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Oral history interview with Walter Askin,
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Transcript

Preface

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH WALTER ASKIN
IN HIS STUDIO IN PASADENA, CALIFORNIA
MARCH 4, 1992
INTERVIEWER: PAUL J. KARLSTROM**

Interview

WA: WALTER ASKIN
PK: PAUL KARLSTROM

PK: This is the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Walter Askin at his studio in Pasadena. What's the address here?

WA: 26 West Dayton.

PK: Near Old Town Pasadena. The date is March 4, 1992. This is tape one, the beginning of the interview, probably the first of two sessions. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. We have just had an enjoyable breakfast, on the archives, which is the way we like it, and this should hold us for maybe two hours. We'll see. First I want to say I'm delighted that we can do this. I think it's going to be fun. I'm looking forward to it, and I also think that you'll have some very special information to share regarding your own work, but this community as well. I think that maybe right up front we could say this that you, of course, have your own career, your own work, your own life to talk about today, but also I think you've been in a very interesting place as an observer over a career that spans, what, about forty years, I suppose.

WA: At least, yes.

PK: You've been mainly based here in the Los Angeles area and presumably have had experience and contacts that would illuminate that subject as well as your own work. So this is what I'm hoping to get at in this interview. This is a somewhat long introduction to the subject, but it certainly makes it clear what we are after. In such interviews we generally start out, of course, these interviews are biographical, and so we start out at the beginning trying to lay in the early experiences. Walter, you, I believe, were born in Pasadena. At least you grew up here. Could you tell us something about those earlier years and maybe special circumstances in your background that would, in some way, explain how you happen to be here now, still in Pasadena as a working artist?

WA: I was actually born in Pasadena, at the Huntington Hospital, which is only a half mile from where we're sitting right now. The studio building is in the center of what used to be the black section of Pasadena. As a matter of fact, this studio is the first building built by a black businessman in Pasadena. I'm very proud of that fact. It used to be the hub of activities here in the church. There's still a black church down at the far corner where you can listen to two sermons during the summer, and it's quite a delight, because they practice the singing in the evenings during the week. I really enjoy that aspect of this. Where we're sitting right now used to be a restaurant called The Other Place Cafe, or the Bluebird Inn. Right behind used to be a beauty parlor. After the Doodah Parade, once Betye Saar came by and she said, "I spent the worst hours of my life in this room," because her mother used to bring her here to have her hair done every Saturday, and they would talk about all the salacious gossip in the neighborhood, but always in code.

PK: You mean Betye Saar grew up in Pasadena as well?

WA: Yes, she did. And Hayward King. I didn't know Betye then, but I knew Hayward in high school. Then the far side was a barber shop, and there was a lawyer here and a realtor as well. So this was really the center of things for quite a while.

PK: Let me ask you, and I don't mean to interrupt, but I gather that Pasadena was not one of those communities then in southern California and elsewhere that basically had de facto desegregation. I know some nearby communities where Blacks certainly were not welcome to stay overnight. Yes, they could come in in the daytime to work.

WA: Oh, not at all. Not at all.

PK: So there was really a vital Black community here?

WA: Yes. Absolutely.

PK: This is, what, in the thirties?

WA: I was born in 1929. So, yes.

PK: Pre-war, then war years.

WA: That's right. This building was built in 1924, and it probably was owned and operated by a Black up until the fifties, somewhere in that bracket.

PK: You find that interesting now in retrospect. Is it possible to think back to your boyhood here? Is this something you noticed, that you remember, that this was a Black community?

WA: No, don't think that it was pure and beautiful. But it was a better-than-average situation for Blacks. But I remember Hayward talking about walking down Colorado Boulevard, and Wally Hedrick and David Simpson would go into the Woolworth's for a milk shake, and Hayward resented that, because he wasn't allowed to sit at the counter there, and he felt that his friends were very insensitive in that respect, and I think they undoubtedly were.

PK: It sounds like it.

WA: Yes.

PK: I'm sure they wouldn't do that, treat their friend like that now.

WA: Oh, not at all. And when we went into San Francisco, we did walk out of places where Hayward would not be served. If they said, "In this place we won't serve you. You need a membership card," or something like that, we just all got up and left, but not before we told everybody in the place pretty much how we felt about that situation.

PK: What made the difference in attitude? Just maturation growing up, knowing more about the world?

WA: Oh, we'd never seen Hayward thrown out. He would just avoid going into those places with them. But I didn't ever spend that much social time with them right after school, and so I never saw that situation. But Blacks did live in different areas in town, and that wasn't by any sort of design. I think there was such a strong racist backdrop that everybody understood this was the line or whatever. So there was a general division in the schools. For instance, Washington School was nearly all Black, whereas, John Marshall, where I went, a junior high school, was pretty much all White and Asian. The Asians were integrated and did live among us, and so that seemed natural. We were always taught tolerance, openness, receptivity. That is, racism simply wasn't permitted in the classroom in Pasadena city schools. The teachers at that time, elementary school teachers as well as secondary school teachers, used to travel widely so that even in the thirties and forties they'd all been to South America, to Mexico, to China, to the Philippines, to Europe, and that was an extremely good situation. There was a strong emphasis on art in town, too. The public school system, I think, prided itself on the strength of art programs.

PK: That's what I wanted to ask you next, or at least at some point along here, just when did you first encounter art? How did you develop an interest? I gather it was something that the public school at that time did provide.

WA: That's true. That's true. I was committed to art very early on.

PK: How did that come about?

WA: Well, we lived in a rented house at 815 Mar Vista, and it had little rose-pattern wallpaper on the wall. I had taken to drawing small figures and boats and things inside of the roses.

PK: With permission?

WA: Oh, no. [Laughter] No, as a matter of fact, my mother was talking with a salesman at the door one day, and she hadn't scrutinized the wallpaper very carefully up until that time. She was not interested in what he was saying, but she did start to see what was happening in her wallpaper. When the salesman left, she let me know in no uncertain terms, and probably with some application to the backside, that this was not to happen. I felt that something that made such a wonderful, kindly, generous, good, and giving person so angry must be extremely powerful. And I really became committed to art, in part, through that experience.

PK: Is that true?

WA: Oh, no. I'm not making that up.

PK: Were you aware of that at the time?

WA: No, not that aware of it. I wasn't aware of it that much at that time.

PK: Or is that in looking back you say, "Well, it must have been this that appealed, the power of art"?

WA: Well, there was this turbulence about it, and it did gain reactions. I remember my father then, who was a draftsman with the city of Pasadena, bringing home all these drawings he'd done from the Engineering and Street Department there, and my brother and I used to draw on the backs of these. My brother became an architect, I think, in part, because of seeing what was on the front side of those drawings. But we always had paper and pencils and French curves and erasing sheets and so forth around us all the time.

PK: So it was a graphic household, if I can use that term.

WA: It was. And my mother was interested in artsy-craftsy kinds of things. Even my Grandmother Miller had been a scholar of putting the centers in daisies on plates and so forth. So there was some small tradition on the female side, but certainly not on the male side.

PK: But this activity, I gather, was valued in your household.

WA: My mother valued it. I don't know that my father did. You know, in talking with friends like Paul Wonner, they talked about how many impediments were put in their way of studying art. And I never felt that kind of resistance. There was always an acceptance that you could be pretty much what you wanted to be. Not that resistance isn't good, because I did meet it in the school system later on. There was always this Rose Parade in town.

PK: That everybody knows about.

WA: Well, we all were a part of that. My father and mother worked in it early on when it was horse-drawn carts that were decorated with roses and so forth. The first drawing that I ever did in kindergarten that went up on the wall of that room was of a Rose Parade float that had a cannon on it, and out of the cannon were shot balloons. This impressed me a great deal, and getting that work up on the wall in kindergarten meant more than it probably should have. So I continued to think of myself as an artist. When I went to junior high school, then they had specialized art teachers. There were only two. One was William Enking, who later taught at Pasadena City College, a very wonderful, kindly man. And then I had a one-armed lady who taught art. Probably their virtue was that they didn't teach that much. They left me free to pursue my own interest and focus. I know that I spent a lot of time looking at the two books that we had at home that were devoted to art. I think one was Masterpieces in the Louvre, and I don't even remember what the other one was. But I used to look at those for long periods of time. Also, we took the National Geographic magazine, and that meant that there was a chance to see what people from all sorts of cultures, New Guinea cultures, people in Egypt, people in India, and so forth, did, and a number of things they did seemed to relate to art. So the idea of art being important in that sense seemed to emerge from that. I don't remember the name of the other teacher in junior high school. Pasadena at that time was on a 6-4-4 plan. You had six years of elementary school, four years of junior high, and then you went to the city college, which was called junior college then, and you had the last two years of high school there plus the first two years of college.

PK: If you wanted to.

WA: If you wanted to. People tended to stay on there, because Pasadena City College had a very strong art program then, and I think continues to have a strong one now. But that's where I ran into Wally Hedrick and David Simpson, Hayward King, Webb Clark-Samazan. She was known as Paula Webb then.

PK: These were in art classes at Pasadena City Junior College?

WA: That's right. They were fellow students there. The reason that we tend to cluster together is that we were at the school from 1945 until 1949, and that was a period when GIs were returning from the Pacific and European theater, and they felt that they had missed out. There was a burgeoning economy, and they felt they hadn't been earning money during all that time they were in the service and they were after gold. So, down to an individual, they were all going into commercial art, and they were going to make money at it. We hadn't had that kind of background, and we had much more altruistic interests, and so we tended to focus on the fine arts.

PK: Now, explain this. Your group was not returning from military service.

WA: That's right.

PK: You were too young, I guess.

WA: That's right. That's right.

PK: But just.

WA: Yes. We'd only be nineteen, you see.

PK: Just.

WA: That's right. We barely missed the--

PK: And so you went on in the normal course of events. You chose to go on to two years of college, and at that very same time the war was concluded. This is '45-'46 and these others were coming and very pragmatically focusing on commercial art where you can make a living, security and all that. Tell me again why you and your group were more interested in the fine arts, the impractical art.

WA: No. Just that that was our interest in art as art rather than art as a means of producing an income. You have to realize at that time that you couldn't earn your living, even a modest living, from doing art, fine art. If you wanted to make any money off of art, you had to go into advertising, design, or automobile design, and so forth. There was this idea very prevalent at that time, sort of a Bauhaus idea, that making chairs, interior design, and so forth, doing pots and all the rest of it, was equal to paint with density of content you'd find in paintings, drawings and sculpture, and that fine artists should be out decorating buildings with mosaics and sculpture and that sort of thing.

PK: Sort of a hold over from WPA [Work Projects Administration] activity? Do you think of that in addition to Bauhaus ideas?

WA: It could have been part of that kind of dream, but Millard Sheets, who was in this area, very strongly emphasized that kind of idea, and you saw the results of that on the Home Savings and Loan buildings that he did all over the place. Plus, Pasadena City College was funneling all of their students directly into Art Center School, which was over on Third Avenue then. And, of course, Art Center's animation program fed people directly into the Disney Studios. If you went into automobile design, you got a job, if you were at the top of your class, at General Motors. And they were known for eliminating people who were not up to snuff, too. So there's this strong sense of competitiveness there. Everybody we went to school with, you see, was five years older than we were. When we went down to sign up for classes, the counselor for the Art Department was always trying to push us into commercial design, and always making up these schedules for us, and we would have to go down and vociferously fight to remain in a fine arts-oriented program.

PK: Which they did offer, I gather.

WA: They did offer it, yes.

PK: What did that involve? What was the distinction? What were the classes?

WA: Well, it would have life drawing, watercolor painting. That was pretty much it. Pretty much a watercolor and life-drawing program.

PK: Which is interesting, because they at least acknowledge value of these activities or media and approaches, but almost as peripheral, I guess, to, I don't want to say serious art, but that art which leads to a career.

WA: That's right.

PK: So they were trying to push you.

WA: I remember when a group of my compatriots went out to the San Francisco School of Fine Arts, and Jeremaine McAgy was the director then. He asked them, "Do you ever intend to make your living off your work?" They said no. And he said, "You're in the right place." So there was this sense. Another resource that was here was the Pasadena Art Museum, and it wasn't an ordinary place, by any means. It was a very fine provincial museum, and they had the Galka Sheyer collection, which is Paul Klee, Feininger, Jawlensky, and who's the other chap?

PK: Klee, Feininger, Jawlensky, and [Wassily] Kandinsky.

WA: Kandinsky. That was it, yes. We really lived in that museum and looked very carefully at the things there. They also had a room devoted to Oriental prints. Then they had something called the San Gabriel Valley Show, and that occurred during our last two years at the City College. We said, "What the heck," and we went down

there and took a wheelbarrow full of works, all of us, and, by God, they put our works up. There was very little in the way of rejection. So Hayward was in that show. I was in the show. Wally was in the show. David was in the show. John Stanley was in the show. As a matter of fact, John Stanley and I had a large mobile that we had done together at Alhambra Sheet Metal Works. John's father was a plastering contractor, and he knew all sorts of people in the building trades, and so we were able to go down there and, free of charge, do this huge mobile, and they hung it from a grill in the ceiling. We had put it together with fishing line, and as it turned around, fray by fray, that fishing line broke until finally the whole thing crashed down onto the floor of the museum. They phoned us up and said, "You've cut through two Armstrong linoleum tiles on the floor of the museum." They were more concerned about the museum floor than they were about our mangled work. And so we went down and battered it back into shape and rehung it with cat gut and it went back up into the museum show.

PK: What was the name of this exhibition? The San Gabriel Valley what?

WA: The San Gabriel Valley Show.

PK: It was not a juried show?

WA: It was a juried show.

PK: But pretty lax in its-- [Laughter]

WA: Oh, now, you're making-- [Laughter] I don't think they eliminated works to the extent that they did today. You know, probably one in two works got in or one in three, but I really don't know. I did give you that catalog and it will indicate in the front. I think Jerry Zorthian was the juror for that. The idea then was not to say we're going to make this show a polemic for this idea or that. It was instead simply to--

PK: Just to get shown, right?

WA: Define the show by the number of rooms that were available. So you just had to cut it down so that you didn't have more works that you could actually hang. That mobile, I suggested a title early on, fairly facetiously, called "Magnificent Edifice." But when I took it down and put it in the show, because two of us had done it and there were two major forms in it, I changed the name to "Duo." And John has never forgiven me to this day, because he always felt that it should be called "Magnificent Edifice."

PK: What was his name?

WA: John Stanley. He went up to California School of Fine Arts, but about all he did during that year was create a one-string wooden banjo, and he returned after about a semester there and went into his father's plastering business, and he's been a contractor ever since. I saw him about a year ago, and he's become a folk artist. He never felt that sympathetic to the abstract direction that the rest of us went into, and he's really found his true path and has returned to art, doing work in that genre. The one other thing I should probably indicate is that Pasadena had an art fair every year.

PK: Separate from the San Gabriel.

WA: That's right. This was outdoors and it was generally held in September or October.

PK: Nice weather.

WA: And it was in front of City Hall and ran down there on the two sides of the street, one side being the YWCA and the other the YMCA. There was a grove of trees there that they set up these wooden backgrounds with paper, butcher paper like this, that ran over top of it. The first year I went down and signed up for it and put my works up. The rest of my friends saw that. I think Wally came down and signed up late, and he hung his watercolors on some clothing lines, washing lines, that he hung up with--what do you call those?

PK: Clothes pins.

