Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Lewis Baltz, 2009 November 15-17

Funding for this interview was provided by the Brown Foundation.

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions
www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Lewis Baltz on 2009 November 15-17. The interview took place in Paris, France, and was conducted by Matt Witkovsky for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Lewis Baltz and Matt Witkovsky have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

Lewis Baltz at his home on November 15, 2009, in Paris, France.

Thank you very much for agreeing to the interview. I'm going to start with some basic background. You grew up in Southern California. Is that right?

LEWIS BALTZ: Yes.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And went to school both for your undergraduate and graduate degrees in California. Did you look at any places other than San Francisco Art Institute for the graduate work and Claremont [Graduate University, Claremont, CA]? Or, how did you decide to go there?

MR. BALTZ: Well, actually, I had it in my mind that I just wanted to be an artist and go take my art. I quite had enough of schools after high school.

The Vietnam War and the draft changed all of that for me and, I think, many, many other people. Given the choice of living my own life and going to school, I would live my own life; and the choice of being conscripted or going to school, I would go to school. So the first place that I went to school, having completely – what's the English word for *rater*?

MR. WITKOVSKY: "Failed."

MR. BALTZ: Failed, blown my high school years, largely through – probably less through malfeasance than nonfeasance; I just didn't show up – the only place that would accept me was community college. This wasn't so bad at that time because we'd just begun, really, for the first time – I guess it continues now – to see the situation where people can – there's just simply – there's a glut of qualified teachers.

So I went to this charming little community college near Carmel, Monterey Peninsula [College]. And discovered that about half the faculty were young. Many had recently received doctorates from Ivy League schools, and this was the best job they could get. Big universities, four-year universities, were full up. Everything was full up. So, I mean, my English professor was a –

MR. WITKOVSKY: So no need to look far afield. Great talent right there.

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, I mean, it wasn't such a good deal for the talent but – [they laugh] –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Great for the students.

[END DISC 1 TR 1.]

Yeah. So we were saying you had quite good talent for the undergraduate work, which –

MR. BALTZ: Lower division.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Lower division work, yeah. And this is at the San Francisco Art Institute, or before then?

MR. BALTZ: No, this was before. This was at Monterey Peninsula College. And one professor who I'd been very close to, Elliot Roberts, who is now – I think he just retired, in fact. But he had just recently received his doctorate from Columbia [University, New York,

NY]. My history professor, Plafkin, had just received his doctorate from Brandeis [University, Waltham, MA]. These are young guys; they're radical; they were transplanted East Coast and not at all what you'd expect to find. It wasn't just a high school of ashtrays.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And what year was this that you –

MR. BALTZ: This was '67.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay. And did you already know then, as an undergraduate – a lower-division student - that you wanted to study art? Or even photography?

MR. BALTZ: I think I knew that from the age of 12. When I was 12 years old, I began to photograph seriously. Too seriously.

MR. WITKOVSKY: That's incredible. And who was around you before college-level education to guide you? Or did you just pick it up through books and –

MR. BALTZ: I was fascinated – I was sort of fascinated by it; I was interested. I was looking at – I mean, every so often, you'd see *The Americans* [Robert Frank. Gottingen, Germany: Steidl, 2008 (50th anniversary reissue)], for example, or the work of Edward Weston. They seem to be two polar things that made it into the kind of semi-mass media of photography, like *Camera Annual*s [magazines] and all those sort of ghastly things that we, fortunately, don't have anymore.

But because of that interest, I hung out in camera stores. I wandered into a camera store in Laguna Beach, California, where a very beautiful woman was quite taken with me. She thought I was kind of weird and precocious and knew a lot of stuff and was, like, super serious for 12 years old.

She urged me to meet her husband, who was a genius. And I think she did a hard sell on him also. But her husband turned out to be William Current, who had opened a camera store as a way of finding a job he could physically do. He'd returned from World War II after 380 days of combat. The average, by the way, was about 29 days. He was circulated out – and had 120-percent disabilities. So he opened this camera store as sort of a small, gentle way of running a living. And his lovely wife, Ruth, worked in the store with him. Anyway, so I –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Did they give you camera equipment to use?

MR. BALTZ: No, no. But I –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Well, what equipment were you using then?

MR. BALTZ: Well, I bought a camera from the camera store, which I – now I think it was one of their rare sales. A Rolleiflex. And Bill would talk to me about everything. I mean, art, photography, whatever his – a remarkably cultivated man. An omnivorous reader. And as I mentioned before, I think one of the most original independent thinkers that I've ever met in my life. And he kind of tolerated my being around.

And finally, I was around a lot, and he gave me a job in the store when I was 14. He thought I was probably, you know, a bright, useful teenager. I thought he was God. He knew everything. And he was kind of a father figure to replace my father, who had died when I was 11.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And what sort of things did he show you – or, to make this a more precise question, when you were first using a camera seriously, at what point in that introductory phase in your teen years did you have the sense that you had looked at another camera image and were trying to do something like that? Like, let's say, Robert Frank or Edward Weston. Or was it just trying to see what a camera can show you without really having a sense that you're following or looking at another photographer's work?

MR. BALTZ: No, I'm trying to think back on this time, but there were two books by people who were known but have kind of passed into disregard now. One photographer that impressed me enormously – but it wasn't my kind of thing at all; I didn't really do it, but I thought it was brilliant. And also use of text. Both actually – both used text and image. It was Ed van der Elsken.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Ed van der Elsken, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: And at that time, he had published *Love on the Left Bank* [London: Deutsch, 1954], which was romantic and sexy. He was a very interesting character, actually. And the other when I was really early on was Wright Morris, *The Inhabitants* [New York: Scribner's, 1946], which is odd because I talk to a lot of people my age who, you know, when I become close enough friends, will sort of admit things to each other that are not cool to admit. You know, I'm not the only one who is –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Looking at someone like Wright Morris, yeah, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: I mean, it's probably very familiar – you should have been looking at Walker Evans. But we weren't looking at Walker Evans. We were looking at Wright Morris. And I found the book to be amazing. I don't know how I'd find it today. But anyway, it's – probably, I'd find it pretty heavy-handed.

MR. WITKOVSKY: I guess, but it sounds like – and I'm impressed by this – it sounds like pretty soon on, you thought of yourself as making photographs for serious, artistic purposes.

MR. BALTZ: Oh, from the very beginning, I never had any ambition to do anything commercial, anything journalistic. I wanted to be an artist, and I wanted to be an artist whose work was done in the medium of photography. It may be debatable to this day whether I ever succeeded in achieving that ambition, but the point is, I was never – I never had any uncertainty about that.

MR. WITKOVSKY: It seems a bit speculative, but certainly from the point of view of a historian, it was very hard to consider oneself an artist in photography until maybe, let's say, 1960 or so. And you're talking about a period that's several years before then. But it sounds as though it didn't strike you as strange or anomalous precisely not to follow the Joe Rosenthals of the world or the Irving Penns, but simply to be a career artist right off the bat.

MR. BALTZ: No, I knew about their work, but I thought it was boring. And we had also this mythology of Edward Weston, which combines a lot of things. Weston was an enormously romantic figure. I mean, he was sort of a man alone in the world against the world; he took off to Mexico. He had beautiful women. At least, he had one beautiful woman I can think of – extraordinarily beautiful. Lived by himself. Had this Walden-like existence on what is now, well, one of the most beautiful pieces of land in the United States, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, and made these images that were wonderful and underappreciated.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And then his focus on the landscape was very important early on.

MR. BALTZ: Yes. I had endless admiration for him, the work, and, above all, the romantic myth. At that time, I conceived it a very romantic thing to be an artist. It was a very cool thing to be.

I think it's no longer that. Today, people are proud of saying, you know, it's a trade like any other trade. And you're making a commodity. This must have been some of the post-'80s position on this. But there was another position – earlier position – that may not have ever [been] obtained, and certainly does not obtain today, but is still somehow attractive.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And so this – you know, this – Edward Weston as a certain conceptual role model propelled you on into applying to San Francisco Art Institute and then Claremont Graduate School.

MR. BALTZ: No, no, it's –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Or, I'm sorry, Monterrey, and then it's what got you to –

MR. BALTZ: It's what got me to going to Monterrey. Also, by the way, Bill Current lived in Monterrey. He had just finished his first – I mean, the odd thing about Bill Current was he was a bit more than a guy around a camera store who dreamed about being an artist. He actually went out, made a body of work, took it to New York; John Szarkowski included it in his "[The] Photographer and the American Landscape" show [Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, September 24 - November 28, 1963]. And this was the first show that Bill was ever in.

He received a Guggenheim Fellowship. He had a one-person exhibition in a place no less than Chicago Art Institute [Chicago, IL]. So he was – given how very few ways there were you could succeed in photography - as an artist - at that time, Bill was quite successful.

MR. WITKOVSKY: So you had both a more distant model there – Weston – and then someone you actually knew and could talk to who had succeeded on the terms that seemed right to you. What I was getting to in my mind was that, when you went to pursue the education that would be necessary to it, I read in several places, you didn't want to hang out with photographers necessarily.

And in fact, by the time you got to the upper division, to Claremont, you said, I think, somewhere, that you specifically wanted to apply to art programs that didn't have any photographers in them or weren't teaching photography. So I guess the logical next question is, at what point did you realize that although you loved this as your artistic field, you didn't want to be part of it?

MR. BALTZ: Well, I loved the medium – as a medium. I didn't like the world of photography. I didn't like the culture of photography. I think I feel the same way. I don't think it's changed. I don't think the culture has changed as much as it thinks it has, and my feelings about it haven't changed either.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Can you elaborate on the shortcomings of it?

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, it was just parochial; it was provincial. I mean, there's a rather – if you want to see what it was like – a really good, depressing picture of the state of mentality in photography in 1970 or so – look at a book from the Norton Simon Museum [Pasadena, CA] called *The Collectible Moment*[*: Catalogue of Photographs in the Norton Simon Museum*. Gloria Sander. New Haven, CT: Published for the Norton Simon Art Foundation by Yale University Press, 2006], because that really shows – I mean, it's a very good survey of what was going on and people's attitude about what was going on. I don't know whether it was there or maybe in a later book on California photographers – I'm not sure.

But Bob Fichter, who was teaching at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] at that time was in a few. He was a very upbeat and very generous guy who compared the photography world to like being on a wonderful little Greek island, you know. And as I remarked elsewhere, it didn't seem like a little Greek island to me. It seemed like some sort of dank, polluted valley in Appalachia where everybody's been screwing their sister for four generations, and people look a little funny and talk a little funny.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Very inbred.

MR. BALTZ: One might say that. I just thought it was suffocating.

MR. WITKOVSKY: So who were you looking to? To whom did you look as an artistic role model once you had absorbed the lessons of William Current, let's say, and absorbed the figure if not the works, it sounds, almost, like, of Edward Weston, let's say? Who really turned you on for art and lended that – [cross talk].

MR. BALTZ: Well, it was very hard in San Francisco because as far as I could tell, there was nothing at all going on at my school, and there was almost nothing going on outside the school - I'm speaking here only of art. I mean, there must have been but I don't know what it was, and finally I just gave up on my formal education at SFAI. Perhaps too soon - in my last year a young, rather unknown sculptor offered a course - I think it was at night. It was Bruce Nauman, but by then I was so alienated from SFAI, and from the Bay Area mentality that I was blind to what good might be there. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art was one of the few museums that showed photography. But they would have – generally, they'd have shows like a [Henri] Cartier-Bresson retrospective or something classical. They did take the – what was it called – "New Documents" [Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, February 28 - May , 1967]? Lee Friedlander was a part of that show [Lee Friedlander, Diane Arbus, and Garry Winogrand], which I saw there.

MR. WITKOVSKY: In 1967, it was at MoMA, so I guess some time around then.

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, '67; '68, it came to San Francisco. And I didn't see that it had a lot to do with what I wanted to do, but I liked the work a lot.

MR. WITKOVSKY: That's very interesting.

MR. BALTZ: Especially, at that time, Friedlander's work. I thought it was something really – really a kind of special sensibility about that. One of the reasons I didn't want to go to graduate school in a graduate program for photography was every graduate school had a master. I can't even remember who the hell they all were. Most notably, of course, was Walker Evans at Yale [University, New Haven, CT], and Bob Heinecken at UCLA. Who was at ID [Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology, formerly the New Bauhaus, Chicago, IL] at that time? Do you remember? But it was also, like, a –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Arthur Siegel?

MR. BALTZ: Maybe, yeah. [Affirmative.] Anyway, so RISD [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI] –

MR. WITKOVSKY: And then later, Kenneth Josephson, and, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: - was it [Harry] Callahan –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Callahan was at RISD, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: So these were all sort of like baronial figures. They sort of ran it a little bit like a fiefdom. If you wanted to work in the vein of Walker Evans, you could do very well at Yale. But if you didn't want to do that, you were just – you're kind of left alone. That seemed to be the case everywhere.

I had another agenda. I was well, well along into making the Prototype Works, which were extremely badly received by my classmates and professors at San Francisco Art Institute.

MR. WITKOVSKY: So this was your first considered body of work made during your student years – the Prototypes. And how would you summarize what you thought you were about while you were making them?

MR. BALTZ: I was aware that, probably, single photographs were not what I wanted to do. I knew there were certain things you could do in single photographs, which can be quite compelling, even wonderful, but they cannot be – unless you overload them in some way, they can't be sufficiently informational.

I wanted to work with groups of images. Certainly I got this from William Current, but not only. Since the beginning of the '60s, now we started seeing serial imagery from [Andy] Warhol, from [Donald] Judd. [Josef] Albers had been resurrected as the father of it all. And John Coplans had made an exhibition investigating the esthetics of serial imagery.

I wanted to be able to make a body of work. In fact, that body of work would be the unit, not individual images. I was looking around, testing things, trying to find if there was a subject that could sustain that kind of engagement, a subject that was interesting enough in itself and interesting enough to me – to provide me with a strong enough subject to make a [body of] work.

So that's what the Prototype Works were. I didn't use the name "Prototype Works" at that time. It was in retrospect I've been, okay, that's really what these are.

MR. WITKOVSKY: You've told me in another conversation that the name, when you hit on it, was an homage to Joseph Kosuth. Is that correct?

MR. BALTZ: Yes. Kunsthalle Berne [Berne, Switzerland] did a show of Kosuth very, very early on, and the first part was called "Prototypes." I've always been an admirer of Kosuth's work. I work with Kosuth now, actually; he's on the IUAV [Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia, Venice, Italy] faculty.

MR. WITKOVSKY: In Venice, where you teach, yeah. At the Architectural University of Venice.

