got married, but it was dormant at that point.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you went to California in 1964 to 1965?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, it must have been like December of 1964. I know I was in India in 1965. I'm not revealing much. Am I? No.

LEWIS KACHUR: But there's things that I haven't even seen in your bios.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, sure. You never tell anyone everything. Oh, an important thing: In my senior year of college I went into therapy and that really helped clarify my feelings and my desire to be an artist. I became pretty sure that that's what I wanted. So by the time I was in the Peace Corps -- which was great because it was a period where those ideas could ferment -- I could really sort of do some work.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you had gotten to the point of applying for medical school or getting near to graduating

college?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, I don't think I applied. There may have been one token application. It was ridiculous for me to have gone.

LEWIS KACHUR: And you started going to, like, psychotherapy?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: In the city?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Well, I don't have to tell who, do I?

LEWIS KACHUR: Well, was it once a week?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, it was more. Two or three times a week that I was seeing him and that really helped me. I think it was important for me at the time. I think it was some way of getting away from the influence of my parents. Not that they stifled me. I think I stifled my desire to be an artist by my own inhibition and my own lack of confidence, even though I felt that was someplace. So I went to India and I met people who were quite involved with the arts.

LEWIS KACHUR: Indian people?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Indians and Americans. Well there was one -- Joyce Roy -- who was an architect who was married to a professor of sociology -- Professor Pradipto -- at Osmania University. They were friends with the Sens and he was Chairman of the Board of British American Tobacco. His father had been Tagore's secretary and his wife's parents were important -- Chief Minister of Bengal or something or Chief Judge. You know, quite a kind of grand Bengali family.

They had lots of art in the house. They had a fabulous house. Servants. They used to have dinners. You'd have lamb stuffed with chicken, anything your heart desired. His brother was the secretary of the Communist Party of the state of Andhrapradesh. We were in Hyderabad, which is a great city. It was fabulous then and Nizam was still alive. I mean, it was the most romantic place.

There is this Islamic city. It's on the Deccan and it was Nizam that controlled all the area from Ajanta Lauro all the way down close to Madras. Nizam no longer had any control, but the guy was still alive. It was a wild Islamic city. There were lots of Shiites actually. I mean, these guys would go around during Maharan beating themselves into a pulp. So I loved it. When I first landed in India somehow instead of going --

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you go by boat?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, by plane. I was truly happy in the Peace Corps. I was so happy to get away from this scenario of failure -- this idea of becoming a doctor which was beyond me and nothing that I was really involved with. This was really a liberating experience, so I was ecstatic. I had been involved with this relationship with Amy and I was now out of that relationship. I want to talk about this before my daughter comes.

I was now out of the relationship, independent, free, and I recall taking this jeep ride in the middle of the night or whatever the hell we got there -- early in the morning, like at four a.m. -- from the airport into New Delhi. There were camels on the road and we stopped for tea. I was with some physician -- the local doctor from the Peace Corps doctor who was quite wild. I was just ecstatic. I mean, I'll never forget the trip. It was wonderful -- the smells, sights, colors.

LEWIS KACHUR: The culture was interesting?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. To be immersed in Islamic culture was -- I think I was very ambitious. I mean, ambition is something I've always had, but it was thwarted by the obsession to be a physician. So I had a great time. We went to Hyderabad to study for three months. They had this Peace Corps down there. I was supposed to teach vegetable gardening.

LEWIS KACHUR: I meant to ask you what your assignment was.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: You will notice on the way out that there's indeed a wilted vegetable garden. What we were teaching in is these basically Gandhian schools that were set up by the Mahatmaji where they were going to turn village school teachers into -- the idea was to educate the teachers, who would then educate the community on how to be more self-sufficient. I think that was one of Gandhi's notions, that each community could be self-sufficient and satisfy their own needs. I'll make it very brief.

We worked with vegetable gardens, fertilizers, laboratories and smokeless ovens -- which were fun to build because you'd build them out of mud and cow dung. You'd start a fire in one of them and then channel the fire so that each fire would reach out of the top pole because a lot of the women had terrible glaucoma.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you built these yourself with dung and mud?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. We'd build them with the school teachers. Then the school teachers were supposed to communicate this information to the rest of the community.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were you a teacher?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well we were teaching in these basic training schools, schools training school teachers. They were kind of primary teacher-training institutes one might say.

LEWIS KACHUR: And everybody knew each other?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Usually they were set up depending on how orthodox -- if they were deeply orthodox they would have a kind of -- one school in particular was where they had hand woven stuff. But I mean at that point in the '60s, Ghandi's notion, of course, was a liability as a concept. This notion of village self-sufficiency and cottage industry, in retrospect, one thinks -- in fact, what they ended up focusing on, of course, is industrialization, which has a far more profound change than people growing their own eggplants.

I met these people. The Sens were very involved with the arts and I vacationed with them. The first thing I did was go to Ajanta [and] Ellore [caves]. I had books at home. My father had these UNESCO books which I pored through. I mean, I pored through art books as a kid -- you know, high school and whatnot, but there were pictures. Maybe it was Skira. I don't know who published it. It was a large book with big color photographs.

[INTERRUPTION]

Then that was the first trip I took on my own. I remember Lynn taking me to Gauge Railroad -- all through the Deccan. It was really unbearable. Third class unreserved, four people stacked up like a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich and I was the bacon or something. Animals and kids. Anyway, we got there and it was spectacular.

I was fortunate because I ended up meeting people in Hyderabad, which is very sophisticated and a big city. Some of the people had a lot of money and lived on some grander style than I was accustomed to. This is early on in the Peace Corps. We were the third group of volunteers to go to India so it was still kind of novel.

LEWIS KACHUR: How many were in your group?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, when I say the third group it was the third batch of volunteers. There may have been two hundred and seventy Peace Corps volunteers, maybe, in the country at that time. By the time I left, there were like two thousand. The Vietnam War really had escalated.

I didn't think of it as a way of avoiding the draft, though it did occur to me that this was better than going to graduate school, which I had no interest in, or going into the Army. It seemed like a very positive thing. It was the first smart decision I had made.

LEWIS KACHUR: Could you say what you did?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, yes. So we moved every three months, but I managed -- and there were so few volunteers and particularly in the South we were kind of autonomous. We didn't have to report to any higher authority. Always being kind of charming and social was relatively easy for me. Some people were totally intimidated. They had no capacity to function in this sort of bureaucracy. But I found it no problem, so I was really left alone. We did move.

There was a group of three other volunteers. There was a nurse, a nutritionist, and I don't know what the other one was. I was the one man.

LEWIS KACHUR: Guard?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I was a guard, right. A pitbull. I was with a group before that. Somehow we didn't get along. We had to split up. We were living in a jungle. It was exciting. I'd move every three months, which was great.

LEWIS KACHUR: With the same group?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well no, but I managed to have a tremendous amount of time to myself. There wasn't



much to do. I would go hang out at the coffee shop and drink coffee and all the Indians. Split for two days and go to Madras to the music festival if I was near Madras. Or go to I really looked at a lot. I saw a lot of south India. A lot of architecture, tremendous amount of art, and met people who were really --

LEWIS KACHUR: Stone sculpture?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, stone sculpture which Elephanta all over and all throughout the south. I made side trips to the north to Bengal and and stuff.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you see your sister there?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. She separated from her husband, but I did see him once or twice. He would get drunk and I would get stoned. We would have these -- I don't know what it was. It must have been hashish. Really strong hashish. Truly potent. That was the problem when we got to India, that it was very hard to get drugs. [laughter] It was absolutely difficult.

It was a peace going on. My friend and I -- Phil -- I won't mention his name actually because now I think he's in charge of drug rehabilitation in the State of New York. I won't mention his name to protect him.

LEWIS KACHUR: Phil blank?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Phil blank. We were trying to get pot and somehow we kept getting this crap that you'd have to mix with milk to make a solution that you'd drink. This is the '60s, remember. Everyone was smoking dope. I wasn't a big pothead. I was a recreational smoker. I smoked it if I had it. If I didn't have it I didn't give a shit. Because everyone else in the Peace Corps was very straight.

LEWIS KACHUR: Muslims?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. They didn't use drugs. It was deeply outlawed.

LEWIS KACHUR: You'd get kicked out?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, absolutely. Shit, if they even had any notion. We were sort of running around the Islamic section of the city trying to get ganja. Finally we had a cook when I was in this jungle and the cook was quite a character. He'd been in jail and this and that, but he was very savvy and smart. So I finally -- when I sniffed he said yes.

He went out and brought in some dope or something. [both laugh] But that was at the beginning. Why I mention this, I don't know. Anyway, it was a moment where I really had time to myself. I looked at a lot of work. But I did other things.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you look at Indian sculpture from an artistic point of view?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I had every book. I had all the books. That big double volume on art in sound and stage. I really looked and studied. I was involved. This is the first thing that I could sort of sink my teeth into. I had the sense in myself. And I painted a little bit. I didn't do that much. I didn't have that much time.

LEWIS KACHUR: I guess there wasn't the facility?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. There really wasn't any kind of facility, but I did some painting which I threw away. Then when the schools would stop, you would get secondary jobs, and one secondary job I had -- one of my friends, one of the Sens who was very involved with handicrafts. I had a job where I was to resurrect this Indian handicraft -- Nirmal Industries. They did this very beautiful woven paintings,

Somehow they met some French broad who taught them how to use lacquer. They used to do these very beautiful kind of folk paintings on vessels and whatnot. She had somehow gotten them to do these sort of big Ajanta cave, big Muslim kind of --

LEWIS KACHUR: Sexy?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Sexy, vulgar stuff. My friend Nandita [Potlasen] wanted me to go there and try to re-orient them to do their more traditional, tasteful, thoughtful, measured kind of work. So I spent three weeks living in Hyderabad trying to do that.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did it work?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think a little bit. I don't know. Then the next summer I did a photographic essay on

weavers and I set visiting I was taking a lot of pictures at the time -- where people were weaving. All these eleven year old kids weaving. So I did a whole slew of photographs, but I don't think anything ever came of it.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were these black and white photographs?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Color, but somehow I really got more involved and I had various jobs and it worked.

LEWIS KACHUR: I'm surprised you got to do so many different things.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, some of the volunteers got stuck in little villages and they were teaching school. One guy -- they were changing the chicken stock. See, the guys who got into these agricultural programs -- I was in this teaching program. I don't know why they picked me for that. I mean, who knows? They had reasons. Once you went into training, it was more of a really psychological battery of tests that they gave.

LEWIS KACHUR: For three months before you went?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. Maybe it was less. Not even six weeks. Then there was in-country training. I saw the whole thing as great for me and I was finally having a good time.

LEWIS KACHUR: It sounds like you had a good time.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, I did very well, as a matter of fact. Better than college. You know, plus I was coming into my own. I was growing up, maturing.

LEWIS KACHUR: And did you have friends among your peers or in terms of the people you were working with?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I had a girlfriend who was a pain in the ass - Linda Rice. She was nice and she was convenient, and she was sort of okay, but she was -- I kept trying to extract myself. But living under the same room was tough. I would want to go to Madras on my own to the music festival and there were people who studied with Toppler and whatnot.

There were American musicians there studying oriental instruments. It was tremendous. Just seemed much more exciting than to have this burdensome friend along. I always regretted that. I think I would had better if I hadn't developed this relationship.

LEWIS KACHUR: You mean, it kept you in the group more or kept you among the other Americans?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Maybe more. I had friends, you know. Phil Brown. Phil and I were pretty close. I have to call him up. He called me up last summer. We would talk about ideas and he came back and maybe he did a dissertation He was a philosophy student so we would talk a lot about all kind of crap. I refer to it as crap now.

LEWIS KACHUR: But you were interested at the time?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh yes. Support your whole function. I think artists tend to use theory as justification. Anything to back up the action which seems a little meaningless. or anything I don't know. I'm not sure if

LEWIS KACHUR: Sounds good.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I'm not sure if you buy it though.

LEWIS KACHUR: Well, it diminishes the role of the critic too.  
[chuckles]

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. I don't think it diminishes the role of the critic at all. Wittgenstein would be thrown out, but it mostly had to do with the fact that there's some analysis, and behavior and thought really is grounded in a way that art is not grounded. Art isn't that well anchored. You may not agree with me.

LEWIS KACHUR: I don't know. Maybe a philosopher would say that they're way out there and at least an artist is making objects.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I think that's true. Philosophers will rattle off -- what's-his-name at Columbia. He's good at it. Arthur Danto.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you study with him?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. I think criticism is important, but there's a point where really good stuff becomes -- Rosalind Krauss. Lynn [Cooke] is good actually. But I'm not talking about criticism as much as I'm talking about artists themselves.

LEWIS KACHUR: For their own work?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes I thought it was some I mean if you look at Peter Halley's work at you'll see a kind of anti I'm trying not to talk about that stuff. [laughs] We're supposed to talk about me in terms of my development.

LEWIS KACHUR: Right.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Now what happens? So I'm in India. I have to come to New York.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you have a certain length of time that you signed up for?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I was there for two years and I thought I was going to come back and get drafted.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was that the limit?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: When I went in, usually if you were in the Peace Corps, if you finished with the Peace Corps and you came out, the government would give you a loan, but now we were heavy into Vietnam -- 1965/1967.

LEWIS KACHUR: When you got out?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Now I should say that before I went into India Amy's sister was at Yale doing a B.A./B.F.A./M.F.A., so I visited her at Yale. That was exciting. Actually I met Jennifer Bartlett then. I'm sure I met Jenny then.

LEWIS KACHUR: This is Jenny Snider?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I met Jennifer. Was Jennifer at Yale then? This is before I went to India. I met Jennifer and her husband Ed who was a doctor or studying to be a doctor or was doing post-graduate work. I don't know what he was doing. He was at Yale. I met quite a few artists and felt accepted and in the right place so I was pretty sure about it. So then I came back, I don't know --

LEWIS KACHUR: But you didn't feel tempted then to go to Yale or something like that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I wouldn't have been accepted then. I didn't have any work. Well, anyway -- so actually by that time, I had developed a portfolio so I had to go to graduate level. I went to N.Y.U. School of Education and that seemed easy. I got a studio downtown.

