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Oral history interview with John Roloff, 2009 August 17-18

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with John Roloff on August 17-18, 2009. The interview took place in Oakland, Calif., and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

John Roloff 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

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, with the artist John Roloff in his studio in Oakland, California on August 17, 2009. This is disc number one.

Good morning.

JOHN ROLOFF: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: All right, we're rolling.

I thought by way of introduction, a way to get into your work both in the largesse of it, the big picture, and then some of the small details, it might be interesting to look at some of the main themes that we'll probably be touching on over the next couple of days.

MR. ROLOFF: Okay. Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: A helpful way to begin that conversation might be by asking you to think about and discuss the similarities and the differences in your early work and your work now—how it's changed and how it's stayed the same. There are certain influences like geology—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—the interaction between humanity and nature—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—the distinction—they're very much the same, though they're approached now in completely different ways. And then there are things that have really changed—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—influence and performance art, that sort of thing; more conceptual, more craft-based—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—But how do you see it?

MR. ROLOFF: I guess, for me right now just—I'm trying to recall specific early works—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—that would kind of launch that idea, and the earliest works were very—they're almost—the peculiarity, which most people don't know these things—I'd say the earliest works were almost more like the more current work in that they were very—I guess, the influence from, you know, being at UC Davis [University of California-Davis, Davis, CA] specifically was obviously [Robert] Arenson because I was more involved in ceramics, but I think [William] Bill Wiley and a kind of—I wouldn't call it illustrated but a kind of depiction of narrative was something—I mean, I'm thinking about very specific things.

One was a kind of very early undergraduate work that was a wave like a slab of clay that was a water surface and had a wave in the middle of it and then the wave was wrapped like with shrouds [*Shrouded Wave*, clay, approx.. 24"x24", circa 1969–JR]. So it was this kind of conundrum of this thing that would be moving but it was sort of held by this form—you know, by this kind of constraint.

And so, I think that something like that is—I see a "Wileyness" in that, in that idea, and also I see—there is

another work which was, I think, more about what I would call science fiction, only in that those were my references. I was more interested in that, because I remember taking a figure drawing/painting class with Manuel Neri and I didn't—I kind of resented not so much him—I loved him—but the idea that I would have to start with, you know, figuration and that sort of idea. I just didn't relate to it.

And I thought that, why can't I start with science fiction, you know, things that I was sort of—you know, in terms of the formative things about art?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: You know, what do you need to know and how do you kind of enter into this space, you know, this terrain of that?

And so, that was just an early thought, and so this other piece, which was called *Diminishing Wave*, was about, I don't know, maybe six feet long and it was a series of—it was like a time thing [Approx 9 ft., ceramic in 5 sections, circa 1969–JR]. It was a series of—where a negative boat hull, just the negative shape, was immersed, you know, into a water surface, and then as it moved along, you know, in this sequence it would pass through these waves but the boat hull would get thinner and thinner to the point where it became a line, and theoretically then it would just disappear.

So this wave had kind of removed the negative space of the boat and in some sense removed the image itself. So it was kind of—

MS. RIEDEL: Was this a drawing at this point?

MR. ROLOFF: I'm sorry?

MS. RIEDEL: Was this a drawing?

MR. ROLOFF: No, it was an actual ceramic work that was about six feet long.

MS. RIEDEL: It was a ceramic work, okay.

MR. ROLOFF: So those are things that were very related to the—you know, I think I mentioned the other day like [Jose Luis] Borges; you know, reading stuff, and also—but somehow this narrative and a kind of Duchampian [reference to Marcel Duchamp's work], you know, thing which, I think, comes as much from Wiley as anything in terms of his kind of wry take on things, you know, and being able to work with—to manipulate ideas within a narrative.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: Those kind of things I think were something that I was really interested in. And so, I had—like I say, my reference points were a little more the science fiction part. And, of course, I was surrounded by narrative in the sense of Arneson and then the kind of eccentric things of Roy De Forest and the faculty at UC Davis, you know, in the late '60s.

And in some ways, you know, we would talk about the lineage that, you know, Bruce Nauman had left a few years before, and [Stephen] Steve Kaltenbach was sort of the—I guess, what I would call the heir to that in terms of the conceptual things. So these—and then Howard Fried would be—who was a contemporary graduate when I was an undergraduate—would be that connection in a way. Mine wasn't overtly art world conceptual; it was more about, I think, literary ideas.

So what happened, in that sense—so, just to tell a kind of story about these changes, I think, most of those works were kind of more like that. And then when I went to graduate school at Cal State Humboldt [Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA] I was also working very much in that vein, you know, of a kind of story and building structures that were somewhat illustrative. I mean, they kind of—they just were representations of an idea or story.

But then I went, and one night I was leaving and there was a salt kiln that was outside and it was a really old one and it was—no one was around. I don't know where the people were but—they had taken a break or something. But it was at the peak of its firing and, I think, they had just salted it, and so there was just this huge—there were flames coming out of every crack. You know, when a kiln—

MS. RIEDEL: When it was reducing?

MR. ROLOFF: That and just when it's at that—you know, the structure expands so that the cracks between bricks and things kind of—so this thing was kind of opened up.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah,

MR. ROLOFF: So I saw this thing and I saw this thing—you know, this thing is alive. And I said that's what it's about. It's about the firing, and all the stuff that's in it is just residue. It's just—you know, it's just the stuff that's, you know, the kind of byproduct of this.

And so that was—so when I think about this, that was a pivotal experience and what it did was it started to more specifically, I guess, more coherently, start this process of me—had already made the connection early on—you know, an undergraduate with geology and the materials in the glaze room—of them being—

You know, I would go and I would see all these—we had bins and, you know, canisters and things and they would be labeled dolomite and different kinds of feldspar and spodumene and lepidolite, and there was all these different things and different kinds of clays and stuff. But I had already known those as geologic materials, so my reference was landscape rather than—

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MR. ROLOFF: I'm sorry?

MS. RIEDEL: How did that happen? How did it become a landscape?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, I knew it—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, from geology.

MR. ROLOFF: I other words, you know, I was studying these—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: Feldspar I knew as a certain percentage of granite.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: So I was thinking of the Sierra Nevada [mountains]—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—when I thought of Feldspar.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And so—you know, and silica, these deposits of quartzite would be a source of that, and silica sands.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: You know, there's a whole lineage of landscape-based things. So they were no longer a white powder in a drawer that came out of a—you know, a 100-pound bag.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: They were already landscapes for me. But I was not—you know, I think that the experience of the kiln started to bring that—for me to have a better place to put that material recognition into a context and the context being process.

And so, the fire component started, you know, developing in me—and it took a while for it to kind of come out very fully—was this idea of process as being a narrative. So the imagery was a kind of narrative but the process was also another narrative. And they were all telling stories. In the same way that the landscape tells a story of its origins—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—and its history, an object would have that somehow imbued in it by bringing out or focusing on those materiality and the process, and for me very often it was in relationship to imagery. So these things started to come together but it took a while for that.

So coming from the Wiley—to kind of round this out a little bit, coming from the Wiley kind of somewhat more conceptual thing to then becoming—for me process was also the analogue to emotions. It was much more of an

emotional thing. So the work started to become just much more as experiments where they needed to evoke—

You know, in other words, the experiment was an open-ended—had different components but it was a pathway to a kind of evocation through material and process of an emotional state that I would say wasn't quite that present in that—like that *Diminishing Wave* kind of thing. That was a much more sequential kind of story.

So the idea of motion now becoming more—not just, I guess, more important but more available and more important. And then I could then start even relating more so to the things that I was influenced on the earliest, which was landscape painting.

Now, why was I interested in that is because of the feeling that was there—you know, the way they looked and everything, but the sublime qualities of those haystacks of Martin Heade's and, you know, [Frederic Edwin] Church's, you know, like volcanoes in Colombia or South America, and [Albert] Pinkham Ryder's just, you know, dark shapes and kind of—

So these became this kind of—and that had always been stirring in there, you know, like—oh, I don't know how you would—I think just my own experience of being in—you know, growing up in the West and having the landscape so available—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—because I can remember things about—which I think is actually more important to me now in a very odd way is that this idea of feeling separate from nature, and what I really wanted to do more than anything was to dig a hole and be in it and just be completely seamless with nature. And that would be an emotional thing.

So these things, they were in some ways—in different ways kind of fragmented and in different ways they were coalescing. You know, and they were kind of orbiting each other in different ways and sort of touching—you know, kind of coming more into connection and then maybe other things. And then having—you know, having studied geology at Davis before I ever got into art was—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: My studio in Kentucky when I was teaching there in the like mid-'70s, I thought of it a lot like a laboratory [Lexington, KY, I taught ceramics there from 1974-78–JR]. So I had like tanks of—you know, just kind of situations where something was dissolving in one area and another thing was kind of leaching soluble materials into it in another area. And so they were things that were in process—

MS. RIEDEL: Right—ongoing experiments.

MR. ROLOFF: And the materials were interacting with each other. And very often that would be important as an initiating stage but they also became important in the sense of I'd reach an impasse with the work and so I would just let it sort of hover, sit, sometimes in the middle of a process or whatever, and go to the point where the piece told me what it needed.

So it's like it's working on the unconscious, because another really important earlier kind of—besides Borges was also Gary Snyder, and there were certain writings of his that were—there was a—I remember this one line when he was on a freighter going to Japan, I believe, and it was just this image of a cup of—the coffee from a cup that has been tossed out.

And so there was this kind of object of this coffee in mid-air that was held in place, and somehow that in relationship to the ocean and the person drinking and kind of this interface between this vastness. Things like that were very resonant to me, and there was—

MS. RIEDEL: The back and forth between the personal and the larger picture, are you referring to that as one aspect of this?

MR. ROLOFF: Yes, there was—and I used to characterize the Ship pieces very specifically as kind of analogues to personal voyage. And then they became more—and even in the kiln when they were more like processed work because the process—like I would make these constructions on the Ships that were designed to collapse and to be altered in the kiln because I was very interested in just not making it—you know, putting a glaze on it and making it green or something, but to have it be actuated by that—by the—and part of that was the idea that—

MS. RIEDEL: Just so I'm understanding, it's physically transformed by the firing process—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—more than vitrification and glazing but there's actually something else that you've designed to happen during the firing.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And that's connected back—and see these loop back—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—in all these different ways to—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—an interest in Japanese traditional ceramics, of Shintoism and the idea of the voice of nature.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And so there was this piece that was very similar—also a very emotional thing but conceptual at the same time was this piece called *The Old Man* [This is from memory, Japanese, probably Edo period or later. I have tried to find this work again (an image or reference) but have been unable to—I may have the name wrong.–JR] and it was some kind of a thrown pot that had been in every firing for however many years, and it was just—it bore that—it bore the evidence of the firing. It was very cracked and kind of—

MS. RIEDEL: Was this sort of a kiln god that was used over and over again?

MR. ROLOFF: Not in a literal way like that—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—but it was really more of—that it had experienced—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—that it actually had—it had done the journey. And so the Ships became things like, well, this was going in—my own experience was 160 degrees in a sauna—that was my limit—but this thing could go 2,000 degrees and it was exploring this terrain. I used to think of that as being an analogue to Antarctica of actually being a landscape—I was sending the Ships out like a—you know, a country or something, or sending things out to kind of examine the world, except this was an analogous world of temperature and change.

So to use a conceptual art term, they were agents. It was a common kind of—I was talking earlier about some of the conceptual—you know, thinking about my interest in conceptual art and how they used language as a tool to kind of ferment and isolate and kind of discover and—and I remember that word "agent" where, you know, instead of the artist—I mean, it's almost unbelievable to me that people still have this thing about that you have to make something yourself in order for it to be art.

I understand the—I understand that because there is this connection, but art historically—the idea of—and you could probably go back to Tristan Tzara—I mean, the idea of automatic writing or these other kind of intercedent elements that are generative.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And so, in conceptual art there would often be—and Howard Fried would be someone who has used this in many ways. His was maybe a little more of a system that he would sort of put in place and then different people would actuate the—they would kind of like take it beyond and then—but this idea of an agent where you—

And so, to me, I didn't see any difference between—you know, the kiln was an agent, the piece was an agent, the —you know, even a glaze. You know, you mixed it and then you sent it into this environment and then it does what you can't do. You know, it melts and it does this thing. And very often it's not completely predictable.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: Which is really one of the beautiful things about ceramics is that you're always engaged with a certain amount of unpredictability. And one of the things I was really interested in was opening that up much wider so that—I had a kind of—a little bit like a scientist—and these were test tubes where I had some control

and I had—I was framing it in a certain way but there was always this thing about it having a voice.

So there is a science connection back to the Shinto connection of nature speaking—you know, and you're arranging the pots in the climbing kiln in the village in Japan and then you—it's a wood fire and how the ash hits it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And so, when things came out that were really kind of special, my interpretation was sort of like, well, this was the kiln speaking. You know, we were speaking but the concept of a conversation—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—was a fundamental thing and that's what kind of evolved out of, you know, one, the materiality of recognizing the relationship of the—you know, feldspar and things being from the landscape. So you're in conversation with the landscape when you're using these materials, and then you're using the kiln, so in a way later on that became a kind of conversation with the entire process of fossil fuel, you know, history and photosynthesis from sunshine that was 100 million years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So you were in conversation with all these dynamics that had material form, had, you know, psychological form, had different—you know, they took on different roles or different kind of ways of speaking, and that the artist—or myself in this case—was just one of those, an actuator. I just would organize stuff. And then things would be able to speak, you know, to allow the other thing to have a voice.

So those who were—you know, that's—I mean, trying to make a series of different influences about something like that, so it came from these different—I guess, just one trying to stay open and seeing different things along the way that were kind of speaking back to me and then trying to extrapolate; you know, trying to expand, you know, what is that, and then to set up a situation where it could become more.

So everything really—the kilns—I mean, everything like that was really from that attitude, and there's all the specifics of, you know, like a site-based—you know, like if a site had certain characteristics, which was very important to me, I would—you know, then I would attenuate it in that direction—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—or I work with it in that direction. But the conversational part was always, I think, a fundamental, and—

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it seems like that. To make one direct parallel between early work and what's happening now, is it seems like it is all part of a very long, ongoing conversation—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—which is about a conversation with landscape—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—a conversation with process—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—a conversation with geologic process, and all this happening over time now—your career, decades—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—and over geologic time as well.

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: So it does seem like—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, the time element is important. Yeah, that became more and more, actually, to speak—you know, to kind of discuss—and sort of to recognize time that's hidden. So there's a kind of revelatory part to this.

So, you know, seeing any—you know, right now in front of us is this slab of marble and—you know, because I

know about geology, this marble is—it's a carbonate. You know, it's a red iron and it has—so there's some form of iron that's in it.

It was from some form of depositional process, you know, some carbonate forming process of which there is, you know, kind of a wide range of things which would have created a limestone. And then it went through further metamorphosism to become marble.

So that—you know, it was probably undersea at one point and then it was deeply buried under the ground, and then even the carbonates themselves were—they could have been—this has been so heavily altered that, at least for me, I can't read the origin—you would have to look at where this came from and look at the whole context of what—where it was—you know, to give you some information about its depositional history—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—to then see whether this was ancient sea shells or whether it was chemically—you know, there's a chemical process for carbonate development, or was part of a reef. You know, this could have been an organic, living thing at one time.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: So those embedded histories and landscapes that these are, to me it's not really that much different than a Frederic Church painting. You know, it's just here's the kind of depiction, and this was this at this time and now we're looking at, you know, that time that he was painting; it's no longer there. We're looking at—now if we went to that same site, some things would be there.

So, you know, this thing of these, I guess, just embedded histories, you know, that are in materials and in—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And everything has that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: See, this is where - I don't fall in very easily with just the normal kind of idea of ecology—

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. ROLOFF:—because most of that is so biocentric, you know, like we're in trouble; let's fix the pond; let's make this—you know, because it's about us not being able to breathe enough or something, where to me ecology is this—it's just literally that the world is transparent in that all the things that you look at, the plastic that's in that scanner, you know, that's ancient sunlight, you know, in a way.

I mean, that's—you know, from the fossil fuel origin and the whole—if you follow the process back it's something else. So that to me is ecology, is that completely transparent relationship with all things and having an interest and an ability to kind of, you know, explore that and to kind of be immersed in it as—

Another thing that's also made out of, you know, all of the food that we eat, the minerals, you know, our DNA [Deoxyribonucleic acid]—I mean, all the different things that constitute an individual, that we—again, I think, we frame in ways that are convenient but for me not very interesting because it's so much more than that.

MS. RIEDEL: It makes me think of your Geology Flags Project [2004 -2006].

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: That's a great example of exactly what you're talking about.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: It's another way of framing the landscape—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF:—as opposed to looking at state boundaries—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—or however we chose to frame the way we see—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—the world in which we live. You're framing it in terms of geological boundaries and how they define where we live, and how we've built it—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—and how we see ourselves and really, who we are.

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: But it's a completely different way of framing location—

MR. ROLOFF: Right, right.

MS. RIEDEL:—and way of looking at the world.

MR. ROLOFF: Right, and I think that's a good way of describing it. I mean, but it—that interest in that—you know, it's taken a while to kind of be able to put it in those terms myself, you know, in the sense that it came from, you know, just feelings about being in the landscape and some knowledge—you know, having studied geology and then being a practitioner of working with materials and being, you know, involved in different kinds of transformations, and then enlarging the transformative dynamics of things.

And then those would become revelatory in some way, and it started to kind of build—you know, and, I think, in terms of the art world thing, this whole connection with site-based work—you know, [Robert] Smithson and [Robert] Irwin and everybody who kind of defined that—a place being something.

And, you know, I think about Joseph Beuys a lot, about this idea of the fond—you know, the stacks of felt. And at least one interpretation is that warmth could be a sculptural attribute, that it wasn't just necessarily presence; it wasn't just, you know, the kind of Post-Minimalist, you know, idea of this—this constitutes value was, you know, how something looks, only. It's kind of that it has imbued in it these other properties and that sculpture could have—that those are valid; you know, that they have—

So this idea of conversation, you know, all those things, you know, them having—and, I think, the site thing was an important part of that idea of conversation, that a piece here might be a different work if it were over there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So these were—you know, all this stuff is—you know, it all kind of overlaps and—

MS. RIEDEL: That makes me think of motion too, and change in motion in terms of your work. You've talked about nomadism and tectonic plates.

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: It's that movement that's constantly happening—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—among populations and in the earth itself—

MR. ROLOFF: Right. Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—is something that I also see as a thread in your work.

MR. ROLOFF: Right. Well, the piece *Metafossil* [1992] which was shown at [Gallery] Paule Anglim's [San Francisco, CA] in '92 is three ships. They were each made out of—I went—they were concrete. They were about, you know, like between seven and 14 feet in length, and they—I went to three different sites where pine trees, you know, grow now and collected three different species.

MS. RIEDEL: Was this all from California—all Northern California?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, they were all kind of within some sort of access. It was important that they weren't—I can find a lot of those things like in the city, and they would be ornamental rather than indigenous. So I was interested in—one, I wanted to go to the place to actually physically be in the spot where they grow.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: It was high altitude, low—you know, different situations, you know, because nothing really—of that ecology thing, nothing really exists in isolation.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So, you know, the climate, the altitude, the soil chemistry, you know, how close they are to each other—you know, so many factors could be part of their story and so I wanted to—that's why they were collected from those places.

And then they were made into these ship-like things and then eventually the needles would degrade and they would become fossil—they would just become a record of their own structure. And that—I'm losing my train of thought here, but those—oh, boy, this is where the lack of sleep is, I think, showing up in a way.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That's okay. We were talking about fossils, about movement, tectonics—

MR. ROLOFF: Yes, okay.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: That's the important—actually the most important point is that as contemporary fossils and having this point of origin that was specifically in the landscape, that it's sort of a window, in a way, to the fact that this climate that we understand now is—you know, this area, the [San Francisco] Bay area during the Eocene, which was about around 40 million years ago, was tropical. So those same species would be much further to the north.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: So when you were mentioning migration—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—the idea of people migrating, well, that's a—if you understood the history of, you know, like botany—I mean, not so much botany but just the biomes, the world, they've been in flux.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: And if you look at the lens of geologic time, you would see an immense variation and movement.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And it's also kind of a Darwinian [a reference to Charles Darwin] thing of adaptation. So it gets too hot and then the ones in the cooler area, they start putting their seeds—you know, they just move.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: And so, it's a common story, actually, and I think that's also what geologists do when they look at—they look at, say, microfossils like forams or something, and they say, okay, well, in this particular limestone, we're now in the middle of the—you know, in the Alps or something, and this was seafloor. And not only was it seafloor, but this was the water temperature.

So this was the context. It was a completely different environment where this stuff came from than where we understand it now, and that understanding, that, you know, space in between to me is sort of like just a window into so many things about ourselves. It gives you a context for what you understand to be stable and also that, in a way, nothing is really, you know, to be taken for granted in that sense; you know, that it all—

So the [Site Index] project that was the University of Minnesota [Minneapolis, MN] was pretty deeply involved in that idea of the geologic history of Minnesota and then using materials from that history at the College of Design, which is primarily architecture—when I first started the project, it was the College of Architecture and Landscape Architecture and they've added things to it. So—

MS. RIEDEL: This is in Minneapolis and this is this long, ongoing project—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—so that in like 2001—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—it's still in process, correct?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, what happened was is that that project—well, to go back a little bit, it was—in a sense, the piece was meant to be pedagogical because, in my experience, a lot of architects and, you know, a lot of—

I mean, just people who are making design decisions, they're based upon more on color and, you know, things like that—the green façade of the building looks good; you know, we're going to have this certain shade of glass, you know, so we'll use green stone or something, rather than including in the conversation the geologic history of the materials as being an attribute that was equally as interesting as the other things.

MS. RIEDEL: The design and everything else.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, just sort of broadening the value set—

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF:—you know, so that—you know, the students there would see the landscape brought up into view in a certain way as a tool so that the public artwork was—you know, had aesthetic elements to it but it was also pedagogical as a context for being in a school of people making decisions like that.

And part of the whole—you mentioned that it's now eight years. For me it was much more about a process and the conversation, so this idea of conversation has kind of folded into the way that I've approached a lot of public art things.

So when I went there, I saw that—I had a budget of $75,000. There was a new Steven Holl annex that was built that was part of my project. That was where the money was coming from was the 1 Percent [for Art]. It was the old School of Architecture, and then there was—you know, they spent $12 million on the building because the building got delayed and the price went up and it was all—but there was no money for the landscape. It was just barren dirt.

And so here I was with this paltry budget to kind of like possibly—I mean, I could have done anything. I could have made a mural; I could have done whatever, but it seemed to me that the dynamic of the School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, with all the money spent on a building and almost nothing on the landscape, was a political situation. And it was also the way a lot of things get played out, the valorization of the structure over the context, as a kind of trope, in a way, for how we conduct all kinds of things.

So I saw this as really important, so one of the things I was doing was—my initial proposals for them were completely outlandish. They were like full-scale geologic lava beds—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. ROLOFF:—that were alive, and I was even challenging the idea of landscape architecture because I wanted—my concept there in that particular one was the Island of Serdtse [Alaida]—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—you know, which is a brand-new island. And so, instead of—because, see, what happens, in my view of landscape architects, is they work in plan view and then they go very immediately to—you know, it's very thoughtful. There's nothing really—nothing wrong with it, really, but it's just a specific process that I've seen.

And then they start pulling out the—you know, the books about trees and, you know, the plant thing. And they go, oh, let's put some here and it will be a nice little place to sit here. So it's all kind of—it's a particular kind of language.

So I was interested in challenging that and saying let's just let the city of Minnesota plant this landscape in the wind. And so, whatever is just out there—you know, we've created this environment; just let it blow into this—the same way the Island of Serdtse was brought in by seagulls, you know, and their dung and everything; you know, the seeds that they had eaten or—all by chance but contextualized within what was the—because that's how new biomes start—

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF:—in these kind of very raw situations. And so, anyway, that was also another idea was to make a living lava environment that was steaming and hot and, you know, unwieldy on all levels and not plant it—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF:—you know, that nature plants. So it was just—but it was more like trying—and the whole idea

behind that, one, was what kind of landscape would be the counterpoint to the Steven Holl thing that would sort of give a voice to landscape architecture and the relationship to architecture of those two intermingled, you know, figure ground or however that was kind of playing itself out, but more like instead of my $75,000, what's the conversation that we need to have about what is going on here?

And so, that proposal was really just the kind of—one, I had fun doing it but it was strategic in the sense of let's make some proposals to alter the conversation and to kind of change, you know, let's just place this and that.

So this thing went through a process of—we had one very large design charrette that involved different faculty and lots of students and it's a whole big kind of thing that happened. And then I ended up—you know, then it was sort of like, well, we're still going to have a landscape architect design this and I would be part of that.

In the end it worked out that Rebecca Krinke, who is on the faculty there [University of Minnesota] and I, she was kind of assigned to this, and now we were at $500,000, and so we raised some money to—and got one garden done and then part of my thing—I was also doing—another kind of aspect of it was to—the four building materials—it's sort of like going back to the ceramic lab in the early days, which was copper, brick, concrete and this glass.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: Those were analyzed as if I was a geologist—and I worked with some geologists in many different kind of resources and stuff about this—as if they were—my idea there was that geologists are from Mars.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: They would come and go—you know, like feel everything and go, I don't know the difference between a mountain and a building. What is this? It's like the more fundamental kind of question: What is it?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So to me the Steven Holl building and the original Rapson Hall were geologic structures to this person.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, why not—why analyze the thing that's over there that looks like a hill and why not this one?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So anyway, that was—that's another piece where it's just called [*Rapson Group*]- the *Geology Text Panels* [2001-2010] and they'll be—that analysis has been done and written in geologic parlayance [sic] because I wanted it to be, you know, valid for geologists as well as, you know, a person—I mean, just a layperson—and also to reveal those landscapes.

So 40 percent of the copper came from a particular mine, and I think it's called Cobriza Mine in Peru.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And the geology of that area was—like this limestone, it was carbonate—it was Copacabana Formation, which is a carbonate—it's a big limestone formation. It had what's called skarn metamorphism. It's a pluton of igneous rock that came in and metamorphosized part of that limestone and made copper ore out of it.

So we have—you know, we have—in there you've got both the contemporary landscape of Peru; you've also got the depositional environment of that limestone, which would have been probably, like this table, probably tropical seas. And then you have also this situation of whatever was—probably plate tectonics is usually what causes plutons, or it was maybe a hot spot of some sort like a mantle plume of some kind that—

So there was this kind of—you know, embedded in that one material is this history. So we tried to write it up in, you know, coherent language. And then the brick for the Rapson—the older Rapson Hall, I visited the Ochs—O-C-H-S—I think it's pronounced Ochs—Ochs—brick quarry in southwestern Minnesota, and took a tour and learned about—saw the actual sediments that the brick came from, and then did the research and that was part of a shoreline estuarine environment of what was—

At a certain period geologically there was—the middle of America was a sea, a shallow sea, and so this was along the shore of that sea. And so, part of that history was written into this. So all these things—and then those text panels will be etched into the actual material. And the glass is from Europe, so there was all kinds of really interesting things to find out there because glass is more complex. It has more materials in it.

And then the concrete was local. It was from also an earlier sea that was in the—I think the sea where the brick came from was cretaceous time periods like 80 million years ago or so.

MS. RIEDEL: And just to clarify, each one of these materials—the glass, the copper, the concrete and the brick—was each part of a separate garden?

MR. ROLOFF: No, the brick was the original Rapson Hall, which was—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—the School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, and then they got the city to—I mean, the university decided let's expand that—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—we want to develop our program. So Steven Holl got the—and it's spelled H-O-L-L—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: He got the award to build the annex.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And three of the materials are from the annex.

MS. RIEDEL: All right.

MR. ROLOFF: Because the one material, the brick was the primary material. It's also—my project was related more to the annex but I wanted to be inclusive of the complex itself.

So it was a bit of a strategy. I had to narrow it somewhat. There's a lot of other materials in there. But they were the dominant ones that were the most visible and they were also the ones that, you know, really formed the actual structures themselves.

So anyway, that—I mean, so the story is—a lot of these projects have these stories—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—but to bring it back a little bit, that idea of conversation—and I've done that in a number of other even much more recent projects of finding—trying to find ways of unearthing something that people might not have known about or thought about in order to kind of change the conversation to something that, I guess, for me which I feel has a little more substance rather than just design decisions, but like actually questions of what things are, where do they come from and, you know, what do they—at least from the viewpoint that I can bring to it—what do they actually mean?

So it's about—it's about meaning in the end. And, you know, I'm hoping that those are—and, I think, they are, pretty much—fairly welcome, you know, additions to the whole discourse about anything. And so I think that's—I mean, that's what's interesting, I guess, in the sense of the role of the artist, and you were asking at different times, you know, how things have changed.

So, I think, there is a revelatory element that's always there but somehow it's maybe enlarged to a certain extent because it plays a role in a process amongst people who are maybe in that case—earlier cases that conversation was a little more embedded in the materials.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: I think one of the other things that we were talking—going back to the very first part of the question was, these trajectories of sort of like kind of conceptual through what I'm going to call emotional and romantic back to something that's a little conceptual—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—is a kind of, you know, curve of some sort, and that—

MS. RIEDEL: That you see in your work.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: I'm trying to give you an elongated answer—[They laugh]—to your question but that's just how it seems to be there. You know, these things seem—because I have to think about what I was—myself, like, well, what was going on and what was I really responding to at a particular point in time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And, you know, you're kind of in the moment but then, you know, time gives you some sense of reflection.

And it's also very—I think that's when a lot of like students and—the idea of having to write about your work, they sometimes don't always see what the value is, but it's just one form of reflection that gives you a sense of trajectory and then also a self-critique, you know, self-examination.

And so, I think, those are—I mean, I find them valuable. I think there are people who may just—they work differently. You know, there are just other ways to do things.

[END CD 1, TRACK 1.]

MS. RIEDEL: Well, one of the things—thinking about the Minnesota project—that came to my mind was that it is so much an intersection of art and science.

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And that's something we talked about on the phone a couple days ago—

MR. ROLOFF: Okay, right.

MS. RIEDEL:—that your career and your work speaks to that more than many people's do, and that that's, I think, part of that curve that you talked about—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—but that's been consistent throughout.

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And something else that you said on the phone was about how you think that bringing awareness to these different ways of looking at things or seeing things is part of what the work is all about.

MR. ROLOFF: Revelation in a sense—not in a biblical sense or anything particularly, although I think it—yeah, I mean, maybe if you're—it can be, in a romantic sense, that, you know, to understand the world is to understand yourself and, you know, many things. I mean, it becomes a kind of spiritual element.

There's one point that you had about—I was trying to think of what—there's something—it's something that you said when you were trying to—

MS. RIEDEL: Art and science?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, okay, the art and science thing. I think one of the issues there is how that becomes a kind of trope unto itself in the sense that people see scientific imagery or scientific, you know, components to the work and then they—and so it's like trying to define art, the idea of even trying to define science, depending upon—it can be done but it's also always a little more complicated than—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: Because science is—from my perspective, it's not just the geology itself but it's the idea of inquiry.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: It's the idea of question and formulating questions and navigating and kind of working with them. It's also very much process-related.

Each one of those components becomes an entire world also. So you can quickly put them into a list and then define something or you can sort of, like, particularly over time, you know, each one of those things can be kind of enlarged.

So science is really not just, you know, empiricism. Empiricism is a tool that's related to just the fundamental idea of someone's desire to even know something, to question your own—I mean, to me it's ontological. It's the idea of being itself. It's just to ask—and it's also mythological, you know, to ask the fundamental questions of where you are in relationship to things; you know, why you're here.

So it's all philosophical, you know, as it comes—if you look at it from that point of view where someone might want to say that science, well, it's just an empirical—you know, all they do is just measure things, without looking at the impetus, you know, the role of the need to measure within the complexity of the psyche and the complexity of the psyche in relationship to—maybe to nature.

I mean, like Gary Snyder's comment that the unconscious—and I don't remember the exact words, but is a mirror of—wilderness is a mirror of the unconscious. So that to me speaks volumes. You know, you could kind of go on and on into that for—and then what is the relationship between the unconscious and the conscious in terms of—because science is so often equated with the idea of the conscious because it's sort of overly, you know, kind of understood as a kind of rationalistic—as a rational procedure.

But the people who—if you read, you know, the guy who wrote—[Thomas S.] Kuhn, or whatever his name is, that wrote about the nature of scientific revolution [*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn; Chicago, University of Chicago Press: 1962] that it doesn't—you know, it has these different forms and sometimes it's catastrophic that things just kind of fall into place, you know, and it's not logical in terms of how these associations were made, you know, like the structure of the DNA.

You know, there's an intuition involved. There are other things involved. So those are things that—like the idea of science and art, it's just this immense concept of inquiry that has all these overlaying—these complex attributes to them.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that's what I'm thinking about in particular is inquiry, and in particular I think of the word "research."

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: As I've been thinking about your work, it strikes—we've talked about research and the importance of that, and I think about research in terms of science, and in your work, in terms of research and art in a different way. I looked up a quote from [James] Jim Melchert—

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, okay.

MS. RIEDEL:—because I thought it spoke so interestingly to your work. I think this was in his papers that are part of the Archives—

MR. ROLOFF: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: It says [Robert] "Bob Irwin used to talk so eloquently about art-making as a means for acquiring new knowledge. Essentially, he argues that unless we think that we already know everything that can be known, we had better attend to what we have yet to discover and understand."

And then he talks about [Edward] Ed Levine at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA]. He goes into how science and art are complementary and gain complementary insights from research. "I think that if we can justify spending federal funds on scientific research, we're equally justified in supporting aesthetic research."

To me, that was a really interesting way to think about your work. It's a different kind of research but that involves a different kind of inquiry, or multiple points of inquiry—

MR. ROLOFF: Sure.

MS. RIEDEL:—that look at art and science from different perspectives over time, over process, over emotions, over movement and evolution.

MR. ROLOFF: I remember—I tell my students—I've used Bob Irwin's thing on occasion. When we talk about research—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF:—I say that—and it's funny, Ed Levine—because when I was in Kentucky, he was running the visiting artists program in Dayton [OH]—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—whatever that—I forget. I think maybe it was the University of Dayton. Anyway, and I remember going up and seeing Bob Irwin and a panel there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: And Irwin had a piece there, so that's interesting that those two are connected. But either hearing Irwin or reading or something about the idea of him coming a week early and just spending time in a space, and to me that's research. So I would say that's research, just pure observation.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure. Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: And so in some sense, the space would come to him. You know, the project was actually—he was—and so the idea of—not that he wasn't doing things but this idea of receptivity and placing yourself in a context of being receptive. And it's really similar.

I mean, a lot of the art process is this idea related to openness—that you're open to things, almost anything that's in your experience can be generative, and if you can be open to that, then you have this amazing amount of resources.

And so for Irwin to go into what is pretty much an empty room and to let the piece—let the work come to him by being—and this is my interpretation of it because I've seen him talk about five or six times, and just my sense of him—that it's equally as valid as setting up a specific experiment.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: You know, I mean, just kind of working off of a series of papers, you know, of other scientists and kind of solving a problem because it's also not the only thing that Irwin is doing. His mind is also active with other works of his. You know, there's many things.

MS. RIEDEL: Of course.

MR. ROLOFF: And he is—you know, he's also looking for something, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—that's part of his framing. So it's a very good, I think, analogy and also to help out the idea of understanding the value of this whole funding, you know, and all of those; you know, how our country sees aesthetics and how they see—I mean, it's so easy to quickly just place it in a container—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF:—and quantify it and make it a line item on a budget or something and not really see what it is, or to kind of create structures that allow people to have the time to see what it is by giving it a more valorized place in our—you know, in our collective unconscious.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that whole sense of observing, it makes me think of [Rainer Maria] Rilke in one of his books of letters. He talks about the importance of—

MR. ROLOFF: Rilke?

MS. RIEDEL: Rilke. He talks about—

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, yeah, he's another interesting person.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, he talks about the importance of gazing in—just the way you're describing Irwin, going in and observing the space makes me think of Rilke and gazing.

MR. ROLOFF: Right. Right.

MS. RIEDEL: He talks about gazing and just losing oneself as you do when you gaze, but something comes—you see it out of the corner of the eye—and how important that is. You'll never see it directly, but it's that thing that comes.

MR. ROLOFF: But you're open to indirectness.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly. Exactly.

