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Oral history interview with Lee
Bontecou, 2009 January 10

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with Lee Bontecou on January 10, 2009. The interview took place at Knoedler and Company in New York, N.Y., and was conducted by Dore Ashton for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding for this interview was provided by a grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Lee Bontecou and Dore Ashton have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

DORE ASHTON: Let's start at the beginning, and get the documentary stuff out of the way, is that okay?

LEE BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: For instance, you were born where?

MS. BONTECOU: In Rhode Island [January 15, 1931].

MS. ASHTON: And you grew up there –

MS. BONTECOU: Providence, Rhode Island.

MS. ASHTON: Providence?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: And did you go to grammar school there?

MS. BONTECOU: No.

MS. ASHTON: No?

MS. BONTECOU: I was a kid. I was a baby. So –

MS. ASHTON: Where did they take you?

MS. BONTECOU: I have to think. I would say the earliest I remember would be – you better cut it for a minute, because I can't think. Is that all right?

[END CD 1 FILES 1.]

MS. ASHTON: – Westchester [Westchester County, NY]?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: And what about – we will start by asking you, as a child, in grammar school, were you already drawing, and interested in drawing and –

MS. BONTECOU: I always was working with pencils and – yes, and –

MS. ASHTON: And your parents were encouraging?

MS. BONTECOU: My parents were – yes. But no, let's put it this way. They enjoyed what – you know, they – that was part of my life. But where my mother was concerned, she would – the thing that I remember clearly is, like, when I was a young teenager, being whisked – she said, "Lee, let's go to the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY]."

And so we went to the Met at night, and it was thrilling to do that, on a train. Took the subway, got to the Met. And it was that huge [Vincent] van Gogh show ["Van Gogh: Paintings and Drawings." October 21, 1949-January 15, 1950].

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was like both of us were bowled over. It was incredible. And I don't think I have ever seen a show of his so thorough, with drawings after drawings after drawings. And we both just held hands and went through the whole thing, you know. And it was – so that's the kind of education I had, as far as my parents.

MS. ASHTON: Well, that's wonderful.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: What did your parents do? Did they have professions?

MS. BONTECOU: During the war [World War II], my mother was working in a war plant, and my dad was working with gliders, and that type of thing.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: That explains a lot.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, well, and – then after the war, he was in the canoe business.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, that's also nice.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, and –

MS. ASHTON: So he could build a canoe?

MS. BONTECOU: He – they – he and my uncle invented the aluminum canoe.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: They went – my uncle was an engineer, and they pounded one out, or how – no, they stretched the skin. And then they took that little model, and they took it to Grumman [Grumman Aircraft Engineering Corporation], and it flew from there.

MS. ASHTON: Did you watch them making those things?

MS. BONTECOU: No, no. I was too young. But I –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, but you knew about it.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, yes. And I paddled – I mean, we used it.

MS. ASHTON: Paddled in those canoes?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And, in fact, that original one that was pounded out, or – no, it was on a sheet. It was bent. It was – whatever – with bulkheads at each end.

MS. ASHTON: Wow.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was –

MS. ASHTON: So you think that you registered that somehow, and –

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: When you came to start your own serious work, it may have been in the background.

MS. BONTECOU: I'm sure. Everything we do is in our background, I think.

MS. ASHTON: I agree.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: So –

MS. ASHTON: And some teacher, I presume, spotted your talent somewhere along the line.

MS. BONTECOU: At high school, I avoided everything that was commercial art. I avoided having to make posters, and I avoided all of these – I just – I didn't want to – I mean, I had no real thought about why, but it was just not interesting to me. But I was always drawing at home, and making little clay stuff and little figures, little – anything that I could get my hands on. And I did enjoy the clay. I – and made a nice mess wherever I went. And that was fine. But –

MS. ASHTON: And both your parents were encouraging, I presume.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, but not pushy.

MS. ASHTON: No?

MS. BONTECOU: Not at all. In fact, they were too busy in their own – getting – feeding us to bother with that kind of – they had no idea. And when I did finally – I finally went to art school, and they were just sort of – well, they went along, you know. But –

MS. ASHTON: You – well, in high school, did you think that you wanted to go to college?

MS. BONTECOU: In the family, the idea was everybody went to college.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And no matter what the situation – and all my family went to Smith [Smith College, Northampton, MA]. I mean, from day one, they all went. And I just – no way was I going to go four more years of prison, is how I – but the nice thing in high school was the literature. And that's where I just learned everything. And they had beautiful teachers. They were older, and they were strict. And they had the information, and they – we delved into the classics that were – they don't even do it in college now.

MS. ASHTON: That was in Bronxville [NY]?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And my mother made a point of getting us children into that, because Scarsdale [NY] was nearby, but – and my brother was going there. It was too big and too classy for my parents. They said no, that they had to go to a school that was really good. And it was. The teachers were amazing. And I think there was only one teacher that I thought was sort of a flop in – but that was about it.

MS. ASHTON: Were there any artists in your family background?

MS. BONTECOU: There was a great – yes. Bond, Sarah Bond, 1800s.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And she did some beautiful paintings. I have some. And my mother has – we have three. And she took them to a dealer, you know, to see – just to appraise them. And she found out that the dealer said, "You know, if these had been done on ivory" – it was – they were beautiful pictures of, like, Shakespeare, King – one was where Anne Boleyn was going to have her head cut off, and the fire – the Trojan horse, and Icarus flying. And they were all – but they were done on, probably, the cheapest paper you could find. But they are beautiful. They're little miniatures.

MS. ASHTON: Do you still have some?

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, yes, I have them framed. They probably should be looked after, but I – you know, that's the way –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And – but that was the only person I –

MS. ASHTON: So, at least part of your family were very old residents of the United States, right? But didn't you once tell me you had some British –

MS. BONTECOU: No, the – my grandmother came from Nova Scotia [Canada], as an immigrant. And my grandfather and – so it – and they were called Murrays. And then there were some Bonds, and – who was on my – I guess my – I don't know. I can't – grandfather's side. But my grandfather was called Jones, so he was a Welchman. And my grandmother was Murray, that was of Scottish – so they lived in Nova Scotia for –

MS. ASHTON: Where does the name Bontecou come from?

MS. BONTECOU: When my mother married, and Dad was Bontecou. And mother said, "Wow, I'm glad to have a fancy name, rather than 'Jones.'" So, anyway, it was –

MS. ASHTON: What kind of a name is "Bontecou"?

MS. BONTECOU: French Huguenot.

MS. ASHTON: French Huguenot.

MS. BONTECOU: And –

MS. ASHTON: From Canada, I guess?

MS. BONTECOU: No.

MS. ASHTON: No?

MS. BONTECOU: No, from – I guess they were – they immigrated to New York.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: I think these – and there are two [inaudible], and I don't really know, but one – at one of the shows a woman approached and said, "Oh, yes, you're a Bontecou," and she was looking at me hard. I said, "Well, what" – and she said, "Well, we're from the Pierre [ph] bunch." And it's a different group. And when Mother – but I read a little bit about them, the Huguenots, and they were persecuted in –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – very badly. Catholic, I guess. But they were, themselves – I don't know that much about it, but they had a religion that was pretty fierce. And I can't even go on, because I – and I keep meaning to look it up, but it seems to me they were persecuting themselves at some point, you know?

MS. ASHTON: The Huguenots?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I don't know. It was a strange religion, I guess, or whatever. But there is a church here. And Mother said, "Well, let's go, because we've always – we know about the other part of the family. Let's go here." So we did, and they were very welcome until they realized we didn't know how to speak French Huguenot. And then they were very rude, very abrupt, and they walked out, and we were left there. And they locked the doors, and we were locked in until they came back from lunch.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, my God.

MS. BONTECOU: And so Mother said, "Let's get the heck out of here." So that's my –

MS. ASHTON: That's really interesting background.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: So, in high school, then, had you thought about going to art school, instead of college, instead of Smith College?

MS. BONTECOU: I said, "Okay, I will take two years of college, and then I will go to the Art Students League [New York, NY]. I knew that much.

MS. ASHTON: You already knew that.

MS. BONTECOU: I knew that.

MS. ASHTON: How did you know about the League?

MS. BONTECOU: I don't know. I –

MS. ASHTON: That's true, I don't know how I knew about it, either.

MS. BONTECOU: I don't know. I read about – I don't know. I just knew that that's – that was the place – maybe I went by it, for all I know, you know?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I don't know. But –

MS. ASHTON: Well, one thing is it was the only place that you could go and – at least when I did go – you could go and just pay as you go. Or by the month, I think we paid.

MS. BONTECOU: By the month. And you could change by the month.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, and I –

MS. BONTECOU: And there were no grades, nothing of that –

MS. ASHTON: No, no. No credit, no anything.

MS. BONTECOU: No credit, and no one told you –

MS. ASHTON: That's the way an art school should be.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. It was –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – turned out to be terrific.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And –

MS. ASHTON: So then you went – you finished high school. You did two years at a college, at a –

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Which one?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, I went to Bradford – it was called Bradford Junior College [Haverhill, MA].

MS. ASHTON: Bradford Junior College.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was really –

MS. ASHTON: There is another artist that I know who went there?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes?

MS. ASHTON: I forget who now, but –

MS. BONTECOU: But it was a nice school. And it somehow folded. But it was – and being from a public school, it was no – it was interesting for me, to – because there was no – it was just girls.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: It was not co-ed. It turned co-ed.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: But – and I didn't mind that, because I had already experienced – but these poor girls, it was like they didn't understand anything. They didn't know how to drink, you know? [Laughs.] So they were all kind of at loose ends. Not all, but –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – in general.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And –

MS. ASHTON: Did they have art classes there?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, we had a nice – one nice art teacher, and he was terrific. And I wrote to him and saw him afterwards, and he was a very beautiful painter. And so it was a good experience.

MS. ASHTON: And what did he think you should do?

MS. BONTECOU: He was happy that I – he, I think – maybe he was the one that suggested the Art Students League. All I said is I was going to be going to art school. Or that's what I remember.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: But – and he just – he was very encouraging and thoughtful. Just a nice

person. And that is, you know, all you need.

MS. ASHTON: And had you been to the "big city" before?

MS. BONTECOU: Well –

MS. ASHTON: I knew you went to the Met, and so on.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, we were – my grandmother, at one point – when my grandfather died, she came and lived with us. And she was part of our family. And every five – every six months, we had to go down to – oh, it was awful – Ellis Island, or one of those – maybe not Ellis, maybe that had closed, I don't know. But one of those cold places you went and sat on benches and waited for your name to be called.

And Mother would always take me, and I don't think she – I mean, it was like driving to the city, going down here, sitting in that place, and getting a visa, something, to extend your stay.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: So she went through that for four or five years, and finally Mother said – or they both agreed they couldn't do this. So my grandmother became an American citizen. And she just hated the idea. It was horrible, you know? It was like stripping her of her natural –

MS. ASHTON: And she was from where?

MS. BONTECOU: Canada.

MS. ASHTON: Where?

MS. BONTECOU: Nova Scotia.

MS. ASHTON: Nova Scotia? Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yarmouth.

MS. ASHTON: Yarmouth.

MS. BONTECOU: And –

MS. ASHTON: Where you later went.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, that's where we – she – they had settled there. And so she had a house there, and that's where we always went every summer. And I never missed my friends, or – I mean, in the sense of I was going there, and I was happy to go. So was my brother. And we just – we had the run of the island, you know. So what can you want?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Tides, three harbors, you know. It was –

MS. ASHTON: Did you work in clay?

MS. BONTECOU: Not until I really got to the League. I worked in clay at home.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Built things, and broke things, and you know, it just – but when I went to the League, I started with painting.

MS. ASHTON: Well, what, you came to New York City, and your parents were in agreement that you would live here?

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, yes. In New York? Yes, oh, yes. They were off doing what they had to do, and I left, and – no, they – Mother, I guess, helped me find an apartment in the Village [Greenwich Village, New York City], and that was the end of our – she having to do anything for me. And it was a basement apartment, and it was fine. And I went to the League, and

then had to leave that apartment. And eventually, in the end, when I was at the League, I was – a friend of mine had a little place for \$13 a month.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, wow.

MS. BONTECOU: No hot water.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: No heat. Running cold water, a john. And then my friend had gotten a refrigerator. So that's what we had. And I just lived in a sleeping bag, and it was fine. For \$13, you can't beat that. That's –

MS. ASHTON: You wouldn't remember what year that was, roughly?

MS. BONTECOU: It would be, roughly, 1955, maybe, or 1956. Something like that. In the 1950s.

MS. ASHTON: Yes?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And as soon as we –

MS. ASHTON: Then you went every day to the League?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. Well, I had –

MS. ASHTON: Whom did you take?

MS. BONTECOU: I took from – first, I took from [Robert] Brackman, painting, for a year.

MS. ASHTON: Real classical painter.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, real – right. And it was good. I learned – I have learned the color and the mixing, and I got to be doing nudes and the whole work. And I'm glad I had all of that.

MS. ASHTON: Sure.

MS. BONTECOU: And then, one day I said, "I'll just take a look down in the sculpture department." And I went down. It was in the dungeon, we used to call it. And I just thought, "This is for me." And without even – so the next month I changed, and went down, and then never came up again, you know? It was – and Zorach was there, and he was –

MS. ASHTON: Who was?

MS. BONTECOU: William Zorach.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, Zorach. Did you have Zorach?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, I had –

MS. ASHTON: You were lucky.

MS. BONTECOU: I know. And more than lucky, not knowing, really. But I had just recently finished a biography of his [William Zorach. Art is My Life. Cleveland, OH: World Publishing Co., 1967], and it was the most beautiful – have you ever read – it's worth reading, because it's –

MS. ASHTON: I would like to.

MS. BONTECOU: It's the history of – instead of the Abstract Expressionists that we're accustomed, it was the whole beginning of – from America's point of view – looking at Italy and France with the Impressionists. And Zorach was talking about these colors that were coming across, and he – the whole history. And he – like his painting, he wrote like – his sculpture, I mean.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: He wrote almost verging on primitive, but not.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And really –

MS. ASHTON: They were the generation that wanted to be, as they said, "True to materials."

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right.

MS. ASHTON: Yes. It was not a bad idea.

MS. BONTECOU: No, no. And his – I grew to really love his work. And he was so – they – that whole period, they were so full of life, and he was so – almost boastful and energetic, and willing to do everything. And, like, for – one thing he did was to – with Axel Adams, I guess.

MS. ASHTON: Ansel.

MS. BONTECOU: Ansel. What is –

MS. ASHTON: Ansel Adams, the photographer?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. They met. I mean, he knew everybody. Everybody knew everybody.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: From Rockefellers down to the artists.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes, true.

MS. BONTECOU: And then he – like, they went, "Let's go mountain climbing," and so they went up this – and Axel –

MS. ASHTON: Ansel.

MS. BONTECOU: Ansel, apparently – I mean, Zorach said, "I don't know how to climb." And so they went climbing up this mountain, and got down – got on top, and he said, "Let's" – it took three hours. And he – they said, "Well, let's just" – there is a word for when you go off the mountain with ropes [rappel], and jump down –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – down, down.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, I forgot the word. I'm not –

MS. BONTECOU: Well, it got out of hand, and they were tumbling and falling and scratching, and trying –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, my God.

MS. BONTECOU: – and landed at the bottom, almost dead, and laid there for something – I think Bill said it was like a week of recovery from this broken, cracked, bleeding –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, my God.

MS. BONTECOU: But this is the spirit that was behind their adventures.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was an eye-opener for me to read that.

MS. ASHTON: So when you worked with Zorach, you were working with clay?

