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**Oral history interview with John Buck, 2008
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with John Buck on September 13 - December 13, 2008. The interview took place in Bozeman, Montana and Palm Desert, California, and was conducted by Lynn R. Matteson for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Stoddard-Fleischman History of Rocky Mountain Area Artists.

John Buck has reviewed the transcript. His corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

LYNN MATTESON: This is Lynn Matteson speaking to John Buck in his studio in Bozeman, Montana. The date is September 13, 2008. This is Disc 2. John, we left you in Humboldt State. After Humboldt you went to Cincinnati?

JOHN BUCK: My trip to Cincinnati was really a visiting artist residence that lasted for about a week. It was not a full-time.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh, I thought it was a year gig.

JOHN BUCK: Oh, no, no. I was brought in there to—I think there might have been a small exhibition of my drawings or something. And then I lectured to students, talked to students about their work. It was an undergraduate situation as far as I can remember. But, no, I was not a full-time teacher.

LYNN MATTESON: So then it was Bozeman, Montana, that you came to Montana State?

JOHN BUCK: Well, yes. After Humboldt State I had a summer school teaching session at Mira Costa College [Carlsbad, CA] in Southern California. Then I lived for a year in Madison, Wisconsin.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh, that's right.

JOHN BUCK: With Debby. And I had a studio there that I—I made a whole series of fairly large wooden figures that in I guess it was '79, which was a little later, a number of those pieces were included in an exhibition at Hansen-Fuller Gallery in California.

LYNN MATTESON: But they were made in Madison?

JOHN BUCK: They were made in Madison.

LYNN MATTESON: Was this the first time you'd gone to the full-size figure, when you were in Madison?

JOHN BUCK: No, I started doing the larger figures in England.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh, I see.

JOHN BUCK: And I came back, and I worked on that in that format at Humboldt State for a couple of years. And then I went to—because the Prix de Rome had ended for Steve Dailey, he came back. So I was without a job. And at that point Debby had already moved to Madison, Wisconsin, to teach there. So we were living apart the second year I was teaching at Humboldt State.

LYNN MATTESON: Let's get this out of the—when did you meet Debby? What was it—

JOHN BUCK: I met Debby at Davis the first year I went there. She was an undergraduate student, and I was a graduate. She was friends with all these other people because she'd been around longer than I had. And I don't know. One thing led to another.

LYNN MATTESON: Right, and the rest is history.

JOHN BUCK: Mm-hmm.

LYNN MATTESON: And so at Madison you were really basically on your own, and she was teaching.

JOHN BUCK: Yes, she was teaching, and I was on my own.

LYNN MATTESON: And you could just do your work.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. I shared a studio with a guy named George Kramer, who ended up teaching in Madison. I think he probably ended up with Debby's job.

LYNN MATTESON: I see.

JOHN BUCK: When she moved out here.

LYNN MATTESON: I see. So then you got the position here in Bozeman at Montana State.

JOHN BUCK: Montana State.

LYNN MATTESON: And then she followed you here?

JOHN BUCK: Yes. I taught for a semester, and then she came out. She wasn't going to teach for a while, at least she didn't have any intention of teaching when she initially came out. But I'd rented a house out on the other side of the valley that was owned by a woman that had an outdoor riding arena. [They laugh.]

LYNN MATTESON: How could you resist!

JOHN BUCK: Yes. Beautiful view of the valley. And there was nothing to it, you know. And she moved out. We brought a horse with her from Madison. She got a place to put it. And I think when she moved in, it was end of December, beginning of January, and it was like 70 degrees out. And she thought she'd moved back to California. I mean it was just so beautiful.

LYNN MATTESON: It was meant to be.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. It was dry and dusty. There was no snow. And, you know, it's the freakish nature of the weather in Montana. You never know. So we got moved into that cabin in the mountains, and it was just so beautiful. It was like *Dr. Zhivago*. The next week it dumped on us, and we got so cold. But, you know, it was all an adventure at that point. So we couldn't resist.

LYNN MATTESON: So the work of the large figures that you were doing in Madison continued. Now, were those figures—I don't have any really documentation about those figures. But were they—Do they deal with large figures before—I'm thinking of *Prairie Fire*, which was 1979, which is the only image I have from those years. That's a figure, a cowboy figure, someone in denims, against a black background, a painted acrylic background of some sort, with a Z-like fire going across.

JOHN BUCK: That would've been later.

LYNN MATTESON: That would've been later.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. There's very little to connect these with some kind of cowboy figure. That was supposed to be Jimmy Jones in Jonestown in Guyana.

LYNN MATTESON: I see. No, there wouldn't be a connection. [Laughs]

JOHN BUCK: Because the subject matter was religious fanaticism.

LYNN MATTESON: I see.

JOHN BUCK: And that was just one figure out of an exhibition. But there was work before that that came in the "Introduction" show at Hansen-Fuller, that probably two years before that that was I think my first show. It might have been '77.

LYNN MATTESON: So how would you describe those figures?

JOHN BUCK: They were flat cutouts that had been painted on one side. The backside of them were like stage sets. So we go back to Stanford now. They were really props in a opera.

LYNN MATTESON: I see.

JOHN BUCK: And you could stand up and arrange them in any way you want and make compositions out of them, so that they became like three-dimensional paintings. You could walk around in. That was my idea. And then since then I kind of moved into a background, a painted background with stretch canvases on a wall and figures in front of it, to apply different sculptural elements to the surface of the canvas. Eliminating the figure. And then building the surface and eliminating the canvas. And now I'm sort of moving on to actually building sculpture again without the background. But I'm actually about to start including this background again.

LYNN MATTESON: Okay.

JOHN BUCK: That's because the size of the panels that I've been working on have gotten so big that I can't afford to do them in just wood. I have to go back to canvas and—

LYNN MATTESON: I see. I see. Now has there been a narrative—were there narratives in this thing. Like you just mentioned the *Prairie Fire*; it's supposed to have something to do with Jim Jones and the whole business.

JOHN BUCK: Yes.

LYNN MATTESON: Does a lot of it have a reference to some subject matter?

JOHN BUCK: Most certainly. At that time I was involved in a whole series of pieces. I think from that exhibition there was a combination of two things: One was my own influences and my need to kind

of separate myself from my influences and I mean I guess the contemporary environment. The figures that were in that particular exhibition were myself, each individual figure was myself under the influence of a different person. Under the influence of William Wiley. Under the influence of Roy De Forest. And so I would be transformed by that, and these figures would sort of morph into other kinds of beings. And in the center of this arrangement was a character standing in a pool of water as an oasis, with a divining rod or a stick that would help him to find water. Naked, blindfolded, holding this stick above his head, ankle-deep in this pool of water, which was made out of a whole series of pieces of wood, that were put together like a piece of puzzle—like a puzzle. So it was like finding yourself in this environment by separating yourself from all these influences.

LYNN MATTESON: So it's a self-portrait.

JOHN BUCK: It is a self-portrait. And all these other characters around this installation were about the kinds of things that were going on at the day. And when I say Jonestown, it puts it in a kind of a perspective for you what the time was like.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes.

JOHN BUCK: So that fits. I've got pictures of that if you want to see them.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes, I would like to see them actually. But do you find that what was going on there formally—well, you've already answered my question earlier when I was asking. Because there's a lot, from just that one photograph that I've seen of *Prairie Fire*, there's a lot of elements which still continue in the sense that there's a flatness. I mean but you've told me that they're painted in the back.

JOHN BUCK: They're not painted on the back.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh! They're construction sets on the back. I mean they're constructed.

JOHN BUCK: When you look at the backside of them, you'd think you were in a theater.

LYNN MATTESON: So have you always had this fixation on the frontality of your work?

JOHN BUCK: I guess, in the sense that when I started working with very specific kinds of images and I was drawing them on a piece of paper, there was an idea about how they looked, and it was always this is the view. So I would make that view and not bother with the rest of it because it seemed like that was just grunt work; I didn't need to do that. Who needed to see the other side of this thing? And I didn't. You know I've since kind of moved away from that. But I like the idea that the sculptures could have their own environment and that they would bring them with them. Sometimes early on I started making sculptures that there was a series of rain men, people who were standing in the rain. And the rain would be around the figures so that you could see that the environment of the figure was a rainstorm. If that makes sense. And there were actually little raindrops on sticks, emanating from the figure. Like those Pomo Indian headdresses with the big sprays coming off of them. And then after that I started thinking about, well, this environment or this atmosphere could be more. It could be like a painting. And so the painting and the sculpture could kind of work together. And I saw a wonderful big installation at the Guggenheim of Dubuffet [Jean Dubuffet], who had a gigantic painting with a figure in front of it, and it was painted into it. And that was very inspirational to me.

LYNN MATTESON: Isn't that interesting. Because when I think of you working with an element in front of the painted canvas, I think of Wiley. Because a lot of Wiley's—there are several Wileys

where there's a strap coming out of the canvas to whatever element in the front—

JOHN BUCK: You're talking in some metaphorical way. [Laughs]

LYNN MATTESON: I mean there are some pictures of his. I mean there are some paintings where there are—a large picture. I mean the Museum of Modern Art San Francisco has one. And then there is in front of the picture some connections to some sculpture in the front. It might be a suitcase. It might be—

JOHN BUCK: Yes, I know what you're saying. Well, you know, I think he definitely kind of pointed the way to what I do with the canvas behind it. But—

LYNN MATTESON: But the Dubuffet you say is—

JOHN BUCK: The Dubuffet really had more to do with it than anybody else.

LYNN MATTESON: That's interesting.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. I mean especially on that scale and the way he had painted the figure really into the canvas was what I wanted to do. And the first successful piece that I did like that was probably a piece about an eclipse, which took place here in Montana which was an actual eclipse of the sun. And it took place over the Gallatin Valley, and you could see the darkness on one side of the valley, and we were in the daylight. Then we got into the dark, and the daylight was on the other side. So you could see how big this shadow was. And there was this wonderful crescent there. Shortly after that we went to Israel. We came back. We went to the temple—to the Western Wall, the old temple. And there was this big dark wall with all these people in dark standing there praying and bowing and doing all this stuff. And above it there was this dome, this big golden dome with this little crescent above it. And it was just like an eclipse. This was a space that these people couldn't go, you know. I just saw this wonderful metaphor for me, and I made this painting with this figure standing in front of it.

It was connected back to Dubuffet, but it was also about something very special as far as my own epiphany, I guess you'd say. And secondly, after that I made a figure that was standing. And on his shoulders he was lying down. So there was a horizontal figure with a standing figure holding him up. And he was standing inside of a house. The house was painted on the canvas on the wall, a cutout the shape of a house. And the outside of the house was painted over the figure so that you could look into the house and see the figure and all the furniture around him. And then you could see the outside of the house. So this was like the conscious and the subconscious coexisting at the same time.

LYNN MATTESON: You did that with a couple of other works where—I think one was a figure with a mountain?

JOHN BUCK: Yes. *Mountain Home* [1983].

LYNN MATTESON: Right.

JOHN BUCK: Yes.

LYNN MATTESON: When I was looking at, Magritte [René Magritte] comes to mind because he did a few of those kinds of things, where all of a sudden—

JOHN BUCK: A mountain?

LYNN MATTESON: No, not a mountain. But a subject will continue to be, it'll disappear into a wall. That doesn't ring a bell with you.

JOHN BUCK: Well, no, I'm trying to think about Magritte paintings that I've seen where there's that transition. Where they turn to stone or something like that.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes, yes. Did you look at Magritte in school?

JOHN BUCK: Oh, I looked at Magritte. All through Davis I saw Magritte. And a lot of my drawings were inspired by that. Because there was a kind of a deadpan kind of approach to information and how you put it down on a surface, and nothing was embellished.

LYNN MATTESON: Exactly.

JOHN BUCK: And I liked that because it made somehow the whole thing ring true. It was like this actually is the way it was. But, no, that wasn't really my thinking when I made the *Mountain Home* painting. *Mountain Home* is what this is, you know. You know the problem with that particular approach in my work has been that you don't have epiphanies every day. [They laugh.] You know what I mean? But aren't these wonderful events —

LYNN MATTESON: It would be hard to live if you did. [They laugh.]

JOHN BUCK: So I mean I look for that. But I couldn't be totally inspired every time I approach my work. And so I had to kind of step back into a more conventional sculptural approach, which is figurative.

LYNN MATTESON: What has always interested me in your work is—and I want to ask you whether or not it continues that way—is the heavy drawing nature of your work. You draw a lot. I mean there's such a graphic element to even the work that you do now that everything's very clearly delineated. And it seems like it's built from drawings to the sculptures. Is that how it works? Has it worked?

JOHN BUCK: I don't draw out an idea and then go try to make it.

LYNN MATTESON: You don't.

JOHN BUCK: I do not. I really try to make it as verbatim, you know. And the drawing that I do is primarily in my woodblock prints, and that is a much more physical activity than you can imagine.

LYNN MATTESON: No, I can't imagine.

JOHN BUCK: There's so much force involved in drawing on wood with a ballpoint pen that I herniated a disc and my back is full of arthritis. Because I lean over, and I work so hard on it. But a lot of the other shapes and colors that you see are by virtue of being cut out with a band saw and that kind of thing. But drawing is important to me, but I don't produce drawings.

LYNN MATTESON: That's what I wanted to ask you: There's no independent drawing? There's no independent drawings that you frame.

JOHN BUCK: No. But I have a zillion of these yellow tablets that you see here. When I sketch, I'm

constantly like, you know, trying to work up an idea or trying to understand something. And they don't add up to anything except that maybe, you know, they'll be Leonardo da Vinci's famous drawings or something. [Laughs]

LYNN MATTESON: Do you keep these things?

JOHN BUCK: I have a few of them, yes.

LYNN MATTESON: Generally they don't last that long?

JOHN BUCK: Well, sometimes I rip a page out because it's really good. And then I lose that. [They laugh.] So I save the tablet, but you won't see the good ones. [They laugh.]