LEWIS KACHUR: This is back in New York?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I brought them a portfolio and they accepted me. I also went to see Ralph Humphrey, actually. I also looked at the Hunter setup. Why did I go to N.Y.U.? Because it was only a year. It was easier and I really was not interested in spending time in school. I was interested in getting a degree so I could teach. For teaching and to stay out of the army.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did Amy also encourage you on that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: Going into teaching?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, there was a lot of pressure. At this point, my parents were not pressuring me to do anything. They were very cooperative. Her father was a real pill -- still is. It wasn't so much to go into teaching. It was just to get a graduate degree so you could get a teaching job. While I was in school I got a job at the Jewish Museum as a silver polisher in the exhibition room. Kynaston McShine hired me. Kynaston was still at the Jewish Museum. I worked with Allen Cole and Harvey Quaytman.

LEWIS KACHUR: They were working there too?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Mel Bochner, Brice Marden worked there. This was a place where artists could get a job -- I think at \$3.25 an hour. It was great.

LEWIS KACHUR: Part of the support for their contemporary art? Things that they were showing?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, and also you had jobs to do. Mel was a guard. Brice was a guard. I worked installing shows, painting boxes.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you install any contemporary shows or did you work on the more ---

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, you know what happened. I got there. I think the last show that I recall was Dick Smith, Bob Irwin and -- is it Gene Davis? Is that the name? Which was this three-person show. I don't know who organized it. Must have been Kynaston. I'm sure it was Kynaston. They had a couple of others, but then the museum got kind of sour and got very orthodox.

LEWIS KACHUR: They may have changed their policy.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, they changed their policy. Since then, they've --

LEWIS KACHUR: But you were still there at the tail end of the time when they were very contemporary?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: When it was a hot place. Then I got a teaching job at Hofstra.

LEWIS KACHUR: Let me just ask you about the silver. Did you know the man there who was the silverist? Actulaly making objects? Silversmith?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. What was his name?

LEWIS KACHUR: An older man. I can't remember the name. Sort of famous.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Not Shore? I've met him. When I was down there.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did that interest you at all?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was there anything going on that --

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. There was nothing at the museum of any interest. It was simply a job.

LEWIS KACHUR: Around art?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: It was a good job around art. I think I was in graduate school. It must have been in graduate school. I got a teaching job right after.

LEWIS KACHUR: So when you got your M.A. in education at N.Y.U., that was in 1969?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, yes. I got all A's.

LEWIS KACHUR: So then you were very devoted to studying?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: Or more devoted than you had been?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I just had to do what I wanted to. I was very hungry to work. I mean, I was working all the time. I admit there were lots of artists that I met and hung out with -- Jon Borofsky, Jennifer, and Elizabeth Murray. Elizabeth and Don [Sunseri] moved to New York and we became very close. He lives in Vermont. That's who she was married to.

Poor Don. Memory of the past. How things go. That's how it shapes out. Elizabeth -- we spent a lot of time together and I saw Jon a lot. A little bit of Sandy Wurmfeld because she was friendly with Jon. Mardik Madrikian. crazy spelling. I mean, it was very exciting and I was friendly with Harvey and Allen and that group. This must have been 1968 or 1969 and New York was hot. Young people were getting some attention.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you got yourself a studio at this point?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Where the hell -- oh yes. Amy had this small apartment and we rented a studio downtown on Broadway and Great Jones Street at 68.

LEWIS KACHUR: North of Bleecker?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, between Bleecker and Great Jones -- right around where my studio is now. Then Bob Littman who is now the director of --

LEWIS KACHUR: Down in Mexico?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. What is the name? It was the Tamayo Museum. Bob saw my work. He really liked it.

He told Marsha Tucker about it. Marsha was a curator at the Whitney Museum and Marsha invited me to be in the "Anti-Illusion" show.

LEWIS KACHUR: You were doing the monofilament stuff?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I was doing a lot of other things. I was doing something new every week. I was really churning through ideas.

Oh, there was another important thing that happened. Amy -- who was still a school teacher -- was invited. The Whitney program had this program for school teachers in Maryland. This actually was an important summer. I forget what summer it was. It was the summer of 1967 or 1968. I think it must have been 1968.

Amy had been invited to go to this teachers workshop for six weeks where they would take school teachers who were art teachers and allow them to be creative for six weeks. I went to see them and said, "Well, can I come?" We got married. I forgot to mention this. Amy and I got married. Did I mention that?

LEWIS KACHUR: No.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, we got married.

LEWIS KACHUR: You were still going to N.Y.U?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right. So we went to this thing.

LEWIS KACHUR: What year did you get married?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: When I got back from India. 1967 or 1968. I don't know. It was a long time ago. Good thing you're getting this now because I think we'd never repeat it.

LEWIS KACHUR: After that then she got invited to this workshop?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right. She was invited and I went too and there were a couple of artists there.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you had to go to Maryland?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right -- wherever it was -- and we had this big barn which I used as a studio. I worked feverishly. Really got a lot of ideas and Bob Barry -- do you know Bob Barry?

LEWIS KACHUR: Robert Barry?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes -- a conceptual artist -- Bob was there because he too was a school teacher. We became very close. I learned a tremendous amount from him. Various people visited. Ad Reinhardt came to visit. Barnett Newman. Those were the two memorable ones. Did Harold Rosenberg come down? I think Rosenberg did too. I'm not sure.

LEWIS KACHUR: These people gave critiques?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: They gave critiques. They had been invited. So these were sort of heavy hitters. Grace Hartigan wasn't too exciting, but Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt were really great. And Jim Seawright, who was a sculptor and chairman at Princeton. Bob was there. And it was very exciting for me because all of a sudden I was in the middle of it and I worked like hell. I just worked and worked and worked.

LEWIS KACHUR: What would you do?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: What kind of work?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I did these weird paintings. These kind of module paintings that turned and meandered and moved.

LEWIS KACHUR: Shaped canvases?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, kind of shaped and then these other pieces that were maybe more interesting. They hooked up to motors. These two circles on the ceiling which constantly find new positions because there was slippage in the motor. Bob Barry was very encouraging. I did a lot of work.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you were doing objects?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, they were paintings, and sort of sculpture. The first thing I cast, I cast there. They were some sort of styrofoam burnout situation. So I did a lot. I really worked. At that point, I was deeply into my work.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were you experimenting with a lot of materials?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. A tremendous amount of materials and things and I was totally aware of what was going on -- visually if not totally intellectually. I think my work was still at that point -- sort of my own, but clearly I was referring to other people. Then after that, I finished school, which was very fast, got this job at Hofstra teaching ceramics, which I didn't know shit about.

LEWIS KACHUR: Except when you did it in grade school?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I mean I didn't know anything about pottery. I mean, I knew a lot about ceramics, but I didn't know how to throw a pot. At that point my daughter was born -- Ivy -- and we lived uptown. We had an apartment on the West Side which I hated. I withdrew. I wouldn't say that I withdrew, but I felt that somehow . . .

I had begun to show a little bit. Everyone was showing. Anybody who was working was showing. SoHo was kind of like the Lower East Side. When did I meet Paula Cooper? When the hell did I work for the Jewish Museum? Where the hell was I living when I worked for the Jewish Museum? At some point -- maybe I was still downtown in the loft. Let's see. Ivy was born and we moved to this apartment.

LEWIS KACHUR: On the West Side?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you keep the studio too?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, I kept the studio way downtown. That just didn't work out because I wanted to be in my studio all the time. And I thought because of my lack of training in early years as a serious art student that I felt I had a tremendous amount of work to do to come into my own. I had lots of ideas that I wanted to do. I think it was after the summer in Maryland that I really began to work feverishly, and it was after that I began to show work.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were you teaching?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: And I was teaching. Who was teaching? Harold Buchwald was teaching and that and that was fun. Who else? Murray -- what the hell's her name? I forget her name. There were a couple of people out there.

LEWIS KACHUR: How many days a week did that involve?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Two days a week, but Hofstra is like in the middle of Long Island.

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes, and you were going out there.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: It was a serious schlepp.

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes, this is when you were already living on the West Side, too?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't remember. I think so. And then the marriage began to disintegrate for various reasons. Amy got very involved with a kind feminist rhetoric. I shouldn't say that. Feminist movement. She was increasingly displeased with my kind of refusal to get a serious job and insistence on working.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was she teaching?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, she had stopped teaching. Getting some money from my parents -- not her parents -- and I was doing my work. I'd get odd jobs. I took photographs of people's work and I built some bases and then I got a little teaching job here and there. I taught all over -- wherever I could get a job. Then the marriage really ended and that was sort of upsetting to me because we had a kid.

I was kind of terrified to be on my own, but I moved into my studio at 54 Leonard Street. Once I moved in there I really worked. Actually, I was teaching at Hofstra by then, and after the marriage ended I was still teaching. Then I worked, showed a little bit. The work was never that well received. Then I had a show at the Clocktower.

LEWIS KACHUR: This was after. . .

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. This was after the Anti-Illusion show in 1969, but nobody gave a shit about my work. It

was all wrapped up with Richard Serra's work and Keith's work.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE B]

[BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A]

There were a lot of good ideas right? Jon Borofsky was working. The ideas were all in the air. I went to Richard's [Serra] studio once. Richard was still married to Nancy Graves at the time. I looked at his place to buy it or maybe to rent? Oh. I was looking for a loft and Richard must have been moving so I checked out Richard's place.

I remember Richard had a big ----Who was that American painter? Richard what's-his-name. Richard Lindner I think. I don't know if it was a painting. It must have been a poster. That shows you how times have changed. He'd kill me for saying that. [both laugh] Nancy was doing those camels. There was a lot going on and I felt real free and open and developing ideas. Kenneth Noland lived in my building. Oh, Bill Copley lived above me.

LEWIS KACHUR: On Leonard Street?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, this was on Broadway just before we got this apartment uptown -- before my Leonard Street studio -- so the first studio was 624 Broadway. Who was in the building? Kenneth Noland was on the second floor. He was moving back from Vermont. Michael Steiner had fixed the place up. On the third floor two guys from Yale: Bill Williams -- black guy, a painter -- and Peter Bradley who is a painter who worked with Perls Gallery. Then we were on the fourth floor. Some designer was in the back. Then above me Ted Stamm, who was the guy who died, wasn't it?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes. Abstract painter.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: He moved in later. I always treated him with such contempt and he was so nice to me, thoughtful, and I always thought he was such a jerk. I feel bad for that. He died. And Bill Copley had a studio.

LEWIS KACHUR: Billy?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, his dad. Do you know Billy?

LEWIS KACHUR: No. I know his work.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, his dad did. I remember he had a party. He had a dwarf running the elevator. Duchamp was there. I remember Noland coming to my studio. Of course, at that time Kenneth Noland was a big deal and he sort of liked what I did. Ibram Lassaw was at my studio for some reason. I don't know why. Somehow as I worked I received a certain amount of individual -- other artists were interested in me and I was encouraged.

LEWIS KACHUR: You were in a circle of artists too. I mean, you were in the midst of the art world.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, and I became pretty friendly with what older artist? Miles Forst. Miles was a 10th Street painter. He was an old hipster. Actually Miles would be an interesting guy to interview. He's so full of shit that he would be interesting. He had this relationship with Dick Bellamy and his whole involvement with -- Oh, and I met Irving Sandler. Irving was a teacher and Irving was really a good teacher. Do you know him?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes. I've met him.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: He loves art. He's a great archivist, actually. He knows everything. Everybody and everything. Somehow I did a paper on Miles or something? I don't know why the hell I did it on Miles. Irving really must have been gathering information for one of his books.

LEWIS KACHUR: He was teaching at N.Y.U.?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. And James Wines from SITE taught. He was kind of a good teacher. He liked me and liked what I did. He was very encouraging. Sort of a peculiar guy. Sort of an asshole. He's not interested in SITE's interest and I don't. Some people do.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did things in buildings and stuff?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. But anyway it came out of my relationship with Bob Barry to some extent.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you meet new people at N.Y.U.?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. There was no one there.

LEWIS KACHUR: You already had friends from before?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, this guy Eugene -- we shared a studio. He didn't have the ambition that I had. He was much more interested in getting a teaching job and maintaining his marriage. He was more loaded with conventional ideas. He was a realist painter and I didn't ever communicate with him about work. My ideas were totally different. Yes, it was a big circle of people.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were you doing the monofilament things?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Not for long. That was only something I did for a couple of weeks -- say maybe six months of those hideous things. The small ones were good. They were very small. Actually they looked like Artschwager. They were good. They were very small, stapled on the wall and very kind of interesting color, but as soon as they got big they were catastrophic.

But I was doing other things with dowels, throwing the shit around. I mean it was all this process involved. There was a certain point after that where I think I got more serious about making my own work, which we will get into next time.

LEWIS KACHUR: Okay. To be continued?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: To be continued because Joel is very tired.

LEWIS KACHUR: I just wanted to ask you if you were interested at all in the ideas of overall-ness -- like Jackson Pollack and things like that when you were doing those filament pieces?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, I was. I mean, I think everyone was talking Jackson Pollack. That was the whole idea -- to have somebody who's immediate -- but I don't think they were very successful. Did you ever see them?

LEWIS KACHUR: Just in reproduction.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: They were okay, but it was so literal. I guess that part of my past I can't quite deal with. Although the Modern [Museum] just got this big fingerprint drawing.

LEWIS KACHUR: Ancient Greece drawings?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Those were interesting. I was friendly with David Diao and a friend of mine -- Jeff Way. Actually I take that back. Jeff Way is an artist who went to N.Y.U. with me. Jeff and I became friendly. Jeff started dating --

LEWIS KACHUR: He was one of the people you met at N.Y.U.?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. He was a very bright, intelligent guy. He lived with my sister-in-law Jenny so we became very friendly. I met David Diao through Jeff, who's now having a resurgence.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did people hang out at any particular places?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, yes. Across the street there was a place. There was the Central Hotel that collapsed? Do you remember it? I forget the name. There was a bar across the street from one of the studios where we used to hang out. But Amy didn't like me to hang out. See, she really had an aversion to because she saw the whole thing. In retrospect now I see it was sort of threatening to  
It really kind of curtailed my activity, but I would have hung out a lot more. I think once the marriage ended I hung out at Max's Kansas City a lot.