MR. BALTZ: Yeah.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Did you happen to see Joseph Kosuth had a show at Eugenia Butler Gallery - well, it wasn't called that; it was called Gallery 669 - in Los Angeles in late 1968? Were you

already – you were in Northern California at that –

MR. BALTZ: I was in Northern California.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay. So really, then, the name came - I'd have to look up the date of the Bern show, but a few years after. So when you brought these things into class, you said, I'm –

MR. BALTZ: This is my new work. The point is, everyone hated this work. It was everything that they didn't like. Again, if you listen to people, their ideal would be something like Jerry Burchard telling people to print the first four negatives on their 35-mm film that they shot pointing at their feet or the sky to get the film into the camera. A hip photograph was a photograph that had a hip subject. Any photograph of Janis Joplin was a hip picture. And so on.

MR. WITKOVSKY: So they wanted something more spontaneous from you, something more high-keyed emotionally and seeming off the cuff.

MR. BALTZ: Every one of my professors except Kathan Brown just hated the work. But on the other hand, I did have work, which made me an exception among the SFAI students of the late '60s.

It was in '67 through '69, and school was virtually suspended for the psychedelic revolution. As you know, students cut class, teachers cut class, and - smoke dope or skinny dip in the fountain in the courtyard, which really – I'm surprised people didn't die of cholera. It really [they laugh] was just frightening.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And then there you were, showing up and actually having done something and printed it.

MR. BALTZ: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Well, since we're on the Prototypes - and I think they do set up a lot of considerations for many of the series that come after - this is, just to clarify, work that's being made mostly between, like, the end of '67 and '71, '72. Is that about – that's not the only thing you're working on in those years, but –

MR. BALTZ: No, but, well, let's say the peak of activity, that would have been all of '67, as far as I can remember, through the first half of '73. I mean, most everything comes from that period. This is –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay.

MR. BALTZ: This wasn't the first photographic work I made, by any means. I had bodies and bodies and bodies of work, which I destroyed, because they weren't really mine. They were influenced by one or another of my idols - influenced by Bill Current a lot. Influenced by a lot of people, a lot of things. So it really wasn't my work, and I destroyed it.

MR. WITKOVSKY: What changed when it became your work? I suppose everything changed, but do you feel that the subject matter changed more, or was it an approach to how you make a picture or how you make a print?

MR. BALTZ: It was about subject matter. Photography had a very rigid hierarchy of subject matter, very much like the 19th-century French salons. If you look at photography from the '50s, even in the '60s, and you begin to think about all the things in the world that were not photographed, were not even acknowledged, [it] was staggering. The list goes on forever.

It dawned on me when I was living in Monterrey that serious photographers – the Edward Westons, the Wynn Bullocks and the Ansel Adamses, would go to some special, privileged "natural" place to work. It was an article of faith - in this case the faith of American Transcendentalism - that to commune with nature was the sign of A Great Soul, no amount of the evidence to the contrary withstanding. The corollary of that attitude was that the rest of the time - when not in the privileged world of pure nature - one might as well be dead to the world.

Unfortunately, my life very rarely involved going to Yosemite [National Park, CA]. My life was about going to shopping centers, being in a town, an urban situation, which seemed to me

was also a landscape but one that no one had any interest in looking at. But I was interested in looking at it.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, absolutely.

MR. BALTZ: The '57 Chevys and the street furniture, and the effaced signage -

MR. WITKOVSKY: Very interestingly, though, in the Prototypes at least, you eliminate the human figure. And you create compositions that are very nearly flat, which is – or at least that's what it seems to be. Not all of them. There are a couple of interiors; there's a poolside shot; there are other things. But the work that really stands out, if I may argue that, is of walls, and it's of piping on walls, and it's of parking lots where you can't really tell if the parking lot is more than three feet deep, although you assume that to get a car in there – so tell me about this.

MR. BALTZ: Okay, that's at least two really good questions. Let me see if I can evade both of them. I don't know when I had this little epiphany, but if you have a human subject, the person is in the picture. Right? And an uninhabited picture has the possibility of the viewer projecting him or herself into the picture. That interested me. The pictures are full of – and they're all about, you know, manmade – or can we say that now – personmade environments. There's no purely natural environment in any of my photographs. In fact, in most of them the only natural element may be the sky, and it's not wholly natural these days either.

My work is full of people - the traces of people - but they're present in their absence – and maybe this is something I got from Wright Morris's *The Inhabitants*. There's an implied human presence in all my work.

The second question was – I know if you'd asked me that question at the time, I would have given you this sort of hyper-literal, smart-ass, Frank Stella answer – photographs are flat.

MR. WITKOVSKY: I'd like to hear more about that though.

MR. BALTZ: Actually, they're virtually flat. It seemed to me that photography was pretty good and even somewhat successful in describing very shallow space. So then my photographs really aren't flat; they're more like the space of a bas-relief.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yes, precisely. A three-foot-deep parking lot. This is my ideal Lewis Baltz photograph. And I wanted to ask – there is a related thing –

MR. BALTZ: And usually there is a plane that echoes the picture plane.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay, exactly.

MR. BALTZ: Not always.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And this, to me, seems emphasized in two ways. I'd like to hear you describe more in the object itself. The first is, as many people have noted – and we should come back to this later - that there are very few shadows in these pictures, which creates an unnerving, because an either unstable or unclear, sense of depth. And the second is that in the exhibition prints, you had a special way of mounting them and in certain cases of emphasizing the border with India ink or some sort of black ink.

And I guess I'd like to hear a bit about both how the prints were made and then something about those two decisions – the relative shadowlessness and this sort of slight object quality, very slight thickness to the object.

MR. BALTZ: Okay, those are – again, I'd rather deal with that sequentially. The question of light and shadow was I didn't want the imagery chopped up by that. I wanted to – one is to keep it whole; second was to try not to imply anything outside the image.

The third reason was that I wanted the light to not enter the photograph. I wanted the light to appear to emanate from the photograph. I wanted the images to seem luminous. And it's - in a certain sense, it's no trick to say what makes something luminous. It's not light and shadow; it's not chiaroscuro; it's having distinct but close value tonalities. I want it to seem luminous and almost, in a sense, self-illuminated.

Because – this is one of these things we talked about a little bit earlier over coffee – but because I believed that photographs and works of art, photographs, my photographs could have a kind of, a real autonomy. That interested me very much. I was quite a bit of a Greenbergian [art critic Clement Greenberg] in those days. I don't believe this is true now. But, I mean, you're asking what I was thinking when I made these photographs, not how I would reconsider that. At the time, that was important to me.

It was important to me to play a double game. That is to say, these photographs were images, and I wanted them to have an second existence as objects. Because a photograph is an object, but a certain kind of object – not the same kind of an object as a painting or a sculpture or, say, a Maserati, but it's a certain kind of object. And I was interested in stressing its particular objecthood.

As with the depth in the pictures. The pictures are not mounted flat on a piece of board. They're actually held off the board, just enough to be visible. The technique is something that I think was described in almost every book dealing with archival processing. There's lot of literature about it.

You archivally process a second piece of paper of the same make, weight, and contrast grade, black, as the image. Then you mount them back to back with a dry-mounting tissue. This, according to the sum of human knowledge in 1971 or '72, was the most permanent way to mount a photograph.

I trimmed the edges because I didn't want the sense of a passe-partout [a form of double matting] or of looking through a window. And I tacked them to a piece of five-ply Strathmore drawing paper. If you flex the drawing paper – I use a thing called Kodak rapid mounting cement - its beauty is it's not very permanent. I mean, as long as you don't fool with it, it's permanent enough. It's not going to drop. But if you flex the board slightly, it will pop off. So the life of the image is not limited to the life of the paper that it's resting on: the supports can be replaced.

MR. WITKOVSKY: So that was a backing. And the India ink on some?

MR. BALTZ: That was something I owe to Bill Current, because when you look at an edge – if you don't, it's like a raw edge. It's sort of like looking at – it's a finishing technique. I mean, today we would do this, but you know, imagine you make a table like this, and when you get to the edge, you just see a cut of ply.

MR. WITKOVSKY: But the difference may be – and I'm sorry to say I don't know William Current's work as well as I ought to – but the difference might be that what you put in the picture actually relates formally, but also in its conceptual content, to that technique of the mounting and the rooming, yes? Because the things in the picture are themselves these sort of only semi-autonomous objects.

In fact, to pursue that a little, I'm very intrigued. You were a bit of a Greenbergian or maybe a [Michael] Fried at that point. And yet you seemed drawn – I am guessing at this, at least – to some artists with whom Fried and Greenberg had a terrific polemic, such as Donald Judd.

MR. BALTZ: No, this is the moment on talk television show where the guy says, I'm really glad you brought that question up, mostly because I was thinking about when I typed this up, what did I mean by that? What I got from Clement Greenberg was his idea - which he claims to have gotten from [Immanuel] Kant - was that for a work of art to have an autonomous legitimacy, it needed to provide a kind of experience that was not provided by any other means. That is, it shouldn't be this, shouldn't be that.

Because obviously, if a work of art is theatrical, we might ask ourselves, so why make a theatrical sculpture? Let's just cut to the chase. Let's just have theater. And I think it's a powerful argument. I mean, I think it's a powerful argument you can even use against the commodification of art that's happening, you know, [at] an accelerated pace, I mean, since the '80s. That is, if it's just a commodity, then –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Then it's interchangeable with other commodities.

MR. BALTZ: - then maybe there are more interesting commodities, if that's all there is to it. And Greenberg spoke again and again about Occam's Razor [reductive scientific/philosophic rule] and about reductive logic. But he really didn't follow his own thinking to its logical

conclusion. He dismissed conceptual art, which to me would be the ultimate fulfillment of the Greenbergian prophecy.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Certainly the kind practiced by Joseph Kosuth at the time.

MR. BALTZ: Yes. Kosuth reducing something to its essential elements, so it's literally irreducible beyond that state. But Greenberg dismissed that as being - "novelty art," I think was his term.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. BALTZ: And in the end, he ended up sponsoring a lot of really weak colorful painting.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah. And as has been pointed out, for instance, in speaking of Greenberg writing about Jackson Pollock, he didn't emphasize, as he might have, all the stuff that's in a Pollock painting, from cigarette butts and bottle caps to all kinds of throwaway things.

MR. BALTZ: He overlooked - or missed - its literalness.

MR. WITKOVSKY: But what your photographs, and these photographs, seem to do, which is, again, sort of like a Donald Judd piece, let's say, is, they have this very tight, classic, posed composition, but their constituent materials will remain asphalt, concrete, stucco, piping, just the way a Judd will remain plywood, steel –

MR. BALTZ: Why not? There's no hierarchy of materials, and this was a time when most of the worst sculpture that was being produced during that time was being done in bronze, and Jasper Johns was making these wonderful things with metal, conclusion being that there's no intrinsically good - or bad - material.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah. But what's –

MR. BALTZ: Frank Gehry was paving his kitchen with tarmac and using, Jesus, a corrugated – not even corrugated metal - corrugated plastic that you put in garden houses, and making astonishing architecture out of it, you know, because he didn't look at it with the preconception of good materials/bad materials. I mean, any material is interesting; it's a question of the possibilities. Chain-link [fencing], for God's sake!

MR. WITKOVSKY: Absolutely, but can we take it from that that in your Prototype works, in your early works, you had quite a romance for the prefabricated, postwar-industrial architectural landscape?

MR. BALTZ: I had quite a fascination with sub-architecture.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And could you specify "fascination" – what a fascination is?

MR. BALTZ: Well, I suppose I mean a mixture of attraction and horror. After all, most of the built landscape is not made by architects.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, it's made by developers or engineers or –

MR. BALTZ: It accretes because of economic reasons, unmediated by anything else. And most of what you see - certainly once you get out of the center of cities, or silk-stocking districts I mean - most of what you see are, sort of, utilitarian structures that are built as cheaply as they can get away with. This is the nature of the American suburbs. This is really how they were conceived and executed.

And this – yeah, I thought it was horrifying and – for many different ways, different reasons – and at the same time, it was fascinating to see this tsunami coming at you, you know. And I mean, this was postwar America, and it was coming at you. And you were like one of those – you know, you have these nightmares where the train is coming after you and you run and run and run, but you stay in place. You can't escape it. This was sort of my thought about American culture.

I mean, maybe you could have said broader, because it wasn't confined to America, but I only knew America. In fact, I only knew, firsthand, the western United States. On the other hand, the western United States, and California, was considered the matrix of what was going to happen. *Look* magazine did this damned California issue every year, and to say,

whether you like it or not, this your future. I don't think people speak about California that way anymore.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Well, not in this particular economy, no. I'm trying to formulate the next question because this is really a fascinating explanation you're giving. If I can summarize –

MR. BALTZ: Well, let me –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay, yeah, go ahead.

MR. BALTZ: I came out of this environment; this is what I grew up with. I mean, the first walls I saw were cheap, fabricated stucco walls, you know, in my parents' building.

MR. WITKOVSKY: It was home.

MR. BALTZ: No, to me, never that. Dealing with this was a kind of exorcism. It was a way of placing it – if you couldn't make any other sense of this, I thought at the time, you could at least try to make an aesthetic sense. And by working with it, you could distance yourself from it. So it was a way of getting rid of something.

This was a fundamental difference, I think, between Bill Current and myself. Bill photographed the things – trees, rivers, the seacoast, prehistoric architecture in the Southwest –that he loved and admired and used his photography to better understand and bring himself closer to. My psychology was exactly the opposite - I used photography to distance myself from a world that I loathed and was powerless to improve.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, and may I ask one – as part of that exorcism, what role did the title play? I'll clarify: the titles to most of these early works – in fact, all of them through the mid-'70s, I think - are purely descriptive. They give, let's say, a street name or a locality. Sometimes, later, they'll say, "East wall of such-and-such building." But the early ones give the name of a locality, and the localities in California can often have very fanciful titles, often in Spanish, which are inherently exotic to an American audience. Was that any part of your thinking, or it was just what you grew up, and so it was just, you know, second nature?

MR. BALTZ: You know, I found it extraordinarily strange to drive across the United States at a certain point – I guess around the 100th meridian – place names stopped being in Spanish, and they seemed weird to me. I mean, things should be called Santo Benitez, not Brownville, you know?

MR. WITKOVSKY: So the Spanish felt home to you; it was the other stuff that was exotic?

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, I thought, actually, but, no, I think – well, I'm trying to really remember what I was thinking at the time, but all these things begin with the definite article: the Prototypes [1967-76], the Tract Houses [1971], the New Industrial Parks [1974]. I wanted to be specific in that way. I wanted to at least give the impression, possibly a false one, that these things were exactly specifically located and locatable, even if they weren't. The tract houses were made all the way from the California coast to what would be 80 miles inland, and some of the houses – I'm trying to remember what stuff cost then, but like, some of the cheaper houses were $6,000; some of the more expensive ones were 100 [thousand dollars].

