



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral History interview with Carlos Villa, 1995
June 20-July 10

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Carlos Villa on June 20, 21 & July 30, 1995. The interview took place in San Francisco, California, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

CV: Carlo Villa

PK: Paul Karlstrom

[Session 1]

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with artist Carlos Villa on June 20, 1995. Carlos is a San Francisco artist, but this interview is being conducted at the interviewer's home in San Francisco, 73 Carmelita Street. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom, and this is Session one, tape one, side A.

So, Carlos, with that introduction out of the way we can proceed, and I think I'll start out by saying a couple things by way of introduction. This is an interview that I feel has been long postponed, and it's certainly time to do it. I also should say that you showed up here at my office this morning without planning to do this, so we just decided to grasp the moment—or the opportunity—and begin, which I think is perfectly fine, and I'm grateful to have this opportunity.

We were talking earlier about a couple of projects that are under way, one of them being this Asian American art-history symposium that's coming up in the fall and you're going to participate on that. But, in a sense, more important, I think—related but more important—is this project that you've been working on, which I gather is wrapping up and has to do with, in effect, retrieving Filipino-American art history here, specifically, in the Bay area. This is something that I think then we'll come back to later on in the interview, but that gives a kind of focus to how our conversation began.

You were telling me about a change for you in your experience as an artist that in a way shifted, I think, your priorities, is the way I understood it, and what you felt really was important and ultimately led to this kind of involvement with these special projects trying to understand, to preserve a culture, to retrieve it, and with that long introduction I'm wondering if you could kind of pick up at that point again, by way of a prelude to this interview.

CV: Well, thank you very much. It gives me a lot more things to think about in terms of how this could go. I could go on by continuing our conversation this morning in the sense that how my life had changed in terms of being an artist first off. I've been an artist who's been exhibiting art professionally since 1958. And I've exhibited with some of whom I felt were artists of the California School of Fine Arts' golden age. I was classmates with Bill Wiley, Bill Allan, Joan Brown, Manuel Neri. I had teachers such as [Richard—Ed.] Diebenkorn, [Elmer—Ed.] Bischoff, Ralph DuCasse, Dorr Bothwell, Walt Kuhlman. I mean, on and on. Bill Morehouse. I had the best of the best that the region had to offer, and I was pretty much a mainstream artist. And so my life had gone on, I guess by anyone's standards really quite well. I'd gone to New York, I exhibited in many great galleries there. My first one-person show was at Poindexter Gallery in New York in the early sixties, and I was at Nancy Hoffman's gallery. There were a whole lot of things that were really very, very good at that time, which made me think that I was fairly successful, you know, like in mainstream. I had friends. . . . When I came back I met up with a lot of friends who were Chicano. Now there's a difference between Chicano and Mexican-American. Chicano happens to be a preferred politicized statement by a Mexican-American that, "Hey, I'm taking my heritage by my hand, and I'm going to call myself what you termed Chicano, a bad term, and I'm going to make it good. And I'm going to recuperate this. And I learned that word recuperation from El Movimiento. Artists such as René Yañ ez, artists such as Rupert Garcia, and Amalia Mesa-Baines. I didn't know Amalia then, but then there were many artists in the barrio at the time that allowed me to think along these lines. Okay, I'd gone through the methodology, all the methodologies and strategies that I was oriented to by dint of my education, MFA at Mills College, and my experience at Art Institute, and being a professional artist outside—showing and hitting on collectors and the whole shot. I was talking with René Yañ ez and I was wondering about his gallery and what he was going to do, because I saw like, well, okay, "Gallery, gallery. This might be a good opportunity for me." The more that he talked about it the more inextricable the idea of artists and their function and their role with their community in non-art terms became just as important as the art that they produced. That making a political poster was just as valid as doing a copy of a drawing by Velasquez. Or something like that.

PK: So this would be, in that case, with the example of Rupert Garcia, his very powerful posters. Was he doing

them about that time?

CV: He had just started getting into them. He was doing a lot of writing. He was incredibly active. He was an educator, a street scholar. When I say street-scholar, he was gathering all these wonderful kinds of snippets of information that weren't really fully . . . that weren't completely fully blown, and by conversations with other scholars at the time, like Tomas Ybarra-Frausto and people like that, able to put together this Chicano history. And so Rupert was very involved. He was doing silkscreens, mostly. He wasn't doing as many paintings as. . . . He was doing drawings. He was doing a lot of writing. And at the time it was very, very interesting. He was together with Amalia and a number of other artists looking into the aspect of Frida Kahlo and talking. . . . And I kind of knew who Frida Kahlo was because we have a great big mural by Diego Rivera, of course, at the [San Francisco—Ed.] Art Institute. So I know a little bit about Frida Kahlo and I know a little bit about that, but then the thing is is that all of a sudden they were sharing this history. They were sharing this [artist's, artists'] strategy and methodology of what Diego was about and what Frida was doing. There were a lot of artists that were in the barrio doing these incredible murals, like [Michael—Ed.] Rios and Patricia Rodriguez, etc. They were doing all these incredible murals, and they couldn't wait to go down there to do these things. I couldn't understand why they wouldn't want to see somebody like [Helen—Ed.] Frankenthaler as opposed to seeing somebody like Michael [Steiner—Ed.] doing his take on somebody like Diego or Orozco. And I was just wondering about that. But then I'd go down and I'd see the power and the passion of what this work was about. I didn't necessarily particularly love overt imagery such as that, but the thing is, though, is that everyone on the street knew what that was. That aspect I really liked, and it really hit home. Because my mother didn't know abstract art. Neither did most of the people on the street know what abstract art was. But you go down to the barrio, and certainly they might not know who the artist is but they know. They know because they're sharing some part of history that's depicted on some of these murals.

PK: What year was this?

CV: Seventies. Seventies, anywhere from about '74, '75. And murals were just going up everywhere. I mean, it was amazing. There were symbols from Aztec cultures coming out, and there were low-rider cars in some of the murals. There was this instant of history where it was present, past, and, because of the discourse of the images, it maybe talked about the future.

PK: So this was the moment that you point to as representing for you a new awareness. You developed a new awareness and really shifted in some ways your thinking in terms of what was important.

CV: Well, I. . . .

PK: Is that right or is that overstating it?

CV: It might be a little overstated, because still, you know, like I was very much into wanting to show in New York. And indeed I had shows there, and I was showing my own kind of work, which was trying to look at old cultures—old traditional cultures—African cultures, Polynesian cultures, cultures that were around the Philippines that weren't trashed or colonized.

PK: Well, so these issues were already of interest to you at this time.

CV: Oh, yes.

PK: So this wasn't brand new. It wasn't as if you had an epiphany.

CV: Well, what it represented to me was that I wasn't alone. See, I mean, I was working pretty much in my own vacuum through my own questioning. Because I [had] remembered when I was a student, I remember asking Walt Kuhlman about Filipino art history and he said there is no Filipino art history. And, lo and behold, I go up to the library and, of course, there wasn't any. I don't say "of course," but there wasn't any, and so there was nothing I. . . there was no bottom. But when I came back from New York after having been a minimalist in New York, I started asking some questions because I just didn't like solving aesthetics viz a viz a community. I mean, I didn't want to just. . . . What I meant by that is that sitting down at a table and talking about Don Judd or [Dan—Ed.] Flavin or what kind of light bulbs Flavin used on his piece at [Maxis] Kansas City, etc. I mean, after a while, what did it add up to? And I just started realizing that my art was going further and further away from me and becoming more and more something else. I had no attachment to it. Which made me start realizing that I would have to develop something like that.

And so when I came back to San Francisco I got a job through the Art Institute being an artist in residence down at Telegraph Hill Neighborhood Center which a lot of young black and Asian kids would use as sort of a clubhouse, and I was supposed to be their artist in residence there. And there was just something that really connected with me because I saw these young guys asserting themselves with their. . . . You know, the black kids with their afros and dashikis and like that, and then to these Chinese kids who had completely their own

style, their own hairdo, their own style of cars. And I saw how important *that* was. Somehow it kind of hit. The idea of a self-affirmation, this idea of their rasquache.

PK: Rasquache?

CV: Yeah, rasquache is a [calo, callo] term; it's a Chicano term. Rasquache is. . . . For instance, if I were Chicano, if I were Mexican and all I had was. . . . And, you know, like we had less than two or three thousand dollars a year to buy clothes with and food with and everything else like that. And to be able to take a T-shirt that my father bought for me and to be able to bleach it snow-white, whiter than white, and to be able to put creases on the shoulders and for it to have the right folds, right on the cuff, and to be able to, you know, look in the mirror and say, "Hey, man, this is me." You know, you'd go out with this T-shirt and this T-shirt would be. . . . You know, that would be the thing.

PK: And that's rasquache?

CV: Well, that's a form.

PK: How do you spell that?

CV: R-a-s-q-u-a-c-h-e.

PK: Okay.

CV: Like rasquache in the most grandest sense would be. . . . In an African-American culture, jazz would be ultimate rasquache. Being able to take shards of musical culture and noises and to be able to put them together in their own way.

PK: Um hmm.

CV: Rasquache, for instance, would be the low-rider culture, you know, going over to Safeway and then seeing all of those magazines and seeing all of these cars. All of which are about. . . . You know, they're 1950 and 1940 and 1960 cars. . . . Able to make these old cars something of theirs.

PK: Yeah, something of theirs.

CV: Something of theirs. And making it maybe even greater than maybe what it was.

PK: So, to transform the cars and, by so doing, to transform yourself.

CV: Exactly. Rasquache.

PK: Rasquache. Got it! So you, then, became familiar or began to appreciate in a new way this concept through working at the Telegraph Hill. . . .

CV: Yeah, down at Telegraph Hill. Well, it all came home to me. See, it all came home. All of a sudden there were things that I was picking up, and there were things that were making more and more sense. I didn't quite put it together as a methodology for art, per se, but as expression, yes. But as art, I'd have to wait many more years for me to develop a mind-set that would include these methodologies as alternative to those that I'd grown up with. Does that make any sense?

PK: Yeah, it does. You said when we were talking earlier that—and you were very direct, I think—early on in our conversation you said that all this business somehow had something to do with your heart—you know, what was in your heart, and that struck me as interesting, because that's in some ways a different level of experience than a sort of calculated strategy or methodology.

CV: Yeah, well, you know, like we've seen artists in the seventies and we've seen artists in the late sixties, and we've seen this kind of networking and hitting up on people in galleries, you know, for shows, for this, for that. "How can you use me because I want to certainly use you" kind of thing. Which is okay. Hey, that's the way business is conducted. But at the same time there was just something about the coin that wasn't ringing true. And the idea of El Movimiento and the barrio and the artists in the barrio and what their connection with the barrio was as opposed to my unconnectedness, or my trying to be connected to my mainstream present, wasn't doing. And there was just something that was wrong.

So back in the sixties I started with my own art. I started trying to recuperate some of things. And not to do a Filipino art but to do an art of my own. To do a visual kind of excavation of things to bring me closer to my own root—whatever that root was, being Filipino-American. So after a while I started seeing the dearth of art history, the very little mention of social history and concern with Filipino-Americans. Asian-American history, which was

amazing, because there were so many instances in that history that I'm now gathering that a lot of us share, and it's all about self-loathing. A lot of self-loathing there. Hating, just hating yourself. Just really hating yourself. And so it's taken a long time for myself to even admit that. And, for instance, you know, like I started making a lot of money working with bronze. . . .

PK: Um hmm. That wasn't all that long ago.

CV: Yeah, it wasn't.

PK: I mean, I went over to the foundry and saw some castings, what, like six years ago?

CV: Yeah. Eight, nine years ago I was doing that stuff. And it was making dough. But that wasn't it.

PK: So that was like a relapse you had.

CV: It was a relapse, yes. I thought that, "Well, like, okay, that window is open, that window is closed now. Now it's time for me to go on with my career." But as I kind of went around the cycle again, it just occurred to me that, being who I am, without that going into the foundry kind of business and recuperating on all of these different levels. To be able to start symposia and do all of these kinds of things. So I went from the idea of artist as being a competitor to artists with the idea of cooperation. And to be able to do community actions was of just as much importance to me as having a group or a one-person show downtown.

PK: Is it going too far to say that that, in effect, then, became your art expression?

CV: No! Not at all. Of course! I think, yes. I think that. . . . Okay, then, we can talk about Joseph Beuys, and if you want to think about mainstream history and what he had done with the Greens party. And he did countless pieces that had to do with—you know, performance pieces—that had to do with the community. Okay, then taking that, going to the other end of it, I saw no difference with a lot of artists that were working in El Movimiento. Except they didn't take it to a performance. They didn't think of a performance aspect as much as that they were thinking of a more active aspect of being part of the community.

PK: Well, you mean, activist in a political sense?

CV: Political. You know, if they took out the word "racist" or even the word "political," you know, in terms of adjectives that we use, we'd really get down to some real humanism.

PK: You think these are off-putting terms that it's hard to get beyond?

CV: It's just like saying "politically correct."

PK: Um hmm.

CV: Now whose terminology is that?

PK: And what does it mean?

CV: And what does it mean after a while? It's an "in" coin.

PK: But your history, your progress, which we will have the pleasure of, in a more leisurely fashion, pursuing. . . . But, you know, this broad outline that you've given, it is a kind of progress of self-discovery and then determining what does that mean, in respect to your art. How do you employ your art to keep it honest in connection with yourself within a certain world? Is that, roughly speaking, the progress that you've seen?

CV: Yes, I've extended the mind-set and the physical being of my studio. I could be at a Xerox machine, you know, as much as I could be at my drawing table. I could be on the phone. You know, there are just so many ways that an artist could be as viable. And after a while you start asking the questions of yourself about your art, you know, like, "Who's it for?" "What's it for?" And you start thinking about the idea that you can do actions as well as objects that would have as much meaning, being an artist. Like, for instance, I just got a book published, and the book is not because I'm a great author. It's probably the best [commodification] of an object as a sculptor that I could imagine. You know, I put some people together and these people did active, incredible discourse that just numbed me.

PK: Mention the name of the title of the book.

CV: *Worlds in Collision*.

PK: And its publication date, is it just this year?

CV: Just this year.

PK: '95.

CV: Just this year.

PK: Based on a series of symposia, right?

CV: Four multicultural symposia that [gainseed, gained seed (perhaps means gainsaid?—Ed.)] from 1988, and there were four symposia held at the San Francisco Art Institute, and there was one symposium that dealt with art education. There was one that dealt with . . . that was basically a call to arms in which we started questioning and kind of delineating an agenda for artists of color.

But, talking about artists of color, you know, like I invited all colors. [laughs] Bill Berkson was in that one. So was Mark Van Proyen. So, you know, like everyone is of color.

The second one was "Sources of a Distinct Majority," which delved into communities and methodologies used by communities and different groups of artists. And then a contextual symposium where we tried to put it together and ask ourselves the questions—challenging institutions as to what the rule in the new world was.

[Break in taping]

PK: Carlos Villa, continuing session one, tape one, side B. Carlos, you were just about finished, I think, describing this book project, your book that just came out and had these different sort of aspects to it, and it seemed to me that it was being described as, well, at least two things—one of them being representing where this progress, your progress, led you. And it also, if I understood you correctly, sort of expanding awareness on your part, that this kind of activity isn't separate or other than art. For you, in your creative life, this is very much connected to your art. Is that true?

CV: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. That even as I hustle foundations, it's the same thing as hustling a collector. I mean, there's no difference except one is a lot larger. The thing is, though, is it that one thing that's been very, very important for me in all of this is that I'm not doing it for myself. I'm doing it with people and I'm doing it with the idea of not just putting, quote unquote, "my name" out there, but then, you know, putting my heart out there. And it just makes much better sense. Now, I'm not saying . . . I'm not denigrating where I came from, you know. I mean I'm going to be having a show at Bomani Gallery with a good friend of mine, Keith Morrison, you know, coming. . . .

PK: Oh, I know Keith.

CV: Yeah. And I'm also going to be having a show at San Francisco State. So it isn't about letting one go, but maybe what I'm trying to do for myself is to allow the idea that artists need to set their own paradigm, as opposed to doing the old ["okey-doke"] at art school. You know, "Look at this monograph and be like this guy." There hasn't been enough monographs for women; there haven't been enough monographs for artists of color either.

PK: So you create your own model?

CV: You have to.

PK: And probably the best way to start is to do a little, as you say, excavation. Dig into the history that hasn't yet really been brought to the foreground.

CV: Absolutely. I think in your own community, whatever that community is. A couple of years ago I wouldn't have known or even considered. . . . I teach art history now, too.

CV: Oh, do you?

PK: Yeah, I teach . . .

CV: At the Art Institute?

PK: Yeah, I teach a class called Worlds in Collision, in which I'm dealing with community social histories as inextricable to visual expression. And we talk about visual expression as inspiration for other kinds of things, either art in the community or expression within the community. Or to even think about artists going outside of the community and showing their art. I'm seeing a lot that now particularly with Asian and Chicano artists. There's certainly a lot of Native American artists that are doing it, too. So, it's like there's this tightwire that we're all on, and I'm glad to be part of it.

CV: I think that this is a good point to now move back in time, because this is your life, as they said on the TV show. . . .

PK: Oh, Ralph Edwards. [both laugh]

CV: This is your story, and I think it's most useful to start out by having an idea of where you've come from and where it led. But what I'm going to do is just pause a moment here, and then we can start up with some of your family background.

CV: Sure.

[Interruption in taping]

PK: All right, well after that brief break we now can climb into our time machine and go back.

CV: Okay

PK: I would like this part to be pretty straight biographical—you know, really for the record. Where you were born, something about your folks, about your background and early family experiences.

CV: Sure. Okay, I was born here in San Francisco, December 11, 1936. Spent most of my life before twelve years old at an apartment house in the basement on . . . let me see, between Polk and Larkin on Geary. The Market Apartments. It's still there. And we lived in the basement. And I went. . . . Let me see, I grew up there in the Tenderloin. I had a lot of dealings with our own family group, which was in the Fillmore District. I attended parochial schools until I went to Lowell High School. Graduated from Lowell. Went into the army. Came out of the army and through the GI Bill I went to California School of Fine Arts.

PK: Was that your first college-level experience? I mean, you went directly from high school into the army?

CV: I went to City College, but I hated it. You know, I mean, everybody. . . . It just seemed that there were all these Korean veterans there at the time, and it was like a party school. And I couldn't get a job and I couldn't. . . . You know, there was just [somewhere] that I needed that City College wasn't it. And I took art classes and I hated the way that I was being taught art.

PK: This was after the war. I mean, after your service?

CV: No, this was after high school.

PK: Okay, directly from high school to the City. . . ?

CV: Yeah, directly from high school. And so I left and I came back and I started really connecting with my cousin Leo. Leo was always my hero.

PK: That's Leo Valledor?

CV: Yeah. He was always my hero.

PK: He grew up here as well?

CV: Yes. He and I were very, very close. Matter of fact, his drawing was the first drawing that I had ever seen. And I thought that magic was performed in front of me. I mean, he drew this little farmhouse scene and I was just completely transfixed. And then I just started drawing. But I would never tell anybody about it. I would just draw and just throw it away after I'd finished it. And I never really took that side of me very, very seriously. And I remember coming from. . . .

And I took a couple of classes at Lowell High School. You know, crafts classes and poster classes but not art classes.

PK: Did they have much of that at Lowell at that time?

CV: They did. They had. . . .

PK: They had a good art program?

CV: Well, I was in no way to judge how good it was or how bad it was. It was a two-man . . . a two-person art department, and there was sketching and throwing an occasional pot and carving into a little bit of plaster. But everything else had to come, necessarily, from whoever the student was. So it was not a big deal.

PK: Were there any other sort of—what shall we say?—proto-artists there? Do you remember anybody else that went on in the arts? Or at least in the visual arts. Here we're talking about painting and sculpture.

CV: I only knew Leo.

PK: Now, but wasn't he a little older than you?

CV: He was one year older than me.

PK: Just one year? So you were. . . .

CV: But he was genius.

PK: Was he at Lowell as well?

CV: No, no. He was at Commerce High School and he went to Galileo when Commerce High School closed. But he was genius. I mean, he didn't have. . . . His father ran away from him when he was twelve, because he ran off with somebody's wife. His mother died at twelve years old. You know, he was pretty much by himself. And yet, at about sixteen and seventeen years old, he was doing these paintings in his house that were ten- by ten-foot abstract paintings.

PK: Really?

CV: They were shown. . . .

PK: Where did he get that, do you suppose?

CV: Well, he showed them at the Dilexi Gallery. He was at California School of Fine Arts for one year at [Famous Studio 15, famous Studio 15] with Wally Hedrick and Joan and Bill Brown and Manuel [Neri—Ed.] and all of these people. And they said, "Ah, you ought to get out of school." So Leo quit school after the first year. And he had a show next year at the Dilexi Gallery . . . or a couple of years later at the Dilexi.

PK: About what? Like '58 or '59?

CV: Ah, something like that. And huge paintings. And I just said, "Shit! What is this?" I mean, I didn't understand what the hell that was, but I sure did like going into his studio smelling oil paint and turpentine. I mean, it's another world.

PK: It's a longtime aphrodisiac [sort of, for, according to] people They describe that in a sensual, sort of thrilling way, don't they?

CV: Oh, God, well it is an aphrodisiac. And unfortunately now it's against the toxic whatever, you know, and you can't do that anymore. But, you know, I remember going in there and seeing these paintings and I was just completely thrilled. And when I came back from the army I had lessons. I took lessons from Leo. I was paying him for lessons You know, drawing. Drawing from actual things. And he encouraged me to go to art school, so I took my GI Bill and I went to California School of Fine Arts in '58.

PK: If we may, that's a good sort of resting point in terms of your eventual career as an artist. And I'm very interested to hear about Leo. We're going to have, I'm sure, lots more opportunity to talk about him as an artist. But what I would really like to do before we get too far ahead is to learn a little bit more about your family and, let's say, your ancestors. You know, if you will, the immigrant story of how you came to be here, and what you remember from your early life in terms of that background and that culture and tradition.

CV: With pleasure.

PK: Okay.

CV: Yeah, you want to do that next time?

PK: Sure can.

CV: Tomorrow, because it's almost. . . .

PK: You need to leave now, right? Well, yeah, let's stop it here and then pick up at that very point.

CV: Okay, that's real easy.

PK: Okay, good. Thanks.

CV: That's real easy.

PK: End of Session One.

[Session 2]

CV: . . . the forties and fifties, that's interesting because nothing. . . . You know, everything is kind of under water, seems to me. . . .

PK: What do you mean?

CV: I mean, there was a lot of stuff happening but nothing comes to surface as much as, say. . . . Okay, at the time, for instance, at the time, say, after 1945 when [_____—Ed.] MacAgy takes over at CSFA [California School of Fine Arts—Ed.], and then shit starts happening, right? I mean, it really gets intense and it gets really serious and everybody's really thinking about the seriousness of all of this. But then there's all of this stuff that was happening. I mean it was fascinating because, you know, like just looking at a lot of the stuff that Mark has. . . .

PK: Mark Johnson over at San Francisco State working on the Asian-American project.

CV: Yeah, right. And I'm seeing how important Dong Kingman was. I mean, he's not just this poster baby for Fisherman's Wharf. You know, I mean, he's not. . . . You know what I'm saying?

PK: Yeah, yeah.

CV: And if you look at his art his art is grounded in so much of what was happening in terms of a hotbed of information at U.C. Berkeley at that time. That was really the hotshit place in the forties and thirties, right?

PK: Um hmm.

CV: I mean, that was when all those guys got hired. The house of wax. [laughs]

PK: The house of wax. That's an allusion that will be lost on some. . . .

CV: [laughs]

PK: . . . but we don't want to get specific about any of the . . .

CV: . . . survivors? [add explanatory note?—Ed.]

PK: Let's sort of start out on this. . . . We've dropped into recording here. . . .

CV: Okay. Yes, that's great.

PK: . . . just almost arbitrarily. But I need to identify this taping session. This is continuing an interview with Carlos Villa. This is session 2, on June 21, 1995.

CV: Longest day of the year.

PK: Summer Solstice. It's downhill from now, but at any rate here we are. It's a great day, and this is a great way to celebrate it because if there's anything I love it's the Summer Solstice and the light and sun. A beautiful day. The interviewer for the archives remains Paul Karlstrom and the interview is being conducted at. . . .

CV: [sotto voce:] Oh, it's on!?

PK: Yeah.

CV: [Still in sotto voce:] I'm sorry.

PK: That's all right.

CV: I didn't mean to pop in.

PK: No, no, no, that was good. The interview is—this is our tag, you see, our i.d.—the interview is being conducted at the interviewer's office on Carmelita Street in San Francisco. And we had an informal sort of prelude to this introduction, which is just fine with me, but what we wanted to do today was pick up where we left off yesterday, and you had laid in a bit of a sort of a biographical skeleton, or armature. . . .

CV: Right.

PK: . . . for you, really getting up to the art institute, California School of Fine Arts/Art Institute days. You talked about Leo Valledor and his importance—your cousin—and you're going to talk more about him, I hope.

CV: Sure.

PK: But I suggested we might then move back again and begin to flesh out a little more your own background and your family and, perhaps, values, what it meant to be growing up Carlos Villa in San Francisco at that time, eventually moving into the arts.

CV: Okay. As I stated before, I was born at Mary's Help Hospital over on [Dorero, Guerrera] Street. We lived in an alley—Myrtle Alley—between Polk and Larkin, and it was in a basement apartment of the [Marquette, Market] Apartments. And our family group, which was a very, very small enclave of Filipino families, had a meeting place over there on Laguna between Ellis and Fillmore. And it was actually a ghetto within another ghetto within a metropolis. It was a Filipino ghetto side by side with a Japanese ghetto in the middle of a black ghetto, which was at Fillmore, and in the middle of San Francisco. And so the thing was is that in 1936 when I was born and in the forties when I was a kid, there weren't that many Filipino families because of the Oriental Exclusion Act. The Oriental Exclusion Act excluded mostly women, because the powers that be did not want these people to propagate, and all they wanted was the cheap labor. And so much so that in some towns in the west coast the dearth of women produced a quota of forty men to one woman. And so myself and my cousin Leo and a few others were lucky to have been born during that time.

PK: Because there were very few couples, very few procreative families, is that right?

CV: That's right. And then also . . .

PK: I didn't know that.

CV: And also the thing was is that there laws, miscegenation laws, that stopped Filipinos from marrying outside of the race. They definitely did not want anybody to marry white; they did not want anyone to marry any other race. There was just. . . . So you had a group of men who were my uncles, at that time, not just because. . . . It wasn't just a title that was given to Filipinos, being my uncle, it was because at that time most of the Filipinos came from the north of the Philippines in an area called the [Ilokos, Illukas], the Ilokos region. There's Ilokos Norte, there's Ilokos [Sur]. Ilokos North, Ilokos South. My parents came from Ilokos South, and a lot of the Filipino immigrants during that time, if they hadn't settled in Hawaii, they came over in the first wave to America. And my father came a little after the very, very first wave . . .

PK: Now what was the first wave? When?

CV: The first wave was actually in the twenties, if you don't count the students that came before that. But then that was another thing. I say it's another thing, because like here we're separating within those Filipinos the two different classes. My folks come from a very, very poor farming class in the Philippines. Those are the people that got targeted by steamship line agents who would come into small villages in the north to talk about how wonderful it would be to come to America to be able to achieve all their dreams. Well, after the Spanish-American War there were all of these American Christian brothers who came in and took over the education and also the. . . . There were the lay people along with the priests that came from America who had really propagandized the learning of the Filipinos then. So you had people—you know, my people—learning songs like "White Christmas," and it doesn't even snow in the Philippines. And you had things like that, so they were really more familiar with the American culture than maybe a lot of the Americans themselves. So when they came. . . . And even to now English is a very, very strong second language. Filipinos grow up bilingual—or trilingual. They learn their native dialect, the regional dialect, they learn Tagalog, which is the national language, and they also learn English. And before that they learned Spanish. So it's quite. . . .

PK: Still!

CV: Yeah, and Spanish is still the lingua franca of the very, very rich. They speak and address each other as Senor, Senora, etc., etc., so. . . .

PK: So it's an elitist thing, an aristocratic thing?

CV: Incredible. Yeah, well, I mean we could go into, you know, like the mestizo class. The mestizo class was actually the bastard sons and daughters of the priests who wanted at the time to take the power away from the priestesses, the native, the indigenous priestesses.

PK: It's sort of a matriarchal situation there where the women really were. . . .

CV: Yes. They had the powers and everything, and so they had the priests, the Catholic priests, do this number on the women, and so they became the ruling class of the Philippines. So to be a mestizo or a mestiza was. . . . Hey, we're talking about *the* class. You know, besides being Spanish and European, which is the top of the line, then you had mestizo and mestiza and everybody else were Indios.