MS. BONTECOU: Clay.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I didn't – what happens in his class is that the monitor who set up, he showed me the – how to do the armature, and the – and from then on, it was like the classroom worked itself. And he never really believed in teaching. He believed in encouraging, and – I mean, I didn't know his point of view. It was just – he came, and he enjoyed – there were old ladies, which we called, even from 30 on –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – and they were very, very nice. And he would chat with them, and they would laugh and have a good time. And he would come around and look at our things a little bit. But once we started on our own, he never interfered. He never interfered. And everybody was doing quite different things, although I can say that, looking at the photographs I did, I can see Zorach –

MS. ASHTON: Yes?

MS. BONTECOU: – in the sense that I used male and female sturdy figures, you know?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And this was my Zorach period. But it was all slab, and different –

MS. ASHTON: A little blocky, yes?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: But – and I just worked with different – I worked as if I were a welder, with slabs of clay, rather than –

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And so I built up things that were different, and I was really happy in doing it. But then, at one point, I said, "I've had enough. I want to get out. I want to have a loft. I want space, and I want time." Those were the two things we argued over, space and time. The heck with money. That had no – I mean, that didn't – and of course, in those days, you could – I mean, we lived on nothing. And – but I was skinny as – I was under 100 [pounds].

MS. ASHTON: Oh, wow.

MS. BONTECOU: You know, I mean, we would go in, and I would have my sandwich of two pieces of cheese and some dates in between, and that was it. And, you know –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And we all – it was –

MS. ASHTON: Did you ever hang out at the cafeteria at the League?

MS. BONTECOU: At one point I guess I did. When I was painting.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: But after I was in the sculpture, we sat on a bench outside and just –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, because the cafeteria –

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: – was a place where some of the old-timers hung out, and you know –

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: – and you could meet any of those old guys that had known –

MS. BONTECOU: Right, yes.

MS. ASHTON: – you know, the 1920s and 1930s, and some really weird people, but interesting.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. Well, I kind of missed that.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I think, because – I did, in the beginning. And it was full of smoke.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Right?

MS. ASHTON: Yes, right.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was really – but later on, we never came upstairs.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was –

MS. ASHTON: So then you found a loft?

MS. BONTECOU: I found a loft and – Avenue C and Sixth Street, in the – way over.

MS. ASHTON: Dangerous.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, it was like –

MS. ASHTON: In those days.

MS. BONTECOU: In those days. And like, I never paid any attention to that. I mean, I would come home 3:00 in the morning, you know, if I had went with friends, and –

MS. ASHTON: I know.

MS. BONTECOU: – walked, but I was really – I mean, I was streetwise, and –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, you get a second sense when you're in a city dwelling.

MS. BONTECOU: You get a second – you know when to cross over, and –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Then, also, when I did move from there – I was kicked out because I was welding.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And –

MS. ASHTON: How did you begin welding?

MS. BONTECOU: Okay –

MS. ASHTON: Had you done it at the League?

MS. BONTECOU: No. I went to Skowhegan [Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, Skowhegan, ME]. I must say Skowhegan was wonderful in those days, and it was – I don't want to disparage, but it was just pure stuff. And we had only one tank for the – all of us. And we shared that welding tank. And the monitor there – not the teacher, but the monitor – showed me how to weld. And the first thing I knew, I was just welding pieces, and –

MS. ASHTON: Were they linear, or –

MS. BONTECOU: Linear, some of them, and just not well done at that point, you know. But it was wonderful.

MS. ASHTON: Had you looked at contemporary older sculptors that were welding?

MS. BONTECOU: The one I – my – the – my favorite was [Julio] Gonzalez, and that's who I –

MS. ASHTON: Not bad.

MS. BONTECOU: He was the man.

MS. ASHTON: And you had the benefit of [Pablo] Picasso, because Gonzalez without Picasso –

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, right. And also [Constantin] Brancusi.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Those three guys –

MS. ASHTON: But Brancusi wasn't a welder.

MS. BONTECOU: No, no, he wasn't a welder.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Far from it.

MS. ASHTON: No.

MS. BONTECOU: But the – but between Brancusi, Gonzalez, and [Alexander] Calder, and the linear man, linear – [Alberto] Giacometti, those were, like – those were favorites.

MS. ASHTON: And he wasn't a welder, either.

MS. BONTECOU: No. No, no, no. The welding – this was – the welding was –

MS. ASHTON: Afterwards I will tell you a Giacometti anecdote.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay, okay. But welding –

MS. ASHTON: Well, I suppose his brother –

MS. BONTECOU: I started in my –

MS. ASHTON: His brother would have done his armatures for him, I imagine. He had to have armatures.

MS. BONTECOU: Not necessarily.

MS. ASHTON: Giacometti – no?

MS. BONTECOU: I don't think so. I – well –

MS. ASHTON: Well, for that pointing hand –

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, oh, yes. No, that had to be –

MS. ASHTON: Sure.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes. I never even thought about that. I never – I accepted it –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – as clay, you know?

MS. ASHTON: I understand. Sure.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And it – but he may have made his own armatures and then did his clay and then cast it.

MS. ASHTON: He could have.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, I'm sure – I have a feeling, Dore, that he must have done –

MS. ASHTON: Well, I was in the street. I didn't see any tanks or any welding equipment.

MS. BONTECOU: But he didn't need to have – you could bend your wire to get that.

MS. ASHTON: That's true.

MS. BONTECOU: And then you build onto that clay.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And you could make –

MS. ASHTON: But that's not where his heart and soul was, anyway –

MS. BONTECOU: No, no.

MS. ASHTON: – so it didn't matter.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: I mean, that's merely an arrangement.

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right.

MS. ASHTON: That, you know – it makes it easier.

MS. BONTECOU: Right, yes.

MS. ASHTON: So, there in the League, then, you already started making figure sculptures, right?

MS. BONTECOU: All figures –

MS. ASHTON: And they had models?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, we had models every week. We had a change. And they were wonderful, they were terrific.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, they were pros in those days.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, weren't they amazing?

MS. ASHTON: They were real professionals.

MS. BONTECOU: Do you remember a plump –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, I had her, too. We should tell Nick.

MS. BONTECOU: What was her name?

MS. ASHTON: I forgot.

MS. BONTECOU: I will remember.

MS. ASHTON: Yes?

MS. BONTECOU: But I will tell the story. I will break in –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I – one of my jobs, I worked at the library. I got – and Jean Noise was the librarian. And I was wise enough to realize I liked Jean; I loved Jean, but I don't want to be around in the [inaudible]. So I took the night shift, and Jean and I had tea together, and she split, and I took care of the library until 11:00, or whenever they closed.

And – but her thing was she could hear – well, haven't got her name yet. This woman was really round and plump.

MS. ASHTON: Very.

MS. BONTECOU: Very. And tiny ankles.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, that's right.

MS. BONTECOU: And very delicate hands. And her – she would walk up and down that stairway, with a robe open, flowing, and everything was flowing, and Jean would lean over the – she said, "So-and-so, cover up, cover up. Just stop that."

And Jean was the nurse, or a nanny, to that – now, I'm hoping – I may – this better be looked at, because this is what I remember –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – and it could be not true. But I think it –

MS. ASHTON: Well, we're only after memory.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. She was the nanny to that beautiful [John Singer] Sargent woman - painting, huge paintings, in the Met of –

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was by Sargent.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And she was the nanny to their children.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, for heaven's sake.

MS. BONTECOU: For years. And then she came to the League. And she was the one that made the library. And as soon as she had gone, they – I don't think they even have a library. I don't know.

MS. ASHTON: I don't know, either.

MS. BONTECOU: But it was a beautiful little spot –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – you could go, and had these very rare books that I had to keep – that was the only thing I worried about. And that was it.

MS. ASHTON: Did you look at Old Master books?

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

MS. ASHTON: What – who were the sculptors in the history of art that attracted your attention?

MS. BONTECOU: Well, the –

MS. ASHTON: Visually, I mean.

MS. BONTECOU: Visually, I would start with the Greeks.

MS. ASHTON: That's a good place to start.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. And when I went there to – on the Fulbright [Fulbright Scholarship, 1957-58]. I said, "Boy" – and I went to Greece, and I thought – I was cocky, I guess, or nasty, really. And I thought, "They better show me something, because I've been thinking of this all –"

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I went to one of those museums, and I was just floored with the Archaic sculptures, just huge – have you seen those?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Weren't they incredible?

MS. ASHTON: They were.

MS. BONTECOU: They were absolutely breathtaking, and you wanted to sort of bow down and just pat them, or do something. And I looked at the forms that were not quite right around the knee, that – all of that was primitive in the – I don't like to use that word, but it was –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: They hadn't solved that problem yet. And the beautiful forms, it was like looking at one Brancusi upon another.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And that's how I think of Brancusi.

MS. ASHTON: I do, too.

MS. BONTECOU: He's a classic.

MS. ASHTON: You're right. Absolutely.

MS. BONTECOU: He's a classic. And instead of going like the – what is that big sculpture that's so – Baroque. Instead of going toward the Baroque, Brancusi went to the pure Classical. And that's how I look at Brancusi, is those forms are just what the Greeks had – now that's how I look at it.

MS. ASHTON: That's the right family.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: I think you're right.

MS. BONTECOU: It was just beautiful.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I – it just – I wasn't disappointed at all. In fact, I wasn't disappointed at all in Greece, where the battles were, and with all that kind of stuff that you can really see them – you go on top of the thing and look at where the Spartans met the other – whatever enemy –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was like, "Oh, my," you know. The fields were not that big, and you could really – oh, my –

MS. ASHTON: And the stadiums.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes, yes. I was – it was okay.

MS. ASHTON: So, now we have you still at the League.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, God.

MS. ASHTON: And you got a loft on Avenue C.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. Okay –

MS. ASHTON: And you're interested in welding.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. When I came back from – I went to – no, I went to – oh, okay. It's – that's wrong. From the League I got a Fulbright.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I think that's what – and so, in Italy is where I started welding. I got a – found a beautiful – or, rather, the signora found me. You're dumped there. And I was so happy to not have been – well, I will go – we had to find our own places, and I found one that was not good, but when I asked for –

MS. ASHTON: In Rome?

MS. BONTECOU: In Rome. And it was –

MS. ASHTON: Which neighborhood, do you remember?

MS. BONTECOU: In Trastevere.

MS. ASHTON: Trastevere.

MS. BONTECOU: But when I – it was so small, but I was happy to find anything.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I worked, and I did some – I actually did some little sculptures there, and slab, and sort of continuation of where I was in the League. And then the signora – I – there was a terra-cotta factory –

MS. ASHTON: So you say you're working in slab. Were you abstract already?

MS. BONTECOU: It was – not – it was abstract. There were birds; there were – it wasn't – no. It was not abstract, in the sense of being – but they were abstracted birds, let's say, more or less.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I could only –

MS. ASHTON: And you left the slabs visible?

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, yes. You could see where I attached it, just like welding.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: It was before I had my tanks. And then, when I –

MS. ASHTON: Had you thought of them to be cast?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. No, no. Not these. I did one, and I did do one later. And they would have been fine cast. They were fine cast. I mean, they – you could see – it would have been – worked very well. But they weren't lost wax.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: When I started – I went – when I needed clay, I asked – I got the terra-cotta little factory to – and this signora came wheeling over nice big boxes of clay, and she looked at this room, and she said, "Venga, venga," "Come, come." And she – we tottled off. And she showed me this – I opened – went through this thing into this beautiful piazza, or courtyard. And around it were –

MS. ASHTON: Cortile [courtyard].

MS. BONTECOU: Cortile. And around it were these buildings. And the man, her husband, was a terra-cotta flower pot man.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: So I – and she took me upstairs on the tar roof, and she said, "In there."

And I looked, and there is this beautiful room. She said – and I said, "I will – would you rent it?" And she said, "Yes."

MS. ASHTON: Oh, wow.

MS. BONTECOU: So I was out of that other place in a minute. And I had the best two rooms, connected on a rooftop, and then the friend had –

MS. ASHTON: Also in Trastevere?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. Oh, this – right around the corner from where I was.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, oh.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Not bad.

MS. BONTECOU: It wasn't bad.

MS. ASHTON: In those days.

MS. BONTECOU: And I looked out, and, I mean, it was like looking down in the courtyard – not only that, she had a big frame, wooden frame, with her uccelli [birds].

MS. ASHTON: Birds?

MS. BONTECOU: Birds. And she would roll it out every morning. And that was her pets; those were her pets. And so it was – we were – and, I don't know, it was simpatico all the way, you know?

MS. ASHTON: Yes. So then you started welding?

MS. BONTECOU: Then I got my welding tanks, and I started half welding and –

MS. ASHTON: But nobody at taught you how to weld?

MS. BONTECOU: Well, at Skowhegan.

MS. ASHTON: At Skowhegan, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I learned that technique. And then I just half welded and half used clay with these spurred forms. And then, later, I just took black wax and poured it out on my – and made slabs, and welded them together. And a lot of the things were just very, very light. And when I took them to the foundry, they were the Something Brothers. Do you remember their name?

MS. ASHTON: No.

MS. BONTECOU: The – I don't know.

MS. ASHTON: I only knew one sculptor, Dimitri Hadzi.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, right, I – yes.

MS. ASHTON: Do you remember Dimitri?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, I do, very much.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I will tell you a story about –

MS. ASHTON: I did visit his foundry once with him there.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. Well, then that was –

MS. ASHTON: In Rome.

MS. BONTECOU: In Rome.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: That's where I was. And I forget their name. The Something Brothers. And they looked at it, and they began squeaking in, sort of, anger. What – you know, what – as far as these very – two figures sitting on a thing, quite large, and then other things, too. The – I did the birds – one bird terra-cotta in – I had them do that.

But first they did this one. And what they did, they just lowered the whole thing in a big bucket, and the core came in and filled in everything all around it. And they put the screws in, or whatever they're called, and they poured it. And when I went there, they were just so pleased and happy. They said, "Look." And the thing was as light – it wasn't this heavy thing. And it was just – the wax was only that thick. And so –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, about a half-inch

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, no.

MS. ASHTON: Less?

MS. BONTECOU: Eighth of an inch.

MS. ASHTON: Eighth of an inch?

MS. BONTECOU: All the way – you know. And these two figures sitting on there. And they were perfect.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And then, after that, they even did the big bird, and they made that thinner for me. You know, I mean –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, wow.

MS. BONTECOU: They just – it was neat. So, that was my –

MS. ASHTON: And how long did you live in Rome?

MS. BONTECOU: We had – I extended a year, and it made it really, really possible and productive. And so most of us stayed another year. And it was fine. It was really – it was really good. The academy – maybe I –

MS. ASHTON: How did you like Piazza Navona?

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, I loved it.

MS. ASHTON: That's my favorite place.

MS. BONTECOU: That's my favorite. I mean, it was like – I go on that thing, and I think of that –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – Giacommeti.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, absolutely.

MS. BONTECOU: I think of Giacommeti.

MS. ASHTON: And that [Gian Lorenzo] Bernini fountain is fantastic.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I liked Rome, and I was happy I chose Rome, and not Florence. I loved – I went to Florence, and I loved everything. But it was too closed, and –

MS. ASHTON: It's a village.

MS. BONTECOU: It's a village, right. And Rome is just – and I don't know if – did you ever – were you there at a time when there was Something Città, Village Città, or something. You went toward the sea –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay. And that –

MS. ASHTON: You went to see the Etruscan places.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. Oh, right. That, too. And the Etruscan terra-cotta were wonderful.

MS. ASHTON: I loved that.

MS. BONTECOU: That one, that queen and king on a – the only thing I can say about – have you been there recently? You were –

MS. ASHTON: No, not recently.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, maybe it was there when – you walk up, and it's placed – you have to walk across a grille. Do you remember that?

MS. ASHTON: I do. Yes, vaguely.

MS. BONTECOU: That was disturbing.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: But, anyway, the piece was beautiful.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And that – they and the Mayans are the ones that – I looked at terra-cotta. They were the – [André] Emmerich used to – I used to not go into Emmerich, but I looked at his – he used – I think it was Emmerich that had these Mayan figures all –

MS. ASHTON: He did.