Now, if you assume that there's been at least 15 times the valuation of money since it was made, you can see what those are now. But what it had to do with, really – the size and view. Otherwise, it was the same. I mean, it was the same quality of construction, the same quality of design – nothing special. If you had a big house with an ocean view, it was a very expensive house. If you had the same house – it was like a two-bedroom, two-bath - out in San Bernardino, it was a very cheap house. But the guys who built the house in San Bernardino would next get a job to build something on Lido Island, Emerald Bay.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And you traveled to all these places marking sameness with, sort of, a superficial differentiality

MR. BALTZ: Santa Barbara to the Mexican border, from the mountains to the sea, as they say on the weather broadcast – it was all the same. I mean, this was sort of like this sludge that had rolled over Southern California. And of course, if you want to take a more humanistic point of view, the lives the people would have in these and this way of living, this

suburbanized way of living – I don't think it's been particularly healthy for – let's say it was a very large step in undermining the notion of community. There was homogeneous housing, where the people change on the average of once every seven years, which is not the same – also, I think the California average for divorce is – maybe these figures are related in some way.

MR. WITKOVSKY: It is, absolutely. And I guess I want to say, just by way of summary - because I'm interested to move to the series that followed from these first couple of things - but what began as a process of exorcism, as you say, of moving into and through a thing to get out of and beyond it, became, it sounds like, certainly by the mid-1970s, a position of feeling fairly confident in opposing the worldview that was represented by this kind of building, this kind of development, this kind of community or non-community. Is that fair to say?

MR. BALTZ: I felt that if you wanted to have a rant, and to rage against something, the most effective way to do it was not to overtly rage against it, but would be to lay out, bit by bit, piece by piece, the evidence, like in a legal brief.

MR. WITKOVSKY: So the photographs have evidentiary value.

MR. BALTZ: And let people, presumably, freely come to the conclusion that you've directed them towards, keeping in mind that no one cares about your ideas, but if somebody believes that something is their own idea, they will die and kill for it. I've thought this has social value or propaganda value and can be effective in a way that scolding and moralizing cannot.

MR. WITKOVSKY: I want to come back, actually, to the social - or as you put it, propaganda - value, but we should probably first enumerate, a little bit, the series that followed. So there's – the first formalized series is Tract Houses, yes? Is that right? And then –

MR. BALTZ: You had them – I didn't print it out, I'm sorry – but you had a list of pieces, and it was pretty much correct, but not entirely.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay, not entirely. Well, let me see if I have – oh, actually, Tract Houses, 1969-'71?

MR. BALTZ: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. WITKOVSKY: Public Places, 1973?

MR. BALTZ: This is very deceptive – that was the name of a show that I did at Castelli's [Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, NY]. And "Public Places" was, in fact, the Prototype Works.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay, and then New Industrial Parks –

MR. BALTZ: For the name.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay, I see. And then New Industrial Parks, which of course, gets you great fame as part of the "New Topographics" show ["New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape." George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, Rochester, NY, January 1975; a revised, traveling version was later organized with the Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ, where it was shown June 13 - October 4, 2009]. But that's getting ahead. A couple minutes left on this tape, and then I have to change the cards. But –

MR. BALTZ: I mean, do you want to continue the list in the –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Oh, all right, yeah. We can, okay.

MR. BALTZ: After that is Maryland, 1976. And Nevada, which was 1978, I believe. Then Park City [UT].

MR. WITKOVSKY: Mm-hm [affirmative], 1980, '81?

MR. BALTZ: Yeah. Then is San Quentin Point [San Francisco, CA, 1986], and then is Candlestick Point [San Francisco, CA, 1989].

MR. WITKOVSKY: And Near Reno [NV, 1986-87] – was that –

MR. BALTZ: I'm sorry, you're right. Near Reno comes between –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Between Park City and –

MR. BALTZ: No between San Quentin and Candlestick.

MR. WITKOVSKY: I see, okay. And all this is sort of 1986 to '88. And then Continuous Fire Polar Circle [1986-87] –

MR. BALTZ: That was in the – yeah, Continuous Fire Polar Circle and Near Reno were done simultaneously.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay. And maybe I'll draw a line there, because I think that the things that come after belong to a different phase. Is that fair to say?

MR. BALTZ: Oh, yeah, I mean, when I finally did Candlestick Point - I'm a little more long-winded on the subject. If you want to know that now, maybe you should wait until you put another tape in and see what it says.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Well, if you can answer in a minute-and-a-half.

MR. BALTZ: Well, I realized I had come to an end of doing this kind of thing. I realized this when I had proposed myself for another site-survey commission for the building of the Newport Harbor Art Museum [now Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, CA] that Renzo Piano was designing for them. And I walked around, and I walked around, and I walked around, and I realized I had nothing new more to say about buildings in construction or churned-up crawler tracks or anything like that – that I'd had my work to do and done it, and either would have to quit completely, or find something else to do, or something between the two.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Which you did, quite admirably I would say, actually.

MR. BALTZ: I didn't want to just be proletarianized in that way as, I mean, like the factory that turns out knowable, pre-visible, predictable Baltz pictures.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, know why you had reached the end of a certain set of problems, and then went on to new ones. Well, let me stop there, and I'll change the tape.

MR. BALTZ: Okay.

[END DISC 1.]

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay. Now, let me just check that – this is Matt Witkovsky interviewing Lewis Baltz on November 15, 2009. Let's hear something from you just to make sure this is okay.

MR. BALTZ: All those things that I didn't want to be quoted on tape as saying.

MR. WITKOVSKY: You won't be.

MR. BALTZ: [Laughs.]

[END DISC 2 TR1.]

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay. So we have gone through the list of works that takes us through the late 1980s. But now we want to jump back to the early 1970s and go back to this remark you made at the end of the last tape, saying that, if a person wanted to make a statement of conscience about the community he or she is living in, rather than beat someone over the head about it, you assemble a body of evidence, and you hope that the weight of the evidence can lead people in a direction that you yourself are going.

You wrote in an essay of the mid-1980s, "American Photography in the 1970s[: Too Old to Rock, Too Young to Die." In Peter Turner, ed. *American Images: Photography 1945-1980*. London: Barbicam Art Gallery/Penguin Books, 1985] - the essay is from 1985 - you wrote that, by 1972 at the latest, the major art movements of the 1960s, including those from the

end of that decade, had been tracked, mapped, identified, and known – became known. And you cite minimalism, post-painterly abstraction, process art, earth art, linguistic conceptualism. So these are movements of art in general, not necessarily about photography.

Did you want to take your art in a new direction based on those movements? And in any event, the social impact of your art, did it seem to you that that was in dialogue with any of those movements I just named in art in general, or was it just in its own separate sphere?

MR. BALTZ: No, I mean, I don't think any of those movements actually addressed – none of those movements dealt with political art, which is different. I think most of the artists in those movements were political. I mean, certainly conceptual artists. If you have ever had the privilege of talking with [Lawrence] Larry Weiner, for example –

MR. WITKOVSKY: It is hugely political.

MR. BALTZ: It is hugely political. No one can articulate that position better or as well as he can. But his art is not so directly political. It raises questions. For example, he told me he made a piece, I think for the first Biennale in Istanbul, and the piece was happening at a time when there was still the war between the Turkish government and the Kurds, and the Kurds were getting the worst of it by far.

And the piece was one of his pieces describing, you know, quantities or dispositions of material, like most of his work is. It said: "JUST ABOUT ENOUGH." And it was a completely ambiguous reading. But I thought that was very powerful because it is ambiguous. Because it is ambiguous, it involves you, and it makes you think.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Well, what about, just to take Weiner as an example – first of all, of course, the position that authorship resides equally with the viewer or the maker, that it is indifferent, as he famously said, whether the piece gets made or not. In other words, whether the materials referred to, as he always calls the work, whether those materials ever come to be used, whether a can of paint is actually flung on the floor, whether some sand or other thing is actually put in the ocean. So it is really giving the light to the commodity system. That certainly is his take on it.

MR. BALTZ: This is, again, a very – I think Larry is asserting that words are materials. Language is –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] And non-commodifiable materials –

MR. BALTZ: Nothing is non-commodifiable. This was a sad lesson of conceptual art, is that art could be dematerialized, but it cannot be decommodified, because anything can be commodified.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Well, then your own work, of course, you are photographing commodities. One of the biggest, most basic: real estate, commercial real estate or residential, but real estate. Do you have anything to say about, I guess, a politics of form, as well as a politics of subject matter, that by producing photos that mimic certain aspects of this real estate in its abstraction, its planarity, its regularity, that you are –

MR. BALTZ: I always – I still am – I stop in front of *immos* [German real estate offices, colloquial] here. I am looking at pictures. I am always fascinated by photographs of real estate, for some reason. And, of course, Ed Ruscha, I don't think I pointed this out, maybe in the past –

MR. WITKOVSKY: No, I was meaning to get to him.

MR. BALTZ: Ruscha kind of saved my life at a certain point, although he doesn't know it. But it seems to me that the commodification – a house as a commodity is one thing, and that is how – probably it is a very American thing. Who was the brilliant guy who was the editor of *Landscape* magazine? Do you know?

MR. WITKOVSKY: No.

MR. BALTZ: I will find his name. He had said something about being American, and

Americans – Americans are never attached to the land. They are attached to their equity in the land. And if they got a better deal, they would move. So maybe it is really a very American thing. But I would always have some sort of, again, maybe atavistic notion that a home was some sort of special place. It was part of one's identity. It was something where your children's identity is also formed, that it has a special relationship to you that no other space has.

So the notion that this would be commodified and simply be an exchange item, that seemed to me – there is something obscene about that to me.

MR. WITKOVSKY: But your way of attacking the obscenity of that –

MR. BALTZ: That becomes more evident in Park City, I think, than anywhere else.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yes. I was going to say you are moving your way toward that. I think, just to paraphrase Weiner just for one second more just to make things clear, it seems that he tried to elaborate a position that would be treating the 99.9 percent of the world as an obscenity, as it were. And then there would be a purity of language and intent that might counter it.

You, though, took a much more reserved approach, it seems. As you said earlier, if you accumulate evidence slowly without trying to scream about it or rage about it, you said, you can achieve a result. And I have a quote from Max Kozlov that I kind of liked commenting on your work. This is writing in the early '90s, where he says, "It is the absence of any sign attractive to us as social animals within an ordinary landscape of our own negligent making that distinguishes Baltz's art and gives it a terrible neutrality." And this "terrible neutrality" phrase I like very much.

But I need to contrast it with a comment that Allan Sekula made on you much earlier. Sekula, whom I know you have respect for, and I am sure he does for you, but in this early and maybe, I think, somewhat dismissive review of 1978, he rephrases [Walter] Benjamin and [Bertolt] Brecht, talking about photographs of the [Alfred] Krupp factory, and suggests that a photograph of the factory doesn't tell you anything about the unequal social relations in the factory. And he says, "and Baltz gives you this, too." Did you feel wounded by that, or do you have some thoughts about that?

MR. BALTZ: Well, I felt probably much more – Allan is a very, very intelligent guy, and he has, I think since "Fish Story: Seattle" ["Fish Story/Allan Sekula." Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, Netherlands, January 21 - March 1995, and traveling] - he has been able to express that intelligence as an artist in a wonderful way. Okay. I mean, I wasn't so happy with some of his earlier work. I thought it was just too much like *Daily Worker* cartoons, although there were early pieces, too, that were very strong. He is a smart guy, and he is a good theoretician, and he has become a good artist. And to have hostile criticism from someone like that obviously means a lot –

MR. WITKOVSKY: He is paying attention.

MR. BALTZ: Well, no. It hurts your feelings. [Laughs.]

MR. WITKOVSKY: It hurts your feelings. Yeah.

MR. BALTZ: If you have hostile criticism from the woman who writes for the *New York Times*, you feel kind of good about yourself. But, when Allan Sekula criticizes you, you think about it. I took it to heart. I realized that what he said was true, but that was also what I liked about photography. I liked the fact that photographs were opaque in that way.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Has limits.

MR. BALTZ: And I don't think it is intended. And if it were intended to show you the social realities behind each of those walls, it would fail unless you used language. Other mediums, certainly film or video, could do that much better. Certainly language is required. You are speaking about captioned picture. The Industrial Parks has limitations, you know.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Well, let's speak to its strengths.

MR. BALTZ: There is something I believed at that time - which I no longer believe, but I had

some idealism coming out of the ’60s - that I could make work that was objective. I was that naive. And you should recall that in the ’60s, some of the highest-volume theoretical positions were coming out of *Aperture* [magazine] and echoed Minor White’s pastiche of spiritualist interests, and held that photographs were worthwhile in an inverse proportion to their literalness.

At the core of this esthetic was the struggle to find or make a symbol for your most secret and profound emotions. You might ask, then, why the hell then did everybody photograph the same things? Does everybody have the same emotions? Did a dead bird or a barn door express
everyone’s most profound emotions? According to *Aperture*, they did.

I believed the opposite.

MR. WITKOVSKY: It does seem – it seems frighteningly like Abstract Expressionism, but from the later ’50s, except it is being done 10 years after that, and really, you would want to be following the late ’30s or late ’40s or, you know, if you –

MR. BALTZ: Well, also, there are social histories behind this. Minor White was gay in a period when gay people were persecuted. And he was interested in having some expression of this at the same time he wanted to bury it somewhere. I mean, this was like the fluoroscopy of Jasper Johns’s paintings in the newspaper clippings. Johns was more successful. I mean, in a certain way, oppression may be good. You know, they say in Russia -

MR. WITKOVSKY: Productive. It may be productive.

MR. BALTZ: - if you can’t fool a censor, you don’t deserve to be published. So you had to think of ways around something. Fortunately, we largely no longer live in a time where people are persecuted for being gay. But that is another topic. Returning to the objective / subjective dichotomy, there is a spectrum of subjectivity and objectivity. Try as they might the A.E. painters of the ‘50s and their late-born offspring, the “subjective” photographers of the ‘60s, never could make a work that was purely subjective. If one did, it would probably be pathological. Equally, one can’t make something purely objective either.

But on that spectrum, I think I was way over on the objective side.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Exactly. And aiming for this – well, if you agree with Kozlov’s description - a terrible neutrality. But I wanted to ask – I mean, clearly, that is the answer to be given to a criticism that might be made by someone like Allan Sekula. But what for you does “neutrality” consist of? What is a neutral – what could it be, or how would you get toward that in a photograph?

