



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

**Oral history interview with Isamu Noguchi, 1973  
Nov. 7-Dec. 26**

**Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.**

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Isamu Noguchi on November 7, December 10, 18 and 26, 1973. The interview was conducted at Isamu Noguchi's studio in Long Island City, New York by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

[SIDE 1]

PAUL CUMMINGS: November 7, 1973- Paul Cummings talking to Isamu Noguchi in his studio in Long Island City, New York. To kind of start at the beginning, you were born in Los Angeles but really grew up in Japan and started your traveling very young and kept at it. I'm curious about what that was like on a kind of day-to-day basis, what you did as a child in Japan. You lived in two kinds of worlds. At least that's the observation from reading your autobiography and the catalogues and things. You grew up with – what? Japanese or English?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: First of all, my mother was American. And going to Japan with an American mother and being half-Japanese puts on in a very anomalous position. On the one hand, she is of Japan, she wanted to be in Japan. But the fact of the matter is that the Japanese do not accept foreigners as another person equal to themselves because Japanese are Japanese and everybody else is foreign, you understand. It's a very traditional country in that sense; and very unusually so, perhaps. I mean very exclusive in a sense. And, on top of that, my mother was separated from my father when I was very, very young so that I didn't have that contact that I might have had to one-half parent anyway. So I was an appendage on a stranger; that is to say...And yet, as I say, she loved Japan, let's say, had friends and pupils there. She taught English. But I was more or less a kind of waif because she was always working a great deal of the time and I was sort of thrown onto the neighboring children and so forth who, of course, were Japanese. So my playmates and so forth were Japanese but I was not Japanese, you see. And, you know, people talk about the discrimination that exists against half-breeds. And, it is probably so. Although I mean, personally, I can't say that I experienced discrimination as such, a third person looking at it more objectively would probably say that it's a classical case. I, for instance, have never felt discriminated against in this country either, for that matter, but somebody else looking at it might say: "Well, but you don't realize that this is evidence of discrimination." And my own attitude, of course, is another question. Am I really free? Or am I really inherently self-protective against incipient discrimination. Do you understand?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It works both ways. I mean, both the people who may be – my whole attitude and, let's say, being in a sense a misfit in any situation both in Japan and here, in a sense, might be a part of what makes me the way I am, you know – a misfit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But growing up as a child, because you lived in Japan until you were – what?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Until I was thirteen.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you had a chance to have kind of teen-age friends and school?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: That's right. Therefore I had a double background there, especially during the time that we were living in the country at Chigasaki from the time I was six years old or earlier – I'm not too sure – but maybe five or six years old, until I was ten certainly, we lived in this country place. There were no foreign children there at all so all my friends were Japanese children.

PAUL CUMMINGS: so you were really quite different from...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. And, as to whether or not they accepted me, who knows. When I was about eight, I started to commute to a school in Yokohama which was a Jesuit school – St. Joseph's College.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you know why your mother sent you to that school?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Prior to that, I was going to a Japanese school and she probably worried about my being a country boy in a Japanese school and thought I should have more European-type education, I suppose.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you speak English at home, or Japanese?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I spoke English at home and Japanese outside. Well. When I started to commute to this school, which was frequented by foreigners, you know, the pupils were the children of the residents of Japan and also of other parts of the Orient came to the school. So, for a while I commuted, maybe for a year or so. And for one year my mother took me out of school and tutored me because she didn't particularly like that school and she thought maybe she could do better tutoring me herself. But that was only for a while. Then I boarded at that school for a while. Finally, she moved to Yokohama and then I went to that school from where we were in Yokohama. But that wasn't for very long, I don't think it could have lasted for more than a year. In any case, she was living in Yokohama then. You see. The reason was she was teaching in Yokohama then. You see, therefore, I was kind of real waif, I would say.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had no contact with your father at all during that time?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: None at all. None at all. So that you might say I'm a classical case of conditioning as a child in a not too fortunate way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, it's curious from reading and everything how choppy it was and how broken up but, but it seems even more so. Was your mother's idea in sending you back to the United States again to get an education?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Probably for the same reason that she sent me to St. Joseph's. Probably she wanted to protect me from the kind of half, you know...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Half in and half out.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: ...business of not belonging anywhere. She probably thought that I would have a better chance of belonging in society here than in Japan. But as to whether or not that was really so, other people are in a better position than I to know. She didn't know where to send me. She happened to read in a magazine about a school in Indiana – the Interlaken School – which was devoted to teaching children to learn by doing; that is, it had a kind of manual training approach. She sent me there in June 1971. As you can see from reading my book, I didn't stay there very long; in

fact I never went to school there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. But, before you came to this country, did you have a lot of friends as a student and as a young man in schools in Japan?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. I never had. I never had many friends; I don't have any recollection of them, or not much. Nor after coming here either, for that matter did I develop great friendships with people. I'm a loner.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your mother being an English teacher, did you have books around? Did you read? Did you read?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, there were plenty of books around.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you remember any of them?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, you know, she was a rather literate person so we had books. I mention in my book William Blake, for instance. And there were books of poetry. She was fond of poetry. And my father was a poet. And my mother herself was a loner; I mean it was not just me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: She was a very quiet person, a very retiring sort of person. She was not pushy at all. Therefore, I mean, her life was very lonely. She didn't have very many friends. So that also reflected on me, you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you every talk to her about why she was so interested in Japan, what it was that – why she wanted to live there?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, for one thing, she had fallen in love with my father and I was born and she took me over there, I think, somewhat to his surprise and maybe to his annoyance. And, having gotten over there and finding that by then he had gotten another family, there was nothing for her to do. For that matter, probably she couldn't afford to come back here either.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So she started teaching?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, she started teaching there. It was a very mixed up and unfortunate situation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you start drawing as a child the way so many children do?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, after all, all children do draw. Yes, I drew. And I looked at pictures and magazines and so on. But I was not, you know – I would say that my mother wanted me to be something like an artist. For a while she thought I would be a forester or somebody like that, and she taught me botany. I have that in my book, by the way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: From this description and from what's in the book, it seems that there's been kind of a great searching that has gone on through your early years trying to find a place or a culture

ISAMU NOGUCHI: After all, for one with a background like myself the question of identity is very uncertain. And I think it's only in art that it was ever possible for me to find any identity at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way, do you think?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, after all, it is only in art that a person who does not belong with any social contact, you see, could find a viewpoint on like which is free of social contacts. One can be an artist and alone, for example. An artist's life is really a lonely life. It is only when he is lonely that he can really produce. If he is not lonely, he may be a social, nice, person, but you know, he might not be driven to it. After all, in a sense you're driven to art out of desperation. People are naturally lazy; they don't do things unless they are driven to it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. I think it's interesting that, for example, Dr. Mack and the people you knew at Interlaken School and in La Porte, Indiana –

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, they meant well for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I understand that but I think it's interesting that they tried to guide you to being a doctor, for example.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. But, all right, I mean it was their limited viewpoint. And it was natural that they would. They tried to protect me in that way. I meant to become an artist was not exactly a protected existence from their point of view. They probably thought it was a rather risky thing. I mean, you know, so far as economic well-being and so forth was concerned, they thought it was probably better to be a doctor.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. But how did you find coming to this country which was brand new to you because you were so young when you had left, and living right in the center – in this very conservative town in Indiana, and finally in high school you did go to? Was that, again, a case where you were still an outsider in terms of...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, they treated me probably as people probably now treat a waif from, say, South Vietnam. You know, they mean every good thing but they don't make them into members of the community. Although I think this country is better than most countries, at least, if you're not a Negro. But looking at the Negroes, you'll see that it's not so hot here either. So that discrimination takes many different forms. It can take the form of, let's say, solicitude. I mean, for instance, the solicitude of the missionary. After all, Dr. Mack was a religious man and he probably had a solicitude for me which was not unlike a missionary in Africa.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Good works.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, look, I'm not trying to accuse him of anything. He was a lovely man, a really sincere man, and a good man. And I'm sure many missionaries are good people. I'm not saying that he was a missionary towards me, but I sort of came in the category of a subject for a missionary approach. I'm still, you know, victimized by people who have all the good will toward me and I feel like a Hottentot.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In going to high school, were you active in any school activities, in any sports, or in art classes? Were there things that interested you – literature, music?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. Things of that sort I rather shied away from. I was not what you would call "one of those boys." I think I was rather shy. I mean in high school I went in for basketball and things like that, like all kids do. But I don't think that I was willing to be, or was accepted as a member of, you know, boys' clubs of things like that, gangs, or...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. The groups that form. Yes.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Exactly

PAUL CUMMING: I'm curious about – was it Dr. Mack who was the friend of Gutzon Borglum?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. It was not Dr. Mack who was the friend of Borglum. It was Dr. Rumley

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did Dr. Rumley and Borglum know each other? Did you ever find that out? Or were they just friends from somewhere?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I tell you, Dr. Rumley was quite very unusual person, a brilliant person. He was from La Porte, Indiana but had gone to school in Heidelberg, Germany. I believe he had gotten a degree as a doctor but never practiced medicine. He became a business man and developed a tractor factory – Advance-Rumley Company – in La Porte. Thus he had money. He brought the *New York Evening Mail*. There was a big scandal that he must have brought to the *Evening Mail* with money from the German Kaiser. There was a terrible sort of case with the government. In fact, he finally landed in jail for having presumably....Spreckels, the sugar tycoon, was involved, but he died. I mean I think Rumley claimed that he got the money through Spreckels; and the government claimed that it was the Kaiser's money for propaganda purposes for the Germans. Rumley was originally an Alsatian. And, having gone to school in Germany, he had German sympathies, you might say; mean, in any case, he was accused of it. The family had a people, not necessarily toward the war. I'm not in a position to say what the facts were. First of all, I was too young to know and I came on the scene after the fact. But Dr. Rumley did land in jail here in town some place-- I forget where it was. Finally he was released – pardoned by Coolidge. I believe he knew Borglum because of his involvement with the newspaper and politics and so forth. I mean, for instance, he was the one who sent John Reed to Russia.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. I mean he was a liberal.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There were a lot of things happening.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. He was a friend of McClure. He was a friend of Henry Ford. He was a single-taxer when I first knew him. Gradually he became more and more conservative and ended up as an opponent of Franklyn Roosevelt in the court packing case. He formed an organization against the policies of Roosevelt and for the more conservative element, including businessmen such as Henry Ford, and so on, the more right-wing element you might say. But originally he was a liberal. The school that he founded – Interlaken—was based on very progressive ideas. He had very progressive ideas in education and so forth which he had learned in Europe presumably. So I was sent to this school by my mother. They must have had correspondence. She had read about the school. The school actually welcomed people of different races. Well, I landed at the school. For a while I was rooming with a Filipino boy who was an Igorot, one of the samples who, prior to that, had been sent to the San Francisco Fair as an example of the people who lived in trees in the Philippines, a wild boy. His name was Agapowan. So, you see, one never knows whether one is a sample of primitive boyhood or whether one is....I really did not meet Dr. Rumley right away. You see, the school had closed down and had become an army training camp. Then the war had ended and the training camp was closed down. I was still left there. I had no place to go. I think it was for about a year I was out there just, you know, in the wild.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do all during that time? What activities?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, first of all, I was in this deserted school with a couple of caretakers getting the victuals and helping to cook a very limited cuisine, you might say. But I mean really in the wild. They had a horse which I would ride to the nearby village, Rolling Prairie, in the morning to get the produce for the day and the mail. Eventually I was rescued from there by a lady whose husband had been the treasurer of the school. She had sort of established herself in Rolling Prairie. So she took me over there. I worked in the garage and then went to school in Rolling Prairie. I commuted from Rolling Prairie to Interlaken for a while. Then I stayed in Rolling Prairie for a while. Then went back to Interlaken. The two places were very near each other. I used to ride his horse. Finally Dr. Rumley heard about me there. He himself had gotten sufficiently extricated from his troubles. So he called me there and where he was established. He kindly put me to board with Dr. Mack who was a Swedenborgian minister and was the minister of the New Church there. It was Dr. Mack's family who initially befriended me. And then Dr. Rumley's family, who lived right near there befriended me too. My going to Gutzon Borglum came about because, as I say, Dr. Rumley knew Borglum through his political and intellectual connections, so to speak, at the time. Dr. Rumley suggested that maybe I could go and tutor Borglum's son, Lincoln. So that's what I did. I went and tutored his son, Lincoln Borglum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: In English, in anything; you know, I just tutored him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were very young for that, weren't you?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I was just out of high school, and he was a little younger; he was about ten, I guess. You know, how you make your way? I mean when you are a kid? So you might say that even while in La Porte, Indiana where I was staying with Dr. Mack – I of course tried to earn my way – and so I was doing all kinds of odd jobs, I took care of people's furnaces, mowed their lawns, delivered newspapers, that sort of thing. You know, it was a real sort of American story. I mean it was not unusual, and I'm not claiming anything unusual about me except that, as I say, I was a stranger and I had no relatives, no sense of belonging rally.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you write to your mother? Did you have correspondence with her much?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. But, you know, it was very distant, after all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It would take a long time for letters to go back and forth then.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Borglum was living where. Then?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: In Stamford, Connecticut. He had a huge place, about seven hundred acres in Stamford. A huge studio. He was building another enormous studio. You know, he did the Newark Memorial inside that – I think seventy-five figures over – life size with several horses in it – all inside the studio. It was an enormous thing. By the time he had lost the job of doing Stone Mountain in Georgia. Although I believe he got about two million dollars from the Daughters of the American Revolution. You know, I understood that, at that time, Borglum's political clout came from the fact that he was on the investigation of the airplane scandal at the end of the First World War and therefore knew the background of the politicians and could put the screws on them. And that's the reason people were fearful of him and did what he wanted them to do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what was it like? This was another new adventure for you wasn't it, in a new part of the country?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Life was an adventure. Its sort of started right in at the very – right where Mr. Nixon is today, that's where I started. It was an American story of a sort.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. How did you like the studio? You had never been to an artist's studio before?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. There I was, living in the woods, you see, I mean in a shack. I had no idea about sculpture, nothing. There were about ten workmen there, mostly Italians. They were kind to me. Borglum worked with clay a la Rodin, more or less. So I became very familiar with clay from the very beginning. Excepting that I didn't get along with anybody, for that matter. I wasn't unusual in that sense. He was a very irascible fellow who enjoyed having people feel badly. I was cutting wood most of the time for his furnaces. You know, I was out in the woods. I was not a family boy, ever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the workmen? Did you learn much from them about the materials and...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. I would say that one learns by osmosis almost. It's not a question of formal education. One learns attitudes and how to make plaster, or how to do this, how to do that. I don't say that I learned to be a sculptor at Borglum's. I learned being in the country and working. I was posing for him for a while. He didn't make the slightest effort to teach me anything at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were just there to be used whenever he wanted something?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, exactly. So far as he was concerned, I was just a useful or non-useful person. He finally decided I wasn't very useful. So that was the end of that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How much time did you spend there?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I went there at the end of the school year and was there all through the summer, at the end of which I came to New York and told Dr. Rumley that Borglum didn't want me, that he didn't think I'd be a sculptor anyway. So I was thrown upon Dr. Rumley's good graces. He put me up in a basement room where he kept some books, I mean he took a storage room. And then he kindly raised some money among friends to send me to Columbia University where I took premedical studies.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like Columbia then?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I didn't particularly like it. And, again, I didn't associate with anybody. I don't know a single person who I would consider having as a friend there. I remember some of the classes I went to, yes. I remember some of the teachers. But none of the pupils. I did not stay there. I didn't pick them out, or they me. It's a complete blank. I was at Columbia only two years, by the way. Which is enough really to have established some kind of contacts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who were some of the teachers you remember?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, there was Erdman for philosophy and he had a course in contemporary civilization. Then there was Weaver who gave a course in Dante. But really it was a chore that I was trying to get finished. In fact, I was cramming to get through in double-quick time. All I was interested in was getting out.



PAUL CUMMINGS: You had no involvement with anything?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Nothing at all

PAUL CUMMINGS: You went to classes and studies and classes and studied?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Heavens! That must have been a difficult two years.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It was very difficult, yes. But anyway, in the meantime, my mother arrived here. This is all in my book, by the way. She finally got here. By then I think, it was around 1923. She got a place on Tenth Street. She had come back from Japan with the idea of making a living importing and selling things from Japan, like Japanese prints and imports and things in a very modest way. It went wrong somehow but she managed apparently. So I went to live with her but not very successfully. It's in the book she got me to go to the Leonardo da Vinci Art School.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But that must have been sort of difficult, wasn't it, to go back and live with one's mother after having been away?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Exactly. I say that in the book. After all, absence from 1917 to – well, say, it was six years – it's considerable for that time of life. So that my being a misfit became a habit after all so you just have to stay that way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you learn how to live in that kind of style.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, you live in that milieu and that's your natural habitat, so to speak. If somebody tries to pull you out of that, you don't like it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I want to ask about the Borglum studio again. You never really made any objects or had anything to do with working on...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, as I say, I posed for a sculpture he was making of General Sherman on a horse. There was a horse there which was very ornery and didn't like to pose. So we would have to force him to pose, you know with his mouth sort of open and one leg up in the air, you know, like General Sherman's horse. The horse would object like mad so he had a trick of drinking air and letting out a great big fart. But he was quite a horse. Anyway, that was one of my jobs there. As for making anything, I mean Borglum specialized in making heads of Abraham Lincoln. He did the head of Lincoln for the Lincoln Memorial in –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Washington.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. That was done by Daniel Chester French. Borglum did another one, a great big one, a head. So I made a head of Lincoln too; and lost it. That was all I ever did there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was really the total kind of activity with him?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. In fact, his art was no more than that, making generals and horses and monuments.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Official art.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the Leonardo da Vinci Art School? That sounds as if it was the first time that you started doing things on your own.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Well, that was more serious, I mean, in the sense that it was sort of an art school which was started in this old church on Tompkins Square on the corner. The red church building is still there. At that time it was an art school. It had been started by the Italian group, the Piccarelli brothers. The director was Onorio Ruotolo.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Of, yes. They were the founders, weren't they?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. There was a whole group of Italians interested in art. Of course it was academic art, but what else was there in those days? There wasn't anything else. So, as I explained in my book, I became an apprentice to Ruotolo and had very little to do with the school. I mean I was at the school maybe three months altogether. The rest of the time I was his apprentice. He more or less promoted me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did he have a studio that you worked in?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. He had a studio on Fourteenth Street near Union Square. He was a Neapolitan, very handsome, with flashy eyes. He was a pupil of Gemito. He took it into his head to make me into a sculptor. I remember the first summer I was with him I helped him illustrate John Macy's book on *The History of Man*. He made some sort of pseudo woodcuts. You see, after I had been at school for a short while, I asked Ruotolo if I would work for him. He paid me to work for him so I was able to quit my job as a waiter in a restaurant. Also, I quit Columbia and became a sculptor.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have drawing classes or anything at the school?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Figure drawing? Plaster cast drawing? Everything?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Sure. All those things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And then you went right into making –

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. And then he sort of promoted me into making sculptures. Within three months I had an exhibition at the Leonardo da Vinci Art School. He promoted me in the sense that he would call a news conference for instance. I haven't called a news conference since those days. He would call up the newspapers and all these reporters would come traipsing in and we would have a news conference. It can be done, you know. I haven't done it since but I'm sure that's the way things are done in Washington – you call news conference and everybody comes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like all of this activity – you know, finding things to do and -- ?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, you see, I had to earn my living. There was no other way. Borglum had paid me five dollars a week, which was enough to keep me going. Then after about – I don't know how long it was – maybe a year of it, it couldn't have been more than that, maybe less – Ruotolo in the meantime had given me his studio and had gotten another studio for himself. I mean he was that passionate a man. He thought he was teaching me through psychic means. He had all those levitations and séances. As I mention in my book, one day some friends of his came calling when I was busy working. I threw them out and he got wind of it and threw me out. That was the end of

that. So, again that's when I appealed to my friend, Dr. Rumley, who had helped me before, to get a studio on the corner of Union Square. That's how I started doing sculptures; that is, I became a sculptor on my own.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What appealed to you, though, in the working in his studio and doing things for him?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It was a quick way of doing sculptures, a quick, academic way of doing sculpture. He taught me all the tricks. Of course, they were of no use to me afterward but I found out how to make things quickly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I mean the activity must have appealed to you in some way.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, it was a lot better than being a doctor. You know, I was fed up with taking the premedical course at Columbia. I liked the life around there. Downstairs in the building was Sandy Calder's father – Sterling Calder. He had a studio there. He was a very handsome man, I didn't know Sandy until later on, but I knew his father and mother. Later on in Paris I met Sandy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long were you in this Fourteenth Street studio then?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: AS I say, I was there probably less than a year and I got this other studio on Union Square.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that's the one I'm thinking about.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I was at that one until I got the Guggenheim Fellowship in the spring of 1927 when I left.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kinds of things did you do then? Because you hadn't started doing heads.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I was doing heads. I was doing figures. I was doing a figure of a Russian girl named Nadia Nikolaiova – a head. She was a girl with a nice figure who danced in the Serpent and in a club. She posed for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were these commissions you were doing ? Or were they just things you were doing --?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, I was doing them for myself. But, of course, I was doing things to make money. I remember the first job I had was doing a mold for a sugar candy –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, the cake mold thing?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, that sort of thing. I got that through Ruotolo, as a matter of fact. Then I got other jobs to do, a head mostly. Because of Ruotolo's beating the drum and so forth, I became a kind of celebrity at the National Sculpture Society and at the Architectural League. In those days, the Architectural League was very, very academic. In fact, everything was academic. And I was academic too. But then I changed at the age of twenty-one, so to speak. I was just twenty-two, as a matter of fact, when I went to Paris.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of artist were you interested in? What kind of artists did you know at that time?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Actually, I didn't particularly care for academic artists in those days. I would go to galleries. I was befriended by several people. I mean being young and sort of wanting to be an artist, people would befriend you somehow or other. One of those was J. B. Neumann, who had a gallery. Another one was Alfred Stieglitz who had a gallery. They both recommended me for the Guggenheim Fellowship. Then there was George Gray Bernard who built The Cloisters and later on sold it to the Rockefellers. Those three people I would say – and they were older people, of course – they befriended me. And who else? Well there was James Earl Frazer who was one of the judges on the Guggenheim Fellowship; but I did not know him until later; I knew him not too well but later. He was a sculptor who was esteemed, so to speak. The figure of animals at The Museum of Natural History are his. I was at The Museum of Natural History the other day and saw the tigers and what not roaming around and they are covered with graffiti. I thought all the graffiti looked good.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How well did you get to know somebody like Neumann?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Very well. In fact I did a head of him many years later, in 1932. We were friends. And I used to hang around Alfred Stieglitz's gallery all the time. And of course the Brummer Gallery; I knew Mr. Brummer but not that well. And, as for artists in those days, I don't think I knew any particularly. It was only later when I came back from Europe that they started to come out of the woodwork.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because there was no meeting place here or anywhere.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. It was a very bad period for art here. The only exhibitions were those at Stieglitz; and Brummer- Brancusi, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did Neumann show that interested you?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Neumann showed those of his own taste, which were somewhat Expressionist, I'd say like, you know, some of the German Expressionists and things like that. But we were friends. He was one of my early backers. He was an enthusiast and a nice man. Of course, you know all about Stieglitz; I don't have to tell you about him

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've always heard of Brummer as being a sort of distant character. Was he --?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, you know, he was a European, you know, somewhat of an oily character. But at least he knew art. He showed antiquities. He had this gallery on top which was a beautiful gallery. I mean it's a shame that it's been turned into a place for Design Research.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. A skinny building.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It's a beautiful gallery building; it should be a gallery again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But they've changed the floors and everything.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I don't know what they've done inside.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's been changed a lot. Mr. John's Hats is in there now. Of course you saw the famous Brancusi show at the Brummer Gallery?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Since you were moving in this rather academic milieu, how could you respond to the Brancusi in such a...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Purely on my own, I would say. I mean it was not something through any conversation of introduction other than just that I happened to see it. There was no sort of direction pointing or sharing of a new viewpoint or anything like that. I didn't have anything like that. I didn't know anybody like that excepting Stieglitz and Neumann, and hey didn't – well, it's true they may have told them to go to see it. I also saw an exhibition of Quinn's Brancusi on Sixth Street. There was a gallery there then and I saw an exhibition there of some of the collection of John Quinn. He had gotten some of his things from the Armory Show, I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Yes. I wonder if that was the Quinn auction because there was the Anderson Gallery and they had a big exhibition.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I wouldn't know. I wasn't in the Anderson Gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It wasn't. It was a different one.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I know – what's his name? At the Anderson Gallery, but later on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you thought in retrospect about what it was, or how it was that Brancusi became so important? Because that seemed to be one of the keys of going to Paris.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, no, actually I didn't go to Paris to meet Brancusi. I went to Paris because I was going to India. In fact, my application to the Guggenheim was to go to India, and Paris was on the way to India. I can tell you that either my memory is very bad or that I am generally hazy about things in the past. If somebody would remind me of things, I could probably talk about things more clearly as to what I was doing in those days. But, you know, some people have a kind of penchant for that sort of thing, you know. There's a fellow in Cincinnati – do you know him? Solway -- ?