WA: Clothes pins, right. [Laughter] Mine, of course, was much more professional than that. And then the next year I went down and signed up for the largest space they had, and, surprisingly enough, they allowed me to do that. Then I went and invited all my friends to show with me. They became a little irritated when it came out in the newspaper that it was to be "Walter Askin and his Modernist Group." [Laughter]

PK: Was that what it was called?

WA: That's the title that was put on it by the people who ran the show. It didn't have anything to do with what I had established down there.

PK: You didn't give it a title, you just--

WA: No, I just signed up under "Walter Askin" for a big space.

PK: What year was that?

WA: That has to be like 1948.

PK: What was the response?

WA: Oh, it was wonderful. It just so committed us to art, I can't tell you. We could stand behind this butcher-paper backdrop and poke little holes in it so we could see people and listen to their comments. And people came along and said, "Oh, my two-year-old kid could do better than that." Or, "This is awful." Or "This is what modern art looks like?" And that resistance is just what every teenager is looking for, and we just thrived on it. [BREAK]

PK: This is continuing the interview with Walter Askin. This is tape one, Side B. Walter, you were telling us about the famous exhibition that you organized, the Pasadena outdoor show, "Walter Askin and his Modernist Group." And you were saying something about your enjoying watching the response.

WA: Oh, all that negativity just told us that we were on the right track, that we were independent thinkers, that we had our own pattern. And, of course, that's just continuing the situation that had already been established by the City College in emphasizing commercial art when we were interested in fine art. As a matter of fact, I remember that we were all forced to take a craft class. It was run by a man who had been a former master sergeant. Wally Hedrick and I went upstairs to this class at a time when it wasn't in session, and instead of throwing our own pots, we revved up the outboard motor that was in the slip barrel and got the slip all in its proper shape, and we poured all the molds for the day and the evening class, using up all the slip, also, and made about sixty, seventy, eighty pots, and then we spent the rest of the term decorating the pots. [Karlstrom laughs] So we turned what essentially was a craft class into a two-dimensional decorative art drawing class. So we always had this tendency to move things around in our own direction. There was one individual who's probably more influential than anyone else on us, and that was Leonard Edmondson.

PK: Where was he at the time?

WA: He had been a student up at Berkeley, and he was hired to come down and to teach classes on painting and drawing. We'd had people like Carolyn Woodhull, who taught watercolor, and others, but Edmondson really had the sense of art that fitted our mode of thinking. He had a class in watercolor painting where we sometimes went out on location, and we would do a different project each meeting. It was on a semester system, so that during a semester meeting, twice a week, we would probably do something like thirty-two projects. That was very invigorating, and his criticism of the works were very forthright, and he even at times would criticize our behavior because we would sometimes try to be extremely inventive in our behavior on location, you know, like finding bits of lead and starting to build structures out on location, which he felt didn't reflect well on the City College itself, if people were to see us engaged in these activities. We were also influenced a great deal by music at this time. At John Marshall Junior High I had acquired a guitar for \$2.50, because the neck had been dissociated from the body of the guitar, and it was in very poor shape. I was able to bolt the two together, and after watching a fellow down at the Pike in Newport--there used to be a place down there where this fellow played guitar out in front--I watched him play in a sort of eight-pattern loop that he used with his hand in strumming it, and got a book on chords and found out you only needed to know three chords, and taught myself to play the guitar. My parents, of course, sat through many long, dreary hours of "Detour," and "My Old Uncle Bill Has a Still on the Hill," and things of that sort. Well, when I ran into Wally and Robert Jenkins and David, I was then playing the guitar, and I took it to one of the evenings that we used to have together either on Friday or Saturday night.

PK: What was the purpose of those meetings?

WA: Well, there's a fellow named Robert Jones. He lives today out in Venice. He was basically a social catalyst for all of us. He had interesting readings and interesting interests. He was a Wagner fan, and still is. They had a game room down at their place on Grayburn, and so he would--

PK: Grayburn Street?

WA: Grayburn in Pasadena.

PK: How do you spell that?

WA: I think it's G-R-A-Y-B-U-R-N. But it may not be.

PK: Anyway, so then they had this home and they would make these--

WA: They made this room available.

PK: [Unclear]. Is that right?

WA: No. No. He was the same age we were.

PK: Oh, okay. He would make these evenings.

WA: Up until the time at midnight when our singing was extremely loud and his father would yell down from upstairs, yes.

PK: And so you showed up on this one occasion with--

WA: A guitar. And people really became interested in that, and I said, "Well, it's simple." And so Jenkins got a guitar. I think Jim Paul, another fellow, got a guitar. Wally Hedrick got a guitar. And I taught them in a couple of evenings how to play a guitar, and then we used to get together and play the guitar and yell and sing together all the time. It's at one of those sessions that Wally and I had made this light machine. Wally had done the larger part of it, but we did work on it together, work on the idea together. It had little electrical contacts that ran down here for intensity of light and a change of light color, and then a box that came up where the light came out, and we used to go into Jones' folks' kitchen and get the colander and knives and other kitchen implements and lay them on top. So we put Wagner on the record player and then played this light machine against that. Another thing we would do is go out and have street parades.

PK: I want to hear more about this light machine.

WA: You should probably ask Wally.

PK: That's interesting. Of course, what it brings to mind is the, I guess, contemporaneous work of, for instance, Dockham, wherever he was, Altadena or something, somewhere in this area, and, for that matter, the Whitney brothers and, in a different way, Oscar Fischinger. What you've described is an interest that you may not have been at all aware of what was going on with these other--

WA: Oh, that's not true. You see, the Pasadena Art Museum used to show films of Fischinger, and one of my big thrills was much later on when he came and sat in my backyard after an opening at the Pasadena Museum once, and we had a chance to truly talk, because as a sixteen-year-old I was very much influenced by seeing those films, and I even made a short film myself. I took an Easter vacation, and I was totally undone by the fact that all my work for the whole week on Easter vacation, night and day, went by--pffff! You know, it was in no time at all.

PK: You were still in high school.

WA: Still in high school, right. And so Wally found out about the film and saw the film. I think I was asked to show it at City College once. He said, "Well, let's make a film." His girlfriend at that time was Paula Webb, and her father had gone to a war surplus store and gotten hold of a whole series of these canisters of film that they used on P-38s to have mock dogfights. Instead of shooting machine guns at their friends, they would shoot these cameras, and they would develop those and see if, in fact, they were on course in terms of dogfighting. So Wally took a couple of those canisters, and the first thing he said is, "Walter, we've got to find out what this film will do." So he took a piece of Celotex with a thumb tack, stuck it in one place.

PK: What is Celotex like? Celluloid?

WA: It's just a soft wall backing, wallboard, and he'd stick it in and he'd run just a little bit. Then he'd move it to another place and run it and move it a little bit further and run it, and then at the very end he did a photograph of me moving, working up a wheelbarrow. We were doing this on top of a garage. He shot me moving this wheelbarrow from above at the very end of it. Then the father, who had bought the film, paid to have it developed, and he invited all of his friends over to their home to see the film that his daughter's boyfriend had done. Well, I knew enough to stay away that evening. [Laughter] So this film came on, and all it was this little thumb tack skittering around on this board and at the very end this wheelbarrow running by in a few seconds.

PK: His father had paid for--

WA: Oh, the father was furious. Of course, the father was always furious at Wally.

PK: I can understand that.

WA: Wally was a baseball fan, and, of course, his girlfriend was up in Sierra Madre, which is close to the mountains, and they had one of the very first television sets. In order to get the baseball station, you had to change the direction of the antenna. So Wally, in order to do that, would have to walk up to the third floor of this

house, go into a clothes closet, climb a ladder, go into the attic and out on the roof, walk over to the edge, and say, "Is it right, Paula?" and change the antenna. Of course, he would leave without putting the antenna back in a position so the father could watch the other programs that came on like wrestling and roller derby. So the father was always angry at Wally, particularly the day, the July Fourth when Wally came down out of the ceiling, having changed the direction of the antenna and stepped on the water pipe, which broke and started to cascade down through the closet, down the third floor to the second floor to the first floor on a day when no plumber was around. [Laughter] Finally, I said, "Wally, I think we'd better go find a plumber." And so we turned off the water at the house outside and went off. Of course, no plumber is available at all. So they had to live without water for a day and then pay for a plumber.

PK: Maybe that's why Wally had to leave the area finally, this kind of behavior. [Askin laughs] This is very interesting to me that you've described a group of young aspiring artists, obviously with having somehow developed the idea of what art can be, beyond simple representation or landscape paintings making pretty pictures that had, perhaps to a degree, a social role, very much as we think of the modern twentieth century artist. One part that interests me, and I'd like to try to get at the circumstances of how that came about, you've described the situation where from quite early on you and your friends, who were sort of later resistant, the good guidance of school counselors to put you in the direction where you can make money. But you've described a situation which some of us or some people might be surprised to hear could take place in this area at that time with perceptions of what Southern California was like. And this moves us a little bit into a later topic, but I think now is a moment at least to begin to think about it.

WA: There were places where you could see work. Not only in the Pasadena Art Museum but the Museum of Twentieth Century Art that used to be out in Beverly Hills. I'm not certain about that title, but that sounds right.

PK: I remember that. It was a short-lived--

WA: That's right. And they had [Alexander] Calder's.

PK: I think Vincent Price was involved.

WA: That's right. And [Lorser] Feitelson, I think, had something to do with that. And the old Pasadena Library up here used to have people like Man Ray come in and talk.

PK: I'm not suggesting or certainly echoing the perception that there's absolutely nothing around.

WA: Not at all.

PK: But what intrigues me is how did you youngsters take the somewhat limited stimulation or information around you and develop what seems to be a very modern, very progressive stance. From what you've said, this is very progressive. It's at least as progressive in terms of thinking as what was going on, perhaps, in New York or other centers. And this, I think, is a surprise. Do you have any idea of how you got to that position? Where did the information come from, about what the proper issues were, what a real artist should be like?

WA: I think reading. To be a part of that group, you really had to keep up on the names, and there was a constant discourse going on, and there was a very definite value system that was developed.

PK: What would you read?

WA: There were a lot of political issues, too, that were involved. I wasn't very much involved in those, but there were others who were very strongly socialist oriented. And people like Robert Jenkins became machinists, because they believed in the honesty of manual labor and the importance of that within a culture.

PK: So it was a social stance, to a large degree.

WA: I think so, yes. And we used to go out and have street parades and that sort of thing, torch light parades, march down the street.

PK: To what end? To what purpose?

WA: Maybe this was just all frivolity more than anything else.

PK: But how did you think of it at the time?

WA: But there was a counterpoint. We didn't believe in all of the materialism that was predominant in those times, and a very definite sense of mutual kind of helping one another. There's a sort of sense of mutual reinforcement, I think, involved there, and also the sense that we were part of a community, and that the community outside that community was very hostile to what we were about.

PK: That leads me to the next question. Part of a community and, of course, you had your primary group right here. You did have this community that you've described within this Pasadena environment. How aware were you of the communities elsewhere? We've mentioned, and we'll talk about later, the California School of Fine Arts Art Institute, or whatever it was at the time, in San Francisco. To what extent were you aware of this larger community, including what was going on in New York or Europe especially?

WA: Oh, I think, you know, Life magazine would show all of the Abstract Expressionists sitting there for their photograph.

PK: Right. That famous photograph.

WA: And they did a number of issues on Picasso, and, of course, Picasso was the god at that particular time and had a very strong influence on me and Cubism had a strong influence on all of us. Paul Klee, as I said, we were able to see the originals. Of all those four artists in the Blue Four [phonetic], I think Klee was the one with whom we felt the closest identity.

PK: Can you describe that experience? I'm setting the stage--correct me if I'm wrong on this--unless you traveled East or maybe the Bay Area, but more to the point, the East or to Europe where you'd see many original works of art, the fare was somewhat limited in Southern California.

WA: That's very true. The county museum was almost nothing.

PK: And so the experience of being able to see the Blue Four, and you say you were particularly attracted to Paul Klee, has to be a memorable one. And I'm wondering if you can describe, if you can think back, what that was like actually being able to see in the original these works of art and how you responded, what, perhaps, conversations it stimulated between you. What was it like? What was the nature?

WA: We were like sponges looking at those works. I mean, just soaked them up, and were very much influenced by them. And these teachers who were teaching commercial art were not unaware of those people either, and those people influenced them also. So it wasn't as if they were hostile to our interest in contemporary works, because, you know, the works of Paul Klee would prove to be very effective in advertising, and he had a sort of vocabulary of forms that could be applied to a number of other fields. Also, you have to remember that we could see ourselves in that context, not only in that San Gabriel Valley show and not only in the art festival, but the Pasadena school system on a regular basis had shows of students' work in the museum, and I showed my work when I was in high school in that museum. One of the works was purchased by Virginia Steele Scott [phonetic], who's the person who put up the major funding for the Huntington and the first million bucks toward the new Pasadena Art Museum that became the Norton Simon Museum. And she bought that work for ten dollars. My life-drawing teacher had wanted to buy it for five dollars. But, of course, I went for the larger amount. [Laughter]

PK: What was the work? This was a figure?

WA: That work still exists today, and it's in the collection of the Laguna Beach Museum of Art.

PK: What is it?

WA: It was a still life, highly abstracted in a Picassoesque manner, that was made of ink, poster paint, and Ajax foaming cleanser.

PK: It's clearly not a dirty picture. [Laughter]

WA: [Laughter] I was afraid to go and see Virginia Steele Scott after I came back down here from Berkeley, because I thought, you know, Ajax foaming cleanser is not in Ralph Mayer's Handbook of Artist Materials, and I thought the whole thing had probably been chewed to pieces. But it turns out that it held up extremely well.

PK: How did you see yourself then in relationship to Paul Klee? You mentioned a specific artist whom you admired. You had a chance to see the work. What did that work tell you? What did that work tell you that was different from what the designers and commercial artists were getting from Klee? What was it?

WA: Well, I think it was the idea that you can make a life around art, and that the most important aspect of art was its spiritual presence and the way it activated one psychically. The interest in psychology was very, very strong at that time and preceded a different kind of look at psychology that occurred later on in the sixties and seventies, so that we grew up in an atmosphere where there was an uncanny concern for what was not visible, you know, just making the invisible visible, which really was Klee's major thesis. There was also something about the way artists lived their lives, of course, and we thrived on learning about those things.

PK: You mean the Bohemianism?

WA: Yes. Yes. And I think that's why everyone except myself went to San Francisco Art Institute, because that was really the ivory tower. I was more interested in going to a place where art was found in the context with other subjects. I also knew at that time that I was interested in teaching as a means of earning my living, so that my art would be free from any kind of economic imperative or economic constraints.

PK: Remind me. Where did you go then on to school?

WA: I went to Berkeley.

PK: You went to Berkeley. Well, that is interesting. You went to the Bay Area, whereas your friends went to the free-form experimental California School of Fine Arts. You chose a more academic or traditional course.

WA: I didn't know whether to go to UCLA or to go to U.C.-Berkeley, and I asked my teacher, Edmondson, where it would be better to go. He had been to Berkeley, and he said, "Berkeley." And, of course, the focus was quite different.

PK: Of course, you could have studied with Stanton McDonald Wright.

WA: You see, UCLA was still mixed up with that whole kind of thing of the applied art, fine art, and they had Margaret Lecky, who did bookbinding and so forth, and it was a much more muddled situation, and I think has continued to be a much more muddled situation than Berkeley. I could never have been happier than I was at Berkeley. There was another strong, compelling reason for going to Berkeley, is that my good friends John Ough and Alice Berg, who became Alice Ough, is now Alice Cronin, went to Berkeley, and they said, "Berkeley is a real community." The university pretty much owns the city, and the city is there because the university is there, and it's a much more encompassing environment of intellectual activity. And so I couldn't have been happier. It was just the right place for me. So for the others to get into teaching it was a very circuitous route. They went to the Institute and then they ultimately had to go over to San Francisco State College to get the things they needed for the degrees and credentials they needed to teach.