MR. BALTZ: Well, I think finally it is a trope. I think we have to admit that, as artists, one must also have something of the charlatan. Beuys put it more nicely - the shaman. The divine Walker Evans himself spoke famously of the “documentary style.”

MR. WITKOVSKY: And right in this time, I think, in 1971 or so, is when he is quoted.

MR. BALTZ: I didn’t know it was that late.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, I think so. That is when he finally says right there, a document has use, whereas art is simply useless, but we can adopt a documentary style. Yeah.

MR. BALTZ: That was well thought and well said, I think.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] But as examples, again at the formal level, some people might say that, to be neutral, a thing should be printed quickly. It should look like it was printed quickly. It should be kind of – you know, it can be of anything, but it shouldn’t look fussed over. I wouldn’t say your work is fussed over. It certainly looks labor intensive. I think, even as someone who doesn’t know much about a photograph, it looks really well done.

MR. BALTZ: In that sense, I would say then it has failed in that way.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Oh, really?

MR. BALTZ: I think it shouldn't look labor intensive. It should just look normal. Obviously, something needs to be high resolution, because you want to see what is in it. It needs to have a tonal range long enough so that you can see what is going on in the shadows, you can see what is going – you know. In other words, to maximize visibility.

It shouldn't look fussed over beyond that. I mean, that isn't "fussed over."

MR. WITKOVSKY: No.

MR. BALTZ: You aspire to making something – at least at the time, I was aspiring to make something that was like a window.

MR. WITKOVSKY: How very interesting.

MR. BALTZ: It seems my efforts have not been crowned with success.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Oh, no, no, on the contrary. Well, here is the example then. So then in 1975, this show comes around, "The New Topographics," that William Jenkins curates for the George Eastman House in Rochester [NY], where your work is shown with that of Robert Adams, Frank Gohlke, Stephen Shore, Joe Deal, Henry Wessel, Jr., Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, and Hilla and Bernd Becher. It is a landmark show quite instantly. And there will be a lot to ask you about it.

Is it fair to say, just to summarize, that the work that is shown there is a bit different than the work you would have made five or six years earlier already? The look of, let's say, the Industrial Parks – or do you feel that it was pretty much all in the same group, the Prototypes, the Tract Houses, the Industrial Parks.

MR. BALTZ: I don't think it is the same group, but I think there is a continuity between the two bodies of work.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Okay, okay.

MR. BALTZ: I mean, it is an interesting show because there are some groupings – first, it was very useful to everybody, because no one knew what to call this stuff before. And once you have a name, even if it is an insulting name, like "Impressionism" was intended to be, it becomes something people, they can recognize, understand. But the "New Topographers" didn't name themselves; they weren't a group. We largely didn't know each other.

MR. WITKOWSKY: That was going to be my very next question.

MR. BALTZ: I knew some of the work and some of the artists. When I went to New York for the first time – or was it the second time – I saw the Bechers at Sonnabend [Gallery, New York, NY], and I was astonished, and I loved the work. MoMA had a two-person show of Robert Adams and – what is the guy's name now – anyway, it doesn't matter – Emmet Gowin.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Emmet Gowin, yeah. So this is 1971 or so?

MR. BALTZ: What struck me as one of the most opposite pairings you could find. But when I saw Robert Adams's work, I was just delighted, mostly because I really hadn't encountered anyone who was working on problems similar to my own. And I was beginning to worry if I was like some kind of like solitary maniac, a minority of one.

You know, in both cases, it was extraordinary work, very good work. I met Joe Deal, also a good artist, at Eastman House.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Before the exhibition, or when it opened?

MR. BALTZ: No, before the exhibition. He was doing his Alternative Service [alternative military service for conscientious objectors].

MR. WITKOWSKY: But Bob Adams said you looked him up after seeing that show at MoMA? Had you sought him out, because that is a few years before, I think – 1971 or maybe '72?

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, it was in '71 or '72. I think his book came out then, *The New West*, [Boulder, CO: Colorado Associated University Press, 1974; New York: Aperture, 2008, 3rd

ed.], which I bought. I was very impressed with it. And I was – at that time, it must have been pretty early on, because I was teaching a course at Cal Arts [California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA] and at Pomona [College, Claremont, CA]. He was traveling more then, so it was like early on. And I invited him to come out and talk to my students.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Did he bring prints, or did you show him your prints then? Or did you already know enough of each other's work?

MR. BALTZ: You know, I really can't remember. I recommended him to a gallery in Southern California that was looking for something. The Bechers I never met until 1975 or '76.

MR. WITKOWSKY: During or after the show. And the others, Henry Wessel, Jr., or Stephen Shore?

MR. BALTZ: Hank I didn't know as well as I know now, but we are sort of competitors, which is interesting because we both had a lot of visibility very young. He later became and remains one of my very closest friends. He is a remarkable artist and as remarkable person.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Sorry, I should say, just to get on record. Obviously, "The New Topographics," it was a breakthrough show, but it was by no means your first show. You had had the "Crowded Vacancy: Three Los Angeles Photographers." Pasadena Museum of Art (now Norton Simon Museum,), Pasadena, CA, June 29 - September 5, 1971] at the Pasadena Museum, is that right, with Terry Wild and –

MR. BALTZ: And Anthony Hernandez.

MR. WITKOWSKY: And Anthony Hernandez, 1971, I think. And then the three-photographer show with DeLapa [ph] – I can't remember his name – three photographers is like –

MR. BALTZ: That wasn't that early.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Oh, that wasn't that early? Okay. So what were the other shows, if you can remember offhand? I mean, the ones that stand out.

MR. BALTZ: I would have to go through the long-form CV. I mean, the Paris Biennale, in 1975. What else was important? A show here, an inclusion in a show – and I have to look it up. I have no idea why or how, but at the Musee d'Art Moderne, Galerie Magers in Bonn [Germany].

MR. WITKOWSKY: Oh, so already showing in Europe? Very interesting.

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, I was really – [laughs] – nature was trying to tell me something.

MR. WITKOWSKY: But, okay, to get back to "The New Topographics," I wanted to ask you more detail, if the sensation we have of this show –

MR. BALTZ: Anyway, the other people, I met – I am sorry – I met later.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Okay.

MR. BALTZ: I think I met Frank Gohlke for the first time in, like, 1999 in Venice.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Oh, wow, much later.

MR. BALTZ: Yeah.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Much later.

So was there an opening? Did you go to it? I guess not.

MR. BALTZ: Uh-uh. [Negative.] No, I don't know whether there was or not. I didn't go. And there was – I mean, I went to two other places, both of them, you know, L.A., where I did go. I think I went. I have been to a lot of openings. And it was in Princeton [NJ].

MR. WITKOWSKY: Ah, in Princeton also. That is right.

MR. BALTZ: [Princeton] University Art Museum. They took it as a summer show. But that was as close as they got within shooting distance of New York.

MR. WITKOWSKY: But by the time – yeah, exactly. It didn't make it to New York. But by the time it made it to Princeton, did you have the sense that, oh, this is a big deal, this show? Or was that –

MR. BALTZ: By the time it made it to Princeton, I was having dinner in Sausalito [CA] with a guy I used to know much better than I do now, named Renato Danese, who was at the National Endowment [for the Arts, Washington, DC]. And he asked me very seriously, "How do you plan to deal with the backlash against 'New Topographics'?"

MR. WITKOWSKY: Oh.

MR. BALTZ: I said, "Not only is this – there hasn't even been a frontlash yet."

MR. WITKOWSKY: Really? So no sense, no sense. And yet–

MR. BALTZ: There was one serious review that I know of, Carter Ratcliff in *Art in America*. I don't think it was reviewed anyplace else. And I assumed it just sort of sank into obscurity, but it didn't. Maybe it will now that it has come back.

MR. WITKOWSKY: That is right. That is right. Right now, yes, it is now touring again. It has been entirely reconstructed, is that right?

MR. BALTZ: You have to allow at least for the possibility that there is a very bad idea.

MR. WITKOWSKY: What is?

MR. BALTZ: To remake the show. I mean, maybe it is better in mythology than it really is. Most things are.

MR. WITKOWSKY: I wanted to bring a Xerox of the catalogue, actually. But maybe on our second session –

MR. BALTZ: Have you seen the catalog?

MR. WITKOWSKY: Oh, yes. I have looked at the original. Oh, no, not the new. I looked through the original.

MR. BALTZ: Oh, the old one?

MR. WITKOWSKY: Because there were pictures to ask you about. I think next time we meet, we will look at specific things. But, you know, certainly if one were to look at your CV, there is a distinct spike in the second half of the '70s, a mission in DATAR [Mission de la DATAR, a commission by the French government], a Guggenheim grant [John S. Guggenheim Fellowship Award, 1977], an M.F.A. Houston show in 1977 that you are the curator of now, like those star actors who become directors, and then a bicentennial grant that takes you to London in 1976 [US - UK Bicentennial Exchange Fellowship, 1980]. So within, let's say, two years of this show, you have a lot to do. How did that come about, I guess? All those many things were there. The groundwork already laid before?

MR. BALTZ: It must have been. "The New Topographics" had a kind of samazad's [ph], you know, appeal. People knew about it. And you have this feeling. The only place where it was actually in an urban center was in Los Angeles. Very few people actually saw the show. I mean, not very many people get to Rochester. And not very many people go to the Princeton University Art Museum over the summer.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Very interesting.

MR. BALTZ: The catalogue was printed, I think 2,500 copies. I don't remember going into a second printing. But some people really knew about this. And I think because – I mean, it proposed, whether you liked it or not – and I rather suspect that most people, certainly in photography, didn't like it. I mean, one, it proposed a new model of photographic practice. Second, it proposed a model of photographic practice that was not conceptual, but was responsive to conceptual art. It was conceptually driven. I mean, it is not conceptual in the sense that – Joseph Kosuth. But it was certainly something that had an awareness of that and responded to it.

As you might say, Robert Ryman was not a conceptual artist, but he was a painter whose

work was responsive to and sensible about the problems brought by conceptualism. So not comparing me or any of the others to Robert Ryman, but just –

MR. WITKOWSKY: Well, I would offer that I do believe among that group – and there are several very strong photographers in the group, but I would say your remark is truest about yourself. And that is something that I feel sets you apart. And I had meant to ask a little earlier, so I will ask you now. What did the artists at Castelli say to you, if anything? You joined Leo Castelli's gallery, I think, in 1971 or so. I believe you were the only career photographer at the gallery.

MR. BALTZ: I was for a while.

MR. WITKOWSKY: For a while. And you were very responsive to a number of art movements outside of photography, as we have already mentioned. Did someone like Sol LeWitt or Richard Serra or Mel Bochner or any – who was at Sonnabend.

MR. BALTZ: I will tell you three quick anecdotes. One was when I was in Los Angeles at one point; Jasper Johns was working at Gemini G.E.L. [artists' workshop and print publisher]. And Irving Blum took me over to meet Jasper. It was just excruciating, really, for both of us. There was no painter I admired more than Johns. I brought a print and I gave it to him. He was very nice and gracious, but it was also obvious he was quite uncomfortable. I didn't know until later that Jasper Johns was a man who was only comfortable with people he had known for 30 years.

MR. WITKOWSKY: And he was only maybe 35 at this time. [Laughs.]

MR. BALTZ: Something like that. It wasn't only that [a] young artist he had never heard of and didn't care about was wasting his time. It wasn't that. The sensation was that I was actually causing him some kind of psychological pain just by being in his space and being a stranger.

The second was also in Los Angeles and also a Castelli artist. It was right after "Crowded Vacancy" and his catalogue came out. I was sitting in Irving Blum's office, and this guy came in who looked like he had been delivering lumber or something. And he – Irving was on the phone, selling something to somebody. The guy had kept the "Crowded Vacancy" catalogue, my work. He looked at me. He said, "You're Baltz?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "That is fucking good work." I said, "Thanks." And he went out. And Irving came back, and he said, "Where is Dick? That was Richard Serra." If I'd known, I would have said, "Hey, man, you too, man."

And the third thing was going to visit –

MR. WITKOWSKY: And you were already with Castelli at this point?

MR. BALTZ: Yeah.

MR. WITKOWSKY: That is impressive. So he had seen your work –

MR. BALTZ: "Crowded Vacancy."

MR. WITKOWSKY: So he had seen your work in that catalogue and then maybe also already in New York.

MR. BALTZ: Pasadena Museum was also a very good museum at that time. It was trying to be the MoMA of the West. And well, other things happened.

But anyway, and the third anecdote was going to meet Bruce Nauman. He had been very good friends with the woman who was Tony Castelli's assistant, Antoinette Miale. She had stayed with Bruce, and then Judith, many times. There was the story that he had built some things for Count Ponza, and Ponza had taken him to his *scuderia* and asked him to choose a car. Nauman chose a Ferrari. He drove it for a while until he realized you can't really drive a Ferrari in California. You can hardly get it out of second gear. So he sold the Ferrari and bought a Porsche and a house. He bought a house in Eagle Rock [CA], high in the mountains above Pasadena, as I remember.

So I took Antoinette up to see him. He was working on the roof. It seems it was a Sunday or Saturday afternoon. And then he came down, very friendly, very nice. But suddenly he

realized that there was a Lakers game on TV. Everything stopped, and we watched the Lakers. He knew a lot about basketball. I think he played in school or maybe played with his friends. And we talked about basketball.

MR. WITKOWSKY: And did you know a fair amount about basketball?

MR. BALTZ: I know bugger all about basketball.

MR. WITKOWSKY: And so you never talked about art?

MR. BALTZ: Oh, nothing even approaching. And after that, I thought, I don't want to meet anybody else anymore. You know, it is sort of a missed opportunity. The people I most admire, I will just know them through their work, because that is really what I admire them for.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Very interesting. Well, though, I can entirely understand that response. But, of course, it is just such an almost exotic phenomenon to see a photographer seriously, you know, devoted to photography in a stable of artists doing anything but, for the most part. And so, of course, you are curious to know what intention it gave you.

MR. BALTZ: Literally, the best artists in the world at that time.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Absolutely.

MR. BALTZ: There were two other galleries that had really serious programs, Sonnabend and Weber [John Weber Gallery, New York, NY]. And Leo still was probably 50 or 60 percent of the most interesting artists in the country. So I felt as extraordinarily privileged and as fortunate as I was.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Well, yeah, it was a wonderful moment. Did Castelli make any regular comments about the work, or he simply – you know, you would bring him a new series, and he would show it? And he produced those books.

