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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Michael Spafford and Elizabeth Sandvig, 1992 September 2-4

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Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Michael Spafford and Elizabeth Sandvig on September 2 and 4, 1992. The interview took place in Seattle, WA, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

SEPTEMBER 2, 1992

[Session 1, Tape 1, Side A (30-minute tape sides)]

PAUL KARLSTROM: An interview with Michael Spafford, Elizabeth Sandvig in Seattle in their home on September 2, 1992. This is tape one. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom.
As I said earlier on, doing an interview like this with two respondents-interviewing two people at the same time-is a little unusual for our oral history program. But I think it's very appropriate in this case because you're married, you're both artists with your own careers. You've been married since, if I'm not mistaken. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: 1959.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: 1959.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that's a good number of years that you, in your relationship, have evolved. You've moved, you've been in different places, but also your careers in some parallel way, at least in terms of proximity, have evolved. What I would like to do, and hopefully I can be artful in terms of the questions, is try to learn a little bit about both of you. Maybe we could start out by each of you giving a bit of your own backgrounds. Liz, you were born in Seattle. And then Michael, you were born in. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Palm Springs.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right. Lived in Southern California for quite a while. And maybe you could take turns sort of filling that in, bringing us up to that time that you met at Pomona College. And then we can just sort of develop it from there. So whoever wants to. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Would you like to go first, dear?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Oh, well, let's see. I'll try and keep this fairly short. I was born in Seattle and I lived here until I was three or four years old. My mother [Mauda Margaret Polley-Ed.] had been married for seven years to my father [Arnold Sandvig-Ed.] before I was born. She had been a librarian. She was a British immigrant and she was brought up in Chehalis. She came to the Northwest when she was like six years old. My grandfather [Thomas Edgar Polley-Ed.] was an optometrist and his wife [Mauda F. Drew-Ed.] was American. She stayed for a short time in Chehalis and then moved to San Francisco. She couldn't stand it in Chehalis.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Excellent taste. [laughs] Oh, no!

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: My mother read every book in the library by the time she was sixteen and then went to college at Berkeley where she got a degree in Spanish. She had a great love for Spain. My grandfather was also fascinated with Spain and things that were Spanish; I know that they took several trips and she ended up teaching English in a girl's school in Spain. Then later she got a degree in library science at Columbia. And so she worked in Seattle for the public library. I know when I was little that my father was a boat builder-that is at least he built his own cruiser-and he was in the Coast Guard, and he played the drums. He was the youngest of seven children and a Norwegian, probably the first child born in the United States, immigrated from Minnesota or someplace like that. And they were probably farmers. The only recollections I have of the family on my father's side is, I had an uncle who was a union leader-or a teamster, rather. My parents separated when I was about four or five or six, and we went to Washington, D.C. It was wartime and we lived in like lots of different places. And we stayed in Washington, D.C. except for a year when we were in Elmira, New York, and my mother taught Spanish at a women's college. And from back in Washington, she joined the foreign service in, it must have been, 1950. She had been working for the State Department. We went to Mexico in '51, and I went to public schools. In Mexico, I went to private school, and I went from being a typical, ordinary child-although I already had an interest in art. And that's because of the Phillips Collection, the Corcoran, the Smithsonian, eating lunch in the State Department because they had an aquarium in the basement. That's all I vaguely remember. And I took classes from a Quaker school-in art. In Mexico, I took private art classes from a man named Robin Bond who was British who had taught in a school for disturbed children in England. And when we went to Mexico,

it was the time when it was full of expatriates who had left the United States because of the war.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, you were in Mexico City, is that right?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Um hmm. In 1951 we went, by train. I remember that. Mexico at that time was very manageable. It was a city of seven million, very exciting. My mother hoped that I would be bilingual, which it was too late by that time, but I learned as much Spanish as I could.
And when it came time to go to college, I wanted to go to art school, but I wasn't really sure about it. I didn't have too much contact with it, so being from a family where education was important, I went to Pomona College. And I met Mike in the second year. I went as an art student. I already knew [that I wanted to be an art major-Ed.], although I did a lot of different things. I had done a lot of different things in high school-everything from writing to acting to. . . . That's why it was so great, because there were so many opportunities in _____.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Excuse me, why did you choose Pomona from way down there in Mexico City?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: It seemed close.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Aside from the fact that it's a good school.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Actually it seemed so close. There were only. . . . I think there were three places that I considered: Stanford, Pomona, and I can't remember; there must have been some place else. But I wanted a place that was small, liberal arts, coeducational. There weren't that many, when you came down to it. I didn't want to go to a big state school. I didn't think I could manage it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or a woman's school, I guess.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No, I didn't want to go to Scripps or. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or most of the Eastern private schools.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, then I suppose the Eastern schools probably would have been more natural in one way, except that I lived across the street in Washington from Holton Arms, which is a private girl's school and I was quite aware. . . . And I had my music lessons around the corner at some other private school. I was quite aware of all the embassy children and the kinds of lives they lead and the amounts of money that they had. And you have to remember at that time in Washington, we didn't have a car. My mother didn't know how to drive. I took the bus everywhere. I had an incredible amount of freedom but not very much money, and it was still, at least at that time, people changed their clothes every day when you came home from school. You changed your clothes and then you went out and did whatever you wanted to, but my best friends were Chinese and I would go after school to this Chinese laundry and have a good time turning socks into little balls. [laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's creative.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And delivering newspapers and things like that, and it was just a different kind of life, so that going to Mexico was a big shock, actually. Incredible amount of money that people had-you know, parties, and the receptions, and the contrast between the people that had nothing. Because I certainly wasn't aware in Washington of people that had nothing. When I went to school, there were hundreds of immigrants coming, and they had English classes after the regular school day where they learned to speak English, all these immigrants. They might have been poor, but it wasn't the kind of poverty that you had in Mexico. It certainly wasn't so visible. Maybe there were more jobs then, too, for people. I mean, like all those wartime jobs. I still remember the women wearing the hair up in nets and scarves and the girls painting their legs with leg paint because there weren't any nylons.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Because they couldn't have nylon.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But Mexico was quite different. It was very exciting. We lived for three months in a hotel, and then we moved into a house at what seemed like the end of nowhere, with no car because somebody wasn't quite really thinking, so we had difficulty with transportation for a few years. And then we moved further back in the city until finally we ended up right downtown in Mexico City. And it was great. You know, it couldn't have been nicer, couldn't have been better.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you went off to Pomona with the intention to study art? This was your interest.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this was in, what did we say, fifty. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Fifty-five.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what were your expectations? You know, a young woman at that time looking at an art career. Were you thinking of it as a way ultimately to make a living?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I had absolutely no idea of a career. I had absolutely no idea of how you made money. The only job I'd had was transcribing tapes from a Dictaphone of a book in Spanish that was being translated into English in the basement of a room in Mexico City College and where I wasn't paid with money. I got paid with tuition credits in the summer. So I didn't think that I would be able to suddenly become a painter and sell paintings, but I thought that there would be something that I could fit into. But I really didn't think about it. I was very, very short-sighted. I think my mother thought about, it and she was absolutely sure that I had to learn how to do something that I could get paid for and to support myself. So that was always understood-that every woman, every child has to be able to support themselves. But I also had, at least at the time, a great deal of confidence, for that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you sense any special attitudes towards women spending their time. . . . You know, when you do it at college, presumably you have some real serious interest in the field? Do you remember any attitudes, perhaps some surprise, when you would tell people what you were doing, that you were studying art, majoring in art?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, did this seem to them a perfectly normal thing to do?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Perfectly natural. Perfectly natural, normal thing to do. There wasn't this feeling of anxiety about what you're going to do. It was sort of like, "What are you going to do?" "Oh, that's fine. That's nice. That's interesting." Because there was also the idea, well, once you got a degree, you could certainly do something, and whether you became a teacher. . . . And that's, in a way, when I graduated from college and my mother realized that I couldn't do anything that was of economic, immediate viability, I went to Harvard and got a teaching certificate in teaching art. They had a one-year program. So there I would be guaranteed there was something I could do that would earn money. And supposedly I could always do this. Actually, I didn't like it. So I thought there were lots of other things I would prefer to do. But I didn't have the idea, I never had any idea of becoming a career. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Fine artist.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No. No, the idea was to become a fine artist. The idea was just to become a painter or whatever, just to make art. It wasn't. . . . Because there were lots of people in Mexico that that's what they did. And either they. . . . Maybe they did a little television. Maybe they did a little set designing. Maybe they did a little fashion illustrating. And maybe they had several jobs-because that was certainly true-and a little teaching. But there was never the idea that you couldn't do anything. Because you were so much better educated than most of the people that. . . . And most of the people that I knew didn't have much money but they certainly had lots of different talents and they used them as best they could. Later, it was after school, I mean, like when we lived in Mexico, I sold paintings in the park on Sunday to tourists. And that was fun.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just like Paris.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: We couldn't live very well from that but it was certainly a help. And there were other people there that that was their primary income.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you ended up a professional artist early on, anyway, just by yourself. I mean, by definition.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes. And actually I always thought that if you just sort of minded your own business that things would come to you. Now, that wasn't quite right. You know, that if you just do your work, people will seek you out. That isn't necessarily true anymore. I think it's much more difficult.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask a question because we're now at that point where your lives converge at Pomona. Is it true that you [MICHAEL SPAFFORD] had been in an accident? I read about this.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Uh huh.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then you finally recovered enough to return to classes and you found that your studio had been given away. Is that true? And Liz was the one that ended up with your studio space? Or is that apocryphal?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I don't quite remember, actually.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Actually there weren't studio spaces, there were. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Rooms.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: You've got to understand that at Pomona you didn't really major in art; you had an interest in art and you had a liberal arts education. So, you had a certain number of credits that you could take in art, and these would be split equally between art history and the practice of art. So what most of us did was we retained very few credits in painting or whatever it was we were taking in studio courses, and we'd spend a lot of time doing it. So eventually we got to a point where we'd take a half a credit of painting and spending hours doing it. So what we did was we had a tendency to stake out little areas in the building where we could come at night and work. It wasn't like they were specifically studios but they were just sort of spaces. And I had a space which-and I was out a whole semester-so when I came back, there was this stranger-very attractive stranger-in this space, and if I remember correctly, there was something to do with carrot sticks. She offered me carrot sticks and that's how we became, well, friendly. But I can't recall exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The carrot and the stick, huh?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right, that's right. [laughs] But at that time I don't think I was particularly interested in Elizabeth as an object of desire or anything. It was just she was another person that I hadn't met before. I had other girls that I was interested in. I also remember talking to Elizabeth later, and she said that she wasn't the least bit interested in the types of boys that went to Pomona. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . because they wore glasses and. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: They all wore glasses.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . they studied, and she was more interested in. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I was thinking of transferring. [laughs] To someplace that you might have thought I might have gone in the first place, like the University of New Mexico. Closer. That was one of the main problems I had at Pomona was I'd had a great shock when I saw all these people with blue eyes. I was extremely homesick.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: For Mexico.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: For Mexico, yes. And so I went back every summer. But eventually I got used to everybody with glasses. I got used to the blue eyes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And here we sit, the three of us with our glasses on.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right, yes, that's true. And blue eyes. [laughs] Yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, and then also you have to remember that at that time-and maybe even later-I wasn't considered one of the major talents in the school. I had a certain confidence because I had gone to junior college ahead of time so I was a little bit more experienced than some of the other people in the program, but just in terms of going to school.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: [You worked, too.]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But there were lots of other students who were considered better artists, and actually there were quite a few wonderful people there at that time, including what's his name, the Dr. Kildare?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Oh, Richard Chamberlain.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Richard Chamberlain.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really. He was studying art?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: He was studying art, and he primarily painted. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Paintings.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . sailboats I think.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Like Feininger. Um hmm.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But he was also very interested in the theatre.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Oh, he was wonderful in the theatre.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah. And so I remember even now when you read interviews about him, he says he wishes he could get back to his painting because it's still a hobby of his.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'll be darned.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: He wasn't particularly important or thought of as a particularly important student either at that time, but there were some interesting. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I can't think of who was.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, somebody like Martin Green, for example.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, see, I don't remember him at all.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: You don't recall him. But anyway, and then there were really interesting people like Ed [Avak], and the young man who went to the monastery. They were very bright and very intense and very nonmaterial in the way they thought about things.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right. And there were a lot of people like Paul Harris, who were intelligent and did wonderful work.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Wonderful. Mowry Baden who is still. . . . Actually he's a person who is the type of person that you should interview, too, because he's in Canada now. He's been a landed immigrant, and he teaches at the University of Victoria, but he's still a United States citizen. He's a wonderful artist.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: His sculpture is mostly shown. . . . He does installation pieces like what? University of California at Santa Barbara, San Francisco?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, there was that, but he's still written about in the New Yorker. I mean, he has quite a wonderful reputation. At the same time, he's not as well known as, say, somebody like Bob Morris or people like that who might do some of the same sorts of things. But he would be great. But anyway, they were all there and they were all very assertive, and my introduction to art came in a totally different way from, say, yours, because you-I'm saying Elizabeth-because she was sort of introduced to art through fine art. And you talked about the Phillips, and I grew up in a small city in Southern California. The finest art was in the L.A. County Museum at that time, which shared the art with dinosaur [bones].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And from what I understand, most of the paintings were questionable in terms of their authenticity.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it certainly wasn't a distinguished collection, that's right.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, no. And so my take on art was more commercial art. And is it [the tape recorder-Ed.] working or. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Um hmm.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Oh, okay. [laughs] But anyway, that would be my history, and I'll do that when I start.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You should tell them about, before you came to Pomona, though, that you did cartooning.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. I worked for an advertising agency for seven years. That's how I put myself through school. Basically, I think I'm still that type of an artist. [chuckles]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's do that, if we may, just go back and then quickly lay in your own background, and then I might say this. . . . You know, some basic information such as Liz gave me. It is also interesting to hear sometimes remarks or recollections that just come to you which may not appear in the usual bio sheet.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, I don't know how personal you want this to be. There are certain things that I never have written about me when they write these little brochures and things like that, and it has to do with my health. And I don't know, is that interesting to this sort of thing?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Absolutely. I mean, this can be and should be as biographical as we want to make it. And there's really nothing outside of. . . . This is your tape. How's that?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Right. Well, I'm not exactly sure. . . . I don't have complete recollections of my childhood.

We just went down to visit my mother [Sarah Alice Maloney-Ed.] who's eighty-one. She lives in Newport Beach and she has recollections of my childhood that are quite different from mine. And I think she's probably more accurate. But I'll tell you what I remember, at least what I was told. I was born in Palm Springs and I already had an older brother [Alan-Ed.]-and then I later had a younger brother [David-Ed.]. And at that time my mother was married to a man named Cutshaw. I forget what his first name was [Robert, Alan's father-Ed.]. And that was an Anglicized version of Gottshalk. His father apparently had something to do with a newspaper in Long Beach and was a political figure and all that sort of thing. And so you'd assume that he was also my father, but apparently he wasn't. But I wasn't told this until I was in my thirties.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really!

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: So I just assumed for many years that this man was my father. And I also assumed, because of his name, that he was Jewish. And my mother was an Irish Catholic. And her father [Samuel Maloney-Ed.] was a member of the IRA, at least that's what she says. [laughs]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And her mother [Ethel Elizabeth Rumberg-Ed.] was a fortune teller.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Kind of romantic.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, we're not sure about all of this, you see.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: We're not sure if this is true. And she had a half-brother [William Hall-Ed.] who was the only person in either family that was ever known to be artistic, and he was a forger, and he spent most of his life in prison. [chuckles]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: In where?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Someplace in California. Chico? Is there a prison in Chico? Now what's that red light mean?

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's telling us that pretty soon it's going to go over, and so why don't we be over? Why don't we just stop it?

