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## Oral history interview with William Weller Leavitt, 2021 May 7-11

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## Transcript

### Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with William Leavitt on May 7, 10, and 11, 2021. The interview took place at Annette Leddy's home in Los Angeles, CA, and was conducted by Annette Leddy for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

William Leavitt and Annette Leddy have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

### Interview

ANNETTE LEDDY: All right, so—yeah. This is Annette Leddy interviewing—see, there's always some little thing, I've got to do this, here we go. This is Annette Leddy interviewing William Levitt at her home in Los Angeles on May 7, 2021. Bill—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Okay—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —sit back in the chair.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —this is—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Can you describe your family background? Who are the—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Hello?

ANNETTE LEDDY: —Leavitts?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Hello? I was born late November 1941, 10 days before Pearl Harbor, in Washington, DC. My maternal grandparents, Hans Hochbaum and Gertrude Hochbaum, lived in DC since the 1920s, and at that time my father was in the Navy, stationed in Norfolk, Virginia, so the logical place was—for me was DC, because of the grandparents. And we lived in Norfolk until the end of the war, when we moved to St. Louis, Missouri.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So you were five?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Four or five, yeah. And my father worked for the rural electrical—cation association, which provided power lines for rural areas, and so he designed these power lines. And he worked for this agency for a year, and then we moved to Garden City where my paternal grandparents lived, Bill Leavitt and Cornelia Leavitt, and they'd lived there also since 1910 or so, and that's where he was from, where he grew up.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Garden City, New Jersey.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: In Garden City, Kansas.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —Kansas. Okay.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And he—so he started his own business as a civil engineer designing power lines, and his office was there in Garden City. And I lived there until I was about 17, when we moved to Littleton, Colorado. Okay, yes—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, first of all, can you describe your father?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, my father was very tall; he was about six-four. He was very quiet, taciturn, he really was an engineer personality, didn't talk much. My mother was vivacious, she'd grown up in Washington, DC, was a city girl. He was sort of a country boy; not really country, because Garden City was a pretty communal place. I mean, there—if you want a picture of it, the movie *Capote* with Philip Seymour Hoffman and Catherine Keener gives a—I think it's a pretty good view of it, especially with the—one of the first scenes, where he's in the rental car office

waiting for his car, and there's this bleak landscape out there. It's wintertime, there are no trees, nothing, it's just white, and it's—but also, I think that that movie shows a little bit of the social life there, where it was—it was somewhat sophisticated. My grand—

ANNETTE LEDDY: How—what's the population?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Oh, the population was about 12,000 then, and it was a kind of idyllic midwestern town; treelined streets, many, many facilities, and then my grand—and also a nice group of people who lived there. My parents had friends, and my grandparents' friends, so there were the extended families. And my grandfather was from Hampton Beach, New Hampshire, and when he graduated from high school he went to Chicago, to a World's Fair, and he saw that they were growing sugar beets in western Colorado, and that there was a kind of industry of that, and then so, instead of going to college, he moved to Colorado and got a job working for this sugar beet industry and met my grandmother there, and then they moved to Garden City in 1910 or so. And he worked for a big company there called Garden City Sugar Company. Oh, kind of—

[00:05:21]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and what did he do for them?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It's kind of a prosaic name, but he—and he was a vice president and general manager of this operation. So they had a kind of group of friends there. The people that he knew were the Burtises, who had the Ford dealership, and the McCoys, who had—I forget what they did. But it was a very—you know, it was a pretty new town; by 1910 it probably—it was like 40 years old, because of—or 30, maybe even 20. I mean, it was a western town that grew up after they brought the railroad in; the Santa Fe ran through there, so the people who moved in there and started businesses were the—kind of the upper crust of the town.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And maybe even like the founding fathers.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, they were kind of the founding fathers of the town, so. And my parents had many, many friends. Our social life at that time was pretty much the local—around where we lived. We lived on a—I think what had been a farmhouse, or maybe it was a hobby farm. It had a corral, kind of a backyard, a stable, and then after that there were just cornfields. And the people next door had a really big hobby farm, they had huge barns and fields and so forth, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: How—well, excuse me, what is a hobby farm?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: A hobby farm? It's somebody who likes the idea of farming but really doesn't farm, you know. They sort of live—maybe they have a garden, or maybe they own some land out there or something and they're kind of—it's kind of a middle-class thing, I think—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Did they—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —did your father grow vegetables and—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, we—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —crops?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —we had a garden, we had a small garden that—because my grandfather in DC worked for the Department of Agriculture, in the education department, and he—and so their house in DC was a backyard that was a block long, it was right at the edge of the city, so there were no streets, and he had a garden. So, my mother was interesting in gardening, so we did that. But mainly my father was interested in engineering, and he did this for—until about the time I was about 13, and then at that point all of the West was pretty much electrified, all the rural places had power lines going into them, so he didn't have much work, and he—he had a choice. He could either—you know, we could move, get a job, he could get a job as an engineer someplace else, or he could stay there, but it was—he—I think he really wanted to stay there; his parents were there, all the friends were there, it was a really nice community. So he started a printing business, but I—and he was a kind of perfectionist, so I don't—so that worked for a while until I was about 17, and then we moved to Littleton, Colorado.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay. Before we go to Littleton, I just want to ask you a few questions.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: What?

ANNETTE LEDDY: That you—before we go to Littleton—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ANNETTE LEDDY: —can I ask you a few more questions? Okay. Could you just describe your—the home you grew up in, in Garden City, just describe the rooms and the way it looked?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It was on a pretty big plot of land, because land was pretty cheap there, and we had a couple of big Chinese elm trees and a front yard. It was a small, yellow brick house. My dad at some point did a remodel, which included building a big living room and a master bedroom, so—and then it was two stories. So we children had the upstairs. My sister, after they built the master bedroom, she got their bedroom; she was downstairs. My brother and I were upstairs and, yeah, so we had pretty much the run of the house, and—

[00:10:38]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And was it—the style modern, or—yeah?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, it was a just sort of cube with a pitched roof. You know, houses at that time weren't—I think the older houses, farmhouses weren't very elaborate, but—and then the backyard. And somebody had given us a horse, an old bay horse, which we put in the stable, and then we learned how to ride this animal, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.] Did you like it?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: But—yeah, yeah, and then—but the neighbor, Virginia Renick, who lived across the street, also had a horse, so. I mean, we were like 12 and 13 and stuff, so we—we rode out into the fields and pretended we were desperados. And then there was junior high and then, you know, that was—that kind of was over, you know, it was not really cool, so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —she kind of went her way and I went mine, but we had—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And how—where are you in the sibling range? Were you the—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I'm the oldest—

ANNETTE LEDDY: You're the oldest.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and then my sister was about two years younger than—Elizabeth, and then my brother Johnny is the—I think he was five or seven years younger. Chip, Rob, Tom, so there were six of us. And—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —my mom was a really good cook and so eventually, we, you know, learned to cook ourselves, because she put us all to work in the kitchen helping.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That's good.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And there were—and all of the houses there had basements, so my father had an office down there, and he was kind of a techie, and he had also, you know—so he worked down there. He kind of holed up and worked in his office, and he—but he had a nice, big engineering office downtown where I used to go, and, you know, and the draftsmen that were working for him tried to teach me how to do drafting. And then when I took mechanical drawing in junior high, I got a C, and they were very disappointed because I was one of their protégés, but I didn't—I didn't come through in the—it was too—that kind of drawing was too technical for—I mean, I was—I wasn't that—it just wasn't my temperament to do—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But were—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —do drafting.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —you already thinking of yourself as an artist, or having—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, no—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —any interest—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I didn't, I didn't think of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —in art?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —myself as an artist at that time.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you never took art classes when you were a child, for example?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I don't think so. No, we don't—we didn't have classes. However, my mother's brother, Albert Hochbaum, was an artist and naturalist, and he had gone to Cornell and studied art and zoology, and then he moved to Canada and started a wildlife station there. And he—he was quite a well-trained artist, and I—so I saw his work, and I thought, Wow, it's really good. And he had—he published these books that had these pen-and-ink drawings in them, and quite good, you know, pictures of marshes with birds flying over, and—but very well done. I mean, he was not an amateur, so he—I thought of him as the artist, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And was it something that you thought, I want to be like him, at any point?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, I never—I didn't think about it, because they wanted me to be a doctor. I was—you know, it was like one of those things that, okay, you got to be a doctor or a lawyer or something like that—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And were you—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —good at—good in math and science?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I was pretty good at science, yeah, and so I didn't—and I didn't really know what I wanted to do, so I said, "Okay, well, that's fine," but I think in the back of my mind I maybe thought of that.

[00:15:15]

But the influences for me, art-wise, early was these realistic paintings of my uncle, and also my grandparents in Garden City had this very nice landscape by an artist named Charles Craig, who—oh, I looked up recently, he wasn't—I don't think he was that good. I think they had the best work of his, but it was—it was a nicely painted painting, I liked that. And then, in these summers, we took the train back to DC to stay with the grandparents, and of course then we went to the museums there and, you know, we saw art there. But it wasn't really—you know, it wasn't a big deal on my list, but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But you enjoyed it sufficiently to—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —to—yeah?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —you know, I mean, I think I was like a lot of kids. I mean, in junior high, I doodled in my notebook. I mean, I drew airplanes and tanks and things like that, and so—

[They laugh.]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I thought, yeah, hey, that's art, you know, that's what I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But, you didn't draw comic strips like—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I didn't—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —so many—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —draw comic—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —guys did?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —strips, yeah, no.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, I mean, I'm wondering, if you think about—just a little more about your childhood, so what was the dynamic among you and your siblings?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: My sister and I were very close, and—because we were close together in time, so we were pretty close. And then there was—it was as if there were two families, my sister and I, and then my younger brothers, and there was a big separation there in time in terms of growing up, so—yeah. And that—I mean, that was part of it, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Were they different in—also, like in a cultural sense, then you and your sister —

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, they were—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —have different interests?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —you know, since they were—I think Johnny and Chip were very close in age, and then Rob and Tom, so they were all together as this young unit, and then we were the older group, and there was a separation of five or six years there in between, so they formed their own, you know, kind of community, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And it's also kind of—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and also, I think you don't—there is a—I think there's a sort of built-in distance to childhood. I escaped by going down to the basement and building model airplanes. I mean, because if I was around, my mom said, "Oh, you should do this or that," and I—I was—or— but if I was invisible and I was working on something, I was sort of protected, and also protected from the rest of the family, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —and the tasks you might otherwise have had to do.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Oh yeah, that I might have to do or it was—yeah, because it was—and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: What were you—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and when I was 13, I went to work for my dad in the—in his printing office.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what did he print?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, he did lithography, letterheads and bulletins and things for people. He also did blueprints for people, and they had what was called an Ozalid machine, which I ran. It was a big—fed the paper in and cut it, and I did that, but then he fired me after about a year.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Why?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I don't know. I mean, he thought I wasn't doing well, I was fine, but it was just—he maybe wanted me to do something else or some—

ANNETTE LEDDY: You mean, part of his perfectionism and—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, and—I don't know. We didn't have like a really close relationship, so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I'm not sure, and I'm not sure why, so. But then I—oh, I think 12 or at 13, I got a job at the grocery store there, Dillons, as a sack boy, which I did for awhile.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Sack boy, yeah. What about your mother, were you close to your mother?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, my mother was pretty—she was really very social, and she kept—we went to church every Sunday. I was in the choir—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Which church?

[00:20:00]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and we went to the—what's it called—the Community Church, which was a

—

ANNETTE LEDDY: What, like the Episcopalian?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, it's not Episcopalian. It's—I forget the—it's not Unitarian, and it's not Commu—it was called the Community Church, that's what it was called, and it had—it was one of those Puritan churches where there were no images in the church itself. There are no pictures of Christ, no crosses, no—there might have been a cross, I think they had maybe a cross, but it was very—it was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But just a plain—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —it was related to—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —cross?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —a Unitarian kind of church [Congregational church -WL].

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: So I went to—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —that's—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —Sunday school and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —interesting, and you sang—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —the choir.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —in the choir.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I sang—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did you enjoy—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —in the choir—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —that?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah. And what?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Did you enjoy that? Did you enjoy singing in the choir?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I don't know, you know?

[They laugh.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I don't remember. I don't remember really liking it. I remember that when, in junior high, I had to be in glee club, and I really didn't like it, but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So it sounds like there were a lot of things you—that you did, that maybe you didn't enjoy, but were like out of a sense of obligation or duty, or something. And then there were things that you enjoyed, and so far, that's model airplanes and riding the horse?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, no, that's true, yeah, you know, I didn't—I mean, sort of the formality of church was not really great, but maybe—yeah, but I think it was—but my—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Did you—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —Sunday School teacher, Bill Brent, had flown P-47s in World War Two, so that was great, and so he—and he was a really good guy, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But did you play games with your siblings, or did—like —?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Not really—

ANNETTE LEDDY: No?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —no, no.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You didn't even play board games, or card games, or—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And we—maybe, I—I'm not sure, I don't think. I don't remember doing that, yeah. And we—it was—oh, it was sort of Gothic there. I mean, western Kansas in the wintertime; raw, bleak, you look—you kind of—oh, I don't know, and I—I—I'm not—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Gothic, you mean in the sense Gothic, like very—like a severe kind of feeling?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Kind of severe, and, you know—

ANNETTE LEDDY: It's duty and—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and not—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —an emphasis on—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah. It wasn't, it wasn't really that—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But your mother sounds like she wasn't like that, but she was more of a, like you were saying, vivacious, or—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, she had sort of two sides, and she was very strict on one hand, but kind of vivacious on the other, so, you know, she had a lot of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Strict as far as what?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah. No, I mean it's interesting how some of the things—my grandmother Cornelia, who lived in Garden City, had a very good voice and played the piano; she was—but she didn't have a piano, she had done that as a child, and my mother had a very good voice and sang to us, so. And then I had to be in the choir, but that, that was something that I—I mean, it was just like, well, that was just the part of life, how to—big deal.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You didn't—did you take piano lessons?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And I took piano lessons, so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, you did?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, and so, yeah, which I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So how far—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —didn't really—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —did you get—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —enjoy.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —with it? You didn't like that?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, you know, I probably did it for a couple of years, you know, and my dad played the piano at night. He wasn't great, he was okay, but he enjoyed it, so. So it was kind of around, but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But you had that musical—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —my—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —foundation that maybe you came back to—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, I didn't—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —later?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —think about, yeah. I mean I could sing all the popular songs of the time, you



know, but I—so what, you know?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: But my mother—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —was—she really liked art, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —since her brother was a good artist, I think she emphasized that, that—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Like, what kind of art was in the home?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, we had original paintings that weren't bad, and not a lot of them, you know, but a few—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Like landscapes, or—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, landscapes and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —portraits?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, and you know, so I remember seeing those. I mean, I think those things happened—develop an interest in art happens slowly. My aunt Gertrude, when I started college, gave me a book called *The Concise History of Modern Art*, and, I mean, really quite a nice book, color reproductions, and I liked that, and then—so.