LYNN MATTESON: That's interesting. I wanted to talk a little bit about sources. Because your openness to the fact that you've been heavily influenced by, of course, some of your Davis mentors. But also the figures of the past. There's a couple of shapes that recur back—time and time again—like the endless column of [Constantin] Brancusi. [René] Magritte comes to mind. As a matter of fact, this morning, in the guesthouse where my wife and I are staying, in the corner next to the dining table, there's a shotgun leaning against the wall. Do you know that comes out of a Magritte painting?

JOHN BUCK: A shotgun leaning against the corner? No. That's nice.

LYNN MATTESON: Is it working here, too? [They laugh.]

JOHN BUCK: Yes, it should be. Oh, I'll be darned.

LYNN MATTESON: And how about David Smith?

JOHN BUCK: Oh, I think when I was an undergraduate student in Kansas City—and that would've been where Brancusi comes from—I think my inspirations in undergraduate school were very conventional. You know I actually felt somewhat at a loss when I finally did go to graduate school because people seemed so sophisticated and knew all about these German sculptors. And they knew about people whom I'd never even dreamed of. I thought I was doing well if I knew who Michelangelo was, you know? And so it was kind of wow! I've got to start learning an awful lot really quick. But, you know, Brancusi, I still think is like the premier sort of elegant sculpture—sculptor—from that period. And most of the people that I really, in history, admire are from that period.

LYNN MATTESON: The Renaissance?

JOHN BUCK: No, Brancusi.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh, for twentieth century.

JOHN BUCK: Twentieth century. But I mean those guys, you know, Picasso and Brancusi and Duchamp and all these people that kind of knew each other. This was a wild time, you know. And they were all so good at what they did and so clear. Every one of them was a kind of a—was different than the other, completely. And yet they shared a lot between themselves. And I think maybe I thought that that was what Davis ought to be like or was like for me. I don't know that everybody's going to be wonderful and famous like those guys were. But that's certainly the model for a great education. If people are interested in the idea of my influences from Davis and how that affected my work, whether or not that's a good thing, to me if those people who were at Davis, let's

say at least when I was there, if they don't somehow surface in your work at one point or another, then you weren't there.

LYNN MATTESON: That's right. You weren't feeling it.

JOHN BUCK: These were like—These were dynamic, wonderful people who you could gain so much from. But the only way to really implement it was to try to ingest it and put it into your work. Didn't have to stay. But it definitely had to be part of it for that period of time. I was willing to give that up. But it was just the idea of my own personal identity just to gain what I could from them.

LYNN MATTESON: Sure. Right. Yes. Well, here Picasso says at some point bad artists borrow it, great artists steal it.

JOHN BUCK: Right. [They laugh.] Well, somehow because nobody laid claim to everything in Davis, you couldn't even steal it. [They laugh.] It was just there.

LYNN MATTESON: And of course there's a lot of folk art here in your work.

JOHN BUCK: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

LYNN MATTESON: And just taking a look around your house and your studio, how much you've collected the—I won't call them miscellaneous things. But these funny things that you collect of deformed animals and all kinds of wonderful sort of—

JOHN BUCK: Deformed animals. [Laughs]

LYNN MATTESON: Well, there are a couple of two-headed cows in there—or one two-headed cow in there.

JOHN BUCK: When Debby and I were first dating, we were in Davis, and we'd need some time for ourselves, and we had to get out of Davis to do it. We'd go to a little town called Esparto outside of Davis about—I don't know how far away it is; 30 miles, 25 miles. And Esparto was nothing more than a crossroads at that time. And there was a bar there, the Esparto Bar. And over the top of the bar was a two-headed calf. And I saw one in an antique store, and it was like a romantic symbol of our relationship.

LYNN MATTESON: That's wonderful. [Laughs]

JOHN BUCK: I brought it home and gave it to Debby. Several years later she bought me a single-headed, double-bodied calf.

LYNN MATTESON: That's the other one.

JOHN BUCK: And that kind of completed the circle. [They laugh.]

LYNN MATTESON: And then enough of that.

JOHN BUCK: That's right. No, well, and then she got into this whole stuffed animal thing, and she gave me a stuffed catfish a few years later.

LYNN MATTESON: Some of your subjects, if one can talk about it, you have—is there a political sort of angle to them? I mean the woodcuts are very blatantly political.

JOHN BUCK: Mm-hmm.

LYNN MATTESON: With the other work, the freestanding sculptures, is there a political—is that not included in there? Or is it alluded to?

JOHN BUCK: I think it probably is more submerged because maybe I feel I'm saying what I want to say with my prints, in that everything doesn't have to be political. That it becomes kind of almost a cliché to have to say that everything you do is going to somehow point towards some political conclusion. I don't think anything I've ever done is going to change anybody's mind. And that is somehow the motive. Right now I'd like to make some wonderful thing about the election, you know. It's not going to happen because the election is what's going to happen. But I have a piece in my studio right now which I don't know if I can call it *Yellow Cake* or *The Occupation*. I don't know which one it ought to be. But that's what it is. And that title may not—if I don't title it that, neither one, then nobody's going to know. That's the thing about these panels that I'm working on. So it's kind of up to me to kind of cough that up or not.

LYNN MATTESON: Have you ever been active in politics aside from the art. I mean have you been out—

JOHN BUCK: I'm definitely a product of the sixties. I think that that's it. I'm involved in the sense that I think about it, read about it, and vote about it as much as anybody. But, no, I'm not a politician.

LYNN MATTESON: Do you contribute work to, say, a candidate's —

JOHN BUCK: I contribute work all the time to various organizations for various reasons, as well as money, you know. Whatever I can.

LYNN MATTESON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Do—well, I'll get to that later. In some of the figures that you did in the seventies, at least what I've seen, they were fully colored figures, the ones I've seen. And again, it's *Prairie Fire* I'm thinking of, and with a head and so on. You now have headless torsos or headless standing figures. When did that first appear? And why is it—the head doesn't interest you?

JOHN BUCK: I went to the Louvre, and I saw a wonderful painting of John the Baptist walking down the street with a fountain of blood coming out of his neck and his head under his arm.

[END OF SESSION 1]

LYNN MATTESON: This is Lynn Matteson, and I'm interviewing John Buck at his home in Bozeman, Montana. The date is September 14, 2008. And we are not using a disc any longer. This is a digital tape recorder. So, John, where we left off yesterday, was when we were talking about how we went from, when we looked at—I mentioned—let me just regroup here. I mentioned that with *Prairie Fire* in '79, you used a full figure which was with head, all the sort of anatomic, fully painted and so on. And then the question was is how you went from there to the headless figures and what this—Did it mean anything? Or what was the reason, if there was a reason? And what you said was that you had visited the Louvre, and you saw a picture—was it a picture of sculpture of John the Baptist carrying his head?

JOHN BUCK: There was a painting in the Louvre of John the Baptist walking down the street carrying his head under his arm and a fountain of blood coming out of where his head should have been. And it was beautifully painted in a classical way. I was fascinated by it because, you know, it was obviously talking about life after death and martyrdom and all these different things. But it was

so verbatim it seemed like a surrealistic kind of image.

LYNN MATTESON: By verbatim, you mean literal?

JOHN BUCK: Yes. Literal, exactly.

LYNN MATTESON: Do you remember the artist?

JOHN BUCK: No, I don't. It was one of those things. You know the Louvre is full of so much great stuff, and you're walking along. You just see things you're not looking for. [Laughs] So that was how that happened. But there was—Can we stop this?

LYNN MATTESON: Sure.

JOHN BUCK: I was interested in what was being done by contemporary artists in New York at about that same time. And Vito Acconci had done some pieces where he had bitten himself on the arm and created these sort of bite marks. And there was this combination of Vito and John the Baptist. So there was this figure not naked, but wearing his underpants. Faceless, without a head. So he wasn't like a portrait of a person. He was like an embodiment of an idea. But he was like without a head like John the Baptist. And he was making a face on the end of his hand like an old comedian whose name was Señor Wences.

LYNN MATTESON: Ed Sullivan Show.

JOHN BUCK: Ed Sullivan Show. And he had painted his face on his hand, and would like make kind of a puppet-like thing out of it. Anyway, the character, this sort of self-imposed martyrdom which—I think martyrdom is a self-imposed situation where you usually have an option of denying yourself or denying your beliefs in order to save yourself. But the martyrs don't do it. So it's a self-imposed sacrifice or self-imposed pain or whatever. And so this character has been biting himself with his own illusion.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh!

JOHN BUCK: And Vito Acconci was kind of inspired that in a way because I always sort of go back to this: What happens in contemporary art and body art and how it's like it is the cutting-edge and somehow it's also kind of—it is martyrdom in a sort of a funny way. A lot of the performance art is body artists and so forth. I've been involved in things that I think are self-sacrificing. I don't know how else to describe it. But a recent print that I was working on had to do with the fellow that gave himself paint enemas, and then was spraying paint onto a canvas. I read about this in the *Artforum* magazine, and I was just so entertained by the idea, that it became part of the subject of this print that was really about the whole avant-garde and how there's this sort of almost naïve sense of sacrifice that goes on. And in order to depict that, I use a Chianti bottle, which is the classic archetypal bohemian centerpiece, with a candle in it burning as a symbol for what I would call the eternal flame. And that would be a kind of a parallel to what we dedicate our soldiers to. Like the avant-garde has sort of become this military group sacrificing themselves for the cause of the intellect.

LYNN MATTESON: Is that the piece in relief work that's a series of candles in a grid that are set in a niche, that I saw in your show in Chicago?

JOHN BUCK: No. This is a print.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh, a print.

JOHN BUCK: It was a wood panel.

LYNN MATTESON: Okay.

JOHN BUCK: And this is—well, it's in the book.

LYNN MATTESON: Okay. The other thing that you seem to have done is sort of sexually neutralize these figures. There are no breasts, at least not until very recently that I can tell. And no genitals. Again, was that a—what's behind that particular transformation?

JOHN BUCK: There's a cat stuck—

LYNN MATTESON: He's outside the door.

LYNN MATTESON: I was asking you about, after a break to settle down one of the wild animals here, about how you went from a fully male figures to basically sexless figures as well.

JOHN BUCK: Well, in the beginning these figures that I was working with, which were these very flat cutout pieces that were sort of cartoon-like, very low relief, the surface of the front had some carving on it; most of it was done by sanding into the surface of the wood with a disc sander to create a kind of a subtle muscular kind of form. And then I did make male and female figures, depending upon the subject matter at that time.

LYNN MATTESON: What time would this be, in the seventies?

JOHN BUCK: Yes, this was the middle seventies, I guess.

LYNN MATTESON: Uh-huh.

JOHN BUCK: Early to middle. It was from the time—probably from about '73 up to '76, '77. The work was primarily just kind of flat, cutout work and had this low relief surface. Like I said, the figures were both male and female. The males, for the most part, had a penis. And the thing about the penis was it was added onto the surface rather than carved from the flat surface, so it actually protruded. There was—On occasion some of the viewers would play with these penises, and some actually would turn them upside down, and suddenly these penises were—they were erections. So that changed the whole nature of the piece. [Laughs] And then sometimes these penises would just get stolen. So over the years I ended up with inheriting a cottage industry of replacing penises by making new penises for those pieces which had been stolen. I didn't really want that particular business. So I just sort of started moving away from making male figures and then eventually was making either genderless figures or maybe more females.

And then at a certain point—I think it was probably about 1982—I acquired some thicker wood which made the figures slightly more in the round. And the figures became more three-dimensional. Not entirely, but they were not—they actually had a backside. Whereas the cutout figures, which were very cartoon-like, were unpainted and very mechanical on the backside. On the front the image would be a very clear kind of figurative form. But on the back it was all mechanics. So then I, because I had this thicker material, I started thinking about these figures more in the round. And it really led me away from that cartoon cutout look to a more animated, figurative kind of sculpture.

But I think your question has something to do with the fact that, you know, that these figures came

without heads. And, you know, I think what I was doing was moving into another kind of an intellectual presentation of ideas. And that these figures weren't headless. It was that the nature of abstraction could be embodied with these figures in a way that presented ideas in the context of the human condition. And I wasn't interested so much in the costuming of these figures. So I reduced the notion of clothing or that sort of thing to just a general figurative form, just ignored clothing. Because it also implied purity of—if you put a person in a gray flannel suit or if you put a person in a tutu or you put a person in the buckskin, you're going to make that figure appear to be part of a whole other story. And I just wanted these ideas to be presented to people in the context of their own experience: naked, free of any kind of imposed socio—society or whatever. Does that make sense?

LYNN MATTESON: Yes, it does. This business about the penises. You told a story last night which I think should be on the record, about the woman who—

JOHN BUCK: Well, yes. Because of this penis franchise that I've grown. [Mr. Matteson laughs.] I ended up being known for doing these pieces with penises. And I had a woman who actually contacted me several times over a period of at least a year or so really, really wanting one of my works. And, you know, I said certain things were available through dealers and so forth. But she really wanted a particular piece that would be made for her. And whatever the piece, whatever the subject, make sure that it included a penis. And so there it was. I mean I needed to make not only a penis, but I had to have a sculpture attached to it. [They laugh.] So I gave her as big a penis as I felt was appropriate for her needs, and she seemed satisfied. I've never heard a complaint from her again.

LYNN MATTESON: Good, good. Always like satisfied customers.

JOHN BUCK: I have to say it was the most anatomically correct penis that I ever made. [They laugh.]

LYNN MATTESON: Your symbols seem to—there's a repertory of symbols which repeat themselves over and over again. I'm thinking of the globe—just a few, a globe, a tree, fans. There are others which don't come to mind. These have specific meanings? Or do the meanings that are attached to them change from piece to piece?

JOHN BUCK: I think they do change from piece to piece. But I have a way of interpreting the tree, for instance: It is the source of the material that I'm working with. And the tree is also like a lineage. It's the idea about family and those kinds of associations. It's very rich in the sense that people can identify with it and kind of play with it in their own minds. You know I do like to think that these figures or these sculptures can be approached and interpreted by the viewer in ways that aren't necessarily just my take on it—or not just my perspective. Like the fan: It's about dodging and about hiding behind certain things. Like there are issues between segments of society where they hide one fact or another from each other. Like we're going through a political election right now. And you have people who have only been able to speak half-truths. They don't tell the truth about anything. Except it's all made up of words which are true. And then the globe, of course, is all about global issues, globe in the sense of man's burden; globe in the sense of the world as a whole.