[Session 1, Tape 1, side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is an interview with Liz Sandvig, Michael Spafford, tape one, side B. We were talking, having heard something about Liz's background, getting her to college and beyond, then we were hearing now, Michael, a little bit about your own background leading up to the time that you two met and started your lives together.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Right. Anyway, I was born in Palm Springs as I said. And as I found out later, the man who I assumed was my stepfather, Lynn Spafford, was actually my father. But obviously he wasn't married to my mother when I was born. I was adopted by him-legally adopted by him-and so was my older brother, six years after I was born. And so my birth certificate and everything has his name on it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Spafford?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: So there's no record of. . . . As Spafford, right? So I guess I should have known then that there was something going on, but I didn't. I just assumed that this was just to make everybody feel better. I never felt terribly close to Spafford, and I think that's partially because my mother got to a point where she wasn't too fond of him. I guess he was a bit of a womanizer. He was very independent. He was quite a bit older than she was. But he apparently was very, very financially supportive of everything that the family wanted to do. Like I say, he was a business person. He was a small business person. He ran a grocery store in Palm Springs. I learned later-actually my mother just told us that last week-that he had a nightclub. I didn't realize that. He had a grocery store in Lake Arrowhead, so we used to go up there in the summers and spend time. Obviously, I had contact with a lot of people who also had money, although I didn't think about it at that time. I worked in the grocery store when I was a young man. The thing that I think that sort of bothered my mother, and actually ultimately led to a nervous breakdown by her, was the fact that when I was six years old, I was diagnosed as being diabetic. We were living in Banning at that time, and previous to that time, according to my mother. . . . Let's see, after we moved from Palm Springs, we went to some place like Seal Beach or some place on the coast. I was having difficulty in a respiratory way, so they moved to the desert. And in Banning I think I got very, very fat, and for whatever reason, anyway, I was diagnosed as. . . . I know, I was diagnosed as having rheumatic fever. I had a functional heart murmur, which I still have, which is not serious, but it was diagnosed at that time as being rheumatic fever, and that was serious, so they kept me in bed. And when I was in bed, I gained a lot of weight. I had very little exercise. And then I was diagnosed as being diabetic. And at that time, which would have been, what, 1941, that was pretty serious. And as a matter of fact, I think it had only been seven or eight years previous to that time that they had discovered insulin as something to do. So before that time, you just

existed on lettuce until you died, you know. It was always fatal. And at any rate, I think this idea of me being ill played against the minds of both Spafford and my mother. I think they probably felt. . . . I'm sure my mother felt that she was being punished. She had very, very strong upbringing in the Catholic Church, and she dropped it at that time, and she became a Christian Scientist. And Spafford, I think, was a Baptist. And there was a whole lot of. . . . They were trying all kinds of spiritual responses to deal with the fact that they had what they thought was a fatally ill child. I was taken to Loma Linda, which is a Seventh Day Adventist hospital in-it [wasn't, was] in Loma Linda; it's somewhere in California-and they did a lot of tests. When my mother had her nervous breakdown, I must have been eleven or twelve, and I was taken to the Scripps Metabolic Clinic which is down in LaJolla, California. I remember playing a lot of Canasta with elderly diabetics that were so thin they could hardly move. And I thought, "Oh, my God! There's me." No, actually I had a pretty good time. It had a wonderful view of the coast and everything. But one of my really strong memories of who I thought was my stepfather at that time was he actually was driving me down to Loma Linda in his pickup. He had an old pickup. We were driving from Riverside because we were living in Riverside at that time, and he cried the whole time. And that was a real shock to me because he must have been at least in his fifties at that time, and it just isn't a thing you expect a grown person to do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was about you?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, that's what I think now. At the time I thought it was because Alice, my mother, was in a sanatorium and having difficulty just dealing with reality. So I assumed that this was why he was so upset, but I know now it was because he thought he was going to take me down there and that was it. It was sort of like that's the final place. And I probably was going down to be regulated, what they call regulated. And I came out of. . . . I don't know how long I spent down there. Seemed like years but it was probably only a month or so. And I came out and I still wasn't regulated, and I was diagnosed as being a brittle diabetic, which means that you go up and down but you can never stabilize. At that time, that was considered the worst type of thing to be because the side effects-blindness and having your limbs amputated and stuff like that-was a question of not being able to keep things stable.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you had this hanging over. . . . You knew this?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, I don't think I did.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You knew it by the time you were a teenager.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, that's true because actually I. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You knew it by the time I met you.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. [laughs]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: He kept trying to scare me.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, I didn't want her to marry me because I was told. . . . I'm sure this is true, but I can't recall what the circumstances were. I was told that I wouldn't live past forty. Or I probably wouldn't be functional, even before that time. And this was told to me by a doctor or a nurse as a way of preparing me for the eventualities of things. In other words, enjoy yourself while you can. [laughs] And then I remember always thinking, sort of focusing on the fact that when I was forty, that was it. And as a matter of fact, when I reached-I'm fifty-six now and I feel just fine-when I reached the age of forty. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're regulated.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, I'm not. I'm still going up and down but I'm obviously very fortunate. I have very few side effects and the ophthalmologist that I have look at my eyes every six months says that if he didn't know he wouldn't even know I was diabetic. So I'm really lucky. I'm just lucky. But at the same time it was sort of like after I was forty I had to start all over again, because I was so focused on that being the time that everything would just sort of stop. I have a friend, Mike Daily, who is a wonderful painter. He came to the University of Washington the same year I did, 1963. And he had developed. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Sixty-five.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Sixty-three. The year Michael [Michael Andrew Spafford (son) also known as the artist/photographer Spike Mafford-Ed.] was born.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You're right, you're right. [chuckles]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: He came from the University of Iowa. He developed MS about eighteen years ago, maybe even longer. Multiple sclerosis has a way of sort of attacking someone and then it backs off and then it goes into

remission. And when he first got it, it just knocked him flat. I mean, it was like he couldn't move. He was in bed; he didn't have any control over any of his bodily functions. It was a nervous thing that it was like. . . . It was such a surprise to him that he-well, he's never said this to me-I knew that he just sort of thought he was going to die. So he got better and he's quite wonderful now. I mean, he gets tired and all that sort of thing and it is a progressive disease, but he's still teaching and he still works to the extent that he can. But at that time he thought that he just had a couple of years left, and so you could see the change in his work. He didn't, in a sense, move in any direction; he just stayed in the same place and kept doing as much as he could, because he thought that that was sort of where. . . . He wanted to make sure that he sort of plumbed that, or dug that hole deep enough that he was involved in digging when he got sick. But as the years went on, he realized he was going to live a lot longer, so he's now. . . . [laughing] I mean, this is sort of privileged information, but he's actually making a lot of. . . . For him would be sort of risky moves in his paintings, because he once again has this feeling-it's not immortality exactly-but at least the feeling that if you do something you'll be able to keep doing it for a while.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or if you mess up, it doesn't matter.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right, that's right. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: It seems apparent to me from your citing this particular case that you see some analogy to your own experience. I mean, you've told this story in a way that suggests when you were a teenager-certainly by the time you were a teenager-you had been told, believed, that your time was limited, and there was even a specific date. Now it's true that forty sounds ancient when you're. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, thirty or thirty-five is what you told me.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, thirty-five is. . . . They told me that probably what would go first would be my eyes and then my mind. And that was really scary, because I always thought of myself as being primarily mental rather than physical, although I did participate in some sports, like tennis and _____.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it sounds to me as if this condition and your awareness of it looms very, very large in terms of those years.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Actually, it still does in my mind.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, [you, you know I] obviously can't help but ask then certain questions relating to that. One of them, of course, would be the impact: the effect you feel this knowledge-this awareness of your condition-had on choices you made, perhaps even in terms of what you wanted to do. Eventually become an artist, although you're going to tell us more about other alternatives you explored, art history. But what really just comes immediately to mind is the question of imagery, a range of imagery, and how much, maybe at some point along the way, how much time you think you really have and then choices have to be made on that basis. All of us imagine that we're going to not last for ever, but somehow it's indeterminate. And that's, of course, the great lie, but you don't have to confront a finite amount of time.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Sure.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Am I moving in the right direction?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, I think you are. I think, though, that I really didn't really have a clear indication of that until I did have this automobile accident.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right. Then that was very clear.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Then it was very clear.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this was just before you two met, so we're now. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. I have to back up a little bit because part of the thing that probably has some impact on the type of thing I do is the fact that I do take injections, and at that time I was taking a lot of them. Now I take three a day. And so my life is very, very organized or regulated. And to some degree I think that's why I paint the kinds of things that I paint. And also I think it's one reason why I can teach-and I really enjoy teaching very, very much. And I think it can have less impact on the kind of energy that I put in my painting than it might have for somebody else, because teaching also involves a kind of regulated activity-or what would you call it?

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's a routine?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Routine. It's a routine, right. And yet, since my whole life has been a routine, I have been able to separate that part from the other part very, very well. And I've been able, I think quite successfully, to divorce what I do in my studio from what I do at school. Even though they're connected, I don't have the one being dependent upon the other. I can get away from it. It's just like I don't have the dependency on insulin be part of my work, even though I know it's connected, but it's not something which. . . . Well, I'm not exactly sure what I'm saying, except that I feel oftentimes that people who teach and paint at the same time or try to do art, really do get into difficulty because they can't do either as well as they could if they did it separately.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And in my own case, I think, partially because of my diabetes, that I'm able to really split them. And so I really have two lives.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Two or three?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, two. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because it occurred to me, of course, that. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Aesthetic, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, okay. In terms of work. In terms of your work, which is then not to suggest that you don't have a. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And then I think. . . . But the other connection is that because I do feel. . . . I don't feel handicapped. I feel limited in terms of the amount of things that I can do. I have to eat breakfast, I have to eat lunch, I have to eat dinner. I have to eat at a certain time. That in a sort of, almost in a Freudian way, it makes me want to do really big things. I mean, I want to do major things, and so I take on big. . . . Well, I paint large paintings. I like doing things that require effort and require a kind of difficulty.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you also take on big themes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Big subjects.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's true. Actually, I mentioned that to my doctor once. I said, "You know, I. . . ." It was a doctor that's now dead. His name was Franz Kirschner, and he was also a painter and a wonderful, wonderful man. We were talking. . . . Actually, I'd go visit him maybe every three months or something. We'd just sit around and talk about his mother who lived in Switzerland and I'd talk about my family and we'd talk about painting. We wouldn't talk about diabetes and all. But it was very good. And I was feeling. . . . I'm like virtually everybody else. I have my ups and my downs, more or less, and I was feeling kind of down and I said, "It occurs to me that I probably paint these superhuman figures because I'm such a poor physical specimen myself." And he said, "Oh, shut up! That's stupid." And I said, "Well, I thought it made a lot of sense." And he said, "It doesn't make any sense at all," he says. And I think he's right. I think it wasn't. It doesn't have anything to do with that. It's more a question of wanting to make paintings which have a kind of assertive visual nature to them, and my way of doing that is to find this Greco-Roman mythology of conflict and origin that allows me to make paintings look the way I want the paintings to look. It's not so much the story as it is how assertive the paintings look. And I suppose it could be connected to some degree, but I think probably everybody feels relatively inadequate in one way or another.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Everybody I know.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I don't want to know the ones that don't _____. [laughter]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. So I don't think that it's a Napoleonic complex. Anyway, when my mother went to the sanitarium because she had her nervous breakdown, she was ill not for too long but it was several months. That was when I actually learned to sort of take care of myself. Before that time she had been very much the person who basically took care of me. And she was quite wonderful. She instilled in me a strong sense of being careful. I remember there was a young woman who was in school with me in Banning-actually a pretty girl-who was pointed out to me as also being diabetic, and she always ate ice cream for lunch. And I was told never to eat anything that had any sugar in it at all. So she died. And I don't exactly know why but it was impressed on my mind it was because she ate the ice cream. [chuckles] She was probably just very ill or she certainly had a worse case of it than I did, or a different kind of case. And they still haven't been able to define it exactly; they have Type A and Type B and all that sort of thing.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Mike doesn't belong to the modern youth in terms of the medicine. We have a young friend who's about. . . . Well, he must be twenty-one now. He learned he was diabetic when he was about twenty or nineteen. He has a whole different set of vocabulary and ideas about testing and numbers and works very actively, I guess, with his doctor in learning all this stuff.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I don't want to know anything about it.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Whereas Mike's idea is to deny it as much as possible, to not think about it, to not know all this because you can't control it. I think the way they teach people now, especially the young ones, is to give them as much information and as much control as they can and make their lives as normal as possible. But we always felt like if anybody knew you'd lose your job, you'd lose your. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And that may still be true.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: It may be true. You might lose your job, or your insurance, your car, your whatever. Nobody would give you any credit. You know, who knows?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I certainly would never want it to be known in relationship to my art, because certainly when I was having that difficulty in Olympia, if they knew I was Type A, they could have really attacked me. I mean, they were attacking me for being a heavy drinker.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how do you mean? How do you mean they could have?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: They could have said, "Well, he was a perfectly nice fellow but obviously he had very low blood sugar when he was figuring out this. . . ." [laughs] In other words, there's a diminished capacity aspect to. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's a defense, too, you know.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, I know, but not when you're doing public art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You remember Harvey Milk and Dan White and [those people].

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: [laughing] That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, there's so many questions that arise from what you're telling me and I want to try to. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, yeah, I should get off of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, not necessarily. It's tempting then to sort of pursue all these different directions and one of them. . . . And I'll indulge myself because this takes out of the order of things and I find it very interesting. I happen to believe that what people do is very much connected with their life experience. That's my point of view and that doesn't mean it's right in your case. But everything you've told me so far suggests to me that you do see a real connection-not maybe direct and maybe not the way I would draw that connection-between this experience, this recognition of your own limitations in a very real, physical way and then the choices you made and ultimately the work. Now I don't want to be simplistic about it, but one of the things that occurs to me-let's throw this out and test it-is that you deal with themes that are-I was going to sort of save this for some time later-but which are somewhat unusual in modern, sort of contemporary art: classical mythology. And inherent in these themes, it seems to me, are. . . . Well, they're big themes, they're big issues, and in a sense they're universal, but one thing seems clear to me that these are powerful, super beings, in a sense, that are us, but us exaggerated and powerful, and that your own. . . . They can be used, I think, or have been used, to point out our own helplessness and vulnerability. I don't want to push this or pursue it, but it's just one of the things that occurs to me. And I guess what I want to ask is have you ever thought in these terms in connection with your subjects: That you have a relationship through your own health situation, your own life experience with these powerful, powerful images and individuals?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, actually, I don't feel that there's a direct response, but obviously there is. I mean, it's a question of, whether I think there is or not, there is. But the reason I do the classical mythology is much more cerebral. It's not a question of how I feel about things. It's how I think about things. And I was a very good student in school-in grammar school and in high school. (I went to high school in Riverside.) I like things intellectual and I like verbal things and I was very interested in Latin, actually, in high school. And I had a teacher named Margaret Finley, who was one of these maiden teachers whose boyfriend died in the First World War and she never got married, all this sort of thing. And she was a very strict taskmaster, and you had to pronounce the words exactly right. Anyway just loved her. I think I took three years of Latin, and at that time I think I got very, very involved in at least Roman mythology, and through that I got involved in Greek Mythology,

but the reason I started using it in the paintings was because I wanted to make paintings that had this kind of gestural, assertive quality to them that was prevalent in abstract expressionism and the kind of painting that was being done when I was learning painting. Now it can also be connected to the other thing, too, but I don't feel like it's as direct a thing-because I could have chosen a whole lot of different things. I could have painted cowboys, which actually I'd sort of like to. Or I could have done other kinds of super heroes, like historical scenes and battle scenes with Napoleon or something.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, after you watched the Olympics, you did do Mark Spitz.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. [chuckles] That's right. Well, they were swimmers, but it wasn't really Mark Spitz but it was the idea of this kind of achievement, which was amazing.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And the divers. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I can see that. I mean, what I've seen of your work, [how, although] these images, configurations, forms which you do, very interesting.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And there's a sense of them being very phallic, also, which is something that I find really assertive. Well, I suppose it's just a kind of assertive. . . . Well, go ahead, you can turn it over [the tape-Trans.].

[Session 1, Tape 2, side A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: A continuing interview with Michael Spafford and Liz Sandvig on September 2, 1992. This is the first session, tape 2, side A, and Michael was saying some interesting things. Of course then he waited until we turned the tape recorder off to continue the idea, but I'd like to prompt you on this. You were saying that one of your concerns is basically giving up. You can imagine, you can conceive of a situation where you lose the impulse, the motivation, to action. And it sounds to me perhaps as if this is something that is an important factor in what makes you work and keep going.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, that's very true. And part of that's connected to my condition as a diabetic. But because I've always thought or it's been a strong feeling in the back of my mind that I'll get to a point where either I'll be blind or I'll be mentally incapacitated or physically incapacitated so I can't work. But I think being sensitive to that has made me sensitive to other statistical information about people who are artists. I recall when I was a student in the late fifties there was some kind of statistic about the number of people who graduate as art students and how many of them continue to work say twenty years after they've graduated as artists, and it was very, very tiny. It was something like eight percent. Now, I think that's a big amount, but at that time I thought that was really. . . . And I think probably what it meant was that people who study art in college or in art school probably learn to be very good people and then they go off and do things that interest them. They could do anything, and it would still be a terrific education. But at that time I thought of it as being sort of an indictment-or not an indictment. It was showing how difficult it was to continue. It didn't have anything to do with talent. It didn't have anything to do with opportunity. What it had to do with was just luck. And in a way I still feel that way, and I feel very lucky that I'm still continuing. I feel very lucky that I have a wife or a companion who is a really active maker of art. I mean, neither one of us does it because we're, say, painting from show to show. I'm not making paintings just so I can show them in a yearly faculty exhibit. I do it because I really want to make it. Not make it. I really want to make paintings, but I know that there are people who somehow are not able to do this. I'm sure I've connected this, like I say, with the diabetes but I'm still afraid. . . . Here I am fifty-six years old, and I'm still afraid that I won't be able to do it again.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you a question that then will move us right into or back to the fact of your relationship. You mentioned you have a wife and partner who is, it seems to me, tailor made to be supportive in some very important ways, and presumably that's mutual and this is something that I hope we can touch on as we talk about this. But it strikes me that your work is really. . . . In fact the more I think about it, the more I notice that your work is quite different and it seems that there are really very different impulses in here [in the art?-Ed.]. And what I would like to do is sort of pursue this idea of individuals, separate individuals, in the same field having met in art school at Pomona continuing with, presumably, certain breaks and adjustments and so forth and always a shifting relationship, which is the truth of anybody's relationship, but to try to track that a little bit in part in terms of not the similarities between you so much as maybe the differences.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Okay, I. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Whether it be style. . . . You see what I'm getting at?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, how does this work? How did it work in your case?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, as I was explaining to you before-and I don't know if it's on the tape or not-but when I was in high school I had a particular interest in Latin and some of the verbal things. I was a very good speller, and my math skills were adequate. But at the same time, I also enjoyed doing things like cartooning-and this would be like sports cartooning-lettering-I was an excellent letterer; I had the kind of control or facility-poster making, commercial art. I was actually in high school when a man named James Smutz came to our school for what they call Career Days. And he had a little advertising agency in Riverside, California, called the Jim Smutz Advertising and Publicity Agency, and he wanted to have somebody come after school and do layouts for his ads. And so a number of us competed for that job and I actually got it. So I worked for Jim for at least seven years off and on, and this is where I really got my strong training in how to do art. I mean, I didn't have any classes in how to do art at high school. I went on to college and learned to paint, but I had already been formed sort of as a graphic-design artist. And what that means, at that time anyway before they had xerography, we were using typing paper most. . . . I mean, not typing paper. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Carbon.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . carbon paper and all that sort of thing. This was back in the early fifties. At that time, the original art was generally done quite large, and then it was reduced to work in whatever-either into magazines, where it had very fine screened reproductions that would be like 120 dots to an inch, or for newspapers where it was 60 dots to an inch. And so you always had to think-or at least I was trained to think-in terms of making things very clear, and this is particularly true in a value contrast way. And I remember I did things-this is in addition to doing the layouts with pencil-I would do original art where they would take it and they would translate it to a billboard size, or I would do original art where they would take it and put it in a magazine, or I'd do original art and they'd put it in a newspaper. But it was always done with the idea that you could make it any size that you wanted and it would still look good. It wasn't the actual piece so much as what the actual piece translated to. And I had many wonderful experiences in the agency, and I not only did art but I also wrote copy and I did some of the financial account work, which was very, very interesting. I even did some selling, but I didn't like that. It's very, very difficult. And I had a broad experience. But that was basically all the art I did. I tried to do a little bit of painting, and I remember I had one girlfriend who. . . . I met her because she was in a play. It was Anything Goes. And actually, this was when I was in junior college, so I had already graduated from high school and I went to junior college-Riverside Junior College-which was on the same campus as the high school. And this girl played the lead in Anything Goes by Cole Porter, and I thought it was just wonderful. I mean, I'm sure she wasn't, but it was just great and her name was Evangeline Durr, "Vangie." We used to. . . . I liked to drive a lot and I would just drive for hundreds of miles, and everybody in Southern California was like that at a certain age. And I'd go and I'd park at a drive-in eating place, and everybody'd come and we'd talk about cars and things. And I had a '37 [Terra Plane, Terraplane], which was an old Hudson and it was a wonderful car. And then I bought a '41 Mercury that was _____. You know, cars were a big part of my life. And I remember driving with Vangie to the desert and back again. There were always other people in the car.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh right, sure.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, that's right. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do we believe that, Liz?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: [chuckles]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I had absolutely no carnal experience with women at all. I mean, it was just. . . . I guess I was just shy or something. Maybe that's why she finally dropped me. The reason I mention her is because I remember meeting her after we had broken up. I met her in a cafe in downtown Riverside, and she asked me something about where I was going to go to school. And I said something like, well, I didn't think I was going to go any further than the junior college because basically I had a good job in the advertising agency and I could continue the work there and I would make lots of money and everything would be fine. And she got so angry with me. She said, "But you could be an artist." And I thought, well, I wasn't really sure I could. But she was mad, and it got me thinking in terms of the fact that, "Well, maybe I could do something other than just be a commercial artist," because at that time, actually, I think I had the sense that being a fine artist was much better than being a commercial artist. I don't feel that way now. That was before Pop Art came along and there was this whole range of people who sort of came from that field and became very, very fine artists indeed. It had a lot to do with her attitude, what I decided to do when I went to college, which was Pomona College. And so I was thinking about not going to college even though I enjoyed the challenge of going on to more school, but it was an expensive school. And when I got there I decided I wanted to be. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You met Peter Selz.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. Peter Selz was there and it was his first year also. Peter later became a curator at the Museum of Modern Art [New York? Los Angeles?-Ed.] and he had written-or he was writing at that