[00:25:02]

ANNETTE LEDDY: So is there any—do you have any memory of, like, your first artwork, the first drawing that you did as a child, or something like that?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, I did a couple of landscapes, that—

ANNETTE LEDDY: What were they of?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —on charcoal? They were like desert scenes, you know, and I don't know—you know?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I wasn't really—I didn't think of myself as an artist, I wasn't—I mean, I appreciated art; obviously, there was some around. And though, I mean, I went—when I was 14, I went to a boarding school in Colorado for three—for my last three years of high school, and I did take one art class there, and, it was a good sort of Eastern-style prep school, when I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So why were you—excuse me, why were you sent to prep school? Was that just something that—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —everyone—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —my grandfather had gone to a prep school, and the company he worked for was part of this big Colorado Springs company called the El Pomar Foundation. They owned everything, they owned, like mines, and The Broadmoor hotel, and Garden City Sugar Company, and so they were—and the—so, I think—and my grandfather was a valued employee for them, he ran this operation in Garden City, so I think as a kind of a perk to him, they gave me this scholarship to the school.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And also I think my parents were sort of okay with this idea, because that was when we could drive at 14 and, so we're out there, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: They wanted—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I think she was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —you to be more—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —my mom—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —supervised.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —was a little worried that, you know, I would really get in trouble in some way, and she thought maybe—I think they thought maybe this is a good way to—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But were you a kid who showed signs of getting—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Not really—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —into trouble?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —but, I drove cars, and—?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And we had—there—I don't think we drank, there wasn't that, but there was no—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what was the name of the prep school?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: The—of the what?

ANNETTE LEDDY: The prep school, what was the name of your school?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It was called Fountain Valley School.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And was it all men?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It was all men. It was very—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, really?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —small. I mean it was about—I think there were 120 students at the time when I was there.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And they were all boarding school students from—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, it was like, I think just high school, it was just four grades of high school, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And was it a good school, did you—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, it was a good school, I mean I had a very good education, I had quite good teachers. Jim Hutchinson, one of the—was the English teacher. And, I mean, we had to read Faulkner, *Light in August*, we had to read Hemingway, we had to read these classics—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Not bad.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —we had to read all the Shakespeare plays, so they were kind of tough in that way. And, but he's—and he—one incident in class, that we were talking about "art for art's sake," and he went to the blackboard and picked up the eraser from the blackboard and threw it at this reproduction of a painting that was in the room there. And he said, "That's what I think about 'art for art's sake'," and threw this eraser at this reproduction.

[They laugh.]

So anyway, I don't think I ever—I don't think I ever got past that philosophical moment about that discussion, you know, of what—you know, when it was art for art's sake. I didn't really, really think about it, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But was—it's interesting that it's the English teacher who's throwing the—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —you know, throwing this at a work of art. Why, I mean, why was he—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I don't remember the—I don't know—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Is it—was it a—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I remember the—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —judgement—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —phrase—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —about art, visual art as opposed to literature, or was it just—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I mean, I think he just meant art in general.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, that—I mean, yeah, so that it had—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But he was your main mentor at that high school?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, he was—I—he was—I had—he was a teacher when I was a sophomore and when I was a senior, so, and then I had somebody else in between as a junior who taught literature, but—

[00:30:07]

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, usually, American literature is usually junior year, you know?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative], well, this was sophomore and, yeah, they were—they started—I don't remember if they followed that rule, I don't know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what about the art class you took there?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It was just, kind of an elective class. You just—you know, we went outside and painted watercolors of nature. I mean, I didn't think much of it. I just said, "Oh, okay, this is another class to take." The other option there was theater, which I didn't do for an elective or something like that. So you had to take a—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So what were the other kids like?

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WILLIAM LEAVITT: They were—some were East Coast kids, but some were from the West, and they had friends from Colorado, Laurie Lasater and—had a—his parents had a big farm east of—in eastern Colorado.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And ethnicity-wise?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: All white, yeah, pretty much, yeah, we had—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But did you have close relationships, like, with this guy, a close—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, we—I have—I haven't really kept up with the people there with—Bill Kitsch [ph] and Larry Matthews [ph] were a couple of people that—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And where—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —where were you in that, kind of, were you guys the—the literary students? I mean, what was your, you know—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —how it always divides into the athletes—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —we were just the survivors, really.

ANNETTE LEDDY: What do you mean?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: We were—I mean, we weren't—I—oh, well, it was a pretty tough school, so I think a lot of it was just getting through. We had to—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Just academically tough?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Academically, it was tough and then, you know, it was—also, since it was a boarding school, one's schedule was very strictly regulated. We had to—after school at two-thirty, we had to do some sport. And they had various options of what you could do—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So what did you do?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I did squash one year, and then I did wrestling one year, and I couldn't—I was terrible at basketball. I played football in the fall; I was really bad at that. In the spring, I don't really remember. I think I tried tennis. I wasn't very good.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what were you—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I was really not very coordinated. It was, kind of, I hadn't—

ANNETTE LEDDY: What were you considered to be good at?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I don't think anything, really. I mean, I wasn't an exceptional student in any way; I was, like I say, a survivor. I got through, I passed, I did it, I didn't get—I didn't act up and get kicked out of school, so, but they had—and then after—and then we had—after sports, we had dinner, we all went to the—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Did you have to wear—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —dining hall—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —uniforms and stuff at the school?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Not really uniforms. I mean, I think we had to wear a coat and tie to dinner, and that was the big deal. Actually, I'm wearing what I probably wore to class, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I wore desert boots, khakis, and an Oxford cloth blue shirt. I've kind of regressed here, to a 15-year-old, but yeah, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And then, you would have dinner then—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And then after—after dinner, we had to go to study hall, so they made sure that you were busy, that there was no messing around. But the school itself was about, I think, 10 or 12 miles outside of Colorado Springs on a hill, and it was also kind of Gothic. It was just there by itself on this dark hill, so there wasn't really any place. Even if we'd wanted to break out and go in town, there was no way to do it, you know? We didn't have cars in those—I remember we did have, I think, a Tuesday afternoon trip to town; they'd take us in there, and then we could go on the weekends. And I remember once going to some place that served beer, and you could drink, I think, at 18 or something, and we were 17, but they served us anyway, so we had—I had like a beer at an Italian place in Colorado Springs. It was—it wasn't real social. It wasn't like—it was pretty—it was kind of monastic.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yes, yes, and so how did you—did you have a way that you could kind of retreat into your own world while you were there, or anything you could do—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —to—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —because at least when you were at home, you could go down to the basement, but is there anything at the school?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, well, you had a roommate, you know, but you had to do your work. So we're—most of the time, you're doing your homework or something, so—or in class, and it wasn't like you had to—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And then you would go home.

[Side conversation.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: So anyway, okay, so you were about to say that you—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well then, in the—of course, we were off for the summers, so—and I got this job through my grandfather working for the company that he worked for. And they had an irrigation ditch that served the farmers that let the land to grow the sugar beets. The first year I was—I drove a tractor on the ditch and mowed the weeds so that they wouldn't choke the ditch. The next year, I was what was called the ditch rider, and I measured the water that was coming out of the canal for the farmers and kind of supervised the operation of this irrigation system, yeah, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, that was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —what was it—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —which was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —like being home, like after you had been away at school, what was it like going back?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I don't think it was a big change. I mean, I think the fact that I had gone away to school pretty much isolated me a little bit. I was older; Johnny was 7 years younger, Chip was 11 years younger, so that's a big, big—

ANNETTE LEDDY: It's big.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —big jump there, and so. And I worked, I had a job.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So you were a little removed from the family?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: A little bit, yeah, just because I had school and these other projects, and so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did your sister also go away to school?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, she didn't. She didn't go to—she went to high school there, and she went to college in Beloit, Wisconsin, when she graduated but—so, yeah, I don't—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so the other thing—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —I was thinking, and then—oh.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I mean, I think, it was—I think I said this already, it was an idyllic midwestern town. Here, it's the 1950s, we could drive, there was the beginning of popular music; rock and roll, Elvis, Little Richard, there was a—

ANNETTE LEDDY: What about beatnik culture, did you have any—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, there were—there was no—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —exposure—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —beatnik—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —to counterculture in that way, no?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, no, it was very—you know, so. I mean, this was like '55, we didn't know about that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And there was no teenage rebellion, it sounds like?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, no.

ANNETTE LEDDY: No?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It was just basically pretty much riding around in cars. We went to the Jade Café, which was, kind of, on the outskirts of town.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Did you have a girlfriend?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I had a girlfriend, a couple of girlfriends, but nothing really—you know, no serious engagements sort of thing, no.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That was in high school?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: That was in high school, but I was away at high school, so I was sort of coming—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, in the summers?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and—yeah. I had dates, let's put it that way, that was about as far as—but I didn't have a steady girlfriend.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, I see, you had dates.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah. But it's kind of a pack mentality. There would be three or four of us that would go together and go have—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Did the school have events that girls were invited to?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, they had a dance like—and they invited girls from Colorado Springs to come to this dance. It was pathetic, I mean, my God, yeah. Here we were supposed to—you know, these groups, Oh, here, here are these girls coming in, yeah, let's see if you can make some kind of social contact, it's kind of horrible, but so—yeah. But—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did you stay in touch, like when you were away, did you, like, write letters to your mother and your sister, or tell them—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I think I wrote letters, yeah, and I had—I was quite—not a writer, but—yeah. Can we just stop? I want to—should we go back, or—

[00:10:02]

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, do you want to—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —do you want to go—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —take a break or—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —forward? You want to—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —let's—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —go to—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —on to college, or do we stop here at high school, what do you want?

ANNETTE LEDDY: I guess—I'm just looking over my questions here. I mean, the only thing I wonder about, you know, before we move forward, is just because of the way that domestic interiors of homes are such a big part of your subject matter, I just wonder if the insides of your house ever resonated in that way, or if there's any connection there?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Maybe, well, maybe that—yeah, it was comfortable inside, and I think my parents put some thought into designing it. It wasn't anything spectacular, but it was—it was modestly well decorated, you know, but—and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But you weren't involved—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —also, and the other—the other factor, I think, is my grandparents' house, which was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: The one in—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: In Garden—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —Garden City?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —City, I mean that was—we went there probably every Sunday for dinner or, you know, for Sunday dinner at noon or something, so we hung out there, and their house was very comfortable. They—

ANNETTE LEDDY: You liked it more than your parents' house?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, not necessarily more, but, I mean, we liked being there. My—they had a lot of books, and we could go through their library and look and read, and my grandmother was a reader. They had a nice basement with a lot of artifacts and books, and, yeah, it was kind of a—it was a getaway place for us. But the social life—and they had their—their own social lives also. Their friends who lived near us in—where we lived on Center Street at the edge of town, the Masons had a very nice living room, comfortable—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Like describe—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —place—yeah, but, yeah, I mean, I don't remember, I mean, being a big outdoor person, except maybe riding a horse and having to—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, you do this—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —mow the lawn or work in the garden or, you know—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you drove the—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —get out and fly the—

[Crosstalk.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: —tractor and stuff.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, and I drove a tractor, and then so that kind of took care of my—yeah, so it was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: It's physical outdoor stuff.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: But there wasn't a lot of social activity between my parents' friends and my grandparents and their friends. I mean, it was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay, so you mean things like garden parties and people coming for dinner, is that what you're talking about?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, they had—they had dinner parties and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And was it also a thing of, like, people would play bridge, or they were—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: —those kinds of things?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, my grandparent—mother played bridge, and I know—I remember that my sister and I were, you know, left when we were, you know, older, 11 and 12 or something, by ourselves. They trusted us to not have a babysitter, and we stayed at home and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what would you do?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —we listened to classical music, and they had a great—I know, it is so—

[They laugh.]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It's so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Sorry.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —bizarre really, yeah. I mean, they had—we listened to Beethoven and Tchaikovsky and Schubert on their record player. That was—that was a big deal, you know? I don't know why. And then—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you had a—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: My grandparents—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —television.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —had a good record system too, and I remember hearing Ferde Grofé, you know, "On the Trail" and stuff, and—yeah, no, it was like a big—music was a pretty big part of life because, also there, the youth center had dances where they played music and all—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But that will be like Elvis Presley, right?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Like Elvis Presley and, you know, the—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so do you remember dancing to, like, "Heartbreak Hotel"—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, I remember—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —or something?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I was a terrible dancer, but, you know, yeah, it was a social—part of a social life, yeah, was the—and that was about it, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: It's just when you say social life, it's sometimes hard to understand what that exactly means, you know? It's almost like—

[00:15:05]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —it sounds—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I mean, I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —very distant.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —don't think of any—I mean, it was maybe peripheral, you know, that I was seeing it—

ANNETTE LEDDY: It's how it sounds, it sounds like—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —from the outside—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —you're—yeah.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and hearing my parents talk about them, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But you didn't yourself interact in a meaningful—a way that was meaningful to you. It was more like watching them?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Not really, you know, we were kids and they were adults, and that was the time, you know, when there was that kind of separation. I didn't—"seen and not heard" was, you know, the—this—was the rule kind of, so. But I think we were—you know, we were keen observers of what was going on, because I—that was—



WILLIAM LEAVITT: —just how people behave themselves. And for instance, the Masoners had this party for my Sunday School teacher Bill and Pat Brent. And Margie Masoner was my mom's friend. My mom said to her, "You know they're Democrats, don't you?" and Margie said, "Oh no, I didn't know that, and I thought they were such nice people."

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: So, I mean, it was a kind of—they were—and we were there.

ANNETTE LEDDY: All right, so your parents were Republicans?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: They were Republicans, everybody—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And your grandparents—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, every—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —everyone you—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —everyone—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —knew were Republicans

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —were Republicans.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And that would mean they were Eisenhower people.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: They were Eisenhower people, yeah, definitely, yeah. Yeah, so it was pretty hard-core, middle-class, you know, upbringing I would say, yeah. Nothing too exotic in that world.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And then, you had no sense of like an underclass that you were—that was—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Not really—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —somehow being contained—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —it wasn't—I mean, the other group there was farmers, I mean, and they—you know, they were on the farm, so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So the farmers—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And we met—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —and the merchants—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —them, they—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —were very separate?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, kind of separate, yeah. And, yeah, there were sort of the—I mean, I had friends in junior high who were mostly townies, and I don't—see, kids from the farm sort of just kept to themselves, they wouldn't—?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, so, I mean, it wasn't—I don't know, yeah, why, so that's it. Yeah, I mean that maybe there was prejudice on both sides, you know?

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so when you were in—growing up, and you were in high school, you felt no particular direction? You just felt, my parents want me to be a doctor or a lawyer or some kind of professional—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, I wanted to get through school, I had my hobbies and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And, yeah—and besides building model airplanes, what were they?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, reading, I like to read, so I read—?

ANNETTE LEDDY: A lot of literature?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah. And, I mean—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mysteries?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Or, like Mickey Spillane, that was a big deal—

[They laugh.]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —when I was like 13; wow, that was pretty racy, and stuff like that, and—no, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And, yeah, listening to music, you know, it was not a really very—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah. So then—okay, so then, from high school, I always wondered why you went to the University of Colorado. Was that because you were already in Colorado for prep school?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yes, I was in—well, as I said, when I was 17, my father moved to Littleton, Colorado—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, so they—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —to work in the—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —kind of converged.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and—yeah. So we left Garden City and moved to Littleton, which was a suburb of Denver, and he worked in home—the home building industry. He was—a distant relative had a company that built houses, and so my father worked for him as kind of an overseer of—since he was good at technical stuff, and, the—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —that they were building—yeah, the contractors. I don't know what the title is, so, but he did that, he did that for—you know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: So we were moved, and my parents had gone to the University of Colorado.