MS. BONTECOU: He seemed to love them.

MS. ASHTON: He did.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: I did a book with him.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, they were beautiful.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes. So then – well, now you're in Rome. And by this time you have mastered welding.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: And you knew all about casting.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: And you were starting, I presume, to think about what you, personally, were

interested in, as a sculptor.

MS. BONTECOU: I – toward the end, I started those soot drawings. I don't know if you know the black and white and – I –

MS. ASHTON: Well, describe them for me.

MS. BONTECOU: All right. They – it was – I wanted a black, for some reason, and I wanted to do landscape. But – and it was just – so I stretched paper on the wall, and I got smart enough to get thick paper. And I don't know. Because of welding, you have – there was this, always, residue of black stuff around. So I opened the – shut down the oxygen, and just used the acetylene. Who knows how –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Anyway, and I just started working with a torch. And, oh my, it just was – I could draw huge – and the higher the flame, you could get away from it or put it in. And sometimes I have a little fire, and then I put it out, and it was – anyway, I got to control it, and I made a lot of drawings, just with that. And they were like landscape.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And “worldscape.”

MS. ASHTON: You call them soot drawings?

MS. BONTECOU: Soot drawings.

MS. ASHTON: I remember that.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay. And they really were “worldscape.” And I began – Sputnik [Soviet Union earth-orbiting satellite] was a big thing at one time.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And I think I was in Italy at the time that Sputnik went up. And I was just so happy. “Look,” you know? It was like – and it was like even I liked that fact, that it was – they were more – Sputnik was Russian; it was the Russian – and it was just terrific. And I really liked that idea. It wasn't American. I don't know why, but that's part of it. And that, I think, was part of the getting involved in – so a lot of the things were spatial, and –

MS. ASHTON: Did you ever go to the American library in Rome?

MS. BONTECOU: No.

MS. ASHTON: No?

MS. BONTECOU: No.

MS. ASHTON: It was censored. That was the McCarthy era, you remember?

MS. BONTECOU: Oh.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, man. Well, well, I don't –

MS. ASHTON: Did you know about Piazza Venezia?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. No, what?

MS. ASHTON: Well, [Benito] Mussolini made his famous speech there.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh –

MS. ASHTON: When he entered Rome.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: All I remember thinking, here was the – that beautiful statue of – that – I think it's Michelangelo's –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – Equestrian statue.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Beautiful. And then this huge wedding cake to the right.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, the Mussolini thing?

MS. BONTECOU: The –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, my. And they were both cheek by jowl.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, right. It's really funny.

MS. BONTECOU: And – yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: And there was even a little Roman temple nearby, you remember? A little – the cupola [dome]?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Small.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Maybe as big as this room.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, beautiful.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: No, it was – it – and not only – I must say even the – you walk up those streets and look at those shop windows; I just was amazed at how pristine, and – they put their pencils – let's say at schooltime, the pencils were all laid out in fans and colors and –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: You know, just very –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – design-oriented.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, that's true.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: That's true. The one place I remember was especially that way was Siena.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, right.

MS. ASHTON: Everything in that place was ordered –

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: – on an aesthetic level.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: The meanest vegetable shop, or –

MS. BONTECOU: I – yes. No, everything, even – Rome was the – I mean, you see a cart of fruit, and it was pyramided and beautiful.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. I just hope it doesn't change. But I – well, I don't like to think of –

MS. ASHTON: The first thing I learned in Rome is – you remember the manhole covers?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: They had the word “S.P.Q.R.” on it.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: And so I didn't know. I should have known it was Latin, and so on. And so I asked somebody, “What does it mean?” And he said, “It means, queste romane sono puttane.”

MS. BONTECOU: What does that mean?

MS. ASHTON: “These Romans are whores.” [They laugh.]

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, that's cute.

MS. ASHTON: So now, let's say you had looked around. I presume you were interested in what was then contemporary sculpture. I, myself, think that we didn't have very good sculptors in my country, U.S.A., and I don't think that was a good period. You were the only one for me, at the time. I have to say that. But –

MS. BONTECOU: Even over people like [Richard] Stankiewicz, or [Richard] Hunt –

MS. ASHTON: Well, Stankiewicz was a special favorite of mine, but he died young.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: I've got one downstairs I will show you.

MS. BONTECOU: What about – who did I – Stankiewicz –

MS. ASHTON: Did you know him?

MS. BONTECOU: No, I –

MS. ASHTON: He was a very nice man.

MS. BONTECOU: And, you know, his wife was – I did see his wife's things.

MS. ASHTON: Who was that?

MS. BONTECOU: Darn it. And they were beautiful.

MS. ASHTON: Really?

MS. BONTECOU: Just small, but similar, in the sense of using –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – materials from the street, I guess.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: More sophisticated, but I wish I – and I don't know. It was just – they were really beautiful, too. And I hadn't – I didn't know about her until later. I didn't even know who she was.

MS. ASHTON: I don't think I know who that –

MS. BONTECOU: You know –

MS. ASHTON: I don't, either.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. But there was one other – Hunt [ph] I liked, but they were elegant kind of things. And I –

MS. ASHTON: While we're still in Rome –

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: Of, let's say, the European contemporaries of the time, whom were you interested in? Whom would you have wanted to see?

MS. BONTECOU: Well, Rome was with – when we were there, all the Rome painters were interested in the Abstract Expressionists.

MS. ASHTON: That's true, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And we were obliged to go to the – one of the academies in Rome. And, as students, we were supposed to –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was – oh, it was – what we did was we went and took our pads to be – this was fulfilling an assignment. And we took our pads. And it was cold. And the poor model was sitting there with a heater on her, getting red in one hip, you know? And we all were – it was embarrassing. It was so embarrassing. The instructor was embarrassing. Everything was embarrassing. And we never went back.

And it was sort of – I just felt – that poor model, you know? All I could think of was the poor model.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was nothing – so we fulfilled something. And that's –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: You know? And I lost track now. Where –

MS. ASHTON: We were talking about other artists that interested you.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh. So – okay.

MS. ASHTON: Of that period.

MS. BONTECOU: All I know is, I think, Dorazio –

MS. ASHTON: Piero. He was a painter.

MS. BONTECOU: A painter. And he was very interested in abstract.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, he was.

MS. BONTECOU: You know?

MS. ASHTON: But he had been to New York.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay.

MS. ASHTON: Piero was the first that got really involved.

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right. Well, I –

MS. ASHTON: He had even written a book.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, I – yes. Well, I don't –

MS. ASHTON: Then he became a pretty bad painter. [Laughs.]

MS. BONTECOU: I don't want to – but –

MS. ASHTON: No? Okay.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: We won't go there.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay. Don't –

MS. ASHTON: But there were –

MS. BONTECOU: There really –

MS. ASHTON: There were sculptors there in Rome, I know, that you would have met, and –

MS. BONTECOU: Well, I met Calder.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, well.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was really – I mean, in fact, what I – my – I met a bunch of architects.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And those were – I don't – I'm trying – I tried to think –

MS. ASHTON: They were at the academy, no doubt.

MS. BONTECOU: No, no.

MS. ASHTON: No?

MS. BONTECOU: They were Fulbrights.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: We were all Fulbrights. And they – I mean, they – I know what it was – they wanted me – I was a sculptor, so they wanted to do a project of Ferney – a project, some project in America. And they wanted to do it. So they said, "You make something, Lee, and we will draw it up, and make a - " and so, we – for quite a long time – and I made a thing, but it wasn't – I mean, it was an underground thing. It was really ugly, I think, probably, you know, but it had some nice ideas.

But they were willing – they wanted to enter it. And we went through the whole procedures of shereding, which is –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – like, at the last moment, you're pouring the thing, practically.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Or getting it ready.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And – but – and every night we would go to Trastevere and spend all night eating and enjoying the people who were around, who were local people, and we spent, I don't know, a good – a lot of time there.

And one time, one of the boys knew Calder, and he came and joined us. And it was fun, you know? And he was older –

MS. ASHTON: And drunk.

MS. BONTECOU: And drunk. And it was – and we – and I know one of the – the guy that invited him made sure he got home okay, you know?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: But it was –

MS. ASHTON: So did you know Sandy's [Calder] work?

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I mean, he was like – you go from Brancusi, Gonzalez, all –

MS. ASHTON: Picasso?

MS. BONTECOU: – Picasso – and Calder, and, as far as sculptors –

MS. ASHTON: Did you ever talk to him about his aesthetic formation?

MS. BONTECOU: No. I –

MS. ASHTON: You know who was the deepest influence on him?

MS. BONTECOU: No.

MS. ASHTON: He told me, anyway –

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right.

MS. ASHTON: [Piet] Mondrian.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, I can see that.

MS. ASHTON: Isn't that interesting?

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, no – yes. Oh, I can see that.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: That's a good choice.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. Mondrian is – it took me awhile to – it was one of those painters I saw at the Modern [Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY], and I thought, "I don't get it. I don't get it." And then, all of a sudden, I walked in and, "Oh, my gosh."

MS. ASHTON: Got it.

MS. BONTECOU: "These things are – I got it." And it's the same with the [Henri] Matisse and –

MS. ASHTON: But only he could do it. That's what I have discovered.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: All the others, they vanished for me.

MS. BONTECOU: I see.

MS. ASHTON: But I still –

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: There was something, some intensity there –

MS. BONTECOU: So pure.

MS. ASHTON: – that comes through.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes. So then you met Calder. And did you talk to him about sculpture?

MS. BONTECOU: No, no. [Laughs.] It was – no. It was just fun. I don't remember.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And at that time –

MS. ASHTON: And were you interested in his ideas, as a sculptor?

MS. BONTECOU: I think they were – the space in them, all the space quality that happens – like, I just saw his show, just recently, at –

MS. ASHTON: Whitney [Whitney Museum of Art, New York, NY]?

MS. BONTECOU: – Whitney. And he is just as new as can be, as far as I – I mean, it's just – and it never ends. You walk and you – it's just beautiful. And especially that time. I mean, I think the others are elegant, the one – like the Modern – that beautiful one that – you walk upstairs, and there is that thing hanging. It's just beautiful. I mean, the balance and everything about it.

But those early ones are – and then here he is, making – and what was neat about that little film clip, not a smile on his face, "boom, boom," and he kept bringing these little animals out, and they would go, "clunk," and – [laughs].

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes. I knew a little bit about that, because I wrote a book about [Isamu] Noguchi, and Noguchi was the guy that did [operated] the phonograph of [for] The Circus.

MS. BONTECOU: I see. He was just really – yes. They were really – I think Calder had the same spirit as Zorach, in a way, even though they were so different.

MS. ASHTON: Yes?

MS. BONTECOU: But that childlike –

MS. ASHTON: The same generation.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, same generation.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: It was sort of like one end to another end.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: It was beautiful.

MS. ASHTON: And what about – now, we're still in Rome. Did you travel in Europe, looking for sculpture and enlarging your vocabulary and that sort of thing? You didn't have to, really; you were in Rome.

MS. BONTECOU: I was in Rome, right. And what's a nice contrast was the difference between the Roman work and the Greek. And the Greeks were just so – I mean, you go to Delphi, and – so pure. And the Romans were heavier. I mean, there was beautiful things, but they just didn't have that – I mean, I guess I like the Greeks over the Romans.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: But, I mean, stuff – I enjoyed – somewhere where I was, you know, I think it was the horse, the equestrian –

MS. ASHTON: Marcus Aurelius?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. I – but, I mean, that's something else.

MS. ASHTON: That's something else.

MS. BONTECOU: And also, I'm not so sure if that horse – I don't know. Dore, you probably – I went to Siena – no. Where is Giotto [di Bondone]?

MS. ASHTON: Giotto? In Florence.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay. No, not there.

MS. ASHTON: Oh. Oh, yes, right.

MS. BONTECOU: Not Siena. No.

MS. ASHTON: No.

MS. BONTECOU: Venice? Near Venice? All right.

MS. ASHTON: Not Giotto near Venice, no.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay, all right. Where was his –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, there is the Scrovegni Chapel [Padua, Italy].

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. Where is that?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: All right.

MS. ASHTON: Here I am.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay, sorry. But –

MS. ASHTON: I've seen it.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: I never remember where I see anything.

MS. BONTECOU: The – in that – I think in that town – and I may be wrong again – but in that town there is a wooden equestrian horse. And –

MS. ASHTON: Wooden?

MS. BONTECOU: Wooden. It was beautiful. Barrel belly. Actually, barrels, practically, but –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I think I have it wrong, but –

MS. ASHTON: I don't think I've seen that.

MS. BONTECOU: I thought it was the – that horse that was used for the –

MS. ASHTON: – model?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, for the – but I may be altogether off the wall. But I know there is that horse there.

MS. ASHTON: And it was wooden?

MS. BONTECOU: It was wooden.

MS. ASHTON: I wonder if that was in Parma. I don't remember, either.

MS. BONTECOU: I was traveling alone at the time.

MS. ASHTON: Modena, Parma, I don't remember either.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, I don't – no.

MS. ASHTON: But I have seen it, too.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: So – yes.

MS. BONTECOU: You saw that wooden horse?

MS. ASHTON: I think I have, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: It was –

MS. ASHTON: Of course, there is a time that you don't – you've seen so many reproductions, though, and you don't know if you saw it or didn't see it.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, right. Well, I don't even know if I have seen –

MS. ASHTON: I think I saw it.

MS. BONTECOU: I don't know if I've seen reproductions of it.

MS. ASHTON: What I do remember is seeing – the last time, which was several – no, almost 10 years ago – in Rome, one of those Roman sculptures of a wrestler who is at rest. And he's got his hands on his knees. And the back is unbelievable. And it is a bronze.

MS. BONTECOU: Wow. Right.

MS. ASHTON: And they put it out in a new installation in Rome.

MS. BONTECOU: I see. I hadn't seen that.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, it was – it made me think twice, you know.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: I had never – I always sneered at the Romans, but –

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. No, it –

MS. ASHTON: – I thought, "Uh-oh," yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: You were –

MS. BONTECOU: No, there are – you can't. It's –

MS. ASHTON: No.

MS. BONTECOU: And you look at the aqueduct and the architecture and, oh –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: You go – they had other things that were – no, they – it was just sometimes I had –

MS. ASHTON: So you had an interest in architecture?

MS. BONTECOU: Oh –

MS. ASHTON: You told me you were working with the architects, and –

MS. BONTECOU: Oh. Well, it was – that was – sort of happened happily, you know? And –

but, as far as – I mean, you can't go in Rome without looking at the architecture –

MS. ASHTON: Sure.

MS. BONTECOU: I mean, it's just – and –

MS. ASHTON: And the sculpture is always so important.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And the fountain, I mean, everything.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: It's – it was a beautiful city. And, I mean, Trastevere was gorgeous, at the time I was there.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: It was still rickety-rackety.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Tiny little roads through it.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I know there was one place where the monks – I couldn't figure it out. There was a straightaway that divided Trastevere from the, I guess, the monastery.

Anyway, I see them riding along, and then they disappear. And I think there was a – some kind of door that they could get into and go somewhere.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And who knows? You know?

MS. ASHTON: Who knows? [They laugh.]

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, who knows?

MS. ASHTON: Okay.

MS. BONTECOU: But I don't even know if that – I mean, I have heard that they have spiffed it up, and it's – places for –

MS. ASHTON: Well, I have heard that Trastevere now is just a rich people's –

MS. BONTECOU: It's a fur-coat place.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: The tape's about to go out.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay.

MS. ASHTON: Really?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, we're at –

MS. ASHTON: That's a whole hour? All right.

[END CD 1 FILE 2.]

All right. Well, we're still in Rome. And you traveled around in Europe, I take it.

MS. BONTECOU: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MS. ASHTON: And did you have any really important revelations, in terms of your attitude toward your particular art, sculpture, then?