time, a book on German expressionist paintings. And I remember he seemed very strange to me with his accent, and he was very foreign. But I was very impressed by him, and I remember that once I got to Pomona that they wouldn't give me any credit-or very little credit-for any of the classes that I'd taken in my junior college. And I graduated from the junior college second in my class. So I was the salutatorian and I gave a speech and all that sort of thing. And I think that I felt fairly smug about my level of achievement. When I got to Pomona, they said I had to take all these classes over again. So it meant another four years after taking two years of college. And so I remember telling Peter this and I said, "Boy, I'm not going to do that. They can just go piss up a rope or something." And Peter said, well, he wasn't sure he liked it there either but he'd agree to stay a year if I would. [laughs] And of course all I had to be was there a year and then of course I liked it and I wanted to go back. So he was big influence on me getting more of an education. But I think this is sort of what I mean by what I said earlier that I feel two things are going on. I feel like there's a lot of luck involved in how my career, or my direction, my life choices came about. I think I could have easily stayed in Riverside, California, for the rest of my life, joined the Junior Chamber of Commerce and the Toastmasters and done all the same sort of things that my boss did. I could have gone on. . . . Well, actually, I had done a cartoon for the Los Angeles Examiner. I don't think there is a Los Angeles Examiner anymore, but there used to be two big newspapers.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. It was only a few years ago that the Hearst paper closed down.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Is that what it was? Well, anyway, they had a cartoon contest for sports cartoons, and I guess I was in high school at that time-I'm pretty sure I was in high school-and I was one of the finalists, and the prize was a full tuition in Art Center School. Art Center is a big commercial art school. At that time-it's quite different from the way it is now-it was just commercial art at that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I wanted to go there by the way, so this is a shared experience.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Okay, but that was way back when they just got started back in the early fifties. I don't know when you were interested, but had they moved to where they are now when you were. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, this was the late. . . . Well, I graduated in '59. This isn't about me but that puts it in time. So it was about '59, '60.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: You graduated from high school in '59?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Okay, so we graduated from college in '59.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, who's counting? [all chuckle]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Of course, that was six years after I graduated from high school. But anyway I've told people that I actually got a scholarship and then I turned it down and went to Pomona. I didn't actually get it. But the possibility was there, because I was one of the four finalists to do the final cartoon. As a matter of fact, this is kind of interesting, because I remember the final cartoon. It was the result of a football game, and they gave you the game that you were going to work on just a couple of days before they had to have the cartoon. And the game was a game between. . . . It was either SC [USC?-Ed.] and Berkeley or SC and UCLA or something like that. And I remember that my caption was "Et tu, Bruin."

PAUL KARLSTROM: UCLA, right?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: [laughs]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And I don't recall exactly what I drew, but it must have had something to do with somebody, a Trojan and a Bear, and. . . . In other words, even then I was sort involved with the Latin kind of classical referencing, even before I decided to become a painter. Anyway, it didn't win. But one of the things that we got to do as finalists, we got to go visit the studio of the guy that drew Steve Canyon. Was is Milton Caniff? Or somebody like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes!

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And it was quite wonderful because. . . . And when I saw this guy with his original cartoons all over the wall, and he was there and he had his slanted table and he had his light and he had his stereo-or whatever it was at that time-and I thought, "My God! Nothing could be greater than that!" And the fact that everybody looked at his work and enjoyed it. So I really wanted to be a cartoonist. I really wanted to be somebody who had that kind of impact on people. And also I think I recognized that this man, even though he had this tremendous impact, was relatively anonymous as a person. You know, people knew who he was, but he wasn't. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: A movie star. I mean he wasn't a personality out there.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, that's right. And unfortunately at that time-or I thought it unfortunately-most of the fine artists were involved in the cult of the personality and it was the artists themselves that was important; the work was relatively unimportant.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you knew, presumably then, about the abstract expressionists?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Oh sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Pollock and all. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . deKooning and these people. They were. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Sure, that's right.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And you didn't feel you could live up to all that.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I didn't want to. Yeah, I didn't like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So getting then to Pomona, something happened that then diverted you a bit on to this course that finally has led to now and what you're doing.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I continued working for the advertising agency even though I was going to Pomona. I would drive back to Riverside on weekends and work all night, actually, just getting things done. And it was very nice because I got paid. The thing that happened at Pomona was I met some people who had such an impact on my life that I really couldn't change after that. And part of them were the students, but most of them were the teachers, and one of them was a woman named Teresa Fulton. She was just wonderful. She's dead now, but she was an art historian. Her husband. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Joe.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . Joe Fulton actually was the head curator at the Pasadena Art Museum and had had some difficulty with the board and there was a big dust up and. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I think he was an alcoholic.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Was he an alcoholic? Well, at any rate, they had gotten a divorce, but Teresa was just the most brilliant person that I had ever come into contact with. I took a course on early Netherlandish painting with her, and I think you [ELIZABETH SANDVIG-Ed.] were in the same course. Or maybe it was a different. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I know I took it, but I don't remember that. . . . I don't think you were in my class.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, at any rate, when I took it that was. . . . The early Netherlandish painting is people like Jan van Eyck, and Petrus Christus, and Roger van der Weyden and those, you know, what they call Flemish primitives. And it was incredible how interesting she made it, and she was always so well prepared. And I found out later that she just worked her butt off to do this.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Went to the library. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I mean, every time she had a class, she spent hours ahead of time getting everything together. And I didn't realize. I thought it just came right off the top of her head.

PAUL KARLSTROM: One wishes. [chuckles]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah. And all of us who studied with her, she gave us a sort of entree to meet other people who were interesting. We met a woman named Kate Steinitz who. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I knew Kate.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, and she was at the. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: We went to her apartment.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: It was quite wonderful because here she had been. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Kurt Schwitters.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . a friend of Kurt Schwitters and she had been an artist herself and now she was in charge of the Elmer Belt Library. As a matter of fact later when we were in Rome she came to visit us and it was one of the most interesting experiences that we've ever had. She was quite elderly at that time, and she wanted us to get shards of pottery from some hill for her, and she'd sit in our little apartment and she'd start talking and she would just fall asleep in the middle of a sentence and then she'd wake up and she'd be speaking a totally different language but the same thought-she'd be speaking French or German-and it was just incredible. I mean she was so. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: The Watts. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Then she got involved in saving the Watts Tower. So that was how. . . . She and Teresa. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Right.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Teresa was very involved.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And all the students also got involved in this. And it wasn't a social issue so much as it was just an art issue. And I think that was one of the first times that I became aware of the fact that something that was nonpractical was important.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You two knew one another at this time? You weren't married yet?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. I don't even think we were dating.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you were going to some of the same things?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: We were in the same classes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, in the same classes, but the visiting of Kate Steinitz was. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But I always think of you as being ahead of me somehow.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, I was a year ahead of you but I only graduated a half a year ahead of you.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right. But Pomona was very strict about requirements. So like my first year was full up with all these requirements and you weren't in any classes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. But I came to school before you.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I know, but by the second year that I was there I was taking some of those classes that you had already taken. Even the art classes; we never took art classes together.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: It's possible.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But I was certainly aware of him as being. . . . He was the most skilled of anybody. I mean. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Ohhh. In a literally accurate way. In other words, I could draw perspective. . . . I used to do elevations for housing developments. And I could do portraits and. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And he could draw the model-in any position. And all the proportions were right. And there wasn't anybody that could do that. And actually I realize now the faculty couldn't do that either.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was Millard Sheets teaching there at the time?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Oh, that's who I went to study with.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, he was at Scripps College, and yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know, but nowadays they [the students-Ed.] seem to be able to cross register.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, at that time, they were very segregated.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You could take classes, though. And I went up there to. . . . By that time I must have been a junior. When I went up to see him, what I saw was that he was doing these murals and things, but the students were doing them and then he signed his name to it. And then when I saw them, by that time. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Way ahead of his time. [laughs]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . my taste was already different. Actually in those two years I didn't like his work anymore. It was all these, those very stylized gold angels and figures and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: And the whole savings and loan. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Oh, gosh, yes. Meanwhile, we also had the man who did the horse, the flying horse for the gasoline. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: For Mobil Oil.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . Mobil Oil, was there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I forget his name [________-Ed.]. He was a sculpture teacher at Scripps.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I remember it was very shocking to me that he did a bench and they embedded this medallion of the flying horse, of Pegasus.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: It's still there.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And somebody, though, painted it red, painted the bronze red. [I think, It was my first] idea of vandalism with a point.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Right. [chuckling]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But when I had been studying, I was already. . . . I started so differently. Like the first painting that ever had any impact on me was the Paul Klee in the Phillips Collection of the. . . . What's it called? Safari Song or Desert Song? Arab Song.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't remember but, yeah.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And, see, the first thing that I thought was wonderful was a Pogo cartoon. [laughs]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: It's so odd!

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it seems you agree that you come from somewhat different positions on this, and what I would like to do when we put a new one [tape-Ed.] in here is to try to then track that initial collision, because you're both interested in art to one degree or another but maybe slightly different views of where that might lead. But you came into conjunction and there's clearly a story there, which we can. . . .

[Session 1, Tape 2, side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: A continuing interview with Spafford/Sandvig. This is on September 2, 1992. Tape 2, side B, and we still have you stuck at Pomona-changing perhaps. Both of you a little bit are evolving and getting to know one another better. And perhaps the both of you can give an account of how things proceeded and how ultimately you ended up here in Seattle but with the many steps along the way, and just how that came about. And particularly in terms of your growth as a couple-evolution as a couple-and as artists.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Now, what I'm going to try to do, Elizabeth, is to quickly. . . . I'm going to regress a little bit and then I'm going to synopsize until we get to Seattle and then if you want to come in and. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . .disagree.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . revise it. . . . [laughter]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, that sounds fair.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I had been at Pomona for a year, and I was in my second year when I had an automobile accident. I can recall very clearly that it was on Foothill Boulevard and I was driving a '49 Ford two-door which I had just gotten the driver's side door fixed. It was a door that had a tendency to open up when you were driving. Of course they didn't have any seat belts at that time. I had a friend in the car with me and it must have been after midnight. We were on our way to a place called Stinky's to get. . . . I was going to get a cup of coffee and he was going to get a beer and we were studying for tests. And I recall my test was going to be in sociology. And by that time, I had gotten to the point where I was sort of on track to be a very good student at Pomona and I eventually became Phi Beta Kappa. But I wasn't thinking of that so much at the time, but I was very, very conscious of making a good effort as a student. The accident occurred because a car that was making a left turn actually got headed in our lane. Foothill Boulevard was a highway that had no divider and it had very sharp shoulders that dropped off the side. The car that was making a left turn looking for a motel, I believe, was coming right toward me. And I don't think I was going very fast, but this car was coming right at us and I recall being very conscious of the fact that head-on collisions were generally fatal so I put on my brakes and we skidded broadside into the oncoming car. He happened to hit at the door that I had just gotten fixed, and both of us that were in the car bounced around and the car turned over several times. I don't think I ever lost consciousness, but what happened was that the person that was in the car with me was just knocked out the other door and he hurt his finger. I stayed in the car while it was rolling over, went over the edge of the road, and I was eventually thrown out of the car and wedged between two rocks and the car fell on me. So I was quite badly injured and I don't want to talk about all aspects of it because. . . . Actually there were some really funny things that happened. But at any rate I was out for like a semester. And the thing that I remember primarily about this were two things: I was angry because I had missed my exam and I was afraid that I wouldn't graduate. Or not graduate, but I wouldn't pass the course. I was upset because my car was damaged. And then later on I was upset because I realized that would have a negative impact on my diabetic condition. I was in the hospital for maybe two or three weeks. Then I had to go home and recover. And I missed school. With the insurance money that was paid eventually. . . . The person that hit me was not insured, was not licensed. He actually was an itinerant crop picker who I've never met but I feel very sorry for because he had borrowed the car and he had a pregnant wife in the car with him and all this sort of thing, but. . . . And I don't know what they did. They probably garnisheed his wages or something. But my insurance paid enough money so that when I did eventually go back to school I was driving a '52 MG TD. [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And there you have it.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And that's one of the things that attracted Elizabeth to me.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Of course. Now, I didn't know how to drive. You have to remember that I'd been living in Mexico and we didn't have a car. We took cabs or [paseros, pesados] or the bus. And so Mike said he would teach me how to drive.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: What a line.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Our relationship almost was ruined at that very point.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Anyway, so he tried to teach me how to drive, and he took me to Disneyland. And then he tried to help me every time that. . . . It wasn't anything to do with painting. It was usually writing. You had to write, it seemed to me, all the time at Pomona. I mean, every single week somebody wanted another paper. So Mike would help me checking over, and also he could do this thing that was so marvelous that I had never learned to do very well and that was type. Because I was brought up by a working mother, I did kind of learn that, if you learned how to do something, that was what people expected you to do. So that if you learned how to type, you might end up becoming a typist. I was very careful. I've been extremely selfish most of my life by not learning how to do a lot of things that other people know how to do. So I didn't know how to drive, but I would have liked to learn, I guess, so. . . . And then I didn't know how to type, and so Mike would type my papers for me. And what else did I not know how to do?