PK: So what about your last name? Which everybody thinks is Spanish or Mexican?

CV: Yeah, yeah. Well, the thing is is that it definitely is Spanish. It's a Spanish . . . it's a Latin name, and there was just some. . . . You know, my uncle used to say, "Well, God, in the Philippines, we're so much like dogs and cats, anyway."

PK: [laughs]

CV: So it just. . . . So I don't know that our family tree really goes back really that far. I mean, I've not looked into it. But when I did go back to the Philippines I found out that in my family there was a state senator. In my family, there was a military rebel who's still living, who went up against Marcos and was a kind of an underground national hero. There are a couple of doctors, lawyers, and people in the military. I mean, they're pretty high up. It really surprised me, because, like coming to America, we don't know. . . . You know, like you give up, you're cut off from that kind of history, and every day is. . . . It's existential, if you will. I mean, you just deal with it. And at the time there was rampant racism. There were. . . .

PK: Here?

CV: Oh, absolutely.

PK: So you're talking about your own experience in growing up then?

CV: Oh, absolutely, yes.

PK: I was going to ask you about that.

CV: Oh, yeah. Well, there were districts that we were allowed in. We were allowed to hang out in Chinatown, we were allowed to hang out in the Fillmore District, but, boy, you know, don't get caught in a lot of these other places. I mean, like don't go into North Beach. Don't go over there with the Italians, you know, you're going to get. . . . That's their territory over there. Don't get caught up with the Irish, which is over. . . . You know, I mean, they. . . .

PK: Originally. . . . Now where were they? In the Richmond or the Mission at that time?

CV: Who?

PK: The Irish.

CV: Oh, the Irish were in the Richmond and big-time in the Mission District.

PK: That's what I thought, yeah.

CV: Big-time in the Mission. And so you had all of these enclaves. They had something called pacts up and down California and in certain parts where specifically written into charters that Orientals—or people of Mid-East origin, meaning Jews or Armenians—couldn't buy land. Couldn't buy land, couldn't buy anything, you know. And I remember my father driving around in my uncle's car, and he was saying, "Well, this area is exclusive, that area is exclusive." Of course, what he meant was white only. And so I grew up very much with that. And where we lived in the alley, particularly during World War II, my parents always used to freak because there was this bar around the corner where all these sailors and soldiers used to hang out and they'd go pissing in the alley and getting drunk and getting into fight, and my mom and my dad, they wouldn't say don't trust white people, but then, you know, there was a body language that was incredibly pervasive. I mean, I picked up the vibe in a minute. So I mean I grew up not trusting very many white people because, well, we were either. . . . You know, like, my mother was a maid, and so when we went off and my mother was working they would have me over there but then I'd be scared to even talk with them. I mean, it was just frightening to talk with white people.

PK: Really?

CV: Absolutely. I mean it was just amazing. I was speaking Filipino—[Ilokano]—at table with my parents until about six or seven years old, until fin[ally]. . . . You know, that was when World War II started happening, and then all of a sudden, you know, like they knew that because I was born here I was an American citizen. so all at once they wanted me to speak English. They didn't want me to be mistaken for Japanese, also.

PK: I was going to ask that.

CV: And there were just a lot of things that happened that I'm detecting now. Particularly when I study the East-West society and I study the artists then and what they had to go through, because. . . . In two words, the thing that broke up that beautiful East-West group, and that destroyed a lot of Asian-American, Asian-immigrant artists, and people at that time—and I want to just say that it was all of the people that were here at the time—the two words are self-loathe. I mean there was just a very, very silent kind, "Well, I'll get to what I need to get to, and I'm gonna work my ass off for it, and this is what I'm gonna do." But meanwhile always knowing that they'll never ever achieve anything really great because even though the Philippine was a colony, an actual colony—taken over in the Spanish-American War—of America, citizenship was always denied to the Filipinos. So I always had that on top of my head. You know, I mean, I always in [the background]. . . .

PK: You thought about these things? I mean, you were aware of this?

CV: Oh, well, they talked about it.

PK: You mean, your folks did? And your uncle. . . .

CV: Yeah, my uncles.

PK: the community?

CV: Yeah, well, they talked about it, you know. Whenever you see pictures of a crossed Filipino flag and an American flag, it doesn't mean a hell of a lot to people maybe my age or even younger. But to them, to the people that were of that preceding generation, it meant really making it, because in World War II, you know, like you would see pictures of Douglas MacArthur doing his [old, little] salute and you'd have the crossed flags and, God, you know, like you're talking about the first time that they ever. . . . You know, because Filipinos were fighting side by side in the army with white American soldiers, they were all of a sudden allowed to become citizens. And so they thought, God, you know, I mean, they thought that they went to heaven, a lot of them. And the army was the best job that they ever had, a lot of them. Because many of them would just be chasing crops up and down the San Joaquin Valley. . . .

PK: What did your folks do? Or what did your dad do specifically?

CV: My dad was a janitor. He had a couple of part-time jobs. The job that he had at the [Marquette, Market] Apartments he worked all morning, six days a week, and for that. . . .

PK: That's where you lived, right?

CV: Yeah right. And so he got. . . .

PK: So does that mean he worked off some of the rent that way?

CV: Yeah, he worked off some of the rent. And then he had a couple of other part-time jobs that he worked in the afternoon and at night to get money for the table. A lot of times Filipinos weren't hired and so I'd remember our household as being a hub of a lot of people coming in because since my father had the only ice box—you know, no refrigerator, an ice box. . . .

PK: Ice box, right.

CV: And he always kept the ice box full. He said, "That's the real money." You know, because of the Depression. And so my mother didn't mind cooking for thirty or forty people, twenty people, whatever, you know, and she knew how to stretch the meal. And so everybody happily ate, you know, and it was mostly all bachelor guys.

PK: Because of what you just described, that there was still like a quota. . . . Was this all Asians? Or Filipinos. . . .

CV: Except for the Japanese. The Japanese made something called "the Gentlemen's Agreement," which allowed a Japanese to bring over families. But very, very few Filipinos, if any, got to do that. My mother and my father came over at a very, very young age. My father came over, God, about fifteen or sixteen years old. My mother came over when she was about thirteen.

PK: They met here, not in. . . .

CV: Yeah, they met here.

PK: So they must have come over in, I don't know, in the late teens?

CV: Oh, about the twenties.

PK: Early twenties.

CV: Yeah, very, very early twenties. They had it tough. I think that they had a rough life, but I'll say one thing right now—and I'm glad that we're recording this—even though they've gone through a lot of rough shit they never ever thought of themselves as victims.

PK: Right.

CV: I mean, they were too proud. They were really too proud.

PK: What were their names? Let's give them identities here.

CV: Oh, yeah. Pedro Corpuz Villa.

PK: Pedro Corpuz Villa. . . .

CV: And then my mother's name is Prisca Gorospe Villa.

PK: Prisca?

CV: Yeah, Prisca. P-r-i-s-c-a.

PK: And the second name, that being a. . . .

CV: That's a maiden name.

PK: A family name?

CV: Yeah, a family name.

PK: And how does that go?

CV: Gorospe.

PK: Gorospe?

CV: Yeah.

PK: Spell it.

CV: Oh, boy. [chuckles] Long names.

PK: Gorospe.

CV: Yeah.

PK: Because remember some poor transcriber has to turn this into print.

CV: Oh, G-o-r-o-s-p-e.

PK: Oh, that's not too bad.

CV: And Corpuz is C-o-r-p-u-z. And that's Leo's second name also.

PK: Oh, okay, well, since we're here why don't you tell. . . . It seems to me that family, and extended family, was very important in this community. So what is the nature of the connection with Leo Valledor?

CV: Well, everything became closer than close. I mean, you have a designation "fresh off the plane" or "fresh off the boat." Well, my folks were fresh off the boat. And coming fresh off the boat, and coming in at the time that they came in, they were all very, very young. They were all very, very young, very, very hopeful immigrants who wanted to make it in the new world. Because, definitely, their world of being in the Philippines offered no solution at all in terms of any kind of future. There was no future there in the Philippines. You know, it was either you were a landlord who never lived there in the province that you owned, or you were tenant—or you owned land, but then, you know, you owned so little that it didn't make any difference. So when these steamship people came and they talked about, "Hey, young man, you could be going with movie stars, you could have a car, you can have a job. You know, you can [be, do] anything that you can do." I mean, all of these people were

really jacking these young kids off. And, of course, you know, like with the propaganda of the Christian brothers and pictures and all of this stuff about the new world and what's happening in America, that's going to whet any young man's appetite. So this is the picture: When they come in off the boat, the American President lines, or countless of the steamship lines that came to San Francisco, they would go to the Mark Hopkins or they would go over to the Palace Hotel and they would go, "Where do I sign? I'd like a room for . . . how many." The waiter would kind of just bring them on the side, and they would say, "Your kind is welcome up on Kearney near International Settlement." You know, "your kind." And so that's why International Hotel played such a big part, because it was like one of the many hotels that was part of the Philippine neighborhood. My father would always used to say to me, "Son, if ever you get lonely, at any time, and you want Filipino food or if you want to see a Filipino face, you always go to Chinatown and you go one block north, south, east, or west to the outskirts and you always hit a Filipino town, a Filipino neighborhood. So that always stuck with me. And very true. If you look at Kearney Street, juxtaposed with Chinatown, you have a description that fits that neighborhood. So fresh off the boat, young men, young women . . .

PK: Mainly young men.

CV: . . . young men would come together and they would cherish these times that they would be able to get together with their town-mates to be able to talk about the past, and maybe even the future, and maybe even how to cope with the present. I can remember going to the meeting hall. My father and uncles had a social club called the Native Sons of Lapog. . . . Lapog is a small town in which a lot of the guys were from.

PK: In the southern section. . . .

CV: Ilokos Sur. And so. . . .

PK: Lapog, L-i. . . .?

CV: L-a-p-o-g. And so all these people would come and play cards and gamble and tell stories and have home-cooked food, and. . . .

PK: Cooked by your mom? No, no, this was at the. . . .

CV: Yeah, well, cooked by my mom and other women and other men who could cook, you know, because it was always. . . . They would have these things and everybody would bring in food to get cooked and everything and it was a wonderful place because that was where I got to meet my cousin Leo and all my other cousins. And it was a wonderful place to be part of.

[Break in taping]

PK: . . . say this much. Here we are continuing session two with Carlos Villa, and this is still tape one but now we're on side B. And we were talking . . . or I was hearing some very interesting accounts of what it was like growing up in San Francisco in the Filipino-American community and what it was like.

CV: Well, you said something very, very important during the break, Paul, and that was something to the effect of friendships and these kinds of things between communities. Number one, America as such was not a place of melting pot as it were, as I remember it. I mean, I could remember the Irish going up against the Italians, I could remember the Latino-Mexican gangs going up against African-American gangs, I could remember the kinds of definitions and boundaries that were set up in between Asian communities. I could remember the kind of insidiousness that the Chinese and the Filipinos had against each other, even in the Philippines, which was brought all the way over to. . . . You know, the Chinese were always characterized in Filipino adventure tales as always, you know, the Chinese plunderers or pirates and they were always the bad guys. And they, we, were always ____.

PK: And that carried over, then, these attitudes to here?

CV: Oh, yeah, well, even more so, because we were after the same jobs and we were put into the same category of the Oriental Exclusion Act of a lot of womenless men. I mean, I think it was Wayne Wang that did *Eat a Bowl of Tea* [film—Ed.], and, you know, like he talked about that, from a Chinese-American standpoint. From a Filipino-American standpoint I would say it was basically the same but a little different. But it was just like a lot of really lonesome guys. I mean, just really, you know. . . .

PK: Except your dad and uncle because they had their women; they had wives.

CV: They had wives. They were probably the most settled of all of the relatives. And they were always considered, you know, like having made it. I mean, everyone else was having either no affairs, you know, or illicit affairs with women, or going to taxi-dance halls and going dime-a-dance and like that.

PK: Now Caucasian women were available within *that* framework, is that true?

CV: Absolutely.

PK: And so that was a way to break the color barrier if one wanted to.

CV: Ah, boy, well, it was like they were the exotic species, and here they were robbing them blind. [laughs] But the thing was is that they wanted to get robbed blind, you know. I mean, hey, there was no victim here. I mean, they knew what they were. . . . This was the price.

PK: And it was in a way worth it.

CV: Oh, man, that brought them all the way to next week, you know.

PK: What about. . . I have seen photos and I can't remember exactly where and they're really quite wonderful. It may be that Mark actually has some of these but there were some famous clubs, I think here in San Francisco, I think in the Northwest—basically Filipino-American clubs—and my impression, without delving into this very much, is that that was central to the community, or certainly the social life, that it all happened around—and I don't know what the years were—but there were these nightclubs.

CV: Oh, yeah.

PK: This is where you had a chance to really step out and. . . . Is that right?

CV: Oh, yeah, well, the thing was is that Filipinos—if I could stereotype my own people. . . . You know, we talked a little bit about rasquache. Well, okay, that's very, very specific. Going into that idea of rasquache, going into the idea of self-esteem through clothes—through identification, through clothes—I mean, you see a lot of . . . there are a lot of people—you know, like people of color, or maybe even all people—who find an identification through clothes. And if you hit the right fashion, you know, you're like, hey! You know, this transforms you from Joe Schmoe to all of a sudden you're this movie star that you've been reading about. You're Clark Gable, you know. And so you're that for a couple of minutes. And so there would be these incredible transformations of guys working for fifteen hours a day at a nickel an hour or something like that and then going home and taking a small bath and then pomading their hair and putting cold creme on their face, and putting these McIntosh suits on, these Florsheim shoes, and these. . . . I mean, they dress like crazy. I mean, they really dress and when they went out they were "guapo." You know, that was the word, "guapo." And they just went and, you know, they were scorned by everybody, just because of the attitude that they take on with their dress. You know, I mean they just had that attitude that went with the clothes. And, God, even Chicano chronicler José Montoya, when he spoke at Yale in about 1972 and he talked about zootsuit, he spoke about the Mexican zootsuit, he talked about the black zootsuit, and he talked about the Filipino zootsuit. And he said, "Of the three the Filipinos had it right."

PK: They got it right. [chuckles]

CV: They had it right. I mean, everybody else was either too floppy or, you know, too much fabric here, the coat was just a little too long there, but the Filipinos just had it just right.

PK: Well, now, this of course moves us into the whole area of a sense of style and aesthetics. And what I need to ask at some point, of course, is to what extent do you feel your way of looking at things may have been affected by this sense of style within your own culture.

CV: Absolutely. Those were my role models. Those were my role models. You know, like there were many times that Leo and I would say, "God, did you see Uncle Jimmy's new shirt? Wow!" "Yeah!" "Did you check this out?" And then we couldn't wait to go up to, say, Uncle Jimmy's room and talk to Uncle Jimmy about, you know, like what kinds of things he did and everything, because he was our role model, and then when he pulled out his little half pint of whiskey and he let us have a sip, you know, all of a sudden we became men, you know, we really felt great.

PK: [in a conspiratorial whisper] That's all it takes!

CV: That's all it took. And, you know, I mean, we'd look at all of the sharp guys, and we'd look at our aunts and, God, we used to see how big their tits were and all of this other stuff. I mean, we had that thing but style was a big thing. Style was everything. I mean, it was a way, it was identif[ication]. . . . It was more than identification. It was all of a sudden you were who you were dressed like, and you completely took on that persona.

PK: The clothes make the man.

CV: Absolutely. And you'd be in the mirror for hours just to try to get the right wave, to try to get the right look. You know, smoking a cigarette in front of the mirror?

PK: Well, you've got to get it just right.

CV: Oh, you had to just get it just right, you know, and you had to turn the lights down in this room, and all of a sudden this mirror and you was this incredible universe.

PK: Who were your heroes or role models? Now obviously there would be sort of adults, some of your uncles and so forth within the community. But beyond that was there anything in popular culture or in the movies that you could identify with? What about [Humphrey—Ed.] Bogart and the way he smoked? Or was that sort of inaccessible?

CV: Well, Bogart was maybe a little earlier. I think that people a little younger than me would look at Bogart as, say, somebody real. Of course, you know, like we liked Bogart, we liked Edward G. Robinson, we liked The Dead End Kids and everything, but the thing was is that they were just almost a generation ahead of me because, since I was born in '36 the people that I was looking at, more or less, was Tony Curtis.

PK: "The Tone."

CV: Yeah, Tony. With the waterfall, you know, and Sal Mineo with the waterfall. . . .

PK: I met Tony on one occasion, yeah.

CV: Well, I'd be surprised if he wasn't in the archives.

PK: Well, he's an artist, you know.

CV: [laughs] I know that. I know that.

PK: Most of the people don't. [laughter] Anyway, excuse me, back to your. . . .

CV: All right, well Tony was definitely one of the people that I was looking at. I mean, as far as music, my cousins were very hip. Like I used to sit there and watch my cousins and their girlfriends and classmates dance to Charlie Parker and Miles Davis. And that's how we started listening to jazz at such a young age. You know, I mean, I have a tattoo of Diz when I was about twelve years old.

PK: Oh, yeah. What is that. . . .

CV: Dizzy Gillespie.

PK: Oh-h-h.

CV: And it's a beret, glasses, mustache and goatee, so. . . .

PK: [chuckles] You're right.

CV: Yeah. . . .

PK: I had to look at it this way to ____ ____.

CV: Yeah, well there's no profile. But jazz always played a great role in my life. I mean, much more so than I could ever acknowledge, because like I thought of jazz as the very, very ultimate expression of communities of color. And since Filipinos really didn't have those kinds of beginnings in the country and since Asian-Americans are really quite the babies in all of the solidarity within communities, Filipinos mostly took on a black code. We identified because of where we were in the neighborhood. We spoke black, you know, among ourselves. We had a black. . . . You know, we used to play the dozens, with each other and with black kids.

PK: Tell me what that is—or tell us what that is.

CV: Oh, they're called snaps, they're like very, very deadly. You know, to a lot of uninformed communities or groups of people, you would think that you were hurling insults at one another. And the dozens was about, you know, like thrusting your manhood out. I mean, like you could cap on each other and call your mama down. I can remember one: Let's see, "If you cap you better cap fast because your mama got a face like a bulldog's ass."

PK: [chuckles]

CV: And then somebody would have to come with a retort to that. So the whole thing was you had to be witty, you had to be quick, and when you got your opponent to a place where that opponent was about to cry and kick your ass you knew you had him. And you'd have to have a crowd around you and then you could just walk off and just say, "Well, I got that dude." You know, and then he'd be crying and [you, he] couldn't sleep for the rest

of the week and everybody would say, "Whoo-ee," you know, "Carlos, kick your ass!" You know, and then they'd cap on him again and then the kid would turn into a puddle.

PK: Ohhh.

CV: And so, you know, this would. . . .

PK: How old were you at this time, about?

CV: Oh, jeez, I was about twelve, eleven, you know, I mean I was going to a Catholic school in that area. It's a Montessori school at this point.

PK: Where is it?

CV: At Pine and Octavia. It's called Morning Star School. . . .

PK: Oh, yeah, I know that.

CV: . . . and it was right across from a Japanese Catholic mission, and that was where I served mass. And I went all the way up to the eighth grade before I went to Lowell. And so even in that school when the Japanese were interned, you know, like the kids who were in that school were all either black or Filipino. So there was a lot of, you know, wearing our pants down and all of this other stuff like that and capping on each other and playing ball with each other, fighting each other. You know, having each other as best friends. And so that was basically how I grew up until. . . . Then the Japanese came back and then when they came back very, very slowly they made a very, very quiet presence.

PK: After the internment?

CV: Yeah, after the internment. I mean, it was so sad seeing them come back. I mean, I wasn't sad that they came back, but it was just they looked very, very beaten down.

PK: I can imagine.

CV: You know, they looked very, very beaten down and then they would come back into their old neighborhood and their old neighborhood was taken over by black folks. And so it wasn't the same. Like they'd live in a house that maybe they once owned but they could only get one room in it.

PK: Yeah.

CV: And there were a lot of single parents because a lot of people committed suicide in the camp or were killed in the war.

PK: Let me ask you about that a couple questions—well, at least one. We're talking about you growing up within . . . it's a subculture, ethnically defined, and it sounds to me if I understand you correctly that you're emulating blacks. . . .

CV: Yeah.

PK: . . . for a reason that. . . . You know, I'd like to look into that a little bit. Another way to look at that would be "Here are—if you'll excuse the term—'niggers,' they're somebody even lower than we are."

CV: Yeah.

PK: But let's hold that for a moment. But what I'm really interested in is how other Asian-Americans viewed the plight of the Japanese-Americans at that time, when they were shipped off. Did you identify with them or did you say, "Well, they got it coming because the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor?" Can you answer that?

CV: Well, that's a very, very complex thing, because, you see, the Japanese were at war with everyone in Asia. . . .

PK: Yes.

CV: . . . and so there were atrocities that happened in China and. . . .

PK: By Japanese ____?

CV: . . . and the Philippines and in Korea. And other places also. Burma. I mean, you name it, wherever they were. And the thing was is that here in America I was too young to remember when they got interned, except for

one point in my life where I had an aunt who was Japanese by marriage and she had to go in. And I remember that that was real sad. Because it left my uncle out of the camp and running all of the family businesses. And I don't know if that marriage was about love, or it was convenience, or there was some kind of deal that was being done. I couldn't tell. I like to think that it was about love. I could be wrong. I remember growing up and looking at comic books, and all of the comic books were "Kill the Japs" and, you know, they all had big teeth and they all had this and they all had that. But I remember when the Japanese first started coming into school and I just said, "Jesus, God! They look just like me. And they look just like my cousin. There's no difference. There's really no damn difference. What is it?" You know, I mean, the whole thing about politics and brotherhood of man and everything, I mean, the first inkling that I ever got of real institutional prejudice was when. . . . You know of course nobody's going to bother with a little kid a lot. But then I sensed things but nobody would really talk to me about it. But then I remember I saw a sign that said "Brotherhood week, let's be kind to these people here." And I was one of those people! [laughs] "Be kind to me." And so it was like, Wow! That's a real strange clue. And all of a sudden I just started seeing differences. I started seeing a lot of differences.

PK: What about the. . . . You said when the Japanese-Americans started returning from the camps, back into the community, you said, "Oh, these monsters, these warmongers, wait a minute, they don't look like those propaganda images." But does that mean that up until that time you had. . . .

CV: Yeah, I had an image. . . .

PK: You said, "Whoa, yeah, these are dangerous killers.

CV: Yeah, I had an image of these people. I mean, I didn't even think they had children, you know. It's just weird.

PK: But didn't you draw some distinction—and I think this is the critical question; it remains the critical question for all Americans—between the Japanese, these warmongers, who indeed were conducting a war and had attacked the U.S., and these Americans who happen to be of Japanese descent?

CV: Well, the thing was is that it was very, very complex. Of course I then had uncles going into the Pacific theater and fighting for the homeland against Japanese soldiers. I would hear of atrocities perpetrated against specific relatives in the Philippines that were done by Japanese soldiers. And then the whole propaganda of going against the Germans and going against the Japanese. I mean, I wasn't blind. I mean, that was that, but after 1945 going into '46, when people started coming out of Utah and places like that and they started coming back to the school, I saw in these people a very, very gentle people, a very, very shy people, a people who were just kind of sneak. . . . I guess they were kind of just sneaking back into the community. And then all at once, you know, like we would have our May festivals, and then we were eating sushi. What the hell is sushi? What's Japanese food? And I found myself fascinated by the culture on that level—of food, and meeting new people, and people that looked like me that. . . . In a lot of ways, you could forget the past because we were in this wonderful enclave. I'm sure though if we were in a different neighborhood, in a different situation, it would have been a whole lot different. If I weren't living in the Fillmore. . . . See in the Fillmore the Japanese kids that grew up either became nerds or they became just like a lot of the Filipino kids, just really into the black culture. I mean, we definitely had an enclave.

PK: Okay, well explain that to me.

CV: Well, blacks, number one, were people who had gone up against the face of white people—in jazz and sports or whatever, you know, and in language—and then you kind of noticed them playing the fool in school and stuff like that and getting away with a lot of shit, and at the same time looking really good doing it. You know, I mean they would be funnier than

hell, and that came from the dozens, you know. I mean, they were funny, they were loud, they were audacious. You know, like a lot of it wasn't smart but a lot of it was smart-acting. And the clothes were of a certain kind of, you know, they had a certain velocity to them, you know. And when they'd walk, you know, like they would do their pimp, the walking like. . . . [demonstrates] You know, kind of dragging one foot behind

other, or having a toothpick in the mouth and a funny hat thrown at a rakish angle.

PK: Style!

CV: Yeah, stylin'. And that was a way that you could identify with some kind of self-esteem, because there was really no other way to do it. You know, like even if you got good grades in the honor roll, even if you got this, or even if you got that, you're always put into a second-class trip anyway. I noticed that at Lowell, even though you make the honor roll or anything else like that, it didn't mean everybody said hello to you anyhow.

PK: Right.

CV: So who gave a shit? And at the same time. . . .

PK: Especially for kids, because they. . . .

CV: There were no other role models that preceded me to tell me any different. I don't know if I'm telling you what you need to know or what this needs to know. . . .

PK: This is a machine!

CV: Okay.

PK: Let's stop.

[Break in taping]

PK: All right, here we are continuing session two with Carlos Villa. It is 21 June, summer solstice, 1995, and this is tape two, side one. We've been having. . . . Well, I can't say we've been having an interesting *conversation*. You know, I've been listening to you *tell* interesting things about your background and the reality of growing up, the interaction between groups, even with an Asian-American community, and then what's, I guess, especially interesting is how the blacks—supposedly the lowest on the rung of the ladder in the American hierarchy—in fact, ended up being the admired ones within. . . . I don't know if I want to use a word like marginalized groups but. . . .

CV: Oppressed communities.

PK: Yeah. And this is something that I hadn't really thought about much but you've been quite explicit and clear on this, but I would ask this question at least: Certainly in other situations there was an opportunity that blacks provided a great gift to other groups who just weren't, for one reason or another, realizing the American dream, is that there's always somebody lower. And yet the situation you described is that blacks were not perceived that way by the kids. What I want to know is, but what about the adults?

CV: Well, there was two agendas there. Okay, now I want to just talk about a for example. Okay, growing up, you know, like I love my mom, I love my dad, I love my uncles and my aunts—when I saw them and met them—and I loved my cousins, and the thing is that, you know like, when you're young you kind of go along with the game, but then after a while you kind of outgrow the game, particularly when you start wanting and needing things because, you know, here you are: You're getting straight up the immigrant dream; when you come to America it's just very, very straight and very, very forthright. "I want to make it. I want to go from step a to step b. There's going to be a lot of shit between step a and step b but then I know my goals are very, very clear." When you're a kid there are too many layers in terms of growing up here in America. It's not straightforward. There's many, many layers of social standing that you don't realize, but then it goes everywhere from choosing to eat a peanut butter sandwich versus the garlic rice that your mom had cooked, in a greasy bag. And, you know, like having the high-priced penny loafers versus going to school in two-dollar Gallenkamp shoes. And so like you know those differences and, meanwhile, your parents are getting a nickel or fifteen cents an hour and they can't afford these things and here you want these fifteen-dollar shoes. And so that's when communication just starts not happening. All of a sudden you're going to a high school where everybody's wearing cashmere sweaters and you didn't know what the hell the difference a cashmere sweater was from anything. But then, boy, your colleagues or your peers will make you know that difference in two minutes. And the poorest people will tell you before the richest people will tell you. And then, when you start seeing all of these things happen, then all of a sudden you can't come home and deal with the anger that you have inside and you can't explain it to your mom or your dad because they have different dreams. They have dreams of maybe, perhaps one day, "Jeez, it'd be nice to have a house. It would be nice to have an extra room. It would be nice to have a car—we don't have a car." You know, that kind of thing.

PK: What about education? Was that part of the picture for the Filipinos, if you can generalize? Like other Asians very much so, that education was the key, you know: "Wouldn't it be great if maybe the kids could go to college?"

CV: Well, the thing is that it's all about class and it's all about the structure that you're in, in terms of your family and stuff. Myself, I was very, very lucky. I was very, very lucky. I think I was the first one in my family to have graduated from not only BFA but MFA And to be a professor. You know, I mean, in a lot of ways I made it even more so than say a businessman in my family. Even though the businessman in my family would be the most envied, but at the same time I had achieved something that a lot of my family hadn't achieved. I happened to go to Lowell because. . . . You know, like, I don't know, I was completely. . . . I didn't talk to anybody about going to Lowell.

PK: They didn't have affirmative action or quotas then.

CV: No, they didn't have affirmative action but they really did look at the grades.

PK: You had good grades.

CV: I had a great GPA.

PK: Well, all right!