Speaking of hangouts, I have a studio assistant -- a young artist Brandt Junceau. Brandt was up here the other day There's a song about -- this is funny. It shouldn't be translated. They don't need to translate it. You can tell them it was But there was a place called McGoo's, which is this hideous dump of a bar downtown south of Houston Street. It was run by this guy Tommy, and I used to eat there on occasion when I had my studio on Leonard Street.

It was really foul, though. Horrible place with a pool table for anyone who wants to shoot pool and pinball machines and the food was quite appalling. Anyway, before it became an artists' hangout it was a cat house. It was a poor house opened a bar and artists hung out there. He had all this shit. He used to trade art for food. So he had all these appalling paintings -- early Bill Jensen, which was probably one of the better pictures. All sorts of shit and work on the walls. Stuffed full of work.

Brandt was quite friendly with Bill Jensen. He told me that business is bad and Tommy's decided to retire. I hadn't been there in fifteen years. He was going to retire and move to Greece or something. This guy was like a tough bar guy.



LEWIS KACHUR: Did he sell his art collection?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh wait. So some dealer comes up and convinces him that he should put up the work for auction. Well, before it goes to auction a Japanese dealer comes in and buys the whole fucking thing. Furthermore, now they're going to take it to Japan and recreate the bar. [laughs] But I mean it's such low level trash, more or less.

LEWIS KACHUR: I guess whatever the artists traded to eat wasn't their best pieces.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Not so much their best pieces -- he didn't have a policy. He traded with anybody. He was just being a nice guy. I used to run up tabs at this place. I guess it's now the Odeon. It used to be a sort of Jewish dairy place [the Tower] run by Joan and Arnie. A lot of artists ate there. Serra used to eat there, I would eat there. Irving Petlin ate there. If I didn't have money they would just hold checks four or five days. When I had money I would pay them. [pause] I'm freezing and I'm tired.

LEWIS KACHUR: Okay. I just wanted ask you to give some kind of chronology here. Do you know about what year it was that you moved into your studio?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Leonard Street?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Ivy was born in 1969. I must have moved in there in -- gee. I was there when Paula showed my work and I showed in 1969. I think I moved in there in 1968. Marsha Tucker came. Yes, I moved out of the studio on Broadway and moved uptown. I immediately got a studio downtown. It was a hundred and twenty-five bucks for the space and it was an abandoned building filled with rubble and crap. We stole gas, somehow I got an electric meter, and we did very well. I mean it was okay. So it was 1968.

LEWIS KACHUR: It was before you got your degree, then?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. It was 1968 on Leonard Street.

LEWIS KACHUR: Before you showed the shelves?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right. It was 1968. I could go over that period of time again tomorrow in a little more detail. I know I've been meandering around too much.

LEWIS KACHUR: Okay. Well I think we've touched a lot of important things.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW SESSION]  
[JULY 16, 1988]

LEWIS KACHUR: Since we talked yesterday we spoke to your mother and got some other points.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. The only thing I wanted to correct -- I took art classes with this fellow Nat Schwarzberg in his house -- not in my basement. He must have been painting my mother's portrait in the basement or something like that.

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes he did. But you remember the idea of going to a basement to take art lessons?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: When it was in his house? Yes. His son's a painter.

LEWIS KACHUR: Then there was something about your mother's work at the Air Force base?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, that's not too important.

LEWIS KACHUR: Anything else you wanted to add from yesterday?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think that's it. What did we talk about? The Peace Corps and somehow being in New York in the late '60s -- you know this energized time with lots of artists, lots of ideas.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did it seem like a particularly energetic period?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think it was an energetic period. I also think it was hooked up with the Vietnam War and the level of protests going on. I think that young people were making certain demands and a lot of curators found themselves in positions of some power in institutions. So I think there was a kind of focus on the new.

LEWIS KACHUR: You mentioned a lot of different artists that you were friendly with and there seemed to be a lot of names coming out. I wonder if you would connect any distinctions about which ones were particularly close friends of yours?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well I think of Elizabeth Murray.

LEWIS KACHUR: Would you look at each other's work a lot?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think we did in some odd way. I guess I was more plugged into the scene than Elizabeth. She was an old friend of Jennifer Bartlett's. Maybe they went to graduate school together at Mills College so when Elizabeth and Don [Sunseri] moved to New York we became friendly. I think at that time Jennifer was splitting up with her husband. There was always a certain amount of tension between Jennifer and Amy.

LEWIS KACHUR: Your wife?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Well, between Jennifer and any woman there's always tension because she's so kind of willful and headstrong. Kind of oblivious to other people.

LEWIS KACHUR: When you first met Elizabeth you met her through her and you had known her from when you were at Yale?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I wasn't at Yale.

LEWIS KACHUR: I mean when you were visiting there?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think so yes. Elizabeth and myself -- as a couple -- were quite close.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did her work interest you or in a personal manner?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Well, it was interesting. She was always such an ambitious artist with tremendous work habits. She's a real worker. I'm somebody who wings stuff much more. I tend to work in tense spurts. Somebody like Elizabeth does steady work. I mean, I'm a steady worker too, but still -- yes, her work was interesting. It was a little Chicago-esque. At that point a little kind of --

LEWIS KACHUR: What do you mean?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: It had this kind of funky quality which is something that I was never too intrigued by. And [Jonathan] Borofsky's work I always thought was interesting.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was he counting at that point?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I guess he began to count -- yes -- but everyone was doing that. but I think Jon was stacking up his papers. He was pretty dopey though, too. I mean, what a pot. He was sort of a serious pot-head, which I wasn't.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was he living in California where he had studied? How did you meet?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think Jon went to Yale with Jenny. He was actually a next door neighbor. He was in the same building or the next building to my sister-in-law when I came back from India. We kind of became friendly. We were never deeply intimate, but I don't think Jon sort of allowed that. Neither of us really allowed that real sort of bonding to each other. We were good friends and spent time together sometimes, but I mean it wasn't the sort of really tight relationship.

LEWIS KACHUR: It's funny that several of these people ended up joining with Paula Cooper.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, well, all of them. All three. Elizabeth, Jon and Jennifer.

LEWIS KACHUR: And you.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: And me. Well, I think I began showing first -- maybe one might say prematurely, but in retrospect I don't think so. Either you develop in public or you don't develop. I think that's more or less the case. But then through Bob Barry I met quite a few artists. I met [John] Baldessari and who else? Bob Hewitt. That whole conceptual group. Larry Weiner.

LEWIS KACHUR: But I guess there's some element in your work of conceptual art that attracted you to certain artists.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think I was. I think I was interested in meeting artists really somehow. That was critical at

that point. I'm talking about 1967-1968. Then I worked with these guys.

LEWIS KACHUR: So when you came back from India you felt very much like getting into the art world and you were very focused on that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Very focused. I wouldn't say I aggressively pursued it, but I think things unfold. They just sort of happen. I was doing these fingerprint drawings. I don't know if you know the work, but that was really about marking time.

LEWIS KACHUR: Like Robert Morris?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Much earlier.

LEWIS KACHUR: Time drawings?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, but they were much earlier. They were really stamped. I think I was using stamp pads and large sheets of paper. Some were all over.

LEWIS KACHUR: The ink forms?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Jeff Way had worked -- I guess this is what they really want, is a kind of history connections?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes, if you can think back.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Jeff Way, whom I went to graduate school with, worked at Marlborough Gallery. He said, "Gee, why don't we show those to Brooke Alexander."

LEWIS KACHUR: The fingerprints.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. So I remember bringing this big drawing up to Brooke. At that time Brooke was on 68th Street on the East Side somewhere between Second and Third. It was sort of an obscure gallery. He said, well, he really liked it but he felt that why didn't I show that to Paula Cooper? I think Carolyn Alexander was working for Paula at the time. So I showed the drawing the Paula.

LEWIS KACHUR: You just made an appointment or you just came in having not met her or anything like that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't think we had met really. So I showed it to Paula, she put in a group show. I knew other artists who were showing there. Harvey Quaytman was showing, Bob Hewitt was showing, so she put it in a drawing show. That was the only gallery downtown.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was that when she was the first one in SoHo?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. This is the late '60s and she was the only one in SoHo.

LEWIS KACHUR: So she seemed to respond to your work right away?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, she seemed to respond positively.

LEWIS KACHUR: And did she come to look at your other work?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Then she came to my studio and I was doing those shelf pieces, which were really about presenting material kind of literally.

LEWIS KACHUR: Different materials?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Different materials the same size as the shelf, really without any gesture. I was doing those weight pieces at the time. I finished with that string stuff and I was sort of reacting to it and doing a much more reduced work which sort of justified itself through its structure or through the material itself -- you know, by the density of the material. I really worked at investigating different ways of making --- When I look back at it I see why I did it and what I did. And actually I did other pieces that people have never seen where there's a column of steel or a column of iron that was equivalent to a column of air. They were all about juxtaposition and density.

LEWIS KACHUR: Stuff like the 75 lbs piece? I guess that's the only one.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, like that. So Paula was interested and I remember she came to my studio and saw these pieces and, "Hey would you like to show them?"

LEWIS KACHUR: Right on the spot?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, and I was of course sort of taken aback.

LEWIS KACHUR: This is when you were on Broadway still?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, no. This was on Leonard Street. That relationship began to develop and evolve. She was very supportive and that was the most exciting gallery. It was the only gallery, really. It was an adventurous situation.

LEWIS KACHUR: What other artists was she showing at that time when you came into the gallery?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: She was showing Harvey. Rebecca is Harvey's daughter. I'm not close with Harvey. I mean, I find him difficult. Allen Shields, Bob Hewitt, Bob Grosvenor, Ed Ruda. See, she had run Park Place and I think when she started her own gallery she had a lot of artists who were involved with Park Place.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you introduce her to any of your friends who were artist people?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes -- subsequently to Jennifer, then Jon and then Elizabeth via everybody, since it was a fairly close group. So I think to some extent that since I was there that became sort of -- Jennifer originally showed a piece at Reece Paley. It was later that Jennifer showed with Paula. Then John showed and that was the extent of the circle and there was really nobody else we had a dialogue with or were close with.

LEWIS KACHUR: It's interesting that you continued to stay with the gallery and so did they. A lot of other artists jump around.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, well she's a good dealer.

LEWIS KACHUR: You have no complaints?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think it was interesting because a lot of people who began to show in the late '60s began to show with Leo Castelli and other places and I think it really didn't do them a whole lot of good. Because I think Leo's focus was clearly on an earlier generation -- on Jasper and Rauschenberg and Warhol. So I think it ends up that Paula was the --

[INTERRUPTION]

LEWIS KACHUR: You started to say about Paula Cooper as a dealer?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: So Paula invited me to put those shelves in the show, which I did. Who knows? The reaction was absolutely peculiar.

LEWIS KACHUR: And you felt that she understood your work and was very loyal?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I think she understood it about as well as I did. [laughs] Yes, I think she was loyal. Yes, I think Paula was an admirable dealer. She was measured and made very few demands. You felt that she absolutely encouraged development and change in the work. She was not somebody who had preconceived notions about what the work should be or look like, which was very beneficial.

LEWIS KACHUR: I guess even between your first two shows the work changed a lot?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh yes. I think my ideas were sort of in transition and they were developing. Paula really understood that and saw it as a positive aspect and she still does. You know, whereas many dealers at the time were really interested in modification of work with a kind of unified presence on a superficial level. Stuff that looked alike rather than --

[INTERRUPTION]

LEWIS KACHUR: So how did you get from your shelf pieces to the things that you showed in your second show? Forming things with balls?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I really think with the shelves I was sort of investigating materials and presenting it in some literal way that made sense without any kind of fanfare or idiosyncrasy. They're really about the investigation of material. And as I think I said before, that the form was basically determined -- I guess you could say it was a priori. I mean it was determined by the structure of the support basically or the material itself. I think there was a point where I really wanted to start to form things using my hands.

LEWIS KACHUR: And be more involved directly with the material?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. You know, more manual. So I began working with clay. You know the stone things are only a certain aspect -- a more presentable aspect -- of what I was doing. I did all these things with modeling clay and really subjecting malleable material to procedures with the limitations determined by my hand. Forming things with one hand, forming things with two hands, rolling out clay, stacking up clay, throwing clay in the corner.

LEWIS KACHUR: You actually threw clay?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh yes. I have them all too. I showed some of the carved out stuff from wood and pressed clay into it with molds. I think it was much more about establishing a vocabulary and somehow stripping myself of preconceived notions of how the work should look.

[INTERRUPTION]

LEWIS KACHUR: There was a piece that you had in the New Museum? A show of early works? It was like permutations of model clay.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I was interested in investigating various ways -- I always did works that were about permutations -- the possibility within a situation. I think the problem was not having any place that I sensed was internal enough to structure work. So I think I was looking for kind of literal ways, numerical ways of organization.

LEWIS KACHUR: But those were all like concept? Like you said, a priori?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I don't know. They were so conceptual that I do think the general attitude that I was interested in was stripping myself of preconceived notions about what work should look like. Minimalism was very attractive because it was so explicable.

People might say it was not so explicable, but I mean it appeared to be so and you could understand it. It was so literal. I felt the stuff with weights and stuff with shelves -- it was okay, but it really dealt with a kind of certain minimal vocabulary. It's not so much that it was a question of finding a place where the work was located that you couldn't refute. So I did something about weights.

Well, you couldn't really refute the piece, because it was sort of self-referential. I think I wanted to do work that was more internal -- more about myself -- which was frightening. I think by establishing a sort of structure where I began to make things with my hands, make things of a certain size so the size was determined by the gesture. Literally dealing with work as artifact rather than as object almost. Where it really became an artifact of an experience. I think a lot of this had to do with reading.

LEWIS KACHUR: Reading what?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Reading books. [laughter] I mean, sort of being involved with anthropology, getting involved with other cultures and whatever the sort of hip rhetoric at the time.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were you reading about India?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. Books about tools . . . I don't remember really.

LEWIS KACHUR: George Kubler?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh yes. Everyone read *The Shape of Time*. But I think the idea was to strip the work of any kind of art or any kind of style and do things that basically were artifacts, were really something that one made themselves. I mean, if you shape something in your hands, fine.

But I think it rapidly went from that kind of more mechanical organization to a more mental organization where the work became much more about a legitimate expense.

[INTERRUPTION]

So I think it was really structuring the work so possibilities could occur rather than working in some preconceived vein. It was preconceived ideas that have been discovered by other people -- you know minimalism and this? I wasn't the only individual doing this.