MR. ROLOFF: I mean, the artist we talked about a little earlier, Mark Thompson, he places a lot of value—which, I think, is really—I hadn't really quite ever thought of it in these terms but I see—I mean, I really know what he's saying is this idea of witnessing—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF:—and that it's really—you think about the [World] Trade [Center]Towers thing and if that had happened and no one was there and you came and you saw just the rubble, you just saw the end product, you know, it would be one thing, you know, but the idea that all these people saw that and how it affects just the presence of something—I mean, I think, maybe they use kind of something that's that dramatic as a little bit maybe melodramatic, I suppose, in terms of the idea, but—

MS. RIEDEL: It gets the point across very strongly.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, but it's this idea of witnessing to change and witnessing history and witnessing time, and that could be so much bigger, you know, as far as its role and its value, you know, in society, and also just in relating to nature. I mean, John Muir—there's so many kind of examples like that that are—I think are valued—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—you know, are seen like that. They have a tendency to be kind of placed away for convenience because they're not—they don't fit into the capitalist model all the time.

So, you know, the kind of dominance of capitalism—I mean, that to me is—we brought that up when I was in [Icheon, South] Korea in this panel for "Ceramics and Ecology: [New Prospects"] recently [at the Fifth International Ceramic Symposium, 2009]. And people were talking a lot about, you know, like, what can we do as ceramic artists to sort of become more ecological?

And they were talking about particular problems of survivability and, you know, just lots of things that are connected to different choices. And for me, so much of that was related to capitalism and the way that it has structured our whole thought and kind of being in the world.

MS. RIEDEL: Way of seeing.

MR. ROLOFF: I'm sorry?

MS. RIEDEL: Our way of seeing, to some degree.

MR. ROLOFF: Yes, absolutely.

[Cross talk.]

MR. ROLOFF: It's very structured by that. And, you know, I've read these things but I don't hold them very—I don't hold stuff very well like this, but I was saying that I wish that I was a kind of Marxist theorist that I could actually speak about, from another perspective, how capitalism works.

I mean, [Karl] Marx actually really analyzed the trajectory of capitalism. And people have, I mean, you know, analyzed what he said also and found some things wanting, but the idea of having more perspectives on it that—the whole health-care issue. There's all these things that have to do with free will.

You know, I mean, it's so—and then that relates back to the choices you make in ecology. I mean, is there actually a free will or is it bounded in certain ways? There's so many things that are looped together that—anyway, I'm not sure where—

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that brings to my mind again the project in Minnesota and the whole objective of refocusing on the geology and the natural environment and the materials—as the materials that became part of this architectural construction and the way architecture has become an increasing part of your work in a way of looking at humanity in nature and as a part of nature, and human activity as just from a broad-enough perspective simply another part of geology, another kind of geologic activity.

MR. ROLOFF: The anthroturbation idea—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—which, yeah, that—

MS. RIEDEL: Would you talk about—since we're on that topic for the first time—talk about how that came up and

how you define that?

MR. ROLOFF: It was just—it goes back to the thing of seeing these materials in landscape and then, you know, kind of repositioned; the context changed. So I would trace it pretty easily to that.

And then—oh, I don't know what it was, in the '90s sometime, one of the people in the—the geophysicist, Paul Spudich, that's in [*New Observations*:]*Organic Logic* magazine [Fall/Winter 2000]. We were talking in general about it and I asked him, I said, "Well, what would you—what would be the term that you would use for humans as geologic agents?" And he said that he thought it would be called anthroturbation, which just means human disturbance, so the idea that you would—

And what's kind of beautiful about that is that, you know—for me, see, those things—I make these really easy connections is that—you know, the Alcatraz terrain which constitutes the whole western half of—the eastern half of San Francisco [CA] is a gray, whacky sandstone that primarily was formed—or is a turbidite, which is a type of sandstone that was formed by turbidity currents.

So the idea that, that was—that we're living on top of something that uses the same word and that our construction of San Francisco was also a kind of turbidity. Just using, you know, the Greek root or whatever that is as a kind of, you know—it's just beautiful to me to think about that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: And so part of that is—there's this whole series of works that are looking at human processes of analogues to geologic process as a kind of removal. Those people that—that family that blows up buildings in a very special way; they implode and kind of fall on themselves. It's just a kind of very fast frame for a mountain losing, you know, a sixteenth of an inch in 20 years or something.

MS. RIEDEL: Fast-frame erosion.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, so it's just framing of time and space and material, in a way, and so—and then the little easier kind of connection is the process of sedimentation, which in a turbidity can occur in an hour.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: You know, it's a very fast thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Fast.

MR. ROLOFF: And then laying bricks, you know, to build a building is just stratification. I mean, it's a very literal—you know, literally using—because you're both dealing with gravity and deposition, you know, as a kind of constructive process.

So for me, the analogue is there, so it's easy for me to see human activity as just a function of nature. And then that raises all kinds of other questions of resources and—I mean, I'd say that the more kind of extreme version of that would say, well, anything that humans do is okay because it's no different than a sparrow, you know, doing this with seeds and building nests and things.

So that sort of totally removes a kind of ethics from that, but even still, ethics is a human construct, you know, so the idea of—I think it's interesting to step out with—as an exercise, if nothing else, to step outside of all things that are possible and to put yourself in that position of can you step outside of yourself? And that's a basic philosophical question that philosophers for thousands of pages have tried to figure out if that's even possible; what are the constraints; you know, how does that work?

I mean, there's just so many—but it's a really interesting thing and it also—I remember reading in *Scientific American* at one of those—I think that probably around the millennium time where some famous scientist was saying that the thing that distinguishes a time from others in his mind was the quality of the questions that are asked by the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: You know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: What are our questions? So to me you can't ask good questions until you can really have as big a perspective as possible in which you, as the questioner, are not always in the valorized position. You're not at the hierarchical node of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: And so, I mean, I see—I mean—we were talking earlier about so many of these things boil down to philosophical things, and so that's why I end up so often with these different—you know, and in trying to understand the kiln as a kind of projection of some sort or to question the role of the kiln in—like one piece that was done in '82 was called *Mountain Kiln/Black Orchid*—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. I like that piece a lot.

MR. ROLOFF: The thing that I was most interested in was I always saw the kiln as a box like a refrigerator, and you stick it in there and you change it and then you take it out and you forgot about the refrigerator.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And so I was interested in the form of the orchid itself being the thing that generated the form of the kiln, so there was this intrinsic relationship between making—made and making.

And so—and I think that there's some—I think conceptual artists actually had some of those questions in their mind, at least at a kind of very basic level of the notion of where ideas come from, the role of ideas and, you know, they were questioning.

So that was just kind of my form of the things that I had to work with in trying to say, well, should every kiln be unique in relationship to the, you know, product, or could the product and the process be indistinguishable from each other?

Now, what does that mean? So if I were—I mean, in a capitalist world, I would—I bought that Epson scanner, I'd own stock in Epson. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: There you go.

MR. ROLOFF: At least to understand on one level.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: But I'm saying it's sort of like—the idea that I'm separate from what that is, and it's in my sort of environment, and yet I'm completely unconnected with how it became; to me, it's really kind of—see, that's ecology to me. That's a fundamental—and it's not, again, like I'm saying, fixed upon—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: It's so biocentric.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: It's sort of like, let's go kind of plant more trees and you don't even—you're not cognizant of soil and—I mean, it's so many things about it, and even the history of that tree in the landscape, which begs the history of the landscape. And there's just so many layers that seem to be part of any act.

And so one of the things—what I try to do—and about 1987, about, I did this piece called *Oculus*: *Emerson/Beebe, No. 1 and 2*, and it was a glass sphere that was related to Ralph Waldo Emerson's idea of being able to see the landscape in a transparent way.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: It was a kind of purity.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And so I thought, well, that's so beautiful. It was very idealistic, you know, but beautiful. And then William Beebe had this bathysphere, spherical form because it would take pressure the best of any form going down into the ocean.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And they still use the sphere for a lot of, you know, things like that.

But, anyway, at that point there was a show that was in Santa Barbara [“Eco-Systems,” Santa Barbara

Contemporary Art Forum, Santa Barbara, CA] and Betty Klausner was the curator and she saw this piece [*Lahontan Group III: Vanishing Ship*, 1987] that I had done at the Matrix [Gallery, University of California-Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA]—or knew about it, I guess. It was a review at the—it was a glass ship that was done at U.C. Berkeley in the Matrix program.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, one of the vanishing ships.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, that's it. And so I built these two glass spheres to basically position in the environment and in the gallery to look out at the oil rigs, you know, offshore.

And that was about the time I was interested in, you know, this idea of observing, and inside of one of these things was—I had built a fire and I was covered with soot, and the other one had seawater in it, partly because I was interested in what I was calling the sort of dominance of marine depositional environments for a lot of different like mats of algae that, you know, is still not 100 percent sure but it's the sort of dominant theory that all those botanical materials eventually became fossil fuels.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: There are some people that think that actually carbon was intrinsic to the Earth itself and that it actually came from—it's just like iron; it's just another material, but it somehow is through the same processes that form minerals and stuff that it actually made these hydrocarbons. But that's a kind of more radical theory. It's not as accepted.

So anyway, this looking and this thing was connected to those oil rigs, and bringing Emerson kind of to the present to see, you know, how the environment—you know, now that transcendentalism, which was looking kind of from, oh, New England, say, looking west, and at least the Caucasians or Europeans at the time that was unknown territory.

And so he's looking at a kind of wilderness in a way, and I was just curious that sort of now that the wilderness is less so—like the idea of bringing that—updating it as well as just this kind of still really, I guess, believing in that, that somehow there's a kind of purity still present in some way.

Anyway, so that was kind of one of the initiating things but I was also working on, in different ways, about the idea of the kilns being—I guess, I would call it—I think, I used the term "conspicuous consumption." So you see that there is a fire and that therefore, you know, you see the fuel being burned, where, like in that scanner again there's—the carbon footprint of that scanner is probably, you know, I don't know, a couple million BTUs [British Thermal Units]or whatever, but it's hidden.

And so people were really—and I remember there was a lecture once where someone mentioned something like that and they were just so willing to kind of just say that this is—because I can see it, therefore I can now take a moral stance on it and say this is bad or something. And I said, well, you know, I don't go skiing so I'm not using jet fuel and—you know, there's nothing wrong with skiing; it's just more of like what would that person respond to that was also doing something that was the same thing, but in another—you know, it wasn't just visible—

MS. RIEDEL: The same cost, right. Yes, sure.

MR. ROLOFF:—wasn't visible.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: So I did four projects; three that were united under one term called *51 Million BTUs* [1991-1997]—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—because I knew that each firing—by then I had a kind of context for—and I had a series of burners that I knew what they were, that each firing was about 17 million BTUs.

So I did three of those, and they were meant to reveal—like the one of—the bathysphere one is this other *Oculus* piece—of this thing, trying to understand, through this narrative tableau, its own origin. Like to go down—it wasn't to go down to the bottom of the ocean; it was actually to go down below to the reservoir of oil—

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF:—that's below the ocean. And so there was the—there was a virgin and an ancient bathysphere and they were this kind of narrative. They would be—one had gone down and the other one was—and it was sort of lost and the other one was now looking for it. So it was this kind of weird family. But anyway—

MS. RIEDEL: Science fiction. [They laugh.]

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah. Anyway, that one and then the—I guess, actually before that, which, okay, I'm now getting the order wrong because before that was this piece called *Untitled (Earth Orchid)*, [1988] which was the first of the *51 Million BTUs*, and it was meant to create a botanical form that revealed where the gas came in and the ignition of the material—the inner side of the kiln where that ignition itself was visible to everyone, but it was also that the materials—the fuel itself and the oxygen were re-experiencing the fuel's botanical origin.

So it was taking place within this botanical form. So it would know itself through this symbology and then go up and become CO2 [Carbon Dioxide] in the atmosphere.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: So I decided—what I was responding to in that time was—this was when the conversation was becoming more ecological in the mid-'80s. What I saw, which I'm getting back to about this whole idea of science and stuff—I saw it as a *TIME* Magazine version of ecology, which is an article about this long—two pages or whatever it is—and it says, do this and don't do that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: So I read my article and now I know what to do. And so what I was interested in was—I said, okay, there's still an opportunity here that I was really interested in, which was to create a physical—so that you were in the presence of a material engaging with its own question of origin and you were there—and the thing about the kilns themselves is that they are conjuring events.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: There are things that happen that don't quite—are outside of sort of easy—they're chemical, in a way.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure—[inaudible, cross talk].

MR. ROLOFF: So I thought that this was—that there was still a kind of path to follow. And I made a very specific decision to continue and do a series. And so each one of those in those three—and then the final kiln piece was *Metabolism and Mortality/02* like oxygen that was done in '92 at the Tyler [School of Art, Elkins Park, PA]—it was part of the NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts] conference. So that was the last—

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting. That was part of NCECA.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, it was in Philadelphia [PA].

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: They had the big—you know—all the different schools and Moore College [of Art & Design, Philadelphia, PA], and then Tyler was an important, you know, different—and there's a whole bunch of schools there in Philadelphia so they were all involved.

And then that one was really—see, the other ones had become part of that series and now this one had sort of become a little different, and I thought that it could stand on its own. And it was—there was a beech tree that was huge. It was like an 80-foot-high giant beech tree that had died because—they think because the saltwater runoff from when they would—there's a parking lot that was a little bit uphill—had run in and eventually killed it. And why it had gotten along so long and it was killed then, I don't know, but maybe it was some bad winters in a row or something.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So that was just speculation as to—but they left this—it's this kind of beautiful sculpture, this remnant of this beech tree. So I was really interested in that. That was sort of the site-based—you know, it was kind of like extracting out of the site.

And so what I was doing—you know, the *Oculus* thing are these two round deals, and so they had—they had transformed themselves into what I was thinking of as an oxygen molecule, which is two atoms of oxygen, and in this case they had become ionized. They were no longer held together as an O2 but they were separated and

one became a kiln and the other became a greenhouse.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And they were positioned at the drip line of what would have been when the tree was alive. So they were referring back to that tree's photosynthetic history, you know, as a kind of agent of photosynthesis, you know, in the environment, and the kiln was referring to that through that lens back to the origin of the fossil fuels itself that were used in the firing.

And then the other ionized—the other sphere was a greenhouse that had a thermometer inside that registered—well, they had two thermometers. One was inside and another was outside, so you could see the greenhouse effect in contemporary sunlight.

So one was about ancient sunlight—the beech tree was about the sunlight of its time period and then the other one was about contemporary sunlight. So there was this kind of three-sunlight-like kind of elements.

And then that was the last kiln that was done, so I felt that it was important, you know, like just—and the artist thing was to take on the issue but not necessarily by stopping doing something but to do it in an informed way, in a different way, and to use this idea that these things are revealed as part of the conversation so that—

You know, again, the tool that was constructed to grind down this—you know, to flatten out this piece of marble and the electricity that was used to do it, I mean, all of those—there's so many things that are in the transport of this marble from wherever it came. It's all here but there's no connection at all to any of those things by looking at them.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So I—

MS. RIEDEL: That embedded history that you were talking about, yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So that's what I was interested in doing. And then I did this other piece after that. Actually, a whole bunch of things were done about trying to work with the idea of firing but not using fire in a particular way. And so that piece *Rotting Flame* [*I*, 1994]—

MS. RIEDEL: With the oranges.

MR. ROLOFF:—the oranges, was about the idea of decay being a very slow form of oxidation.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—and the fire being a fast form.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: And there were some photo works that had oranges in them that were decay things.

And then I did this thing [*Pitzer Project: A Prototype System for the Production and Distribution of Ancient Sunlight*, 1996] at Pitzer College [Claremont, CA] which was a single light—lamp pole connected up to a gasoline generator, and they had a flue that was the same height as the lamp pole, so it was a kind of equivalence there. And the gasoline generator was designed with a kind of chip to go on—on and off for a few minutes at a time anytime night or day and then this light would come on.

So I was trying to use slightly different—use industrial language to talk about the same things, that the Kilns—that series of Kilns we're talking about, but what I was interested in—I mean, it becomes a didactic thing. There's a gasoline engine and then there is this light, sort of like a, you know, easily read system that's, like I say, would be pretty didactic.

But what I was interested in was that the chip was completely random, so you didn't—and what I liked about that was that it started to bring in this idea of the wilderness but more like a wild animal that was unpredictable in sort of conventional terms. So this thing would just come on in the middle of the day and die, you know, for five minutes—come on in the middle of the night.

And it made kind of a noise. You know, it was sort of like the noise of a generator. And it sort of had this kind of autonomous kind of existence.

MS. RIEDEL: What would spark it to come on? Was it random or was it arranged?

MR. ROLOFF: No, it was this chip.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: It was a little program.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: I had someone program a chip, and then it would send a signal. It was a nice little Honda generator that had an automatic ignition thing that I could do that. And then someone had to fill it up with gas so it was sort of like—

MS. RIEDEL: Would it come on at the same time every morning or every evening or it was completely random.

MR. ROLOFF: No, it was completely random.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: So you didn't know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: You had no idea.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: I wanted it to be unpredictable.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: Because, you know, like all the street lights in—I mean, this was in L.A. [Los Angeles, CA] I was thinking this would be kind of connected to all the street lights in L.A. And they—you know, they come on at—when you fly into any city and you notice, you know—particularly when you go into New York and you see, well, there's yellow lights here. Those are sodium vapor, and then there's blue lights and those are, you know, like halogens or mercury vapor lamps.

And so you can kind of read the—but there's thousands of street lamps, you know, all over these cities. And so this was kind of like a little comment on the city of light in L.A. And anyway, it was important that that wild animal component be there.

MS. RIEDEL: You have, in the past five minutes, commented on alchemy and systems and site-based materials being very important as a way of referencing the site, and the importance of the West in general in your work—

MR. ROLOFF: Exposed landscape in that sense, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—which I feel are some of the main themes that run throughout your work, and that we will touch on, I think, as we begin to move more chronologically through things.

MR. ROLOFF: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: But this has been a wonderful extended introduction—[They laugh]—a way to start to think about, or to present, themes that will hopefully come up and be repeated and developed—

MR. ROLOFF: Okay. Right. Okay.

MS. RIEDEL:—over the next couple days.

MR. ROLOFF: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: So with that, unless you have any final thoughts on how things have changed and stayed the same over the past 30 years, maybe we'll move back to the beginning.

MR. ROLOFF: I think that that's probably good for that part.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: This other stuff that's—I need to maybe, like, find a slightly different angle to enter into the most current things.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So I think that will—that summarized the attitude, and I think that that curve that I was talking about, about the kind of—and I say it's—I use the word—

MS. RIEDEL: You're starting from more conceptual to more romantic and then more conceptual again.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And I might even change that slightly. I don't know if "conceptual" is—I guess, it's—I guess, it is the best word. I don't think it's the conclusive word.

MS. RIEDEL: It certainly feels that way—I think it's conceptual. That's part of the challenge of talking about your work is there are so many different ways to describe it. I think about environmental; I certainly think of conceptual; some of the earlier pieces I think of performance—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: But the other pieces feel—in terms of a process unfolding, they have a process quality to them as well. So there are so many different ways—points of entry—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—for looking at you work and thinking about it and talking about it.

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Hopefully we can address it—

MR. ROLOFF: Well, I think one of the things that is part of that, which is what—now that I'm thinking about it, is that it's actually a change of the definition of aesthetics—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—because the things in the middle were done more by eye in that—

MS. RIEDEL: Eye—E-Y-E.

MR. ROLOFF:—the way that they became—the idea that the object was resonant in the normal way that you would think of aesthetics would be at its highest point in terms of—as being a co-equal as to its—you know, of all the different properties and maybe even more of the thing that drives stuff, like when is something done? When it has this most aesthetic place.

And that, you know, this—I mean, I kind of—I'm both very understanding but also annoyed by someone like Kenneth Baker, who is our—he is so aesthetically dominant it's like—you know, I think that's why he speaks about painting so well is that's what he—it's like this is what art is and it's about these particular pursuits.

And when these things fall into place in a particular way, then there's this, you know, celebration. When they don't, then it's a lesser celebration. It's a hierarchical system. But I've really started to kind of question much more so. I think it can be seen in some ways as kind of sour grapes or something that people don't—but, I think, it's more—

I mean, a friend and a one-time student was Charlie Ray, you know, and he's made like such a really fantastic career. I'm very proud of him and really like his quirkiness and what he's doing, but it's built upon, in my mind—this is just my interpretation—an idea of the properties of sculpture, and that the properties are still evocative as visual things.

And he builds all these really interesting conceptual things into them, which I know about, and sometimes you wouldn't know about them at all, but for him that imbuing is really part of the work and it's like the hidden part—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—that is somehow there but you can't—you know, it's there but you can't identify it sort of thing. It's this beautiful tricksterism that's part of all that. But it still has a kind of fundamental thing about the idea of the visual as a kind of highest point of valorization.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And so when you get involved in systems like this sort of stuff, those things, I think that the visual becomes an attribute rather than necessarily the—so the question becomes sometimes, is it art in those terms, and maybe it's not even anything, and maybe it's just something else.

It's a little bit Duchampian in the sense—I mean, do you think that the signed toilet is beautiful? Does it have a kind of presence? I don't know, maybe. It might. Yeah, it has some, but it's also got something else. So it could be kind of a bit of that conceptual art sort of idea.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: But I find that most of the writing—unless it's—I mean, I think identity politics and things that are more socially based have kind of found new languages to sort of work outside of that uber-aesthetic kind of dynamic, because they certainly needed to.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: They needed to have an expanded field in the sense of how the discourse could function and be more inclusive and have other sorts of dynamics to it. And, I think—I mean, to me Joseph Beuys would be, I think, more of the paradigm and maybe more of the objective, I suppose.

If I were to say—and this is still a question of mine; I don't really know the answer—is that, I think, that he had these really fundamental systemic ideas about what he was trying to do that did evolve, but he also had a good eye. So he brought both things. He could make something just look—it answered that other thing, that aesthetic part.

And so my question for myself is like, on certain things—because some of that may be subsumed by the research or the concept part of it, has this failed as an art work in this sense or is there enough of the other thing in a different sort of set of terms to kind of carry it forward and recreate the terms that it is being carried forward in?

And it's funny—you know, it becomes also a question of whether or not—because, I think, all along there's this kind of issue of subjectivity and objectivity in terms of it. When you know what you're trying to do and then you also know how it's perceived and somehow that they have this—there's a synergistic quality to them—I've always kind of believed in that myself.

But whether or not I have the sort of capacity to lend this objectivity to—because the research-based things take such an extended period of time that there's another dimension to it that you don't arrive at these places where you say, well, it works or it doesn't work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: It's not—it's more nuanced than that and it becomes a different kind of terrain in a sense. So that's kind of where I'm at in terms of that—there's a question there of, well, what is it, you know, and how does it actually operate? And if you use a certain critic like Kenneth Baker as kind of your counterpoint, then, you know, you'd go, well, it's not working. But to me that's such a specific view—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF:—that it's kind of—I go, gee, I don't know that that's that interesting to me anymore. I don't know that I really care that it actually does those things, or that that is such a priority that you subsume other elements to become that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So it's a kind of—it's a curious, I guess, conundrum.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: I'm going to go to the restroom here.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

[END CD 1, TRACK 2.]

MS. RIEDEL: You were just talking about Kenneth Baker before we broke and—

MR. ROLOFF: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: Your work has been written about quite a bit and insightfully so. I'm thinking in particular of Constance Lewallen and Robert Morgan, but in particular of Lisa Becker.

Along the lines of what you were just talking about, I thought this was an insightful description of your work. She talked about—I think it was Lisa Becker ["John Roloff: Displacements Holocene Fragments (Black Water Group)," in *John Roloff: Displacements*, John Roloff and John Micheal Kohler Art Center; Sheboygan, John Micheal Kohler Art Center: 2001] writing about the Kohler installation [Holocene Fragments (Black Water Group), 2000]—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, right.

MS. RIEDEL:—"providing the investigative viewer with a poetic realm for research and reflection." That was so accurately described.

MR. ROLOFF: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: It presumes an investigative viewer, for starters.

MR. ROLOFF: Right. Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And it combines the idea of a poetic realm with research and reflection, which feel more like juxtaposed—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—ways of approaching something rather than approaches I would necessarily put together, but I think by putting them together it really summarized that combination of your work, which is unusual; that sense, that deep sense of poetry with research and then reflection, but presuming, again, an investigative viewer.

MR. ROLOFF: I think what's happened in a way, in that sense, is that the idea of poetry itself is—I was thinking about what I said about like—like I say, Kenneth—you know, what I would call the sort of minimalist aesthetic.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: I'm still an incredible sucker for that. I mean, I love that as much as anybody. You know, and when I see that happening, I mean, I appreciate—you know, it's something that means something to me. I just think that it's limiting at the same time.

And I don't know that I'm the one to try to figure out the alternatives or anything, but it just—it just causes more of a question than an assumption that when you've arrived at "X" that you're done, or that you have arrived.

And so—and, I guess, because I think in certain parts of my work I have at least—you know, to some extent I have done some of that—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: I think the black Ships and a few things were probably in that—you know, in that, and it took me 10 years—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—of a distillation of working with the Ships to kind of like arrive there, and that may be in the end what I'm talking about is that, you know, I'm just at a different point in a larger process that I don't have that other—

MS. RIEDEL: And those feel very poetic.

MR. ROLOFF: I'm sorry?

MS. RIEDEL: The black Ships feel very poetic—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah. Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—in relation to—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—more recent work.

MR. ROLOFF: But, see, what gets—this is where I get into this kind of—

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF:—conundrum—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—in the sense that, of course, I can read Rilke and [William] Shakespeare and whoever and I know that I'm reading poetry.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: But when I read [John] J. Tuzo Wilson and his scientific paper on the definition of transformed faults —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. ROLOFF:—I also think I'm reading poetry.

MS. RIEDEL: I believe you.

MR. ROLOFF: But it's completely different—and Harry [Hammond] Hess's origin of the seafloor papers. Early geologic, particularly marine—the romanticism for me is the marine geologists like [Henry William]Menard and [Robert Sinclair]Dietz and [Harry Hammond] Hess and [Roger] Revelle just putting themselves into this position of the unknown in the sense of trying to map the ocean with very limited equipment, particularly compared to what's nowadays.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: We're talking about in the '50s before plate tectonics—and the evolution of the concepts and the arguments and the whole thing about plate tectonics itself, like what is going on.

And so, that to me—that's the romantic—that in itself, to place yourself in that conversation is romanticism and the writing about it, however scientific it is, is inseparable from that. And so—and I can make some distinctions between one writer and the next and things like that but it's all part of a process that is intrinsic unto itself. And so, how you could—I mean, for me, I can't separate—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—where the aesthetics are—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—and aren't, particularly.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So it's—and, I think, what's happening to me is that I'm also choosing to want to believe that as an aesthetic context, even though they didn't think of that. It wasn't their intention, necessarily.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: But it's really a kind of—I guess, a viewpoint of mine and—

MS. RIEDEL: Would you describe the contemporary installations and the contemporary work feeling as romantic to you as the earlier pieces?

MR. ROLOFF: Do you mean the work themselves?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, the work.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, I think so.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: Particularly the one that—I remember that I saw the review of the piece at Yerba Buena Gardens [*Yerba Buena Complex*, 2008, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA] last year. It was not mentioned in any reviews. I think there may—I don't know if they were trying to protect me or—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. ROLOFF:—they didn't see it, or I have no idea. But even a colleague of mine wrote kind of dastardly about the show, which was a kind of strange show, I think. And he didn't say anything, like I wasn't there. And it was probably the biggest piece in the show. It was a huge—it was sort of like the size of the building, in a way, or it took on the building.

You know, and there's this very didactic aspect to it, as part of it. The drawings were a lot like—there was one drawing that was very much like the way that geologists illustrate something that they're doing. And I've actually—I could find them, but they're—I have some big printouts of these, you know, very graphic sort of layouts of stuff that I got down at USGS [United States Geological Society] in Menlo Park [CA].

MS. RIEDEL: This is the *Yerba Buena Complex* piece you're talking about from 2008?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah. Right. And so, I think—you know, I think that in a way the piece probably failed in the sense that it was—unless you were willing to spend the time with it, it was not, unto itself, as evocative—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF:—as it might be if it spoke in the normal language of the unspeakable—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—like art had been assigned—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—through history and through the Minimalism and things like that, to speak through an unspeakable tongue, in a sense.

And so, although it had aspects of that—and that could be—you know, given a similar site over and over again, that could all evolve, and that probably should evolve, as how the visual relates to that, how—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And, I think, even the [Geology] Flags—you know, what people have said about the Flags was, well, I liked them but I don't know what they mean because I'm not a map reader. I mean, I don't know map symbology. So what was interesting, though, is that the relationship between needing literal information to kind of make the piece work and needing—it couldn't exist as an abstraction.

To me, what I was interested in was whether or not the symbology of the graphic representation that mapmakers used to represent geologic materiality, whether that would carry through strong enough—you didn't necessarily know what you were looking at but somehow you sensed it. So I was still interested in the unspeakable.

MS. RIEDEL: And there's also a pattern that even if you didn't understand what it meant, there was a pattern on the flag that could be—

MR. ROLOFF: It was a pattern but, you know, every pattern has got something to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: That's kind of—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: I think one of the things that could have been—I think, you know, on that one level of the aesthetic experience of it is that the Flags could have been bigger—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF:—so that there was a physicality of how they're connecting to the wind—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—was slightly more out of scale than the other—but I used every cent of the budget to make those Flags. It was just—I took on the whole site and that was kind of a limitation in a way. So anyway, that was—I mean, I could see that and that would be how I would approach that.

MS. RIEDEL: To make them larger next time?

MR. ROLOFF: I'm sorry?

MS. RIEDEL: To make them larger next time? Is that what you're saying?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, and more physical, sort of like where they are not just the flag but they're actually—they have an entity in some other—also in some other way.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So that would be—that was just thinking about it. But, I think, what was surprising to me is that people wanted to go and they wanted to understand it now.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: And so, the difference is somewhat objective and subjective. I understood it now but—and I didn't think that it was that necessary. So it could be related to the language of flags.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: It could be the expectation of an artwork. It could be a lot of different things, but—

MS. RIEDEL: It could be the translation between the languages, too, from geology to artwork.

MR. ROLOFF: Right, and whether mapping symbols themselves are enough of a—or whether they needed to be actual photos of the materials.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: And I looked at all that. I actually tried a lot of different schemes and things.

But I was interested in letting the abstraction be—and also one of the things that I was also interested in was the idea of a map sort of also being on the landscape that the map symbology was—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—was in a way a little more of the landscape and as a symbolic language than, say, photos of the materials.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And so that was kind of something I was thinking about. And, you know, then over in the [San Francisco] Art Commission window there were big panels that described everything. I mean, it was all—it became as didactic as you could ever want—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. ROLOFF:—with actual geologic, you know, writers and, you know, like texts and everything.

But, you know, that's kind of—I guess, it's partly the—and, I think, again, for a critic it may have to do with the expectation of how an artwork fits into the world. And in some ways, when you're trying to, like, question that expectation a little bit, you may have to, like, do an extreme example in order for it to be—in order for it to register.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So those are all, you know, kind of questions of strategies about the way things work—you know, the way that the world kind of works. So those are all things that I've considered in terms of, you know, evaluating something. But I liked it. [They laugh.] See, that's the thing. I was completely satisfied, you know, just in my own way.

So anyway, those are some—that's kind of examples of—that would be one example of that. And, you know, I think, it was—I mean, I used the entire—the whole civic center [This is a reference to *Protogaea Civica II (Franciscan Formation/San Francisco, CA)*, 2005 installation for the San Francisco Civic Center Plaza. It is the second variation of the Geology Flags Project.]—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—all 18 poles and then the one big giant pole had a different set of Flags on it.

But there's a guy named Mark Wallinger, who is a British artist, who—and there may have been another artist that's done something like this, where they took political flags and he'd made them into—reduced all the different colors of the countries into black and white. So it would be like the U.N., you know, here's all the flags—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF:—but they have been—they no longer have their colors.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: They're just kind of reduced to this thing. So, I think, when it's—and that was quite poignant, I think, because it was in the social dimension and it questioned the nationalistic, you know, things—representation in a direct way, you know, through that language.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: And, I think, it's also that the milieu of—in a sense of identity politics and political work in general is—you know, allows for that. It had a very strong reception.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: It was seen is what I'm saying—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—while, I think, the Geology Flags, like who cares about geology?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: What the heck is that?

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. ROLOFF: It was not seen.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So those are—I think there's a distinction there in terms of—so does that mean that I have an extra responsibility in terms of how you make something seen, which, I think I could take that on—you know, I could try to work with that—or is there something else—you know, is it just the way it is, you know? You know, you pick obscurity and so you get obscurity, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. ROLOFF: I just don't think it's obscure—I think it is obscure but it's unfortunate, see, and it's—

MS. RIEDEL: That comes back full circle to one of the things we started talking about earlier, which was giving voice to something that has no voice—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah. Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—and making something that's invisible—

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—really seem visible.

MR. ROLOFF: Right. Right. So, I think, you know, those are all like the kind of like terrains to explore but there's also degrees—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: You know, within it there are degrees of what's—

MS. RIEDEL: That's true.

MR. ROLOFF:—what is required or what is—and also maybe what is the goal—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—I suppose. And my goal was kind of met in the sense of displacement of the normal flags that are there, kind of like the history of the American flag, a kind of geographic or political boundaries in that history.

And then my—you know, I was just supplanting another history temporarily, although I didn't really use that language of the history because there is no real history of the Flags. I suppose there's a history of maps or something.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: But that wasn't what I was talking about. I was talking about more like the place.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, the Earth itself.

MR. ROLOFF: And in a way, those flags—the flag—the normal flags, they only talk about the place in a kind of tangential way, meaning that it's the civic—you know, it's a place where politics occurs and so this is a political—history of some politics, and the U.N. Plaza [United Nations Plaza, San Francisco, CA] is down a ways.

And so it—I mean, it does make sense. It just—I don't know that it's as much sense as could be made. It just seems kind of, you know, generic.

MS. RIEDEL: San Francisco, with all of its turbulent geologic history—is so ripe for exactly that sort of—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—way of being examined and framed—

MR. ROLOFF: Right. Right.

MS. RIEDEL:—and looked at.

MR. ROLOFF: I think if there was - things about the earthquake, that's the place where most people have a connection. And I'm not that interested in—earthquakes are not that—I mean, I understand what they all—I mean, they fit in in different ways to things I'm interested in but they're not—it seems too much—too easy, I guess.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: Have you seen that wonderful map out of Point Reyes [CA]? There is that little half-mile earthquake walk and there're actually little maps that show you all - how the tectonic plates have moved and the continents have shifted—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yeah.

MR. ROLOFF:—over millions of years.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. ROLOFF: And it actually—one of the things that's so interesting is that not earthquakes specifically but land mass specific, it shows how the western edge of the country is moving northward—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—slowly over time, and that's always—I like to take visitors there because it gives them such a strong sense of the geology of the place.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, there could have been—instead of having those—I mean, if you wanted to describe it, that would be—you know, you could—and there—I mean, you could use other strategies of having something more like—you know, more present.

But that becomes a big question as to whether or not you want people to understand it, in the sense—that's the didactic part—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—or whether you want like kind of like—see this is where the romanticism seems to want to come back is for people to feel it—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF:—to feel that that's there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: And so, flags are kind of graphic, abstract things. Maybe they're not the right—you know, it's more of an experiment, but what I was interested in was an opportunity to try out what for me was a whole system of using flagpoles particularly over a period of space and looking at—because there is a diagrammatic system that geologists use which are just to place graphically in relationship to each other core samples. So you can see, over here—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—the disappearance of one stratigraphic unit—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—and then you can also see its continuance maybe between other ones. You can read the landscape—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, through those core samples, yes.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, maybe the flags have—there is a particular site that is its optimum and that all kind of makes sense. So those are—I mean, those are issues, I mean, that are all kind of latent in thinking about how did it work? So that's—but I think that those issues are different than whether a piece only has presence or not.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: It's kind of like there's maybe more than one kind of experience—

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. ROLOFF:—that an artwork can make available.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: But it seemed like that the system—the structures of the system of the museums and critics and things are tuned to a particular kind of grouping of things and that—you know, and I also like a lot of that, and there's nothing that I'm not interested in as well, but I see the limitation.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And, I think, a lot of people that are—I think, conceptual artists, that was part of even the strategy then was—you know, like Dennis Oppenheim taking the floor plan of a museum that - he was going to do project and then using a white marker powder to literally place the museum floor plan in the forest [*Gallery Transplant*, 1969] so a displacement of floor plan—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF:—as a work—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—and then that was documented and—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: And, you know, that's a kind of conceptual strategy that was about—in those days, you know, they were questioning the idea of the museum as—you know, and that was that thing about don't trust anyone over 35 if you were—and they were seen as the establishment.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So they were ripe for kind of like undermining. I mean, and so, I think, it maybe had a certain kind of coherence, in a way, and there were other works that were building on that, that were doing that in different ways. So, you know, it's just something to think about.