And so those things are a part of our everyday dialog. It's part of what we all talk about it seems. I don't know anyone that doesn't know something about the world that's going on. Global communications, you know. Every day we're bombarded with this information. Every day I go to my studio, and I walk into my woodshop, and I start working and carving and making things, and all the stuff is like—is present with me. It's part of my mind, it's part of my experience. And I don't feel like I can completely ignore that. And so that does enter into my—even my printmaking or my sculpture

on one level or another. I have to say my printmaking really does reflect more of my political interests and my sort of social awareness than my sculpture. My sculpture tends to be more about dealing with—maybe a more spiritual kind of balance within myself.

LYNN MATTESON: I wanted to ask you about the process or if you would describe how would you go about making a sculpture as opposed to the woodprints, which we'll get to in a second. But as we mentioned earlier, you're very explicit about commentary in the woodprints and very allusional to in your sculpture. There's enigmas, a sense of ambiguity, a sense of mystery in the sculpture. How does that—I mean when you go into your studio, do you have the idea already in your mind which you're going to work on that day, if you're beginning a piece, what's going to happen to it?

JOHN BUCK: In sculpture there are times when I'm really inspired by some event. I was listening to the radio one day, and there was a story about the Ku Klux Klan having a resurgence on college campuses all across the country, all different places that you'd never expect to have that kind of racist stuff happening. After the sixties, you kind of thought, wow, this is all over with. You know we're free. We can move ahead now. Not so. So there was a realization in me that this was a battle that wasn't going to end with the sixties. This was something we were going to have to live with probably for a long time to come. And I did a piece about the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. It was made up of various images that, you know, in a Rube Goldberg kind of way created a large wooden assemblage that was a composition based on the Ku Klux Klan being drug out from underneath a sewer with burning crosses in the window, and a number of other elements that were all part of the structure, that couldn't stand without all these various elements of hate and responsibility, let's say.

And it really just happened. I made it because I felt like I had to. I didn't think I was going to change anything. But I had to change something in myself. I had to make this thing. And something similar occurred when we went to Israel. We stayed at the Mishkanot Sha'ananim, and we were across from the old temple from the walled city of Jerusalem. And the temple itself of Solomon. And every day we would go to the museum, and Debby was making a series of horses in the museum, and I was working on drawings and little paintings and so forth. And so I was just along for the ride. But after about four o'clock, we would take off and go to the Old City and walk around. So we had a lot of interaction with general people. This was like for about a month we were there.

And when we came back, I made this fairly complicated piece called *The Month of Sundays*. And it was about that stay and about this sort of precarious balance that existed at that time in Israel. And it takes into consideration the various factions that make up the society there. If you're in Jerusalem, if you're in the city, you find that there is a kind of, out of necessity, a way that people have learned to get along. Now, there is a faction today of terrorists and so forth that have undermined that. But at that point there was a kind of a balance. You know I found it fascinating. I looked at the work of young artists that were in Israel working at that time, and they were filled with a lot of political imagery, a lot of political issues that I was intimidated by because I felt like, well, this is stuff that if you do this, you're going to be insulting somebody; you don't want to deal with this kind of imagery. But somehow I was liberated by what I saw there. And I felt like I could approach it and that I could work with it. And so that started me on the more political kinds of imagery that I've worked with since.

LYNN MATTESON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOHN BUCK: So it does happen in the sculpture.

LYNN MATTESON: It does happen in the sculpture.

JOHN BUCK: It does happen in the sculpture, but it isn't as fluid as it is in the printmaking.

LYNN MATTESON: And is it deliberately—I mean that separation between the overt connection in the woodprints and the sort of enigmatic version in the sculptures? That's a deliberate thing on your part. In, other words, in the woodprints, are you really becoming more public in what you think; as opposed in the sculptures; it's really a kind of almost a rebus of associated symbols?

JOHN BUCK: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, first off I must be a real traditionalist in the sense that I see printmaking as a form that has always dealt with more public kinds of communication. It was accessible to the general public in the same sense as Hogarth [William Hogarth] and Gillray [James Gillray] and these characters, who were from England, who used it as a populist way of creating images for everyone. And I think printmaking is like that. You make more than one of each, and they proliferate. The image becomes seen by more people. And because of that, it's something I think I want to talk to more people about. Whereas a sculpture is more contemplative. And you want people to interact with it but maybe in a more quiet kind of context.

LYNN MATTESON: So it's almost a question of public versus private.

JOHN BUCK: Yes, I guess so. I guess so. There is initially in the prints, usually a central image which sort of becomes metaphorical and doesn't necessarily describe the turmoil that's sort of within the background.

LYNN MATTESON: Right. Yes. It's almost as if there's an actor doing a soliloquy. Well, that's true of your sculptures, too, but there's a very forward figure, and then in the background it's as if the canvas is a kind of chorus commentary of what's going on.

JOHN BUCK: Mm-hmm.

LYNN MATTESON: I wanted to talk to you about the material of wood. You started with what kind of wood? What was your favorite wood at the beginning? And then you discovered this unpronounceable wood you'll have to just pronounce for me later on which seems to be more supple and more manageable for you. But what were the first woods that you worked with?

JOHN BUCK: Well, this is interesting. When I was a student in Kansas City, I was in a printmaking class. I started out thinking I was going to be a painter, like as a sophomore. And so I took a painting class and a printmaking class. And the printmaker gave me a piece of end grain cherry. And he wanted me to make a woodcut. And it was the toughest, hardest, nastiest thing. And I tried to carve it, and I was just like wow! This is impossible. So I quit printmaking, and I quit painting. [Laughs] And I went to sculpture, which seemed like a whole lot easier. But also because—and this is a key to probably everything that I do. When I was in painting, I was really just trying to draw pictures or make paintings of images or things that I might make as a piece of sculpture. Assemblages, so to speak. I was moving shapes around on the canvas and making compositions that would have been logical sculptures. But I had to paint them, and it was like whoa! Once removed. And so then I decided I would make sculpture.

And in sculpture I worked with steel and cast metal and clay and all these things. I still didn't run into anything that was as difficult as that piece of cherry. And so then after I left undergraduate school and went on to graduate school, I got into a more direct assemblages, natural materials, various found things. And didn't actually manipulate the materials in the same way that you would with steel or clay or even wood. It wasn't until after I'd gotten out of graduate school and was in England, that I started actually cutting shapes out of wood. And that was actually pine, and it was very

accessible. It cost about 20 cents a board foot to buy a nice piece of pine. If you went to the lumber yard, you could just buy several boards, take it home, get out a saber saw, and cut out the most basic kinds of shapes. You could shape it and carve it and paint it. It was very, very direct, but nothing much more resistant than, you know, almost like cardboard because pine didn't really—I mean it's not a hardwood.

But over the years I've sort of looked around for more—maybe more workable material. The pine would crack or splinter. It was kind of fragile. And I tried poplar, and I tried basswood and redwood and, you know, various materials. I was never really looking for a wood that had a lot of character to it like oak has a wonderful, beautiful grain. Walnut has a beautiful dark color. It wasn't those characteristics of wood that I was interested in. What I was interested in was finding a material that was as fluid as working on a piece of paper, drawing an image on a paper, and arriving at a conclusion that was, you know, acceptable. And so working with a soft wood like basswood or pine was really the avenue for me. And eventually a friend of mine told me about a place down the road that carved decorative decoys, and that they had some wood that they were trying to get rid of.

So I went down, and it was a wood called jelutong; it comes from Malaysia. It's a soft wood that was used by industry in pattern-making. I've been told that it was used for—the tree itself produced a latex that they used to make—that was called chicle that is used for making gum. For the most part it's used in either the upholstered furniture industry or crown molding in houses or architectural features where it's painted. And so you don't really see the wood. It machines beautifully. It carves easily. It's strong enough to hold itself up on almost any scale. For me it's the perfect material.

LYNN MATTESON: It accepts color very well? It accepts paint?

JOHN BUCK: Oh, it's yes. It's like a blotter. You can put any base color on it. And from that point on it just gets better. And also because I carve these things in my sculpture, I can create a wooden form that can be molded and cast in bronze. Or it can be burnt out directly in a kind of lost-wood process.

LYNN MATTESON: Mm-hmm.

JOHN BUCK: Similar to what Debby does with her sticks. I can take a carved form, invest it directly, burn it out, and cast that. So, you know, it's pretty spontaneous and that part of the woodworking that I really like the best.

LYNN MATTESON: In your large relief works like the one on the wall across the way, which is deeply inset niches, there is this contrast between what different symbol is in the niche and the surface of the wood, this kind of wonderful sort of wavy chisely kind of surface. I'm curious about the surface. It's very easy to see how that wood is really quite an expressive force for the work as a whole. Are you trying to imitate or realize the effect of a kind of bronze thing, too? Or is it the wood comes before the bronze? Because you do bronze castings as well as your other effect. Less bronze than you do wood, but you do do bronze.

JOHN BUCK: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

LYNN MATTESON: And when you do bronze, do you try to affect the surface of the wood as much?

JOHN BUCK: This is like which came first?

LYNN MATTESON: Yes. Right. Exactly.

JOHN BUCK: Well, you know, you're talking about a flat panel with these niches with objects that are setting into them. I've never cast one of those in bronze. With the figures, there's a certain kind of texture that can become interesting. But, you know, the carving marks and so forth are part of the process.

LYNN MATTESON: You don't try to hide that.

JOHN BUCK: Hmmm?

LYNN MATTESON: You don't try to hide that.

JOHN BUCK: No, I don't try to hide it. I mean I like the fact that they are of wood, and that they can be translated into bronze directly. I've very seldom tried to enhance that. But I have done some sculptures where I used sandblasting and that kind of thing to bring out the grain of the wood. And then I found that in fact the jelutong didn't have enough of a grain to be able to enhance anything. It just turned to mush. And so then I actually tried carving some pieces with—made out of sugar pine. And when they were sandblasted, their hard and soft grain, they were eroded in such a way that you really saw the pattern in the wood. And that was kind of a desirable effect. I haven't really left that, but I haven't taken it very far. I'm still working with just the basic jelutong. And, you know, I think it's something I would reserve more for the public works or something like that, commissions or something. But the panels, you know, they're done by laminating, edge-joined pieces of wood together to make up a large sheet of wood.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh, I didn't know that. It looked like it was one block.

JOHN BUCK: No, that's a strip of wood that's about two and a half inches wide by three eighths of an inch thick.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh!

JOHN BUCK: And then that's glued together on edge until you get like a six-by-six sheet of wood. And then that is carved to create that kind of ripple surface. And then I cut holes into it to correspond to the various things I'm putting into it. And that is like a way of creating a composition that's all very mechanical. I think the reason I'm working this way, the way the panels are evolving, comes from the woodblocks. The fact that in order to make an image in the woodblock, I have to cut out a shape on the band saw. And then set it on the woodblock, trace around it, cut it out, and inlay it into the surface in order to differentiate the various areas of color. So if I want a red tree in the center of a black and white background, I have to actually make that tree out of a separate piece of wood, all its various limbs and so forth. And then that's laid on the surface of the block, traced around it, and then that's cut out and the tree is then inlaid into it. And yet it can be lifted out and inked separately.

LYNN MATTESON: Mm-hmm.

JOHN BUCK: So that when the whole piece is printed, it's printed together at once: the black and the red and whatever other colors may be in the print are inked up on the various pieces of wood, assembled, the paper's laid over the top of it, and then it's spooned from the backside. Or using a baren, they press on the surface of the paper to attach the ink from the block to the paper. Now, when I make a block, I'm drawing, but it's an actual very physical activity. And it forces to me work in a way that is very different from just drawing on a piece of paper with a pencil or an ink pen. I learned early on in graduate school that I have a certain kind of facility—I had a lot of finesse or at

least I had the potential for having a lot of finesse. And at a certain point, for some reason, I just felt that this was probably the worst of my characteristics as an artist. That I would eventually become so slick at doing what I did, that I would be seduced by it to the point where I would only draw those things that I felt good about. And so I started moving away from using those kinds of materials and trying to work with things that had a certain amount of resistance to me.

So the woodworking, even though I'm looking for something very spontaneous and direct with the wood, if you were to hold up one of my carvings next a nice early German example of fine woodworking, you would know that I was a total hack. And I think that when you asked me about the connection between my work and folk art, there is a connection there because I think wood is something that is probably—it's an antiquated choice of materials. It's not something that contemporary artists seem to be drawn to because there are so many other materials that can probably work better. Jeff Koons can have what is it? A C&C machine carve out something for him, and they wouldn't use wood. They'd use a polystyrene or something synthetic. And it can all be made up in some either cast chrome or who knows what kind of space-age materials. But for me it's like the craft of painting is something that you can't, you know, you can't actually slather paint on a canvas with a spray can. You've got to get up there with the brush and paint it. It has a certain look, and it's a certain character that I'm drawn to. At least that's where I'm drawn to the woodworking is that I have to see it and realize it in those materials, using my own hands, to make the thing. It's a direct process for me. To just turn it over to other people, it just takes it away from me.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes, you can't—

JOHN BUCK: It's not my work anymore.

LYNN MATTESON: You can't have fabricators.

JOHN BUCK: Well, as a matter of fact I do have a studio assistant who's very helpful. He helps me do everything. He helps me carve the figures.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh!

JOHN BUCK: He helps me make everything.

LYNN MATTESON: Really!

JOHN BUCK: I couldn't produce the amount of work that I do unless I had somebody helping me.

LYNN MATTESON: I see.

JOHN BUCK: And then the same is true about my rubbings. My rubbings are, for the most part, produced by my secretary. She comes in, and she deals with the office and that sort of thing. And when she has time, she works on the rubbings.

LYNN MATTESON: This is Dawn?

JOHN BUCK: This is Dawn. And she's really good about it. She has that kind of energy that she can put to it. I mean I have to work with her until we reach a conclusion on how I want it to look. So at that point it's my work. But then the labor has to be hers. The same is true with my prints. I don't print those prints.

LYNN MATTESON: Right.