[MACHINE TURNED OFF]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You got the Guggenheim and went to Paris in 1927

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. But I did not go there with the intention of meeting Brancusi. It just happened by a kind of fluke. The second day I was in Paris, I met a man – Goldman – who knew Brancusi. So, when I mentioned that I had seen this exhibition and that I admired it, he asked, "Would you like to meet him?" I said, "Sure." So we walked over there, you see. That's how I met Brancusi. And that's how I asked him if I could come and hang around and help him a bit. He said, "Yes." So I'd spend half a day with him and the rest of the time I'd spend drawing at the Academie Collarosi, the Grande Chaumiere. I don't know how long I was with Brancusi, maybe six months, I don't really recollect exactly how long; but it was for quite a while.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But that was such a shift from the academic world, but obviously you –

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. I'm quite capable of doing that, you know. Well, first of all, I was not pleased with the academic thing anyway. In fact, that's why I applied for the Guggenheim. If you read my plan for it, it's not oriented toward the academic; I mean it's oriented to something else. I was trying to find a way to get away from the academic. Although I mean I wouldn't have been able to put it in quite those terms in those days. I really wanted to find another way. So, coming to Paris and being among all those other artists who were all in another vein... It's surprising how backward America was. People don't realize how backward America was in art. Excepting for a very few – for a small

coterie. And with my background in Indiana and with Gutzon Borglum, you can imagine that I didn't have the best kind of training to see the difference. That was to say, I felt it. I stupidly knew there was something wrong. I had an idea – it wasn't necessarily sort of ...Although no doubt there must have been conversations with Stieglitz and Neumann which disposed me that way. But not otherwise.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting. What was the activity in Brancusi's studio? Did you cut things for him?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. He showed me how to help him cut bases, for instance, out of limestone; you know, how to do this and that. I was his helper, his sort of right hand. He would give me things to do that he thought I could do. He was very kind to me. After all, I didn't ask him for anything. He didn't have to pay me. I had the Guggenheim Fellowship. I was useful. You know, he wasn't a man who was given to helping people. I mean he was rather dour, you might say. I don't think he ever had many assistants, so that it was exceptional that he even allowed me to come there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you learn things about cutting stone and surfaces and finishing...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. That's what I learned.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Craft kind of things?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, exactly. He was entirely oriented to craft. And everything he did had to go through his hands in a very vigorous way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because I know even the bronze things – the surfaces are articulated and changed.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: That's right. Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's curious – you were twenty years old and had a certain activity with an academic sculptor in New York, and all of a sudden here you were in Paris going to Collarosi and Chamuiere and working with Brancusi and I suppose sometimes moving around and meeting other people. What was Paris like for you? I mean this was a new country and a new language and a new atmosphere.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It was a fantastic experience for a young man like that. Of course, I wasn't the only one. I mean there were other Americans in Paris; Sandy Calder, for instance, who I soon met up with and made friends with. He went there under somewhat different circumstances. But his father was a strictly academic sculptor who I knew downstairs from Ruotolo's. Sandy was a freewheeling sort of cartoonist in wire, you might say. He was making those charming Circus figures floating in the air. I would say that Sandy was one of my early influences there in that his things were anti-gravity, you know, they were very light. I made a lot of friends there, surprisingly. Whereas previously I had very few friends, in France I suddenly came upon, you might say, people who either were like me or that I could accept, or who would accept me. After all, this business of any kind of separation of discrimination didn't exist there. I mean I don't say that it existed in New York either for that matter; I did not recognize anything like that. Although, as I say, when you enter the art world you are not in a world which is discriminatory, that's the last thing they think about. Therefore, I say it's only in the art world that you can be free.

PAUL CUMMINGS: ...and develop and do things. Do you think also the fact that in France the visual arts were more important generally than they were in New York in those days...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, Well, at least they gave you a certain self-importance that you wouldn't have. I mean here it just didn't mean anything. You must have interviewed other people who were there around that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes. Right.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: So you know just the general atmosphere of what it must have been like. I mean people like – well, there were certain enemies like Marin and Dove and O'Keeffe who were still young then, of course, although they were all fairly young.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Stuart Davis –

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Stuart Davis. Did you interview him, by any chance?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, Stuart Davis, for instance. When I went to Paris I had friends in the Rue Vercingetorix. Stuart Davis was one. Morris Kantor was another. And Andree Ruellan, who was a cute girl. I used to see Stuart a lot. He had exactly the point of view. He was one of those, of course, who had broken away from the Academy even while here. He had gone there as more a mature artist. I was younger, of course, you see, and therefore less developed than he. He was seven or eight years older than I. And Morris Kantor too, was a more developed artist. I made the only painting I ever made in Morris Kantor's studio.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really! I never heard about a painting of yours.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I haven't got anything to do with painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. What was it of?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, I forget.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was just a painting you made in one day.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes

[END OF SIDE 1 – TAPE 1 – SIDE 1]

[SIDE 2]

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is side 2. Anyway, let's put you in Paris a little more here. After Chaumiere and Collarosi, were there any particular people that you got criticism from? Or were you just drawing...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, the drawing classes had no criticism. We just drew what we pleased and we were our own critics in a sense. But I must say that in Paris I really sort of became a part of society in a sense. I had a letter to Jules Pascin and he introduced me around. I had a letter to Ezra Pound but I never used it. I never met him until many, many years later on. Let's see, I had a letter to Fujita, the Japanese artist. He found me a studio. And who else?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who were the letters from? Who wrote them?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, Michio Ito, the Japanese dancer, gave me the letters to Pascin, to Fujita,

and to Pound. In Paris in those days, the café was the center of meeting and so forth; it was a very easy way of meeting people and of striking up a conversation. I mean the best way in fact, the life of Paris was the life of the street. Something we don't have here. I think I was very, very fortunate. That's all I can say.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious about sculpture you made with the sphere with the quarter sliced out of it, I guess, cut out of it—that piece.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. That piece I made in 1928. By then, I had gotten a studio in Gentilly which is outside of Paris near Mont Rouge. That was the year following Brancusi where I was trying to digest his precepts and at the same time get away from him. So I made these things which were Brancusiesque.

[INTERRUPTION]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were describing the quartered *Sphere*.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. As I say, it was a period when I was trying to digest... And I felt that I had to learn cutting stone on my own, I mean aside from just being a student of Brancusi. That was my sort of effort to learn how to cut sphere. You know, it's a very definite process of cutting. For instance, you have to make a cube; and from a cube you make the corners. Otherwise you'll never get a sphere. That was the problem which I set myself to do. And did. That's all it is you see. Both of the pieces – the inside which was cut out, and the part that was cut out, I saved for a while anyway. And to the quarter section which was cut out I added a piece of metal. A photograph of that was reproduced in *Vogue* magazine with myself a year or two later. I don't remember the issue; you might be able to find it. But I wouldn't have it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, one can find out, sure. So you had really set yourself a problem to make a shape rather than an object of anything else.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. It was purely a mechanical thing. I mean it was not trying to be art; I was merely trying to learn how to make a sphere.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How to use the tools and stone and the surface and cut...

ISAMU NOGUCHI: That's right. There were other things I did which were not that pure. They were attempts to make abstract art, you might say, art. That *Sphere* was non-art in those days. Today you'd say: it's art. But in those days I considered it purely non-art. Maybe that was its virtue.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were the other kinds of objects that you made then? I mean you just couldn't keep on making spheres.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I made, on one hand, solid things, some of which were cast, some of which I cut in wood and stone. There are a couple in here I can show you but I can't show it on the machine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Okay

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Do you want to come and take a look?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sure.

[MACHINE TURNED OFF]



[MACHINE TURNED ON]

ISAMU NOGUCHI: To get away from Brancusi I started doing things in sheet metal. He wasn't using sheet metal. At least I thought that was the only way of getting away from him. So I made things in sheet metal; and then combinations of wood and metal, and things like that. I have photographs of a great many of these things. [Addressing a third person] Do you know where they are?

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing that interests me is that you were consciously reacting against Brancusi.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Well, to find one's own identity, you cannot borrow from somebody else. Also, one has to revolt against one's parents – yes? And I had that very strongly in me in any case because I hated my father. Therefore, it was easy to hate somebody; not that I hated Brancusi... I didn't hate him, but I felt obliged to be free of him. So when I came back from this country, I brought some of these things with me. I had one show of them at Eugene Schoen's. And after that show abandoned abstraction completely; I felt that it was just sort of a cul-de-sac, for me anyway. [Ms. X has brought some photographs which they are looking at.] These [photographs] are things I used to do in Gentilly. Here is the Quarter Section, for instance.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

Ms. X: Is that the Quarter Section you used?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. That's the *Quarter Section* I'm talking about. You see, so they merged from being very Brancusiesque like this – like this—things like this –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes but now this – What is this piece called? Do you remember the name of that one?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I forget

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting where a rod comes in it.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, I put rods in the work. One tries to get away from strong influence. How Brancusiesque can you get?

Ms. X: where do you think most of these are?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: God knows. I have no idea. Well, before I left Paris I did this plaster figure to get away from Brancusi, you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. To really react - -

ISAMU NOGUCHI: At that time in Paris I did another figure which the Whitney Museum owns.

PAUL CUMMINGS: there are a lot of pieces I've never even seen photographs of.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, that gives you an idea.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was part of the reaction to try different materials, to combine things?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well – if you're looking for yourself, and you haven't got the foggiest idea, isn't it natural that you try everything? I'm not capable of mentally predetermining what I am or what I'm

going to do. It's only by doing it and getting rid of it, and then doing something else and getting rid of that, and getting rid of every possibility.... I don't know when it is that the I am I – I can't tell you – maybe I'm never I – I'm not saying. But at some point, out of a number of things you might say: these things would consider myself and the rest are not. Or you might say: they're all me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. When you were making the things in the mid-1920's in Paris, did you make drawings? Or did you work directly?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, I had a lot of drawings. Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were they studies for the sculptures?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Generally, or going alongside it. I have some of those drawings left.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Even for the sheet metal pieces and the wood-and-stone combinations?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So that the images and objects developed in your mind through the drawings and then were put into ...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. [Addressing Ms. X] Do you know where those drawings are?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm still very curious about that kind of structure which looks like it's rods and –

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, you know, these – [Looking at drawings]

PAUL CUMMINGS: How are those made? Is that a drawing? It looks like a print.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. No, it's painted.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Anyway, we have you working in Paris in 1928. That was where your first one-man show was – right?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, not in Paris; it was here at a place called Eugene Schoen's. You see, I brought a number of the things back here with me, including these that you saw in here, and they were shown at Eugene Schoen's. He had a kind of furniture shop – not exactly a furniture – I don't know what he had – things like that. It was, I think, on 61st Street between Lexington and Park, around there. Eugene Schoen was his name and I had an exhibition there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that successful in any way?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. I didn't sell anything. And I needed money badly. So that's when I started doing heads again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. That's the Carnegie Hall Studio. The heads have always been useful?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Useful because I could make money and meet people.

[INTERRUPTION]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Anyway, we have you back here in the Carnegie Hall studio.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Well, I tell you the Carnegie Hall studio –

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find that?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: How did I find it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, there are some artists who have been there but usually it's dancers and musicians.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: There was a penthouse there, you know, at the top. Dorothy Maynor had it for a while. How the devil did I get in there? I must have gotten in there in the very beginning, I mean when I came back here. I needed a place and I got that. I did all my first heads there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But how did you meet people?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, by then I was a kind of social character, you see. I had become an artist. I don't know how I met people. For instance, Michio Ito I had known before. He was this Japanese dancer, very handsome. I had done a head of Michio Ito in 1926, maybe before I went to Paris. [Addressing Ms. X] Have you got a head of Michio Ito there?

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, there were people who you met who had other studios in Carnegie Hall.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I didn't know anybody in Carnegie Hall. I used to go there and listen to music but .... Here's the head of Michio Ito that I did in 1935 in my academic period.

Ms. X: 1925?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Or 1926 – I'm not sure. I really don't know. I mean it's in that time. So, as I say, I had letters to various people in Paris, from him. He had a studio in the John Murray Anderson studio building, the dance studio building. He had a dance class there, and so did Martha Graham. I think I met Martha Graham there. So subsequently, when she moved to a studio near Carnegie Hall right a few doors away on 56th Street, I used to go there and watch her dance, or rather watch the kids dancing anyway. That was my entry into the dance world that way. And various other worlds that compose New York. One meets them, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But where did somebody like Buckminster Fuller appear?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: In 1929 I used to go down to Romany Marie's in the Village. A lot of people went down there. I met him there. And one met a lot of people down there. It was sort of a transfer of the Paris café life to New York in Romany Marie's. She had a real function.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm very curious about your association with that place because so many people have mentioned it with different groups of people. It seems like each corner had its own group and once in a while somebody would go back and forth.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Sure

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who are the people that you met there generally? Or who would you see when you went there?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I mean everybody went there. For instance, Stuart Davis went there. Or

anybody you can think of in those days went there, I mean in the early days. I remember when I was doing Bucky Fuller's head in 1929, she had a place on Minetta Street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was the first one, yes.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: And Bucky got me to help him with painting the place up solar, you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Early Andy Warhol.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: And having got solar reflectors and so forth of Bucky's devastating. As a matter of fact, when I did Bucky's Head it was at Carnegie Hall. I had moved to Madison Avenue to an old laundry on top of the building. It had windows all the way around it. We painted the inside of that silver. It was practically blinding, I mean you couldn't see a thing. That's where I did a Head of Bucky Fuller.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And that's the chromium one, isn't it?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. And I did a head of Marian Morehouse who became E. E. Cumming's wife. I did one of St. John Perse. I did an awful lot of heads in those days.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious how those came about. Does one person know somebody else or recommend somebody else?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: How do you meet people? What's a city? What is life of a city? How do people come to cities? Yes? There's a kind of...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Interplay.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. A kind of electrical spark that flies from one to the next you...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why was the *Fuller Head* chrome? Was that something new for you? Was there a particular reason?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, actually chrome was such a new thing in those days; very new. I had been making bronze heads. It may have been Bucky's influence to make it chrome. But it must have been my volition because it was modeled for that. It could not have been put into chrome if it was made in some other way. Subsequently I did chrome steel castings, you know, heads, too. At least one head anyway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really!

ISAMU NOGUCHI: But Bucky's was a chrome plated bronze head.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. Did you have time to do much other work besides the heads?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. I did the heads entirely in those days; nothing else. As a matter of fact, I did it almost with the intention of not doing heads; that's it, I enjoy doing heads but doing heads was not my objective at all. I did heads as a means of earning money to have friends. I did heads of friends too – after all, Bucky and Martin and all those people I did. But, by the spring of 1930, I had made enough money to escape. And I went off back to Paris for a few months, back to Gentilly to the studio which I had kept right along. I couldn't have kept it forever, after all. I did some more work there during several months. And then in the summer I took off for China. My objective was to go to

Japan but I got into Siberia through the Siberian Railroad all the way across. We went through Manchuria, you know, Harbin, Mukden, and the got to Peking. And got stuck there. As I describe in my book, I got stuck there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now, one thing I'm curious about: somewhere along in there you got in touch with your father, or he got in touch with you.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Well, you see that's right in my book. I don't have to tell you.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, but how did he find you on the way to Peking? Where did your father come into this because there was that note about you...

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I was in Peking for eight months. I hate to go over this again because it is in my book. But a letter was sent to me from my father from my mother enclosing a letter from my father asking me not to come to Japan.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: So I didn't want to go to Japan. That is, I was very ambivalent about it; I wanted to go, and I didn't want to go. But I was already on my way, so I went to Peking, my money was running out and I might as well go back to the States but I thought I'd better stop in Japan anyway. I had no intention of seeing my father; I was just going to stop by. It was only because of newspaper reporters that I got to meet him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: From what it says in the book, it sounds as if life in Peking was very exciting.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, it's a fantastic place. Anybody who goes to Peking feels the same way, of course.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Here again is a new....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Peking is like Paris. It's a city of great antiquity, you know, a thousand years. I mean you find the Yuan walls there. It's a culture that is so embedded in the place that it has a life of its own. I don't think the Communists have destroyed it. I mean nobody can destroy it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's just there, part of earth.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Part of the people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like working there? I mean, here was a whole new situation again.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I loved it. I did drawing there. I did one sculpture which is outside there. You can see it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was that man....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: A figure. A bird....

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right, the figure. And the rest was the large drawings?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there small drawings? Other things?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Not much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There were no classes?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, no.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you meet many of the Chinese artists?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I met Chi Pai Shi, who was the most eminent – a very famous artist. He dies not too long ago at the age of ninety-six, or something like that. He was a great painter. He was already a patriarchal figure – I don't know how old he was – he must have been close to seventy then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you study using brushes and inks and things before that? Or not?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I was facile at drawing. I seem to have lost my facility but I was facile at drawing. I could do anything. It was easy for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting to see how it kind of follows a natural progression....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I tell you, I'm strong believer that people are conditioned at different stages of their life to be most effective in certain ways and that you shouldn't try to protract that effectiveness. For instance, if you are a good long distance runner at the age of twenty-two, this does not guarantee that you will be able to walk up the steps when you are fifty.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You can do one thing but not the other.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, exactly. But do that and don't try to be something else.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see. But it's awfully hard to recognize that, isn't it?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, I don't think it's difficult to recognize. You can see what you're capable of doing, I think. I mean I might say that just now I'm capable only of making monster trigasas. But, on the other hand, you could say I was probably not capable of doing it in those days.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it's change and development and evolution.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Either way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've never been to Peking, have you, since then?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. I'd love to go.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was Japan? Because you had gone to Japan and this was the first time in many years.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I went to Japan in 1931. I was there once before, My recollection of Japan is very strong from my childhood and from those years. Some people think that Japan is doing great, and some people think, you know, that it's too bad. I belong to the second class.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But how was it? Because when you left before, you were a child, and then you came back and you were – what? -- in your twenties and you had traveled and you had had a lot of experience. What was it like? Had it changed a great deal in your eyes?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Of course. I mean, again, we come back to this whole problem of not being a Japanese. I was still a foreigner. I was just as much a foreigner as I ever was; in fact, maybe even more so. The question is: am I acceptable? And you say: no, you're not. So, being in Tokyo, one of my uncles took it upon himself to befriend me against my father. He didn't approve of my father so he befriended me. He gave me a house to stay in and did all kinds of things for me – kindness directed toward me just partially but against my father mostly, I think, and for my mother, by the way. She was well-liked by other people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long did you spend in Tokyo that time?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I didn't stay very long. I did a couple of heads. I did a head of my uncle, the one who befriended me. And I did a head of the maid in the house. And not much else. I then went off to Kyoto and was there for five months working in stems from that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that an interest in finding new ways of making things? Or, again, a cultural...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I was very much clay-oriented by the time I had done all those heads after all. I did those two heads in clay in Tokyo and then I made them in ceramic later on in Kyoto. I was interested in working in ceramics. That was when I started doing ceramic work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why did you want to meet somebody who was a faker of the Tang figurines?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Because they made good fakes, you see. If I can make good fakes, presumably the skill is there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see. And the celadon....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: But, whatever it is, I mean....