CV: But it was a social thing though that really kicked my ass.

PK: What do you mean?

CV: Well, it was the idea that I never really fit into the Chinese-Japanese population, which was a small minority at the school.

PK: At Lowell?

CV: At Lowell.

PK: Which of course is now [a, the] majority.

CV: It's the other way around now. But before it was mostly people from St. Francis Wood who were basically, you know, like English, Scots, Scots-Irish, European descent. And then there was a huge population of Jewish-American kids. And so you had these kids that were kind of flaunting this whole idea of style in your face with convertibles and cashmeres and that kind of status—besides grades. And there [just] was this thing that I couldn't understand, that I couldn't talk to anyone if I didn't have the right clothes. And so a lot of times I was always in between transferring or being completely . . . you know, completely acting the underdog.

PK: Of course, in the Fillmore it wasn't that different, from what you've described—the right clothes, or everything—it's just that these were different clothes.

CV: Very, very different clothes.

PK: Still the values. . . .

CV: But you see it was a different code.

PK: A different code but the same values, in a sense, once you ____ ____.

CV: Exactly. Exactly. You hit the nail right on the head, except they were just different clothes. There was a beautiful quotation in last Sunday's Times in which I believe it was the director from the Latin American Museum in the Bronx, I believe, was talking, and in the very, very end of the article this artist had admonished her because she had said, "Oh, those are fake pearls." And he said something to the effect, "No, they aren't fake pearls. That's wrong. They're not fake anything. These pearls are what the people want." You know, they could buy lots of them, they're plastic. "This is what they want." Now that says something about the idea of values.

PK: Yeah, absolutely.

CV: You're talking about commodity, you're talking about something that looks really nice, it's not about finding the one black pearl in the perfect lagoon in Malaysia twenty miles deep. Who gives a shit! I'd want twenty of them.

PK: [laughs]

CV: I don't want that one fucking little pearl. You know, I mean. . . .

PK: So cost isn't the index—rarity, this kind of thing. It's what you want.

CV: It's just another. . . . Yeah, it's just values within a culture.

PK: So that cheap then can become desirable and, what shall we say? express ____ ____.

CV: Yeah, right. It's not even the cheap. It's "I could get all of these colors! I could get all of these things!" And it's not even. . . .

PK: Right. Well, let's talk about aesthetics, because I think we're starting to move in that direction anyway aren't we, a little bit?

CV: Yeah, we're getting to one of the ramifications, most definitely. But definitely as I was saying before, rasquache, the idea of making something out of what was a throwaway from another culture. Like jazz, you know, like, "Okay, then, we don't need those old instruments any more. We'll just throw them away or we'll put them into pawnshops. You know, "I heard Bach, but this isn't Bach, but this is my version of Bach." "I love these drums. Let's play these drums behind that, whatever you're trying to play."

PK: [Behind, Like] the Brandenburg Concerto or something.

CV: Yeah, right. But then, my way. And so you get a whole set of other values. So I would imagine these kinds of things, if you want to identify with that, can kind of come in with your art. And I see it happening more and more now. The idea of rasquache. The idea of "Here are my values." You know, in concern with the pearl. I don't want the most rarest, most wonderful pearl in the world. I want ten dozen pearls.

PK: I want a lot of them.

CV: I want a lot of them. I want that crushed velvet. You look in low-rider magazines. Well, Jesus, this certainly doesn't look like the Peugeot that's parked in the driveway. [laughs]. I mean, "Hey man, I don't need all that chrome. I don't need my tires to be looking like that." But this guy wanted his tires to look like that because of these values. And so there's that and then there's also a thing about. . . . Well, it's rasquache. It's about making the best out of being poor.

PK: Yeah.

CV: The best out of being poor.

PK: Tell me some specific stories if you can remember about, you know, as you were growing up and as your, quote, "values" or aesthetics or ideas about culture, if you will, were being formed. What had the impact? What are the models? What are the things that come to mind? Did you go to any of these clubs? Where did you hang out? What did your uncles do? What formed your aesthetic?

CV: Oh, God. . . .

PK: Big question.

CV: I love my. . . . I guess it was my Uncle Rudy, who's my father's brother. He was a chauffeur for this guy, Mr. Price. And Mr. Price at the time had these incredible shoes. I mean, Price's Shoes. It was like everybody had to have Price's Shoes. And not only the Filipinos or the African-American teenagers, but it was all teenagers in San Francisco had to have Price's Shoes.

PK: Price's Shoes?

CV: Yeah. And so my uncle happened to be Mr. Price's driver. And being Mr. Price's driver put my uncle really into the cat-bird seat, so to speak. He could bring one of three cars home, any time that he wanted. He had twelve tailor-made suits. He had a whole closet floor filled with Price's shoes—of every style: suede, everything. I mean, Scotch grain, smooth, alligator. I mean, anything. Anything you needed, it was there. It was, wow! you know, I mean, it was like. . . . He was my role model.

I had another uncle who had a red 1940 Buick convertible with a white top. And at the time, the Filipinos were being pulled over, hunted down, and beaten, and no questions would be asked.

PK: When was this? As late as. . . .

CV: This was all the way from the thirties all the way through the forties.

PK: Almost up to 1950, you mean?

CV: Yeah, well, it was open season. Up until about '43. See, '43 was when, all of a sudden, a lot of Filipinos were allowed to go into the army and they were given citizenship. But before that it was like. . . . I remember a song in *From Here to Eternity*, and it was these soldiers marching down the road and they were singing, "The monkeys have no tails in [Zambawonga]." You know, Zambawonga is in the Philippines, and so we were always called monkeys or goo-goos or, you know, there were a lot of very, very specific terms for Filipinos.

PK: Was this hurtful for you in a personal way when you were a kid? I mean, do you remember that? Or is it more looking back?

CV: Well, sometimes it would. Sometimes it would if it was a direct kind of thing. But then if I would be talking with my cousins, you know, like we could cap on each other and call each other monkeys. . . .

PK: And goo-goos.

CV: . . . and goo-goos or whatever, you know, and then just. . . .

PK: Like blacks do? Like saying "Nigger this," and "Nigger that"? .

CV: Oh, yeah, well, we'd do all kinds of things, you know, not dissimilar to that. We wouldn't completely trash each other as bad as African-Americans because we were only copying the form. They had the form down. I mean, that form was culture. And, as derogatory and as strange as it was, we understood that—that that was the way that they were. I mean, we could be this because we were just teenagers. We didn't understand all parts of that. But growing up Filipino, and acting black was really our true essence. You know, a Filipino-American essence. And the thing was is that it's just like when you make progress in history: a lot of people often forget the real lessons to be learned.

And so there's a lot of my generation that kind of went off into that zone, as it were. And all of sudden got lost because after a while there wasn't any kind of real communication as to practical values for Filipinos, where young Filipinos my age could go. You know, how many really get to college? How many graduate? You know, like a lot of my cousins went to places like city colleges and got their A.A. there, like in drafting, so that they could get a better job. To be an artist, that was not a real calling. Maybe commercial art, if your parents were real liberal. But to be a fine artist, that's trying to be. . . . That isn't really a step up at all. Besides that, we don't understand what they're doing, anyhow.

I mean, with Leo, that was really easy. He had a real incredible life. His father and mother came to America married, which was a real rarity, and they came very, very early. The father would be following crops up and down the west coast and the mom would kind of follow where there weren't the right crops they would stay in San Francisco and Leo's mom would have card games in the house quite regularly. So she was "the house". So she was actually supporting the family for a while. And after a while Leo's father never went back to pick any more. Leo's mom got shot by an uncle of mine.

PK: Shot?

CV: Shot. And paralyzed her.

PK: Why?

CV: Because . . . gambling.

PK: By your uncle?

CV: Yeah. He was pissed off. He was pissed off that he lost all his money. He accused her of cheating.

PK: Was she cheating?

CV: I don't think so. Well, she didn't have any reason to, because you never lose if the house is yours.

PK: So this uncle shot his . . . well, some sort of relative, sister-in-law or. . . .

CV: Yeah, he shot his cousin. And so he went to jail and left Leo's mom paralyzed.

PK: Was Leo's dad still around?

CV: Yeah, he was still around but he was hanging out and he was being a playboy. He played tennis all the time and he did all of this stuff he was really being a playboy.

PK: Tennis, that's a white man's sport, or it used to be.

CV: Yeah, well, it was but there was a Filipino association that played tennis. Matter of fact, they had a club. They had a Filipino tennis club that met where the restored Maybeck Buildings are down in the Marina where the Exploratorium is now. And before Treasure Island, that was all tennis courts. And so there was a Filipino tennis club that met over there, and he was part of that whole thing. There's still a Filipino tennis club.

PK: Really?

CV: But they never made it. You know, I mean, it's just like the Filipino Flyers. Now who the hell ever heard of the Filipino Flyers? There was a Filipino flying club. But, you know, I mean, it's just . . . that's a subtext.

PK: So go back to Leo's situation, and his mom was shot. . . .

CV: Okay, well, Mom was shot. Father was being the playboy. Mom dies when Leo's about twelve years old. Father splits because he ran off with somebody else's wife. So Leo's pretty much alone. And so, you know. . . . I always loved his mind. I always liked coming over to his house and playing. He always like to come over to my house and play. We used to like to go to movies together. Because we loved each other's minds. And he was more intellectual and more imaginative than any of my other cousins. My other cousins were nice but were limited. I had couple of cousins that were really wonderful, but they didn't spark me like Leo did. Leo was just amazing. He read things and then he'd show me the things that he was reading, anything from any kind of dirty little Mike Hammer book to. . . . I forgot who wrote about opium, a famous writer. You know, he would show me stuff. He would show me all of this stuff. And he would talk about Aldous Huxley and all of these people like that. All these L.A. guys, you know, and so he had me going. And he would do these incredible models. He did these great sculptures. And he would do these fantastic self-portraits and stuff. And I'd go home and I'd try them, you know, and I. . . .

PK: This is before you went to art school?

CV: Yeah. And I'd go home and I wouldn't tell him that I was drawing or anything but I had a lot of time by myself, anyway, because there weren't that many kids around where I lived, in the Tenderloin. So I spent a lot of time drawing by myself, but I never paid attention to myself as being an artist. And he went to public school so he had art classes, and so I went to Catholic school and Catholic school is, you know, like draw a circle and two triangles and you have a cat's face. I mean, that was the extent of that.

PK: So in those days the public schools really had the best art programs?

CV: Well, they had a semblance of some kind of creative situation. But Catholic schools, I mean, what you wanted to be was work in city hall. That was that, you know. Post Office. But at any rate, though, Leo was this person who I just followed all the way through. And then after he got into California School of Fine Arts, jeez, I just thought that was amazing. But there was one thing that he said to me that really fucked me up. He was about to take a scholarship there, and after the first half year, he said, "You know, I'm going to go into fine arts." I said, "God, you're going starve to death, Leo! I mean, what are you going to be doing?" He says, "I like abstract art."

PK: Did he tell you why? ____ ____ ____.

CV: Yeah, well, you see, the thing is is that when he was. . . . When I was in my last year of high school and he was in his first half year at the. . . .

PK: California School of Fine Arts?

CV: . . . California School of Fine Arts, and even a little before that, he was doing these. . . . You know, his art god became my art god. My art god and his art god was David Stone Martin. And David Stone Martin was. . . .

PK: I don't even know if I know who that is. David Stone Martin?

CV: David Stone Martin was this incredible illustrator who copped a lot off of Ben Shahn. But he was an incredible book illustrator who did a number of things, and the things that he was most famous for were covers on Norman [Granz's] [*Jazz the Philharmonic*, "Jazz the Philharmonic"]. And he would do these line drawings of jazz scenes—of tenor saxophones on beds and guys with pork-pie hats and playing trumpets and drum kits, kind of down in a very, very sketchy kind of . . . or kind of an agitated line drawing done with India ink and pen. And then, every once in a while, he'd throw some water on there and then he would have this big blur. And it would be beautiful! You know, I mean, these were. . . . That was art! You know, I mean, we. . . .

PK: And it wasn't abstract. . . .

CV: Oh, but it was far out enough to. . . . You know, it would make you doubt what you were seeing. So that was cool.

PK: That at least pointed in the direction of abstraction, I guess. Let's stop and turn this. . . .

[Break in taping]

PK: Okay, here were are. This is session three [meant session two—Ed.] with Carlos Villa, tape two, side B, and we've gotten to the interesting point where cousin Leo says he's going to the California School of Fine Arts and he's interested . . . he's going to be an artist. And you say, "No way! This is not a smart thing to do."

CV: Right.

PK: He says, "I'm interested in abstract art." And so you were telling how you had this shared art god, David

Stone Martin, a book illustrator. I want to know how do you get from there to an interest in abstract art. How did this all come about?

CV: Well, you see, it's all about the underdog. I mean, when you start thinking of life in the fifties and life in the late forties, you're either straight or you're underground. And you have the jazz world, and aficionados of the jazz world, which are kind of either fucked up white people or hanging out with these dope-taking black people, or you're somewhere in between. And so to be. . . . I mean, like Wally Berman and a whole bunch of other people, you know. They always thought of themselves as white Negroes.

PK: Um hmm, exactly.

CV: Okay? And Norman Mailer wrote something about . . . a whole book or article on the white Negro.

[Interruption in taping to answer telephone]

CV: Right, Norman Mailer. . . . I mean, well, those are people who . . . intellectuals who've really documented a kind of position that a lot of people . . . a lot of my friends took. I mean, for a Filipino to listen to jazz was like being able to be in a kind of a nirvana: into a place, into a situation where, all at once, you become creator, you become empowered by these abstract sounds, and it's so hip to know the liner notes that you could kind of exchange with other people and you, too, could be hip. Or if you went to a certain session at Jimbo's Bop City on Post Street, you know, like you got to catch Sonny Rollins or somebody, and you were all of a sudden cognoscente, you know, like on another level. And so, being an abstract artist was not like being a figurative artist. You know, you had something. It's like latter day. I mean it's just like looking at graffiti writers, and it's like listening to hip-hop and it's about talking about certain DJ's. You're talking in encoded terms and you're talking about culture, sub-culture. So jazz, abstract art. . . .

PK: All went together.

CV: Yeah, Sonny Rollins, Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Zen. I mean, hey, that's. . . .

PK: But were you, before Leo announced his intentions and took that move, were you, Carlos Villa, aware of these artists? The music, yes. . . .

CV: I'll tell you what made me feel about these artists. Here I am in my chintzy little crafts class over at Lowell High School, a junior, and then Leo, his first year there at California School of the Fine Arts, every night I'd be on the phone with him. "And then what? What did you do then? And then what did you do then?" He'd say, "Well, how would you like to come to a Halloween party?" "Halloween party? Oh, far out!" And so here I am, I got invited to the Halloween party, you know.

PK: I'll bet it was wild. Was it wild?

CV: Well, it was wild to me. Now, we're talking 1953.

PK: Not a very wild time, but. . . .

CV: Not a very wild time but it was incredible to me. It was eye-opening. And I'll tell you why it was eye-opening. Okay, I dressed up in what I thought was very far out. What I thought was really far out was to wear my sweatpants with "69" written on them.

PK: Oooh!

CV: Oooh! [laughs] And a T-shirt. Now I thought that was pretty far out. In 1953 we're talking gonzo. [laughs] And so there I am, a junior at Lowell High School, meeting my cousin over at California School of Fine Arts. And so I come in and, you know, we're on the Stockton bus and everybody's kind of looking, "Who the hell is this guy?" And so I'm walking up the hill past Bimbo's and then it's real dark. I go into the Diego Rivera Gallery. The Diego Rivera Gallery, incidentally, has a big curtain with a Diego Rivera mural.

PK: Now?

CV: No, then, 1953.

PK: Oh, then.

PK: Oh, because it was Communist?

CV: Absolutely. And you how much we used to _____.

PK: Now it's no longer Communist, or at least we won so we can see it. [chuckles]

CV: Right, right. No Marxist. . . . You know, I mean, we were all against that. There was a toilet bowl right in the middle of the Diego Rivera, you know, in the middle of the exhibition floor. A toilet bowl.

PK: Really? This was for the party?

CV: Yeah. And then here are all of these lights. And here are all of these spider webs all over the place. Studio 13 jazz band is playing in the background. Nobody really is dancing, but. . . .

PK: Is that the one that Wally Hedrick was. . . .

CV: Yes, absolutely. And there was Charlie Still playing the clarinet. Charlie and Wally were the originals and guys are still doing it, but there they were. They were real young. They were still happenin'. Leo had given me a rundown on all of these people that were around at the time. Bill Morehouse was there and, you know, all of these people were there, and I read this "Dixieland Jazz," and I said, "Jesus, this is weird music." But, man, it kind of fit in, you know? It was kind of smoky in there and it was real dark in there and they had this toilet bowl and it was really Dada. Everything was kind of Dada-esque. And then there was this woman by the name of [Yakabena, Jacobena], who was dressed in the first bikini bathing suit that I'd ever seen.

PK: Wow!

CV: This is 1953.

PK: [laughs]

CV: And so here were all of these veterans. . . . At that time there were nothing but veterans there at the school. And so they were chasing Yakabena and laughing, and Yakabena was laughing, too.

PK: Was she a model, or what?

CV: Oh, she was one of the students. She was a very, very well-endowed young blond woman, just kind of very, very Rubin. . . . Not Rubinesque. She was very Renoiresque. And she was just, you know. . . .

PK: Enjoying it.

CV: Oh, she was loving it. They cornered her into a phone booth, the phone booth fell over and everybody was laughing and everybody was just having a great, great time. And I remember I was just kind of standing around, and then I finally got enough guts to ask this woman to dance. And she was kind of. . . .

PK: Yakabena?

CV: No, no, not Yakabena. There was another woman. This other woman was dressed up like Helen of Troy, except she had glasses on. And so I asked Helen of Troy if she wanted to dance, and she said first she must have a sip of this, and she pulled out a gallon of wine. And I thought, "God, how far out!" [laughs] And so here we are, we're just dancing whatever the kind of dance. . . . I guess we were doing the dirty boogie or something while we were listening to Dixieland music. I mean, it was more or less free-forms. But we were dancing and stuff like that, and I had the most wonderful time there, because it wasn't like I was this teenager and here were these older people. These were all artists. And. . . .

PK: You were a junior at Lowell at that time?

CV: Yeah. And then later on we went to these apartments on Russian Hill. They're very expensive condos now, but at the time they were just right for people on the G.I. Bill.

PK: They were dumps.

CV: They were dumps. And so we went up for after-party kind of . . . after-party party. And so I remember for the very first time in my life I got into a discussion with these two guys that were artists from the institute who were veterans of the Korean War and we really got into it. All of a sudden it was like about six o'clock in the morning and I didn't even know what the hell I said. But they were interested in what I said because I was interested in what they were saying and we got into a conversation. And I said to myself, "Jeez, this is the best time I ever had in my whole life." It was the first time I got understood by older people. And . . . white people! Because there was always like that gap, ever since I was a kid. And I kept that in back of my mind because, of course, you know, like a little more than a year later I went into the army and I decided that, irregardless of whether I turned out to be an artist or not, I needed to go to California School of Fine Arts because it was the only place that ever made me happy. Because the artists really made an impression on me. I never really took what I did seriously. I

had no value. I was ____ ____.

PK: So it was a community that you were seeking, rather than training to become some idea you had of what it was to be an artist.

CV: Yeah.

PK: Is that true?

CV: Yeah.

PK: Or maybe your idea at that point of what it was to be an artist was to be with this group of people with whom you felt comfortable and who were interesting.

CV: Well. . . .

PK: Bohemians.

CV: Well, it was that, I mean, but then there was Leo, you know, and he was an artist. But all I knew is that there was this community that I needed to be with. And then when I came back after . . . you know, in 1957, and I took lessons from Leo. . . . You know, I paid Leo to teach me how to draw. And what was his aesthetics behind things and would show me reproductions of different artists and stuff like that, and why he respected what they did and everything. It got me more and more interested in the technicality and the integrity of what art was about. Through this, he encouraged me to go to art school. And I wanted to go anyway, just to hang out, but he gave me more reason. He gave me more reason because Leo would never ever tell me a lie anyway. He always told me the truth. And he said, "I think you could make it as an artist at California School of Fine Arts."

PK: So he really was your mentor.

CV: Absolutely. He was Damian. He was Damian to me. [Referring to Herman Hesse's novel—CV] He was my way out. I mean, in the middle of a ghetto without any parents and doing ten-by-ten-foot black-and-blue paintings that were going to be shown at the DiLexi Gallery, the biggest contemporary gallery in the city—or in California—next to Ferus. I mean, shit! I mean, that was really something. I mean, I didn't know all the ramifications, but then here were all of these hoity-toity people saying that he did great art, and I said, "Yeah! That's my cousin!" You know? I was really proud of him.

PK: Did it surprise you that through art there was this entree to white society?

CV: Well, you see, the thing . . .

PK: Was this a surprise for you?

CV: Well, I learned how to differentiate, because when I was in the army I met many different kinds of people—white, black, Asian. And by that time the army was becoming segregated. It just started becoming segregated—I mean integrated—when I was in the army. Like there were no all-colored units any more. Everything kind of dispersed.

PK: How long were you in?

CV: I was in the army for two and a half years.

PK: Two and a half years. You got out in '57, is that it?

CV: I got out in '57. And got into California School of Fine Arts spring semester in '58.

PK: Is that when you did a stint at City College?

CV: No, that was. . . .

PK: Oh, that was earlier. That was ____ ____.

CV: No, that was right after. . . . That was '54.

PK: Okay. I got that straight.

CV: Yeah, that was '54. But, you see, it was all. . . . All of this stuff was hand-in-hand with being kind of in a situation of a hip-cool situation as opposed to a straight 9-to-5 situation. There were hip white folks, and there were square white folks. There were hip [Pinois (Pee-noys)]—hip Filipinos and there were very square ones. I

mean, there were people who could understand my code as much as I could understand theirs. Not that I didn't understand anybody else's but, whatever situation I wanted to be in, you know, like I was able to, after the army, more or less choose.

PK: Did it come to seem to you, over time through these experiences, that art—we're talking about avant-garde art, at this point—was a way to get out of, beyond the restrictions of racial limitations?

CV: Oh, yeah. Oh, absolutely. I mean, there was something that Leo had shown me, when I was in the army, and I always thought then that it was really Communist. [chuckling] Because here I was in the army and they were telling me, "Don't look at any kind of Communist thing." And so I kind of knew that Communism and Marxism and family of man and getting together with everybody was. . . . "That ain't the way it really is but this is an ideal that is not American. It's Communist." And so when he showed me this fabulous book, *Family of Man*, I said how wonderful it is on one end of it, but then on the other . . . but my left brain was saying, "Communist!" [said in a stern tone—Trans.] [laughing] I mean, it was just really kind of weird. I had to try to figure that one out. I never had. . . . I was more reactionary than idealist. My cousin Leo was more idealist and more intellectual. As I was just kind of a bull-in-the-pasture kind of guy. And I never really thought about . . . in terms of family-of-man kind of stuff, and that art was a . . . Art at that time was a language that didn't have any race, color, or creed being any kind of obstacle, but that art is art, you know, and that was it.

PK: Is this even more the case if it's abstract?

CV: Even more so.

PK: Is that exaggerated?

CV: Yeah, well. . . .

PK: Because that removes even the possibility of coloring. . . . With representation you have people. . . .

CV: Sure.

PK: . . . and they're going to usually be colored one way or another. And that's all removed.

CV: Well, yeah, it's all removed. Well, very, very specifically, Leo turned me on to Kandinsky, *The Spiritual in Art*. And so that became the foundation for the idea of this language. And it seemed to me to be very, very significant because it was almost analogous to what I felt jazz music was about without the rhetoric. The rhetoric made it interesting because it was down-home, it was colloquial, and it was people-to-people. But then, there was just some[thing]. But to understand jazz music and to look at Kandinsky's work, or to look at Diebenkorn's landscapes at the time—you know, those abstract landscapes. . . .

PK: You mean the Berkeley series?

CV: No, before.

PK: Before that, yeah.

CV: Before the. . . . The period between New Mexico. . . .

PK: And then Berkeley.

CV: . . . and being in Berkeley. I mean, there was that kind of freedom. Leo always talked about freedom, and I knew when he talked about freedom it was going beyond the ghetto. And for me it was being able to be classless and faceless kind of thing.

PK: Faceless? What do you. . . .

CV: Ah, yeah, I mean it was. . . .

PK: What do you mean by that? Why is that desirable?

CV: Well, it was a whole thing of. . . . It was all about self-loathe. I mean, I was always given the model of just basically white male as being the way to be handsome, and so, okay, that's the way I grew up and I obviously wasn't that, so it was. . . . You know, the nose wasn't sharp, the face wasn't angular, the hair wasn't. . . . I mean, there was all this stuff, and so it was like, well, if I didn't have that that means that I couldn't be part of. And not to be part of would be eventually to loathe myself because of my inability to come to that. So, no matter what, I was always at a point of marginalization. Again though, it's not to say that I was a victim of but it was close to it a lot of times.

PK: But, Carlos, does this reflect the way you were thinking then? Or is it possible that there's some projection—with the benefit of reflection, back to that time?

CV: Oh, God.

PK: It's hard to say, I know, but. . . .

CV: Well, I'll tell you, when I was in art school from '58 through '61, it was the most freeing years that I think that I ever had because it was just like everything that I did was almost recognized as art. And all of a sudden people were looking at me not because I was Leo's cousin but it was because I was doing art. And then when they would say, "Oh, Leo's cousin? Ah, yeah, okay, cool!" You know? But then it was like as soon as I hit there, it was incredible. You know, like in 1958 when I was there I did a sculpture. I did a sculpture that I made from an old water-heater box and some wood that I had wrapped in some red and white and blue bunting and I put hide-skin glue over the whole thing to kind of glue it together. But then there was this stench of hide-skin glue, and I put it up there near the fountain, and immediately Bruce Conner came up and he said, "I want to show this in my "Rat Bastard Show." And it became a piece that headed a poet's parade from the bagel shop down to Dean [Russell] [Long] Hall where Phillip Lamantia had shredded this Eastern poet with two words. And they were using my coffin to lead this whole procession down. I mean, it was. . . .

PK: It's incredible!

CV: Yeah, I mean, that was my. . . . And then it got shown at Spatsa Gallery, and that was my first one-person . . . the first time that I was shown.

PK: What year was that?

CV: '58. Summer of '58.

PK: Yeah, well I mean you were just brand-new. You were a student at the California School of Fine Arts.

CV: It was my first half-year.

PK: God, how interesting! What an interesting time to be there.

CV: It was incredible. It was incredible. I mean, everything seemed to be popping all at the same time. And then Joan made a . . . Joan Brown, you know, like. . . . All of a sudden we were in Manuel Neri's first sculpture class in the summertime. He got kicked out the semester before for non-payment of tuition, and then, because he got the Nealie-Sullivan award and stuff, he got a position teaching a class, and so there were about five people in that class. Me and Joan Brown, an Italian priest, Forrest Myers—he was a sculptor in New York—and I forgot the other person, but, jeez, we made these great plaster sculptures. Joan made this plaster wreath for my figure. It was fantastic. I mean, everything I did there, everybody really took a second look at and shit and hanging it up and everything. I didn't know what the hell was happening, to tell you the truth. [laughing] But everything was clicking.

PK: Everything was good.

CV: Everything was great!

PK: Now, there will be a number of things to talk about, I think, on this when we talk further, because this was a very important time at the California School of Fine Arts, the art institute. . . .

CV: Ah! It was great!

PK: And you were there at a great time. Your fellow students and the teachers. . . . But tell me, as we come towards the end of this particular tape, in terms of the instructors, who do you really remember?

CV: Bill Morehouse—that summer—and Manuel Neri, because they were my first links to an incredible freedom. Bill Morehouse taught a class at that school called. . . . It was some hokey name, but the thing was is that he was bringing in non-art materials to do art. I think that that's what it was called. So I picked up on some tar, and all of sudden, jeez, it just opened up a whole new world for me. I just started doing these paintings out of tar and paint and oil paint that were just amazing. I mean, all of a sudden I found my voice through that experience.

PK: That early? Really?

CV: Yeah. It just hit me. It just really hit me. And Morehouse, when he died, I remember I was over there. I was supposed to paint on his coffin. And his girlfriend comes up to me and she says, "Do you know the reason why you're here?" I said, "No." She said, "Bill said that you were his best student." I mean, I had no inkling of that

from '58 all the way until he died in '93 or '94.

PK: A couple years ago, yeah.

CV: And he wrote me a note before he died, and he says, "We know what we were. We know who we are." [pause] And I knew exactly what he meant. I mean, he didn't have to say shit about, "Oh, here's my student," and all this other shit. He just let it be and we both knew. And that really brought tears to my eyes. I mean, it was a killer way to do shit.