MS. BONTECOU: I think it was in – when I was in Rome, the – and traveling, it was more looking at that, as I talked before, the Greek Archaic, and all of that.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: But – and I guess I was probably – I don't know where I was in Rome at that time, when we left, what I was doing, whether it was with the – I don't think it was the soot drawings. That came a little later. But –

MS. ASHTON: Birds?

MS. BONTECOU: I was working with birds, and trying – and I thought, "Well, these birds are not going to fly, because the world is not ready." I mean, they have cut their wings already. I mean, I had all that pollution thing already. And the flowers I made later in plastic, where they were trying to breathe, but no one got that picture.

MS. ASHTON: I did.

MS. BONTECOU: Good. Thank you, Dore.

MS. ASHTON: Remember, I put you in a show with those, in France?

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, I didn't know –

MS. ASHTON: There was a – I did this large show. I had two sculptors, you and Eva Hesse. And a couple of others –

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: – I had to include.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. Oh.

MS. ASHTON: But what I got from you were the flowers.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, that's nice.

MS. ASHTON: And, you know –

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Well, we will get to that in a minute.

MS. BONTECOU: We'll get that, all right.

MS. ASHTON: But now – all right. So you have – let's finish your European soggiorno [trip].

MS. BONTECOU: Okay.

MS. ASHTON: Yes. You had to have that Permesso di Soggiorno [Permission to Stay], didn't you?

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, right.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, I did, too.

MS. BONTECOU: All the time.

MS. ASHTON: Once a month. And they were always out for coffee.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, I found –

MS. ASHTON: It could take all day to get this permission to stay in Rome.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, it was horrible. It was like going to Gestapo time.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, it was terrible.

MS. BONTECOU: And one little – I will just – one little English girl, and she had to go for her soggiorno, and she was so scared. And they had picked on her, because she was sort of – she was full. She was – and kind of sloppy dressed.

And so, I said, "Oh, I will go with you." And so we went, and sure enough – I mean, I – even when I was there, one of the men broke a pencil in front of me. I mean, like – and it was because his guard, his thug there, did something wrong, and he broke the thing and threw it at him. You know, it was horrible.

And so, anyway, this poor girl, we got her through it. I said, "Don't say much; don't do - " I tried to, you know – and we got through it. But she was really scared.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I mean, it was really –

MS. ASHTON: It was unpleasant. I remember that, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: It was very unpleasant.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes. Well now, the two years are up.

MS. BONTECOU: All right. Two years are up, and I came back.

MS. ASHTON: You came back to Manhattan?

MS. BONTECOU: Manhattan. And I had all my sculptures. And we sailed them under as ironworks. We didn't say they were sculpture.

MS. ASHTON: Works of art, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And we got them under "ironworks," and they were all dumped on the wharf. And I – you know, I can't really – I think I had found that studio – I think I had found the studio on Avenue C and Sixth Street, or – I want to say Seventh Street, but it's Sixth Street, I think. And I took them all there, and I took them in a pushcart. And I took a pushcart from Avenue C, brought it over and put them in, and trundled off, and got them home. And that was that.

And then, I started working there, welding, and –

MS. ASHTON: How did you support yourself?

MS. BONTECOU: Art Students League library, and then I – any kind of dumb job. I stuffed molds for a ceramics – who was also a student there. And Rose Crantz and I – she was about four-feet-something, and we went and – stuffing molds after molds for her. And then one day I looked up and said, "Rose, your kiln is on fire." And there was flames going up the wall. And she had a real thick accent. And she pulled the plugs, and everything was okay.

Anyway, that kind of job, and Art Students League job –

MS. ASHTON: So you knew how to do ceramics?

MS. BONTECOU: No, but I – working with clay, you can do –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: You know. So I did that, and anything that came. Horrible jobs. Some little bit of a secretarial thing, which I couldn't do. I couldn't type, so half the stuff went out in the trash. You know? [They laugh.]

MS. ASHTON: I had the same thing.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, it was – but anyway, I managed. And I got – and the rents were – even the one on – the studio on Sixth Street was – it wasn't that expensive. I think it was

something like \$75, which was a lot.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, in those days, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And then, there I started welding, and I – it just opened up. And I could – I just welded all the time, and made frames, and started – the canvas – just like all of those – Stankiewicz and all of those people, we got everything off the street.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: The material was there.

MS. ASHTON: Canal Street.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, man, it was beautiful. It was terrific. Look at it now. Junk.

MS. ASHTON: One thing that always interested me: when I first saw the work that you did with the canvas and the metal, I thought immediately of gas masks.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: And nobody else did. And I bet you used –

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, I used gas masks.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, sure.

MS. BONTECOU: In fact, the whole – my whole – everything – there were two parts of what I was doing. The one was the spatial, and that came – well, I had to work side by side –

MS. ASHTON: What do you mean by "spatial"?

MS. BONTECOU: Okay. Outer space.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Outer space. Outer space and the war. And the war, I –

MS. ASHTON: Which war?

MS. BONTECOU: Second World War. I just – I was angry that things, other things, were creeping in already. And I was angry that nothing held. So I – all of those darker – all the ones with the teeth and – it was a thing of what that war was. That –

MS. ASHTON: The Second World War?

MS. BONTECOU: Second World War.

MS. ASHTON: You weren't concerned with the war in Korea, for instance?

MS. BONTECOU: Not as – not at that time, because it wasn't there. It hadn't started.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, it had.

MS. BONTECOU: Had it?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay. Well –

MS. ASHTON: I think so.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, that's maybe another anger.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Because here we are, back in more again. And after that –

MS. ASHTON: And ever since.

MS. BONTECOU: And ever since. And after that Second World War, my feeling was – and I said it to my friend, who was Jewish – and I think we both sort of – I think we both were nodding, and I said, "Susan, at least the children aren't going to be killed anymore." I mean, I was so naive.

MS. ASHTON: We were.

MS. BONTECOU: I mean, at least there is going to be – I – it was before the Korean [War].

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: But just after the war.

MS. ASHTON: It was probably before Vietnam. You remember we had a big war in Korea. We didn't call it a war. It was a "police action."

MS. BONTECOU: Well, Bill –

MS. ASHTON: Euphemisms started then.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, but Bill [Giles], my husband, he was a medic in the Korean War. So –

MS. ASHTON: All right. Now let's get to Bill. When did you meet Bill?

MS. BONTECOU: Not until after I –

MS. ASHTON: – came back to New York from Italy?

MS. BONTECOU: And was doing this stuff. And –

MS. ASHTON: And he had been a medic in the Korean War?

MS. BONTECOU: Right. But I don't know if this – the dates are right on that, because – all right.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, it figures.

MS. BONTECOU: Right after the war, when I was back in – on Sixth Street, I started doing those dark teeth. And then, I couldn't stand it, so I would jump to working on these big, spatial things that were more open, and you could breathe.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And so, I went back and forth with that. And then, I think, at one point Leo's [Castelli] – I think [Richard] Bellamy and Ivan Karp.

MS. ASHTON: Dick Bellamy.

MS. BONTECOU: And – right. They saw the work that – I mean, I had already finished a lot.

MS. ASHTON: And they had a gallery on 59th Street, facing Central Park.

MS. BONTECOU: I don't –

MS. ASHTON: Something like that?

MS. BONTECOU: Right. But I think it was – at that time, Leo was up in the 80s. Where did they have the –

MS. ASHTON: Well, his gallery, when I first knew it, was at 10 East 77th Street.

MS. BONTECOU: That's – okay.

MS. ASHTON: How did I remember?

MS. BONTECOU: Wow, I'm impressed.

MS. ASHTON: I impress myself. I may be wrong.

MS. BONTECOU: No, 77th.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Where is the –

MS. ASHTON: So, when – no. We're going ahead of ourselves.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, right.

MS. ASHTON: I want to get back to – all right. You mentioned Leo Castelli. How did that happen?

MS. BONTECOU: That – when I –

MS. ASHTON: Well, first of all, tell us about Richard Bellamy.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, I – it all came – that came all at once. I mean, once I – I mean, I was working there for a year – kind of a few years by myself, and –

MS. ASHTON: Working where?

MS. BONTECOU: At Avenue C and Sixth Street.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I just – building, and things were beginning to crowd in. And I was finishing things. I was really going.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes. Right.

MS. BONTECOU: And I didn't have anybody to contend with, you know? And then, Bellamy and –

MS. ASHTON: Well, how did Dick Bellamy find you?

MS. BONTECOU: I don't know. Ivan [Karp], maybe?

MS. ASHTON: Ivan found you?

MS. BONTECOU: Maybe. I don't – between the – there was two or three, and they saw it, and then I think Leo came down later. And then he liked it. And as far as I can see, no one was going to look at these things. That was my feeling.

MS. ASHTON: Was Gabe already in the gallery when you were there?

MS. BONTECOU: Gabe was there.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Gabe and –

MS. ASHTON: Gabriel Kahn.

MS. BONTECOU: Kahn.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. And also the guy who did some Plexiglas stuff. And he was interesting, because he was – his side – the way he made a living was – oh, it was taking tree peonies, trying to get a tree – trying to – you fertilize, and to work on a species that would be a neat tree peony.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, my God.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And he did Plexiglas stuff. Who could that be?

MS. ASHTON: You know, I don't remember.

MS. BONTECOU: I know. And anyway, he was there. And that was where I saw Stankiewicz's wife's little pieces that were just so beautiful.

MS. ASHTON: At Castelli Gallery?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. But it was kind of a fight going on. And, I mean – and she was really mad. And so I sort of had to leave.

MS. ASHTON: Sure.

MS. BONTECOU: It was between – she was mad, and something had come up, and I didn't –

MS. ASHTON: But he never showed Stankiewicz's work.

MS. BONTECOU: No, no. I don't think so.

MS. ASHTON: Maybe we should spell it out. S-T-A-N-K-E-I-V-I-C-H?

MS. BONTECOU: -W-I-C-Z-S [sic].

MS. ASHTON: Oh, you got it. Yes, right, right.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh.

MS. ASHTON: Richard.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, Richard.

MS. ASHTON: Nice guy.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. Well, his wife, I just thought, "Wow, these are very, very nice landscapey" – I was attached to them, and I only saw them briefly. And that's all I've ever seen of them. And I am sure she is well known, maybe under another name, you know? But they were –

MS. ASHTON: So, Richard –

MS. BONTECOU: Okay.

MS. ASHTON: He was connected with another gallery, not with Castelli.

MS. BONTECOU: No, no, I don't think – he was with –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, he was.

MS. BONTECOU: What is that gallery in back of the League? Was he there? You know, and I think [Robert] Rauschenberg was there. He was very –

MS. ASHTON: The Stable Gallery [1958, New York City]?

MS. BONTECOU: The Stable. I think maybe –

MS. ASHTON: Richard was connected – no.

MS. BONTECOU: No?

MS. ASHTON: No, no, he wasn't connected with that.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay.

MS. ASHTON: That was Eleanor Ward.

MS. BONTECOU: Sidney Janis [Sidney Janis Gallery, 1948, New York City]? No, no, he would – no.

MS. ASHTON: I don't remember now.

MS. BONTECOU: I don't know where he – but he had a big go at the time. I liked his things.

MS. ASHTON: Who?

MS. BONTECOU: Stankiewicz.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I really – and I think I felt akin to all of those people who were grubbing around the streets, getting materials.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: That was the bond.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I think the “crumpled fender” man. He, too, was –

MS. ASHTON: Yes. Yes, Leo took him.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes. He is still around, I gather.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, I guess so.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. But – and then people – now they – there was [John] Doyle and – he's at Knoedler [Knodeler & Company, 1846, New York City] now, big construction work. And he was hurt really badly in an awful –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, Mark di Suvero

MS. BONTECOU: Mm-hm [affirmative], di Suvero. Di Suvero –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, right. He was – yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And I –

MS. ASHTON: I think Richard Bellamy first showed Mark, I think.

MS. BONTECOU: I could see –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: He did.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, they were beautiful. And –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – so was – I mean, I think Doyle –

MS. ASHTON: Well, that would have been a time when he was putting timber together with cast iron and – yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I see. And Doyle fit in there. And I think he sort of – I think his things are as good as any of that nature, where he takes the wood and works that – those joints to – I mean, they're spectacular. And they are humorous. And of all those big heavy things, there

are humor with them, and lyrical, and I just really like them. And so, I always put those –

MS. ASHTON: So –

MS. BONTECOU: And I guess [Richard] Serra came – I don't know Serra's things, work, but he –

MS. ASHTON: No, he is much later.

MS. BONTECOU: Much later, I guess.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, much later.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay, okay.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay, he doesn't fit in that group?

MS. ASHTON: No, no, no.

MS. BONTECOU: No? Okay.

MS. ASHTON: You're talking now, the late 1950s and early 1960s, right?

MS. BONTECOU: Okay, yes.

MS. ASHTON: I think so, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay. And Serra wasn't involved then?

MS. ASHTON: No, no, no.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay.

MS. ASHTON: Not that early.

MS. BONTECOU: I just – yes, okay.

MS. ASHTON: Then – so, Leo came, and he offered you an exhibition. And –

MS. BONTECOU: He showed some – the piece, and, yes –

MS. ASHTON: In a group show first?

MS. BONTECOU: I think one was hanging up, or something, and then –

MS. ASHTON: And that's on 77th Street.

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And then the rest – then I had a show with the Gray [The Richard Gray Gallery, 1963, New York City], angry things.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was maybe a few of the outer space, more gentle things, or more open things. I think a few of each. There couldn't be too many in that little space.

MS. ASHTON: That's true –

MS. BONTECOU: But he did really well, I mean –

MS. ASHTON: Well, you could do five pretty well there.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. So that was the beginning of that. And –

MS. ASHTON: So then I presume you were in better shape, economically.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Did you move your studio?

MS. BONTECOU: No, no. I stayed. I loved – I mean, it was wonderful. But I was welding, and there was no sprinkler system. And the walls – when I welded, it was right on the wall, so there was just – and when the – we – what we did was anytime we heard somebody on the stairs, everybody, even – I would – it was – who was above me? It happened down in Sixth Street, and then that attitude moved to when I moved to Worcester [Street].

But on Avenue C, we would just sit still, and not move, because there were people coming up the stairs, and they were, apparently, inspectors.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And so I never opened, and, like Bill said, "Lee, all you really had to do was pay them off." And I didn't know that, you know?

MS. ASHTON: Join the club.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, right. I just didn't know that.

MS. ASHTON: It took me years to figure that out. And then I wouldn't do it.

MS. BONTECOU: I know. I didn't want to do it. I mean, oh, well.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Anyway, I think –

MS. ASHTON: Had you already met Bill?

MS. BONTECOU: No.

MS. ASHTON: No?

MS. BONTECOU: Not quite yet, anyway. But Marcia Marcus was above me.

MS. ASHTON: Whatever happened to her?

MS. BONTECOU: I don't know. And I thought – when I first saw her paintings – she went to Cooper [The Cooper Union, New York City].

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I thought, "Oh, my" – and we were living in really – we were freezing. I mean, it was not easy.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And what we – I – did was to go to the Thalia movie [theater] every night. You know, every night. Pay a dime –

MS. ASHTON: The Thalia? Up on the Upper West Side?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, I just went up there.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, my God. That's so far away.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, it was, you know, cheap. A dime.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: You know –

MS. ASHTON: Well, we had one here that was cheap, too, on Third Avenue.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, I –

MS. ASHTON: You never made it to that one?

MS. BONTECOU: Well, maybe I did that, too.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, double features.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: I remember the first time I went –

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: – it was two dollars for a double feature.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes. Yes. Well, anyway, the movie houses were full of us.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes. Everybody went there.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: I used to hang out with Philip Guston, you know.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: And he was a movie freak, too. We would go to Times Square.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, go on.