[00:20:02]

ANNETTE LEDDY: At Boulder?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: At Boulder, and we didn't really have a lot of money, I mean, that was the other factor. So, I mean, my choices were maybe the University of Kansas, which I could've gone as a state, you know, school, or the University of Colorado, which had very low tuition as an in-state person. But an Eastern school like Cornell would have been way too expensive for us—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But you say—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —Cornell, because that was a place you would have wanted to go, is that—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, that's where my uncle Albert went, and so he—that was kind of in the thought, something. They talked about him going there and working, and so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I think it was more—it was just more efficacious to go to the University of Colorado, and I liked it. You know, I mean, it was close to home and a big, good school, and yeah, so. And, yeah, and then, I mean, I was in pre-med, so I had to take all of the classes that were necessary for that. So I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, you went—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I had to take—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —there as a—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —biology, I had to take physics, I had to take chemistry, but also there were other requirements. In those days, you had—you couldn't just take what you wanted. You had to take what the school said you had to take, and you had to take English literature, and we had electives; I took anthropology as an elective.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay, so it's 1960.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: This would've been 1963.

ANNETTE LEDDY: When you started?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Wait, let's see, wait. No, 1959, it would have been 1959 when I started college.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay, '59, '60, okay.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And then—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So tell me, just to set the scene a little bit, where did you live, what were you wearing—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, the first year—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —what was it like?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —two years, I lived in the dorm, yeah. And then I was in a fraternity, and I lived in the fraternity house for the last two years.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: But I think there—the—I mean, you know, there was campus life, there were football games, there were, you know, a lot of schoolwork, and I was a pretty diligent student. I mean I didn't—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —flunk out or any—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —what did you enjoy about—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: What did I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —college?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —enjoy? I didn't—I guess I enjoyed the classes. I mean, it was—it was—they were well taught. I mean, it was—I was interested in the subjects, and I—so, yeah, I mean, I enjoyed doing that. And we—and I decided, well, this is my track, I'm in pre-med and I'm going, but I started to think about it and I thought, am I temperamentally cut out to be a doctor?

ANNETTE LEDDY: You mean like a—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Do—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —a surgeon, or a—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —or a surgeon—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —a family practice—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —you know, like a practitioner. Do I really want to get that close to other people, do I want—am I—do I have the right thing? But, kind of, concurrently with that, in my last semester, my sophomore year, I took a drawing class, and I did really well, and I really liked

it, and I thought, and so I thought, well, maybe this is an interesting—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So who was the teacher?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: His name was Richard Dudley, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what kind of assignments did you have?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: We did life drawing, oh, we had—we did—we started out with charcoal of course, and with charcoal, then we had—we did this great exercise where we used India ink and white tempera and wash and brushes. So this was like the beginning of Expressionism. We could just slop this paint around, and I really liked that; I did that pretty well. I still have those drawings, actually, that I did.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so was this teacher, like, encouraging?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, and, you know, I—he was impressed with what I could do. So over the summer, I thought, oh, man, you know, maybe I should—I'm not—I don't think I'm really a doctor type, and maybe I'll think about it, so I changed majors. I became an art major.

[00:25:16]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Oh, and I took—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —and so that became your junior year that—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Oh, I'm going to—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —you started?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I started a junior, I—and so, I took painting and art history and printmaking and sculpture and, I did—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so, did you feel like you had really found yourself?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And—yeah, no, I felt, okay, well, this is something I really want to do, and I really enjoyed doing it, and it was a good department they had, yes, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what was your favorite class that you took?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Oh, I didn't really have a favorite, but I didn't think—I don't know. I didn't think of—I was still, working out what I wanted—

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —to do.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So it was just sort of interesting to do all of it?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And you had to take, sort of, these basic classes. Like, I mean they had a sculpture class you had to take. It wasn't called sculpture; it was something like—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —three-dimensional or something?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —"Material and Methods," or something like that. And we had to take wire and weld it together into a shape or into a form, or we had to take a hunk of clay and mold it into a head, and then take a plaster cast of that, and then cast it. So that, that—I thought that was pretty interesting stuff, maybe there's—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And who were the other students in the art classes?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, for one, John de Andrea is—was a classmate of mine, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And a friend?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: What?

ANNETTE LEDDY: A friend?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: A—and a friend, yes, so. And I took a painting class, yeah, and—from— blank, I can't believe I just blanked, and he was quite a good teacher.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what style were you—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —sort of exposed to?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I think I still paint the way that he teaches: ground the canvas with gesso, then with washes, kind of sketch out, you know, sketch out your thing in charcoal or chalk, then use turpentine washes to, kind of, fill them in, then use your pigment, then—you know. So it was a very kind of thin, free kind of—Frank Sampson is his name. He's a really good friend, and I can't believe I blanked on his name, but anyway, and so, yeah, and that was good.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So you're still friends with him?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I'm still friends with him. I haven't—because of the pandemic, I haven't been back to Colorado for two years now, and the last time we went and visited him, he's probably in his 90s now, so. And I haven't really—I don't keep in touch with him unless I go see—go to Colorado to see him, and so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And—yeah?

ANNETTE LEDDY: —were you aware of artists like, say, Rauschenberg at that moment—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —of time?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I think so. Yeah, there was—I mean, this was when Pop art kind of hit, you know?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And so, Warhol and Rauschenberg, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —Jasper Johns, and—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —Jasper Johns, yeah. And so there was discussion about, among students, I remember, in a printmaking class people going, "Oh, this Warhol, it's really horrible and—" you know? But I didn't really know, and so I took the other side, "Well, yeah, but it's kind of radical," so.

[They laugh.]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: So, you know, that was sort of the beginning of—of—but the predominant style was Abstract Expressionism.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Still, yeah, at that time.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —at that time.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —mostly, a lot of the teachers took that approach. But there was another artist. He wasn't really a friend, but he was ahead of me, his name was Clark Richert, who is still painting, I think, and he did quite sophisticated combination of geometry and abstract expressionist paintings. They really—he was quite good. And I, at that time, had really had no developed style. I did—John de Andrea and I did these sculptures with welded steel and made

these out of junk parts and things like that, very—

[00:30:03]

ANNETTE LEDDY: But was there someone, a particular artist whose work you admired, like a known artist, who you were—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —thinking of ?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I didn't really have what you would call—I'm sort of democratic. I was interested in a lot of them, and I hadn't, you know, said—really said who I was really committed to. I mean, I didn't make those kind of commitments, you know, in terms of—I kind of did what—I had been to Museum of Modern Art, and I'm not sure the year or whatever, but the French artist Jean Tinguely had one of his sculptures in the lobby there, the one that kind of destroyed itself, this awkward—I was like, wow, that is fantastic. I thought that was incredible.

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ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, it is kind of like a combination of—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: But—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —engineering and sculpture, and—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and I think maybe, you know, the sort of junk art sculpture that I did at that time was that—

ANNETTE LEDDY: That came—? Yeah. And how did your parents feel about this, this big switch in your direction?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, they weren't real happy about it, but—I mean, but since my uncle was an artist, there was some, you know, precedent for that, they said. And so they told me, they said, "Well, Uncle Albert says one should have art as an avocation, and then you do something else as a vocation. And if you want to do art, that's okay, but it should—it shouldn't be your main, main thing." So they were cool with it—yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So that's good. So there wasn't any real judge—negative judgment about it?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, no, no.

ANNETTE LEDDY: They just sort of accepted—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: they were kind of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —it?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, and they had their own problems, so they didn't—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Like what?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, you know, hey, they were parents and they had—they had to support themselves and others, and then—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So they were distracted, they weren't focusing on you?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: They weren't—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so, in these last two years when you found your direction, did you also find a peer group? Were you really part of a group of other artist students?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah. I mean, John, and then Nancy Myers, who I married—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, that's when you—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —met your wife?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah. I met her there, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And was she—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —also an art student?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: She was an art student too, yeah, so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, I didn't know that.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, so I knew, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So how did you meet?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: There was a small—you know, we met at—I met her in painting class or something in—yeah, the last couple of years there, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so, did you get married in college?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: We got married a few years later. In between, I joined the National Guard at—when I graduated from college, I joined the National Guard because I didn't want to get drafted, and I thought, well, this is a good way. So I had—I did the six months of active duty in 1963—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And that was when you were in Los Angeles?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, that was when I was in Colorado.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I joined the Guard there in—

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —in Boulder.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So where—what was your assignment?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: My assignment was—the first one was basic training at Fort Ord, California, for two months.

ANNETTE LEDDY: How was that?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It's pretty bleak there; it's pretty cold. It was like winter in the middle of August, and it was like freezing, I couldn't believe it. And, you know, it's being in the Army, you—you—every moment of your time is taken up with something, so. And then after two months of that, I went to infantry school in Fort Sill, Oklahoma, for four months, and then I had done my six months active duty, and then I just had to go to the weekly—you know, the weekly Guard meetings. And in those days, you just had—like, you just had to go one Tuesday night, once a week for six years, that was it, and then you had to do two year—two weeks in the summer, you had to do summer camp.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: But then what happened was, after a couple of years of that, there was the Vietnam War. So then they started getting serious and saying, "Well, you're going to have to go—we're going to have to go all weekend. You have to come in on Friday, and you can leave on Sunday." So we sort of stepped up our training, and by that time I had moved to Los Angeles, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, we don't want to—let's not—let's save Los Angeles for next time, but what I do want to understand is, while you were at this basic training and all of these things, did you pursue art in any way?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I drew, I drew, I had notebooks, I drew in my notebooks and I went to—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what would you—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —the library.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —draw?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Pictures of soldiers running around—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Really?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —drawings, yeah. They weren't very good, but, you know, I—I had to do something, because I—you know, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And the other thing I'm wondering is, when you were—you said you took classes in, you know, sculpture and painting and drawing, and so did you already have in your view of your work this idea of pursuing many different disciplines? Because, you know, you're a composer and a playwright and—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, no. I didn't, I really—I—I think I was—sculpture was really what I was—I was a pretty physical person. I mean, when—my summers, when I was in college, I worked for a cement contractor as a laborer and form setter, which is pretty heavy-duty work, you know?

[00:05:16]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And so, I did that for three summers. And, of course, I got the job because my dad was part of the home building industry and worked with these guys, Tom Richie, and it was—you know, it wasn't interesting, but it was hard work. And I—at some points, I think, hey, why didn't I try to get a job as a law assistant or something?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, it's—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: But, you know—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —it's kind of interesting that you did this hard labor with the tractors and the ditches and so on.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, no, I did a lot of physical—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —stuff.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —I wonder, you know, it seems like from your background, yeah, you would've gotten some job in an office or—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, no, I mean—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But you—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —maybe that's why my sculpture—at that time I was into sculpture and—but so—yeah, no, there—the group there at the contractors are pretty—I mean, that's—one of the cement contractors, Tom Richie, was this cracker from the South, a really tough guy, and he had been in the Army, he was pretty—but a really, really good guy. And the head finisher, Art Gonzalez was one and then Rudy Gonzalez was the form setter and so he was, sort of, my boss. And then there were a couple of other guys, Lloyd Collete was another finisher and all—

ANNETTE LEDDY: What is a finisher?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —the thing that really—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, like, you mean, you would make, like, a floor?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, they had—at that time, I think the houses had basements. So I would—after the house was built, the cement walls and the—you know, they didn't finish the basement,



they just, you know, dug it out and poured, you know, the walls and stuff. So my job was to go down and grade the basement to get it level for the floor, and then—so it involved a wheelbarrow and dirt and stuff, so just basically pushing dirt and stuff with—around with a shovel. Then, when they poured the floor—it was before they had these pumps. The cement truck would put the chute into one of the basement windows, and then the—it would—the cement would go into a wheelbarrow, and then I would move the wheelbarrow and dump it where the finishers would work, and so I'd—yeah, it was like pretty heavy-duty stuff.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —also, you know, like, I was 19 years old, you know, and, you know, so I had—I wasn't really—I was in good shape, so I could do that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But—and you—it sounds like you kind of liked it.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Maybe, yeah, yeah, I liked the money, I liked working and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I kind of liked the social life, the—of just this other group of people, you know. I mean, I was a college student, but I was, kind of, on the—we met every morning before work at seven in Englewood, Colorado, at the Cherrelyn Café, to have coffee and talk before—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So it was like a—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —window into a different social world than you knew?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, yeah, it was pretty, pretty cool, actually.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And when you were in college the last couple of years, so did you—were you—? The whole politics of like the civil rights movement and things like that, did any of that come—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —your way?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —a little bit, yeah, yeah. We had—we had some socialist speakers coming in to talk, and I—you know, we went—I remember John de Andrea and I went to hear those. They also had a big week of where they brought people in to talk from all over the—it was kind of world affairs week. Marshall McLuhan came every year and talked, gave a speech during this week, and it was pretty active, in terms of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did that have—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —what the extra—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —that impact on you?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did you start to consider yourself a Democrat or a leftist at some point?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: A little bit, yeah, yeah, I mean—

ANNETTE LEDDY: In that—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I think I did—I was thinking of, the socialism was kind—it was kind of interesting—

ANNETTE LEDDY: You felt like you were—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —a socialist?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, yeah, I didn't think I was really going to be a Republican, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: No, it's interesting. Okay. So—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Okay.

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WILLIAM LEAVITT: —we did that, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right, a little bit, yeah, hang on. This is Annette Leddy interviewing William Leavitt at her home in Los Angeles on May 10, 2021.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Okay.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay. We—we're taking up after your college graduation. So here's my question for you. Did you feel like an artist when you graduated from college?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Not necessarily, I mean I had other things to take care of; I mean, I had to support myself. Also, I think I mentioned that I had military service to do, which we talked about, and I think when that was done, it was like, beginning of 1964, and I went back to Colorado after that and got a job—another job, of course. I worked for Bekins for a while.

ANNETTE LEDDY: It's a—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And again—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —you mean the moving service?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, the moving company, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: What did you do for them?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I lived back, I went back to Littleton and lived with my parents until—and, oh, then I applied to graduate school, was accepted at Claremont where I started in 1965, January of 1965. Got married in, I think, the fall of '64, and then Nancy and I moved to Claremont for graduate school, hence that was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And why did you select Claremont?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I didn't have a lot of options. I thought about the San Francisco Art Institute, but I wasn't accepted to that school. I actually had spent, you know, a fair amount of time on the East Coast with the trips back as a child to DC. Also, I taught two summers at a boarding school in Newport, Rhode Island, so I, kind of, knew the East Coast, so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: What did you teach, may I ask?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: What was the school?

ANNETTE LEDDY: What did you teach at the—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I taught Spanish and art, because I had studied Spanish in college, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Did that—and that made you want to go to graduate school back there, but—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I mean, I—I had been in the army in California, and I also made a trip during college to California, so I felt like I was more comfortable on the West Coast, and I wanted—I didn't—and I had some knowledge of the East Coast, so I had some reference point about that, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay, and did you like Los Angeles?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I found it rather strange at first. I mean, it—the landscape and the culture is quite different, even though I wanted to say that Garden City in some ways was a

miniature LA. It had a substantial Mexican American population. It had the rich people's modern houses on the hill, and—what hills were very slight hills, of course there, but—yeah, and it had a kind of varied, diverse community, and it was—but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But it—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —just the way—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —didn't have a movie industry.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: What?