PAUL CUMMINGS: I want to ask you about the thing you did. *The Wrestlers*.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, yes. That's something I did in Toyo at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that cast? Or how was it made?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: That was made in clay and then I made a casting of it and from that cast I made a mold and made it in terra cotta.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That explains it because it had the lines and things on it. I was just wondering how that was arrived at.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I did quite a few things in terra cotta then, and they were shown at John Becker's gallery in 1932, I guess.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Afterward, yes. Where does John Becker come into this? He seems to be an important person.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I knew of him in Paris on my way to Peking. He bought a stack of drawings from me. This stack of drawings was a part of his stock, so to speak. He didn't have a gallery then. He was a rich boy from Chicago. He opened a gallery on Madison Avenue and sold my drawings and other things. He had Roy and various other artists. So, when I had an exhibition at Demotte Gallery

of my drawings, I had a small show of these terra cotta things at Demotte. It was a double exhibition.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you knew Becker for a long time, didn't you?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I mean, as I say, I had this exhibition. Then I didn't see him any more until I was going to do a book – well I was asked to do a book. Kurt Wolf of Pantheon suggested that maybe John Becker could help me write it. I got into trouble then because he thought he was me by then. So I had trouble getting rid of Mr. John Becker.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Over identification.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wondered, because the name kind of weaves in and out. An obvious point – have you ever thought about all the traveling that you do. Looking at it from the outside like me, it seems that you go places and do things, not necessarily knowing that you're going to do something when you get there, or that it's an activity that seems very much a part of your normal way of living. There's so much traveling. It that...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: First of all, there's not that much traveling if you look – I mean it's only at certain periods. It's only more recently maybe that I've become sort of habituated that way. But it just goes to show that you're really inside yourself; you know. The more you travel, the less contact you have outside because you're thrown upon yourself. You come to a new place and people get along very well without you; they don't need you. So, normally speaking, you're all alone. There's no more lonely thing than being a traveler, right?

MS. K: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Coming into some new town in the middle of the night. Yes.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I mean you have to be predisposed to bear it. Otherwise, you won't do it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You did the *Playground* idea, and *The Mountain*, the first play piece.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. You see, in about 1933, having done more heads and so forth and being disguised with doing heads, one has, you know, a kind of desire to get away into another realm, another dimension. I suppose it's the same thing that makes us go to the moon; a desire to get away. Although I was popular, you might say – I knew a lot of people – I was not satisfied. Maybe, again, that's your lonely traveler who tries to walk away to some place and attempts to look at the world in a different way. I did three things then. One was called *Monument to the Plow*. The idea was a pyramid on the plains with a plow at the end. The way that came about was because Dr. Rumley had told me that the steel plow was an American invention brought about through correspondence between Franklin and Jefferson, you know, how to weld steel and iron together so that it won't break but would still be hard. Since Dr. Rumley was a manufacturer of tractors, at one time, he knew John Deere people. I thought maybe I could get them interested in doing a monument to the plot. I never did, but I did the model of the *Monument to the Plow*. I still think it's a good idea to make.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's marvelous when you think in terms of current "Earth" art and things.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Right. But I was a little ahead of the time. Then, at that time I did the *Monument*



to *Ben Franklin*. How that came about was there was the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. There's a triangle in front of the Franklin Institute. I thought of making a monument to Ben Franklin on this triangle. And devised this thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. It was just the insulators –

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Dordovich put on a show at the Franklin Institute and asked me for ideas on how to light the thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I didn't know about that.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: So I suggested making a great big disc of cloth which would be hanging there, bring the ceiling down. I think it was used. Anyway, the third thing I made was the *Play Mountain* which came about because I thought that a New York city block could be much better used as a playground if it had three dimensionality and was in the form of a rook where you could go both inside and outside and that it be an incubated place, a big play object. I had done a head of Murdock Pemberton, the critic on *The New Yorker*, in 1931 or 1932 – I'm not sure. He took me over to Robert Moses with this idea. Moses just laughed his head off and threw us out more or less. That was the beginning of my experience with the New York City Parks Department. And I have no use for them whatsoever.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They haven't improved. One thing that fascinates me about that plan is that there are so many kinds of shapes and articulations and forms in it that you seem to have pulled together from the past and then developed afterward. It seems like a pivotal point.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It's a key piece.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you arrive at it? Was it made with lots of pieces through drawings?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, it was purely instinctive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you arrive at it? Was it made with lots of pieces through drawings?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, it was purely instinctive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All the pieces went together. It's such an obvious sign, you know, from everything.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I think that occasionally you have pivotal pieces that you do and those are not preconceived, but by accident, by circumstances coming together. I did another thing then called *Musical Weather Vane*.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, with the sound.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. And, again, I wanted to break out of this constricting category.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I often wish the *Monument to the Plow* had been built. I think it's a marvelous idea.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, maybe it will be built one day who knows?

PAUL CUMMINGS: One never knows.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Actually, you know, if I pursued it – it's still not impossible. It's just a question of wanting to do it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Still, about 1933. How did the whole interest in *Playgrounds and Gardens* come about?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, it all developed, you know, one thing after another. One thing leads to another. For instance, this playground – *Play Mountain* -- was probably a precursor of other playgrounds. In fact it was. That also tried into topographical thoughts and from that to other types of topographical work was a natural transition, you see. You know, I don't know what made Mr. Olmsted make parks. I understand he was a newspaperman at first, was he not?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think so.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: So what made him change course? Who knows? It's probably that sort of thing. One thing led to another. Maybe he read a book, or, who knows.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it seems that, in recent years, you've done gardens and – I don't know – you've....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. But I don't go about trying to be a landscapist. I'm only a sculptor. I don't try to do anything which is.... I wouldn't want to do Central Park, for instance. I don't think I'm well equipped. I couldn't do it. And I don't like to do things which are too big because then I lose control of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But some of the projects have gotten to be quite large.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. But they're still within my scope. I can hold onto it. You know, in about 1956 or 1957, Detroit had asked me about using the earth which was being dug up for the expressways. They thought I would make a mountain of two out of it, or a sculpture, which was a nice idea. Mr. Blessing had been down to Machu Pichu and he thought this was a great idea. Which it was – a great idea. And I don't see why it couldn't be done. It can be done. AS a matter of fact, Max Urban, the architect who did Cape Canaveral (Cape Kennedy now), all those enormous things, he was doing in Nassau County Center and he asked me if I wouldn't like to dig a lake there and make a mountain. I said: "No, thanks," because I thought it would be beyond my scope to control as a sculptor. Maybe today I would say differently. But at that time I didn't want to get mixed up with a civic job which would rob me of my freedom to be a sculptor. I mean, the other day I was in Paris. They wanted me to do Les Halles – you know – that space....

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, where the markets were.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: There was this great big hole. They wanted me to do that. But then I pictured myself arguing with French bureaucrats and this, that, and the other.... So I said: "No, thanks." I'm very cautious about keeping myself free and not entangled with becoming, you know, a landscapist, so to speak. You know, you can become terribly involved.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. But how do you find working on these large outdoor projects like, for example, Yale for Chase Manhattan Bank Plaza?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Those were done with the office of Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill and they're very defined space. I knew just what I wanted to do and I had the support of the architect. I did not know the owners, the governmental...

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I mean in terms of doing, well, say, studio sculpture, things that you would make here, as opposed to the larger, outdoor pieces. Do you find that you alternate? Does one take all your time? Then another takes all your time?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, it's not that way.

[INTERUPTION]

PAUL CUMMINGS: We were discussing problems of moving from interior sculpture to the outside.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. I shift. You know, you feel lonely after a while and you want to have contact. I work with architects, dancers, and what not, partly for the contact, partly for the experience of working more in more space.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your whole involvement with Martha Graham and the stage sets – those things – the images and the objects and the space seem similar to the sculpture but yet quite different. Do you conceive of those sets as being specifically different? Or do they just...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. Everything I do is linked to each other. I've never done anything in, for instance, a theater set which I was not already involved with elsewhere somehow. It's all linked. Take, for instance, *Herodiade* – I built it up out of plywood. I had already been doing sculptures of that sort. You know, everything is linked together like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How influenced were you by, say, the choreography, or the music, or your discussions with her? About what she...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: She had specific requirements. For instance, she wanted to have a place to sit down, or she wanted to have a place to...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Climb on, or push against?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: She would tell me what she wanted and I would try to supply her with the required things. Plus the fact that she would tell me the story was involved with and now to evoke this emotion through these props. That was the main thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you get very involved in how she was going to use them? Or did you just present objects and props?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I knew how she was going to use them. I was delightfully surprised at how well she used them, you know, how inventive she was. I knew how she was going to use them. Of course, sometimes I was disappointed. For instance, the last thing I did for her was for *Hecuba* – it was called *Cortege of Eagles*, or something like that. I was disappointed because she asked me to make about seven masks that she wanted to use and then abandoned them and used only one or two. I was disgusted, you see. And also they did not use the props the way I wanted them to be used. I wanted them so that they could be sort of thrown around like kites. I suspect it was not so much she herself as her company wanted to use them like something to climb on and they had to be made completely differently. And I did not like that. That's the reason I haven't done a thing since then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the Union of Stagehands and Carpenters and people like that? Did they build those things? Did you build them?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, usually it would end up that I had to build them more or less because, you know, they can't be bothered.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know that's such a tight union, I was just wondering if you ever had any trouble with them over the years?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I never had any quarrel with them. I mean you make your proper obeisance and then they leave you alone. I mean, a thing like this is very much a theater thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. I'm trying to get town a little more to the thinking behind the pieces that you would do for the stage. For example, were you interested in the music? Did that have any specific...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Very much. Very much. Yes. For instance, I like to listen to music when doing things, somewhat similar music. When I did *Orpheus* for Balachine, I didn't have the music of *Orpheus* on a record, but I had *Verklarte Nacht* of Schoenberg. So I played that constantly while I did *Orpheus*. And, well, it seemed to have worked.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And Stravinsky and Schuman and all those other composers that were used. Where you had some music you would listen to it?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like the experience of designing for the stage, which, in many cases, they say is a closed-in shoe box?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I enjoyed it because to me it becomes a world. I have a little model here of a stage which I've always used, or I use one similar to it. You can see it here – would you like to see it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. I notice in the Dance Collection at the New York Public Library that you had made many things out of cardboard.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, yes. They asked me if I had anything to give them and, you see, I had nothing. I just happened to have those things left over; they were just leftover things from the time I did *Orpheus*. And, as for Martha Graham, she never wanted me to do the costumes anyway. And the sets usually got lost in the making. I'd be making them and, since I never made instructions to set designers to do it – I did it myself in a sense – whether I did it here or whether I did it in a set designer's studio, it didn't make any difference. I did them. So I didn't really need drawings. I'd just go ahead and make them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was all in your head and you just make them.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: That's right. I had little maquettes, you see, but unfortunately the maquettes always seemed to get lost.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everything gets lost in scenic studios.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Especially if you do it yourself, nobody is responsible and, therefore, you lose it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you always made the maquettes for the various sets so there would be

made some pre-visual...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I read that, when you did the *King Lear*, you never got to see that performance ever.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. I never saw it. Which was a pity. What happened was I went to England to do it. The first performance was going to be – I forget – a month away. I couldn't hang around England, and I couldn't go back again, I mean it was too expensive. So I just didn't see it all again, I mean it was too expensive. So I just didn't see it at all. And, you know, these things – after you do the sets it takes time – the actors, you know....

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find working in the English theater – in terms of the actors and the sets...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It was marvelous. The British are natural-born sort of linguistics. They love the English language; they really speak English. Here we just use it as a tool. Over there it's an art. They're absolutely great.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did they react? I remember there was an awful lot of furor about the costumes.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: They reacted very strongly, very positively, and you know, most of them against me. Of course, there were a few like Bryan Robertson who way here who was of course pro-me. But then he was pro all kinds of people with his... You know he ran the Whitechapel Gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Well, what about the actors, though. I mean these were not...they looked as if they were not easy costumes to wear.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: They were very difficult costumes to wear. Gielgud hated it; he hated it. But the last times I saw him in London – oh – maybe last spring – I saw him in a restaurant where I was having supper. He was at another table. He came over and said, "You know, I'd like to work with you again." He also said that Peter Brook said that he got everything from me. I mean he said so; I don't know whether... He said so to please me probably.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One of the things that's interesting – and I ran across some correspondence that you had with the Federal Arts Program – the WPA – in the late 1930's – that seems to have been a very difficult experience.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, you know I tried to get on the WPA. And I was always turned down. Then I did a head of the Audrey McMahan who was head of the WPA in New York. And that sort of clinched my disfavor among them because I think she hated this head. I mean she was sort of ugly as a mud fence and I guess I made her even more so. I got so annoyed that, when Harry Hopkins came to visit me once with a gal, I mentioned it to him. He said, "Oh, we'll fix that right away." He called his office and said, "Get Holger Cahill here right away" (to my studio). And Eddie (Holger) Cahill came running. You know him, don't you?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I knew him yes.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: He came running and he said, "Of course we can get you on the WPA" – he was in charge of the WPA Art Section in Washington. But Audrey McMahan was in charge here in New

York. He said, "We'll get you on. Where would you like to go? How about Seattle? How about Chicago? How about anywhere? We'll get you on the WPA anywhere but in New York."

PAUL CUMMINGS: I always thought that was very curious because everybody was on it.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. That was what annoyed me so. You see, I wanted to do big things. You know, you get so fed up doing heads. I was trying to get out of doing them. I'd enter all sorts of competitions. I didn't win any at that time. So in disgust I took off and went to Mexico and did this thing down there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was interesting because you never had made anything like that before that I recall.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It was what you call social protest against the WPA.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. How was Mexico to work in?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It was marvelous. They were open to art, open to artists' propaganda, you know, there was not all this Mexico for the Mexicans." Or all this national feeling. Where I get along well is where people haven't got this kind of...

[MACHINE TURNED OFF]

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious about the *Wall of Mexico*. Did you submit designs and everything for that? Or was that a ...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I made a little drawing, a painting, which I submitted to Diego Rivera who was in charge. He approved it. I agreed to do it for the same price that the muralists were getting, so much a square meter. Which wasn't very much, I forget what it was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Very little. Eighty-eight dollars or something.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: That was the whole thing; I got eighty-eight dollars for the whole thing. It was a little more than that but I never got it. In other words, it was to have been twice as much, which I never got. But it was a great pleasure doing it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It is still existing there?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, yes, yes. When I was down in Mexico last, which was three years ago. It was in fine condition.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How is it to see something like that thirty years later?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Marvelous! It's marvelous experience really. It brings back that whole period, and the people who were my friends then, many of them dead. Diego Rivera is dead; and his wife. And Miguel Covarrubias. And all my friends then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's the only one like that that you've ever done?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: In cement like that, yes. Excepting, you know, there was a hangover from that, I mean the Plague on Radio City is a kind of hangover of that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes. It's the same large background.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Because, after coming back here from Mexico, there was this competition and I submitted one which was quite different from Mexico. But the second one I did just as a hangover from Mexico City and did a somewhat similar sort of thing and won the competition. And, whereas it might have been appropriate in cement, I don't know whether it might have been appropriate in stainless steel.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I always have great arguments with people who come to Rockefeller Center and say, "Where's Noguchi?"

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I know

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's fascinating how it looks still alive.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It's nothing alive. And the steel looks great. I mean nothing stands up like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. That's terrific. After Mexico, you came back to New York. What about the Artists Union?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, first of all, you see, it's a long question by the way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: There was the question of the artists' relation to society then and how artists felt sort of as a people apart. You see, that's why I felt at home being an artist. We were all pariahs to start with. And I, being a pariah, was among pariahs and was not longer a pariah. So we all supported every cause which was against the Establishment – like the Spanish Civil War, like the union thing so long as the unions were less strong than the people they were bucking. Now we're no longer interested in unions because it's turned the other way around. But, in those days, the unions needed our support and we supported the unions and we did all kinds of things in support of causes. I think the chief employment of artists in those days was sort of social rebellion and supporting this cause and that cause. They're still called upon to do these things but I think artists do it very halfheartedly now. I mean at least I do; in those days I was committed to it. But no more because it's a kind of hangover.

[END OF SIDE 2 - TAPE 1 – SIDE 2]

TAPE-RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH ISAMU NOGUCHI  
IN HIS APARTMENT IN NEW YORK CITY  
DATE: DECEMBER 10, 1973  
INTERVIEWER: PAUL CUMMINGS

[SIDE 3]

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is Side 3 – December 10, 1973 – Paul Cummings talking to Isamu Noguchi in his apartment. It seems that, in the late 1930's, you had a particularly strong reaction to the Spanish Civil War, as did many artists and literary people. I was wondering what your feelings about that are.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I think that all artists, or most artists, had a strong sense of belonging to the Loyalists cause. I mean there were very few that took the opposite side. I meant it all came from all our experience with the Depression and so forth that we associated ourselves with the more liberal element. You know, we had hopes of a better world. I suppose we also had a strong sense of guilt. I

mean I can't imagine what else could have been in the back of our heads excepting to feel that we should be doing something for the loyalists. At that time, too, there was a considerable number of refugees coming from Europe. There was this group called the Neue Belginum. Kurt Weill and others were deeply involved in trying to get people out of Germany and Europe. Not that they had a premonition of the was that was to come, but, in any case, that Hitler was there and we were all concerned to try and help the people from Europe in Europe. And, of course our own position in those days was strongly pro-labor. I mean we were very much involved with the labor movement with – what's his name Hillman, and Joe Curran, and all those people were not exactly heroes but they were on the right side, so to speak. And so was Vice-president Henry Wallace. Not that our heroes were such great guns but we had to be on that side. I think it took the was really, and Stalin and his coming to terms with Hitler, to really sort of make us diverge from that very fixed and sort of convinced point of view. We just were not going to be convinced otherwise.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you as an artist ever feel any pressure by the Trotskyite group or the various Left political organizations that were around and kind of filtering into American...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, yes. There's no question but that there was an effort by various factions to solicit out participation. I remember I was asked if I would go to Germany and do a head of Hitler by one of the Communist groups. As far as that was concerned, I was approached by the Japanese, too, to come to Japan or make a statement and so forth. So there were all kinds of pressures for people's sympathy and so forth. I avoided any kind of direct involvement. I was never a member of the Communist Party of anything like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: People like Stuart Davis were very involved....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Even Stuart I'm sure didn't belong but he was sympathetic, he had to be. I mean it's not that it was particularly in his character to be, you know, political; I don't think he was a very political person. And yet you had to push your side. There were very few people who didn't take a side. As a matter of fact, I think Gorky was one of those who didn't take sides.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, he was always sort of in the middle, wasn't he?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, it wasn't a question of being in the middle; it was just that he refused to take sides. I remember when Hitler invaded Poland I was with Gorky and DeHirsh Margules. That night we were listening to the Radio, as a matter of fact. We made several paintings together at hat time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. It was interesting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you meet Gorky? You knew him rather well, didn't you?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, I knew him for a long, long while. Oh, I don't know when I met him. It was during the time when he was on the WPA and I wasn't. I must have been him around in the galleries and knew him and talked to him and so forth. And then I became quite intimate with him just before World War II, in the spring of 1941. I had a station wagon and I drove him out West.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was that like? That must have taken days and days.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Well, I mean it was almost an epic trek.



PAUL CUMMINGS: During all that time did you talk about art, or the country, or...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. We argued all the way across. He insisted upon seeing a little old lady in the clouds. I'd say: no, that's just a cloud. I mean it was one of those interminable arguments. He was very, very well-versed in art history. I mean he was a great teacher, among other things, for me anyway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way was he a teacher? Other people have said this about him who you really couldn't expect to say it, and I'm very curious what it meant.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, his enthusiasm went over so that he had to participate with other people. Which I suppose is what makes a great teacher: I mean his own discovery being sort of shared. I mean, after all, people who are developing receive new viewpoints, they discover the world, or they "discover" something that had already been discovered. Let's say they discover a painter. The painter has been discovered long before. But then they want to share. That's the best kind of teaching really, because you're not off the griddle. You have really discovered something, you see. Here, I just cut this piece out of [he gets a book, there's the sound of pages turning] to find a cancer cure, it says here, for instance [reading]: "Among the remarkable new discoveries, "he explained," ... are the hardy microbes that live happily in nuclear reactors, virus that beat Buckminster Fuller's idea by several million years." I mean these ideas have been kicking around for a long while. But, suddenly, someone perceives them again all of a sudden, sees them from a slightly different angle, you know. I know a lot of mathematicians say about Bucky, "Well, it's not nothing new. We know it all the time." However he maybe talked about it a little more than somebody else. He kept on pointing at it, you know. So it becomes important enough that it's known – it probably was known – maybe there's nothing new. In fact, there's nothing new under the sun anyway. But it's a continuous discovery by an artist. I think that an awful lot of art today is learned by a sudden discovery and people pointing and saying, "Look! Look at that! That's a cube. Have you ever seen a cube?" That's sort of the thing, you know. And I think an awful lot of it is a terrible bore because I mean, yes, all right, you don't have to tell me once more. And especially I find that true of young artists today. I mean they just discover something and do it a little worse that it was done not very long ago, let's say, not more than twenty or thirty years ago. Suddenly a lot of traditional and ordinary knowledge is dished up anew. They say, "My God! Look, you can cut a piece of wood with a chisel!" I mean, so what? But, on the other hand, I do respect a person who transmits his discoveries. They're getting sort of worn out by now. But I mean a man like Gorky, you know, discovers Ingres and he wants to convey this discovery of his about Ingres. Before that he was discovering Picasso and Miro. For the longest while, he was simply discovering things that had already been discovered and that everybody already knew about, but he was conveying it to us. And it was really only after the war started and people like Andre Breton came here that Gorky became free to discover directly from nature than through other people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you get to know Breton during that period?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. I came to know Breton through certain Surrealists like, for instance, David Hare. They were all here. And Duchamp. In fact, I introduced Breton to Gorky because I thought they could do something. And it did indeed. It worked exactly as I thought.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's great. What about somebody like Duchamp who had been there on and off for many, many years? Did you know him?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I knew him from the time when he first...He was probably here for the Armory Show, was he not? I didn't know him then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was probably after that.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I first met him at Brummer's. He was there with the Brancusi exhibition. I think it was in 1926. He was there in Brummer's office sort of looking after the exhibition.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He had some strange arrangement with Brancusi, didn't he?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, apparently. I don't know what it was. I understand he was sort of involved in trying to prove some mathematical relationships, that is, that what Brancusi may have done instinctively in the Bird actually certain...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, like a graph.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: A graph – a certain mathematical flow of relationships which he was studying. Which I'm sure could be worked out. I mean, like people who work out airplane wing sections and so forth, they don't do it by guess, they do it by mathematics. But apparently it was originally done by an artist. That is to say, the Wright Brothers I think were artists, were they not? I'm not quite sure. But I have been told that artists have the capacity to find things instinctively. I remember that Sterling Burgess, who designed the Enterprise, the American Cup defender, was a friend of Buckey's and they built a boat together during the 1930's. He was a sort of an artist. He said that as an artist, he was able to make proper shapes. Of course nowadays it's all done by computers. But I mean probably before computers existed it was too tedious to try to do it by mathematics so they did it by eye, so to speak.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fascinating.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: For instance, they had a shop up in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Because of the Depression, everything was up for grabs so they got an old factory there and built their boat there. And Buckey did his Dymaxion Car there. I did the plaster model for him. It was quite early it must have been around 1933 maybe. I would say I made the plaster cast during that time. I think it was before I went to Mexico. I'm not quite sure. But I remember doing it on 75th Street where I had a studio in a shop. Next door to me was Anton Baski, a plaster caster. And I remember doing them there. I was installed there actually from 1932 to 1933. Either I did it then or went back and did it. It was quite early.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were they made from drawings? Or what was the evolution of the casting?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well I believe he had some drawings and then we talked about it. That's how we did it, I think. Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And then you just made the images, the shapes. To kind of go back to Gorky and your relationship with him, there was another fellow around, John Graham.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you know him? Was he part of the milieu you were in?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Sure. Oh, very much. He was a sort of, you know eminence gris. He was older, of course. He had a reputation for being sort of a real connoisseur of African antiques and things like that. I mean I used to see him independently. I may or may not have seen him with Gorky. But, you know, there were all these émigrés, real or fake. Nobody ever knew, or really cared very much. In Paris, for instance, there were all these White Russians. They were all princes at least. I remember