[Session 3]

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, a continuing interview with artist Carlos Villa. This is session three. The interviewer is, as usual, Paul Karlstrom, and the interview—this third session—is being conducted in San Francisco at the interviewer's office, July 3, 1995, the day before Independence Day. Sort of a subtext of this whole interview.

CV: [chuckles]

PK: Oh, this is tape one, side A. Carlos, we were chatting a little bit before turning the tape recorder on again and trying to ascertain just where we left off. You were talking about your experience coming back from the service and enrolling at the art institute. You talked a little bit about what that meant to you, in terms of, as you said, a way out of the ghetto. Sort of an escape from racism or so it seemed. . . .

CV: Um hmm.

PK: . . . and that art represented this for you. And then you were talking about the importance of Leo Valledor, your cousin, some of your teachers. And I'd like to continue with that, because the art institute—or California School of Fine Arts—is, in your story, an extremely important institution because you're still on the faculty there. I don't know how long. . . . Well, how long have you been on the faculty at the Art Institute?

CV: I've been on the faculty for twenty-six years. That's a long time.

PK: A big chunk of time. So that place for better or for worse and I'm sure in many ways is central to your experience as an artist and also you're making a living. But, anyway, let's return to those days and maybe you can say some more about what it was like being there, the society that existed, the artists, how they interrelated, and, I suppose, beyond that, what you discovered as a student then a young artist in terms of the art world at that time of San Francisco. What did you find in all of this?

CV: Well, it was a family. It was a family. The idea of art for me as it was described—or what I got from Kandinsky's book, on the spiritual, concerning the spiritual—he spoke about. . . . There was a statement about art as being something incredibly universal, and it was the whole basic tenet of modernism. And I felt that I was part of modernism and I felt that I was part of a new world. I mean, it wasn't like Ray Bradbury or anything like that, but it might have been. As I went into the San Francisco Art Institute it was just a very, very amazing place because maybe at the time there were only about fifty full-time students, and there were a lot of people there that were going there part-time. There were businessmen, there were artists that had jobs. . . .

PK: Businessmen?

CV: Yeah. Oh, they had classes over there for businessmen—Businessmen in Art—to appreciate art and it was taught by Ralph Putzker in the evening; it was like an extension course. And it was a very, very popular course. And there were like these kinds of inroads into the community that I think that the art institute is trying now in the nineties to recuperate that. But getting back to myself and my own situation, there were only probably fifty full-time people, and it was just [an] amazing bunch of people because the students, I thought, gave me more of an understanding about art than maybe the instructors. The instructors were always there as the icons, and there were certainly incredible icons. My first two teachers were Elmer Bischoff for drawing and I had Ralph DuCasse in painting. Dorr Bothwell for design. And that was just to start off with and I had, let me see, it was Zigmund Szavich and Henri Marie Rose teaching me sculpture and Ernie Kim teaching pottery. And so I had a great bunch of people. I had Richard Fiscus over there teaching me English and composition. And all of these people just opened up all of these great roads for me. And the people that were around me then were Joan Brown, Manuel Neri, the Washington [D.C.? state?—Ed.] contingent of my close friend Bill Allan, Bill Wiley, Bob Hudson. Kay Lee Manuel was going around with Wiley then.

PK: Who?

CV: Kay Lee Manuel. She's a Santa Cruz artist now, and she does a lot of work that reaches on fashion, that reaches on. . . . You know, it's kind of a tight-wire between fine art and wearable art. And there was Bob Hudson,

Donna Hudson. We were all in a program for teacher education and we were teaching . . . we were all in teacher education. They certainly had their enclave of people, the people from Washington. There were about seven or eight people. There was Pete Ferakis. There were a lot of the old members of [the Six Gallery, The Six Gallery]. And then when the parties happened, when the Studio Thirteen Jazz Band got together with Charlie and Wally and whoever wanted to sit in. . . . Then there was this other group of people who were affiliated with the Six Gallery, not as artists but sort of hangers-on, and so there was this society of people that were there for these incredible parties over at the San Francisco Art Institute, which was a fantastic event all to itself. Learning there at the San Francisco Art Institute was just amazing, because there were a lot of people that came in and out of my life. Walter De Maria was there. He was playing drums with Wally Hedrick's jazz band.

PK: What was the band called again?

CV: Studio Thirteen Jazz Band.

PK Studio Thirteen, yes.

CV: Frosty Myers was in it. Mike Henderson's in it now. I mean, it was just a continuing group of all of these luminaries, it seemed. And my own education. . . . God, Gregory Bateson taught me science. Diebenkorn was a teacher of mine. I had Walt Kuhlman, Bill Morehouse, who changed my life a whole lot. I mean, I saw David Park all the time. I remember him playing piano for the Studio Thirteen Jazz Band. God, everybody was drinking Wally's beer but he would bring his own fifth of Old Crow—or I think it was Heavenly Hill. It wasn't even Old Crow; it was Heavenly Hill. It was a Walgreen's whiskey, and he'd drink the whole damn thing, you know, just playing piano all night long. He wouldn't talk to anybody, but he'd just play piano, work up a sweat, have a great time, and then go home. That was David. I mean, he hardly spoke but then you'd see these paintings of his that were just amazing. I mean, it was like, when you saw those [bather, Bader] figures, it's like Africa coming through . . . Picasso coming through David Park and coming through all of this paint. And some of the best words in terms of critique was Bischoff. Bischoff was so eloquent. He was incredibly eloquent. I mean, I just fell in love with his words, with his logic about how he looked at painting, and he was probably one of the first instructors that I'd ever met that had his feet on the ground in terms of what he was talking about. And so when he spoke in glowing terms using examples from German expressionism or impressionism, or even people like [Edward—Ed.] Hopper, there was this fantastic connection that connected to other things. And it was through that lens I got to appreciate the finer points of aesthetics dealing with. . . .

[Interruption in taping to answer telephone]

CV: And then there was Joan Brown. Joan Brown was incredible because she was just very. . . . You know, like when she looked at my work and she gave a critique, it was just straight ahead. I mean, you just had to know that she loved you when she was doing it because she always was incredibly directed. She was a very, very directed person.

PK: Now she was a student, though, at that time, right?

CV: Yeah. She was in, I think, her last year. I was like in my first year.

PK: Um hmm. So did the students actually participate—is that the way it worked—in criticisms?

CV: Well, you see, it was more an atelier system at that time. A lot of artists kind of came and went, and there was some criticism there. . . . Like, for instance, Diebenkorn would never give a class critique. He and Jim Weeks were maybe two of the shyest people I've ever met. I love Jim, myself, but he would have to work up to a point of where he would be comfortable to be able to talk to you about your work, because of his—I guess it was respect—but a big part of it was incredible shyness. And with Diebenkorn, also. He'd walk around with this kind of . . . it was part smile and part grimace, and he'd kind of tiptoe in back of everybody kind of looking like Wiley Coyote in a way.

PK: [laughs]

CV: You know, he didn't want to disturb anyone, and at the same time he wanted to encourage people, but he wasn't as stringent in his comments as, say, a guy like Bischoff. Bischoff was very specific. He'd just go bang, bang, bang.

Manuel Neri who's been my friend for a very, very long time and was one of my first teachers who gave me a certain kind of guidance. . . . He always did things by example and you paid attention to his body language much more so than his words. And that was interesting for me because I never knew anyone like that. [laughs]. But I learned a hell of a lot from him.

PK: Well now, Manuel, was he faculty at the time?

CV: Well, there was one year he got kicked out for nonpayment of tuition. And then there was a show at the San Francisco Museum in which four people were spotlighted. And it just turned out that all four of these people were like very, very strong members of the Six Gallery. There was Fred Martin, there was Wally Hedrick, there was Manuel and I don't know if it was Jay [de Feo?—Ed.] or not that was that fourth person. But Manuel being the person that wasn't really that well known, all of a sudden his work just really kind of just stood out there. I mean, he was using plaster and cardboard and all these kind of makeshift materials to do art and using these very, very bright colors. I mean, there was just an incredible innocence about the work, but incredible knowledge, because of the way that they looked like fragments of forgotten kinds of civilizations. And his work was like that, and it was plaster, also, and so there was that fragile part about it. And so immediately he won the Nealie-Sullivan award that year and I think by bequest of Bob Howard and his wife Adeline Kent they established some kind of subsistence money for Manuel to teach there in the spring. It was an amazing class. There were maybe about five or six of us. There was me, Joan, Frosty Myers. There was an Italian priest, there was Helen Burke.

Helen Burke is really kind of famous in San Francisco because she was a person who was friends with and brought over Claire [Falkenstein] one summer, I think, after or during. . . . It was the second session.

PK: What year was this, Carlos, just to keep me on track.

CV: I believe it was spring of '59. Spring of '59. That was just an amazing time. I think I was talking about the sculpture that I was doing at that time and all the kinds of things that were happening in that plaster studio. I mean, it was on fire.

PK: So do you feel that Manuel and particularly this class—this special class that he taught—were of pretty much primary influence on you at that time, in your work?

CV: Ah, kick my ass! It was wonderful! I mean, it just kind of reiterated all of the kinds of things that I had a certain affinity to. You know, like when I made that coffin figure and when Joan collaborated and made another sculpture of her own which was a wreath or a bouquet that. . . . You know, it was kind of a floral kind of birthday cake. It looked like a birthday cake with a red garland around it, and it was very funky kind of sculpture shards all hanging around the edge, like petals of some sort, and it was like red. And then she scrawled in pencil, "He died for love," and she put it right in front of the coffin. And that was when Bruce Conner came in and said, "This is rat bastard work, you know," and that was my entree into the world there. I mean, he put me in the first show that I was ever in. It was the Rat Bastard Show in Spatsa Gallery. And at that time Bruce Conner was. . . . Bruce Conner was the first person I knew that employed these kind of Dadaist methodologies but then kind of put into Cold War terms or something, you know—Cold War period terms. He had a stamp that said "Rat Bastard Protective Association." And so he would stamp every goddam thing "Rat Bastard." I'm glad he didn't do it to my sculpture.

PK: [laughs]

CV: But at the same time, he said, "This is Rat Bastard work, you know." And so that's how I got into that Spatsa show with Al Light, myself, Joan, and Manuel. Joan had a peanut butter-and-jelly painting up there, you know. It was kind of a parody of Clyfford Still, and I had the coffin over there, and Dimitri Grachis's cat always used to sleep up on top of the coffin. I mean, it was just kind'a homey. And then Al Light had one of his beautiful . . . one of the first of his wood pieces there, a small piece. And then Manuel either had some drawings or he had a painting. I think he had painting. Yeah, he had a wonderful . . . one of those red/green paintings.

PK: Were Joan and Manuel together at that time? I forget.

CV: Umm, they were. . . .

PK: That must have been '60 then, '59, '60?

CV: '59, yeah. Well, they were . . . I remember at that time there was a lot of kind of rifts between Bill Brown and Joan Brown because. . . . I remember Bill Brown used to make the best martinis. He made very, very beautiful martinis. I mean, they used to have some cocktail parties in Studio 15 that were fantastic, you know. They'd have Pete Forakis playing drums and you'd have all of these kind of esoteric guys—Dean Fleming and people like that—playing flutes and drums and they were awfully serious about all of it. And meanwhile here was Bill Brown making these great martinis, and Joan would be covered from head to toe with paint and she'd have her pinkie out and drinking these martinis. I mean, she was just the quintessence of something, you know. And we'd all be. . . .

PK: Style. Or anti-style, maybe.

CV: Oh, panache—I mean, to the bone. She always was like that anyway, but then here were all these guys like

myself, young guys just kind of falling around and, "God, Bill you have great martinis." [mimics a dorky voice—Trans.]

PK: This isn't the studio on Fillmore, is it? That's a different one.

CV: No, no, Studio Fifteen is still a painter's studio at San Francisco Art Institute now. . . .

PK: Oh, okay.

CV: . . . in which honors students go, but like it's always had it's ghosts. My cousin Leo was in that Studio Fifteen. They used to treat Studio Fifteen as though it was like the Vatican or something.

PK: Maybe it's like the Institute for Advanced Studies or something at Princeton, right?

CV: Absolutely. Absolutely. They had their seminars daily and it was an enclave. It was a think tank.

PK: Yeah, but that is right there on the property. It's part of the complex.

CV: Oh, yeah. It was important as. . . . That was the place where if you wanted to . . . if you thought you were really good—or if they let you in. . . . If they let you *in*. So that was a place. . . .

But getting back to this. . . . Bill and Joan. . . . Bill had kind of slacked off. He was kind of, I guess, going through a tremendous block because Joan, I think, during that time had all of this kind of energy. I remember there was a party on [Potrero, Patrero] Hill and I remember Manuel and Bill were both passed out on the same bed. And Joan and I were just kind of picking up the potato chips and throwing beer cans into the garbage can, and then she looked over there and she just—you know, she was kind of wrecked herself—and she'd go, "Ah, there they are, my two old favorites." You know how Joan would talk. And so I kind of remember asking her, "What's happening? I don't want to get into this, but I know that you and Bill were getting into some heavy kind of stuff," and she just kind of said at that time that Manuel was closer to her in terms of spirit. I think with Bill, Bill was a teacher. He was very, very kind, he was very, very knowledgeable, he was very intellectual. He was also an incredibly good painter. But he was kind of that helping hand. He was that helping hand for Joan. And they had split up. She then moved out from Fillmore Street, and Bill kind of stayed there and then he kind of left her, and then maybe about a year after that he. . . . He'd gotten a few jobs, I think, teaching painting or art at Boy's School or something, and then he left to go live in Europe. And meanwhile Joan was living over on Montgomery Street—Monkey Block, that was what she called it.

PK: Really? She lived in the famous Monkey Block?

CV: Oh, yeah, well, there were so many. . . . All [those, us] people. This was right near the end of that whole era. But she was living there for a couple of minutes [*sic*], and then she moved in . . . she moved in with Bernice Bing's sister [Lolita—CV] on Powell Street, and I think after that Manuel and her hooked up and moved further down to Powell Street and had an apartment down there.

PK: But you were hanging out with these people during that whole time.

CV: There was a lot of . . .

PK: A lot of social interaction as well as just the art.

CV: There was incredible intercourse not because of me but because of Joan and Manuel. The thing that was happening. . . . There were all of these things that were happening all at once. There was this guy by the name of Norman Kantor who kept on coming back . . .

PK: Canner?

CV: Kantor.

PK: Kantor.

CV: Yeah. He kept on coming back and forth. It was either Norman or Morris Kantor. There were two guys and I keep on forgetting the name. But he kept on coming back and forth, and on the West Coast he'd be known as an East-Coast painter and then he'd go back to the East Coast and then he'd have this. . . . He had this dual citizenship, if you will. And he was part of the group. And he was kind of hanging out to network so he could, I think, be famous. There were these people that came up. . . . You know, Bob Alexander. . . .

PK: Right.

CV: . . . and Jim Newman, who would start running Dilexi up on top of the Jazz Workshop. The Six was kind of going under because it couldn't pay the rent. Dimitri kind of kept on. . . . Dimitri Grachis, who owns Spatsa, was kind of skimping along. East-West Gallery kind of faded out, because Sonia Gechtoff and Jim Kelly had gone back east to make their fortune and so Sonia Gechtoff's mother, who ran East-West Gallery, wasn't. . . . You know, like it wasn't the light that it once was. Lucien Labaudt Gallery was just kind of same old people, and then I guess there were a couple of others but. . . . And then there was Bolles Gallery. That was pretty famous at the time.

PK: Now was Hayward. . . . Maybe not that early. He eventually became director at Bolles. Hayward King.

CV: Oh, yeah, well, he was. . . .

PK: Was he associated with. . . . Was he around then?

CV: Well, he was back and forth. When I first went to school there, he was living in Paris. He was living in Paris, and I remember for one of my summer jobs I had the cafe and I was going to the [Dented Can Depot, dented-can depot, and bringing in Campbell's soup and offering that for lunch to these starving art students. I mean, I couldn't cook worth crap and so. . . .

PK: [laughs]

CV: . . . and so I was giving these people Campbell's soup, and so everybody just welcomed Hayward coming in. [laughing] Because he was the most fastidious cook. I mean, you sit to dinner with that guy, I mean, he decants the coffee three times and all of this stuff and it has to be purified water and. . . . I mean, lunch at the cafeteria at that time was, you know, you're in a gourmet bistro or something.

PK: You mean Hayward studied. . . .

CV: He was just . . . I don't know if he. . . .

PK: . . . culinary arts in Paris?

CV: He was just a cultured guy. I mean, he dressed to the nines. Everything about him was impeccable. You know, everything about him was impeccable.

[Break in taping]

PK: Continuing the interview with Carlos Villa, session three, tape one, side B. Carlos, we were still talking about those days—early sixties, I think, is really what we're talking about—the very interesting times in and around the art institute, or California School of Fine Arts, and you were talking about some of the people, and I'd like to continue with that, trying to create some of the sense of the ambiance. You know, the situation, what you characters were thinking about. Besides having a good time, I think that goes without saying, but no doubt. . . . Well, I should ask it, not tell you, but did you see yourselves as special, that these were special times, that there's. . . .

CV: I think that most everyone had a name or a place that they wanted to be or there were specific kinds of issues that everyone was dealing with. I think the people that were maybe the most focused. . . . I can't say that I was the most focused person. I would say that I was taking a lot of things in and I was just learning everything. I had a lot of catching up to do. I failed to mention Bill Morehouse as a very precious . . . he was a very, very precious commodity for me, because his teaching allowed me to find myself. He taught a class at the same time Manuel taught a class. Manuel freed me a lot, but then I'll say one thing about Bill Morehouse. He had a class dealing with painting but using industrial materials. And he cleaned out his garage and he brought all of these . . . this old paint and tar and everything else like that. He says, "Do some art with it." And I remember doing some art with this roofer's cement, and all of sudden I bypassed a bunch of centuries of art to come to my own right away. [chuckling] I mean, I was getting a lot from Manuel—Manuel and Joan—but just that one class. . . .

PK: Well, what did that tell you? I mean, what did you get from that experience other than, "Wow, lookit! I can use this stuff that's certainly nontraditional."

CV: I made a connection with myself. See, this was an important thing. Because when I was in everybody else's class and everybody was saying, "Oh, you're doing good, you're doing good, you're doing wonderful. Just keep on doing what you're doing. Ah, look what he did, look what he did." My eyes just weren't that sensitive or attuned to exactly what I was about or what I was thinking about. But when Bill said, "Do some art with this, this tar," when I did it all of a sudden it made a direct connection to me.

PK: Well, what came out of that? I mean, what did you make?

CV: Ah, paintings! These paintings.

PK: Yeah? Abstract Expressionist-style paintings?

CV: They were abstract paintings. They were abstract paintings, and they had gotten me into the dialogue of people looking for young artists. You know, looking for young artists. I mean all of a sudden people just started coming to me. . . .

PK: Really?

CV: . . . and buying my stuff and doing that kind of. . . .

PK: All thanks to Morehouse? Or partly thanks. . . .

CV: Yeah! Yeah, well a great part of it was because of that and it was. . . .

PK: Are these works still around?

CV: There are a couple of them over . . . from what I know, I haven't been over to the Oakland Museum. The Oakland Museum has something like about seven, eight, or nine pieces of mine. I don't know if it's completely decayed or whatever. I remember it going over there because it was in a collection of John Bowles', and there were about two or three paintings that I'd done at that time, and a couple of them went from him to Oakland Museum.

So it was really the first time I made this direct connection. It wasn't just kind of working on kind of genetic memory or whatever it is, and just kind of constructing these wonderful things. I mean, it was like all of a sudden I knew what I was doing, and I had to thank Bill Morehouse for that.

PK: How did you get color into this roofer's tar?

CV: Well, I just liked the roofer's tar as it was, but then I started mixing a lot of white with it and other colors with it and producing some really very, very strange mossy greens and things and . . . like that.

PK: How long did you work with that material?

CV: I worked with it for a couple . . . I worked with it for about a year, and then I got into using Bay City gallons of paint. You know, down here on Market Street where the old man used to make all of this paint specifically for artists. There were two different kinds of paint that artists were using and it was either Fuller Oil and Color or Byzantine. Or Foster & Kleiser Oil Color paint. The difference between the Byzantine versus Fuller and Foster & Kleiser was that Foster & Kleiser and the other paint was very, very stringy and had a very enamel-like kind of quality. You see a lot of Joan's paintings, particularly the one with the three goats in it—kind of goat-like images in it—and you see that kind of stringy, weird paint. That's Fuller Paint. And then the later ones that she's done, like of herself with kind of lattice-work behind it, that was Bay City Paint. And so we were doing this. . . . So I was . . .

You know, I was into paint so much that I was using my hands a lot. And I could put my hands in these gallons of paint without looking and I could tell what color they were.

PK: Really?

CV: Yeah. Like the earth tones, they produce a certain kind of temperature. If it was like a dye it would be a lot cooler to my hands. I would use different kinds of whites, like a pearl white or that mixed kind of titanium and white lead, and it would be really cold. And I remember black was really warm. I mean, I developed a real sensitivity towards paint just in terms of feel.

PK: Hmm!

CV: And I don't know, I mean it wasn't anything that I was looking for; it was just that I just knew that my hand was in it when I. . . . You know, I said, "Yeah, this has got to be ultramarine blue," I'd look, "Yeah."

PK: So that added a whole 'nother sensual dimension, perhaps, to color rather than just the visual.

CV: Oh yeah, because I wanted to. . . . I did feel. . . .

PK: . . . feel the colors . . .

CV: . . . feel the colors and. . . .

PK: And were you putting it on with your hands, you mean, and reach?

CV: Yeah, yeah. And I'd scrape things off. I'd put things on, scrape things off. And, God, that was a lot of fun. That was a hell of a lot of fun. The person that I remember. . . . You know, during 1959 that was an incredible time, an incredible year, because there were so many artists that were coming in and out of the art institute that . . . I mean, I couldn't take them all, but I knew that they were there. You know, like for instance Nathan Oliveira when he was teaching drawing in the drawing studio, that summer he. . . . You know, he was friends with Wolf Kahn, and Wolf Kahn would come in. I remember I liked Wolf Kahn's paintings and I liked his palette a whole lot, but here he was in the cafeteria; he was eating with all of us, you know. And then there was Claire Falkenstein, who I mentioned earlier. Helen Burke brought her out. And, God, you know I could remember her and another artist by the name of Bob McFarland just breaking all these glass bottles—beer bottles and wine bottles—and putting the shards . . . separating the shards in terms of colors and stuff like that, in anticipation for Claire Falkenstein when she came. She did those kinds of commissions—or sculptures—where she just throw these shards of glass into these welded structures and come up with this incredible weird kind of spacey art. I mean, there were a lot of people coming through there. Stanley Hayter was teaching printmaking. I mean, there was a real enclave of people that was there at the San Francisco Institute, all there at one time. I can remember a lecture in which this very, very famous . . . I believe his name is Tapie.

PK: Yeah, Michel Tapie.

CV: Yeah, well, he came. . . .

PK: He's a friend of Claire's, Claire Falkenstein.

CV: Yeah. Well, he came and he brought—it was just amazing—he brought this entourage of Japanese artists and he brought over the head . . . Teshegehara, who was the head of one of the more radical schools of flower arranging in Japan. And there we were 1959. He was talking about the movement that he helped foster, which was [gutai (goo-tie)].

PK: [Gutai], hmm.

CV: And I remember the work of the gutai artists when I was in the army in Korea and I remember it being written up and stuff, but then to meet this guy and to watch him on film. I mean, it was just amazing. Here he would be, flanked with two women who were dressed like geisha, holding up an umbrella and while he sat in this incredible throne. And he'd have these men in black running up these cedar trees with chains and things. And this was flower arranging. And I just said, "Wow, you know, this is too much!" And then he did an overview of all of the artists that were in the gutai group in Tokyo. Just am[azing]! I mean, it's still pretty far out stuff to me. I mean, it just told me what the frontier was in terms of art after Jackson Pollock. And not that many people were into art history, strangely enough, at the San Francisco Art Institute. There were people there teaching art history, but maybe the only person that really taught art history to me was Ralph Putzker, and he taught a sort of art history 101. You know, kind of a linear . . . "Okay, this is Degas and then this is. . . . Okay, here's a slide." You know, I mean. . . . And he just kind of taught it that way. I mean, it was a beautiful kind of unfolding of history to me since I'd never had it before and he obviously loved his subject. But you could never get into deep water with it. It was just like, "Okay, the bus loads up at ten o'clock and we're going to go over here to expressionist country." That was the way he taught that. And then we had other teachers there that their delivery for me was very, very dense.

PK: Who was that guy who was teaching the art history?

CV: Ralph Putzker, P-u-t-z-k-e-r. He later on moved to San Francisco State. The other art historian that I thought was fantastic, but I've never had him but who had taught there for a number of years, was Fred Martin. I mean, he was teaching history from a Freudian point of view and from a point of view of being an artist also, which really inspired a lot of people. I remember Bill Wiley, for instance, after seeing Fred Martin's work and taking his class, he started doing a lot of writing in his art. And it wasn't from Jasper Johns; it was from Fred Martin. And I remember Bill Wiley had gotten into a big fight with his then mentor, [Frank—Ed.] Lobdell, and that was a big breakup. Because he started asking questions about Jasper Johns to Lobdell, and Lobdell said that all of those people were shirkers and they weren't really into *the* act of painting, they weren't really into the spiritual, and he called Bill Wiley a quitter. And so that kind of initially kind of broke Bill off with Frank Lobdell. And it just seemed. . . .

You know, now that I'm on the subject of Bill Wiley, there was this group of people from Washington and they were younger than me—well, I was in the army—but, God, they were brilliant! They were just brilliant. They were those people. . . . You know, the two Hudsons [Bob and Donna?—CV], Wiley, Bill Allan. Totally brilliant people. I mean, they came down and they were so almost. . . . They were kind of laid back but sort of had this mission. They were all down there, and they had this famous art teacher. I've forgotten his name. They did something for him at the San Francisco Museum maybe about seven, eight years back. Jim something. I've forgotten his name.

But, anyway. . . .

PK: Wait. You mean up in. . . .

CV: Washington. . . .

PK: Well, there was Philip McCracken, for one.

CV: No, no, no. No, it wasn't Phil McCracken.

PK: He was also a teacher of theirs.

CV: Yeah, well, he was like one of their icons but there was this other guy, Jim somebody [_____—Ed.].

PK: Yeah, I remember hearing about that. That's set down somewhere.

CV: Yeah, he later taught down at the American Indian Art Institute, and he had done a stint in Japan. Bill Allan used to tell me about these kids in this funny atom bomb town [Hanford?—Ed.] up there in east Washington and how he would get their imaginations just soaring. I mean, these kids knew art history. They'd already digested it, shat it out, and was looking for another way of doing art. I think that they had the most information that was focused going to another place. They initially came down as art education majors. And there I was with them, these genius people, and, you know, they all wanted to build a school for this guy. They'd do their four years, go back up to Washington with their teaching credentials, and have an art school with this guy. And, God, Bill Allan used to tell me about all of them going off to the desert in Washington, and this guy would light a fire and he would call these sessions "thought fires," in which everybody would just look into the fire and just say whatever they had to say. And I would imagine it freed these guys up from a lot of stuff. And they were all in competition, and they all loved each other like brothers and sisters, and they still do. They all still do get along together. And, like I said, they were the most focused of all of the people.

Basically, there was something that Wiley was working on at that time and he did an incredibly beautiful series of pictures. All of those guys were into. . . . They weren't into Bischoff as much as they were into Nathan Oliveira. They liked Nathan Oliveira a whole lot, because there were a lot of kind of funny ways that Nathan would deal with paint and deal with images and stuff, and I remember Wiley, Allan, and—no, not Allan—but Wiley and Hudson really getting into some of that imagery and taking from them like a lot of people were taking from Bischoff, and, like Joan was borrowing from Bischoff and David Park, these guys were borrowing from Nathan Olivera.

PK: What was it, do you think?

CV: It was a way. . . .

CV: It had to do with these images, the ambiguity, the. . . .

CV: Ambiguity.

PK: . . . mystery of these images?

CV: Yeah, it was kind of the ambiguity of things. They were putting. . . . What they would do is that they would take symbols—say, flags or a popular icon then was using x's. . . . A way of taking all of these kinds of things. And the way that Nathan had painted, I mean, he used drips in a certain way that no. . . . Certainly, Bischoff wasn't using drips in this way and neither does Diebenkorn. And I remember Nathan was using a lot of white in a lot of the paintings. And these guys—both Wiley and Hudson—were using a hell of a lot of white in their work. There were a couple of other people that were kind of in that Washington enclave, and I can't remember their names because it's been so long, but there were about two or three friends that hung out. Bill Allan, by this time, was in the army and he was serving his stint in Turkey and a couple of other different places. He was an amazing artist. He was a very, very amazing artist, too. He was amazing because he was just totally independent. He always had a very, very independent way of looking at things. Even more so than Wiley or Hudson. They were looking to Nathan. But Bill Allan always had his own references and he always had his own reasons. And that was that. That was that.