ANNETTE LEDDY: It didn't have a movie industry.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It didn't have a movie industry. No, it had the agriculture industry, but—yeah. But I think when you're first in Southern California, the movie industry isn't so visible. I mean, it's in the media and so forth, and if you go through Hollywood, you see studios and so forth, but that really wasn't a factor.

[00:05:06]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Because you were living in Claremont.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: But I was in Claremont also, which was 30 miles out of LA, so it was a different—a small, nice, little midwestern-like town, so that was quite—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And where did you live in Claremont?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I had a—we had a house, you know, near the school. A couple—we moved a couple of times, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you were—so you were there for three years?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I was there for two years—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Two years.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and I studied sculpture with John Mason, and also art history with Nicolai Cikovsky, who also ran the gallery. I worked as the preparator for the Pomona College art gallery, I did—so. But, yeah, my main focus was sculpture; I don't even remember taking a drawing class, I must have, and they had a very good facility there, they had bronze casting and that kind of thing. But the house that we lived in had a two-car garage, which I used as a studio, and for my thesis show, I did some fiberglass sculptures, kind of, but they weren't really—they were kind of a combination of biomorphic and geometric shapes—they looked, so. I don't even know if I have pictures of those; I'm sure I have them somewhere, but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So let's see, you were doing sort of abstract sculpture, it wasn't—you hadn't come to the tableaus at that point?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, no, I hadn't. No, they were abstract, yeah, they were but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and so all the other media that you later developed an interest in, like drawing, painting, photography, theater, music, and film, those were not part of graduate school?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, no.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Wow, that's so interesting.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So you were kind of a straight-up sculpture student?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, and—yeah, it was pretty much that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And it sounds like it was a pretty good experience though.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, no, it was good. We have—and, you know, I had—I met, you

know, fellow students Jim Bradley, Bas Jan Ader, Bill Hardesty, whoever—I mean, those were the close friends. And when I graduated, we—I think it was January '67, I'm not sure about the date, of course, the—it was job search then. And I had originally thought, well, the reason to go to graduate school is to get an MFA so that I could teach, but once I got out of school, I wasn't quite so keen on doing that, and I'm not sure exactly why. One reason is my friend Bill Hardesty interviewed for a job at Chouinard as the night school registrar and assistant to the dean of students. And he didn't want the job, so he said, "Bill, hey, maybe you want to check this out," and I did, and I was hired, and I worked in that capacity for, I think, like, three years there, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So before we do that, can we just go back a little bit and to stay with your graduate school experience? Okay, so Bas Jan Ader in particular, I was wondering if you could just describe when you—how and when you met him, and what he was like, and what your relationship was like?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, he was a fellow student, and he made this really funny-looking sculpture, and I, sort of, came up to him and said, "Wow, what is that?" and he said, "Oh," and he described it as part of his past or something. I forget exactly what the thing was, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: What did it look like?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It was a cube with a cone, and then another cylinder on top of it, and it was painted, and—

[00:10:11]

ANNETTE LEDDY: So how was that funny compared to—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —other things?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I don't know, it was painted—he painted it, and it was in bright colors, and, I don't know, it just wasn't what I was used to seeing in terms of the sculpture, so I thought, well, that's pretty interesting.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and so, how—what was he like?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, he was a very talkative, energetic person, and we shared an interest in jazz, and so that was one thing also. His art was humorous, I think, at that time. He had—he liked puns and jokes. And, for instance, he had a painting, it was done on Masonite and had rough edges, but it was cut in two. And then the top part had—it was painted silver, then there was a yellow rectangle at the edge of the break, and then on the bottom part there was no yellow rectangle, and the title was *I Wonder Where the Yellow Went?*, you know, referring to a commercial that had been around, about—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, I see.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —toothpaste, so, yeah, so he had a pretty good sense of humor.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so, did you hang out together outside of class, did you—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, well, his wife Mary Sue was there. She was teaching at San Bernardino Valley College. They had a big house.

ANNETTE LEDDY: In Claremont also?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: In Claremont, yeah, sort of, the outskirts of Claremont. His friend Ger van Elk visited them for six months, so we got to know them—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And that's where you met Ger, and—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: That's where I met Ger—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And he was with Kitty?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and Evelyn, and his wife Evelyn.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Evelyn, uh-huh [affirmative].

WILLIAM LEAVITT: So—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And then so you had these kind of Dutch—you know, a Dutch circle of friends.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and I had one Dutch grandparent of a grand—my grandmother's last name was Schenck on my mother's side—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh really?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —which is Dutch, so I had some family connection too.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But you had never been to Holland or—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I had never been—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —anything like that?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —no, I had never been to Europe, but I didn't—we did—we did a trip in '72. I did a show at Art & Project, and we stayed there for two months in an apartment that Ger had in his house upstairs, so we had free rent, and it was nice, it seemed.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Did a kind of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —that was—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —a tour of Europe and so forth.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Oh yeah, that was after college so it's—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: That was after—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —'72, yeah.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, '70.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So okay, so you're—I'm just trying to get a sense of the scene at—in Claremont. So you have—you're married to Nancy, you have this house, and you, kind of, socialize with this—with Bas Jan and his wife. It's kind of a foursome thing?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah. We were a group, and then—also, I don't think Bill Hardesty was really part of that group, but he was a good friend. He was a ceramic sculptor, quite good, and he was from Kansas, so we had that connection, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], I don't—I'm not familiar with this name, Bill Hardesty, is he—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Bill Hardesty—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —an artist, yeah?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —he's not with us.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, he sort of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now, did you and Bas Jan collaborate on artworks?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, we did later, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But not while you were students?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Not while we were in school, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And was he also kind of—his mentor was also John Mason, or did he have—

work with someone else?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I'm not sure. I don't remember who he worked with. I don't think he worked with John Mason, no.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and did you feel—did you and he and the other people you knew there, did you feel that you wanted your art to be different than the art of your predecessors or your mentors, or did you feel that you wanted—you had new ideas, or did you feel like you were following in their tradition?

[00:15:00]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, no, I think we wanted to, you know, go into new territory in terms of art, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And how would you have defined that new territory at that time?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I think when one is in graduate school, one hasn't defined what it is, you know, that you want. It's a question of trying different things and—but I think that's probably the desire of a lot of graduate students, is to find a new way, and because it's kind of the tradition of modern art is to break new ground, again, so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and so, you were a part of that, you felt that pulling you forward?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And Bas Jan felt that also?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, I think he did.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But what was he like, personality-wise?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I mean, he liked puns, that was one—

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —sort of a jokey guy?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, he liked that as his kind of—but—he was energetic, he was talk—he liked to talk, and he talked to—I'm not—so how to describe a friendship like that? I'm not sure, you know? We shared an interest in art and also music, so I think that those are good—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And what about Nancy, was she still—was she working as an artist too, during that time?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: She started as a grad student there. She went—so we both did—she did, I think, only one semester, and then she dropped out in a way. I don't think it was as interesting to her as it was to us. I mean, she was more a painter, so I didn't—I think she—also, I think she was a little bit homesick. She had a very strong family background, and I think she felt a little isolated from her family being in California. And the—her artwork didn't fill that up, so I'm not sure what that—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what did she do when she dropped out?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: She—well, she was a housewife, yeah, pretty much. She was—took care of things, and—well, let's see. Now, we're still in graduate school?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, you've described your—it seems like we can move on now. I just wanted to get a little better sense of it, you know, what that—what that scene was—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, well—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —was like.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So—all right, so then you got this job at Chouinard after art school, and you did that for three years, so that would be from—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative.] Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —'67 to '70.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I mean, that was quite an interesting experience I think, for me, because I met many new people: Raul Guerrero, Al Ruppertsberg, Bobby Clark, Guy and Laddie John Dill were there, Chuck Arnoldi. So I had a—even though I wasn't a student, I was kind of of the age of this—I was just a little bit older than most of the people there, but I knew them, and so I—it's kind of—and I think Al and Raul and Bobby had graduated by then, and they were actually working at Chouinard, so we were all postgraduate from somewhere on that. And also I met, like, Terry Allen. He wasn't around the school, but he was a friend of Al's, and he visited, so I knew him.

[00:20:24]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Another good contact there for me was Harold Budd, the composer. At that time, Chouinard was called CalArts, even though it wasn't—what—the one in Valencia, and it was the Chouinard art school and the school of music, which was five blocks away up on Wilshire Boulevard. And I—and I remember that Harold gave a noontime concert of John Cage's music, which I thought was rather impressive, and so I started a friendship with him, and so that, yeah, I mean, that was, I think, a good—the good part of being there was new contacts. I mean, the—shouldn't—Claremont was somewhat isolated in terms of its connections to the art world, it was not—and so. But here we were in the middle of the city, and even though I think the scene in LA at that time was small, it—there was something going on, so I really felt more part of the modern art—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —community—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —did—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —at that time.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —I'm sorry. So, but did you, at the same time, remain friends with the people you'd met in Claremont like Bas Jan, or, you know, was it—did they integrate into that crowd, or did they remain somewhat separate? How did that work?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I mean, I stayed friends with Bas Jan and Bill Hardesty, even though he got into motorcycles and moved to Ojai, I think, and had—sort of took up another way of life. Jim Bradley also moved away from Claremont. I—I'm not sure, I think he moved to New Mexico, he was a painter.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And then—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It was a very small department. and so there was a lot of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Where did you live during this period in LA when you were working at Chouinard?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: First, we had a place in Venice; I had a small studio there, and then we found this studio on Beverly Boulevard in LA under the second floor of a building set back from the street, which was, sort of, set up for an artist. It had living quarters on one side, kitchen, bathroom, living room, porch. On the other side was a big empty space that was good for a studio, so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, like, describe your day during this time when you're working at Chouinard. Did you work there at night, or did you work during the day?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: When I first started, I was the night school registrar, and we would come in at four o'clock, and they had an evening school, so they had students who paid. And I was sort of the superintendent of the school, but also, like when people signed up for the classes, I

registered them. They also had Saturday morning classes, so I was there—no Friday classes, so I was there Monday through Thursday and then Saturday morning. And so we'd drive in from Venice to work at four, and worked—I think we worked till 10 and came home and—yeah, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Wait, then when did you do your work, in the morning, or—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I—we had a—I had also had another garage space where I did some work when—this was actually in Ocean Park, before the Beverly Boulevard studio.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And then, did you—when did you socialize with people?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I don't think we had a big social life.

[00:25:02]

ANNETTE LEDDY: No?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Bas Jan and Mary Sue were still in Claremont. We knew—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But when you say you met Raul and Al, and—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And, yeah, I didn't—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —all these people—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —really socialize with Raul too much. Al, I didn't—I mean, maybe saw him for coffee or something once in a while, but it wasn't until later that—really when he got together with Claire Copley, then we socialized, you know, as couples socialize, that kind of socializing.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So you really were, kind of, isolated within your marriages while during that period, but you—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —met—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —it was kind of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —but when you say you met all these other people, you knew them well enough that you knew what they were doing artistically—what—you could talk about that, is that —?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, well, I mean, and also the work itself was somewhat social, so we—that filled up, I mean, the fact that you're dealing with students and faculty and that kind of thing, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, so that—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So it was kind of on-the-job socializing in a way?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah. I mean, that really kind of filled it up, and then married life, yeah, so that was—that. But after—I think, I'm not sure how long it was, but the night school was abandoned by Chouinard, they had no more night school, and the new CalArts came in to take over and start the new campus. So they had—they rented a big office building near the old Chouinard school, and then I had another—I—they gave me another job. I was assistant to the dean of students, and I took care of, oh, things like GI Bill questions that students had, or scholarship questions. I had—it was a desk job, and I did filing for them, and then when the new group came in from the East to start CalArts—

ANNETTE LEDDY: You mean, what, like Allan—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I mean—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —Kaprow and—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Allan Kaprow and, yeah, and the whole—they—I'm not sure that all of them were there yet, but the administrative staff was there for the beginning of the new school. And



then I moved to the new office building, and I worked in the mailroom, and I did the printing and, you know, mimeographing and printing, and that's where I started the magazine *Landslide*, because I had access to this mimeograph machine, and I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and, sort of being the mailroom clerk, of course I had a lot of time on my hands there.

[They laugh.]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It was somewhat of a cushy job; yeah, it was good.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: But also there was another aspect of this work at that time. The guy who was in charge of the physical grounds, Bob Cormack, started a film series in one of the classrooms there. I'm not sure, I think it was once a month, and he had really good choices in films, so we had a little mini-film school.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Such as?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, he did the Hammer films, and all of the war films, he showed all of those, and he showed some French films. I can't remember exactly what the—all the titles, but that was an interesting kind of sidelight to being part of this school community, you know, it was this film series that he did that—yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, your interest in music and film start to come out at this time, it seems like?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, I mean, I didn't really—I mean—you know, I mean we were young adults who went to films, and there were—it was, you know, good—there's some pretty good stuff around, Robert Altman and a lot of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So did you feel that this new group of artists that you became friends with had different ideas than the ones you've been exposed to at Claremont?

[00:30:05]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, perhaps, yeah, I'm not—that's it, yeah. And I think a lot of younger artists' time is spent evaluating what has already happened and trying to form an answer to that or, you know, either to be influenced by that or to reject that as an influence, and so that—I don't feel like I had—that I knew exactly what I wanted to do, at that time.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So your aspirations weren't clear? They were—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, they weren't clear, but they were—the—a couple of things in terms of—

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WILLIAM LEAVITT: —exhibitions I think influenced me that happened. One was the Ed Kienholz show at the LA County Museum, and I'm—I have no idea what the date of that show. It was some late '60s, I think. And, of course, here are these big room installations and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Tableaus.

[Crosstalk.]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —well, yeah. And then the other one was, Ed Ruscha had a show at the Ferus Gallery where he had these black paintings, and they were—he used three objects on the paintings: a bird, an oriole, I think a fish, and a pencil. And he took those three elements, and there were five or six of, you know, moderate-size paintings with these things on it. And I don't think he really ever developed that, and I don't think he's really, sort of, promoted that as part of his work. But I think I was kind of—I was pretty influenced by that use of these objects in combination, and I think it's—if you look at some of my later works, some of the things I'm doing now, I mean, I've expanded the range of objects that I choose to combine or use as, sort of, inspiration for something. But I would say that that—probably a lot of that comes from the—

from seeing that exhibition, and I don't—yeah, I mean, on—also, maybe not directly, but I think the Kienholz obviously had an influence on my making of installations, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what about—let's say a little bit more about *Landslide*. You did that with Bas Jan, correct? Was that—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —a collaboration?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I started it. I did three or four issues that I sent out as an anonymous to, like, 25 people. I sent it out as kind of a joke. You know, these were—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —was the joke, I mean what—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, the joke was that the first issue was a series of prints by "Brian Shitart," so that—and—and then the one issue, and then I made up another phony artist, and so I kind of—I think it was satirical, I mean, I had us—and then, pretty soon, friends figured out that was I doing it, you know, so. And then since I was friend with Bas Jan, he said, "Well, let's, you know, what if, you know, I get in on—?" You know, I brought him in, and we collaborated on it but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And was it—was the object of satire *Artforum* and their language?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, it could've been *Artforum* or, or—I think our—our target was pretension in the art world; so, maybe—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Pretension in—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —there will—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —terms of concept, or in terms of—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —or—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —just, you know—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —well, , maybe the kind of writing that people use to describe work and stuff, and we—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], like the jargon—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —or—yeah, yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —lingo?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —we had—yeah, we had—we made up this artist John Grover, and we interviewed John Grover. Bas Jan was the interviewer, and I played the part of John Grover, and as—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.] So it was a performance—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I had—

[They laugh.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: —it was a performance.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, and then we published it with pictures of his work as a—as an issue of the magazine.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, of course, now *Landslide* is a collector's item and, you know, and kind of considered one of your works in effect, yeah?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I guess, yeah, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But do you really—do you see it that way, or do you see as a way that you crystalized your thinking, or was it kind of—what?