PAUL KARLSTROM: I thought you said you weren't interested romantically.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, that's true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it sounds like doing a lot of work for her.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, but she's sort of squeezing this together.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, okay.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yeah, so anyway. Anyway, we had a good time because he was smart. We went around for at least two years or _____ to me.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: We had a long courtship.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I was not. . . . I was much more experienced than Mike, and I think that was why I was interested in him. I'd already known a lot of boys in Mexico and I already knew what I didn't want. And most of them were what I didn't want. Especially being in Mexico, they had a very narrow view of what women did or the kind of life they lead and how supervised they were. And I could see I wasn't going to fit into that kind of life at all, so. . . . So off we. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: The needle [on the tape recorder-Ed.] isn't moving very much.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: What? Oh.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, that's all right. Go ahead.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Anyway, we got married in 1959, and my art teacher, painting teacher, Jim Grant, gave us away-or gave me away. We got married in his garden.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I'm going to regress back again.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You are? Why?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Because I haven't quite got to the point that I wanted to get to.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Oh, gosh.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I had just gotten to getting the MG. Then I came back to college, and that was when I first saw Elizabeth was when she was sort of in my space, or what I thought was in my space in the art school. At the same time, even though I was interested in painting, I knew that I wasn't as skilled-or maybe not skilled, but I didn't have as clear a view of what art was as some of the other students in the program. My idea of art was basically illustration. And so I had quite a bit of difficulty with the teachers, not that I wasn't teachable but I can recall writing a paper for a sculpture teacher by the name of Charles Lawler, who was quite a wonderful teacher, I think, and he did work that was similar to Brancusi's. He was that type of formalist. And I wrote a paper about Wilhelm Lehmbruck-an artist, a sculptor named Lehmbruck. And he thought the paper was wonderful. He had everybody in the class-it was a sculpture class-write a paper about an artist. And the way he expressed that to the whole class, while I was sitting there, was he said. . . . I don't know how he referred to me but something like, "Mr. Spafford, this is a wonderful paper that you've written about Lehmbruck. Perhaps you should be an art historian rather than an artist." So it was sort of a backhanded compliment. And as I think about it, I think most of my career choices and my choices for directions that I've taken in my life have been pretty determined by a kind of perversity. I have a tendency to do-just like everybody else-the opposite from what I'm told I should do. And it was not only his commentary that kept me interested in being an artist, but it was a monograph written by a man named Morley, who'd written a book on. . . . He taught at Princeton, I believe, and he wrote a book on medieval art history. I can't remember what it was called. But he also wrote a monograph explaining that it was not possible to be both an art historian and an artist at the same time. That one discipline involved a kind of rational, fact finding, the other needed a kind of intuitive process, and that they were mutually exclusive. And so just because he said it couldn't be done, I thought that that's what I would like to do. I had a number of different opportunities for going on to graduate school. I was a very good student at Pomona. I guess, I graduated magna cum laude.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You were going to apply for a Rhodes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Right. I was going to apply for a Rhodes scholarship because my profile fit fairly well and I was told that I'd have a fairly good chance. I was a former tennis player and I still played some tennis. I had the diabetes, which in a sense it was a plus because it showed that I could overcome adversity. I had exhibited a kind of academic intelligence, which was the sort of thing they were looking for. And I had this hobby, which would be painting. [laughs] And the other thing that was sort of a drawback was that they didn't have any courses in art history at Oxford-that was all done through the Slade School, which I guess was their art school-so I would have had to, say, go in comparative literature or something like that which was all right. I didn't mind. Or even philosophy. But by that time I had decided that I'd rather be married, and it was not possible to be married and to have a Rhodes scholarship.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You had to be single.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: You had to be single, right. So when I was in the process of actually being promoted for this thing, and I told them that I didn't want to do it. But I did apply for. . . . What was it called? A Woodrow Wilson. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yeah.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . Scholarship. And I remember going down and being interviewed, and you actually went with me.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yeah.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I did very poorly in the interview and I didn't get that either. But, through Teresa Fulton, I applied to three graduate schools in art history. And I decided that it would be best to get a Ph.D. in art history and then to continue being an artist, just to show that I could do that.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And also, you thought it would be easier to teach art history.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. I thought it would be easier. Fewer hours.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Uh huh. [said sardonically!-Trans.]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And some people, like the artists kept saying, "You can't do that."

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And I said, "Well, you can't do it but I can."

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: So off we went to Harvard.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, actually I applied to three schools. I applied to NYU, to Harvard, and to Yale.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I don't remember.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And I was accepted at all three. I got no money offered from Yale, I got two thousand dollars offered at Harvard, and I got some money from NYU. And in retrospect, I think I should have gone to NYU, because it would have been more the kind of program that I would have found challenging.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Also you would have been positioned better as an artist.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, that's true. But anyway so I went to Harvard to study with a man named Seymour Slive, who was a Rembrandt expert, and he was a friend of Teresa's and she had recommended me very highly so. . . . Unfortunately, when I got there-this was in 1960-he had just gone off to Holland for a year, so I never studied with him. And the courses I did take at Harvard-with perhaps the exception of a course from. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Rosenberg.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . Jacob Rosenberg-were laughable. I was so used to a really excellent, very challenging kind of education at Pomona that I was really disappointed by the kind of education that was offered at Harvard. Now, I know that a lot of that had to do with my own fault. That I just didn't put myself in the position to be challenged, because I was interested in continuing to paint and I did paint quite a bit during that year. I had an exhibit in the Fogg Museum along with other first-year graduate students. And a lot of first year graduate students had been painters. And I think there were nine or ten of us, or seven or eight of us in that program. Anyway, after a year there I decided that that wasn't for me.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, you'd better explain what happened. Really why you decided. Or what brought it to a head. He went to a party.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, well, it's partially apocryphal, I think, and I'm not sure. . . . I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Oh, well, that's. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: We were invited to a party in New York City. At that time, Peter Selz was the curator at the Museum of Modern Art. He lived on Central Park West and he was still married to his first wife, Thalia Selz. We were going down to New York and I guess we got in touch with him, and he said, "Well, come to this cocktail party." Or I guess it was just a party that he was having or a dinner or something.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Peter loves to give parties.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, right. And so we went up and Mark Rothko was there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Whoa.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . and a man named Bates Lowry. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: He was an art historian.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . and some other people.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: A whole lot of people.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And at any rate, I was introduced to both Bates and Mark as somebody who was taking art history at Harvard and who wanted to teach, or something like that. And I remember Rothko. . . . I remember this very clearly. He laughed and I remember him as being a very ebullient person. I mean, he was drinking very heavily at that time and so he was obviously. . . . He wasn't drunk, but he was very high. And he laughed a lot, and he said he just loved to teach. And I was surprised and I said, "Well, Mr. . . ." Of course, I was twenty-four years old or something, and I said. . . . Guess I was twenty-five . . . or twenty-four. He was a god to me, and I said, "Do you really like to teach?" And he said, "Yes. Think of all the talent you can squelch."

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And I'm sure that's exactly the kind of answer that I would give now, but at the time it came as a great shock to me. Anyway, he and Bates Lowry were. . . . And if you're a personal friend of Bates, I'm really sorry but he. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, I'm not. I'm an objective observer.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: They were arguing, and the upshot was that Bates was writing an article about one of Rothko's pieces for the [College Art Journal, College Art journal]. And Rothko was saying, "But you haven't even seen the painting." And Bates was saying things like, "Well, but I've seen a lot of your work. I'm very familiar with your work." And Rothko was saying, "But you should see the painting." And he said, "Well, I've got this photograph of it." And he had a little black-and-white photograph of the painting. And Rothko got increasingly more angry. At first I thought he was sort of kidding, but then I realized he was really quite hurt. And Bates was being. . . . Obviously, he hadn't drunk as much or he just could hold his liquor better or something but he was being much more precise and cold about his position. So it was sort of very yin-yang type of thing. And finally Bates said that. . . . He said something that struck me. . . . I mean, it struck me as being sort of true. He said, "The people who read my article are going to see this photograph. They're not going to see your painting." And I realized that was true and it was a thing that an art historian could say, or at least a person who was writing an article could say, but it was very wrong also in a broader sense. And I identified myself with turning into somebody like Bates Lowry and I really didn't want to. So I think it was from that. I had been thinking about it previous to that time, but I think that was the time that really set in my mind that I didn't want to continue in that particular field. I think I realized that probably this person was right that wrote the monograph that if I wanted to be a painter I just had to do that. I had no idea of how I would do it. I had no way to make any money. I think that at that time, though, that we had lots of friends who were poets and things and they did things like they drove trucks or they parked cars or they. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Heaven knows what they did.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: You know, they did very menial labor as a way of doing their art, and I assumed that that's the sort of thing I would do too. But. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: We went to Mexico.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, the thing is I got a degree without knowing it.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: See, I'd been there a year. I'd taken a German test, which I just sort of guessed at and passed, I guess. And the Latin that I had took the place of the French that they wanted me to take. I just took courses. I didn't write any thesis or anything. I left. They mailed the degree to my mother-an M.A. to my mother!- and I didn't' even know about it until much later. So that's how I have my advanced degree. [laughs] It's probably why I have my job at the University of Washington, but it wasn't. . . . It was sort of a consolation degree. It wasn't something that you got on the way to a Ph.D.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's a terminal. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: It was something that you were given as a consolation if you weren't able to finish.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I think the term is the "Terminal M.A."

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Is it? Well, whatever. It was nothing. It was just a year of very mediocre classroom stuff.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what were you doing, Liz, at the same time? You were studying. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Paul, I was in another place. We were living in the same apartment, and supposedly I was in the education department, which was so different. I had a class from. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Kepple. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . Francis Kepple, and what he was doing was motivating everybody to canvass for Kennedy. And I remember I wanted to take a class at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and whoever my advisor was says it wasn't taking advantage of being at Harvard, so that was out. So they allowed you to take exams in education subjects and waive those topics. So then I took reading courses. Harvard wouldn't let you. . . . I mean, the art history department would not let you take graduate courses in art history if you were in another department. So they let me do private, arranged courses.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Like with Havrecamp Begeman.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, really.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I did a class with Havrecamp Begeman, and that was wonderful. Or I took a course in architecture. I don't know, I just sort of hopped around and took. . . . I had a class that. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: With Naum Gabo was it?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . with Gabo, and, you know, a lot about Moholy-Nagy and things like that. [laughs] And then I had to do other things like practice teaching, which I just hated because they had one art teacher for seven hundred students. It was in the suburbs in Weston and she taught three days in the high school and two days in the junior high. And I couldn't remember all these. . . . When you had all these children-you had thirty in a class-I couldn't remember their names, I couldn't distinguish between them. And it was very rigid. You had ten minutes to lay out materials, ten minutes to work, and ten minutes to clean up. And for that kind of an art class, I thought it was better to have none. So we went to Mexico for the summer to sort of decide what to do. And we stayed with my mother. By this time she'd moved to an apartment right downtown at the corner of [Mondres] and [Anjuhentes], which is like in the middle of the city. And I sold paintings. I was allowed to be a guest artist in the [Parke de Sullivan] and join the Artists' Union and sell paintings on Sundays to tourists, very inexpensively, but it brought in a little money. And then Mike got an under-the-table job teaching at Mexico City College. [phone rings; MICHAEL SPAFFORD apparently goes off to answer-Trans.] And I know we took a trip. Then we took a trip to. . . . Well, we were there for three years. At some point, my mother needed eye surgery, and we took a trip to Washington, and I found a little gallery there to sell my work. Very nice French woman. Oh, I know. Somebody came from the University of Arizona to this park and they. . . . [laughs] His name was Bill Steadman, and he was director of the gallery at the University of Arizona, and he wanted to arrange a show of Diego Rivera. So I took him home with me and introduced him to my mother, who then tried to call and make arrangements for him to meet people that could help him. Well, he couldn't get anywhere. So I ended up having a show there. That was very nice. And all I did was mail off the [Mong, Hmong] prints, and then they framed them and set them up and then when we were driving. . . . We drove up there and stopped and then drove on to Washington. So at some point along there, I guess I became pregnant so that by the time we came back to Mexico, we stayed until our son was born. By this time, we had realized we didn't want to lead an expatriate life. I had a lot of friends that I went to high school with of all kinds of nationalities that spoke like five languages. And if you weren't Mexican, you really had to be able to do something, some skill that the Mexicans couldn't do themselves. And there really weren't. . . . Because they were very strict about the immigration and things that were available. And so we realized we couldn't stay there, make paintings. I mean, it was full of people from other countries who would come and stay six months or three months and then drive to the United States and hit these-I don't even know what to call them-these shows like in Florida and places like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Art shows?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Art shows. But they were painting tourist paintings, and so certainly we realized we couldn't do that. And obviously in having a child. . . . We had friends there who were artists who prayed for money, but we couldn't live like that either. We were much too conventional. So Mike started to apply for jobs. And a lot of them wanted him to come and be an art

historian. One of them was actually the University of Arizona, but they wanted him to come and. . . . It involved a lot of flying, taking trips. And we thought with his health it was too risky. So we chose what we thought was the best place to leave from. You know, like we didn't really want to be in California at the present time, but we thought we might in the future. But once we got here. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: To Seattle.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: To Seattle, we stayed here two years in a house-rented a house-and then we began. . . . Oh, let's see, I think we went and spent the summer in Mexico, and then we came back and bought a house. It's [the tape recorder-Ed.] just starting to flash.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's all right.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: So, now that doesn't say anything about art. It gives no idea of the kind. . . .

[Session 1, Tape 3, side A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, this is a continuing interview with Spafford/Sandvig. We'll do a little bit more perhaps, if that's okay.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this is session one on September 2, 1992. This is the third tape, side A. And Liz, you. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I was talking about going to Mexico after leaving Harvard. The three years that we spent there were great working years. I guess, for one thing I had a room to work in, and I spent most of those three years, I suppose, doing monoprints or monotypes. And I didn't really get into painting. Maybe I did a few little paintings, but. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But did you say you were selling some, that you were actually making a little income?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes. These were all monoprints, though. And they were not done with a press. I painted on the piece of glass, I put the paper down on the glass, and I drew on the back. And then I kept repeating the process, building it up. So in a way it's sort of like transfer paintings but with a slight linear aspect. The kind of subject matter that I was interested in were some Greek myths, but quite different from Mike. Things like Harpies and. . . . What else? I can't remember very well.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Leda and the Vacuum Cleaner.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Leda and the Vacuum Cleaner. Well. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, now is this serious?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: It's true, she's got it. It's a beautiful piece; she's got it.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Foggy scenes, dancing mice. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: She did a lot of animals.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Lots of animals. That's a huge range of animals.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Her work was seen in this park by a man named Steadman.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Did I tell about that?

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mentioned that and ended up with a show as a result.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: At the University of Arizona in Tucson.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And I had a show at the. . . . I had three shows. The first show was at the Galeria Genova and it was all watercolors, all totally abstract. Just shapes. And I remember Alma Reed came. Do you remember Alma Reed?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Um hmm.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And it was very exciting and I didn't sell a thing. And there was another gallery. You remember Antonio Sousa?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Um hmm.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: They were going to give me a show, but I had to do work that was like work that I had done much earlier and that I wasn't interested in doing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was that like?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: That was work that I did when I was at Harvard. Actually, it was little tiny paintings about eight-by-ten inches, because the space that I had to work at was a hallway with a desk in it. And it was three-feet square. And so I worked very tiny and I just adjusted to that.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: What were they of?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: They were very abstract sort of little plant forms. More like Paul Klee than anything else, I think than any other time. Watercolors. So then in Mexico City I was doing these monoprints, and I was doing animals, and one of the reasons I was doing these animals was because in Mexico animals were not considered appropriate subject matter. Partly it may be cultural that there isn't very much respect for animals, but also it's just they had all these rigid views-of art had to have content-political content-or it had to. . . . There were so many things about the way it should be, and so I always went the other way so if they said. . . . Mine was very pale and soft as opposed to everything being very strong with big thick lines around it. But meanwhile we went around and looked at it all. And I mean certainly I loved Diego Rivera's murals in [Chapingo, Japingo] and Remedios's. Well, Remedios Varo was one of my favorite painters and she was a very tight. . . . What would you call it?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Surrealist.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Surrealist painter who. . . . But her paintings are funny. People riding bicycles through narrow streets but a man with a long red beard and it's his beard that becomes the bicycle handlebars. And she painted about twenty paintings, but she died fairly young-I think in her forties-and so. . . . She's one of the women that's included along with Leonora Carrington and Frieda Kahlo. And I always liked Frieda's paintings but. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I was going to ask you.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Frieda was still alive when I was going to school, and nobody ever thought of her as a painter. She was a political person. She was a star and she demanded this incredible amount of attention.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what about the idea of roles, if I may ask that? By this time you two were married.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were trying to keep body and soul together, presumably, trying to. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: We had no. . . . When I think about it, we were totally unrealistic. I had the idea that he could work for five years and then I would work for five years. And then this would provide enough money. It was just totally unrealistic, because you couldn't do that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But did you see yourselves-if it's possible to think back to that time-both as artists and coeval, in a sense, that you both had your art and that you needed to find a way, each of you, to pursue these careers? Or sometimes did you have perhaps a more traditional idea of roles and responsibilities for income and work? Or is this something you really didn't think about?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I can honestly say I didn't think about it. I mean, I realize I probably never thought about it very much. I think I was not very well trained in thinking about money or managing it or. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you see your art as equally important? I guess that's the most direct way to put it.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I'd say no. And that was partly from my experience at Pomona. There was more of an attitude where the men were going to go out and get a job and earn money and become artists and the women were going to become teachers or homemakers. And it spread through everything. Everything from. . . . I always had the feeling nobody ever told you the truth about what they thought about what you did. Now I realize it wasn't that they didn't tell you the truth, it was that they didn't know-anymore than one knows now. That it's more to do. . . . Unless you have an absolutely stellar talent and are so brilliant that you're just surpassing everybody else, then you're just, you're one of a huge number of people that make art for pleasure. So of those

people that are going to go on and continue either to enjoy it or to be productive or to be creative or to be inventive, there's no way of telling who those people are going to be. So that no adult is ever going to deliberately discourage a young person and say, "I don't think you should do this." Although every once in a while somebody tells me about people that have done that, told them, "No, you don't have enough talent or you. . . ."