MR. BALTZ: The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there. That is not original. Everything Leo needed to say about the work, he said to me when I showed up in the gallery about an hour after I had left the work off. He said to me in about less than five minutes. He had to go catch a plane for, I think, here [Paris]. And he said, "Congratulations. I like your work very much. We wish to buy this portfolio and then to exhibit it."

After the second exhibition, which was in '73 - I mean, first, the stuff didn't sell for very much money, like $75, which even then –

MR. WITKOWSKY: This is the show, "Public Places," the Prototypes, essentially?

MR. BALTZ: And the sales, I mean, I am sure the sales didn't cover the costs of printing the announcements. So finally, I got Mrs. Castelli aside.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Hold on. Is it going? Yes, continue.

MR. BALTZ: Anyway, you know, concerned about that and concerned [about] the fact that I was such a financial drag - I had to be a financial drag to the gallery - I sort of asked Mrs. Castelli. I said, "What is happening? What is the problem?" And she explained how it worked. She said, "There is no problem." I said, "Is there is a contract?" She said, "You have a contract. Leo shook your hand. He is your dealer as long as you wish." She said, "We represent 44 artists in this gallery. Eight of these artists make a fortune. The others don't pay for themselves. But they are the artists Leo wants to represent. Don't ever worry about that again."

Can you imagine Matthew Marks or Larry Gagosian - the deans of the gallery profession today - saying something like that? Maybe they David Zwirner. Maybe not.

MR. WITKOWSKY: It is amazing. And did Castelli get involved – beyond the books, of course; they produced those incredible books. Did they ever finance making a print, or did they ever pay you a stipend, or in any other way - you know, give you a show?

MR. BALTZ: No. I never asked for a stipend. I always thought I could if I needed it, but I had

a little bit of family money, not a whole lot, but a little bit. And then I had a day job. I was teaching.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Right. And you taught continuously, is that right, pretty much through the ’70s?

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, more or less. And I had an NEA [National Endowment for the Arts, 1973 grant. And then a second NEA [1976]. So I mean, I had some other things I could do for money. I didn’t want to ask them for that, too. I always thought I could, but I didn’t.

MR. WITKOWSKY: And did you then show fairly regularly, every couple of years, until the 1980s?

MR. BALTZ: Pretty much, something like - curriculum vitae was like ’71, ’73, ’75, ’78, ’81, ’85.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Yeah, very regular presentations.

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, seven or eight times, I think.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Did a museum exhibition ever come out of being a part of Castelli, or some kind of critical attention? Or did you not feel that it was generated from that?

MR. BALTZ: I think it was – it was a huge validation for the work. I think everything, every positive thing that happened in my career, is owed in greater or lesser degree to them.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Well, that is quite a compliment to pay to Castelli.

MR. BALTZ: Well, it is an earned compliment. Something you figure out early on is that there is no justice in the art world. There are really good artists who have no success at all. And there are really bad artists – and there are some really good artists with a lot of success, Bruce Nauman. I mean, he was a star when he was born, and merits that. But anyway, there is no system for this. I could have made the same work and then [be] completely overlooked. Or I could have been, you know, hit on somehow and been 10 times better known. It is really a crapshoot.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Yeah, it is. It is. In the midst of this success, I guess, showing with Castelli, having “The New Topographics” exhibition, even if sort of a sleeper hit, and then as I mentioned earlier, a string of grants and projects of the late ’70s, you moved to the Bay Area, I believe, in 1975. You had been teaching in Claremont, down in Los Angeles. You moved to the Bay Area.

MR. BALTZ: Well, we all got fired at Claremont.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Ah, is that why? Okay.

MR. BALTZ: This is something – Rebecca McGrew is working on this now. These are sort of the glory days. But, I mean, I was fired with some of the best people, you know, Jim Turrell, Helene Winer. We all sort of got kicked out at once.

MR. WITKOWSKY: They closed the department down or radically reduced it?

MR. BALTZ: They radically wanted the department to have a position different than contemporary art. Norton Simon had donated his print collection, plus money to acquire the collection, plus grants. But Norton Simon believed that art such as he understood and cared about ended in 1940. That is to say, after the école de Paris, there was nothing that he considered to have issue. So the school brought in a new department chairman to clean house, a guy who had been refused tenure a Stanford and would do, literally, whatever he needed to get it at Pomona. To placate the Simon interests, he picked a fight with Helene Winer – whose gallery program included [William] Bill Wegman and Bas Jan Ader, and was doing a superb and very visible job.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Yeah, really seriously interesting things.

MR. BALTZ: They wanted to get rid of her. The studio faculty said, “No, you can’t get rid of her. You know, we all go.” I’m sure the school administration thought - they said, “Thank God, that was easy.”

MR. WITKOWSKY: [Laughs.] So you all were split up in this incredibly myopic way. And you moved back up to – back because you had studied, of course, at the San Francisco Art Institute.

MR. BALTZ: I had lived in Sausalito. I had shared a house there with a bunch of hippie friends. We managed to scrape together the rent. And in 1975, I moved back and bought a small house. I remember it was – it was the second-least-expensive house for sale in town, you know, which was – and it wasn't so crazy expensive then

MR. WITKOWSKY: I am sure. I am sure.

MR. BALTZ: It was still a town that was raffish. It still had a houseboat community where people defecated off the sides of their boats and washed the dishes off the next one. You know, drugs and hippies. It hadn't become just a dormitory for venture capitalists in the computer rackets as it has now.

MR. WITKOWSKY: No, I am sure. So the community was appealing in that sense. But, you know –

MR. BALTZ: It was an art community, but it was – and also, I mean, it is a gorgeous-looking place, probably the right distance from San Francisco. It is 17 minutes by car to downtown San Francisco, or you can take the ferry boat, which is even nicer.

MR. WITKOWSKY: As a viewer of your work, though, it strikes me that the landscape, at least as I know it, is just so different than the landscape of Southern California. And your work is so bound up in that landscape. I happened to notice as a coincidence, or not a coincidence, that, you know, if the work of your first seven years or so is really centered on Southern California, and you are living there at least part or most of the time, when you move to San Francisco, what do we get next? [The three series] Maryland, Nevada, Park City, you know, and it takes a good, almost 10 years to get back up to [the two series] San Quentin Point, Candlestick Point. I wondered, was this because you were restless and wanted to make work that was away from where you were living, or was it the change in scenery actually put you off of working there?

MR. BALTZ: No, I was interested in projects. One thing was, with the Nevada work, which was a long story, not even a very interesting story, about how that came about. But I came to like Reno, Nevada, very much. There is something about it – I don't know if you have ever done this by car, made this drive across the Sierras [Sierra Nevada Mountain Range, CA and NV].

MR. WITKOVSKY: I have, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: So you know about going up into the Sierras and the Gold Rush country, and then, bang, it just slams shut, and you have this vista of this desert and this basin and range that goes on forever, and Reno down at the bottom looking like some sort of gaudy little piece of costume jewelry. I liked Northern Nevada very much.

MR. WITKOVSKY: It wasn't anything against Northern California as a site. It was more just this turn to the fascination –

MR. BALTZ: - fascination with the desert. [Robert] Smithson said it gets the water off your brain. I was interested in Park City for another reason – the same reason I was interested in Irvine [CA]. It was growing so rapidly. I could go there and work for a couple of weeks, and go away for two months and come back, and it would all be different. It would be constantly changing. And it was built almost on nothing. Historic Park City, it was a little tiny village in the mountains. Below was a huge toxic plain of mine tailings and waste, which was where most of the new Park City was built. And recently it hosted the Winter Olympics.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Yeah, which is a huge change. Yeah.

MR. BALTZ: But at that time, they were building these incredibly tacky houses. You could have Western style or Greek style or Tudor style. They sort of paint a style on the outside. It was just kind of nutsy, like the fantasies of people who don't have a great deal of imagination. But, you know, they have fantasies nonetheless. I liked that about it.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Yeah, so that was a significant change for you, I guess, in the sense of a

town developed as a resort, really. But then once you were on the terrain, the series themselves near Reno and Park City and all do seem quite different than the work – noticeably different than the 1975-and-before work. Is that a correct thing to say? And if so, did you sense the differences only later, or were you thinking through the problem of how you wanted the series to function differently?

MR. BALTZ: At that time, I would have given you one of those [Garry] Winogrand non-answers like: "I learned to stand back further."

MR. WITKOWSKY: Right, okay.

MR. BALTZ: But, there was something to that. There was something about this *abstand* [German: interval, distance] which really had to do with certain formal or technical questions as I was devising strategies for dealing with larger areas of space.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Both, I guess, within the frame of a single composition and then also as a series, more parts to it.

MR. BALTZ: Also, the series became – for example, the New Industrial Parks is circular. It is supposed to be in a "river run past Adam Eve." It is not supposed to go anywhere. There is no development. There is no narrative.

And it was very difficult to do that, because you find out if you take a little photograph, and you shuffle it like a deck of cards – it is almost a deck of cards, 51 - and just lay them out randomly, you see narratives. I mean, it was really very time-consuming to break that down as far as I did.

MR. WITKOWSKY: To try to –

MR. BALTZ: Eliminate.

MR. WITKOWSKY: - marginalize or eliminate narrative.

MR. BALTZ: With the Park City – no, Park City is much more cinematic. First, it is divided into two parts, exterior and interior.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Oh, I see. So in Park City, in these other later ones, you were allowing narrative to creep back in. Or when you say "cinematic," you don't necessarily mean having narrative. You just mean –

MR. BALTZ: I don't mean having a story. I mean using a lot of techniques borrowed from cinema.

MR. WITKOWSKY: I see.

MR. BALTZ: Pans, reverse shots, tracking shots. Somewhere in the questions you sent me, you were asking what I saw when I was in San Francisco in the way of art. And my answer – I can remember what I wrote, which was, in terms of exhibitions and contemporary art, I saw bugger all, because there was almost nothing there. But in my text, I made this long paean to the Pacific Film Archive [Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, CA], which is one of the greatest institutions on the planet, as far as I can tell. It was there that I got to see a lot of – [Michelangelo] Antonioni, for example. No one –

MR. WITKOWSKY: Of course, *Red Desert* [1964].

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, *Red Desert*. I mean –

MR. WITKOWSKY: *Zabriskie Point* [1970].

MR. BALTZ: Antonioni was a real influence on my work, an obviously traceable influence. I would like to say I was equally influenced by [Jean-Luc] Godard, but I wasn't. I simply loved his work.

MR. WITKOWSKY: But didn't find a way to make it fit with what you wanted to get at.

MR. BALTZ: No, no. There is something also I put in this written text which I noted so I wouldn't forget it. Many years later, I was in a seminar in Marseilles [France], and I met one

of the professors there, someone that you might know, Brice Mattieussent.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Yeah.

MR. BALTZ: He is very well credentialed, but probably not known so well in the United States. He had made the remark that there were two kinds of people in the world. There were the people who liked [Francois] Truffaut, [Frederico] Fellini, and the Beatles, and there were people who like [Jean-Luc] Godard, Antonioni, and the [Rolling] Stones. And that is, you know, reductive, but probably correct.

MR. WITKOWSKY: So Truffaut, Antonioni, and the Beatles.

MR. BALTZ: No.

MR. WITKOWSKY: I'm sorry.

MR. BALTZ: No, Truffaut: over-caffeinated. Antonioni, the Stones, and Godard, let's say. And Truffaut and Fellini and the Beatles.

MR. WITKOWSY: And Fellini and the Beatles were for the – right. So they are the socialists, and you went with the Marxists.

MR: BALTZ: Well, you can also think of it as hard and soft. But there is not much doubt as to where I put myself in that equation.

MR. WITKOWSKY: Uh-huh, uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Well, I think maybe we should –

MR. BALTZ: Is that a cliché that he said? I mean, have you heard that before? I have never heard it before.

MR. WITKOWSKY: I'm pausing.

[END DISC 2.]

We are testing. This is Matt Witkovsky interviewing Lewis Baltz on the November, 17, 2009, at the artist's home in Paris.

[End DISC 3 TR 1.]

Well, in the first two sessions, I think we made it to the late 1970s. So I thought we should continue with the work of the 1980s. The thing that struck me looking over what you did in the 1980s is, among other things, that you did a fair amount of writing and speaking, at least in the first half of the 1980s.

I had two questions about that. Had you been writing much before and I wasn't aware of it, and secondly, has your writing activity continued through the present?

MR. BALTZ: I hadn't really written anything since college, and I'm almost hard-pressed to say why did I start writing then in the '80s – apparently I felt I had something I had to get off my chest, and, as I remember it, almost without exception what I wrote was generally some sort of panegyric.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Panegyrics?

MR. BALTZ: I found the artists' works that I thought were praiseworthy, lavished them with praise.

MR. WITKOVSKY: But you did a great service. For instance, I believe you reviewed Edward Weston in the book – several books on him - but drew great attention to his late work, which had been largely sidelined. You had one piece where you spoke at length about four different photographs, one by John Gossage, one by Anthony Hernandez, I think two others.

MR. BALTZ: [William] Bill Eggleston.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Bill.

MR. BALTZ: And Bob Adams.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And then Bob Adams, not people who weren't, certainly, necessarily ignored, but you focused on in a way that hadn't been done so much. So, yes, so was this something you suddenly felt you had your thoughts together to put down? Did it come out of your teaching?

MR. BALTZ: No, no, no, not at all. The only thing that came out of teaching was that I went back to teaching. I had a visiting professorship at the University of California in Davis, and when I went back there, I realized how, I don't know, laconic I had become, spending most of my time either by myself or in the company of specialists, to the point where you go to a museum with someone like Henry Wessel or John Gossage, and you look at something, and you look at each other and go, "Mm-hm," and that there was a certain coziness to that. How do you explain what is interesting, what is demanding, what is compelling about a specific work to a person who is interested and intelligent but a nonspecialist?

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah.

MR. BALTZ: Like most of my students.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, exactly, so it didn't come out of the teaching, but maybe it fed back into it later once you got into it.

MR. BALTZ: And it's popular writing. It makes no claims to be theoretical writing or critical writing. It's pitched at about the level of the *New Yorker* reader.

MR. WITKOVSKY: That's very interesting.

MR. BALTZ: Leaving, how do we say, race and class out of it, it's sort of pitched to the *New Yorker* reader in the sense it's a well-educated person who's a curious nonspecialist.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, yeah, yeah, but you were not only a specialist but someone interested in a lot of kinds of art, and I'm guessing also a fair amount of more abstract writing. Did you address those subjects in other places? Did you write about, for instance, things other than photographs that I may not be aware of, architecture or other contemporary art?

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, I did – well, this goes on. I wrote a bit in the '80s. The '80s are mostly memorable for me because this is when I began – it's kind of time-consuming, ridiculously time-consuming process, but I began moving away from the United States. I wrote, again, a number of pieces. You may have mentioned these, but for a couple of years I wrote for *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* [magazine].