Then I think I began to shape things and form things based on my own experience -- what I was going through at the time.

LEWIS KACHUR: People are always talking about the small scale of your works. You would say that period was because it was hand-made?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, I think I did these things that were really the shape of one's hand. Doing pieces that were sort of the size of the inside of your head or what you would imagine. But I was trying to find a size that was appropriate to the gesture of the idea.

When I made that small chair there was no need for it to be large. I saw it as a sort of personal artifact. In a way it really dealt with the memory of an experience, but I think it did more than that. I did have this sort of formal condensing of space. I think really it was about insisting upon myself in public.

[INTERRUPTION]

LEWIS KACHUR: Do you think those works were addressed to a public space?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, I don't think they were addressed to a public space, but I think the fact that they were shown in a sort of insistence on person in public became an issue. The seeing of the piece.

I think even more so than public there's a moment when you do a work and then you somehow look at it and you become the public. You know, the act of working or what occurs when you actually work. The transformation of thinking whatever it might be into form is a private activity -- something my mother doesn't understand. When she walks into my studio it pisses me off.

I think when you're out of that situation afterward and in time it's a very different experience. If the piece is strong it sort of jerks you back to that situation and I think that was an important discovery for me. You know art could be temporal. It could be of the moment and not really be this sort of fact. It could be a fact of referring to an incident.

LEWIS KACHUR: Rather than the nature of material or something?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Fuck material. It got to the point of that. But that's something I covered in my development. I think I really learned a lot about material and made very conscious decisions -- and I still do -- what material to use. But it's not a significant idea. It's strictly a developmental idea. I think those were sort of ideas that I had worked with and digested in earlier work.

LEWIS KACHUR: When did you start working with wood?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Early on.

LEWIS KACHUR: When the small chair was done?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: It was initially made out of wood, yes. I mean, I've always used wood. As soon as I had to build anything then I started to use wood. When I stopped using found material. You could in a way refer to those shelves as "found" even though I cast certain ones. It may have been tar or concrete. I had to make a mold of it. But those weight pieces were found. I think there's a certain point where I began to make things in clay. Then of course, once I wanted to make something that was more geometric then I began to use wood which is really the most expedient, easily manipulated material.

I think if I had modeled the chair it would have been hideous you know. It would really have had a kind of reference that wasn't -- I mean, I've never been too interested in idiosyncratic work that was involved with sort of precious surfaces and whatnot.

I mean, I think what was interesting about those small pieces -- you don't read them as being precious. You don't read them as being representational of a chair. You really read them more as the experience of the chair and I think to some extent the sort of reduced form and the mode of making the piece helps convey that.

LEWIS KACHUR: Still, I guess there's a certain change around 1973 when you started making things that were at least in memory as recognizable? Like the bridge and the chair?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, yes. I think those things were sort of dealing with my immediate experience at the time. They got away from this more didactic work that was more about how much can you mold with two hands and this and that. I think the first piece I did was that bird. I mean they became more loaded, more emotional.

LEWIS KACHUR: What were the factors leading to that, do you think in retrospect?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I guess ambition and a dissolving marriage and a kind of sense of despair, more or less. I think more or less I really felt that the work required intimacy and I required intimacy and more translation of

myself into the work, but I had set the terms for that.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was that the sort of impulse in general as you saw it at the time? Like the process artists who were coming out of minimalism and going towards a more personal imagery?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I think the work coming out of minimalism was more personal, frequently more abstract and less referential. I think what I wanted to use was sort of use images with all their abstract implication so I mean it was never realist work. It was always this sort of more the emotional bang in the work than what it represented because I think it never represented anything that was particularly interesting.

LEWIS KACHUR: You were the first artist to show at the Clocktower?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right.

LEWIS KACHUR: How did you manage that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: How did they manage that is what one should ask. You should ask Alana Heiss how did you manage to show Joel [Shapiro]? Well, let's see. Well, I had shown a piece earlier that year at Paula's -- that small balsa wood piece with the bridge, a bird, a coffin, and something else. A boat. Which is a piece that really received a certain amount of attention and interest.

Alana lived on Leonard Street. I lived on Leonard Street, and she was married to Gene Highstein at the time. She came to my studio and said, "Hey do you want to do a show?"

I was pretty nuts at the time. I shouldn't say I was pretty nuts, but I was somewhat distraught and frustrated. Alana saw this bridge that I was doing and she said, "Do you want to show that? Do you want to do a show?" And I said, "Yes, I'd love to." I mean, I said, "Yes, great," and we did it.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you felt then the ladder?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: All that stuff had been sort of around. I just showed those two birds -- the mirror image bird. Right hand, left hand pickup. But the big piece was the bridge and it was a great juxtaposition because it was this sort of archetypical bridge. I insisted on the size of the piece in this cavernous public space and I machined the bridge out of a block of iron which was a kind of way of justifying.

I mean, I had some tremendous trepidation about casting anything and as long as the wood was balsa wood or made out of clay or made out of sort of material that was not permanent that, I was on safe grounds. I wouldn't make some tremendous blunder.

[OCTOBER 26, 1988]  
[BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE A]

LEWIS KACHUR: When we talked last summer, towards the end we were talking about the early '70s and your first castings in bronze. I want to pick up with that and just ask you to describe a little bit how you make a work if it's in wood and then how that is translated in the casting process.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I'm not sure that I talked of it. I guess the first thing I cast was a bird in bronze. I wanted to insist on the form as making the form permanent.

LEWIS KACHUR: And that was a clay piece?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: It was clay to bronze, yes. Then I made some wood pieces.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was that lost wax process?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, it was lost wax. Then I did wood pieces in which I joined wood together. Actually, I did some other modeled bronze stuff too. Then I joined wood and wood cast in order to unify the form. It might be that I had four pieces of wood and the four pieces would ---

LEWIS KACHUR: I think you said the first house it was just five pieces of wood?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, and then I cast it in solidified form, which had a kind of insistence.

LEWIS KACHUR: Which is what you were after?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I was sort of involved in the intention of the work. I mean I wanted to focus on the intention.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was the wood piece hollow itself?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, usually the casting would be -- at least in the early work -- was similar to the wood. So if the wood was, say, an inch thick the casting would be an inch thick. Whereas if the wood was thin the casting would be thin. If the wood was solid the casting would be solid.

LEWIS KACHUR: If it was hollow then . . .

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Generally speaking. I'd say I did that for a while, but that's not something I'd necessarily do now.

LEWIS KACHUR: And was the wood lost as the wood burned off as it got cast or was it like the wax?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. Most of it was sand casted where you take the wood and make an impression in sand.

[INTERRUPTION]

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: We were talking about casting and hollowness?

LEWIS KACHUR: And you were saying it was done as sand casting? You would cast the wood model?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, most of them were flat surfaces. If you have a kind of planar surface it's much more conducive to sand casting.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you keep the wood models?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Some of them. Some I have, some I don't have. They're all over the place.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you ever try to exploit the idea of multiple castings or the whole sort of '70s interest in the idea of the multiple . . .

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: It was the '60s idea. Multiples. No. I mean I've done editions. Sure. Once you cast . . . But I find that each piece ends up being kind of different anyway.

LEWIS KACHUR: Each of the three?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Since I sort of supervise the casting --

[INTERRUPTION]

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you ever use a cast of one thing on something else or ever experiment with a cast?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I thought the cast and casting of the work was intrinsic to the piece. Yes, there were moments when I would break something from one cast and add it on to another. Or use a form that had been cast reused with a different context. I think casting is prone to that.

But I was always thought of casting was a means of sort of insisting on the form, and I think what was important was my attitude about chasing the piece, finishing the bronze. Because I think that the traditional method of -- or at least the common method, foundry method -- would be a kind of chasing of it where the chasing looks like material.

So if you cast from a piece of wood, they would then chase wherever they would gain some screws in the piece would then be chased back to look like wood, which I wasn't particularly interested in doing. I was interested in obtaining a kind of memory of the casting or the experience of the casting so I would chase pieces by filing them with the vestiges from the casting. That was fine. I think that was important.

LEWIS KACHUR: So it made it look more metallic, you mean?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't think it looked more metallic. I think what it really did was made it seem that the casting wasn't about something that was wood and is now bronze. You didn't have that sense that it now looked like bronze. Which the piece would retain a reference to its origin and a reference to the process of the transformation through the process. All that was evident in the work. I don't think I invented that. It exists in Chinese bronzes.

But I think that's something that the artist has to want. I mean, the tendency in casting bronze -- at least when I began to cast -- was a very commercial process where things were made into bronze almost for the intrinsic value of bronze or bronzeness.



I didn't think that was so interesting. What I was interested in was the passage of bronze to alter the state of something and also for the bronze to refer back to that conception.

LEWIS KACHUR: There's a kind of trace to make?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes -- well, that it would be made a trace. As I was saying before, you generally take tools and you retousse work almost to get the grain back into the piece. If there was a screw what I would do afterwards is just file it down to the surface of the piece so it would manifest itself as a flat area -- a reflected area versus the actual cast area and generally would be more crenelated and hold more light. Which becomes interesting in itself, because I think a reflected chunk of bronze means something very different. It absorbs light. I probably said this before. It's like looking at a Brancusi. It's highly polished and reflects light. It exists in space entirely differently than a -- even on a Brancusi like the Sleeping Muse where there's some modeling that exists that holds light and then a reflected surface. They have an entirely different meaning.

LEWIS KACHUR: So it sounds like the surface was very important in what you were involved in?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, extremely important -- yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: You didn't just send a piece out?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, you didn't send a piece out and get it back. Never. I still don't. I guess now I don't do that much chasing myself. At that time I did a lot of my own chasing. I would finish the piece.

You know, there's a moment when you get the piece out it just looks like there's all these screws and you see a central image of what you want and then all this stuff hanging off, gates and screws. Then you begin to eliminate them until the piece sort of comes back to what it was or what you wanted or when it comes to what you want it to be. Which is referring back and now it's been transformed and the transformation is to be attended to.

LEWIS KACHUR: And where do you cast your pieces now?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, the first place I cast, I cast a piece at Excalibur Foundry on Bleecker Street. It was about two doors down from here, but I wasn't here at that point. I did one piece there.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was that a house?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, it was a bird. Then I cast at a place called Bedi Makky on India Street in Brooklyn, which is an old sand foundry that did very good work. Then one of the guys that worked there started to work at Modern Art, which is an investment foundry -- you know, a lost-wax place -- and they set up a sand department so I could work there. He left and I cast at Johnson [Atelier] in Trenton where I now cast. I've cast in industrial foundries too. I used to. It's much cheaper. Cast iron.

LEWIS KACHUR: Do you think now in retrospect there would have been any direction or any tendency that was brought out by the actual people you worked with?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I do think at Bedi Makky it was sort of cruder casting. I mean, they use French sand which gives you a very delicate surface, but my pieces have always been relatively difficult to cast because they were not -- well the routines weren't so involved because they weren't traditional bronzes. Yes, I think every foundry's work tends to change to some extent. It's not the work that changes, but the look of the work. And there are superficial things that are different from foundry to foundry. Individuals at the foundry really change the work? No, but I had this guy who used to work for me. Total pain in the ass -- Joe Gardella -- when I met him. Joe must have been a friend of Bill Crozier's.

LEWIS KACHUR: You mentioned him as one of the only people you knew as casting bronze?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, so he must have been a friend of Crozier. I got him to chase work for me and he was a pretty good chaser. Very delicate, sensitive, and knew a lot more about bronze chasing than I did. It got to the point where I just didn't want to chase the fucking pieces. The chasing at the foundries was always terrible.

LEWIS KACHUR: You mean if they did the chasing?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, if they cast the piece, then they chased the piece. They would do it according to their standardized way which was to make it look like what it was and I wanted something else. So I needed somebody who would respond to my request and I would work side by side with them.

Joe was okay in a way, but difficult because all these guys were sort of dormant or failed artists or fancied themselves as artists. Joe was kind of not so involved. I shouldn't be mean about it, but I mean he wasn't the most mature individual.

So I think it would be a real conflict for him to do work for me. For him to chase the piece was -- when it sold I would make the money and get the credit and just sort of nonsense like that. The way the foundries chased has always been difficult. Then I started working at Johnson, actually.

LEWIS KACHUR: When did you start?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't remember.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was it in the '80s?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Must have been the early '80s. I had some serious tantrums. I made all these demands about how the work should be cast and not to touch the piece. Just cut the screw and that was it. I didn't want them to go near it. I remember coming out and seeing the first piece and they had wire brushed the sand off of it and the whole surface of the piece was scratched and I was fucking furious. I think I made the girl in charge of chasing break into tears. But somehow the standard foundry techniques were really antithetic. They were the opposite of what I wanted and it takes time to show people so they understand what you want.

Each piece of course is different. You have to deal with it. Then a guy named Patrick Strezelec, who's a young sculptor. Patrick seemed to be intelligent and sympathetic and not an asshole. I mean there's all this petty jealousy. If you're Henry Moore or some grand artiste you go into the foundry and it's fine. But if you're kind of younger and demanding -- who the fuck are you? Not that I was unknown.

LEWIS KACHUR: You were not known to the workers at Johnson?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I don't think I was really known to them and a lot of them, of course, were art students, but cornball -- you know, sentimental.

LEWIS KACHUR: So then you'd drive down to Trenton?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, they used to be at Princeton, so I would drive out to Princeton. I would keep careful watch over the work. Each piece required different situations, a different idea, a different kind of approach to the casting. In terms of casting, one has to be there. It's not something that just can be done.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you go to Johnson in relation to the fact that you were doing these larger wooden pieces?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. I heard they had a good sand department -- I forget who told me -- and that they would be very cooperative. They had sent me letters when I taught at Princeton. I just thought, "Johnson Atelier"! What cornball shit. And I threw it in the garbage. Actually I was repelled by them and the very notion.

Maybe I spoke to Wade Saunders. I think maybe Wade interviewed me? And Wade was interested. Somehow said, "Why don't you try them out?" He felt that they could really do my work and be helpful so I went there. I think Wade recommended them. And indeed they were. They were far more cooperative and generous than any other foundry I had worked with.