JOHN BUCK: I make the blocks, and the blocks are printed by a master printer, Bud Sharp, in Colorado. If I had to make those prints, then I wouldn't be able to make the rubbings, I wouldn't be able to do the sculpture, the panels [laughs] otherwise.

LYNN MATTESON: To get back a little bit to the symbols. Now I noticed in your studio you have bits and pieces of this and that that you've carved. And they're scattered about on the shelves of your, well, various cases there. And when you're working on a piece, do you—and is it a combination of both—do you make a particular symbol for the sculpture you're working on, or do you have something on the shelf that you look over there and you say, well, I think that'll work?

JOHN BUCK: [Laughs] You bet. I do that all the time. But that isn't my way of working. I save the stuff that's—What you see in my studio are pieces which are generally parts that I've made for something else that didn't work for one reason or another. If they were either too heavy or too fragile or whatever. Or maybe I just cut too far on one part of it, and it changed the shape too much, and I couldn't use it. So then I would probably make another one that did work. But I wouldn't throw that first one away because, one, it's a learned lesson. I made this thing. And I maybe figured out how to make it. So I don't want to lose that information. And I keep it around, oh, I guess you could say, for inspiration. But also, you know, if it does work for me in some other piece, I'll use it.

LYNN MATTESON: Now, one of the things which was a total surprise to me, visiting your studio yesterday, was the kinetic work that you've done, which is something which—has that been in some of our gallery shows? Or is that just kept here?

JOHN BUCK: I have actually exhibited my mechanical pieces in three different venues: First one was at Greg Kucera Gallery in Seattle. The second time was at the Mago Gallery in Palm Springs. And then the last time was in Oregon at the Schneider Museum [of Art] in Ashland. And these pieces are made up of various parts that have to be assembled, and they have electric motors on them. And they drive pulleys and leather belts which propel all these various things to move around generally in little circles or something like that. I think that my inspiration for working with these kinds of basic mechanical pieces was my father was involved in an organization called the Izaak Walton League, which was an outdoorsman's club dedicated to fishing and hunting in the Midwest.

LYNN MATTESON: That's the author of *The Complete Angler*?

JOHN BUCK: Right. Izaak Walton himself. They had a fundraising event every spring called the Izaak Walton Field Day. And you'd go out, and they'd have a fishing derby, and they had a slingshot shooting range that my father was in charge of. And it was kind of a boring little thing with a target and you'd shoot it with a ball bearing. So he decided to make this contraption of all these moving targets. And it was made up of old farm equipment that he kind of robbed one little part off of another. And they had clay skeet birds on it for shooting at. It was—once he turned it on, it was just such a contraption, it was fun to watch. But what happened was then these people would get up, and they'd shoot at it with slingshots. And, you know, I don't suppose it really made much of an impact on me later on until I met Wiley, and he was so involved in these slingshots. And I saw these slingshots, and I thought, hell, I remember slingshots. When I was a kid we had this thing my dad made, you know. And it seemed like that kind of what art was for art critics. There's this thing you could shoot [laughs] a slingshot at.

LYNN MATTESON: Maybe that's the origin of the bull's eye in Jasper Johns.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. [They laugh.] The critics. And so, I don't know, that was something that I kept in mind. And I actually did a piece while I was in graduate school called *Whammo!*. And it had a canvas

which was stretched tight, and it had rocks embedded in it, all across the surface of it. And then one turkey feather kind of painted on it in a most realistic way, kind of floating—as though it were floating on the canvas.

LYNN MATTESON: One of the things that has intrigued me about your work is not a device but a way of working which is very like the surrealists. And that is—and again here I'm talking mainly about your sculptures and your panels—where things are done with exquisite realism and detail. And the craftsmanship is absolutely superb. And you have this presentation of very palatable—not palatable, but—an object, crisply presented before you. But the association with other objects is enigmatic. So there's that conflict between the bold presentation of symbols, crisply and accurately rendered, but mysteriously presented at the same time in association with one another.

JOHN BUCK: That is what Surrealism is, I guess.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes. That juxtaposition between the real and then the creation of this sort of super real. So my question is was Surrealism really a part of your vocabulary?

JOHN BUCK: Oh, absolutely.

LYNN MATTESON: We've talked about Magritte, but there must be others.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. Oh, wow, when I was a little kid, my brother was interested in—when he first went to college, he came back, and he had all these pictures that he'd picked up of Salvador Dali's paintings. Ah! I loved that stuff. It was so, on one level so realistic, and another level so strange. And so that's something that I've always been interested in. I look at it, I read about it all the time. And I try to understand it as best I can. I mean I'm not sure I still understand where these guys were really coming from. But I love the irony that comes out of some of those juxtapositions, as you say, you know. I mean sometimes they seem really dry on one level, and then there's wow! On another level, say, they're sensual kind of strange things. And then sometimes the objects are so poorly crafted, sometimes they're horrible. And yet you suddenly realize they're pointing you in another way of seeing. And you suddenly start to see stuff in a way that that's quite ironic. I mean I think Debby does that with her materials quite often, where she picks up the most crude kinds of sticks and assembles them in a way that becomes very elegant. And, you know, I think that—Well, if we want to make a comparison between Debby and I, she finds the sticks that she works with. And I have to make the things that I find. And so I try to make the things as well as I can within reason.

LYNN MATTESON: Talking about comparing the two of you, you've collaborated with her on one occasion, at least one I know of, which is in the Montana collection of Billings, is it? The Yellowstone —

JOHN BUCK: Yes, yes.

LYNN MATTESON: Is that the only time the two of you have collaborated on a piece?

JOHN BUCK: Well, no, I would say that we collaborate a lot, where we talk about each other's work to each other from time to time, and that's our collaboration.

LYNN MATTESON: I see.

JOHN BUCK: In these days. And then most certainly Wilder and Hunter, our boys, are our collaboration. But that piece actually came up because of when we were graduate students, we were involved in an exhibition that was put together by Wiley's seminar, where we would—we

locked ourselves in the art gallery in the university building, and it was called the “24-Hour Show.” And whatever transpired within those 24 hours would be exhibited. And so everybody came in with some kind of an activity that they were going to do or some kind of a plan. And it sort of evolved, you know. It was like a collaboration among all of us. Debby and I kind of went back to that many times, and we’d talk about what happened. What we had thought we were going to do and what we ended up doing. And then it seemed as though every time we would go on a trip or we’d go to a new place, that we would be inspired to do something different than what we would do if we’d stayed in our own studio.

One of those things, of course, was when Debby went to Israel and did the horses there. And I worked on paintings and so forth. Somehow because of the experience of being in a new place, our work changed. So they wanted to do an exhibition of her work, I think it was—you’ll have to forgive me if I can’t remember the name of this town; it was something like Cincinnati. There was an arts center, and we were supposed to go there and exhibit a piece or build a piece as a collaboration. And right about that time Debby was pregnant with Wilder. And it kind of completely put the kibosh on our traveling and us being able to go there and actually work. So we did this piece together in my studio. And we stretched a very large canvas across the wall, and we just sort of worked on it together. We added things to it. We painted on it. She ended up making a horse, standing a horse up in front of it. I ended up making a piece of sculpture and putting that in front of it. And we made this big ball, and we covered it with scrap metal. [Laughs] It was a wooden ball of scrap metal. And a crazy composition. And you know it was like between the two of us we kind of fine-tuned this thing in a kind of democratic way. And that was as close as we could come to an actual collaboration. Because it was formalized by the idea that we were making this for a show that somehow it wouldn’t be the way I’d want to work. And I think when she’s working and I come in and I kind of casually suggest throwing another stick on a tail or something like that, I don’t think it works for her either. [They laugh.]

LYNN MATTESON: Yes. I want to get to the prints finally. You, as you related, did a lot of graphics as an undergraduate and so on. Oh, something that came to me last night after all this. The school in Kansas, was that at all associated with the Hallmark card people? No?

JOHN BUCK: You know the Hallmark people, I think, are very supportive of the Art Institute, but they’re not—

LYNN MATTESON: It’s not a feeder kind of thing.

JOHN BUCK: No.

LYNN MATTESON: I was just curious about that.

JOHN BUCK: Now it might be within the graphic design department. Because I think a number of their students have ended up working at Hallmark.

LYNN MATTESON: I see. Okay. Well, you had this background as an undergraduate working in graphics.

JOHN BUCK: Not in undergraduate school.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh, I thought it was.

JOHN BUCK: I worked primarily in sculpture.

LYNN MATTESON: Okay.

JOHN BUCK: I really, like I said, I started out in painting, and I quit. Really after one semester I was all done. I didn't want to go on—

LYNN MATTESON: Okay. So you took up printing and graphic printing about when?

JOHN BUCK: I didn't do any woodblock printing—

LYNN MATTESON: 'Til 1980?

JOHN BUCK: 'Til 1980, 1981.

LYNN MATTESON: And that was your first. So it's sort of [inaudible] first woodblock print.

JOHN BUCK: My first print was done while we were visiting artists in Alaska, at the Alaskan Center for the Arts.

LYNN MATTESON: It's a very simple, was it two? Black and white, very simple.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. And really I hadn't done a print before that of any consequence. And when I say that we like to go to a new place and be inspired to do something different from traveling, we were on this visiting artists gig, and we're both giving talks. And they asked me if there was anything I'd like to do while I was there. And I said, well, I don't know. And they said, Would you like to do a woodblock, a print? And I said, Sure, I could do a woodblock print. And I made the print there, and it was really kind of one of the first things.

LYNN MATTESON: And then it became increasingly complicated,

JOHN BUCK: Much more complicated.

LYNN MATTESON: Now can you describe—you started working with several colors, four colors, at one time maybe on a block. And now you're up to what?

JOHN BUCK: I started working with what?

LYNN MATTESON: Just about four color blocks, very simple.

JOHN BUCK: Oh, red, white, and black. That was as far as I could go. And I can credit the added color to Bud Shark who kept agitating for something more in my work. And really because I work with a person who's capable of doing this so well, at least in terms of inking and printing, that I wouldn't have been able to do it without him. You know if there's a collaboration going on, that's definitely the one.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes. Not unlike how those woodblocks were done in Japan; where you had the colorer and the printer and the whole—

JOHN BUCK: But now when I make a block, I'm thinking in a much more complex way about how the colors are going to go together, and how this is going to be printed, and, you know, what can be done and what can't be done. Such that I started out not knowing what was possible. And then I got to the point where I was trying to do things that weren't possible. And now I've sort of compromised that. And I know when I try to approach some of these things what I can and can't do.

LYNN MATTESON: And it's interesting that it's in this really intractable medium, by which I mean difficult—As you were explaining, you do the tracing of the wood and so on and so forth. Then you cut the block, and then it has to be inked. There are many steps involved. But it's interesting that it's where you sort of—in contrast to your sculpture where there are big blocks of paint of one color; your whole figure is a blue or it's all red or it's all whatever, blond with the wood—there's a lack of monochromatism in your work. It's become almost painterly in the sense that you're becoming much more subtle with your colors.

JOHN BUCK: The prints?

LYNN MATTESON: Yes.

JOHN BUCK: Yes.

LYNN MATTESON: So you're discovering—it seems to me that you're becoming much more alert to the nuance of color or you like to play with it more in your prints more than your sculpture.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. Except that I'd say that, you know, with the sculptures, you have a freestanding object, and there is this thing which exists within a space around it. We're back to those raindrops.

LYNN MATTESON: Mm-hmm.

JOHN BUCK: But the panels I'm putting shapes inside of shapes. And that's more about painting, and it's more about the possibility of the different color combinations. I guess I think maybe I haven't resolved this yet. But this is the process that I'm going through now in terms of how I'm going to make this thing grow into something else. And the panels, I think, are the key to that. And that's the way I'll pursue it. It won't be suddenly I'll start painting my figures with red arms and blue legs and that kind of thing. What'll happen is the colors will start to happen in the panels more.

LYNN MATTESON: I see. Okay. That's interesting. I notice that there's some connection between the prints and the sculpture in that some are given the same name. But they're not quite the same. So you have something like *Crossroads* as a print, but the sculpture *Crossroads* is different.

JOHN BUCK: Mm-hmm.

LYNN MATTESON: And *East West*, *Between the Wars*, *Basket*, *Cherry Blossom Time*. Those are just ones that I selected out of your book.

JOHN BUCK: Well—

LYNN MATTESON: Why do you go back to them and—

JOHN BUCK: I have done. There is not a clear connection between a lot of the things that I've done for you. It's very clear to me because there actually exists a piece of sculpture called *Cherry Blossom Time*. And it was a piece that was done about my trip to Washington, DC, to the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial. I saw the memorial, I saw the Washington Monument, and I saw the cherry blossoms. And I saw at the end of a configuration of the memorial there was a protest group of the American POW's from Vietnam, who had created a mockup of the tiger cage, which was a way they used for torturing American captives. And on the other end of this configuration was the Washington Monument, was up in the distance. So I had this experience where there was this composition in my own mind of these elements that represented Washington, DC, and the history and the present. And there were these people there that were protesting. And there were people

there that were like worshipping. It goes back to maybe my exposure to the Western Wall, the old Temple. That there was some sort of occupation.

So what I really connected with was the fact that the monument was about war, it was about death, it was about mourning. At the same time there were these cherry blossoms, and cherry blossoms were about rebirth. And the cherry trees had been given to Washington, DC, by the Japanese which were, you know, a gift of respect and peace. And after the Second World War, after we decimated Japan, people went to Washington, DC; they made cuttings of these cherry trees and sent cuttings back to Japan, to kind of reestablish the cherry blossoms as a gesture of goodwill. And so all that considered, I felt that the most significant monument in Washington, DC, was not these grandiose domed edifices, but was really the cherry trees and the cherry blossoms which were about life and rebirth and all of that kind of stuff. So I did a figure that incorporated all these various elements. And I also did a print about that same thing with a lot of those elements drawn into the background. And it was like the same kind of inspiration that I had about *A Month of Sundays* and about the *Eclipse*. It was about making the connections between my own life experience and the things that are important to all people.

LYNN MATTESON: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I see.