MS. RIEDEL: You did very specifically—over time—make a decision to move your work from very studio-based work out into the landscape in the larger—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—the larger world, literally, figuratively. I think it will be helpful to move back to the beginning now and we work through—

MR. ROLOFF: Okay, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—chronologically and a little bit more specifically. So with that in mind, let's go back to the very beginning.

MR. ROLOFF: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: You were born in Oregon. You grew up in Sacramento [CA] but you were born in Oregon. Is that correct?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, Portland, Oregon.

MS. RIEDEL: In Portland.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And when were you born? What year?

MR. ROLOFF: Nineteen-forty-seven.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Did you spend the first few years in Portland, then?

MR. ROLOFF: No, we were living—my dad was a coach—

MS. RIEDEL: What was his name?

MR. ROLOFF: Harvey Roloff.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, and your mother?

MR. ROLOFF: Eileen.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: E-I-L-E-E-N. We lived in Forest Grove, Oregon, which was 25 miles, or something, to the West of Portland, and that's where Pacific University was.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: My dad went to college there and he was also a coach there. And so, until 3rd grade I lived in Forest Grove.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And then he got a job at Sacramento State in Sacramento [California State University, Sacramento, CA] and we moved down there. So I started from 4th grade through high school in Sacramento.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: So it was—but the family are—my dad's family are all in eastern Oregon. They're farmers.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: And somewhat in southeastern Washington and they're all—they're all farmers.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: My mom's family is from Fort Scott, Kansas, and they were almost—most of them were farmers at one point. So it's a very agrarian kind of background.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you spend your summers with your relatives or visiting them, their farms?

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, yeah, lots of that, and then spent some high school and later grade school working in the orchards in the summer.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: You know, the Roloffs in eastern Oregon were fruit farmers—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—so I worked—and so I've done—actually there's a bunch of projects that I've done that are connected to orchards.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: So that was part of that.

MS. RIEDEL: Fruit trees—pears, apples, peaches?

MR. ROLOFF: Cherries and prunes—Italian prunes were the main things that I worked—and the apples, we worked on the trees but they were harvested after I went back to school.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: There was all these procedures that people don't—where the trees are actually sprouted. They pull the new sprouts out. We would do that. And then, you know, during harvest time we would—in those days they were all lugs, you know, smaller boxes. Now it's containers that are moved around by tractors and stuff.

But we would scatter boxes in the—and my cousins could read a tree and say, that's a three-box tree, five-box, and so we would—we were going through the orchard and we would throw off that number of boxes at the base of each tree and then the pickers would come and we would take the fruit out also; we would stack it. And then we would move ladders and just all kinds of things that had to do with the harvest basically.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. ROLOFF: So that was—it was very meaningful, you know, being in that part of—being on the farm and—you know, and seeing the—they were—I mean, I don't know what the word "subsistence" farmer actually is because they weren't completely that, but I think at different times they were more—I mean, everything came from the farm, the milk—you know, they had hogs, they had their own cows, and they had different things, you know.

And then they would also—were hunters and fishing, you know. The Columbia River was this really major water—we would travel a bit back and forth from the Portland area to that part. And so, fishing and hunting and outdoorsman—it's a very outdoors kind of life.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And they had a cabin up in the Wallowa Mountains in further eastern Oregon where they would hunt. So that kind of—

MS. RIEDEL: Were you part of all that? Did you fish and hunt and—

MR. ROLOFF: I'm not a hunter, no, at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And I don't—I never—I sort of like fishing but I didn't—I liked being out but I didn't like the act so much. It wasn't that appealing to me, but I did. You know, I did it, you know. And my dad—they all loved it, though. It was a big—I just liked—I mean, I was more visual. I was looking at the trees and the landscape—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF:—rather than, you know, doing that other stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Do you have siblings?

MR. ROLOFF: A sister.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And she's two years younger. And so, she and I were all part of all that, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So it was a big extended family experience even though you were in Sacramento.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, then when we moved down here it was still a little less so, but we were connected and we would go up there. And we would also go to Kansas on and off to see the other relatives. So it was—

MS. RIEDEL: And there were farms down there too?

MR. ROLOFF: The farming had—there was still some farms, but my mom, you know, one of 12 children—it was like a classic, you know, walked three miles in the snow to school kind of thing, from the farm and, you know, take the buggy out and all rode horses. I mean, it was all—I think they were more of a subsistence farmer in that sense.

I'm sure they had some crops that were sold and stuff, but that had all started to change and so only a few of the—some of the people were still in the farming. And then even more that changed more—some people moved to Kansas City [I believe, Kansas City, MO–JR] and then the [World] War [II] came and that further moved people in different places. My mom was now in San Diego [CA] and some of her sisters. But it all had agrarian roots—

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. ROLOFF:—in a sense, and that was carried out in different ways. And there's still some farm-like activity there but it's not very much.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that an early—was that a significant part of your childhood, being out in nature and being part of farm work?

MR. ROLOFF: Sure, I think it was very formative because I really liked being there. I really like being at my grandparents' place.

MS. RIEDEL: Where were they?

MR. ROLOFF: It was in eastern Oregon.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: Milton-Freewater [OR] is a really small town—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—just south of Walla Walla, Washington. It's kind of near the Washington border.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right.

MR. ROLOFF: You know, but then we—and also we did all these trips along the Columbia River Gorge, so that massive—what I know now is these massive lava flows and stuff were things that I was fairly aware of, and the dams had not been built. I remember seeing Bonneville Dam and John Day Dam under construction.

And there were a lot of Native American salmon fishing—traditional fishing with these rickety piers that would go out in the raging—up in that part, the Columbia River was quite more - less placid than down near Portland. They would catch fish in nets and things and it was a traditional way of fishing.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you see that growing up?

MR. ROLOFF: Some, yeah. I didn't—we didn't stop and watch but I saw them doing that and I saw a lot of their apparatus and things. My dad explained what that was and stuff. And then at the time when the dams were being built, I saw the construction of that. But it was kind of a journey into the landscape and—

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. It sounds like it.

MR. ROLOFF: It was definitely a cyclical thing that was built in, and I think very important. And then we mentioned a little on the phone of going the other direction, which is to the coast, and Seaside was the main—one of the towns we would go to. They had an aquarium. And we probably went to Astoria [OR]. We would go up to Washington and go fishing and we would dig clams along the Pacific Coast.

So all that mountainous—you know, at the end of the street when I was—the place we lived the longest in Forest Grove was—Mount Hood was at the end of the street.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my goodness.

MR. ROLOFF: So every day I would see Mount Hood there. And so there was a lot of—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: It was pretty connected to that without, you know—it wasn't overt—I mean, it wasn't like—it was just the way things were.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: I wasn't really trying to do it so much.

MS. RIEDEL: It was just a big part of life.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah. And it was pretty—Forest Grove is a small town so there were friends and things that lived in rural areas, and we would go out and do things—tobogganing in the snow and stuff like that. It was pretty—access to those things.

The guy that lived across the street from us was a logger. There was a big logging industry up there, and that's where I first saw—oh, god, I remember him skinning a deer in the—you know, of course, I had elk sausages and things because it was a German family so they made all this stuff, you know, with my family, but I had never seen a deer being skinned and that was quite an eye-opener.

MS. RIEDEL: How old were you? Do you remember?

MR. ROLOFF: It would be 1st grade or something.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, pretty young.

MR. ROLOFF: I don't know, five or six years old.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: And I didn't like it particularly.

MS. RIEDEL: That's right, and the hunting idea for you—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, that kind of ended much of it. Also, in the end I—it was sort of like the fishing—it was kind of—I didn't like cleaning fish. It was just kind of—and, you know, I'm more of a—I'm not exactly a vegetarian now but I'm more like that. So it's just that kind of visceralness was not my thing, you know.

But I was interested in—I did a lot of reading and I was a little more of a dreamer kind of, you know, in a way, and did fairly well in school. You know, I was considered a good student and things like that, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Were there art classes all through elementary and junior high?

MR. ROLOFF: I never took any art at all except—

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. ROLOFF: No, I was all science—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF:—in terms of my interest, and science fiction. And—

MS. RIEDEL: Who did you read in science fiction, do you remember, when you were young? Anyone in—

MR. ROLOFF: What did I read?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, anything in particular that was influential?

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, yeah, [Edward Elmer] "Doc" Smith is one. Arthur Clarke was very important, also a lot of the—Edgar Rice Burroughs—kind of pulp-like stuff. Some of it is a little more contemporary. And then [Robert] Heinlein I read but I didn't really like him. I find him very dry. But a little later on *Voyage to Arcturus*; [David Lindsay, London, Methuen & Co., Ltd.:1920] was an important—nice book.

And then just many—oh, Tom Swift. So that sort of brought this kind of idea of the scientist more into—the idea of the laboratory. I think a lot of kids my age—boys—would have had—sort of like the role that Nancy Drew played for a lot of girls at that age of kind of, you know, finding your way or finding some kind of—

MS. RIEDEL: Did you have those little science kits, those little laboratory—[Laughs].

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, yeah, I had all that. Yeah, I had a lot of those, [chemistry] chem kits—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—and Erector Sets and all that stuff, sure. And then, you know, this book here—these were early—these *Life* Magazine, *The World We Live In* [book series]—

MS. RIEDEL: *The World We Live In.*

MR. ROLOFF:—and it's just this amazing—and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. That's probably the reason why I have Mark Thompson's, because that was one of my favorite things. Look at this - amazing geologic landscapes. I mean, this is all right here. I mean, this from the—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, interesting. And you were looking at these as a child.

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: So this was, you know, an undersea—all this stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: All these ecosystems and—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, this was a great, great thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: The dinosaurs. Nowadays, you know, there's so many books on dinosaurs—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—that people just—it's like a—you know—

MS. RIEDEL: This is beautifully illustrated.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, this was like really an important kind of thing, and then, you know, just other—a *National Geographic* kind of thing, in a way, but this one—and all the—oh, the astronomy is amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: So really Earth sciences—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—and geology in particular.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah. Yeah. And, you know, what was interesting when I was in high school, speaking about art classes, was that Mel Ramos was a teacher there.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, and he was teaching—

MS. RIEDEL: In Sacramento—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—at your high school? Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, at Mira Loma High School.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And that would have been—I graduated in ‘65 so I don’t know—I was aware of him more like it would be my junior and senior year, I think, but I never took any—to me the art class was drafting, so I was more interested in—and somehow the art was—it just didn’t appeal to me because it was kind of—I did actually do some painting at home on my own and I was interested in the idea of expression but I didn’t see it in the school for some reason. I don’t know why. I just didn’t. I was interested in shop classes and things, just kind of how it played itself out.

It’s not anything about him or anything like—I just somehow wasn’t aware of it as something that I would do. And, I think, I was like—I was more like the lab tech in chemistry, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF:—and I was—

MS. RIEDEL: More processes, more chemical—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: I was interested in that. And so, when I went to college—

MS. RIEDEL: Hold that thought because I’m just going to change this disc.

MR. ROLOFF: Okay.

[END CD 1, TRACK 3.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, it’s on.

MR. ROLOFF: Hello, hello, hello. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art with the artist John Roloff in his studio in Oakland, California on August 17, 2009, disc number two.

And you had just started talking about college.

MR. ROLOFF: I think it was what’s his name—

MS. RIEDEL: And this was at [University of California] Davis? Did you go to Davis for Marine geology?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, what I did was I went from, you know, high school, and so that was really science related, more so, and then I went to American River Junior College [Sacramento, CA] for one year and took a lot of—

MS. RIEDEL: Is it American River?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: A lot of basic classes.

MS. RIEDEL: Where is that, in Sacramento?

MR. ROLOFF: It’s in Sacramento. It’s near—it’s the one out—I was in the north area out near Carmichael [CA]—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—you know, that area. But that's where I took beginning chemistry. And, you know, I took—and got some of the requirements out of the way, and then I went—then I went to Davis—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—and was in the geology department. I wanted to—I at least was studying to be a marine geologist. I was interested in oceanography and, you know, I actually did pretty well in geology, and you have to take calculus; you have to do all kinds of stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: That was a pretty interesting time in geology, yes, because plate tectonics were developing?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah. I was in Eldridge Moores's tectonics class and he was like probably the most well known and he had continued, I think, a very respected geologist who was working on—actually I'm not sure if his actual work at the time was doing that. I know he was—he looked at what are called ophiolite suites, which are—you know, he was going to—I think, this was after that but going to Crete [Greece] and looking at some things there.

But he—anyway, that was—but that was also at the time of the Vietnam War and a lot of—

MS. RIEDEL: What year was this that you started at Davis?

MR. ROLOFF: So '65 graduated high school; '65-'66 American River, and then in the fall of '66—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—was that. And so, you know, there was - a lot of things that were happening. And I was, you know, involved in marches and stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: So fairly political.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah—not extremely but—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—you know, maybe we were very aware of the draft. I also—one of the things that happened was my dad, having been through World War II, he was concerned and so I ended up, through him, joining the Naval Reserves as a way to kind of hedge this whole thing. And I actually joined an officer program there that I would become—I would get a degree in geology and I would then potentially be able to work on an oceanographic ship in the Navy.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: So there was some—there was a trajectory there and I was at officer training school and that kind of stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: So he was concerned that you not be drafted.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, there was a—you know, that was his—and I went along with that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: At the same time, I was not interested in—you know, like I was opposed to the war as well, but—

MS. RIEDEL: You were opposed.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah. And civil rights—you know, we did sit-ins and all kinds of stuff for—you know, cultural studies programs and—I wasn't like at the high end of that but I was a participant in different ways.

And there was also at the time, when I was in a—I made a transition sort of through the questioning of—I still stayed in geology but I also—some of my art interests started to come out and I—

MS. RIEDEL: How did that happen? Do you remember what sparked those interests?

MR. ROLOFF: Probably psychedelics.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: I already had it but it was kind of like just more accessible, the idea of this sort of like—of creativity in that—say, in that sense.

I was also a member of the Experimental College, which had all these different kinds of—there's a whole bunch of things that were going on that kind of created a kind of transformation.

MS. RIEDEL: Was this part of the general spirit of Davis at the time too, do you think?

MR. ROLOFF: I would say so, yeah, lots of different things.

MS. RIEDEL: That was a pretty extraordinary faculty as well.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, I ended up taking—I thought, well, I'll take an art class. I really thought that that would be—and so I took one, and it was a beginning art class and I didn't—

MS. RIEDEL: Drawing, painting sort of thing?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, it was like watercolor and—you know, it was like—I think we dabbled in different things.

MS. RIEDEL: Had you done any [three dimensional] 3-D ceramics up to this point?

MR. ROLOFF: Nothing really at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Nothing, okay.

MR. ROLOFF: I mean, you know, in grade school you put your hand in a cast or that kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. ROLOFF: There was nothing that was of any—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—nothing like that except—

MS. RIEDEL: No three-dimensional sculpture in high school?

MR. ROLOFF: No.

MS. RIEDEL: So this was your first exposure.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah. And so, then I ended up taking a ceramic class and—

MS. RIEDEL: Was Arneson teaching already?

MR. ROLOFF: Arneson was my teacher.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow, your first ceramics class.

MR. ROLOFF: And a guy named Lucian Pompili, who was a—I think a fairly well known ceramic—he was the TA [teaching assistant] and several other people—we kind of got into that whole thing I was talking about earlier where [Bruce] Nauman had left and became aware of that, but the main thing about all that was what was called TB-9. Ceramics was in that building.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Yeah. Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: And it was, like, a place to go.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: And I found a kind of home there.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: And, you know, something about it spoke to my spirit about, you know—you know, Lucian was

important, Arneson was important—you know, and other grad students. The whole world opened up, you know, in terms of—I didn't realize what you could—you know, you could do these things. And so, that—

MS. RIEDEL: Would you describe that experience? TB-9 has been discussed in so many different ways, from so many different people, it would be interesting to hear what about it was significant for you.

MR. ROLOFF: It seemed like it was outside of the normal constraints and structures of the university. It had its own—you could stay there all night. And would work until midnight, you know, and maybe a guard like once every month would come by there. We were left alone.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: And the grad students there were working all the time, so you understood what it meant to work, you know, to actually pursue something. And Arneson was very instrumental in formenting that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: He really like—and the building in the back was a big—oh, I would say it was probably 20 feet square or something. I don't remember exactly, but it was a big sandpit. And Tio Giambruni was the sculpture teacher there, and they used to do aluminum pours, but they were far and few between.

That whole thing was kind of left—we just took it over, you know. And Arneson would let us just grab some shelves and some stuff and just create a studio just in the corner. So I had a place to go like that fairly early on.

MS. RIEDEL: So your own private little studio space.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, it was a little corner kind of area but it was nice, you know. And then—

MS. RIEDEL: That's pretty—because you weren't even a major. You were a marine geology major—

[Cross talk.]

MR. ROLOFF: I became a double major—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—art and geology.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: You know, because part of that was because of my dad. You know, I couldn't—

MS. RIEDEL: Aha.

MR. ROLOFF: I mean, I was definitely interested in geology still but I wanted to do both.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: And so, you know, he questioned that. You know, as a coach he was—it was—most of the—he thought of the kind of hippies as pinkos. You know, they were communists. He was an old-school—you know, I think he tried to understand but the guys on his teams and stuff were pretty clean-cut, weren't hippies. There were some. And he would kid them a lot and stuff.

I had to kind of answer to him in different ways and so that was part of that, the double major, but I still was really interested in geology.

MS. RIEDEL: Clearly, yes.

MR. ROLOFF: Anyway, but the art slowly kind of took over. It became the more ascendant thing and—

MS. RIEDEL: Who were some of the other students there at the time, do you remember?

MR. ROLOFF: Sure. I remember the day [Deborah] Debbie Butterfield arrived—this beautiful blonde from Southern California. Everybody was tripping over themselves trying to help her find a place, you know. And she

was a potter from—sort of trained, if I remember right, in a kind of Korean tradition and very—you know, and that's—and she was into her horses and things, and was working with Arneson and she started making these saddles.

And Davis was one of those polychrome low-fire kind of places where that was a big difference as opposed to pottery—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF:—with sculpture and that stuff. And [Richard] Dick Notkin was a graduate student. Oh, and in other areas—the guy I mentioned, Howard Fried, was very important; Jock Reynolds, who was also a very important person; Steve Kaltenbach, who just left—was just leaving around then.

Chris Unterseher was a—he was just kind of finishing. I had a year or so of his—there's some overlap in different ways with these people. A guy named Art Shade was a very kind of vital kind of person. A guy named Leighton Mortenson, who we called Mort, was a wonderful kind of Zen, L.A. Jazz kind of guy who was—John Fernie was another guy who—and then his girlfriend—I forget her first name. I think they were married. I think they were both in grad school.

And then later on John Buck came, and then a guy who was an undergrad who stayed—like Debbie, David Storey was undergrads who became—stayed on for grad school. And I decided to go someplace else, so I—it didn't seem—I don't know why exactly but this didn't seem like an option for me to stay there.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: I think maybe just everything was just a little too much the same or something.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there a lot of back and forth between Davis and [University of California] Berkeley [CA]? Was Peter Voulkos at Berkeley already?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, there was some. I mean, one of the things—I was very close with Lucian, and so we did a lot of trips to the city. But we would go—I mean, one of the places I remember a lot was going to Mills [College] and going to concerts because it was before they sort of dismantled that whole music—it was a very vital—still music. And Terry Riley was there.

And it was during that time period, some Berkeley—I mean, there were riots in Berkeley at the time. There was pepper gas. There was all kinds of stuff going on. So it was a little more cultural in that sense of—and Voulkos we were aware of but, I think, the city was more the art scene in a bigger sense—the museums.

I remember meeting Jim Melchert at a show he had at the [San Francisco] Art Institute [San Francisco, CA] called *The 'A' Show*—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my goodness. Yeah, that's pretty amazing.

MR. ROLOFF:—which is a great show, and I think that show is so under-known and so under-played. The "Show" It was the first real conceptual thing—it was the most conceptual thing connected to ceramics and it was really an important show. And I think that people just don't know about it. It should be restaged at some important venue someplace—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF:—I think.

MS. RIEDEL: That's a great idea.

MR. ROLOFF: It should be totally—it was really—I mean, it brought together all his interests and—but anyway, then so there was a lot of—it was not so much Berkeley but it was more the Bay Area. And, you know, Stephen de Staebler was very active. There was a lot of—let's see, Ron Nagle wasn't in Mills; he was still at their institute. And maybe he was still—I think, he had some connection with San Francisco State [College, San Francisco, CA].

There wasn't much connection to State. We didn't quite go that far. I mean, we mainly went for concerts, and it was kind of a more cultural thing, and with awareness of some of the things that were going on. And I think that at CCA [California College of the Arts] we didn't really have much connections. Viola [Frey] hadn't been really recognized by then at that time. I think we knew about her and stuff, but it wasn't kind of a very big deal—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF:—at the time. But we would go down—because we would always go to Leslie Ceramics [Supply Co., Berkeley, CA] and get stuff, you know, and we'd make these—we would sort of do a lot of trips that were kind of multipurpose things. We would go out to the Haight-Ashbury [San Francisco] area and the Golden Gate Park [San Francisco] and do concerts. It was all the whole thing, you know, the big hippie thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Was [Robert] Bob Brady at Davis then?

MR. ROLOFF: He came later—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF:—and I got to know him real well. It would have been actually after—I was either in grad school or—he may have—I think he was—I think he was slightly older than me but, I think, his school trajectory was a little—he started later. I'm not sure exactly that whole—but he was there but it was after I had left. And, oh, Victor Cicansky was there. Let's see, those are the main characters that I remember.

MS. RIEDEL: Now, what was your work like? What were your first ceramic—

MR. ROLOFF: Well, that was what I was explaining was that diminished—

[Cross talk.]

MS. RIEDEL:—*The Wave*.

MR. ROLOFF: *The Wave* and that. They were early—

MS. RIEDEL: Those were undergraduate works.

MR. ROLOFF: What I had done, I had done some things in like beginning classes. This actually is the first piece I ever did, which is—if I can find it here. The reason why it's so hard to find is it's a book that I made.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, really?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: A ceramic book.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, here it is.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah.

MR. ROLOFF: It's called *The Text of Ceramic Bookmaking* [circa 1967-68–JR].

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. ROLOFF: So there's already a kind of—

MS. RIEDEL: That's great.

MR. ROLOFF: I think the punning maybe of those guys.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: But then I had a fire where I lost everything. I was living in a farm and I lived in a stall, and that piece—

MS. RIEDEL: You lived in a stall?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, it was being made into a room but it was—there were horses next to me and across was another stall that was also made into a room. We were caretakers—

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF:—in exchange for rent.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And it was a great place.

MS. RIEDEL: I'll bet.

MR. ROLOFF: But one day—it was a really old barn and it just—I was working in TB-9 and this friend of mine, Dehner Patton, who was also—part of the other history was that he was a guitar player for Oxford Circle.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: You know, he had this music—you know, they're all kind of connected in different ways but—

MS. RIEDEL: Were you a musician yourself?

MR. ROLOFF: No, no, I wasn't, but I love—I knew a lot of these people, and I forget why—well, I was a waiter at Larry Blake's and Dehner was a waiter there. That was how we made that connection. And then, oh, another woman—I'm not remembering her name now—was the cocktail hostess, and so that's how I found out about this place to live.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And I was swapping aluminum water pipes for rent; you know, changing the irrigation.

But anyway, I was working in there and Dehner came by and said, hey, your place is on fire. So we went out and it was just this huge blaze. It was just like—and the poor horses died and everything.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my god.

MR. ROLOFF: All I had was my sleeping bag and the clothes I had on, and I had my car. And so I stayed at Dehner's. He kind of put me up. And my mom—we had a little bit of insurance that I was able to kind of get some clothes and stuff. But when I went back to the—this had been rakued in that fire—

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. ROLOFF:—this book, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MR. ROLOFF: So I was digging through the ash and finding the melted part of my old tape player and all this stuff, and then I found that book. So that coloration that's on there right now is—that's why. It was a beige glaze or something. I tried to make it be kind of like a generic book.

MS. RIEDEL: So it had already been fired once—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—and then it was rakued in—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MR. ROLOFF: And this was—and it stayed—it didn't—it's got one big crack in it but it stayed together so—

MS. RIEDEL: That is pretty great.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That is really pretty great.

MR. ROLOFF: So that's—I can't say it's the absolute first piece but, I think, it was right at the very beginning.

MS. RIEDEL: That's great.

MR. ROLOFF: And so, anyway, that's the story.

MS. RIEDEL: The beginning of the story.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Figuratively.

MR. ROLOFF: And so, I'm sure—I mean, Arneson was very resourceful, and he was influenced—everybody was influencing each other but I think that—I'm sure that that book was before his book [*Earth Book 1*, 1973 inscribed with the title *Secret* [*Ceramic*] *Glazes*, that one.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So for the record—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. ROLOFF:—you know, I don't want to take anything away from Bob. He meant a lot to a lot of people.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: But I think that would have been the order of that. He would, you know, kind of—ideas were floating around he would do things, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: Sure. Of course. And did he actually work in the space as well?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Did he work in there? Okay. Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: His studio was directly across the hallway from the main classroom. He had a nice big studio.

MS. RIEDEL: And so it was easy to walk in there and just watch him working or talk with him?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, we didn't really—after I was more part of the scene, part of that group, it was a little easier. I never really spent much time in—because he—the classes were more taught by the TA, so the early time was really with Lucian.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And the Bob would come in for critiques and stuff.

Let me go to the bathroom again.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

[End CD 2, TRACK 1.]

MS. RIEDEL: So you're saying you knew Peter Vandenberge as well and—

MR. ROLOFF: There's Tio—there it is. See there's Tio Giambruni.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: This is the sandpit that I was talking about.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And here are our kilns. And this was the burnout kiln for the wax. And then this here, this cupola, which is where they melted things, this thing would—this was eventually taken off and this was opened.

So one of the things we used to do, which was typical of the place, was we would just start a—you know light a wad of paper, throw it in that furnace and then just crank it up and there'd be like a column of fire that would come out like eight feet high, and it was just like—we'd just hang out. You know, we'd have this kind of fire going and it was just this kind of very open and sort of wild, kind of, feeling place, which was really great. Oh yeah, David Gilhooly was around.

MS. RIEDEL: When you think back on that, especially now as somebody who's taught for all these years, what do you think of as the different strengths or weaknesses of that particular program?

MR. ROLOFF: You mean of Arneson's program?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: Boy, I mean, just the freedom and, you know, and kind of leaving people alone and letting people

do things.

MS. RIEDEL: Real spirit of experimentation, it sounds like.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, it would definitely be that. And—

MS. RIEDEL: Was it fairly hands-off or were there very specific technical instructions?

MR. ROLOFF: It was more hands-off. We didn't have—usually like in the beginning classes, they'd just mix up a couple of colors and everybody would do it and then it was—so many things happened outside of class. That's what was good about it. It wasn't—I don't even have—I mean, have memories of the classes, but I have so much more memories of what was outside of class, just working late into the night. And that—and then just, you know, being around the grad students and being around other people and—

MS. RIEDEL: Was there much mixing—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, Victor made this when I was there. This was this tree; it was like a picnic table kind of tree thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: Do you know—

MS. RIEDEL: I don't.

MR. ROLOFF: Do you know about him? He was Canadian. He's kind of known in Canada a bit.

MS. RIEDEL: Victor Cicansky.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, see, here's this—this was actually one of my very, very first pieces, which was kind of like a Wiley influence, this *Slantstream Reef* [circa 1969–JR].

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So it's the idea of the slant step, kind of connection, but, you know, with this water. And then also, I think, this was the area—where I was casting porcelain—I think this is where Arneson also got the idea to start doing his whole porcelain series that he did of these porcelain chickens and artworks and all that stuff. That's just my impression, but I—

MS. RIEDEL: So there was a real cross-pollination of ideas and everybody was picking up from everyone else?

MR. ROLOFF: There's Lucian, Notkin, Nancy Carman, I knew her, which I don't know—Bruce Guttin was there. John Buck, Deborah, Sandra Shannonhouse, she was a student then. This guy named Dan Snyder. Oh, there they are. That's Lucian and Gilhooly. Oh, and Tom Rippon was there.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right.

MR. ROLOFF: And Donna Billick. Okay, he said, "I came to TB9 in 1972," so I would have already would have gone off to grad school.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that Brady?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, Brady, yeah. But I would go back every summer.

MS. RIEDEL: Now, where did you go to grad school?

MR. ROLOFF: Cal State Humboldt.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And did you go there directly?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So you finished up at Davis in '67, '69?

MR. ROLOFF: No, I was—it was 1970. I took—since I took a little time off to go to—to get to work, and I didn't—it took me from '65 to seven—took me five years. And then I—let's see, there was a time of—I think I even worked again. My grad program was '71 to '73, so there's a little time in there. I went to Europe and—

MS. RIEDEL: Where did you go?

MR. ROLOFF: Actually, I went with Lucian and Cheryl Lundstrom was his girlfriend and Nancy—I'm not remembering Nancy's last name. It was my girlfriend. Anyway, we went and—

MS. RIEDEL: Looking at art? Looking at museums?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Camping, backpacking, all of that?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, it was all—

MS. RIEDEL: Was it France, Spain, Italy? Where did you go?

MR. ROLOFF: Okay, what happened was, is that we were going to go camping. See, Cheryl had bought a new Land Rover and we were going to the Land Rover factory to pick it up. So we would have a vehicle in England.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: We were going to spend a month and just camp all over England.

MS. RIEDEL: How great.

MR. ROLOFF: So what happened was, is that the—it was kind of one of those trips that went sideways. There was a—their camping equipment got stolen. The plane ended up going and they had to stay overnight—something happened with the plane and we flew into Brussels [Belgium] I think. And then it—the connecting plane, we missed it, so we had to spend the night in the airport, and then found out that their camping equipment had been stolen.

So then we went, got to London [England] and they were going to buy some new equipment and stuff, and they end up to the Land Rover factory and test drove it and then driving away in this Land Rover. And then we went down to—we're driving down, thinking we were on our way. Okay, we went to the—we went out to Cornwall [England] area, came back, and then got in a car wreck in Christchurch [England] got hit.

And then that—and then so what happened was that Lucian and Cheryl had to go back to London. We ended up renting a place in London and spending quite a bit of time there because they had to deal with all this insurance and all this—could it be repaired? And all this stuff. So then I ended up with Nancy going over to Europe and back, and we just took some of our own—and to Ireland and did some small trips. And so the whole trip just kind of went sideways.

But it was all new to me and it was—I think the most impressive thing was London. And just all the museums and the Victoria and Albert [Museum, London, England] and seeing the Turner collection and I was really into—those early days I was really into romantic painting and [Joseph Mallord William] Turner was really important and Winslow Homer was really important and John Sell Cotman was another water colorist that I really was interested in, as well as the—well the whole American, you know, painting that I mentioned earlier—Heade and —

MS. RIEDEL: Church.

MR. ROLOFF: Those people, yeah, and then Albert Bierstadt. Going to Crocker [Art Museum, Sacramento, CA], and seeing the paintings there of the landscape. And I actually did a piece when I was in Kentucky called *Bierstadt's Snag* [Part of *The Exile* series done at the University of Kentucky, 1975–JR]. It was a little ship hull that had a log sticking through it. Really simple piece that was from a corner—it was like a—I had a—I took a slide of a corner of one of Bierstadt's paintings.

I was interested in the underwater logs that he had painted because I used to go down the American River when I was growing up in Sacramento. We would float and the American River was clear enough that you could actually sort of see things where the—when the Sacramento River was kind of murky.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So we spent a lot of summers just as kids inner tubing and there was all these submerged logs and stuff. So that kind of thing, there was some connections made back with that type of stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Had you spent much time in a cosmopolitan area like that or was London sort of a new experience?

MR. ROLOFF: It was new, definitely.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, and the museums must have been pretty extraordinary.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, I had only really been to the San Francisco museums.

MS. RIEDEL: So that must have been a pretty extraordinary experience for a young fellow.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, pretty much. A little bit in L.A. Well, actually, you know, one of the things that—one of the—one of the things that—

MS. RIEDEL: Was there something else that you wanted to say about the book?

MR. ROLOFF: I was just looking to see if there were more names. There's somebody that I can't recall, but I didn't see in there that they probably just couldn't get a hold of that was working—there was this one work area where Notkin and Cicansky were working. There was a third person and I can't remember his name. So that was what I was looking for. But around that time, what was really actually the most exciting while I was still a student, was I went to New York [City, NY] with Arneson, Lucian, Art Shade, Roy De Forest, and their wives and you know.

It was kind of a little enclave. And they were staying in a hotel; I stayed at Steve Kaltenbach's loft. So it was really kind of nice—you know, it was interesting to—and this was in SoHo [New York City] when SoHo was really like the art scene. It was still a place where there was rags—what am I saying? Bundles of—just bales of rags was that whole area where they were—it was like a processing area for the textile industry.

MS. RIEDEL: It was really the garment district, yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: But one of the things—that now reminds me that one of the important places that we used to go to a lot of openings in San Francisco was Reese Paley Gallery [San Francisco, CA].

MS. RIEDEL: Reese Paley Gallery. I don't know that gallery.

MR. ROLOFF: It's in the old—it was in that Frank Lloyd Wright building on Maiden Lane. You know that—you know that's now a shop of some sort.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: It's been several things. That was a really important gallery because he had—Reese Paley had a gallery in New York. And that's why I'm—now I'm remembering, because I went to that gallery in New York, and then that—so we saw—like, there, we saw Steve Kaltenbach had done a couple of rooms: this room filled with heaters and another room that was you go into and its points of light. When the light goes out, like you're in the middle of the universe, sort of.

And then early Dennis Oppenheim works. Reese Paley was a really good gallery and that was something I just remember very clearly, of seeing that stuff. And then making the connection in New York. Actually, I did a piece in New York, which was—it was the site piece that I have no record of [Done during the trip with Arneson, et al.—I believe it was 1968 or 1969–JR]. I made these handles, ceramic handles, and the idea was to—I got some epoxy and I epoxied these handles to these buildings, just to have this, you know, like some sort of weird handle. And I never took any pictures of them.

But one of the things I saw, which was a kind of curious contemporary thing, were the Lozenges [also referred to as Blips] of Richard Artschwager, which were also kind of stuck around. And it may have been that I had—I don't know the sequence. I doubt that I was that original. But Steve Kaltenbach was doing these Plaques that were set in—they were made out of bronze. They were put into the concrete, so they were—there would - like a piece that just said "life" or "blood." And they were bronze—and this is where—and he did the one called *Art Works* [1968].

And Arneson took a mold of actually - of the original—or got the original mold or something and made porcelain artworks and he had—but he had like these castings of this artwork and then he'd have like a cast chicken, like tearing apart this artwork, so to—so it was adding his own funny stuff to this thing. And then they were all glazed celadon. I don't know if you know that series of his work.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't know that one.

MR. ROLOFF: That's where I think that that *Slantstream Reef* thing, I think that was one of the things where he got part of that idea. Anyway, that was so—the trips you were asking me about, and actually the New York trip was probably the most—

MS. RIEDEL: I would imagine.

MR. ROLOFF: Most important formative kind of thing. And just being around artists.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you still an undergraduate?

MR. ROLOFF: Being around kind of—and that was the era when everybody was either conceptual art or giant paintings. I remember seeing a Frank Stella show at the MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York City, NY] of his Protractor series [1967-1969]. And then we would go back to New York [City] on and off. That sort of started this kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: This was during your undergraduate year?

MR. ROLOFF: It was 19—I'm going to say it was '68, summer of—or sometime—

MS. RIEDEL: That would have been extraordinary

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, yeah, it was really great. Because you were in the middle of that whole—that whole thing, excuse me, happening. And I remember going to—I think, I—yeah, Reese Paley Gallery. I remember going there. And Reese Paley was the place, I think, where Joseph Beuys did his coyote piece [Beuys' performance *I Like America and America Likes Me,* 1974 took place at the René Block Gallery in New York City, NY]. So, I think, there was that.