But all of these people were very, very focused. I would say Manuel and Joan were incredibly focused. Wally Hedrick, of course, had his own thing going. I mean, he was wonderful. I mean, his methodology. He had a mimeograph machine, and he had a name for that. I mean, he was doing this kind of poetry with this mimeograph machine, and he'd do drawings on it and stuff and he had his own thing going. I mean, there were people who had pockets there. You know, I mean, you could just see them and see all of these kind of funny tendencies. Win Ng, for instance, in pottery. He was like the star potter of the ceramic. . . . The pot shop, we called it. He could do virtually *anything* with clay. I mean. . . .

PK: Who was this now?

CV: Win Ng.

PK: Oh, E-n-g, huh?

CV: Right, Win Ng. Later on he hooked up with Spaulding Taylor to do Taylor and Ng piece. . . .

PK: Oh, yeah. Sure. [They have a?—Ed.] place right over there.

CV: Right. Now it's taken over. . . . Since Win's parents—I mean, not parents—since Win had died all of his relatives kind of took over the whole shop. Spaulding now is kind of sort of semi-retired. He goes back and forth to China to do paintings. He runs something called the Belcher Studios.

PK: Yeah, it's right over there.

CV: Right there, huh? And Win had just died from AIDS. But I remember Win, though. I mean, he did these large slabs and gorgeous—utterly gorgeous—sculpture. He was a relentless worker. He could do studio. . . . Just studio production pottery. I mean, he just did all of this work. He was maybe the richest guy in the school, because people were either buying his work as fine art or buying it because they needed a perfectly matching set of plates and wares. . . . you know, vessels in which to drink water from. He was just an amazing, amazing artist. I think everybody used to get me and him all mixed up, because he was Asian and I was Asian. We were about the same age and they would call me Win. And I would imagine he would go crazy calling him Carlos, because we were total, opposite people.

PK: [chuckles]

CV: He was focused and business-like, and I was just crazy and coming right off the walls. I mean, it must have driven Win nuts, out of his mind.

PK: That's like when Mary Robinson used to see me at an event, socially, and say, "Oh, hi, Bruce. How great to see you!" That's when I had my goatee and I was [fair]. . . .

CV: [laughs]

PK: . . . and she couldn't get me. . . . She thought I was Bruce Conner and I'd say, "No." She kept doing that and doing that, and finally I said, "Look it, Mary, how long does it take before you can tell the difference between Bruce Conner and Paul Karlstrom?" [both laugh] I even had dinner, you know, with her as a dinner partner and so forth. She has it straight now because I shaved. I don't know if Bruce still has his goatee, as a matter of fact. [laughs]

CV: Jesus.

PK: We were types, you see. What I'm saying is we were seen as types.

CV: Yeah, I know. I know. Well. . . . [laughs]

PK: Because as you know I'm not a bit like Bruce Conner.

CV: Well, collectors are like that. [both laugh] They have their own way of telling. They have their own way of telling.

PK: Let's flip this over. I mean, start a new tape.

CV: Okay.

[Break in taping]

PK: This is a continuing interview with Carlos Villa, session three, on July 3, 1995. This is tape two, side A. The subject continues to be the art institute days and, really, that special group of people in the early sixties with which you really were associated. And I was real interested in several of the things you said earlier, I think particularly talking about the group that came down from Washington who had this, I don't know, sort of art-utopian ideal, this ideal that they were going to get trained. . . .

CV: Good words, good words.

PK: . . . and then go back up to Washington and establish something new. Some questions come up. Well, they didn't, by the way, go back to Washington and start up a school.

CV: [chuckles] No.

PK: They hung around here. So they were subverted and corrupted by something. But these are the people that were more or less your peers, and you said a couple other things that bring for me this question to mind. One of them was that there wasn't a lot of art history. There was some art history being taught there, but you didn't get the feeling that that was an important part of the training at that time. The group from Washington came down imbued with more art history. They seemed to be better informed, I guess is what you were saying.

CV: They were.

PK: But that in their case they were ready to push on. They felt that they needed to create something new and this certainly was the case with Joan and Manuel. The immediate preceding art history of this institution—in the California School of Fine Arts days—had to do with the reign of gestural painting, abstract expressionism, and the great god, Clyfford Still.

CV: Right.

PK: At least this is the way the myth reads, and that wasn't that many years earlier. I mean, it was basically . . . well, about a decade, just about a decade earlier. But still that legend must have continued to live on, and so I guess what I'm asking is, to what extent did you or perhaps the group from Washington or others see the Art Institute in terms of a very powerful history that was of the [_____—Ed.] MacAgy years—and carried on then with like Lobdell, for instance. Was this something to react against? I mean, did you consciously think of that?

CV: Well, for myself, since I didn't belong to anything and this was essentially my milieu. . . . I remember asking Walt Kuhlman one time about—this was about 1959—I remember asking him was there any Filipino art history. And he said, "Nope, I don't think there is." And so I went up to the library and, sure enough, there wasn't. There wasn't any on the shelves. And so I had nothing to refer to, but meanwhile I kept on trying to fit in in one way or another. And I certainly had friends who were incredibly influential, and I'd gotten a lot out of them, like we all kind of came up together and everything. But I could never find myself in any one of these people, you know, I mean, necessarily, in terms of. . . . God, you know, I had these questions, you know. Filipino art, what the hell was that all about?

PK: So you were already asking these questions? This is not something that you've come to recently, or like ten years ago or even twenty years ago?

CV: No. I was always asking that kind of question, but I didn't know exactly where to go with it. I mean, I met some incredible people, I mean, for instance, when I first saw Jay de Feo's painting, you know, like [*Death Rose*, *Death Row*, *Death Row*] is when it was first on. I was in total admiration of both Jay and Joan as painters much more so than I was Clyfford Still. Because they were there. And there was this substance. And with Jay's painting. . . . You know, I'd have a birthday or it was Christmas or anything, and I can remember when the painting went from a foot and a half thick to two inches thick or to one inch thick. I mean, she used so much paint on that painting that, you know, like every bit of her money went into buying that Bay City pearl white paint, which was pure titanium. And I remember looking out the window at her studio. She used to take these empty cans of pearl white and throw them out into the light well. And all of a sudden these cans of paint start going up from one story to two stories. I mean, these were all paint cans. And this was just two or three years' work on *Death Rose*. And I've seen Jay de Feo go from like this sprite, mysterious woman, with this black hair and. . . . I mean, she always had an intense, beautiful presence. It was almost like. . . . It was anything from being a precious flower to a never-seen-before insect to the most beautiful exotic woman in the world. I mean, she was all of that stuff. I mean, I could see Fred Martin and Bruce Conner having these kinds of, ["Oh, I can't really say how I feel" "Oh-I-can't-really-say-how-I-feel"] unrequited love for this personage. She was a fantastic personage. But I seen her in front of that damn painting for over seven years. And I seen her turn from that woman to this woman with these Ella Fitzgerald glasses, Coke bottles, and just staring at that optical illusion that she's created, that she's made real and unreal. I mean, it was just amazing. I mean, it really did something to me to see her in the act of painting. It did something to me to watch Joan paint. You know, particularly when she was doing those kind of slathery paintings. Much more so than Clyfford Still.

PK: So what you're saying is that your tradition was one, really, of the present. It didn't reach back in time, even recent past, like Clyfford Still, and also proximity, because Still was right there within that same school.

CV: Sure.

PK: But that your tradition was brand new and fresh; it was what was going on while you were there. Do you feel that that, in general, was true for most of the other students?

CV: I can't say that because. . . .

PK: Any feeling on that?

CV: My feeling was that everyone had a better grounding than me. I just came in and I knew that I had to be there. There were a lot of people there—like Tony Luraschi and Philip Perkis, and all these people—who had had this incredible information. They knew all of this stuff. They were better prepared for art school than I was, in a certain way, because they had a grounding in some kind of art history and philosophy before they got there to that school. And so for myself it was just this amazing kind of. . . . It was like this bus station with all of these people and this campfire with. . . . I mean, it was a smorgasbord. I don't know what to say. I mean, it was all of these things. Every bite was okay. You know, every conversation I knew that I was going somewhere. It was a very, very vital time. I can't say enough about that. I mean, even when we restretched Jay de Feo's painting four or five times, getting drunk on Wally's [Hedrick—Ed.] beer and everything, I mean, that was amazing. You know, drinking a fifth of scotch with Pete Voukos every night when I was over there at Mills College. We used to have these talks about twelve o'clock at night over [Ballantyne, Ballantine] scotch, and he'd grunt a couple of times and I knew exactly what he was talking about. I mean, I don't know. . . . [laughs]

PK: When was this? Were you teaching over there at Mills?

CV: No, no. I was there on my MFA.

PK: Oh, I see.

CV: I was there on my M.F.A. That was another story altogether. I met another group of people over there. I mean, I just. . . .

PK: Well, let's hear about it.

CV: Jennifer Bartlett was undergraduate. . . .

PK: No-o-o. . . .

CV: . . . and Elizabeth Murray was my painting studio-mate.

PK: Really?

CV: And there was Norm Lockwood and Dick McLean. And Dick McLean used to get pissed off at me because I'd drip paint on his very pristine kind of little landscapes, and here I was "Mr. A.E." [Art Educator?—Ed.] [chuckling] And meanwhile here was Elizabeth Murray who was fresh from Chicago and she was just the shyest person in the world. She wanted to crawl underneath.

PK: I didn't know she taught there.

CV: Oh, no, she didn't teach there. She took her M.F.A. there.

PK: Oh, she was there as a student.

CV: Yeah, she was my fellow student.

PK: And Bartlett as well?

CV: Bartlett was undergraduate.

PK: Oh, she was a wimpy kid. [teasing]

CV: Well, she was a talented wimpy kid. I mean, she was just amazing. I mean, of any artist that I've ever met. I mean, she could do shit, overnight, and make it look so incredibly fresh and real and everything. It didn't seem to me that she had to work that hard.

But I remember Elizabeth Murray, We had a great time together. We used to get just plastered. We went to a bar up on 63rd and MacArthur—all of us graduate students—and like she came. . . . Elizabeth came from this Catholic background—Irish Catholic background. She was very, very shy and salt of the earth, and we'd get wasted up there at the. . . . And we'd bring beer back to the studio and she'd say [CV whispering:], "You think we're gonna' get caught?" "Shit, no, Elizabeth. Let's just drink."

PK: [laughs]

CV: And we had a great time. And I remember, you know, this is a funny story. I brought her for dinner a couple of times over to Jim Melchert's house when Jim was living with Mary Ann over there in Berkeley. And we'd go

over there for dinner and, then, oh, maybe about eight or nine years ago, like in one of these big NEA [National Endowment for the Arts—Ed.] gala or whatever, you know, "Oh, how do you do, Elizabeth Murray, I'm Jim Melchert." "Oh, I used to have dinner at your house," you know. And Jim would go, "What, what?" You know, he'd just, you know. . . . But she just had a different persona at that point. Now she's. . . . She's always been salt-of-the-earth person. Of most of the artists that I've ever known, she has never changed. She has never, never, never changed. I mean. . . .

PK: Do you ever have any, still, contact on occasion?

CV: Yeah, when I go back there. I could sit; we could have a couple of minutes together and that's all we need. You know, we just need a couple of minutes, and then we hug each other, and then just kind of laugh, and then I take off.

PK: So how did you get to Mills then, and how did *they* get to Mills? What was the attraction at that time?

CV: I don't know. I mean, it was like. . . . I'll tell you, my father had passed away. I wanted to go to either [Slate, Slade] or Bristol, I think. I sent some letters off, intent to go to England after I graduated. And that was my wish; I just wanted to leave.

PK: Now, let me ask you: Why England? I mean, this. . . .

CV: Well, I just thought England would be a kind of a good place—you know, a real nice place.

PK: Hassell Smith wasn't teaching over there yet, I guess?

CV: No, and Bill [____—Ed.] was still kind of, you know, on the boat with his wife and kid. I don't know, I don't think that [they'd, they] really settled down, either. And I know that they were in Bristol, but I wanted to go to an art school away from. . . . You know, I always thought that you don't eat where you shit kind of thing, you know. . . .

PK: [laughs]

CV: . . . so I didn't want to go back to the art institute or. . . . You know, it just got named the art institute right as I graduated in '61.

PK: Right.

CV: So I ended up going to Mills because my mother and my sister, I was just kind of worried about them, and I wanted to be reunited with my old teacher, DuCasse, and a painter over there that I really admired went to Mills. His name is Bob Downs. And so I thought that that would be a good place. And I also thought that it would be a great place to learn art history. And so, sure enough, for two straight semesters I was Alfred Neumeyer's assistant.

PK: Really?

CV: Yeah. You know, I'd do his slides for him and I'd. . . . I used to really enjoy talking with Neumeyer. I mean, he opened up a *lot* of things. He opened up a whole thing about northern renaissance—as well as southern renaissance. But northern renaissance he was really into much more so, because then it kind of just dovetailed into German romanticism. And then there were just all of these other kinds of events that happened, during and after, and it was a great lens. And then being able to go to him and his wife's house to see all of that incredible art by [Max?—Ed.] Beckmann. When they had the visiting-artist years over there. . . .

PK: Yeah, it was great.

CV: . . . they had some of the best of the best of people, and their cottage was just filled; it was just like a small museum. It was just amazing and just the reverence that he had for history and just the familiarity in which he could speak about Froffle . . . Frufflewinkle, you know, what's his name. [chuckling, deliberately mispronouncing name]

PK: [Bigby].

CV: Yeah, he'd call these guys by the first name, I guess because of World War II, and he was so into his scholarship that, you know, like these people were more real than some of these other people but. . . . And his wife would tell great stories about Beckmann and tell wonderful stories about Léger and stuff, particularly during the visits over there. It was an amazing time. I mean, they had this great music department over there, too. I believe it was Terry Riley [had, would] just come in and then help establish a tape center. And, God, there was [Luciano—Ed.] Berio there. Berio. Kathy Barbarian. There were all of these. . . . And Darius Milhaud was still alive.

I remember sitting in the cafe and Madame Milhaud and all of her French conversation students would come over and sit in the patio and order bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwiches in French, and I thought that that was pretty far out. [both chuckle] I mean, there was just this whole thing. . . . It was this women's seminary. I mean, it was still that way. You know, there was a woman that memorized [Eric—Ed.] Satie, and she would play while these women did their gymnastic exercises. And the teacher over there was kind of always dressed like—I forgot that famous modern dance person, you know, like with the leotards and the wraparound skirt, you know. . . .

PK: Not Isadora Duncan?

CV: No, no. No, but it was. . . .

PK: Loie Fuller?

CV: No, no. . . . I mean, you're getting warm. But dressed like her. And she had a protégée who was much taller and a much stronger dancer who was like her, I mean, in every way. Dressed like her and . . . I mean. . . .

PK: Ruth St. Denis.

CV: [laughs] Name dropper. [laughs]

PK: _____ right along. Martha Graham.

CV: Martha Graham, that's it.

PK: Finally!

CV: Yeah, that's the one. But, ah, jeez, it was all a wonderful kind of trip. But all in all, though, you ask the question, did I really get into myself? Well, I did, but it never was. . . . You know, I could never stay with the information. Because it wasn't. . . . I mean, I think I was doing some really good work, but it wasn't. . . .

PK: Still these paintings?

CV: That wasn't *my* work.

PK: But still growing out of these paintings that you did at the art institute, California School of Fine Arts?

CV: I think so, yeah.

PK: So, abstract. . . .

CV: Very abstract expressionist.

PK: . . . painterly, gestural. . . .

CV: Oh, yeah, all of that.

PK: So, no change yet through your period working on your MFA which was. . . . What was that? Like '61?

CV: '61 through '63.

PK: Same old stuff.

CV: Yeah, same old stuff. It was just like being the stud in the studio.

PK: [chuckles] It could be worse.

CV: It could. . . . Well, a stud at Mills. . . .

PK: That's a very heroic abstract expressionist ethos, as they say—you know, Mr. Macho. What about that? I don't mean to digress, but did you become imbued a little bit with that whole—I don't want to say ethic—but that abstract expressionist notion of the heroic individual and the. . . .

CV: There was nothing else. . . .

PK: . . . stud muffin and. . . .

CV: Oh, yeah. _____ _____.

PK: Of course, it's much in disrepute, you know, now.

CV: [laughs]

PK: Much in disrepute. [said tongue-in-cheek]

CV: Oh, God, you know, it's something to grow from. I mean, it's. . . .

PK: But it really was in the air at that time?

CV: Oh, God, I had a Hickory shirt that I. . . . Oh, incidentally, you know who else was in my MFA program? Graduated maybe about a year before me, was Bob Arneson.

PK: Really?

CV: Yeah. So that was an enclave.

PK: God, it's great!

CV: It was really an enclave. And so you know, I mean, all of the kind of stud kind of guys would have on these worker clothes. It was kind of an idea of, "This is the way that we produce work. It's through industry." And so I kind of had those work shirts that were kind of Hickory work shirt, Levi's past my ass with plenty of paint. At one time I had work boots, another time I had those huaraches with the big tire treads underneath them. All filled with paint. And so I'd walk in. I'd have paint all over me. And I'd get shit dirty. And that was where I was at with this. And Bill Geis was another. . . . was my compatriot. I mean, we used to drink and knock things over. I mean, we were. . . .

PK: He was at Mills, too?

CV: No, he was at the institute.

PK: Right, right.

CV: But, you know, I mean we were total assholes, you know. . . .

PK: Well, let me ask you a couple of things, without getting too much into this. So this is where revisionism, or _____ the reexamination of the past is certainly much with us, and that is in the feminist view of history—and try to sort all that out. But I have a couple questions, and again I don't want to dwell on it, but I think it's really interesting that you're at Mills College, a women's school, and yet you're describing yourself and then perhaps a few of your other colleagues—Arneson was there a little bit earlier—in terms of this now notorious abstract expressionist, bohemian, kind of Jackson Pollock, if you will, inspired way of conducting . . . how an artist conducts his life].

CV: Yes.

PK: How did that play at Mills?

CV: Well, at first it was really cool to take that stance. And after a while I just became one of the girls, you know.

PK: [chortles] That's what I want.

CV: I mean, I'd sit in the cafe and then if a man came in, I'd start looking up and say, "Ah, there's a guy." And instead of looking. . . . I mean that's the way it turned out. I mean, I just became one of the girls after a while, or something.

PK: Well, what about . . . and that's a really interesting observation, because if you take these testosterone types out of their reinforced environment, like the art institute . . .

CV: Yeah. . . .

PK: . . . as I understand it, and plop them down at Mills College, that there's this, quote, "civilizing"—or moderating influence, perhaps—of women. Because here you are. . . . I mean, it's really interesting that your fellow—and at the same time Jennifer Bartlett and Elizabeth Murray who became a good friend were there. And it's interesting to look back on. . . . They've become very prominent, very well-known, but they were also coming out of this same kind of ethos. And it's interesting to think how they fit in and how they saw themselves as artists. You know, how do they, as women, conduct themselves as artists. Did you observe that at all?

CV: Well, it was a coming out. It was a coming out. I mean, particularly then, because at the time that I was in school women. . . . Women were going to those schools, it seemed to me. . . . Now, okay, I don't know if this was

a script, but it just seemed to me that every conversation that I've ever had with any woman that was in art school—Mills or San Francisco Art Institute/California School of Fine Arts—was that these places were seminaries for women. That these were places in which a woman could be well-rounded and could be fitted to be able to be a desirable counterpart to a wonderful economic union, and whatever, and these places were like. . . . Well, where else would you put an eighteen-year-old woman? I mean, you don't put her out in the street, you know. I mean, you put her in these shelters that they. . . .

PK: Like a finishing school.

CV: Absolutely. Absolutely.

PK: Interesting.

CV: And so, you know, like they'd go through and they'd have their majors and stuff like that, but then the whole idea was, it seemed to me, to get out and be part of the world with your husband—you know, with your companion. I mean, since feminism, everything has changed, but then I couldn't help but think that this was the drill or the script that most people would follow. Because there weren't that many women that were going off into being artists. I think, of course, there. . . . Okay, there was a lot of great artists that I've known, but they were incredible anomalies, I think, and they were people who almost had to . . . they always had to undergo this whole thing: "Oh, she's painting like a man." Or "She's working like a man." I mean, Joan Brown, when you think about Joan or you think about Jay, or you think about any of these people, they had to go head-to-head with a lot of really weird kinds of things and they just. . . . They were my heroes and. . . .

[Break in taping]

PK: Continuing the interview with Carlos Villa, this is session three, tape two, side B. We were talking—still—about your experiences in art school—first, California School of Fine Arts and then on to Mills—and one of the things that struck me as interesting is these women that you keep bringing up. In fact, I think you said that in some ways some of them served as inspirations—or, really, models—for you. And especially if you felt that way at the time, that's interesting because they themselves didn't have very many role models, actually. And that's a whole 'nother issue, but related. And I was real interested to hear how you felt they, in fact, were being treated at these schools, in these situations. Just, to get specific, when I interviewed—many years ago—Joan Brown, I asked her some of these same questions and she, at that time, which was like the early . . . it was about '74, I think, would say, when asked about her lot, how she was treated at the art institute by all these macho guys, she said, "Oh boy, they were very supportive. Very supportive and nothing but great support," and more so than the women, is what she would say. Whether she was being absolutely candid in her memory, or if in fact this was the circumstance, I don't know. But you were in a position to observe this gender interaction, and how would you recall it?

CV: Pretty much the way that you just recalled. Number one, she was already married. She was either with Bill Brown or she was with Manuel [Neri—Ed.]. And she's a very, very dedicated artist, and so there was an aura about her that she. . . . She wasn't anybody's, you know, like over-night stand. She wasn't a groupie or anything. She was a real contributor. She was just a very, very focused young woman. And had some work to do. And that was it. And so I think people like myself admired her because, without saying anything, she had gone past what a lot of people would have wanted, you know. And, God, there was Sonia Gechtoff, and there was Jay de Feo, and then there was Joan.

Nell [Sinton] I thought in another way was a kind of a hero, but she was completely not in my class or anything else like that and she was an older person. But I admired her because she just came from another class structure completely. But she was very, very independent and that was what I really liked and admired about her. I considered her one of my friends at that time. And she just went past all the shit. Same with Bob Howard. I'm sure I would have felt the same about Adeline Kent if I'd met her.

PK: Do you think that this is unique to the Bay Area? What you've described is a kind of equality and mutual respect: that if you're an artist you're an artist and gender is a side issue. And yet that's certainly not the way feminist art historians describe the general situation, even at that time. That there was inequality and that men basically—especially out of the abstract expressionist tradition, if you will—women were as artists, second-class citizens. But you don't recall it that way. That's unusual.

CV: Well, no. Well, I'll say one thing: That the strongest people survived. The strongest people survived and however they had to survive. And I can only talk about maybe about four or five people. . . .

PK: Right.

CV: . . . out of many, many hundreds—literally hundreds of incredibly talented, talented females. And if they had

more of a notion of themselves, I think that they would have been much more better off. Say if they were transported into this era right now, they would have found a place for themselves in the landscape.

PK: Right.

CV: But at that time there just seemed to be one landscape, and that was it. And you talk about art history. Well, art history for me, contemporary art history for me, was *Art News* coming in once a month or something like that, and we'd look at a one-inch—as Manuel Neri would say, "We would look at a one inch-by-one inch little reproduction of Franz Kline, and without even thinking about the dimensions everybody would blow these things up." And not even know what it was about. See, I mean, the art history here, particularly in Northern California, if you didn't go to a place like Mills College or maybe even University of California you really didn't have a real clue. And the places that I was at, particularly the art institute, wanted to get rid of that history so that you could be on your own.

PK: Right. Exactly. I was going to ask you that next—the difference between Mills, which you've just described, a really cultured or cultivated environment where there's a respect, a reverence for tradition. . . . That doesn't mean modernism isn't a part of that, but the perception is that the art institute made, basically, what shall we say? staked its claim to fame on turning its back on this tradition and looking forward. And there are stories. In fact, even Bruce Conner tells stories about how he'd bop into class and, well, basically—I can't even remember the story exactly—but say, "Here's your problem. Do it and see you at the end of the term."

CV: That was the way those things were negotiated. And I hardly had any real closeness with the teachers, say except for Manuel, and we were closer in age to each other than, say, me and Walt Kuhlman, or me and Jack Jefferson, for instance. I mean, the one time that I had any kind of talk with Jack Jefferson, even about my work, I mean, it was. . . . I mean, he was a good teacher because he left me alone, but I think that . . . I have a feeling that I needed more negotiation. But maybe I didn't want it at that time, maybe that was the vibe I was giving out, also. I'm not quite sure. You know, when you're 25 or 24, I mean, I was pretty unconscious.

PK: What do you think now, though—taking the advantage of the years that have gone by to do a little time machine travel here—with your own perspective, do you think that your work is richer by being informed by a greater understanding, which you then picked up by your experience at Mills, even at that time, but a greater understanding of the possibilities that history offers? In other words, you're a teacher now. Do you, Carlos Villa, think that a student is short-changed by being deprived of any sense of something beyond him or her?

CV: Well, okay I can only look at it from a very, very personal point of view. I was in search of a grounding for myself. I didn't find one, really, as a Filipino-American. I couldn't find one. . . . I loved history and I wanted to know what the tradition was about so I would be able to participate in it. And if I were genetically part of something, that would be, God, jeez, incredible! You know. But not really, you know. I mean, I was linked to a lot of things very, very emotionally, and it was the intellectual kind of dialogue and it was like something a lot deeper than, "Oh, I like your work." "Oh, do you like my work?" "Oh, that's nice, well, I like your work, too." I mean, I wanted to go much deeper than that and I wanted a basis and so I guess I was looking for it all the time in one way or another—either looking for a kind of a Filipino-American route, a route which was about what. . . . You know, I felt really emotionally without friends. And when I was in New York, I let go of a lot of academic stuff and I became a minimalist. And I spent six years there and it was great years. Then again I met a lot of artists, I was friends with a whole lot of artists. I showed a whole lot. My first show was at Poindexter Gallery, one-person show.

PK: What year was that?

CV: That was in '64, '65, I forget. I think it was '64. And I was having shows at Park Place Gallery, and I was parts of . . . I was in shows there. And before I left one of the best things that ever happened to me was when Richard Bellamy selected me as one of the artists for his [Ark, Arc, Art] to Artschwager show, at Noah Goldowsky's Gallery. That was a real plum. I mean, some of the most incredible artists that I've ever met were in those shows. And another thing that happened to me when I was in New York, too, was Mark Rothko visited my loft, and he was there for at least about twenty minutes and he liked my sculpture.

PK: How did that come about? That's worth telling about.

CV: Well, there were these people from Marlborough in Rome. Countess—lets' see, I forgot her first name—Panicali, Carla Panicali. She came to New York. We met her at an opening and stuff like that, and she wanted to know some of the American artists, and she was interested. I was living in a real great block. [chuckles] I lived on Broadway and Bleeker for a number of years. And, oh, God, down the street was Lawrence Weiner. There was Dan [Christiansen] living around the block from me. There were all of these color-field guys that lived all around me. I think there was Paul. . . . What's his name? Paul Brach, I think it was.

PK: Yeah, sure.

CV: Yeah, he lived next door to me.

PK: Married Miriam Schapiro.

CV: Yeah. And Harvey Quaytman had a loft in the building next to me. And then there were all of the people in Park Place, you know. [Mark—Ed.] Disuvero and all of these other people. And so, you know, she wanted to meet these people, and so I took a couple of days off and brought her and her boyfriend around and introduced them. And then Don [Kaufman] was living underneath my loft in another loft—a real beautiful loft—and we all became quite good friends, and so she wanted to throw a dinner for Mark and his wife and some people from Marlborough in Don Kaufman's loft. A friend of Don's was going to do a standing rib crown roast number, and we were going to get these Italian wines, blah, blah, blah. And so, big deal, you know. And so Rothko comes out of some kind of seclusion and is over there, and I said, "How'd you like to come up and see my stuff? You know, I like your stuff a whole lot and I remember you from . . . you know, you're legendary at California School of Fine Arts." He says, "Ah, are you from there?" He was a man of very few words. So we went up to my loft and we stayed for at least about twenty minutes, and he just sat and he just stared at my sculpture. I had it all set up. It was metal sculpture I was doing. And he stared. And, God, he told me he loved the work. And that just blew me away. That was worth being in New York for six years. I mean, it was amazing.

PK: Metal sculpture, huh?