I'd also done some work in Tallix, which is the foundry that Nancy Graves used. A lot of people use them. Actually, the first piece I cast I cast in 1968 and it was a piece of weights. These weights that you pick up in your hand. I recall I needed a block of tin that was like a certain dimension by a certain dimension. Sol Le Witt actually had that piece. I think he gave it to the Hartford Atheneum.

LEWIS KACHUR: His collection?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. It was a piece that was all the same weight. You picked them up and each metal had a different density so you'd think it would be heavy, but it wasn't. A student piece. Well, not a student piece, but a very early piece. I had to get certain ones made. You couldn't buy the material. I think the lead I cast myself, but I think we cast the zinc and the tin at this foundry Tallix. Then I went back there subsequently to do some small pieces. Again they have a bunch of people chasing who would just sit chewing gum and doing it like the people knit sweaters in a knitting mill. Not at all sympathetic to the work or really paying special attention.

At Johnson, Patrick was willing to do that. Of course, everybody thought he was crazy to bend over backwards to capitulate to my demands which were not ordinary. But I think it was good for him. He has Prix de Rome now. He's in Rome. I think he learned a lot working there for me.

Now the three guys out there who work on my pieces intermittently chasing -- in fact I had to go out to the foundry last week when we were supposed to meet and I have to go out again on Monday. I'm there frequently.

It depends. I used to go there when we discussed the piece, then when the piece has been cast, and then again before it's finished. So I have to be there at least three times for each sculpture. Not always, but sometimes

more. I'm doing this big piece now so I have to be there quite a lot because there are things that are unresolved. As you cast you have to figure, how will I do this? Will it hold?

LEWIS KACHUR: It's pretty complicated. Did you ever cast a piece that you had painted? Had you painted wooden pieces or anything?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Have I cast a piece that I had painted? Yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you ever sell anything that was two versions? A wood version and a bronze version?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: I'm thinking of some of the wall pieces you did. In the late '70s, you started to paint them more.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, those wall pieces -- yes. I only cast two of those. I guess some of my early ones I cast, but of those sort of irregular shaped wall pieces I only cast two and then I painted them black. It's interesting because they had much more density than the wood ones even though the paint was theoretically a disguise.

I just did a piece. I did one in wood and then cast off a different wood in bronze and they are quite different in feeling. A lot of pieces just won't hold up. The wood just doesn't have the structural properties that allow for the piece to exist.

That piece right there in fact -- J.S. something. I don't know if you want to get the slide of it.

LEWIS KACHUR: Galerie Daniel Templon [Paris]?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. So that piece was a piece that I originally did in wood and then I did one in bronze. The fact is, the piece was cast in sections and then welded together. I left the head open so you could penetrate it.

The whole thing is hollow. No. I think all the extremities are hollow.

LEWIS KACHUR: The kind of three-legged piece?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, well, it had a crutch. I did a piece like that with paint. I've worked on it unmercifully hard.

LEWIS KACHUR: So this would end up in wood?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, it does, but it's an entirely different piece. It's sort of intimate and bronzed. In fact, I opened the bronze up so you could get inside the piece or have some kind of access.

LEWIS KACHUR: We were starting to talk about an assistant. When did you start using assistants?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't really even recall, though I recall having assistants from maybe Great Lakes College. I had a kid from Oberlin once. I don't remember. As soon as I could I began using assistants. Some were a total waste of time.

LEWIS KACHUR: Once you started to show at Paula Cooper and get some recognition for your work?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I think there are always certain things one couldn't do alone. But I think entering into any friendship or just spending time with another artist and then if you had an open avenue, which I have had because I chose early on to exhibit. I guess in the '60s, the question of exhibiting was an issue in itself in my circle of individuals.

LEWIS KACHUR: You mean, when you enter into the gallery corporate system?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Whatever it was. Such horseshit.

LEWIS KACHUR: It was a pretty politicized period.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. But I would get people to help me with work if I didn't have an assistant when I needed to carry something. You always need some assistance.

LEWIS KACHUR: But I mean in terms of when you started to pay somebody. Was it two days a week or three days a week? Someone who was a regular assistant?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, yes. Gee, I would say it was in the '70s. Actually, I began working with pieces that were

just too hard to do alone -- like those houses and stuff like that, I did alone. But as soon as I did those more sprawling floor pieces, I found that I needed somebody to work with. I couldn't do it alone.

LEWIS KACHUR: And also you had someone to work with you on the wood?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, I just used whatever I need.

LEWIS KACHUR: You mentioned a Japanese worker in one of your interviews.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, right. Kato Ichiro. He's busy building Donald Judd's furniture. I wish he'd stop and get over here and work on my work. He's doing all that Maine furniture that looks like --

LEWIS KACHUR: You have to compete with his time?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: ? revisited.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you go to that show?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, I did go to Judd's show. I think some of Judd's furniture is kind of interesting. It's all very handsome. What did I think of the installation of the big room? It's great. What's the name of the guy who did the Fontainebleu Hotel?

LEWIS KACHUR: I don't know.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Looks like Trump Tower. [Both laugh.] It's incredibly garish and vulgar in that big room.

LEWIS KACHUR: I haven't seen it.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: You've never been? It's good, though. I mean, the problem is it's a huge space and very jumbled up with very architectural sculpture, so what can I tell you? Do I think it's great? I mean, I like Judd's work and I think he's a major sculptor. In this show I think it looks like somebody lost control. Go see it. It's wild. This huge wall image of wood and plastic and these big concrete things and this and that. It's kind of a cityscape. I hate to be so corny, but you can't read any piece independent of another piece.

LEWIS KACHUR: Are these all recent works?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, no. They're from all different periods. I mean, I only find it ironic because Judd is somebody who's always made such a kind of written commitment to the necessity to present work properly. Then all of a sudden you have this exhibition. The show looks like a Borofsky show. It's just scale and color bouncing all over the place -- to some extent detrimental to the work -- so it's curious. I wonder how he feels about it. There's a lot to learn. But the work in the back room is very beautiful. If you deal with each piece, there's a lot you get out of them, but as a show it's really garish. Anything else? This doesn't get published, does it?

LEWIS KACHUR: No.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I only say that because Judd has been extremely contemptuous of other artists. He's not a particularly generous individual so I feel at liberty. I recall reading something in Art in America that I thought was so appalling where Judd had to list what a fourth-rate artist Mike Goldberg was? Now we all know that Mike has not accomplished very much. He's kind of very minor. But why begrudge -- or why really believe that anybody takes it seriously? No one does. That just shows you Judd's level of paranoia. That he would take this clearly fourth-rate individual and take him seriously and then attack the poor bastard in public in Art in America. Then attack artists of my generation and saddle himself in a gallery that basically is about my generation. So I mean the guy is clearly full of conflict and problems. I mean, just lots of problems. I think that Judd functions as a critic in a way that many critics live in a world that's not grounded. No offense, but to be critical frequently has to do with one's inability to make things.

LEWIS KACHUR: And Judd wrote a lot of art criticisms?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: You bet he did. Yes. So it's an extremely interesting show. He's a very complicated guy. He's very fucked up.

LEWIS KACHUR: Do you see your work as very separate from the minimalist generation?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, yes, I do. I think it's tied up to it. There are links, but they are clearly links and as I said earlier, I've learned a tremendous amount from that whole -- but I want my work to amplify stuff or have more experience. Everything Judd's opposed to I'm for. [both laugh]

LEWIS KACHUR: Who are your peers then or who are your artistic contemporaries or people who are your friends in your early days?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, I think Elizabeth Murray and Jon Borofsky and Jennifer Bartlett. Of course, I knew Keith Sonnier and Richard Serra. Lots of artists -- Frank Owen, Jenny Snider. I mean, there were lots of people who I used to hang out with. But I think that the interest for art began to work. I remember that minimalism was basically bankrupt. I mean, it was a great movement and probably the most important thing to come around in a long time.

LEWIS KACHUR: Especially for sculpture?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, but I mean there were so many pretenders and mediocre artists where that became a viable form. Where the more interested artists like [Don] Judd, and [Carl] Andre, and Sol [Le Witt], who are owed a greater debt. But you look at that Primary Sculpture [Structure] catalog.

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes. There's a lot of stuff . . .

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: There's a lot of stuff that's just somehow . . . And basically the form of minimalism wasn't too clear. They really had to do with architectural reference.

LEWIS KACHUR: What about your architectural reference?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think mine was quite different from theirs, but I mean, clearly it has references to it. But the fact that the work was referential in itself differentiated it because I do think that one intention of minimalism is to be non-referential and only to refer to architecture as space. I was more interested in the mind, I think, or the psychological aspects.

LEWIS KACHUR: I've read about a lot of discussion about the scale of your early houses and this kind of anti-heroic gesture.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: That was the perception of the work. That had to do with the scale of the work. But, I mean, it wasn't anti-heroic. I mean, was Donald Judd heroic in scale? No. There's nothing heroic about Judd. The only heroic sculptor was probably Tony Smith. Barnett Newman spoke about it. But of the minimalists Ronald Bladen -

LEWIS KACHUR: Park Place Gallery. Did you know the Park Place Gallery?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, not really. I knew those guys like Harvey Quaytman. I knew artists who showed there. I think Paula ran it for them, too.

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes, that's what I was wondering. If you knew her then?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, I didn't. But guys like [Charles] Ginnever and [Peter] Forakis and all that monumentality really never intrigued me. And I don't really think I considered that when I was making work, so the fact that my work was a reaction to that -- I mean I'm sure it is. All work is synthesis reaction.

LEWIS KACHUR: Not consciously?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I mean consciously it seemed to be the right size. There was no need to make it big. I think for the N.E.A. I swear in the '60s half the fucking applicants were doing houses. I see Jennifer's [Bartlett] house and I sort of puke. Her scale is appalling. She just had a nice party for me in Paris, but that doesn't mean that I have to be beholden to her work. I mean, I admire her productivity. She has quite an interesting mind, but that doesn't mean I think her work is without faults or exciting. In fact, this three dimensional stuff is quite hideous. Sailboats. What yucky shit.

LEWIS KACHUR: Its relationship to the painting is sort of interesting. Where did you stand in relation to the whole issue of getting art off the base? Getting away from the precious object and tendency to move on the floor or have to do floor pieces?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I think I was very involved in that. I mean, that was an idea that rang true to me. I don't think I needed a pedestal until I wanted to isolate a piece from the room -- from the actual space it was in. Why do you want the piece to be in the actual space of the proceeding?

LEWIS KACHUR: I wonder what your first pedestal was?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Probably that house piece.

LEWIS KACHUR: The house with the shelf?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No.

LEWIS KACHUR: The house on the table?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. That piece. In fact, I think that's it.

LEWIS KACHUR: Because a lot of these photographs in the catalog here are of the . . .

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: That would be the piece. Because I sort of put stuff on the floor to avoid the preciousness of the base. But we all know what a base does -- it isolates the piece from the world. I used shelves for things like that. I showed that piece in 1969 in the period when I was doing shelves, but I never used the base.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were you interested in what [Carl] Andre had done and how he activated the floor?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, sure. But whether he activated the floor, I don't know. Yes, it was interesting. I mean, Andre's work was something I understood. I'm still an admirer of it. More so than Judd's work.

LEWIS KACHUR: And how did you get from these cast pieces in the floor to doing them much lighter or more ethereal? Painted wood pieces on the wall? About 1978?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Like in 1979. I hate to talk about it. It's so fucking boring.

I was doing those wall pieces -- those ones that sort of look like swastikas?

LEWIS KACHUR: Interlocking?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, those interlocking ones. I was doing pieces like that and I was doing those floor pieces. You know those pieces in there that were parallel to the floor? But complicated so they activated the space around the piece, but established a parallel to the plane on the floor?

LEWIS KACHUR: You mean like the Chasm?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well kind of like Chasm and subsequent ones. Like this. Pieces like that. I mean, the problem with that, of course, was that it did establish this boundary above the floor so all this was sort of discuss space, but above it was still the fucking room.

LEWIS KACHUR: It would be like the spinning house or --

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't know what you call those things -- yes. I mean, that would be a vulgar way of putting it. [both chuckle] A low-brow way of stating things and since we're in a low-brow art world --

LEWIS KACHUR: But there's a plane on the top -- as you're saying -- is parallel to the floor?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Let me see that photograph. Oh yes. That was a good show. Yes, there was a plane on the floor. It looks a little far-out. Gee, I haven't looked at this catalog in years. These things were an attempt to break away from that housing phase and less with the psychologized space and somehow deal with something that -- you know, where the room was inert and this piece was active rather than sort of the inertness of the sculpture and the activity of the space. I mean, I think in some ways that might be a way of looking at the art. If the house was on the floor and charged up, but it in itself wasn't particularly mobile . . . I mean, what moved it around was your memory of your experience of houses. I think there was a point where I really wanted to get away from that kind of psychological situation and into something that was really active in the space itself.

So I began to do these pieces -- busting up that model, or busting up the model even as an idea of busting up the house. So I began to do those pieces. But in many ways they failed. The failure was the parallelness to the floor, which is something that is very kind of symptomatic of minimalism. It's almost a pathological condition in Andre. Maybe at the end I could say, well, that really looks like a painting. I mean, the way an Andre looks like a painting that's falling off the wall. It's so literal and it doesn't challenge the space of the perceiver the same way. His does more the way a painting does. So I guess I wanted work --

I did those bunker pieces where there would be this big defensive mass of metal with two holes? You'd sort of see the operative mass and you'd sort of somehow mentally penetrate into the piece so your only real access was access via transport, if one wants to be so formal.

I began to do wall pieces because I couldn't work on these fucking pieces on the ground. I didn't have the means or the way -- not economically, but intellectually. Not intellectually -- physically. My hand couldn't do them.

But I started to do pieces. I have some plasters downstairs which nobody's seen. I'll show them to you next time if you make a note of it. I'm not going to go into that storage room. But there were pieces that played with the idea of architecture. They would be like the negative space and above the negative space there'd actually be the physical form itself.

LEWIS KACHUR: Wall reliefs in wood or plaster?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Plaster floor pieces. And then I was doing these things on the wall where -- let me see the dates on these.

LEWIS KACHUR: I noticed you did a lot of paintings -- at least in this catalog -- in 1979?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, but I think they're earlier. I remember seeing a show of Jasper's [Johns] too that I found inspiring.