MR. WITKOVSKY: Right, yeah, how did you get into that?

MR. BALTZ: Every five years or six years they would do an issue on Jean Nouvel. So they were doing their first issue on Jean Nouvel in nearly a decade, and I ended up going out and having drinks and drinks and drinks with the editor and assistant editor, and they decided to do a text on my work. And then Jean Paul Robert and Francoise Fromonot asked me if would I be interested in writing a column for them –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Had he read other things by you?

MR. BALTZ: Yes, and being a sophisticated and well-educated French intellectual, he found my naiveté refreshing.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, there's a longstanding tradition of that, I think going back to [Charles] Baudelaire and [Edgar Allan] Poe, let's say.

MR. BALTZ: And also I think the fact that I was – I mean, most writing that's published here, critical writing, except at the highest level, is very tendentious, and I wasn't in that scene. I mean, I didn't have anyone that I had the knife out for, and there was no one that I was trying to butter up. I just wasn't in that world. So perhaps in that sense I was a little bit less implicated than a lot of the people that were doing this kind of writing in this sort of venue.

MR. WITKOVSKY: But you did find people who wanted to advance their perhaps tendentious thinking on your behalf. Is that right? Regis Durand wrote a piece on you, and Bernard Lamarche-Vadel presented things by you. In fact, although you had a big retrospective later in '92 in the States, is that also something that came out of an idea in Europe?

I guess I'm meaning to ask, did you find all of a sudden that you had this big fan base in Europe among the intellectuals?

MR. BALTZ: Well, it wasn't that large, but let's say I was very pleased. We spoke about Regis briefly, but Regis is like this enormously, I mean, wildly literate and intelligent and articulate man, and Lamarche-Vadel is – there was just an exhibition dedicated to his memory at the Musée d'Art Moderne [Paris] over the summer.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Oh, really?

MR. BALTZ: He was an amazing man. He sponsored a lot of local artists at a certain time when it's – you know, Catherine Millet apparently asked him, "Why would you do something as uncool as supporting French artists?" He said, "I'm interested in artists. I don't care about nationality." At the time she was pushing the American agenda.

At the same time, he was, I think, the first French critic to write about [Joseph] Beuys and to know Beuys. He became friends with the artists. He's one of those remarkable critics, sort of like Paolo Costantini. He starts the professional contact but really becomes a close personal friend. You saw those pictures of him. He was amazing, because I had forgotten – first, I had forgotten that he was an enormously handsome guy, but he was handsome in a certain way. He looked like a film actor from the *Nouvelle Vague* [New Wave film movement], and I'm sure that he was aware of this, and he cultivated it, but it's still amazing seeing this in the context of his writing, which was famously sardonic.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, but to the point also, did he - through this writing and curatorial activity, did he introduce you, or did you meet, I guess, through him or otherwise, people that – so he would have been associated by some with Castelli and by others with the New Topographics.

Did you come, in Europe or as you were moving towards Europe, to enter any kind of a scene, or did you just become kind of your own solo player?

MR. BALTZ: Not really, because, I mean, a lot of things motivated me towards going to Europe. I don't know how much of this personal stuff we need to get into because there's probably more important things to discuss. But I was in England for – it was supposed to be a year, but I ran out of money because suddenly I landed in London, I realized that I was in the Weimar Republic, and everything was like –

[Cross talk.]

MR. WITKOVSKY: It was hugely –

MR. BALTZ: What cost a dollar in Manhattan, cost a pound in London.

MR. WITKOVSKY: So it's double at that time. When – what years are we talking about?

MR. BALTZ: Nineteen eighty.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, okay.

MR. BALTZ: It was a pathetic place during the [Margaret] Thatcher years. Now it's not – I went back in '92, and really, the city was unrecognizably different.

MR. WITKOVSKY: In - 12 years later - '92.

MR. BALTZ: Yeah.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, from what it had been.

MR. BALTZ: It was just a sad place, and everybody was broke, and the government was dysfunctional, and people were leaving; many of the best people were leaving.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And you stayed, or you didn't, because you ran out of money.

MR. BALTZ: I ran out of money, but I made a tour of the Continent, and I fell in love with Berlin, and I planned to go to Berlin. I met some people in Berlin that I liked very much – Michael Schmidt and all his gangsters from the Friedrichstrasse, who became my closest

friends at that time.

MR. WITKOVSKY: I see. So you did. That was a community for you in Berlin, early 1980s.

MR. BALTZ: I went back to California and studied German at night school.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Oh, how interesting.

MR. BALTZ: And by the early ’80s – I can’t remember any of it now, but by the early ’80s I was not so bad. But I was planning on coming to Berlin, and in 1985 I was in the south of France, and for personal reasons, things changed.

MR. WITKOVSKY: I see. So you ended up not making it to Berlin.

MR. BALTZ: No, I got as far as Paris.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Where you still are today.

MR. BALTZ: Well, there’s big changes – interruptions between those times, but anyway so that’s – and Paris was a city - I never had any special desire to come here. I had no romance about France or French culture. I think that, in a way, fortune has not treated me badly in this, because although as critical as I am of the deficiencies of the cultural scene in France, it was a pretty good default choice.

Berlin didn’t work out as well as it was supposed to, and with reunification they lost that edginess that they had, but they didn’t really – how can you say this – the government moved to Berlin. Everyone was very excited about this, but you lived in Washington. Can you imagine any city looking at the influx of 350,000 civil servants and their families as being a cultural bonus?

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, no.

MR. BALTZ: As an economic base, certainly, especially for Berlin, which has always been the poorest of German cities –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Right, right, so you don’t regret, in other words, not having made it up there and having to deal with that.

MR. BALTZ: No, Berlin is going to become the center of Europe eventually. But not in my lifetime and certainly not in the five years after unification, as they claimed. Sooner or later, it will. But it goes very slowly. It goes very slowly now because the east – they call it the New Lands – has to be developed economically. But Berlin is the center because the east is building - but it’s not building quickly.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, that’s interesting. So to follow on that, the writing actually relates to this. First of all, it strikes me that, in other words, in a period where you’re doing a fair amount of writing – for instance in 1985, there’s this show in England called “The American Image” [“American Images: Photography 1945-1980”], or something like that, and you have a wonderful text there on American photography in the ’70s.

First, it strikes me – I’m just putting this out there in case we disagree - that you’re sort of summing up your own maturation, and from a distance, from the remove of a few years but also the remove of a change in life and in place, which I didn’t realize. So I just wanted to get that on record. Does that sound about right? You’re writing this in England, or for an English audience, in the mid-’80s.

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, and I made some very good friends in England too, by the way. Whatever I thought about the system and the general problems of England, which at that time were enormous, little was I aware, they were changing. But a couple of people I can think of there, Peter Turner, Mark Haworth-Booth, became good personal friends.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: No, but that was my feeling about England. They’re wonderful people. I really felt sorry for them because they have to pay the equivalent of nine dollars to go across the city on the damn metro.

MR. WITKOVSKY: A very expensive city, yeah, which makes art difficult.

MR. BALTZ: Well, so is Zurich [Switzerland], but the point is that, in Zurich, incomes match the cost of living, and London had the greatest disparity between incomes and living cost of any European city at that time. It's still expensive.

MR. WITKOVSKY: I think so, yeah. I think it still is.

MR. BALTZ: But now – but then, people – I don't know, making more money. I don't know.

MR. WITKOVSKY: But it also strikes me – well, it struck me in a way reading these things - that if I return to, for instance, the article on Adams, Hernandez, Eggleston, and Gossage, that the explanations you provided, the readings – very compelling readings of four works – were quite strongly based in narrative.

They were almost literary in tone, and you took the reader through an image as if you were a narrator. And even though it's a narration of, let's say, sameness and namelessness, nevertheless, I had not thought of your own work that way. So I wanted to ask in light of that if you felt that your own work has some narrative possibility, and whether you welcome that or, on the contrary, don't welcome that.

MR. BALTZ: I think everything has some narrative possibility. As far as how I chose to approach those works, I was interested in the works because all four of them shared a quality of being a little repellent and off-putting, [and] at the same time, I thought absolutely compelling and extremely important individually and in the bodies of work of the artists.

I don't know, your first year in art school, there's not a lot to talk about in terms of formalism. It's not a very interesting subject. It may be an interesting fact, it may be a necessary thing, and it may provide certain philosophical quandaries that are really worth meditating about, but it's something to write about.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah.

MR. BALTZ: This was why so many bad figurative painters still survive, I think, because writers find something to write about.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Are you suggesting then, outside of formal qualities, the only other place to go in an interpretation is toward a story?

MR. BALTZ: No, it's not the only other place to go, but it was the only other place to go, I think, for the audience that I conceived of. The other place, obviously, to go is into philosophical and critical writing.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, yeah, exactly, and that's what I see operating in your work. I mean, Hal Foster, for instance, reviewed Park City, I think in 1981, and what he found most compelling was how it resisted narrative, how it seemed to be taking you on a tour of a place and yet was constantly frustrating one's expectations of gaining knowledge or having a beginning, middle, and end.

MR. BALTZ: Well, that's always been a quality, and it's fascinated me in my work. It goes back to Sekula, quoting Brecht as a critique of the Industrial Parks.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah.

MR. BALTZ: I'm always interested in what happens when a system fails. What are the boundaries, where – when photography doesn't give you any information, when the more you see of something, the less you know, or certainly you don't know more; maybe you even know less because there's more spectacular interference.

But that's almost, in a sentence, what the work from the 89-91[: Sites of Technology] project was about. It was photographing machines as photography has always done. But the difference between the beauty of the Aristotelian machines that you see in early 19th-century photography, or the beauty of the kind of things you see in the Becher's work, and these boxes that look like freezer units that are really doing the heaviest work of the world, and yet there's nothing that is revealed about this.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Let's go into that work then, actually.

MR. BALTZ: Plato was vindicated.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Really. That's fascinating because - so this work from '89 to '91, is that – that I believe is the great break. You feel, I think, that you had arrived by the later '80s; it's sort of an exhaustion of the subject of the postwar industrial transformation of American landscape, and you yourself had shifted. Is that right? And so you – well, describe what you went to then.

MR. BALTZ: And that I had done my work and done well. I had given what I could give. That's the optimistic explanation. The other explanation, which is very, very difficult to not be clouded by since it was sesquicentennial of photography–

MR. WITKOVSKY: Nineteen eighty-nine, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: Every major museum in the world did a history of photography show. Then they compounded their errors by exchanging shows with each other. It left me with a feeling that photography was an exhausted medium, bankrupt. I mean, oh, God, you know Frank Zappa's remark about jazz? It's not dead; it just smells kind of funny. You're really left with –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay.

MR. BALTZ: No, what you're left with is, one, if you've seen one, you've seen them all because there is only one history. I mean, how people at the Royal Academy [of Arts, London] are going to stack it up with how people at the Metropolitan [Museum of Art, New York, NY] would, or it's going to be more a competition to see who has better examples of things.

Then, after Robert Frank, nobody knows what's happening. There is no direction. There was no direction – shows in the last 30 years that made any sense. Some people thought it was all sort of going to be like David Hockney, and everybody had some –

MR. WITKOVSKY: But yet you found a way not to give it up entirely. You didn't stop photographing. It would be some years before you did that. So what did you do – maybe just describe what you went into, even at the level of form, because you pick up color, I believe, and you changed size. A lot of things change with those pictures of industry.

MR. BALTZ: Well, no – I was taking – actually, we used this as an epigraph in the 89-91 book [*89-91: Sites of Technology*. Gottingen, Germany: Steidl, 2007], but I remarked – I mean, when I first got to know Jean Nouvel, we were in a bar, and I was asking certain questions about his practice.

I'm really glad I was naïve enough to ask, because I received great answers. But now I kind of feel foolish for having asked. One was, I said, "Do you consider yourself postmodernist?" He said, "No, I'm a modernist." He said, "But to be a modernist in 1990 has nothing to do with being a modernist in 1928." The other –

MR. WITKOVSKY: He said that, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: I wish I had. The other was probably about the lack of signature style and so on and so on, and he explained to me – I'm sure he must have said this before, but he said, "You don't give the same answer to different questions."

MR. WITKOVSKY: So this opened doors for you.

MR. BALTZ: Yeah.

MR. WITKOVSKY: This kind of thinking. So you're saying you felt you could renew yourself within something that had a logic to it. It wasn't like picking up a different character on certain days, and yet you could outwardly have an utterly different appearance, because the questions had changed around you, and you wanted to answer questions that were actual, that were contemporary.

MR. BALTZ: Without going on and on and on with all these damned different things I did, one thing, there were a lot of changes. There's also really a change in how I perceived, in most cases, the *destinare* of the work. Most of these works, went from a private to a public [setting]. Most aren't gallery works. They were public commands.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay.

MR. BALTZ: They were done in the public sphere. Some of the later ones, which you probably don't know about, were ephemeral, which is why you don't know about them. Others were – as it turns out – and the story – you have *The Deaths in Newport* [(CD-ROM) Santa Monica, CA: Parador/Ram, 1995], don't you?

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yes.

MR. BALTZ: So the whole story about how I got involved with that is, in fact, part of the book itself. So there's no real point in repeating it here on tape.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Right.

MR. BALTZ: You can –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Well, we'll just say quickly it takes the form of - which I have experienced - it is a CD that's played that's a narrative you provide based on press coverage.

MR. BALTZ: The text remains the same no matter what form it is.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay.

MR. BALTZ: But this was about when I shouldn't have even thought about this – I'm hearing the Newport Harbor Art Museum was going to have their own independent building, wanting someone to do a site survey. I thought, I could do this. I should have some sort of inside edge on this because, after all, I'm the only living artist that anybody's ever known about that was ever born in Newport Beach, or would admit it.

So I went and talked to Paul Schimmel, who was there at the time and doing his usual very good job. Anyway, I started to do this, and I realized that - this was just dawning on me - I don't want to do this kind of work anymore. And I think I'm quoting myself on this, but I started thinking in a more broad sense about what a site might be. A site might also be a social fabric, a community. It may be the history of a place. And I was –

MR. WITKOVSKY: So were you suddenly seeing all those buildings and debris you had photographed as objects, and you didn't want to be capturing objects anymore?

MR. BALTZ: No, I saw them as something that I already knew too much about.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay, because when you talk about community and people and history, it sounds like you're trying to get away from something definable in physical terms.