CV: Yeah.

PK: And that's mainly what you were doing when you were in New York?

CV: Metal and wood sculpture. And it was like relief work, and then I had it on the ground and it became . . . and all of these . . . there were all of these different planes. And I was very. . . . Ah, God, I was a minimalist. I was a minimalist, and I did all of this work in mild metal, and I did some work in stainless. I did a lot of work in aluminum. And that was all good. I mean, I gained a hell of a lot from it, but at the same time I still had these questions in my mind, you know, like. . . .

One thing I hated when I was there was that everything had to be done in terms of committee. I'd have this enclave of great people that were my friends, like Bob Grosvenor and Sol Lewitt, and my cousin Leo [Valledor—Ed.]. . . . There were all of these people. Dick Van Buren. We'd all meet, and we'd talk about, you know, like how much we hated fiberglass. We'd talk about who's doing what and what seems really interesting. And then we'd go into our individual studios and work out those problems and then we'd come back and we'd meet and we'd talk some more and then we'd do. . . . You know, it was almost like problem-solving by committee or doing work by committee, and there was something real about it and something wonderful about it, but there was just something that wasn't hitting my core.

PK: Did it seem calculated to you, almost?

CV: Well, it just seemed like I was just one of the boys. I mean, I was getting bored. I mean, not bored of the people, just bored of the system. It was just too same-o same-o. Like I met a lot of great artists there. I was not close to but we had great affinity. . . . I had a great affinity to Ken Noland. We get along real well. And I'd go up to his place in South Shaftsbury a couple of times, and that was always really terrific. Chuck Ginnever, he had me and Leo in a show.

PK: How did you meet Noland?

CV: I went to a show one time, and here were all these collector types all around me, and I looked at his work, and I stared at it. And he walked up and he says, "Hi, my name is Ken Noland. I like the way you're looking at my work." And I said, "I like your work, period." I says, "Ah, well, blah, blah, blah, you know." I've never met anyone like him, just in terms of how he was so objective about certain things. I mean, he was objective about the marijuana he used. He was objective about the size bands he was using, the color bands he was using and stuff like that. And all of a sudden, just from learning about his abstraction, all of sudden Impressionism just made sense to me. You know, just in terms of weight, color. I mean, it was coming through . . . in terms of [Joseph—Ed.] Albers. It was coming through in terms of Impressionism and Modernism, from Impressionism. And all of that . . . I mean, he guided me through that and we didn't have that many conversations. I just looked at his work. And that to me was amazing.

PK: How would you describe the difference between. . . . I mean, your first real experience in the art world was in San Francisco.

CV: Yeah.

PK: And you had those years that were rich and formative and all that. Then you chose to go to New York as, of

course, many California artists did.

CV: Yes.

PK: If you're going to make it that's what you do.

CV: Right.

PK: And I gather Leo had already gone there. You joined him or you. . . .

CV: Well, you know, he was part of the Park Place group. The Park Place group was. . . . Well, it wasn't Chuck. Chuck was kind of . . . he wanted to be in it but he wasn't. It was Disuvero, it was Pete Forakis, it was Bob Grosvenor, it was [David—Ed.] Novros, it was Disuvero, it was Frosty Myers, it was Tony Magar, and Ed Ruda. And those were the main people in Park Place, and a lot of times they asked me to join but I didn't want to join in the group. I mean, I just. . . .

PK: Did you go to join Leo? Was Leo part of the attraction for you to go to New York?

CV: Oh, he was saying, "You gotta come to New York! You gotta come to New York." Matter of fact, there's a place over in Park Place. . . . Park Place was a loft building down in Tribeca, and it was on one of the streets that one of the twin towers is on right now. And Park Place they had a thirty five dollar a month rent, and so I was paying thirty five dollars a month when I was in San Francisco so I could get that loft when I got there. So I had a loft as soon as I got there to New York. I mean, I was connected.

PK: Yeah!

CV: Bang! I had just got there. I had a couple of reams of drawings that I just wanted to break into and do, and I just started working. I mean, I started working at the Ninth Circle. Neil Williams. . . . Mickey Ruskin, who later opened up Max's Kansas City. . . . Neil Williams is a painter, an [oil, old] painter and a painter friend whom I met at California School of Fine Arts; got me a job over there at Ninth Circle, and which I was a busboy and waiter and bartender until I left six years . . . you know, until six years later. I mean, I just stayed there at that one place, and that was my base of operations. And that was a place to go to at the time, you know, before Max's. You know, [Frank, Joseph—Ed.] Stella used to hang in there, and all these people used to just come in and eat a steak and do whatever they had to do. Go up to the bar, hang out, and talk art business, stuff like that. And so I was all part of that, and I was just doing my thing.

But then again, I was starting to have . . . I was starting to kind of get. . . . After six years I had a couple of things happen to me. The relationship with the woman that I was with kind of just went away. She took my daughter away. We weren't married so I didn't have any real thing to say. I should have gone to therapy but I didn't. I started getting into drug and drinking problems. I was still creating but still, though, there was this thing. I didn't have a focus, and I was kind of bored with the way that I was doing things. You know, I'd go to somebody's place and somebody'd say, "Ah, this is great, this is great, this is great." And you were supposed to take the sum of the ideas over to your place and then kind of build it up and then invite the guy over and say, "Hey, how do you like that?" "Hey, that's cool." And so after a while I just said, "I gotta leave. I gotta get out of here."

PK: Did you feel that the drug scene was more pronounced—or became more pronounced—in New York than here in San Francisco? In other words, how would you characterize—you can only speak about the groups that you were with, of course—but both the alcohol and the drugs. And there was a lot of drinking going on here in the group in San Francisco, of course. Were they getting into the dope a bit?

CV: Well, in New York I was . . . it was all. . . . Okay, I'll talk about where I was working. The Ninth Circle was amazing because everybody was—at the time that I got there, it was like about '64 or '65 kinda—and everybody was into hard liquor but also [Dexamills, dexamilles]. Everybody loved Dexamills. And every bartender had a jar of dexamilles. It just kept them going. I mean, it was like an insane asylum. People would just scream on each other and, I mean, it was weird. It was just weird. And then later on everybody just kind of . . . more and more people just started smoking pot. And then, progressively, people started getting into [coke] and then, right at the time that I left, at about '69, it just got too weird because I started seeing skag—you know, heroine and cocaine—right on the cocktail table. And I knew that it was just time to leave. I mean, this is not what I came for.

PK: A lot of the artists were participating in that?

CV: A lot of artists just got wasted. I mean, I saw people like Larry Zox, for instance. . . . Larry Zox was always spoken in the same breath as, say, Neil Williams and Frank Stella, because all of those three guys were like right in the thing. And Zox, he had. . . . And I just saw his shit just go down because of cocaine. I saw Ken. . . . [chuckling] When Ken was sequestered in South Shaftsbury, and he was smoking. . . . You know, he used to carry these Campbell soup cans of pot around with him. And he was a smoker. I mean, he used to smoke. He

was just going through. . . . Him and all of the people that followed Clem [Greenberg—Ed.] around, that was his enclave of color field people, their only big vice was. . . . Well, not only big vice. I mean, they had a lot of coke vices, they had a. . . . I don't know that a lot of them were heavy into skag. But I remember every time that Clem went from [Reichean] analysis to [Sylvanian] analysis all those guys switched, too, you know. [laughs] And it was weird, I mean. But Ken [Noland—Ed.], after a while lost his innocence when he came down to New York. He bought this big place and he just threw millions of dollars away. He just got too wasted because of cocaine.

PK: God.

CV: There were a lot of artists who. . . .

[Session 4]

PK: Okay, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, a continuing interview with Carlos Villa. This is session number four, July 10, 1995. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom and the venue for this interview, as before, is my office in my home in San Francisco. This is tape one, side A. Carlos, we left you just returning from New York. I think that is the last thing that we talked about, your . . . was it six years?

CV: It was six years.

PK: You were there six years, and you spoke a bit about that phase of your career, which was, as you call it, your minimalist phase and your interests, obviously very formal . . . formalist interests in art and, presumably, that's at that point how you saw yourself. Despite these nagging questions you'd been having all along, even in art school, even before, about, well, trying to place yourself, I guess, is one way to put it. But it seems to me that during that period of six years, which was sixty. . . . What were the dates?

CV: _____. Late '63 to '69.

PK: Pretty much the sixties. Clearly during that period you were excited about the prospect of casting your lot in the art world. Or casting your lot *with* the art world and probably, playing that game in a fairly careerist way. You know, looking for shows and getting attention, getting some write-ups, some reviews, selling work. Right?

CV: Oh, very much so. I had my first show at the Poindexter Gallery. Fred McDarrah, then of *Village Voice* came, and he took my picture at the show and took a picture of my work also. [laughing] Grace [Glick] did a small—very, very small review of my work. [said ironically—Ed.] And there were people that responded to it, there were people that weren't responded to it [*sic*], and you're quite correct in terms of the careerist moves. Not exactly a strategy but then, because I was working at a place called Ninth Circle, named after Dante's ninth circle. . . . I was working there as a bartender-waiter-bus boy, and it was the precursor to Max's Kansas City, which I helped open up with Mickey Ruskin, who was my co-boss at the Ninth Circle. And Mickey had bought a piece from me and it was one of the first pieces at Max's Kansas City.

PK: Oh, really?

CV: Yeah, right. It was right along with, I believe a. . . . Oh, God, I think it was a piece by [John—Ed.] Chamberlain. It was a piece by Chamberlain.

PK: So, you were in pretty good company while you were there. I mean, you were having a really great start.

CV: Yeah.

PK: In terms of getting some attention and meeting people and opportunities to show your work, it was. . . .

CV: I thought it was really. . . . It was good. I was in with some incredible people. And, you know, like the work wasn't really selling that well, but it was being brought around to a lot of influential shows, and people were really looking at the work as though it could contribute or maybe it didn't contribute or whatever. I mean, people were looking at it. And so, as I said before, my activity wasn't fulfilling some very, very deep questions. After a while, it all seemed to be being at art school still, in the sense that, even though art interfaced with life in a very careerist way in New York, it was still incredibly surface, as far as I felt, and so I was disappointed. I was disappointed because my relationship, along with my kid, had left my life.

PK: That was in New York, right?

CV: That was in New York.

PK: You were living together in New York, is that right?

CV: Yeah, and we had the baby here in San Francisco and we went back to New York. And then, at the time, let

me see, my former girl friend had left with my kid to live with Michael Heizer.

PK: Oh, really?

CV: Yeah, Michael Heizer.

PK: Well, what's her name? She sounds like she should be identified. [laughs]

CV: I know. Her name is Sidney Renee Matisse Villa, and her mom was named Sharon Keyes, and so Michael Heizer was her stepfather for most of her formable years. And I probably should have gone to a shrink but I didn't go to a shrink, and so I started drinking and I started doing a lot of drugs. And so, with all of those issues sort of itemized the way I described them, I felt that it was just time to recoup and detox and do all of those kinds of things. So I came back to San Francisco the year the Mets won the pennant, the year the Nicks won the basketball championship, and it was a couple years after Joe Namath got the Jets into the Superbowl and won, and New York was an incredible place to be at that time and to come from, and it just seemed like it was the right time to leave. I came to San Francisco, and I got a part-time job at the San Francisco Art Institute working through Neighborhood Arts as a . . . A very, very important job for me. It was down at the Telegraph Hill Neighborhood Center, and I was supposed to be a liaison between the art institute and the black and Asian community, both of which occupied the projects down there on Bay and Francisco Street between, I believe, between Powell and . . . I forget the other street. At any rate, Telegraph Hill Center was where all the teenagers hung out, and I was supposed to be an artist-in-residence there. This meant I had to set up a studio there and kids could come in and paint—and draw—and I would give them lessons and the kids would then understand what art was all about, and they would understand what the school on the hill was all about, and it would be something for them to shoot at. It did a lot of things for me because I hadn't, at that time, interfaced with kids like this in such a casual manner. When I taught. . . I taught kids at Studio One many years ago, before that, in about 1960, '61, and I taught formal classes but I never taught informal classes like being an artist-in-residence. At any rate, what happened was that there were these Asian kids and these black kids. The black kids started coming in with these Afros and they were all looking like. . .

PK: This was '69 now, is that right?

CV: This was '69. And everyone was kind of looking like the Jackson Five, and kind of dressed that way, except there was a lot of dashikis and stuff. But there was this sense of pride that I was feeling in their elan—you know, like the elan that permeated through the projects. There was a sense of pride—of who they were and what they had to do. There was John [Carlessen] and the other African-American sports star, both of whom raised their fist in the black power salute. That was part of the pride, and I sensed that in these kids. They may not all have been so politically aware, but they knew they had something—or they knew they were about something. The Asian kids, most of whom were Chinese, had these cars that were. . . [laughing] You know, it seemed like every Asian-American kid at that time who owned a car customized his car to look. . . They had risers on them. In other words, the body of the cars went up from the wheels something like about two or three or four feet. And so you had these funny cars on these stilted wheels, and these guys had their own kind of haircuts, they had their own kind of shirts. And I remember I was talking a little bit about rasquache, earlier on. . .

PK: Yeah, right.

CV: . . . and so what I was seeing was rasquache, as expressed through two different communities, and I was utterly fascinated by it. And I said to myself, "Well, why couldn't this be a subject matter of my art?" Now, all of a sudden, it just opened a new door for me. Besides doing the kinds of spray paintings or the kinds of sculpture that I was doing, which was very, very minimal, I wanted to bring in older, traditional, non-European traditions into what I was doing, so as to amalgamate these traditions along with a modernist tradition to do an art about what that experience was—except in a very abstract way. I started looking at African statues. African statues. . . Well, I wanted to define Filipino. Since there was no Filipino art, really, I started looking around. I started looking at the Philippines: the racial composition of the people, the neighboring islands and continents of the Philippines, and also the Polynesian culture. And I wanted to draw from all of those influences as well as Melanesian, Polynesian influences. I started looking at the Philippines as being a place where at one time the original people of the Philippines were mostly Negrito. They were black. China was not that far away in terms of being a neighbor of the Philippines. There were always tales of Chinese pirates coming and taking their women and raping them and leaving kids and stealing. I mean there was always an intercourse of some sort with China. There were two large migrations which came from India going past the Philippines and on south of . . . in Southeast Asia. And religion came through there. The people came through there, left their mark. The Japanese came to the Philippines. The Spanish, of course, came to the Philippines. So there were all of these different stocks that came through the Philippines, and so to this day you could go to the Philippines and put fifty people in a room that were just right from the street and you could swear that the only thing that people had in common was the fact that they lived there and spoke in Tagalog, which is the national language. But you look at the faces and you can see the different strains—the European strains, the Asian strains, the Melanesian strains,

the Indian strains. You can just see this incredible mix.

PK: Okay. But how did that then change your art and, as you became more aware of this, more interested, how did you incorporate it into your art? What form did it come to take to embrace these ideas or express them?

CV: Well, first of all it came into painting. I remember one day I was painting in my studio and the windows were kind of not only nailed shut but painted shut and so there was really no ventilation. And I started painting with blood, and I started painting with acrylic, too. And I was still into Pollock and [Helen—Ed.] Frankenthaler and I was pouring paint and I was pouring blood. . . .

PK: Where'd you get the blood?

CV: Oh, I got it from Chinatown. I got it for a couple of bucks for a quart and I mixed it in with acrylic and. . . .

PK: That's cheaper than paint.

CV: Well, it sure was. [laughs] Much cheaper. The colors weren't as permanent as some of the other colors, but the idea that the piece . . . after a while the blood kind of faded and kind of grew into the piece by itself, making a totally different color than you thought of before. I mean, it was also a great lesson. I was using all of this different stuff. And I was putting in bones and I was putting in feathers. I was doing a lot of different things. . . .

PK: This was all in painting? Still on canvas, presumably? Still a flat surface.

CV: It was still on a flat surface, but I had started using an unstretched surface and staying with an unstretched surface because I felt that the kind of [stretcher, structure] that I wanted had to be that of a tapa cloth. And a lot of the art became actual ceremonial garments. And if you ask me what ceremony meant, ceremony was just a definition, not for anything specific. And the art, particularly the cloaks and the coats that I made later as they hung on the wall, became reminders of what was. I mean, I was used as a model for the size of the work, but I could never wear anything like that. You know, I could never wear anything like that. And so part of it being on the wall was . . . there developed a kind of a tension between you wanting to go up and take the damn thing down and actually wearing it. But since it was up on the wall as a decoration that was all part of the piece. And so I remember this is where I met Tom Seligman.

PK: I was going to ask you about that.

CV: Yeah, and Tom at the time. . . . I don't know what his position, you know, in the table of organization was there but I knew . . .

PK: At the de Young [Fine Arts Museum—Ed.]?

CV: At the de Young. . . .

PK: He was deputy director.

CV: He was the deputy director, but when I met him, when he first started, he was a curator. . . .

PK: Of the African ____.

CV: Yeah, curator of African [stuff].

PK: And he had just returned from Liberia, right?

CV: Yes! Big bracelets, dashikis, the whole shot.

PK: I remember.

CV: Right. [chuckles] And so I met Tom because there was a wonderful spirit in there, and he always wanted to turn me on to stuff and I was just very, very willing. Like I'd go into his office. He'd bring me down, not only to the workshops, but to some of the other collections, the African collections. And I became very, very intrigued with the idea of a lot of the figures and what they meant. And this was something that I wasn't getting in school. And [but] by myself, being in touch with this stuff as well as a lot of the Polynesian stuff, gave me enough inspiration—an inspiration to reinvent myself. See, the whole painting act after a while became a recuperation. It became my reinvention—the reinvention of myself—for those parts that weren't very clear to me. So in other words, it wasn't about authenticity or a set definition for what authentic meant, but it what it meant for me was the idea of becoming a Filipino-American.

PK: Was this your first real introduction to what they call tribal arts? It was through Tom, to a certain extent?

And having access to those collections at the fine arts museum?

CV: Well, it was a combination. Tom was a guy in position to let me in to see a lot of this stuff. But then there were libraries that were available, and those pieces that interested me were available through reproductions. And it was just amazing. It was amazing because I started really listening to the African-ness of jazz music. I mean, I was always aware of Jazz, I mean, since I was a little kid, but I was looking for something else. And now I was looking still for something else—a spiritual meaning of the music. Another layer of abstraction of the music as, you know, like listening to tunes or that kind of thing. I wanted to be inspired by someone, say, like John Coltrane. But not necessarily like naming my work for John Coltrane. I mean, it's not about that. You know what I mean?

PK: Um hmm.

CV: So I was looking at this art not necessarily to ape the art, or to copy the art, or to do anything like that. I wanted to get an essence or a flavor to be able to put in as an ingredient with this work. And finally I started looking at what I was putting in. Like I've known so many assemblage artists in my life that I was looking at them for all of these reasons. But then when I started putting all of these of things together à la assemblage—or assemblage [giving it the French pronunciation—Trans.]—all of the ingredients became very, very important. Like specific words or specific phrases in poetry stanzas which, . . . You know, like I wasn't thinking that I was making a poem necessarily, but it was made more complete because all of these ingredients became a context to themselves. I put bones in there. I put blood. I mixed it with paint. I go through a paint process which Jackson Pollock gets from the Zuni Indians, which Frankenthaler uses to her advantage. And so there was this whole thing of being. . . . You know, it's all like coming together or forming in this other way. And meanwhile, as objects, all of these things are forming their own life. So, you know, like I was ecstatic from about 1969 through about the mid-seventies. I mean, it was just a very ecstatic time. I mean, it was. . . . After a while it wasn't about careerism but all of a sudden all of these opportunities . . . I don't know what the hell

happened but all of these people started coming to my door. You know, I mean, it's weird.

PK: Well, you were doing something different and, if I may interrupt you, I have several questions that come to mind. Did you feel that your work was taking a different departure on its own terms? Did you feel that you had found something that was really your own? Was there anybody else you knew of or felt that was doing similar things for similar reasons?

CV: No. And it was both good and bad. It was good because I had to refer to myself. It was bad because I had to refer to myself.

PK: [chuckles]

CV: Because, since everything was on my own terms, it's very, very easy to become very, very tight-ass about where my references are coming from, or further references. Because I didn't want to copy. I did not want to copy anybody. I mean, I saw something really great. Ah, God, I'd just clench my fist, close my eyes real tight, and say, "Fuck it, I didn't see that." Or "That's a road that I don't want to go on." And so the thing is is that, you know, then I started making a few mistakes. I wasn't humble enough. I wasn't humble enough. I don't know, then the work was still okay for me, but at the same time, here I was trying to get that old feeling but then it wasn't being humble.

PK: Let's turn the tape over because I don't want to interrupt you, and this is a breaking point.

[Break in taping]

PK: Continuing the interview with Carlos Villa, this is session four, tape one, side B. Carlos, you just said something that was interesting. You had introduced this whole, really personal departure in your work where you felt it was really then becoming somehow authentic. This is the impression I get. That this really, then, matched what you were after.

CV: Yeah.

PK: And it involved some technical and media . . . the use of media in a different way—or materials, I guess I mean. So that was part of it, but it also had a great deal to do with—as I heard you—well, with yourself. With retrieving an idea through art of who you were. And tribal art contributed to this but, again, not imitation. And furthermore, I assume you were aware of like [Robert—Ed.] Rauschenberg and, here [in San Francisco?—Ed.], I'm thinking of Bruce Conner. . . .

CV: Yeah. Sure.

PK: . . . and there were others who, well, were certainly working formally in a related area. But you felt, I gather, no particular identification or real link with, say, Rauschenberg. Because in some of his work it's highly autobiographical. You know it's about him. . . .

CV: Yeah.

PK: . . . like when he was a kid and so forth, and his experiences. But you still felt that you were. . . . That that would be a false comparison. Is that right?

CV: Sure, that would be . . . it would also be a false identification. And since I've been teaching, you know, now for twenty-six years, I've noticed that with myself or with anyone else who's very, very young, you go through those pains and you get those same lessons, and it's the lessons of just copying rather than going to the essence. Like, okay, then you see this great Rauschenberg piece, "Oh God, where do I get a goat?" you know. And then paint it a different color and get it a different size tire and say it's really mine. [laughing] You know, I mean, that's. . . .

PK: So you think that your work, in a sense, has really nothing to do with Rauschenberg. What about the formalist examples?

CV: Oh, sure. Sure it does. You know, they preceded me in a certain way. I saw it before I did . . . I saw Rauschenberg's stuff before. But I'll say one thing though, that work did not give me permission to do my work. I saw the work. The work influences, but it does not give me permission to do that work.

PK: Well, would you describe it this way? That it provided a kind of vocabulary for you, that there are slightly different languages? You said, "Ah, this could work for my interest and what I think I want to try to do?"

CV: Well, formally in terms of assembling certain kinds of things. I mean, you know, like we can go all the way back to [Kurt—Ed.] Schwitters, you know, like going through the garbage can and then retrieving all that has been lost and thrown away in life, to be able to make incredible . . . to be able to conceive of these beautiful visions. I mean, that's where Rauschenberg comes from. I mean, I like that line of thinking. I love that line of thinking and I love the context that it's in but it wasn't my own context.

PK: What about Bruce Conner, whom you certainly knew? I mean, he. . . .

CV: Bruce. . . . [laughs] Bruce is an incredible genius. I mean, to this day I think that the two best shows that I've ever seen in my *entire life* in terms of architecture, in terms of concept, in terms of everything, was Bruce. . . . One was Bruce Conner's show at the Batman Gallery in 1959. Billy Yarmark and him painted the gallery walls black and he had these beautiful pieces just coming out of the wall with these incredible pin-light spots on the pieces, and there was this incredible sisal floor. I mean, it was fucking elegant. I mean, I'd not seen. . . . I don't care how many people think in terms of installation. I mean, Rebecca Horn, any fucking body. Bruce fucked my brain.

PK: [laughing] his must have been something!

CV: It was. And the other one was [Alexander—Ed.] Calder's retrospective in the Guggenheim. Because, as you know, about the planes and that. About the viewing planes in the Guggenheim, and pieces hanging from the ceiling. I mean, that was Calder's place. I mean, the entire structure of Frank Lloyd Wright and Calder—I mean them being like colleagues as it were, coming from the same age. It was just like, hey, all in the family, you know. I mean, it hit. It was perfect. For me, you know. I mean it was perfect. I mean, I've seen great objects in architectural spaces that knocked me out, but just in total context those two just fucked my brain. Bruce Conner, fucking genius.

PK: But. . . . But, I infer, that you acknowledge this and you would acknowledge certain similarities from a sort of formal standpoint—use of materials and so forth—these connections. But that basically you feel your art is about something quite different. Is that right?

CV: I think so. I felt that I was in territory that I didn't know, that all of a sudden I was discovering for the very first time, and I didn't actually have to refer to books but just refer—or slides, as I did as an art history student. All I had to do was do. It was the same kind of question and response and action feeling that I had when I first entered California School of Fine Arts. I mean, you know, like everything I did became art. Or it became an object of contemplation.

PK: Well, at what point did you determine—if this indeed is the case—that this archaeology, if you will. . . .

CV: It is.

PK: . . . excavating the past and trying to locate some spirit, some identity, in the other—to use a kind of fancy

word. . . .

CV: Sure.

PK: At what point did you understand or acknowledge or decide that this was the proper subject of *your* art. Not necessarily the proper subject of *all* art, but for Carlos Villa this gave meaning, resonance, and authenticity to making art? Is that a fair. . . .

CV: Yeah, I think that's great. And what comes to my mind as you say that is that I got to a point of where I cared enough to get on another level where I didn't have to care. And I just opened up for more. It was like being able to welcome all of this stuff. And everything else was residue.

PK: So you said, "Ah-ha, eureka! This is why I'm doing this."

CV: Yeah, yeah. It was. . . .

PK: It must have been very heady. Very, very incredibly exciting for you when that just came together.

CV: Well, I like to think of the time when the windows were nailed and painted shut and all I could smell was the blood and that acrylic paint amalgamating and coagulating, and it was retching—my stomach was retching—and I just said, "This is what the fuck art's supposed to be about." That, I think, was the best way that I could describe that feeling. I mean, my head was very, very light. My stomach was nervous and retching from these smells. And I just came to that point: "God, this is it!"

PK: So for you the making of art—the experience of making the art—was heightened, was punched up. . . .

CV: Yeah.

PK: . . . really by the physical. And by this physical reaction which some people would, I suppose, describe as very unpleasant, but that somehow for you, within that state of mind and in that circumstance, that gave it, what, a validity. . . .

CV: Yeah, it's a kind of chemistry. I mean, like I know about. . . . You know, like when I was younger going up to my cousin Leo's paintings or going up to a Clyfford Still painting, or going to a totem pole, a really good totem pole. Or some of the stuff like Tom showed me, like a Dogon dancer. You know, his film on Dogon dancers. And these great things that he was showing me and these beautiful sculptures. There was a scale in those older pieces—and even the good newer pieces—that had something to do with a kinesthetic response. There's a kinesthetic response as you see an object. I mean, it's the same thing when you look at a five-by-five-by-five-foot cube by Tony Smith. I mean, you're confronted by this volume, this object, in a very primal way when you look at the Tony Smith thing. When you look at an African thing, or anything that comes from a traditional culture—older traditional culture—there's that and something else. There's that and something else. And so when you come to a totem pole, I don't know exactly what that is. But I'm confronted by this volume and this something else. But dealing with painting, a lot of it. . . . There's certain physical properties, but at the same time everything becomes so abstract. And I know that when I see great painting and I feel that energy coming right out of it, like those early Pollocks and stuff, that time investment and those strokes and all of those kinds of . . . those brushstrokes and the choice of paint and all of those sensations just come out in a very, very specific kind of way. It's all the same but on different terms.

PK: Do you think—sort of to explore this idea a little further. . . .

CV: Sure.

PK: You said that you look at a piece of African tribal art—maybe New Guinea, whatever the culture may be, whatever the source may be—and that you may see—or a totem pole I think is what you said—you can deal with it in aesthetic terms and respond, and respond profoundly, to that, and perhaps in certain ways as you might to. . . . Oh, I don't know, Mark DiSuvero or [Donald—Ed.] Judd or somebody like this, which we were talking about . . .

CV: Sure.

PK: High modernist, Western art. But there's something more. So this is what I want to move on to. You said there was something more and is it. . . . Well, I suppose I should just ask you to maybe probe a little further. What is that something more? Because it seems that you in your career have attached yourself. . . . You decided the other wasn't enough. You attached yourself to that something more.

CV: Right. Well, it's a little. . . . That "more," when I say more, it's not defined. It's not defined. I'm not of those specific cultures, so how could I know?

PK: Right ___ observe that, right.