LEWIS KACHUR: You mean to paint?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. See this piece too? That piece from the Modern in 1974?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I was interested. I began doing these pieces that looked like figures. They had struts coming out of the wall and then these planes in front which I liked and then I saw this Jasper Johns show. Somehow that reinforced what I was doing as one could look at work and interpret as a reinforcement even when it has nothing to do with what you're doing. I was trying to see the chronology here. It's a ballbuster to find.

LEWIS KACHUR: Well, there's the interlocking pieces we were talking about.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: 1976, those interlocking pieces. This piece and that free piece.

LEWIS KACHUR:

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: It's a tree.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, it's sort of a tree female piece is important.

LEWIS KACHUR: Why is it important?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I think it was very additive. It dealt with branching in a way that ---

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[BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE B]

Sort of a piece that was all about why did the ending up leaving the figure, but not really being able to do anything with the figure. Again, it was intrinsically individual unto itself. I made this sort of metaphor, this rigid -- so really it looks like a figure, but it has no figurative experience with this piece. That's probably the answer to your question.

LEWIS KACHUR: Well, we can talk about that.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I don't want to talk.

LEWIS KACHUR: Some people connected that to the death of your sister.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: This piece? Because I had mentioned that. That's the only connection. Well, I probably dealt with that to some extent. But I wonder. I do think that there's this tendency for artists to grab at the dramatic, you know. I'm sure it had to do with -- who knows?

LEWIS KACHUR: Maybe some of it did.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Well, who knows? Exactly. Those explanations are very convenient. The public wants them, but I've had so much -- I'm getting Spy Magazine -- talking about feuds -- it's great. Spy's the most interesting magazine. It's the only magazine that's amusing. So there's this article on feuds. And the feud in the art world. Julian Schnabel and David Salle. They kept saying, "Yes, Robert Longo was a sculptor who dealt with big issues like life, sex and death." I mean there's so much of that slop, self-promotion of puke going around.

LEWIS KACHUR: You're suspicious of that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: It's not that I'm suspicious of it. I mean, I always think there are always convenient explanations for things that are not so explicable because I don't think art is so simple.

LEWIS KACHUR: But you've just spoken of wanting to load up the pieces with some kind of

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, I think I've always wanted to load up the pieces as much as I can.

LEWIS KACHUR: It doesn't have to be autobiographical?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. I mean, there was no sense that I ever wanted work to be bored with reference or bored with the anthropomorphous. But that's what minimalism was about. I wanted the antithesis of that. I would load the piece up as much as I was capable of doing. Without the piece being illustrious, without it becoming Duane Hanson or George Segal. Segal's works were different.

LEWIS KACHUR: More abstract?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Actually I saw pieces I liked. I forget which one it was, but it was kind of moving. It was in the Nasher collection. I forget the name of it, but I sort of liked the piece.

LEWIS KACHUR: Time to get back to that at the end. These are the

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, these pieces. Yes, I began doing these pieces because I was interested in the activation of the entire space. And again, these pieces were about busting up the model. I worked on the wall because the wall was convenient, but these pieces suffer from the same symptom of a piece like this piece from 1977, where you do perceive this parallel plane. I think some of them I got to the point where I really did like those pieces which really did shatter that plane. Like this piece would really be far out in the space in the room and that's what I wanted to do in sculpture in the round, but I wasn't capable of doing it until I did that figure in 1981. You can really see a direct link between a piece like this and a piece like -- wherever it might be -- and a piece like that. They don't look alike, but believe me they're closer. This piece is far closer to that piece than this piece is closer to that piece. I wouldn't do so well in certain tests because would say, "Well, of course this piece has more to do with that piece," but the fact of the matter is that really in terms of the way things operate in space and in terms of what I wanted at the time, these two were much closer. I wanted things so active in the room, that activated the space that we occupied simultaneously.

LEWIS KACHUR: Color seems to play a role in that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, well color was a way of masking stuff and disguising stuff.

LEWIS KACHUR: But did you want the color to project into the space in the same way?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, well it was interesting. I think it was a certain parallel between the drawings because some of these drawings were really about space and back space and front. That's nice. Where is that? Fucking Metropolitan Museum. They'll never hang it -- the bastards. He won't anyway. His taste isn't good enough.

LEWIS KACHUR: These are more linear drawings. Are you talking about the gouache?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, these drawings which were somehow -- where the line all of a sudden. No. that these drawings are very dependent on the page -- unfolding in terms of their structure. Not necessarily in terms of what they refer to. Where these drawings really are more about the discovery of a form that still pays dependent than the color that was there. This should be fine.

Then the color that was introduced inside of the drawing was totally independent of the page. So I think the color referred back out so the drawing really had all this kind of structure that refers to the page where the color refers to some other context. Much more mental than planar, if that's the right word. Not planar, but much more mental than planned. Much more mental than drawn. I didn't say anything They had a piece blue so the color would differentiate from the naturalness of the wood.

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes. There was just a show I guess?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, at the Hirshhorn.

LEWIS KACHUR: They had a wood sculpture. How do you feel about the role of these

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I'm more aggressive in the city than in the suburbs. [both laugh] How I feel about them? I feel good about them. I like them. They're interesting.



LEWIS KACHUR: In a way, they seem to have started out more abstract.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, they were because I think that I was trying to work through problems.

LEWIS KACHUR: They're getting away from the houses and

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, but I was trying to work through real problems with those things and trying to find a way -- you see how that piece functions entirely? It doesn't really function in relationship to the plane of the wall. I didn't want my sculpture to function in relationship to the plane of the floor. I thought that was a problem that I was having. It might work, but it was something that I had to deal with, so I aggressively pursued it. I think by the wall pieces, which were relatively fast to do, that I sort of experienced something else which allowed the sculpture to kind of amplify itself into function. So they were extremely important in terms of my work.

LEWIS KACHUR: They seemed to get you back into working with wood?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. It wasn't a question of working with wood. I mean, it was a question of recognizing the limitation of the work and overcoming that limitation by working on the wall and then going back to the sculpture. Do you understand?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes. There was a show at the Guggenheim around in those days about the Planar Dimension which was a historical show or something --

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Right.

LEWIS KACHUR: Would that have been

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. In fact, I think if anything that show was after my --

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you find that an interesting concept?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, I think that was interesting. But I mean the wall -- a leaf is a great way to work because you're working in a prescribed art space. See, that's an important piece. Again, that piece busts away from the floor for support and I think that's what I want to do. I wanted to get away from that notion of minimalism where the form was determined by the floor, where the form was determined by the wall. The way Frank Stella's were all about flatness and the way Andre's were about flatness. I found that an extremely prescriptive notion and I think initially I began to work with those houses and somehow introduce a whole psychology into the work that would circumvent that, would give one a new access into the work.

And then there was a point where I wanted the work to be more physical, more engaging. I found in that physicality that I too was limited by the wall or by the floor, but that planar-ness was so significant. I think I worked very, very hard to get away from that.

I think by doing that, that enabled me to really get off the ground and there was no one getting off the ground and doing anything at all that was of any interest.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was it literally off the floor?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I mean literally off the floor. I think the way an Andre hugs the floor is basically cowardly in terms of sculpture. Well, it's a brilliant idea, but it's not really about ascertain. It's about capitulation. And the way Stella's hugged the wall was about capitulation. It was really in some ways maybe about the height of decoration. I think Stella found the same thing. That's why he had to bust out of it.

LEWIS KACHUR: Coming off the wall?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, well he is making a -- but I mean, I think he had to fight that, to deal with ideas about illusion and all that. I think the dominant rhetoric at the time when I began to work -- you know, less flatness and no action. It was here and it was Judd-y and Johnsian too. Because all the talk about Jasper's [Johns] work was the map as a reference to the world and the flatness to the flat. I mean, it was a portable art where you became absolutely about the rational and the logical and the explicable. That's something that was a challenge that didn't work with me. There was no room in it for me. I think I tried with those shelf pieces and those weight pieces. They were early and sort of pathetic in that -- oh yes, where the justification for the work was in the piece itself. Seventy-five pounds of this, you get seventy-five pounds of that. Kind of sophomoric ideas. Then I think I challenged those notions by trying to externalize what was feeling.

Then I wanted to get away from the kind of magical aspect of that. I mean, the idea of Joseph Cornell or Lucas Samaras really makes me puke. I saw Lucas's catalog and thought, "Ugh! I hate that!" Kind of magic, self --

LEWIS KACHUR: you mean?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. It was just the level of self-deception. You know, art is just art as just magician really does not interest me at all. So I wanted to be more grounded in the world. Of course, wanting that meant the work had to really depart -- had to break away -- from the space that it was in and not be determined by the space itself. So architectural reference and all of those things, I think in retrospect, were probably running through my mind. We can't use any of this. Do I have access to this tape for my own uses?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes, when we transcribe it.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Because it's something that probably would be in a catalog. Some of this stuff sounds good so I might as well give it to them. Are we allowed to do that?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes. I'll ask about copying the tape.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: But what are the parameters? What are the laws?

LEWIS KACHUR: Usually it's transcribed, then we get copies. That takes a while. But it is for the researchers and people to use, so I mean people have access.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: All this negative stuff. Am I allowed to edit stuff after?

LEWIS KACHUR: Well, at the end you can decide whether you want to have people ask your permission or not.

[INTERRUPTION]

LEWIS KACHUR: I'm just trying to get at how something like the 1980 piece here still looks like several pieces of wood put together and somehow kind of rises off the floor pretty dramatically. I mean, there's some great error or decision to go towards the parameters of the limbs of the body?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, sure. Why not?

LEWIS KACHUR: How did that come about?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I didn't know what else to do. Not quite. Actually I tried to do these pieces. Those three little pieces on the floor? This sort of where I would take the figure --

LEWIS KACHUR: You talking about the coffin?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. This was later. You know, like this little guard figure and you see the small figure on the floor. It was about defensiveness and self-protection and you'd sort of read that and see that produces a sign. Then you think, "Of defense." lowbrow about it. Then I found there were moments when I was really much more elated. I'm really talking about the size now. The work demanded to be larger. I remember being in a show looking at the small little piece that I did whose arms are sticking out. It's quite a joyful piece, and then the size was ridiculous all of a sudden.

LEWIS KACHUR: This was the group show?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I forget where it was. I said, "God! This piece is asinine!" I'm doing this piece that's really about elation. I was embarrassed. See, I never was embarrassed with the small chair or small house because those were the right size for the material. But as soon as I got involved with figuration -- that's a certain point where the piece really demanded to be larger.

LEWIS KACHUR: So you went towards the figure on a small scale first?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. When I did these pieces I was trying to do this female figure that was just sort of laid back and laying down flat figure that didn't -- it just seemed inappropriate. It was the same as making like a big chair instead of a small chair. It just didn't mesh. Didn't have the right syntax, so I started to work. The pieces were more kinesthetic -- more about the moment. More immediate. They needed largeness.

LEWIS KACHUR: And also movement?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, well, that's all the same.

LEWIS KACHUR: But of course you were still interested in activating the space around them?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, I think they would, yes. I mean, you never give anything up. That I learned. You just don't lose it. I mean, somehow the experience of your work always manifests itself.

[NOVEMBER 28, 1988]  
[BEGIN TAPE 4, SIDE A]

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Ask me a question.

LEWIS KACHUR: Okay. Well, last time you had talked a lot about the development of your work and you said we would talk more this time about your life or the autobiographical dimensions of the '70s and up to the '80s. What is the most significant thing can we talk about in terms of your life in this period?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, did we talk about Leonard Street? What studios?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes, you did talk about Leonard Street. I think you said 1968 to what -- 1975? So you were at 54 Leonard Street and you talked about being in the building with Kenneth Noland.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: That was earlier -- yes. That was 1968. That's probably more like '69. I'm not sure. It's 1968 or '69 I got a studio on Leonard Street, but for a year or two I lived on the West Side in an apartment, when Ivy was born. I used to commute to my studio. It felt like a commute to go all the way down from the West Side to Leonard Street. It was truly a trip. That was a half an hour. Whatever it was it seemed like.

Oh, I know what happened! Then we moved downtown to a sort of middle income housing place. Nice apartment. She's still there on the twenty-seventh floor with a view of the Brooklyn Bridge.

LEWIS KACHUR: This is the Lower East Side?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Well not really the Lower East Side. It would be south from Lower East Side near Beeckman Downtown Hospital. You know the place?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: That whole area. I also kept the studio on Leonard Street, so at that point it wasn't so bad. I could just walk to the studio. It was like six or seven blocks. But the marriage began to disintegrate. I was still living with Amy, but I was teaching at Hofstra [University]. I got a job at Hofstra.

LEWIS KACHUR: I was going to ask you if you ever taught?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I taught all over. I had one job at Orange County Community College which was a farce. I had to drive an hour and a half to get there. One class a week. I think I barely showed up. I stopped showing up. I mean, I'd show up intermittently. It was an embarrassment and I just couldn't cope with the travel. It was ridiculous.

LEWIS KACHUR: It was in New Jersey?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. I think it was in Middletown, New York. It was at least an hour drive or an hour and a quarter up the Palisade. It was truly a nightmare. I think at that point I'd take any job offered because I needed the money. I think after that I got a job at Hofstra which wasn't so bad. It was two days a week. The pay was poor.

LEWIS KACHUR: You took the train out there, I guess?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, I drove out. I had a car. Howard Buchwald was teaching. Perle Fine taught. She's an abstract expressionist. Actually, Perle is Amy's cousin. That's not how I got the job. How did I get the job? Interesting question. You know I don't remember? You know, I absolutely don't remember how I got the job.

LEWIS KACHUR: What did you teach?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think I was teaching ceramics, possibly sculpture. I'm sure it was 1970 or 1959.

[INTERRUPTION]

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Who taught at Pratt? Dave Jacobs who is a sculptor taught there. It was also you know sort of the late '60s and there were quite a few students in college and jobs were available.

LEWIS KACHUR: You didn't have any trouble getting into teaching? I mean not having taught before?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: It wasn't too difficult. It seemed to me that there were teaching jobs available at the time. Lots of people had these adjunct positions.