PAUL KARLSTROM: These are artists then?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Uh huh. And I think that's terrible because, I don't think there's any way of being quite so clear about it. I mean, there's certain basic-or at least it used to be-there were certain basic skills that you had to know. But even now, some of the people who are most skilled end up being the worst artists. So therefore you can't use that as a guideline. You can't say that if you can copy this bust in fifteen minutes, and make it look just like the way it looks given the sixteenth-century viewpoint that you're going to be any more successful than anybody else. So nobody said, "Elizabeth, you've got to learn to letter," or "You have to learn to do this or do that." It might have been more useful if they had, I suppose, although I hated it when people did try and teach me that sort of thing. And Mike said I was an unteachable. That is that whatever everybody said it just sort of went right through me and I didn't pay much attention. Maybe I've always been that way.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Which I meant as a compliment. I don't think we. . . . At that time, we weren't thinking in the same terms that we think now, but I realize now that there is a fundamental difference between the way Elizabeth is an artist and the way that I am an artist. And the way I like to explain it is that basically my intelligence as an artist is reactive. I react to things either that have gone before or to ideas that. . . . Like I did a piece for the [Seattle-Ed.] Opera House called Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird, which is based upon a Wallace Stevens poem. I happen to think the poem is just absolutely beautiful. And I've done it three times and I'll probably do it again. But it's in reaction to something else. Elizabeth, on the other hand, her artistic intelligence is basically creative. It's not reactive. And she actually comes up with solutions that even she doesn't know where they come from. They just sort of pop out. Now, it's not that she's not reacting to things that she has experiences with, because she does, but she doesn't do it in the same sort of way that I do. I basically had one idea in 1958 and I've been reacting to that same idea ever since. Elizabeth, through her career, has gone from being an abstract painter to being almost a naturalist painter. She's done landscapes, she's done polyester resin sculpture. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: That's true.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . she's done proposals for major sculptural projects, she's done installation pieces. In the last ten years, she's been primarily a painter.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But that's because I just made that decision. I decided, "Well, I might live another twenty years for sure and I better stick to one thing." That I had to settle down. And that as far as the sculpture went I didn't have the physical capacity to keep developing by myself, that if I did sculpture, I was going to be dependent on other people. And I wasn't brought up that way. You know, I wasn't. . . . I'm not a team player. I'm an individual.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But at the same time, another reason for selecting the painting is that you could see by what was happening to our two careers that I was having more success than you were-in a career sense.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes, right.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And part of that was because I kept doing the same basic thing. It's not that the work didn't change, but it was like variations on the same approach. And it's a very. . . . At least it's described as a very Eurocentric male point of view. You know, you become like [Giorgio-Ed.] Morandi and do your bottles just in infinite varieties.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: That's true. You get better at it. And also, there was another little thing that came in there. And that was between the time when my child was born and he was six years old we went to Italy. So for two years when he was three, from the time he was three, I had a studio and I worked on the polyester resin sculpture, which were techniques that I'd learned in college, partly from Jack Zajac, who taught sculpture, and partly from Jim Grant, who then went on and became. . . . He was a painter, but then he went on and became a sculptor using polyester resin and did big pieces. Well, the bigger these pieces. . . . When I was in Italy, everything had to be done by hand-I didn't have any tools-and it was obsessively slow and I also found I didn't have the California interest in finish. You know, the idea of perfection. And there were a lot of other people that had that, and they could do it much better. And mine were always sort of a little funky and a little odd. So then I began making things out of screen and mesh, and I did that for at least ten years or longer. And when I went from making three-dimensional things into like one-dimensional pieces that hung on the wall, I then went to Bellevue Community College and learned how to weld so I could make the structures to hold this transparent. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, ____.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And then I hung it with transparent net, which I wrote on or drew on with silicone sealer. And then this became. . . . It's like a very fragile temporary art. And I think I felt like at the time I was expressing some kind of vulnerability and I was making all these things which if you turn around the wrong way they're all crushed. With the public art thing, you put them up and you take them down, you put them up and you take them down, and then they begin to disintegrate. Well, I decided it was becoming a performing thing rather than making something that was more permanent. And I could certainly see with Mike that he'd built up this big body of work, and I felt all I did was accumulate all these pieces of material that then you had to get rid of. But then, he had. . . . When was it 1979? 1980? That's when all the public art furor over your piece in 1980.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: In Olympia?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yeah.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That would be '81.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Eighty-one. All right, by that time, that was it for me. No more public art. I didn't want to have anything to do with public art.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But you [were] still bought by people. Your individual pieces were bought by the city or by the state or. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, yes, in a way, but the. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . so in that aspect of public art _____. It's not like you're doing commissions for public buildings and. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No. But the only piece that. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: By the way, you mentioned earlier that your work became one dimensional. I should correct you, it's two dimensional.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: [laughing] Two dimensional. That's true, that's true.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I mean one dimensional is too ephemeral. [laughter]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, it could have gone. . . . It was going that way, though. I thought, like, well, I was going to end up with nothing but light.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Or ideas.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And some people did that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Absolutely right.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And I'm very attached to the physical aspect of it all. So I decided, "Okay if I stick with painting or printmaking I can control that."

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But, Paul, it's interesting that. . . . Now, these are not necessarily choices that people used to make but they're making them now. I know my own students are particularly interested in knowing how to be known as artists more than they are in how to be an artist, because there are so many multiple ways of being an artist now. So I think-and this is just my opinion-but I think Elizabeth is much more creative than I am but I'm a much better known artist. And the reason is because of my choice of how I accumulated the work that I did. And the reason she's not as well known is because she wasn't as interested in having her art define her. I think you had more self-confidence or something.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You sound more experimental first.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, that's right.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yeah. And that's what everybody's complaint was. "Oh Elizabeth, she's always too experimental."

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Or they'd see one show and they say well that's so different from the last show.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And I did have this feeling like that every show had to be a surprise. And finally I got to the point where I thought, "I can't do this. I can't keep making these surprises. I need more time."

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But now you see an artist like Sigmar Polke is actually doing that as an aesthetic preference: trying to make every piece different from every other piece or every drawing different from every other drawing.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, I'm going the other way now.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I'm trying to make things that are more similar and carry over my thought from one paper to the next.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But to get back to what Paul was talking about, I myself find-and Elizabeth doesn't agree with me here-but I find that living with Elizabeth and watching her work has had more impact on my work that any other experience that I've had. I mean, it's like I've been to the Sistine Chapel, and I've been all around Europe, and I've been to Mexico, and I've been to all the major museums in the United States. And I still believe that when she does something that clicks-and she does it quite often-it's an absolute butt-kicker for me. I mean, it really makes me want to work. Aside from the fact that she's also saved my life several times when I've been in difficulty with having a low blood sugar and that sort of thing, she is the main reason why I've continued to work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's quite a tribute.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Except that. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: She doesn't believe that.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: For one thing, we talk about art all the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I've wondered about that, yeah.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: So that means that. . . . We go to so many shows that most of them I cannot remember. But it also means we're always talking about why that person would do what they did. And then how do we relate that to the whole. And it's always interesting.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's my main interest. [chuckles]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: So in that sense. . . . And Mike used to yell at me, you know like, why didn't I learn anything from him? Why didn't I look at his work, you know. Or why didn't I. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that right?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, I'm trying.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, now it wasn't that so much. It's just that you would point out people that were getting some recognition, and I'd say, "Well, can't you see that. . . ." They either were students of mine or they had taken certain devices that I used and they were using them. And you didn't see that so much.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But at the same time, you see, you have this incredibly wonderful independence-and a perversity just like myself-where you don't want to be influenced. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And probably I think right at the beginning. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But you are.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes. I can't help it. I can't help it.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: We both are. It's very reciprocal.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And it keeps getting more, sometimes it seems to me. But at the beginning one of the reasons that I wanted to do sculpture, even though I didn't have a whole lot of sculpture experience, was because it was completely different. There was no chance of anybody mixing us up. No possibility of any kind of

comparison whatsoever. And that's why I kept my maiden name was because we went to Mexico and I already was known or there were people that knew me. I think I'd been painting probably. . . . There were enough people that knew I painted or did things in high school so that I. . . . And also I felt I was the last one in my family, so to speak. For a long time, it was like having a split personality. You know, like sometimes I'm Mrs. Spafford, other times I'm Elizabeth Sandvig, and some people don't know that they're the same person.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: [giggles]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: That's all right. And so sometimes I think it would be better if I used both names so that you could put them together in one person. But I can't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does it bother you that it's the woman, often, that seems to have to take the removal, the separation, to make sure that. . . . Say, even in choosing medium, that this was your job or role-that Michael stays on true course.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Oh, I see.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: He's charted his course-he's chosen his imagery, his materials-and it falls to you. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Actually, I didn't even think about it.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, I don't think either one of us thought about it.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Because for one thing, I didn't really learn to paint in college-with oil paint. So I came out pouring resin on wood. Big colors. Making dams out of clay. Oh, it was the most wonderful stuff. And baking bread and then pouring the resin over that. They're in the attic, but most of the bread stuff has all fallen off.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you weren't committed yet to one thing or the other?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I didn't have that. No. Huh uh. I didn't have that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you [Michael-Ed.] obviously were pretty early on.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, I think I had the idea that basically if I narrowed what it was I was trying to do that I could probably do it well, if I just kept at it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. Which goes back to what you said in the very beginning.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I was brought up like reading Picasso, you know-or about Picasso-and thinking you can do everything. Anything.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Many of my students feel that way, too. Particularly the women. They all want to be Renaissance people. They want to be able to do everything. And they want to be excellent painters. They want to be excellent sculptors. They want to be performance people. And I think it's great. At the same time, eventually they just run out of energy, so they either have to do one thing or they do nothing.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You do have to sort of. . . . You do have to focus, I must say. For a while I was committed to an idea. That is, that the idea is the most important part of the work. And actually I don't feel that so much anymore. I feel more maybe that the process feeds on the idea, but the process generates those ideas, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, do you feel that you two over the years-through your marriage and your association, let's say-collegial association-have really learned from one another? I mean, I gather that's the case from what you say.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I don't know if you. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I think so.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Oh, yes. Yes. Sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Influenced? Learned?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And also, even things like. . . . It's amazing how much you can forget. I mean, that you learn something once and then you can completely forget it. And you need to be brought up and have it repeated. And Mike's good for that.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: [laughs] Right.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And even things like technical things. I mean, like I'm fine now. . . . I painted as big as I could and found that no larger than [eighty-eight, eighty] by eighty. It doesn't suit me. It's too big for me. It's more than I can manage. So that all the time I'm learning these things, but I wouldn't have tried it if I hadn't had somebody to help me stretch the canvas. Him. So. . . .

[Session 1, Tape 3, side B, is blank]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. A second interview session with Elizabeth Sandvig, Michael Spafford. This is tape 1, side A, and we are, of course, continuing discussions that were begun here in Seattle two days ago. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. Before we turned the tape recorder on, we were talking a little bit about. . . . I was telling you a story from my dinner conversation last night about a local collector who has one of your paintings, Leda and the Swan. And without telling the story again, it raised some what I think are interesting questions or issues, because he told the story of how he acquired this painting, how he fell in love with it basically. And love is the operative word here-or passion, if you will-because he and his wife-they were not married at the time, they were courting let's say-feel that your painting and the imagery therein played a special role in their getting together. Or at least they're looking back at it that way. And this gentleman knew we would be talking again and asked me to ask you. . . . He said, "Why don't you ask Mike why his work is so erotic. Does he see it that way?" So I thought we might just play with that theme a little bit, because from what you've said, and what Elizabeth has said, is that the work, especially at certain times, has been very much perceived that way and has had in some cases quite an effect, in the way people respond to it, and it's been, I guess, kind of interesting for you to watch it. What are your thoughts on that?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: [laughs]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: [laughs]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, first of all, the term erotic has a certain connotation that implies. . . . I think a better term for the word could be sexual rather than erotic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Because some people don't find it pleasant or erotic in that sense. They find it quite disturbing. I think the reason that it has this sexual look to it is because my primary interest in painting is to contrast a kind of visual opposition. The way I came upon using mythology in the first place was to have a kind of story or a kind of subject that would allow me to do this kind of contrasting. And the nature with which I accomplish this, I set up systems-visual systems-which are like figure-ground reversal-what they call figure-ground reversal. And oftentimes there's a kind of symmetry also involved in the work. So it almost functions like a Rorschach blot. So, actually, people see the sorts of things that they're thinking about in the work. Now, if in terms of the subject matter of Leda and the Swan, it's obviously what we term an origin myth, and it's Zeus that turns himself into a swan. . . . Actually, in Ovid the metamorphosis, the story is that the swan sort of waddles over to Leda and lays his head in her lap, and she strokes the head a couple of times and then the swan walks off and lays two eggs. You know, so it's not erotic at all. On the other hand, when you read what William Butler Yeats did with that poem when he was in a very erotic period of his life. He was, I think, thirty-four or something like that. It's an incredibly sexual poem. It talks about the thundering beating wings and the thrusting neck, and it's just. . . . And that's the sort of imagery that I was trying to get into that series of paintings, of which [Ray-Ed.] Cairncross has one. I think I like that kind of subject matter because it allows me to make paintings look powerful, or look exciting, or look visually active. And I think that all artists are interested in making paintings look visually active. Elizabeth, with her work, is less dependent upon the subject matter than she is upon, say, the surface of the painting, the use of the color. . . . She could probably take any subject, regardless of what it meant, and make the painting active, but I sort of need the subject to react against. And so if I think "Okay, there's Leda. She's female. She's more or less passive. She's being. . . . She's sort of. . . ." Let's see, I don't quite know how to put this, because I don't want to sound sexist or anything, but the swan becomes very male. Leda becomes very female. One becomes very active. One becomes more passive. It's all a Yin-Yang, opposition type of thing. Now I could see a person who is, say, involved in thinking about a relationship with some other person picking up on that. I would hope they did. Do you have something that you would like to add?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, I think at some time, at least maybe earlier in your career-post student-you were maybe. . . . I think it was after you were a student, you were interested in human origins and. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And sex!

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . you tried these birth paintings and sex.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it went together very nicely. [chuckles]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And it was just very pragmatic, and for you sex was the major thing.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But I can also recall that it was the sort of thing that people would react to-you know, the viewer.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you were looking for [_____] stuff.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I was looking for something which would make people look at my work.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But also, then there was this other thing on the side, which was the question of something being pornographic. And on the one hand, you didn't want it to be pornographic, but we had friends actually who did. Who felt that that would be a. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Right, an obscenity. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . compliment for it to be pornographic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean pushing the edges, the boundaries. Is this it?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right. So then you think, well. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Although this takes me back to. . . . In 1967, I had a painting removed from the Bellevue Arts and Crafts Fair. It was The Rape of Europa, and there was a sort of a dustup in the paper. And I remember this woman that I mentioned on an earlier tape, Teresa Fulton, was visiting us in Seattle at that time. And I remember complaining to her about the fact that they were misinterpreting my motives and all this sort of thing, and she thought that was nonsense. She actually told me that it was easy to do work which would offend people-that it was easy to be a pornographer-and it didn't take any artistic integrity whatsoever and that I should be careful. And so from an early day I've been very, very aware of the fact that this is a tendency that I have, maybe that I sort of look out for. At the same time, I do it well.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But also, in that period, in the. . . . What was that?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Oh, '67.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: In the sixties.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Just before we met Jerome [________-Ed.].

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: There were all these shows in Denmark, books, lots of shows organized about sex or erotic art. And here were lots of photographs of people taking their children to these shows, and the purpose seemed to be to make it. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: To sort of expand.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right. Expand the awareness and make it less. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Taboo?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . secretive, less taboo, more sort of a normal part of life. I mean, there were all this interest in nudist colonies and. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And drugs. [chuckles]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . topless bathing suits. Rudi Gernreich did these topless things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh sure, we remember those.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Sure. Sure.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I did a drawing for that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And Carol Doda in San Francisco.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Sure, sure, absolutely.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And then women stopped wearing bras.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: So the sort of thing that we were doing seemed very mild in a way. But probably the people that we were affecting were just that much further removed. But I think probably. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But then I think you did decide that you didn't. . . . The reason you didn't want it to be pornographic in the sense of pornographic magazines was because that would be so boring. I mean, that it was like a once. . . . Seen once, seen all, that's it. There's no kind of aesthetic involvement.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, there's certainly nothing. . . . I don't think anybody would charge that your work-at least that which I've seen-that these images are pornographic. I mean _____.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Many people say that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Even now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: See, that shows you how much I know. [laughter]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I know, I know. I know it's quite. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I'm still introduced by students to their parents as that pornographic artist who teaches at the university. But I don't think of myself that way at all. As a matter of fact I consider myself to be quite the opposite. I'm extremely principled and ethical and moral and you know. All my intentions are absolutely above board without any, any. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No. Never had any problems that way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said, Liz, that you during a certain time of doing paintings with topless. You mentioned Rudi Gernreich.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Uh huh, at the [Remden, Railroad, Rembrandt].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is this an imagery that you thought was amusing, fascinating, timely, what?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: When was that bathing-suit business? Well, I don't know why I did it exactly. I thought it was very funny. Actually, the shape of the bathing suit was quite odd. And then I must. . . . But I did a lot of drawings of topless dancers in glass boxes. I must have gone somewhere and seen it.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Go-Go.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes. And I thought it was quite extraordinary.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you see it as a kind of liberating imagery, or as a phenomenon that had a positive aspect in terms of opening up? You used those terms earlier, and this was the time. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I suppose so. But at the same time, like I can remember being in college and going to look for somebody and knocking at the door, and whoever came to the door had no clothes on and the whole place was full of people with no clothes on. And I was quite shocked at the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Embarrassing.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And I think they invited me in and I just declined and ran off as fast as I could go thinking this was beyond my abilities to deal with, and I certainly. . . . And I think that happened also like when we were in Mexico and we went to those foreign films. I went to see [Bernhill] films.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Uh huh.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Anyway.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about the idea of the artist though as voyeur. I mean, this is not a new idea I have, but we all position ourselves, somehow, either as active participants-I think those are in the minority-and others of us are attracted to different things-maybe lifestyles, behavior-but tend to hold back, and it seems to me that-although this is your response, your tape, not mine-but it seems to me that with many artists, they're observers. They watch the world. They watch life. And there is a kind of voyeuristic role that is played and then that is channeled and comes out in this form. Does that make any sense to you?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's particularly true today, I think.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: It's a lot safer.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: When we were trained as artists, Elizabeth and I-or at least when we developed our aesthetic preference-that was during the period of Abstract Expressionism, and the formal aspects of art and the personal involvement in the making of the art were the primary elements. At the present time, and before that time, the kind of personal statement about where you are in your environment and where you are in your psyche, these things are all particularly important today. So virtually every artist is not exactly voyeuristic, but they're sort of keeping a diary of where they are in history. Well, I don't feel like I'm doing that. I think that Elizabeth is more now than she used to, but she's still using an extremely formal basis for doing it. I have never painted anything that has anything to do with my life. Unless you want to really stretch it and say that I think of myself as Hercules or I think of myself as Perseus, but I don't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you agree with that?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Basically, except for a few little sketches here and there. Few little animal sketches. A little scenery of Greece.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Oh, sure. I do Christmas cards and birthday cards. Sure, I do that. But I mean when I'm working in my studio on my art. . . . And I was going to say, in answer to another question that you had on your list here, that probably even though I'm sure I've been affected by where I am in the Northwest here, I'd probably be painting exactly the same thing if I went and taught in Nebraska. I have a strong inner conviction that. . . . Or maybe I'm just. . . . Actually, I'm sort of stubborn and I have very little imagination, and I have this inner conviction that if I do the Greco-Roman mythology enough that I'll eventually get a painting that'll last beyond my lifetime. And that's about it, you know. And the fact some of them get attention and that some of them affect people in a nice way, like your friends, or even if it affects people in a sort of a negative way, relatively is unimportant to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I've wondered about that. I mean, there's not a goal of yours to invoke this [thing].