PK: Did you major in fine art? You were in the Art Department?

WA: At Berkeley?

PK: Yes.

WA: Yes. The Art Department at Berkeley was strictly a Painting Department when I arrived there. Sculpture was under Architecture. I ultimately did take sculpture with Richard O'Hanlon and Jacques Schnier, two totally different people. Schnier was on the--

PK: I know. I know both their work and actually met Jacques on one occasion.

WA: A very phobic individual. He was on the mental health boards of all the surrounding community.

PK: I can't believe they let an artist be on the mental health board. [Laughter] I just want to make sure I have this clear. You made a decision to go on to Berkeley. Your interest remained art. You wanted to make art. But you recognized the need to make--

WA: A living.

PK: And to be independent. And so you were studying art, but presumably to get credentials for teaching at this point. So you saw yourself, your career, as teaching art. Is that right?

WA: I saw myself as wanting to be an artist but realizing I couldn't support myself by doing that and that I would need to find an alternative, and it seemed to me the best, most liberating way to do that was to teach art.

PK: Do you find that's true after all these years of teaching?

WA: Oh, surely. Surely. The situation could be better, of course, but I've enjoyed most of the moments in teaching. Actually, if you think about doing it again, I might have stopped teaching earlier, but in terms of practicalities, it's provided a good kind of life. Teaching at a state university is not the same as teaching at Berkeley.

PK: Which one is better? Teaching at Berkeley is?

WA: Oh, yes, in terms of liberating your time.

PK: That may change, you know, because the U.C. system is going to have to put its teachers to work.

WA: I noticed that. I noticed that.

PK: For the first time.

WA: Yes. Yes.

PK: My editorial comment. Scratch that.

WA: And, of course, we've always taught six classes a year on the semester system and nine classes a year on the quarter system. As a teacher, I do so much more than my teachers did. You know, they never showed slides. They never came in with extensive lectures. They were simply respondees.

PK: They show up to criticize or something like that. Let's pause right here, if we may, and get a new tape.
[BREAK]

PK: Archives of American Arts, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Walter Askin in Pasadena on March 4, 1992. This is the second tape, tape two, in this first session. Walter, you mentioned that you attended a particularly interesting lecture, I guess it was, by Man Ray.

WA: That's true.

PK: Do you want to tell us about that?

WA: Surely. That was probably in 1947, sometime around then, and Man Ray was introduced by the then critic for the Los Angeles Times. As was the way that people did things then, he remained on the dais while Man Ray spoke.

PK: Was that Arthur Millier?

WA: I believe it was Millier, yes. Man Ray took a review that Millier had written of his exhibition in town and read it, and step by step and point by point refuted everything that Millier had said. And, of course, here's Millier on the stand turning red. [Karlstrom laughs] And Man Ray didn't have an ordinary tie on. Instead, he had this little blue string that Van de Kamps Bakery used to have to tie up all of their cakes and so forth when they gave them to you. The questions from the audience were very hostile.

PK: Towards?

WA: Towards Man Ray, basically because there was always this phobic attitude toward Communism at that time, and he was always having to say, "Well, the boys on Rue de la Paix are always setting up barricades," blah, blah, blah, and so forth." Something I didn't know anything about at all. He would respond to these, but as he responded, he was slowly walking down the aisle of the lecture hall.

PK: Where was the lecture?

WA: At the Pasadena City Library. And when the last question was asked, people turned around and Man Ray was no longer in the room. He just had simply left. He walked away. And so that was quite wonderful. Then they had a series on different linear forms--vertical, horizontal, diagonal--by Carl With, an art historian out at UCLA, and I was absolutely fascinated by this. Nobody was talking about what these formal elements meant in my classes. And so I made a very complete report of that.

PK: In what terms? Psychologically?

WA: Sure, that falling water always moves downward. It's always the idea of tragedy.

PK: So symbolic, emotional, psychological.

WA: That's right. That's right. The only problem was I lent my paper to Alice Berg, who needed a paper for an art history class. I turned mine in for extra credit. I didn't have to put one in. But she said she needed to get some additional information from mine, because she'd also gone to the lectures. I didn't know that she'd copied my paper, and so we were faced this terrible situation. The art historian who ran the class said we both had exactly the same paper. And I didn't rat on her, but she should have spoken up and said--

PK: And she didn't?

WA: No, she didn't.

PK: Oh, some friend.

WA: Well, we're still friends today.

PK: Do you remind her of this every once in a while?

WA: No, I have not brought it up.

PK: We'll send her a copy of the interview.

WA: It would have little purpose at all. Little purpose. We were talking about Berkeley, and I think it was just a wonderful time there, and old professors, John Haley, who just passed away, and Erle Loran, Worth Ryder, all felt that that was a golden age at Berkeley, that something very special was happening. So they would walk into the classroom, but essentially the students made the classes in lots of ways, because there was a strong sense of competition, everybody was educated. They educated themselves in the background. I can remember going to the first painting class with Margaret Peterson O'Hagen, and Jay DeFeo was sitting right below me and Fred Reichman was over here. And Jay was opening up the Skira books, those Edelman dyed print, lively books, and I was saying, "Why is she doing that? We read those two years ago. We looked through those years ago." But everybody was in a very active frame of mind, and people like Walter Snelgrove were there. As a matter of fact, it was the years of the Walters. There was Walter Askin, Walter Snelgrove, Walter Wong, Walter Bach.

PK: Walter Horn.

WA: I did take a class with him.

PK: Did you take a class from him?

WA: Yes, I did. It was probably the most influential class I've taken. I enjoyed taking classes with Alfred Frankenstein, and he was extremely good. But Horn's class in medieval art really gave me a kind of understanding of what art history could mean. And Mrs. Clausenthu, who taught art history at Pasadena City College, was a by-the-book gardener-art-through-the-ages art historian. It was extremely dreary facts and dates and so forth. But Horn explored the reason why certain things happened and you really got an insight into the mosaics and the [unclear] and so forth that you wouldn't have gotten otherwise. Those ideas carried over in your thinking about other art as well.

PK: This is interesting to me because--well, this doesn't really have anything to do with this tape, bring things around. Last week I was with Monica Haley.

WA: Wonderful woman.

PK: Yes. I picked up the rest of John's papers. So they're in the archives now.

WA: Well, John and I used to correspond a little bit, a couple of times a year.

PK: I don't know how complete his letters are, but you should be represented in there.

WA: I talked to him on the phone more in the recent years.

PK: But it is interesting, because while I was at the Haleys, the phone rang and Monica, who's very frail now, asked me to answer the phone, and who should it be but Erle Loran.

WA: Sure.

PK: So, right there. Erle's not feeling well. We also have his papers and we have Worth Ryder's.

WA: Wonderful.

PK: And so most of the Berkeley group that you studied with and some of the students are represented or documented in the Archives of American Art. Just as an aside and following from that I'd like to ask again two things. What years were you at Berkeley? You've begun to tell about some of the influential professors, but if you'd like, I'd be pleased to have you pursue that.

WA: I was at Berkeley from 1949 until 1954. So I took my two upper-division years, junior and senior years, at Berkeley and then went on to three graduate years.

PK: So MFA is what you--

WA: There was no MFA at that time. I got a BA in '51 and an MA in '52. The University of California at Berkeley for years fought against the MFA, and they did for very good reasons, reasons I think are still solid ones, that you

shouldn't keep artists too long under tutelage, under a master, under somebody else's direction or response, that you have to maintain the kind of sense of independent value-making. That kind of integrity is extremely important for an artist. And so they only turned to having an MFA when they realized their graduates could no longer compete for university jobs without the new degree MFA. I think they were absolutely right in that. It's too bad that graduate students now stay around so long and become so dependent upon the university. You tend to see them stay a lot longer than they actually should. When I got my MA, they gave me a Calmerton Fellowship in Art, which meant that I received \$1,200, which at that time was to fund a year in Europe. But by that time, I was already married and had a daughter, and so there was no way in the world that I could go to Europe for this \$1,200. So I went to Dean Pepper, the aesthetician Steven Pepper, and asked, you know, what could be done about this. And they very generously converted it to a year of painting in Berkeley. So I had this wonderful year, right after my MA, of being liberated from regular classroom activities. I went down on University Boulevard and I found a house down there that I could rent for \$50 a month, a derelict, musty old house. I kept the front room with a fireplace for myself and closed it off, front bay windows, and then I rented the house out to Bill Morehouse and Wally Hedrick and, I think, David Simpson or John Ryan, one or the other. And then that was \$15 a month for each of them, and then Susan Reagan, who became Susan McKillop, had the studio behind mine for \$5 a month. And then they paid the utilities. So that meant I had this whole place free.

PK: Presumably you had another apartment or a house where you lived with a wife and daughter.

WA: That's right. In order to support myself, the first year I was at Klassic Cove. K-L-A-S-S-I-C. [Laughter] It's the name of the people who ran the place on Channing Way, a boarding house, and I shared my room with Herbert Ho, a Chinese from Honolulu. He today is a vice president of Bishop's Bank over there and has perhaps six or seven children and is very well-to-do. My father's roommate at university--he went to Dennison University in Ohio--was from Burma and was blacker than the blackest Black you can find around. And so that was a wonderful kind of tradition of living with a person who came out of a different kind of background. The people who ran Klassic Cove came up to my parents when they delivered me to the house and they said, "Well, do you object to your son staying with a Chinese person?" Well, of course they didn't object. They weren't that way at all about things.

PK: They weren't racist.

WA: That's right. And so I don't think I was a good influence on Herbert at all. Herbert was Catholic and very quiet and studying business. He stayed up late at night, got up late in the morning. I got up very early in the morning and went to bed early at night. I had to get a yellow sailor hat that I pulled down over my eyes in order to sleep in that situation. But then I got married at the end of that year.

PK: Did you meet your wife at Berkeley?

WA: No. I met my wife through my friends in San Francisco at a party, and things just took. And so we went back to her place in Minnesota that summer and got married in Berkeley in September of 1950. And somehow she got pregnant. [Laughter]

PK: Somehow. Well, you were naive.

WA: And so nine months and two weeks later, my daughter, Nancy, was born. We lived in this small, basically one- or two-room apartment where I managed the place, and Doris worked for the Pet Milk Company in San Francisco and used to take the F Train over every morning, and she continued to work there during that whole period. My daughter had to be taken care of, which wasn't tax-deductible in those days. We were very, very poor, but at least we were able to survive by doing that. It didn't pay any money. As a matter of fact, I think we still paid \$20 a month on this place while I took care of it. We won't go into all of the stories that are attached to that, because they have very little to do with the world of art. But at any rate, my friends in this building on University Avenue used to invite David Park and Elmer Bishoff and the jazz group over to play on Saturday nights.

PK: This was an apartment complex or something?

WA: No. This was just a single house on University Avenue. So, one evening a crowd developed there, and they said, "Well, we need more room, so let's take out this wall." So they hammered out the plaster at the top and the bottom of the wall and sawed out the studs and threw the wall out in the back yard. Bill Morehouse, who lived up above, had a floor that started to be concave rather than flat. I came in the next day and I just knew I was going to jail, because I had signed a lease saying I would not change the color of the walls without contacting the owners.

PK: And your friends took the wall out.

WA: They took the wall out and threw it out back. [Laughter]

PK: That's pretty bad, actually.

WA: It is.

PK: They were really irresponsible.

WA: Yes, they were. They were. They absolutely were.

PK: I don't know anybody that would do that to their friends anymore.

WA: Well, yes. Wally could. [Laughter] I suggested to friends recently that we write a Wally Hedrick behavioral manual. And they said, "I can't believe you said that, Walter." But, actually, we've had two different methods of operation that are quite different, and yet we're really very close in lots of ways. You know, for instance, Wally always wanted a Model-A Ford, and his father was a used-car dealer. So he got him this beautiful little Model-A Ford, but Wally wanted a convertible, and this was a hardtop. Wally's father came home one day and Wally had converted it to a convertible. He'd sawed the top off. And, of course, the structure of the car was such that it wasn't intended to lose its top, and so it would wobble down the street. He had a piece of canvas that he laid on top of your head, supported by the windshield and then your head, that you used when it rained. But it was a very insecure automobile. It seems to me that Wally's father was always angry at him. His mother, who was from Texas, you know, his name is not Wallace William. It's Wally Bill. Just like Billy Al Bengston, who's from Texas, name is not William. Billy. William William. [Laughter]

PK: William Albert.

WA: Or William Albert, yes. Those are the real names. And she used to just yell at him all the way down the walkway, telling him how he should comport himself, what he should do, what time he should be back. And this would just all fall off of him like just--

PK: So his life was devoted to removing himself as far as possible.

WA: That's right. Fending off the influence of what other people wanted him to do and instead pursuing his own path.

PK: Well, in this infamous incident here, did I understand you correctly that this was an event that took place in the building, the house that you had leased, and then you were subleasing?

WA: That's right. That's right.

PK: And this was a musical soirée of some sort. Did David Park come to this one?

WA: Oh, yes. Surely.

PK: And so Park and some of the others were there when this wall was removed?

WA: I think so. Yes.

PK: You weren't?

WA: No. I was not.

PK: And you showed up the next day.

WA: Oh, they even resented the fact that I locked off my studio, because they wanted to be able to go in there and use that. Luckily, they put it up for sale and they sold the building without ever going inside.

PK: They didn't know? They never found out the wall was removed?

WA: That's right. And they made it into the University Motel, and I stayed at the University Motel for years just out of gratitude for the fact that I didn't have to go to jail about that building.

PK: Tell me the location of that again.

WA: It's on University Avenue.

PK: Mini-historic.

WA: And it was very near the railroad tracks.

PK: And is that motel still there?

WA: Oh, yes. I think so.

PK: What's it called?

WA: University Motel. If it is, it must be pretty shabby by now.

PK: I'll have to check it out. I'll take some pictures for you.

WA: Okay. [Laughter] Well, they moved down to Oakland, because they were actually going to Arts and Crafts. They really wanted to continue to go to the Institute.

PK: Who moved over?

WA: Wally and Bill Morehouse and so forth. But Arts and Crafts got the GI Bill and the Institute did not have it. The minute it did get the GI Bill, it could support people who'd been in the service and were on the GI Bill.

PK: So they had been in the service?

WA: Wally and I went down one day, because we didn't want to go into the service, and joined the National Guard together and were put in a communications outfit in the headquarters, in headquarters company. John Stanley and Robert Jenkins also went in, but they came at a different time. They went to a medic unit with a mortar outfit in the same Sunburst National Guard battalion. And we spent a couple of summers together up near San Luis Obispo at the National Guard camp there training, and we used to have to come in every Monday evening and train.

PK: Is that the place north of San Luis Obispo down from King City that you drive by?

WA: No. It's not Camp Roberts. It's the other one that's near where the Madonna Inn is.