[00:05:07]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, I mean I—I mean, it was something that was, kind of—it was fun to do. I mean, we were involved in it, and there was also a term at the time, "joke art"?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, yeah.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Right. And you had Baldessari and other peoples doing joke art, which was—I don't know. Maybe it was reaction to the seriousness of academic art on the East Coast of—I'm not sure, but anyway, it was something that was maybe California style, or—

ANNETTE LEDDY: California style, but also somehow Dutch, right? I mean—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative], and Dutch, yeah, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —kind of—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: There was a kind of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —very connected to Art & Project and all of those kinds of artists there.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, kind of.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], how do you understand that this LA, Amsterdam—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative], yeah, there was a kind of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —synchronicity? What—how do you understand that now, how that—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —came about?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —hmm, I don't—I mean, I think I probably filtered through Bas Jan and Ger van Elk's work and their interest in puns and lack of seriousness. I mean they wanted—Ger's father worked for Hanna-Barbera—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —as an animator.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —animator.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —so he was sort of part of this cartoon industry already as a son of a cartoonist. So that was, I think, maybe a good connection and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But do you think that the Amsterdam—the culture somehow of Amsterdam and Los Angeles were—had something in common, or was it just totally—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, no—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —serendipitous?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I only went—I mean, it's so different, you know what I mean?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It's not really—maybe there is some kind of Dutch humor or something that I don't—

ANNETTE LEDDY: It—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —see any—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —simply was serendipity. It was the fact that there were these two artists who went to school in LA and who were the—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —conduit between these two worlds.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, and also, I mean, there was the support of Art & Project, you know, that they—they showed and promoted international artists who worked in these styles that were—I hesitate to say, conceptual, but that—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Were they called that—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —did—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —at that point, they were—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I think so, I'm not—

ANNETTE LEDDY: A little bit—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —sure.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —it was called—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —concept art, right?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah. But, you know, the work that was done on paper, or as—you know, as—something that wasn't hard-core painting or sculpture that—something that could be mailed, because they had their bulletins and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, I guess I partly wonder to what extent, like, Los Angeles conceptual art was impacted by Bas Jan and Ger and that—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I don't know—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —connection to Holland—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I don't know how much it was. I mean, I think it would—it would've been a very narrow kind of path, and I don't—so maybe just for a few people, I mean—

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see, yeah. Okay, so then another name that comes up, and I don't know what time you met him, is Guy de Cointet. Is that more the '80s?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, I met Guy later, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Later?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay, all right, so essentially then, getting back to—so we're now around 1970, and that was when you had your first show, solo show I guess, *Forest Sound* at Eugenia Butler.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Right, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so you had that show after, you're saying, you saw the Kienholz show, that that—was there a direct—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —did you—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —there were a couple of years in between that. And I had—like I said, I had this studio in Beverly Boulevard that had this big, open space as part of the layout, and I had

done these sculptures where I took earth and plants, and then I made these poly—plexiglass cylinders, or triangular-shaped things that were filled with water, and the water circulated. I think I was interested in something that was kind of absurd, that there was—and also probably, you know, they came from my having grown up in Kansas and part of the agriculture, being part of an irrigation system. So these were pretty much done on the floor—

[00:10:42]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And were those—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —shown in the '69?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And those were never shown.

ANNETTE LEDDY: They were never shown?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, so. But I think I—and so I had this—so—and some of them—growing plants at the time that are in the earth, but then I had the idea for artificial plants. I thought, well, you know, this is—maybe I'll make a little artificial forest with—and it will have the sound. Instead of water, I will have the sound of birds in the forest, and maybe one of those California colored spotlights that they shine onto the apartment walls to illuminate the foliage there. So I made that, and I think it was like—they had like—God, I went down to Moskatels downtown and bought five- or six-foot high artificial trees.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Got some dirt into the studio and some—and got a sound—put a speaker in one of the trees and that broadcast the mockingbird sound, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And when I showed—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —it's a mockingbird.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —it at Eugenia Butler, she said, "Well, I don't really know what this is. Is it something about the—a comment on our plastic society?" [Laughs.] I said, "Well that's a good, good point, but no." Yeah, I just thought of it as more of an absurd combination of materials; you have the live recorded sound and, you know, you have the slight illusion of a forest and trees, but the elements are really made up of artificial things, so I think that—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And is that the first work you did that really focused on that sort of Southern California domestic design and kind of—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah. I don't think it had so much really to do to the design, more about maybe it was an appreciation of what I saw, the weird foliage here or something, [laughs], I don't know, I mean, but I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But the staginess of it and the way—it's like, sort of—I mean, it's part of people's yards and gardens, right, but at the same time—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: —it has a little twist that's very LA, which is the colored lights, and maybe the mockingbird too. I actually never—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And the mockingbirds—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —realized that was a mockingbird when I saw that show. That actually adds—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, that was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —to it.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —the tape I got, yeah. And I did another piece at that time which was called *Garden Sound*, which was in a plot of ivy and plants, also all artificial, and a little—some bushes

and ferns, some ivy, and then a cardboard box lined with fiberglass. No, it wasn't cardboard, it was actually plywood, fairly stable, filled with water, with a pump. And then the sound of the circulating water was amplified with a mic. You know, it had a mic and an amplifier, and then the sound of it came out of the plants, so and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: What happened to that work?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: What's that?

ANNETTE LEDDY: What happened to that work?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It's still around. It's—Carol [Greene of Greene Naftali Gallery -AL] has it, yeah.

[00:15:00]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Did you—was there any response to land art in these works? Was that—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And it was what?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Was any response to land art, or earthworks in this work that you're doing, or was that outside of its—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, I think—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —intention?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —it was, sort of, I mean, except I didn't—I didn't feel any rejection or—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], it wasn't—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —anything—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —in relation to—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —that.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —didn't, possibly in the back. I think it was more my feeling of a kind of absurdist sensibility at the time that—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], so the show—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Also the—you know, the politics were pretty awful. It was the middle of—you had the Vietnam War, and a lot of—had just happened and or was happening, and—you know? So there was kind of a—I think maybe something of that, of some, but not wanting to really deal with it—face straight on, you know? I wanted to—it was a kind of a side comment about the mood of things. Well, this is the absurd approach and—you know?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You also had a show in 1969, right, with Bas Jan and someone at Claremont—is that not true?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I—no.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Sixty-nine? Let me—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I don't remember that, I don't, I don't. Do you want to stop here and look that up? Do you want to take a—?

ANNETTE LEDDY: I have it, just a second, it's over here. [Sounds of paper rustling.] No, not '69; '72.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, the show at Eugenia's was really my first. Bas Jan and I did a—an exhibition at Mt. San Antonio College. It wasn't a formal exhibition, it was part of *Landslide*, and it was in a big, outdoor installation work called *Piece "G"*. And what we did, we had three things: we had water pumped up a hillside that came down, and it was done at night and so you could see the water and the spotlights on the water. We had a pen of—with, I think, three sheep in it, and also a choir, a women's choir singing traditional songs. So this also, I think, was in the line of

humorous work of—yeah, but it wasn't done as a formal exhibition, and it was just one evening that we did this, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So the—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Because I think this—Bas Jan was teaching at—or going—he had some connection to Mt. San Antonio and Pomona, and I'm not sure what it was at this time but—so that was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So—and then in '72, which was the show I was thinking of, I'm sorry—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Oh yeah, in '72, yeah, that's a—yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You did *California Patio*, right, as part of that group show at Pomona?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, this was done at the Pomona College gallery with Helene Winer as the curator of this show. And it was Ger van Elk and Bas Jan and myself, and that's where I did *California Patio*.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Still your most famous work.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: My most famous work, yeah.

[They laugh.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And at the time, how was it received?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: You know, I think it was—well, it was—I mean, I think there was interest in it, you know. I mean people thought it was funny. I mean, it had the wall text with—telling the people what they were doing, and then you are looking at this installation of a fragment of the scene that was described in the wall text, and so.

[00:20:18]

ANNETTE LEDDY: So people, you would say—the general response was positive?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, I think so, yeah, yeah. I mean, it wouldn't—yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And the other pieces in that show, what was Bas Jan's piece, which one, which piece?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Bas Jan had these pieces where he had gone to Sweden and had done some falling pieces and—so he had these movies of these trees. And I'm not—I don't remember exactly what was going on, but I remember there were projections of trees.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I remember the ones where he's falling off a house in Claremont.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: That was—I don't think that was in the show, but that was a movie that he did, yeah, and then he did a version in Amsterdam, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And which work of Ger's was shown?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: What?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Which work of Ger's was shown?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I'm trying to think of what his work was. Oh, he had photographs of him, and one of them is a kind of manipulated photograph of him playing the piano, and it's so—the title was, *C'est moi qui fait la musique*.

ANNETTE LEDDY: "It's I who made the music."

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, that was the title of the piece, and so there was like a little bit about his, you know, ego and so forth, so it was good, and there was some other photographs like that, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, at this point now, you are still—you're still working at CalArts as a day job, or were you—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —teaching at this point?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —no, at—around 1970, CalArts had a campus at Villa Cabrini in Burbank or in —it was a one-year campus. It was their first campus before they moved to CalArts in Valencia, and I didn't go with them at that point. I got a job at Immaculate Heart College teaching art.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And it was a full-time job?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It was a full-time job. I taught drawing and sculpture, I think, was—they were my—so that was—I was on another track there.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did you like it?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, I mean it was an interesting experience definitely, and, you know, I think one of the things about these jobs is they are very social. This is how young people get to know other young people and older people and, you know, this is—these are sometimes deep social contacts that you—one keeps one's whole life, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So who did you meet there?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I met students: Mary Gail Artz; Nancy Klobucar, who was Ali Acerol's wife later; Patty Foley; Tonda Marton. And their interest was more—it was theater, so this was really kind of my connection to theater. Also, there were—one of the people who taught theater there, Bill Shephard, was quite avant-garde in the theater, and he kind of brought me in. We—you know, I went and took part in his classes, so I kind of had this—

ANNETTE LEDDY: You mean—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —you did acting.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I had this sort of inadvertent introduction to the theatrical world that I did. Some of the—other people from this group led to meeting. And at one point, I'm not sure, it's probably later in the '80s, Tony Abatemarco had his theater club downtown. He had a big loft in downtown LA, and he did this once-a-month or twice-a-month theater club where one would go, one could present works, and so—

[00:25:25]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did you present plays that you wrote there?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I didn't write any plays or produce any work for that, but, you know, I was part of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: You acted, you did, you performed—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I was there as a part of the club, you know, and I was audience to people who were putting on these short works, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And were these works have—in your line, in the sense of being avant-garde theater, or were they—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, they were—I remember one was kind of a spoof of *My Dinner with Andre* or something, so they might have been satirical works about other things. Yeah, I mean, I don't think there was a lot of original work done in this. I mean, it was more of a social thing, but a good way, you know, to kind of meet people and hang out and do that kind of thing, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You know, you frequently told this story of how when you were in the National Guard and you were stationed in LA, you saw the sets.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, that—I mean, that was earlier and—yeah. And in—I was in—1965 was the—I think the Watts Riots, and we had—part of the Guard responsibility was a two-week summer camp at the end of August every year. So I was in Colorado in the summer with Nancy and her family, staying there. I made the trip to LA for the summer camp, you know, appeared



with my uniform and everything, and they said, "Well, we're going to Watts," and we did. On Friday night, we were sent to a school at Century Boulevard and Harbor Freeway, which was the headquarters for the Guard and police for that Watts Riot operation. So it was right there in the middle of that, and—but it was—you know. And when that was over, I think I was only there like five or six days, and the riots stopped, and we did some street patrolling in Jeeps in areas around USC, and then went on to summer camp up in—up by Central Coast somewhere. But in the years after that, of course, everyone was very concerned that there—could be more riots, so they wanted the National Guard to have riot training, and they sent us on one weekend to Twentieth Century Fox Studios. This is probably '66 or '67, and the whole back lot was completely empty of any movie activity, and they—we had to sort of simulate riot training in this place. But it was like, wow, these are all these great kind of sets, so it was—I mean, it was a nice side-light of being there, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: It's bizarre—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, it was bizarre—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —a military—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, yeah, it was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —exercise in a film set. [Laughs.]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —completely surreal. Here is this completely empty back lot, and us running around with our backpacks and our rifles and our helmets acting like riot police.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, I'm just thinking about that, because of, you know, the—we get these various sources of your tableaux, right, from that experience in the National Guard, to seeing the Kienholz, to being part of these theater groups, and, I mean, there's some kind of mix that starts to happen.

[00:30:05]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But then I'm thinking, okay, so we're here in the '70s then, and you're teaching at Immaculate Heart, and then the—you're doing the Dutch, the Art & Project shows, and you're doing the Claire Copley Gallery shows, correct?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Oh, yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Also in the—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —it's—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —'70s.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I don't know when—when is—I don't have a—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Let me get—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —an idea of when the Claire Copley show was, and—?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, it's on here, I'm just going to find the exact—all right, so Art & Project is '72, and then '74 is Art & Project again, and Claire Copley: '76, Claire Copley; '77, Claire Copley.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative], okay.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So you were—that's pretty much part of your life in the '70s—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: —with those galleries now considered, of course, you know—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative].

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ANNETTE LEDDY: —really important for the foundation of what other people call conceptual art.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative], yeah, yeah, that was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But at the time, it's—what did it feel like? Like, if you went to an opening at Claire Copley Gallery, what did that feel like?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I mean, yeah—oh, somewhat isolated from reality. I mean, it was small—a small group of people go to this small modern art gallery to see Joseph Kosuth or, I don't remember, so many of the other shows, but there was—I think David Salle had one, was part of one of the group shows, and I did a couple of shows there.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And then Al [Ruppertsberg] did shows there.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Right, yeah, Al had a show, and my wife Nancy worked as a gallery assistant for Claire, so there was, sort of, have a—but it was a small—I don't even think we got reviewed, I don't think there—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, yeah, there were reviews—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: There were—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —I've read them—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —reviews, okay.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —in the Claire Copley Gallery records, yeah. They were all just kind of, you know, completely mystified to what—it's that guy Champlin, right, who was the reviewer then for the—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: What's—?.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —*LA Times*?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: William Wilson, or—there was another guy before Will—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Was it Champlin, Charlie—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I don't remember—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —Charles Champlin?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —them, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Anyway, I can't remember the reviewer at the moment, but I did read some of those reviews, and they all seem, kind of, like mystified about what's going on.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But kind of like—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Not surprising—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —as if they understood they—that something big could be happening there potentially, but they didn't especially like it maybe.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did you feel as the '70s went on that the—that this group of your friends, and your interests, were becoming—you know, had a trajectory that they were becoming more accepted and known or, you know, that the—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, no, I think it was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —it didn't feel that way?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —a feeling of, you know, of being somewhat insular, and then being part of a smaller group here. But having the opportunity to show was important and so, I mean, I think—

and having the support of an actual art gallery was quite good. I mean—

ANNETTE LEDDY: What else was—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I think—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —going on?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —Eugenia Butler, you know, I mean, she was fantastic, really. I mean, she— I went into her gallery. I think she had a William Wiley show there at the time, and introduced myself, and said, "Yeah, I'm Bill Leavitt, I'm an artist, and would you like to come see my work? And I have a place on Beverly—" She said, "Sure, yeah, I'll come over." She came over, and I had the sculptures set up, the *Garden Sound* and the *Forest Sound*. She said, "Oh, yeah, I'd like to show these." It was like, "Yeah," like, "hey, okay, well that's fine, yeah, let's—" so. So that—I mean, that was a pretty good, good scene I would say. You know, the artist Dieter "Rot," as we called him, Roth, as the sound—called himself at the time Dieter Rot, but had done his 37 suitcases of cheese [*Staple Cheese (A Race)*, 1970] about two or three months before my show, and then Peter Zecher had a show after him, but the gallery still smelled of the cheese by the time I had the show.