MS. ASHTON: We would go to a double feature, go out and get a hot dog on the street, and go back and see another double feature.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay. When Billy and I met, that's how we met.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, really?

MS. BONTECOU: We said, "Let's go to a movie." So we would go to a movie, go out and have pancakes, and then go back to another double feature. And then go, "Bye, Bill." I was so – we were both –

MS. ASHTON: He was a painter, your husband?

MS. BONTECOU: He was both, I think. It was really –

MS. ASHTON: He did sculpture, too? I didn't know that.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, he did a mixture of a lot of innovative things. And he was showing at Leo.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And that's where –

MS. ASHTON: What's his last name?

MS. BONTECOU: Giles. And so – and he was really innovative, with an amazing imagination, and never stopped. And when he did things, they looked rough and tough, and – but he did them so well. He has hands that could band and twist and put in, and – so that's where I met him. And – but I'm not so sure that I didn't know him before.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And that's where movie times went – that we went – and then we would go

to Coney Island. And he had a girlfriend. And sometimes all three of us would go. And it was fun, you know. And we would hang out, and – I don't – I won't even – I have to skip that – this – because it was embarrassing, so I – not embarrassing, but –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: We had a good time, and played the – went on the Steeple Chase, and it was sort of falling apart at that time. And there was a neat zoo there. And I remember Bill and I went. We were alone. At that time I guess we were pretty much together, and Annie [ph] had gone off somewhere else.

And we went to this place in Coney Island, and there was a little chimp. And there was mice that had no hair. And, I mean, it was a freaky place. And the little chimp I went up to, and I talked for about 10 minutes. He had a little diaper on and sat on the thing. And I said, "Well, I have to go," and I walked out the door, or started to, and the little guy had a fit. He – and I just, "Oh, Billy, he is wanting to be hugged," you know, he's wanting –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And so we just – oh, I just left, and it was horrible. I mean, it was a real cry for attention and love and –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: So that was my Coney Island zoo – so – [laughs].

MS. ASHTON: Did you draw from life at all after that schooling?

MS. BONTECOU: No.

MS. ASHTON: No?

MS. BONTECOU: No, never went to – and I sort of wish I had, but I – but when I started –

MS. ASHTON: Not even animals, or chimps or –

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, I drew –

MS. ASHTON: Birds?

MS. BONTECOU: I did my own – yes. I did things.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And a lot thrown on – studies, studies. And so, that was in the – I don't know where we are.

MS. ASHTON: I think we are already in the mid-1960s, no? Or late 1960s?

MS. BONTECOU: All right. We're in the 1960s.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay. And –

MS. ASHTON: We can always check it out.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. I know, I know.

MS. ASHTON: I never remember any dates.

MS. BONTECOU: I know. Well, when – later, I guess, Bill and I were married. And later he had a falling out with Leo and left.

MS. ASHTON: He did?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And I tried to keep going, but later I dropped out, too.

MS. ASHTON: You did?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And then we – oh, we went to Worcester Street. Worcester was before – and I kept doing these big things, did a lot of them. And that was continual work. And I had another show, I guess, of them.

MS. ASHTON: At Leo's?

MS. BONTECOU: At Leo's.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, you did.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay.

MS. ASHTON: That I do remember.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. I had another show there. And then, Billy had a studio above me in Worcester. And then later, we both moved – he moved to Green Street, and I worked at Worcester and lived at Green, and we had Vallie [Valerie]. And she grew up there –

MS. ASHTON: Your daughter?

MS. BONTECOU: Daughter. And then we started looking for a farm to – or a place to live outside the city. The city was beginning to get – our haunt, that Hell's Kitchen – whatever they wanted to call it at that time – there was no one there, no one. And we had – it was terrific. And there was – then a woman came in, and kept phoning and saying, "You have to join the Artist in Residence, Artist in Residence."

And I said, "No. You're going to spoil it. You're going to ruin it." And I kept hanging up, and she was a bulldog. And sure enough, later on, the galleries moved down, the boutiques; when they started moving that stuff down, we said, "It's time to move out." And – because my loft was sold below me. It was sold. And it was a nice factory below, and it was noisy, and it was okay. It was, you know – but they started to – it changed hands, and there was nighttimes –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was all night long, music – and the pounding music came in.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: "Let's get out of here." So we finally found a way of –

MS. ASHTON: Well, how did you decide to leave New York?

MS. BONTECOU: Well –

MS. ASHTON: You had left your gallery?

MS. BONTECOU: At that time –

MS. ASHTON: I remember people saying, "What ever happened to Lee?"

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, right. Well, we –

MS. ASHTON: We didn't tell people, even.

MS. BONTECOU: No –

MS. ASHTON: I didn't know where you had gone.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, it just – it wasn't a plan. It was just a plan to get out. And Doyle knew of the – his parents, or his relatives, lived in this area, in –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, Tom Doyle?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And so we all went and looked together, you know, for a place. And then, one day – Vallie was about six months, and we said, "Well, let's take another look

around," and we got a map, and we watched – we wanted water, so we saw a creek and followed that, and Bill – we went to the general store and said, "Are there any farms for sale?" And they said, "Well, there is one," blah, blah, and she gave us directions. And we went up and down hills and down, and came across this beautiful field, and there was a little farmhouse. And we got out, and we didn't even go in. Well, I guess we couldn't.

But we said, "This is it," you know. "Let's see what" – and so, the little place was up for sale. And so they had an auction, and we bought it at auction.

MS. ASHTON: Really? Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And Tom was there. And then he found a place. And so we sort of settled in there for a while.

MS. ASHTON: Is Tom still in –

MS. BONTECOU: No. He moved –

MS. ASHTON: To Florida, or something?

MS. BONTECOU: Went – no, no.

MS. ASHTON: No?

MS. BONTECOU: He's up in Connecticut.

MS. ASHTON: Connecticut? Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And – no. When those Nazi people moved in, bought that house near us, they gave us a hard time. And so I think Doyle said, "That's enough of that," you know?

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And we stuck it out. I don't want to go into all that.

MS. ASHTON: No, we don't have to.

MS. BONTECOU: No, no. But it was –

MS. ASHTON: No – Bill did – he left Castelli, and did he try to get in another gallery?

MS. BONTECOU: Can –

MS. ASHTON: You want to –

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

[END CD 2 FILE 1.]

MS. ASHTON: There you are. You had left Castelli? Because you didn't show for quite a while.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, no, I had left. And it was just wonderful. I just would – we would come back to New York. And remember when we went to the Downtown Community School [New York City] – Vallie – and that's where I met you, going home one day?

MS. ASHTON: Yes, right.

MS. BONTECOU: And –

MS. ASHTON: Both our children were going there.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Same school, right on this block.

MS. BONTECOU: Is it on this block?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, Downtown Community was on this block.

MS. BONTECOU: Wow. No wonder you found the – I mean, I had to take a bus to it.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, right.

MS. BONTECOU: And I rode Vallie on my shoulders, and we got on the bus, and I dropped her off, and –

MS. ASHTON: But then –

MS. BONTECOU: But it was very short-lived.

MS. ASHTON: Then they collapsed.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Then I had to send my kids all the way over to the West Side.

MS. BONTECOU: Where –

MS. ASHTON: They had to take the bus to –

MS. BONTECOU: Where did they go?

MS. ASHTON: Village Community School.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay, okay.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And what did we do? Oh, it was harder for Val, because we moved around a lot. And she went to – well, she was too young to go to school at one point, and so eventually, we landed up on that farm. And then we would come back, and she went down – she went to a school out on Long Island for a while, and we rented out there for a while and still worked, but not as – I didn't have the loft. So I did most of the work then at a farm. And Billy was painting. So that's how that –

MS. ASHTON: You were renting in Long Island?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes –

MS. ASHTON: Living there?

MS. BONTECOU: Living there in one of the old houses.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, and then you would go to the –

MS. BONTECOU: And then go to the country.

MS. ASHTON: – country in the summer, or something?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: But that didn't last too long, because Vallie – we finally found the school, the Steiner School [Rudolf Steiner School, 1928, New York City].

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And that was half successful, but not really. I don't want to go there too much.

MS. ASHTON: No. So, well, artistically speaking, this was a big move for somebody who was so engaged with Manhattan art life.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, it wasn't so big, because New York had changed so. And as far as our – the loft situation, and the living, it was not that –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: It's already passed. In my mind, it had already passed.

MS. ASHTON: Right.

MS. BONTECOU: When you get boutiques down there, you have passed.

MS. ASHTON: Right.

MS. BONTECOU: So we – it was no big deal, no decision.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And so, I was happy working. And later, when we did move up to Monsey, New York –

MS. ASHTON: Where is that?

MS. BONTECOU: It's – the county there, you're going to have to put it off for a minute. On the waterfront there, there are these – it's a famous area where –

MS. ASHTON: On the waterfront? You mean –

MS. BONTECOU: Where some of the waterfront – some – and we lived in Three Springs [Spring Valley], or Monsey. But you go across [Route] 59, which is a horrible drag. It was a big thoroughfare. And one end was where a lot of crafts were done in the river, and people – it used to be an old place where people would go for vacations.

MS. ASHTON: Is it up very high?

MS. BONTECOU: No, it's about an hour out of here, out of New York. You would know if I could remember.

MS. ASHTON: Doesn't matter, but –

MS. BONTECOU: All right.

MS. ASHTON: So you thought you might settle there?

MS. BONTECOU: Moved – so we bought a house there. And it was really quite nice, and it was an old Victorian place with a barn, and we had a little garden, and I worked. And that was in the 1970s, I guess. And I'd do a lot of drawing and a lot of experimenting. A lot of experimenting. Nothing came, but I was happy. You know, it was, like, interesting.

And I did some – at one point I went – I began teaching at Brooklyn [Brooklyn College, New York City]. That freed me. And one day Morris – he's the head of the department – came and said, "Okay, Lee. You've got to teach" –

MS. ASHTON: Is that George?

MS. BONTECOU: No.

MS. ASHTON: No?

MS. BONTECOU: Morris Dorsky.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, Dorsky, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Did you ever meet him?

MS. ASHTON: I think so, but I don't remember.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay. But – well, he was hired – he was a strange man, but really nice, in the sense that he hired women, and there was no problem with him in that. And he was kind

of a wild man, in a way. And I don't want to go too far there.

MS. ASHTON: No.

MS. BONTECOU: And – but –

MS. ASHTON: So you were teaching at Brooklyn College?

MS. BONTECOU: I was teaching at – yes, and commuting to the farm. Bill was living on the farm, and I was teaching.

MS. ASHTON: The farm where?

MS. BONTECOU: In Pennsylvania.

MS. ASHTON: Already in Pennsylvania?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, I see. Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And –

MS. ASHTON: That's a pretty far commute.

MS. BONTECOU: It was. But Morris got it set up so I would teach three days, or two –

MS. ASHTON: And where did you stay? They provide lodging?

MS. BONTECOU: I had – no. I first stayed with a friend on Hicks Street, I guess, in Brooklyn Heights. And then, later, my cousin had an apartment on Thompson [Street], and she wanted to leave. She was becoming a lawyer and going out west. And she said, "Do you want to keep it, and we can keep it, you know, in the family?" And I said, "Great."

So, I took it, and I shared it with a nice guy. In the beginning, we were both really simpatico, and he would clean up after he left; I would clean up, you know; it was really fine.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And so I stayed there during the – those – the nights I had to stay, and then I got on the train and went back home. And – but it was sort of disjointed, in a way.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: But I didn't – as far as –

MS. ASHTON: And at this time, you didn't have a gallery connection at all.

MS. BONTECOU: No, no. It was really neat. That was one reason for teaching –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – was to be free of all that.

MS. ASHTON: Be free, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And so I didn't have to contend – and Morris used to stomp in and say, "Why aren't you showing," and all this stuff, and I would say, "Oh, Morris, go away." You know?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: So, anyway, it was years of working and bringing Vallie up, and experimenting. And I had no pressures. And it just was as it should be.

MS. ASHTON: Well, I'm trying to think. When I got the pieces, which were the plastic pieces –

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: Those terrible atomic flowers.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: I saw them that way, anyway.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, right.

MS. ASHTON: That was for an exhibition I did in 1970.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: So you were already out there, I guess.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: And I got them from a gallery. Now, which gallery did I get them from? Knoedler, right? Were you already there?

MS. BONTECOU: No.

MS. ASHTON: No?

MS. BONTECOU: No. I – what happened – those pieces were –

MS. ASHTON: And then you had a show in SoHo of those pieces.

MS. BONTECOU: I know.

MS. ASHTON: What gallery was that?

MS. BONTECOU: No, wait a minute.

MS. ASHTON: Wasn't that in SoHo?

MS. BONTECOU: I think what happened – when I left Leo, they took those pieces and dumped – put them somewhere.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And then they were given to me when I was up in Monsey.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And that – I kind of saved them; they were really – most of them – a lot broke. And then I just cleaned them up, and I put them away. The big flowers were gone.

MS. ASHTON: So I would have got them from Castelli in 1970?

MS. BONTECOU: Did – were they huge?

MS. ASHTON: They were – yes, six feet.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, you must – okay. You must have gotten them at Castelli, then.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And they were gone before I got the other things, the little ones.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And so they were gone then. And I think they were – my feeling is they were either broken, or somebody has them, that's all.

MS. ASHTON: You don't know where they are?

MS. BONTECOU: The big, black flowers, I never know. And everybody tried to hunt for it. And I have a feeling probably it broke, and no one said anything, and no one – they got the insurance, and that was that.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: But other than that, they are sitting somewhere. But the last time I saw that one was at that neat little gallery down at – the Gray Gallery? Down in the Village, on the park.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, that's the Gray Gallery.

MS. BONTECOU: Gray Gallery. It was sitting in the Gray Gallery. I thought, "Oh, that's nice," you know. I saw that piece for the last time, and that was it. Yes. And those –

MS. ASHTON: Now, let's talk about those flowers.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay.

MS. ASHTON: Because they struck me, as all your work has always struck me, as a commentary. And since I am a political person –

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: – I think immediately of the political disasters.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: And did you think of them that way?

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, yes.

MS. ASHTON: I mean, I thought of them as –

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, I –

MS. ASHTON: – the monsters that atomic bomb gave birth to.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. Well, it's – what happens, that – they were force fed by tubes. And they were – that's what it was. And when I started the vacuum-forming whole process, which was a whole – I don't know if I should go into this or not.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, I think so.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, okay. At one point when we were – it's back when we were in Worcester, and Sandy Beale and – I've got to get the name of the guy that – and I always feel –

MS. ASHTON: Sandra Beale, the painter?

MS. BONTECOU: She was a sculptor at that time.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, really?

MS. BONTECOU: And she did some vacuum-form things, and they all disintegrated, because they were made out of a different kind of material.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And she had them – I don't know if they were vacuum form, but she made these plastic things, and they were – she found them in her closet, you know, just sort of wiped out. And anyway, we – when we were there, it was Jack Beale, and Bill, and myself, and all of Jack Beale's friends, who were really nice. And I don't really remember. But Lindsey Decker came –

MS. ASHTON: Lindsey Decker?

MS. BONTECOU: Lindsey Decker. And he was a really good sculptor.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Aluminum, God bless his soul. I mean, they were beautiful, and he showed

them at – oh, a woman gallery, run by a woman. I don't remember. But he had footprints in aluminum. They were beautiful. They were reliefs. And he, all of a sudden, turned – he had a beautiful family, and I don't know if we should mention this, but he – can we turn that – okay.

[END CD 2 FILE 2.]

MS. ASHTON: – artists, then we got together and –

MS. BONTECOU: – at Jack Beale's, and Sandy Beale was there, and me, and all of us. Bill was there, too. And we were all – and everybody would go their own way, but Lindsey came, and he started building this vacuum former. Very primitive. I had to get rid of that one. But it was a riot. And fortunately, there were a lot of people.