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And actually he couldn't. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you're not a pornographer, by the way, because it seems to me that's part of the definition of pornography is intended to excite if it's effective.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Sure. And, by the way, I think-to get back to your earlier question about the eroticism-the reason I picked up on mythology as a thing to do is because when I was a student in the late fifties, I determined, by discussing with friends and things, that painting and art were the same. I don't believe that anymore, but I thought painting that dealt with real things was not really art, but painting that dealt with metaphysical things was. And I thought that probably that was the only way that you could deal with using painting as an art form. So through some process, I came upon Greco-Roman mythology as being a symbol of what was happening in reality. And philosophically I knew that there were a certain number of myths that kept being repeated in culture after culture. And I don't know how many of these-thirteen, eighteen different stories-that these are still applicable to contemporary society. Even though the technology has improved, we still have jealousy, we still have people interacting in ways. . . . And so I remember thinking when I first did an Icarus, and it was one of the themes that I did early on because I associated that with the role of the artist-that the artist would be a person who always failed. We used to discuss that all the time-that if you didn't fail, then you weren't an artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because you were playing it too safe, is this what you mean?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You weren't trying?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. You'd have to try to do something that you were incapable of doing. And so you could associate that with Icarus because his father told him not to fly too close to the sun but he went closer and then he failed, you know. But he was trying to get higher. And I thought to myself this also related not only to the idea of being heroic in the sense that you're trying to do more than you're capable of doing, but it also was like somebody loaning his car to his child and telling him to be careful. [laughs] And then they go out and drink and smash it up. And it was happening all the time, all these Icaran-or whatever the adjective is-these kind of Icarus-like things were happening all the time, particularly in California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: So that's the way I associated it in my mind. Now I know that's not true, but I believe it.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Mike couldn't, say, paint Brillo boxes and get excited about it.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: He can look at a vase of flowers and paint it, but it doesn't have any feeling to it, or any intellectual tension, or it's just a little illustration of flowers.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, that's another thing that I have as a flaw. I have a strong illustrational capacity. I'm very, very skilled. And the mythology thing for me was a way of concentrating on very basic, simple, formal things that were happening, and I sort of eschewed the skill. I didn't use the skill. I didn't want it.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Had to work hard to get rid of it.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. I worked at least three years. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: It took at least two years to get rid of these skills that you learn.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Some of it, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was after you moved back here, do you think?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No, this was in Mexico.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: As a commercial artist I learned to be efficient. I learned to do things well and fast. And I learned to satisfy other people's expectations. When I decided to work for myself, it was hard to stop thinking that way, to think in terms of being inefficient, and to do a lot of destroying of things, and work on things just for the purpose of working on them rather than for some goal. And Elizabeth mentioned on another tape that I had this big studio in Mexico. It was a whole building-no electricity, no plumbing or anything, but it was just room after room. And I would put paintings on the wall, and I'd paint in this room and then I'd go to another room and I'd paint in that room, and, you know, just fill the whole building full of paintings. And most of them weren't any good, but that was the way I worked it out. And we all used to do this in the fifties and sixties. You'd stay up two days in a row-two days and nights-and then you'd paint, because you'd be tired and you wouldn't have this ability. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You did. I did not.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Or you'd tie your brush on the end of a big stick, or you'd paint with your unnatural hand.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Oh, yes, it was. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Or what I used to do was I'd have a painting on the wall and I'd throw a bottle of Canada Dry soda water-they were in glass at that time-that hadn't been opened-at the painting, and then it would explode. And then I'd spend half my day picking up the glass. It was a way of somehow dealing with . . . concentrating on what you were doing in a nonskilled way, just in a visual way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, was part of it also chance?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: You kept hoping, you kept hoping.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean it [was, wasn't] a goal at the time.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: You kept hoping that there was chance involved, but I also philosophically sort of believed that there wasn't such a thing as chance and everything was sort of preordained, but I didn't know how to put it in any format. But I remember sitting-and I'm sure you did this too, Paul, when you were working-but I would sit for hours finishing a painting in my head, that I'd be looking at [if, but] I would have been working [on it].

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No, I don't think other people do that. You do that and you still do that, but I don't . . . I can't do it.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: You have to continually keep working?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, I can only visualize just a tiny bit ahead, and then as soon as I do it with my hands it's different. So I can't do it. Maxwell Gordon used to do that.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: What I find is that that process, while it's very, very inefficient and probably wasteful, I always felt like if I didn't do that then my next move wouldn't have been the same. You know, like it's all. . . . It's

sort of like. . . . I remember telling my students, they talk about, "Well, this is a waste of time," or "This is a waste of time," and I tell them that it's all like. . . . [It's a derivation, It's very Asian, Their evasion], it's like a ripple. This is just a stone, and the ripples in the water and the ripples go out and they meet the bank and somehow they all have an effect on the bank." And it's like anything you do somehow has an effect on what you're going to do next. That's obvious. So, I don't know what I was talking about.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I don't either.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, a manner of working and the breaking down of skill. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Right, and the eroticism. And the eroticism, which to me is more in the actual subject than it is in my work. I think my work, what I try to do. . . . And it's another thing that I have problems with. My work has a tendency to get too pretty. I'm so skilled that I can. . . . I'm a good designer and I can just sort of take any number of colors or patterns and make them so that they look good.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like a good commercial artist.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. That's absolutely correct. So I spend a lot of time trying to make the work less pretty. Everybody has a governor, and I don't know what yours was, but mine is, if the painting is not going well, it's usually because I think it's too pretty. The subject matter allows me to come back to what it is I'm really trying to do. I don't have to worry about how the painting looks; I have to worry about how well I'm dealing with this subject.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And if you didn't have that, you would be a victim of your design skills.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I would be totally seduced in the studio.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In the color. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right, I would be. . . . What do they call it? Some kind of seduction.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I was thinking, you know, like when he said yesterday what kind of plans we had, what we were going to do, and all I could think was I didn't have any plans. One of the things that we did have, we always had in the background, was Mike's skill as a commercial artist. That he could always get a job doing commercial art. Now there was. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Which I know is totally out of date now, because. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: That's probably not true now; everything's changed. But at least at the time. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: If I talk to the graphic designers at school, they ask about computer skills and things like that, you know, and I have absolutely no knowledge of that and no interest either. But I could be an illustrator. But it's a very. . . . It's much more competitive than the field I'm in.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: [laughs] I don't know if that's true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's an interesting thought.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: There are all these different levels of graphic [design].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Earlier we were talking-before leaving this subject of sexuality, the imagery of your work and responses-and it seems that there have been-whether you like it or not-there have been these responses and some of them have made sort of unpleasant situations for presumably both of you. And this brings in the whole, ideas about public art and so forth, but, Liz, you were saying earlier that it seemed extraordinary, I guess, to you the way some people, especially women, would at certain times respond to Mike's work. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right, to his paintings. Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and then imagine, I guess, that they knew exactly what kind of guy he was. I mean, what are your thoughts about that? Was this something that was played. . . . Did this have anything to do with the dynamic between you, or just what are your. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Oh, no. Well, since he was always nice to women that were very enthusiastic about his

painting, and he sets up so many defenses against them personally. I mean, they always wanted to pursue this, but he has so many defenses that I really didn't think much about them. So when one of these women come up and compliment him and start ooh and aahing, I just disappear. And so I don't have to, I don't really deal with it and I don't get jealous. Certainly not. Sometimes I understand, and other times I don't understand it at all. You know, like I mean I don't understand how they feel. I don't react the way they do. I'm too close to the paintings, and they're too formal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Liz, what I wanted to ask you, do you see the work that way?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, yes, some of the paintings. Particularly some of the Leda and the Swan ones. I always take. . . . I identify with Leda. I never identify with the swan. Most men identify also with the Leda.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that right?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Because it's a victim thing.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: It's a human. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And they're not that specifically male and female. They're just different.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But the swans are, somehow. . . . In some of the paintings, swans are so aggressive, and it's such an attack that it always makes me feel more vulnerable and that you have to protect yourself. It's sort of like the difference. . . . I always think of. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: The government. [chuckles]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . Huckleberry Finn when. . . . Is it Huckleberry Finn? When the aunt is throwing the ball to the little boy and he's dressed as a girl and he closes his legs or he opens his legs.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, exactly.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: He _____.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, he closes his legs because he's. . . . No, he doesn't.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, he doesn't.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, anyway, that's how he got caught.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But that's how he got caught. He got discovered. He got busted. [laughs]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, that's the way I always feel. You have to protect yourself.

[Session 2, Tape 1, Side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is Session 2, a continuing interview with Spafford and Sandvig. We'll start abbreviating. [laughs] At any rate this is tape 1, side B, on September 4, 1992.
Why don't we continue with that line of discussion we really started on the other side of this tape, with the imagery of your work, like the sexuality and. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Let me say one thing about that. I alluded to the fact that I selected the mythology as a kind of subject because I thought it had a relationship to everybody's life. Even though it would have been metaphorical, it would have been symbolic, it's still related to everybody. Well, I think the same thing about sex. I think that regardless of how some people don't like to talk about it or don't like to be confronted with it, virtually everybody is either a result of some sexual act or they participate in some way or they choose not to. So it seems to me, like sort of the height of hypocrisy for people to complain about somebody being interested in sex.
Now, I happen to use it as a formal device. I mentioned on an earlier tape that I have a tendency in my work-and I don't know where this comes from-to do things that are phallic-not just sexual, but phallic. And this is described as being more Baroque than Renaissance. It's not so much vertical and horizontal as it is diagonal and dramatic. I think, oftentimes I don't even recognize it when it happens. When it's pointed out to me, then I can see it. And it occurs to me that a lot of people see this right away. The painting that brought your friends together has a phallic nature to it, but it's not as phallic as some of the work that I've done. But it has a kind of sinewy form on one side and a form which is more tense on the other side, and it's very sort of black and white and it's. . . . But I did a number of paintings which brought a kind of a negative response from business people in the sixties. And

one of these paintings was a painting called Europa and the Bull, or The Rape of Europa, and I think it was partially the title that bothered people.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: A lot of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was the one over at Bellevue?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Right. And at that time, even though I was a member of the board of directors of that fair, I was asked to remove the painting-or at least the police were brought to remove the painting. And many of the people that were involved with the fair wanted to make a big deal of it in the newspaper, and I was very interested in just sort of not having it be an issue at all. But it was interesting how it sort of blew up because the papers had got wind of it and the TV got wind of it, and they began to interview the people on the other side, the people who actually had objected to the work rather than the. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: The Philistines. [laughs]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, I know that's what a lot of people say, but I personally don't think of them in that sense.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: It was funny. The kinds of comments were very funny.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: There was a man, and I don't know what his name was, actually, but his store was Uncle Harold's Bike and Key Shop. The man is dead now and I don't mean to say anything that's offensive about him but he was quoted as saying. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, two women went and complained to him.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Right.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I mean, they'd been to the fair and they complained to him. They didn't like this painting and they thought it was obscene and shouldn't be there.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Right.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: So he went over and looked at it.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And he also felt like it was inappropriate for a show where people bring their children.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And in a public area.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes. Yeah, outside in the shopping mall.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: It was outside, on easels. Right and that was before they built Bellevue Square. So it was very much more open. It didn't have a roof or anything.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But what he said, which was quoted in the newspaper, was, "It don't look like no Greek bull to me."

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Right.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: So you can see how the liberal press sort of took this guy and. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And so somehow, you think, "Oh, Holy cow! What does a Greek bull look like?" and so forth. And then when the TV came, Mike wanted to show them the painting because there really wasn't that much to it.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I had the painting at home.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But they wouldn't photograph the painting because if they showed the painting, the controversy would die down.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Which I thought was really interesting.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You know, they wanted the controversy because they can write about it. So people could imagine anything.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: The reason I mention this is because a lot of the difficulty that I had with my second public-art piece, which was the thing I did in Olympia, The Labors of Hercules, was precisely generated this way. I mean, the people had not seen the work but they were upset because they had heard that it was obscene or they had heard that it was not appropriate or that they heard that it cost too much money or something like that. And so they objected on principle.

PAUL KARLSTROM: On hearsay.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: On hearsay.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: On hearsay. But actually on principle, because like I recall there was. . . . A lot of the objection came from the eastern side of the state and there was a legislator there who sent out a newsletter, and in the newsletter he wrote a question. It was a question that he wrote to his constituents, and he said, "Do you want. . . ." Ahh, gosh, I can't remember exactly what it said, but it was sort of like "Do you want pornography in your state legislature, on the walls of your state legislature?" Now, if I'd gotten that question, I would have said, "No!" Answered, "No!"

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: So I got some letters from these people-and some of them were anonymous-saying how could I do this? Why did I put this pornography. . . . They had never seen it. So that's sort of how the controversy developed. Now it is true that a lot of the people who saw the work who were legislators actually saw things that they considered inappropriate and pornographic. A lot of this has to do with the phallic nature of my shapes. This particular piece has a lot of figure/ground reversal. It's basically just a dark/light patterning. Even though it's figurative, it's abstract.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes. In a way it was the abstraction that caused more difficulty.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, they saw images in between the images. Once again it was sort of a _____tion.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: They made up the images that they saw. They began to invent.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: At the same time, the. . . . I intended to do this as a way of keeping the piece active as a visual element. And I think that's really what bothered them the most. It didn't sort of fade into the background and become sort of like wallpaper. It actually was something that if they looked at it, they became engaged in looking at it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They wanted Muzak, visual Muzak, rather than an aggressive, confrontational. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. And, Paul, I have nothing against that. As a matter of fact, my position was eventually-and I stated this publicly-was that I would be happy to take the piece down. I'm not the least bit interested in them having it if they don't want it. But what I didn't want them to do was to resite it and say that they were doing me a favor by putting it in a more appropriate place, because that was not true. And so, if they wanted me to take it down, I thought it was incumbent upon them to destroy it. And I would be very happy if that happened, and they could get any kind of visual Muzak up there they wanted. It's their chamber.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Destroy it?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Sure. That would be what I would prefer to do.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And that's what we went to court. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Rather than moving it.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: That's what we went to court about.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, why don't you maybe sort of sketch that in, because I myself don't know the full story. It's kind of famous around here. Just how did it develop? What was the sequence?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Let me just digress a little bit. In 1978, I was given the opportunity to do a mural for the Kingdome. I actually didn't apply for this and it came as a complete surprise. As a matter of fact, I didn't. . . . I almost just turned it down. I just figured it wasn't the sort of thing that I'd like to do. It was a group of people that had met-Judy Whetzel and some other people-who decided that because my work was so graphic. . . . And this

was largely due to the fact that I'd been a commercial artist, I think, and I think in terms of value contrast and design structure. Rather than things being very beautiful, I think more in terms of sort of structure. And so by seeing the work that I'd done like that, they thought well if I did it big that it would look good. So I had the opportunity to go to. . . . Actually, I went to Mexico that year on sabbatical and I worked out a design for this mural. When I got back, I worked with fabricators. I was one of the first artists to work with the Fabrication Specialties in Seattle-and that's two men, Larry Tate and Gerald McGinness, and they were both artists who started this fabrication place. And we did this piece, put it up on the Kingdome, and I was very, very pleased with the way it worked out. The public really had no particular knowledge about what was going on. I selected a site in the Kingdome which was not one that would be seen every time everybody came to a game. I wanted it to be a place that people would go as a destination rather than just something they would see. As a matter of fact, before that time there had been a competition for doing art at the airport and I didn't even apply because I felt like that, even though there's some wonderful art out there, I don't think it's an appropriate place for at least the kind of thing that I would like to do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let me just ask why is that? Is it that people have other business to conduct and they just pass by without much of a chance to. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, once again it becomes sort of a background. And I think it's important that you don't make people feel ill at ease when they're about ready to fly off someplace. [laughter] I mean, this piece that I did at the Kingdome is a tumbling figure, although people see it as a falling figure, and if that were in the airport. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: There it wouldn't be so good.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: [inaudible]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, it's the wrong message.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Right. So at any rate, so I'm aware of that factor. Anyway, that was in 1979 when I installed that piece, or early '80. The King County Commissioner at that time was John Spellman, and he ran for Governor and became Governor. During the time of Dixy Lee Ray, who was the previous Governor, there was a program established to put art on the Capitol campus. This was a program that was reinstituted. For years, ever since they built the building, they had been trying to put art in the Capitol building. And there have been spaces that have been designated for art ever since it was built. And I think it was built in the thirties, wasn't it?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Um hmm.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: A number of artists previous to this time had submitted proposals, and Kenneth Callahan was one of those artists, and I don't know if you interviewed him about that or not, but he did a series of proposals that covered every space in the building. I mean, it would have been an incredibly immense effort for him to do this. And they were rejected. And not because they weren't considered fine art, but because people couldn't agree if they were appropriate or not. And so they had this history of maybe spending some money, getting proposals, and then deciding that they couldn't agree on what they wanted. So we all knew that this was the history of the process.
At the same time, in the late seventies when it started-I think it started in 1979 is when they started this process-to 1980, I guess, when we were selected, the idea was that this would be a wonderful place to spend money on art to sort of show how art was developing in the Northwest over decades. Like maybe they would start with a project that Alden Mason and I were selected for, and then the next project would be the dome area and then there were all these walls in there. And they would do this over. . . . Every decade they would select a new artist to do this. And it would become almost like an art history book. And that was such a wonderful idea-and it was promoted primarily by a man named Parks Anderson-that everybody sort of got into thinking that this was possible. The process involved competing for being considered for this. They sent out a very big printed brochure, and they sent it out nationally or internationally, I guess. And it was a call for artists and a call for art in the legislature. It wanted slides of work, a letter of intent, and then the jury would get a short list and then they'd select from that list. And I wasn't going to do it. As a matter of fact, even though I've received a lot of recognition and I've done quite a few things, normally I don't try to do them. It just seems that somehow I get involved in it. And in this case, I wasn't going to submit anything but I was called by a person who wasn't on the jury but who was connected with the process and they said they would really like to have me submit an application. So I put together slides of the Kingdome piece, slides of my piece that was rejected from Bellevue. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's fair warning. [chuckles]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. . . . .slides of a number of things that I had done. Not the Leda things because they weren't in existence yet. But a number of things that had a certain erotic quality to them and certainly a violent quality. Labors of Hercules I had submitted. And in my statement of intent, I said, "I would really like to