PK: Oh, a good location. [Laughter]

WA: Yes. [Laughter] We denigrated military life. We didn't like it at all, its structure, its pattern, its cynicism, and we tried to remain resolutely buck privates. There were officer training patterns. My father had been a second lieutenant in the First World War, and my uncles had been officers and so forth, but I was not interested in moving up in the military. The interesting thing was that since Wally was sort of my compatriot there, he refused to go away on weekends on leave, and so we stayed on the base and played our guitars, and our friends like John Stanley and Robert Jenkins and others came with us, and we would just pal around as artists over the weekend. Wally somehow had to stay on in that. When I went up to Berkeley, in order to carry out my National Guard activities and obligations up there, I had to go down to the Oakland Naval Station, and it meant taking an hour-and-a-half bus ride or something like that, perhaps an hour, and they left you out in the middle of nowhere, and you just followed these little pattern of lights off into infinity. I told them I couldn't take the time to do this, because it took so long once I was there to get back. They promised me rides, and the fellow never resolutely came by, the lieutenant who was supposed to pick me up and deliver me there. When I did go the few times, there was nothing for me to do. I reported in at roll call. Everybody had a job and they went off and started to do it. And so I generally took a copy of Plato or Socrates with me and did my philosophy reading in the commissary and then went back for final roll call and left. It seemed absolutely useless to me, and I became a pacifist at that time as well, not believing in the idea of killing anyone. So I spent a great deal of time with the lieutenant that was trying to convince me that underneath we all had at certain times to become militant. He used the sister rape thing and I told him I didn't have a sister. [Laughter]

PK: You had a daughter, though.

WA: But I stuck with it. And in the end, I realized I couldn't do that and maintain my studies at the university. When we joined at that time, we were looking for student deferments, and they indicated that if it interfered with our schooling, we should get out. And so I did get out and I put in 1-A status. But, as luck would have it, my daughter came the next week and I was able to get a letter in to the draft board. But we, you know, stayed under the cloud of military service for a very long period of time. With Wally, he hadn't been attending the Monday meetings, but he was still in the Guard. So they came and picked him up at his home, and he was in the military and he went off to Korea. Wally must have been a problem for them, though, because Wally didn't ever do military things quite the way they intended. When he was to be latrine captain for the day, you know, you're supposed to go down twenty minutes in the morning and twenty minutes in the evening and clean up. But Wally went down and spent the day, and anytime you went in, he'd be leaning against the boiler with his mop, smoking a cigarette. [Laughter]

PK: He liked that.

WA: He liked it. He didn't do any of the training for the day when he was--

PK: Oh, he was dodging the training?

WA: Yes.

PK: He wasn't doing it because it was funky.

WA: No. Nobody told him not to do it, and unless you told Wally not to do it, that's what he would do. I remember one evening they marched us out with full battle packs out to this field and we were to set up our shelter halves, and Wally and I joined ours together and set it up. But Wally was into comfort, as I said, and so he collected grasses in this cow pasture and built a fairly thick mattress for himself in this thing. He undid his entire pack and put it in a nice kind of arrangement, easy and accessible for him and part of it as a pillow for him to use during the night. Spread his blankets out. I didn't do any of this. We went over and watched a fire fight. We came back. Everyone was expecting to spend the night, but they said, "No, we're packing up and marching back." So I put my shelter half back in my pack, and Wally had all of his stuff all over the place. It was a moonless night, and in the end what he had was a big long train of stuff barely attached together. I remember this big long blanket at the very end. And so he was put in the line of march and dragging this sort of snake of all this equipment behind him. He did very much the same thing, I've heard, in Korea. He was sent out to guard a bunker and his partner said, "Hey, listen to those bugles. The North Koreans are coming. We've got to get out of here." They were simply a forward observation post. They weren't supposed to be fighting by themselves against huge hoards of North Koreans. And so the partner said, "Wally, let's go!" But Wally was so busy trying to get the air out of his air mattress that the bugles got closer and closer before he was able to maneuver his way out. The next time they put him out in the bunker it was in the cold winter, and he started a fire. And when they came in the morning, there was just two guys standing among the embers of what had been a bunker. So they finally decided--

PK: He burned it down.

WA: --he should just take care of fixing radios. So they threw a radio up into his bunk and a case of beer a week and that was his contribution.

PK: And then that's a career that he continued. I don't know if it's to this very day, but there's the Wally Hedrick Fix-It Shop out there in San Geronimo or wherever.

WA: Comes out of that light box that he did early on. [BREAK]

PK: Interview with Walter Askin, tape two, side B. A moment ago I was hearing interesting stories about the old days in Berkeley with that rambunctious gang, those friends of yours and especially Wally Hedrick and the National Guard. Just almost as an aside, but I guess not entirely so, I was curious to know two questions. First of all, is there something in your early experience with Wally Hedrick that might explain the direction that his art took, which--well, I don't want to analyze it, but he had an interest in humor as well, something we're going to talk about--

WA: That's very true. Very true.

PK: --a great deal later on in the interview. So there's that. But I wondered if you had some thoughts on that. And then on a second part, though, of the question, and I think more to the point, is what impact your association with Hedrick and Simpson in Berkeley here had an effect on you that perhaps carried over, even though your work may have gone in different directions. So there are two parts, sort of wrapping up the association with these interesting people.

WA: I think that there were key qualities that we were after. One, we were very independent, and so the terms "liberating" and "transformative" became essential to us, the fact that we were liberated from the prevailing zeitgeist, the prevailing situation, and could do something that was alternative to it. I think most of our lives our position has been one of a counterpoint to what's been going on around us. And then secondly, the ability of art to change. So we've always been moving toward something that was more idealized. I know that there's a dark side to Wally's work, but both David Simpson's work and my work, while very different in their nature, are both altruistic and looking at the sense of visual delight, the ability of visual images to transform one's state of mind and to work toward a better state of mind, a more lively, delectable, nurturing sense of possibility. And I think that's been at the very [unclear] of what we've been about.

PK: Do you remember ever talking about these things together? In other words, were these ideas articulated in a conscious way?

WA: No, more implicit. We carried them out. We acted them out, which is probably better. And we sometimes probably did them before we realized what we were doing. I think there are probably two things in our earlier

stages that made for this. One is that nobody came down and really forced us to stop. I mean, they might have objected or they might have had a difference of opinion, but nobody said, "No, you can't do this." Or if they did do that, we probably would have gone to another place. You know, we found the right nest to rest in. They certainly found it in the sense that artists do, which is the ivory tower of all ivory towers, and certainly I found it in Berkeley where painting was the major focus and that was my interest then as well. I was an abstract expressionist and that was an Abstract Expressionist school. So everything was right from that standpoint. The second thing is that there was a chance to be visible, be part of the real world at every stage in our development, through these school exhibits, through the museum shows, through the art festival. And then when we went up to San Francisco, the San Francisco Art Institute, which became the San Francisco Museum of Art--

PK: The Art Association. The San Francisco Art Institute Art Association.

WA: That was it. That was it. It had three shows a year. It had a sculpture show, had a painting show, and had a drawing show, and we were used to showing.

PK: And you could enter things even though you weren't a student?

WA: That's right. Margaret Peterson O'Hagen would sometimes call us to task for doing that and said, "You shouldn't show as a student." But I'd been showing for years. So I continued to show in those exhibitions. So that was a competitive environment and a place where we'd have considerable success as well. I would always enter two works, which is the maximum you could enter. One would always be accepted, and one would always be rejected. I got into the pattern of sending the rejected work the next year with a new work, and the rejected work from the previous year was the one that always got in the second year. And this happened in a pattern over and over and over again. But that access to visibility gave a sense of being able to realize yourself, to actualize yourself and your ideas. You had a market, a place where people could see the work. You weren't invisible. And that's a problem with many young people today, is that they are so totally invisible. And you're competing against your professors as well. They would sometimes be in the show, and sometimes they'd be blocked out. There was always the student who couldn't take instruction after he got in and his professor didn't, and that was always fun to watch that situation, the kind of arrogance that some could develop.

PK: How would you distinguish or separate yourself or your group--let's just say the Pasadena group--in the Bay Area from others working in the Bay Area? Was there any sense, at least in the beginning, of some distinguishing characteristic associated with Pasadena and that background as opposed to others out there who may have been from that area or from elsewhere?

WA: I think, first of all, there was this strong social integrity, and the idea of taking action based on one's principles as a group was a part of it. So that's why a bigger number of people involved with that Six Gallery were from Pasadena and they created that. I wasn't able to show there, only because I couldn't afford the \$25 or \$75 it cost in order to have a show there. But I did show at other places on Sutter Street. Ken Nack, who had been at Pasadena City College when I was there but later on, opened up a gallery on about the fifth floor of a place on Sutter, and I was able to show at that location. And other museums like Richmond Art Center had shows. Oakland Art Museum had shows. So we were able to realize lots of things, to be truly active participants in what we felt was the life of art in the city. And people later on always wondered why certain things happened in San Francisco, and it was because of this Pasadena mafia. The people had known each other. And, of course, Bill Morehouse became a part of that mafia very quickly.

PK: Hedrick has talked, and Hayward as well, I think, has talked about that same thing. You know, they're aware of this sort of origins in Pasadena and these early early [unclear]. It's interesting to hear it articulated, because one suspects none of these things arrived full blown. I mean, in an area there are different contributing components from different areas and so forth. I don't know if I've given you the chance to answer those two questions, have I?

WA: What was that? What questions?

PK: My earlier questions.

WA: Sure.

PK: Do you feel you had the chance to answer?

WA: Sure. We can move on.

PK: But related to that and sort of building on that--

WA: But it was very hard for me, you realize, to go to Berkeley when everyone else, literally everyone else, was

going to the Institute. I mean, that was a very strong, compelling group focus. But it just shows the level of independence I have, and I've always continued to do things that the rest of them would not do. I do all these things with the College Board and Educational Testing Service.

PK: You're an establishment person as well as a bohemian.

WA: That's right. Exactly. And that was true at Pasadena City College as well. I joined the Honorary Art Association, and I dropped out of it as well and sold my pin back to them. But I could cross over that way. I was more gregarious and less limited by the ideology than they were. I have always felt that you have to apply the idea in the context, and you have to play the cards as they're laid. It's too easy to get over into your own little game room and try to play things out there and let people come to your room. I think you have to be much more actively engaged. You know, I'm just about the only one who returned back down here from the Bay Area.

PK: Right. And we need to talk about that in a moment. But first, before we leave this interesting subject, here you were at Berkeley. Most of your buddies were at the Art Institute in San Francisco. So that puts you into contact with others. You mentioned Jay DeFeo, Fred Wrightman.

WA: Jim Fuller was another one who was a professor out at Scripps College.

PK: Was Sam Frances there then?

WA: No.

PK: He was earlier.

WA: He had left. He was about two years head of me. He went to Paris, and he made it because he went there, really.

PK: What was the nature of your interaction then with your Berkeley, U.C., friends in college, your fellow students? Or was there any?

WA: Oh, yes. Of course there was. Of course.

PK: Did you interact, and what effect, maybe, did that have, and what do you remember about that as a formative, contributing factor?

WA: Oh, extremely strong. You know, my heart still is in Berkeley in lots of ways. And I went back there and taught a couple of times later in '69 and '70, and I think the place is wonderfully generative. I don't think the professors then had to do a lot. We provided our own kind of environment, and the old building that we worked in there, the old art building on the campus next to the faculty [unclear], was a place where works were always up on the wall. We learned as much from our fellow students as from anyone. And also the library there was wonderful. I was just talking with Bob Beetem, who is just retiring from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, who graduated, first of all, with an MA in studio art and then went into art history and spent a long time at Berkeley and finally achieved his doctorate there. We were talking about using the library and how we would spend so much time in the library. I tried to spend every Sunday afternoon that I could, at least two hours, in the library. And, of course, you couldn't get into the stacks until you were a graduate, and once you did, it was a privilege. Then there was also the Morrison Reading Room, which was almost like a very large, well-to-do person's living room, which had some fine art books and other things. Because plays were being put on of Ibsen's "Peer Gynt" and Molière and so forth, you know, all those kinds of ideas infected our thinking as well.

PK: What about the other students? What about, say, Jay DeFeo? Did you keep up with Jay?

WA: Surely. Because when she and Wally got married, of course, I'd visit them on Fillmore Street, which was always a fascinating experience.

PK: That was a shameless place. What was that like? Why not reminisce about that a little bit, because I've heard various stories from Bay Area participants and all that. But what was it like coming from, by that time, you were back down here.

WA: That's right.

PK: So this was actually in the--when in the heck was this? The early sixties? Late fifties?

WA: Late fifties, early sixties. I used to visit them up there. Their place was above a Chinese laundry. Wally was always trying to get me to show at these places like Batman and--I forget the name of the other one.

PK: Spatza?

WA: Spatza, right. He'd say, "Why don't you go down and have a show at Spatza?" He could arrange for all this. And I always turned up my nose at these things. You know, what are these places? I think I was that way a little bit about the Six Gallery as well, and yet that was wonderful. I know my friends really established the whole beat generation in San Francisco. They generated the whole thing of poetry with jazz, with art on the walls, all of that.

PK: Thanks to you, they knew how to play the guitar.

WA: That's right. And Wally has continued to play.

PK: He has, indeed.

WA: The banjo. Whereas, most of the rest of us have fallen off by the wayside. Robert Jenkins, who still lives here in town, was art historian at Citrus College for years and also was a student of mine in my first classes at Cal State-L.A., continues to play a very mean guitar.

PK: So what was it like, though, when you would go up? Can you sort of reproduce one of those visits that's memorable?

WA: Well, you'd walk up the stairs and go into the first room, and that was just old Christmas trees with limbs clipped off, and they had various hats hanging on those trees, extremely fanciful. From there you walked directly into the kitchen, as I recall, or the kitchen was just through and to the right, and there the orange of the wall would fall down across part of the kitchen table--it wouldn't cover the whole thing--then down one leg and partway across the floor. So they really lived in an Abstract Expressionist environment. When they came to paint things, they would paint them in the same way, not letting the area paint being described by the subject matter, but more by kind of whim or visual movement.

PK: The paint creating or transforming the space.

WA: And Wally was making all those machines then, the old washing machines filled with marbles. There would always be some beer being brewed over in the corner. And then you'd go out and see Jay's painting on this very lumpy floor, because she threw the paint down all over the place. She pulled the curtains.

PK: Was she working on "The Rose" then?

WA: Yes.

PK: That would be the case, right?

WA: Oh, yes. Yes. And I once miscalled it the "Death Rose," and Wally said, "Don't. Don't let Jay hear you say that." Because she spent ten years on that painting, ultimately, couldn't have been less than eight. It finally came down to the Pasadena Art Museum, and she continued to work on it here, and that's when she met Walter and they got involved. I sent all my classes up for the opening, which was announced in the museum bulletin. And it turned out they didn't have the opening. She said it wasn't quite ready to be shown. Finally, she did show it, and they showed the film ahead of time upstairs about removing--the Conner film.

PK: Bruce Conner's film, yes.

WA: Yes. Removing the work from the building. And then she said, "The work's not finished, but you can go down and paint on it if you want." So she divorced herself from that work. You know, Mrs. Miller at the Modern in New York had been ready to buy that work for eight years, had somebody in Chicago with the money to pay for it, and I think it was a fairly good slug of money for those days. And by the time she finished it, that money had vanished. And now, I guess, the painting sits in the basement of the San Francisco Art Institute in desperate needs of repair.

PK: I actually don't know what the current plans are. Did you have the opportunity to, at any point, talk with her or perhaps Wally, but, more interestingly, her, about that work during this time, with Jay?

WA: Yes, I did talk with her about it.

PK: How could anybody--that is intriguing.