Well, I started carving these things, these flowers, and these fish –

MS. ASHTON: Carving?

MS. BONTECOU: – out of Styrofoam.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: Of a – I went to Long Island, and got these big logs that were a very fine Styrofoam which was used for bulkheads in airplanes or canoes, or whatever. And I started carving this stuff.

And I don't know whether Sandy had started painting already. I don't remember. But I mean, the studio was about that deep in this crap, and it – I got excited about these, and the plants began to grow, and I had them vacuum-formed over at Sandy's. And the fish I had vacuum- – and I would have to split – I did the fish, and – as a whole, and then I split it in half and put it on the bed for the vacuum form.

MS. ASHTON: You did it in what, in –

MS. BONTECOU: This Styrofoam.

MS. ASHTON: Styrofoam.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was a very light poundage. And I wish I had gone a little heavier, but it was faster this way. And so – and I am not really a carver. But I had done one piece in stone, and I thought, "This is not for me."

So, I – anyway, this was fast. Cut them in two. Made all of those pieces over there. And what it was, like, you put your piece on this platform. You had electric up above. You put on the electric heat, and you attached your piece of special material up top, and you let it get heated and heated and heated. And it sagged and sagged, and then you had three people here, and three there, and we said, "Okay, lower it." And when it was ready, "Lower it."

And they lowered the thing, and clamped it. We had to clamp it down, so – and turn the switch. And the vacuum form would go – and the thing would form right in front of you. And then you had to start – quick, the cold towels had to go on, so it wouldn't remember itself and go up.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: So it was a real – and everybody was dancing around. And it was a panic. Every time you did it, it was a panic to get those towels on quick enough, and to – but – and it didn't come out perfect, but it was okay, you know. I pulled, oh, I don't know how many. And then I took them back to the studio, cut them out, and fit them together.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, you fit them together.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh –

MS. ASHTON: How did you fit them together?

MS. BONTECOU: Well, let's take the fish or the – one of the big flowers. And I did – on those flowers, I did them twice or three times, so I could have a central dome for the – and put the

petals that were made – oh, it was complicated – and put the petals together.

What did I do? If I vacuum-formed one side of the petal, then I turned it over, and do the other side. The fish, I couldn't do that with, so I split it in two. But all the rest, I had to cut out, sand down, grind down, and bolted them together with plastic bolts.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, you bolted them?

MS. BONTECOU: I first glued –

MS. ASHTON: You can't see that. Or I didn't see it when I looked at the work. I didn't see bolts.

MS. BONTECOU: Little, tiny nut and bolt –

MS. ASHTON: Tiny, tiny –

MS. BONTECOU: But they were part of the texture.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And, I mean, I was happy with those little – and, in fact, I put, like one dome, and then I'd have another, and I would cut that dome out and put things so that I have an etched –

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: – different kind of –

MS. ASHTON: And the smoky color? How did you get that?

MS. BONTECOU: Okay. The smoky color –

MS. ASHTON: If I remember correctly.

MS. BONTECOU: Let's – yes.

MS. ASHTON: Am I remembering it correctly?

MS. BONTECOU: It – yes. I think you are remembering it better, because I don't know what fish you saw, but I did two. One was clear, and one was – I put –

MS. ASHTON: Well, I was thinking of the flowers.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay. The flowers were all – they changed color over time.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: They got yellower. Amber, amber.

MS. ASHTON: No, but I'm speaking of these sort of charcoal, smoky charcoal-like –

MS. BONTECOU: The big flower?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay. That I took – I said, "How can I color it?" And I took a big wok and heated the water, and put aniline dye in.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, my God.

MS. BONTECOU: And I put those – that big fish, for instance, or the – no, wait a minute. Okay. The black flower, I actually used black material. So that's why that's so pure.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: But the fish was clear, until I put it into this aniline dye bath.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And it came out – what I wanted was burnt, raw umber. And so the fish wasn't – and later on, as the color hit it – and aniline dye is impossible to stop – the fish turned red.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: You know? It's really red.

MS. ASHTON: No wonder you got so sick, aniline dyes and vacuum forming, and oh, my God.

MS. BONTECOU: And it –

MS. ASHTON: You almost killed yourself.

MS. BONTECOU: And also, in putting in the piece that's at the theater, it had wings coming out. And I – to get that epoxy on, I put it – Fiberglas underneath, and I used that airplane glue, and then put the – and one day I came in to see – "Billy, you don't know it, but I'm six foot tall." And it was like my legs had grown a whole yard. And I walked into the studio, and I said, "I think I'm high on that glue." And I was [laughs] – I kept buying carton after carton at the Grand Union [grocery store]. And then they found out kids were sniffing it.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And that was the end of that.

MS. ASHTON: And it killed some kids.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, probably was –

MS. ASHTON: There was a kid on this block that died of it.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, it's probably one reason I got –

MS. ASHTON: No doubt.

MS. BONTECOU: But it was – but to have that, that was – you understand why they were sniffing. I mean, you had a euphoria that was grand. I mean, how can you be six foot and be – oh, it's –

MS. ASHTON: So when they appeared in the gallery – I guess it was first at Castelli that I saw it, but you had already left Castelli.

MS. BONTECOU: No, I had a show of the plastic things there.

MS. ASHTON: There?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, I did.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, okay.

MS. BONTECOU: I did. I had the big flowers.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I had a big show there.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, that's where I got it from.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, you got it there.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, that – yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: So that would have been – I would have got it – collected it in 1969.

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right, right.

MS. ASHTON: For that show.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, that's the last time those things were seen.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: So –

MS. ASHTON: Until Long Island.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes. So – oh, that's exhausting. I mean, going through years like that.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes. That was hard work.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, it – I didn't – as far as making those things, it was – I didn't show them to anybody until they were finished. And then – that's partly why – I mean, I just worked on them. And no one saw them until I showed them. And then everybody was disappointed, you know. They wanted more of the same old same old, and they didn't get it.

MS. ASHTON: Not me.

MS. BONTECOU: Good. And it didn't bother me a bit. You know?

MS. ASHTON: No.

MS. BONTECOU: Because I had such – and I – what – the reason I wanted more vacuum forming – why I started it was to be able to make big forms light, because working on those huge, heavy – I wanted to get them up, and that was part of the reason for doing it.

And it had nothing to do with Pop [art]. I had friends who wanted to put them into Pop context. And, okay, I was willing to go along with that, but it wasn't what I intended.

MS. ASHTON: No.

MS. BONTECOU: And they were really anti – it was really antipollution-oriented.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And same with the birds, those big – they were birds I made in Italy, but they never could fly. So these – I don't want them to fly, because they can't. Not now. And so they were –

MS. ASHTON: You mean because of circumstance –

MS. BONTECOU: Because of –

MS. ASHTON: – such as atomic bombs, and –

MS. BONTECOU: That's right.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And the idea of poor old [Albert] Einstein going around, trying to fight the fact, and explain that this energy that we're doing is bad. And he had black circles under – I just felt so bad for him. I mean, you know –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – the realization of what happened.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And, oh, man.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Just horrible.

MS. ASHTON: I read his letters.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, Dore, what were they?

MS. ASHTON: Oh, well, he was desperate.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. Oh –

MS. ASHTON: And I guess he felt guilty.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, I'm sure.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I mean, we all feel guilty.

MS. ASHTON: Sure.

MS. BONTECOU: But he would be – oh.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And that's why he was trying to –

MS. ASHTON: But he had a – Einstein had a very long history of going to international meetings against war.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: He was a very –

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: – conscientious human being in that respect.

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right.

MS. ASHTON: And, of course, nobody paid any attention to that side.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And now we're still – and now they're still wanting to put one of those things up. And they want to destroy some of Alaska.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And that part is – apparently, from what Andrew has said – it's like a great bird sanctuary there, where only rare things still land.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes. That is –

MS. BONTECOU: I mean, what is –

MS. ASHTON: Well, they want to put one of those atomic energy plants in the middle of Long Island Sound.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, God.

MS. ASHTON: You know?

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, God. And –

MS. ASHTON: You can't stop those people.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay, what do you think about – I mean, I'm all for wind [energy].

MS. ASHTON: Yes, of course.

MS. BONTECOU: And they were talking about putting windmills on – somewhere along Long

Island there, where the wind –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, and the people were against it.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: They're not pretty, they – yes.

MS. BONTECOU: That –

MS. ASHTON: That is crazy.

MS. BONTECOU: And I think they're beautiful.

MS. ASHTON: Of course.

MS. BONTECOU: Actually, they're the really –

MS. ASHTON: They're fine.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, they are.

MS. ASHTON: Sure, sure.

MS. BONTECOU: Dore, I will have to break in. When I was in Nova Scotia, oh, was Andrew and Vallie with me? No. I was – anyway, we bumped – we were going along the shore. It was so foggy, you couldn't see in front of you. And all of a sudden, we heard this – there was a rope-up, and there was this – we got out of the car; we were lost. And this "whoo, whoo," and we got closer and closer. It was one of those windmills.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: It was, like, 200 feet up there.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And that big propeller was going around and around. And it was beautiful. And we were about to leave, and a little voice said, "Hello." And we said, "Hi." And he said, "Do you want to go in?" And we said, "Yes." And he invited – this man, who was the keeper, I guess, in this beautiful tube. We entered at this beautiful tube.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was just electronically – talk about gadgets. And a staircase going all the way up, if you had to. And otherwise, I guess – but it was –

MS. ASHTON: Like a lighthouse.

MS. BONTECOU: It was like a lighthouse, with this huge thing going. And they were hoping – I don't know. They were going to put others, and it was already servicing so much land around. And it was beautiful.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: My goodness.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Well, it somehow relates to your vision.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. Oh, yes. Oh –

MS. ASHTON: Doesn't it?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: I mean, you know, space, and twirling things, and –

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, yes.

MS. ASHTON: – gliders, and all of that stuff.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes, yes. No, it's really neat.

MS. ASHTON: Well –

MS. BONTECOU: So – Is it almost over?

MS. ASHTON: I'm not sure, actually. We paused it. I can stop it – I think it's probably – we're nearing the end, but I will ask you one more question about –

MS. BONTECOU: Okay, okay.

MS. ASHTON: I know that your husband has – flies, is a flier.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: And years ago, you used to talk to me about the experience of flying. And you were quite excited about it.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, right. And, I mean, he –

MS. ASHTON: And it affected your work, I imagine.

MS. BONTECOU: It's all a part of it.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I don't think I ever – I mean, I can go from the ocean to a desert to the sea and to those mountains, and it's all one – it's that natural world. And to watch it crumble in front of you is horrible.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And then – I mean, there is a book – I almost had – I don't – I have never put down a book. I had – even if I hate it, you know? And it was about the whaling. And that –

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: You know, and it was interesting to know about Nantucket [MA], and the whaling and the white whale, and the destruction of that white whale. And I was – when that whale hit that ship, I was so – you know, a big bull hit it and sank it.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I was – I just thought, "Thank God it happened."

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And –

MS. ASHTON: Had you read Moby Dick [Herman Melville. 1851] when you were a kid?

MS. BONTECOU: I read it in and out. I have –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I still pick it up and read it.

MS. ASHTON: Yes. Oh, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: But – yes.

MS. ASHTON: There are some beautiful parts in it.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. Oh, it's a beautiful thing.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: One of the few great works of literature from this country.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes?

MS. BONTECOU: Well, yes. I've got a couple of them.

MS. ASHTON: What?

MS. BONTECOU: I've got a couple of them. I mean, I really love [William] Faulkner. It might just be for me.

MS. ASHTON: Yes. Well, he was good, sure.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: He was good.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes. He –

MS. ASHTON: I guess Melville and Faulkner are the two, from my point of view, at any rate. Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Well –

MS. ASHTON: So, I think we will take a pause now.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, right.

MS. ASHTON: Because then I want to talk about a few other things.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay.

[END CD 2 FILE 3.]

MS. ASHTON: [Conversation in progress] Let's say it, the Castelli Gallery. It was shortly before you left New York, is that right?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: And there was a shift, I feel, myself. There was a shift in attitudes in general. Did that have anything to do with your fleeing New York?

MS. BONTECOU: No. Really, what happened was what I said before, about the whole city was turning into a –

MS. ASHTON: - boutique?

MS. BONTECOU: A boutique. And galleries and boutiques.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And there was no – and noise, we couldn't take the noise, either. That factory under us –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: That really was the crowning glory. But, like, we came back from a summer. We looked out the window, and down came a parade of little dwarves. And they had their banners flying, and they were happy, and jumping the – and then another parade.

And I mean, it was – SoHo was turning into a zoo. I mean, there was just so much going on, that –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And all – like, one store we used to visit because it was Puerto Rican and no one went there, and we went and got Val's diapers and did all – well, it was like – coming and going, it was like a big, thriving metropolis.

So, it had changed. And once that artist in residence came, that was the end of it. We knew it. So it wasn't a surprise.

MS. ASHTON: When – once upon a time, a long time ago, I talked with Uli about that moment, and you were there. And you told me about – you had two or three friends, but they were not art friends; they were people you used to see quite regularly.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: One was a scientist, I think, or –

MS. BONTECOU: No, no. It was probably Doc –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – who was – his name is Irving Groop [ph], and he was an electrician. And one day he walked into the Met. And he was – apparently, before I knew him – talented. And he walked into the Chinese-Asian area and all, and he just – it blew him. It just blew him. And he started learning –

MS. ASHTON: Calligraphy?

MS. BONTECOU: – calligraphy. And he got good at it. And he did these beautiful paintings of Japanese style. And he was so well known in Chinatown that the Chinese would invite him down, and they – Doc said they would undo their scrolls to show him, and cord them up again. He said he hardly had time to look. But they became friends, all these strange – and from there, he just kept doing those things.

And then, I had other – and friends of Willy were there, a big friend of his, and other people. And we would just sit and have Chinese dinner all night long. And he would rustle up the food, and we would just sit there and enjoy. And those were the kind of friends.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was just –

MS. ASHTON: And there was one – you mentioned two that you saw a lot of. Him, and there was one other you mentioned. I don't remember now.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, there was Willy, who was Doc's – who introduced me to Doc. And so – and she was a true eccentric. I mean, amazing intellectual eccentric woman. And she went – and she was a painter. And she did some really nice abstract – and I bought a couple. When I made a little bit, I bought a couple of things.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, nice.

MS. BONTECOU: I bought something from Doc, and – but she went to Amherst [MA] with some friends, and they're living up there. And she's done this beautiful mural of – her passion was Joan of Arc.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, my God.

MS. BONTECOU: And she did these – this pastel that was – oh, it was like a wall painting, a pastel. And she did one of – she turned Catholic. I said, "Really? How can you do that," you know? But, you know, not be – and anyway, very liberal kind of Catholic community or church up there, in the Bronx.

She has – the big Joan of Arc is in the cathedral. And she did one of Christ, another kind of –

and that's the one that she wants to get out of her studio and she can't. But she's a – very, very special and really beautiful paintings that you never – will never hear of, you know? Talking about people that work.

But so she was another one, and we had a good time. And Doc was an electrician. So we – I mean, he showed me how to wire up my whole studio. And then we got into woofers, and woofers and, you know, got our radio – it was fun.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: It was really – and his wife, Spike, who was a – what do you call those –

MS. ASHTON: Typist?

MS. BONTECOU: No –

PARTICIPANT: Stenographer.

MS. BONTECOU: Stenographer.

MS. ASHTON: Stenographer?

MS. BONTECOU: In a court scene thing. And very formal, very nice. And I just wrote her a Christmas card, you know?

And Doc went out west, and he – like Bill, he learned to fly. He wanted to fly. And he was sort of a – became a little detached and mad, in a way, and finally – he's not with us any more. His wife is there, and it just sort of – oh, I know. What he did was he was invited by Japan to come, to stay in a whatever you have in Japan.

MS. ASHTON: [Inaudible.]