But I didn't see that piece. I saw a piece of a guy who did—who, I think, is—it may have been Doug Huebler, but I—it may not have been. It was someone who has used hunting as part of their work [I have looked for this work since then and have not been able to locate who or exactly when–JR]. And the piece was just a simple chair that was somehow related back to this hunting project that he was doing. I remember seeing Joseph Kosuth pieces [Not sure of the exact piece or location—probably Castelli gallery when it was on W. Broadway. I saw his work on numerous trips to NYC in those days—the images merge.–JR]. I mean, it was really amazing thing. And just the energy of being there, with all those people, and going down to Little Italy for Italian dinners and stuff. It was exciting.

MS. RIEDEL: As an undergraduate, that must have been extraordinary.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, it was kind of—it was really—I didn't really know, but the idea that I would be included. That I would be thought of well enough that I could actually join them and stuff was really kind of special and—

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. ROLOFF: I think, it was also important, in a way.

MS. RIEDEL: So it was Arneson and Lucian and who else?

MR. ROLOFF: Art Shade, Roy De Forest.

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

MR. ROLOFF: Roy's wife, I'm not remembering her name now. And, I think, this was when—there was the whole transition from Arneson's first wife to Sandy Shannonhouse. That all happened right about then. I think—you know what, I actually think now it was his first wife. I don't remember what her name was. But—yeah, I don't remember her name right now. But he was—and then we lived—not lived. A lot of people—the grad students and I also did some things—we all worked on his Alice Street house.

And so Arneson was actually using the kiln. He would give us a hard time for making practical things. He called it—if we were throwing something, he would call them pottery pot pots. It was okay if you put stuff all over it, because see the Bob and Roy-ware and all those—he always was messing around with like pot stuff, you know.

But Lucian liked to do—he wanted to throw and sell, and kind of—he was also was more of a trained—excellent potter. So he kind of was in his blood still. So we did a little of that, but—okay, Alice Street. Bob was firing all the stoneware tiles for it. And so we were giving him a hard time, going "Hey, you're making all of your useful things." And so anyway, but—oh, this other guy that - I'm trying remember the name—he did a lot of laying the floor of that. And it was—it's a name like John Fernie, but it's not him. It's some—I may think of it. I didn't see it in there.

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe we can look it up, perhaps.

MR. ROLOFF: I'm sorry?

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe we can look it up.

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, okay, okay. And then I did—I remember Art Shade saying, "This is a major work." Come on. I ended up making the thing behind the—in the kitchen—what do you call it? Not the baseboard, but the—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, I know what you mean. Like the spatter, or—

MR. ROLOFF: Splash board. Or something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Splash board. Or something like that.

MR. ROLOFF: And then coming down around the—you know, just add a lot of coil. Just kind of like some freeform kind of thing. And honestly, we just, you know, he just—he'd kind of come in and encourage you, but wanted you to do what you were doing. And other people were doing other things in the house.

But it was a neat thing because he had this idea of all—that the house was an artwork, because he made the palace at four a.m. That was the Alice Street house. And he did a giant painting of it. He worked it as a piece and so the idea of artists working in it, we're all contributing to the piece. It was all interwoven. It was really wonderful.

And it didn't have a name, in terms of like, well you're working doing this kind of art. It was just a continuation of his connection to kind of Pop art and the kind of idea of the common object being a kind of launching place for art. And so the idea that that house and that there were other people working on it and in it and, you know, and it was all part of that. It was all mixed together.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. It sounds like a real blurring of borders between art and object and life.

MR. ROLOFF: Sure.

MS. RIEDEL: And that has become increasingly significant for you.

MR. ROLOFF: Oh yeah, no, I think, it—I didn't think, I knew it. It wasn't the kind of thing that you thought directly about.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: But you saw—you were there. And out in front, instead of a potted plant on the front step was one of his thrown things with a kind of lumpy, ceramic thing with decals of flowers on it, and stuff. That was a potted plant as you entered into the house. And then from—everybody in those days was going down to the military surplus, which was one in Sacramento, one in San Leandro [CA] and one someplace else, I think, in the Bay Area. Because that's where Voulkos got a lot of his bronze. You know, it was a resource for all kinds of materials and stuff.

And at that point someone had found some lead tape, and so Arneson's front door was covered with this lead tape. And a lot of that surplus stuff showed up in different places. Even manual, they had—I remember seeing this one area where all these stacks of lead, sheets of it, and they all had this beautiful coloration just because they'd gotten wet or something. And so he did some pieces that were placed on these sheets of lead and stuff, kind of like architecture.

He'd been down to Yucatán [Mexico] and so he did a project like that, sort of a little bit of an interruption in his figurative stuff. And I remember that was a show that I saw—we all went to the opening at the Art Institute, way before I had any connection to the Art Institute. It would have been late—just like around—I think, the new building would have been—was built in '68 or '69 and so it would have been right in the—maybe in the early '70s.

Because when I went to teach in Kentucky, after I got out of grad school, I would come back to Davis every summer. And Arneson would just—mainly Arneson—well, he was on—in and out and then Gilhooly would come and use his studio early in the morning. And it was different things in different years. But I just worked all summer in TB9, even after I was out of school. It was all available. So I could continue—

MS. RIEDEL: Even when you weren't matriculated as a student?

MR. ROLOFF: Oh yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MR. ROLOFF: It was in the summer, so it was kind of like under the radar. And all he cared about was people working. If you wanted to work, figure out a place to work and work.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. ROLOFF: He was really generative in that way. I mean, just—he didn't really say a lot about things. But he was kind of—he'd kind of come in and say a few things—but it was more - his just desire to have energy, people working. It was great.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds it. And so many extraordinary artists have come out of that program that it's—

MR. ROLOFF: There was something special. And I, you know, coming from the science—coming into it that way, I had no idea. I just stumbled into that art department.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: It was just completely by fiat. But something told me that this was for me. I think I was more attracted to Bill Wiley's ethos, his kind of work and his thinking and stuff. But Arneson was more of a—more of the tangible part of the whole thing. And it was a place and a sense of belonging to something and stuff. It was really nice.

MS. RIEDEL: Were the painting studios open 24 hours as well? Did they have that same sense of energy?

MR. ROLOFF: That was in the regular art building and it had different—you could kind of get in and we knew ways of doing things. It was—it wasn't anything like TB9 though, but it was—you know, I think, compared to things nowadays, it was probably loose, in some ways.

MS. RIEDEL: Then how was Humboldt? How did you choose Humboldt? Who was teaching there, then, and how was that experience?

MR. ROLOFF: I didn't really know—I didn't really understand graduate programs very well, and so I only applied to Humboldt and [Sacramento] Sac State. And that's where [William] Bill Allan was, and Steve Kaltenbach was there. It was actually - would have been probably a better place. But it was—my dad was a coach there and stuff. So it was kind of like, I wanted to do something different. So I only applied to Humboldt because—I may have had—I don't know why but there was someone that was some connection there. And I didn't research—I didn't even think about Mills or Berkeley or any—

MS. RIEDEL: Berkeley. Nothing? Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: I just didn't—I don't know why or what was going on. But I got a scholarship to go to Humboldt. And the tuition was—I think economics paid a lot of it. And I didn't really—I don't think I really understood what grad school was or what it was for. Even though I knew these grad students from Davis, I just—that's all I kind of knew about it.

MS. RIEDEL: So did you think about it as more of the same, continuing to develop your own work?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, I remember thinking about the idea that, having been at Davis, that there was so much influence. There was so many—because John Cage came for a week and then people would come in from New York [City] and it was a very vital kind of thing happening, and so many trips to San Francisco. That it was kind of more of a cloister, a sequestered sort of thing up there. And they had a—[Louis] Lou Marak was the primary teacher. And this guy named Reese Bullen was the old, kind of, glaze chemistry teacher who wore a white smock and the whole thing. And it was—

MS. RIEDEL: Really? That was a change.

MR. ROLOFF: I had no idea about that. But I ended up deciding to go there and they had a big old laundry. I think that may have been part of it. And I could have my own studio again. So there was a continuation of the things that I knew that were, at that time, the most important to me.

And I didn't have to wait tables, because that's how I made my way through college. So that was sort of—I think there were just these things. It was kind of like, in some ways, the path of least resistance, I suppose. I don't—there wasn't any real reputation about Humboldt that I recall.

MS. RIEDEL: Was your—

MR. ROLOFF: I must have had a personal connection because I—there must have been some reason that I applied there. I don't remember what it was.

MS. RIEDEL: Had your father pretty much relented or decided at this point that you were going into the arts no matter what? Was he becoming supportive?

MR. ROLOFF: I think the fact that it was a master's degree, because that was—he had a master's and that was kind of the limit of his—so I was now—because it was a master's program, that it had sufficient credibility.

MS. RIEDEL: Seriousness of intent.

MR. ROLOFF: That it was okay. We still had—we had arguments about the war and all that stuff and it was kind of—and I was pretty self-willed. I was just heading out, basically. So I just—but I was completely unstrategic in the sense of positioning myself. I often wonder—because someone else asked me recently if I had—because Debbie Butterfield and John were there—and David Storey, who were very close, good friends, carried on at Davis. I just—I didn't apply. I don't know. I'm not sure that I thought maybe that I would even get in or something. I don't know what it was.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. But at the same time you were traveling back and forth to New York with Arneson and Roy De Forest.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, that's true. That's true. It may have been—maybe I needed more self-confidence, needed to go away and kind of—

MS. RIEDEL: Change of pace.

MR. ROLOFF: Do something of my own, in some sense, or find out something. I think Humboldt was actually very good for that. And it had its—it has a surprising history of—Michael Lucero came from there. People that I know that I teach—like Ian McDonald is at the Art Institute now, had a connection there.

There's just several more that I kind of—every time I've—and I don't remember who they are at the moment, but when I find out again I went, "Wow, you were also there?" It was this odd little place that had a similar something. It wasn't nearly at the scale of Davis, but it had something synergistic about it that was a kind of intangible thing.

I remember also at Davis, they would get like 400 applicants. And it was like, it was a big pipeline from Kansas City Art Institute [Kansas City, MO] that's where Bruce Guttin and John Buck and different people all came from Kansas City. And, I think, I may have been a little intimidated by it somehow and just kind of wasn't ready to do that.

So it was—that's just my guess. Anyway, that was—and then the thing about Lou Marak was a teacher is that he was good friends—because Lou was from Alfred [University, Alfred, NY] and Richard Shaw had gone to Alfred at the time and they were close friends. And so that started the connection back down to the Art Institute, was that Richard would come up.

And then right out of grad school, Richard offered me a class at the Art Institute, you know, come down and teach. So he was really important just in giving me something—and so I did—I think, I was there two semesters, but maybe just one class.

MS. RIEDEL: At the Art Institute?

MR. ROLOFF: And I lived with my sister in a—it was in—it was kind of like a low-budget thing. And then I went back to Humboldt and didn't really know what I was going to do and then this job in Kentucky came up and I applied and I was able to get that one.

MS. RIEDEL: And where was this in Kentucky?

MR. ROLOFF: University of Kentucky, Lexington [KY].

MS. RIEDEL: And you started there in '73-'74?

MR. ROLOFF: No, '74.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so you finished up at Humboldt in '73.

MR. ROLOFF: Seventy-three and then '73-'74 was the Art Institute. And then David Middlebrook got the job from Kentucky. He got the job at San José State [University, San José, CA] so I took his position. And they were looking

for someone—in those days it was—most people in ceramics were doing pottery. But if you were doing low fire and they had a potter guy named—geez, what was his name? But he was—he'd been there a long time, was very classic kind of pottery. So they were looking for a low-fire person to kind of take over—

MS. RIEDEL: Middlebrook?

MR. ROLOFF: Middlebrook's position. So that worked out. And then it was a real job and I had—the studio was half-again as long as this bay. It had a really nice, big studio. It was in an old tobacco warehouse. It was great and there was nothing to do in Lexington except make work, for me anyway. I didn't have any connections, much to do there.

And then I had—that's when I'd come back every summer to Davis and I would stay at Lucian's or different places, depending, and then I—by then I had a show—a connections at this place called Lester Gallery in Inverness [CA] and had shows there. And I was selling. I sold almost all my work.

MS. RIEDEL: Really. And what sort of work were you making now? Were these ships?

MR. ROLOFF: All this was called the Exile Series [a series of tableau works from the mid-1970s].

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, so this was the Exile Series.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, that was made in Kentucky and I remember my old panel truck. I drove them out and they were all in vitrines and—

MS. RIEDEL: Was Inez Storer part of this Lester Gallery?

MR. ROLOFF: Inez was—she was very—she was the person. She was teaching at the Art—the year I taught at the Art Institute, I was in a show there [SFAI show: ceramic work from *Elements of a Voyage* series, show title: *Ceramic Invitational 1974*–JR] of some small, very early ships kind of things, and then she saw them and offered me a show there. So I may have been heading for Kentucky and—I don't remember which show was which, but yeah, she was great. And people somehow would come out to that place. It was really sort of a—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, it had a draw. Absolutely.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, I didn't—I still don't quite get it, but I did well.

MS. RIEDEL: That's wonderful.

MR. ROLOFF: That established me in the Bay Area - was that little gallery established me. And from that I was picked up by Hansen Fuller. Hansen Fuller then had—by then was Fuller Goldeen [Gallery, San Francisco, CA].

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And so I was picked up by them and I had—in '78, I had gotten—I had left Kentucky and I started back at the Art Institute again. So I moved back here and that was right about when I started at Fuller Goldeen. Something in that—I may have had a show the year before that. I'd have to look at my resume. I can't remember.

MS. RIEDEL: And early on you were in a group show at the Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York City, NY] weren't you, in '75?

MR. ROLOFF: I was in a "Whitney Biennial."

MS. RIEDEL: That's what I thought.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, that was weird.

MS. RIEDEL: How did that happen?

MR. ROLOFF: Because it was a special case. I don't think I would have gotten in in a normal—the Whitney had decided that what the Biennial stood for was a snapshot of what was going on in America. So they sent their curators—instead of just a New York-based thing, they sent their curators out to every state.

And so they came by the University of Kentucky and myself and one other guy from the school, Dan—I don't remember his last name but his first name was Dan. We were selected—oh no, I know, it wasn't Dan. Leonard Hunter was selected. He was teaching sculpture and Dan—I think Dan may have been in—no, he was in a different show. But anyway, we were selected from that faculty to kind of represent Kentucky as, I guess—I

don’t know, it may have been state-by-state or something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: How interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: And so I had ceramic work.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was the Exile Series that you were working on?

MR. ROLOFF: This probably would have been just after it or just—there were a couple series that were kind of related there.

MS. RIEDEL: The *Rower* [circa 1976] I’m thinking of as well.

MR. ROLOFF: The *Rower* was later. And that was a second big show at—that would have been ‘78 or about—or ‘77 maybe at—‘75 would have been the Exile. Let’s see if I’ve got it.

MS. RIEDEL: Actually it says ‘76, the Rower Series. [This series consists of two large floor works, *Rower*, circa 1976 and *Rowboat II*, 1977.]

MR. ROLOFF: Which one?

MS. RIEDEL: *Rower,* ‘76?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, then that—okay, then the ‘75 would have been Exile, but that was—there was a show—

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MR. ROLOFF: I can’t find it. There was a show called “OK Art” meaning—

MS. RIEDEL: “OK Art”.

MR. ROLOFF: Meaning Ohio Kentucky. And it was at the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati [OH].

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: A really nice kind of high-profile show - at the catalog—that is what I was looking for. And that one was the Exile series.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: They were first shown at University of Kentucky and then they were kind of shown up there. And then different ones made it—some were bought by different people there and the rest of it came out to—is that a résumé there?

MS. RIEDEL: This is a list of the works.

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, okay.

MS. RIEDEL: But no, I didn’t bring a résumé.

MR. ROLOFF: Okay. Anyway, that was that show. It was around ‘75, I think. And the *Rower* may have been ‘76, it was made. But then it went to the Lester Gallery. It was shown there. And then that guy, [Joseph] J. Patrick Lannan, the early Lannan connection, he bought it.

MS. RIEDEL: How great.

MR. ROLOFF: And I ended up going to Florida to install it. And it was in parts and so it had to be all assembled. And then his girlfriend, Mary McFadden, had a big kind of collection. She commissioned another *Rowboat* [I believe commissioned in 1976–JR] without a rower in it, so I made one that was the same size. It was in her showroom for a long time and then she donated it to what was the American Craft Museum. But then that name changed.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, Museum of Arts and Design [New York City, NY].

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, that is where—I have all these things like that that I don’t know whether they have them still. I try to keep track of a lot of stuff, but it gets pretty obscure going back. And so anyway, that was part of that story, I guess.

MS. RIEDEL: That ship image was just iconic for you for so long and in some way, still is. What in particular about that image has held your attention for so long?

MR. ROLOFF: I am trying to think of the earliest versions. Well, it would have been that diminishing hull. It was very early. And it is a romanticism. I mean, it is a seascape painting. I used to show—I wish I had some record of some sort of the earliest slideshows and stuff because I taught—[J.M.W. Turner watercolors, such as: Color Sketch, CXCVI-N for *The Loss of an East Indiaman*, circa 1802-20; Fitz Henry Lane, *Brace's Rock, Eastern Point, Gloucester*, 1863, oil; Winslow Homer, *The Green Dory*, 1880, watercolor; Thomas Eakins, *John Biglin in a Single Scull,* watercolor, 1873-74; and others: Ryder, Church (landscape), Kensett, Hoade… -JR]

MS. RIEDEL: I wish you did, too. They are wonderful to see.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, there may be some videos, but they wouldn't go back real early. I just remember, you know, just from childhood, drawing ships. A lot of boys did that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, but you did draw as a child.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, it was more—I had some friends when I was in grade school and a little bit into—more in grade school that we would sit, you know, in a class and draw, you know, fortresses and stuff, have mock battles back and forth across this aisle, that kind of thing. And ships somehow came into that.

And I remember, you know, that is one of the reasons I wanted to get that *Encyclopedia Britannica*, this version, because I remember looking at the shipbuilding pages of that thing back when I was, you know, would have been early on and just something about it. I don't have a specific, you know, book for that.

MS. RIEDEL: You didn't spend any time on boats? You weren't particularly interested in boats in reality, in the physical reality of the world, right?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, you know, fishing and, you know, I mean, some. But it wasn't—my memory of those boats wasn't in the same way as seeing what that form meant, you know, like in the painting.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And it was just something about the architecture of it and this relationship to the wind and the full-masted sailing ships and stuff. It was just a very romantic, you know, just something that moved me as an image. And so I don't know if there was any like story that I read. I mean, I remember when I was really young, I read—the only book that I had for a while that I read was - I read [*The Adventures of*] *Robinson Crusoe* [Daniel Defoe; Boston, Lothrop Publishing Co.: c. 1897] maybe five or six times. I read it over and over again.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: And so that and some movies, you know, seeing this, you know, *Captain Blood* [1935] or I don't know what, you know, it would have been. And somehow it is kind of almost like that Turner thing where you are lashed to the mast. Something about experiencing that tumult, the tumultuousness of that of a storm and moving through it was very emotional for me. And so, I guess, that is one of the reasons why I connected with Turner was that he had a connection that was physical.

You know, there is that classic story. He would grab dirt and rub it into a watercolor when he was up on a mountain. He was just kind of in the moment. So it is sort of like this—and you could probably even go back to early storms, you know, like the feeling of what a storm was like in the dark clouds, just being in a kind of ferment of some sort. And then the ship would somehow like the surrogate. And it had this form and it was meant to kind of pass through it or something.

I mean, those all seemed to make sense to me. That can kind of connect the dots in that way. So it is—and then you start seeing it. And books and, you know, some museums and things, but starting to see some of the paintings of that and then building a vocabulary and then eventually you go, oh, that was even better. You know, that one is more. That one has got it. You kind of like go more into it.

But my actual—I mean, when I went fishing with my dad up in this place called Neah Bay, which was—it is at the tip of the Olympic Peninsula. It was one of their favorite fishing places. And him going out and rowing out in this early in the morning solid fog and going out and just freezing. And I couldn't—I just could not wait to get back. I mean, it was not—

So to me, it was imagery. It wasn't so much the thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: Although I had been on ferries. I remember loving to be—go up to the bow of a ferry or something that was moving and just watching the waves, watching it kind of penetrate through—there is something real primal about it, you know, that just hit a chord. I don't know exactly, you know. I mean, as I talk about it, I still get kind of really interested in it again. I get really—because I haven't followed it recently in any particular way.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. ROLOFF: Although it is sort of starting to show up again a little bit.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, just in Yerba Buena.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, well, that was to—that was to—the idea there was to take the ship and to map it onto the building in some way. And it actually had what I thought were better schemes about—a little more abstract, but a little more architecturally inclusive. And Kate Eilertsen was a curator. She was kind of—she really felt that that would—the ship would be more iconographic of making that connection.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: But it didn't seem—it didn't seem as immersive as I wanted it to be. I mean, I would like to have made all the windows of the museum green, you know, to where you were in—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, you felt. You were in there, yes.

MR. ROLOFF: You were in the ship, not just look at it.

MS. RIEDEL: Looking at it. That makes sense.

MR. ROLOFF: And there wasn't time and money. It just couldn't happen. Because one of the things that I had proposed, the initial—kind of the segue to that whole thing was the piece [Original Depositional Environment, 2001, which was an installation of living algae and photoworks] that I had done at [Gallery] Paule Anglim [San Francisco, CA] that was the algae skylight. That was my first proposal to Kate - for that Bay Area now - was to see about making an algae skylight for that kind of atrium space that they have in there.

And it turned out that it didn't have the budget because it would need—the span was too far. You had to build some pretty good—some trusses and things. And then the guy who was the building manager didn't really want to do it because it needed to be anchored to the roof and anytime you make a penetration in the roof, you are causing—I would have had to get an architect and a much bigger budget than what they had to really pull it off. But that is still a part of this idea of being immersed was what I kind of tried to do. That is why I put the other parts of the ship, the corners that were in that window, so it wasn't just one image.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: But like Paule Anglim, where this process of nature was affecting the gallery, so it was actually the black and white prints were—the idea was - is that they would become tinted in a sense by this living process. And so there is a series of proposals that I am still kind of working on. One is the big sloped thing at SFMOMA [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA] is to create an algae system for that. The other one is the entrance foyer at the de Young [San Francisco, CA] is that shape that is above where, I guess, the [Andrew] Goldsworthy kind of thing is.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And any other more ambitious, would be all those things. And then I also proposed for this show that I did these drawings, ended up doing. I was going to do an algae intervention for the skylights at the art institute.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And they couldn't—the guy nixed it at the last minute because I had to seal off these spaces. And they were thinking that this moistness would actually start affecting some of the materials up in these, you know—I couldn't vent it properly.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And at Paule Anglim, I was actually able to—the skylight was on track with an electric motor, so I could—you could open it and it wasn't a trapped moisture system, kind of buckling that—

MS. RIEDEL: Paint or—

MR. ROLOFF: Drywall or something.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: But anyway, I have started in different ways to make proposals as a conceptual thing for—as to work with museums to make that because what I was interested in was that I wanted them to have any kind of show that they wanted, you know, beneath this. And my piece would not be part of the show. It would be more that it was—that whatever aesthetic event was occurring would be sort of—the word, "subjected," isn't right, but influenced or related to a natural system event like nature was actually affecting aesthetics.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: So it was kind of like building—I don't even know how to describe it. It was not like building a storm or environment, but it was something like—it was kind of like adjusting the hierarchy of even like what it meant to be in a museum and what it meant to show there, what it meant to kind of like—the dialogue itself that there would be this natural system that would be kind of, in some ways, unavoidable, but not necessarily—or not necessarily unduly altering other people's work. It was more that this was a context, that the context of the museum as being the white space was the thing that has been carried on. But now the context includes a natural system that is part of the architecture. It works with the architecture as being this aesthetic environment.

So the environment itself included this other voice.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Well, it is giving form to something that is really there, that is present, but is in many ways invisible. And you are making it—

MR. ROLOFF: And making it into a voice of nature, you know, a kind of natural thing. And it also kind of feeds back to some of those other ideas about the inseparability of these things.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MR. ROLOFF: And so well, you know, the algae that is there, the green light or whatever, it is just a kind of unfiltered version of the light that is coming from the electric bulbs or the little cans on the things. But it is not removed by the fact that it came from a power plant that was using fossil fuels that came from an algae environment of 100 million years ago. So it is like closing the gap in a way and a commentary on the illumination of all these things and the way that architecture functions sort of.

So it was all kind of—but anyway, that is what is partly behind the thing at Yerba Buena was there was these other things—attempts were made and they didn't work, so that was my next idea was to take the ship and to take what it was attempting to do in a certain way and expanding it to include, you know, the built environment. It was meant—it actually was meant to reference the built environment through the idea that the Moscone Center [San Francisco, CA] is—there is a big space underneath there.

So I saw the landscape, that membrane of the park and everything, which—that is all faux. That park is just sitting on top of—it was actually like water—so the ship was sinking into—it was connecting up above and below.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: Symbolically.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And then that below not only meant just that space thing there, but it also meant the geologic origin of the entire structure.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. ROLOFF: So it was just an extrapolation—a further extrapolation of an initial extrapolation.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs]—yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So that is what it was supposed to do.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: So it was a kind of variant, but in a really different direction from the algae interventions, which was examining natural system's relationship to built environment, a little less geologically, but more kind of

through sort of the idea—a little bit more—a little more art connected, you know, like the idea that these pieces that people make are placed in these sites that have this constructed construct around it, you know, of architecture like the white box thing, the idea of the neutral space.

And so just trying to kind of work with that idea, you know, to make an adjustment on it by bringing in this other voice, but still using the architectural structure, the actual negative spaces that an architect has said this is where natural light needs to come in. But I was just re-naturalizing the light in a different way. So it was just, you know, different layers of this whole thing.

MS. RIEDEL: I think this is how this conversation is going to work—it is going to come out in layers. That is the only way because there are so many different layers to each of the programs.

MR. ROLOFF: And each project, I think you see the kind of—you see the result. But there is so much about the process. And it is not always—it is true in different amounts in different ones. But in that case, there was a sort of whole passage that the concept went through that, I guess, for me, this is where I was getting at as this kind of finality of the kind of decisions that were made to kind of resolve the thing in the aesthetic realm at the end, that the piece works.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MR. ROLOFF: It doesn't—you know, I haven't figured out the way. But it doesn't necessarily include a thought process that is as equal as interesting to me that at least that I experienced. So that is kind of a little bit of that thing that I was talking about. And that is, in a way, going back to Jim Melchert a little bit, the idea of, you know, when you say art as research, what exactly do you mean? You know, do you mean—and then how do people experience it? And does it matter? Or could it be just purely embedded?

I mean, the piece—I don't know if this story is true or not, but this is so typical of Charlie, [Charles] Charlie Ray, I was mentioning earlier. Jennifer Pasture who was his girlfriend, who is a friend of mine, no longer—I don't think they are together anymore. I am sure they are not actually. She was saying that he got this tractor and had it all taken apart and then had each of the parts modeled by—or divided in half, so there is two piles.

And he had a male and a female each reconstruct by modeling all the parts exactly as they could. And then the molds were taken off of those constructed things and then cast in aluminum and then the whole thing was assembled. So it has a built-in animus/anima [the archetype of contrasexuality] in it that you would never see.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: But it was so much like what I—it made sense to me because I know a lot about parts of his mind and the fascination was something like that. It may not be completely true. It may be more—and he also—there is an element of him about constructing myths, mythologies. So that is an interesting variant on the idea of the research is it is kind of actually a buried process, but it is more mythic. It is sort of like, you know, saying well, I climbed this mountain in order to make this drawing. And maybe you never did. But it is part of the story of the drawing.

And so does it matter that you actually climbed the mountain if people think about the fact that someone climbed a mountain to make a drawing? And where is that boundary? You know, is the power of suggestion as strong as something that is—I mean, it just brings up all these curious questions, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: It makes me think of the piece you were talking about earlier where you went to very specific locations to pick pine needles.

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Does it matter that they were from those exact spaces?

MR. ROLOFF: It did to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: See, that was the thing. And I like to tell that part of the story. And, you know, and it is also theoretically possible that I didn't.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. [Laughs.]

MR. ROLOFF: I did take video of me being—you know, I mean—and was the video constructed? You know, who knows? But, I mean, but, yeah, it is sort of like—it is—I think it is whether you want to—see, with Charlie, I think he likes to play with all those things. It is just something about his interest in like—he is really—he is really a

trickster model is the way I see him. And he doesn't always appear that way.

That is why what is interesting is that his end game in a certain way is this piece that also answers the Kenneth Baker review. But it may not actually be that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: It may be something completely different.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. ROLOFF: It is like when he made that car that was smashed and remade [Title: *Unpainted Sculpture*, 1997–JR]. That was also taken apart and cast into fiberglass and then assembled. What he said that he was interested in was whether the ghost was in the machine in the sense that someone had died in the actual car wreck. But would that eminence, that perception or that whatever it is, the ghost—if everything was impeccably transformed, would that also—would the materiality and the structural and the eventness of that crumpled car also carry that other element? It is kind of a beautiful—it is a little—for some people, it would be kind of difficult because it was someone's life that was sort of being, you know, kind of looked at like that.

But there was also something kind of beautiful about where do things begin and end? You know, what is the edge of anything? So those are—I mean, that is—you know, in a way, his research is his method in a sense. The rebuilding of that thing. It is also an aesthetic thing, the decision to just spray it as primer, which is kind of like the state before everything is actually painted. So it is kind of like you are hovering in this intermediate state rather than a trompe l'oeil duplication of the car and seeing if that transference kind of works.

So, you know, he is juggling kind of fine lines between the different attributes of belief and object and those kinds of things.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think that is really interesting, that concept of "space between" because that seems to be something that comes up a lot in your work. Your work has got a foot in one world and it has got a foot in another world and it has got a foot in another world. There are multiple references. It could refer to a variety of things and it could refer to none of them in specific at all.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, yeah. Well, that is—I think when things are operating—kind of things fall into place well. The piece [*Seventh Climate (Paradise Reconsidered)*, 2006, 1-5 Colonnade Park] in Seattle [WA] has some of that, too.

MS. RIEDEL: The piece under the overpass.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you want to talk about that a little bit now? We are jumping around a little.

MR. ROLOFF: I would say that in a way that that is—the reason I say that that is probably for the viewer, that may be the more readable version, if they know the story, if they know that the programming of the overhead rain and light was done from a 1960 timeframe, the time before the freeway existed.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MR. ROLOFF: I think what they won't quite—I mean, that is kind of a thing—you know, I think, some people, they have some fascination with that to itself. But the idea that those four terrains that each of those trees kind of represent, being asked to kind of create their own relationship within the context of that displaced environment, displaced timeframe, that may be more obscure.

And, I think, for me, I guess, it pulls together most so with the title, *Seventh Climate*. If you read again—you read the little thing and it says that the seventh—there are only six elements, so the seventh climate is the emergent property of the six elements.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: So there are the four trees, which are actually four different climates, you know, in a way. They are all Northern hemisphere, but they are from different biomes. And then there is the program climate of another era. And then there is just the ambient climate of Seattle day to day in contemporary times.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And so it is basically like a big science experience in that I don't know what the seventh climate is.

It is the summation of those things interacting with each other. And I have made few—I have made some specific things—there should be no pruning or that we reevaluate every three years as to whether there is any adjustments. I wanted the things to create their own synergy. So if there was enough from a different programming of the lamps that come in, if there was a phototrophic thing where the plants would start to head that way to—

MS. RIEDEL: To head out as opposed to growing straight up?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, yeah. And then their engagement with each other, it almost gives them a release valve because what is happening particularly like the birch tree is there is no branches on the inside. They are all on the outside.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: So I actually asked on this last trip I went up there to temporarily tie it back to the group because when it was raining—and they had turned off the rain for a while for some maintenance or something. And so when I turned it on when I was there, I wanted to photograph it with more in its rain state. It would bend the tree too much. I wanted to—you know, so I am adjusting it a little. I wanted it to—I wanted to give it a little more strength before it was to just be completely at the mercy of the whole thing.

So, you know, I am playing with the experiment a little bit. And I do—I did ask that they take out the dead palm leaves because the metasequoia that was—I lost one tree. I had a Southern hemisphere tree that I was really interested in. It would grow—it was a eucalyptus that will grow in the Northern climate. And I was interested in white being a theme. The magnolia has a white flower. The birch has a white trunk. And this one—this is a eucalyptus urnigera which also has a white trunk.

So the white was important as a kind of ghost-like sense of the elusiveness of the climates, in a sense, or more of a—but I couldn't—the metasequoia ended up—I couldn't get another tree to replace it except the meta—so I defaulted to a tree that I was just interested in intrinsically and also was different enough in terms of its texture to be a representative of a fourth kind of specimen and also a biome.

Anyway, because it was planted later, the dead leaves of the palm were kind of causing it to grow outward.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, I see.

MR. ROLOFF: I wanted them—I picked the trees originally important that they all be the same height, so that they started with the same—they started in the same kind of thing and that their differences would come from the site. So because I had to switch that one tree out, it was behind in its growth.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And so I wanted—I made a little adjustment to kind of even it up. So it is—you know, I am—it is sort of like adjusting the kiln, you know, kind of tuning it up or down to sort of watch how it goes.

MS. RIEDEL: And it makes me think, too, of laboratories. You know, it is an ongoing—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, right.

MS. RIEDEL: Somebody, I think it was Lisa Becker, again talked about an experiment—you are creating an experimental space, hovering somewhere between a scientific lab and a florist.

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, okay.

MS. RIEDEL: And, I think that is actually kind of an interesting way to think about some of those spaces.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, and it comes from the Kilns, too. Well, the idea of a conversation. It does something, you know, and you are kind of like well, I will speak a little bit on this at this point. And then just let you keep speaking, you know, kind of thing. She may have been referring to this piece [*Holocene Terrace*, 1999 for the exhibition "Morphology of Change"] that was at Lance Fung Gallery [New York City, NY], which was an extension of the exterior through a vitrine that came in.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it one of the Holocene pieces?

MR. ROLOFF: *Holocene Terrace* that was the first one. Then *Holocene Passage* [2002, a site-specific, architectural intervention designed for the Archivo Emily Harvey as part of "Next," the 2002 Venice Architectural Biennale, Venice, Italy] went between two windows.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. ROLOFF: And that would have been something that was kind of like—it would be like a test tube where the environment was affecting what was ever in there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: But it was in where you could actually have some connection to it. But as an observer, you didn't—you could only watch. You couldn't really do anything.

MS. RIEDEL: The facts, yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So it was—that is a lot like the kiln in a way. I mean, I did turn up—you know, I did kind of—I mean, what do you call it—turn up the burners because the kiln is a little more of a dynamic system. It is not reliant upon so much external thing. But there is a parallel there for me in a way of not being too much in control, just being enough to—I think in the case of the Kilns is a sense of fruition, which may come just from the idea of a more classical kiln firing, where the kiln is allowed to reach its kind of point, its apogee of its own—of a kind of expression where it is as hot as it will get. It is as bright as it will get. It is sort of like all the parts are kind of in sync. The egress or the ingress is equal to "X."

There is this equilibrium. And so that is kind of where the tuning of it came. And in the vitrine piece, the equilibrium is, I think, more dealing with a little more benign environment. It is not like where it is going to be—it is going to—the structure is kind of more an underpinning of equilibrium and that it allows—it allows this certain range of interaction because one of the things that happened and no one knows about is that I didn't attach the roof very well, so a big gust came in and the sheet rock roof went—[makes noise]—and then fell in.

So when Lance [Fung] came in the next day, the roof had fallen in on the thing. So he got some—I wasn't in town then and some other artists from the gallery, they came in and they patched it back up. So it was sort of like, you know, maybe in another piece, that would have been—I don't know if I would have allowed it, but I might have allowed for something to kind of expand and contract, but become a little more planned or a little more part of something in a way.

So that was an odd element. It is not really part of the—people don't know about that.

MS. RIEDEL: Does that happen often?

MR. ROLOFF: It happened once. And then we screwed it down.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. But in general—

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, oh, I see.

MS. RIEDEL: Does that happen with your installations or are you surprised frequently by unexpected participation?

MR. ROLOFF: Not too much.

MS. RIEDEL: Not too much.

MR. ROLOFF: I think what happened in the Kilns is what I did was I—after the first few—and I ended up buying a series of six burners that I knew the output because I was always—I was borrowing burners and things from people. It was kind of—it was a question of whether I would get enough to make it kind of interesting and stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: We haven't talked about the transition from the Ships to the Kilns. Let's talk about that.

MR. ROLOFF: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: So you had first started doing the Kilns in the late '70s, early '80s?

MR. ROLOFF: Seventy-nine.

MS. RIEDEL: Seventy-nine, okay.