do this. Thank you." [laughter] Okay, so I made the short list and they finally broke it down into six candidates who would be given money-I think it was fifteen hundred dollars to make a proposal. And for the House of Representatives there was myself-I was one candidate-Norman Lundin was a candidate, and the third was a man named [James-Ed.] Hansen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Duane?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Duane.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Galo?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No. Another Hansen. Robert?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: He's a sculptor.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: He's a sculptor and he. . . . There are so many Hansens here. It wasn't Robert because he's down in California. He's at L.A. State, or was. But, gosh, I should know. Anyway he has a number of sculptures on the Capitol campus. And then for the Senate, there was. . . . Well, let's see Dale Chihuly.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And Dale Chihuly was also in there.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And Dale Chihuly was also being considered for the House of Representatives. For the Senate there was Alden Mason and Lee Kelly, and maybe that's where the Hansen piece was too.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Maybe that's where Hansen was.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And we prepared our proposals and then we were invited down as a group to present our proposals to the jury. Now the intention of the jury was to get art which would be, they stated, that would be good as art and not just decorate the Capitol building. And they felt that they had communicated with the legislators to the extent that they had.... Some of the legislators were ad hoc members of the committee. Everybody had the opportunity to participate if they wanted to; at least they were given the information. Later on it was said that they didn't have any facts and that they were surprised when they got what they got. But everybody assumed that the process was done very well. Although they're much more careful now than they were then. At any rate, I recall that they were saying that there were a number of ways that they could award this commission. The commission, by the way, was going to be for $100,000 or less, depending upon how much you decided you wanted to do. So you had to put in a budget as well as a proposal. They had the option that they could select more than one artist for one of these rooms-so they could ostensibly give me one wall, give Norman Lundin one wall, and give Dale Chihuly a table where he'd put his glass; that was his proposal was to put glass in Plexiglas boxes around the room-and split up the money. You know, give us each $30,000 and do it that way. And I was aware of that. So when I made my proposal, I said that first of all I was very interested in letting them know that I didn't want to share the space with anybody, and that if I were selected that I not only didn't want to share the money, I wanted to paint all four walls. And I think that Alden Mason, who got the commission for the Senate, got paid exactly the same amount of money as I did, but he only did two walls. And so it wasn't a matter of doing a certain amount of work for the money; it was a matter of determining how much money you wanted and then doing the work to cover that. And I was more interested in controlling the space. I wanted to create a kind of visual experience that. . . . And you can see that that's a very arrogant way of dealing with things. I'm surprised now that I got away it. I just. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe they were intimidated, you know, they said, "My God, this guy must really be good. Look at his self-confidence!

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But also the idea of having a different artist on every wall, permanently, really is. . . . It would be _____.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Oh, it works in the Sistine ceiling-I mean, the Sistine Chapel. I think that my thought-and I really think that this is true-I thought that if I put enough roadblocks in their way that they wouldn't select me and that's what I wanted was not to be selected. At the same time, I really wanted to do it. But I didn't want to do it with any strings attached.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Also, we were involved in a group called TAG, which is the artists group which actually wrote the legislation that was passed for the one-percent program [1% for Art-Ed.].

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That was in 1971, that started. And I was president in 1973 of that group.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: So during those years, most of the things that were for commissions went to sculptors. And once the people got these commissions then we heard about how awful they were and how bogged down they got in bureaucratic details and how they lost control to architects and contractors.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, the contracts and. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: So he was aware of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So in other words, you were aware.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I was very conscious and I didn't want. . . . Actually, when I finally got my contract, I had a lawyer go over it with me and we changed things in it just so I could have as much control. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: As many things as you could.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Of course, it didn't work out but I tried. Anyway, I also remember that-and I'm sure you

[ELIZABETH SANDVIG-Ed.] remember this too, you were there-I remember standing up in front of this jury, which consisted of. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No, I wasn't. I didn't go in there.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: You weren't part of the presentation?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Hm mm, hm mm.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, at any rate, there was Virginia Wright. . . . It was what they call a perfect jury. It had an art collector. It had a museum person or a curator. It had an artist. It had an architect.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Even had a photographer from Eastern Washington.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah. So the jury consisted of Virginia Wright. The architect, his father actually built the building, Norm Johnston, and he was at the University of Washington. There was a man. What was his name? The photographer.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Okazaki.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Oh, was it Okazaki? Okay, from Washington State University. Parks Anderson, who was the artist. And I'm trying to think of who was the museum person. Oh, it was the man from Ellensburg [________-Ed.].

PAUL KARLSTROM: What museum?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, he was at the college there but he ran the gallery there. Oh, you know. He's now retired and he shows in San Francisco and he. . . . Oh, I should know.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I know his name but I can't think of it. Anyway.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, well, we can look it up.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Anyway, I stood up in front of these people and I explained to them that I wanted to put the Labors of Hercules. . . . I had all these things, by the way, drawn out-an inch to a foot so they knew exactly what it would look like. That's my commercial-art training coming in, too. And I explained why I wanted all four walls. For the Labors of Hercules I had six episodes on either side. For the front, over the speaker's platform, I had an Icarus-type figure or figure that rose and fell. And that was in a dual chromatic format, rather than being more or less noncolorful. The Hercules ones are not black and white, but they're described as black and white because they're largely dark and light. And there is color that comes through the edges but you sort of have to look close. And then on the back wall there was going to be this large Chimera, which was also polyptychal. All of these things would be polyptychal. The Labors of Hercules would be six episodes on one side and six episodes on the other, and then the panel in the front would be six temporal sequence images of this figure. It would be the same figure in six different forms. So that would be sort of what we call a temporal sequence rather than an episodic sequence. And then on the back wall. . . . The Chimera itself is an ancient Greek symbol for storms or volcanic activity. And you've got to remember this was in 1981 that I was presenting this idea, and Mount St. Helens had erupted not long before that. And so the whole idea of the Chimera made a lot of sense to me and it's a very polyptychal beast because it has the head of a lion and the body of a goat, the tail of a serpent. And I was working it out so that it would be formally polyptychal, too, because I would have some of the things on the

wall. Partially it would be the wall that would be. . . . The image that would work sort of like in the Kingdome, where the figures become the wall that's behind the panels. And then it would be an explosion of color back there. And I thought my God what a beautiful sequence of visual information that would be there. And then I started thinking about the political ramifications of these images, and it fit so beautifully-in my mind-that I couldn't see any reason why it would be considered inappropriate.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you mean the political, specifically?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: [laughs]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Okay, okay. With the Chimera. . . . Today, the term "chimerical thought," or something like that, refers to fanciful notions. You know, something that is not really workable. And a lot of political rhetoric is chimerical. So I thought, "Well, okay, that really fits." And at the same time, it also has a kind of gerrymander aspect to it in terms of the way it looks. And so I thought, "Well, that also fits." But the main thing that I thought of was that the Hercules thing worked so well because it broke down into twelve months, you know, or twelve labors. It broke down into these episodes where this really well-meaning, not-totally-in-control figure was trying the best he could to solve impossible tasks. And through compromise and making errors and hurting people, he was able to somehow resolve these things. And virtually every one of those labors
to some kind of political action. I wasn't thinking as clearly about that as I just sort of felt it, until the trial began in 1987. But at that time, it was explained that something like, say, Hercules fighting the [Lenerian, Linnerian] Hydra was so much like, say, doing tax legislation, because with the Hydra every time you'd cut off a head two heads would grow in its place. There was no way to solve the problem except to somehow have somebody help you and to compromise with the idea of not killing this thing but just burying it someplace. And it's still out there and someday somebody'll find it and it'll pop out and do its thing again.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And don't forget about Olympia.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That right. And of course, that I thought was an incredibly appropriate tie-in because there's this wonderful temple of Zeus that was at the Olympia Greece and one of its main attributes were the [Maenoepe, Medipe] sculptures of the Labors of Hercules, and I thought, "Wow! What a great opportunity to put Hercules in Olympia." When I mentioned this to one of the legislators, who I won't tell you who his name is, but he didn't know there was another Olympia! And he didn't know there was an Olympia, Greece.

[Session 2, Tape 2, side A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: A continuing interview with Michael Spafford/Elizabeth Sandvig. This is September 4, 1992. Interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. This is session two, tape two. And Michael, maybe you just want to. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, we were talking about the fact that some of the legislators weren't as involved in the imagery-at least philosophically, the way I was. And, Elizabeth, you were saying that that was one of the things that surprised you so much was the lack of. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, I don't know which time we're talking about.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, you said you went down to Olympia. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Even at the beginning, the attitudes that were expressed within that building I felt were so anachronistic. I mean, here's this huge building built out of marble, and the dining room for the visitors and the staff was this cramped little dismal place in the basement. The hallways were full of papers because the printing plant down there didn't have enough room. They had leftover wires that were strung all over the place left from, in some cases, Nixon's visit years before.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: So you didn't like the way it. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: It was a combination of tacky neglect and lack of consideration for the employees combined with these grandiose statements that were sort of like [this] [Victoria Emmanuel] monument. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And that's what I liked about it.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . in Mussolini's period. You know, I mean, it was just not. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But, you see, that's what I liked about it. And actually. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I didn't like it at all.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . for two years, from 1967 to 1969, Elizabeth and I spent our time at the American Academy in Rome. And it's the same kind of place. I mean, just faded elegance. You know, very pretentious but

lots of cat fleas and the curtains were all tattered and they wouldn't let children in to eat there, and all of these rules and things. And yet it was terrific because it was the kind of place. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Once you learned to get around all these rules.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, it was like you were there as a. . . . I don't know, you could sort of role play in a place like that. And I thought the same thing about the legislature when I. . . . Actually, I hadn't even gotten the award. I remember Alden and I had taken our proposals down there, and we were walking through the building and we ran across a person who does the tours and she was talking about. . . . We introduced ourselves, and she said, "Well, I hope you won't do anything to hurt the building." And we were both really surprised that that would be the way she would respond. She said, well, she'd been there for decades and that her whole family was involved in showing people through this building. She actually pointed out pictures of Governor Langley in the marble tracing in the wall. She had looked at it so long that she saw Governor Langley and his wife and his dog in the marble. So she obviously had a great love for this building; it was her life. And I heard later that she was terribly upset by what we did in that building.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That you violated her. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. And she felt like it was not art. She felt like it was something which was working against what she loved. She felt like it would have a negative influence on the people that she loved to show the building to. And it wasn't just my piece but also Alden's. And much of the resistance to the work has come from the staff at the legislature.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Comes from the tour guides.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Because the legislators themselves are only there for a short time. Some of them are there for a long time, but many of them are just there for one term or for two terms and then they're supplanted by another group. But the staff-the people that more or less live there-they're the ones that really objected. Anyway, Elizabeth, you were saying that when you went down there that you were surprised at the narrowmindedness and the stupidity.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, I did things like. . . . I did things that were different than you did. After the murals were done and up, I would go and sit in the gallery, and the staff would be having a break and they would sit there and gossip about each other and talk about the murals. And they were so nasty! Mostly they weren't talking about the murals; they were just talking about each other. And I've never heard such, such. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But you also were responding to what the legislators. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, that was later. That was another time when I went with Michael to photograph them, and we turned on the lights and some legislator chased us all over the building screaming at the top of his lungs.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And was so nasty and mean, and, I mean, I've never been attacked like that and I didn't like it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean, he knew that you were the artist?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I wasn't there.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: He wasn't there. I was there, with our son.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: It was our son. Michael, our son.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I understand, okay.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And so these people just shout out their gratuitous comments. You know, most rude and kind of. . . . And ill-mannered and. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: They shouldn't do that, but I. . . . You were saying that you felt like they were stupid and that sort of thing. I don't feel that way.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I didn't say they were stupid.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yes, you did. Maybe not on tape but you were saying that just as the tape went off.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes, I did. That's probably quite true. I'm much more of a snob than he is.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, it's not. . . . [laughter]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I mean, I feel if you're stupid, you should at least keep your mouth shut.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, but they have a different range of knowledge.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: True. That's certainly true.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I mean if I were going to, if somebody asked me about irrigating for winter wheat in the Palouse, I would know nothing. And what they feel, what many of the legislators felt, was that because they were sort of the caretakers of the state and this was their palace that somehow their aesthetic preferences should be bowed to.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right, yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And that's why they had never gotten anything in there before because they could never. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Agree.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Anyway, one of the experiences that I can relate is right after I was selected to do the proposal-or not the proposal but the actual commission-I was asked to come in to the Speaker's office to talk to John O'Brien, who wasn't Speaker at that time, and the Speaker's name was William Polk. And Mr. Polk I think was a landscape architect but he was Speaker of the House at that time. And they wanted me to sort of talk about my proposal. Actually, I didn't know what to think. Judy Whetzel was partially involved in this process too, and her husband was either a legislator or a senator, Jonathan Whetzel, at that time.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Um hmm, um hmm.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And so she told me about. . . . She said, "Well just relax and go in and tell them what you're going to do," and that sort of thing. So I did. And both O'Brien and Polk were sort of questioning why I did what I did, or why I was proposing to do what I did. And I explained to them what I told you about the political ramifications of these labors and the business of there being an Olympia, Greece. And then one of them pointed out. . . . They were looking at these one-inch-to-a-foot proposals I had, and one of them said, "Well, what's that?" And he pointed to sort of a bulge between the legs of Hercules and I said, "Well, those are his balls." And he says, "Gosh, when that gets up on the wall it'll be the size of a basketball." And I said, "Well, that's true." And he says, "Well, do you have to do that?" I said, "No, no, I don't." I said, "I'll just take it out." So I did. And then they were looking at it some more, and I believe it was Mr. Polk, although I can't be certain of this. He asked me why I didn't paint something that was more historical.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: O'Brien.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Was it O'Brien?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Um hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean real history.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Um hmm, um hmm, yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's what they said.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And then he started to explain.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah. And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" And he said. . . . And actually I knew what he meant, but he said, "Well, he really liked the murals that were up in Victoria, and they showed the people who explored the area, the Indians and stuff like that." I don't want to put words in his mouth, but I think he said something like, "It would be nice to have Lewis and Clark with the Indians perhaps presenting them a salmon, or something like that." And I said, "Well geez, that's not history." I said, "You know, I was thinking about putting something about. . . ."

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's mythology, is it not?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Same thing.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And I guess I was being sort of nasty. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes. [said with a smile]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . but I said, "You know, I was thinking about doing Washington State history and the things that interested me were the IWW riots in Everett and the Chinese massacre and, you know, all of these things that happened in Washington State." And they said, "Oh, no, no, no, no," they didn't want anything like that. And I said, "Well, look, what you want is mythology, and that's what you're going to get." [laughter] But I think that that may have . . . not only did that sort of show them that I wouldn't get pushed around too much, but I think it also sort of hardened their resolve to somehow prevent this from happening.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, do you think it was then. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: John O'Brien, by the way, is very supportive of the work now, and he was a very, very strong supporter when I was being attacked.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Um hmm. And he was the one that you were meeting with.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: He was the one that was questioning me.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And he was the one who was on the art committee and he was very, very interested in getting art in Olympia.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, it was his baby.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And when he had his birthday, they hung decorations all over the murals and teased him about it.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Underwear. [chuckles]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You know, I mean it was. . . . The murals began to have a life of their own. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I can see that.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . which we weren't involved in at all. And we would not know any of these things until somebody would send us packages of strange newspapers or letters or comments or . . . that we didn't want to know about.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Anyway, I should explain that the process was that we were dealing with General Services Administration, which would be part of the executive branch rather than the legislative branch. And the person who was administering the program, who was. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Michael. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: He got fired. He didn't feel like he had to communicate as directly with the legislature, so he was always telling me that everything was fine. And it was a voucher situation where you. . . . Is that what they call it when you. . . . I spent my money on materials and then I got money back. And in the contract, it said that Alden and I had a year to do the work and an extra year if we weren't able to complete the work, and that the money-or at least he told me-that the money was unencumbered and that they couldn't spend it for any other purpose so there's no problem about that. Anyway, so about three months into the project-there was a lot of controversy going on in the newspaper and people were beginning to object to the whole idea-I was told that the biennium had come to an end and that they hadn't appropriated any money for the next biennium for the murals, so that I would not be able to complete the murals. That's why there are only two walls up there instead of the four. I was told by people who were, people like the guy who's a congressman now, the one who lived in [Montlake, Mountlake], the doctor with the beard.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Lowery?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, no.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: McDermott.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: [Jim-Ed.] McDermott. He was a member of the legislature, and he and his wife were very supportive of the murals and they would tell me sort of how to go about getting around these people who were obstructionists. And Judy Whetzel was recommending things for me to do too. And other people would come to my studio, which was down on Jackson Street, and sort of tell me how to go about politically to sort of get around these people. Their thought was that if I put up the Herc. . . . What I wanted to do was complete all four walls

and put them all up at once. They felt like if I did that they probably would never go up. So they thought I should put up the Hercules walls that I was working on, and then we would try to get the other two up. I realize now that that was a mistake but. . . . When the Hercules walls went up, then the shit really hit the fan. They really hated them. And I was told later that maybe if I had put up something that had some color in it that they wouldn't hate it so much, but I'm not sure that that's true, but. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's plausible but. . . .