JOHN BUCK: There's a lot more of those in my book. I can show you—

LYNN MATTESON: A lot more of those—?

JOHN BUCK: The sculptures, the prints. I mean there's crossover almost—I'd say better than 50 percent.

LYNN MATTESON: So it's a constant dialog in your work, yes.

JOHN BUCK: Mm-hmm.

LYNN MATTESON: So, yes, one work does not exhaust whatever you're dealing with in any particular setting. Can you think of doing a third version of, say, *Cherry Blossom Time*?

JOHN BUCK: Yes, as a matter of fact. I did one called *Three Generations*.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh, oh.

JOHN BUCK: Which is a very, very good tequila. And when I was—it was funny. I mean I was working on a commission for the Principal Financial Group in Des Moines. And they wanted me to do something for their foyer. They were really giving me the opportunity of a lifetime, as far as I was concerned. And it came about primarily because I was born and raised in Iowa. And they were looking for someone with a connection to having—to being an Iowan—to do something for their headquarters in Des Moines. And so, Well, sure I would love to do this. I'd never done a big commission. And they were willing to pay me whatever. And so I worked on it, and I had been just doing that cherry blossom sculpture. And they came out and were looking at what I was proposing, and they kept questioning me about why I was suggesting doing this. And I said, "Well, you know, I've really got this thing going on in my head right now, and it's really hard for me to think about doing anything else. But," I said, "I don't think it's appropriate for your headquarters." And they said, "Well, what is it?" And I showed them the sculpture, and I talked about it. And they said, "Well, this is really what we would like." And I said, "Well, are you kidding?" And they said, "No." They said, "Why don't you just go right ahead and do this piece?"

So I made a painting which was, let's see, I think the painting was, the canvas was, eight or ten feet high and about 25 feet wide. And there were three figures cast in bronze standing in front of it. And it was all painted in a very textural kind of way in the background. It was all black like the wall. Then these figures were very dark and kind of blue and green and that kind of bronze look. And it was all connected to the same composition as the *Cherry Blossom Time* sculpture.

LYNN MATTESON: So there is two versions up to the third generation.

JOHN BUCK: The third generation. A guy I knew in high school called me up—or he didn't call me up; but he wrote a letter. And I hadn't seen him for years. And said he'd been in Des Moines and was in the foyer talking to somebody that was kind of a docent. And they were explaining their collection, which was quite extensive. And they were talking to him about my piece and told him that I had been to Vietnam [laughs], which is not true. I was never in the military. And that, you know, I'd done this piece about my trauma from being in Vietnam. So he was writing me a letter questioning me about my integrity.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh?!

JOHN BUCK: And this was like one of those things about passing it on.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes.

JOHN BUCK: Where this next person does another version of the story.

LYNN MATTESON: Exactly, exactly.

JOHN BUCK: So on top of the fact that this is called *Third Generation/Fourth Generation*, it's coming back to me in a very negative way.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN BUCK: So you have to be careful about that sort of thing.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes. There's a hiatus while we eject a cat. John, talking about scale, both your sculptures have gotten larger—I've seen some where they're really quite tall—what's the tallest work you have?

JOHN BUCK: Oh, well, I think, you know, scale is something all sculptors—they want to deal with it. They want to have everything as big as they can because the context that things go into changes them so dramatically. Put a piece of sculpture outdoors, it diminishes it by the world. Then if you put it indoors, of course, there's limits. I've always aspired to making things that were sort of monumental, I suppose. And not because I think I want to overwhelm the audience. But because I just want to be able to see it on another scale. I don't know. It's an impulse maybe that goes back to Kansas City where Dale Eldred always wanted us to challenge the environment.

LYNN MATTESON: How about—the woodprints are large, too, now.

JOHN BUCK: Well, that's really kind of human-sized. The paper that I use has always been approximately what they call tatami size, which is the largest sheets of paper that are generally made by hand, are that size, which is about three foot by six foot. And that makes for a very good

scale for the figure. It just fits into that space perfectly. So I've used that a lot. Originally I was using a paper called Zuzuki. And there was a family that produced that paper, but they no longer are alive. And so that paper doesn't exist anymore. And, yes, so I use rolled paper, mulberry paper, that is pretty accessible. But it's machine made, and it doesn't have quite the same quality that the old handmade paper did.

LYNN MATTESON: In your most recent work, I'm thinking of the panel reliefs, new symbols are cropping up. I mean I'm sure they're used symbols all the time. But there's a Taj Mahal, there's a Guggenheim, there's all manner of things. A pocketknife. Again, are these specific to something? Or is there—

JOHN BUCK: I think that in part it has to do with the fact that I love to go walk around in junk stores, antique malls, etcetera.

LYNN MATTESON: Which we've been doing. [They laugh.]

JOHN BUCK: And there are some wonderful, ironic kinds of associations that you can make by whatever you find in the context of something else. And dealers always put their stuff out in weird heaps. And sometimes you can find poetry in these piles of stuff. It isn't that I'm trying to reproduce that. It's just that I've started to see things like I think people should see the symbols in their own lives that they are existing with. Because when you get up in the morning, what is the first thing you see? And what is the next thing you deal with? And what combination of things do you see out the window of your car when you're driving to work? Are you paying attention to what's being presented to you as probably your own fate and your own poetry and your own life?

LYNN MATTESON: Mm-hmm.

JOHN BUCK: That's an experience that everybody has on their own. And I'm trying to present objects together in ways that will have—maybe give people the opportunity to pick out and think about what's relevant to them.

LYNN MATTESON: I noticed you did some work in Pilchuck [Glass School], the glass.

JOHN BUCK: Right.

LYNN MATTESON: And what did you do there?

JOHN BUCK: Well, this is another epiphany.

LYNN MATTESON: Okay. [They laugh.] I'm glad I asked the question.

JOHN BUCK: You know we had two little kids at the time. And we were invited by some people who were sponsors of the Pilchuck School to apply to the school to be visiting artists. And this was a casual kind of situation where we first met these people. And they said they had a lot of different rules, and one was no kids. And we said, "Well, we're not going there unless we could have our kids with us." And they said, "Oh, well, we can probably arrange that." And once again, this is that situation coming up where, wow, maybe if we did this, we might experience something new and it would encourage us to do something different in our work. So one thing led to another, and we were able to take our kids there. And they said we have one place where a resident can stay that has actual two bedrooms and a kitchen and it'd be livable for children. And so when we got there, the gaffers, the people who actually do the heavy lifting in the glass world, had been staying in this house three or four of them, and they hadn't cleaned it up when they left. And we arrived, and it

was like, wow! This place was a real mess, you know. So Debby was pretty mortified that we had to stay in this filthy place. We ended up not staying in it. But we walked into this little house, and on the kitchen sink somebody had left next to the sink on the counter a potato that was like completely sprouted, and it was rotting away. You know I don't know whether it was purposeful or what. But I looked at that thing, and I was just—You know this is the height of garbage.

Then the only thing that I had ever done with glass was an image of a jar with fireflies in it. So I started thinking about that glass jar even before I had come. And I actually cast a bronze tool that I thought could be used for glass to give it the threaded lip of a glass jar. That never worked. But in the process of making this glass jar, I started thinking about the one time I ever saw something that made a lot of sense was in the Mission District in San Francisco; somebody had put a kind of a wrapping paper—not Christmas wrapping paper, but a decorative wrapping paper—in the front window of a commercial space, which was being lived in at this point. And they had in that space that was to present, I suppose, hardware or something, a beautiful, big glass jar with a potato growing in it. When I saw this potato, and I was thinking about this glass jar, this thing came to my mind about what a perfect object that is to put in the window, a perfect sculpture. And voila! I spent the whole time making this glass jar. I made Idaho potatoes, sweet potatoes, avocados, carrots, ginger, whatever you could plant in a jar like that. And I thought it was very successful conceptually.

The quality of those first few jars wasn't really there. But I've done some since then that were better. And then of course since I've finished that particular project, I've done other jars. I put wood carvings in. I've done different kinds of glass things. Glass is hard for me because I can do it when I'm at Pilchuck, but I don't work that well in Pilchuck because it's noisy, and I'm deaf, and it's just hard to be there. But I can make wooden things that go inside of the jars. And I've completed a number of those, and I'm still working on them. And then I was invited back for the third time to Pilchuck two years ago now. And I started a series of televisions, television screens, that function in the same way as the jars except their presentation is much more frontal. You can put things in from the back and create scenes or whatever you want to do.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh!

JOHN BUCK: Those would be woodcarvings in there as well. But I haven't gotten that far because this is just one more thing that I'm trying to do.

LYNN MATTESON: Have you ever seen that sculpture or assemblage artist Arman? He did things. He stuffed things in jars, one of the things.

JOHN BUCK: You know Jimmy Suzuki [James Suzuki] did that, too. Because there's a book on Jimmy Suzuki's jars. I think the approach is a little different than me. But, you know, it isn't uncommon, I guess.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes, it's fascinating that should come up.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. I think it's sort of like encapsulating something, you know; it's like a storage jar.

LYNN MATTESON: Looking now as an artist here in Montana, and you travel a bit around the country, Hawaii, going to your other place, and I notice even here in your house, you have a lot of art books, a lot of magazines and so on. So you do keep up with the current art scene. We were talking about Jeff Koons last night a little bit. [They laugh.] But what is your take on the current art scene?

JOHN BUCK: Oh, I don't know. I mean there are certain things that I find fascinating. You know I just

read an article in *Time* magazine on Damien Hirst. And it's always fascinating. I don't think things get written that complimentary about most contemporary art. Whenever you read it in a publication like *Time*, it's like it's out there for the entertainment of the general public to prove once again artists are goofy and doing goofy things. But I think that the art scene is still—if it's not New York, it's LA. Or if it's not that, it's European or something like that. Those are the places where I think you have to be. You have to participate in the world in order to be considered by that art world, and I'm not. I feel like there's an awful lot of information that I don't get by not living there. And there's a lot of information I have yet to absorb in terms of what's available to me just in my own little humble library, you know. I have books on the surrealists, I have books on a lot of different artists. And I read about them—not constantly, but I read about them. And I look at their work. And I try to understand it as best I can. And I try to educate myself so that my perspective won't stay the same. That I'll be constantly learning something new and doing something new. But I can never be a New York artist living out here in Montana. But at the same time I don't really think of myself as a cowboy artist in Montana. I'm whatever I am up here. I don't define myself by the fact that I live in Montana, anymore than I dress the part.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes, yes. What kind of reading do you do? What is your—

JOHN BUCK: Oh, gee, I don't read enough. Debby's a great reader. She throws books in my lap constantly. If I get through a few of them, I'm lucky. But I don't read enough. I read a lot of periodicals, and I read things of that nature. But I'm not a great scholar.

LYNN MATTESON: Now looking at yourself, we were talking about you and the wider world. Do you find yourself or do you situate yourself or do you conceive yourself as some kind of an American tradition? Is there something about your art that can only be understood as being American?

JOHN BUCK: Well, I mean I think I'm inspired by folk art. We talked about that. But I'm also inspired by somebody like H.C. Westermann, you know, who was a great woodworker; I'm connected to that material. I'm connected to the music that people listen to. I listen to music constantly.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh, I didn't know that.

JOHN BUCK: All kinds of music. I listen to a lot of rock and roll, blues, jazz, whatever's on the radio. It's kind of background for me for a deaf guy working with a lot of noisy equipment. So it's not a casual thing. It's just there. I don't get to relax and listen. It's just the noise in the background. But I'm constantly hearing it. And I think that that's like kind of a common ground for a lot of people about a lot of things. You know my parents used to listen to classical music all the time, and I grew up listening to classical music because it was the sound of our house. So that's part of who I am, but it's not a real conscious thing. What am I inspired by in terms of being an American artist? I guess the fact that I can make these prints, you know. Think about all those guys that the Nazis persecuted. Think about Joe McCarthy [Joseph McCarthy] doing the same thing in this country. And then you think about today and what's going to be happening next, and we wonder. I don't know. I don't know where I belong in all of that.

LYNN MATTESON: Is there a kind of independent streak you might have?

JOHN BUCK: Well, you know, I would hope that I'm independent, but not in some heroic sense.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes.

JOHN BUCK: I mean I would hope that I'm independent enough to be able to make decisions for

myself and go by it. I don't feel persecuted in the sense that I can't. I don't know. Yes, I guess I'm kind of like—I feel like if you were ever to ask me about my work, I would have to tell you I haven't done it yet, you know. You know the work that I'm going to do is the thing that I'm most interested in.

LYNN MATTESON: Right.

JOHN BUCK: Things that I've done I've been inspired by, influenced by, heaped up by, and are all over the place to look at. But I haven't done the thing that I'm most excited about. And I'm not sure what that is, you know. And I must be working towards it. You know I think it might be made out of wood. It's probably going to be really good looking. And you know.

LYNN MATTESON: And well crafted.

JOHN BUCK: Oh, well crafted, yes, but not to a fault.

LYNN MATTESON: That's right. Right.

JOHN BUCK: Not to a fault. [Laughs]

LYNN MATTESON: Well, you know that's something also that's quite American; the distress of high finishing some ways. There's a counterculture to that of maybe the Southern California finish fetish was called.

JOHN BUCK: Oh, yes, I remember that.

LYNN MATTESON: But generally speaking there's a kind of American thing that's too slick, it's a little bit distrustful, you know. Anyway. Well, John, thank you very much. It's been very illuminating.

JOHN BUCK: This is all I get to say to listeners of America?

LYNN MATTESON: If you want to say more, you can.

JOHN BUCK: No thanks.

LYNN MATTESON: Okay. Thanks again.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. Thank you.

[END OF SESSION 2]

LYNN R. MATTESON: This is Lynn Matteson talking to John Buck in Palm Desert, California. The date is December 13, 2008. John, we want to go back and talk about your family. You're from Ames, Iowa. And can you give us some idea of what your family background was? What your father did and how many siblings and all the family material?

JOHN BUCK: To the best of my recollection, my dad was born in a little town in northeastern Iowa called Calmar, Iowa, and my mother was a farmer's daughter in Decorah, Iowa. They met somewhere along the line in their teens. Were married young. My dad had some interest in the arts and at a certain point moved to Chicago to go to the Chicago Art Institute and study art. He had appendicitis and was not able to finish school. So he went off and eventually took a job to pay off his debts. He was working for a construction company carrying mortar for bricklayers—what they call a hod carrier.