MR. ROLOFF: It was just a—

MS. RIEDEL: That is an interesting transition, I think.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, it was a transition in the sense that it was not too big of a transition in the sense that—

MS. RIEDEL: You don't think so? Do you think about them as being so similar?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, I just think about it more like one thing leading to another. By 1979, I had done a number of large pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Are you referring to those Night Ships, or something other than—

MR. ROLOFF: No, this big *Shoreline Piece* [1977] and that rower kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So the scale was kind of moderate and medium-sized interior sculpture kind of, I guess. Fifteen feet or something would be—and so—and then the natural idea of going larger also started to become included in kind of thinking about doing something environmentally. And then the Ships also as—you know, there are so many different kinds of material experiments. The idea of using native clays or using different materials that would respond to the, you know, the firing, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So what I did was I was asked to go to University of Notre Dame [Notre Dame, IN]. And Bill—I know his name and I can't think of it—Bill Dailey—no, Bill—no, it wasn't Dailey. He is still there. I talked to one of his students recently.

MS. RIEDEL: At Notre Dame?

MR. ROLOFF: Anyway, he invited me to come. And they had just gotten this giant old football workout place as this ceramic facility—huge. It is great. It was amazing. And so I actually didn't do anything in there. But I went outside because it was kind of like there were just these kind of nether spaces out there. And I decided all I wanted to do was just fire the ground.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah.

MR. ROLOFF: So I made a ship shape out of brick and then I had been noticing that people were making these raku kilns out of kaowool that they let the light come out. And that is what - I made the connection back to that salt kiln I was talking about—about all the stuff going on, you know, and thinking that that was the fire part. So I made—I just made a simple metal structure and pinned the kaowool top to this brick structure. [Roloff is referring to his Kiln project *Fire Earth Piece*, 1979.] And then on purpose, I stuck a burner—he had given me a burner and, I think, it was a gas line I got. Maybe there was an outdoor line or something. I had some way of doing it.

And I purposely—this is kind of more the geologic thing coming in—did not want to know what cone it went to. So I put a—I stayed there with it and I kept it—I just turned it on full blast. And I put a fire—a brick—so it would be like—because they would heat up a brick and it would reignite. It is a kind of typical thing that you would do.

And then as soon as it got to the point where it looked like it was going to stay, it wasn't going to cause a gas—there would be some problem, then I went away. I didn't want to watch it anymore. I wanted to just kind of go do something completely different and not have any idea what the temperature—not do any of those things. I came back that evening and the top was—it had heated up and the top was glowing. You know, it was like—so it had that ship effigy-like structure. And then I liked that idea of fruition, sort of sense—okay, well, it has gone on long enough. It has become itself. There is nothing really more for it to do to become. So that was just my intuition about it and turned it off.

Went back the next day and took the top off. And I just basically—because I knew about iron and stuff, it showed how much iron was in the soil because there was this kind of darkened—there was some reduction. There were some other issues that were involved with that as well. So that was great. So then I went back. I took some pictures of that. And then I went back and I went in the glaze room and I thought I would do another—and I took the glaze materials I knew to be non-toxic like borax and some frits and things and I made up a kind of uncalculated formula, you know, different—I may have even done something like well, take one scoop of everything. I can't remember. Something very much like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So then I spread it back—I spread it on there and I just turned the burner thing back on again and did exactly the same thing and left it on for about the same amount of time. And the next day I came back and then there was this kind of piece of glass that was in there that was fused and the ground had been fused into it. So it was just—that was the first kiln.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: And it didn't seem that different. There are things different about it, but it wasn't—it was kind of like putting a ship in that I had done some stuff to see what it would be like. So it was more like the see what it would be like thing was the same and trying to—you know, and the Kilns, even then, I probably still fired to, you know, a certain temperature or something like that. I didn't want to blow up things, particularly, although I even played with that and different things.

So there was something about it that was the same.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.]

MR. ROLOFF: And then that became, you know—I got another call from this guy and I am blanking on his name because I don't think he is there anymore, University of New Mexico [Albuquerque, NM].

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And he said hey, come down and do a workshop. Okay, but I want to do this one thing. I have got them working on developing these kiln things. And so I went and did the next thing, which was then the idea of firing a lava boulder. And the idea there was more pointed was I knew—because we were driving around and I knew about the volcanics in that area. And we went to this place called the JA Volcano [Albuquerque, NM] which was outside—kind of a place where, I guess, people would go out and drink or something. It was kind of a known, odd place away from town.

So, you know, then we found a boulder and we stood it up on end. And I was working with ships that were connected to the Monitor and the Merrimack [two American Civil War ships]. And so this idea of a land monitor, just this strip of molten—you know, of ground and then this thing that the boulder was kind of the turret in a way [Roloff is referring to his piece *Land Monitor/Fired Volcanic Boulder*, 1980]. So it is just that formal shape like that. And so—but the idea there was more to see how—this was a boulder about like this. And just to see what happens if you just fired it, you know, as much as you—you know, like build a kiln and then—

And so what I wanted to do was - we made the kiln in two halves, so that we could fire it up to like that point of fruition again. And then we had two teams of students because they were involved in it a little bit. And we took the half—we turned off the burners and while everything was still hot, we put some poles into these areas in the top of the kiln, where we could lift it and just remove it and then just have this molten boulder and this molten strip of ground.

And the idea there was to go back in time to re-experience the birth of that boulder, which had a molten origin. And so what was really interesting for me was that the boulder was red hot, but it was essentially completely unaltered. There was no melting at all. All it did was absorb everything we threw at it.

And so what was interesting - to look at that and then to look at that volcano and to know how much energy went into that and then to extrapolate it to the idea of like wow, what is that—you know, this is a volcano itself. And this was a small one. It was just a little cinder cone. It has a huge amount of energy. So it was a kind of attempt at getting at that idea by taking this boulder back to what I was hoping would be more of its origin.

MS. RIEDEL: So was this a refocusing or a—what is the word I am looking for—a realigning of the focus to some degree with a new emphasis on geology and on the site-specific materials? And were you thinking about performance art at all at this point? Or was that just sort of a byproduct of everything else that was happening?

MR. ROLOFF: I was thinking—I think its point was not so much performance, but more process art.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. It makes sense.

MR. ROLOFF: You know, maybe Hans Haacke's grass growing or something like that would have been kind of a sort of antecedent in a way if I had to—I wasn't thinking about him. But, I mean, that would more in that lineage.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And performance, I went back and forth about that as to whether these things were performances or whether they were events.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And I had kind of—I now think of them more as performances because I see the act of building and, you know, the whole—I guess, because now I have an even more holistic view of the process and they became performative in a way. And I like also the idea that if you use it—I think, also the vitrines that come in, I was

thinking in those performance spaces for nature or for environmental, you know, in the context of a kind of non—less-environmental sort of space and that they would be—they become arenas or stages.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: That was sort of—that was a way of performance. And, I think, what is nice about it is that if you look at—if you think about material interaction as performative, it changes a little bit of the way you can kind of—of the boundaries of it, you know, how you can approach it. So I like that and that particularly more now. And so it opens up the idea of so many other things being performances that don't have to do with, you know, the things—the tropes of performance, so to speak.

So that—it is just a semantic window, which I like. You know, I have—I brought some food for us if you want something. You want lunch?

MS. RIEDEL: I am starving.

MR. ROLOFF: Okay, I just brought these little salads.

[END CD 2, TRACK 3.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art with the artist, John Roloff, in his studio in Oakland, California, on August 17, 2009, disc number three.

We were just about to segue into architecture, which has become increasingly important in your work. We will go back to teaching a little bit to address some of those other questions, but it seemed a nice time—you were waxing poetic about architecture students.

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, yeah, right.

MS. RIEDEL: It seemed an interesting time to ask how architecture became increasingly important to your own work.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, I think that that is against the definition. To me, naval architecture is architecture. So the Ships were also very—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: Early, you know, in terms of studying—I mean, I remember I have like this one—let's see, what is the—oh, yeah, *The Search for Speed Under Sail* by [Howard Irving Chapelle; New York, Norton: 1967]. It is just an early book that looks at—well, form is obviously the main thing, but it is also that you—the idea of structure and form in terms of a body of water. And so—or moving through it. And real early interest, I remember, in seeing images of Navy studies of ship hull design, the big tanks that they would test in, and wind tunnels, testing of aeronautics kinds of things.

So both—like the kiln things is both the instrument and the thing that is being examined. There is an integration. So that is very similar to the ship. The other thing, which, I think, is a very important part of it, is the vitrine. And they were quite earlier works. And that they—the idea in the case of that—the thing that I liked—the vitrine was partially a protection because I could work really delicately. And some of those things were quite delicate. But there was also a kind of atmosphere. And for me, it was pretty easily connect up with this kind of Turner-esque, kind of atmospheric idea of landscape and things like that.

So those would be the sort of antecedents. And then, I think, it is, you know, I think, it development of also building kiln structures, which are architectural, and then even the idea of working with that thing I was talking about earlier, working with the thing that is made and the thing that makes it. That is also the instrument idea, where the structure that something is being housed, you know, or kind of transformed in.

So to me a kiln—and I have drawings and stuff that are like this—is not that much different than an alembic [a distillation apparatus] or a kind of retort or some sort. So those things are all—have architectural dynamics for me. And then like the atmosphere thing that the interior of the kiln, the sort of like that envelope of heat and I would—I did a lot of things that were cast. I worked with molds and things. But then another point, which is connected to the vitrines, so going to these oculus things, for example, or the glass ship.

The glass ship would not be really any different in terms of an armature or structural-like system to how a lot of the kilns were made. It is just - it wasn't kaowool sheathing it. It was glass.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And the process is much slower, right?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And the processing is different as well. It is, a sedimentation as opposed to an oxidation or a reduction. Does that sound right?

MR. ROLOFF: Between what two things?

MS. RIEDEL: Between the ship—I am thinking of sort of the example of the ship at Yerba Buena [*Deep Gradient/Suspect Terrain (Seasons of a Sea 'Adrift'),* 1993]—

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, I see.

MS. RIEDEL: And I am thinking of one of the Kiln projects, something like that.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, there was also some Ship Kilns—

MS. RIEDEL: That is true. That is true.

MR. ROLOFF: That were, kind of in that. So, I mean, these things cross pollinate or cross feed each other in different ways. And then this idea of the materiality of the architecture, that, I think, is a little bit more recent in the sense of, you know, a vitrine or the atmosphere or sort of like the enclosure or if, you know, you build something out of glass or plastic or whatever that is clear, the material is in service of something.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: That after a while got applied to the material of the architecture, you know, more as content itself. So rather than it just being the thing that the something is made out of, that it was sort of like what it was made out of became. And then where that came from.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, the form seems increasingly connected to the process.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, they always were from the Kilns going back.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: But is more that the material—I guess, I should try to think of an example that is earlier on.

MS. RIEDEL: That would be helpful.

MR. ROLOFF: Because I think that the glass ships and the kaowool kilns and the cast kilns and stuff, material was important, but it was kind of in service of the thing. And so the idea of anthroturbation [a concept that situates man-made constructions, created from natural resources, within a geological context] as I think, embedded in there, but it was connected to that real early perception of the ceramic materials also being landscapes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So I am not really sure. I will have to think about when did that kind of really connect, you know, in terms of—the theme of anthroturbation was in the late '90s, most specifically, although the piece, *Metafossil* [1992] the ships that were made out of the pine branches—

MS. RIEDEL: That was at Paule Anglim?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah. I mean, those—I mean, what it was made out of was the content as well as the ship, the form. So this was form and material becoming content.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So that may be the most salient or largest example. That has antecedents in the fossilization process of where process creates form or—in a way. I mean, I used to tell this story about—in lectures, where I would say imagine a creature dying and settling to the bottom of the ocean and then being covered with silt. And the silt getting hard enough at the same time that the creature was decaying. And so then you have this negative space of this creature.

And then over time through different processes, that space can get filled by kind of, you know, liquids that are in the—you know, if it became something like—if it became agatized, where those are salicious [ph] solutions that become deposited within that shape. So most agates that you find are like just like vacuoles or empty spaces

that have, you know—that is why you see that concentric growth rings in it. So anyway, that would be—so that idea of that process of fossilization would take 100,000 years or whatever it was to go through a very, pretty large-scale cycle, where I could do something that was similar in the kiln by taking a handful of straw and dipping it in slip and then putting it in the kiln.

The slip straw burns out and then I have these negative spaces. Maybe in that case, I haven't filled it with something. But I have that fossil-like structure.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So I have the impression of something as a kind of analog or surrogate fossil. But I can do that, you know, in a week or a couple days. So this compression—taking a long-term process and compressing it down was—I used to talk about that as a—more as just a logic to see that I could—in that process, I saw fossilization. I saw a longer-term process or that is how I came to arrive at my making of that, that idea. And then I used that in many different ways.

So there was one kiln, the one at Humboldt that was a negative space of a ship [*Humboldt Ship,* 1989–JR]. It was actually built—there was whole quite complex construction because it was made with strips, the way you would make a hard chine boat. And then that became the negative space that was cast. And then that was all taken away.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So in a way, that was kind of—at least one melding of architecture and material and process. And then the pine needle one was also where the material that the thing was made out of was actually an important part of the content. So, I guess, that is what I was trying to do. I was trying to connect up the early kiln fossils with that particular kind of idea of fossil. So that process of material and form, it had a kind of—it was not the same window as the things that were—like at Minnesota, where it was really specific origins.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MR. ROLOFF: Although the origins of the thing in the *Metafossil* did start to come in. So, I guess, what I am saying is that there are different places or pieces that you could look at that have—maybe you could trace it from different sources—

MS. RIEDEL: Angles of entry.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, the angles of entry. Trace it from different sources. And so they become—these things converge in different ways.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And the actual anthroturbation—I am going to have to kind of look back at that. The vitrine, the *Holocene Passage* was seen like that in a very abstract way because I was interested—Lance Fung Gallery was on Broadway [New York City, NY]. And the way I was seeing—I was seeing Broadway as a canyon.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And that this space, this kind of negative space that came in that was also still connected to the—I saw as a kind of niche, you know, sort of like—just some like little shelf that was in this thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Coming in from the canyon and cutting into the gallery space.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, yeah, that kind of thing. And so there is this—in the sense of the built environment, being a canyon or being a stratigraphic assemblage that humans had made, this was a little bit—I saw this as a kind of respite, you know, a kind of—I was also interested in—which is not as clearly connected, but I was interested in the idea of architecture—and this is as I recall all this now, architecture as a system and that the electrical system, the plumbing and everything were like, you know, veins and nervous system. You know, it was really kind of an organism in a way.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: And some of that comes from that book by Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* [translated from Italian by William Weaver; New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: 1978].

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. I haven't read it.

MR. ROLOFF: That is an interesting book. That is where Marco Polo—

MS. RIEDEL: What is it? *Invisible Cities*?

MR. ROLOFF: *Invisible Cities*. He is a kind of traveling ambassador and reporter to either Genghis Khan or Kubla Khan. And in this kind of context of this story, the empire of the—the Khan empire had grown so large that he had no idea what it was composed of. So Marco Polo was sent out to report back. And so he would come back and he would well, there are these amazing cities. And there is a city that is only made out of plumbing parts or there is a city that is made—you know, it was all these metaphorical things about the idea of a city and a kind of systemic entity in some sense.

So there is this kind of—there is a connection to that. And I remember thinking about that intrusion as relating to that system. I am not recalling the exact connection or the logic to it, but it was kind of like, I guess, probing an architectural structure to see where it—or to adjust the interface with how it related to the environment and maybe thinking about some of the systems that are keeping it alive. So it wasn't something that was resolved as a kind of concrete idea. But it was kind of different things that were hovering around the built environment, analogs to geologic systems, analogs to biological systems.

And just looking at it more through a metaphorical lens, in a way, analogous—lens of analogy in different ways. So, I think—

MS. RIEDEL: All at once, which is one of the things I think that is interesting about it is it is not one of any one of these things that is all of those things.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, there was at the same time in that same show was there was a first version—no, it wasn't the very first. The first version was done down—the show [at the Museum of Contemporary Art] I had in [Lake Worth] Florida.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right. *Rising Sea* [1998] that show?

MR. ROLOFF: *Rising Sea,* yeah. And there are these things called landscape projections for an unknown window.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And what they were were—because Robert Morgan writes about it, which I think he and I talked about it some, so, I think, it makes sense—was this—because of the Orange Pieces [a series of photo/processes involving orange slices arranged on a photograph, which are then sealed] and some of the imagery that was being brought up in there as a kind of analogs for a bunch of different things. I was looking at knights in armor. I was looking at robes, sort of materiality of robes and things like that. And that they started to kind of—and also this idea, really into [Gottfried] Leibniz, which is—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So what that all falls under in a larger thing is this idea of the Baroque. And what I was interested in was the rationalism of some of the other kinds of constructs, you know, like [René] Descartes and maybe Neoclassicism and a bunch of things that could be architectural, could be philosophical.

Leibniz in that era, the idea of the Baroque, which is also the [Gilles] Deleuze thing of the fold and those things, is the relationship of something organic to something that is formal and that they influence each other. And the big orchard photos [*Slump (Orchard) I*, 1997 and *Slump (Orchard) II*, 1998] that I was doing besides kind of connecting back up to my history, I saw those orchards as fundamentally an architectural space. And the ordering of it, you know, like the Karnak Columns [of the Great Hypostyle Hall of Karnak, Ancient Egypt (present day Luxor, Egypt) 13th century BC] or something like that. And yet—

MS. RIEDEL: Is that what you mean by the parallel between organic and formal?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah. And so you would have this formal system of them, the organizational relationship. But then from each node of expression would be this completely unique, organic thing called a tree. Maybe it is monoculture. I mean, you can kind of pick where you see difference and where you see similarity. But there was this synergistic relationship between those things. At least, that is what I was starting to look at.

So these landscape projections were organic digital things that were brought into—reshaped into a frame.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, those rectangular frames.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah. And so the space in the middle was what I was thinking of as a theoretical architecture, an architecture that was—let's see if I can get this all kind of put together here. I don't know. I think it was

something like a kind of relationship or trying to struggle with the relationship between a kind of rational system and an organic system in general. And that may have been something like that formality of architecture as a—you know, like Lance's building, and then there is bionic quality of these pipes and fluids running—it is like turbulence and hydrologic kind of events and things, as well as, you know, electrical quantum events that were happening in the electrical system, coexisting, kind of coexistence of those things.

And so, I think about like Leibniz in a sense of his—and I did this piece much more recently with these wigs ["Thermodynamics of Silence," 2006] that were—they were supposed to kind of represent Leibniz's huge wig. And they were cast in different materials.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, I think, I saw this show. Was this at Paule Anglim again?

MR. ROLOFF: Paule Anglim, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: What was that called again?

MR. ROLOFF: "Thermodynamics of silence."

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MR. ROLOFF: And so that was connected—that was just kind of—also, these sort of—by then, the idea of Leibniz and the interest in it was connected to him being seen and, I think, a lost art of the idea of synthesis. Looking at the world through—I have this new thing that I am working on called synthetic art ecology, where so much of philosophy and so much of science and so much of things is analytic. In a sense, it is about—it sort of takes things apart and then looks at the parts. But it is less—it is less of a value than how they are put back together.

So the synthetic compositeness of it. And my view of Leibniz is that he is—you know, I concur—and from my own interpretation of him as being eminently synthetic in that, you know, he, more or less—I don't know if he rejected [Sir Isaac] Newton's system of—what would you call this—sort of planetary, you know, gravitational, the whole kind of—I think Leibniz saw greater dimension because the idea of the monadology and that worlds existing in worlds. It is so much more dimensional and I think more nourishing or more generative way than to—and synthetic—than to sort of have this kind of purely—what I saw was a kind of purely analytic thing.

And people have talked about that in different ways of the problematic of science in that the empiricism—empirical has no room for the intuitive.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So that, to me, is where Leibniz is the one—and that is who I also saw the Baroque, this being the rational and the organic as having a synthetic—and having to kind of engage with that relationship. So this theoretical building that these things were frames—they are windows—they have no real place exactly. But they were—it was just a kind of imaginary idea of architecture where the organic was actually constructing the formal in that way. And so—and each window was different, you know. And they had—they drew from different landscapes and drew from different things.

So that landscape itself started to kind of coalesce in this hypothetical thing. In a way, that pre-stages this whole idea of the more current thing of this, investigating the piers and stuff of seeing them as meta-landscapes by looking back through the geologic history. So this other thing that I was describing—

MS. RIEDEL: The San Francisco Pier project.

MR. ROLOFF: Was a generative—it was kind of like going there and it was more theoretical in a sense.

MS. RIEDEL: Two questions. You are talking about the San Francisco—the current San Francisco Pier project.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, the *San Francisco Wharf Complex* [2008-2009, San Francisco Bay, CA] is what I am calling it now.

MS. RIEDEL: And also, I just want to go back briefly while we are here and talk a little bit more about Leibniz and the monadology because I know that has been so significant for you. Could you—

MR. ROLOFF: Right. And I can't say that—I am an armchair philosopher—more like a—I would say more like a sit-on-the-toilet philosopher or something or roller skating maybe would be better because I am not trained.

MS. RIEDEL: No, but what is it about it that speaks to your work, in particular, that resonates? And is it that the room for the intuitive and the empirical, is it basically—

MR. ROLOFF: I think that is—the space for the intuitive and, you know, the organic. You know, that there is this kind of—I guess, this one piece that I did in '94. It is called *Deluge (Radiant Sleep/Helium Ash)*. And it is this kiln project that is slowed down to one-tenth its speed, so these flames are really slow coming out. And then on top of it are just these words that are the name of brain chemicals that are kind of—they dissolve into this flame sort of.

MS. RIEDEL: Brain chemicals?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, you know, dopamine, serotonin—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: A whole bunch of different ones because I was really—I was kind of upset in a way about the idea that, you know, my consciousness is just chemical interactions. And in some sense, I mean, I can kind of accept that. But I think that organic chemistry is not developed enough to actually—you know, it is just—that is sort of the limitation of science is that it is—we can measure. We know what these things are. But we actually don't.

So I was seeing the monadology as an analog to quantum mechanics, which talks about, you know, like a beam of light being a wave and a particle at the same time. These things that are not as rational that it is more than just these interactions or it may be the interactions, but we don't really know what we can—we only know to a degree what those interactions actually are and what they do. And it may be that I am fooling myself, you know, in that sense. Maybe it all is just, you know, I mean, psychology has come to the point where you just need the right dose, you know? You will be fine, which I also don't buy at all.

I am going to run to the bathroom again.

[END CD 3, TRACK 1.]

MR. ROLOFF: You got it?

MS. RIEDEL: We are on.

MR. ROLOFF: So to me, that is—I guess, the other way of—the relationship between the intuitive and non-linearity is, you know, people have kind of looked at that. And I think that is—so quantum mechanics is a kind of, you know, has at least some—you know, it heads in that direction. And in a way, I guess that project that I was describing—

MS. RIEDEL: The Wharf project?

MR. ROLOFF: The *Deluge*.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, right.

MR. ROLOFF: I am a little bit at loss for words because I don't have the right framing for it. But it is something that is kind of like neo-vitalism, which, you know, it is like a Native American idea that everything is alive. It is really about perception, which is also the monadology are these perception kind of elements. And so the eminent rationalness of boiling everything down to kind of things that don't allow for that is something that just doesn't seem right to me.

So again, I think, the Baroque actually maybe represents—you know, and, in some sense, the synthetic, which is those two things together, you know, a kind of rational and the irrational or the empirical and the intuitive together.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that why these frames that were organic and formal have a blank open space at the center?

MR. ROLOFF: The open center was more just a void. It is a kind of more Zen idea. I think of just this—I would like to—what I should do is I should find the description of that because that—

MS. RIEDEL: Is it on your website?

MR. ROLOFF: What is that?

MS. RIEDEL: Is it on the website?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, and it is—

MS. RIEDEL: I think Robert Morgan's essay was there. And that was pretty insightful about that—

MR. ROLOFF: But I had an actual—I had—you know, in other words, I had made a description of what that was, the actual—I just had a way of saying it that was—let's see if I can—

MS. RIEDEL: Let's look for that.

[END CD 3, TRACK 2.]

MS. REIDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art with John Roloff, in the artist's studio in Oakland, California on August 18, 2009. This is disc number four.

MR. ROLOFF: So that was—the way I was going to think about that was the most recent interest in the relationship of myself to ceramics.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And so one was this Spanish ceramic magazine.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you know what it's called, John, the name, the title of the magazine?

MR. ROLOFF: It's in an e-mail.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, we'll find it.

MR. ROLOFF: I'd have to—I'd probably mispronounce it if I didn't look—if I wasn't reading it.

MS. RIEDEL: But the fellow you said is Antonio Vivas [editor of *Revista Ceramica*]?

MR. ROLOFF: I think it's something like *Ceramica Revista* [*Revista* Ceramica] or something like that. But I don't what that means, what the second word means.

MS. RIEDEL: Ceramic review sort of thing.

MR. ROLOFF: So it's Antonio Vivas, is what I think his name was. Something like—I can check that. But anyway, they had done an article that was a survey up to 1996, primarily on the Kiln projects and then they wanted an update [*Ceramica Revista Internacional*, "John Roloff," No. 55, 1996, pg. 100-103–JR]. And so I sent them a bunch of things and I don't have much to send at this moment because it's not—I think the big issue there is the discrepancy between the general definition of ceramics and my definition.

Because there was a point in time when I was—I said everything is ceramics. Because when I looked at it, like the steel of this table is just - it's hematite which is just an ore with the oxygen taken out by industrial processes, a little bit of carbon added to make it steel. So it—and I've even sat—I remember doing a lecture. I was on a panel at Alfred [University, Alfred, NY] and I was saying, I'm looking at this room and I'm looking at the stone, it's made out of—the gypsum that is in the wall board of the rooms that we were working in or were in at that point, it's a depositional material that's often interlaid, you know, interbedded with clay and other things, depending on the depositional history.

So I don't see any difference in it. In other words—and also because you use plaster to make a mold that's ceramic, does that mean that it's not—is it just a tool? So I kind of get into these issues of everything is ceramics, if you boil it down to another place. So even the plastics, if it's fossil fuel connected, then you're back to the fuel that causes the ceramic to become hot. So why is it different, in terms of an ecological and a kind of earth-based perspective?

So that to me is completely natural, and then in the magazine he's saying, "Well, our editors want pictures of fire and things like that." Which that makes sense, but it's still about—instead of the discourse itself changing, it's about kind of—maybe it's capitalism or whatever, but kind of adhering to something that other people will recognize as ceramics, rather than expanding the definition intrinsically as a kind of—and, I think, you know, people then could get very confused and say, "Well, everything is everything and so you have nothing," you know, kind of idea.

But if you don't have—if it isn't sort of developed as a series of connections, then you get into those kind of vague areas, but—

MS. RIEDEL: Can you walk through, to some degree, how those connections have developed for you from ceramic to a broader understanding or definition of it?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, it's really the same thing as I was mentioning when I—in the glaze room as a young student saying, "Oh, that's a landscape."

MS. RIEDEL: The dolomite and spodumene, that sort of thing.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, all those things. That's a half of a mountain or part of a mineralogical suite that is used to construct—and somebody has the—I used to tell this lecture. I said, "The only reason that we make this stuff in the way that we make it, and which is almost all universities and all things, it's because we're at the very tail-end of an industrial process." There's no way that you could get 100 pound bag of 200 mesh Custer feldspar. It would cost you $20,000 to make that. You'd have to mine it. You'd have to then get a ball—you'd have to crush it and go through all these procedures, and if it wasn't for Kohler and toilets and all the different kind of industrial forms of ceramics, and the glass industry and all these things, we wouldn't be able to do what we do.

So the fact that that's not even in the conversation, really, it seems—again it's not—it's seeing things in this very isolated way, and I think, for me, it's a very convenient way. And it's more about product then about an understanding of something. So you go use my glaze formula, and I don't care where these came from. I just want to know the result that I can get that green, that particular green. So it's just boring to me. I mean, as far as the touchstone idea in ceramics, I pretty much just, right around 1990, I just left ceramics in that sense of the NCECA conferences and everything.

Because that would be—you'd give a talk and it would be about this relationship to landscape and then the questions from audience would be, "How'd you get that glaze?" "How did you do that?" So it was sort of like I didn't say anything. It's like nothing was said and so—and I've had even arguments with people about, I didn't want to be seen as a ceramic artist but as a landscape artist.

And that was a kind—and that was late '90s when I—there was this show I had in Florida. I remember talking with an instructor at a university in Florida about that, and kind of—it was a little bit of a difficult conversation. I don't—I think I backed off from that because it's not that interesting to me to just continue to kind of hold some sort of territory. I'd rather sort of see about the re-connections and what I can do and it's kind of—I don't feel particularly sensitive about it.

But it was really a reason to kind of not be interested in that—in the NCECA kind of envelope. Because it was really—I saw it as a just a really big comfort zone. And it was, you know, go to this school and you get this degree and you get hired and you kind of perpetuate the sort of comfort zone of this material and things. And then it's also isolated from the critique of the regular art world. It doesn't necessarily have to stand up to these sorts of issues.

I mean, when—I think that there's one of the things of re-entering into it, partly I was mentioning because of the re-vitalization of ceramics at the Art Institute.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, and that's brought you back to these NCECA conferences.

MR. ROLOFF: That was the primary thing, but also I have a lot of friends still in it and there are some new friends. I mentioned Walter McConnell and Neil Forrest in particular, who really are—they have their own kind of place and position in this whole thing.

But they're expansive minds. They're very intelligent and so they're not—those kind of people weren't really there. It was really sort of the end of the hardcore potter thing with—then low fire ceramics was sort of the only option, and a few isolated other things that were kind of testing some—asking some different questions.

But in kind of re-immersing in myself in a—there are other people and, I think, it is a lot more interesting. So—

MS. RIEDEL: So you see it starting to open up. You see them stretching a little bit and asking some new questions.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, there's a lot of new young artists. I went to the NCECA, there's a show called "[The] Margins," [2009] at [The Icehouse Gallery]—it was at the last, in Phoenix [AZ], NCECA conference, and it was—there were some interesting things there. It's still very formal as far as—and it's still kind—you look at it and you say, "Okay, these are—they're still objects in a normal objectivity kind of thing."

Although there's a few people that are working a little differently, and then I still have questions as to why someone like Santiago Sierra is not invited to the NCECA conference, who's working with materiality, but as a kind of Marxist, you know, the idea of the labor itself being an intrinsic part of the work. And he did these big mud installations and he's done—as far as a kind of ceramic definition that people can still grab onto, there's even—and Richard Long has done mud drawings and things like that.

And that's still even with, if you wanted to keep the idea of ceramics as being clay. Which makes sense sometimes, and people expand that, but to me it was always wasn't just clay. Clay was just another—was a rock forming mineral. It was a function of a certain kind of geochemical erosive process that, because of transport

dynamics, it was consolidated in different ways, and it was primary clay, secondary clay, sandy clay, silt. It's just a geologic category that has so many other things in terms of like why it is and where it is in the landscape.

I mean, the idea of years and years of using Kentucky old mine, OM4 ball clay, and wondering well why is the ball clay from Kentucky? What was it about that place in Kentucky that made that? And so those questions were intrinsic to me, but weren't part of the conversation.

So, I guess, the big picture idea of the touchstone thing was that I don't think I've ever left ceramics, in my definition. It's just that I couldn't find enough compatriots, or a conversation that I was interested in engaging in to sort of stay that tight with it. And so that's why it's still a touchstone, because I—for me, is I don't think I've ever really left it, and that these other logics, these other reasons that are coming back in and seeing new faces and new things, it gives me some hope and it makes me—and, you know, the thing is is that I'm not interested in defining ceramics for other people really. That's sort of a problem, and so I end up kind of a little bit isolated.

Some people are interested. Obviously people—like this interview and different things, partly on history, but also because maybe I represent something that's a little different than other things. And I don't really want to take away from people who are—that just go and buy a slub of porcelain and don't care what it is. Not everyone has to do that. But it also is for me, overall, it's just not a broad enough conversation. It doesn't bring in the idea of sight, which is now, it's an old—[Robert] Smithson is long dead. As a vital part of a discourse, it's not even discussed, to speak of, in this milieu.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting. It's true, yeah. Do you think of those as being particularly American confines for ceramics or—you've travelled quite a bit. Do you see a broader perspective or definition of ceramics elsewhere?

MR. ROLOFF: The thing that's more interesting of all that right now is this phenomenon in China, I think. Because there are people who—and, I think, this is yet another perspective, which is, I think, it's kind of interesting, is that they're basically practitioners who use cultural materials. And some of them are real art world, like paintings, and then they'll do a ceramic installation. Because the history of ceramics, in their country, is I don't think—it has a craft element, but I don't think it's isolated in the same way.

It's just like, this is—I'm commenting on the China's ethos and ceramics played such an important part in that because it's so much of a bigger timeframe, and ceramics meant a lot more before plastics and things. Other materials kind of took their place.

So they would move laterally between one material to the next and they weren't hung up on one question or another. It was like, okay, this makes sense. Let's do it. And that makes sense. Let's do it. There was a kind of freshness about it that I thought was really interesting.

And they also tapped into this whole—the Chinese kind of post-Marxist production thing where—like everyone else has done, which is that labor is cheap. And so you could cast—you could go to a village and get 20,000 objects cast in a particular porcelain and a surface treatment for a reasonable price and do a very large installation, the same way that you could go and have something woven out of bamboo in another part of China, and do a big installation. So they were tapping into history, materiality, productivity. They were tapping into all these things multi-dimensionally, and ceramics was part of that.

So I thought that was really a wonderful thing, and—but it was also that they—that ceramics was one material of many in terms of—not all of them, but a number of those artists. Because they were talking about culture, not about—in a broad sense, not about the way it's defined in America, which is a tendency to be more craft, in a way. More, kind of—or at least the history of the discourse is that. And so that, I think, has helped shape the—and I'm not—when I talk like that, I don't mean to disparage craft particularly. It's just I'm more—for me it's a singularity that is a comfort zone that can be very productive some people, but also just a comfort zone.

So it's like, the idea of questions being intrinsic to something, that's why conceptual art and things like that are a little more appealing to me because the question is a foreground. What is it? You ask that fundamental question rather than you're assuming something. Or you're looking at how other people are creating assumptions and then you're navigating between those things because you're trying to, kind of, unearth something else.

I kind of admit, in a way, that it's—maybe it's my age or something, but it is an avant garde strategy to have the sense of the new in a certain way, and that it's kind of a modernist idea. And maybe the Chinese thing is a little more Post-modern, where it's kind of like things are more of a collage of—the boundaries between things are not so discreet.

I think there are two different ways of saying a similar thing about boundaries. Anyway, but the idea of it still being a touchstone, it's—I think, I needed distance, in a way, and now I'm really kind of—partly to be reunited with friends and reunited with new things, and be reunited with—what it may sound like that I'm not supporting,

but I do support in a different way, is the sort of history of ceramics in America, because it's also meant a lot to me. It's not that it hasn't. It's just—

MS. RIEDEL: Well, your focus, it sounds like, has just been larger.

MR. ROLOFF: What's that?

MS. RIEDEL: Your focus has just been much larger. Your focus was idea-based and continues to be idea-based and question-based and specific, and ceramics is part of that. And that was a way you got into, as you said on the phone the other day, it was a doorway, the doorway you walked into much of this—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, it was just—it was TB9.

MS. RIEDEL: But it wasn't that alone.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, TB9 and Arneson.

MS. RIEDEL: It was not material-based.

MR. ROLOFF: And a few grad students and people that were—they were, within the context of ceramics, TB9 was very adventurous.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. ROLOFF: So that adventure, you know, Arneson embraced, and that came through. And so you could feel it and it meant something very strongly to me. So those are very important, in a way.

MS. RIEDEL: I think this segues nicely into your exhibition history. You began in ceramics, and certainly, that oftentimes would describe the sorts of galleries where you would exhibit. But over time you've gone far beyond that and exhibited in a wide range of spaces. How did that progression work for you and was that difficult to move from specifically ceramic-based? I know you went into the kilns and the furnaces, and that almost seems—

MR. ROLOFF: That was very interesting, that all—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, I would think that would be the way that—be defined

MR. ROLOFF: Because you ended up with documentation in other forms of that.

MS. RIEDEL: And completely outside of traditional spaces.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, I had—I think one of the reasons that I'm part of the Smithsonian project, in a way, is because of the history with Lester Gallery and then Diana Fuller who was so supportive and so vital in the Bay Area in those days. And then her different partners. I didn't work with Wanda Hansen, the original partner, but I did—but Dorothy Goldeen was very supportive and then Brian Gross.