WA: Well, every time I would visit, it would be quite different, and I felt it was a mistake on her part, because she really had twenty paintings in that one painting, each of those simply was a change of form. Of course, a change in form is a change in content, but these were just variations on a single theme of that central point of radiating lines coming out. Sometimes they'd be rounded, sometimes sharp-edged, and so forth. What do you do after you finish a ten-year painting? Do you start another ten-year painting? And I think it led to a very difficult period in her life, you know, the decision of what to do once you've worked on this one piece. And once you've

had that much drama in your life and that much focus from people on a single work, how do you move ahead with things? But that's the kind of driving dedication that all of us had and just that most of us put it into a lot of different works rather than into a single piece like that.

PK: When you would go up there and visit, Joan Brown was, I think, in residence at the same time in that building. Right?

WA: I never met Joan Brown.

PK: You didn't?

WA: Never met her.

PK: And so you didn't go to any of the parties there? They had these notorious parties where everybody seemed to--

WA: No. No. No. No. You see, I had a family. [Laughter]

PK: That's right. You had grown-up responsibilities.

WA: I did have responsibilities, and Wally and Jay purposefully did not have those responsibilities, and so they were much more free to be social operatives.

PK: I think Bruce lived there for a while.

WA: Probably.

PK: And maybe Michael McClure as well.

WA: Probably.

PK: Although I don't know how many flats there were. I don't know how many people could live there. But, anyway, this gives an interesting perspective on those times. And you did not leave the Bay Area upon completion of graduate school and then your year with a stipend. I believe you then took a job briefly at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor. Isn't that right?

WA: Yes. Susan Reagan, who became Susan McKillop, had been teaching classes on Saturday morning at the Legion of Honor, and I took over those classes after she left and spent two years doing that. It was a wonderfully inventive program under the directorship of Robert Sterling, who was head of the Education Department. The job carried this wonderful grand title of Assistant Curator of Education.

PK: Oh, really.

WA: And put you down in the basement with the storage rooms of the museum. So I could go in and look at those. I generally looked at the old slides they had of early films, and I would show those to the students, and then they would take off. I basically took care of the eight- to ten-year-olds. And you had an assistant who laid out their paint for them. Sometimes there had been big bashes the night before in the museum, and since this class was held in the kitchen, the whole floor would be covered with champaign corks. Earl Warren, who was governor of California then, would have been to the bash. The first project would always be a cork-stamping project, and then you got around to the imaginative images that came out of those slides. You see, I was already moving away. My work always insidiously carried a level of subject matter in it. I never was a pure abstractionist. I found out later that most of my compatriots at the school like Paul Water and Bill Brown, Walter Snelgrove, Jim Fuller, Ralph Johnson, they all were rankling against the instruction at Berkeley because it denied the presence of subject matter. But they tended to cluster around Ward Lockwood because he did have a life painting class. I never took that class. And I was invited down to the life drawing sessions that [Richard] Diebenkorn and Wonner and Brown had in their studios on Shattuck Avenue.

PK: Oh, did you? You attended some of those?

WA: Oh, no. I could never afford it. It cost seventy-five cents to go down there for the evening. [Laughter]

PK: Oh, so you couldn't get in there, but you visited. Did you ever visit there?

WA: No. No.

PK: Oh, that's too bad. You just missed a nice piece of California art history.

WA: I did. I did. I remain close friends.

PK: Seventy-five cents is what it cost?

WA: Seventy-five cents a night and we all put that in for the model.

PK: God!

WA: [Laughter] But you realize the going rate then was fifty cents an hour for work, and so all my work for Mrs. Schwartz of digging up her front lawn and so forth was at fifty cents an hour.

PK: Well, you certainly didn't support yourself by that distinguished position of Assistant Curator of Education.

WA: No. I also had a job as an illustrator for the Agricultural Extension Service in Giannini Hall. And so for a number of hours a week I'd go over there and I did all the drawings of strawberry plants for the Department of Agriculture. If you got a brochure then on how to grow strawberries, that was my art work. If you were a 4-H Clubber in any of the cities of California, then you got all my manuals that I drew on how to make a solenoid switch and that sort of thing. Those are all my works.

PK: That sounds like temporary work, keeping-food-on-the-table work.

WA: That's what it was. And it was difficult, too, because they criticized the way I drew hands, not realizing that they were very true to the Cubist tradition. [Laughter]

PK: At some point, obviously, you had to take another step and presumably that then or very soon led you back to the classroom.

WA: There were two options open to me. One was to take a job in the public schools in Santa Rosa as a junior high school art teacher, or to take a part-time and very tentative position at Contra Costa City College. They wanted me to go there. But I couldn't count on that. It was about \$1,500 for the year, and I didn't know if we could make it on that. So I moved up to Santa Rosa and took the junior high school job there for two years.

PK: What years were those?

WA: Those were '54 and '56. That was a new school with lots of money, good kids, all new teachers, very young, almost everybody on their first teaching job, and it was a delightful situation. I've heard since then, you know, that the students that went through my program just went on, and the people at City College thought, "Wow. This is the best group of kids we've ever had." So I feel that I truly accomplished something there. But Jim Fuller, who had been with me in Northern California, had moved back to his roots, which were after South Dakota were out here in Chaffey, and he was teaching at California State University-Los Angeles, which had just begun a few years before. And so I took an interview in the second bedroom on Berendo Street by City College, where they were at that time, and got a job at the City College. I never intended to move back to Southern California. I thought, "Well, I'll do this for a few years, and then I'll go someplace else." But in the five years I was associate professor, at the end of ten years I was a full professor, and the only way I could move was by being a department chairman. The two things I care about, about my work, is the students and my own work as an artist. And being a department chairman, I realized early on, would move me out of those jobs. It isn't that I didn't do a lot of fake interviews, because I found that by doing interviews I could travel to parts of the country at their expense that I wouldn't get to otherwise, give a nice little lecture, answer their questions, but see things. So I went to the University of Toronto; University of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; University of Western Washington; State University at Bellingham. And I was offered jobs at some of these places. So, you know, I went around and toyed with the idea, but I ultimately remained where I was.

PK: When did Cal State-L.A. become Cal State-L.A.?

WA: It was Cal State-L.A. in 1945, but it operated out of a supermarket building on Vermont for the first eight to ten years. Maybe it was '49. Somewhere in that bracket.

PK: It was in the present location when--

WA: When I started in 1956, it was in its infancy, its first year, on Goat Hill at the juncture of the Long Beach and the San Bernardino Freeways.

PK: So you started together, in a sense, the school and you as a professor.

WA: Yes. That's right. And now I've been there--what is it, thirty-five, thirty-six years.

PK: At what point did you realize, well, you're vested in this place?

WA: Never. [Laughter]

PK: Still to this day?

WA: I'm always open to offers.

PK: Well, I understand that. I feel that way, too.

WA: And I've spent a lot of time away from the school. I've taken about five leave years away.

PK: When we meet again, because we're coming to the end of this tape, but when we meet again, we can talk a bit about some of those leave years and sort of move you on up to the present time. But I think this is a good breaking point. So, thanks. [BREAK]

PK: This is the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, a second interview session with Walter Askin at his studio in Pasadena [California]. The date is March 6, 1992. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. Walter, we dispatched a number of biographical issues last time in the first session, and I would like to wrap that portion of the interview up this morning, first off. You talked a great deal about early days in Pasadena and then the time in the Bay Area and the friends and the contacts there and some of your own working experience there. At this point, I'd like to move a bit beyond that in time. You said that travel, at some point, became an important part of your experience, presumably important to your art and all that. Presumably, or guessing that maybe some of that took place before you then finally settled down here, back down there in Southern California teaching at State, or maybe not. Why don't you sort of put that into perspective.

WA: No. In fact, I yearn to travel, and I always find new vistas to be very valuable to my work, somehow to change the context in which you work. Particularly at a time when you're at the end of a period of work and are starting to try to figure out what you should be up to next, or you've done the groundwork for that and you need to get fully into it, it's great to be able to go off to another environment, because the door handles are different, the road signs are different, pattern of existence is different, and generally you're freed from the telephone and from mail and from the general social discourse that you find yourself in. And I find that full-time occupation really gives me the chance to triple my productivity in the field. I yearned for a sabbatical after I came down here to Cal State-L.A., and I went in at the end of my sixth year or the start of the sixth year with the forms for a sabbatical to be the following year, and they just laughed, because the legislature simply didn't fund them. But I dutifully took these in every year, and so in my tenth year I was finally able to go to Europe. As I told you earlier, I did have a travel grant at Berkeley but wasn't able to take advantage of it, and spent the year painting. So, finally, I was able to go to Europe, but I didn't have a whole lot of funding. I didn't know where the money was going to come from to do all of this. But I was determined that we were going to go to Europe for the year, and we made all the plans for that. As it turned out, it was the most wonderful, fortuitous, glorious year you could possibly have imagined. First of all, I had to leave the house and was able to rent that to the vice president of my university, the new one coming in. He became the president during his tenure there. I moved all of my studio equipment out to the Huntington Hartford estate, which was up in Rustic Canyon above UCLA. It was quite a wonderful place, because they had ten houses, and those were occupied, one each, by a poet or a composer or an artist. And I had a very nice place way up on the hill, far away from everyone else, looking down into this canyon.

PK: Was this in Rustic Canyon or Belair? You said it was up above UCLA.

WA: It was in Rustic Canyon.

PK: Next to Santa Monica.

WA: And it was offered by Huntington Hartford, the A&P heir. But it only lasted perhaps a year beyond the time I was there, because he got into debt, about \$650,000 behind in his payments on this canyon area, because he was building this gambling paradise down in the Bahamas. But as far as an artist goes, it was one of the most wonderful places you could possibly imagine.

PK: I never actually heard of that, I think. How long did it operate?

WA: Well, Ynez Johnston and John Berry met there, artist and poet/writer. It was in operation probably for a period of ten years, but I don't know the whole history of the place. But you got a house. My house had a grand piano and a fireplace and small kitchenette and a bathroom, a bedroom, and a studio in the back. And I'd never had a circumstance so fine as that to work. So I set to work, and I'd work all day and much of the night there. As a matter of fact, the other residents said, "Well, we saw your light on at twelve o'clock last night in the studio." And they said, "We don't want you to burn yourself out." And it turned out that most of the other people were foundation buffs, who would only do a certain amount of work. Of course, I could look down and see them outside in their backyards simply basking in the sun. One of the most interesting fellows there was a fellow

named J. Iqbal Geoffrey, who had gotten his degree in business administration from the University of Pakistan, but who turned quickly to art. He blew into town and did a lot of very fast work. He'd go into an art store and get a lot of illustration board and lay that out in the backyard, and he cut some of the illustration board into shapes and he'd plop these shapes down, put down some modeling paste, because he realized that people liked thickness in their works, and then he would take spray cans and spray over these shapes. Then he'd move the shapes and spray with another color. So he could complete an entire show in a day and a half or so, and then he could spend the rest of his time and tenure going around approaching dealers. He was very successful. He arranged three shows in one day with three different dealers. But, of course, dealers are connected to each other telephonically, and by the end of the day, when each of them found out the other had a show as well, he didn't have any shows. So here it was the middle of the summer. There was a trail of smoke going up from Iqbal's fireplace. He was burning all of his work. And he just took off on his little motorscooter, his Vespa, and went up to San Francisco to do the whole thing all over again.

PK: What years were these?

WA: That was 1965, in the summer. And then just before we were heading off on Icelandic Airlines to fly over to Luxembourg--Icelandic was the cheapest way to get to Europe in those days--a grant came in from the Bureau of Research of the U.S. Office of Education to take a look at image-making in British colleges of art. You see, I was very much influenced by, or very much touched by the works I had seen the previous two years of Kitaj and Hockney and so forth.

PK: What about [Francis] Bacon?

WA: No, not Bacon so much at all. Bacon was an interesting phenomenon, but he has never had much influence on my work. He's good to use in teaching, because he represents, in great strength, a certain ideology. I had hoped to meet those people when I went over, but it turned out that both Kitaj and Hockney had come to the United States that year. So I eventually taught at Berkeley in the winter of '68, and I followed Hockney and Kitaj and Paolozzi were both there in residence teaching as well.

PK: Well, David--was it '64 or '65 that he first taught or about then he taught at UCLA?

WA: I see. I still have yet to meet him. So we have a number of people in common. His students were intrigued by him. I think he's a good teacher because of his ability to articulate ideas. But they would also remark extensively on his clothing--yellow suits, orange ties, blue shirt and so forth. And, of course, women in classes at Berkeley were used to getting pinched every once in a while, but not the guys. And so for the first time guys were getting pinched. [Laughter] And they didn't get over that very easily. At any rate, we arrived in Europe and--

PK: Now, in Europe, you're talking back again now to '65?

WA: That's right. That's right. Fall of '65.

PK: I want to make sure I understand that you had how much time at the Rustic Canyon.

WA: I spent two months there.

PK: That was early summer or late spring?

WA: That was during the summer.

PK: Okay. So before you went to Europe.

WA: And it was late August when we took the plane over to Luxembourg and picked up a Volkswagen bus at the Volkswagen dealership in Luxembourg. But then since we couldn't afford the camper, we had to go to Mr. Putz's [phonetic] lumber yard and then pick up the wood that we needed to construct the interior for this place so we could sleep inside of it. And we traveled around through Germany, a little bit into Austria, just barely through a part of Austria, Switzerland, France to see the [unclear] Chapel at Ronchamp, which I've always admired, and then through the Netherlands, Belgium, and then we took the boat across to England. I had seen an article in the Saturday Review of Literature about a house that was available for professors in literature and fine arts. The fellow who had owned this house was Peter Stuckley, and he was a fan of things American, and, as a matter of fact, lived with another American chap. He painted his house there in colors that he got from Williamsburg. He was true establishment--Eaton, Cambridge, Grenadier Guards, Lloyds of London, heart attack, retired to the country. And so he had this old parsonage in the little town of Buscot, only seventeen people, located near Farrington, about twenty-five miles west of Oxford on the road going out to Cheltenham and Lechlade. They were looking for somebody to take the house for five to twenty-two years, but no academic could do that. So I offered to take care of the house for a year, to live in the house for a year. But I'd also need to have the amount

of rent reduced in it, and they did that for me, because they really needed somebody sitting there, because this house came with a cook, a gardener, and the person who came in and polished the brass, cleaned off the glass on the Hogarth prints and all of that. So it was the most propitious situation you can imagine, this beautiful old house right on the quiet upper reaches of the Thames between the last two locks. You could see Buscot lock and the St. John's lock, which sets the tone for the tide for the run of the entire river of the Thames. And it came with a formal garden, a kitchen garden, a sheep pasture, a tithe barn, an apple orchard, and so forth. And it was absolutely a delight. None of us had had any servants. We always did for ourselves. And, of course, it was a problem adjusting to having those people around, because they were like little children. You had to take care of them and you had to take care of the internecine squabbles that developed between them. But it turned out there was a small studio on the top floor, and a friend of this Peter Stuckley, Charles Musset, was an artist who taught at Radley, a boys' school, and just recently died. And so I set my studio up, up there and started to work. As time would permit, I went out and visited the colleges of art that were listed on the visitation list from the Bureau of Research of the U.S. Office of Education, and that was wonderful. But I don't know where they got the names from. They were a fascinating group of places to go and visit.

PK: Did you run into Hassel Smith? Was he over there at that time?