LYNN MATTESON: What year was this?

JOHN BUCK: Oh, sometime in the early thirties.

LYNN MATTESON: So it was during the Depression.

JOHN BUCK: Yes, it was during the Depression. Rough time to be an art student. Anyway he eventually worked his way up the ladder in his own company and became the owner of the company. So that was a big thing for him, and I was very proud of him. We all were because if anything, he knew about work. But at any rate, when I started to show some interest in going to art school or studying art, it wasn't too difficult for my father to say, "Okay, if you want to study art, I know what that's about." And so I went to the Kansas City Art Institute after I graduated from high school and studied sculpture and ceramics and worked with some interesting people.

In fact while I was a student there, the school brought in as visiting artists H.C. Westermann and Peter Saul, who were both relatively young and vital as artists. And they were really inspirational for me. Peter Saul was doing those anti-war paintings, and Westermann was doing these wonderful, crazy drawings. Both of them came in to do prints with Jack Lemon in the printmaking department. At that time Jack wasn't the head instructor, but he was kind of like a tactician, and he arranged to bring in people to do prints work. And then later on Jack took off and formed his own business in Chicago called Landfall Press. And the rest of it is just history, because he's worked with all the different famous artists.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes.

JOHN BUCK: Contemporary people. At any rate, after I got out of the art institute in Kansas City, I got a scholarship to go to school at Stanford University.

LYNN MATTESON: Before we get there, let me ask you about—What, first of all, drew you to Kansas City as the school to go to?

JOHN BUCK: Well, I had an older brother who was interested in art also, and who'd also gone to school to study art at Washington U in St. Louis. He joined a fraternity and did these things, and they were not—they weren't the route I wanted to pursue. So when I got out of school, when I graduated from high school, my art teacher, whose name was Priscilla Sage—interesting fabric artist. She encouraged me to go have a look at the art institute. She said, "I think this would be the place for you." I started out in that school in painting. But my idea of painting was to make pictures of things I would like to make.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh. [Laughs]

JOHN BUCK: So I eventually switched over to sculpture, and that was the right place for me. So I don't know how else can I answer you.

LYNN MATTESON: So when Westermann and Saul come, these were artists who were really outside the circuit of Kansas City. I mean it was a—

JOHN BUCK: They were invited there I think because of Jack Lemon. I think because he had offered a way for them to do prints, you know. Probably that was the lure. For me this was interesting because the sculpture instructor said, "There are some interesting guys down in the print department. I think you should go take a look at them and see what they're doing." You know.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes.

JOHN BUCK: I was not part of the printmaking department in any way. I just went down there and sat there and watched them work until they left. [Laughs] I was in awe. I saw a Peter Saul drawing in a traveling show on Pop Art that was in 1964-65. And it just blew my mind because it was so raw; it was just so directed and funny and weird and aggressive all at once. Then when he showed up on the campus, boy, I was really fascinated. And they had a big traveling exhibition of his work while he was there. And they were all the anti-war paintings about Vietnam and that kind of thing.

LYNN MATTESON: I mean how did it go over in Kansas City, this kind of vehement protest against —

JOHN BUCK: That exhibition I think was sponsored by the Jewish Community Center. So they're probably the reason why he came there and came to the school. Because he was in town, and they made it possible for him to come in and do a print. Now, I'm just kind of going back through my mind to kind of research it.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes, yes, yes.

JOHN BUCK: What I remember about it. And, I don't know, he was a fantastic guy.

LYNN MATTESON: Do you keep up with either of these?

JOHN BUCK: Well, Westermann has died. Peter Saul is still around.

LYNN MATTESON: Right.

JOHN BUCK: And he's actually doing very well. He's living in New York now.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes, he was at Roy de Forest's memorial dinner.

JOHN BUCK: Right, right.

LYNN MATTESON: So what year was this that Saul and Westermann came in?

JOHN BUCK: I think it was like—probably about '66.

LYNN MATTESON: So right in the middle of the Vietnam thing.

JOHN BUCK: Yes.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes. Okay. And then you applied to Stanford?

JOHN BUCK: Oh, yes.

LYNN MATTESON: And why Stanford?

JOHN BUCK: Well, it was kind of one of those things. I think maybe I'd heard that they had a sculpture area. There were some really pretty strong students who had gone from Kansas City to Stanford. They didn't have a big program, but they had money, and they had a place for you to work. It sounded like the right thing for me to do. I didn't want to go to the East Coast. For some reason I really felt like going to the West Coast is where I wanted to be. I can't tell you why exactly. Maybe I was intimidated by the idea of New York. But at any rate, this was one of the schools you

applied for, and I applied and I got a scholarship. I was the only one they accepted in sculpture.

LYNN MATTESON: Really?

JOHN BUCK: Yes, it was a big deal. Then of course the department itself, they only had three or four people.

LYNN MATTESON: I was going to come to that. But did you, while you were in the Midwest, in Iowa, or Kansas City, ever go to the East Coast? Did you travel there just to see what it was like?

JOHN BUCK: No, I went to Chicago a few times, you know. No. I guess the thing that I remember about the West Coast initially was—and I think about '67—I went to Haight-Ashbury. [They laugh.] And I was just kind of there for a while.

LYNN MATTESON: Spooked out. [They laugh.]

JOHN BUCK: Yes. I was there for a while, and it was sort of a spontaneous time. And I don't know, I felt attracted to the fantastic atmosphere, and it was sort of youthful. And, you know, the light in San Francisco, I'd never seen anything like that. It was white light. I was truly kind of amazed by it. And I wanted to be back there and see that again. So, I was never disappointed about that.

LYNN MATTESON: So this was a trip that you made before you went to Stanford. You'd gone to San Francisco.

JOHN BUCK: Oh, yes.

LYNN MATTESON: I see. And then—so you had a taste of the West Coast before applying to Stanford.

JOHN BUCK: Yes.

LYNN MATTESON: I see. Okay, okay. And then when you got to Stanford, there was who, Nathan Oliveira?

JOHN BUCK: Nathan Oliveira.

LYNN MATTESON: [Inaudible] Frank Lobdell?

JOHN BUCK: Frank Lobdell. And there was a guy named Richard Randall who taught sculpture; he was from the Midwest and made these kind of surfboard-derived kinds of slick sculptures out of fiberglass. And, you know, initially I thought that that would be kind of interesting, but it wasn't. The painting instructor really had nothing to do with the sculpture people, and there was a very structured kind of critique session every week, and it was kind of brutal. I was just really depressed by it.

LYNN MATTESON: How many other graduate students?

JOHN BUCK: Well, there might have been ten at max—maximum.

LYNN MATTESON: Was the work varied amongst the graduate students?

JOHN BUCK: Within the painting department, it was kind of a figurative dark painting style. Probably elicited more by Oliveira than anything else. And I didn't really know that much about Frank Lobdell

at that time. But you know since then I've—what I've seen of it I've really enjoyed.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes.

JOHN BUCK: So that's an interesting thing. But I was not interested in what I was doing either. And finally at a certain point there was a seminar brought in, a group of pieces that were these little balsawood toy-like shapes that were replicas of various artists' work. Each one of them had a little squeeze ball hose attached to it so it would jump. And I put them out on the floor for people to kind of play with. So we had art movement. And they didn't like that.

LYNN MATTESON: When you say it's a replica of—

JOHN BUCK: It would be like derivative of, say, Westermann or of I don't know. Just contemporary forms. It's been so long ago, I don't really remember. They weren't like real serious attempts at anything. But they did have this little squeeze ball thing on it.

LYNN MATTESON: So they were playful.

JOHN BUCK: Yes, very playful. So, at any rate, I left there, went to work for a factory, and—Well, actually I went up to Sacramento and lived there for a few months in Oak Park. And that was an interesting experience. It's primarily a black neighborhood. And it was before any really bad times in that area. So I felt pretty comfortable there. I was lucky to be there at that time. But later on I moved to Denver and got a teaching job—or not a teaching job. [Laughs] I got a factory job working for a plastics company as a fabricator, making [plastic lab equipment –JB].

LYNN MATTESON: How did you come across these gigs?

JOHN BUCK: A plastics factory.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes, yes.

JOHN BUCK: Well, I'm sort of handy. You know I could make things. I was used to—

LYNN MATTESON: But here you were in Stanford, and then you're here at this job in Denver. How does that come about?

JOHN BUCK: I got in my car. [They laugh.] And I drove back to Kansas City. I at first thought I would get a job as a welder because I knew how to weld from making my sculpture. And then I really kind of got depressed about being back in Kansas City where I really had no connection with the art school or anything else. And I had a friend living in Denver. So I went out to visit them. I decided I liked Denver, you know. And so I went looking for a job. There was an ad in the paper, and I went looking for it at this place. And they wanted trainees as custom fabricators, which meant they got a special order—somebody would come in and say, I want this thing all made out of Plexiglas, that's what you'd have to do. It was really fun. But it didn't pay very well. I did that for a year. And then I applied to go to UC-Davis. And the reason I was attracted to Davis at that time was because once again I had some acquaintances who were students at Davis who told me about [William T.] Wiley and [Robert.] Arneson and these people that were teaching there. And that it was this sort of a real open community of art, and there was a lot of humor and all kinds of wonderful things. And it really sounded great to me. So I went out and applied.

LYNN MATTESON: Before we get to the Davis thing, I want to go back to Stanford a bit. What kind of work did you do at Stanford? How would you characterize it?

JOHN BUCK: I would say that what I was doing was a kind of hangover from what I'd been doing as a student, which was sort of a—I was attempting to find my way out of this metal fabrication.

LYNN MATTESON: Which is what you did in Kansas?

JOHN BUCK: Yes. When I went to the art institute in Kansas City, I has been making these large welded steel sculptures that were all fabricated up, you know, maybe ten feet tall. And a lot of strange shapes interlocking.

LYNN MATTESON: Who was influential in that regard?

JOHN BUCK: Well, you know, probably my fellow classmates as much as anybody because that was sort of what our interests were.

LYNN MATTESON: It wasn't anything like—

JOHN BUCK: I think if anything, it would've been [Robert] Hudson.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh!

JOHN BUCK: Bob Hudson's work.

LYNN MATTESON: You heard about Bob Hudson in Kansas City?

JOHN BUCK: Oh, yes.

LYNN MATTESON: Really?

JOHN BUCK: Oh, we were a sophisticated group. [They laugh.]

LYNN MATTESON: Now his things were highly colored. Were yours?

JOHN BUCK: No. Well, I did try to do a few things that were colored. But they really large interlocking sort of welded, fabricated things that were all pretty much painted gray.

LYNN MATTESON: How about David Smith? Were you looking at him?

JOHN BUCK: I looked at David Smith. I looked at all of that kind of stuff. David Smith was very popular. And of course he had stainless steel and aluminum and various other materials at that point. And so that was something that was a little bit beyond me.

LYNN MATTESON: In Stanford you continued in that style?

JOHN BUCK: Well, I was trying to avoid from it. And I had already started making these sort of machine-like things that were—they were not kinetic. But they appeared to be somehow machine-oriented. And that was because of the shapes that I was working with were shapes that I found made of metal, you know, in my environment I said, ah, that's an interesting form. You could see how it would be made. And so that would be the base from which some other forms would evolve. At any rate, I was trying to get away from that. I was trying to do something new, and I didn't know what that was exactly. But the school itself really just wanted me to kind of, I think, perpetuate what it was—They had accepted me in as a student. And, you know, I was moving away from that already.

LYNN MATTESON: I recall from another conversation that you worked in the drama department there?

JOHN BUCK: Well, the deal was that they didn't really have studio space within the art department. They had some spaces that were used for storage by the drama department. And also by an oceanographic research expedition that had been to, I guess, the north Pacific or something. And they had gone under the ice and collected all these fish specimens. Huge sharks and various things that live under the ice and never see the light of day. And they brought all this stuff back and put it in big tanks and pickled them. They kept them in this building. That was part of my studio. And then the other part of that studio building was used for storing the sets for the drama department. So I had a little space off to the side that was kind of what they could give up. Or what the art department was able to kind of weasel out of the storage people.

It's funny because then after that, probably from looking at those things, I eventually evolved a sort of way of working that was very flat and frontal. And there were these sort of images: one side, the backside, would be very mechanical; you could take them apart and stand them up and, you know. And then I started creating these sort of tableaux where there were various images interconnected in a big sort of—not diorama, but a kind of a set like a theater. And they were three-dimensional in an illusionistic way.

LYNN MATTESON: Would they be, were they conceived as working with one another, these—

MR. BUCK; Yes, yes, they were initially. They all got broken down and sold off separately. But they were pieces that I thought of as part of a theme. And they could be interrelated or they could be separated out.

LYNN MATTESON: But that's interesting because so much of your later work has—there are stories to tell.

JOHN BUCK: Mm-hmm.

LYNN MATTESON: There are constant references to other things in the picture or the sculpture that seem to imply the connection between various parts of the picture. I don't know if I'm making myself clear. I guess I'm not.

JOHN BUCK: No, I think if you want to look at my work, you have to bring your own imagination to it.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes. Okay.

JOHN BUCK: And if you're doing that, that's good.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes. So there you were working at Stanford and dissatisfied with Stanford. And they you thought were sort of dissatisfied with you.

JOHN BUCK: Oh, definitely they were dissatisfied with me. I seemed to make—I'd sort of shot myself in the foot, you know, whatever the situation.

LYNN MATTESON: So you didn't finish at Stanford?

JOHN BUCK: No.

LYNN MATTESON: You didn't finish.

JOHN BUCK: I left after the first quarter or first semester, I guess it was, and went up to Sacramento.

LYNN MATTESON: Okay.

JOHN BUCK: Then from Sacramento I eventually went to Kansas City and then back to Denver and worked as a plastics fabricator.

LYNN MATTESON: Then UC-Davis, which turns out to be pivotal in your career.