Brian is the one who really, I think, sold this whole series of those Night Ship pieces. And I had exhibitions and I would always have work in the back of that gallery, and so he's the one that really, through Nan McEvoy and a few other people, that's how the work [*Night Ship/Storm Garden/The Frozen Sea*, 1986, *Night Ship/Submerged Channel/The Frozen Sea*, 1986, and *Night Ship/Wind Reef/The Frozen Sea*, 1986] ended up at the Smithsonian [American Art Museum, Washington D.C.] or the—I don't know—it's not the National Portrait Gallery [Washington D.C.] but it's the National—

MS. RIEDEL: Renwick maybe, the Renwick Gallery [Washington D.C]?

MR. ROLOFF: No, there's another gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Smithsonian Museum of American Art?

MR. ROLOFF: I remember having communication with some curator there about, where would you want your work, with what context? And I said, "Next to the [Albert] Pinkham Ryder." Because they're the ones that had those—because they also seemed like there's this night connection and stuff.

So I don't remember—it's a museum and it's in D.C. that's—I think it's part of the Smithsonian, but it's—and, I think, it's next to the National Portrait Gallery, but I'm not sure. I don't remember that—and the names may have changed.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, they have.

MR. ROLOFF: It's not the National Gallery [of Art, Washington, D.C] which is a bigger—had a big new wing and all. It's something else.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember the curator's name?

MR. ROLOFF: I could find it. I don't have it, but anyway, so there was a strong gallery kind of—and Diana Fuller, who had Arneson in her stable, so there—I think it was the fact that ceramics was embraced in the Bay Area multi-dimensionally. There was the [Braunstein]/Quay Gallery [San Francisco, CA] which was more just ceramics, with Bob Brady and some other people were showing. And I felt that—and also Bill Wiley was at Diana Fuller's and it was just people that were kind of the people that I had some connection with. And let's see.

Anyway, that was—so the idea of the objects and things were—and the Kilns started in 1979, and so they were parallel. And one of the things, which if we talk about working process, which is, I think, something I'm really trying to find again, was—what I remember the most strongly was that you would do a large work, an environmental work, and it was more design-based because you kind of had a schedule and you had to sort of like make—figure what you would do in a fairly short timeframe. Maybe there would be research involved, and then you would come to the site and you would—and then you were working in someone else's studio or situation where you were building this thing, often with students or some help.

And then it would usually be exhausting. You would do this thing, and it was just like—the project in Arcata, [CA] *Humboldt's Ship*[1989], we had ordered all this material and we ordered—and we got a—this was with Lou Marak and Jim—what's his name? I don't remember. The other instructor there. And we had fork-lifted all this material up to the roof of the ceramic building so that we could open the bags and back up a—this time I wanted to do it right, supposedly, which was to use a cement mixer, a big one, like a real one on a truck.

And so we opened up these bags and we're dumping them in and we were putting water in, and it was rotating and it was—I thought we were doing—and we noticed that it was starting to steam. And so what was happening, it was setting up prematurely and so we went, "Oh my God, let's get all this stuff in there." And we tried to run down to the—and back the truck into the—the thing was all set. And coming out of the shoot were steaming balls of concrete.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh my gosh.

MR. ROLOFF: So it had set up in there and it was—even though it was still mixing, it had made these kind of concreted balls. I had this on some video. It's really—somebody shot this thing. And so the driver was freaked out because he was going to have concrete setting up in his thing. So he—we got somehow, and we're like, this is not working. This was—so there was like five tons, or whatever it was, of concrete and aggregate and a bunch of stuff, and all this work. And here was the schedule. It had been all—it was just like the most complex welding and fabrication to be at this structure prepped to be cast, to make the thing.

So he took off and he ended up putting—he had to put so many hundreds of pounds of gravel in and just beat it, just run it and it beats all the concrete out. And so that—thank God that wasn't a lawsuit or something. But anyway, so what we had to—what we ended up doing was, we ended up going to the head of the California Special—it's the summer program where they have all these events and it's a lot of high school students and stuff are there. I forget the name. I just did one last summer and I'm—CS, California Summer School of the Arts, I think. And it was held in different campuses, state college campuses.

And so this was the—and Michael Lucero was doing another project. He had—we were both doing two different ceramic projects that Humboldt had put together. Anyway, we decided, well—so we went to the head of that, and we said, "Well, we've got a kiln to fire and we have no way to do it." And so they found a couple of grand, we ordered the materials, I made a whole new formula where I used red lava as a—I needed an insulating aggregate, something I could find close, vermiculite and some perlite, few things like that.

And so we mixed it by hand and we mixed 80 wheelbarrows, and I'm saying—I'm telling you full wheelbarrows, and we're—the students and different people going down this wooden path—

MS. RIEDEL: With full wheelbarrows of some—

MR. ROLOFF: Concrete.

MS. RIEDEL: Clay, concrete aggregate.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, because what we used for that is a fondue, which it's a calcium alumina cement, and it's a high temperature cement. You can't use concrete. That was a problem, is it has a different set up time, and when you do it—when I had done it before, I never ran into—because we had always done it by hand.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, I see.

MR. ROLOFF: And so we never ran into this issue and there are retardants. There's ways you could do it, but it wasn't thought about in that way and probably could have talked to an industrial—the supplier and got the right thing. It just didn't happen. So anyway, we did it.

MS. RIEDEL: With 80 wheelbarrows.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That's amazing.

MR. ROLOFF: It was amazing. I mean, it was just—

MS. RIEDEL: That sounds back breaking.

MR. ROLOFF: Back breaking.

MS. RIEDEL: Eighty wheelbarrows of concrete.

MR. ROLOFF: High stress, getting that, you know, and you couldn't stop because the concrete needs to be wet to wet. So you can't—once you launch this project, you have to finish it. So I don't remember how long it took, but it was—it actually was amazing how short of a—I mean, it took a better part of a day, but with a kind of teamwork thing, it really pulled together.

So that was—I should watch that tape again. I haven't seen it in years. Anyway—

MS. RIEDEL: That's a whole other aspect to these installations and events that we haven't even discussed, is what it was like coordinating that and—

MR. ROLOFF: Well, that's why I ended up doing it, because in a way, one, it was kind of—it kind of had run its course.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And the NCECA thing in '92, it seemed like it was kind of like the time to not do that, you know. There was no more—it was really somewhat reliant upon people getting a grant and setting up a situation that I could respond to. Because then they were easily $30,000 to do one of these things. And they had grown. They needed an engineer. They needed a steel—there was structural issues if—the one in Humboldt has the back—there's a couple of big steel pipes that come back to a concrete anchor that's four feet by eight feet by six feet or something. I mean, it's a huge, slug of concrete the size of a small car, and stuff like that.

So they'd become—you know, the safety, if they're going to become a little more permanent. There's all that kind of—it just got—from an experimental thing, it became a construction project and really architecture. And I was a foreman in a construction crew. An artist some of the time, but more of that. And that was kind of—I think there was—because it was deadlined, and everything exhibition and stuff had deadlines. But this was all on somebody else's environment and if you had good paid help, people that you knew you could rely on—I eventually said I could only do this with paid help. Because in other situations I had student help, and right at the most crucial time, "I've got a test." You know, they all bailed out on this one project in particular, and I was just like, I had to finish it all myself.

So it was like, late night—and after having worked and worked for days on end, and so they just became these giant exhaustion machines. And so that was kind of—it was partly my fault because they had sort of grown in scale and people wanted something a little different from it, like more permanent. It's just the nature of things.

Now the one I built for NCECA in Tyler's School of Art that was—it had a lot of heavy welding. I mean, it was like—

MS. RIEDEL: When was that?

MR. ROLOFF: Ninety-two.

MS. RIEDEL: That was the one in '92.

MR. ROLOFF: And they built a special annex, a little kind of shed, for me to work in. But it was not insulated and it was February in Pennsylvania, and I was there a whole month, working on this. And I had some good help. I mean, there were a few people who—but they had to be paid. I wouldn't accept a non-paid—because I needed

people I could rely on, having been caught in this problem.

It became like a theater, like a theater production.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. ROLOFF: The show must go on and at what cost.

MS. RIEDEL: So this was one of the final ones at Tyler.

MR. ROLOFF: That was the last one like that. And so that was a lot of it, was the dynamic had gotten just kind of bigger than something I wanted to continue to work on. But what I was getting back to, this was—this other process was, okay, so you get exhausted on a project. Then you could go back to the studio, and see to make a change on a big project was like so much was—you already ordered all the materials, there was just—there was only so much time, there was—so you really were bound to a design.

And what was so refreshing was to go back to the studio and make something that was three or four feet long or whatever and flip it over, turn it upside down, cut it in half. The idea of manipulation of an idea that you could actually alter and explore was a great counterpoint. And so those two things, for all in the—well since the late—all the whole 80s, they fed each other, and that was a really good cross-fertilization sort of dynamic, the two different scales and two different processes.

And so what's happened in a more recent time is that, still working in a large scale, but because they're more even larger scale in the sense of public art and they have other—you're now involved with contractors and other things, you end up becoming even more of an architect—actually, only partially the architect, it was mainly the rest of the office. The people that are making the phone calls to get prices and stuff.

So that's the downside, and I'm doing this project at the Exploratorium: [the museum of science, art and human perception, San Francisco, CA] I told Peter Richards there, who's one of the senior artists and long-time friend there, gee, you know—because I was working. I was making all these drawings, which I did for this Fort Mason part of the project which was part of a National Science Foundation grant. It's all conceptual. It's all just concepts about—and I love to make the drawings.

MS. RIEDEL: Which Fort Mason project is this?

MR. ROLOFF: It's just with the Exploratorium.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: It was kind of the initiation of what I'm calling the *San Francisco Wharf Complex*. We're looking at the—basically it was a case study and then the second case study is Pier 15 and 17 where the Exploratorium is moving to. So this was segueing into that whole project of—like the project in Minnesota where I was doing a geologic analysis of the structure in terms of its history, it's construction history, more like industrial archeology, and then taking that into another step of geologic analysis and looking at these—the pier is an 800 feet long kind of object. It's penetrating—the pilings penetrate down into existing sediments, into the geologic history. It's also made out of geologic materials that have another history.

So these things become meta-landscapes to me. They're these kind of elaborate landscapes built of ancient landscapes, or they're intersecting with other parts of the current landscape and to sort of—but one of the things I was saying to Peter was, "Gee, you know, I don't know that I want to actually make anything. I'm just interested in exploring."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And then making is the drawings. It's just the ideas and somebody else can do that. Because I don't like calling the contractor and getting them. Because what happens is I end up designing things that are unique to me, or they aren't off-the-shelf things, so then you've got to find someone that can make it. And usually there's not enough money. It's all this stuff.

So it's just kind of—you're changing hats to be the construction manager and I—only in a really special situations or if it's in a public art project where you're actually have—you know what the budget is, and even that's hard because there's usually—I mentioned that I usually design very large things and then scale it down more as a political thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, the projects seem, too, to have developed stages over time. The San Francisco project has three or four different stages, and the Minnesota project had how many stages.

MR. ROLOFF: And still has them.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, and as the projects have gotten more complex, you haven't narrowed down the project, you just expanded the stages. And that seems to be one way of dealing with the complexity, both of the processes that you're engaging in, and then the ways you're wanting to examine the project itself.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, that's what the—they had a show at the Exploratorium called "Observing," [2008, curated by Susan Schwartzenberg–JR] which was just a series of—they had a done a program there called "Invisible Dynamics," [ongoing] where a lot of different artists were looking at invisible, basically invisible systems, like atmospheric, biologic, I was looking at geologic, you know, different things. And so they had a show that was pretty much basically the research. And part of my—they paid for me - to do a very large print out, this kind of description of the project, and it was divided into five phases.

And so I—of which the final phase could be a build-out phase, and in the Exploratorium sometimes things are done by individuals as a kind of artwork or they can be done as part of the infrastructure that has to do with the museum system. And I'd say the artworks don't really—are not separate from that, but there's things that could be much more—there's things that may be more integrated and may not even have my name on them. That's just a—they might just be where you're working very collaboratively with a lot people and there's this kind of project that happens. So it has—it's a different process and has different dimensions to it.

So anyway, the—but I have made a series of proposals of ideas and what I like about that place is that the ideas, they actually have a really developed process for examining and working through ideas that's a little different than the one that I use personally, because it so much has to do with—it's something that needs to fit into the kind of language of the museum in a certain way, and that one that they are very interested in interactivity, which is something that I'm not that particularly interested in. So it can go through these—it can morph into these different things, and I found that in observing that that I've learned a lot about subjecting ideas to yet even more kind of processes that have different agendas.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, and just thinking about the Exploratorium—which people who aren't from the Bay Area may not know it's such a wonderful, hands-on science museum—but it makes me think of a point we were talking about yesterday, which is points of entry and angles of entry. It's a hands-on science museum. It's science as a creative art in many ways. It's approaching science in such a different way, climate, geology, gravity, all of that. So I would think that would be a really interesting fit for your work.

MR. ROLOFF: I have so much pleasure going over there and interacting with—the staff there is amazing. It's really an interesting place. And I had no—there's 350 people that work there. I had no idea.

MS. RIEDEL: I had no idea. That's extraordinary.

MR. ROLOFF: And they had—what you see when you're there is part of it, but there's research wings, there's media wings, there's even more sophisticated shops than the one that you see when you go in there. And there's really interesting people and, I think, what's—in moving to the piers, which is a bigger space yet. They have a huge space now, but they're going to an even bigger one, is that one of the things that I'm interested in, because it's kind of connected for me conceptually, is to make, not so much exhibit style interaction, but immersive, environment interaction, where you're walking into—because when you're dealing with geologic time and space and things, the scale of—it's hard to make that scale mean very much when it's such a small thing.

Where if you have a laser beam that's shooting across and it's hitting the top of Mount Diablo and coming back for something or just something that's kind of at another scale, then you can start to approach those things that you're talking about that I'm interested in. And so it's become a kind of catalyst to develop some things.

Again, the initial ideas are absolutely unwieldy. They would be projects that are the size of the Bay Area, almost. They're willing to kind of explore and then how do you kind of distill them and make—work with it? But again, in an odd way, it's all ceramics.

So this is—because it's landscape. I don't see the difference. I don't understand the difference, and it's process and it's change, like transformation. It's in a different timescale, the firing cycle of a kiln, the lithification cycle of a certain amount of—certain kind of sedimentation or a lot of volcanic activity over time in this part of—the Sonoma Volcanics and the—which basically made the whole terrior system in Napa Valley [CA], in Sonoma [CA] and that whole area. It's the source of all the geothermal that's going on there. The Berkeley Hills was all kinds of rhyolite and andesite, you know all volcanic—there's a big history of volcanism

And then undersea volcanism has been brought in and is part of the Franciscan Formation. So you're surrounded by, for me, it's ceramic-like things. So it's—I guess, I can—in my mind I can move between the two very easily. And maybe, this is what we were talking about yesterday a little bit, was that in some ways—I mean, the Kilns, I think, had a certain—they captured something, but there may be a failing as an artist, to a certain extent, of

making that excitement transferrable to someone else. And I think that there's something like the Kilns that were—that made so much sense in a certain way.

They were also kind of limited in a certain way, in terms of, I guess, the context and the audience. Although other people that aren't from the traditional ceramics appreciate them in some other way, they become like—people see them as—you were asking about the performances and things like that. They can sort of—there's other ways that people can relate to them. But—

MS. RIEDEL: There is that element to them. It's just one element, but there is that element to them.

MR. ROLOFF: I guess, I haven't really found a form like that. I can't say that I'm exactly looking for it. Because, I think, one of the things I'm doing is I'm enjoying, that reference back to Melchert again, of just the act of research itself. And so that was kind of the underpinnings of my query yesterday was about, in what way is research, as a work, so to speak, vital? Vital as an experience, as a communicative experience, which is where, I think, the art part is.

And yet the research itself, as a personal experience, is so—is actually more dimensional than it was when I was doing—there's been a slight displacement, in a sense. Where the Kilns were fed by research, were now, in a sense, some of the research is actually such a—and I'm finding that drawings—and that probably the problem there is that they're kind of computer, they're more didactic. They're more like proposals, so they don't have the, as much as the kind of flourish of the hand and the whole—that's why I was getting into the aesthetics. What is this thing—

MS. RIEDEL: How has this evolved, your sense of that?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, and so in some sense, maybe I'm not a very good graphic designer, where I don't make these things kind of sexy as a proposal-like things, like a—I mean, it would be great if I was a designer during the Soviet Revolution when they made those amazing posters and they had that kind of fervor that was kind of pushing a whole aesthetic out there. And I probably haven't found that.

I think there're things—I think, I show drawings and video at NCECA. That was my contribution to that show called "Perils in the Sublime: [A Poetic Consideration of Ecology, Landscape and Reconstruction," 2009, NCECA, Phoenix, AZ.] It was the one that Neil Forrest and I had co-curated. So I hadn't had any ceramics in the normal sense, although I had references to obsidian, and I had in the videos, there was a video of the gathering of the sediments that were in the ship at Yerba Buena. And so that—and then also the construction of the Yerba Buena complex itself where there were—there was this kind of digging and also all the concrete being poured, which was also, for me, another ceramic-like material, in terms of it—one, it's fired.

It sort of like gets me that clay is fired and it makes it ceramics and then concrete, which is limestone and some actual clay and some other things, some fire ash, there's different formulas for it, but it's also fired. And then it's ground down, and so it's calcined, the same way that you would calcine khalen to make an engobe that is not shrinking. You know, you cut down the shrinkage of your engobe, and they do that for cement, and yet people don't make the connection.

They may not know about it, which is part of that, but it's—they also maybe not interested enough to look. So is that my job, because I am interested, or is it—should other people maybe be more curious about what things are made out of? I don't know. I mean, it's just a big question, I suppose.

[End CD 4, TRACK 1.]

MR. ROLOFF: So anyway—where were we?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I can think of three different things we can move to from this conversation: technology and commissions and scale.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, scale, to me, now the latest thing—to me the abyssal planes because I was—that book I had out of [Henry William] Menard's called the *Ocean of Truth:* [*A Personal History of Global Tectonics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press: 1986]. It's actually—what it is, it's a—for me it's one of the best books I've read in a while. It's just—he was one of the initial progenitors of plate tectonics. He was a professor at Scripps [Institution of Oceanography at University of California San Diego, San Diego, CA] and all the other people that I named the other day: Hess and Heezen and Tharp and Revelle and Dietz, Bob Dietz.

They were all part of that same crew and that's a story of like the Capricorn, the Mid Pack and the Capricorn expeditions [an oceanographic expedition into the deep Pacific, 1952-1953]and some other ones that were early

1950s expeditions using, in a kind of rusty old boat, not with a big box that are available—you know, some support. There were different supports from national—there was a naval wing—I forget the names of all the things in that time period that did give some support. But they were using old sonar equipment from World War II submarines, kind of basic fish finders and stuff, and they found the East Pacific Rise.

Menard pretty much found one of the fracture zones. This is 1,000 mile long feature that's under the ocean. I mean, there's these amazing terrains that are under there. So for me—and there's areas that—there's different kinds of ooze. There's a ooze that's mainly clay, and there's another ooze that's mainly calcareous. It depends on how far they are from shore and it depends on how deep they are and the geochemistry of the—which is temperature based. There's a number of—there's a whole bunch of factors that determine which ones these are.

But there's a lot of stuff that is actually—there's this—over centuries and centuries there's this very fine dust, which is pretty much a clay that comes off the continents, and it's deposited out in these big abyssal basins in the ocean. So there's these huge, for me, and in the very classic idea of ceramics of clay, of some of the most amazing works that exist that are just there. And I didn't have to—no one made them. I didn't have to make them, but I can think about them and it's kind of like a Smithson-type thing of mapping and kind of delineation of terrain and how do you—I mean, those are interesting. They're not tools that I—they're tools that I use some, but they're not as sufficient as what I would hope to eventually figure out about this.

But there's these immense works that are being made and it's sort of like that thing man and nature. What difference does it make whether I make it, I dig up the clay and then I go and I roll out some slabs and I make something or whether this—the appreciation of the deposition of these materials. It's that Gary Snyder, which I—maybe I can find, which is, "Long dark centuries of rains make dark red tropical soils." Something like that. It's just this—it's like—and then Lawrence Weiner. The idea that work could be just the description.

So that poem and the idea that those things are, in a certain way, I'm kind of set, in terms of just—I mean, there's a moment of rapture just in that. I don't know the difference between that and seeing one of Bob Arneson's pieces.

So those are the—that's kind of the dilemma of—like I can go there and can I take someone else? Maybe a story like this is the best way to do it. But one of the things that I've been also working with this—when I went to [Icheon, South] Korea for this symposium [The 5th International Ceramic Symposium, 2009] that was—because it was ecology and ceramics and I was—part of my position in that whole thing is that this appreciation and maybe not appreciation is—that was part of it, but understanding is actually really important part of the idea of ecology in relationship to ceramics as to the extensibility of the medium globally.

And then what does the role that an individual or group or practitioners play in relationship to that sort of extended terrain, that expanded landscape, of these materials. And you can just—if you want, you can just look at clay. It doesn't have to be all the other geochemical things that it became or it becomes. You could just look at that, and taking field trips and tracing a strata, like the length of Utah or something. To understand what that landscape and looking at the fossils that might be in there and projecting back to a time of when that was the bottom of an ocean and realizing, gee, this is here and I'm using it and there's also a bottom of a current ocean that's making the same stuff right now.

So there's immediate connect between the oceans of the—the terrestrial oceans of the, what are now, terrestrial and what is new landscape that is being formed right now by these fine dusts or these—the daily death of a diatoms or different kinds of plankton and things that radiolarian skeletons are making a siliceous—because of where they are in the ocean and the context, there's more of a silica-based kind of ooze that's coming down. So it's just—these things all start to connect up and you find your place in that.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, your piece is something if—[inaudible]—and Terrace in particular—your climate piece in particular feels very related to this. I'm sure they—

MR. ROLOFF: That's what this one little—this was an attempt at just kind of a little bit of a catalog and it says, "Selected works inspired by geology and climate." [Catalog is unpublished and became a series of "project" treatises.–JR] And so I had trouble separating anything out that wasn't—it just depends on—because geology and climate are inseparable because it's a depositional environment of when something is made.

And then also the erosive—erosion is creating yet the next landscape. So they don't—there's no boundary, in a way, if you look at it that way.

MS. RIEDEL: It's just a different point of focus. The Kiln projects feel very much related to geology, and climate as well, but the process is different and the focus is different. Whereas with the climate and the paleoclimate and even the systemic pieces, the focus is different, the time seems different, the scale of time, the scale of the process, the type of the process. But I can see the dilemma, because they are all so clearly connected.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, two projects—

MS. RIEDEL: The subtle—the differences are subtle. Sorry, go ahead.

MR. ROLOFF: From what you just said, because I didn't think of them necessarily, but the *Prairie Starfish* [*Glacial Epoch*, 1980] which was, you know, in [Saskatchewan] Canada. That was all about the fact that that had been ice age. It was sort of like imagine - starfish was thought of like - what could have lived mythically in a frozen sea. And so this idea of this starfish came out of that.

And then the project [*Ancient Shoreline (Island for Lake Lahontan)*, 1985 and *Talking Tree/Glacial Epoch*, 1987] that was [University of Nevada] Reno [NV] which is actually three—the titles have been coalesced into what's called *The Lahontan Group* [*I-III*]. [The third project *Vanishing Ship (Greenhouse for Lake Lahontan*, 1987 was commissioned by the University of California, Berkeley, Berkeley, CA.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right. *The Lake Lahontan Group*. It was at—describe—

MR. ROLOFF: One of them was a kiln.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And that's—they're all eulogies to the ice ages, so those are, in terms of what you were saying and picking up an earlier reference, it's very specifically to a paleoclimate like thing. And in that sense, it was more of, kind of, I guess, it was nostalgia or missing out on the ice ages, missing out on the mega-fauna that lived here and the kind of struggles of Native Americans coming into the landscape and working with that.

That's our American story and then there was also the same struggles that were going on in Europe and other parts in terms of that. You know, just thinking about where and how someone lived. And also the eulogy in the sense of the nomadic sensibility, to live in response and I love this characterization of the nomad, of living in a kind of sphere where their foraging areas are sort of—there are sort of environmental constraints and things. That was their world. But the world moved with them, and sometimes it was bigger and smaller, depending on the environment.

But it was a kind of—what is that phrase? Act local, think global, kind of. It was sort of like that—there was kind of in - there in that way. And also one of the things about the big fish head pieces that I was - interested that, was one, that there was some interesting—in Pyramid Lake there's this giant trout that was special to that lake. I forget the name right now. But it also was referencing what might have lived in Lake Lahontan and I hadn't really—I've read a fair amount about the lake, but I haven't seen much about what kind of fossils that—what they found about that part of it.

But then I - when I extrapolate back, in terms of what we know about the history of life, is only really what's revealed. Because there may inside of a mountain the strata that in that particular set of strata, there may be whole other groups of animals, fossils, that are there and we've only been able to see the edge, like what's sort of been made available to us. So there may be a whole facies change or something of—we don't know what's inside of most mountains. We can read the external and we can extrapolate that it looks like it's the same, or it's the same on this side and on this side, but we don't really know necessarily what that internal environment is.

So this was a kind of eulogy to all those things that we don't know, like that in that sense. And so it's—that all infers the sort of climates, basically the environment that anything would exist in, whether it's something that's living that's trying to survive or exist or whether it's a landscape that's being made through some kind of deposition or whatever. Those are all climatically connected. There's a climate dynamic to that.

So anyway, those pieces, to kind of - following on what you were saying, they are progenitors of this other interest in these—

MS. RIEDEL: The *Lake Lahontan* and the *Prairie Starfish.* Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: Yes. And it's—

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible]—too.

MR. ROLOFF: And a paleoclimate is a—would be part of what you would call paleogeography.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So it's actually a landscape of which is inseparable from its atmospheric thing. So they're both be a geographic terminology. That would be a term that would be used.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's by its very nature intrinsically holistic. There's no way to separate it out.

MR. ROLOFF: It just gets like that. You just start looking at stuff and you realize that you have to consider, well it's [Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe. It's not the fish, it's the fish and the sea. You know, if you want to look at something, you pull a fish out and you're looking at it as an isolated thing and without remembering that while it lived primarily below light level or something or whatever, its environment.

So you're bringing it into this environment, so that contextualizes things. It's a kind of—the psychology of ecology, when things are anthropomorphisized to a certain degree, then something is usually not included, the context is lost.

So those are really fundamental ideas to me about how you understand something, and so the way—it becomes this interesting conversation about, is humanity, if you're really, completely immersed in nature, is that a way of saying that you need—the context is all inclusive. But that's something that cannot be, not considered, or do you need to be sort of separate in order to do that? I don't know. I go the way of saying that it's—that the acts—every act that a human does is acting as a function of a natural process.

So that's why I did—it becomes ironic in our own—it ends up—it actually brings up this whole idea, which is, I don't really know how to deal with it, is what is exactly is ethics? What exactly is morality? Because it has to—most often to do with our own survival. So is that ethical and is that intrinsically ethical in itself?

And I made this one piece, it was part of the drawings, it's called *If the Sea Were Gasoline, It Would Still Be Nature* [2006-2008]. And I had this friend of mine who was a staff at the Art Institute to kind of do a study of, do we have the resources, are the resources present because, you know, gasoline has a—or octane, I guess, is the main component is—I don't know what it is, C8H32 or I forget what it is. No, I think, it's that, I think, it's something different. But do we have—could we do that? Could we take the amount of water that is in the sea and actually make it all gasoline?

You know, we wouldn't—no one could live here, and actually it's not that much different than the moons of Jupiter, which are methane and other things, but it would still be nature. See, that's kind of—it's more of an ironic sort of view point is that even if we did that, it doesn't make it not nature. It's just that form of it and us acting of this—creating this transformation of water from a water planet to a gasoline planet is still the same thing.

So it's kind of—I mean, it sounds peculiar, in a way, but it's also—I think, it's just a way of making a point. And anyway, I had fun making the drawings, turning the blue into a kind of orange.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk, if you're done with that thought, about the installation [*Stratigraphic Column I,* 2002] at 101 California [Street, San Francisco, CA] which is such a good example of visual fusing or mixing, at least, human and geologic experience of this particular landscape, plate tectonics and also photographs. We haven't talked about them at all. I'm thinking of those tall columns, of course, that were photos manipulated to look like materials that were how 101 California was built. Is that right, the actual building materials and then the materials that it's built on top of?

MR. ROLOFF: It wasn't that.

MS. RIEDEL: No, okay.

MR. ROLOFF: But it was close. Basically the column that - that was a structural column. So it was an existing thing that was just adapted to make that stratigraphic column around. And the commentary was more broadly about architecture and anthroturbation idea. Because alternating were—there's in Oakland [CA] - was this immense, immense warehouse that was literally a block—it looked like a block wide, a block deep and about a block high. It was just like a big cube.

And it was Montgomery Ward's distribution center or something. It was the most, biggest thing in Oakland. Anyway I had some—I happened to see it torn down and I was able to take a bunch of photos of it, looking at it again as a kind of idea of erosion.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly, yeah. Thanks.

MR. ROLOFF: And then there's some few other photos - I went into a building that had caught fire and all this stuff—the ceiling had kind of come down and sort of melted and I don't know what it was anymore. It was all one, and there—but it was an amazing landscape of something that had been transformed.

MS. RIEDEL: In decay and human related.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: Kind of a natural process of fire and this kind of having altered a constructive thing. And then there were all these photos of cliffs from a trip to Death Valley [CA]. So they were—and the Death Valley reference was it could have been kind of any place because what I was mentioning is that the gypsum that's in this sheet rock here, I think—I haven't studied the California sources, but, I think, Southern California there's—I know there would be gypsum, so this may have come from actually Trona Lake, which is in the Panamint Valley [CA] is—I don't know that it's gypsum. It's another—it may be a borate. I'd have to look at it.

But it's an evaporite, which is the same thing as gypsum is, so this could have almost come from that area. If not, it came from someplace like it. And so, anyway, the idea of all these materials being transported. So a piece of architecture is very likely an amalgamation of many landscapes, just by the beams in here are from some forest, that whole—all that kind of thing. That's that anthroturbation sort of idea.

So what I was interested in was taking those images and using what would be—what I would call kind of digital lithification, which is to compress this way and by stretching them that way so they're just—like in Photoshop that just changed the proportion from being—

MS. RIEDEL: So they're shorter and wider.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, so they became distorted the same way that what you would call in metamorphic geology would be schistosity, which is just something becoming—it could be a flow, like the stuff got so warm that it could actually flow, or it could just be compression, like something that had a certain volumetric thing was now by all this strata on top of it.

So I compressed the images of the buildings being taken down and then these cliffs. And they were alternated and they—so then they become the structural system referring—or they refer to the structural system that was holding up that building, that it was being shown in. So that was, for me, it was a nice, I thought, was a nice kind of dovetailing of different things.

And then I did look up the—it's in the here, of those—we were talking a little bit about the—

MS. RIEDEL: That's it, right there.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, this one here. So—

MS. RIEDEL: And they're visually intriguing. Aesthetically, they're intriguing and at the same time, to me they encapsulate a lot of what we were talking about earlier, this very large process of sedimentation or deposition that's happening that many don't see. But there does feel to be very visual sensors.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, well that's true. That's, I think—and if you take the time to look—they're not so distorted that you can't see the parts, but you can kind of—if you saw it in person, you would—you could recognize stuff.

And what's kind of nice, in going back to the ceramic touchstone a little bit, is that there's some biennials in Taiwan that are being kind of checked out and—or curators are being asked to submit proposals. And this one woman from Australia that I met at NCECA wanted to show that piece in Taiwan, which was nice because it wasn't made out of clay and yet it talked about clay.

And so what I was interested in that case, I said, "Well, that one, that actually doesn't really exist. It's kind of - there's some fragments of it left." I wouldn't want to make one that was maybe about—that also included the landscape of Thailand, I mean of—[Didn't happen.–JR]

MS. RIEDEL: Taiwan. Thailand or Taiwan?

MR. ROLOFF: No, Taiwan.

MS. RIEDEL: Where it's going to be.

MR. ROLOFF: And think about, you know, more of a site-based thing and whether or not there's opportunity to come there and work and then give her a budget for what it would cost print it out and kind of do more of—be more of a project. But that was nice that someone in ceramics was open. And she was a little bit—she was worried whether the curators of the show would see it that way, but I—it was nice. There's that—that it could—

MS. RIEDEL: That bigger picture, and somebody else understanding your point.

MR. ROLOFF: Right. So the landscape projections, it says in this thing I was—it says—okay, this—first of all, it's referring to larger photo works. And it says, "This group of installation of the larger photo works, user scale

image and configuration as abstract interior earthworks," which is kind of—that would be then—in that sense, "that formally engage architectural space to create tension and dialogue with a room in which they are installed." [Reference must be my website, similar: -JR]

The Landscape Projections [(for an Unknown Window) Series, No. 1-10, 2001] which were the window things, "extend this concept into a theoretical dimension by suggesting an unknown window in a conceptual building. This perceived landscape is at once a metaphysical, the void in the center, and an organic one, the compressed photographic image framing the void. This altered organic landscape refers to a vitalist's interpretation of architecture as an extension of nature, geologic building materials as remnants of a living earth, lava flows recumbent folding, fossiliferous assemblages, metamorphic laminations and intrusions."

So that was—I was trying to—I was struggling to remember that that void was the metaphysical of the Baroque, the kind—the monadology, again Leibniz's interest in the infinite. So there was this—and what I—I loved reading this thing. It was actually, I think, it was from [G.W.F] Hegel, but it was reference—[Jeffrey] Jeff Wall had written this and this idea of there being—and it's something I don't have a grasp of exactly, but there being more than one infinity. It's like, how could that be?

So it's just kind of, these things become—they're really kind of beautiful. I mean, that's the—I mean, I just—and I associate that idea of Leibniz being able to sort of—that multiple infinities would be that alien to him, or he would have a way of talking about it. So it's part of that discourse of the time period and it was more metaphysics where now it'd probably be just mathematics.

So mathematics was in that—the invention of the calculus and stuff was kind of, in that synergistic way, kind of at the service of other ideas. And in those days there was all this problem of deism, of always having—and he was—he wrote the theodicy, which is the atretic on how God could still be involved in the world, in these new explanations.

And so they were still struggling with, how could this—the larger being deal with things that are being discovered in science and those kinds of—so it was an interesting time because I think that the mythic was still in connection with this sort of this build being considered in terms of the larger understanding of things.

And so that's still—that Baroque is - still kind of holds that, and that's a little bit of what that void would symbolically be referring to, for me. And that architecture in this kind of larger understanding of things, was also part of that dialogue.

MS. RIEDEL: It's really interesting to hear you say that, because that just gives me such a lovely image of your work as literally being a frame, a geologic, informal, organic frame around this undefined divine. We talked about this briefly on the phone, I think, a couple days ago about spirituality in your work and while there's nothing blatantly there, there is a profound sense of the sublime and that seems a pretty good illustration of it.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah that's—right, and metaphysics somehow is a good word to fit in there, in that traditional sense. I don't know how it's thought of now, particularly, but in that kind of—and, you know, that's why I identify with Leibniz—besides the synthetic, he was one of the last—to me he was one of the—because, I think, with Newton, the idea of the mechanistic world view—you know, people have talked about this. It's kind of almost a post-modern theme nowadays, but this sort of distilling the world in a kind of the mechanistic view and Descartes, which was a little more of the idea of the machine, and those kinds of things.

And, I think, Leibniz was still trying to hang onto something and didn't really want to see it that way or didn't understand the world in that way, and I can't say that I—I read a lot of things that he's written, but I'm in no way a Leibniz scholar or anything like that. But he's reconciling still—he was still reconciling Aristotle. And, I think, in a fundament—in some ways, kind of a fundamental way of how naming and organizing alters understanding. I mean, it's—as well as maybe some of the specifics of Aristotle, but—and then this issue of God. What do we do with it? The classic theodicy, which many people have worked on and say, "Why is there evil?" If everything is—why would someone make something that had evil in it, that is—why would a perfect being create that?

And the fall of man and all those—the kind of Adam and Eve—and there's probably—they become kind of a sort of fables to kind of begin to answer that more, I think, kind of topical way, rather than necessarily an intrinsic way.

I mean, that's what—that struggle is a kind of interesting struggle to me. And we now, maybe on the other side of it in terms of—at least for some people, a little more materialistic—we've embraced a kind of materialistic kind of way of understanding things. So anyway, that's what it's all kind of layered in there.