MS. BONTECOU: Sort of a temple or something.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And he did – he actually did seals for them, and he has – he gave me a beautiful seal. And he – well, he was – his paintings were beautiful, just absolutely gorgeous watercolor, and scrolls, and he had them done in Chinese style, with roll-up and stuff.

So, he was – remember that guy we were talking about last night that was so bad, that we were trying to remember his name, and we – I couldn't get it out? Well, anyway –

MS. ASHTON: [Inaudible.]

MS. BONTECOU: No, it was the – well, skip him. But Doc transgressed into an area that he never would have, as an electrician from New York on Rivington Street, you know, to a very knowledgeable man who was respected by an Eastern world. And he was – it's sort of like Lawrence of Arabia.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: You know, I mean, they transform themselves into what – a whole different nation kind of thing. Well, Doc was like that. And those paintings are – I have a little brochure of his, and it's just beautiful, seagulls and just – he learned that way of doing. So that's the kind of –

MS. ASHTON: Another artist?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And then I had my friend from – Bernice, who was from the Art Students League, and she was the one – we went swimming, and then we went to the movies, and –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – had that experience. And very few friends, but very close and interesting. And that was enough. And another Japanese photographer that – darn, Dore, I tried to get them to put his name – a lot of his things are in this book, that catalogue from –

MS. ASHTON: Your show?

MS. BONTECOU: My show. And they – no one – they – it was like – and I was dumb enough, I couldn't keep it together. And I should have insisted, you know, "You put his name on there," you know? But if it wasn't a famous name, it didn't go in. I mean, that's my feeling. "I don't know if this should be in there," you know?

MS. ASHTON: You're so right.

MS. BONTECOU: You know?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I just got PO'd. Everything –

MS. ASHTON: You really have to – always, I have always tried to demand they give the photographers credit.

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right.

MS. ASHTON: They don't like to do it.

MS. BONTECOU: No.

MS. ASHTON: They don't like to do that.

MS. BONTECOU: And it just – and that's why I got – at least I got his name in the book, and I – it was like – what do you call it when you add something? They were –

MS. ASHTON: Addendum?

MS. BONTECOU: Addendum. It was like that put in –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – and I took out something, and I don't care.

MS. ASHTON: Wow.

MS. BONTECOU: I mean, at least I got that.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: They wanted me to be – and I just – I wouldn't do it to Eva [Hesse]. I met Eva once, and she was very nice. And she was like a little moth at a Guggenheim [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York City] or one of these big openings, and she looked like a –

MS. ASHTON: Who, Eva Hesse?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes. I didn't know her, either. I met her, but I didn't know her.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, that's how I knew her, and – but one day Bill and Tom and I, we went to Tom's studio, and she had these things here, which she was working on, and they were beautiful. They were what she was really about. And Tom was really proud, he was really proud. And –

MS. ASHTON: Was he with Eva?

MS. BONTECOU: At that time I don't know whether he had separated or not. But I think perhaps he had been separated. I don't know.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: But she – I feel, because of her – she really harangued at him, and everybody picked it up. And it was unfair, because he had none of that. And the only bad

thing he did was fall in love with somebody, you know? Now, that goes for the – everybody falls in love, or out of love, or –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, right.

MS. BONTECOU: You know? Anyway, it was a rough time. And I didn't want them to – they wanted me to be a bosom friend, because she said that, oh, well, she liked my work, or something. But she was – Eva is Eva. And that was her work, and mine was my work. And no one should try to merge these two things and – if they're not true.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: So, I just – that PO'd me, you know?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I just – and I began – I was so dense, myself, at that time. I was sort of staggering through that disease, and getting over it, and trying to make – finish up work, and I didn't pay attention.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I blame myself, you know? I didn't pay attention. I didn't understand what was going on. So, you know, as far as manipulation, and doing –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, oh, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – hopping through hoops.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And, I mean, they got Knoedler there, because, I mean, it was – Knoedler could pay for some of that stuff. You shouldn't put this in, either, probably, but I don't know, you know?

MS. ASHTON: Well, we can certainly put it in, because it's a major, established old gallery that's well established.

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right.

MS. ASHTON: Let's put it that way.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, and I was –

MS. ASHTON: So it would be a good place for an artist like you.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. I really felt happy with it, instead of those other places that had been showing –

MS. ASHTON: Sure, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I did like Martha Jackson, you know? I met her, and she probably has the prettiest gallery in town. Do you know what I mean?

MS. ASHTON: Yes, I remember, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Is she –

MS. ASHTON: She was one of the first ones to make a townhouse gallery.

MS. BONTECOU: Now, am I right with [inaudible]? She was down in –

MS. ASHTON: No, I don't think she ever got downtown.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, who am I –

MS. ASHTON: She died before the downtown period.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Sidney Janis?

MS. BONTECOU: No, no, no, not Sidney.

MS. ASHTON: He never got downtown, either.

MS. BONTECOU: No, no. I think Martha Jackson – no, wait a minute.

MS. ASHTON: Had a gallery downtown?

MS. BONTECOU: Maybe I've got the wrong name. But there is a pretty place down in that place where you said you went a couple of times, the fashionable place to be now for young people, and –

MS. ASHTON: Chelsea.

MS. BONTECOU: Chelsea. And there – she – I went to this older person, and we hit – I mean, we just knew each other, because of time –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And she had – Kelly –

MS. ASHTON: Ellsworth Kelly –

MS. BONTECOU: Kelly, and the guy who went out west. And, actually, he wrote a thing for me in the book, too. But he had died already, I think.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, my.

MS. BONTECOU: You mentioned him.

MS. ASHTON: Robert Dody?

MS. BONTECOU: No. Oh –

MS. ASHTON: He wrote a text in your catalogue for the Long Island show?

MS. BONTECOU: No.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: In the thing that went out west and everywhere. And he is famous. He made a whole area out there in the west, and everybody is happy with – beautiful. And I've never seen it, but –

MS. ASHTON: James Turrell?

MS. BONTECOU: No. It's –

MS. ASHTON: Who?

MS. BONTECOU: Who did you say?

MS. ASHTON: I said James Turrell.

MS. BONTECOU: No, no.

MS. ASHTON: No, he's an artist. She's talking about a –

MS. BONTECOU: This guy is an artist, and he's a writer, too.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: And you know him very well.

MS. ASHTON: An artist who writes?

MS. BONTECOU: He does very simple things.

MS. ASHTON: The man I mentioned before, the British guy, William Tucker?

MS. BONTECOU: No.

MS. ASHTON: No?

MS. BONTECOU: No, no, no.

MS. ASHTON: This is somebody who went to California. Who went to California?

MS. BONTECOU: Right. We better knot this one off, just for a second.

[END CD 3 FILE 1.]

MS. ASHTON: – sculpture residency for poor kids over there in Queens.

MS. BONTECOU: I see, right.

MS. ASHTON: And he has courses going, and he has done a lot of very good things over there. Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, I even saw a pick-up on that. It was really nice, yes.

MS. ASHTON: His studio –

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, it's really nice.

MS. ASHTON: – was one block away from [Isamu Noguchi's]. So, you know, whenever I would go out to see [Noguchi], I would walk over and see what Mark [di Suvero] was up to.

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right.

MS. ASHTON: And he is an honorable man, Mark.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. Yes, he is. Well, anyway –

MS. ASHTON: So, this guy we can't think of. He's an artist, and he is a director of something in the west?

MS. BONTECOU: He has his own work out there. And even Frank was saying he had seen it, and said it was beautiful, and stuff like that.

MS. ASHTON: Well, it's not those light fields?

MS. BONTECOU: Uh-uh [negative]. Uh-oh.

MS. ASHTON: No?

MS. BONTECOU: That was something else. Oh, you know, you're going to – we will all just – how can I – and –

MS. ASHTON: Anyway, he was a friend of yours?

MS. BONTECOU: I knew him, but not well. And he died when – he had died when I had that show. He had died, I think.

MS. ASHTON: Oh.

MS. BONTECOU: I don't think he was with us. And –

MS. ASHTON: The guy who died who wrote very well – but he wasn't – as far as I know, wasn't a sculptor –

MS. BONTECOU: He was in ARTnews, or – he could write any – you – I know you know –

MS. ASHTON: Of course, I would have known him, whoever it is.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. Oh -

MS. ASHTON: But - in those days, at least. I don't know anybody now.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, you - yes, in those days. Well, anyway, I don't know why I mentioned him. I can't - I've forgotten already.

MS. ASHTON: We lost the thread. Well, we were talking, really, about your - I told you before. All of a sudden you disappeared for - and -

MS. BONTECOU: Okay. Turn it on, and we will -

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes. Nobody knew where you were. I remember asking, "Whatever happened to Lee?"

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: And people would say, "I don't know," you know. "She moved out." Just was nowhere.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. Well, I was -

MS. ASHTON: For - and you didn't show for several years.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, it was a long time.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I was even teaching, and I didn't show. So that - and Morris used to rail me for it.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, right.

MS. BONTECOU: But I was - it wasn't a decision, "I'm going to stop," or anything. It was - I wanted to do some work.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I wanted to experiment.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I had done those flowers, and I was ready to experiment.

MS. ASHTON: And didn't Leo pursue you and try to get work and -

MS. BONTECOU: Once I left, no. And I wouldn't have - I was through, mentally, through. And I wanted to experiment. And then Vallie was there.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And we had a farm, and it was exciting, doing different things. And I worked and just - in the 1970s I moved up there with - and I was working up there in Rockland County. That's where it was.

MS. ASHTON: Rockland County.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was about an hour from New York

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And we had a little old Victorian house and a little barn and enough place - and a little tiny orchard. And my dad was with us for five years. He was - and it was - really worked out for him, because he could go to the farm, and then we brought him back. And he was there five or six years. And he was really elderly and having trouble. And -

MS. ASHTON: Why did you give that place up?

MS. BONTECOU: It was very noisy. The 59 [Rt. 59] came right up, and we were down here.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And it really – it was – and I guess we had sort of finished, you know. And Dad died. And so it was an ending, I guess. And it was a rocky road, sort of, and a rocky road for Val, because we kept changing schools and all this. That was not nice. And – but we got through it. And –

MS. ASHTON: When you got to Pennsylvania, did you ever think of maybe showing again in New York?

MS. BONTECOU: When I – we moved to a place, and I don't even know if I – turn it off, right? I don't know –

[END CD 3 FILE 2.]

MS. ASHTON: You started making rather different sculptures after you left New York.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. And we had moved to a place called Bryn Athyn [PA], which is [Emanuel] Swedenborg-governed, let's say. And I found it was – I was – it was interesting, very, very interesting, and very nice.

And Val went to a school there. And after being at Steiner, it was hard for her. But I think she made some nice – really nice – friends, and went to the little college there, and – which was very – they're very high intellectual-oriented. I mean, they – it has things – like Swedenborg invented things like Leonardo [da Vinci]. I mean, they were – he was a wonderful character. And more than a character, but a 17th-century gentleman that was a scientist, and blah, blah, blah. You know?

MS. ASHTON: And a mystic.

MS. BONTECOU: And a mystic, very mystic. And I – we stayed maybe –

MS. ASHTON: Maybe we should define what we mean by mystic. I know my definition. Let me hear yours.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, he was involved with the spiritual world very heavily. I don't know if this should be on there.

MS. ASHTON: Why not? Interested –

MS. BONTECOU: You know, well –

MS. ASHTON: Well, let's call it – it's – you have, as an artist, many interests.

MS. BONTECOU: I know, I know.

MS. ASHTON: And, among others, there are philosophic interests.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: Whatever they are –

MS. BONTECOU: But I feel I'm stepping on people's feet, maybe, and not correctly. I mean, you know, I don't know. Anyway, I have always –

MS. ASHTON: Mr. Swedenborg can't feel it.

MS. BONTECOU: No. Mr. Swedenborg, he is something else. And –

MS. ASHTON: He was a huge influence, you know, on 19th-century poets.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. Oh, I know.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I know. And [William] Blake.

MS. ASHTON: Absolutely.

MS. BONTECOU: And the woman who was – Helen Keller, and a whole slew of interesting, interesting people.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And they would have these symposiums there that were just wonderful. I mean they were – it was such an intellectual – where some people, they were practically persecuted at some point, being –

MS. ASHTON: Yes. Well, I'm interested – the one definition I do remember was – I can't remember who, in the 15th century, a mystic, said, "I see God with the same eye God sees me."

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: And that's very Swedenborgian.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: And that, more or less, to me –

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: – defines a mystic.

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right. Yes.

MS. ASHTON: A mystic speaks to God directly, without any intermediaries, right?

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right, right.

MS. ASHTON: And it's cosmic.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: And you have always been interested in cosmic motifs.

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right.

MS. ASHTON: At least in your art.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: As far as I can see.

MS. BONTECOU: Right from the get-go, really.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And so, it just – I felt comfortable. And I really liked it, and respected it. And – or was amazed by it. And you – it's a beautiful spot, you know? And they built it all themselves by their little hands. And they knew how to – they put the stained glass windows in. I think maybe something like the Met had a show of it, you know, at one point. And they built their own – everything is done by themselves.

And so, I – we stayed there quite awhile. And then, all of a sudden, I don't know, something – I guess Vallie left, and it sort of – we found ourselves back on the farm again. And I have been there ever since. And –

MS. ASHTON: But you had the farm all the time you were living –

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes?

MS. BONTECOU: We would go back and forth. And, in fact, Bill had a great friend, Nishon,

who was a beautiful painter. And I have a painting of – we traded paintings, and he's just beautiful. And he was just a neat fellow, just a neat man. And he was suffering from cancer. And we got him through that, and he passed away. But it was – I think that's – when that happened, we sort of left after – somehow everything sort of fell apart, and we went on with our lives in another way.

And I keep – I got to – well, there were just – we had – when you're artists – we always used to call ourselves the children, or the children – there was a word that artists used for themselves. Oh, we were the children; they were the grown-ups, meaning –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: You know?

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And we found ourselves with younger people, where we were maybe 10 years older. And the people that we should have been, really, more compatible with were our age, and we just didn't fit. And I guess we're too young, you know, too childlike or something. And so, we met Nishon and his friends, and they were younger than we, but it was all the same, you know.

And I have a – anyway, that was a period of our lives there. And it was beautiful. And so that was –

MS. ASHTON: Well, we perceived you to be in seclusion. And, as I said, nobody knew where you were.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: That I ever asked.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: And so, how did they fetch you back? Who fetched you back?

MS. BONTECOU: Well, I started teaching, you know. In this area, I was teaching. I was commuting from –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – there to –

MS. ASHTON: Baruk?

MS. BONTECOU: No.

MS. ASHTON: Brooklyn?

MS. BONTECOU: No, no. The place I just – Bryn Athyn.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, Bryn Athyn.

MS. BONTECOU: And then we would go to the farm when we could. And on weekends, it was close enough, you know.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: So – and Val went to school there, and she made some nice friends, and –

MS. ASHTON: But what I asked you was, from the Manhattan point of view, you had disappeared from –

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, right.

MS. ASHTON: – from the horizon.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: And people really didn't know where you were, whenever I asked.

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right.

MS. ASHTON: I remember when I was doing the show. And who fetched you back into the so-called scene, and how did that happen?

MS. BONTECOU: I think that happened because when I had been working on these things, and I had really gotten in my studio, and was working on those big pieces that are shown now – and so when I got sick – I think I would have kept going and not even bothered to come back. I mean, just too – it was too nice. I had privacy, and I could think and work. And I had done that show biz.

And – but then, when I was sick, and there was a year, or two years, there, getting over that cancer kind of thing, and then Elizabeth [A.T. Smith] came and said – or she didn't. She wrote, I guess, and said, "Would you be interested in showing?" I don't know how it really approached it, but – and then I – she came and saw the work, and liked it, and thought, "Well, why don't we have a show," you know?