MR. BALTZ: No, because it turns out there is some sort of reification of all this narrative material. It's not pure language or sound. But it is – no, for me, most of those things were – I could do it. I could do it too easily. It's a problem that I had been solving for years, maybe too long, and I wasn't interested in going about doing this again.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah.

MR. BALTZ: Then so I started thinking about this and recalling this story that my father told, and thence – and I'm quoting myself – any reader, all they have to do is just go down to Barnes & Noble store and buy a copy of the book, and they'll hear the whole story.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay, but then talk about the process of working on commission. This is very different than what had happened before, and because what you had done for so long had this critical dimension to it, in a very straightforward sense of hat term, how do you negotiate that? Who is giving you commissions, and did you – I assume, too, that you took a commission because you felt you had total liberty to create anything you wanted, but how does that work out in practice?

MR. BALTZ: The first and only commission I did in the United States was Candlestick Point. I took it on board, and I ended up working on it intensively for two years, and off and on for another couple of years. So I did sort of over-fulfill the requirements.

MR. WITKOVSKY: What was the commission? How was it phrased to you?

MR. BALTZ: It was to make a document of the land at Candlestick Point, which was becoming Candlestick Point State Recreation Area, as it was before the interventions. The interventions included a fairly ambitious arts program, the centerpiece of which was a huge Aeolian harp to be made by Martin Puryear. But I was there before all this happened.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Did you find something nostalgic in that commission, or sort of instantly soon-to-be-nostalgia, as it were?

MR. BALTZ: I'm trying to think. It was one of the few times that I photographed – how do you say – a place in its farewell.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, exactly.

MR. BALTZ: And consciously thinking that that's what that was about. This would show people what it was like. It was actually – I mean, it was a landfill. It was completely – a lot of rubbish. But it was also quite lovely. It was very quiet. It was on the borderline of the poorest and most dangerous community in San Francisco, dangerous because of the crack houses.

But it was completely empty – no one went there. You couldn't get mugged there because no mugger would waste their time looking around these many square miles of stuff for somebody to mug.

MR. WITKOVSKY: At least you were free to work. What happened to the photographs that resulted from it? Were they shown nearby?

MR. BALTZ: No. They were given to the San Francisco – I had to reposit them someplace there in the Bay Area. So I gave them to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art because they had been very supportive of me in the past and had a lot of my work. Then later, I was able to publish them with a Japanese publisher [*Candlestick Point*. Tokyo, Japan: Gallery Min/Aperture, 1989 (exhibition: May 13 - July, 2, 1989); republished by Steidl, 2011].

MR. WITKOVSKY: I see. And then from there you moved – well, I think you had told me off camera, as it were, that you printed them, in fact, in Europe, in Italy I think, and then if I'm getting this right, there's a bit of the industrial work in there, but there are the public spaces, the Piazza Sigmund Freud [Milan, Italy], and others. These were done in Italy.

MR. BALTZ: This was work I was doing when I was in Milan.

MR. WITKOVSKY: So describe the changes. I mean, those are things that look quite different in every respect from the work you had done to that date. So maybe say something about those.

MR. BALTZ: Well, that was what I had in mind. I thought – and I thought with Candlestick also, I mean, Candlestick has – it's 84 images, and 12 of them are color images.

MR. WITKOVSKY: So the first – the introduction of color into your work in an official sense.

MR. BALTZ: Introduction of color and sort of mixing color and black-and-white together in that, which was something that wasn't very often done, I think, except maybe in commercial photography..

MR. WITKOVSKY: A series body of work, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: But I thought it was safe. I mean, you know the history of color photography in the arts, let's say. It more or less begins with MoMA's recognition of Eggleston and Stephen Shore, and suddenly it's okay to do color, if you can afford it.

And then, Jesus, we were swamped with this new color, kilometers of – treacly – inviting surfaces and finally ending up like calendar pictures, art galleries full of 30-by-40-inch calendar pictures.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah.

MR. BALTZ: And you know who I mean, although I'm not going to mention.

MR. WITKOVSKY: But your color –

MR. BALTZ: And yet, the other guy, too, both of them.

MR. WITKOVSKY: But your color, it works. I haven't seen the ones in Candlestick Point, but the color in these public places, it's as if you had a camera, and you put a color filter over it or something, is how I want to describe it.

MR. BALTZ: No, no let me go back.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay, yes.

MR. BALTZ: So I thought, after enough time passed, everybody is sick of color. To make an exhibition about something being in color is like an exhibition about composition. I mean, it's just mindless, and finally I thought, "Okay, it's safe." It's a convention. Nobody even sees it anymore and they certainly don't remark on its being color.

MR. WITKOVSKY: I see. So from 1976 through, let's say, 1988, '89, you feel that that decade, it domesticated enough so you could finally work in it, and it wasn't like a big deal.

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, it just became a convention of representation, replacing what black and white had been. After that, black and white starts to look more arty, and color looks more normal.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay.

MR. BALTZ: The color pictures in Candlestick Point were done on – the color negative pictures were done on – what do you call that paper at that time?

MR. WITKOVSKY: Ektachrome?

MR. BALTZ: No, Type-C, which is very delicate, very light, a little soft, and they're very unsaturated. It was difficult to find a lab that would believe me when I told them what I wanted.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, because, as you describe that explosion of color work, it was incredibly saturated, dye-transfer prints, or it was Cibachrome, and it was –

MR. BALTZ: Still is.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: The other thing, I was interested in Cibachrome because Cibachrome had a quality that I liked very much, along with several I didn't. But one was, it's very sharp. There's something about the molecular structure that the image resides on the surface rather than embedded behind.

I mean, any Cibachrome looks sharper than any C print. There are ways around this, as we have found; as [Andreas] Gursky, for instance, has found out. But anyway, but the problem with Cibachrome is it's so blatantly artificial.

Cibachrome pictures of anything natural look fake. I know that people have tried this and mask[ing] and so on, but it all ends up looking ridiculous.

Anyway, it looks very punched up, very buzzy, but where it works perfectly is at night, which is already artificial light. So there's no real reference to any kind of natural colors. You're looking at these sort of poisonous chemical colors that are just like the Cibachrome.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, and so that, in fact, is what you made with night scenes. They were all those public places. I think there are some in Germany or Switzerland. They're in Italy.

MR. BALTZ: Mostly in Italy.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Mostly in Italy, and they are all at nighttime.

MR. BALTZ: It's nicer to go out in Italy than it is in other countries. You said it's like there's a filter. No, that's the whole point. There is no filter.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Right.

MR. BALTZ: The light is just whatever it is. Piazza Sigmund Freud is outdoors with two or three kinds of sodium light and God knows what else, tungsten. I did nothing.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Well, I guess just to defend that a bit, I guess you're saying that's why it gives that impression, and that's a good impression to give. In other words, you don't have to do anything to get it to look artificial. It just is artificial.

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, yeah, and I didn't try to make any effort to make it look less so.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: Which I suspect wouldn't have worked anyway. But I never tried.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And can you tell a little of what you were after in those scenes? I mean, if that's not too reductive to ask.

MR. BALTZ: I think there's an artificiality that interested me. It was very intense. It was very urban, and it was – it made almost no reference to nature.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, for instance Piazza Sigmund Feud, if I remember right, you see a long line of cars on a diagonal off in the left, and then there's a railing. I guess it's a parking lot or something, and there's little signs saying the name of the square, and then there's a lot of streetlights, and then off on another side are the tall buildings in all sorts of garish colors.

MR. BALTZ: It's actually the parking lot for the – there's the [Milano] Centrale, big station. There's a second station, [Milano Porta] Garibaldi Station. This is – and just behind Garibaldi Station they built what they call the American Building, which was multistory, 20- or 30-story skyscraper that looked like a little copy of the AT&T building [New York, NY], a little PoMo [Postmodern].

MR. WITKOVSKY: With the peaked roof.

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, and broken pediment.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Right.

MR. BALTZ: The idea of postmodern in Italy is ludicrous, in a country that's been existing in a state of postmodernity for thousands of years.

MR. WITKOVSKY: [Giorgio] de Chirico picked up on this. The Baroque is full of that kind of pastiche.

MR. BALTZ: But anyway, and these secrets only come out in these things later in life. I discovered that was Piazza Sigmund Freud when I printed them.

MR. WITKOVSKY: I see.

MR. BALTZ: I just knew it was the parking area in front of the Garibaldi Station. I saw the sign, and I thought – I took that as an immediate sign that there was a god, and that god loved me.

MR. WITKOVSKY: I love it. Well, I did want to ask about that. But not –

MR. BALTZ: I'm just getting coffee. I won't be long.

MR. WITKOVSKY: I wanted to ask about the relation of the titles in work like that and whether you saw sort of a parallel to the titles of your early work. You may remember, earlier in this interview I said that part of what I found so fascinating about your work from the later '60s, early '70s was the absolute deadpan nature of the imagery that contrasts so hyperbolically with the exoticism of the place names, and then you said, well, actually, those place names seemed totally natural to you, and what seemed exotic were East Coast Elm Street and Locust Street and things, because we're very used to Camino Del Mar and things.

But here in Europe, of course, what you have is a lot of naming going on - Sigmund Freud, you just named Garibaldi, Sigmund Freud, and I forget the other.

MR. BALTZ: One short street can have several names.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, yeah, and did that produce any effect on you that had an impact on the work, or was that sort of an epiphenomenon in addition to the work?

MR. BALTZ: It didn't influence my choice of places.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay.

MR. BALTZ: And not everything has – I mean, some things had non-place-name titles, as a piece that's made outside of Verona in an industrial area, which was an amazing place. It was incredibly ugly, and the second-most expensive hotel in the city was located there, which is to say it was [an] all-new, business hotel for 24 hours a day. You had telecommunications plus somebody who spoke Japanese, English, and so on, and that's where businesspeople stayed; expensive, and it's ugly. That piece is titled after a line from Romeo and Juliet.

MR. WITKOVSKY: The line from [William] Shakespeare?

MR. BALTZ: "There is no life outside these Verona walls."

MR. WITKOVSKY: Oh, I see.

MR. BALTZ: The cover picture for *Rule without Exception* [Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, and Des Moines, IA: Des Moines Art Center, 1991], the name was changed to that because it was just a way – an identification thing. I think it was actually – [in French] – named after something in the Risorgimento [19th-century Italian unification].

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay, yeah, the names were not really important, but they acquire some importance, maybe after the fact, like as you say, just a happy coincidence in certain cases, or just a coincident in others.

MR. BALTZ: By the way, *Rule without Exception*, no one ever asked me about this, and finally the when exhibition came around to Los Angeles County Museum [March 26 - May 31, 1992], Bob Sobieszek sent me a fax. He had just seen a documentary on Wim Wenders, which - I'd known about this for years, you know.

Wenders had planned a film which he never made. The title for *The American Friend* [1977], originally the working title had been *Rule without Exception*. It's one of my favorite films, and I knew that. So that's where that came from, because I admired Wenders for his rendition of urbanism.

MR. WITKOVSKY: In what sense? In the sense of giving a panorama of the urban experience?

MR. BALTZ: Of the way he represented the city.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay.

MR. BALTZ: And Robert sent me a note saying, "You sneaky so-and-so, you didn't tell me this was from Wim Wenders," and I said, "You ignorant so-and-so, I thought you already knew that." I miss Robert.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Sobieszek, yes, a great loss, absolutely. That's an enormous loss.

MR. BALTZ: Any man who thinks Barbara Steele is the greatest actress of his lifetime, well, we won't see his like again soon.

MR. WITKOVSKY: No, no that's very true. I want to ask in a bit about the show itself, but that title can almost, in the context of the work you did in the early '90s, be seen as an expression of total paranoia. Was that very far from your mind? You know what I mean? Living in a society or a situation that is so ordered that there are no exceptions. There's no way outside of it.

MR. BALTZ: Paranoia is never far from my mind.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay, okay, yeah, I mean, the photos have that look, too, a look of being

watched.

MR. BALTZ: Well, most of the things I worked with were things that I believed – I mean, quite the opposite of what, say, the Bechers, what their wonderful enterprise is about, which is to retain something that's going fast, and I think the history was, 80 percent or something of the buildings they photographed no longer exist.

This was very necessary to do in the most reductive terms. I was interested in things that I thought were prophetic and things that were going to sweep the world.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Going forward, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: The world, the future that had already begun, the future that we were – the tyranny of the new, the future that we were being compelled to live with, the future that was being shoved down our throats.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, and this came out very strongly, then, in the show you had at the Pompidou Centre ["Ronde du Nuit." Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1992], but you have to remind me exactly what year that was.

MR. BALTZ: That was 1992.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Ninety-two, so just after this. Yeah, tell me about the show.

MR. BALTZ: There was a project that was commissioned by the – something for photographing Nord-Pas-de-Calais, and they'd invited photographers from all over the world to to remark in some way on their region and the effect of Eurostar on this poorest, poorest area of France - which had at that time 28 to 33 percent unemployment.

I believe it's not so much better now either, and they're very enthusiastic about this investment, because there hadn't been any investment since coal mining.

MR. WITKOVSKY: That was the proposal initially?

MR. BALTZ: Most of the proposals read sort of like conceptual art for not-smart people.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Oh, I see, yeah, absolutely.

MR. BALTZ: What I proposed – because I wanted to do this anyway, and I had already done a little bit in Japan – I wanted to photograph centers of high technology. So I said I would like to photograph in sites of technologies that will impact the Nord-Pas-de-Calais region during the next 30 years. Actually, I couldn't think of any high technology that wouldn't.

MR. WITKOVSKY: So, in a way, almost anything would have served your purpose.

MR. BALTZ: Yes, so they agreed to this. They also are very helpful because, through government institutions, everything in France is connected; it's a monarchy here. You've lived here. You understand. The monarch is elected, but it's a monarchy nonetheless and a highly centralized one, at that.

MR. WITKOVSKY: But it's good to know the monarch, then.

MR. BALTZ: It's always good to be on the right side of the monarch.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: So they could, through their public status, get me into anyplace that was either publicly owned, semi-publicly owned, or where the private owners felt that they had a lot to gain by being on the right side of the government. Which is nearly every enterprise in the country.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Incredible.

MR. BALTZ: So it's like Hewlett-Packard, which is the third category, Air France, SNCF [French national train system], the –

MR. WITKOVSKY: You went and photographed in many of those places?

MR. BALTZ: Yes, all over the country. France Telecom's research facilities in Lannion and again in Menton. They tend to put these things in nice places.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Well, so here I want to get into the detail. What was your procedure? What sort of pleasant conversation would you make with people on site, or none, or how did you present yourself? Did people ask you anything about what you were doing, or they just –

MR. BALTZ: People were generally very, very nice. France is not "naturally" a high-tech society. For the French, high technology is not a birthright; it's an achievement and one in which they take considerable pride. In one of his more lucid moments, [Jean] Baudrillard wrote about this: Americans look at France and dream of culture; France looks at America and dreams of technology. Everyone longs for what they don't have.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah.