LEWIS KACHUR: How do you spell Kurahara?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't know. K-U-R-A-H-A-R-A? That job at Hofstra -- many of the students were okay.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were you there for a few years?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: And Howard and I would drive out. Who else was teaching there? There were some other young people who were coming from the city to go there and to teach. They had a museum -- Lowe Gallery. Bob Littman ended up running that. I got Bob the job, actually. I don't know what the hell he was doing. Ted Kurahara was running it. I knew they needed someone so I called up Bob and they interviewed Bob and he was great. He actually put that gallery on the map for a period of time.

LEWIS KACHUR: What? With contemporary shows?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. He did a show called Hanging and Weaving, which was sort of about the work that was going on at the time. Eva Hesse and I were in it. Other people were in it. I wasn't really part of that group. It's like that John Russell review yesterday? I think it was in 1969 that I began to show, and also my work wasn't so fully formed. Other artists, I think like Keith [Sonnier] and Richard [Serra], were more evolved than I was because I had a late start, basically, although I was ambitious and right in there. Somehow I didn't have quite the fortitude or the strength to sustain -- I mean, I kept working, changing, working, switching, working, changing. Anyway, the teaching job was good. There was a certain amount of money.

LEWIS KACHUR: Any other shows that Bob Littman did that were memorable or interesting to you, like Process Art?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes there was the Process Art show. But I forget what he did. I'd have to refresh my memory. I mean, it was so long ago. Eighteen years ago is like post-memory years.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you teach anywhere after Hofstra or was that it?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Let's see. What other teaching jobs did I have? I always had teaching jobs. I think Kurahara went to Pratt and he hired me at Pratt to teach a drawing class, which I hated. It was at night.

He hired me with this idea that I would teach a more rational notion of drawing. But the kids were really night students and I think they wanted to learn how to do fashion drawing. There were always a few kids in the class who were interested in me, but the bulk of them wanted a more conventional training. I didn't blame them. So in a way it was kind of inappropriate.

LEWIS KACHUR: What kind of training were you giving them? Live model drawing?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes we had live models, but --

[INTERRUPTION]

LEWIS KACHUR: How did you approach teaching?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I had live models. I gave them various problems. Basically, I think the drawing or the teaching reflected my own interests at the time. They were much more subversive than conventional drawing techniques. It would have been okay if I was teaching more advanced students, but I think to teach fundamental figure drawing class the kids wanted to -- I think they wanted to learn how to render the figure.

I was not really equipped to deal with that and I was never that interested in teaching. I just saw it as a way of making some money. But of course, I had a sense of responsibility so I was constantly quite tormented by my inability.

Conflicted by my -- not my inability. I'm sure I could have been better. I just didn't bother doing it. I was too preoccupied with my own work so it really became insignificant. That must have been like 1972 or 1973.

LEWIS KACHUR: At Pratt?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: At Pratt. Then they fired me. I went on unemployment.

LEWIS KACHUR: You hadn't done any other kind of work other than teaching art?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, I think I did little stuff. I was pretty desperate for money at the time because I really was not getting money from my parents. My marriage began to disintegrate and I had to have child support, which wasn't much, but nevertheless it was something and maintain my loft, which was cheap too -- a hundred fifty, a hundred seventy-five bucks -- so it was a difficult time.

I was quite frightened because -- I was relieved in a way that the marriage was ending since it wasn't working -- but I had lots of anxiety about being on my own. I think Amy -- who is a year older than me -- was kind of more mature at the time. She had taught at schools and then she stopped teaching.

Now she's the chairwoman at Pratt of Art Education. She was quite hostile to the art world in general. I'm sure that she saw my friendship with Paula [Cooper] as something that was threatening. I think it was very complicated, but I mean it was a shitty marriage. The summer we split up -- I forget when it was. Ivy was maybe a year old and Amy's father had rented a house for us which we shared with her sister, Jenny Snider the painter. Jenny was going out with Jeff Way at the time. It was just miserable. Also it was the moment of sort of women's lib where feminism was sort of entering the picture on a more sophomoric grass roots level. It wasn't even ideology. I mean it was much more about lifestyle -- less about ideology. I think now it's ideological. Then it was really a question of women getting together and talking about their general rage, which I'm sure was deeply conditioned by their relationship with their fathers and, of course, the man that they lived with. Not that I was victimized by any means because I'm sure she had all kinds of -- I think she wanted a lot more out of me that I could possibly provide at that age.

LEWIS KACHUR: Where were you spending the summer?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: We were in Amagansett someplace. It was torture. I recall visiting Paula, visiting Alan Shields, seeing Klaus Kertess on the beach. I had my own anxiety about being in the art world -- even participating in it. I think she reinforced it. I don't think Amy was at all supportive. She probably sensed my own trepidation and confusion with it. So the marriage dissolved and I moved in with --

LEWIS KACHUR: Dissolved is a funny word that you've used about three times.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, it just ended. I'm not going to give any details.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did having Ivy precipitate anything or make things more difficult for you?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, yes, I think if you have a kid it's always more difficult. If you don't have a child when you separate it's really nothing. I mean, it's no big deal, particularly if you're young. You haven't accumulated --

LEWIS KACHUR: No, I mean does that put more of a strain on your relationship for some reason or not particularly?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, I can't say it did, but yes, of course it did, because I think Amy had expectations that I would take care of the child and that I would somehow be a more -- not responsible, but I would assume more of the burden of child rearing. Which I think I was willing to do and I did it to the extent that she would almost allow me to do it, but in many ways there was a lot of hostility between us at the time.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was she teaching art at that time?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't think she was teaching. I don't know what she was doing. I think she had stopped teaching. I don't know what we were living on. Somebody must have been giving us some money. Maybe her parents gave us some money every month? Somebody. There was a lot of financial anxiety and also I felt somehow that I did have some opportunity to show work and it wasn't that well received. That was my perception. Somehow maybe I had illusions about what being well received meant. But I mean, I felt quite rejected and dismal and that I had a lot of work to do.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was that before you showed at the Clocktower?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, this was way before. The Clocktower was 1973, I think.

LEWIS KACHUR: You talk about the Whitney -- the Anti-Illusion show?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. That was 1969. Then maybe I started showing with Paula in 1969. I had some shows. There was some interest, but just that somehow in many ways was how I felt and Amy was not particularly -- she was supportive, but she wasn't truly -- remember, she was somebody who had tried to paint and was a failed painter. I'm sure that I had moments of elation and moments of real depression. I felt really that I had to work as hard as I could and explore ideas.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were you formally divorced?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. We did get a separation. Then for a couple of years I was basically alone. I took care of my daughter on weekends. I had virtually no money. I had a great time, though.

Let's see. I showed that piece at Paula's and it was far better received than previous work. It looked like it was a

strong germ of an idea than . Then I pursued that.

I was furious at the time. I wouldn't say I was nuts, but I was pretty distraught. Living in a shit hole, taking care of my daughter, and not really fully equipped to do that. In the meantime, Amy was living in this sort of middle-class apartment house, you know, fairly comfortable, and I was uncomfortable. But I was happy actually in many ways. I mean, it was more exciting. I was free. I basically was free to explore different ideas and see people and fuck around a lot. Various things that just developed a better sense of myself, which was sort of impossible before.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did that feed into your work?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, sure, it fed into my work. Or it feeds into the sense that your developing sense of self so I think that was an important time for me. I think it corresponded with the work. My work became more personal and more about what I was experiencing. It was just riskier. There was something about Amy that was more conventional. I guess I really felt deeply limited by the relationship, and parallel with this she was contemptuous of me. I sort of had identifications with her that I think didn't have that much to do with who she was, but maybe more to do with what she represented.

Her father was a real prick. I never liked him. He was a failed architect who had quite a strong sway over his children because he was opinionated and intolerant and a windbag. Do you remember Luis Camnitzer?

LEWIS KACHUR: No.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: This was a guy from Uruguay who was very involved in anti-war movements. He invited me to do prints. You know, Amy was just -- when I saw her the other day at this show and, of course, I would get more attention than she would and she just could not deal with it. They weren't political. He was political. He also had an etching studio. He invited me to enter these fingerprint etchings.

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes. There were a couple of etchings I guess in the mid-'70s? 1975 or so?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, these were much earlier. This is like 1971 or '72. The Modern has one of those big drawings.

But, you know, somehow Amy was really grudging about the time I spent there. It was an impossible situation. She was deeply unsympathetic. Anyway, regardless the marriage failed and I was on my own.

LEWIS KACHUR: Couple of years?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Three years maybe? Two or three years?

LEWIS KACHUR: You told me about 1973.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, it must have been 1974. Remember I talked about Bob Israel and I went to Europe? Didn't we talk about that?

LEWIS KACHUR: Oh, yes, I think so.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: And then I met Ellen on the way back. When I came back we spent a lot of time together. About fifteen years.

LEWIS KACHUR: [laughter] How do we start to evaluate or touch upon Ellen's role in your life? She's also an artist.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, well, Ellen is a painter and I think that was important and still is. But to enter a dialogue with somebody where there was some real mutual understanding about the process one went through to work. We definitely had a more sympathetic relationship. I'm just saying at that point it seemed to me that the only relationship -- this was a real viable relationship because of similar interests and similar ideas.

LEWIS KACHUR: She was interested in being in the art world too?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, she was interested in work. I mean, I don't think Amy was interested in work and I think Amy's idea about work was naive anyway. It was more sentimental and she had a fucked up idea of what being an artist amounted to. And she was very controlling. And Ellen is not. Ellen can be quite demanding, but basically she doesn't try to control the way I behave or think. She's much more tolerant and I need a certain amount of latitude. I particularly needed a certain amount of latitude to pursue my work, and so did she. I think that was something we could provide aside from the intimate aspects of the relationship.

LEWIS KACHUR: You told me she's from Detroit?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Right.

LEWIS KACHUR: And she came to New York and rented a studio for the summer with another artist?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think she wanted to get out of Detroit. She realized that place was pretty limited. Actually, she should have moved to New York earlier. I think it's pretty impossible for an artist to develop outside of New York. Maybe California, but not Detroit. I guess Wayne State had a pretty aggressive visiting artist program, so she met a lot of artists and they said, "Hey, why don't you move to New York?" They encouraged her to move. I guess I'm not revealing much.

LEWIS KACHUR: We'll talk about whatever you like. Would you say you hit it off pretty well when you first met?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. You know -- it took time for the relationship to evolve.

LEWIS KACHUR: I saw a catalog recently that she had showed some --- I don't know if they are paintings or sculptures on the wall? In the early '70s. I don't know if that was before you met.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, not before. It was after. But that's always been conflict with my career and Ellen's career -- anytime two artists are together. And since I was better known . . .

LEWIS KACHUR: And you were already showing?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I was showing. I think it's always been a kind of tortured situation. Somebody called me today and said, "Would you like to have dinner with this collector and his wife?" I said, "Well I'm going to run it by Ellen first," because I know they're going to fall all over me and ignore her and that can just be devastating to her and deeply uncomfortable for me. The only drawback between two artists in being together. That is who receives the most amount of recognition. It's just an unbalanced amount of attention. But I think Ellen's been quite persistent and I think she's got her own identify in the art world. Economically, I think she suffers to some extent because people assume she can rely on my income which I think really burns her up. She's a rich girl. I just don't think she's as hungry as an artist. It's a bad situation.

LEWIS KACHUR: Well, was Paula Cooper as hungry when she ran Park Place?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, well, Paula was younger and Paula was not somebody who was born with money. It's not a question of money, but I mean it was that her life was the gallery. It was a full commitment which corresponded to the sort of commitment artists were making. That's one aspect of what is really important. Aside from being intelligent and thoughtful and having many great attributes.

Of course, it wasn't a particularly high-pressured time. The art world was smaller.

LEWIS KACHUR: I guess SoHo was just starting to get started?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. She had the first gallery in SoHo.

LEWIS KACHUR: Twenty years ago?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, and it was mostly about artists. It was much smaller.

[END OF TAPE 4, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 4, SIDE B]

LEWIS KACHUR: How about your relations with your family? Were they supportive of your being an artist?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I don't think they were disappointed. I think they were happy that I was involved and totally committed to what I was doing. I think they had anxiety about where I lived, but it wasn't discussed that much.

My mother was quite supportive. My father was supportive in retrospect if I look back on it. They didn't say that much about it. I think then when I began to receive a certain amount of recognition and peer acceptance, then I'm sure that they felt a certain amount of relief. I really felt that they were generally not supportive.

It's difficult because most artists of course had come to New York. Had left some other city or area. They came out of the Midwest or California, went to school and came to New York. Whereas I was somebody who really came from New York.

I used to think that they could make much more firm departures from their past, where I was always inundated by my past and my past continued into the present and the present was always very real.

LEWIS KACHUR: You could tap that in your work?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I think I did. I think I was slower to succumb to style than a lot of other people, or succumb to fashion, which I think in the end was an attribute or something that was in my favor.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Then I had the show at the Clocktower. I was friendly with Gene List and met Alana. They were married at the time and Alana offered me this show. She gave Ellen a show at the Clocktower. The people I knew who were part of this took Ellen very seriously.

Then of course Ellen showed some work at Paula's, but there was no way that was going to work out. You know, have both of us in the same gallery.

LEWIS KACHUR: That would be pretty unusual.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. It was just too competitive a situation. Then Ellen went out to California to teach so we were separated but we still maintained the relationship. After that we got married.

LEWIS KACHUR: When was that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: It was ten years ago, so what is that?

LEWIS KACHUR: 1978?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: 1978. The relationship had gone on and on and there was no sense in not marrying.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did you have any new friends or did she bring you into any other circles?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, yes. Ellen had a whole circle of friends -- Nancy Mitchnick was a friend. Susanne Hilberry. In fact, there were a whole group of Detroiters -- John Egner, Barbara Wilbur -- who I became friendly with. We had mutual friends because she was friendly with Elizabeth [Murray] and, for better or worse, with Jennifer [Bartlett]. It was kind of a much smaller situation.

But there was one chunk of the art world, I guess. You know, Julian Lethbridge was a friend of mine, was a friend of Ellen's, a friend of Paula, a good friend of Jasper's [Johns], Jan Hashey who now shows at Douglas Baxter. I mean there was a whole group of us.

Ellen of course taught at Pratt with [Jonathan] Borofsky, but I don't think she was that friendly with Jon, but there was this connection to myself and Jon.