WA: Hassel could well have been there at that time. He was probably in Santa Rosa at the same time I was there living out in Sebastopol, which is only twelve miles away, but I never met Hassel either. Strange that you can live in the same circumstances and if there isn't a vehicle for making connections, it never happens. So I visited the Royal College of Art, Slade School, Central College of Arts and Crafts, all in London. Then I went to the Edinburgh College of Art, and I met Robin Philipson, who was head of the Art Department there, who later became Sir Robin Williamson, and he introduced me to a number of important discoveries such as glenmorangie or another derivation or method of pronouncing that is glenmorangie in Scotland, a single malt scotch whiskey, which had a mellowing influence on my life for a while. In Wales, I visited the Swansea College of Art and then the Belfast College of Art in Northern Ireland. As a matter of fact, I went up to Ireland and camped all over the country and was up by the Devil's Post Pile and so forth and finally just came down into Belfast to check to see if everything was ready for the visit. I went in and asked to see the principal and they said, "Well, he's in there." So I walked into this room and there were a number of people sitting behind a desk, and I tried to ask them questions, but they asked me more questions. Finally, at the end of our talking about my visit the next day, he said, "You're the person we want." I had blundered into hiring day, and they had been looking at different painters and they thought I was just another painter coming through. And I got the job. I had to walk out and tell Doris and Nancy that I'd just been hired. [Laughter]

PK: Did you really take this job?

WA: Oh, no. Of course not.

PK: You couldn't, because you had to get back to teaching.

WA: Well, that very morning the Volkswagen bus wheel had gotten off this narrow macadam road at the camp and slipped down to its hubcaps in the mud. I'd never experienced such rain as we had there. Then later on in '73, I was back in Ireland. This time I was invited to give a whole series of talks at the Irish Academy of Art, which at that time was right downtown in the center of Dublin, right next to the Parliament, the National Library, the National Gallery and all of that. That was a genuine thrill. It ended up the last evening with giving a talk in the rotunda of the U.S. Embassy in Ballsbridge, and they virtually had every artist and dealer from all over Ireland. It turned out to be just the kind of thing they were interested in hearing. So we had just the most marvelous evening together. They gave them Irish whiskey at the start of the evening, and some people said, "It will be a surly crowd here this eve." But it turned out to be just the most ingratiating experience that I've had.

PK: You've set the scene rather beautifully. I feel as if I'm there. But what then do you feel you gained from this experience, you learned? What did you carry away with you? This obviously looms large in your memory for reasons that have to do with your art and what you learned and your ideas, as well as, what shall we say, the travel log aspect of it, the charm and so forth.

WA: The value of travel is encountering the other. And I think S.J. Perlman was the one who truly expressed it best. You know, he's always writing about these difficult encounters he would have, and as he went on in life he had to travel further and further into deeper and darker sections of the world in order to have that kind of strange encounter. But the things that people cherished in England were quite different from the things that we cherish here. The pattern of life was different. For instance, in order to build the interior of my Volkswagen bus for the travels back on the continent, which were quite extensive, through France and Italy, up through Switzerland and on up to Denmark and back on down again, taking [unclear] back from Rotterdam, to build the interior so we could sleep in that bus for several months meant going to Farrington County Secondary Modern School in the evening. The people there were sometimes just doing, by hand, a mortise joint for a chest. It was the process of doing those things. There was no rush. There was the relish and enjoyment of those things. And I

found because I could only use their tools for two hours a week, that I prepared myself to rush in there and do this work, and I found the whole class looking at me, you know, this ferocious American hammering away at things. Since I hadn't been there for the first couple of meetings, I didn't realize that this was a very fine woodworking class. I asked for some nails, and they gave me a little box of eleven nails. I used those up pretty quickly, and I asked the Scottish instructor for some more nails, and he said [imitating Scottish accent], "Do you realize, sir, that you've used up all the nails for both the day and evening class for the entire year?" [Laughter] So I went out and bought him some nails. But I realized I was doing very ersatz construction at that point.

PK: Did this affect your attitude toward work then, toward your own work? Is this what you're suggesting?

WA: Absolutely. It provided a sense of independence, that other people were doing things contrary, outside the system of art, the sort of power structure that existed in the United States. I was very much attracted to that, that sense of independence, that the work was valuable in itself and its kind of meaning that it had in your life, first of all, rather than something for public consumption. So I did a series of works, and those were shown at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art and the La Jolla Museum of Art when I returned. But it's that kind of independence and seeing alternatives. It's why Indian art from India, Rajput painting, in particular, has had so much meaning for my work. I find an idea, a pattern of working there which has a long tradition and a long history, but which is quite different from what you find when you just go out normally to the galleries. Then later on, I guess, friends of mine like Paul Wonner and Bill Brown had been collecting those works for years. And, of course, Erle Loran and John Haley, who were teachers of mine, had been collecting African art, and I used to go over to their houses and see these works. What a different experience those works gave in their construct. And, of course, people like Picasso were very much influenced by the work of primitive artists, and I today collect primitive art. I wake up and look at a nine-foot New Guinea shield, look over at a Dogon piece, which I treasure greatly, things I haven't paid a whole lot of money for, but which are great in their visual properties and always get me back on track of the innate, natural kind of creative drive and energy, the sort of sense of an independent vision, because the value that you represent to other people as an artist is the experiences you give them that they've never lived through before. So it's this otherness that is of constant interest.

PK: How were you different? In what ways were you different upon return from this, I guess, crucial year in Great Britain?

WA: It wasn't just in Britain. It was traveling over and looking at works all over.

PK: Right. And you were based there. But do you feel that it made a difference that was lasting? Did your work take a slightly different turn?

WA: Oh, surely. Surely.

PK: How was that?

WA: Well, at Berkeley I had a teacher named Mine Okubo, and Mine would come into class and he'd say, "You've got to get rid of da object." Realize we were all Abstract Expressionists at that time. But my work always had suggestions of the human figure in the work. But that the terms illustrative, narrative, and so forth were extremely negative terms. As a matter of fact, for a while at the university, my office partner used to come in and say "narrative artist" humorously, but he was just saying that. He didn't think that one should be involved in depictions, that the symbolic or poetic content of a work of art was the important aspect. People believe pretty much the idea that Clive Bell had espoused of the pure form as being the central focus of the work, which became even narrower in definition with someone like Greenberg, who believed that the work of art should be defined by the materials worked in. Working on a flat canvas, it should look flat. If it's oil painted, it should look like oil paint. As a matter of fact, you shouldn't do anything that's extraneous to the nature of the material. That's the environment that existed in the United States at the time I went to England. That's why I was so attracted to Hockney and Kitaj, is that they were involved with images, and they were involved with reading. And literature has always had a strong impact on my art. I remember telling that to Erle Loran once, and he nearly wept. [Laughter] Because he was very much against that kind of literary inference in the work. But I find it to be very gregarious and expansive and invigorating. [BREAK] [Note: The first five minutes of this side of the tape are inaudible.]

WA: I did meet him, because Jim McCray at Berkeley had given a seminar assignment to do a monumental work that dealt with a very forceful human being. So we were all to go over and see Lebrun's show, and then do our own painting. And so I went over there and I arrived at the DeYoung a day before his show was to open, and the guard said, "No, you can't go in. You can't go in." But Rico was in there, and he said, "Hey, come on in."

PK: "Hey, kid, come on in."

WA: Yes. I said, "I'm a young painter from Berkeley." And so he said, "Ah, come on in." And so he let me come in and look around. I even talked with him a little bit about the show. So he was a wonderful individual, and I don't

mean to denigrate what he was about, because he was in a kind of nonpreconceived process of finding an image. I ultimately did a crucifixion myself, which was done on three window screens, or the frames for three window screens in this slum apartment house that I managed, which had holes in them, and they weren't about to replace the screen material. So I simply stretched drapes over those and put chem tone over top of that and did this large painting. And it resided for about a year in Dean Dennis, head of the graduate division at Berkeley's office, and then I put it in the hallway of this slum apartment. This fellow Bennett Berger, a Jewish lad in sociology upstairs, came down and said, "God, I'd like to buy that from you, Walter." And I thought, "Should I tell him this is a crucifixion?" You see, it was somewhat abstract. I finally figured I needed the money more than that. So he bought it, and he subsequently became Chairman of the Department of Sociology, probably largely through looking at my work and being inspired thereby. No, that's-- [Laughter]

PK: Who was the teacher in the class that assigned you--

WA: Jim McCray. He was a one-armed teacher, and I think he had graduated from Berkeley as well.

PK: He was well known. I think that's interesting, and I don't mean to digress, but there is what I think is a bit of a mythology that's grown up, that there's very little connection in California between north and south. But I think it's--

WA: Well, that's a fiction.

PK: Well, yes. And I'd like you to comment on that. But this certainly is an interesting example that a teacher at Berkeley would be aware of Rico's work. Of course, his show was coming. But I've always suspected Rico was a more prominent figure even nationally than his base in Southern California would suggest.

WA: Surely. Surely.

PK: And what you say indicates there really was more awareness, north and south, back and forth, than what some are saying. Is that right?

WA: I don't think my teachers were hostile toward people who did other kinds of work. For instance, they showed Reginald Marsh through the rooms one time, and they respected what he was about. They didn't want to emulate what he did, but they still respected him as an artist, as a very prominent artist.

PK: What about this issue of you were going to say something about the perception that there was very little interaction between the north and south. You're in a position to know.

WA: The Northern California artist always regarded Los Angeles as the marketplace.

PK: Even back then?

WA: Surely. And they were showing at David Stuart Gallery or at Landau's Gallery. Esther Robles.

PK: This is the sixties now we're talking about.

WA: No, the late fifties and sixties as well. Surely. Most people felt they couldn't sell anything in San Francisco, and there weren't the prominent galleries there. There weren't a cluster of galleries the way they were along LaCienega Boulevard. So they would approach dealers down here. And Bockus would show his things after he moved up north at David Stuart's, and Joan Brown showed there. Joan Brown's early paintings would always come down. Thick, thick oil paint, having just been done. The only way she could get them down there is put spreaders between the paintings. And I remember there was this totally wet show she had at David's place. One lady got her mink coat into the painting and the lady went to David and said, "Look what that painting did to my mink coat." But David wasn't fazed at all. He said, "Look what your mink coat did to Joan Brown's painting." And so it was a standoff ultimately. It's true that lots of artists in the Abstract Expressionist period would do their works in the two weeks before the show. So you'd say, "How are things going?" And they'd say, "Well, I'm working up to it. I'm a little bit worried about it, but I'll be getting the works together," and so forth. Of course, everybody was painting in oil in those days. So we were looking at a lot of the same gestures over and over again. That got to be pretty tedious. So when I first moved down here to take the job at Cal State-L.A., I shared a studio with Jim Fuller, who was already at the college and who had been a friend at Berkeley. The studio was the front office for an azalea farm. So when you opened up the back door, as far as you could see into infinity were these gorgeous violets and oranges and reds and so forth.

PK: Where was this?

WA: It was down in Temple City, where we were both living then. Rented houses.

PK: Was it that rural at that time?

WA: Oh, this was a holdover from an earlier time, and that was all farming community. During World War II, you know, we used to go out, because the Japanese farmers had been taken off their farms and shipped inland. So the raspberry bushes and so forth or vines would be down there. We'd go down and have "pick yourself" sort of raspberry and blackberry things where people would charge you, but you went in and picked the berries and so forth yourself. You did have to can foods at that time, because the food distribution system wasn't what it is today, and there was rationing of a number of different kinds of food at that time. I always wonder what kids today would find it like if suddenly rationing were imposed. We came out of the Depression. My brother felt that he didn't have things he should have, but I never felt that way. I was always delighted with whatever was around.

PK: You were grateful.

WA: I never felt deprived, ever, even though we didn't have very much. And, of course, during the war you couldn't travel anywhere, because there wasn't any gasoline. There weren't any tires and so forth. And people worked five and a half days a week then.

PK: Go on with what you started to say. You said you moved down south in this studio. I don't want to put words in your mouth, but you moved out from that from saying that it got tedious after a while.

WA: Well, Jim, like Paul Wonner, had had a vision while they were still at Berkeley, of art having larger concerns than were offered. I hadn't felt that at all. But suddenly I was feeling that very strongly. And there was Jim on the other side of the studio painting away, doing pots on shelves and doing pictures of strawberry farmers and so forth.

PK: This was your studio mate down there?

WA: That's right. He just is retiring out at Scripps College in Claremont. But this was a revelation to me, to think of doing works that way. I was trying to find the subject matter for my own work. I was trying to find out ways in which I could extend what I had been up to. And I worked all year long, and I threw every bit of it away at the end of the year. It was just one of those very confusing years where it was all involved in search. Context was difficult. It was a totally new situation. The teaching was a different kind of situation. And I just didn't like anything that happened. Then I moved to south Pasadena at the end of that year, used my garage as a studio, and that's when things started to come together. I had to really back up and retreat back to things. The one thing I'm grateful about, though, for the experience I had at Berkeley, was there was a genuine belief in an innate ability of the human being to produce, create, manufacture ideas out of nothing, that you simply started to work, and in the process of working, came across the idea that you wouldn't have come across if you made a conscious decision before you started.

PK: So it was the process.

WA: The process. Extremely important. Because you never could have told me that I would have been working with polyurethane over welded steel and sculpture or doing bronze sculpture or screen printing or lithography or whatever. So what you really have to learn is how you go about the process of finding visual ideas when what you're doing isn't satisfying, when it doesn't fulfill the needs that you have at the moment and all you have is this vague feeling that what you're doing is just not fulfilling, it's not right, it's not true, it's not fit, it's not proper. So by just sitting down and starting to work, I was able to make things happen.

PK: Tell me about that process, or perhaps we should say progress, from that moment, your frustration in Temple City, the azalea farm, and then moving to south Pasadena and beginning what I gather is a search for visual ideas, for something of your own. And then, though, if I remember correctly, ten years elapsed before you went to Europe.

WA: That's right.

PK: So what happened during that decade? How did your work evolve? What about this quest for visual ideas and images?

WA: Well, you know, the things that your teachers have told you do not disappear easily out of your mind. I remember Edmondson was here, and we would be showing together in the California National Watercolor Society shows, and we'd be showing at San Gabriel Valley, and we were on the Art Selection Committee together for Pasadena Art Museum, and we were both on the board, as a matter of fact, at the Pasadena Art Museum. So there would be this continuous dialogue about what is worth doing. Every once in a while, heads and eyes and nose would creep into my works--bodies, figures, and so forth--and he'd be very critical of those. He's very much a kind of father figure in that sense. I just gradually had to overcome those voices and overcome the way that Edmondson thought about things, and to become my own person. That takes a while to have that happen. I remember going around when I was teaching at Berkeley in '68, I used to go over to the graduate

bungalows every week and talk with a certain constituency of students I had there. Kitaj didn't go over every week. And so around the ninth or tenth week in the ten-week quarter, he went over to see his students, and he had just left when I arrived to talk with my students, and the students were all hopping mad, because we had some students mutually. And I wondered what made them so irritated. It turned out that he had gone around and talked to them, and the only thing he had said to all of them that day is, "You don't do anything worthwhile until you're thirty-five." And here they were twenty to twenty-four years old, and he just told them that for the next ten, twelve, fifteen years they weren't going to do anything, that they just had to keep working. That's not good for your attitude at all, and I don't believe that idea, but it is true that many people do not mature, and it takes a long time to mature in art, and we've seen a lot of people in the art world in the last ten years, fifteen years, who have been promoted as the latest new blinding vision.

PK: Straight out of Cal Arts or something.

WA: Straight out of Cal Arts, right. Like Salle, Schnabe. I talk about them all the time when I go down and give lectures, because I think some of--

PK: They're public figures. You know, one can use them as sort of exemplars or symbols.

PK: Well, David Simpson and I made a pact, though, about fifteen years ago that we were not going to bring them up in class ever. [Laughter]

PK: But you did.

WA: Oh, it's hard not to, because the students will be talking about their works.