[They laugh.]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: At least in my imagination, anyway. So I thought it kind of fit with these— these works that I was doing there. And the work, I mean, that I showed at Claire, I thought was a little more refined, even though I did one piece, the *Red Velvet Flame* that was the red curtains with the slate floor and the burning lamp there, which, I—that for me was an important piece that I was—also maybe an influence of the Hammer Films I've seen earlier. That was kind of—I kind of got into a movie kind of sensibility through English horror films or something, yeah.

[They laugh].

WILLIAM LEAVITT: A lot of times things are very indirect, you know, in the way one accomplishes things, but—

[00:05:08]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right, exactly. So, over the course of the '70s, how did your art evolve, and how did your feelings about your trajectory as an artist evolved?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Hmm, well, I mean, I think that also one has to factor in one's life, one's home life, and what was going on; I mean, having to support oneself. It was—I—it was somewhat of a difficult time, I have to say for several reasons. We—on the good side, in—in 1969, our son Matthew was born, and he lived with us in—on Beverly Boulevard there, but—yeah, and then—we're going to skip to—anyway, around '75, '76, Nancy and I split up, and that— that's a pretty major thing. And she moved back to Colorado and took Matt with her, so I was pretty much on my own there. And Michael Asher had got me a job to take his place at CalArts, teaching Post-Studio Art for two quarters, or one quarter, I don't remember exactly what, but it wasn't really a successful experience for me. I don't think I was really ready for that kind of high-powered art school teaching, so, but, I did it and I made—I made some friends there, and that I'm glad I was —

ANNETTE LEDDY: But what was—what was uncongenial about it for you?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, you know, I mean, I think I had, you know, personal things going on, and I don't think I really could give myself to—and I don't think I was really that set about what I was doing. And it was still, still evolving as—so, but, oh, so—but anyway, that was definitely a factor, I think, was personal life at that time. So I only taught maybe one or two quarters there, and Michael took his job back, and so. And I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so then—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I—yeah and so, I—but I had gone there from Immaculate Heart, so I had—and here were two really very different kinds of institutions: the Catholic, closed, very small, almost like remedial art for people, I mean, that was the—to CalArts, which was just super high-powered, top-level thing. So there was kind of a big jump for me, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But did you actually quit your job at Immaculate Heart to take this job, this job

at CalArts?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I hadn't quit there, yeah, I hadn't, and so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, actually I had not; there was an intervening job. We have—always have so many jobs. I taught life drawing at East LA City College, and for—for a couple of years, which was kind of good, you know, and then on to CalArts. And then after CalArts, I needed a job. My friend Joel Marshall, who was a student at UCLA and who did the lecture series there, so, he brought a lot of people in, and I did one of his lecture things.

[00:10:07]

His father, Noel Marshall, was making a movie in—near Palmdale, and so he said, "Hey, want—do you want to work in the art department of this film?" and I said, "Sure yeah." So I went out and worked on this movie that had Tippi Hedren and Melanie Griffith and Joel, and all the—and that was a pretty good experience and a nice way of—well, the other thing was, I mean, at the time, like—I was like 30-something, you know, and I didn't really feel—I had been in school my whole life every—And I thought, well, I really—I don't want to spend—I don't want to be just a teacher, I want—and so it was a good opportunity to do something that wasn't academic, to do something that was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did you make—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —again, I'm—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —sets?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —hands-on? Yeah, we built sets. They had been working on this film, it was an independent movie obviously, and they had built this big house using telephone poles. It was a two-story house on this lake, and the rest was, kind of, bamboo, and so it was kind of ramshackle, but it was a pretty big, big structure, and Joel had built it. He was quite good at doing these construction projects. But they had had a flood because it was in the riverbed, and it, sort of, wiped out the lower floor of this house. So part—the first part was just rebuilding this; it was heavy work, and then when that was done, I got to do some special effects where I made masks of people, cast—live cast, cast in latex that they used for special effects, and—yeah. Also, the other factor about this was, because they had so many wild animals, they needed all these fences to keep them apart and for the shots, so they had all these chain-link things. And they had a very large labor crew there, about 40 people or so from one town in Mexico, so it was another mixed, Spanish-speaking community, so, which also was good for me, because I had studied Spanish, so. And most of them didn't speak English, so I had a chance to become somewhat of a Spanish speaker. Even though if you live in LA, you really don't get to speak Spanish unless you work with somebody who can speak only Spanish; otherwise they're going to want to speak English, so that's not the—so no, that was good. Also, I met a lot of people from the desert community who weren't—this guy Chris Gallucci was a—kind of a biker guy, and these other people who handled the—who—I don't know what that—trainers I guess or handlers, animal control people. Alex Newman, who her—she was a niece of Tony Duquette's, and she—she specialized in lions and things, and they had elephants, and so there was this other group of people that I met. And I had this one thought that, well, my work, I want it to be—appeal to not just art people, but I want people who come from Palmdale to be able to look at it and say, "Hey, yeah, that's cool." So I did these drawings on black paper using colored pencils, or they were somewhat psychedelic, and with scenes that I think influenced by the desert itself and—yeah, so.

[00:15:00]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And I showed those at Metro Pictures. I think that they were—my first show at Metro Pictures had these in 1980, because they came after this—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, that's right.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —experience in the desert.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But also, 1975, you do *The Silk*, right? You start this whole—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah. I was—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —complicated—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —teaching—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —project.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —at CalArts at that time, yeah, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So it's the drawings and it's the story and it's also a play, correct? It's a—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah. I had this interest in soap operas, daytime; I was fascinated by the banality of them. Also, I had this, you know, highbrow interest in, say, like Alain Robbe-Grillet, and *Last Year at Marienbad*. And so, I think—I don't think as far as my plays go, that *The Silk* is very good, but it was a way for me to kind of combine this weird combo of—combine a combo there. Anyway, you have—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —the—the lowbrow soap operas and the highbrow. I don't think it was a successful mixture, but I did get—you know? And it was—it was a piece of theater, and I, you know, got my feet wet from having these other theatrical influences and experiences. And I did a couple of plays after that, and then—when—but the first—I don't think the first ones were quite as—I would've liked more. The second one was *Rain or Shine*, which, yeah, that's really, really kind of abstract and not very good. *Spectral Analysis* I think was the first play that I really realized something, in terms of the writing that I could do, that it was more—I had a little more fun with how to do the dialogue, and that kind of thing. The first two I think were a little stiff, and I didn't do—and I wrote another play at the time, the one of—*THE PARTICLES (of White Naugahyde)*, which was never produced, but it was—it was, I think, a good venture, and it was produced later, much later, in 2012, so. But see—and at that time I had—was—you know, I didn't live out in Palmdale when I was working on *Roar*, but just doing this scenic work got me jobs in other ways. So, I got jobs with commercial production companies doing scenic, and I had a studio on Second and Western in LA, a very nice, second-floor studio, and I—I was paid well enough that I could do my work and not have to really worry about meeting the rent and so—and it gave me a lot of time. And, I think after these first three or four plays, I said to myself, "You know, I really want more out of the writing. I don't want to just, you know, have just the expression that I'm feeling right, I wanted—" So I wrote, like, three or four plays during the period, that a couple of them I would stand by today. I wrote a vampire play called *Crimson Shadows*, which I like, and also when—about—sort of peripherally about Aimee Semple McPherson called *Paradise Delayed*, which was good, and I think that—and then some—and these were actual, you know, theatrical works. They weren't as abstract as the earlier ones. I mean, the narrative was much more well-developed—

[00:20:24]

ANNETTE LEDDY: But, you know—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —when you look at the CV, one thing that stands out is that the '70s seem to be when there were, you know, performances and installations. But then once you get to the '80s and '90s, it was like two decades where—that you shift much more to drawing and painting, but I'm not sure if that's just in terms of what was shown, or if it's actually in terms of the work you produced?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I think that was what the work was shown. I mean, I did have time to paint, and I never—I didn't really have, since 1970, an actual studio. I worked in—pretty much in the spare bedroom, or the living room of whatever apartment I was, because I was writing, and I was—I wasn't really concerned about producing a lot of big work. And I did a lot of drawing, and also had the opportunity to go to the library and read. I mean, I had, sort of, a good life, because

ANNETTE LEDDY: What did you read? When you said you went to the library to read, what did

you read?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I mean, I—at the time, structuralism and poststructuralism was really important, so I read a lot of that, which, I don't know, if there's any real influence in what is there. But, it's interesting as philosophy to make these distinctions about language, and so I did that. And, let's see, what else? I mean, yeah, that's—

ANNETTE LEDDY: I'm thinking, and so, as we get to the end of the '70s in this discussion, there are, kind of, two questions that come into my mind. So, you start showing in New York at Artists Space, and at Metro Pictures, and so part of me wonders if you ever thought of moving there, like so many other artists?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, I didn't, and in fact, I think I sort of—I had a little bit of art world rejection impulse at that time. I don't know exactly where—what it came from. Maybe it was because I was getting involved in the writing of the theater, and of pieces, and also—I don't know. I—and also, I think I'm a shy person, and I didn't—yeah, no, it—I just kind of rejected the scene. I think I felt like, okay, you have this time, you—well, you can use it wisely if you don't try to do too many things. If you don't try to—I—so I felt like I just really wanted to concentrate on drawing and writing, so I did, and reading.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And, kind of, related to this question, I wonder about your relationship with Helene Winer, you know, which seems to have extended over that whole decade.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ANNETTE LEDDY: And also Jack Goldstein, right, I mean, who were of course at one point a couple, but—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —I mean, how those two people, you know, impacted your life and what—if you want to talk about that?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I mean the fact that they were in New York. I mean, Jack came, visited—came saw him once—once in a while when he—when either I went to New York, or he came back here for his family, or something like that. He house sat for us in the '70s when—on Beverly Boulevard when, say, I went to Colorado or something and not—but, yeah, I think Helene was always pretty supportive, but I—the second show with Helene I did these really kind of interesting—what's the matter?

[00:25:20]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Nothing.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Has it run out?

ANNETTE LEDDY: No.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Okay. Drawings and paintings, she gave me the show of them, and I didn't even go back to—want to go back to the opening for—I don't know if I was having some kind of, you know, ADD or something about the art world, but I just didn't—I don't know, I just didn't want to participate. I think that was probably like '82, or '82, or something like that, I'm not sure of the dates of that. And I didn't really show, I don't think, any much work in the '80s. I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: You made a lot of work—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I made a lot of work, but I didn't—but the fact that I was working at a job consistently had allowed me to do that. I mean, there was a five-year period where I didn't even have a car, I mean it was separated, where I could take the bus, I could take the bus to work, and it's a kind of amazing thing. If you don't have a car, you have a lot more time, because you don't just make these unnecessary trips somewhere to do something that you don't really need to do, you have to really think about it. Yeah. Yeah, so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I think it gave me a lot of time to you know, produce more work as a—you want to stop here?

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.] Okay.

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ANNETTE LEDDY: All right, one, two, three, here we go. This is Annette Leddy interviewing William Leavitt at her home in Los Angeles on May 11, 2021. Okay. Let's follow up a little bit on some issues from last time.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Okay.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, you said that the end of your marriage in '75 and the departure of your wife and son for Colorado was kind of a wound that you had to recover from. So, do you think that this experience is expressed in your work?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Hmm. I don't think I really got back to working as much—I mean, I think there was a gap in my—I hate to use the word *productivity*, but—

[They laugh.]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah. But I had some other things to deal with, and I—like I said, I had the new job working on the movie, which was pretty time consuming. It was six days a week, and it was in Palmdale-Acton area, so it was—I drove out every day. It was a—so I think I, sort of, spent some of the negative energy that I had from divorce and separation from my son by working for a couple of years, so—and I did work for two years on the movie. And I think it was a while before I really got back to—I may have—I don't—if I look at my—you know, the dates of what I—I don't see anything from that period, say, '76 to '78, I don't really see any. I think it was—it sort of started again—1978 through '80, I started drawing again, and writing.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now, I'm going to ask you some big questions about your work, okay, the things that encompassed your whole oeuvre in a way, maybe. What do you consider the core content of your work?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Good question. [Laughs.] Well, I mean I—I'm in—I feel like I'm dealing with the elements of the world that we live in, or I live in; the objects, the buildings, the people, the landscapes. And in some way, I feel like, well, that's my material, to take those elements and represent them in some way, and develop work from what I have, and not so much from what they necessarily mean, but the fact that they exist and that this is the world I'm surrounded in, so. So I think that wanting to represent the life that I live, and represents the things of that in my work, is primary.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay. But how do you represent those things, or what facets of those things?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I think my modes of representation are fairly traditional in terms of drawing and painting. I think early influences; my uncle's painting and drawing was, I think, a very strong influence on me. Just that he had an economical approach to it, and a skillful—I mean, he was a skillful artist, and I—so I want to—I think I've used that way of working too.

[00:05:21]

I'm not so much interested in expressionistic techniques or things like that. I think my approach is more illustrational, and that—to, sort of, represent the scene or the object in a way where the handling of the drawing or the paint doesn't really get in the way, but is—has some quality that one could appreciate if you—one takes the time to look at it, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And, so what are those qualities that you—for example—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —you've—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I mean, a certain freedom of handling, you know, that I don't think my work is fussy in that way. I mean, it has—I mean, I like the graphic quality of line and paint, so I think I—my paintings tend to be a little tighter than my drawings, but—so that's one. And then—well, and then the question is, what do you choose from this sort of sea of things that we have, and how do you make that—those choices? Well, I guess I make the choices through what I desire, what I see as interesting to me or—which is something that inspires me as form, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, so my impression is that even though, of course, there is a technical aspect to your drawing, just, for example, the drawing you might do of a chair or a curtain or something, there also seems to be a kind of supercharged atmosphere. I mean, there's something that is on the one hand technical and objective, and on the other hand there's something very charged—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, maybe I choose things that I feel will create a mood through juxtaposition or focus of what's represented.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right, sometimes it seems like the objects—that you emphasize the references embedded in the objects, if you know what I mean, by the way you draw them; do you think that's right?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You know, that—I think that's fair. Maybe I choose them for their form and structure, and I'm interested in how things are put together in terms of, say, buildings and landscapes and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But you wouldn't really be a formal artist, that's not—that's not how anyone would think of your work, right?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ANNETTE LEDDY: They would think of it, in fact, as almost the opposite; like, in other words, referring to many real-world phenomena, right?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, maybe when things are taken out of context and isolated and highlighted, they take on other qualities by—although, I mean, I think I do appreciate something of the ordinary, which—but then how do you define what's ordinary?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And so I have maybe run into other philosophical questions with the choices. I mean, I think I try to avoid symbolism; however, it always kind of creeps in, kind of comes in the back door, you know? I try to kind of push it away, but then if you pay attention to it, well, that could mean this or that, you know, and so maybe I'm denying that aspect of it.