MR. BALTZ: So when the French master a technology they participate in, they are very proud of this.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And so the technology of telecommunications was something they felt they had mastered?

MR. BALTZ: Well, they had. At that time they were doing research that was equal to anything being done at the Bell Labs. What else were they doing?

MR. WITKOVSKY: What was it about –

MR. BALTZ: Earth sciences, they had satellites, meteorological satellites that were, again, cutting edge.

MR. WITKOVSKY: But knowing you a bit as you do, I can only imagine that their being at the forefront in and of itself held very minimal interest for you. But what was it about that that –

MR. BALTZ: People were happy with it, and they were proud to show it off.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay.

MR. BALTZ: I mean, people were sorry that I was leaving without looking at this or that.

MR. WITKOVSKY: I see. That's fascinating, and then you really photographed this or that and still never really photographed people. So you weren't showing anyone actually being proud, but you were showing the objects of which they were –

MR. BALTZ: Only their technology. I had a long, long list of sites; I worked at CERN [European Organization for Nuclear Research]. The only time I was ever turned down was by Aérospatiale-Matra, in Toulouse; I had an authorization, and then the Gulf War broke out, and I didn't have an authorization.

MR. WITKOVSKY: I see.

MR. BALTZ: Because suddenly they wanted to become anonymous, insofar as they were the primary supplier of aircraft to both the French military and to Saddam Hussein.

MR. WITKOVSKY: At the same time.

MR. BALTZ: The same airplanes, except the French models had the little black box, and the Iraqi ones didn't. But Matra was living in mortal terror of a headline that would read: "French soldiers strafed by Matra airplanes in Iraqi air force."

MR. WITKOVSKY: Right, right, right, and so what form did the results take?

MR. BALTZ: This is TV talk. I'm so glad you asked me that question, Matt. About midway through the program, they wanted to make a kind of term report, probably having to do with continued support from the government, to show they were actually doing something, spending their money well and getting some results.

And I was offered this room that, to their eternal credit, no longer exists in the Centre Pompidou to do a midterm show, but I decided instead to create a new piece for this. And

the room was like two meters 50 high and 12 meters long, and I think maybe about five meters deep.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And where was it in the Pompidou?

MR. BALTZ: It was in that area – what the hell do they have there now?

MR. WITKOVSKY: Was it where the bookstore is now?

MR. BALTZ: No - on other side.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay, but on the ground level?

MR. BALTZ: On the ground level. It would be what is facing now the restrooms but not on that side, on the other side in a little cubicle.

MR. WITKOVSKY: So a low space, I mean, kind of a dark, low passageway space.

MR. BALTZ: Dark, low, very oppressive space.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And you knew that before you – you created a piece kind of having that space in your mind?

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, I created it for that space.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah.

MR. BALTZ: I was very interested in the idea of the information processing as a form of social control. The Berlin Wall had come down, and when the secrets of the DDR [German Democratic Republic, East Germany] had started to leak out, they released an astonishing statistic: one person in five was working as some sort of spy. This is a country with a chronic labor shortage,

We don't do that here because we don't *need* to do that here. In the West social control is done by engineered consent, and it's engineered in very simple ways. They make a telephone poll in the afternoon, ask people what they think about an issue, and in time for the 11 o'clock news, our leaders can appear on television telling the people what they just told them. And, democracy being what it is, *in extremis* they will even act on this.

That is, the political class will even do some of these things that the public demands, not, of course, things that absolutely upset their deeper agendas, but some. So I thought of the circularity of this, and how it was enabled by communications and information technology, and that interested me.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Sorry, let's – we'll pause here to change cassettes only.

[END DISC 3.]

Sorry, we had a little pause while we changed the batteries. So we were talking about the Des Moines Art Center ["Rule Without Exception. Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, IA, July 12 - September 1, 1991, and traveling] and Julia Brown Turrell and her –

MR. BALTZ: The Saarinen Building.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And the Saarinen Building, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: I found the name.

MR. WITKOVSKY: The Saarinen, yeah, Eero Saarinen. But just to finish with the retrospective by asking, is there something else that comes to your mind as being important to remember about that event, which is clearly a major summing up and a major, sort of a threshold in your career? Any writing that came out of it by others or any sense that you have?

MR. BALTZ: Well, the book itself had multiple authors. You have this book, yes?

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yes.

MR. BALTZ: And then we remade the book. The show went to the Fotomuseum Winterthur

[Winterthur, Switzerland], and we remade the book, including some new material plus an essay from Urs Stahel. That was the first book I ever printed with Gerhard Steidl. I first met him in October of '93.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay.

MR. BALTZ: When I first got to know him.

MR. WITKOVSKY: So you met Steidl through that.

MR. BALTZ: That project.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Or the redoing of the book.

MR. BALTZ: The redoing of the book.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And then still traveling in 1993. You said it started in 1990. This must have been –

MR. BALTZ: The end of 1990. It started December 1990 [opened at P.S. 1 Museum, Long Island City, NY, December 16, 1990 - February 10, 1991].

MR. WITKOVSKY: Still, it occupied a good two-plus years of your life [final venue at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA, March 26 - May 31, 1992].

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, well, it's something you can do in a medium of multiples – I don't think you can to do that so easily with exhibition of paintings or any exhibition of unique work. Lenders want them returned as early as possible. Or in this case, museums. I owned everything in the show.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Because you printed it again for the show?

MR. BALTZ: No, I mean I already had the works.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Really?

MR. BALTZ: I still have a very good collection of my own work. If you think about it, this doesn't really speak well for me.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Well, I do remember the painter Shirley Goldfarb, who lived and died in Paris half her life and still remains completely unknown, a nice quote from her saying she was the best collector of her own work, yeah. So you reprinted the catalogue, and that is how you met Steidl, and that, of course, became a very creative productive relationship, yes?

MR. BALTZ: Amazing. Steidl-Verlag was a literary publishing house and, as I later learned, had the first hardcover rights in German to anything by Günter Grass, who is also Steidl's oldest friend and political ally. And their commercial relationship gave Steidl a great deal of freedom in choosing his other projects

I liked Gerhard, but I had no idea who he was, really. He was the one of the most discreet men I'd ever met.

He was a very formal man. Each morning I'd say, "Good morning, Herr Steidl," and he'd say, "Good morning, Herr Baltz," and we'd start to work. At that time he had a two-color press to run four color, which means that you could get very fine color, but you couldn't proof anything unless you knew exactly how the colors were going to lay down - unless you were Gerhard Steidl.

And then because we were on a deadline, and Walter Keller was calling twice a day, we also had the presses at the local newspaper printing sheets. So we were driving back and forth between them, approving sheets. When I had a few minutes to rest between press calls, I'd go up to the library, which at that time was just a little closet with the coffee machine and some books. When I started to look at the books, I realized Gerhard Steidl was the guy who videotaped Joseph Beuys on his trip to America.

Gerhard was the man who filmed the famous Beuys *Dillinger* [1974] performance in Chicago.

So I asked him about this, and if you asked him, he'd be very forthcoming. Otherwise you'd never know that he was such an important guy. This kind of discretion is something I respect tremendously, and wish I had more of it myself. I think [that's] the kind of modesty that may come from being really self-assured.

Gerhard Steidl was like that. He never boasted about anything. If asked, he would respond at whatever length you liked. I thought that was extraordinarily cool. But most of what I thought leaving there was, this man is the best printer in the world, and I had worked with David Gardner, with Acme, and with Sid Rapoport. I had worked with excellent printers, but he was the best of the best.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Actually, this reminds me of an important area that I definitely want to cover before we leave off, which is precisely the books. And we should come back to Steidl, but we should take a little step back for me to ask you, you know, how you first came to make a book, and clearly, books became very important to you. So maybe just say a little bit about that and lead us back up to Steidl.

MR. BALTZ: In terms of small-scale photographs, I prefer looking at books than looking at originals. It also calmed my bad conscience a bit, because books are democratic. They are less precious than original works, more democratic. And, in their finest instances, books are machine-made and mass-produced, except for handmade artist books, which I thought oxymoronic. But it was always necessary to achieve facsimile reproduction.

MR. WITKOVSKY: You mean to say that the printed page should look just exactly like the print?

MR. BALTZ: Or better.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Or better, okay.

MR. BALTZ: Which is possible.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, yeah, so how did you achieve that, though? You said how many times you had to burn and dodge your prints to get them the way you wanted. Does this mean you spent a lot of time on press?

MR. BALTZ: For *Industrial Parks* [*The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California*. New York: Castelli Graphics, 1974], I spent two-and-a-half weeks in press with Sidney Rapoport, who was the best printer in the United States at that time, so Lee Friedlander and everybody said, and I wouldn't deny it. He was a very, very skillful guy and good with technology. But still, the technology hadn't caught up with that.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Were those printed duotone?

MR. BALTZ: They were printed – he had a variant on duotone called stonetone, which, I think, is like using a stochastic pattern [smaller dots, non-grid setup for finer tonal detail] for the black plate..

But he still had to go up on the press, and if he wanted a sky that's three percent gray, he had to take a rag and hand-develop out the skies - and when he just got it, then the dot pattern would break down totally, and he had to strip off the plate, and you'd be in there another two hours doing make-ready. It was a nightmare.

It got easier after they started doing laser scans. The first thing I ever did with laser scan was the Nevada book [*Nevada*. New York: Castelli Graphics, 1978], and when that was done, I couldn't be [there]. I asked John Gossage to go up to Boston [MA] and be on press, and he agreed. John is better with books than I am, and better with books than almost anyone I know. I don't know why I couldn't be there, but he went to Boston, and it was just a day on press, and he did that.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Wow, but every other part of it was still as it had been, in terms of the plating?

MR. BALTZ: Pretty much. Back in '78 Acme was the first American printer to use laser scans. I called John that night to ask how it went. He said, "They're sharper than the originals," and I said, "John, that's not possible." He said, "It is now," and he was right.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Wow. But they worked with – you had to give them a print. As you said, you couldn't be giving them a negative to print from because it didn't resemble the print in any way. So they took this print, they made an internegative and then did a laser scan of this?

MR. BALTZ: No, I think they scanned directly from the print.

MR. WITKOVSKY: They scanned directly from the print? Okay, and then you kept - so you would do a book for every series, for every body of work, yes?

MR. BALTZ: Whenever I had the possibility, yes.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, absolutely, and then by the time you met Steidl, though, you weren't making a body of work in the same way. Now you were making pieces, single pieces. So you weren't going to do a book for one piece, but you had this exhibition come along, and so that was a chance. And then where did it go from there with Steidl?

MR. BALTZ: We worked again – what was it – another exhibition. Am I missing something here? I'm just trying to think chronologies because it seems like there had to have been something in between that. But no, I guess it was awhile. The next project I remember doing was a book with L.A. MOCA for the show [*Lewis Baltz: The Politics of Bacteria, Docile Bodies, Ronde de Nuit.* Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998].

MR. WITKOVSKY: For when they redid the piece from the Pompidou, which by the way, we should say was called *Ronde de Nuit*.

MR. BALTZ: *Ronde de Nuit*.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Which I did want to ask about, but anyway, *Ronde de Nuit, The Politics of Bacteria, Docile Bodies*, these three pieces. So Steidl printed that.

MR. BALTZ: You've been really doing your homework.

MR. WITKOVSKY: It's very easy to remember these things. They're quite memorable. So then – and of course again, you had a sort of format for the Castelli books, for a few of them, but at this point, every book is its own animal, is that right? Different sizes, different shapes.

MR. BALTZ: Not so much. I mean, the 11-inch square was something that – that's how the pieces were originally – they were put in the box, and they were mounted on 11-inch squares. And they were six by nine inches or 5.5 by 8.5 inches. So the book was – there's a copy of it. You've seen it.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Copy.

MR. BALTZ: And then just kind of stayed with that because it worked well, and then finally, well along the line, you have vertical pieces, and that worked well for that, too. And of course, all this was based on the romance of the square, which was something that I owe to William Currant.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Really? Now, very interesting.

MR. BALTZ: He only worked with Rolleiflexes, and he only worked in square format and was the only serious photographer I knew of before Diane Arbus, who did.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Yeah, in the 1950s, yeah.

MR. BALTZ: Anyway, so that's how that came about, because we're speaking now - and we should be doing it, but of course, we're behind - Gerhard wants to do a Lewis Baltz library. He's doing libraries, not on the extent he's doing the Robert Frank, because there isn't that much material. But that's his model for this. He wants to reprint all the books, and they'll all be the same format.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Well, that's what I was going to ask. So when you say reprint, they will be facsimiles of those books? So, of course, the library will look – it won't have the look of a series really, because you get to a certain point, and the books all start to –

MR. BALTZ: Yeah, then it gets screwy. But that's – I mean, I thought about that. Why

shoehorn something into some other – I wanted to use the formats when they were appropriate, and it could be something else.

MR. WITKOVSKY: That's very interesting. But so with this project, now, which amounts really – this book project by Steidl – amounts to another retrospective, of course, but in book form. You have more or less said, stop, to making new work. Is that true, and if so, since when? Can you pinpoint about the day which you decided you didn't really want to make more work?

MR. BALTZ: Well, let's say – I'm not really doing anything now to speak of. I like to believe that I'm a man who learned when to quit. It's a valuable lesson and one that I recommend to many of my colleagues.

MR. WITKOVSKY: And has that been true for a couple of years?

MR. BALTZ: Well, that answer I gave you is very ambiguous.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Okay, okay, I see. All right. I'll take it as such. Good.

MR. BALTZ: So, I mean, if you want to know, you'll have to wait until I'm dead.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Exactly, very good.

MR. BALTZ: But on the other hand, I'm in pretty rotten shape. So that shouldn't be too long.

MR. WITKOVSKY: Let's hope it takes a long, long time, and I look forward to more surprises. Is there something else you want to say, winding up?

MR. BALTZ: To all my friends out in televisionland? No, I mean, I think – it's possible. You can just talk forever about these things. I can' think of anything that you have failed to ask. I think we already have so much more information here than anyone will ever want to know that I think it's probably just as well to –

MR. WITKOVSKY: Well, I'm not so sure about that. But I do sense precisely in these last answers that sort of modesty, of someone who knows exactly what he's about, that you were attributing to Steidl. So with that, we'll have a very modest ending. Well, thank you very much. This was really wonderful.

MR. BALTZ: Will all of your compliments also be in the transcript on the tape?

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...October 3, 2005