the Grand Duke – what was his name? I mean they were all grand dukes and so forth. We used to go to the Russian Christmas as the Hotel Lutetia – I think it's in January, but I'm not sure – the Greek Orthodox Christmas, I used to go with various people. I remember I used to go with Zatkine. You know, he would take me. So that one more Russian prince didn't mean that much, you see. So John Graham was an officer in the Czar's army, as we understood it. I mean I never went there, but I understood that on Tuesdays he would get all dressed up in his officer's uniform and go down to the meetings of the Russian officers' corps. We understood he was quite an important officer, not just an ordinary officer, and probably a prince, you know. He had the military bearing of a prince. Of course, with Gorky, there was a kind of embarrassment there on his part I presume, because he was really – his name was not Gorky and he was not a Russian. So that I mean for him to meet a real specimen might have been a little bit embarrassing, you know, so that I never really pushed that angle as to whether Graham really was or was not a Russian prince. So apparently it was quite deliberate on Gorky's part to be sort of misunderstood a bit. It wasn't beyond him to put on a bit of mystification. He probably thought it was a good thing. I think he enjoyed it. He probably thought it was good business, you see. In fact, probably that's why... You know, I never found out until long after his death that... Well, I mean I went to his funeral, of course, and then met his sister and so on and discovered that he had an Armenian name. And then I met various other relatives of his, I believe one was a son of his sister who wanted to write a book; he came by and interviewed me at one point. I think it was he who told me that Gorky's father lived near Chicago. It was a complete surprise to me that he had kept him hidden. I mean he had never let on that he had any relatives in this country at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, he did have at one point.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: But he had his father and sister and other relatives and he had them carefully.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He really created a mysterious life for himself.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: He created this character Gorky. And he had the physique and the posture to carry it out and get away with it. Excepting he was always, in a sense, playing a part, a role. And you felt that he was playing a role.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you find that in private discussions with him that there was this kind of role-playing going on? Of did it sometimes drop away?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I think that he was very keen on being accepted as an artist. And when Breton sort of took him up and helped him and he became apart of Julien Levy's Gallery, that was, for him, arriving. It was very important for him to arrive. You should interview Julien Levy if you are interested in Gorky. Because Julien Levy... I mean everybody in New York, in a sense, plays a role. They are all sort of not exactly what they appear to be. I mean in fact they are all making their own roles. For instance, Julien Levy is the son of a real estate man. But he had ambitions to be an intellectual among the artists. So, although he had money, that wasn't his chief aspiration, to be just the son of a rich man. Now he lives in the country and....

PAUL CUMMINGS: In Connecticut, yes. One of the things that has sort of struck me in reading about the 1930's and, say, up to the time of the beginning of the war, was that the art world seemed very small – in the number of people, you know. It wasn't as immense as it is today, there weren't as many galleries or as many artists, the museums were not as ambitious. There was the Whitney Museum downtown. The Museum of Modern Art was not too concerned with what Americans were doing. Do you think that that kept the artists together in a way?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, first of all, there was no such financial remuneration to being an artist so that there wasn't this sort of enticement for all kinds of people to get into the act, so to speak. And the key to what would go and what wouldn't go hadn't been supplied yet. So that it wasn't that easy to be an artist. Now all you need is a little gimmick and you're in.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think it's better for it to be more difficult than as easy as it appears to be today.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I would think so, yes. I would think so for the reason that I think art is nurtured in a certain isolation anyway. When people are isolated or they are alone rather they tend to become more and more peculiarly themselves. Whereas not I think the peculiarities are more fashionable than original.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So that you mean the individual living and working by himself generally is more imaginative and productive than a public person?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I think so, yes. I think a public person is already – I mean unless he's just a charlatan or an actor becomes constrained by that rather than freed. But, you know, this business of success, I mean I have a deep sort of suspicion about it. Now it's easy to be successful and therefore....

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of suspicion do you have about it? In terms of what?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I think success like what we were just talking about – the easy possibility of being an artist today – is it that success seems to fix a person, or tends to fix a person. It may free him to a certain extent, but it also tends to make him continue in that success; he just doesn't want to have it one day and give it up the next.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean his ability to take chances...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Yes. He doesn't want to blur his image once it's been established so that he tends to be less experimental and creative, I think. I think there's a tendency for success to inhibit people. I don't know – some people it doesn't seem to. For example, Picasso is an example of where success doesn't stop him one bit. I mean he goes on and on. The bigger the success the better he was. But I think a lot of people get a style and they stick to it. That's their style and they're not going to throw it away.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But don't you think it's possible for an evolution of style once you've formed it?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, in Picasso's case, he did. Even in Matisse's. But I think, in the case of Americans, it just doesn't seem to work that way. I mean it hasn't. In fact it all seems to end up in their untimely death through their not being able to surmount the success; that is to say, that having gotten success, it's so dreadfully difficult for them to free themselves from it. I mean I would attribute the death of all those artists from Pollock to Gorky to Kline to Rothko, all of them – it may have been a heart condition or something else – but essentially I mean – in Gorky's case, let's say it was aggravated by emotional distress and family situation – but success which demanded of him to have a certain stance and it, for one reason or other he felt he was unable to deliver, it was just too bad.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think that is?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I mean I attribute it to that. Maybe psychologists will tell you something else. But

it's remarkable how many of my friends have died violently at the peak of their success; always at the peak.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's fascinating because Motherwell said a very similar thing about the very same people, many of whom were friends of his.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. It's true.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's very strange. It's like you always have to strive.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. And those who do not die are under a kind of pall. I mean they're already like dead people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way though, because, you know, so many have gone on to...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, ask Motherwell.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, what's your point of view, though?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I don't consider myself a dead person, by the way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Good.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: But I'm not speaking of Motherwell.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One of the things I have found to be curious – and I'm curious from your point of view, it seems that, during the end of the 1930's and early 1940's, the American artists was reading *Cahiers d'Art* and listening to Breton and still looking very, very much to Europe, but it seems there was some tendency to also become individualistic in a way and kind of break the bonds with Europe. Is that an accurate generality...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I tell you, during the WPA days, there was an effort to be different from Europe in a nationalistic sense and to be "American scene," "Hudson River scene," and this and that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Folk image and all that stuff.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: And folk image. To be American meant to be non-experimental, non- nothing at all. I mean just being.... I imagine Stuart Davis was about as much as you could get....Or Sandy Calder, you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But Calder was very flamboyant compared to, say, Reginald Marsh.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I mean people would say they were Parisian, you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He could fit one way or another.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, both ways, of course. And, you know, people in Europe who had an idea of what it was like to be American, like Leger, for instance. He thought to be American was to be like a machine, that is, the people became like machines. And so he came over here and he was rather non-plussed. I remember in 1941, that summer before the war had broken out, I did a head of Leger, He was in Hollywood and what he was doing in California in those days was to paint his parrots, his birds. He wasn't painting any machinery or bicycles and so forth. He was painting parrots. Of course

he was already then quite socially conscious, I mean he was giving interviews to Humanite.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One of the things that I find interesting is that you continued to produce heads of people for years and years, but then also you designed that great playground.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: You know, the question of making abstract art such as.... You know, I had a period of it in Europe because of Brancusi. But it didn't last very long because I suppose – it must have had something to do with my American background perhaps, you know, rather skeptical and tendency to think of it in a Puritanical way, feeling a little indulgence. The truth of the matter was much more that it was a personal idiosyncrasy; was, let's say, looked upon with a certain attitude of skepticism on my part. I'm not saying that it was good; I think it's bad. But this skepticism – which pervaded the atmosphere – after all there weren't many people who could override it – my only way of overriding it was to find a reason for doing it other than that of art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It had to have a purpose. So that in 1993, I think, it was when I did *Play Mountain*, and *Monument to the Plow*, and those things, it had a purpose. It was not art and that's what gave me the right to do it, in a sense. It's this bad upbringing, and Puritan attitude, intolerant attitude toward art. But I think that sort of thing is what underlies the anti-art aspect of American art today. It may very well come from that sort of thing. I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's true because there are a number of artists who make art but don't want to be called artists.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Not only that but artists who are selling art as art which is not art. There are an awful lot of people whose art is so obviously not intended to please in any way as art but as some kind on – you know, everything from diagrams to craft and to anything at all, but they just say it's not art. And them in a sense, it's excusable. Otherwise it's inexcusable; it's a stylistic sort of play and it's not countenanced.

PAUL CUMMINGS: During the 1930's, after you came back and you were around New York, you had the heads and abstractions and various things going back and forth. How was that to maintain as an activity? I mean doing two things.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I must be very frank, you know – and I don't know whether this sort of take is ever published, I mean I don't think it is; it's a private archive...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: ...so that in case one wants to find out the secret facts behind the facts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I mean, you know, I personally had this moment of liberation in Paris for two years with the Guggenheim Fellowship. It was like a trip to Paradise and then coming back to the cold world, and one doesn't suspect it to be transferable. And the one person who apparently was able to transfer it as an American was Sandy Calder. And, frankly speaking, I resented him very much because I was very poor, I had to make a living. Sandy somehow, whether he was or wasn't rich, was able to get away with it. So I didn't like him at all. I knew his father, Sterling Calder – he had a studio underneath me on 14th Street where I first started. And I knew his mother. We were very friendly. In fact, I was very friendly with Sandy. So I consider myself to be – well, an American with the problems

of being an American. And of course in 1929 I had met Buck Fuller and he is a typical American. He has exactly the same kind of hang ups in his attitude toward art which I am not mentioning.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It's not different. You know, not outstanding American really sorry of went in for abstraction per se as being really excusable.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It was one of those European indulgence that we didn't equate with real invention or real progress or real anything. And therefore everything I did outside of just doing heads for a long time had to have a very definite excuse. I mean my sort of leftist leanings precluded my doing anything other than that. For instance, I used to think of Sandy as terrible reactionary. It turns out now that he's more liberal than I am. But, in those days, I used to think of him, and I think quite correctly, that he was just a plaything of the rich and I was on the side of the downtrodden.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He's always been able to attract rich people for some reason.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. But, you see, I associated myself with the laboring class; with the less fortunate people. And probably it comes from many different sources but I suppose my background of not belonging, as I mentioned in the other tape, had something to do with it. My mother, for instance, not being of the wealthy or fortunate ones. And I think that children, young people, tend to maybe over associate in that sense; I mean that is to say, they feel very strongly injustice in the world and want to be on the side of fixing it up a bit. That's why they have all these demonstrations and what not. Otherwise, they don't feel they want to be here very much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It gets more difficult as they grow up, too.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your mother lived in New York for a long time, did she not?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: She was born here. And then she came here in 1922, I think it was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: 1922 or 1923, somewhere in there.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: She died in 1933, I think. So that she was here those years –about ten. She lived in the Village. She was not well off. She had difficulty making a living. So I felt guilty about that and I very strongly sort of associated myself with less fortunate people. I still do, by the way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way? How do you mean that?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I would say that, for instance, the fact that I occupy myself as much as I do with art which in a sense is not definable as art as such, as, for example, these lanterns even, or playgrounds, or parks for people and so forth. There's still a streak of suspicion and ill will toward, you know, calling something art and thereby getting away with it, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you get into designing the lanterns and the furniture and all of these things?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: That's part of that kind of motivation. And also I mean it's an understandable

field. You know the American idea – every American in a sense is an inventor. After all, that's how America was made, by invention – a screwdriver, a gear, of what have you. Recently I did a nozzle for the fountain I'm doing in Detroit. It's a real invention. I mean it's a special type of new nozzle. That sort of thing pleases me a lot. And of course, Bucky – it's the inventor, the American inventor. We admire people like Alexander Graham Bell. Those are the real artists of America really. These people who come in and weave a pattern of so-called art, in a sense, we look upon them with a certain suspicion. We expect them to look upon themselves with a certain suspicion. In fact, we think that they do, and that's why they kill themselves.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I don't know, that's a little romantic. You've known Buckminster Fuller for a long, long time. How had he been involved with your life? Have you done various projects of things with him?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: He's been one of my greatest teachers, you see. But, as I say, a man who accepts success has to more or less accede to the myth. And he has acceded to the myth. And so have lots of other people. I mean I don't blame him; it's all right. But it's based upon a fundamental American attitude I think of making do in an inimical world by a new and better way of making a mousetrap or finding a new way of living. I think Bucky it in that line of inventors, you know, from the Wright Brothers who invented the airplane, to Benjamin Franklin who made a stove or whatever. One of the things I did in 1933, by the way, was *Monument to Ben Franklin* which had lightening with a kite up above and a key below. Well, you say you could call it an abstraction, but to be it's a very practical demonstration of the story of Benjamin Franklin and electricity. So in a sense I'm very American.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's true. I mean I don't think one could look at your work and see it in other cultures.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: A lot of people think I'm Japanese.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's back and forth.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. All right. But even these lanterns are very American, I mean they couldn't have been made by a Japanese.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, that shape I would never think of as coming out of Japan, for example.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: You wouldn't think of it otherwise, wither.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You should think of it here though.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, all right. But I mean it's ;ole you know, Rausche have a speech in Japan last year which I read of in the newspaper. You know, people worry about Japanese culture. He said, "Don't worry about Japanese culture. It's doing fine in America."

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's marvelous. Over the years, one of the things that has become apparent is your interest in a great variety if materials to use: bronze, clay, paper, wood, marble, aluminum, just sort of an endless use. Have you looked for things?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. It's just a question of immediate convenience and what you can do with the material. I think that materials limit you to that which you can do best with. When you run out of the means that that material allows you and you want an effect that that material will not allow you , then you have to go on to other materials. As a sculptor, I, always trying to expand the possibility of



sculpture and therefore to be tied to one material just merely limits me. It's like being tied to a style or tied to a certain technique. Then you're limited. You can't do more.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So sculpture for you then encompasses anything and everything?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. I mean, for instance, if Rothko hadn't been tied to his squeegee brush, or whatever he happened to use, he could have had a new life, you now, to be born again, to be unsuccessful, to start all over again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's a fascinating point. One thing that interests me; some years ago you did the exhibition with balsa wood pieces and then they turned up being cast in bronze.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I couldn't sell the balsa wood.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? People didn't believe in it as a material.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, that's true. Similarly with the aluminum pieces. You know I tried to show them at the Stable Gallery in 1958 and Mrs. Ward didn't want them because she said they were too commercial-looking, that they wouldn't sell. The sheet ones. So I went ahead and finished up the marble pieces and had a marble show and didn't have the aluminum show until two years later in 1961 at the Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery. In the meantime I had gone to Knoedler too. They had agreed to put them on. Then they backed out. So it was on the third try that I got them shown. And now, of course, everybody does aluminum things. But it takes time. I mean it's no good to be ahead of time. In fact, most of my sculptures today I don't show until – I wait as long as possible. The tendency, of course, it to show things as soon as possible before somebody else does a similar thing. But doing the stone things, it takes so long to do one anyway that you can't beat them so it ends up by somebody saying, "Oh, well, he's just copying somebody else." Like what's his name? The other day I saw his things at Knoedler's right now....

PAUL CUMMINGS: Clitski?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Clitski, yes. Well, I've been doing those kinds of things for years. But he shows them and, therefore, when I show mine, they'll say, "Well, he's influenced by Clitski." But, you know, these things....all the time...I mean, for instance, today I was over at Edison Price and he was explaining to me about what's his name? – Barney. Well, he had a show downtown apparently and he was explaining to me what it was. He said it was those sort of profiles, you see, fifty feet long like this, metal, you see, and behind it there was a little object that would come up. I said, "Well, that's a stage ground row." I've done those things before. I remember I did one with some of those in a thing called The Seasons with John Cage. I don't know if you know it. I had something that looked like a plaster cast of a foot that would come up behind. But, you know, things which were used in a different context, let's say, a stage or something, are suddenly put into a gallery as something new.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think that is? Because it's taken out of its usual context and put in another one?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, for one thing. And people forget very quickly. So they think it's something new.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's something I read that you had said – I don't know whether it's an accurate quote or not – in the interview you said that you related the gardens that you designed to stage sets.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. But, you see, the thing is that the tendency has been – for very good and economic reasons – to call art which was not called art before by a different name. There categories, these names, have become sort of blurred, and purposely blurred, and it sells better as art, let's say, with a fancy pride, you understand. I have a tendency to do exactly the opposite way: don't call it art, call it something else; let's say, call it a chair; even if it doesn't function very well as a chair, it's a chair, instead of calling it a hill. I mean it's part of my sort of orneriness to not want to ride on the coattails of art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think a lot of people have picked up on Duchamp's idea of selecting something and calling it art as an excuse?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Sure, sure, sure. Yes. I mean, for instance, the man who made the bicycle was a genius. The man who put the bicycle wheel on a pedestal is another kind of genius; I mean he recognizes that the man in inventing the bicycle had neglected to consider that it might be a work of art, too, you see. Especially if you make it so that it's useless. So long as it's useful, it's lacking in that quality of art. When it becomes useless, it becomes art. For instance, this thing here, this lantern – this akari. It is didn't have an electrical light bulb in it, it could be mistaken for art. The very fact that you have an electric light bulb in it removes it from the realm of art, I believe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So, in other words, if you took the light out of it...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. If I took the wire off, it would enhance the value. I'm not kidding.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's marvelous. So there are thousands of people who have lanterns who almost have a work of art.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When the light bulb burns out, it's a work of art?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Exactly. I just take away that cord, you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. And there it is on a pedestal.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's very sly then. It's marvelous though. Anyway, we talked a little bit before about the Associated Press Building project in Rockefeller Center. Now that was the largest stainless steel piece of sculpture made up to that point, was it not?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

PAUL CUMMING: Why was stainless steel chose? Because it was outside? Or for practical reasons?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I tell you. I've always had a sort of suspicion about bronze because things which are made in bronze immediately become art. In fact, doing my balsa things in bronze made them into art and therefore salable. You understand that as balsa wood they were not yet art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's marvelous.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Bronze smells of art. It's an official art material. Therefore I had this kind of

distaste for bronze. Although, mind you, I used to do a lot of bronze heads. I'm not saying that I haven't touched it. I have. But nevertheless, given the choice,...At that time, I happened to know a man named H.H. Harris who had a thing called the General Alloys Company in Boston. Casting that in bronze was to cost I think about \$25,000, which was a lot of money in those days. And Harris came up with a figure of \$20,000 to do it in stainless steel. I talked to him about it. Somehow or other it was accepted but the people there to do it in stainless steel. And it was done in stainless steel. Of course, all I ever got out of it was my prize money -- \$1,000 plus, I think, another \$1,000 for a years work in enlarging it and then casting it and then grinding it. I didn't get anything out of it extra for doing it in stainless steel, mind you. What I did, I did it in stainless steel and did the welding -- it wasn't bolts -- and the grinding. That was an awful lot of work. It's in nine pieces and each piece is bigger than anything that had ever been done before. It's a half-inch thick. There are nine tons of stainless steel there. It's worth a fortune now but we don't tell anybody.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's always intrigued me how well it looks in those buildings in terms of how it sort of keeps up to date. And I think if it were in bronze and had gotten some patina or something, it would kind of blend in.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's fascinating.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Anyway, it was an experiment. Nobody has ever done anything like that again, I don't think. I don't think anybody would be so foolish. You know, Brancusi wanted to have his *Endless Column* cast in stainless steel but they never could figure out how to get somebody to pay for it. So it was never done. It would have been fabulous. I think it still should be done.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Like the ones of the wood.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. It could be done.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One of the things I have read about, of course, in your book and elsewhere is the whole business of the war and what happened to you in Arizona and your connection with John Collier. Where did John Collier come into the bit? Did you know him? Or was he just a man around?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: As I say, my whole social conscious attitude -- by social conscious we mean left leaning attitude -- all came to a head with the war because of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. As I say, I went to California with Gorky in the spring and remained there during the summer. When Pearl Harbor came, I was still in California. In fact, I was on my way to San Diego to pick up some onyx, or to look at some onyx there. I happened to turn on the radio and that's where I heard it. My immediate reaction was: Oh my God, I'm Japanese, or I'm Nisei at least; I'd better get in touch with other Nisei and see what's going to happen. So when I got back to Los Angeles, I went to the Japanese-American Citizens League place and introduced myself and became acquainted with them. I felt I ought to be able to help in some way. Actually, I mean I was one of the older Nisei, as Nisei go, because they were all rather young, at that time anyway. I felt that I ought to be contributing something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Can I turn this over?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

[END OF SIDE 3 -- TAPE 2 -- SIDE 1]

[SIDE 4]

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is Side 4

ISAMU NOGUCHI: So I would go to these meetings. And that sort of started a whole sort of effort on my part to – the attitude of most left leaning people in those days was to try to make something good out of a bad situation. One tried at first to sort of fluff over the Hitler-Stalin affair and say, you know, that one should fight for the good causes and forget about the bad things. So that my intention at that time was to try to find something good that might be done, whatever good could come of it. For instance, I organized a group in Los Angeles and San Francisco called the Nisei Artists and Writers Mobilization for Democracy, a very fine title, you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Marvelous, yes.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: This group, which I was the investigator of, met in the studio of Jeanne Reynal who was a friend of mine who at that time was left leaning. She let me use her studio so we had these meetings. Our intention was that we would counteract the bad press which we saw coming, to do whatever – pull all the strings we could to stop the hysteria that was developing, to do all that sort of thing. That was our intention.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I have the papers of that time. It's very interesting to read. The whole thing kept on going from Pearl Harbor all the way until the evacuation order, which came about in March, I think. We had to get out of California. Everybody had to get out, including me; I had to get out. I abandoned my car in Los Angeles and flew out from San Francisco. I came to New York. The place was more or less deserted of artists. They had all disappeared. There was nothing to do, I mean. So I went to Washington and went around inquiring if there was anything I could do. I went to the State Department. They said: "No, go away; there's nothing you can do; you're the last person we want to see; you're a half-breed; what do we want with you?" And I knew people in the O.S.S. They said to me: "What do you want to do? Get involved with killing your brother?" I said, "I guess not. Good-bye." Finally, I happened to bump into John Collier. He was with the American Indian Service. He said, "come on over and let's talk about it." He suggested that I go out to one of the camps which was going to be under his direction because it was going to be on American Indian land in the Mojave Desert. That's how I happened to go to Poston, Arizona. So I snuck back into California – though I had no business to – to pick up my car. I drove from Los Angeles to San Francisco and over the pass there into Nevada and then down south to Poston and got there before the evacuees arrived. So I was sort of one of the people getting the place ready. I was friendly with some of the people there. One person who was there was John Evans – is it? You know, the son of Mabel Dodge Luhan; he was an American Indian.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes...