I like that. That's a nice—that—I think what people—people don't get those pictures very well. They see them so formally, or something, and I like them.

MS. RIEDEL: I like them too.

MR. ROLOFF: And it's just nice to have another kind of angle, a perception on it is, them being even bigger than what I was intending them to be. There is one piece that's a little bit echoes what you're getting at. I think I saw it in here.

Which was more of an architectural one. That was—that's actually just a displacement of a kind of frame from the Franciscan Formation and I was looking at—I was trying to have that in conversation with what I was calling the *Manhattan Formation* [1998.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right. I like that title, too.

MR. ROLOFF: So they were kind of talking to each other.

MS. RIEDEL: The *Franciscan/Manhattan Formation* [1998.]

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. And the slub pieces are really interesting too.

MR. ROLOFF: They were seen as earthworks in a way. That was what was interesting. I was interested in photography, but I found—I guess, one of the things that was happening after the kiln and I tried—did the orange thing and I mentioned this one [*Pitzer Project: a Prototype System for the Production and Re-distribution of Ancient Sunlight*, 1996] that was in Pitzer [College, Claremont, CA] that was kind of the energy, more metametabolism-based.

MS. RIEDEL: From the ancient sun, right? Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And I was interested in photography—I had done some real early—I don't—in here—actually in 1982, when I had shown one of the Kilns in this show at the Art Institute, it was part of an NCECA conference that was taking place in San José—yeah, it was '82. I had large photos in there. I had been working with big photos since—even since then.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: And they were more documentary. So I had this—let's see if I can—and then—oh, okay. The idea of the orchards, how to work with orchards. And I had made some kind of orchard-like things that were more like objects.

MS. RIEDEL: Are those like the flaming trees, the flaming orange pieces? What were they called? *Rotting Flame*, it was perceived—[inaudible]?

MR. ROLOFF: No, that was—

MS. RIEDEL: Later.

MR. ROLOFF: A little bit connected, but it more was—they've never been shown. There's one just sitting downstairs there, but it's just some orchards made out of just a kind of a little landscape thing, tableau-like.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And I had done a piece, actually called the *Orchard of Tears* [*for Sax Rohmer*, 1984] it would have been in the '80s which was based on a Sax Rohmer. And it had a—it was another tableau-like thing. Let me run to the restroom right quick.

[END CD 4, TRACK 2.]

MS. RIEDEL: We were talking about the orchard idea you were developing.

MR. ROLOFF: Right. There was a whole series of studies that had to do with working with photographs sculpturally and wrapping them around and having them work and relate to architecture. So there's a bunch of studies that I don't really—most people haven't seen them, but from that came—I worked with a student from the Art Institute named Jerry Spagnoli who was a photographer. And we went into—outside of Davis because I—when I was in—both from working in orchards from my family farm and everything and then going to school at UC Davis. A lot of times we would just go out in the country and orchards were there and they were mainly almond orchards. Which if you went the right time of the year, there'd be beautiful white flowers and, you know, it was really great. So that was—

MS. RIEDEL: Do they smell? Do they have a smell too, those orchards?

MR. ROLOFF: They're not as fragrant as the amount of flowers would lead you to believe.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Nothing like orange blossoms or—

MR. ROLOFF: They do have something. There's some. And anyway he had an eight by 10 camera and so we took some black and white photos of orchard things and so I had built—in the studio here I'd built a mural-sized darkroom and I had been working with—boy, I'm trying to remember her name, Katherine—it was an artist who was a grad student at Mills College [Oakland, CA]. I was working there during the '80s, teaching there part-time. Boy, I wish I could remember her name because she died recently.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh dear.

MR. ROLOFF: I know. It was very—I was like, whoa.

MS. RIEDEL: We can probably find it.

MR. ROLOFF: Katherine Sullivan, I think was her name. I may be able to find it in an e-mail. Anyway, and I was doing prints and one of the other things that I had done that I had used photos for was to make proposals for the Kilns, to do studies for Kiln projects. I think that's where the second round of these—the first photos were mainly documentation. And then I was—I would take images that I was interested in, photos, and I would go in alter them as to studies for Kilns and then they became more like things unto themselves. And so with these orchard photos of Jerry, and I actually had done an earlier image that was called—it was a piece [*Study: Wissinger Tomb/Furnace/Orchard,* 1990] about an underground kiln that was in the shape of a tomb, a German tomb of the Wissinger family, which was—the tomb was designed by either Bruno or Max Taut, I forget—one of the Taut brothers. They were German Expressionist architects.

So that was kind of exploring my Germanic—you know, my background and stuff. So I had used an image that I had taken of an orchard in that and then that kind of parlayed itself into wanting better quality images and he was a really good photographer who—I still have all those negatives. He also went with me—we spent a week out in the Florida landscape in 1998 photographing the stuff that was used in that show that I did, *The Rising Sea*, these very large photos. So that's where that came from.

But the orchards were—I think, the first—there was an—I was interested in them as interior earthworks, kind of like what I was referring to when I read that statement. And to both respond to the architecture and also to kind of have a sculptural dynamic in the sense that they would be—like one was an anticline, like a geologic, which is a hump basically. That they would become structural and so—

MS. RIEDEL: But interior, so you wouldn't necessarily make out much detail.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, let's show you this—let's see if I give you this more specifically.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm just wondering if this was the way you were describing the mountain.

MR. ROLOFF: This one.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay, okay, okay. So gallery installations, yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: And so I had used—this was the first big photo that I had—when I built this mural darkroom in the studio, that I had made this. And it was—I had a show—

MS. RIEDEL: This is *Propped Anticline* [*(Orchard) I*, 1999] that we're looking at.

MR. ROLOFF: *Propped Anticline*.

MS. RIEDEL: Now was that installed? Where was that installed?

MR. ROLOFF: Maryland Art Institute or Maryland Institute College of Art [Baltimore, MD] I guess, it's called. And I had done an—anyway, that was—so I'd done a bunch of studies for these things, and that was the one I decided to do, and I basically made all the parts. So I could configure it in these whole bunch of different ways just by making a structure that it would, you know, lay on top of or respond to.

And so—because one of the things that I had trouble—the Kilns—making proposals was fine, but because of background and sculpture, photo unto itself has no thickness. And I kind of—I wanted to, you know, do something with it. So the only the way that I resolved that was to make these articulated structural things with the image. And then they took on the idea of geologic structures, like a slump, which is just a section of land

that's kind of given way on a hillside usually.

So I was—that's how they became earthworks, in that sense. They made the reference to kind of earth structures, but they were interior. And then—

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: And the one that Lance—it was at Lance Fung, it was a very big—there was an—[inaudible], it was much bigger. That one was, you could walk on, set it up where you could—and there's a picture of him walking out onto it. So that terrified all the photographers because it's like their—it's such a precious thing, but that was kind of part of it. And I still have it. It's not—this was RC paper [plastic photo paper–JR] in this case, so it was plastic and it was pretty durable. It was amazing how well it held up. And people would wear their socks or something, it was somewhat respectful. And there's a picture actually of Lance's dog laying on it. It was a great picture. That was a—I wish I had—I don't remember where that is. I think he has it.

Anyway, then there were the other ways that treating as—I was still interested in the Kilns and this idea of transformation that was somewhat outside of myself. So sort of like the way the kiln—like the glass ship was like a test tube, the kiln was kind of like a test tube in that you could work the controls and do certain things, but there was still this other life going on inside where you would unleash the force and the force was also had its own voice. And that's that conversation thing.

So part of that, I did some glass—some robe works [*Robes I & II*, 1998]. It's still connected back to kind of Baroque-like painting and imagery and stuff and this idea of the organic. And so these robes were sandwiched between big sheets of glass and then slices of orange from the—partly from the *Rotting Flame*, but also from—well the idea that—yeah, the orange was seen symbolically as a kind of—like a kind of atom of fire, in a way, like a molecule or something, some particle. And like in a reduction flame, that would be why the flame is orange because there are carbon particles that are illuminated that are being given off because they haven't—there's not enough oxygen in the kiln to make—to completely combine with the carbon to make CO2, so free carbon is given off. But it's hot, so it's yellow. But you don't see them as particles, you see them as a yellow flame.

So that was all part of this extrapolation of the kiln idea and fire itself. And so those oranges—and then they were slices of orange that were then positioned, and in some cases inserted in slices, within photographs in these sealed glass environments. This is the piece called *Robe 1 & Robe II*, would be kind of—they're in here. They were then process pieces because everyone is so careful with photos to not—and then if you don't wash them properly, the acid turns yellow. Well, there was a lot of acid in an orange, a citric acid. So it was kind of—you know, it was just also that art thing of trying to subvert something. It's just kind of a normal, I guess, strategy.

I guess, I don't have them. I thought they were in here.

MS. RIEDEL: That's funny. I don't think of a lot of subversion when I think of your work. Do you think of it in terms of subversion?

MR. ROLOFF: I think the Kilns had an element to me. There were, you know—I think, there's a kind of wanting to sort of—this was the other thing, which was another—on the level of same metaphysical level, which is a part of the thing I was—another problem I had with ecology was, if you looked at metabolism, it's—you have to destroy to build. So in other words, cells are being broken down and cells are being—so the anabolic and the catabolic are the two forms of metabolism, and they're—you know, it's sort of life and death. And so the idea that death was not part of the picture was always kind of problematic to me. And that may be more my romantic, romanticism, sublime kind of—

MS. RIEDEL: Holistic, systemic.

MR. ROLOFF: That whole thing. And that was—in some ways that's the *Sea of Gasoline* was also it's—and the idea that subversion was in some ways connected to the idea of death or that destruction or erosion of things were sort of—if you see it in isolation then it's that, but death is also so much a part of life. So when you see the whole thing, it's different. But when you only see life without death, then you're kind of like in happy land, Disneyland.

So that's the thing I always had some—also the ecology issue of—well again, fix the pond, but what happens in nature—it's sort of like the idea of—Native Americans were tied into this of using fire—if you don't burn a forest every so often, the underbrush gets so bad that then the forest really burns when it burns. And so if you're not kind of in tune with all sides of the issue, then you're really—it's just more illusion to me. It's just like perpetrating these kinds of illusions. And no one wants to hurt anyone or do anything like that. It's not kind of like—I think that's only when you see it in isolation.

But when you see these things in larger cycles, I think, it gives you, if nothing else, a certain peace of mind of that you're part of something that is a kind of larger schemata, a larger kind of structure and that these isolations of loss of your grandmother or something. Very traumatic, but it's also a new cousin is being born or—you know, and it's just—and she lost her grandmother when her daughter was born. And there's these kind—you can't escape and you can—but if you see it larger, then it starts to have a different sense of it, and it also places human issues in context. That's what I somehow, I guess, I have a need for that, in a way.

And so darker things sometimes, or this idea of subversion and stuff, why do we get off on it? People want to—there's a thing about doing that, and it feeds something. It feeds a part of the unconscious that's part of people, part of—

MS. RIEDEL: Bigger picture.

MR. ROLOFF: So it doesn't mean, like I question the idea of what ethics means. It doesn't mean that you remove it, but it's also measured in terms of what is the value—where does it actually lie? And what is it in the service of and how does it—what does it allow and the idea of the ethics of capitalism becomes—well it feeds everybody, so therefore certain things are just glanced over. It's just kind of—it just becomes—

MS. RIEDEL: It doesn't really feed everybody, though.

MR. ROLOFF: Huh?

MS. RIEDEL: It doesn't really feed everybody.

MR. ROLOFF: No, you're right, but it's sort of like feeds them better than maybe the serf system did or something.

MS. RIEDEL: When you talk about ethics, I wonder, are you thinking about ethics as a purely human structure or are you thinking about it as a larger geologic structure?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, I think that—to me they become—one becomes the other, that one question—wherever you started with and it does become—I mean, there's this interesting thing about—because I've taught some ecology classes and different writers that look at nature and their kind of—they say that nature doesn't care. It's not—it doesn't have an emotional—I think, there's something about that, but it's not—it isn't a very vitalist—I have a tendency to think of things more in a vitalist sort of perspective. I don't know that care is the right word.

MS. RIEDEL: I think more of balance.

MR. ROLOFF: Something like that and so that's that thing of going back to that piece, the *Deluge* [*(Radiant Sleep/Helium Ash),* 1994] piece, as to whether or not consciousness is just enzymes interreacting or is there something else? Is there something that's kind of unquantifiable, and then how is that—where is the boundary between this consciousness and the consciousness of the trees or of what are seemingly inanimate things. Because, like I was saying, the Native Americans think can see about everything being alive. So how do you—what does that do to ethics?

MS. RIEDEL: Right, absolutely.

MR. ROLOFF: I think the enlarged version of the question is the most interesting version of it and I don't - that there are answers in the normal sense of that, like this is right and that's wrong.

MS. RIEDEL: And I think of your work in relation to scale in terms of human activity from a big enough scale, from far enough distance, becoming part of a larger geologic picture. I'm thinking about ethics in a similar sense.

But shifting gears, something that's been instrumental in your career, especially more recently, is the Arte Povera.

MR. ROLOFF: Arte Povera.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: I was corrected by a friend of mine who had a friend from Italy.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, because it's Povera, yes?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, he said it in the most beautiful way. It's like only an Italian—he said, "It's Arte Povera." It just was like butter, something flowing off of his mouth. So okay. I love it. If I can do that—I'm trying to imitate it

ever since.

MS. RIEDEL: And you did sound like that on the phone. That's true.

MR. ROLOFF: That's just, you know, I think that's the—there's the classic sort of—one was that - we also talked about Germano Celant and his writings as being very—as being less arty, art worldly in the normal way that we're kind of referring to it, or we have a tendency in the *Art- forum* kind of version, and being really poetic and kind of literary and exploratory and kind of as forum rather than just critique.

So there's something really intrinsic—I guess, for me that movement is very aligned with conceptual art, but it had its materiality, expression of materiality and I have a very simplistic idea of its, which is a kind of generic idea of it sort of origin of Italian artists. If you're in the lineage of Michelangelo[Buonarroti] and you're dealing with that amazing weight of history and the idea of the eternal materials from Rome [Italy] and everything, of bronze and marble and those kind of classicism.

And so they were able to find a way to, I guess, subvert it, in a way and comment on it to kind of play with it, open it up.

MS. RIEDEL: Open it up, absolutely.

MR. ROLOFF: And so, you know, Jannis Kounellis, he uses classical images, but they're little busts of figures and things, but they're always in a different context of some kind of narrative or another kind of materiality—there's crows standing on them and things like that. And then Mario Merz, the table, the spiral tables with rotting fruit. I meant that was—that would be a really—one of the connections I would have to my own, like the *Rotting Flame*. It's in some sense permission. You can kind of—these things can just stink and then the stink is part of it. They just are what they are, and they're transitory.

So that whole kind of attitude just really spoke to me, and also the lyricism. Giovanni Anselmo's use of—putting rocks on the wall and then painting one of them this beautiful purple, or something like that, and they had a lyrical sense of space and Mario Mertz's the igloos and this idea of—I just love—I don't know if this is all the way it is, but the idea that for me they represent the idea of the nomadic as being a kind of—I don't know if it was more pure, but a kind of more—just an essential part of the human kind of story.

So—[inaudible]—has a really nice, one of his igloos and you go and look at it and all the—it's all meant to come apart. The clamps that are on the steel structure, the glass is just sitting on there. They just kind of made a series of like shelf-like things to then form this. So it was—a lot like a yurt. There was a nomadic—it was meant to be dismantled and moved.

And so there's this kind of language of that and the beeswax and neon, just different assemblages of materials is kind of an open ended kind of palette that wasn't—that included the prosaic and the poetic and the common place. And so it contextualized the classical, in a way. What's his name, [Michelangelo] Pistoletto did that a lot because he made more figurative and used actual—he did this beautiful piece [*Venus of the Rags,* 1967*,* 1974] which is this glass window and then a pile of rags layered so that they're up against the window. So from the outside they are—you see the stratigraphic. You see this pattern of how they were layered on each other.

The backside they're just this pile of rags, and he took a full sized statue, something like *Venus de Milo* and just kind of pressed it against so that the statue is holding the rags against the window, kind of compressing it to make this—it's just to me extraordinary work, simple.

They found these kind of juxtapositions of elements that just had a kind of efficiency and yet they were also kind of exploding at the same time in some way. So there was a sensibility there that was really beautiful, I thought.

I think they were also really important in the Bay area conceptual thing of Paul Kos and Howard Fried and Tom Marioni and people. They were responding to kind of New York conceptual stuff also, but Arte Povera somehow, they just had—the artists, at least the ones that I've come to know, Pistoletto, Jannis Kounellis, Mertz, another that I really like is Gilberto Zorio and then I'm blanking on his name but I've got some books. Oh yeah, Giuseppe Penone, who also did ceramics.

And Kounellis is shown in galleries these giant olive oil jugs. They're kind of like the Chinese artists. In the most expanded form, ceramics is just—it's as vital as anything. That's what's—there's something about that that I think is really—it's not ghettoized. It's not its own kind of like club or anything. It's just—and so you see it in these fresh ways. It's just brought in and also with those olive jugs, they are what they are, but they're contextualized within a kind of language within a poem or something.

So I, you know, even early on I was getting—there were things like that that were fermenting in me. So that to me would be, in a way, the kind of glory of ceramics. So anyway, another artist that I thought of, which is a little

different, is Barbara Bloom. You know her? She did this whole series of - kind of - mainly known for this work about Narcissus [“The Reign of Narcissism,” 1989] about herself being kind of more playing with this idea of identity and putting her name on the edges of books, you know. Books about—it’s kind of like Walt Whitman, the *Song of Myself* [East Aurora, Roycrofters: 1904] except it’s more couched in kind of Post-modern terms.

But she did a really beautiful piece which was just a table, a round table, and it was stacked with plates and cups and stuff all with—they were made—I don’t think they were original, but they just said HMS Titanic on them. To the whole story of that thing was just kind of there in that piece. [Table piece was about the Titanic with crockery labeled as if from the Titanic.–JR]

I don’t know. Anyway, it’s just another example of, I think, a kind of ceramic—or using ceramics as part of an idea, which is a little different than ceramics being made itself into—but it doesn’t have to be. It could be both. It doesn’t have to be either.

MS. RIEDEL: Marek Cecula just—

MR. ROLOFF: Who?

MS. RIEDEL: Marek Cecula. He’s worked in clay. He’s been in New York for years. He was at Parsons [School of Design, New York City, NY] for probably, I think, 15 years and he’s left now and he’s spending a lot of time in Poland. But he just did a wonderful show at the Museum of Art and Design called “The Object Factory II: [The Art of Industrial Ceramics, 2009] Did you see that?

MR. ROLOFF: No.

MS. RIEDEL: You can probably find a lot of it online and he did another version [“Object Factory I,” 2008, Gardiner Museum] in—[Toronto, Canada][inaudible].

MR. ROLOFF: Write down the name because I’m missing that.

MS. RIEDEL: But a real interesting—a second look or another broad look at what’s happening with ceramics.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, that’s part of this newer generation, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MR. ROLOFF: That, I think, is—they’re really opening up stuff, which is just wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: Really interesting. Marek Cecula.

MR. ROLOFF: Oh yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, I’m sure you know him.

MR. ROLOFF: Is he the guy that does the sort of things that are kind of like—

MS. RIEDEL: Decaying and falling apart ceramics, they’ve sort of been destroyed by water, that’s one of them.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, he also has a design business but he does ceramic work as well, and art pieces are part of his profession.

MR. ROLOFF: Is he the one that also did a bunch of—

MS. RIEDEL: Very minimal circles and squares as well.

MR. ROLOFF: There’s something that—hospital ware. Was that him?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, exactly. Exactly.

MR. ROLOFF: That’s how more I knew him from before. And he was in a show in Korea and had a beautiful cup saucer stack that was—[An exhibition as part of the 5th World Ceramic Biennale, Icheon, Korea, 2009.–JR]

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MR. ROLOFF: Kind of like it had been—something had happened to it, like it was—

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly, exactly. His work is really interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: I actually show a slide from a long time ago. No one ever did much with it, but it was this stack of plates that was in a museum someplace around here that had been in the San Francisco earthquake. It's a lot like this book. Imagine—most Victorian houses, like the kitchen would be—a shelf in the kitchen would be at least 10 feet in the air because there's usually a part basement or something. So this place caught fire and this whole stack of plates were up on this shelf, and as the building burned and things collapsed and it just settled down in the ash or in the embers and then became kind of fused together as this object. I used to show that slide in class as a kind of—it would be a lot like his work, in a way, like a process that it occurred to something existing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And it's sort of like it told another story. There was another story added to this thing.

MS. RIEDEL: You would definitely like that exhibition because he curated it, it's international, and there are some really interesting works combining dishes exactly as you describe. He's an artist and he curated this exhibition as well.

MR. ROLOFF: And he also curated it. Okay, wow. Sounds great.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, I think you'd actually really like it.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, okay. Do you want to take a break in a while to eat? I've got some sandwiches.

MS. RIEDEL: Are you hungry? Would you like to break now?

MR. ROLOFF: I might be, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: All right, let's take break. That was actually good time.

[End CD 4, TRACK 3.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art with John Roloff in the artist's studio in Oakland, California, on August 18, 2009. This is disc number five.

MR. ROLOFF: So dealers.

MS. RIEDEL: You've had some very long-term relationships, Paule Anglim, Diana Fuller, I think you mentioned, Brian Gross.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, and then Inez Storer early and then Lance Fung.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: I think I've been kind of lucky in the sense that they've all been very honest, very supportive. I don't know that—like particularly with Paule, I think, I've done some nice shows there but I haven't given her much to work with as far as sales. I don't have—I've got one or two things maybe in the back room or something, but and then—

MS. RIEDEL: And that was always fine with her, that—

MR. ROLOFF: She didn't—yeah, I think because she's—with Paule, I don't know. There's a kind of—you're kind of grouped in a way with a series of other people, like particularly a number of faculty and from many genres or different parts of the Art Institute and she's been on the board of the Art Institute. So there's a connection there and, I think, a sense of support that way and, I think, it was that way with pretty much—with Diana also and then Lance I knew before.

MS. RIEDEL: Before?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, before he opened a gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. ROLOFF: And he was telling me, he says, "Well, I want to open a gallery and I'd like—I'm hoping that—I'd like to consider you to be in it," because his gallery was—excuse me—more of an installation and so he's also extremely supportive. He had no money personally so it was a bit of a—it's kind of like whatever—like the big photos and stuff.

I mean, I printed all those, all that stuff's on my own and then some situations—excuse me, where the gallerist has a backer or whatever, then they can fund things. But I haven't had much of that. So I don't know.

I've had good relationships with all of them and, I think, one of the fundamental things which is, I guess, maybe the lucky part is they've all really been interested in art for its own sake and that the sort of sales and things have always been—it's an important part because it keeps the doors open. But it hasn't been the primary thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: So they've been—and usually I'd say less so with the Lester Gallery but the context of who you were showing with was always interesting and, I think, made me feel good in terms of being a part of something. Actually Lester, I'm not even sure who else showed there because it was kind of far away and I did a lot of shows or some of the shows when I was in Kentucky.

So I would do it maybe in June after coming out and I'd only be here in the summer. Then I'd be gone again. So I didn't really have much real connection to the gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: I was with Diana Fuller for 12 years and then, see, now with Paule for it'd be 19 years about. I think '90 was the transition pretty much.

MS. RIEDEL: That's pretty amazing.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, and then Lance - I did one group show and two solo shows there and then he stopped doing galleries. He just became a project curator of his own things and I ended up being in the "Snow Show" [2004, Remi, Finland] of his and I've been—I started working on some projects. One in particular is called *Sink*, which he's—it's a project that would be—if it comes to fruition—would be seen underwater. All the pieces are underwater.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: And then those first kind of—I did some projects, [*Preliminary Studies: the Biological Pump*, 2005 and *Preliminary Studies: Inverted Factories*, 2005] some designs and ideas for Turks and Caicos [Islands, Atlantic Ocean]

MS. RIEDEL: I saw that, yes—

MR. ROLOFF: What that ultimately will be—was supposed to be was collaboration with scientists.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So what I did on mine was kind of pre-that. I didn't really have the—I didn't do that collaboration yet. I mean, it just never got there.

And then it was going to go to Greece and now it's scheduled for Bali [Indonesia], if it all works, and my role in that is not as much in the exhibition per se but actually as a commission to build what was called a living walkway between this ancient Hindu temple and this new kind of facility that they're building on this little island that's off the coast of Bali.

So I did designs for that and they were interested in it but I don't know—I don't know if that will happen.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting, and it was going from the mainland of the island to a smaller island?

MR. ROLOFF: No, it's both—it's all on the small island but it's going across a kind of inlet.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: And so there was coral remediation things and it was a walkway that had—it was trans—it was a floating walkway that was translucent. You could see into the ocean and then there was a pavilion in the middle that—it was kind of like the thing I did at Paule's where there's the ceiling—it'd be tanks of water that'd be filled with algae.

So the shape would be created by a living algae system up there and I don't know if there's any other—there's some solar power. Oh, the solar power was for it to be able to do something at night or stuff like that. So yeah, I mean, we'll see if it happens.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, it sounds great.

MR. ROLOFF: I do a lot of stuff that doesn't happen.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, yet.

MR. ROLOFF: Just a lot of proposals, a lot of things that I just kind of—you know, on hold for one reason or another or just never get off the ground or somebody else is selected or whatever. But that's part of that way of working.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Well, actually, that leads into two other questions that I want to ask. One is how your work has been perceived over time and through your different ways of working and then secondly, about commissions in general. You certainly work with more commissions or proposals than many artists do and how has that experience has been for you?

Is it frustrating? Does it feel fairly successful? Is it nice to have the back and forth between your studio work and the commissions?

MR. ROLOFF: What was the first question?

[END CD 5, TRACK 1.]

MS. RIEDEL: How your work has been perceived over time.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, one of the things that's been—I think, the ceramic world perception has been pretty good and I think that's been very—you know, meant a lot to me.

I think that that, because it's a little bit ghettoized in terms of its own magazines and its own thing, that's been a little bit of a downturn because I felt that I was also interfacing with some of the—or a little bit of a disappointment I'd say because interfacing with some earth works, some other issues that—landscape issues—and there has been some things on that.

But I'd say mostly is which we have I think that's one of the things I'm interested in this talk is a kind of continual reference to ecology and not really being seen in that light very much because it's not—I don't think that it's the typical ecology, like where you're kind of "Let's plant trees down the street" sort of thing.

It's more commentary or engagement with ecological systems from a range of different angles and, I think, it goes back—it goes back quite a ways actually and so that to me is I wish were maybe a little more—maybe a little bit different but it still might come.

I think also the problem with a lot of it is then if it's ecology, then you're an ecology artist, which you're sort of only that. So, I guess, part of it is the idea of what the categories are don't quite fit that well or they're limiting or they're something else and other people fit them very well and so it could be just that.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you feel like your audience has changed over time from the early Night Ships through the Kilns?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, I'd say that the whole collector scene is not—I'm not having much to do with them and it's funny, I was at—because I went to school with Debbie Butterfield and John Buck and I just went to the opening of Debbie's at Paule Anglim.

I saw all these collectors hovering around her and I was like, boy, I remember that, not so much that they were hovering around me in the same way, but it was that it's kind of like a lot of rich people who are all really wonderful people but you never get to know them well.

It's always this—it's a weird relationship because they're purchasing your work and then that's kind of sometimes you're invited to the barbecue or something and then you become sort of like the artist and it's an odd—it's not bad or anything. It's just seeing that reminded me of that and I did have one kind of fun thing that was when Patrick Lannan bought that *Rower.*

I went to—I stayed, I don't know, at least three or four nights or more at his big villa in West Palm Beach [FL] right out looking at the ocean and I was installing the work and everything and I remember having dinner—this really long table and it was only he and I. We weren't at opposite ends like the classic picture but we were next to each other.

And this butler came in and served—offered us—held out plates that we would take from. There was no food on the table. It was kind of brought to you each time and I just thought, "Wow, I've never—this is a world that I know nothing about," and it was interesting that people now—that's sort of their lives.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: And there are also some other collectors that I've known that have been pretty—some of them are very passionate. They're just—I forget his name right now but it was a husband and wife, almost never had any money and, I think, he was a schoolteacher and he lived in Arvada, Colorado, and they recently sold their collection or something happened to it. I just got kind of got reminded then of them. [Carroll Hanson and his wife.–JR]

But he was totally passionate and another guy, [Robert] Bob Pfannebecker, which was—he was also very passionate and he was a lawyer. But I think that he was buying like 20 pieces at a time. So you always got a check for $50. He just would spread it out over a long period of time. So there were different styles and different kinds of people.

But it's interesting because I just remember that that was—it had a certain dynamic to it and so then—but I haven't—that's changed in a way. I haven't really had—in some cases, some curators have done some of that or had some connection to maybe purchasing or more likely in the commission side would be how something was purchased, so to speak, when something was—they wanted a new work or something and—

MS. RIEDEL: So collectors or an audience that was interested in something like Night Ships didn't necessarily come along for the Kiln installations or for the more site-specific—

MR. ROLOFF: Seemed to be separate—seemed to be very separate.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, okay, I would think so but—

MR. ROLOFF: Occasionally there'd be something where someone would maybe commission a small work and usually, I think, those pieces didn't work out that well, kind of not in the flow and it was kind of like something was interrupted sort of. So it didn't happen that often but that's sort of what I remember and—

MS. RIEDEL: What about commissions, because you seem to have done a lot of commissions but in different types.

MR. ROLOFF: There's different kinds of commissions because some of them are just temporary works that were—had a lot to do with the National Endowment [for the Arts] because schools and different situations, nonprofits and places would apply for National Endowment grants that had funding for projects and so that was where a lot of—that's where most of the kiln things came from.

MS. RIEDEL: And you received three NEAs yourself didn't you?

MR. ROLOFF: I got three NEAs and then a—

MS. RIEDEL: A Guggenheim [Fellowship] as well.

MR. ROLOFF: A Guggenheim in '83, which was a long time ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, that must have been very exciting at the time.

MR. ROLOFF: It was kind of unexpected in a way, which was nice. Yeah, no it was great. Just after I moved into this building—I moved in this building in '82. So the next year and then—I'm trying to think of—the other—see, the commissions would be more for temporary works that were like the kilns or things or they would be for public art and those were generally more permanent works.

There's a few public art type things that were temporary and then there's also commissions for some things like drawings or things—I mean, I put those under the commission category because they were asked for as unique things. They weren't necessarily something I would necessarily make or they weren't in a particular flow.

So they were made special according to a request. So there were several different forms of that.

MS. RIEDEL: And certain artists feel that commissions, encourage work that they wouldn't necessarily otherwise have done. Was that the case with you as well or were they just variations on things that you had done before, another kiln project for example or something like that?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, because most—I'd say the vast majority if not all of them were site-specific. I consider myself in that kind of camp of site-generated work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And so there's a unique aspect to all of them from that perspective and then there's usually something that's similar thematically or whatever from the—on an ongoing perspective.

And then also in that—like on my résumé in that category I put environmental installations.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: Which may not have been as much commissions—some cases they were personally—like one, the Kilns that were at Mills around '82, I funded those but they were environmental works. So they—that category is broader. That's why—they didn't have anything to put something like that.

But they had a presence. They were done—there was an aspect of them that were done for also the NCECA conference that was some—was that—yeah, that was a thing at the Art Institute and a thing at Mills that I had. So that's my labeling system and—

MS. RIEDEL: And were they fairly satisfactory, the commission?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, I think it's similar to what I was mentioning before about the scale issue of needing to then—they have a special dynamic that can be exhausting and then to be able to go back in the studio and work at a different pace and a different scale.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: So that—and they are—they were generative. They would feed each other, which, I think, was the most important thing, that they would—and also you were ready to do the next thing.

So I thought I did one commission a year, which was kind of a sometimes every other year—be kind of a normal pattern. That was about right and it was sometime—well yeah, that's about the schedule of it.

Now, I'm not sure. I think, the piece like—the piece at Berkeley, the original *Vanishing Ship* [1987], I don't think I listed that as a commission because it was for an exhibition. But when—and it went to another exhibition at the Smithsonian [Institution, 1989], but when it was installed outside, under a new title, at the Djerassi Foundation [Woodside, CA] that was listed as an environmental work.

So these things sometimes have multiple lives but they need—at least for me, to list them separately, they need to be distinct, have something about them that is distinct. So I titled the piece at Djerassi, I think it was *Vanishing Ship, Third State* [1989].

MS. RIEDEL: That sounds right.

MR. ROLOFF: So it was like the third iteration of that. But then it was also the place for me to put that in terms of how do you catalog that event would be at least for me under environmental projects or commissions. So it's—and I'd kind of like to see the public art things as not being in a separate category but they're just other environmental works.

MS. RIEDEL: Right and it's confusing because some are site-specific but they're permanent and some are site-specific but they're extremely temporary.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, right, right it depends on the—I don't do much in the way of temporary things unless it's a sort of exhibition-like, which, I think, working outside and building new work for that is pretty demanding.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: Although there may be other things that are more ephemeral that are possible too. It just depends on whether I'm in that wavelength or not.

MS. RIEDEL: Looking at the list of environmental installations, for example, the Geology Flags are long gone, correct?

MR. ROLOFF: I have the Flags.

MS. RIEDEL: You have the Flags? Okay, but the installation has ended.

MR. ROLOFF: One month.

MS. RIEDEL: Whereas certain of the other—like the University of Minnesota, that's very permanent.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, yeah, yeah, right.

MS. RIEDEL: So there's no distinction here necessarily between the ones that were permanent and the ones that were temporary.

MR. ROLOFF: No, I haven't been listing them in that way. But they—I suppose you could. But they seem like that they are—I guess, when I see the list, they all seem to make sense.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm just thinking if people want to go see them, some are going to be easier to find than others.

MR. ROLOFF: Oh I see, yeah. I think that's why it says environmental installations as part of the category.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, so they would have to—

MS. RIEDEL: Look into that before they arrive.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Thinking about traveling and travels that have been instrumental for yourself or your work, you mentioned China earlier and how that gave another perspective on—

MR. ROLOFF: China?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: I didn't—I've never been to China.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh you didn't go to China? Weren't you talking about China and the way they used clay? I thought you'd been there.

MR. ROLOFF: No. How was I talking about it?

MS. RIEDEL: In terms of how they used ceramic and clay.

MR. ROLOFF: Oh no, just more that I've seen the exhibitions that people have done.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, sorry I misunderstood you. I thought you'd actually been to China.

MR. ROLOFF: I've been only to Korea and that was recently.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: But the travel—I mean, I think anything that's new is fruitful. I mean, it's generative. Traveling in the West was the main thing and I still have very strong memories of the landscape, even from a boy in the '50s on the train and going—passing through the landscape and then the family trips down the Columbia River Gorge. I mentioned that

And then in the summer, all in the '70s and probably part of the '60s, going out into the West—that friend Lucian I mentioned earlier, he would—he had friends in Montana and so that was kind of a destination and how you got there or how you got back was a completely wide open kind of thing and then family trips and there had been for a while, every Christmas was at Death Valley.

So there are many, many forms in terms of camping or just the Western United States things and then when I was teaching in Kentucky, driving—I drove back and forth pretty much every year and so I was—you know, you think about particularly in Nebraska and the Great Plains of that being not really different than an ocean just in terms of the scale and the horizon and that type of thing.

So and then living in Kentucky, all the towns that I only knew as baseball, football teams—Cincinnati [OH], Baltimore [MD], all those places—I was able to go and spend time there and I went to New York a lot.

It was an inexpensive plane ride from Kentucky and so then in Chicago [IL] is also—had started to have some friends there who were from—so just having a node like that was really pretty, pretty generative as a—getting in—Kentucky you kind of—for me anyway, there wasn't much to do.

So you were working and so the way to kind of balance that was to just go out of town, take a trip. So that was a nice balance and then some trips to Europe. I don't know. I've been there maybe six, seven times. They've all

been many things, many different things; particularly interested in Germany because of the Germanic—the Roloff side and my grandparents being immigrants that spoke German and so wanting to know a lot more about that.

MS. RIEDEL: What part of Germany? Do you know where they're from?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, what happened with them is that they were—they actually—they left Germany in 1815 or 1812, right around that time period and were settlers. They were called Ausländers. They lived in Moldova. It's now called Moldova. Then it was called Bessarabia, which is—my grandfather was born in Odessa, on the Black Sea.

So there was a German enclave in Russia because at the time, Catherine the Great had opened up the land for settlement and there were the St. Petersburg, there was the Bessarabian and then the Volga German enclaves and so there was basically about a 90-year displacement from Germany.