PK: Are you saying, then, that this notion of a period of self-discovery, not wait until you're thirty-five to get to that point, but this applies to your case?

WA: Well, of course,

PK: These years while you were teaching, before you went to Europe, and we can use that a pivotal moment, what from that period do you remember? How would you characterize this?

WA: Well, you see, I did have a show. My first one-person show was at the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco.

PK: What year was that?

WA: That was probably in 1952, '53, '54, somewhere in that bracket. You know, it wasn't a mature show. It wasn't a fulfilling show. It was extremely tentative in its nature. And it was probably the wrong time for me to have the show, but I did have it and it did get response and so forth. And then I had a show at Pasadena Art Museum in 1963. Well, ten years made all the difference in the world. That show at Pasadena was a mature show. It had quite a number of developments that have remained with my work since then. The scale is larger. It's much more assured. And it was much more round and full in terms of the vocabulary that was used in it. And all those things just really take some time, and nobody wants to take the time anymore. And, of course, I was showing things all along, and I've always realized the frailties of my own work at different stages. But, you know, you need the support of seeing things out in the world, and you need to see things in context in order to really get a perception of what you're about as an artist. You can't do it just inside the studio. So when you see your works up with other people's works in a context that the revelations start to occur to you and say, "No, I don't want to continue to do that," or, more positively, "What this work needs is--," or, "What I should be about next is--," and so by showing, it gives you something back, and you've got to say, "This is Askin 1968," Or, "This is Askin 1963." And that's what I was about during that period of time. So it tends to be biographical in that sense and not to always be the ultimate conclusive opus magnum, the most complete work that you could possibly come up with.

PK: Let's talk about the mature Walter Askin, allowing for the fact that it's always maturing and it is a process. At some point, I suspect, you hit upon a theme and perhaps a style that matched the theme, the subject that is carried through your work. It seems to me that there is, from what I have seen, a kind of unity.

WA: People are always trying to lay the idea of self-expression on art, and I try very much to get away from that. I feel that my work is part of a process of becoming, of establishing a being, and I am just content with myself at most stages, and I'm trying to establish a better self. So I tend to move toward my artwork rather than have my artwork express what I am as a being. Of course, that's an ideal, and only about 10 percent or 5 percent of that is what really happens. The rest does represent what I am. And thematically I think you can find there's a very strong sexual content in my work. The idea of male or female is a prominent dichotomy that exists in this world and a very forceful one, and that's been a large part of the content of my work.

PK: That's also seen, of course, in [unclear] and certainly Hockney, to a degree, and certainly Kitaj. That would suggest a parallel.

WA: Yes. I just recently was in a show at the Armory Center, and one person who used to be the head of the board of the old Pasadena Museum came up to me and said, "You know, the reason I never bought one of your works is because of the content." And so when you start to touch upon things that way, where it really gets down to the reality of our being, I think that you are really gripping something important. And she felt that the art that she wanted to have around here had to avoid that, that avoidance is something. You're not trying to fit in by being an artist or creating works of art, and you're not trying to make these things fit other people's morality or other people's sense of propriety. Instead, you've got to do something that is real. And so I don't mind the jungle drums beating in my work at all. I think that's just the natural part of being. It's the old Protestant upbringing that I've had that makes that even more intense for me, because it's really very contrary to the way Protestants operate. They just don't talk about such things. They don't discuss those kinds of matters.

PK: That's interesting, because this would be very definitely a case where your life and your experience contributes a force and a direction to your art. [BREAK]

WA: And you just hoped there would be no major fights breaking out. [Laughter] They did have some very ferocious arguments, and the art club meeting I went to was fraught with people yelling, "Gentlemen, gentlemen," and trying to slow things down and have them be less emotional. But I think going to England at that time and going around and visiting art schools made me see that a number of students there found narrative and subject matter to be extremely important. Another thing you've got to realize is that in painting you can always slur everything. And having been a juror a number of times for different exhibitions, I discovered that works would be getting into shows for what they didn't reveal rather than for the elements they did reveal. But there's this kind of idea of slurring over or fogging over things.

PK: Concealed?

WA: Yes. I think disclosure and concealment has always been a major thrust in my work, of what you told and what you didn't tell. But these people were doing this in the negative sense of they didn't want to make what they were talking about that clear, because the minute it became that clear, it became criticizable.

PK: And so would you suggest that abstractionist can serve that--

WA: Oh, very definitely. An Abstract Expressionist dream was fraught with people who just were hangers-on, nonbelievers who it wasn't truly a very good vehicle for them to develop their ideas. I think perhaps doing sculpture, more than anything else, helped, because with paint you can slurry it off, you can scumble it, you can fudge it, and you can see things through a cloud. But when you start to work with bronze, the wax has a very definite and precise kind of form. So the level of commitment that came about when I started to do bronzes--

PK: Which was when?

WA: I put together a show at my university called "The Janus Impulse," of painters who also did sculpture, and that must have been in the early sixties, maybe around '62-'63. So I probably started to do bronze sculpture in 1960, something like that time. I had a grant from the university that helped me a bit. I did quite a number of pieces, and then I'm doing these polyurethane pieces now. You have to come to a very clear, definitive kind of edge in those pieces, and I think you keep refining those edges and moving them around. My mode in creating sculpture was different than other people's. I started very much as an Abstract Expressionist sculptor. So without anybody telling me that this was a process, I developed a method where I'd stick my fingers or the heel of my hand or brushes and other tools into clay, and then while this clay was still wet and damp, I could pour hot wax in. After that cooled off and became hard, I could pull the clay away and have these horns. So it was like, you know, a God with a stockpile of horns there and some would have associations of an arm or a leg or a torso or whatever, and I would start to put them together until they made sense as a figure. So I think the Jungian process, while I didn't know it, was very much what I was after, and some forms were right and some forms were not right. So it's not so whimsical as people would like to think. It may be lighthearted, it may be gentle, but it is not whimsical. Woody Allen has criticized the term "whimsy" used in connection with his writing. Ultimately, there's a very hard objective lesson, a very hard fact, or a very hard intention, that exists behind what people call whimsy. It's as much governed by feeling sense as it is by conscious knowing, much more by feeling sense. So you feel your way toward a form that astonishes, amazes, ingratiates, that has a sense of being about it, but isn't just willy-nilly trying this or that. I have trouble with young artists who just do things for the heck of them. Just because they think of that idea doesn't mean that it's a good idea. So you're finally coming around to some kind of judgment, kind of validation or evaluation of what you've done to see whether it really is right, whether it makes any sense or not. So, my paintings started to become more clear as I did sculpture. But also I'd become a reader. I had a fellow named Sears Jane [phonetic] at Berkeley, and I discovered reading very late. It didn't mean I didn't read, but I never realized that at the university you could read novels and get university credit for

it. And I took this course in world literature, second section, from Cervantes to Hemingway or something. I started reading about [Fran ois] Rabelais. Rabelais was just the most wonderful discovery for me. Here's this man who treated very scatological, earthy things in the same way he treated very spiritual, ideational, conceptual things, the way he would make lists where everything was included. You know, if he started to talk about children's games, he tried to list every single game he could, like in a Broyhill painting. And he tried to list every kind of plant that could be found in that region or every sort of thing that people in a certain section of France would eat and how they would eat it and how they would cook it, or the name they would use to describe certain human activity. All those things became fodder. They became content for his works. That was a revelation to me, and so I started to realize a lot more of what I read and was dealing with in my life could become a part of the act of creating work. So I started looking at books of French cooking utensils as a source for ideas for the forms of my works. I started looking at Georgius Agricola's "De Re Metallica," which is a book on early smelting techniques. And if you look at those furnaces, they're just like giant sexual organs and so forth, with fires and things around them, and there's these people tending them and so forth. And I just thought that was wonderful, because it provided me a whole new way of dealing with things, and I have got tons of things on paper in my notebooks and acrylics on paper I've done that were based on collecting all of these other images.

PK: And infusing them with your own meaning?

WA: Oh, yes, of course.

PK: Using this example, the big furnace.

WA: He was describing early smelting techniques so other people could go in and use those techniques.

PK: Right. But your interest was in an image that invoked for you, I mean, you just said it, the phallus, I guess, that sexual imagery.

WA: Yes.

PK: It's like being a pirate, I suppose, stealing images in a way and then converting them.

WA: Who wants to be the last of the line, eaten by busy cockroaches and winged moths before they start on the museum director socks? Nobody wants to be in the basement of the museum. They all want to be up where people see their images and take the ideas. If you want to call it stealing, that's fine. But I do a lot of auditioning.

PK: Appropriating.

WA: Well, appropriating is one thing, because that almost means a direct translation. But I'm talking about where a number of different elements from a number of different cultures and a number of different hierarchies of types of subject all come together in the mind of the artist and are selectively extracted in a transformed state where they take on a totally new meaning as established by the artist. I was just back in New York, and I saw the show at the IBM Gallery of early depictions of space exploration. In among all of those things was a couple of illustrations from Diderot's Encyclopedia, and it was people in France making fireworks. God, they're so beautiful, I thought. I looked around to see if they had a catalog and if those images were in them, and they weren't. They weren't any good if they were. And so I started to look for a copy of Diderot's Encyclopedia. And where did I find them? In my own campus library in Special Collections. So I started on a project of going through all of the plates for Diderot's Encyclopedia and selecting ones out and I'll Xerox them and then start to collage them. They go through a process before they end up in the works. If you were to select the plates that you would Xerox, it would be quite different from the plates that I would select to Xerox. Yours would be much more perverse than mine. No. [Laughter]

PK: I doubt it. [Laughter]

WA: I doubt it, too. I doubt it, too.

PK: What about collage? This has been a factor in your earlier work. Isn't that right? Or do you view your combination of images as a kind of collage anyway?

WA: Yes. They're really pastiches. They're taking from a number of sources and systems. They're very eclectic in their nature. But eclecticism is not bad.

PK: Not in the post modern era, that's for sure.

WA: But if they're resolved. Like Sigmund [Freud] hoke I don't care for, because his things just look like they're [unclear]. They're unresolved. He'd say, "Here are all these things. Here's the vocabulary, but I haven't made these things into words or sentences or paragraphs yet." So I think what you, as an artist, have to do is take the effort of making the hard job of converting these in a committed statement and staying, "I believe this," you

know, "I care about this. This is right this way." And I don't feel that a lot of these other artists do that. I think there's sort of a sense of, well, we're sort of sifting around and we try to exist and trying to put it in some kind of collection or put it together in one way or another. But they're not making that kind of commitment. And I think it's essential that the artist do that. It just isn't off their [unclear]. To go back to the first point, reading has become very important to me, in most part because of the kind of state of mind in which it places you, an alternative state of mind. And also it suggests images, and I like the way the imaginary images you form in your mind are so superior to the actual images that you look at out here. The world is not made according to our manufacturing specifications, and so the process of creating art is really making things according to your own specifications.

PK: Improving upon.

WA: And I don't expect anybody else to find my imagery to be their way, but I would hope ultimately there would be some people who could live in terms of these images so they wouldn't feel that life was worth living unless they were on the side of these symbols and forms and so forth.

PK: Tell me about words and images. What strikes me from what you say and from some of the works of yours I've seen, that those have a potency, a visual image of the word itself in your work, that they're attractive to you. You've been talking about your interest in reading ideas of a literary nature. We don't have a work right here to look at, but can you sort of elaborate on that a bit, those cases where you have used words as captions or maybe as visual elements?

WA: David Simpson and I, when I was teaching at Berkeley that one quarter, combined our seminar, because we realized that we had split, you know, that we were doing quite different kinds of things. So we held a dialogue back and forth in front of our students. I don't know if it was useful to them, but it was extremely useful just to-- it wasn't done with a sense of animosity at all, but just a sense of trying to describe two different worlds. I think David's work has gone toward music, kind of a purity of the visual experience. Mine has gone in exactly the reverse direction, toward kind of the vulgarity of everything becoming a fodder for content, and it's gone towards literature. As a matter of fact, it ended up with my writing books. Like I did, Another Art Book to Cross Off Your List, which is based on the fact that people like the story of the repulsive life of an artist more than they like the artist's repulsive work, the old saws that people have about the way in which artists should live their lives. You know, people come to my studio and say, "Oh, this is too neat. You can't be an artist if--" Of course, we were talking about June Wayne earlier, you could perform surgery in June's place. And so I think that's a perfectly viable way of organizing your life, that we don't all just have terrible morals or just live things--

PK: It's not required.

WA: That's right. [Laughter] I did a folio when I was an adjunct professor over at Arizona State University called, "A Studio Tour," which became a part of that book, and another one called, "A Briefer History of the Greeks." The "Briefer History of the Greeks" came about because I was over in the library looking for a book to hold my office window open just the right distance, and I discovered a new book called A Briefer Greek Syntax. I had to go to a faculty meeting on the way back to the office and stopped in at this meeting and people said, "Oh, you're into Greek syntax, are you?" And so I said, "Oh, why, yes. Of course." I noticed their estimation of me went way up. So I started to actually look at the book and discovered that there were strange phrases to be found in that book. So I compared those with resumes of what happened in soap operas not found in a newspaper, as you might imagine, but in the Los Angeles Times every Monday morning. And so I put the soap opera resume together with these small syntax statements in Greek and made up little legends.

PK: Was there any connection between them?

WA: Yes, of course. They were very close. [Laughter] Can't you see Socrates on "Days of Our Lives" or "The Last Days of My Life" with the hemlock-drinking exercises?

PK: It's amazing to know those TV soaps have a far bigger audience than poor Socrates had. Interesting.

WA: Also, titling is a part of this, and titling has been one of things that people have questioned during this century. Of course, you can't become too attached to titles, because people put the titles on that they want. But when I'm doing a work of art, I tend to write titles at the end of each painting session on the back of the work, trying to get a handle of what the work is about. That titling becomes a very important process. I have to remember to erase the earlier titles, though, because sometimes they will go to a museum and they'll put the wrong title up. Then I'll get this review and I wonder if it's a review of my work or someone else's in the show and so forth.

PK: If I spell titling correctly, it's an amusing pun, titling. [Laughter] I don't know if I spelled it correctly. Anyway.

WA: At any rate, so writing has become an important part of things, and if you look in this notebook here, half of

it is devoted to quotations or ideas I've written down, and the rest to images, some of which are taken from other people's work, some that I've developed myself and so forth.

PK: Do you feel any connection at all with an artist like Jess?

WA: Yes, of course, I do. As a matter of fact, I hadn't heard of Jess. I didn't know Jess' work until Steve Prokopoff, who also went to Berkeley and is director of the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois, said to me, "You know, I ought to put you and Jess together in a show." Because he said there's a great deal of correlation there. And then in going around to the galleries in New York, I went by a gallery that's no longer extant, Odyssea Gallery. They used to show Petlin, who's straight out of Kitaj, and a friend of Kitaj's, I believe, and Jess' work, and William Allen's and, of course, this old student of Hedrick's, William Wiley. So all those people, I feel, are true compatriots. I even feel some who are outside of what people call the formal art world, people like Saul Steinberg. I was so pleased to see Steinberg have a show of his work at the Whitney Museum of Art, because it meant to me a confirmation of values I held mutually with him which had been long denigrated in the art world. He was taken to be a cartoonist, an illustrator, somebody on the periphery, and he did books as well. You know, most of his ideas are put together in books called *The Passport* or whatever. I think books are a superior means of parading ideas, more than probably exhibitions are, because you have more work. A person can look at those works at any time of the day or night, in any condition. You can put a sequence of works together so one work builds on another. There's a narrative, a visual narrative, that's created. An artist like Glen Baxter is another one, and [Edward] Gorey. Both of those people, I feel I have a relationship to.