ISAMU NOGUCHI: So I mean all the people of the American Indian Service, including their lawyers had other people and various cooperative people, the Rasha cooperative people, all those people were coming in there to help. It was among them – excepting that when the internees arrived I became one of them too, naturally. So I was stuck there and couldn't get out for seven months. That made me very uncomfortable. Collier suggested that maybe I could help make the place pleasant. So I made plans for the park development and this, that, and the other, to make the place into a park-like place. The trouble was that what John Collier wanted and what the War Relocation Authority would countenance were two different things. John Collier wanted to make it into a

perfect sort of -- what the Mojave Indians couldn't do he thought the Japanese could do; make the place blossom with the new water coming in there from the Hoover Coffe Dam. SO my plan was sort of skewered by the War Relocation Authority. It was one of those things. So I puttered around and became one of the internees. I remember I carved a head of Ginger Rogers there. I had started it in California. I was doing all these heads, you know, while I was doing all this social work. I had a head of Leger. I did a head of Henry James – no, I mean of his namesake, Edward James. I did heads of all kinds of people. When I was in this camp, the San Francisco Museum gave me a big show, you know, out of protest I suppose. All these various and sundry things I had done were shown there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you allowed to go and see that show?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just there you were. What was it like? Because, so far at least from what I've read, your association with the Japanese in this country was sort of very....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, I had no association at all with the Nisei. It had just happened that, as I was leaving with Gorky to go on this trip, I was given a medal saying "Nisei of the Year." I thought "Oh, my God!" That's how I realized I was a Nisei; I wouldn't have thought of it really otherwise.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's incredible. So it came at the wrong time.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, exactly. Or the right time. I don't know which.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was it like, being in this camp and all these people...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Suddenly, you become a member of a minority group. The tendency of people with mixed blood, I think, is to be either you pass or you don't pass. You pass if you find it convenient and if your associations are such that, if you don't have to think about it, you don't have to think about it, I think most people take the side of the less privileged.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I think so. I mean I think you find it among blacks, too. The blacks despise people who pass.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, right.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: SO it's natural that – although nobody ever sort of brought any pressure upon me in those ways, I would have despised myself for passing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what did you do there? Was there any kind of organization among all those different...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: There was nothing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were dropped in the middle of the desert.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I was supposed to motivate, you know, to start to think up things myself. It was rather difficult under those circumstances. After seven months, I got out on a pass and went to Washington and saw Milton Eisenhower. In fact, that's the reason I went to Washington first. I wanted to see him because he was head of the camps. Of the War Relocation Authority. As you

know, he was the brother of Dwight Eisenhower who later became President. We had a very frank talk about the dichotomy of interest between the War Relocation Authority and John Collier. Collier was trying to make it pleasant, and they were trying to make it unpleasant.

PAUL CUMMINGS: and they had more power than he did?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you didn't go back there after that, did you?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I've never been back. I'd like to go and see what it's like – what's there now – to see if the little lakes that I built in the dam are still existing, or not. I don't know. It would be interesting to see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. To see what happened. It must have been very difficult for you at that time, wasn't it – moving around doing things, trying to work?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It was very difficult. Very difficult. That's the reason that, when I finally landed back in New York in 1942 – it must have been in the late fall of 1942 that I got back – I had about enough of all causes and everything else. Eventually I got a nice studio in MacDougal Alley. I just checked the whole works, I mean I wasn't going to have anything to do with it, you know. So I more or less arrived at the same attitude that let's say, Gorky had had all along except that, you might say, he didn't have quite the scruples that I had. But he probably had other hang-ups. I mean I'm not saying that he had, but they weren't the same kind that I had.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You really spent a lot of time just right there in New York, didn't you? As far as I know, you didn't travel much in those years.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: You mean from 1942 on – excepting for my interim in California and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, right.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. Actually the last traveling I had done was to Europe in 1933, I think. That was after my going to China and all that. In 1933, I was in Paris, and I was in England mostly. In 1933, I had a studio in London on Chiswick Mall for six months. Then I went to Paris.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you ever thought of going back to Peking to see what it's like and what's happened?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I'd love to go there. The question is, how do you get in? Apparently it's easy enough to get in with a group. But as an individual without proper introductions it's very difficult.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's difficult even for groups.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: If somebody would remember me from then it would be easier.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes. If you were to be invited, it would be very easy.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. If I was invited and I would find somebody that I knew....Some people have said that it shouldn't be difficult for me. I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing that interests me. Of all the traveling that you did up to, say, the war, did you keep diaries or notebooks, or was there correspondence with people, letters and things like

that? Or not?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Very little.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you keep notebooks, I mean sketchbooks? Or don't you use things like that very much?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: You know, after all I wrote that book and somehow or other I was able to dig up enough material to write a book. But it was like pulling teeth. And, since I wrote that book, Harper and Row have been very insistent that I should keep a diary. But I haven't. I don't like the idea. Well, I suppose, if I had to write another book, maybe I could.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Things are around and you remember things.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. If something bothers me enough, I'll write a book about it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do in New York? You made those marvelous marble slabs.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. I did a lot of sculpture then. You see, I was no longer distracted. In 1946 I was in a show at the Museum of Modern Art. In 1948 – it must have been rather early in 1948 – I was in Europe. I know, in 1949, I was off on this trip again, you know, this trip around the world with the Bollingen Foundation. But before 1948, I was immersed in work and may have done my best work then – who know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing that interests me is that Bollingen Foundation business where you were going to write a book on Leisure. Where did the topic come from? What interested you about it?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I tell you. As I say, one can explain a lot of things about me by a kind of incipient sort of social consciousness which I have hidden in various ways. And one of them is to call it "leisure." You know, don't call it art; call it leisure, call it anything but....In UNESCO now they have a Department of Cultural Tourism.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. But I mean that's another name for the same thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the basic idea that...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: As I say, from the beginning I had this feeling that, if the world wasn't good enough for me, I just didn't want to be in it, you know, it I couldn't function somehow. And so one wanted a world one could function in, or one despaired, you know. I felt that, with the atomic bomb and all that, that the world either was going to survive or it wasn't going to survive. And if it was going to survive, I'd like to know more about it. That's the reason I took this trip. I wanted to take this trip and I wanted to key it on some purpose like discovering hoe sculpture fitted into a world with more leisure for looking at the sculpture. You know, what's the use of making sculpture unless people enjoy it? And I wasn't particularly interested in making things for rich people, having this sort of phobia about things. And so I thought if I did things for people in general it would have to be for people who could find the leisure class that I was interested in but what to do with people's leisure. I mean the thing I'm doing in Detroit is very much that, by the way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The foundation?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, no, that plaza. It's kind of a culmination of my social consciousness.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In terms of what? Because I don't know what the plans look like.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It's a park for people. It's a people's park.

PAUL CUMMINGS: To walk around in, sit in?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Eight acres of just enjoyment for large masses of people. It had nothing to do with money.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, you know, considering the kind of social interest and political interest of the 1930's, and the fact that your interest in abstraction was not really sustained by the culture around you, it's interesting that you never did take up figurative art of anything that was involved with the social realists phase of that period.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, you know, I did – I was involved. For instance, the Mexican thing. Or even this Rockefeller Center thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, but even after that.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, I didn't continue after that. Maybe I didn't have any talent – I don't know – maybe I just wasn't interested. I remember that Philip Guston was another one who was....

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was doing those murals.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: In Mexico, yes. Have you interviewed him?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, but it's on the agenda.

[END OF SIDE4 – TAPE 2 – SIDE 2]

TAPE –RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH ISAMU NOGUCHI

DATE: DECEMBER 18, 1973

[TAPE 3 – SIDE 5]

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is Side 5, December 18, 1973. You have said a very interesting thing just sort of off hand at one point, that you thought you did some of your best work in those years in that studio.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. In that studio for the first time I felt guiltless, you might say. The war had eliminated my sense of association with the authoritarian cause. That is to say, that it was almost during the 1930's there was in America. Especially in New York, a sense almost of indecency that one should be occupied with art without some noble, moral cause behind it. This took various forms. I mean it had political connotations. For a sculptor, for instance, it had the connotation that he had to do direct carving. I mean, for instance, William Zorach. That was his thing that he laid upon young aspiring artists to absolutely foil them before they could even get started by saying: "It has to be directly cared." If it wasn't directly carved, you were just a son of a bitch.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you were never influenced by that particularly, were you?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, yes, everybody was. Everybody was, excepting Sandy Calder, of course.



They learned things in school, let's say, by doing it in clay, but doing it in clay was slightly sort of unethical. First of all, you had to have the money to cast it. You know, it's an indirect process, therefore it's already suspect. And also I imagine there was this certain reaction against Rodin. There was a feeling on the part of the people here that people in the United States couldn't or shouldn't be involved in these sort of pictorial... You know, things do in cycles. And prior to the abstract expressionists there was, I think, a certain reaction against expressionism; that is to say, expressionism came as a reaction against the lack of expression, you might say; lack of expressionism in the sense of Rodin. After all, the man I originally worked for when I was seventeen – Gutzon Borgum – was that kind of a sculptor, you know, like Rodin. For instance, during the 1930's – and I speak about these things because I think it's in your interest to have a relevant sort of information from various people as to why they think things were the way they were.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: There was, I think, a kind of inhibition against free expression. I may be wrong. I mean, for instance, even somebody like Stuart Davis had to have laid down very strict limits as to what he could do and what he couldn't do. And since, in a way people were trying to find within themselves their own ancestry, that is to say, the Americans on the WPA, of course, were that, in order to be Americans rather than European, one of the guidelines was that you had to use American subject matter like, say, the Hudson River School. And prior to that you had John Sloan and all that. And, as for the influence of Stieglitz and Marin and Demuth and O'Keeffe and all that crowd, that was a kind of non-proletarian offshoot which didn't seem to jibe with the vigor of the American drive toward an identity. The American identity as art was very, very dubious. I mean it was hung up on all sorts of social questions and sort of the questions of the location, the land, this, that, and the other. They were thrashing about, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that was because there was so little support for art in the society generally? That they felt should be a social...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Probably, yes. A kind of protest. Artists have always protested against the Establishment. But there was this dissociation. I never got on the WPA. And I objected very strongly when they couldn't hire me. I think I told you about Mrs. McMahon's objections to me. She had asked me to do a head for her. She objected to me. Of course, in a certain sense, I always have a sort of out-of-the-running kind of felling. I still have it. Of course now I have it with different groups.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How has it shifted?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Now I feel that I'm sort of out of the running when it comes to the general – well, generally you might say that people talk of me as being distinguished, of another generation, and so forth. That is, I think so. And therefore, they dismiss me as practically somebody dead maybe – I think – I may be wrong. But that's my general attitude – feeling. You know, all this Pop and funky business going on, I probably am a little intolerant of it. I don't find it particularly amusing. I feel it's sort of a betrayal of art in many ways and I won't have anything to do with it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you feel that it's a betrayal of art?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It's a betrayal of art because it doesn't go far enough. You see, it takes certain aspects of art and enlarges it to enormous proportions and they think they've done something when they haven't done a thing. They've just merely taken an aspect which existed and just enlarged it and said, "Look what I found." Which I mean is not serious enough. And then, after all, those of us who are involved with this moral sense of trying to find the basis of any given art or

material...I mean, for instance, that, if we worked with stone, we wanted to find that stone. We weren't using stone for some other reason. And I still felt that way. I mean you say that I wasn't particularly influenced by Zorach. I was, in a way. In fact everybody was. I mean a painter had to paint – I mean he had to use the idea of paint, the oily substance one canvas was valued. And people like Bill de Kooning, for instance, who are of that school – I mean I am more or less in a similar position to Bill in that we think of material as assign something to it. And in fact it no doubt does. But then there are people who, merely use material; and make it out of plastic and so forth. And plastic also is an indirect casting material like bronze is. It has no particular character. So that those of us who are in a sense wedded to the idea of intrinsic quality residing in the material are suspicious when one starts making things in such an indirect way with materials which in themselves, are supposed to have a kind of quality of being modern – I mean the earth, for instance, is a modern thing; it's not an old-fashioned thing. And the ground itself is a modern medium. Of course, there are people now who have more or less come around to my point of view who go out in the desert and dig a trench and say, "Look, we've found the earth." But that, again to me is a kind of fragmentary thing. First of all, it's an artificial situation, the desert, let's say far away from anybody, like doing something on the moon. You don't have to go all the way to the moon to do something. You can do it right here. When you give yourself special situations like that, again, to me it's a denial or an avoidance of the real problem, the real situation. Whereas I have no personal object to – I rather like some of the things that are done out in the desert or some place – it's just a little bit far-fetched and an avoidance; it's fragmentary.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious, you know, because, to go back to those years in the mid-1940's, the war was going on and you weren't showing or really...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, in fact I never showed from 1935 to 1946 when I was in a show at the Museum of Modern Art. That is, I was in the group show called "Fourteen Americans" and in it were people like Gorky, Motherwell, David Hare, Roszak. All those people emerged from that exhibition. And then I had a show at Egan Gallery in 1948. But, immediately after having the show, I left right away. Probably I could have pursued that – not that I sold anything – but I mean...People have criticized me; why didn't I continue? Why did I just go off? That was because, again, I had this feeling that, if the world was to survive, sculpture as an important part of the living experience and not something for collectors to buy. I wanted to be able to work in sculpture as part of this whole....

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was really a manifestation of your like and experience?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. It was my wanting to know what sculpture could do in space, what it had done, what it was in space in former days, how it related to people's ceremonial view of like.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you say "ceremonial?"

ISAMU NOGUCHI: For instance, in military situations, in plazas, and so forth. There was a kind of use of sculpture in a ceremonial sense, whether they are effigies or whether they are temple plazas, or dancing spots, you know, there is a ceremonial use of sculpture....

PAUL CUMMINGS: The general on the horse, that kind of thing.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes – not – I mean even the general on the horse. Marcus Aurelius on his horse still had a great deal of significance. And of course when the sculpture is used for religious purposes that's a very ceremonial use; it had real significance. With the demise of religious art, art became a sort of self-perpetuating, self-regenerative thing. And to me, and perhaps to others, that was not enough. There was no link to the general population. But I wished to find some relationship a little

bit larger than that. It might have been a sort of wild-goose chase, but it was not altogether a wild-goose chase because other people now are concerned along those lines. You know, you find that some of the young people are very concerned about finding some linkage or....

PAUL CUMMINGS: They say they are trying to get art out of the gallery and to the public.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Exactly. For instance, during the time of the WPA, I made one sculpture, when they wouldn't hire me, I went down there one day. I said, "Now, look, why don't you let me do you a sculpture in front of the Newark Airport?" There was a triangle there. "I'd like to make a sculpture just to be seen from the air so that, when you come to a landing, you will see the sculpture there." You wouldn't see it otherwise. Well, they laughed their heads off at the whole idea. Well, you know, it wouldn't be laughed away right now. At that time I did a thing, a head really, to be seen from the moon or from Mars, you know, away up in space. If you had the proper kind of instruments, you could see the effigy of man out in some of the desert area. It's in my book. It's the kind of thing that they're interested in today. In fact, in 1933, I did this thing called *Monument to the Plow* which is a big triangle about a mile cross to be planted with different sorts of seasonal crops. Well, that sort of thing is not commonplace. But in those days I didn't get very far with that. That is to say, it's a useful thing. I mean to say that it comes from my own particular hangup on the question of morality in art and it took different forms. One hides it, but one doesn't eliminate it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. I'm curious about your referral to a kind of regeneration of art by art rather than through the social or public milieu.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well. You see, although I had this whole period of Brancusi and that should have made me accept art – and I do accept art in its most aesthetically pure form, that is to say, without any reference to social issues (for instance, just now you heard me in relation to a thing in Michigan: that I would not want to be involved with something trying to give a message) – however, there is a kind of relationship which has nothing to do with a message but has to do with peoples' place in the world, their sense of belonging. And I think that kind of thing can be suggested by art. I was just reading a book called *The Secret of the Great Pyramid* on how the Egyptians had this very strong sense of place and of time and of their situation in the world and in relation to the stars. The Great Pyramid was very definitely and precisely calculated as to spot; as to the measurements of the earth, I mean, that is, the circumference of the earth is embedded in the proportions of the Pyramid; the length of Egypt is determined and is an agricultural marker for determining what were the boundaries of properties after the Nile decided....

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, the river would sit there and not move.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. It's an absolute marker, you see. And from the proportions of the Pyramid, the foot measurement and its slide variations are embedded in it. The meter – which the French developed – is a later attempt to find the basic measurement. Which the Egyptians were concerned with. It's extremely interesting to me, this whole business of measurement, of place, of situation, and so forth; and how we function on the planet earth. And, of course, my association with Bucky probably also influenced my feeling of the limits and the geometry, of possibilities of art: that it's not just a personal whim but that it's determined by the stars, so to speak, as to what you should do or what you shouldn't do, and so forth. I mean, you are limited, of course; you limit yourself. But to limit yourself I do not object to. I think it's rather good. I mean because, when Graham used to say that, in dancing, she never opens her hand out but closes it in and this retains the energy; it doesn't flow out indiscriminately; it flows back into her. It is a way of my saying, you know, that you set your own limits, and why you set those limits and for what reason, there are the result of personal experience and history and are not necessarily valid. I mean they're just made out of little

funny sort of psychological quirks which, if you looked at in a big way, you'd say it's nonsense. But for that particular person it works. And I think what's so remarkable about art is that, left alone, a man will go off on his own tangent. And if you have no communication at all, like the Japanese, in the two hundred years they were cut off, developed a very distinct and wonderful art in those color prints which were purely Japanese. Prior to that, things were not purely Japanese. They were all mixed up with the world winds, you know. That's why the Japanese since the way have been very sort of eager to find their antecedents in things like Jomon, for instance, which predate Buddhism and predate anything that came from China and in a sense is very international. It's very much like pottery everywhere. That is to say it related, let's say, to prehistoric Greek, to the cult of the mother goddess. It's sort of female-oriented spirals and circles and this and that. After the war the Japanese said, "Oh, we are the Jomon people." Japan had suddenly become not Japanese. They didn't want to be Japanese. They wanted to be sort of pre-Japan. It's very interesting. The whole movement in refinement and so forth of Japan.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Into...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Into a more brutal acceptance of the world. That's the reason that they kind of ... All my friends, from Tange to Tara – all those people always talk about themselves as being Jomon and not Yayoi – Yayoi being the first sort of evidence of this refinement the Japanese are capable of.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting because I had always wondered why, say, the happenings that were done in Japan in the early 1960's were the most vicious in a way, you know, the most....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I mean this Yoshiro Horo, who is my friend, who started the whole thing of Gutai and the happenings, he was over here, a cultured and knowledgeable artist. I mean he had gone through all the surrealist phases and everything else. He was not an ignoramus. When he promoted this sort of thing by the young, he was motivated by trying to find Japan which was antecedent to Buddhist Japan, I mean, to the brutal, you see. I mean it was, let's say, as is the Greeks of the Periclean Age had suddenly decided they were going to throw it all up and go back to an earlier time, to have a Neolithic work is a similar sort of thing excepting that I am trying to undercut everybody else by going one below – instead of one up, it's one below....

PAUL CUMMINGS: That piece up there, the – what? – The tube with the bones – those bone pieces, fragments that you use...

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. These things I was doing in 1940. I mean those were sort of trying to get back to a sort of pre-art thing, trying to find something in the rubble from which....

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why were you trying to go back and back?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, to go back is to go forward in a way because, if you go back to bedrock, then you have something to stand upon. When you are all involved with fantasy and the peculiarities of an art which has developed independently of you and you come upon it and you accept it or not, you are really starting at a level which is not necessarily you. To go back and back to origins, at least if you start from there I mean any direction you take and if you're not distracted by other people, you might say is your own, yes?

PAUL CUMMINGS: There are bones that appear in various other places, aren't there?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. I used to get them at the Natural History Museum in the attic. There are lots of bones up there. And I get them and use them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What attracted you to using them?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh – I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The shapes? The lines?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, the associations, the shapes. For instance, the ones I call *The Monument of Heroes*, the idea of the hero, bones, is not very far. I mean he is dead. I meant his is what you sacrifice your life for and this is all that remains. That sort of thing. So that natural "found" objects have a kind of meaning. You know, art which comes from art is limited by the very fact that somebody else has done it, I mean that it, originally. Well, if you care able to circumvent that, you might find something. Also, I am very suspicious about your own influence upon yourself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In terms of what?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: For instance, if you are constantly reminded of what you have done and what you stand for, and this and that, you become a stylist and you become blinded to the larger possibilities. And I think it's a tendency we all have as we go along to become more and more ourselves in that sense. But it's not necessarily true that you're becoming more and more yourself. You're becoming more and more – that is, you do things which are similar to what you've done before. To break away is very important to me because then you suddenly find that these things that you thought were yourself may not necessarily be and the fact that you trip yourself and fall on your face gives you a chance to get up and shake your head.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you consciously break away at times?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, I think I do. Yes, I do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because there are shifts....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I do. I shift very rapidly because that's the only way I can get away from myself. As far as the art world and your identity in it is concerned, it could be much better if I didn't do this sort of thing. But for my own development it's better that I do, you see, because merely to continue making productions, to produce, obviously it's much better to continue. But, if you don't continue, at least you have escaped that trap which limits your life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What tells you that it's time to make a break, to shift? What indicates in your life, or your work, that now you've got to shift, got to change, got to break the line that forms? Or did that happen and then you noticed it after the fact?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I get his sort of stewing around and, let's say disconnected with my situation and wanting to break out. I mean it's, let's say, that you need some air in your head so you shake your head and you throw out all the cobwebs and all the accumulations and so forth and you try to start again. So, moving around from one place to another, I think, is part of me effort to shake out. For instance, in Japan I am very much involved with boulders and granite, trying to find in boulders some reason to but that boulder. If I find enough reason, I'll go at it and do something. It's a very primitive attitude to find enough excuse to do it. I mean an aborigine someplace might do the

same thing. And he's probably motivated by the fact that he wants to make a god, let's say. What motivates me to do something so arduous is...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, there are a couple of large pieces there that are...