So the records and stuff of tracing back to the earliest time are very obscure, which I was really interested in seeing what I could do and there is an Ausländer museum in Stuttgart [Germany], which I haven't been able to get to that.

So, but yeah, it's all peasants, all farmers, working class or serf or however you would determine it and just interested in that whole story and let's see, that's where a lot of the orchard images come from.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: It's all connected to that kind of trying to unearth that idea and then the other side of the family is mainly from England, Ireland and my mom's maiden name is Lyons, which I believe was also Norman; early on it was from Lyon.

So there may be a French sort of connection there. It would be quite early. So I'm interested in family history and also got very interested in the German art scene, Joseph Beuys, German artists, lots of different people that I've had a lot of affinity with.

And then the other place that I really responded to was Italy and just mainly because the culture is so—it's just such an amazing place to be and when I worked with one of the projects that I did with Lance at the gallery was a copartner with Lance's gallery in Manhattan was Emily Harvey and Emily mainly worked with Fluxus artists.

But she had a space in Venice, Italy, called the Archivo Emily Harvey and so over time I was—an exhibition occurred that was a - two solo exhibitions in that space which could—had kind of two different areas and it was a big honor for me, one, to have a show in Venice but also that the other person was Gordon Matta-Clark and it was during the Architectural Biennale in 2002.

MS. RIEDEL: That's great, yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: And so that was—I felt that my kind of art life had reached its highest point. She had an apartment in Venice and I was able to stay there a month. It's like what you read about and it's like wow, this happened. So that was really wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you able to meet any of the artists there whose work you had admired?

MR. ROLOFF: It was an Architectural Biennale. So I didn't so much and in Germany, I had German friends but they weren't really necessarily the—I mean, Reinhard Mucha was an artist I was very interested in but I never saw anything. I mean, I never saw him and oh, Sigmar Polke I suppose, and there was a number of people that I was interested in.

But Beuys was very important and I saw a lot of his work at different places. He had different collections and stuff and so that was really—also to see it in context was really, I think, pretty amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: But the landscape, everything about being there was so interesting to me, also it was where Leibniz was from, he's from Leipzig [Germany] and Leibniz was the librarian in Braunschweig [Germany].

So there was just all these different echoes and different ways. The family was probably from more what would have been Prussia or eastern—not Eastern Prussia but what's now Poland would be in Mecklenburg which is still in Germany or it would have been in Pomerania which is just into Poland. That's where I believe where I've traced it back to that. So I never went there.

I did go to Berlin [Germany] quite a few times, which is very close to Mecklenburg and so that was—and then I went to Dresden [Germany] once which was the furthest east that I had gotten and that's kind of another trip at some point, although having had that 90-year missing history plus the two wars and the damage of loss of records and stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So I still keep looking but I'm not sure how much is really there. So the journeys have meant a lot of different things, personal.

MS. RIEDEL: You'd mentioned Hawaii too at one point.

MR. ROLOFF: I went two times to go to—specifically to go to the Big Island to see the volcanoes and one of the first times I went, I went by myself. Actually I went two times by myself and rented a car and just drove the circumference of it and stayed in the—there's a great place. I call it—it's called the Volcano House.

I think it's a Sheraton hotel at the edge of Kilauea crater and Kilauea crater is two-and-a-half miles across and with cliffs are about 400 feet high. So you wake up and there's this immense volcanic landscape and this big crater and then out in the distance is another crater that's inside of it that goes down yet further and that's active. So I did go out there and it's—there's molten lava but it's cooled over.

So there's a skin and there's just some cracks where there's kind of fissures of that—you can see the molten material and—but the landscape is like being on a—it's like being on a broken ice flow, just because it was all these flows of material but they were fractured and kind of bending—bent up against each other.

Areas were steaming and there was an area of a lot of sulfur and it's just really primal, amazing, alive kind of place and then there was another crater that was just over, a crater that was next to Kilauea [HI] and that one at one point had overflowed.

It kind of filled up and just flooded out and so it formed a fall of lava down the cliffs of Kilauea that was probably about two or three times the size of Niagara [Falls, Niagara Falls, NY]in terms of the scale of this giant flow of lava down the side of there.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. ROLOFF: So there was just this immensity. Then there was a black sand beach. It's on the southern part of the Big Island and then there was this forest that was actually kind of interesting in terms of some work that I was doing.

It was a forest that a lava flow had flowed into and was flowing fast enough that what it did was it flowed around the trees and because the trees were moist, they chilled the lava and formed a casting. So the lava kept flowing and left behind a vertical casting of the tree but the lava was hot enough so that it burned out the tree and left the negative space of the tree in these columns of lava.

MS. RIEDEL: How interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: So there was this—it's a little park or a little kind of set aside so you can see that. It was great. It was just a lot of really interesting things.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, makes me think of your description from yesterday of dipping straw in slip and just burning out—

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, it was very much like that on a big scale and then there were—I didn't—another trip which was comparable because I was saying that there weren't lava tubes that—I think, they were there but I didn't see them in—but when you go up to—a completely separate trip was to northeastern corner of California, which is the Modoc County area and there's a Lava Tubes National Monument [Lava Bed National Monument] and you can just walk underneath these lava tubes for like a mile underground.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That sounds really interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: It's just the same thing. It's just a flow of lava. The outside chills and the inside just keeps moving. So you have this—you have this—there's always flow marks on the inside. It's beautiful and the ceiling would be like drips because it was just molten material and sometimes there would be—there was not a perfect tube.

It'd be like that and then it would get narrower and wider and change. So you had to kind of climb through it a little bit and then in other places the ceiling had fallen in and so you had these open air kind of—light would come in. Otherwise it can be pretty dark when you're down in this tube.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MR. ROLOFF: But the whole landscape, you look—when you come up above the ground and you look and it just looks like a big lava flow and you don't realize that the whole area underneath is just like threaded with all these tubes and then you can get maps and it's a national monument, so it's all been—I actually have a really nice big volume that has a whole story of all that and big foldout maps and everything of it.

MS. RIEDEL: I've never heard of it before.

MR. ROLOFF: It's the area where the—it's not Shasta and then you go to the east and there is Goose Lake, Tule Lake and the corner where Oregon, Nevada and California come together, right up near that corner is the Lava Tubes National Monument and those lakes and there—it's great. It's a wild area.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds it.

MR. ROLOFF: It's pretty nice, so—

[END CD 5, TRACK 2.]

MS. RIEDEL: So we were going to talk a little bit about politics—how you see politics affecting your work or what sort of political commentary you see running through your work.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, for a long time the politics were—the way I would describe it was aesthetic politics in the sense of to some extent, and I'm using the word politics in a broad way, this idea of possible—of transgressive in order to ferret out ideas. It should be to some extent the Kilns have some of that kind of thing because they were meant to create another kind of dialogue in a way. I see that partly political.

MS. RIEDEL: Especially in relation to the ceramics field and art in general?

MR. ROLOFF: Somewhat in that way and it's just—I think, the whole history of what was important to me and the idea of earth art and conceptual art was - it is political in the sense that it was really connected to the Vietnam War and this idea of going outside the system and so that's an underpinning that, I think, was so generative and so formative that I kind of related to that and responded to that energy.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: As being—to find something new, to find an alternative, to find a different answer to things and so if you're involved in aesthetics in that sense, that's the area that you challenge and so you're challenging it in the same way that the earth works artists challenged the idea of sculpture and also the video challenged the idea of sculpture, that I think the Kiln works and things—and also in much smaller ways, other things.

There was a spirit of challenge in it that may not have been so overt that that's what the first thing you thought of. But it was kind of an underpinning to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, and the emphasis certainly on process rather than product.

MR. ROLOFF: Yes, that was—that's in some sense a challenge to—because they were challenging the market system.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. ROLOFF: I remember Dennis Oppenheim's piece where he tore up the floorboards of a gallery as a work or he installed a hangnail in the floor and there's a close-up photo of it [*Material Exchange*, 1970]. It's like sell that, in a way.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah

MR. ROLOFF: I mean, it was just kind of—there was a spirit which is sort of what I was referring to as anabolism catabolism, is there's a form of destruction that is actually a form of construction.

In order to dismantle—you know, maybe [Jacques] Derrida's deconstruction or you could probably think of it in other forms, but the status quo or the existing order, in order to kind of dismantle it and in order to find something new.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: That's an age old—or at least a 20th century or maybe since [Édouard] Manet or something like that, as a kind of attitude. So, I think, that is part of that and then I think that the whole concept of Poststructuralism, Postmodernism, to me those are eminently political, I think, because they apply themselves so specifically to political areas like identity politics and social justice and things like that, which to me is an immediate segue into environmental justice or environmental issues.

And so the idea of kind of the postmodern viewpoint in a broad sense was another form of that, a kind of subversive thing. It was taking on Modernism and a particular viewpoint of in some sense the monolithic and to create alternatives to that. So, I think, if you tap into those things, at least for me it was always—I may not necessarily always agree with the specifics of it but it was the spirit of it that was interesting.

And writers, there's a whole lineage of writers that I connect up and they've connected themselves up also, from Heraclitus to [Gottfried] Leibniz to [Johann Wolfgang von]Goethe and now much more contemporary would be [Gilles] Deleuze, [Felix] Guatarri and [Michel] Serres and people like that that are kind of like mavericks to a certain extent.

I think they have a philosophical—they're philosophers. They have a philosophical integrity but they also have kind of an outsider dynamic that is part of the idea of the challenge of existing systems or existing kind of viewpoints.

So, I think, for an artist those things are always inspirational, at least for this person, for me, and then you saw it in architecture. You saw these things showing up in different places and in the last 20 years, to me architecture has been at least as interesting as most of the art world and I've seen some buildings by Jean Nouvel.

And I think back to even when I was in school that there was this—well actually I was always interested in German Expressionist architects, which I mentioned that connection to the Taut Brothers, the Wissinger family tomb and then some of their other pieces.

But Arcosanti, Paolo Soleri's project out in the [Arizona] desert.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: People knew about—I didn't go there but people I knew had been there and it was kind of like something that was an Archigram [architectural firm–JR]. There were different groups that were proposing pretty radical things and they always—I thought in the language of art or at least a kinship because they were probing. They were pushing at boundaries and pushing at definitions and things.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. ROLOFF: I think that spirit is something that catches. Even the idea of—I was - mentioned earlier Menard and Dietz and everybody, the idea of a plate tectonics and how [Alfred] Wegener was not accepted. It was always contentious, the idea that continents could be drifting and then even then, even some of these guys held on to the '60s of the idea of the expanding Earth as being the logic for how all this stuff occurred.

So it was a hard battle and, I think, rightly so. It's like these things shouldn't be—they should prove themselves and they need to have their—they need to be tested.

But there's also a kinship there and it may be—I was thinking—last night I was thinking about—I'm reading the biography of Beckett [*Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* by James R. Knowlson–JR] and I was really thinking about the other biographies that I've read fairly recently, well, in the last so many years, and they've been [Samuel Taylor] Coleridge was the last one and then Leibniz was before that and before that was a biography called *A Ringing Glass* [Donald Prater; Oxford, Clarendon Press: 1986] which was a biography of [Rainer] Rilke.

So they're pretty much all writers and they were people who were kind of challenging things in their own way and their own time and they usually had some—I'm not sure about Beckett yet but they usually—they had some flaws. So that was—there's a kinship there, I guess.

And I don't know. I was curious as to why—I was thinking about I get as much out of reading a biography as I do reading some of the actual text and I'm not sure why. I've been trying to think about that in the sense of the person and the work and either the connection or the schism and, of course, biographies are never embodiments. They're just—they're kind of examinations somewhat from a distance.

MS. RIEDEL: And with some context.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, yeah, so they—but it's still. There's something about that that every so often a biography seems to mean something to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: What someone went through, and I still often think about Coleridge taking off across the mountains up in the lake country just in a white shirt and into a rainstorm and just taking a multiday hike just out into the wilderness, just kind of not a lot of preparation and the idea—I think I mentioned earlier about Turner tying himself to the mast of his ship and then when he was—he would paint on site, being up on a mountain and then grab some dirt and rub that into the water—into the painting and this kind of connected—a kind of visceralness that somehow, some of these people aspired to.

I also think about Rilke, who was in different ways a pretty challenged person psychologically but that was where his—that was the strength and he didn't want to undergo psychoanalysis because he was afraid he would lose the thing that was feeding him, which was a certain kind of dysfunction or a certain—nowadays you might see it in these sort of terms and stuff.

But for him it was part of the pain of existence that came through in a certain way and for him it was something he could tap into and you could also see that in Coleridge and I'm beginning to get a little sense of that from the Beckett thing. Leibniz, I don't know, he had a—he was very different and there was only one biography that I think has ever been written and this was—this cost me $70 to get a hold of a used copy of it.

But it was something that I—it's not that well-written either but he had—mainly in

His older life he had a lot of detractors and so that was probably—it was more on that level. But I think for him, like these other people, was this amazing curiosity and him particularly, just unbounded curiosity and in some ways capacity to pull in and to make connections and things.

And I think there was something like—it's sort of like the bequeath. Was it Turner bequested 20,000 watercolors to the Tate [Britain] or the National Gallery in England and Leibniz bequeathed equally as many—I think more—letters to, I think it, was the library in Braunschweig where he was the—he ran.

But that was also the time of—in those days people wrote letters. But that's how a lot of things were unearthed was through discourse and this kind of the distance of a letter and how long it took to travel and the kind of—so those are all really interesting things to me.

What was the topic that we started?

MS. RIEDEL: It somehow feels political in some ways.

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, political, I ended up—ended up with the personal, I guess.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, there we go, maybe.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, there was someone who had said there's nothing that isn't political.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: So I'm not sure who that was.

MS. RIEDEL: Same person who said there's nothing that's not ceramics.

MR. ROLOFF: There's not what?

MS. RIEDEL: There's nothing that's not ceramics.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, right, right. Yeah, so—well as long as I have an atom of iron in the center of each hemoglobin molecule in my blood, I'm connected to ceramics, not to mention the magnesium and the other—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: I mean, actually chlorophyll in the center part has a—it's either magnesium or manganese atom. It's a hydrocarbon but it's also connected to the mineral world. So at certain levels these things coalesce.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. Absolutely, physically or metaphysically or somewhere.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, yeah, that's the—I think that's the part that's the interesting thing to me is that there's the coalescing and I was trying to think about what I said in that lecture in Korea. It was something like—oh yeah, something like I wasn't interested in the way things were different but more the way that things are the same. So that was applied to this idea of ceramics in a sense.

And so that was the context for the ecology, the kind of perception or the vision of ecology as being the gradients or the transitions between the ceramics that you might know and the ceramics you could know just by application of these things.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: Thus expanding its ecology of connection and meaning and so that was sort of the basic, I guess, message of that and by coming to grips with that, there wasn't—I gave some images of certain kinds of works and things where maybe that was happening.

But it was more about the process of doing that was vital to then have an enlarged ecological view or in some cases people were—which is totally in good form in a different way was like, well, here's a more efficient firing—if I were to—what if I tuned all my glazes to cone eight instead of cone ten.

This would be the quantifiable difference and things like that and so that's all kind of an aspect of that. But it makes me think about if you were looking at it even broader, how you might then think about those types of things again. So they don't seem like that they're one or the other but they exist—they inform each other. It's almost like the two scales of working, the studio and then—[inaudible].

MS. RIEDEL: And the connections between them because it seems like it's not—nothing in isolation but it's always a connection and a system.

MR. ROLOFF: Right and the idea of they inform each other and how—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And your openness to that discourse.

MS. RIEDEL: And how far they can expand and open and relate and what else they can relate to, how far that will continue on.

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And then what will connect them back up to on the other side around.

MR. ROLOFF: Right, right, right.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think we're—

MR. ROLOFF: We've expired?

MS. RIEDEL: I think we're coming on the final flames.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: I think we really have done—

MR. ROLOFF: We aren't repeating ourselves enough times?

MS. RIEDEL: I don't think yet. I think it's, as we discussed early on, that there will be so many different ways to approach these different topics, coming up with a different way of understanding them through those multiple approaches.

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: But I do think we can begin to move towards summing up.

MR. ROLOFF: Okay. How would you do that? What's the best way to do that?

MS. RIEDEL: I have a question.

MR. ROLOFF: Oh, okay.

MS. RIEDEL: You have been working for over 30 years. When you think about site-specific work, earth work, the type of work that you've been engaged in, what about that has been significant to you and brings something to the art world that no another type of art does?

For example, not your work in specific but your way of working, the site-specific installations or earth work, why has that been of value and compelling to you more than, say, ceramics, clay in and of itself?

MR. ROLOFF: In and of itself it's this idea of context, us being an actual component of something and, I think, it's interesting because the terms are fairly well defined if you look at it just in a kind of theoretical way of the idea of the white box was meant to be a neutral space so that just the work was there and so that isolation—there's always the cultural context.

There's always the thing about who's looking at it and things like that. But the MO [modus operandi] was for it to be a kind of purity in that way.

And then site-specific work brought in location or other kinds of contexts. I mean, that's what's been interesting is that site specificity has morphed into different sorts of terms that are very similar that take on different aspects of that, that it can mean cultural dynamics. It can mean cosmological things. It can mean anything almost. It's another formative approach to something that has expanded and become a language and an interest all on its own and it's also a thing that people have challenged. They make works that are purposely not site-specific because that becomes a kind of trope or a status quo kind of thing.

So that's—but to me I like to try to have that, the definition of what that means fairly expanded so that its'—hopefully it doesn't become only a one-liner or something. Like the project in Minnesota, for me the site was—at minimum was 50 miles from the center in terms of like a radius of 50 miles because that's where geological form could actually have a chance for change or expression and then at least to the mantle.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, that's depth, yeah?

MR. ROLOFF: And in some cases going up, so it's kin of like up, down, east, west, all in terms of the geographic aspect of it, as a starting point and then there's time. There's history, there's all kind of other things that are sort of that. But rather than it being a small area or the building itself or something like that, it almost always included the terrain in a bigger sense and the landscape.

So I had my own way and own entry point into that way of doing things. But other people have interpreted it much—Miwon Kwon's book, [*One Place After Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, MIT Press: 2002] which is all about site-specific kind of in a new way which looks at borders. It looks at things somewhat more politically. It's really like that's one of the next generations of that because it came kind of from minimalism in the sense of there's a kind of formal.

[Robert] Irwin is the one who made that—there's that one article called—I think it's called "Being in Circumstance" [*Being and Circumstance: Notes Toward a Conditional Art*; Robert Irwin, Larkspur Landing, Lapis Press in conjunction with the Pace Gallery and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art: 1985 is a book.] And it lists three or four different categories, site generative, site relevant, site specific and there may be one more.

And so the idea of kind of from Smithson and Oppenheim and different people like that and Mary Miss and practitioners looking at what they were doing and then also kind of—and Robert Morris for sure—kind of formalizing that and creating a language out of it and then people have started to use that and once they start using it, then they have a point of departure as well. So that was kind of—that's sort of the story, at least the way I see that thing.

When you mentioned, I think, in the list there as another little article that might be connected to this which was artist writers or writers and certainly Smithson's writings are so important in that whole language and one article I give out to my students very often is the one on the Nazca Lines by Robert Morris ["Aligned with Nazca."] It was in *Artforum* in, I think, it was August 1975 [October 1975: 26-39] was his—I think that was the issue.

And looking just—I think those days and—[inaudible]—writing, there was—the dominance of the critic and the curator I think has been a little bit hand in hand with Post-structuralism and has been kind of a co-evolution.

And there's been a lot that people have gotten out of that, meant a lot in different ways. I do miss the time when the art magazines, I think, had a lot more artists writing in them and artists also thought that it was—that writing was a companion to a lot of the work that they were doing and that's happen.

I mean, Jeff Wall has written a lot, even Peter Halley has written. It's not that it doesn't still happen. It's just—I think, the art world is so big that there are so many other things but back then it was a little easier to kind of see it I suppose.

MS. RIEDEL: And writing by artists in particular as opposed to curators or anyone else, is especially significant to you.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, I think, historically, yeah, definitely and now I don't know. There's so much writing. I don't know how to distinguish it anymore. But, I think, it was concentrated to this idea of a conceptual art as challenging the status quo or challenging the idea of the institutions and that to write as part of that challenge was a kind of natural thing and that, I guess, it's sort of all kind of made sense in that in some sense, I guess, it's —nowadays it's all confused I'd say because the role of the curator is so strong.

But in those days, the artists were really in leading—my perspective—and the museums and things were all trying to—were scrambling trying to figure out, "Well, how do we now show this new work? What do we do with it? How do we," and so the issue of documentation became part of that whole language.

So there's something about the artist-led kind of movement or discourse that has a different kind of energy than something that's more academic, more imbued with what you might call rationalization in a sense rather than just a kind of more pure inquiry and I'm not saying that there aren't very sophisticated curators and critics and stuff who do that and, I think, they have found those ways.

But there's a kind of—it may just be a nostalgia for a kind of simpler time when that was—when you could see it and you could sense it.

MS. RIEDEL: Does anything in particular or anyone come to mind?

MR. ROLOFF: Then?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, just the people I was mentioning which was mainly Robert Morris and Smithson.

MS. RIEDEL: Smithson.

MR. ROLOFF: I've seen some of Oppenheim's writings. They were kind of—they were like Germano Celant. They were like reading—it's like kind of poetic and it was almost like one of the things I always really liked about—I've had many, many conversations with Dennis and one of the things I've noticed—he would refer to Vito Acconci's speaking in this way—is this thing of the third person, of not saying—it was more sort of like—it wasn't like, well, I did this and then this is what the work was.

It was sort of like the work was an entity out in the middle of the room or someplace and then they were walking around it like going, "Well, the work wants to become an enemy of itself. This work wants to somehow reconstitute its own foundations in its structure."

It was such a generative way because they would sort of look at something and almost like they were being given information from it rather than—and interpreting it rather than the idea that I made this and it's just an extension of myself; for me, it was just such a beautiful relationship to something and a way—and it was just like this whole way of circling something and kind of like looking at it in different ways.

It's a way of asking questions through a dialogue. The Harrisons [Helen Mayer and Newton] had a kind of similar thing where they took on the role of the watcher and the lagoon maker.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. ROLOFF: In *The Lagoon Cycle* [1974-1984] where they would speak from these different positions about the topic, maybe the crabs in Sri Lanka or something that they were investigating and they would say, "Well, this thing sort of has this attribute," and then the other one would respond and it was kind of—so it was almost like theater.

You were playing a role and the thing that you were looking at was also—so you were in this kind of tableau and you were taking these roles and it was a kind of dismantling of self in a way to take on yet another persona or another perspective.

So the dynamic itself, the dynamic of inquiry was actually being kind of unearthed and kind of opened up and fermented. Those are the things that—that's what I kind of miss in a way, is that sort of thing and, I think, the hyper-academiciation of things has—I can't say this short-circuited that but it sort of—it may be by just pure amount has kind of sort of encapsulated it or subsumed it or something like that.

So those are things that I—really interesting when the question is the question. What is the nature of the question that we're asking and then how are we asking it and what is this—how can we even begin to create a

question? What gives us a right to create a question?

You go further and further into some more of a foundation itself, like what is it that everything we understand and are trying to do is built upon? That's ecology to me. See, that's what I keep coming back to. That would be ecology. You are actually completely questioning every aspect of things. So anyway, that's a good—

MS. RIEDEL: That feels a lot like what you're doing now.

MR. ROLOFF: What as the question again?

MS. RIEDEL: Do you see your career now in time in specific periods or do you see it as different phases of a series of questions? Do you see a thread of continuity running through it? How do you look back on your body of work over all these years?

MR. ROLOFF: Wow. It's hard to say. To me, when I look—I go back and look at like a few pieces of the Exile series, as far as beauty, I don't think I've done anything that's more beautiful than a few of those.

MS. RIEDEL: Those were exquisite, absolutely.

MR. ROLOFF: There's a few I really like and so I don't know whether then just to sort of a continual attempt at some kind of expansion in a way and I don't know how well that feeds me in the end. I continue to just maintain my interest and engagement and so I think that's something.

MS. RIEDEL: I guess, another way to phrase it would be what about it in particular is important to you or is significant to you?

MR. ROLOFF: The history?

MS. RIEDEL: Your work, over time.

MR. ROLOFF: I don't know. I guess, an odd answer to that is, sort of the friendships that I have.

Finding people all along the way that have had a kind of enough of a similar interest that, one, you feel that there's some camaraderie and that you feel that there is some kind of—well, kinship and you're not alone in a way and that—I guess, I just think about—an example would be Mark Thompson, the guy I mentioned earlier and just the types of conversations that you can have and they might be harder to have had 20 years ago if the stuff in between hadn't happened in a way and I don't know. I can't measure them against a lot external things so much.

It's just more like how they feel inside and so you get into—I don't know. I just—I don't know how to even answer that other than to just kind of the things that have continually meant the most to me, which are some of the people I've met, which is also why I was really interested in going back to the ceramic thing in a sense.

And I think that's what Walter McConnell and Neil Forrest have given me is a camaraderie about something where you can challenge each other and you can see what they're doing and just kind of also feel that you're part of something that you think is interesting.

It's enough to kind of—so I think that's kind of a personal angle. I don't know how else to put it particularly. I've talked enough about big picture things but I don't know about that in terms of other—how to say it in those terms. It'd probably be kind of egotistical to say something too much in that way.

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, sort of—yeah, how do you fit into some sort of picture and I'm just not sure.

MS. RIEDEL: You haven't thought about that?

MR. ROLOFF: I'm sorry?

MS. RIEDEL: You haven't thought about that at all?

MR. ROLOFF: Only as you go along. You're constantly challenged.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And so you think that you're responding to a certain challenge in a certain way. Sometimes it's well received, sometimes it's not. And so, I think, it's more in the moment of that than it is about—I don't know. I think it's nice when people, younger people say something.

They recognize my name like at a ceramics conference and they might say something and they say that they've enjoyed things and that's always very heartening. But I don't know that that's—that's not really something that's like a measuring stick.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. ROLOFF: It's more of a kind of individual—some connections and not being totally lost or—

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe another way to think about it is what keeps the work still compelling for you?

MR. ROLOFF: I think it's this idea of the expanded landscape, the continual reinterpretation of something is so much of a juice to me that I can't—I'm almost obsessed by it and the next project, which is impossible—well, there's a couple. But I'm really interested. I read this thing; it's on the shelf over here.

I read it and it was the influence of the Farallon Plate on the development of the West Coast of America and this guy—it was a book on the basin and range, which is that whole area pretty much Nevada, parts of Utah, and a little bit of California, that the effects of the completely subductive plate which is now at least in this part of the continent, the San Andreas Fault is what's left over from that.

It's a transformer fault that the residue of that subduction is still affecting and they even think that it may have affected—had something to do with the Rocky Mountains, that it would have been felt all that way in.

So I was talking with a neat guy that I met named Sebastian Martin, who's actually—he works on the staff at the Exploratorium and he's a German who, I think, just not too many years ago just got his doctorate in geophysics and he was working in the Andes, in Chile and stuff, really nice guy.

And so we were talking, just kind of brainstorming about the idea of somehow, particularly with—I think, one of the things that we're doing, which, I think, is important is we're bringing some geological language to the Exploratorium, which I always felt was kind of physics and at best, biocentric, a kind of focus and the idea that some of these larger things, because the new piers would give a whole different venue and you're constantly looking out from the piers.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right, the new location.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, it's going to change the dynamic and then how can we respond to that and so we are—there's just always different levels of looking at that and so one of the things that would be, I think, really interesting would be to somehow create a visualization system or a model that actually talks about the way that the Farallon Plate subduction is actually just shown itself all across the whole makeup of California. So it's not even the act of subduction anymore, which is like we've been focused on the act—just the accretion of new material at the edge.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: But it's the residual and kind of comprehensive effect of what that meant to all that we take for granted as for what our home is and our landscape because right now the remnant of that plate is the Juan de Fuca Plate, which is still active subducting under Washington State and part of—it's actually all the way up from Northern California, Oregon.

There's a thing called the Mendocino Triple Junction which is just off the coast of Mendocino and it's where the Juan de Fuca, the Pacific Plate and the North American Plate come together and triple junctions are fairly rare. They have a special interactive dynamic to them.

So from that point on, that's a living subduction zone and that's why Mount Saint Helens erupted. I mean, that's—I mean, if everything is correct and what everyone—and geologists don't usually say that's why. They usually say, "We think," because these theories are always being challenged and I think that plate tectonics is pretty solid.

But people thought things like that before. Anyway, so a thought—and the fear over Mount Rainier, it's just an active living place and you look right across and San Andreas moved up and formed—that's where the San Andreas ends is at that. It actually turns into the Mendocino—oh what's that called—it's the one—Menard discovered it. It's a fracture zone.

Anyway, Lassen [Peak], the rumblings of the Long Valley Caldera, somebody just died not too long ago from a gas release at Mammoth Mountain. There are still magma chambers active, things underneath there that would have been from the Farallon Plate and it's just that far in.

And so the modeling of that, to actually think about the edge of the continent and being at the edge of the bay

and stuff and just kind of—so I don't know, that's what we were talking about, like is there a way to make an immersive, make some way to feel that. It's a really interesting challenge and there's not an easy answer because it's—I don't know how—I can think about it but I'm not even sure myself how it feels to know what to do.

So we're looking also at a lot of some models—the whole bay area structural geological—that's what I've been working on lately is some things for them for that.

MS. RIEDEL: It's going to be great to see how that evolves.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, we'll see. It goes through—like I mentioned earlier their process.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: So it'll be shaped in some way through them. I don't know. I'm not sure how long I'll be able to be involved. But I'm hoping that it will—there's another grant that may come in in a while that maybe I'll have something to do with. I'm not sure. But to me it's really exciting.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, Exploratorium is such an interesting place. We talked about this briefly yesterday but it's not specifically a scientific laboratory and it's not specifically an art school. It feels like a fusion of the two.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, they have brought in that long-term artist thing and that was part of Frank Oppenheim[er]'s vision was. See, what I really like is you can—there are some images that are around there that you can see and it was like the first week of Exploratorium. There was that giant building and there was maybe an office or something. Maybe they had a trailer.

I can't remember what it was and a couple of guys just standing in this huge space going all we have is possibility and so now you see what it did and Peter Richards was just—in a private conversation—people kind of said this. They're going, "Why don't we just start over, get a new space?"

I think, it's a complicated thing because of institutionalization of anything and now that a lot of employees and institutional history and stuff and, I think, they invoke Frank and everyone is interpreting what they think and, "Well, Frank was involved in this project," and all the dynamics but he also might say, "Yeah, why don't we just start over?"

I think there's—it would be hard to keep everyone employed. So it would be difficult. But you could probably do some part of that and, I think, there's some of that happening.

MS. RIEDEL: It's pretty wonderful they're even thinking along those lines.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, that you could be that open.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: Because there were probably five employees then instead of 350.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: But they did—I went on a visit of the—I'm forgetting the name of the boat now but it's—the Exploratorium has just launched a new relationship with NOAA—the National Oceanographic Atmospheric Administration [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] I think is what it stands for—and there's an oceanographic ship there which is state of the art, one of the new ones. It was completely rebuilt as an oceanographic exploratory vessel.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. ROLOFF: And it has the whole hull is a built-in sonar—site-scanning sonar system, multi-beam sonar, that has an 8 kilometer width of swath as it goes over the ocean bottom.

It takes data from 8 kilometer wide sort of bands at super resolution and it has all these—it has this amazing—it's about like a 6 foot cube, maybe bigger, maybe even like 9 foot cube, kind of ROV [Remotely Operated Vehicle] which is an underwater remote thing that goes down on a tether and it can go down to, I don't now, 6,000 meters or something like that and it has its own separate little thing that can explore even different things than that.

It's like a little kid - that's on its own umbilical - from that - and it's all high definition and they have a transmission system. So they can transmit globally, high definition systems. I think it's real time. If it's not, an

incredibly short delay.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. ROLOFF: Of what's going on; like so you're right there with these scientists and you have an Internet connection and a satellite feed or something like that and you're—so globally there'll be this global discussion about scientists and, I think, one of the things that the Exploratorium is doing is that it's going to be a visualization wing and a public wing, a way so that boat will be able to dock there and they'll have ways of downloading that data and you'll be able to see research being done right now and—

MS. RIEDEL: Would this have any impact on your wharf project potentially?

MR. ROLOFF: It's a little bit outside of that but it's—the wharf would be the—I mean, it's just the point of contact physically and if there's something that's in there that is actually an expose of how the wharf relates to the local geology, basically what's really interesting to me is that 20,000 years ago, the ocean beach was at the Farallons, which is 25 miles out. So this, the bay was dry. All that, even going under the Golden Gate [Bridge] that was just a valley and there was a river going down there.

So the idea that you could look through time and understand where you are in that way and then possibly from a kind of microcosm, maybe be able to kind of connect up to a larger situation that was maybe going on off the coast of Hawaii or something and so there's this idea of using a local to connect to the global could be one thing that might be—it's the same ocean.

It's the same thing that's there and all these—the stuff that the pier is setting in, the sediments are actually not that old. It's what's supporting it as something that's fairly young and it wasn't that long ago that the pier would be in air. It wouldn't be in water or in land. It'd just be in air. So that'd be kind of an interesting just diagram to think about. It can become—that's a big issue.

It's so interesting to me as it is that it sort of becomes didactic. It becomes illustrational. So those are—that's the big challenge and I think that the illustrational may be—that's the one question. Is that a step towards something else or should that be bypassed because it's too much of a trap? Those are the questions in terms of that, in terms of, I think, scientific visualization.

MS. RIEDEL: How is that a trap or how could that be a trap?

MR. ROLOFF: Well, you just see it as being a form of an answer in some way. Well, this depicts and that's a little bit of the issue with the Exploratorium itself is there's a tendency to kind of stop at these places because they show.

It's kind of like show and tell. This is what this was. And so there's a literalness that has a place. It's connected more to science and how does art operate in that. How does it kind of work outside of that and yet connect to it and maybe create a more visceral relationship to that.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it also makes me think about what you were talking about earlier in terms of lyricism. There is a lyricism and many metaphors, I think, in this idea of a pier floating in air.

MR. ROLOFF: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: There's all sorts of interesting ideas from that idea.

MR. ROLOFF: Well, you're right. In a sense, the trap is that that is lyrical enough.

MS. RIEDEL: It's pretty interesting.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah and maybe it is. It's just do you have an objectivity to see and sometimes you do things and you need distance. You need to kind of get back away from it and work on something else.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. ROLOFF: And so in some sense, I guess, that's kind of what I'm looking for in a way which is why I'm kind of reluctant to let this part of the place become rented is I need to make things in order to understand what these things are because what I was talking about, that's a missing component, I think, at this point.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. ROLOFF: And if things are research-based to that extent, they become unbelievable time sinks, a huge amount, because very often I'm interested in the most arcane part of it and so it's - you're lucky when you get something. You could go to umpteen dead ends and just bounce back and forth and get really frustrated and it can be quite a kind of challenge.

It's like—see if it's—it's maybe early—if the engineer calls, that'll help because I went to a lecture of his, a PowerPoint, about the piers. This is "Joe Pier" [as if he personified all things pier related–JR]. He really—and so I'm working on this big drawing.

That's how I kind of get centered in something is to do - with a CAD program [drafting software] do a very accurate drawing of this entire pier that's had all these different changes. It's been repaired and built out in different phased and stuff and there's things that have been taken away and then new parts added and so I wanted to understand all that.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. ROLOFF: But I also wanted to do - was to be able to have an accurate enough drawing that I could get a measurement of the amount of concrete that was actually constitutes the structure so that I could understand—there are several options as to where that concrete could have come from and one of them may have been a reef that was off the coast, about 90 million years ago would have been 2,500 miles out in the Pacific on the east slope of what was then—it would have been on the Farallon Plate that's now subducted.

But if that—and so if I knew how much cement was involved, I might be able to say, this was actually a reef that was a quarter of a mile long. This was a living entity that was being made by biological—

MS. RIEDEL: Secretions.

MR. ROLOFF: Entities, yeah, secretions and this is what you're standing on in a certain way. If you go back, if you extrapolate far enough, you eventually come to these places, these other landscapes, these other kind of environments and then how do you make that tangible in a way that's not just didactic but somehow a kind of—an experience in some way. So those are—that's kind of the issue at the moment.

MS. RIEDEL: Sounds like a perfect place to call it a day.

MR. ROLOFF: Yeah, okay, all right.

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you.

MR. ROLOFF: Great.

[END CD 5, TRACK 3.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]