[00:10:24]

ANNETTE LEDDY: I don't know if it's symbolism but, you know, in—I guess you've mentioned this before in some way, that some of the drawings and paintings, especially of the '80s, seem to refer—not to judge so much, but to refer to consumerism or commodity culture in some general sense?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Hmm, well it—I hadn't thought about it like that, but it could be, yeah. I should probably go back and look at some of that work from the '80s and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: I think one time you told me that it was like that *Leave It to Beaver* fantasy

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, that's a good—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —a quote.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —that's a good point. I mean, I think that since my background is so middle America, tract-house environment, maybe I have a way of wanting to, you know, recreate that or deal with it. I don't think of the—my choices as exotic; I just think of them as more part of everyday life. But it does point out—I mean, when I moved to California, I thought that the environment here was exotic, and I think also somewhat banal. And so, I think my work focused on that a little bit with *California Patio* and the lighted gardens, and the sliding glass doors, and the poolside dinner party. I mean, that—that's a pretty, everyday middle-class vision of things, so, but I don't know. Sometimes I wonder if, say, I'd stayed in Colorado, what would I've—what would've been my material for these constructions, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: That's a really—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —so forth.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —interesting question. What do you think the answer to that is?



WILLIAM LEAVITT: I don't really have an answer, because—

[They laugh.]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —maybe I was trying to get away from that a little bit. Or what if I'd, say, lived in Europe after I've got out of school, what I would have chosen as—? But I think what all this points out is that what I'm interested in is representing where I am, what I see, where I live, what I encounter on an everyday basis.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, you said something, that it's on the one hand exotic and on the other hand, banal, you know. I mean, so what this says to me, and correct me if this is not right, is that you're really talking about fantasy that's embedded in objects.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, yeah, I mean, that—also, I mean, I think the—I mean, the exotic, but also here in Southern California, there is—so, the banal part I think is the artificiality of how things are represented, you know, and that—

ANNETTE LEDDY: You mean like plastic plants?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, plastic plants, and I have this fascination with these fieldstone walls; I mean, they have no structural use at all. I mean, they're pieces of stone glued on to a flat wall that's already built. Whereas, say in Denver, all the houses are made out of brick, or at least they were for a while because there was a building code that you had to—and they were—you know, it was—they were cemented together. It wasn't a decorative element. But I think that maybe seeing the, kind of, combination of fantasy and artificiality interested me, and—

[00:15:31]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And it's kind of a contrast with these sort of midwestern, you know, homes that you grew up in, that were maybe more traditional, and possibly—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, sort of more plain and having some—yes, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Plain, but maybe also more—what is the word—substantial.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Yeah, they had a kind of solidity to them that maybe—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Solidity—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —that didn't happen here.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Solidity, and maybe reflected traditional values, you know, as sort of homes and the—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, well, yeah, I think that's true, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: many critics would say your work is about Los Angeles. Is that true? Is your work about Los Angeles?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Is it about—is it—? Well, I don't think entirely it is my subject matter, but, I mean, I have chosen to represent aspects of Los Angeles, but I don't think that it's my whole thrust as an artist. I don't—I—I don't—yeah, that's—

ANNETTE LEDDY: I mean in the sense when you represent Los Angeles, you're representing the movies and television too, right? I mean, that's just, sort of, part of the city, the whole city is one big—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, and it—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —sort of set, but also—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —was so influenced by movies and its architecture, and so on.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, one thing about Los Angeles is, I mean, if you pick one part of it, you're going to have a different city, and then you go to another area, you're going to have another different—yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, that's true.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: It had a kind of multiplicity that—and variety of areas that maybe other places don't have. I have, I mean, you know, I'm—there's kind of an inconsistency of styles here, so I don't know if that's a factor or not, but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: I don't—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —also—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —find that.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I mean, I—maybe we work for—we're pulled by something, but then we're also repelled by it, so, and maybe I think the two are working that. I mean, I'm not a big movie person, I'm not, you know, a fan of Hollywood movies, and maybe I made some choices that resisted that pull. I mean, certain influences like Raymond Roussel and his approach to narrative, where he uses things that generate the narrative in a non-emotional way. He's not interested in pulling in the expected human emotional response from what's happening in his work. And I found that as a kind of liberation about working, and that I could do scripts that didn't necessarily have to build to a—an emotional climax or something. That they could—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —sort of follow the rhythm of conversations and the activities that the characters were doing. But maybe the—what was moving them along was a kind of device that changed the scene, or the circumstances of the exchange between the characters.

[00:20:17]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Have you seen the movie *L.A. Plays Itself*?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yes, I appreciate that, that's a good movie.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Because in a way—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I went out—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —your work is, a little bit reminds me—I mean, that movie reminds me of your work, or vice versa. There seems to be something similar.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Oh, okay, I have to watch, listen, yeah, yeah, and like—yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Because of the idea of the entire city being a movie set and never really being—it's never—the city is never about itself, it's always about other fantasies and other places, you know?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But, all right, let's talk about this—the speculative in your work. Like, do you—how does the speculative enter your work?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: How does the what?

ANNETTE LEDDY: The speculative, you know, the visions of the future, or thoughts about what might be?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: You mean a kind of science fiction—

ANNETTE LEDDY: A little—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —you know, yeah. Well, maybe I go—maybe that's my interest in design that—and here, maybe I'm again going to the exotic, maybe I'm thinking of an appreciation of scientific objects and forms for their shapes and their—the way they're put together and—yeah. I mean, would that fit as a kind of—?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah. And is that related to Surrealism in any way?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I think I have appreciated Surrealism, but I think that, yeah, it's

probably a natural artifact of putting disparate things together that are outside of the everyday that you're going to encounter—refer to Surrealism perhaps, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Would you say that Marshall McLuhan, or you said you saw Marshall McLuhan speak, do you think that he influenced your work?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Hmm, yeah, I'm not sure, I don't—I—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Is that one of the people you usually mention, you usually say—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —Raymond Roussel—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —maybe, you know, and sometimes I think influences become assimilated, and then you don't even know that they're an influence, and then you—when you go back to the influence, oh, yeah, yeah, that, oh yeah, that's what that was about, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, yeah, so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: All right, so this is another big question. When you think about your whole career, what are the key shifts in your work, or the key stages? What are the different stages, how would you describe it?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I'm not sure that there has been a shift, you know. I think, oh—I don't know, I'm not—maybe before 1980, my work, I—well, concentrated on what I thought was the everyday and tried, you know, not to. But after—no, I'm not sure that I've really shifted. Maybe I've shifted my interest in styles of, but I can't—I don't think I've really shifted my work. I don't—I feel like it's fairly consistent from the beginning that I'm concerned with the same thing—you know, what people do, where they live, what are the objects they use in this life and how they, you know, kind of, fit together. And if—so, I mean this implies that I'm interested in some kind of narrative of what's going on, that my work, maybe the drawings, are settings or illustrations of settings for a potential narrative, but then I also have words on paper that are actual narratives and—

[00:25:49]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Narratives, but as you say, they're anti-narratives, they don't follow this conventional structure—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, maybe—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —of coming into it. They're more about anomie in some way.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I think we talked about this a little bit last time when we were talking about the early theater pieces, which I felt were a little bit distanced and abstract, and I was able to, you know, do a kind of cut-and-paste kind of Cubism with the narrative. And then I did, like, mention in the '80s that I did some work that I felt was more straightforward narrative; characters have a problem, the script followed that through to the end. And then I—but more recently, I've come back to using techniques where I've used chance, or sort of automatic writing for—to—so maybe I've gone back to a kind of early Dada Surrealist approach to generating of the script. And also, with the representation of things, that my early drawings usually are one object, a setting, or so, but there was a time in the '90s when I was living in Silver Lake, and I did these—well, they weren't really Cubist, but I—they had an element of Cubism in them, where we would put these—represent these landscapes, but instead of the rectangles or, you know, geometry of the houses that were there, I would put other scenes, so that replacing the forms of the houses with various other, other things, which is a kind of Cubism because it's representing several aspects of something in time at once. It's not just one view, one time, one place; you have multiple viewpoints multiple times, all in the same work, which maybe is not a classic definition of Cubism, but I think that there's an aspect of that in this work. And also I think the recent work that I've been showing has done that again, where—

ANNETTE LEDDY: With the cutouts.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: With the cutout—

ANNETTE LEDDY: You kind of have the little—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Oh—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —a—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —with the figures—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —square—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and on—yeah. But also the recent ones where I've done these complex landscapes where there are two or three scenes going on at the same time. And for me, it's a compositional challenge to, kind of, make that fit in, how they fit together, even though one may be a nighttime scene and one might be daytime, one a—the different part of the—the countryside or the city or whatever, so that the—there are many things combined.

[00:30:08]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, here would be one—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Okay—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —for example.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, there's a—uh-huh [affirmative].

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Where they have—you have multiple things going on in the landscaping, and I don't think of that one as so Cubist because there—it's—they're not geometrically—and they're not using the geometry of—let me see. Oh.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You're talking about these [pointing to works in Leavitt's MOCA catalog -AL].

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, like so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So you have—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I mean—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —have—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —this is something maybe I don't even know the dates of those, when are those—?

ANNETTE LEDDY: This is 1991.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Ninety-one, so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —all of these, like *Rose and Chandelier*, where you like the iconic airport, and then you have the—

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ANNETTE LEDDY: —the same shape, essentially, but quite a different object, and then a rose.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: So maybe the shift you're talking about is—I mean, I see this happening in my work now, so maybe that was something that happened later, you know, in the '90s, where instead of the earlier work, which was the—

ANNETTE LEDDY: It's like this, where you have the cell phone, and then you have something that looks like Minerva, so it's like the ancient world, the contemporary world, and then there's this ship that could be either from today or from, you know, maybe the age of exploration. I mean, to me they always seem like visual timelines, you know, so it's—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ANNETTE LEDDY: —although the title is *Untitled Cordless Phone* 2003.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Or here's one, which is, yeah, *Bass and Duchamp*, and this is *Picabia, Magritte, Pevsner, and Apollo*. So this seems very much like a kind of art historical mural—you know?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative], but also something that came up was that these are representations of a kind of proscenium, where the objects are on a stage there and the stage is—the background is a landscape, but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, yeah.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —that's right.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —that—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative], that's right, it's—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: There—there's—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —a landscape—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and then—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —behind the—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And these are the figures, are definitely on some kind of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —stage.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —stage, even though they're multiplied and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And why are they on a stage?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Why are they—?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Why do you—why would these things be on a stage?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I mean, I'm thinking of the picture plane as a kind of proscenium arch, you know, that this is an illustration of my little, little theater, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But maybe also, you know, it just seems looking at your work, that suddenly history enters your work in the 1990s—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: The—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —you know? That history enters your work, like before that maybe history was in it in some remote way, but this seems really to be referring to historical events or figures, or—you know, and that seems like something new that happens in the 1990s. And why do you think —

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —why do you think—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —maybe—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —that happened?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, maybe—well, I think I had this idea that, well, for instance, that painted image, the painting of the German shepherd with the gold frame on an easel was an object. And it was an icon kind of thing that was—and that the context was maybe a street art fair. I mean, I was trying to take it out of the white cube of the gallery and bring another context to it. Also, say the painting, when the orchid for *The Silk* was a theatrical prop for—and it had its context with the set of the theater piece. And the leopard for the photo series, that was set over a sofa, so I wanted to—but maybe I—I couldn't always find the—a new context for these, and maybe I wanted to explore the compositional possibilities of drawing and painting that weren't

done with—when it had just a single object, or—and on the—in the rectangle or square of the painting. So I, sort of, gave into just more traditional kind of painting.

[00:05:03]

ANNETTE LEDDY: But there's a—it's—they're also not traditional, in the sense that they're juxtapositions that are very unexpected, you know, the cell phone and Minerva, or whatever—but maybe also it introduces the element of time.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative], that—yeah. Well, you have—I mean, at one point that—I did choose things from history, but also juxtaposed to everyday objects like the cell phone—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And the scale, the scale of things is—you know, the phone is as big as a person, you know?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: They have that—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, let's see. This work from—I just saw it here—I won't find it again probably. [Laughs.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, what?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I think the one called—oh, I wanted to find the date of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: I can—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —oh, darn it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —maybe I can find it.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: *Symbolic Objects*. Oh, wait—look, wait.

ANNETTE LEDDY: What?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: This one, what's the date on this?

ANNETTE LEDDY: *Spectral*—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: *Spectral*—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —*Analysis*.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —*Analysis*, this—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —1977. So you were already doing that horizontal linking of images—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh, yeah, yeah, but kind of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And even the ones with *The Silk* have that too, right, or the ones that came from that? Where you have the pearls and the—I don't know where that is, but it's the pearls and then the lion, and then the—a tropical leaf, or I can't remember exactly, but, yeah, that's this here. The tiger and the pearls in that. So you already had that horizontal—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, so—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —like, juxtaposition going, but it took on a different feel. It wasn't so much about narrative as it was about—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Not the one I was looking but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —oh, yes, *Symbolic Objects*, 1974. Yes, this also has historical feel to it.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, again, I mean, here is—it's a combination of different scenes and things together—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —and making fun of—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —anti—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —traditional symbolism, right, that this is—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That the—you know, this one is a symbol of the virgin, and the rock is a symbol of—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Oh, yeah, also—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —resolve.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —yeah, I mean, I think this is my reference to Magritte because, I mean, I chose the—what the—you know, *The Book of Symbols* said the rose stood for. And, I mean, I always appreciated his work where he didn't have—it didn't—the word didn't line up with the picture, and so that was, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right. So, if we go back to the '80s again and to these drawings that you did, let me just—let's talk a little bit about Richard Kuhlenschmidt Gallery where you showed a lot of work, and that was the '80s, '70s maybe, and the '80s, yeah.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, so '80s, yeah, well, that was—that was that time. I mean, I didn't—I mean, a lot of the work was on paper drawing. I mean, it was—I had an—

ANNETTE LEDDY: The pastels—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —apartment, I had an apartment that had—I worked on the dining room table, where—on a studio, and I had a bedroom, and a living room and also a deck, and sort of that was a pretty productive place. I mean, I—yeah, I don't think I did a lot of paintings at that time, and so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But when you had the showings at Richard Kuhlenschmidt, you showed the pastel drawings, the interiors, is that what you showed?