CV: Yeah. How could I know? I mean, even if theorists and anthropologists told me how these art pieces or these ceremonial pieces fit together in this incredible ritual. You know, like they could tell me that and I don't care what color they are, they can tell me all of that, but if I don't have a connection, I'm sorry I don't. But the thing is is that I was oriented to see Judd, I was oriented to react to diSuvero, I was oriented to act to a [John—Ed.] Chamberlain—or to a Stella or to a Noland—to any one of those great people or to even these closet-attic [laughs] kinds of visions that Bruce Conner comes up, came up with.

PK: That's well-put. Closets, attics, basements.

CV: [laughing] Yeah, I know. Basement space internalized. I mean, all of that stuff I was oriented to see. I mean, I've seen movies, I've, you know. . . .

PK: But, you know, it's interesting. Within—I can't say mainstream and mention in the same breath Bruce Conner, I guess—but nonetheless, in a sense he represents an alternative modernism that's very much part of our Western art history. . . .

CV: Sure, yeah.

PK: . . . and yet *completely* different from these minimalists, these formalists, who are operating in New York. I mean, as far as I'm concerned, almost polar opposites.

CV: Yeah.

PK: And yet now from our perspective we can see that, in fact, these are different manifestations of Western art as it developed.

CV: Yeah.

PK: Nonetheless, would you agree that Bruce Conner is looking—at least looking in the direction—of this something other that appeals to you and that we're talking about? Is he closer to you?

CV: Well, for me Bruce, in terms of the pieces that we're talking about, is like [Edgar Allan—Ed.] Poe abbreviated. You know, abstract Gothic or something. I mean, it feels that way. I mean, it's. . . .

PK: Yeah, interesting.

CV: You know, it's horrific. It has very, very horrific implications, his work. And, when I say Poe, I mean, I'm not just throwing it out. I mean, when you read it, you can really feel that sensation when you see those tar babies and all of this stuff like that. And when you saw it in 1959, you know, "Like wow! This guy's something else! It's really saying something." And so it would get to a point of unknown. Of unknown. Maybe some of these African pieces said that to me in a visceral and in a mental way, but, still though, the thing is that there's a difference between looking at a New Guinea piece as opposed to looking at a tar baby in a high chair with nylon stockings all over. [laughing]

PK: Well, yeah. Okay, what's that difference? I think it's worth—though I don't want to waste this interview on this kind of speculation. . . .

CV: [chuckling] It's great! It's fun.

PK: . . . but the reason I'm willing to do it, if you're willing. . . .

CV: Sure.

PK: . . . is that I sense somehow this gets in a very central way to what you're about.

CV: Yeah.

PK: You know, just, I sense it. I don't know exactly. But it has to do with a concern for social and cultural issues that can be accessed. And you can say all you want about form in sort of Jungian shared blah, blah, blahs, and about what the spirituality of modernist art, but that is speculative in the extreme. . . .

CV: Sure. . .

PK: . . . and almost *none* of us, like [_____—Ed.] [Veronis?], will say, oh yes, I connect with this and that [through even Rothko].

CV: [laughing] Right.

PK: It's a different way of looking, and it seems to me, Carlos, that you understand that, appreciate that, but were drawn to sources that release something else. And *why* do they release something else?

CV: Well, they release something else because, well, it goes back to the idea of origins, I think. Number one, Bruce is from Topeka, Kansas. . . .

PK: [laughs]

CV: . . . and I'm from San Francisco. I imagine from his name, Bruce Conner, I think there's a bit of Irish there, there's maybe some English. I'm not sure.

PK: Right.

CV: You know, I can't even speculate on what he's coming from. The trickster in him reminds me of the best of what I have read or [am] familiar with in terms of Celtic mythology.

PK: Right, right. Good point.

CV: I mean, there's something about that. And in his work he's invested that whiteness—the Irish whiteness maybe, if I can speculate—into his work. He's invested his whiteness in the sense of, well, who the hell has attics, for Christ sake? You know, who the hell has these great basements with these fantastic spider webs and objects and things like that? And why am I getting this incredible Victoriana kind of memorabilia and dust? Where am I going to get that? That certainly wasn't given to me living in a basement over in the Tenderloin as a kid. I mean, I saw rats, I saw mice, I saw garbage cans. There were things that were of interest to me that would not have maybe interest[ed] Bruce. His culture, I think, was defined. And through his investigation—visual and cultural investigation—through his subconscious and to the objects that he's made, he's made his own icons. I couldn't go to those icons because I didn't have . . . unless it was a class project. [laughs] You know, I had to go to my own. I mean, there was an incredible. . . . When I was back in New York I met Ornette Coleman, and we sat down . . . we were talking about . . . he was talking about. . . . There was a couple of people that I was around and they were talking about Ornette being part of this gallery, the Park Place Gallery, and he was going to be the musical director. And so we just started talking and stuff. And Ornette . . . he was just very, very specific about everything he said. He wasn't jivin', he wasn't putting anybody around or anything. He just came in, he sat down, and, boy, his eyes were just straight ahead. When you spoke with him he was, bang, specific. And so we kind of talking about, you know, like where we were coming from in art school and he was talking about music school. And to this day I'll always remember what he said. I mean, it's *just so perfect*. He said when he was in music school, they taught him all they knew, but they didn't teach him what *he* knew.

PK: Hmm. Received wisdom, received sensibility? So would you say that, then, has been the quest for you through your art, to a large degree? Is that right? To understand who you are, but more than that what you know rather than what Elmer Bischoff or some other nice person. . . .

CV: Sure. Well, it's been a battle for myself, because there are so many great people. You know, there are so many great people, there are so many great things. But the thing is, though, is that. . . . And there are things that you can pay tribute to. But the thing I think that's very, very important is I believe that you have to go back to where *you* feel origins are. I can't be even specific about what those origins are. Can't be very specific about that, because I can't speak for everyone but you have to go back to those origins.

PK: Let me ask you this. This, of course, gets to be open-ended because it's so interesting and so important, I think. We've talked off the tape quite a bit about these things, but what I would like to know, try to understand, is this: That you have adopted, it seems to me. . . . Or I should ask the question, rather than stating it. Have you adopted a non-Western identity that is reinforced by objects, images, ideas, expressions from any number of non-Western cultures even though they may have absolutely nothing to do with you and, in fact, your own? For that matter, how much are you truly a product of even the Asian-American or Filipino—or, I mean, *Asian*—or Filipino history. But does this come close to the truth, that basically your identity is a much broader one—you know, encompassing, embracing the whole wonderful—what shall we say?—source material of non-Western imagery, but as long as it isn't western? In other words, that is, us and them? Is there a bit of "us and them"?

CV: No, I don't think so. You know, I feel like I'm just maybe one person that's been really lucky to be in a position that I've been in, in which I can experiment, I can use myself and my facilities as this laboratory. I'm Filipino-American, and being Filipino-American means that I am an American of Filipino descent. I am an Asian-American. But it doesn't say just Filipino. It doesn't say, like, I'm just Asian, you know. I'm Asian-American—two very, very different. . . . It's a very, very different experience. I mean, it's, well, neither fish nor fowl. I mean, it's something like in between. and so it's unsettling, because you tend to ask questions because you're on the fence. And here we're talking about comparisons and they're always binary. They're always like, "Okay, if you

aren't black you're white." "If you're this, you're that," you know. And so that was my [tic, tick] in growing up. Even though we know of this incredible value—this great gray value scale. . . .

PK: Yeah.

CV: . . . it's never. . . .

[Break in taping]

PK: Continuing the interview with Carlos Villa, this is session four, July 10, 1995, tape two, side A. We were having, I thought, a rather interesting discussion on some issues that, well, I don't just sense, I know are pretty important to you in your work and even your self-identity, and I was asking—I'll let you sort of respond to what I was saying during the break—but basically I think it had to do, as much as anything else, with the notion that "hyphenated Americans"—any American—in trying to locate a sense of a history elsewhere, which is perfectly legitimate, but very often, then, can fabricate something that's brand new and spiritually is true but perhaps historically is appropriated. Is that accurate?

CV: Yeah. Well, I think it's very, very important. I think street. . . . You were stating before a little bit about street scholarship. All of these means—family photographs, interviews, casual interviews with your parents or with relatives—allow you the chance or the nurturing that you can. . . . God, you could be as solid as anyone with this knowledge. [chuckling] And culture, I think, becomes very, very important. I think that we all realize and we all know the idea that history only belongs to the victors. Okay, here we are in America. When America was colonized, it was about the English coming over, and then there was these indentured slaves—not slaves, but servants—and then there was this indigenous population that was around. Well, we all know those histories. We all know history about slavery, etc., etc. Well, at any rate, maybe what I'm getting at is the point that these people, who were the English who came over themselves, were either part of some great company from England or some great corporation, and they were establishing franchises on this land, bringing in these other people to work in the company and these people who were working in the company, and even the people that were English, completely became American. I mean, I see them becoming American. The people who didn't have history were the people that were working for these other people, right? [laughs] That's the way I see it. And to strip someone of their culture, or to tell them that they don't have a culture, or that they don't have a real history, is to, well, I mean they become completely faceless. They become victimized in a lot of ways because they don't have that fortification, they don't have that nurturing system that others are allowed to have. I mean, it's just amazing how many holidays we have here in America, and you wonder, like before 1930 or so, how many people of color, say, or how many people on the margins could really believe in or buy into—wholly—all of those institutions. I mean, they did because it was around, but at the same time there weren't any black faces on any of the greeting cards. I mean, there weren't any. . . . To hear Amos and Andy on the radio. . . . [laughing] I mean, after a while I was looking for all of the servants in all of the movies to see if I could really be part of this movie, you know. But when I'd pay to go to see an MGM movie I'd want to see a Chinese servant or something, somebody that looked like me.

PK: Did you like to go to Charlie Chan movies?

CV: Charlie Chan was amazing, but there was just something very mysterious about him. He was an icon. There wasn't any humanizing kinds of things. I could have liked Charlie Chan, but at the same time there just wasn't, because I didn't really. . . . I heard him on the radio more often than I saw him on the screen. When I saw him on the screen there wasn't anything very human about him. You know what I mean?

PK: Um hmm.

CV: It was like looking at a playing card or something.

PK: Well, of course, we have two things going on here at least. Which is right; this is exactly what we should have going on. And we're talking about Carlos Villa as an artist—your career and your experience—and we're also talking about issues that are important to you, your identity and search for a history—an art history specifically—and there's no question that that's. . . . And I hope we'll be able to touch a little bit on that later. But I think one thing that I would like to try to clear up—and this, of course, is just your perspective on it—and that is the function of art as a vehicle, an agency, to provide identity. And this is about as current as any topic right now can possibly get. . . .

CV: Sure, absolutely.

PK: . . . and there's no answer, really, to this, one way or another, but it has to do with efficacy, I suppose, and maybe even self-delusion. I may suggest in some cases that it's an equivalence—that making images finally are equivalents, constructing images. Well, I'm not the one that should talk about this. You know the direction that this is going.

CV: Sure.

PK: And I'm thinking very much about the—what am I looking for?—I won't say serpent, that means too much, but certainly the prominence, predominance now of identity-based art in, certainly, the art schools and colleges and with, especially, younger artists, I think.

CV: Yeah.

PK: I think of you as one of the pioneers, by the way.

CV: Ah! Thank you.

PK: And if you go to the CAA [California A_____ A_____—Ed.], you go to any of the conferences, this seems to be almost the *main* interest, in my recent experience. Something has happened, and I guess I'm asking you for your. . . . You and I aren't going to be able to dispatch the issue on this tape. . . .

CV: Sure.

PK: . . . but asking you for your observations on what that is really all about and finding the efficacy of using art to establish something that is important and real.

CV: I think art is boundless. Art has no horizon, for me. I mean, the horizons are incredibly temporal, and I feel that art now is very, very exciting because. . . . You know, you talk about efficacy, and I think that art, in its boundless state, can provide street scholarship—or scholarship. It can invite opinion, it could invite many of these things that had been completely submerged in a lot of people for such a long time, and it could come out in so many different kinds of forms. It could come out in documentary form, it could come out in abstract forms, it could come out in poetic terms. And I think that the artist—the artist/cultural worker (whoever they may be, whatever their color, whatever community they come from)—can talk about the idea of artists as conduits to their communities and from their communities. As opposed to just being the documenters—or the specialists. They become members of the community. And I think that we have an incredible vision here, and it's a vision, and hopefully a collaborative action, and a network of actions that are happening at this point where, because of all of these voices, we're getting some sense or some sensation of our personal history and our history as it interfaces with each other, and as it becomes a landscape. And I think we're at a very, very exciting time right now. Because I think that at this point, besides African-Americans exploring their blackness or Asian-Americans exploring their brownness, or Latinos. You know, like going through whatever spectrum, what incredible spectrum they are about. The rest of the people can start exploring their whiteness—and what they've invested in terms of loss, in terms of gain, in terms of vision. I mean, they have a history also. There are so many artists that I'm in touch with, particularly in my class, *Worlds in Collision*, the art history class, when they start talking about, "Well, I don't have a history. I'm white. I'm in America." I said, "Are you fuckin' serious? I mean, you're not looking back far enough. You're not looking close enough."

PK: That's a very disturbing comment, that they . . .

CV: It's a truism.

PK: . . . assume being an American means no history.

CV: Yeah. Well, that's it. You know, like July Fourth is for firecrackers. There are no rites of passages.

PK: Right.

CV: America has gotten rid of, and at the same time not provided, any rites of passages by which anyone can be proud of who they are, where they come from, any way of remembering. And I think that maybe they could start being inspired by some of these people who are on the margins—gays, lesbians, whoever—looking into those ethos.

PK: You know, I'm going to make. . . . I can't resist this; I have to inject this.

CV: Sure.

PK: I personally don't believe—and this is not an interview with me. . . .

CV: Sure.

PK: . . . but I personally do not believe that the Fourth of July or the War of Independence from those oppressors over there in Great Britain, by whoever happened to be over here, is a white-American historical marker. It's an American marker, but, see, even in our talking about it, you interestingly—as I heard it—cast this as something

that the white Americans should embrace. They are Americans; therefore the Fourth of July is their holiday. To be American, to be part of this country, no matter if you've been up here or down there, these are the markers.

CV: Yeah.

PK: And don't you agree with that?

CV: Sure. I mean, I've grown up with the best . . . you know, in the midst of the most poignant celebrations, you know, having lived as long as I have. You know, I've seen Christmas in. . . .

PK: Were you raised as a Christian, by the way?

CV: Yeah, Catholic. I was an altar boy.

PK: That's right. You told me that.

CV: And that was an incredible rite of passage for me. Being in the army was a rite of passage.

PK: Where were you an altar boy? Let me just ask that.

CV: On Pine and Octavia there's a small Japanese Catholic mission called St. Francis Xavier. It's right across from the Buddhist temple and. . . .

PK: [chuckles] Perfect.

CV: Yeah, beautiful. [chuckles]. It's a wonderful small chapel, and I have the greatest, most fondest memories of being an altar boy and having studied to be an altar boy, and, finally, when that came about I thought, I mean, I thought I was on some kind of level. I mean, it was just a wonderful thing. I mean, I don't think that there are those kinds of things that are available to most people now—or they have been devalued.

PK: Um hmm, I understand.

CV: You know, many of the traditions have been not only deconstructed but incredibly devalued. I mean, by looking at all of this culture now, it's maybe much easier to understand what happened in Polynesia and why you'd have to go to the Victoria and Albert Museum to see all of the Polynesian stuff, as opposed to just going to Hawaii and seeing that stuff. Or going over to England to see the Elgin Marbles. I mean, that's out of sight, too. Or to go over to the Louvre. Or go to the Vatican and see what they have. I mean, it's truly amazing. All of that, along with our loss of identity. You know, like, it's the same form letter, as it were.

PK: That's very interesting. I think of ethnic identity as a subject for art. Or gender identity, sexual identity. And this is where we are now; it's simply the fact. [In this, And] I'm not making a value judgment, but it does have all kinds of interesting . . . raises all kinds of interesting questions along the lines of what you're saying. What I would like to ask you, what strikes me as interesting, is that you have in America a secularized society, whereas you say those things that have carried tradition and identity for so many centuries—religion, being one of them, nationalism is another one, a sense of country, of being of community—perhaps worldwide, but certainly in the U.S., much of that has been devalued or lost. And you have—I don't even want to say a generation—but a number of people here in this country that are cynical about what they view as American traditions—which are still imports, or constructs—to try to invent something for us to have. They're cynical about that. They tend very often to not be believers. Even Jews. Very few of them are true believers and yet they somehow manage to hold on to the form of it, the emblematic quality. But what strikes me as interesting is the invocation, images, and ceremonies and structures from other—and sometimes even imagined—histories and societies that then are embraced and become the linchpins of, like in, let's say, Chicano art.

CV: Yeah.

PK: And the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. Or Frida [Kahlo—Ed.]—she's a religion herself. I don't want to go on about this, because you know exactly what I'm talking about.

CV: Yeah.

PK: But how do you respond to it? You, better than I, have watched . . . it's a phenomenon.

CV: Well, now I feel that we can use these things as currency. You know, there isn't just one lingua franca; there's many lingua francas. But the thing is, is that now I have a feeling that we have a phenomenon that goes beyond gallery system and even beyond Internet.

PK: [chuckles]

CV: Because this subject matter becomes personal. As it becomes more personal, it becomes documents. They become documents. They become like a language of modernity—coming from modernism whether anybody likes it or not. It's coming from abstraction and modernism, and we're able to communicate these ideas and these values through a lot of these structures. And I think it's very, very interesting because all of a sudden it isn't about economy as being a fulcrum of authenticity. The objects themselves become the real thing. It isn't the money that supports it, necessarily. I mean, when I go to Museum of Modern Art [San Francisco?—Ed.] and I see Gary [Garrells] talking about the way the collection is going to go, and his knowledge of ethnic communities, and saying, "Well, those people would rather—"those people," quote. . . .

PK: [gesturing toward tape recorder?—Ed.] Quote! Quote!

CV: Yeah. . . . would rather be doing production in their own communities." I mean, he's only spoken, I think, with Coco [Fusco], Guillermo Gomez-Peñ a, and Edgar Heap of Birds, because he had some kind of interaction with them up in Walker Art Center. But, and so these people are action-performance, ritual kinds of people. Edgar is that, and he does actual objects also, but the thing is, though, is that he gets his sense that. . . . [laughs] Well, you know, like they don't necessarily want to be in the Museum of Modern Art. They would rather just do their thing and then go back to their own communities.

PK: I understand. It doesn't have to be either/or does it?

CV: Well, he put it in a context by which his path becomes a clearer one, as to where to go to. I mean, it's a much more linear one. It's like okay after Jasper Johns we have Christopher [Wool], and after Christopher Wool, well, maybe we'll bring in. . . . I mean, there's the knee-bone connected to the. . . . You know, I mean, it goes on like that, but then, I don't know, I don't happen to see it. I happen to view the Museum of Modern Art at this point right now as its own repertory. And I think that when I see communities make up their own network of art—I mean, their own network of art and artists—it's wonderful to see that kind of interchange. I think that it becomes really healthy. I mean, I find it most stimulating because these people in the alternative museums and galleries such as SOMAR or Mexican Museum operate on a much smaller budget than the Museum of Modern Art.

PK: Right.

CV: And there's this. . . . Okay, I just spoke about *two* different communities—but that interface every once in a while, that do collaborative things. But then Museum of Modern Art is basically on its own, is basically, it seems to me, to be a satellite of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and like there's this circuit, as it were, of mainstream art palaces.

PK: So you don't think that that's changed all that much in the last few years?

CV: No, I don't. . . .

PK: Mainstreamism remains mainstreamism, for the most part, and. . . .

CV: The collectors, you see. . . .

PK: . . . not very open, I suppose.

CV: Not very open because you have a collector society, and you have a lot invested there and it's its own game, I think. It's a very enclosed kind of game.

PK: Well, you know, I have to apologize because I sort of dragged us—and I certainly have found this illuminating in talking about these big issues—but I realize that I've dragged you away from Carlos, in a sense. So I'd like to, at this point, turn it back to you—and specifically to you—in terms of your own experience. And one of the things that maybe it's a sort touchstone or an event that we can turn to productively, and that is that performance you did. Well, in fact, we have the video in the Archives.

CV: Yeah, with Tom.

PK: Yeah, right. And maybe would that be an interesting thing to talk about a little bit to just touch base?

CV: I think that it's an incredible touchpoint. I have to apologize for getting so wordy there. . . .

PK: No, no, no, not at all, because I'm the one that introduced the subjects, but now with that by way of the framework, let's. . . .

CV: Okay, well, I think the collaboration with Tom came from. . . . Tom Seligman, we're talking about. Tom Seligman had shown me this fabulous footage that he had gotten from Africa, and it was about the Dogons, and they were performing a very, very specific ceremony, and he was very, very proud of showing this to me.

[chuckles] And I was really proud about, you know, being a recipient of all this great information, because Tom was very, very passionate about it. So we were talking about all of this, and he had mentioned a book of tales of Ogotomelli. . . .

PK: What's it called?

CV: *Tales of Ogotomelli*. He's a Dogon elder.

PK: Do you know how to spell that? Ogotomelli?

CV: O-g-o-t-o-m-e-l-l-i.

PK: Thanks.

CV: Or I think it's with one "l." But, at any rate, he was a Dogon elder who, in a series of interviews, had just spoken about the cosmogeny of the Dogons, their belief systems. Just this incredible. . . . You know, like it just makes sense when you start looking at all of their architecture, their artifacts, their art, their expressions—which includes dancing and even singing—to see how interconnected all of these things were, and it just completely fascinated me. So I had read the book and I had done this performance over at The Farm in 1980. The Farm is located in San Francisco, on Army at [Patrelle, Petrel], and the videotape that you have is probably only eight to thirteen minutes long. And it's an abstract of the actual performance, which took over an hour and a half, and what you see on the videotape is a series of slides that was taken by a friend of mine, Lars Speyer. . . .

PK: Oh, yeah.

CV: . . . who had put it through . . . all of his footage, or slides, onto two carousel slide projectors, and then he had a synthesizer that he used which allowed all of the images to dissolve into one another. And so that was videotaped, and we had some actual musicians who played along with the tape.

[Break in taping]

PK: Okay here we are, going again. This is continuing our fourth session with Carlos Villa and this is tape two, side B.

CV: Okay, well, there were a number of things that happened at that performance/action. I was amalgamating my Tai Chi as part of the movements, along with many other kinds of ingredients. I spoke about ingredients, and there were many, many ingredients here. Here it was in the open. Here it was in the middle of a farm which had animals. Here we had twelve conga players we had playing congas as well as a [Kuntang] player. Kuntang is an ancient Philippine instrument. There was an electric guitar. Leo Valledor, my cousin, was playing saxophone. And Tom [Seligman—Ed.] was interacting with me as a very major part of the piece, because there were parts in which I would walk up to him and he almost acted. . . . Because of his stature and because of the interchange that we did, he became a permission-giver. And so it's very, very interesting to look at that tape, because as I refer to him during different parts of the piece, it's almost like amalgamating the idea of . . . or synthesizing the idea of being an altar boy—him being a priest, me getting permission from him as a museum director and as a person of information and me referring to him. And then me going actually out into the piece and painting myself and then putting that residue—or fragments—onto a canvas. And so, meanwhile, the backdrop was . . . there were two movies that were playing simultaneously besides the music and the interaction of the people. The two movies that were played simultaneously was Hans Namuth's movie on Jackson Pollock [_____—Ed.], and then the other one was [*Le Maitre Fou*], and it was a Belgian film documentary of this tribe that was in Africa who go. . . . You know, like every day you see them and you see them smiling and you see them laughing and you see them just being the tourists' delight. [laughing] And then, meanwhile, every once a month or something they go off into the dense jungle which. . . . Many of these men are part of a cult that goes into trances, and when they go into these trances they all of a sudden become their oppressor. Like one person who works in the ditches becomes a witch—not a witch doctor; that's so awful to say. . . .

PK: [laughs]

CV: . . . but becomes a medicine man of sorts. He becomes. . . .

PK: A shaman, maybe.

CV: He becomes a shaman. He mixes up a stew that's made from dog, and it's a dog stew. And they take this and then these different members of this cult become their oppressors. There's a corporal who's part of the guard. He becomes the inspector-general. And they act out all of these roles under a trance. And so here's this incredible cartoon of all things that are happening. I mean, it's like being in the ghetto on Saturday night. You know, what it is. That's what it is. That's the closest contemporary reference that I can think of. And so we had

that film going on at the same time. So all of these layers are happening. Meanwhile, I was talking about audience participation. Well, it was all part of something that we call, in Filipino, a [conyal, pinyal], which is a celebration. And all the people, later on, were brought into [the farm, The Farm], where a cousin of mine had prepared something like thirty fish, and we all ate and we all drank and we all shared. And later on there was some poetry reading. That was just part of an event.

PK: So it was really a social event.

CV: It's community.

PK: Community, a social . . . a society.

CV: Yes, and the society wasn't just all Filipino. I mean, there were Bonnie Sherk, certainly a lot of the people who were with The Farm, there were friends of mine who were artists, there was family. There was family, there was nonfamily, but we were all family. And so it became this. . . . You know, like all together like you talk about a talisman, well, that's exactly how I view art in a way. Information, maybe information sources, icons, communication, making, being.

PK: But clearly with a social function. I mean, I think that's now manifestly there from what you say. Was this a unique performance or did you do other performances?

CV: Well, it was the first time I took off my clothes in front of my relatives, in front of anyone.

PK: Now, see, that's self-revelation is what that is.

CV: I mean, I didn't even know I was going to do that until that time. I just said to myself, "I can't go on in Levis."

PK: [laughs]

CV: And I surprised the hell out of everyone including myself, I mean, and so it was. . . .

PK: But it seemed appropriate. That was the appropriate thing to do, right?

CV: And Tom later on said. . . . I believe Moira Roth was interviewing Tom, and she said, "Was taking off clothes African?" And he said, "Absolutely not." And so maybe what I was doing, it was just something like . . . it's just very much what you said. You know, like it was revelation, it was being open to everything. There were no secrets.

PK: You know what strikes me about this. . . . See, that's very, if not American, it's very [Western, western].

CV: Ah, totally, totally.

PK: And, I mean, in [comparison, ___ison], because this has to do with a sense of the individual, with the self. Certainly in this country maybe to some degree that's really what we're really all about. And so the thought of the community and of the tribe is all very, very important. . . .

CV: Yeah.

PK: . . . but, finally, when Americans get hold of it. . . . You get a sense of behaving very much like a [Westerner, westerner] and an American, because you relate to the society very much in terms of maybe becoming vulnerable but sharing yourself. Saying, "This is who I am. Me, I, self, I." Do you think that's true?

CV: Sure. Well, it's that and reinvention. That and recuperation. And all of it, the whole event, was syncretic. I mean, here we all were. We did it. [laughs]

PK: Again, was that singular and unique? Was that _____ then, or did you do other performance work? I mean, I don't know.

CV: Well, performance/action work. There's a whole listing of things that I did that doesn't look like. . . . It doesn't look like a performance artist's resume, but I did actions that performed, or that was done in correlation and in collaboration with many other people. The [symposia, *Symposia*] was an action that I think goes beyond performance. I did a couple of performances [chuckles] about the Manila gorilla. *Manila Gorilla* was actually pretty funny. In the two cases that I did it. . . . I did performances up at . . . one in Sacramento and one in San Jose at the galleries that were representing me then. And we constructed cages of bamboo, and I got the gallery dealers to rent gorilla costumes for me, one a little bit more elaborate than the other, but, nonetheless they were gorilla costumes. I remember one as being a lot more funkier and a lot more cheezier than the more

elaborate one that this other gallery dealer did. But nonetheless they were gorilla suits that I put myself into, and the whole scenario was that the gallery dealers would introduce me to different clients and different people who were looking, who were there at the gallery, and then would give me a glass of wine and some peanuts and they would put me in a cage. And soon everyone in the gallery would come to the cage to look at me, and I had a Polaroid camera around my neck and I would take pictures of everyone and give the pictures to the people outside of the cage. [laughs] And meanwhile the gallery dealer was introducing me as the Gorilla from Manila. And so did that.

Did another one called *Doin' the Do*, and it was. . . . I went to a place called the California Wig Shop and tried on all the wigs. And so I became a flaming redhead, I became a hippie, I became. . . . [laughs] You know what I mean? There were just all of these things that I became. And then there were community. . . . You know, like beyond the performance kinds of actions, there were more collaborative actions that I had done.

PK: What would be an important example?