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. I mean, for instance, I break a rock. I have damaged that thing. Then I try to make amends for this damage and, during the process, I have a kind of dialogue with that stone. And that sort of thing would be quite impossible to do in New York City. First of all, the materials and the dialogue that I might have with the material here could be of a different sort; would have to be. If I functioned more in New York City, I would probably find means of a kind a dialogue with whatever I find because that's what's here. The reason I haven't don't it is because I think of out present junk as being too timely, that is it's kind of subject to decomposition. Maybe that's what makes it modern. But, in dealing with stone, you are dealing outside of time in a way; that is, it's not time here at all; it's timeless, if anything. And you can take all the time in the world doing it because there's no grand rush to show it or anything. I mean nobody is waiting for you. And it takes too long to say that it's hot off the griddle. Most of my things take years to do. You might say, "well, you haven't got that much time. Why don't you cash in or capitalize on what you can perceive instead of just doing them and burying them more or less?" Which is what I do. I'd like very much to show them but it's awfully difficult. First of all, they're heavy; they're not likely to sell; who wants to show them and why? And the galleries haven't got the capacity to show them in the first place. So I thought : all right, museum. But then, what museum has that kind of dough? So you might say I'm sort of committing suicide in a way. However, I might say I do it for my pleasure. That's the only reason I can give. I can't say that I'm so historically oriented as to think of myself in historical terms. I'd rather not. But I do think it's because I think it's essentially sculpture. And if I'm looking for sculpture, instead of crushing an automobile body, I'll crush stone. I don't deny that and automobile fender or something could be a medium of sculpture. Maybe I don't do something so different after all. But still, if I succeed, I have transcended not just our time but all time. In fact, I am associated with all sculpture from the beginning of time, you see. You can compare them. Like these granite things here. You can say—well, you can compare them to Stonehenge and say, well, all right, they are more or less the same line. And one might say, "Well, what is your identity then? It is Japan? Is it New York? What is it? Why are you in New York?"

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because what you do in Italy again is somewhat different.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Again too, you see. However, I claim that, well I'm not that simple, that I'm all of these things, that I'm a person of the Stone Age era and I'm also a person of this era, and that my real, real self to be really apparent, had to be looked at in various aspects. Even these paper things that I've been doing relate me, let's say, to lightness as opposed to weight, relate me more to people because, you see, they are consumable things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's like what you said about using fabric for the lanterns.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: All right. Yes. You know, in art, one does not work isolated from humanity. My areas of contact are not that broad. I mean, with these lanterns, I certainly have contact. With these plazas, I certainly have contact. With the stone things, I don't have too much contact excepting that they derive from my interest in landscape, you see. I probably wouldn't be working in stone if it weren't for the fact that I use stone in landscape. It's one of the natural mediums to use so you want to work with stone. So all these things are facets of my personality you might say. And I'm a little difficult to pin down.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When you talk about materials, and to go back to Zorach again, and the whole

truth to the materials....I think in the 19430's there was a prevalent idea of looking at a rock and kind of seeing that sort of image the natural shape of the rock indicates. But I think you've always seem a different thing.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, Zorach could look into a rock and see a woman...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I mean I tried to look in a rock and find a rock, or at least the spirit of a rock or maybe some relationship to human feelings but in terms of the rock, you see. It's not that easy. But I mean....

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, you know, one of the things that seems to have happened in the 1940's was using the slate that you used a great deal of, thin sheets of stone, you know. The piece – *Cronos* I think, is the name of it with the large thorns – seems to have been kind of the first broad manifestation of so many things that you developed after that period, I mean, shapes that appear....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Not only that but a lot that went outside of me. After all, I did those things during the war when most people were involved with other things, you see. They had to be in Europe, for instance, you know. One of the first requests I had was for that *Cronos* to be reproduced in Germany right after the war.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Somehow or other word of it had gotten around and the wanted to see it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fascinating.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It was in U.S.I.S. and other publications. They wanted to show what could be done and, you know, a lot of things done by people in metal and so forth more or less on the line of *Cornos* was before. It hunk it was probably die to The Museum of Modern Art exhibition that that sort of think took hold. But the reason I did those things in stone – first of all, I did them in wood originally but then I want satisfied with the wood. And there were all these marble yards downtown which were being demolished because of the development of Stuyvesant town and various other areas around there where the stone yards were, and they were all demolished and the stone could be gotten awfully cheap. That's how I got all that stone and used it. Again, you find local mediums being used, you see. At that time that kind of stone was reasonable here. And then of course all the remaining stone yards were right along here. Where now the Consolidated Edison is were all stone yards.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. And so they were all demolished to put that damned Consolidated Edison there. The only one remaining is Colonna here. So it becomes rather absurd to be using stone here. For instance, it's much more reasonable to of it in Italy. First of all, the material is available there. Somebody can help you. Here, supposing you can get somebody to help you, he's an imbecile, he just doesn't know what you're doing. Whereas, over there you have the hoists, the equipment, and this and that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They're accustomed to working with it.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: They're accustomed to working with it and it's much easier. I feel it's natural to work in a medium like that over there. Occasionally I still do things in a flat material but I tend more and more to do things in the natural shapes in which they come, that is, that mass. Although I think that I feel toward the use of materials that they should be broken down into their components to be able to handle them, in the sense that things are constructed of volumes, planes, and so forth, and that, the more you are able to segregate the various functions within the material, you are better able to control it and, I feel, more together with it. For instance, breaking that rock gives me an inside toe hold on that affair so that I'm using the rock totally instead of just tickling the surface, you see. I'm within it. And things that I do today are of that sort. I don't necessarily break the rock but I want to delve into it. That kind of attitude I think is quite different from, let's say, Bill Zorach's who is trying to find a woman in it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's fascinating that that feeling seems to go through even, say, in a marble piece that's set on a wooden base, the wood has a certain quality, or the ceramics, or the various pieces – the shafts – of kind of awkward shapes going through it, or looking as if it went through it. But yet, no matter what the material is, there seems to be a large vocabulary of shapes which are your shapes.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, more than just a vocabulary of shapes, I'm interested in utilizing the natural forces inherent in that material from which the shapes derive. That is to say, it's natural for certain materials to be used in certain ways. With metal, for instance, you can weld it, you can cut it, you can bend it. But when you want a complex curve, it's not very clever to start off with a flat sheet because you're up against it. You've got to hammer it into shape or whatever and then you have to cast it. Then it's no longer the metal sheet that you're working with. What can you do with a metal sheet to its most expeditious way? I mean every medium has its limits. Stone is one of the more flexible ones. You can make a flat plane or you can make a curve. It doesn't really matter very much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, clay is very flexible.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Clay is very – clay is too flexible. There are no limits, you see. Without limits, the medium isn't really giving you anything at all excepting a certain muddiness. And so you use the muddiness and say: This is it. But is that you use the muddiness and say: This is it. But is that muddiness necessarily an intrinsic – well, we all come from mud so there is no doubt that it is an intrinsic form, from mud there is no doubt that it is an intrinsic form. But, when you try to make the mud expressive and so forth, then it'd congealed in some way and most often pit into bronze because the clay won't stay. I would much more prefer to make some thing in clay and, let's say, bake it. And I have done ceramic sculptures. To me that's more honest; it's more direct. And, not only that, the clay has gone through a transformation through the fire and has acquired a new quality.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But one which is basically cast.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Which is intrinsic to it, you see. I mean, making a thing in clay, casting it in plaster, making it in bronze or this or that, or copying in stone or granite – well, it's a kind of very, very sort of roundabout or dishonest way of doing things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting because in your book you have a whole paragraph talking about the use of the pointing machine.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. That sort of thing – for instance, I never use any – well, I did make a few heads like that originally because that's the easiest way, and after all, you learn that way. But that



was before I started doing these sheet stone pieces. But you don't use it any more.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find that, over the years, as you've had new projects or new ideas and tried new materials, is it the material that suggests problems or answers? Or is it in the project?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I would say mostly when I'm working with my own self without any program which I'm obliged to fill, I tend to be very much concerned with material. But, even when you do a project, like the man who was here, you consider: What material do you use? What is feasible economically and otherwise? If it's in a school, I would probably consider something in metal. It's much more practical from an economic point of view, the either conditions, and this, that, and the other. One could do something in granite but the weight and the money involved would be just too much. You know, one's capacities are not infinite. Although I might look that way, I'm not.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? Well, let us think you are. To sort of go back to the 1940's again to say, The Museum of Modern Art "Fourteen Americans" exhibition, which was really the first time you'd been seen here in a long time, and you had not previously had pieces in group shows or anything, you were still doing heads though, weren't you?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. I had done heads up to the point when I went into the Japanese campo. In fact, as I told you, I had done some things in Hollywood. I had done heads of Leger and Ginger Rogers and a few others. I carved the head of Ginger Rogers in a Japanese Camp. It as given a piece of Georgia marble and I carved it. You know, you could even do things like that. But then you come to an end; you come to a very definite end. After getting out of the camp, I made very few heads. I did a few when I had the studio in MacDougal Alley. And subsequently I did a head of Nehru and one of Sukarno, just as a kind of social gesture and a way of getting to know them better. Those were done in 1950 and that's when it ended. That was the very end. I found that I no longer had need for this kind of contact.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, you know, you had been doing the theater things by this time for quite a while.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. That occurred during the 1940's. I had done a couple of stage sets for Martha Graham in 1935 – Frontier and, subsequently, there was one – what was it called? Oh, I can't remember. But then anyway she asked me to do these three pieces for the Library of Congress, you know: *Appalachian Spring*, *Herodiade*, and another one with music by Milhaud. But subsequently I did quite a few.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm curious about how you related what you were doing in your studio to the problems that were set by the dance as she envisioned it.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, the theater stage was for me a very challenging and basic concept. The whole volume of the theater stage and how things related within it and to the people moving, was for me a sculptural problem.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean in terms of the wings and...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, the whole...In fact, in the Coolidge Theater in the Library of Congress, since it's merely a chamber music stage and very small, I had to transform the whole thing in order to make it possible to use sets like for *Appalachian Spring*. I built flies and everything else, you know, a very miniature sort of thing, but I did in order to be able to do it. And it worked. I think that most of my efforts in gardens and so forth derived from my theatrical experience. That is to say, they are

the same thing; they have to do with a given space and to create a sort of dramatic situation there by these shapes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But did you ever think of the shapes for the stage in terms of sculpture? Was that like a large sculpture? Or was that a particular solution to a problem – a prop that had to be used that somebody would lean on? Or sit on?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I mean Martha would say, the various people would say, “These things we require.” For instance, in *Orpheus*, they go to Hades. All right, so I had to go to Hades, you see. Or Martha would say, “I need a bed, and action that takes place in a bed.” So I’d make a bed that looks like two people lying there, more or less, very primitive but still...My interpretation of the requirements of life, let’s say, I would prefer to have requirements in a sense. If I’m left completely alone, I mean, I’m a little bit at sea. I enjoy a problem. So when this man came here today with a problem space, which is really a bad problem because the thing is half in shadow, and it wasn’t in the right place....On the other hand, it presented a problem of relationships, you see. Those relationships are what I’m interested in, I think. It’s not the thing itself, it’s the relationships of things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So, just to continue on the stage, you know Martha would say, “I need a bed.” So she would get a certain slat surface that you would....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I was interested in the relationship of the movement and the space and how they interrelate, you see. To me, just to do a sculpture and plunk it down there really doesn’t mean much; I mean, what sculpture? What shape? In that sense, I don’t think I like sculpture very much. But when it becomes so integral that you no longer are even conscious of it as a sculpture, then I think it’s good.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Does that imply that you didn’t think of what you made for her as sculpture the way you would make, say, something else?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, there are elements in which overlap. When people come with a problem – like today – I dislike the idea of just selling them a piece of sculpture; where do they put it, and why. Although I do sculpture, I’m not that keen about selling the stuff.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why is that? Do you like to have it around?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. It isn’t what I want to have it around. But my interest in doing it was the doing of it and, although it itself was interesting to me, if I’m asked to do work in a given space, I don’t know that anything of mine is quite that suitable.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, you mean something you’ve already made?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Of course, if somebody just buys it and uses it, I have nothing to say. They might put it in a museum with a lot of other things where it may or may not look all right – I don’t know. But I mean a space problem is a challenge to me which I’m interested in. Or else I’m not interested in it. If I’m not interested in it, it becomes a thing that you are doing for certain requirements which are too restrictive of what you might want to do. Or it may be too bog for me. I mean I just won’t tackle something that requires me doing something which is not art, you know, but that I become a decorator or a landscapist, you know. I’m not. I’ve had all kinds of jobs offered to me which I considered to be not restrictive enough. For instance, I remember when they were building this military headquarters in Washington – it wasn’t the Pentagon, it was something else – a huge complex of buildings, They wanted me to do the whole ground floor area, inside and out. I’m

not interested in that sort of thing. I want a given space which I can call my own and I'll do something with it. I'm not interested in just landscaping, per se. It's got to be a work of art. To me a work of art has limits. It makes a certain space you see.

[END OF SIDE 5 – TAPE 3, SIDE 1]

[SIDE 6]

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is Side 6 – December 26, 1973 – Paul Cummings talking with Isamu Noguchi. On the other side we had just mentioned the show with Charles Egan in 1948 which you said was arranged by de Kooning.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, he showed there, and he suggested that I go there. So I had this show. It was a very nice looking show. As Tom Hess, for instance, said in something he wrote that “here I was ready to become part of the art scene, so to speak, acceptable and so forth, and then I grew up and ran off” and why I ran off and how I managed it. Well, I don't know whether I mentioned that at that time I applied to the Bollingen Foundation for leisure to write a book on leisure. Again, you see, I went off on this tangent which was a search of concern for art other than just art but art in relation to people and to use in a sense. After all, when you look at art from the point of view of people, how it relates to their leisure time and so forth – and I was thinking, of course, in terms of how public art, public sculptures, how it relates to people, what is the usefulness outdoors, in spaces where – that is to say...

PAUL CUMMINGS: You hadn't done anything outside up to the point, had you?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. But I had the idea of making it, you see. And so my suggestion that I write a book was merely a way of my wanting to find out more about myself. So that, in a way, although I had done these proposed playgrounds and so forth – which never had come off – I had, however, done the theater pieces which were in a way a public space sort of thing, you know, in a hypothetical sense the theater space, people in action in the theater, the ceremony of the thing, and so on. And so, from a consideration of theater as a kind of ritual, to wanting to see how sculptures were used in the ritualistic or space sense to people as public consumption and giving myself the theme of leisure. “Leisure” was not the right word really. It was more to do with the use of sculpture in, let's say, a spatial, cosmic sense that people had in former times. And so this trip that I then went upon under the blessing of the Bollingen Foundation took me first to Europe where I was interested in seeing the origins of such use of sculpture. I went to England and saw Stonehenge and Aylesbury, and all those prehistoric things. Then I went to Paris and went to Brittany – I went there twice – to all the menhirs and the Malacaire and the devinis and then down to Lascaux and saw the caves there, all the various caves and so forth, how people were in contact with a public use of art. You see, it comes into questions of usefulness which go back to my arbitrary whim of the artist because it's pure art but a kind of working art; not exactly applied art because I wasn't really interested in applying it to designing things but I wanted it to generate its own use. That is to say, that art should be its ultimate use and not that art is applied to making, say, a television set more attractive of something like that. That I wasn't interested in. So then in describing my trip – I mean what I did in France were these early prehistoric things. Then I went around and saw some cathedrals, like Vézelay, and so on, which I hadn't seen before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you make drawings or sketches or take photographs or anything?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, I did drawings and I took notes. After all, I was supposed to be writing a book. I took copious notes. And they still exist. But I never wrote the book. After that, of course, I

went to Italy and spent a couple of months around there looking at things I had never seen before. I was a real sort of self-educational thing without being very sort of academic about it. I was merely observing for myself and experiencing the real thing in situ; because we see these things in books but I wanted to actually see it, and in a sense be a part of it. And then, going to Egypt, for instance, to all the Pyramids and the tombs and Luxor, it was absolutely fantastic to me at that time to be able to do this. And, as I mention previously, I did all this on the assumption that – well, it, after all, the world was going to survive in spite of all the atomic things, well, I was going to be prepared to be able to contribute something. So that's what I was doing. After Egypt, I went to India and spent about four months there, going all over the place. I really know India – all the Temples...After a very brief time, I was going around Indian costume, more or less staying in Brahmin riding the trains; and sort of forgetting all about the New York scene. I was completely far removed from the New York scene. Of course, during my absence was when all these things happened, you know; Franz Kline and de Kooning, and all the rest of them were establishing themselves with this new myth of American art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long did this tour take?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It took two years. It not only just took two years, but it sort of directed me elsewhere than in the New York scene. I was the absent one, so to speak. Every time I'd come back, I'd see my old friends who were then becoming very famous and all that. Gorky had died, of course. But I mean all the rest of them were...

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, it's very interesting. That trip was two full years. I mean you didn't come back at any point during that time?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was just one place after the other?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: That's right, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you done much research or preparation for it?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. I just left. You know, a lot of people study art history, for instance. I never had any. So my way of looking at things is without any preparation and without any knowledge really, except in a very superficial way I suppose, of what I was looking at, you see. But, on the other hand, I came to my own sort of conclusions. You know, my educational process has always been sort of backward. It's the opposite of the way that people generally learn. You know, for instance, people learn language by studying grammar and so forth but I never did. I speak French fairly fluently and so do I speak Japanese but I couldn't write a sentence in either language. I just know the idea, so to speak. And I think that's how I look at things too. I mean, I know it by looking rather than through any knowledge.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, one of the things that interests me, because you've frequently talked about art being useful and doing things – I suppose the Detroit foundation is a great example of many different ideas combined. But what do you think of a small object as a work of art, as an object of contemplation? I mean does that...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, I do that too. It isn't that I disdain it. It's just that I worry about its ultimate purpose so far as the general like on this earth is concerned. That is to say, it depends so much on museums and how it's related to the museum and the collectors and so on. It's a very dubious sort

of outlet for art, I think. I mean I generally dislike collectors. I would rather not know where my things go. If I know that they're going to somebody's sort of living room, I'm not that happy about it. If they go to a museum and I happen to see it in a museum and it looks all right, naturally I'm pleased. But it's questionable you know. So I don't have much faith in myself as a kind of object-maker with a sure audience. My audience I'm afraid is...I think it might develop after I'm dead, you know, in a way like Brancusi. I don't think Brancusi ever had much of an audience when he was alive. There were a few people. He was known by reputation in a vague way. He wasn't that well known because he just didn't exhibit and so on. I'm afraid that a lot of the prejudice which I sort of blamed Brancusi for I think applies to myself. Although he wasn't interested in doing the things because they were useful. I think usefulness is a kind of security of its validity. That is to say, if a thing is useful, people will use it and they will cherish it, at least for the duration of its usefulness.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's almost like the idea of being consumed.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Being consumed, yes. I once heard a talk that Marcel Duchamp was giving in which he said more or less the same thing: that art is consumed. For instance, he was saying that his *Nude Descending the Staircase* was practically a hollow shell by now because it had been over-consumed and was no longer useful. Those lanterns which I'm very interested in right now – I've been making them for over twenty years – it has a usefulness, a like span of maybe a year or two and then it's all broken up. But by then it's been thoroughly consumed and useless, and if they feel like it, they can get another one.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Of a different shape or a different kind.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. I keep on making these new shapes. Each one has a certain distinct character.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How many shapes exist now?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. I keep on making these new shapes. Each one has a sort of certain distinct character.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How many shapes exist now?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, over a hundred.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, yes, sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's phenomenal. I didn't know there were that many. Are they all available?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Right now I'm trying to work out a new sort of catalogue and system of distribution. I mean I have here, for instance: [sound of paper rustling and Mr. Noguchi is counting] one, two, three, four, five.... and so on, up to eighteen consecutively.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [More pages rustling] Oh my goodness, look at them.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: [Mr. Noguchi starts counting again at] One, two, three, four, five...[And so on, consecutively to forty-nine] and then there are all these variations [counting again] fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two....[and so on consecutively to sixty-three] And these are all successful ones. So you might say if I counted in the less successful ones of things that I eliminated – all these tripod ones I've

eliminated, I've made probably at least two hundred or so. And of these, let's say, sixty are good and will be sold.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's terrific.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: About half of them are being sold now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And they're all made in Japan?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is Bonnier the only store that has them? Do they do the merchandising?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: They wholesale them. They sell them in Bloomingdale's now. It's a continuous process; it's not a still thing at all. I must say that art which is recognized as art fares better; it's treasured more, I suppose it becomes a sort of landmark and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, people....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: They're not in anybody's home. There are. After all, I sell them by the thousands. I would like to find some way whereby the art distribution could be on that scale, not just limited editions, you see. I don't particularly like the idea of limited editions. Why limited editions. Why limited? You know, if they are...might as well be...And I don't like that very much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because these are not that expensive.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. They aren't expensive and why should they be limited? That is, if there are people who want them, they should be able to buy them, instead of saying, "Oh, I missed the boat. I didn't get it while they were still available."