[Interruption in taping]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: So many things that went on that I can't possibly cover it all, so I think maybe it would be a good idea to sort of break it off. And I don't even think I put on there the fact that I specifically said to the jury when the proposal was being considered that they should consider very carefully selecting me because I did have this reputation for doing controversial work. And so it was sort of like. . . . They said they didn't care.

[Interruption in taping]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Richard Serra being supported by people that called his work, they say it's like Michelangelo. You know, I mean, it's just. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hm! A little hyperbolizing.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah. Oh, is that on? [the tape recorder-Trans.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Oh yes, okay. Anyway, I was just saying before we broke it off that when the proposals were being made to the jury, one of the things that I was very, very careful about was to actually tell the jury that I had a controversial reputation. They knew that. And my work had been considered controversial before, that they had to be particularly aware of the fact that a lot of people didn't like my work. And they said they knew that. And so when I was awarded the commission, I assumed that I could do what I did. I mean, I wasn't trying to work for somebody else like I might if I were a commercial artist. I was working just for myself. Now I know that today most artists who work in the public arena are much more sensitive to the people who are viewing their works and what they want ahead of time. But I still feel that the best responsibility that an artist has to his public is to do the best work they can, whether the public likes it or not. Anyway. . . . [chuckling] The other way I think is more. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you. I mean it's not entirely clear to me. Did the public, whatever, J.Q. Public-John and Jane-hate this work, or was it more complicated than that? You know I mentioned. . . . I suggested it might have come down to a kind of turf war to a degree that you were viewed as perhaps being, not insolent necessarily, but certainly intractable on the part of. . . . Do you have any insight into how this developed? It became, from what I hear, quite a cause célèbre here. The factions were aligned, and it's hard to imagine that this would happen without some fueling and feeding and other things at stake. You know what I mean? Just quickly, to try to make a national comparison. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, there wasn't anything at stake really. The only thing was. . . . One of the main things that had changed was an attitude which was economic. And all of a sudden, there was less money to spend.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it wasn't sex, dirty imagery.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, I don't know. I don't know.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, there was. . . . But remember about the. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, I think Paul's right. I think that there was. . . . It wasn't exactly a turf war, but it was like it allowed people who were more liberal and people who were more conservative to somehow have something to talk about.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: That's true.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And just like, clear across the country this was happening. You know, the religious right was developing as a political force.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think of the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts-Ed.], obviously. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Of course.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and Jesse Helms's motives, which are perhaps not as apparent as some people think. So, you know, it's not clearly sex and art.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, he was just trying to take the heat off the tobacco industry. You know, he was. . . . [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was just wondering if. . . . When I said, you know, "something else at stake," I'm wondering if there was anything here of a perhaps political nature lining up?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, the legislature itself was having this big fight about money.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right. It was a period of economic downturn.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: All of a sudden there was a downturn. There was no money for chore services for the handicapped, and that became an incredible focus. And then they said they shouldn't be funding art; they should be funding the poor and. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, it wasn't even that direct though, it was like. . . . I would call it being described as the mural served a purpose that went beyond the original intent, and that was that it was something that both of these factions could talk about and dislike.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes. That's true.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: So they could agree on it. So apparently at that time the conversation between the two aisles-the Republicans and the Democrats-was so acrimonious that people were actually getting death threats. I mean, they were very, very angry at one another.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And fighting and. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But when it came to the murals they could agree that they wanted that shit out of the House, you know. So it sort of gave them an area that was almost like a no man's land that they could discuss and agree on. And I thought that was terrific.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: They could discuss it and make jokes and all kinds of things.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That was very, very good.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes. It was. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But to get back to the idea of it being sort of a symbol for the difference between the more liberal element and the more conservative element. That breaks our state down into two areas, too, because Seattle is considered sort of "Sin City" and where all the liberal, bad ideas are promoted. And then the eastern side of the state-and some of the smaller communities in the state-is considered more basic or which we'd call "family values." And that's always been true. The murals, once again, were able to sort of focus that difference. Now, I don't think that what happened to me had anything to do with what happened with the NEA or anything like that because. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mapplethorpe's _____.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Basically, I was not censored. I did a work of art and the people didn't like it. And that's not the same as being censored, saying, well, "You can't do this," or, "You can't do that."

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But it was covered up.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's true, but it's not. . . . They covered it up because they didn't like it. I mean, that's not the same as saying there's certain things that you can do and certain things that you can't do.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: That's true. And in fact the obscenity claims were made because that's the best way. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, to rally support.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . to say that you don't like something is to call it obscene.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, actually in the contract. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, but there lies a very important similarity, because this is what's used to try to generate the support and opposition of whatever little art _____ project.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: There was one state senator-Richard Bond-who sort of led the fight against the murals, and he genuinely did feel a sense of outrage about the murals. He was a born-again Christian, which I have no objection to whatsoever, but he was also an ex-Marine and he genuinely felt like the murals were filthy. And when I think back on it I think well he probably felt some guilt about whatever he did as a Marine. He undoubtedly had all these things bottled up that he could sort of . . . they were brought out by how he felt about the murals.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Do you remember his card?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, it said. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: He sent you a card?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, no, it's a business card.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: It's a business card and it said. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: It just said Richard Bond. Was it Bond, or no? What'd I say?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yeah. Bond. Yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Is it Bond? I think it was Richard. Anyway, and then it said, "Christian."

PAUL KARLSTROM: There was a phone number? And an address?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I thought it had more than that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Pearly gates.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But, like I say, I don't object at all to that, but they objected to the murals because they were non-Christian. They were pagan. They were Hercules. They were pre-Christian. You know, they were all these things that they could relate to Satanic. . . . You know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. So once they were noticed. . . . I mean, it would have been okay if somehow attention of this nature hadn't been caused, but as soon as there was some attention paid and there was publicity then, as you said earlier, even those who didn't actually see the works or the images drew these conclusions. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and felt threatened, became outraged. Do you see this as a fairly typical pattern in this kind of thing? That it's less a direct confrontation with. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, that's right. They don't look at them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I hear that this is bad. It's anti . . . it's unreligious and so forth.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Sure.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this is then basically what happened. This was the phenomenon that. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But on the other hand there were numerous supporters, and they would generally write about what a fine teacher I was. They'd talk about the University of Washington. This would just add fuel to the fire to the people who didn't like the work because the University of Washington was a place they would not send their children because of all the sin that was there. You know, in other words, the people who supported the murals put a spin on all the things I was that was good, and those same things were considered to be evil by the second group.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did it resolve?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, it resolved itself by them covering up the murals and refusing to let me complete the murals. In 1987, they passed a resolution to take them down, and Alden Mason sued the state trying to get an injunction against them taking down his murals. And I was in Europe at that time, and my gallery [Francine Seders Gallery-Ed.] joined in the suit on my behalf. And so when I got back, we all went to court together. And the state won. Even before the trial began, they were given the right to take the murals down. Then the trial. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: He was a wonderful judge.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah. Terrence Carroll.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But no, the preliminary judge, that was a woman.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Uh huh.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Don't you remember?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Right, but she didn't make that ruling. Carroll made the ruling that. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But she did this wonderful explanation about it. It was the most succinct thing we heard in at least, in five years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean, it really was wonderful?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: It really was.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes. She was very, very clear. I was trying to think. Was it Barbara. . . . [Jacobs Rothstein-Ed.]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I can't remember her name either but she was good. She made all the issues very clear. Anyway, after Carroll had made some kind of preruling that the state could not be prevented from taking the work down. . . . In the contract, to get back to what Elizabeth was saying earlier, the contract had a provision in it that said that the Legislature could not stop the production of the murals for aesthetic reasons. There had to be something nonaesthetic. So they went to pornography and to economic reasons as a reason to stop the murals. And this was supposed to be nonaesthetic. And that's how they stopped them. But in the contract it said that the murals could not be altered, damaged. . . . There were all kinds of things like that.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right. But it didn't say they couldn't be removed.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: It didn't say they couldn't be moved.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Or removed.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: So the judge said since it wasn't in the contract that they couldn't be moved, as long as they could prove that they weren't going to change them in any way. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: They could move them.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . then they could move them. Our defense was that they were site-specific and that they were designed specifically for that space and if they were moved it would change them. But he didn't buy that, so. . . . Anyway, as the upshot was. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So just like Icarus, you failed.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That's right, that's right, except that what happened was because I had put them up with the intention of them being up very, very sturdily partially because of the earthquake business and everything. . . . Alden had painted his on canvas and had them stretched and they were hung on hooks. Mine were on [Indio, indio] plywood, laminated canvas, and adhered to the wall with industrial cement.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: They couldn't. . . .

[Session 2, Tape 2, Side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing Spafford/Sandvig session two, tape two, side B. These notorious murals.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: [laughter] Yeah, that's right. It was ruled by the judge, Terrence Carroll, that the piece could be moved as long as it wasn't damaged. And so our defense was that they couldn't be moved because they were site-specific pieces. But he finally ruled that they could. Luckily, the way I put up the murals made it very, very difficult, if not prohibitively expensive, to move them without damaging them. Alden Mason's murals, unfortunately, were painted on canvas, and they were hung on hooks, and so as soon as this ruling was made, they took them down. It took them half a day, and they just went in there and they took them down and put them in storage.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: You didn't explain that one of the things that's happened in the meantime was that they hired a designer and they spent, what, a million or so to redo the Legislative Building.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: That was for the Centennial. Right.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And they gold-leafed everything. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Three-and-a-half million dollars, they spent.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Three-and-a-half million. They bought new carpets, hand done in England with patterns of rhododendrons.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Actually, it's quite beautiful. You'll have to go down and take a look at it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But this was at the same time they were. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No, this was after.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This was afterwards.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: This is another governor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So there were no longer the economic issues.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: No.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: No, no, there never was. The judge ruled that that was all artifice and subterfuge, and he awarded me the rest of the money during that trial.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: But so here the building had all been done. So the reason they wanted Alden's down was that the colors didn't go well.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: They said they didn't match the decorative scheme.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: It didn't match the new decoration.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And they looked beautiful there.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: So they took them down. So Mike's, even though they didn't match the decorative scheme, actually. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: They do.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . they couldn't take them down because they were stuck to the walls. Now they had been covered up with wooden walls for how long?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Five years. Or seven years.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: So the judge ruled they were to be uncovered. Right?

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is a second trial, now?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Same trial.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Same trial?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Same trial, right. So, see, the murals went up in 1981 and the trial was in 1987. After the murals were up for less than a year, they were covered. And then they were covered until the time that they were. . . . Alden's had never been covered. His had never actually been criticized.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Nobody ever said anything. [laughs]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: As soon as this building was remodeled, then they decided they didn't want any of this junky art in there so they passed this resolution that all this art should be taken down, and the ruling made it possible for them to take Alden's down right away. And then what they did was they had an estimate made by experts about how. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . .to take his down.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . how to take mine down without damaging them, and I think that. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: They made little films.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah. It was incredible.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And they showed the judge. And they were so funny; nobody would pay any attention to those films.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: The way my murals went up, they have. . . . This [Indio, scindio] plywood comes in five by nine sheets, and they were jigsawed and the canvas was sometimes laminated over the top of these joints and sometimes it wasn't. And so it was really difficult for them to know where to put something under it to pop it off without damaging the rest of it. They came up with a figure of something like $300,000. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: . . . .to take them down.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . as a possibility for the amount of money it would take to take them down. But then they would have to, according to the judge, they'd have to have an expert check them every two or three months while they were in storage to make sure that they weren't getting mildewed or. . . . [laughs] It was ridiculous! I mean, I would have been perfectly willing to go down there and just rip them off and toss them. But they these. . . . I mean, they really were very hypocritical. They kept saying they didn't like them but they didn't want to destroy them because they might be worth something someday. [laughs]

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: So some people. . . . Everybody had a different opinion like, "Well, maybe we can sell them to another state."

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Yeah, right. Or they were going to put them in a cow barn at the Puyallup Fair. You know, they thought they would look good there. But at any rate they weren't able to take them down, so the judge suggested that they leave them up, leave them uncovered, and have the public respond to what they thought of them. And so they left them uncovered for something like four months?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right, and now meanwhile, we had a new Speaker of the House or leader-Joe King?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Joe King, right.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And then new people like. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Sure, lots of new legislators and. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And the Henry Gallery. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And the arts. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Richard Andrews. Well, he went down there and spoke to Joe King and spoke to the Legislature and convinced them all to. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And Richard, of course, had been in public art at the NEA for many years, and he was very involved with the Richard Serra thing, and there became a kind of a. . . . Actually the judge-not the judge, the lawyer that wanted to. . . . One of the lawyers that I was going to use is a blind man who practices down in Portland. He's a famous art lawyer. And he actually was part of Serra's team also. So we didn't use him finally.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, we did for the first part of the trial-for the preliminary. But then it was too expensive.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Interesting fellow. He was an artist as a young person and he was mixing chemicals and it blew up and destroyed his sight. But he's considered a terrific art lawyer because. . . . Duboff, not DuBois.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Is it Duboff?

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Yes, that's right. Uh huh, [Leonard-Ed.] Duboff.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: He's considered a terrific art lawyer because he can't be shown to have a bias, a visual bias. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Because he can't see it. [chuckles]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: . . . because he can't see it. At any rate, Joe King finally decided not to bring the issue of taking the murals down again to the full House. He had the executive committee of the House of Representatives make a decision that the murals should not be voted on again. And by doing that, they stayed up. And they're still up. And actually they look very good, but people still don't like them.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Some people like them.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Some do, but most don't.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: And lots of things happen where a group of Russian tourists, somebody will ask, "What will you explain about these?" And then the tour guide says. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: "We're not supposed to talk about them."

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: "Oh, I'm sorry you asked that. We're not supposed to talk about them." [laughs]

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: And there's a whole group of artists and art supporters who are down there and in Seattle who feel like this is not the right sort of thing to have up there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Artists, you say?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Um hmm. Yeah. And as a matter of fact, when the controversy was occurring, many artists said that they would put up something for nothing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what artists are these.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Well, these are some unknown. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I have no idea.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Unknown artists, let's say.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, people. . . . I wasn't that well-known myself.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: I know. But you had quite a track record, you keep forgetting.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Well, anyway.

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Everybody in Washington state has an opinion about everything, I think, you know, so. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: In terms of how it affected. . . . I think it had a really strong effect on this whole burgeoning kind of art, public art thing that was happening in the state of Washington. And I think that's really interesting because Elizabeth and I were very much involved with the TAG [The Artists Group-Ed.] group in 1971 that set up the original ordinances for the public art ["1% for Art program-Ed.]. And then we got involved in a kind of a different way with the murals. And what it did was it changed the process for selecting art. And it brought it more into the nineties-or into the eighties-and there is a strong sense of somehow communicating with the people that you were doing the art for that didn't exist before. And that's probably why I wouldn't operate quite as well today as a public artist as I had an opportunity to in the past, because I am basically very selfish and. . . .

ELIZABETH SANDVIG: Right. Well, one of the things [that-Ed.] happens is that now for every public art project, there's a public dialogue, usually before, during, and maybe a little bit after. But usually what it involves is canvassing people and then going to lots of meetings. And people spend hours and days and days in meetings trying to decide what's suitable and whether art has a healing effect or not. And then it ends up usually with what the architect decides, rather than. . . . You know, they can change the color at will. Or sometimes the architect installs something of his own. So it doesn't always work.

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: But there were many people who were upset with me because of my intractability, and I'm not going to mention the person actually, but there was somebody who was very highly positioned in the state who asked me the question. He said, "If it were proven to you that your murals-or your attitude about your murals-are leading to a total, say, the removal of the art budget for the rest of Washington state, would you retract? I mean, would you let them do what they want to with the murals?" And I said, "No." I said, "That's their business." I didn't care about the effect on other artists. And they got so upset! [laughs] But, of course if you say yes, you're doing the worst thing. I mean, you're compromising and you're playing into the hands of people who want to just sort of control. It's more a power thing than it is an aesthetic thing. So they certainly don't have to choose me to do anything, and they don't have to like it once I do it, but I shouldn't have to do things so that other people, you know what I mean, so that they will fund other people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you don't see the artist as a team player?

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: I think some artists work wonderfully in terms of teams. I can't even work if there's somebody in the same building. But no, that's not exactly true. I use the same fabricators for the murals in Olympia that I did for the piece in the Kingdome, and they're wonderful. I love to work with them as a team and

they had lots of suggestions, and. . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I think more of what I meant was operating in terms of a community with shared interests, that you don't feel it's the job of the artist to primarily be looking out for the, in this case, compromising in order to supposedly have a better. . . .

MICHAEL SPAFFORD: Actually, Paul, I do feel that the artist has great responsibility this way, but I feel like that responsibility is best served by doing art that has energy and strength rather than trying to. . . . I've seen so many young artists that are very, very talented who go out and do awful art because they think they're doing something good for the community. And that does disturb.
Anyway, do you suppose that's enough?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. Thanks so much to both of you. Maybe we'll have another opportunity to discuss some of the other issues. Thank you.

[End of interview]

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