CV: Other Sources. Other Sources, in which I was a curator—a curator and director of a project. San Francisco Art Institute artists. . . . There was an enclave; I forgot what the hell they were called. But they had asked Jim Pomeroy, Phil Linhares, all of these people. They all got together and then they asked me to do a show for the Bicentennial, 1976. And so I've not had any curatorial experience and I was just about to just kiss it off but then Rolando Castellon said, "You've got to do it because it's going to allow more people in the community that don't get a chance to show a chance to show, so why don't you do it?" And so all of a sudden the plans that they had given me had completely escalated in my mind to something, I would say, probably more formidable. So I started thinking of a catalogue. No one had ever done a catalog in which mainstream writers went head-to-head with street scholars, artists from marginalized communities, talking about the validity of third-world art. And we had Alfred Frankenstein. We had Tom Albright talking about stuff. We had Fred Martin talking about stuff. We had Rupert Garcia talking about stuff. Alan Gordon. And there was an incredible forum that went on in this catalogue. It was like about three, four hundred pages of poetry, of a directory of artists, reproductions. And then at the San Francisco Art Institute we had a three-to-four-day celebration that showcased food from all of these different cultures. We had dancers. We had people doing skits. Winston Tong. Not skits, but actual small performances. We had Taiko drummers. We had Polynesian dancers. We had Kaisek Wong doing an incredible procession in which we used the architecture of the school, and he used these beautiful gossamer-like silks, and we had an orchestra using ancient Chinese instruments along with synthesizers. Just, you know, for about four days straight. And somebody had mentioned that, "Hey, wow, looking at all this stuff is just like a window into the future," and I couldn't. . . . I was so into the project I didn't think about it in those terms. I just wanted to provide a time and a place in which all of this stuff could happen all at one time. And, amazingly, I did.

And it was the first time I'd ever gotten and requested funds for such an event, and I got fifty thousand bucks, and that was for the publication and everything and that was amazing. I mean, I never ever did shit like that. But like again like it wasn't about me. It was about what could happen, and I think that that was an art action.

PK: Well, yeah, but ___ you say it wasn't about you, but from what we've learned just in this interview it seems to be *absolutely* about you. These are the issues that you care about.

CV: But I was able to share . . . I was able to go beyond it to allow people to feel it was theirs also.

PK: Right, sure. Well, all to the better. What about your. . . . Well, you've been involved in several different projects of this nature, and I was thinking, most recently, of the Filipino-American history, retrieving the history of, I guess, five.—is it five?—artists in that. . . .

CV: Oh, yeah.

PK: Tell me briefly about that just for the record.

CV: Well, Asian-American art identity is a term that was first used maybe about three to four years ago. I was involved in a panel that Margo [Machida] and Moira Roth had organized to bring out for the first time Asian-American identity in art. And it legitimized Asian art history for the very first time at CAA and in that circuit. And, historically, it's the youngest of all of the ethnic communities represented in North America. And so it was a very, very important event. I thought about what I had presented, which was my work and the kinds of things that I was doing, and I remember talking with some younger colleagues and saying that what I think that we need to do is to provide a groundwork for Filipino-American art history and we have to begin from a street-scholar point of view—which is, in my case is very, very limited because I don't have the resources to know all of it all at once. But to think about the artists that I knew that lived as contemporaries at a certain period of time. . . . Filipino immigration started, of course, really a very, very long time ago. You know, like during the Spanish galleon trade, but when it really began—for me, and maybe for a lot of social historians—was around the twenties when waves of Filipinos were recruited from the north of the Philippines to come to America to become a labor force. We talked about this in one of the tapes, I believe. And so in that grouping of people we

selected five artists. Maybe some of the people knew of each other, but for me they represent the kind of diversity of that small Filipino community at the time. You know, we have the scholars, we have the people who went to the art schools, we have the self-taught artists. And whether they knew each other or not makes no difference, because here they were—people who had a need to communicate in one way or another. Well, we know that drill—you know, from our own cultures, from our own *other* cultures. So bringing these five artists together just sets a foundation for Filipino-American art production in America. [CV undergoes a coughing spell here that prevents him from speaking, and also obscures some of PK's speaking.—Trans.]

PK: Now is that over? Is that project over or is it ongoing?

CV: It's still continuing. We've gotten a small grant from the San Francisco Foundation for so many thousand bucks, and so that's for materials such as film and video equipment and renting all this. And so we have three videotapes of some three of the artists—or one videotape for three of the artists, let me say that. And then we have some other . . . not footage but we have some other kind of interview material from people who've known these other artists so. . . .

PK: Some of them are dead, right?

CV: Four of 'em are dead. One is still very, very barely alive. He's in his late eighties and he lives over in [Bernal] Heights.

PK: Now their heyday would be, what?, the thirties, ____, forties?

CV: Well, Victor [Duena, Dueña], for instance. His heyday was, say, in the fifties, because by now he was completely retired and he was showing art at Vesuvio's Café during the late fifties and early sixties.

PK: You've mentioned him, I think. He used to hang out up there. He's not the one that tried to hit on your girlfriend?

CV: Always. [both laugh]. Always. Here'd be this guy—who'd be Victor, you know—he'd be over there in this overcoat and he'd come up with his hat and he'd just hit on my girlfriend, whoever I was with. And then he'd hang out, and you couldn't kick him out. And, you know, he didn't have any teeth, and he'd go [imitating toothless speech:], "These are my paintings." [laughs] And we'd look around the studio, and here would be all these wonderfully drawn naked women and, you know, like lost in paradise.

PK: [laughs]

CV: In one form or another. Either groupings of four or five around fantastic animals with palm trees or singular women or women figures that were in some form of the dance. And so he had a running one-person show for many, many years at Vesuvio's through Henri Renoir. We had another artist by the name of Dr. Roberto Vallangca, who attended California School of Fine Arts and became a chiropractor. . . .

PK: How do you spell his last name?

CV: Vallangca. V-a-l-l-a-n-g-c-a.

PK: Okay.

CV: And he had a practice on Divisadero Street and I had remembered, you know, like in my Filipino community he had this profession of being a doctor, and whoever went to his office would be just blown over by these incredible paintings—these paintings of places that he had been to. And I've seen the paintings in color and, boy, the color was just . . . I mean, he really knew his color quite well. I mean, just academically he just knew his colors. Composition was good and everything, I mean. So he was an icon through our community. There was another artist by the name of Joaquin Lagaspi. L-a-g-a-s-p-i. Joaquin.

CV: He was in his sixties at International Hotel and he had lived there. Was a spokesman for a lot of the men who were living there. At that time there was an awareness that was happening at San Francisco State in about '68, '69 where ethnic-American students wanted to be taught history through that lens, as opposed to just a Euro-American lens. And so ethnic studies was then born in 1969. Joaquin Lagaspi was living over there in the sixties and in the fifties, etc., off and on. And when he retired he became the mentor to many of these Filipino-American teachers that was in those Asian-American studies classes—and students—that were all at San Francisco State University at the time. So he was a figurehead. He was really a figurehead. He was a mentor. He was a very, very inspiring person who was not only a poet but he was a painter as well.

There was. . . . God, I forgot this per[son] . . . [laughs] I'm getting memory block right now. There's this other artist who's now alive who lives up on Bernal Heights, and he had been painting now for something like about forty, damn near fifty years, but painting these wonderful kinds of landscapes and things from around the Bay

Area, and also reminiscing in my mind as to what the Philippines was.

PK: Well, see, there you go. There you got the tune.

CV: Exactly. And then you have Carlos Carvajal. Amazing artist!

PK: This is the father of. . . .

CV: Carlos Carvajal, Jr., who was the choreographer and director. Amazing artist! Now, that was an amazing. . . . Now he was a very amazing artist. He is the closest. . . .

[Break in taping]

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, continuing a fourth session of interview with Carlos Villa, and this is on July 10, 1995. This is tape three, side A, and we expect that this will be concluding the interview but who knows. [both chuckle] I think, Carlos, we both felt that we ended a little abruptly, that we needed a little more time to sort of complete this picture, and so without further ado I'll turn it over to you. Although I should say this: That we've emphasized very much in this interview your—what I would call—really social involvement through art. I think that's a reasonable way to put it. I don't want to say that this is the more important part of your enterprise or activity, but at any rate it certainly has gotten a lot of our attention here, and on the other hand—and concurrently—you continue to produce art. Or at least you certainly have done so recently, and what I would like to do with this last section of tape is to sort of lay it in from. . . . Well, you know better than I where to start with this, but to just sort of trace the development of your own art—painting, sculpture, assemblage—to give some idea of how it's changed. And then, I guess maybe, then, right up to the present. What, if anything, you're doing recently [and, in] that.

CV: Sure.

PK: You can do that? [chuckles]

CV: Yeah, I think so. I hope so. [laughs] We were talking off-mike about bronze sculpture. Well, from the eighties I was doing bronze sculpture, and I was doing it at the Artworks Foundry with Piero Mussi. And Piero and I had developed a lost-paper process, and the lost-paper process was very, very interesting because I really liked. . . . Being a fiber artist—I've done that also—and, being a fiber artist, I started casting figures in plaster and I was forming these pieces into paper and a lot of the subject matter didn't necessarily have to do with the idea of being. . . . Well, what can I say? It didn't have as much to do with Filipino community as much as it had to do with a failed marriage.

PK: Really? How so?

CV: Well, the marriage had just gone down the drain and so what I did. . . . You know, what I had done was I had started casting certain pieces, you know, like with plaster, and I was making those molds from either plaster or rubber and I was forming paper and feather constru[ctions], pieces from these molds. Like, for instance, I wanted to do a piece that had to do with artists' feet, and so cast my feet and then what I did was, it became a mold. And so I'd press paper and feathers into it and embellish it with more feathers later on until they became feather-paper shoes. And they became artists' feet, and so these pieces. . . . So I was doing all of these different parts and pieces, and then my marriage had failed and then all of sudden I started going to therapy and I started thinking about the idea of relationships. And so I started thinking about the vulnerability of relationships, and also the strength of these relationships as they've gone through the ages and stuff. And so a lot of this kind of historical backdrop and a lot of this just went beyond the idea of just being Filipino-American, and I just started trying to solve this idea of what it is in terms of my relationship with women. I mean, it came down to that. So for, I think, maybe about six, seven years I was involved with that kind of papermaking, going into and involving myself with bronze and other kinds of metals. So I did these. . . . I went and I looked at Rodin, and Rodin did a piece called *Eternal Spring*, which involved a man and a woman. And so I got a couple of models to do these poses of, you know, like from that Rodin piece. And so with these parts I had first of all used all of. . . . You know, I put all of these pieces of paper parts all in a row, and I started assembling these wooden dowels along with these spools, which became joints, and so I had constructed these figures that were wood and almost like Tinkertoys or Erector-set kind of people, and on top of them I'd have these paper parts, and so they didn't really follow *Eternal Spring*, but I got the idea from *Eternal Spring*. And so all of these paper parts then became manipulated by me and placed up on top of a wooden armature. And so all of these pieces became kind of malleable as they were, so I was able to bring about all of these different attitudes of, God, you know, like fornicating—but not really getting into that—but, you know, like all of these attitudes that had to do with complete surrender, with being in the act of being the male missionary kind of. . . . You know, I mean, all of these kinds of things, all of these kinds of issues and notions were involved in these pieces that were paper, feathers, and wood. And they were on these large wooden discs. And the paper was perfect because of the vulnerability, and also the kind of, you know, like the distortion that happens from a little bit of age, and what

happens there, and then there were some parts that I wanted to stiffen up and so. . . . [laughing] I saw a great show at the de Young—I think it was a Japanese helmet show. . . .

PK: Oh, yeah.

CV: . . . in which they used . . . I think it was [harikake]. I think that that was [a, the] process of stiffening up paper. And so I invented my own kind of harikake, which was to infuse the dried paper pulp in the mold I would use shellac and acetone to stiffen up the pores in the paper pulp and feathers. And so a lot of these pieces became very, very stiff. Which then allowed me to go into the foundry with Piero, and we would back some of this paper with wax, which allowed for a perfect size shell so I'd be able to get a thin-cast bronze, and so I thought of a twentieth-century material to contrast bronze—which would be chrome-plated steel—as an armature. And so it went from fragility to a kind of an eternal kind of traditional . . . a traditional kind of a material to describe all that I felt in paper about my failed marriage, the relationship of man and woman, you know. And so bronze, as everyone knows, in an incredibly compelling and very, very pervasive [epic, epoch??] all to itself. Every culture that has done bronze was this great culture, and so the material also dictated a hell of a lot of what was going on, too. And there were things that happened in bronze that surprised the hell out of me because of how powerful these figures became. And so I was going on, making money from this sculpture and getting attention. . . .

PK: They were pretty well received?

CV: Yeah, they were fairly well received. But then after a while I just said, "What the hell am I doing?" You know, here I am, I'm kissing all kinds of butt, and I'm getting this money, but I'm saying to myself "This is weird." I mean after a while, I mean, the marriage is already gone. I mean, I've already gone to therapy, I'd already gone past all of that experience, and all of a sudden it became this job and then I would see this guy over there at the foundry and he was. . . . They had these folders on this guy when he was this young stud-muffin—you know, Mr. Buff, in his safari clothes—and he'd have all of these lions and stuff all around him like he was a big hunter and everything, and his deal was [deepening his voice:], "Put it in bronze and buy me"—you know, this kind of thing. And you'd see this guy come in and he was clearly about twenty years or ten years past that picture. He's no longer a stud muffin. And he's chugging along in this aged Mercedes-Benz, bringing out these tired old shitty casts of these sculptures that he did a million years ago. And I just said to myself, "Is that me?" [both laugh] I just said, "Where have I gone wrong inside?"

PK: We came over and visited you in that foundry, in Berkley.

CV: Yeah.

PK: What was the name of that?

CV: Artworks.

PK: Artworks, okay.

CV: So after a couple of years there of just thinking along those lines, I just said, "This stuff has got to be a lot more direct than this. And it's got to be more to the point and it's got to get back on its mark." And so I did some pieces that were based on monkeys, and I showed them. . . . The last big show that I had of those was at the American Academy in Rome, where I had a one-person show.

PK: Oh, really?

CV: Yeah, I was the guest artist at the American Academy.

PK: Well now, tell us about that. That somehow hasn't appeared yet in this biographical. . . .

CV: [laughs] Well now, that was fantastic. I was asked. . . . Jim Melchert was the head of the. . . .

PK: Yeah, he was head of it.

CV: Yeah, he was head—or director—of the American Academy at Rome, and I applied to be a guest artist there and they said, "By all means, come. And you could ship your work to the American Academy, and you can stay as long as you want." And so that was a truly amazing time. I went over there with an assistant. I sent some work over and it was. . . . I stayed there only about a month during the winter, even though I could have stayed for a year, maybe even a year and a half. But I figured out that was enough. It was a great visit. I was a guest artist. I had a wonderful studio there overlooking a part of Rome. The meals were fantastic. [laughs] Particularly since the dollar was down and lira was up, the meals at the Academy became incredibly the right thing to do. I had a great time, met a lot of great people, and there was this huge opening where all of the Rome art world came to the Vernisage, and I renewed my acquaintances with Carlo Panacali, who is still the head of the

Marlborough [Gallery—Ed.] in Rome, and . . . like that. I got a chance to visit many things. I went to the Uffizi [Museum—Ed.], and in the dead of winter there's nobody there but the guards.

PK: When you were there? What month?

CV: It was '88-'89.

PK: Yeah, but I mean, what, well, December-January?

CV: Yeah, December-January. And got a chance to. . . .

PK: Christmas and New Year's.

CV: Oh, yes, absolutely. The best times to be in Italy. And I visited the Sistine Chapel ceiling. I went all the way to the top and got to touch the mural.

PK: Whoa! Let's see, were they restoring it at that time?

CV: Yeah, they were restoring it.

PK: You left your fingerprint.

CV: Oh, right in between David's hand and God's hand. And I just said, "This is my own tag."

PK: You mean Adam.

CV: Adam, right. Yeah, Adam's finger. It was perfect; it was wonderful. And so I showed the pieces, and then maybe that was one of the last times that I showed that work. I showed that work at a Pro-Art show here at Oakland [Museum—Ed.], and then. . . .

PK: Where did you show it in Rome? At the Academy there at the ____?

CV: Yeah, at the Academy.

PK: And the series. . . .

CV: Monkeys.

PK: Monkeys, um hmm.

CV: Yeah. I got this mold from a good friend of mine. I mean, it was a laboratory monkey, and it was a rubber monkey that was thrown out, and my friend gave it to me and I took castings of it. And I did just what I did with those monkeys [probably means the human figures he was just talking about?—Ed.], except on steel armatures and in cages. And that's what I showed for a while.

And so, right after that I started in asking the real questions again. I just said to myself, "I have to start thinking about where it is I am, what is it I'm doing, and where it is I want to go from this point." And, so Angela Davis and Moira Roth came up to me and they admired the work I did in *Other Sources*, and they said, "Maybe you should continue this work." And I didn't know what they meant. You know, have an exhibition? Bring things together? And I started thinking that this might be the right time to do something about this, because I really need to know, and I'm sure that there are artists, scholars, administrators, and other people who would want to know pretty much what they were, and so instead of just an exhibition of artists' work I thought a symposia series would be the best thing to do—by bringing all of these factions together to be able to talk and to be able to [dialog, dialogue]. And so that was the start of the four symposia that we held from 1988 all the way through 1992 at the San Francisco Art Institute. So I became an organizer, I became an activist, and in no way did I feel that my art production was down. Matter of fact, I feel that art actions and art products are basically all the same. Whatever I have to do to get the job done. And so I extended my studio, as it were, from this kind of garret idea, from there through metal fabricating shops, bronze foundries, to offices and computers and telephones, and, again, you know, like I became . . . I thought of an artist as just being a conduit. But that was in back of my mind really. What I wanted to know was, what is it an artist had to do post-Martin Luther King? What are the issues now that an artist of color had to face? And when I thought of that [dialog, dialogue], or when I thought of that issue, I didn't think that just artists of color or minority artists should be the only ones to answer that question. I brought in white artists also and white administrators, and writers to talk about those issues, too. So we went from education to challenging institutions to sources and it came out in a book called *Worlds in Collision*.

PK: That's the four symposia?

CV: All put together in a book, and I remember my daughter just saying, "Ah, you're a great *author* now." And I said, "No. That's a sculpture." [chuckles] "I didn't write anything in there."

PK: [chuckles] So you see it as seamless, I guess. Pretty seamless. That this doesn't represent a big shift or a big break or anything like that. It's just different venues for ideas, or something like that.

CV: I think so. And all relating pretty much to the same thing—I feel. All relating to the same thing—or at least I like to think that way, and my role of being an artist-teacher at the San Francisco Art Institute now, I'm learning how to use all of these materials as an artist-teacher. I remember both Fred Martin and Bill Berkson asking me to do a class over there at the San Francisco Art Institute, and bringing in community activists, street scholars, etc., to talk about art expression in these specific communities, dealing with those issues as they interface with issues and aesthetics from the mainstream. What are the differences? What are the similarities? Where are we going? What are we doing? And so I thought of a class . . . I designed a class by which young artists could do grant proposals and manifestos dealing with themselves as part of a *new* community, and not just thinking in terms of linear art history but to take into consideration oral kinds of histories as well as dealing with these kinds of informations that was coming through street scholarship. It's a pretty heady class, and it's almost out of control a lot of times.

PK: How do you mean?

CV: Well, it's out of control because, being not a lecture class, when we start getting into discussions—and heated discussions—as a seminar I'm not a great time manager.

PK: [laughs].

CV: I'm not a great time manager. We start getting into these things and people start talking from their point of view or their own experience or where they're at, and so wherever that leads us is where we go. I try to keep to my lesson plan. I do have lesson plans, but I get constrained by time and I . . . I'm thoroughly excited about that class, and because I'm so thoroughly excited about that humanities art history class, I've brought the theory part into my studio painting class in which we're looking to deal with a lot of theory. Like, for instance, in my painting class I have them do a project on nihilism. I have them read a little bit of Cornel West. I have them read a little bit here, a little bit there, a little bit here, a little bit there. Now, where is nihilism in your own community? And it doesn't necessarily have to be modeled after a black-American community or a barrio. We know the difference between a barrio and a black community, but what is it from the community that you come from?

PK: Well, now how do you bring that into the painting class? I mean, do you have discussion periods?

CV: Yes.

PK: It's not just painting, and you go around and critique like in the old-fashioned. . . .

CV: I do that, too. But I give them actual projects, I give them actual projects to do. After the self-portrait, then we do nihilism in one's own community. What does that look like?

PK: Gee, I don't know.

CV: I don't know what it looks like either, but kids come up with either something very abstract. . . . They talk about the colors they choose. They talk about the kinds of forms that they're making. Why are the forms looking the way that they are? Why are there rounded edges over here, jagged edges over here? And then we discuss, you know, like what's visible and what's not and what's not making it. And so it's just interesting, the symbols that people use. So, in other words, instead of saying, "Draw this still life. . . ." Which I think is pretty important. If they're into doing that, I'm not going to stop them from doing that. But then if somebody wants to do something beyond that, hey! you know. So there are a lot of different kinds of things that I introduce in a beginning painting class besides introduction to color theory and things like that. But I want them to go into their own kind of theory, you know, and we do discussion periods. And the discussions are really interesting, because the kids start bonding with each other and themselves and their own ideas, and then they start thinking of what they are saying as something of value.

PK: You mean, hopefully, then they see what they're saying through their work as something of value. . . .

CV: Sure.

PK: . . . and involving ideas . . .

CV: Sure.

PK: . . . not just making something?

CV: Yeah, not. . . . You know, the old style was to, you know, like, okay then, you have a model up there and then you show them Degas, and then you show them an Elmer Bischoff, or you show them a David Park, and you show them this and you show them that. Well, I'm not beyond that, but then kids aren't . . . there are a lot of . . . most of the kids that I have don't really want to do the model. I mean, I know that they do it in their drawing class and I'd like them to do it in the painting class, but it just seems like they have more questions. The kids now have. . . .

PK: How do you mean?

CV: They seem to want other kinds of things, other than just the traditional kinds of things that I've been offering to them. Like go to the park. "Let's go to the park and let's do [Stowe Lake], let's . . ." You know, "Let's do this and let's do that." They're people that I think are willing to do that but, by and large, they're younger kids that, God, I'll show them some work by Jess [_____—Ed.], and they're completely enthralled by Jess.

PK: _____ [understand].

CV: They're enthralled, and they don't even have to know what the hell Jess is about. I mean, they look at that work and they can read certain kinds of things. Or there was an artist that wants to do something very culturally specific, God, I could turn them on to [_____—Ed.] Basquiat or somebody like that. I kind of try to leave an open end for myself so I can respect who I'm supposed to be teaching and we could negotiate a specific course that they might want to explore. And through our negotiations, whatever they are, like we'll come up with something.

PK: Do you feel that this class—the special class that you have is. . . .

CV: Yeah, *Worlds in Collision*.

PK: Well, it really is a new departure. I mean, it's an addition to the curriculum.

CV: Ah, curriculum design, I think, for me, anyway, is a terrific expression because, to think in terms of an artist as a conduit in his or her community, I think one has to be ready for so many different kinds of things. I mean, like painting is a good place to start from—and it's a good place to end for some people—but if one wanted to get into computer-generated kinds of art or different kinds of actions they have to know, I think, that they can do it. And I can refer to Guillermo Gomez-Pena, I can refer to [_____—Ed.] Coco Fusco or Amalia [Mesa-Baines—Ed.], you know. I can refer to a lot of different people whose production is . . . a lot of it is ephemeral, some of it is object-oriented, some of it is other media-oriented. And what I think is necessary at this point in time in 1990 [probably means "in the 1990s"—Ed.], whether I do object art or whether I do something like curriculum design or organizing certain things in the community, I think is all the same to me. It's become all the same to me. I mean, I know inside that things are going on and they don't have to have this kind of monograph look—I mean, for it to be valid.

God, like getting back to Joseph Beuys. There was a lot of work that he did—you know, like from *Fluxus* on—that was ephemeral and that was object-oriented, and etc., etc., and that was action-oriented. I mean, his work with the Greens Party I thought was amazing. Along with Rupert Garcia. I mean, he's done a lot of writing and he's done all this, and I don't think any of that production can and should be denied at this point by art-historical fact. I think intentions have to be taken into consideration in terms of context. And I think context becomes very, very important. And that in art school at this point it isn't whether we graduate, necessarily, these people with this fantastic technique—although I don't dispel it. I mean, last year I had three ex-students in *The Whitney Biennial*.

PK: Really?

CV: Yeah. *Biennial*.

PK: Who?

CV: Chris Schumann was an ex-student of mine. [Toba] Khadoori was an ex-student of mine. And Jason I had a lot of conversations with—Jason Rhoades. So, I mean, it's not a big deal [to have put so much effort into other venues??—Ed.]

PK: Well, it's interesting.

CV: You know, it's not a big deal. [laughing] I mean, Domingo Nuñ o and Julio Morales helped me with the *Worlds in Collision* book, and they're showing all over the place now. So it's like, wow, I'm so damn fortunate.

PK: What about this [thought]. You seem to be comfortable with the idea that your expression as an artist, your

creativity, can take these different forms, including creating a book that grows out of a symposium—or symposia, not a symposium—which is a dialogue, ideas are being exchanged, but that you don't feel as if you're engaging in different, really, activities. That what's important about it comes to the same thing. And you also are collaborating with these art critics or art historians—like Moira Roth, for instance, and people even in somewhat . . . other fields. Is it possible, then, by your definition of . . . I don't want to say *relevant* artistic activity. Let's just say a *kind* of artistic activity. Is it possible that art historians, then, depending on what they choose to do and how they choose to do it are engaging in the same kind of activity?

CV: Absolutely.

PK: What's the big difference, then, between. . . .

CV: Intention. I think, of course, there are a lot of activities that are very, very specialized but the thing is that it just depends on the intention. I mean, we could go off and we could do something together, and if our intention has all of the parameters and all of the kinds of identifying marks and signifiers that art usually has, I mean, that's completely okay. I mean, Beuys said everyone is an artist. [laughing] I mean, there are so many people that said everyone can be an artist so. . . . I believe that. But the intention has to be there. And the product has to have its own legs and has to walk by itself for it to be really . . . to go past just being a brilliant idea. I don't know if that answers anything.

PK: Yeah, well, it does. And it's a complicated area because then people will start demanding definitions and so forth.

CV: Sure.

PK: But it just seems to me that throughout. . . . Starting from the very beginning of this interview it became clear that you have cast a wider net. And certainly your definition of what comprises artistic activity—you know, the proper work of an artist—is not limited in any way to traditional notions and it doesn't require the creation of an object, a sculpture, or a painting. But when that does happen—for you, at any rate—it embodies these ideas and these concerns that you can address in other ways. So it boils down to, to me, in my opinion, a social awareness [and, of] responsibility that informs art or related activity, and that for you, Carlos Villa, this is enough. And this is more than adequate; this is appropriate.

CV: Well, I believe that art and life have to interface. Otherwise, artifice doesn't make any difference. I mean, it's just another object, or it's just another idea. But when it becomes part of life then it becomes cherished, it becomes valued. And there are more handles on it, in which something becomes functional, whether it's a memory of a great conversation—or you're providing some kind of signifier for a great conversation. I mean, either/and. I feel that all of these—whether they *are* objects or whether they are ephemeral—as long as they keep the conversation going to other levels I think is really important. And, I don't know, that's just the way I

feel. I mean, we see this wonderful piece by Fletcher. How many conversations does that object elicit? But at the same time, though, on the other hand, a good movie can do that, a good book can do that, with ____ words.

PK: So finally. . . . We should give Fletcher credit on this tape. Fletcher Benton here, I mean. This is a little steel watercolor that you're thinking of by Fletcher.

CV: Hey.

PK: But at any rate it does seem to me, then, that finally you think of art as discourse, as an exchange—always in a conversation, an exchange of ideas—and that to put it just—you know, to stick it off in a little ghetto of aesthetics by itself—is not at all satisfactory to you. You don't agree with that.

CV: Well, everyone. . . . Like, okay, we get back to the idea of intention. What is the artist's intention? I'm not going to say that David Smith's work, for instance, any of his sculpture, isn't going to be any good anywhere else but that.

PK: Yeah, right.

CV: I mean, and vice versa. I mean, the thing is, though, is that like every. . . . It's the intention of the artist. Whatever the artist intends. And if it hits the mark, great, and if it doesn't, well, you know, hope that it does sometime, somewhere. I mean, some art's pretty damn lucky, you know, like if it's revitalized or resuscitated in some way, shape, and form in another time. I mean, certainly Apollo Belvedere had its function when it was whole, and when it was broken, oh, God, what a great thing. I mean, who knows? [chuckles]

PK: Who knows? God, that's a perfect place, I think, to end this. Our little red light is going and. . . .

CV: [laughs]

PK: But who knows?

CV: Yeah, that's it.

PK: Well, thank you, Carlos. This is great. Thanks a lot.

CV: Okay. Thank you. [exit laughing]

[End of interview]