PK: What about somebody closer at hand? I don't want to force any of these connections unduly, but what about Strombotne, who you know as a friend, I think.

WA: Oh, very close. Yes.

PK: And how so? How would you describe the points of contact perhaps beyond what--

PK: He is very clear in his imagery. What he says through his imagery is different from what I would like to say. I think he is sexist in what he says in his work, and I don't think my works are sexist. But, you know, he's very closely allied and we've pulled each other into gallery situations simply because of the closeness of our work. Another is Keith Crown. I feel a close affinity with what he's about. Around 1975 I taught down at Cal State-Long Beach. I guess they had a position down there and they needed somebody, and they thought I would be the one person there wouldn't be any objection to. So I went down and lived on a boat down there and taught. They gave me a studio, and the studio was next to Paul. Paul was the other visitor that year.

PK: Paul Wonner?

WA: Paul Wonner. And our work during that period was so close in intent. It was basically about lunacy, about madness, you know, about being driven by the alternative side of our nature. He'd done a whole series of small works on paper, and I had as well. We had a show together there of those works, and we each did it on three postcards. So it was six postcards that were sent out as the announcement.

PK: Tell me that again. You said that the work was about lunacy. You used that term. And it was driven by--what did you say? Some other side of your nature? What was the terminology?

WA: It's not driven by the rational sort of money-making, day-to-day conscious striving of people, but more by that lyrical, demonic alternative side of the mind. I have a work of Paul's which I cherish greatly, which shows a moon directly above the figure of a man standing on a scape. And my work during that time generally had to do with things with titles like "Esoteric Lesson," mostly things on stages, and stages, to me, meant a space where anything could happen, where you could do the things that didn't have to fit the normal pattern of activities that people carry on. It wasn't a matter of cooking breakfasts and so forth. It was a matter of the inquiry of why we're here, what we're about. Just basically lunacy.

PK: But basically it seems to me there is a strong philosophical foundation to your work.

WA: In England today, they still have in certain towns the Feast of Fools, and they still permit people to go in and give fake sermons in churches. They mimic, at least, old medieval days when people could express themselves, which they couldn't in feudal times, and state alternatives. So you could go and put donkey ears on and go into the town council chambers and it's okay that day to make these pronouncements.

PK: Jesters and fools.

WA: A fool up as the mayor of the town, and to do things. In Haxey they have a ceremony of smoking fool, where a fool with smoke coming out of his pockets runs through the town. And so I read a good deal about the Festival of Fools and Feast of Fools.

PK: That's interesting.

WA: And there are some people like Harvey Cox, who have written about the Festival of Fools and how we need to reinvest our lives with this sense of festivity, of celebration, that we don't have.

PK: Well, I think you probably remember it correctly. It's probably still like that. This sounds like a good moment to move into the whole issue of humor, I think. But first we have to turn the tape over. [BREAK] [Note: The first five minutes of this side of the tape are inaudible.]

WA: ... and his interpreter, a place that desires to be a l'oeuvre of laughter. They believe that the world lasts because it laughs. And so they have this 80,000-item archive of humorous visual material. Some of my material is in there as well. And they also produce a couple of catalogs a year, which are distributed around the world. Of course, this is an Eastern Bloc activity, and with the change in the political climate, I suspect that the House of Humor and Satire will either disappear or change in its nature also. With the head of the International Society for Humor Studies, Don Nilsen, and his wife, Aileen Nilsen, of Arizona State University there, and they gave a talk about humor and art. We had Judith Stora-Sandor, who is the head of CORHUM, which is the French humor studies group. She's at the University of Paris. We had Fritz Schwegler, who is a professor of art and artist at the state school of art in Dusseldorf, I believe the same place that Beuys had a position for a long while, or for a while. And a couple of Spanish artists and Mike Ott, an artist from the University of Kansas, and Stephan Prokopoff, who is head of the Krannert Art Museum at University of Illinois. So we sat around for a couple of days in this chateau and talked about the situation revolving around visual humor and what should be done. Out of that came the Visual Humor Project, and all these people have lent their name and their background to it and their advice, and, in addition, we've added Roy de Forest, an artist in Northern California; Peter Zall, an artist in Texas; Judith Hoffberg, who runs Umbrella, who is very much involved with artist books and publications and that sort, who is there primarily because she's a vehicle for distributing ideas about what we are doing.

PK: Not because she's funny? [Laughter]

WA: No. [Laughter] That's true. That's true. That's true.

PK: Well, I don't know. We all have different sides that we show at different times.

WA: She has Umbrella, which is a magazine of male art and periodic art, and she's been very good about putting items in of what we're up to. Warrington Colescott from the University of Wisconsin, who's just recently retired, and so forth. So we've got a cluster of people, and I've put together a program for the College Art Association, which was held in Houston about three years ago on humor in art. They put it in the smallest room of the conference and had to move it to the largest room of the conference, moving up a group of art historians on French Revolution.

PK: Not too shabby.

WA: That was just fine. I've been asked to put together another panel which will be at the College Art Association meeting up in Seattle next year, in 1993, in February. So I'm doing a number of things. I'm giving a number of talks around the country. I'll give a talk at the National Art Education Association meeting on artists who create fictitious cultures. What we've discovered is that there are so many different kinds of artists who are involved with humor. And so we're going to have the Second International Conference on Humor and Art, which will be held at the same chateau this coming July, and we have five different people coming from five different artistic constituencies to talk about five different approaches to art. There's feminist humor. There's fictitious culture humor. There's ethnic humor. We've got an Indian artist from Vancouver who will be coming to give a talk on that, who's studying art history up there and studying Indian humor. It's hard for me to think of all the groups involved, but there are quite a number. And so what looked to us in the beginning to be a fairly small, restricted house turns out to be just the anteroom to a very large chamber and more and more people are finding that humor is more and more a central focus in their work. We're not concerned with boffo art, one-liners, and I've confused that issue by myself starting to do cartoons, which were shown for about six months in Art Week newspaper. Now I do a cartoon a month for the National Art Education Association, which totally confuses the issue, because we're concerned that this be serious art which has an aspect of humor about it, that the humor is an ingredient that greases the skids for the ideas and puts the ideas in a forum where they become the most efficacious, where the impact they have on the world means that they're able to get a more true picture, more authentic picture of what we're about as human beings as than do all these parading of our hurts and injuries, and our injustices. I think we're really in a position where we're developing a language where we're capable of overcoming these problems. And, of course, during the 18th century in Europe artists like Hogarth and Rowlandson, artists connected with the French Revolution, all used humor as an essential ingredient in high art. So we're just simply trying to revive the use of the language. So much of what has happened since World War II is simply recovering from a series of revolutions of the earlier part of the century, the language, the full range of language, so that when you sit down at the organ, you can work with all the keyboards, all the stops, rather than

just the upper limited number.

PK: It seems to me that all of this has a political or at least a social aspect to it with the goals ultimately going beyond a way of approaching art.

WA: Some do. Some have a very clearly articulated goal in that respect, and I think Peter Zall would be one, Steinberg would be another. But look at Roy de Forest's work. Where's the politics there?

PK: Well, not just necessarily political, but social as well. I guess maybe I didn't say that well enough. I don't mean that in a limited sense. I mean that in terms of, perhaps, changing people, changing the way they view themselves.

WA: Oh, of course. Of course. Exactly. Exactly. And the real hope is that you have changed the context in which people view ideas so that the stories that people play in their minds as they leave an exhibition are changed and the focus is different. That's why it's so comical to watch these presidential contenders, if it weren't so sad. It really is tragic underneath. But it's very comical in the way in which they try to go about selling their ideas and the kind of combative situation they get in with each other. Just a little bit of humor in there on the part of one of them would totally change the pattern of discourse. Our connection with each other should be a path of revealing delight, and I've always felt that the central aspect of art was one of play, of serious adult play. I think you always have to get to the serious side of the agenda, but play first. Always play first.

PK: Let's, in the few moments that we have remaining, bring it around.

WA: You're just talking about this tape. You're not talking about our lives or anything. [Laughter]

PK: I hope not. Right now I'm operating only within the context of the tape recording. But if we could bring it around full circle to this place, to Southern California, where you started out, born in Pasadena, and how you might describe it in terms of a salubrious environment for your own work. Let me be more direct with that. You've been here a long time. You've been able to observe the advantages and disadvantages of working here. Furthermore, you must have some feeling for the personality of the place, those special features which may be more pronounced here than elsewhere or maybe exist only here.

WA: Pasadena, you see, used to be the center of art in southern California. The old Pasadena museum was the focus for all artists here, and so Bengston and everyone else had their show here. Erle Loran had a show here. It was a place where everybody went if they wanted to see what was going on, and a lot of artists came to live in Pasadena as a result of that. As a matter of fact, within a six-block area, moving northeast from the studio here, there were hundreds of artists just fifteen years ago. Changes in real estate have moved people out. So it used to be a very reinforcing environment for artists. Now it's us tough old birds who are committed to here, to being here, and who don't have to be in any particular place in order to have our careers flourish, who tend to remain here. I think, also, as you go along, you start to see that your constituency is not the people in the immediate region, that you'll hit a certain segment of the population, and that the other major recipients for your ideas or the major audience or the people who are attuned to or are ready to receive what you're about are in London or they're in Austria. I had a show at the Kunstlerhaus in Vienna. Or they're in Greece--I had a show in Athens at the Hellenic American Union--or they're in Tokyo, or they're in Seattle, or they're in Lawrence, Kansas, or they're down in San Antonio, Texas. So you start to live in terms of activities that extend well beyond an area geographically. So it's one thing to travel to places to see the art and to experience the environment, but then there's the secondary aspect of sending your art out to those places. And I've exhibited all over. I've given talks down in Australia and had shows in Japan and Korea and Switzerland and Denmark and Germany and France and Spain. And all of those things are a delight to think about your works being over in those places. I had a one-person traveling show that went around Yugoslavia. It's hard to think of those cultured people shooting, you know, firing rifles at each other and blowing each other up these days. When they talk about Herzegovina, I've had shows there in that region. I delight in that. I like that kind of sending the works out and a wide kind of distribution. That's why I like these books, is because books can go anyplace in the world. They're as close as the nearest mailbox.

PK: Do I understand you to say, then, that one of the features of this area or perhaps one of the changes that you've seen here in the greater L.A. area is a greater internationalism?

WA: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Yes. People always used to think that it was just to show to your friends here in town, and I think we've grown out of that. The art has grown a lot stronger than it used to be. It really has progressed. And printmaking, particularly. I mean, you can't compare the little press each artist ran independently with the current situation where people are working collaboratively. That's not to denigrate what individual artists are doing in their own studios, because some of them have come up technically to where they're doing much more fulsome work than they were in the past. But it used to be they would think of, "What can I do in terms of my technical capability?" And now the capability is way out here. We almost have too much in terms of mediums available to us, tools to use in front of us. The important thing is how to transpose those

tools with this language. The development of language, I think, has been ultimately the most important aspect, because what we're doing now is worthy of really being widely distributed and widely appreciated.

PK: So you feel there hasn't been a falling off from, say, the sixties, that famous period when--

WA: Oh, no. That art is dead. There was a fellow at Berkeley when I was there that time who was giving a series of lectures. He was in the science field. His idea was that all the major discoveries in science and art have already been made, and it was only going to take about thirty years--that was '68, so it's '98. In 1998, we will have discovered all the ramifications of all of those things and people will have to find something else to occupy their minds other than science and art. That holds up in theory, maybe, a little bit, but when it comes down to facing the canvas, you realize the whole world is yet to be realized.

PK: And always will be.

WA: Yes.

PK: What about this place, trying again to describe, perhaps in terms of physicality, especially in terms of culture or evolving culture, what about this place? How would you distinguish or how would you characterize Southern California, particularly, of course, in terms of how it might affect or influence your work? One thing that comes to mind is the pervasive popular culture.

WA: Well, the lack of a sense of ownership here. You know, like I think in other cities they feel that this is their identify and this is their nature. Here, everything comes into play. And, of course, the entertainment industry has been one of the big supporters of art, and they've also put a bias on the art. Because you think of Jack Nicholson buying the works of Donald Roller Wilson, and then he would buy a work by Witkin. And who's that comedian who was on the board?

PK: Steve Martin.

WA: Steve Martin buying art. Sometimes I think there's very little correlation between the kind of art they buy and what they represent as a public persona or what they represent as artists themselves.

PK: And they probably insist upon that. Apparently, Steve Martin is not at all like this wild and crazy cutup that you see, but quite thoughtful. So, yes, I think it's a good observation.

WA: And even with Woody Allen. When he goes out to buy art, he bought a work of a friend of mind, Maxine Cole--Max Cole, who was here and moved back to New York--and her works are simply like a kind of fabric, small marks made in a very even regulated pattern across the whole surface. So what he does in his own writing and what he does in his own films does not become the value system that he uses when he buys art. So I think there's a little bit too much of that sense of political correctness and of gobbling up what is offered to you as being the right thing, rather than really--there are a lot of people buying art who don't directly respond with their own being to it. They tend to adopt a certain ethic that's offered to them by the culture, and they tend to believe it. People are very insecure when it comes to buying art.

PK: Again, the idea of popular culture, which is associated very much with this area, some might in a denigrating way say that's the only culture that's here, and I doubt that we would agree with that.

WA: No. That's so silly.

PK: We'll just set that aside. But in your case, do you feel that your work in any way is a response to the popular culture?

WA: I never see movies except what I see on television. I never go out to discos. I don't travel across town to eat in the right restaurants with the right decor. I don't do any of that sort of thing. I don't even go out to openings of other artists, only very, very rarely, and only depending upon its geographical proximity. Because you can't get there from here anymore. Freeways are clogged. When you get there, there's no parking. Also, when you go to openings now, there are so many different classes of MFA students. This group moved through Cal Arts, and they know each other, and they've become an entity to themselves. And this group moved through Cal State-Northridge, and they're an entity unto themselves. This group moved through USC, and they're an entity to themselves. So there tend to be these little pockets where there is a genuine interrelationship between the artists, but there's no vehicle for cross-graining these things. Institutions like the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, I mean, those curators are not out in their cars going out and visiting studios. They tend to be more closely allied with the commercial art world, and eat the dinners that the gallery dealers put before them, rather than looking widely and making judgments that have a real integrity and relationship to what goes on here. So that a lot of what goes on in Los Angeles is really quite invisible, and yet it's visible other places. Once again, you can't think of this region as the place where you're going to be seen.

There's a lot that goes on here that just is not visible at all. There used to be the L.A. Institute of Contemporary Art, which was an alternative space and showed a wider range of fare, but it's no longer in existence. I was on the board of that group. And there's LACE. But they represent a point of view, and it's not one which I easily affiliate. So it does mean that there is a sense of isolation that exists here, even with the richness of the environment and knowing so many people within it.

PK: To bring this to kind of a closure, perhaps a more positive note, you used the word "isolation" as one characteristic.

WA: It's not bad. This removal, this being outside of all that. I mean, all that stuff just would take an immense amount of time and energy and it would be largely wasted time and energy. I go to friends' shows after the opening, because I really want to see the artwork. The important discourse that we have is on the basis of looking at each other's work. And so that's where the important focus is, as far as I'm concerned.

PK: Good. Well, I think our tape is winking at us again. That means it's time to wrap up. Thank you.

WA: Ciao. Arrivederci. Hasta la vista.

PK: It was edifying and enjoyable. [End of interview]

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