[00:10:04]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, I'm pretty sure that's—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And how were those received?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I think—yeah, I mean, I think positive, I think, yeah, I mean, I had—yeah, I mean as far as I know, I can't— [Laughs.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: People got it, people—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And people got it, yeah. Yeah, I know, I mean, I think it established something of what I was doing, so—yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —these drawings which, you know, I mean, essentially from the reviews that I've read, were really praised, and people really loved those. The source material, was not just things you saw, right? You also used what, for your images from that?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, they may have been from my photographs, or they may have been from printed material that I saw and said—I mean, it was pre-internet, so it wasn't—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Like shelter magazines, yeah.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Oh, yeah, yeah and so I did sort of a—and I had—let's see—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, when you were in the—so even though your CV doesn't show any performance or theater or film or anything in the 1980s, all that time you were writing plays and you were involved in theater, even though it doesn't come out until later. And so, this is where I'm wondering how your relationship with Guy de Cointet enters into your life, is it—how does

that happen?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Okay. The—there was the Jancar Kuhlenschmidt Gallery in the Los Altos apartment building, in the basement of that, where I did one show. I think it was around—I'm not sure of the dates of this—sometime '70s, I think, or maybe early '80s, I'm not sure.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, definitely Kuhlenschmidt is, what? '83, '84, '85.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative], what about Jancar Kuhlenschmidt in the—?

ANNETTE LEDDY: I'm looking for that, I know about that.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Okay, well—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —but I just don't actually—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —okay, with that, but that show was also—that gallery was also part of the—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, yes, '82 is Jancar Kuhlenschmidt.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Okay. That was part of the social life of that Los Altos apartment. Denise Domergue had an apartment there, and she, as an actress in Guy de Cointet's play, was a connection to Guy. Also Phil Garner and Nancy Reese lived there in that apartment, so not only was it a gallery, it was also a kind of an expanded social world. And then Denise married Bob Wilhite, and they moved to their own house over in East Hollywood, and so maybe, I think, you know, I encountered Guy there. And he had seen *The Silk* actually, and then I had seen his work *Ethiopia* at the same theater, the Barnsdall Park Theatre. So we already had some, you know, elements for correspondence and discussion, and so we—but, yeah, so I think. And he was also interested in—his texts were generated in—with his own system of cryptography, or something like that—I mean, it was very, very sophisticated what he was doing in terms of theater, so that was a—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —a connection—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —chance operations also.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, so and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But—so did you—I don't have a sense of—I mean, I, of course, see the similarities between your work, but I don't have a sense of how well you knew him, or if you ever thought of doing, say, collaborations, or anything like that?

[00:15:05]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, we didn't think of collaborations, but we were friends, you know, we had coffee, we visited each other's studio and that kind of thing. Also, Bob Wilhite was a friend who had done these amazing, you know, props for *Ethiopia*. I mean, musical things, I mean, that was quite a great event, you know, seeing that play and Bob's contributions, so. I mean, I don't—I mean, is it interesting to—? I mean, do you want to talk about how I got involved in the music part of that, or is that—?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, yeah, I really want to hear that.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: You want to—?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: I kind of got there through the back door. I mean, it's a little bit of a shaggy dog story here, but I—sometime in the mid-'80s, or maybe '87 or something, I needed something from Yale Electronics on Sunset Boulevard, so I went there to buy it. I was looking through their rack of magazines and pamphlets, and I saw one that said, "Build your own guitar effects device," so I bought it. And then I bought the components, and I built this little circuit. It didn't really work, but if I reverse the polarity of the power supply, it made the sound of a helicopter, so I thought, Wow, this is pretty—really cool. So I continued this exploration of electronic circuits until—for a couple of years, until I built a small analog synthesizer. And just—I



mean, I got involved in this electronic circuitry and putting together these sounds, so. And one time, I visited Denise Domergue at her conservation studio on Third, and her assistants were Rick Potts and Joseph Hammer. And we started talking, and they said, "Well—" I said, "What are you doing?" and they said, "Well, we're musicians, and we have this little studio," and I said, "Oh, I built this analog synthesizer," and they said, "What? Wow, bring it out to our studio, we'll play." So it was in Alhambra, they had a little second floor office in a building there. And we—I wouldn't say jammed, but we made sounds, and Joseph had a—his tape loops, and I had my synthesizer, and Rick had his synthesizers. So we made this noise music for a couple of years, off and on. Then they gave up that studio, and they joined Steve Thomsen who had a big studio downtown, and he was also a musician. And so they worked with him for a while, then they asked me to come join them, and I said, "Okay, I will," and I had a more sophisticated, commercially built synthesizer. But as we were playing, I thought, "Well, we all have these kind of electronic things and tapes, and it would be interesting if there was some kind of drone sound from an acoustic cello-like instrument." So I built this little crude cello—it was a two-by-four and some bass pickups that I could bow and make a different kind of sound. Next thing I know, I built a little bass that I could play. Well, this was kind of the end of our—of collaboration, because the bass has a quality of jazz or something, and it has more of a beat kind of quality, and I don't—it wasn't something you really wanted, but it was something I wanted to do. I wanted to explore this, the rhythmic possibilities of the bass, so I kind of went on my own, and I built some—I ended up building a cello and so forth, and learning to play that.

[00:20:32]

But the other experience out of playing with them was they were really committed to this sound-noise thing, and I had, as I mentioned before, played the piano as a child, also sang in the choir, and I—so I think I had this tonal basis for my interest in music. I thought diatonically, maybe, and not just so much this noise. So I took—I started taking classes at LA City College in music theory and harmony, and it was very accessible to me. I mean, I could take one class per semester and work at the same time, so I ended up, you know, learning composition through that school. And I think that I was able to use those compositions later in my installations; several of them that really had a soundtrack component to them. For instance, *Warp Engines* and *Arctic Earth*, also, have a very particular soundtrack that goes with them, so. And in that way I kind of, I think, combined those, you know, ways of working into—also later, some of the movies that I did, used it with soundtracks.

ANNETTE LEDDY: It's interesting to me that you would feel the need and urge, you know, to build a synthesizer and build an instrument rather than, you know, just purchasing one and learning to play it. And, I'm just wondering what you get from the act of building them?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, you know, maybe that's kind of a regression to preadolescence or something, when I was escaping in the basement building model airplanes, using my hands to build something complicated that involved me and kept me out of the—what else was going on, you know, and so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, what else was going on that you wanted to be kept out of?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I mean, you know—as a—you know, I think as a—you know, we—all need our little islands of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, retreat.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah. no matter how—

ANNETTE LEDDY: But you—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —how good things are—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —but it seems to—say, how does it complement, or relate to the drawings or the visual work you do at the same time, or is there—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: You know, I don't think there's really—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Is that connection—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —you know—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —just to kind of—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I think—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —therapy in a certain way?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, maybe, yeah, it was—you know, it's a way to keep an even keel emotionally, being able to go to a kind of complicated, hands-on project or something like that, could be that. I mean, drawing could be that way too, but it—not—it's not the same, you know, it had more—

ANNETTE LEDDY: It's more performative, in a sense.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: More performative, yeah, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, but also it seems that it's kind of great, the idea of you building machines that make sounds, you know, I mean, it's like—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Oh, also, I mean it was very inexpensive, you know?

[They laugh.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: So—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —it's a cheap hobby?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I'm doing buying—yeah, I mean, to buy one of these things is quite—and I lived on a limited budget. I was—I didn't, well—yeah, I didn't want to go in debt buying a synthesizer or something, or a cello or something like that, so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, I see.

[00:25:00]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, I guess I would feel so concerned in doing something like that, it wouldn't ever sound right. I mean, that you obviously felt very—a certain confidence in your—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, what—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —building skills.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I mean, I think a lot of the—sort of the early forays into that music sounded pretty bad, and I have to say that. And I'm—but at least to me sometimes, even though, I mean, I've gone back and played some of the tapes that Rick and Joseph and I made, yeah, that's okay. I mean, yeah, they're— they're good—I haven't really heard much from what was recorded with Steve Thomsen and Rick and Joseph when we did that. Maybe I'll impose on Joseph to release some of those to me. I'm sure he has them. He's—

ANNETTE LEDDY: What are your musical influences apart from these experiences? Who were the composers? Like, you mentioned John Cage yesterday.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: John Cage, and—well, yeah, I mean, I had a pretty strong interest in classical music for a long time and—for, like in the '70s, I liked the early modernist—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Like Schoenberg, Webern or those people—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Satie and Debussy and Ravel, I was kind of into that. And, yeah, later, I mean, there's—I mean, I've maybe expanded my interests, and I'm not thinking of particular people at the moment, or—oh—well, yeah. Xenakis was someone sort of in the—I was interested in for a while and, you know—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So your goal in building these instruments was to have an instrument to play, and to play music that was classical music with—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, no—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —or—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —it was really—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —to compose—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —more—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —your own—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —sound-noise music—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Sound-noise—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —with these other people to play with. And there were—you know, I mean, it was—there was a small scene of people who played. I mean, Rick and Joseph and Steve and I played. I played with them in maybe three live shows and at various things, and then they went on to, after I left the group, perform by themselves. And then later, I mean, I played with Joseph again and also some other people. You know, sort of just as a, you know, kind of went in and out of it—of the scenes there. Yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you're still doing it, right? You're still—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, you know, I'm not—I haven't really—once in a while I have a couple—you know, we'll get together with Joseph Hammer and we'll try to do something together. I mean, it was—we made a lot of recordings, I'm not really truly happy with them; I think I'm still wanting more tonality, something more diatonic. I get a little nervous when it gets too atonal, it hurts my ears a bit, so. But that's sort of a factor of one—of that kind of music. I mean, now I work with—it's with the—I mean, I used to write—I mean, when I was at City College, I wrote everything on paper, but now you can do it all in the computer with a notation program like Sibelius or Finale, so you can write it out on paper, type it into the computer, and it'll play back. You don't have to—

[00:30:34]

—some of the pieces that I wrote at City College were played by live acoustic musicians, which was kind of a perk of being—of going to school. They had the composers club there, and then—and every semester they would do a concert and you could submit a composition to them, and—

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WILLIAM LEAVITT: —if it was accepted, they would bring in these musicians from outside to play them, which was a nice event always. But I wasn't there that long, and I only had, I think, three works performed.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, so. So—and yeah, no, I mean, but some of this work is useful for—like I say, for soundtracks. I mean, I think that's my use of it, is that I can use it with an installation, or if—or a video or something like that, to—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And at least in my experience of those, it feels like the music emphasizes the —what—the anomie of the characters, or that kind of, you know, it—it doesn't have a climax, just like the—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative]—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —you know.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: And it's kind of ongoing and yeah, yeah. Yeah—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right. The kind of—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —anti-narrative, you know, thrust of the works to, kind of, fit with the music, is

that your intention?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, no, I mean, that would fit that, yeah, yeah. It's background sound that would kind of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And sometimes it's a little bit—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —help—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —of a parody—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —empha—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —there's a little parody element in it sometimes too.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative], yeah, to kind of fit the mood and—yeah, so. Yeah, so, yeah, I mean that would be the result of it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, I just thought we should maybe talk a little bit about the criticism you've had, the critical support, the reviews, and the—that you—over the years in Los Angeles, especially. I mean, did you feel that—you know, a lot of artists feel that critics don't actually get their work. I mean, did you have that feeling, or do you have that sense of having been understood?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Hmm, I sure—I don't—I don't know. I don't really know how to answer that, actually. I—but—yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, say in 1979, Tom Lawson said of your work, "Anything can be projected, nothing confirmed."

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Ah—[laughs]—that's good, I guess, yeah, right.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Do you agree with that?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, I guess, yeah, yeah. That's good. I hadn't heard that, I like that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That's the last sentence of his essay about you. And then I was thinking about this new book, which I know neither of us have actually read except as a—you know, in a kind of a synopsis, right? *The Speculative City: Art, Real Estate, and the Making of Global Los Angeles*, but—so she has you, Ed Ruscha, and Lewis Baltz as examples of a kind of what she calls remediation of the real estate development of Los Angeles. And just, knowing you haven't read it, I mean, do you have a sense of yourself, of your work sharing certain premises with Ed Ruscha's or Lewis Baltz's work?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, yeah, I would say. I mean, I don't think that would be a stretch to get that in there, you know. I mean, one of—I think one of the influences of, in the '70s for me, with like *California Patio* and some—the other works was, there was a catalog of swimming pools that would—you could get at the lumberyard or someplace. It was called *Anthony Pools*, and it was this very nice, full-color brochure of these examples of houses that had these pools, and that's definitely a sort of real estate advertising. So, you know, I mean, I was fascinated by that, and I wish I still had my copy of it, but—yeah, but anyway, yeah, no, I don't think that's too far afield, or—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So if we go on to just—okay, another question I really wanted to ask you as we come towards the end is, did the MOCA retrospective affect the work you made after the retrospective?

[00:05:10]

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, I don't think so. I mean, I think it gave me a chance to evaluate the work I've done, and I feel like I kind of built on what I saw was there, you know? I didn't feel like I had to reject what I had done before. I felt like I could kind of build on the work I've done.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You know, many artists say when they have a retrospective they see something in their work that they had never really seen. They see their work in a new way.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Uh-huh [affirmative], yeah, I don't know, no—

ANNETTE LEDDY: No?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I don't think I really—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —doing kind of—

ANNETTE LEDDY: All right, so do you think—? I guess, what would you say has been your contribution to American art?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: [Laughs.] My contribution to American art?

ANNETTE LEDDY: This is the Archives of American Art—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I don't know that—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —we have to talk about that.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I don't—I can't—geez, that—that's a tough one. I mean, I don't know, you know what I mean? I don't know how to—I have to kind of evaluate the whole field. I hope that people would see my work as sort of coherent, and reflecting part of the times that we live in and have some relevance to what's going on right now.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Meaning the pandemic, or just—?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Yeah, no, yeah, no, just—you know, just American life—

ANNETTE LEDDY: American culture.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —culture, American culture, yeah.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But, I guess that question about your contribution implies that there's something unique that you've done that no one else has done, which I personally think is true, but the question is, what do you think?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, I mean, I think because, you know, I'm a product of, you know, these influences of American art, I don't know that I've done anything except maybe expand on what those influences were—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —maybe, and approach it, you know, with a slightly different approach, I mean.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That's very modest of you, but—

[They laugh.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: —I will let it stand, but I actually think you're downplaying what you've done here.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Okay, well, I think it's difficult to really see one's, like, effect or relevance from within, you know? You have to be—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —you have to be—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —that's probably—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —I think—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —true—

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —sure about that of yourself—

ANNETTE LEDDY: That's probably true.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —a little bit.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And then, do you have these, do you have goals of—for your work in the future?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: Well, yeah, I mean, I would like to continue the work that I'm doing right now. I mean, I feel like on the last three or four years, I've been pretty productive. I've done a lot of drawing and painting, and I've written three scripts that I think are pretty good and they're, you know, the result of just, sort of, bearing down and keeping at it, you know? And so, I would maybe like to have one of them produced in some way, would be one goal, and, yeah, sort of, but—and maybe the other thing is, I think I would like to, kind of, have a theatrical work that used the music and the narrative together, you know, that I could work the two of them more in conjunction, you know, so that they were, you know, not separate, and—I don't know. I'm not actually sure exactly how to say that. So maybe that's one of the—yeah, that's one of my—

ANNETTE LEDDY: One of your goals.

WILLIAM LEAVITT: —my problems that I might like to work on.

[00:10:05]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay, is there anything else you would like to say?

WILLIAM LEAVITT: No, I think I really said quite a lot.

[They laugh.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: All right, that's it.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]