LEWIS KACHUR: From the gallery?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, no, otherwise. From sort of being in New York in the late '60s. I guess we were somewhat a livelier group than the Jake Barthot group. I mean, there was a group around Bykert, right?

LEWIS KACHUR: Yes. Right.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: You know Chuck [Close]. I don't know if Chuck . . . But David Norros, and Klaus Kertess, and Linda Benglis who used to live with Klaus at the time, Brice and Helen [Marden], Bob Duran. I mean, that was one group in the city.

Then another group was a group around that I was part of.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was there a central person?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't think there was really a central person. Jennifer, myself, Borofsky was always on the edge. Then I began to show with Paula and then they did too subsequently.

LEWIS KACHUR: So that sort of cemented that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, yes. I, of course, was the first one showing even though I may have done the least amount of years behind me in terms of work. Everyone saw that I was willing to take risks and I was not particularly cautious.

LEWIS KACHUR: In showing your work?



JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, and there were lots of other people showing too. I mean, the whole group around Clement Greenberg. There was a group sort of around [Robert] Smithson -- you know, Mel Bochner and Dorothea Rockburne. I'm sure if you could map it out and figure out what was where, I think that you could figure out there were certain circles.

Then there was the Joseph Kossuth, Larry Weiner, Bob Barry conceptual art circle with Lucy Lippard.

[INTERRUPTION]

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: For a long time there were just groups of people -- spheres of influence.

LEWIS KACHUR: What significance are those?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't think there's any significance. Well, I mean, I just think there were a lot of young artists who were showing at Castelli too -- you know Keith, Richard. There was a whole group of people on 112 Greene Street.

LEWIS KACHUR: What about alternative spaces? Did you ever get involved in any of those?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I showed at 112 Green [Street Gallery]. They hated my work, though. I never showed there again.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were you members of any of these artists groups or cooperatives?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, I didn't get into that stuff. Paula's seemed like a real viable, lively place. It's the only place that seemed active.

LEWIS KACHUR: You mentioned the reception of your pieces that you showed there at Paula's.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, well, somehow I felt that there was a kind of -- It was just that I had a strong identification with the work itself, so I felt much better about it.

LEWIS KACHUR: Were there any critics who started to write about your work then?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Gee, I don't remember. Then I had that show at the Clocktower which reinforced things. I guess Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe generally began to write about my work. Then Roberta [Smith] reviewed it a couple of times. Hilton Kramer reviewed it.

LEWIS KACHUR: Where there any critics who were particularly receptive?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, Rosalind wrote that essay. I think that was important. Rosalind was the kind -- she still is -- pretty serious. And of course Rosalind developed interest in the work -- maybe via Jeremy. She and Jeremy, I think, talked with each other -- you know, were very friendly.

LEWIS KACHUR: Did she visit your studio? Did you know her before she wrote about your work?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I'm not sure. Then I had a show in Italy at Salvatore Ala [Gallery]. All of these house pieces and whatnot got some attention. Bob Morris included it in one of his articles on sculpture.

LEWIS KACHUR: The famous landmark article in Artforum?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. That's being re-published. It's great because they were right on the money at the time. Everyone said Bob was a great charlatan. In fact, some of his articles were about other artists that didn't exist.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: What do you mean?

LEWIS KACHUR: I think he invented individuals.

LEWIS KACHUR: As part of a conceptual . . . ?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Has he been interviewed by the Archives?

LEWIS KACHUR: I don't know. I would think so.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, I would think so too. But I think Bob's thinking was very lively compared to a stiff like [Donald] Judd.

LEWIS KACHUR: We were talking about the Judd show -- at the Whitney, right? -- the other day. I guess in 1974 you showed at Salvatore Ala and then in 1976 at the Contemporary in Chicago?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. That had a tremendous impact, I think.

LEWIS KACHUR: And then the Albright-Knox?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: That was a stupid fucking show. At that point I was sort of working on the wall. I think I'm somebody who will always sort of take a certain risk in the work and then retrench. Figure out what the fuck it had. What had I done really? What in fact am I doing here? Really investigate it.

LEWIS KACHUR: What would be an example of that?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I don't know. Those wall reliefs. Doing those for so long.

LEWIS KACHUR:

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, and then those as sort of a surrogate sculpture that I couldn't solve. See, but at that point in the late '70s I was pretty well accepted amongst my peers, which was I think all one cared about.

LEWIS KACHUR: Any other critics that you thought were receptive?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think Roberta was receptive. I mean, now she isn't. So I understand. I mean, I assume that to be the case. I don't know. She hasn't written about me in years. But I think Roberta's taking some distance from her early involvement with people. I guess she's probably trying to figure out where she can get on target.

LEWIS KACHUR: She did your Whitechapel [London] catalog?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, and then she did the Whitney catalog. That wasn't that long ago, but we are totally out of touch.

LEWIS KACHUR: You've got quite a long bibliography here. Nobody else of interest?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, John Coplans interviewed me. That was interesting. What else do I have there? Let me see it. Let me refresh my memory. Well, I mean Rosalind was a very attractive and intriguing individual.

LEWIS KACHUR: She talked about the role of psychological dimension in your work.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: We've discussed that. Yes. Kenneth Baker. Well, Kenneth Baker has always written about my work. He's writing an article right now for Artforum. I didn't realize he had always written about my work, but he had been writing about it in the Christian Science Monitor.

LEWIS KACHUR: I didn't see it.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Anyway, Roberta and I were pretty close. I talked to her about work. Sandy [Sanford] Schwartz was quite -- Except Sandy is like so remote. It would be difficult to figure out Sandy.

I think one aspect of being married to another artist all of a sudden the critic has to deal with your partner's work too. They can't quite just focus on you. That's being sensitive and [Donald] Kuspit was quite interested in my work. I was a little frightened of Donald, and then he truly put Ellen off unknowingly a number of times. I mean, it's difficult. We discussed it the other night. I just don't have a relationship with artists. You're the first critic -- I mean I talked to Kenneth Baker a couple of months ago. I really have not had much critical dialogue. You know Lynne [Cooke], but there's not that kind of -- Peter Scheldjahl wrote about my work, but Peter never dealt with the work. He's a contemptuous mother fucker anyway. Bleep, bleep. Excuse me. Peter's okay, but he's such an egomaniac. I don't think he was ever fully involved with my work, but Roberta definitely was. I think it was important for Rosalind [Krauss] to some extent. Jeremy [Gilbert-Rolfe] was pretty involved, but Jeremy is so weird.

LEWIS KACHUR: It seems like you got more out of these artists' groups that you were talking about than from critics or writers.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I think, yes. I mean, you'd have to be a pretty kind of advanced critic to come in. What are you going to do? What dialogue exists unless you're involved with semiotics or you're involved with the dialogue the critics are involved with? Sandy and I are friendly, but I haven't seen him in a long time. It's difficult. It's very hard to maintain that relationship between critics and artists. Very difficult, complicated. Particularly if you get friendly. It's interesting. Like Irving Sandler and I were friends, but Irving was very close

with Alex. But Irving was not so much of a critic as a kind of art historian. It's different.

LEWIS KACHUR: He started out as a critic I guess in the early '60s?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. Right. And also sort of a chronicler. He was very involved with the Archives, I think. He's much more about what it was like in the '60s, '70s. Now he's working on the '70s, I think, so it really is about somehow documenting the present.

LEWIS KACHUR: Do you think that's a valid kind of ---

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, I do. I think in many ways, it's more valid. Unless you have a big position -- Rosalind clearly has a kind of large posture. She's an historian with a certain point of view that she's been developing. Has excluded sculpture and painting. Now it's strictly photography and language. I haven't talked with her, but I assume that somehow the work was important to her development of thought.

I'm not so sure about Roberta. I don't know what the fuck she thinks about. I know this sounds petty, but I know that anybody who could think that the guy that does that beeswax house is interesting . . .

LEWIS KACHUR: [laughs] Wolfgang Laib -- yes.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, who can take Wolfgang Laib seriously and say that was sort of outstanding work is kind of beyond me. Because I see it as antithetic to my interests. Not antithetic, but I mean, it just seems like some little eddy that swirls around and goes nowhere.

LEWIS KACHUR: In relation to the Carnegie International?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. In relationship to doing work. I mean, most artists that I know are practical -- the ones I'm interested in are pretty grounded.

LEWIS KACHUR: Talk a little bit about the experience of the Carnegie International.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I had a problem with that because I sort of saved work for it because I thought it was important. I guess I wasn't willful enough when I installed it. I should have been more insistent. It's been reinstalled, but after the opening. The opening was so political.

LEWIS KACHUR: You mean most of the critics saw it at that time?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes, critics, dealers. People liked my work, but then when I read Roberta's review I was sort of appalled that I was totally excluded as if I didn't exist. It's painful when somebody excludes you.

LEWIS KACHUR: That was in the New York Times?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes.

LEWIS KACHUR: Had you seen a previous Carnegie International?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No.

LEWIS KACHUR: I also wanted to ask you about the whole issue of public art and how you became involved in selling pieces out of doors?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: I haven't. [laughs]

LEWIS KACHUR: Was the Seagram building the very first?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. Somebody commissioned me to do the Seagram piece so I pursued it. Even though the commission fell apart, I decided I was so far into the piece I would finish it. Then it was a question of looking for a place. So I had been offered a place across from the Sherry-Netherlands [Hotel]. You know the entrance to the park close to the Pierre [Hotel], I guess? Or the Seagrams [Plaza]. I said why not in front of the Seagrams? It was such a good space.

LEWIS KACHUR: You mean, it wasn't Seagrams that originally commissioned the work?

LEWIS KACHUR: They never commissioned me. They don't commission anybody for anything. They grant you the privilege of using the space. They're hardly doing anything anymore.

LEWIS KACHUR: So then did you sell that piece?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, I still have it.

LEWIS KACHUR: Do you have any interest in public art or is that a red herring? Or shall we say, architectural context for your work?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, I think it's interesting because it's challenging. The first thing I did, I did a commission for the Signa Corporation. Yes, I'm interested in it, but I'm not interested in it exclusively. It's terribly time-consuming. Look at this. You have a piece like that piece that's real interesting. And shit, it's slotted to go on the side of some building. Now it's a good building, but --

LEWIS KACHUR: This is the piece that's going to Japan?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No. This is going to California. I guess I'm more interested in making sculpture. I'm not interested in the dialogue.

For years I was interested in working large and outdoors. It seemed to me that the only people who had the opportunity are these people who did environmental work.

I thought it was really disgusting when that Battery Park thing came up. They asked six artists to make proposals. Victor Ganz was involved with this. I think they didn't ask one sculptor like [Mark] di Suvero or [John] Chamberlain. I mean, they did for separate projects, but not for this whole basic scheme. They wanted people who would cooperate with the architects.

It was the work of plunk-sculpture. You know, when you take a piece and plunk it down someplace. Clearly that's not what people were involved with doing. They really considered the whole space just because it manifested itself as an object rather than some integrated aspect of the environment.

Suddenly you can see just so many Dicky [Richard] Fleishers. There were things that were like tame [Robert] Smithsons that border on landscape architecture, landscape design. So yes. Sure it's interesting to see.

I showed Paula this piece in back of you. She talked about that would be great for some closet, but I don't know if I want to do anything unless the space is really right.

LEWIS KACHUR: Was the piece that you did for the Signa Corporation something for a particular space?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Yes. I mean, scaled it for the space and dealt with the space in mind. But I mean, the whole idea of working for a particular space -- yes, you consider the space it's going into. You don't make it the way you might do it in your studio.

LEWIS KACHUR: You want to talk a little bit about or describe this commission that you're doing for Tokyo?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: No, it's not Tokyo. It's in Fukuoka, Japan. Well, you know I went to see this guy. Came to my studio, liked the piece, bought a piece, told me to come and meet him in Japan. I went and then he asked if I would do a sculpture in front of his bank and I said sure.

It's very challenging. It's like really an interesting piece. It's an opportunity to work very large. Clearly, the work is not going to be as felt as something that you turn out in your studio for yourself.

But it's a challenge to work that size and still retain your hand. It's difficult. Public art -- big stuff -- is always interesting because I think very few people can deal with it because most of the work that went outdoors ended up being weak. Because whatever kind of human humanity was behind it got lost in its huge scale. Di Suvero worked well outdoors and he's generally quite lively and giving. But most of the outdoor stuff was appalling.

So it's a challenge. Can you do it? Will this piece in Japan really work? It's exciting. As a steady diet at this point there's certain ideas that I have about modeling and other ideas that I really have been tangential and I haven't been able to pursue because of this sort of involvement with commissions.

LEWIS KACHUR: How many commissions are you working on now?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, not that many. I'm working on this one in Japan. I have another one in Japan that's at a museum. That's pretty resolved. I have this one which I think will happen in California and another one for the governor of California.

LEWIS KACHUR: What about this one?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, this is a piece that I did and then I looked at it and decided to make it six foot tall. I think it could be a kind of great public piece. This one's very successful. I think this one is a sort of abstract, in a

way.

LEWIS KACHUR: I was going to say like a torso, but it's not really.

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Well, that's been proposed for someplace in France. I don't think it will happen, but I want to pursue it anyway. I mean, I just don't like the restraint having to deal with someone else's approval. Who the fuck needs it? That's the problem dealing with commissions. Basically you're subject to committee and to somebody else's taste.

Now like Mr. Shijima -- the guy in Japan -- has been totally free about it. He's put no restraints on me, but he's somebody who's very sophisticated. He commissions lots of buildings and he has a big collection and all that really big power and he has an interesting manipulating situation. Where a lot of other commissions you end up being not manipulated, but controlled, by the commissioner, which is no real fun.

LEWIS KACHUR: What are you doing for California that you mentioned?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: That's tentative. I'm doing a G.S.A. [General Services Administration] proposal.

LEWIS KACHUR: You started talking about the General Services Administration?

JOEL ELIAS SHAPIRO: Oh, yes. Just I'm doing this G.S.A. thing. It's a sizeable commission, but you have to bend with the architecture. I haven't made the proposal yet.

[DECEMBER 14, 1988]

[TAPE 5, SIDE A WAS NOT TRANSCRIBED]

[NOTE: SEVERE SOUND DISTORTIONS AND BACKGROUND NOISE MAKE THIS SESSION OF THE INTERVIEW VERY DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND. REMOVED AT THE REQUEST OF THE ARTIST.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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