And then, I thought, "Well, it's – I can't do much more." The place was getting crammed. And also, I was getting better, and it might have been something – I felt, okay, it's refreshing to work on something that's fresh and new, and stuff. And so, I consented. And then –

MS. ASHTON: And then came Knoedler.

MS. BONTECOU: And – well, then came Annie Philbin, from the – because Elizabeth couldn't do it all. It was too big a project. And if I had – now, if I look back, I would have made it so much smaller, or – if I had been in Knoedler, I'd just have a show there. That was – you know, if I had had that gallery –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – I think I'd just have had a show there, and that would have been it.

MS. ASHTON: The last show you had there was so beautifully installed. Did you –

MS. BONTECOU: No, they –

MS. ASHTON: That was actually – I came there when that show was coming down.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, the –

MS. ASHTON: The vacuum –

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right. No. They all were working, you know? It was really nice.

MS. ASHTON: It was beautifully done.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: I thought it was one of the most beautiful –

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: – commercial gallery shows I ever saw.

MS. BONTECOU: And, well, it was nice. Frank [Del Deo] and I talked, and we just said, "What do you think?" "Where do you want this?" And I said, "Well, it's" – and then we'd both decide, "Yes, that would be the best place." And the hanging pieces and stuff, got them established, and then how to show the other without –

MS. ASHTON: The smaller pieces were beautifully shown.

MS. BONTECOU: – without being hurt. Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And you didn't want to step on them, or they –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: You didn't want to have those pillars.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, right.

MS. BONTECOU: You know?

MS. ASHTON: Right.

MS. BONTECOU: So, it worked out beautifully.

MS. ASHTON: It did, it did.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: It was elegant.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: An elegant show.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, I really –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I think they were happy, too, because it wasn't –

MS. ASHTON: But all those years that you were in retreat, how did you survive, economically?

MS. BONTECOU: I was teaching.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, the teaching did it.

MS. BONTECOU: It – the teaching did it. It gave me a freedom that I didn't have to –

MS. ASHTON: I know. I do it myself.

MS. BONTECOU: You know what I mean?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: That's what I did, and it turned out to be a very smart decision.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, I was lucky, because –

MS. ASHTON: Whole summers off, right?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, that – right.

MS. ASHTON: You know? Every book I ever wrote was written in two summers.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: You know? One summer to sketch it out –

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: – and the second summer to do it.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: And –

MS. BONTECOU: No, it – but you had to be in a place – I mean, you obviously liked Cooper, and it worked for you.

MS. ASHTON: It worked very well.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. Well –

MS. ASHTON: It still does.

MS. BONTECOU: I went to – I was coached by – into Brooklyn. And I just lucked out, because there were – it was free, like – old Morris had his problems, I think, but I never – it was very fine, in the sense –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, sure.

MS. BONTECOU: – that he never – you had to teach – talk about two-dimensional design, and this and that, and everybody taught the way they wanted to. Well, I took that two-dimensional design, and just started a very basic painting course, so that – I mean, and others had a very intricate three-dimensional stuff that was very heady, and a lot of kids loved it, you know? And so, there was enough span –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – so everybody could sort of find their way.

MS. ASHTON: That's the great thing about public colleges.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. Well, also –

MS. ASHTON: I'm all for public education.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, it was open – what was it called?

MS. ASHTON: Open studio?

MS. BONTECOU: No. Open enrollment.

MS. ASHTON: Open enrollment, right.

MS. BONTECOU: And I loved that. And it was not easy. You had to crawl over your students, and –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: It was like – it was a madhouse.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: But it was so lively.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And then they put down –

MS. ASHTON: And many a poor kid got an education.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, yes.

MS. ASHTON: In those days.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, I loved –

MS. ASHTON: That way.

MS. BONTECOU: That's right.

MS. ASHTON: It was something very important.

MS. BONTECOU: But then it quit.

MS. ASHTON: I know.

MS. BONTECOU: I mean, they went – yes. So I was disappointed in that, and the halls were less jolly. But the – it was – I was thinking of when I graduated – when I retired. I thought, well, the people I went in to teach mainly were the undergrads, and then I had a graduate class. And at first I thought I was going to go crazy. I felt they would know something. They didn't know anything.

MS. ASHTON: Well, you should see them now.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, oh, well, it was like –

MS. ASHTON: It's frightful, frightful.

MS. BONTECOU: Anyway, it worked out, because I learned, and then I figured out ways of – and now I thought, well, boy, if I did it ever again, I would just concentrate on one or two things, and that would be it, and let them flow, you know? But –

MS. ASHTON: You think it helped in any way in your own point of view, teaching?

MS. BONTECOU: I think it – I grew. But I don't think, as far as work. I was always going home and doing those things that I was working on.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And so, I don't think it really – but I grew as an understanding person. And with my sickness, that really helped a lot.

And it's – there was a – I digress, but there was – to give an example, there was a senator I disliked terribly. He was a Pennsylvanian guy, and he was always jabbing out loud and making noise and not doing – I don't know. But he got sick, too. And when he came back – he was in the Senate or in the Congress, I don't know which. And I looked at him and said, "Oh, he's grown." You know, he was – he's a nice person now. And so, I just – I made a –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And his face, his eyes were different. It was really interesting. And I said, "I understand what happened to him," you know? And he was really a – so anyway, that was – we got off, but it helped. That illness sort of woke you up to the fact that things are – and Bill helped me immensely. And it was, sort of, all this natural stuff that we were taking. And just the activity was important.

And the other doctors, they worked their hearts out, you know, this one that thought it was going to work, these strong drugs and – oh, oh. And it might have worked if I were 20 pounds heavier, a bigger person. But being light like me, it just – I mean, I got every darn – what do you call it – side effect you can imagine. And I added more to it, you know?

MS. ASHTON: Yes. Oh, dear.

MS. BONTECOU: But, you know, it was –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And it was – a sense of humor bubbled through it all.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And all of us would – you know, if one day I was Venus de Willendorf, with all those lumps and bumps. And then the next I was Magandy [sic].

MS. ASHTON: Isn't it funny –

MS. BONTECOU: Not Magandy. What's his name?

MS. ASHTON: – how we all remember the Venus of Willendorf?

MS. BONTECOU: I know, I –

MS. ASHTON: It's really strange. I've talked with other people –

MS. BONTECOU: – just love her.

MS. ASHTON: Yes. And everybody I know, yes. We –

MS. BONTECOU: Have you ever seen those little fetishes, I guess – what do you call them, little tiny cave painting, cave dwellers –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And their breasts, little round breasts –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: – made out of alabaster.

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Have you seen –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Aren't they incredible?

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, how – they are the most sensitive things I've seen, you know?

MS. ASHTON: Well, primitive – or so-called primitive people –

MS. BONTECOU: I hate that word.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: I will show you later, I have an alabaster thing that I am told was what the Indians carved to keep track of the numbers of flocks that they had.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, I think I've seen one in print.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I – yes –

MS. ASHTON: There is one right over there in the cabinet.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay.

MS. ASHTON: I will show you when we're finished.

MS. BONTECOU: Okay, okay, okay.

MS. ASHTON: And you know –

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, it just – I mean, think of the Mayans. I mean, what –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And those things you see from the air. I mean –

MS. ASHTON: Oh, well –

MS. BONTECOU: You know?

MS. ASHTON: Sure.

MS. BONTECOU: It blows you.

MS. ASHTON: And they still have no explanation for that.

MS. BONTECOU: No, not –

MS. ASHTON: That I know of. Do you?

PARTICIPANT: No.

MS. BONTECOU: No, I – and also now, people laugh at it, but the field crops. What the heck is that?

MS. ASHTON: The what?

MS. BONTECOU: The field crops.

MS. ASHTON: The field crops?

MS. BONTECOU: It –

PARTICIPANT: The crop circles?

MS. BONTECOU: Crop circles.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, the crop circles, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I mean, they – okay, they said it's possible, and they had people going around stomping – not overnight. No way, you know? I mean, it's –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: It's –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: It's Swedenborgian.

MS. ASHTON: Yes. I would say that that's true.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: That's true.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: So, now let's get –

MS. BONTECOU: Okay.

MS. ASHTON: – for a little bit to the most recent work that you have been working on. You had one exhibition not that long ago. And you have sort of moved in another direction, one feels. Not vitally different –

MS. BONTECOU: No.

MS. ASHTON: – but –

MS. BONTECOU: Well, basically, I am experimenting again. And the older you – I mean, just being old doesn't mean much, in the sense that you have ideas coming as fast and furious as when you're a teenybopper, you know?

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And it's terrible, because you can't keep up with it.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: So, anyway, I am finishing up some pieces that I had done half – two-thirds

done, maybe, and I was about to crash them, and I thought, "No, this one I can see something happening." And so, I started finishing some of the – oh, done in the – I don't know when they were done, but I will find out.

But I'm trying to finish those, and working on drawings, and working on ideas, and working, hopefully, maybe to do some more – this blown stuff.

MS. ASHTON: The vacuum –

MS. BONTECOU: Vacuum-forming stuff, and working with – in the 1970s I was working with sails, and I couldn't – I got them all over the yard, just porcelain sails, or terra-cotta, or clay. And I couldn't get them together. I liked certain things, but now I am hoping to work in that area and work with a vacuum form. And –

MS. ASHTON: But what about sailcloth?

MS. BONTECOU: What?

MS. ASHTON: Sailcloth?

MS. BONTECOU: It – I thought of – I have a parachute, and I thought of setting up a thing with a wind thing and putting – but then it – it doesn't work. It – you would have to put epoxy on it and let it blow out.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: And I – no, this is what – with vacuum forming, the main thing, even when I first started, is to see through it, and to be light. And then, with a Styrofoam thing, I can be pretty liberal in forming it. And also, I will try other ways of forming it. But it's just all an experiment now, just a big experiment.

MS. ASHTON: That's wonderful.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes. So –

MS. ASHTON: That's wonderful.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, I – as I start experimenting, that's the fun.

MS. ASHTON: I presume that's at the very fundamental base of all art.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Isn't it?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes. And –

MS. ASHTON: And who can't bring themselves to experiment is not going to make it as an artist.

MS. BONTECOU: No, no.

MS. ASHTON: No. Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: I just – when kids come and say to me, "Am I going to be an artist?" And that – I mean, that question should not be asked. You either are or not.

MS. ASHTON: I'm afraid that's true.

MS. BONTECOU: You either have to go at it, and you don't think about that commercial world, and you're just doing it because, "Wow, look what's – it's magic; the little pencil is a magic box," you know? It's like a poet has – is lucky, and so is the draftsman, because you can take a piece of paper and walk anywhere and start using it.

And so, I – when kids come – and nowadays it's so commercial that first – when at Skowhegan one kid asked me, "Well, do you think, because we're at Skowhegan, we will be known?" And I just couldn't – it just – and I looked at her; I thought she was pulling my leg, you know?

But this is sort of the attitude, at times, that if you – I know when we left Worcester Street, the young man that came up to look at the loft to take, his father wanted to buy him the building next door, which I had my eye on, and thinking, "That is a grand building," you know; "That would make a great studio." And to have – parents were pushed away. Boys, poor men, were disowned, some of them, because they were going into the arts.

Now, "Come and join, and come and expose these – "and they're called little artists. I can't – I mean, I can't deal with that.

MS. ASHTON: My kids used to say, "Trust Fund Babies."

MS. BONTECOU: Your kids are smart. You're right.

MS. ASHTON: Not me. I didn't know anything about trust funds, but they knew. I guess they were hoping.

MS. BONTECOU: Right, right. Oh, I – right. No, it's just – it has to be – and I just admire the people that are painting away, and doing beautiful paintings, and probably will never be known, and – or, if they are, it's local or something.

It's just not – it's too dangerous to fuss around with. I kept saying, "It's too dangerous." I mean, I had kids come – a woman, a young woman, came, and she left her family to become an artist.

MS. ASHTON: Children? Her children?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Oh, my.

MS. BONTECOU: You know? I mean, it was like –

MS. ASHTON: That far, I can't understand.

MS. BONTECOU: No, no, I couldn't, either. And she was so – I don't know where she came from. All of a sudden she was in my studio, you know? And I just – it – you – it has to be – because you're going to have to live a terrible life at some point. Or not terrible, but it's going to be hard. It's not going to be –

MS. ASHTON: Certainly.

MS. BONTECOU: You know?

MS. ASHTON: That's for sure.

MS. BONTECOU: It has to be a chosen thing within, and not a chosen thing from somebody else.

MS. ASHTON: That's right, absolutely.

MS. BONTECOU: And teaching is not – I am not all that – I ended up thinking – I had wonderful grad students, and some who I just adored, where one would sit down – and he was a good painter; I knew he was a – I didn't have to say anything; he would be painting. But he said, "Do you know, Lee, when I first came here, I didn't even know who Picasso was." And we both roared, you know?

MS. ASHTON: Yes, yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes. So it's got to be from within, and life has to be part of it. And when – like at Brooklyn, I think the best years there were when they didn't have their special studios, and they were thrown into this dungeon that – they put stuff on the floor, and they – it looked like a refugee camp. And they – but they were so – working with each other, and it was just super. And same with another part of the building that was full of them.

And now, they have these little cubicles, and –

MS. ASHTON: Yes, right.

MS. BONTECOU: And I don't know.

MS. ASHTON: Well –

MS. BONTECOU: I think they learn to use their elbows and learn to –

MS. ASHTON: The culture is in a bad state, in general.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: And when that happens, these little children get swept up, like with a vacuum cleaner.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: In the culture.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: And one or two may survive.

MS. BONTECOU: Right. When –

MS. ASHTON: If they have innately good values –

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: – they may survive.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: But it's hard.

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, I –

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: The allure of gain –

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: – not only monetary, but you know –

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, yes.

MS. ASHTON: That's very, very seductive.

MS. BONTECOU: I – and then there are some that are really, truly suffering, and – but I don't know. If you don't really need to do it, then there is no need to do it.

MS. ASHTON: Of course.

MS. BONTECOU: You know?

MS. ASHTON: That's obvious.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: That's why, in some ways, it's so silly to have art schools at all.

MS. BONTECOU: I know. That's why the League is passable –

MS. ASHTON: I tried to, in my own –

MS. BONTECOU: – because it's open.

MS. ASHTON: – in my own school, they wanted – a lot of them, mostly the academics,

wanted to put in a master's degree.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: A master of painting?

MS. BONTECOU: Oh, that's right.

MS. ASHTON: A master of sculpture?

MS. BONTECOU: Right.

MS. ASHTON: I mean, come on.

MS. BONTECOU: Well, when –

MS. ASHTON: It's ridiculous.

MS. BONTECOU: When I heard about that –

MS. ASHTON: And now I heard there is something, some school, that's giving a Ph.D. in studio art.

MS. BONTECOU: No, no. I heard that a long time ago. And they said, "Well" – and we all came out – I was at the League at that time. And they said, "Someone is getting a Ph.D." in da, da, da, and because they had a show, you know, or something. And I said, "Well, I'm a Ph.D. I had" –

MS. ASHTON: Sure.

MS. BONTECOU: You know? I don't know. It's crazy.

MS. ASHTON: Well, that, I think, is about all we can go –

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: – as far as we can go with this interview.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes.

MS. ASHTON: Although, there is much more to be said. But I don't think we can push it any further.

MS. BONTECOU: No, no, no.

MS. ASHTON: I think probably you agree?

MS. BONTECOU: It's – yes, I agree.

MS. ASHTON: Yes?

MS. BONTECOU: It's finished.

MS. ASHTON: You agree?

MS. BONTECOU: Yes.

MS. ASHTON: Yes.

MS. BONTECOU: Do you agree?

MS. ASHTON: Sounds good.

MS. BONTECOU: You have to give the –

MS. ASHTON: It's a great place to end it on.

MS. BONTECOU: Yes, yes, at the end. Right, right.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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