JOHN BUCK: Absolutely. You know I met all these fabulous people that were teaching there and some wonderful students. That's where I met Debby [Deborah Butterfield]. She was there as an undergraduate; she was an undergraduate student. And she was in ceramics at the time. So, you know, I mean I can't tell you how much of a change it made for me, because for one thing I never really was confronted in the same way that I was at Stanford. At Stanford it was like really oppositional to experimenting with things like humor. Or taking someone else's idea and using it for your own purposes. I don't know exactly how—the Bay Area Figurative School expected you to take in information and put it back out. I don't know. It seemed kind of like there were barriers between new ideas and what they were there to do. But anyway, at Davis it was wide open. All students shared all ideas. We all worked on various things.

The Bay Area was really lively like over in Berkeley. Some of Wiley's friends, they did that *Slant Step Show* [1966] show. Which I wasn't there when they did that. But I mean that was sort of typical of how they'd sort of just—would take something, and everybody would respond to it. And Wiley was doing these things where he would—he did a 24-hour show. We'd all go into the art gallery at the university and stay there for 24 hours. And whatever we did while we were there in that time, was what the show was afterwards. And people did some wonderful things. Some people stood an easel up and painted a picture. Some people carved something. And some people just I don't know—did performances. They did all kinds of stuff.

LYNN MATTESON: At Davis you also had a studio to yourself, did you?

JOHN BUCK: I had a little—it was an apartment in a building called Aggie Villa.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh, I see.

JOHN BUCK: It was a series of married student housing. And I had one of those. I shared it with another student who never really ended up showing up that much. So I ended up just, you know, using the space. It was great for me. And I did a lot of drawing then. That was really what I focused on. And it was funny because when I was a student in Kansas City and I went into painting, I realized I was just making drawings of things I'd like to make. Or paintings of things. And when I went back to Davis, I ended up doing just exactly that. I started doing drawings of things that I would like to make. Or proposals for sculpture. But then I never made them because I could develop my ideas much quicker by just drawing them and leaving them at that.

LYNN MATTESON: Mm-hmm.

JOHN BUCK: I'd move on. And there was no opposition to that. So it gave me a chance to grow and learn about other people's ideas.

LYNN MATTESON: So at Stanford they would have expected you to finish up the drawing?

JOHN BUCK: I don't know. I never even had an opportunity. I would say this, too. Because Wiley was there, and he was such a great draftsman and all these wonderful watercolors and so forth that he did where inspiration to me because I realized that you could create an image that was very compelling and that you could communicate ideas without actually making these things. I mean he would make them and make watercolors from them. But if you weren't party to that whole process and just saw the watercolors, somehow it was still convincing enough that that was enough.

LYNN MATTESON: That was enough. Now you're going to Davis sort of as a sculptural student, a student of sculpture. And it seems like a lot of the artists there were just crossing the boundaries. I mean Arneson is doing ceramics, but he's really doing sculpture. Wiley's doing paintings and drawings, but he also does sculpture.

JOHN BUCK: Right.

LYNN MATTESON: And Roy [De Forest] is doing his thing, and he also has sculpture around his frames. So there was this element of absolute openness about—

JOHN BUCK: I think that's true. And that was a real inspiration for me, to know that you didn't have to worry about those kinds of problems. But I mean it was probably true of everything at the time. I mean we went to art galleries, and there were photographs on the wall, and a tape recorder on the floor, and extension cords running around. And that was kind of an art show. And so between that and all your conventional kinds of painting and sculpture, it seemed like it was anything in between. So combinations of those things didn't seem to start any fires. [Laughs]

LYNN MATTESON: Did you—Do you know what other graduate students—Who were some of the graduate students—and what year are we talking about? You arrived in Davis in what year?

JOHN BUCK: I arrived in Davis in 1970 and left in '72.

LYNN MATTESON: So I just missed you. I started in '72.

JOHN BUCK: Well, when I arrived there, there were still a few people around. Steve Carletonbach was still there, and he was maybe one of the people that was most connected to Bruce Nauman at any time.

LYNN MATTESON: Right, right, right.

JOHN BUCK: Who was still around. And I didn't know who Bruce Nauman was when I came there. A friend of mine John Fernie, who was actually in my class in Kansas City, was just leaving Davis. Because of my quitting Stanford and doing things I was like two years behind. But John was somebody who had brought Bruce Nauman back to do an exhibition in the student union building, they had a little gallery there. And John was running it as part of his work-study. And Bruce had come in and done this piece. And it was some kind of performance, environmental piece, that several different artists were involved in. And that's how I learned about Bruce Nauman. But he was never really a real influential part of why I came there or what was going on while I was there. Not personally. But there was kind of a culture of performance and installation art and those kinds of things that was definitely influenced by him. And Steve Caultonbach who had started teaching, I think, at Sac [Sacramento] State at that time was still coming around Davis. He was still doing things. For some reason he'd come down and use certain areas for his performances or whatever. He was using some photography equipment at one point to do some kind of big major project. So I saw him from time to time and talked to him a little bit.

There was a guy in the photography department who was like a technician. His name was Bill Morrison, and he did a lot of black-and-white photography. He allowed me to come in and use the facilities at night when nobody else was around. And I was able to come and develop photography as a documentation of my work when I was trying to learn about performance. And so I'd do performances, document it, put it all together and hang it on the wall, and it looked just like real art. I thought it was hilarious because that—Not only that, but when you took a slide of a wall with these photographs on it, and then you projected the slide, it looked like you were in a magazine. [They laugh]

LYNN MATTESON: It was *Artforum*. [Laughs]

JOHN BUCK: Yes, exactly! Black and white.

JOHN BUCK: And that's what the art looked like in those days. It was so funny that, you know, eventually, because of this idea of images of your work—There's something. A lawnmower. I developed this one idea that was early on I wanted to do a piece about transition of artists and the evolution of artists and how artists' careers kind of create this fame, and then they kind of gradually fade from view. So I built a large frame with glass in it, and then set up sources of steam on one side of the glass, steam and heat. And then sources of cold on the other side of the glass to steam up the glass. Then the glass, once it was steamed up, would be filmed from one side. And an artist would come up, and you would not see the artist, just his hand. And the camera would frame off just the shape of the glass. The hand would reach into the picture screen, draw an image on the glass. Then the camera would be set into a kind of time-lapse mode. And the glass would gradually fog up again. So the drawing would disappear. And then each artist would be brought in to do their own picture.

LYNN MATTESON: Interesting.

JOHN BUCK: It would fade away.

LYNN MATTESON: Interesting.

JOHN BUCK: And then another hand would come in, and another one would fade away. And then once this film was made, it could be projected on the steamed-up glass. So that it'd actually take place in the same format that it was done in. And I had this old worked out, but it never happened because I couldn't make the glass steam up. It wasn't contained. It was in a room, and the glass never steamed up. I had a steam blower on one side, and air conditioning and everything on the other.

LYNN MATTESON: Great idea.

JOHN BUCK: Oh, it looked good. I refrigerated it with a big chunk of ice in it and a fan blowing, and it was as Rube Goldberg as you can get.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes. Did you ever see that film, that French film by Clouseau, *A Picasso Drawing on Glass*?

JOHN BUCK: Yes, yes. I think I have. Kind of like Jackson Pollock.

LYNN MATTESON: Right. Yes, yes. It reminds me a little bit, too, of the Duchamp [Marcel Duchamp] glass. I think there was a lot of—

JOHN BUCK: Oh, yes, yes.

LYNN MATTESON: Duchamp was a big thing in Davis I assume especially with Wiley.

JOHN BUCK: Yes, he was, he was. We always talked about Duchamp. But at some point we ran out of things to say about Duchamp. [They laugh.] So the talk became sort of like a kind of blind admiration, but nothing could really go any further than that. And it opened up the door, but you had to go through it, and you had to go do your own thing.

LYNN MATTESON: Right.

JOHN BUCK: You know that's, I suppose, where all that performance stuff came from.

LYNN MATTESON: And Wiley also—speaking of performance—Wiley also used to do these things every two years, stage performances.

JOHN BUCK: Right. And I participated in one of those.

LYNN MATTESON: Uh-huh.

JOHN BUCK: In fact—yes. We were in a seminar that Wiley was teaching. And he wanted to do this performance. So he invited everybody in the seminar to be part of it. And I think he also was—The seminar included students from Berkeley. So they came up and worked within the same stage setup as well. And the guy in the theater department was named Dan Snyder.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh, yes, I remember him.

JOHN BUCK: And Dan Snyder had acquired or set up a revolving stage in the theater department. It was, honest to God, it was like a wheel. It must have been—

LYNN MATTESON: They're great for [inaudible].

JOHN BUCK: —30 feet in diameter. So we were all kind of excited about using that thing. Jock Reynolds and Bill Morrison were both very much involved in performance at this time. And they were really kind of maybe the most sophisticated about how they were going to use it. Some people just kind of went up there and they didn't know what to do, so they just kind of played on it. I worked with a guy named, oh, gee—Jim? He was from Berkeley. Jim Pomeroy.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh, I remember him. He was the preparator at the museum for a while.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. Jim Pomeroy and I did a wonderful piece where we set a person in the middle of the room, Jim, or in the middle of this disc, and he was sitting on a chair. And there were rubber bands, long rubber bands made from inner tubes, stretched on the wheel. And then there were chairs sitting all around him. And as the wheel turned, the rubber bands would start to wrap themselves around the chairs, and the chairs were kind of gathered up into this sort of pile. And then he had this pole and would sit there and try to keep the chairs upright. It was a little bit like something you'd see on Lucille Ball or something like that. But we had a good time.

LYNN MATTESON: Ernie Kovacs.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. [Laughs] And then the other thing that I did with this particular project was a series of tapes of turkeys that I did at the poultry farm. Where I called out the names of various

women, and the turkeys would respond. So I would call out, “Lucy!” And the turkey would go, Goooble goooble. And then I'd call another name. And finally I'd exhausted them. So some women's names did not elicit a response. And that was when it got really interesting. [They laugh.] But that was the extent of that performance piece. And by that time I was pretty much just involved in drawing. I wasn't making so many sculptures. I had done a bunch of things using natural materials: sticks and pieces of rubber inner tubes. I'd go out and work on site using material that I could find in that space. And I got involved in making proposals for working with agricultural processes or materials. So we could use straw, hay, something like that. And then because that was—I mean I could come up with these ideas, but doing them—finessing it so it really looked great—was never something I could actually do. But I could draw it to look like it. So then I just started doing more and more drawings. And it got me away from the frustration of actually making some of these things.

LYNN MATTESON: So while you were at Davis, did you then go to Skowhegan?

JOHN BUCK: While I was at Davis, I was given a scholarship to go to Skowhegan.

LYNN MATTESON: And was that at all important for you?

JOHN BUCK: I think it was because it gave me—I'd never had any money. I always had to work or work-study or something like that. I didn't expect to have the opportunity to just do my artwork and not have to work.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes.

JOHN BUCK: And so I got a whole summer in Maine, which I'd never been—I'd never been east of Chicago. I got to go to New York City and visit some people there a couple of times. And go to the museums and see that work. And when I came back from Skowhegan, I had a big portfolio of drawings.

LYNN MATTESON: Did going to New York and seeing all the canonical things that were in the museums, did it have an influence on you? Did you, I mean—

JOHN BUCK: I think it did. You know I was pretty much overwhelmed by what I saw because everything that I knew about art history or whatever had all been in books. The Janson books are all black and white [laughs] except for those few colored pages. Then there was of course the whole art scene was coming up. SoHo was just starting then. And I don't know. Gee. That's a good question, I suppose. I don't remember if there was something that I saw in particular.

LYNN MATTESON: Well, let me go back to the years at Davis just for a second because you're not too far from San Francisco. Did you often go into the Bay Area? For openings surely.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. That was the great thing about Roy and Bob and Wiley and Manuel [Neri]; those guys, those four people were the four people that I was probably the most close to as far as my instructors whom I talked to. Whenever even one of them or any one of them would have an exhibition, or somebody that they knew was having an exhibition, that they thought would be good for us to see it, they'd tell the whole seminar or all the grad students, Come into town on a Thursday night and see the opening of such-and-such. And we'd go, and people were very receptive. And there wasn't this sense of you're a student so you have to stay away. I mean we'd go out drinking after the openings and have dinner—it was a wonderful experience. And it opened a door for me at least to feel socially connected with a whole range of people: people who I met who were students at Berkeley or other teachers at Berkeley or someplace.

LYNN MATTESON: Well, there you probably met Bob Hudson.

JOHN BUCK: Yes, I did meet Bob Hudson at that point. And actually traveled with Bob and Robert Arneson to a lecture in Santa Barbara at one point. We all got in a car and drove down there, you know, talk about their work. I don't know why they took us along. [Laughs]. A friend of mine, David Storey, and I went down with them. And it was just kind of a debauched thing. I remember—who was the? Oh, well. There was this one particular artist who couldn't understand me because I was too drunk. [They laugh.] I remember that much. Larry Rivers.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh.

JOHN BUCK: Larry Rivers. He got mad because he couldn't understand me.

LYNN MATTESON: So after Skowhegan, where you really spent a lot—just doing work, right? That was it. During that time, did you go from drawings to sculpture?

JOHN BUCK: I made sculptures at the same time I was there. I used a lot of found material. I used a lot of things that—I went to the Goodwill, and they had 5,000 neckties, so I bought the whole box of neckties. And brought them back and tied them all over everything and made these various sort of fluttering decorative things. And I got a bunch of inner tubes and cut up the rubber. And made rubber bands and tied things up with them. And just elaborate kind of process-oriented things.

LYNN MATTESON: And what was the response at Skowhegan?