PAUL CUMMINGS: They can go the next day and get one. I think it's marvelous that this has been .... I don't know that you had made so many of them, that it was an ongoing activity.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You have a foundation named after them now.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Well, my idea was that after I went I wouldn't like this to just stop. I'd like it to keep going for a while, anyway. You know, if a thing is a living tradition, it should live; that is to say, so it's usefulness continues. Naturally somebody will have to catch on fire so that they can continue it. Maybe they'll make new developments. Last night I was talking with Christo. I am packing light really. He packages objects or air or something else. I'm merely packaging light.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think of them in terms of a form that will be illuminated from the inside and will have a shape of light?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, actually the illumination travels from whatever source there is inside to the surface to that it's the whole surface which becomes luminous. You have a much larger luminous surface from these; it's not the whole surface which becomes luminous. You have much larger luminous surfaces from these; it's not from a point that it's illuminated from the surface. So it's translucent light, not reflected light. Most objects you see are reflected light. Sculptures are all reflective objects. These are translucent and, therefore, have a somewhat different quality. But it

acquires like, it's light. To me, light is one of these paper bags is equivalent to gold, you know. It could be just like gold sheets crinkled because they're gold and they reflect light. These are translucent light but they really have that quality.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the fabric ones that you started working on?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes [showing something]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. That's the new base?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. That's the new business. Because I feel that to be a static light is not enough. It should be flexible, changeable and that's the reason I got interested in doing these stands.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But about the fabric ones because you talked about ....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, you know, there are these Indian friends who wanted to make akari. They made them for themselves, I mean, a more traditional kind. They were made in India.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, yes. I did, "Sure, Why not?" Then they wanted to be able to make things to export to the United States. You know, naturally India would like to export to the United States. But the trouble was their paper was from Assan but it's not that good; I mean it's very beautiful to look at but it's very brittle. SO I thought: well, these people were milliners, they have a lot of cloth so much as in the handmade, you know the Madi – Gandhi cloth. So I thought: well, why not design something which could be made in cloth. So I did. And I will probably peruse that thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Will they be called akari, too?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fascinating.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: But, you know, I'd like to make akari so that people can get inside them. Of course I think probably this sort of thing comes from my recollection of Japan and the shoji and the light coming from outside inside so eventually you end up by being inside the light. I think I have that kind of feeling about sculpture, of wanting to be inside the sculpture. That's when you're really a part of it. I mean the usefulness in integral. Well, you can say that architecture is sculpture as an experience to be completely experienced not just looking at it. But – no – I think of sculpture as an experience completely experienced, not just looking at it. You're encased in it, you know, I suppose as back in your mother's womb sort of thing. You are an integral part of it. Well, I mean there you have sculpture; it's your world. It's the world and the world then becomes a sculpture. So everything is a sculpture, you see. I think I'm a megalomaniac.

PAUL CUMMINGS: To go back a little bit to your travels, to your two-year tour, it's interesting to think about the things that you saw – I haven't seen many of those places but I've seen photographs of them – but thinking what their shapes are like and the shapes that appear in your sculpture and the kind of -- "sensibility" I think is a bad word sometimes – and you've talked about Zorach and his "truth to the materials." I have gotten a greater sense of stone, I guess, marble, or whatever, the crystalline quality in that piece in the way you use things than most other sculptors. Do you think that's an accurate reading of your work?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, you know, I have regard for the material, you see. As I said, again, it probably comes from Japan and from Brancusi. Respect for the material itself. For instance, this paper, I respect that material of the paper. People will say, "Why don't you make it out of plastic or something else?" That's not the point. To me the excellence of sculpture derives very much from the material, you know, the truth of the material. And I feel that with stone it's possible to know what the truth of that material is because it's part of our experience on this earth that we are involved with. We walk upon it, it's a part of our environment which is absolutely true. I don't feel that way about plastic, for instance, because it's a strange and new medium which I'm not that familiar with. And I don't really know that plastic has any intrinsic character of its own. It may be a sort of gummy substance. But you cannot break it and say that it reveals itself. It's just a mess. I mean, if you break a piece of stone, it's stone revealed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. The colors, the striations, textures and everything.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. If you polish it, it comes out – another quality is revealed. So I mean the medium is the message, very much. By my medium is that which I'm familiar with and which I associate with the qualities of stone or space, of, you know, the natural mediums – air, light, water; those are natural mediums. And where necessary I will use man-made materials. For instance, I use aluminum there or I will use pumps, you know, ways of acquiring, getting this effect. But the effect to me should be like nature. If I make a fountain, it should be like a storm at sea, you know, a waterspout, if you will. But it should have that kind of quality.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it's interesting that it goes back to kind of a basic natural forces or qualities rather than to an imaginative one or an application of an idea on the material? It goes from the material?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Actually, all our imagination derives very much from nature and, however we stretch it, it alludes to things in nature. I mean, you take a geometric art such as Mondrian's, for instance. Where it is good, I think it still relates to nature and man's use of natural mediums. For instance, in a Japanese traditional house, the way wood is used – planning it, sawing it, grooving it, notching it, and so forth, you end up with something like Mondrian. And I think Mondrian was quite aware of this. I mean he was not against nature. His things derived from nature and there is a sense of nature in it. I think that where he succeeds and others don't is because he and this link. If you see his early drawings, you can see that he understood perfectly well. Where other don't succeed is because.... While he developed one form the other so that it was a logical progression, just the same as the Japanese house is a logical development of the use of tools and of the medium of wood and so on. But somebody who goes to school and who starts out with Mondrian and goes on from there does not know where it comes from and therefore their things are very sort of shallow and arbitrary because they think that they are superseding Mondrian when they are doing nothing of the sort. They are merely misunderstanding things; you see, they haven't really profoundly understood things. So that when you say that I got o nature instead of to art – well, I think that where artists have succeeded is because they have not gone from art to art but from nature. For instance, when Gorky was so enamored of Picasso and Miro and so forth, he really didn't get very far away from them as prototypes. But when he went to Virginia and saw nature he was suddenly aroused to do what he did. And I think the young artists have a tendency to forget that, to not be aware that they have to grow from some place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's fascinating how it always goes back tot eh same thing but the individual's reaction makes something different. The development is different.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Sure



PAUL CUMMINGS: To go back to the tour again, your two-year trip, you ended up in Japan?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, I ended up in Japan. As I say, I went from India then to all sorts of places, to Burma, to Bali, to all sorts of places; and finally I ended up in Japan. I hadn't been to Japan since 1931 and I didn't know what to expect. I hadn't even planned on being in Japan very long. After all, the war had intervened. I was absolutely astonished to find how extraordinarily sort of open the Japanese were at that time. My best time in Japan was then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It was the first time after the war when everybody was more or less penniless and everybody was sort of equal and there was this tremendous sort of felling of friendship and possibility, not just toward me but toward each other, I think most Japanese would agree that this was the best time. Nobody had anything. These walls between people only develop with the acquisition of things, you know, and the ambition to get ahead and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Let's see, in 1933 the economy in Japan was fairly good, was it?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: 1931 was the time just before the Manchurian Incident. I was on the boat when that Incident took place and the war with China more or less started. So that Japan at that time was not very....You know, it was still the old Japan and there was a kind of nationalistic or militaristic, reactionary thing which had set in, which continued to get worse until the war. This misconception of the West, you know, this aggressive, commercial, military thing which gripped in this desire to prevail, you see. But at that time, in 1951 – I arrived in Japan at the beginning of 1951 – I was surprised that there was this extraordinary sort of springtime that it was actually spring, of course. I became very enthusiastic about Japan. I've kept on going there every year since, at least once, twice, sometimes three times a year, staying there for a couple of months at a time and doing what I could there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had an exhibition there, didn't you?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, I've had several exhibitions there – not very many....You mean at that time?

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I mean the first one.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: At that time, yes. I was there for four months. I had an exhibition right off. I did some ceramics and had an exhibition at the Mitsukoshi Department Store. Everything was very pleasant. Everybody was very friendly, very sort of....I was kind of like the pigeon coming to Noah's Ark, I mean I was a kind of symbol from the outside. There was no other artist than me. I was the only one. I was more or less, you might say, the progenitor. The whole art movement in Japan, you know, derived in a sense from me. Certainly the sculpture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, the ceramics made, that was the first time you produced anything like that?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, no, no. In 1931 that's what I was doing. I was in Kyoto for five months doing ceramics only.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. But in the 1950's they were very different.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, in the 1950's I just merely continued what...I resumed what I had been doing – well, it was twenty years before. This twenty years had not existed; I mean I just continued. One had that capacity, you know, going to a place one went back to where one was. One forgets

that time that intervened or that people have changed and you have changed and so forth. Bit one continues because that's the easiest thing to do – to continue. And even today when I go to Japan I continue where I left off.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Exactly. And when I come back here I'm at a loss because I'm too much away from here. And when I come here I'm sort of troubled by things that are extraneous to my own development or belief in art here, you see. It's a little bit removed. I don't like it. I mean it's only when I do things like this Detroit project or something like that that I feel I'm in contact here. I have to be in contact. Of course, these lanterns are sold all over the world so that's a kind of contact. I like the contact. But then in Japan the contact is not with people but with the earth. And I work with stone and it's a kind of communion with something really worthwhile, you see, even if people don't see it. Maybe some day they will, I don't know. It doesn't matter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's interesting because you really have now, I gather, for the last few years, residences in three places, I mean Italy, New York and Japan.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find that sense of continuity in Italy, for example?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, yes. There, after all, I work with stone too. I have great satisfaction working with stone. It's something I can believe in. First of all, I myself work in the medium. David Smith used to say, "Why don't you work with metal? Why don't you become a welder like me?" Well, for one thing, I don't like working in a sort of dark place with this flashing light looking through a glass hood, with dirt and so on. It's not a medium that's friendly to me. I mean the result might be nice but the method just doesn't please me too well. I like the function of being an artist working with mediums that I like. I like working with wood on paper or stone or something like that where you're on a friendly relationship to the medium. But with metal – I mean I'll do something in metal, yes, but it usually ends up by somebody else doing the welding for me. The only really big experience I've had with metal was the Associated Press Plaque. That was cast up in Boston and I spent almost a year up there doing it. I ground the whole thing and did a lot of the electric welding, the plugging of the wholes. I was doing it and everybody else was doing it. I mean it was full of holes and we plugged it up. That sort of thing. But in the sense of David Smith – no. I enjoy more working in a different way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What is it about the stone that you like in terms of working with it?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It's a direct medium. When you've finished with it, it's what you intended. It's not a translation. I don't particularly like the translation business. For instance, if you do something in bronze, you're not doing anything in bronze. You're actually doing something in clay or plastic or plaster or something and then somebody else reproduces it for you. It's a false sort of double-removed thing. It never does well, I have done some but what bronzes I've done really are reproductions of things I've done in wood or something like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Like the balsa wood.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Sure. Sure. Probably I could cast the lanterns in bronze if I wanted to and probably I could get a good price for them. But, you know, what's the point?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. You've done some projects in Japan which find very interesting, the *Gardens*, the Memorial you did for your father's university.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, you know, in Japan probably because of my childhood there I have a yen to sort of be accepted, to be a part of it. Just the same as here too, I'd like to be but I don't seem to get very far in New York City; I certainly just don't get going. And I haven't succeeded in Japan either, for that matter. But when I went there in 1951 I did get involved with Hiroshima.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. And the *Bridges*.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: And the *Bridges* there. I was given the opportunity to do it because of this surge of interest in me at the time. And I could do anything in a sense, you know. They even offered me to do the *Memorial to the Dead, Hiroshima*. After all, it was rather farfetched after America had dropped the bomb to ask an American to do a *Memorial to the Dead*; it was just too much. After I made the design for it, it was turned down by the committee. Probably because I was an American.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, it was a little strange.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: But it was just too much. I mean one had to recognize that it was really....But, as an American I thought: well, I'll do a little expiation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But how did the Bridges come up as an idea for the project?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, Hiroshima is built on a lot of canals – rivers, rather – and it's like Venice in a sense except that the rivers are too far down so you don't really enjoy them like in Venice. And there are these islands, you see, and one of these islands was designated by them as Peace Park. And that's where the architect Tange had built this building as sort of a museum of the historical remains of the holocaust. There are two bridges that approach this island. You see, the bridges already existed, it was just the railings that I did. It was through Tange that I was asked to do this.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. I thought there was the whole....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, it was just the railings. And I did the railings. I went to see them the other day with Bucky Fuller. They looked fine. I mean they're still existing. It's the main thoroughfare of Hiroshima. It's very well kept up. There's a movement now to put them in bronze, or selections of them into bronze, they're in concrete and they have to keep on repairing them. So I think it would be good if they were eventually put into concrete. It's not that they look so bad now, it's just that the... the process of....

PAUL CUMMINGS: Wear and tear. Of consumption....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's fascinating because there again it's art in use.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, exactly. But it's the use that derives from the art and not from other use. You might say, "Well, you designed a bridge." That's true enough but still in general I'm not interested in designing a thing so that somebody can make money out of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You also did a garden for *Reader's Digest* in Japan.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Well, I was interested in gardens. You see, in going to Japan so many times, you become more and more aware that that's one of the principal art enjoyments in Japan, especially for somebody who is a sculptor, as I was, was to look at the gardens. I realized that the gardens were the sculpture, the use of rocks and so forth. And I wanted to do some gardens. And

to get experience is very important; I mean you can keep on looking at gardens or studying books on gardens and this and that, but to do a garden is very important, you see. So I did these two gardens in Tokyo. One is for the Keio University where my father taught for forty years; I had an opportunity to design a room and a garden with the architect Taniguchi. And then Antonini Raymond, who had been in Japan for so many years and was the dean of architects there, was doing a building for *Readers Digest*. It was a very interesting building. He asked me if I would do the garden. Not that he had any money for it; he had \$1,500. By then I was in America but I spent part of the money to go to Japan and did the gardens. That's how I did it; it was for experience that I did it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Then you did the one in Paris, the UNESCO Gardens later.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, later on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had talked before about the relationship between a garden and the stage and theater. Did that maintain itself when you started doing the gardens? The gardens came after the theater?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: The gardens came after the theater, but to me it was kind of going into a more direct and public use, the kind of dramatic setting that the theater, you see,....

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you follow the traditional Japanese gardens very much? Or were there great differences?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, No. I was not particularly interested in a Japanese garden. First of all, it's too traditional and then you are sort of stuck – I wanted to be able to develop form that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But there are different kinds of gardens, aren't there?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: They have different kinds of gardens but I mean the Japanese garden in Japan itself has become very sort of hackneyed. I'd be very much interested to do a garden in Japan, I'd like to again – to be free and yet to be able to use the stones and so forth, the materials available. I'd like to try it. In fact, maybe I will. But my gardens have not...Excepting for the UNESCO Garden where I in a sense felt obligated to do a somewhat Japanese garden – you know, I was making a kind of homage to Japan. So it's a Japanese garden and yet it's not a Japanese garden.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I think to do a garden in Japan, all right, you make a Japanese garden but I think at least it should be a contemporary garden. It should not be traditional in the sense of being a Tohuna Period garden, or an Ayan Period garden. That would be just too exotic. I mean I am not interested in doing a period piece. I'd like to make a contemporary garden. I'd like to make a contemporary garden of stones, for instance. And I have attempted that in....

PAUL CUMMINGS: But isn't the sculpture at Yale a garden in a sense?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Sure. That's a garden.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Or Chase Manhattan?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Those are gardens. I mean Chase Manhattan is to me a contemporary garden. It may use rocks but it's still not a Japanese garden. It's different.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you select – for example, at Chase Manhattan, that large, incredible piece of stone?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Having that space to work with and having made vaguely a concept of what I wanted – and then you happen to find such rocks, you see. So you adapt your design or concept to the mediums that are available. So you develop a kind of garden that is a sort of integration of the material with the space possibilities, and you have the Chase Manhattan Garden. You couldn't do it twice. Those rocks don't exist. You couldn't buy them. There just aren't any. They're unique. And they're out of the question now so far as money is concerned. They're fantastically expensive. I mean all those rocks together cost them only \$6,000 then you couldn't get it for ten times that. It's impossible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? For what reason?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: First of all, those particular kinds of rocks simply don't exist. Well, you might find them some place else, maybe in the Rocky Mountains or some place, or on a glacier in Alaska. But those particular rivers have been stripped. There aren't any. Why don't you get rocks from Japan? Well, the Japanese have been searching for rocks for centuries and they are people who have been out looking for them. I found some of the principal rocks in various stone yards. They don't come from one place. Some of them came from the bottom of a river where they originally came from. I was interested in going through and seeing if I could find some in the bottom of a river again. But that river bed had been stripped and I was able to find only some of the small ones there, not the big ones.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. It's fascinating.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It's interesting that those two gardens are wells really, they're at the bottom of a kind of well. Well, that's the sort of situation you wouldn't find in Japan, for instance. In that sense they're not Japanese gardens at all. And they relate to buildings which are very large compared to Japanese buildings. Japanese gardens are looked at from the inside of a low building, from a verandah, let's say, right out on to the garden. There's a kind of formal relationship.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's curious, the one I've seen the most is the one at the Yale for some reason and I notice that, if you look down on it....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It's very bad looking down because the parapet isn't properly done. It's too wide.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. You see only like the distant parts of it.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I know. It's not good. I mean that parapet is terrible. They should either have made it narrower or pitched it so that you could look into it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I have a friend who has an office right there and, if you look through his windows, it's the landscape in a sense right in front of you with the light and the sky on top. The spatial sense is so different.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I know. Yes. The same is true of the Chase Manhattan Bank Garden. You get a better look from above than from at Yale. And it's more satisfactory from that point of view.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you find that a limitation: to work in a low, confined area like that?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: After all, I had designed that area. That garden came about because I had been

asked to be a consultant on the whole plaza by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. And I had taken the entry – the entry was in through the hole there originally – I took it out and put it out by the road there so that the steps could be so aligned so that one would be able to get down into the bank from the outside without going into a hole in the plaza. And then in that hole I suggested making the water garden. That's how it came about. I had also indicated a place for a big sculpture which they wanted on top there. That's why that horrible Dubuffet....

PAUL CUMMINGS: It doesn't work there.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It doesn't work at all. Therefore, you cannot trust people. Unless you do the whole thing yourself and say: this is it, they muck it up the best they can.

PAUL CUMMINGS: To go back to Japan and 1950, in the catalogue of your recent exhibition, that was there one of the essays say that you discovered the world of Zen. What does that mean? Had you been interested in Zen? Or was this a new discovery. Or was it just a kind of poetic inference.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, it's a continuation actually. My mother was a very sensitive person. My father was a poet. I knew gardens as a child. And so, when I went there in 1931, I was already looking at garden and Zen temples. For instance, there was a student who went around with me who was interested in Zen

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, the one who used to do contemplation and meditation.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. And therefore I was familiar with Zen. It wasn't that it was a new discovery; it was a kind of continuation. In 1951 when I went there I got somebody to go along with me to visit temples and so forth. His name was Hasegawa Saburo. He subsequently came to this country and became more and more involved with Zen. He died at Allan Locklin's place in San Francisco. I might say that it was because of my interest in Zen that he became more interested in Zen. It wasn't that he was not familiar with it, but he was a Western-oriented painter like all modern painters over there. He was not an old-fashioned painter; he was a modern painter in the sense that he admired people like Kandinsky and Klee. So when I became interested in looking at these temples, we went around making rubbings. So he became more and more interested. When he came to this country he came here in the sense of being a Zen teacher. He was a well-to-do young man who had married a French girl and was sort of bringing back to Japan the latest European art and wrote about it and so forth. He was popular for that reason. But then, when he came to America after the war and went back to Japan and started to talk to them about Zen, they had no use for him at all. They said: "What are you talking about?" so he had no place in Japan and so he came back here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's extraordinary. I always get the feeling that modern art in Japan is sort of isolated from continuing cultural activities.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, as I was saying at the beginning of this tape, they have taken up art in mid-course, they have entered into modern art in mid-course, not from the beginning but in mid-course. And so they started out where somebody had just arrived, let's say, Mondrian or somebody else, whoever you have here. And, therefore, in a sense it's more artificial than the artificial; I mean, to me, there's a kind of lack of continuity a lack of – well, but they are so adept at it I would say that by now maybe the Japanese are leaders in the technologically-oriented art of today. Maybe Tokyo is....In fact, Tokyo is so much more modern than New York. But I mean I don't particularly like it. It's artificially into the extreme to me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? In terms of what? -- the way people live? The machinery?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It's all sort of fashion. The Japanese are terribly fashion-conscious, you know, being up on latest wrinkle of everything. You never have to open a door in Japan. It's all opened automatically when you come near it. Even in taxis you never open a taxi door. Everything is automated.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's why they're having such trouble because of the energy crisis.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: They've gotten around the Arabs all right. They have the oil and now we'll be the ones who will be starving. They'll be sending steaks over here that will work so beautifully and we'll be fascinated to but them like toys.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think what it? Why do you think they've modernized things so much?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Because they want to succeed. They see that our success was dependant upon our technological ability. They lost the war because they didn't have the technological ability that the Americans had. So they've become super-Americans, that's all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fascinating.

[END OF SIDE 6 – TAPE 4 – SIDE 1]  
[SIDE 7]

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is Side 7. In the mid-1950's you began working with Skidmore – wasn't that in the early 1950's.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that come about? Was that through Bunshaft? Of Harrison?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It came about through Hans Knoll. I had known Hans Knoll for many years, since he first cam here. You know, he's the furniture man. In those days – let's see, when was it? – right after the war, as a matter of fact, or maybe it was even during the war – he had landed over here. Prior to his coming here, I believed he was in the furniture business in Germany. At any rate, his family was. Anyway, he was a young man. Furniture was a thing that had a spurt of very interesting development at that time. You probably know about the Eames chair, and all those things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. And the Bertoia things.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, the Bertoia was a little bit later. Bertoia was a talented artist you see. His furniture came a little bit later. But anyway it was a time when furniture was a thing that showed great possibilities of development. They had gotten rid of the stuffiness. The leaders I think were really Breuer and Corbusier back in 1926, around in there. But anyway there was development. And so a lamp that I had devised around 1944-45 – it was for my sister for Christmas – it was a circular cylinder with three legs. This thing which you might say was an invention – I mean it was a very basic thing how you could have a cylinder being held up by three sticks. So Hans started to sell it. I didn't have any patent or anything on it so it was immediately copied. I mean all the lamp shops all over the place had it. It was not mine any more. Knoll continued to sell my version of it, or a version of one of my versions. So in 1955, 1956, around in there, Skidmore was about to – was doing things for Connecticut General Life Insurance Company – I think that was the first one – and Hans suggested that I should work with them on the Garden. That's how I happened to do it. Well, I mean it was a continuation, I did it because I was interested in gardens in Japan. I happened to be useful

to Skidmore I guess at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you've done a number of projects with them.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. The last one I did was this red cube. But one runs one's course. I mean, after all, architects are vain people and, if they feel you're competitive with them, they don't want you around any more. So that was the end of that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find that architects generally are difficult to work with after a while? They change do much.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, in a way architects develop over the years, they become more and more so. I think they start out probably with considerable megalomania but they become impossible after a while. So one has to drop them, or they drop you, one or the other.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had made some sculpture with sheet aluminum, I guess, with Edison Price.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: After coming back from Paris having done the garden there – you know, working with stone is just impossible in New York. It just doesn't fit. You know, you can bring stones here but just to work with stone here is out of the question. So I had this friend Edison Price – who incidentally I saw yesterday. He has done these lighting things so I started doing aluminum things there. Incidentally. For instance, Kelley started doing things there too, afterward. So did Alexander Liberman.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, I remember.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: So in a way I was doing it just a little bit before those people were doing it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you come to make those things out of aluminum like that?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, it came about through the particular machines that Edison had, that's all. And he had aluminum available because he worked with these lighting fixtures so he knew the people at Alcoa Aluminum Company and they gave me the aluminum. And so, how to use aluminum in that particular way of folding – I used a kind of folding technique – may have come from Origami, for instance, you know, folding paper in Japan as a child. And it was a kind of version of the structural use of stone, you know, which I was doing before, I mean sheet stone.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, so that you fold aluminum...I mean if I was interested in welding, probably I could have welded sheets like so many people have done subsequently. But, anyway, the things that derived from a single sheet of aluminum the things that derived and so forth was sort of interesting conceit on my part that you could do all this. There were none of them welded. They were all folded. There was no welding at all. Do you might say it's limited by what you are able to do out of a folded sheet of aluminum. So you set your own limits. You set the limits of what a classical example of that sort of thing can be. That is to say, it's inherent within the tools and the material. You might say the same thing is true of a piece of marble; it's limited by the material and the technique available and what you wish to express. Of course, somebody else would do something else. For instance, Kelley does. And I didn't use color. I was against the use of color. For instance, Sandy Calder uses sheet metal and he bolts them together. So, all right, you set your own sort of limits and you say: that's my territory.



PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you made any other things of aluminum after that in that way?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I tell you, the trouble with aluminum is that it's not a very satisfactory medium for outdoors. It just doesn't stand up. So recently, I've made some metal things in steel and those are welded but not by me; I get somebody else to weld them for me. I go to the studio. But they just merely hark back to the things that I did in aluminum but with just a slight divergence. As a matter of fact, many of the designs were reproductions from the aluminum things I was doing. But, to me it's not in my real interest.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was an experiment.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It was just an experiment and going back – it's a kind of an adaptation to New York and not necessarily what I really believe in. I mean it's all right, I suppose, but I mean, to me, there has to be a kind of continuous advance or furtherance of what you're looking for rather than what is practical or possible at the particular place where you are. That is to say, given the possibility of doing the best you know how, or the truest to what sculpture might be, and then you say, we don't want to be tied to the possibilities in the whole world, what would you do? Well, given all possibilities, I would probably do things which maybe it would be impossible to move. Then what happens? Well, it's all very well you make something, you can't move it, it's there. If it happens to somebody's property who is willing to keep it there, that's fine. But supposing it isn't, supposing you just happen to make it in your own place and can't move it, then what? That's the kind of situation I'm in, of course, these metal things are easily portable, they're very salable, they're this, that and the other. But they do damage to my amour-propre.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start gluing pieces of stone together? That's epoxy, is it?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, well, again, it's an extension of my structural use of stone. I used to do it with dovetailing together sheet stone things. And then I was interested in sort of post tension stone and made some columns where there were these rods which you tighten up on either end so it holds together in that sense. From there you go on to piles of stone. I do a good deal of breaking of stone and putting it together. Again, it's a kind of searching for the structural relationship to the medium, not just leaving it alone but shattering it, then putting it together again. For instance, Marcel Duchamp's piece of glass he broke and then pasted it together again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it broke.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It broke. All right, but not deliberately.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You have in the studio a large vertical rock which really looks as if it was broken in different pieces.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It was broken.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is it broken? Or is it sawed? Or how did you do that?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It was deliberately broken.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you break a huge rock like that?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: You put wedges in it and you shatter it, you leave it, you break it. By breaking a thing, you destroy it and then you take some time....The question is: how deliberately do you do it and do you have a plan when you do it? And it usually works out that what you plan to do is not

what you end up with at all because the breakage has given it another character and it doesn't go back the way you expected it to; it goes back to something else. I've done quite a dew of those things. I've taken rocks and stones and twisted things around. You have a new thing. By breaking it up, you enter inside the molecules, so to speak.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you can control where the break is going to go?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, that's the point. I mean it really doesn't matter I mean you might just as well break it any old place. I think and think and think and say: al right, this is what I'm going to do. But if I did it any old place probably it would be just as well. So I mean I'm not liberated to extent but "the indeterminacy of things," as John Cage would say. You might just as well do it by throwing dice as by anything else. Well, why do you have to throw dice? You might just as well back into it and just fall over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Well, it's a ritual, too.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: All right. But you pretend that you have some control over the thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. There's a piece which ahs been sawed and has many sections but it's been carved and articulated and the surface is....What's the procedure on something like that?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It's not as simple as it looks.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. That's what I mean

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Eventually it becomes a kind of assemblage, an assemblage that you work upon. It's like the walls of Machu Pichu. You don't suppose that those stones were just found like that? They were made that way. Why? Because they were crazy. That's all. It's a kind of madness that you pursue for some reason or other. It has to fit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it's made up of many pieces?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes, that's right.

PAUL UMMINGS: But what do you do – do you assemble the pieces and then work on it?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: You work both ways. I mean it's indeterminate. The result is just your own private sort of pleasure. You know, things aren't done that way any more. There are people who are mad here too. They do things in their own way. I mean, for instance, Edison Price is quite mad making those lights, you know. They work beautifully but then he spends all night long working on them. You don't know how they'll come out but he simply labors. That's true of most anything else, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, he does incredible things in that plant there. Another thing I want to ask you about it the titles that you put on works. Are they meaningful?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: They're only after the fact, in a sense; after you've done it and you want to suggest something of what you had intended. That's all. I don't say that they're always very successful. In fact, most of them aren't, I don't suppose. But I mean it's a kind of identification instead of just a number. You might sort of start people thinking in that direction instead of in some other direction.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So there is some kind of idea behind them?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. Some sort of identification of your intention.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the mid-1960's, you started staying in Italy. Was it then?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I well you – how did it happen? When I was doing the UNESCO Gardens Henry Moore was doing this sculpture down in Italy at a place called Henraux. They were carving it for him out of travertine. I had met his friend, Peter Gregory, who was a book publisher in London, of London Humphries.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right. Yes.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I went to visit Henry Moore with Peter Gregory. He told me about this firm. Peter Gregory had been in Italy with Moore when they visited Henraux. So when I went to Italy I called at Henraux. They had this sculpture shop which had been set up by the director there. His name was Tchidonio. He wanted to promote the relationship between a large factory like that and the artist; you know, it was a place that had occurred elsewhere. I mean there was the idea of a symposium, sculptors coming there and working and so forth. So they asked me to come over there and work too. And I did. Subsequently, when Tchidonio lost that factory and tried to set up a place of his own, he fixed up a place for me to work. And that's how I continued going to Italy and with Tchidonio. He wasn't able to get many artists to go with him. I was practically the only one. He made a place for me to live there. But he died recently, two years ago, so now I am homeless again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you still go to Italy and work, don't you?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, I did go for just a very short time this past summer. And I'll probably go again this summer. It's very convenient.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have assistants there, and workmen?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. I just use whoever is there to help me. I don't really have assistants. I'm much too free and I don't like the idea of having a sort of staff and all that sort of thing. I'd rather use the labor available, the skills available and not have them dependent upon men for survival, or have me sort of tied to their lives so much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've never had very many people over the years who've worked with you, though, have you?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Not continuously, no, no. Just periodically somebody would come in. When I would happen to need somebody to help me, they would come and help me and that's the way it was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's fascinating. I was looking through those catalogues and there's so much work that you've produced, it seems that there must be a big factory.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. I have nobody.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of things would you use assistants on? For example, what would an assistant do for you?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: For instance, on these aluminum ones Shoji was here. He was the only one who helped me. In fact, I got him a job at Edison Price. He was there for about five years subsequently to my working there with him. He was a student of Bucky Fuller. So he helped me out and then he worked for Edison. Now he's with Bucky. Various people have helped me when I needed them.

There was a young Japanese named Hirohi who wanted to help me. He was around my place helping me for several years. He's a teacher now. He's become a leading authority on kites, you know, that fly in the air. I suppose in a way they're akari in a way because they're involved with paper. In fact, I made a collection of kites.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: He became involved with kites and now he chases kites all over the place. I'm very pleased to see people who develop like that. Another young man who was at my place is now carving redwood burl in California, very fine, very huge, very beautiful thing. I'm very pleased when people develop like that, people who I had something to do with.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you've never really taught, have you?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I don't teach, but I think I teach enough without having to actually say it in words. Because I do things and I say those things influence people in the way they think and in the way they make things, and that's enough. I mean as example.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. To go back to the *Playgrounds* which keep coming up again: In 1961-62 with Louis Kahn, you designed the *Playground for Riverside Drive Park*.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. It was never built.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened? Why was that?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: We worked on it for five years, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? That long?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: But it just never got realized for the simple reason, but a complicated reason that – well, we kept on changing it all the time because of the requirements of the City, you know. It was like trapping the old man of the sea, it was always changing shape. And anyway, we were trying to force something on them that they really didn't want. They'd say, "Oh, well, this is not the place. It's got to be some place else." And we'd shift it, we kept on shifting it around this way and that way, all over the place. There were always objection. And then finally it looked as if there were no more objections left. I mean we compiled with the City code and this, that, and the other; we surmounted everything. But, by the time we surmounted everything and the money was available, Mayor Wagner had signed everything; -- the last thing he did was in a big meeting down at City Hall, it was going to go through, everything was signed. Then, you see, the Mayor was changed., and immediately I was the first person thrown out. Hoving was made Parks Commissioner. He said to me – these are the word she used – "This is the saddest thing I have to do but you cannot do that park – that garden, because that was one of Lindsay's campaign promises." That's the only reason I was ever given as to why it was killed: it was a campaign promise.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? I wonder why. How peculiar.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It was a campaign promise. You know, it was being financed half by the City and half by the *Adele Levy Memorial*. The person who was back of it was Audrey Hess – Mrs. Thomas Hess. And you can ask Tom Hess as to what happened. I heard subsequently that what happened was that it was a campaign promise purely on the basis of the Republicans versus the Democrats and that they were ready to expose Wagner as having received campaign funds from Adele Levy and that this was a pay-off; that this was the last thing Wagner did was as a pay-off for favors

received, you know, more or less a la Nixon; and that, if the Hesses didn't shit up and so on and so forth, they would throw the whole thing to the public and there would be a scandal. Now this is the sort of thing, these dirty, crooked, incredible shenanigans. That's how the thing was killed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's incredible.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Now that the Democrat is back – the fake Democrat that Mr. Lindsay became – you might say, maybe it can be revived. I don't know. Maybe I should ask Tom Hess if the funds are still available.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That would be marvelous – ten years late.

ISAMY NOGUCHI: Yes. I should ask him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, one of the things that you designed was for the Memorial on the 2500th Anniversary of Buddha which, from the way I read it, was done without your knowledge and all of the sudden you appeared one day and there it was, finished.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, no, no. What happened was that – actually it's a little confusing and complicated. Actually it started out in 1956 when I was working for UNSECO. They asked me if I wouldn't be interested in doing a park for Lumbini, in Nepal, for the birthplace of Buddha. So I went to Nepal on the way to Japan. I tried to get to Lumbini but never could get there because there were no connections then. The air traffic down there was very bad. And it was very malarial. People said, "Why do you want to go there?" and this, that, and the other. Anyway, I didn't spend too much time in Nepal. I spent a week or so. Then I went on to Japan. Interestingly enough, Tange had subsequently been basked to do something for Lumbini and he asked me if I would like to work with him on developing Lumbini. But, you know, it takes money. They want to know who has the money. There's nothing there in Lumbini. But subsequent to that, a year or so later, or something like that, there was a competition for the *Buddha Memorial* for a spot in Delhi. I worked on this thing in Japan and sent it off to India for this competition. Actually I didn't win it. Somebody else won the competition. But nothing was ever built. It's talked about instead by an Indian architect I know. I wasn't that much interested in Delhi. My hope for it – I would like to have it in Lumbini. I still would like to have it in Lumbini. Maybe some day it will be built. Who knows?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, it hasn't been built?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, it hasn't been built. My best things have never been built.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? Well, the parks and all the....

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, some of the things have been built. But I mean none of the *Playgrounds* have been built. The Detroit thing is the nearest thing to some of the ideas that I've had being built.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that come about? – because this is an immense undertaking.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: That came about simply because this lady, Mrs. Dodge, left \$2,000,000 for a foundation. And they could never decide what to do with it. I think it was about two years from the time she gave the money until finally there was about two weeks left 'till the deadline when they would have to give up the money. So, at the last minute, in desperation they asked me, they said, "Hurry up and do something." So they asked me, they said, "Hurry up and do something." So I did. But I said, "I have to do the whole place too."

PAUL CUMMINGS: The park and gardens and all?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. So I did it, but I did it just on speculation. Do finally they said, "Sure, you do the whole thing. Nobody else will do it. You get the job."

PAUL CUMMINGS: You set up a company for it – it's called the Noguchi Foundation and Plaza Company. Why is that?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: You have to because of the contractual relationship. For instance, in doing the Riverside Drive thing we had the Kahn-Noguchi Company for that. You have to have a kind of entity that they can deal with.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long have you been working on this then?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, for quite a while. In fact, for the longest while we were stuck there because Mrs. Dodge's grandson wanted to do it himself. He threatened me with lawsuits and this and that. He had to do it. And he said that it had to be at the foot of the Woodward Avenue where Mrs. Dodge said it was to be. The trouble with that is that at the foot of the Woodward Avenue there is no place to put it. There is this park which is at the foot of Woodward Avenue but off to the side. But anyway things really got resolved. But things are very difficult to get done in a municipal situation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why is that do you think? They're all protecting themselves?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I suppose so, yes. They have rules and regulations. They don't want to stick their neck out, this, that, and the other. But it is surprising how well it has gone in Detroit. For instance, in New York I've never been able to do a thing here and this is my home town.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The other day in the car you mentioned that you have invented a nozzle for the fountain.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What is unusual about it? Or what did you have to do...?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, it's a nozzle which...Gosh, I've sealed it up; I have a patent application for the nozzle right here; it's too bad I sealed it up, I can't open it. It's a nozzle which allows the water to come out in a C shape; that is to say that the inside pressure and the outside pressure is equal. You know, a large nozzle where the water comes around the periphery had this sort of unfortunate sort of imbalance between the inside and the outside. Now they're able to overcome it by this invention. The nozzles we're building are ten inches in diameter. That's quite a big nozzle.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. You must have tremendous pressure then and millions of gallons of water and everything.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. When it's going full blast there will be eight hundred horse power, you know, eight hundred horses running full speed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And it's programmed – how many? - thirty-one different variations –

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Well, about an hour or so I suppose – the whole cycle, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. And completion date is when?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I think in the spring of 1976.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A couple more years.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Let's hope it gets through without any further...

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is it still in the design stage? Or has any construction started out there?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Construction hasn't started on this. Probably next spring they'll be giving the bids out for it. The plaza is now in the working drawing stage. They're doing the working drawings. That should be finished by spring. The whole thing will sort of slowly get going.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's going to be an exciting project. And you designed the theater that's going to be there too?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: The whole thing. Everything. Underneath side, up side, everything. It's a very complex affair.

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is one of the most complicated projects you've done, isn't it?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Oh, yes, by far the most complicated. Yes, and by far the most money involved too. It's \$7,000,000 for the plaza, \$2,000,000 for the fountain, about \$300,000 for a pylon; there's a roadway going underneath. That's a separate funding. There's quite a lot of money involved.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How much time does it take on your part? I mean, do you go to Cambridge a lot and back and forth.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. It all started here in my studio. The original model and everything was done here. Then, having come to the point where you have to make drawings, that was done up in Cambridge because Shoji has an office and a staff there and is better equipped.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He's an architect – right?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: He's an architect, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's going to be fabulous. One thing we haven't talked about much are your dealers. Eleanor Ward was your dealer in the 1950's.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I really have never had any real contractual relationship with any dealer so that, you know, they were just temporary like many other artists have done. I mean you just show and you have another show if they feel like it; or you don't. So that, for instance, when Eleanor Ward didn't want to show the aluminum, I had a show of stone and marble. But then Knoedler's said they'd show the aluminum and the backed out a month before they were going to have the show. So I was trying to find somebody to show the aluminum. Ekstrom said he's show them. So I went over to Ekstrom to show them. Well, so I am out of the Stable Gallery somehow because Ekstrom has taken me on. That sort of thing happens. And I'll probably show some place else because it's more convenient, or they're more interested, or there's more space, or something like that. For instance, right now I'd like to show my stone pieces but they're too heavy and you've got to have somebody who is willing to put their shoulder to the wheel and push. I don't think Ekstrom has a particular interest in that sort of thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of stone pieces?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Those Japanese pieces.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, those broken ones?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: Yes. I had a show of marble at Ekstrom but nothing happened at all. It was right at Thanksgiving time. I think the show lasted about two weeks. Nobody came. It poured rain all the time. It was a complete washout, so to speak.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What – this year?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, no. A few years ago. So I'm not interested in repeating that performance. But I don't know who else can do it properly. I really am quite in despair.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But have the exhibitions been useful to you in any particular way?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: You see, first of all, since I'm not contractually obligated to them, they have no obligations to me. So they don't want to put any money into it. So there are no catalogues, no nothing. So I'm really not promoted very well. But it leaves me free. Of course it's very much the kind of situation Brancusi was I all his life. He never had a show. Nobody had any responsibility to him. Somebody like Giedion-Welcker or somebody would write a book about him but that was all. But he was free. And I'm the same way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So there have only been momentary manifestations?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: That's right. Momentary manifestations but no hoopla, nobody sort of making it a....

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing I want to talk to you about is your book, the autobiography you wrote, *A Sculptor's World*.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I wrote it because nobody else would write one.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was that as an experience for you to sit down and sort of remember everything and write about it?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: It took me – God knows-- an awful long while because, first of all, I had trouble – I don't know whether I've mentioned this: Originally George Wittenborn had an idea. He thought that Dore Ashton could write a book that Karpel at The Museum of Modern Art would do the bibliography. But Wittenborn made the mistake of asking Eleanor Ward if she would put some money into this. She said no. and when I saw her after I had returned from Japan she said, "Don't you have anything to do with that man because he wants money. He doesn't really believe in it but he needs money. I'll get you somebody who will not need any money and will do it because they want to do it." So she got hold of Kurt Wolff who ran Pantheon. Hew was eager to do it. I said I couldn't write. He said he's get somebody who could write for me. But the trouble was that the man he got to write for me was a very charming sort of dilettante in Rome who had written a few children's books and thought he could do it by just getting some tape such as we're doing right now. But, instead of his asking me questions he just gave me a tape machine and said, "All right, go ahead and talk." Which is very difficult, you know. So he took this taped material and wrote something himself. The only thing is I didn't like it because it sounded like him in me. It was in the first person, you see. Then he thought that it was his work of art and he wasn't going to give it up



and he wasn't going to let me do anything else. It was very, very bad. There was a kind of confusion of identities. He thought he was me. Well, it took a long while to get that thing cleared up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of procedure did you use when you actually started doing it yourself?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: You know, Chapter One, you try to think about your childhood, try to remember your childhood. I'm very bad at remembering things like that. So I just sort of started from the beginning, so to speak. Then of course what I did was try to find some photographs that I had had over the years. Various people had taken photographs. Many of the things were lost. How to organize them in periods and of interest and so forth. To organize them like that takes time. And by the organization you clarify your own mind and you find a certain continuity and reasons in it which you may not have thought of at the time. So eventually you have a kind of shape to the book. Otherwise it would have no shape but just jumping around this way and that way, like I seem to be doing all the time. But there's a kind of continuity.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes. How did you like the experience of trying to remember and writing it out in words?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I didn't like it. It was painful to me because, first of all, I thought it was time taken away from what I ought to be doing, namely, sculpture. I'm not interested in being a writer, you see. I had a few things that I had written previously on occasion for magazines and things like that. I incorporated them in the book. You know, you collect things and eliminate and do what a writer does. I'm not a writer but I sort of imitated being a writer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like the business of reviewing you like that way?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I think it was very interesting. As a matter of fact, people have often said to me, "Why don't you teach?" I think the main value of teaching would be just like that in clarifying your own mind about things. By trying to explain yourself you no doubt clarify things in your own mind. By writing, you do the same thing. And, by talking to you, I do the same things. You, by the particular questions you ask, get me thinking about things. I mean your asking me questions...No doubt there are many things I've said in the book, in some different form perhaps. Some things are more explicit, more deeply gone into; and other things probably are not gone into as much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of effect did the book have when it appeared? What response did you get?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: There were a couple of nice reviews in the *New York Times* and so forth. I was interested in the review that Martha Graham had gotten on her book, you know, on her Notebooks which had a very nice review. And just the day before yesterday, there was one in the *Times*. Somebody had written a somewhat critical book on her. But this review was very sort of defensive of her. It was very nice.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did that book do anything as far as stimulating projects for you?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No, not at all. That's one thing I thought it would do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I thought now, this way, by my explaining things I'd get all this work doing parks and playgrounds and so forth that I was interested in doing. But not at all. Either the people who might have given me such jobs never saw the book or didn't get that far in the book to even think

about it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ISAMU NOGUCHI: No. Not a peep.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: I would have thought that that would have established me as being somebody who could be worked with. But not at all. On the contrary. I mean probably it merely became a kind of textbook for people who wanted to copy me. And I think that people who have talked about me like Mr. Friedman who has admitted being "influenced" by me – they prefer to use that word, you see, and so, all right, they make these things and, you know, they say somewhat sort of similar things now, in space. But, you know, I did all the work on it since 1933 or 1934. And I've never been able to do a thing.

PAUL CUMMMINGS: That's incredible.

ISAMU NOGUCHI: That's the way it is. I've been always that way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. That's fascinating.

[END OF SIDE 7 – TAPE 4 – SIDE 2]

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *June 28, 2005*