JOHN BUCK: Well, at the time, the sculpture instructor was really encouraging students to make little figures on pedestals. So I was not really in the loop as far as what was going on in the sculpture program. Again. [They laugh.] But I was really—I mean what I did was I had these very long poles. I laid them out on the field, on the ground, in this long grass. And it was like a space of about 100 feet. Like every 20 feet there'd be a pole. And then between each pole I used this rubber. I created a huge rubber matrix of inner tube rubber and neckties just across this thing. So it was like a hundred feet long and probably about 20 feet high. And then once it was completely tied up with all these various rubber bands and chunks of grass and so forth that had gotten tied up in it while I was making it, then I just stood it all up and staked it out with long rubber bands. So the whole thing was this kind of big weaving, stretching kind of shape. It was like a big wall. And when the wind would blow, the rubber would kind of flutter in the wind. And it'd make this strange groaning noise. [Laughs] And so it's like alive. And I thought it was a big success. And I had a critique and Luke Samaras was there. And he came to the critique, and he looked at it, and I think he was pretty interested in it. But the rest of the sculpture program wasn't really. They didn't know quite what to think. So that was pretty much the response I got. In fact, at the very end of the session, I had about three or four days, and they wanted to have these big final critiques and discussions and so forth. And I kind of gave up and went down to New York and went to some more museums and things. [Laughs] They were really, really very upset with me for that.

LYNN MATTESON: Were you one of the first to go to Skowhegan from Davis?

JOHN BUCK: No.

LYNN MATTESON: No. Because I knew there was a—I mean after you went during the seventies, a lot of people, a lot of the grad students did go, including Debby.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. Debby went the year after I went.

LYNN MATTESON: So you didn't tarnish Davis's reputation?

JOHN BUCK: Not to the point where they wouldn't accept another person, no. As far as I know, they only had the opportunity to send one student a year there.

LYNN MATTESON: Right.

JOHN BUCK: And so it was important that they were able to continue doing that. Yes.

LYNN MATTESON: So you got your MFA from Davis. And then you go to England?

JOHN BUCK: Yes. One of the people that was teaching at Davis was a guy named Nick Stevens who came from England. He had studied in the Bay Area as a student. And went back to England, got a teaching job there at the Gloucestershire College of Art and Design. And then was brought back to take a sort of replacement position that was opened up by Bob Arneson, who traveled that semester or that year or something. So he was at the school, and he took an interest in what I was doing. And suggested that I apply as a teaching fellow at that school where he was teaching. And they had a position which was kind of like the graduate student teaching assistant. And they gave you a stipend and a studio. It wasn't a lot of money. I think it was \$45 a week. [They laugh.] And I sold everything I had. I sold my truck, I sold my air conditioner. I didn't have anything else. [They laugh.] And I took that money, and I flew over to England and stayed there for the academic year. Then I was kind of hoping that maybe—because Debby was still in school. She went with me to England for a short period of time. But then she went back and finished her degree. I was hoping that maybe they might hire her. You know sort of like Skowhegan did. You know let's just keep this thing going here. But they wouldn't do that. So I went back and was able to get a teaching job as a replacement for a sculptor in northern California Humboldt State. His name was Steven Dailey. So I taught at Humboldt State for two years in that capacity.

LYNN MATTESON: When you were in England—Well, first of all, was that the first time you'd ever been outside the States?

JOHN BUCK: Yes, essentially.

LYNN MATTESON: Did it somehow change your perception of things?

JOHN BUCK: Well, I mean the most important things to me at that time I suppose was that I was really against Nixon [Richard M. Nixon]. And Nixon got reelected. [Laughs] That was a real blow. And there was a—I was surrounded by a culture of people who weren't necessarily in support of Nixon. And that hadn't really—I mean, of course, in college, you know, Davis at least, it was not a conservative place to be at that time for students. You didn't find a lot of support for Nixon. But in England I didn't know what to expect. And it was kind of a—it wasn't that supportive of what was going on with the United States in Vietnam. And so I felt somehow like I was in a better place. I really liked it.

LYNN MATTESON: Did your work change?

JOHN BUCK: Yes. Because I had been doing these drawings or proposals to make things in the environment that were made of natural materials. But in England you couldn't go out and just get natural materials because things were kind of kept tidy. And so I was just doing drawings and watercolors of—just experimenting with paint. Not really thinking about making something in particular. Although they still were kind of hinged on images. The school got kind of worked up because I hadn't been making any sculpture. They said you're here in the capacity to be a sculpture

person, and you're just doing drawings and paintings. You need to make some things. Is there anything we can provide you with in terms of materials that would encourage you to do that? And I said, "Well, some wood maybe." And they brought me a pile of lumber. And from that point on, really, I've just always worked with wood.

And it was simple for me because my father had been a woodcarver, and his father had been a carpenter and a cabinetmaker. So I grew up from day one, you know, seeing somebody with a big plane making curls of wood on the floor and hammering and pounding nails. So when I got this piece of wood, I knew exactly how to work with it. And I started cutting out shapes based on the drawings and the shapes I was doing in my drawings and watercolors. And started making these kind of flat assemblages that were kind of based on the drawings. And it was such a direct step for me that made all the sense in the world. And I really never went back to trying to work with natural organic materials because I realized I had this sort of natural ability to fabricate things out of wood.

LYNN MATTESON: So that was critical. You were actually starting to work with sculpture materials again which was your first calling. It happened in England.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. And you know it's funny because in this recent book they're talking about outliers.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes.

JOHN BUCK: And they're talking about how people who succeed in certain areas are never really just on their own. But there's always somebody there to help them at the right moment, and there are circumstances that come up. And when I look back at those kinds of things, I really feel that that's true.

LYNN MATTESON: So that was a really pivotal time. Because when you look at your biography or the list of things, the English episode is just hardly mentioned or hardly discussed at all. It just happened. You were just there a few months, and then that was it.

JOHN BUCK: Mm-hmm.

LYNN MATTESON: But it turns out it might have been quite a critical experience.

JOHN BUCK: I think it was because socially and whatever the environment was, I was stepping completely out of my context: California, Davis. I mean anything goes, right?

LYNN MATTESON: Right.

JOHN BUCK: So it doesn't matter. But you go into this place like England, suddenly there's this other kind of structure. But you still don't really quite know what that is. And it's kind of exciting to learn about all these different things. How do you order a beer? You know. [Laughs] What's a pork and kidney pie?

LYNN MATTESON: Right.

JOHN BUCK: And so I was kind of tuned up for a lot of things.

LYNN MATTESON: My experience with the same thing, just to briefly interject, is that you go from this—because I also went from California to spend two years in London—but you go, and it's highly structured in England, at least it was then, between how you say things, to whom you say things.

JOHN BUCK: Mm-hmm.

LYNN MATTESON: And the class-consciousness is the first thing that you are struck over the head with as an American. Where even the pubs had different entrances for different classes, at least that was the case—

JOHN BUCK: What you're struck with as a Yank.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes, as a Yank. Right. Exactly. So this in a sense can be sort of a shock to some sensibilities. So it's interesting. And did you—When you decided—Well, the teaching fellowship was only for the one year.

JOHN BUCK: It was only for the one year. Actually they invited me to stay there for another year.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh.

JOHN BUCK: But it would've—I couldn't—I'd spent all the money that I'd taken with me from my truck and my air conditioner. And there was no more money. And \$45 a week wasn't going to cut it.

LYNN MATTESON: Yes. So you decided to return. And you returned to this gig in Humboldt State.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. I didn't really return to that. I returned, and then I applied for it.

LYNN MATTESON: And got it.

JOHN BUCK: Yes.

LYNN MATTESON: And Humboldt State was—two years is quite a bit to be in the forest.

JOHN BUCK: Yes. [They laugh.] Yes, there was lots of wood. It was dark and dreary, and they had a condition there called the Humboldt Crud which gets in your lungs and everything.

LYNN MATTESON: [Crosstalk]

JOHN BUCK: Well, it's really just that moist, cold weather that the Pacific Northwest is known for. And so, you know, it was still within driving distance of the Bay Area, and I visited people down there from time to time. Debby was back in Davis again, and she was just finishing up. So I would go down and visit her. Then what happened is eventually she graduated, and we got married in Humboldt State in the winter of '74. But that was after she had accepted a job at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. So I was teaching at Humboldt State, and she was teaching in Madison. We got married, but then we were separated because she was living over there. And so I finished up that year teaching in Humboldt, and then I moved to Madison with her.

LYNN MATTESON: Right.

JOHN BUCK: And I had a studio that I shared with an artist whose name was George Kramer, who eventually became an instructor at the school. And I was happy making my work there. I mean having this studio and so forth. But I felt a little like I needed to get a job because I still didn't have any money. And I was getting unemployment, but that didn't last for long. So I applied for a job at Montana State. And I went out there, and I was teaching in Montana, and Debby was teaching in Madison. [Laughs] That's a lifestyle that doesn't work real well for very long anyway. So then eventually she took a year off, and she moved out to Montana to see if she liked it. And it's horse

country. So what do you think? So she never looked back, and we've been there ever since.

LYNN MATTESON: Now at Humboldt, again, did you continue with what you had done with any of them.

JOHN BUCK: Yes, I did. I had a little house that was a—it was out in the country and had a big truck garage that was with it. So I was able to use that as a studio. And that made a lot of difference for me. I was able to get some wood because that's a lumbering country.

LYNN MATTESON: Right.

JOHN BUCK: Easy to buy lumber. I bought a little saw, and I just started making things. And man, I got to work every weekend. And I had some money.

LYNN MATTESON: So what about shows? When did you start exhibiting? About this time?

JOHN BUCK: I actually—let's see. I guess my first exhibition in the Bay Area was, in a commercial gallery, was at Hansen-Fuller Gallery in 1977. It was in the summer of '77. And they had an open gallery show. It was called an "Introductions" show. And they would encourage students, young people, young artists, to come in and show their slides to the galleries. And then during the summer they would have this show. And I showed my slides to the gallery, and they were interested. I had met these people before from graduate school, so I knew them.

LYNN MATTESON: The gallery people or the other artists?

JOHN BUCK: Diana Fuller and Wanda Hansen. So anyway, I sent them my slides, and they were pretty much the work that I had done in Madison. While we were in Madison—I should step back a hair—while we were in Madison, a woman came up to the school and was kind of wandering around the campus looking at artists' work. Because she said she was going to start a new gallery in Chicago. She came up, I think, because she wanted to see Debby's work. I think she's heard about it. Then they came over to my studio, and she saw what I was doing. That was Roberta Lieberman of the Zolla Lieberman Gallery. She had an exhibition of Debby's work that spring. And she had some of my work in the gallery also. And there was a little bit of a stir. Debby's work was pretty well received. So there was some kind of attention being paid to the work. Not mine so much as Debby's. Then I went back—I applied to this job at Montana, and I got this job in Montana. Left that summer. During that winter I continued to make my work, and I put together a portfolio and sent it down to Hansen Fuller. Then once I had that exhibition—they kind of knew of Debby's work in California, too. And she came out to California for the opening for this thing. She was already in Montana with me. Yes. But anyway, that was when they asked her to show at the gallery, too. So, you know, it's just sort of one thing leads to another. And you pursue whatever openings there are. I don't know if that makes it very clear.

LYNN MATTESON: Well, it's fine. I just wanted to know just about when the exhibitions started to come in your way.

JOHN BUCK: Yes, '77 was the year of that introduction show. It wasn't too long after that then I had a one-man show at the gallery. And Roberta Lieberman had a show of my work in Chicago in '79. Then after that it became kind of a merry-go-round because I would be trying to show at these various places. And a lot of my work takes a long time to make. It just can't be made instantaneously.

LYNN MATTESON: Right. And it's fragile, too.

JOHN BUCK: Yes, it's fragile. And it had to be made so it could be disassembled and reassembled. And there was a lot of that kind of thinking involved in it.

LYNN MATTESON: So then you were doing, whatever, you have to—

JOHN BUCK: Tinker-toy style. [Laughs]

LYNN MATTESON: Yes. Right. Are they constructed that way?

JOHN BUCK: No, not so much like Tinker-toys. I had little dowels sometimes pegging things together so that they can slip together and then be pegged and then pulled apart. But there's all different kinds of ways of doing it. For the most part the work that I do now is much more solid and in the round, and it doesn't have so much of the Tinker-toy style. But I was proud of myself. I could have a whole show which could be like maybe seven or eight pieces of sculpture in one crate. [Mr. Matteson laughs.] All these tiny pieces, you know. Nobody else could put it together. [They laugh.]

LYNN MATTESON: Well that means a trip out there.

JOHN BUCK: Yes, it was good. But anyway, let's see, '77 and '78 and '79 was a real busy time because I sold quite a bit of that early work. I kind of kept thinking that eventually it would be like a circus. And I would travel around and have this sort of mini pieces that I could pop out of a box. [They laugh.] Assemble and have this big environmental—

LYNN MATTESON: Duchamp's suitcase.

JOHN BUCK: Oh, yes. All of this stuff, you know. And then people started buying it, and I didn't have it. Boy, then I had to make more and more stuff. And you know both Debby and I were working really hard at showing our work and—

LYNN MATTESON: Fabricating it.

JOHN BUCK: Traveling and fabricating—making it. Yes. And it was like, I think maybe '81 we both were given grants. I got an NEA and so did she. Then she also got a Guggenheim grant. And the Guggenheim was based on traveling to China just to see the great tombs that they'd unearthed with all the ceramic figures and so forth. So we traveled over there. She also had an invitation to do an exhibition in Israel at the museum there of work that she would make—

LYNN MATTESON: At the museum?

JOHN BUCK: At the museum, you see. And then that kind of goes back to this idea of this 24-hour show.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh, yes! Sure.

JOHN BUCK: It goes back to that because she would never have accepted that sort of thing—she wouldn't do it now—but she would never have known what she was getting into. Because once she got over there, she really wanted to do something significant, and there were a lot of problems to dealing with another culture.

LYNN MATTESON: Oh, absolutely.

JOHN BUCK: But she made that show, and it was well received, and the work traveled to Germany

and went around. And that was—

LYNN MATTESON: So it didn't stay in Israel?

JOHN BUCK: No.

LYNN MATTESON: And I asked her about that.

JOHN BUCK: Some of the work did. But it all went to Cologne to the Rudolph Zwirner Gallery and was exhibited there. And then it traveled to some other places. Some of that work ended up being a permanent part of their collection in Israel.

LYNN MATTESON: Well, I think we've caught up with what we missed in the first session.

JOHN BUCK: Sure.

LYNN MATTESON: Thanks a lot, John.

[END OF INTERVIEW]