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Oral history interview with William Conger,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with William Conger on 2015 May 18-20. The interview took place in Chicago, Illinois, and was conducted by Lanny Silverman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Chicago's Art-Related Archival Materials: A Terra Foundation Resource.

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

## Interview

LANNY SILVERMAN: This is Lanny Silverman. I'm at [William -WC] Conger's house on May 18, 2015. And I'm conducting an interview for the Smithsonian Institute Archives of American Art. Well, William, I think of you as a quintessentially Chicago artist, but as I well know, you were born south of here. Or is it downstate? You were born in Dixon?

WILLIAM CONGER: Dixon, IL is about 100 miles due west of Chicago on the Rock River and just as a comment about history, there was no road between Chicago and these western towns such as Rockford or Dixon until after the Blackhawk War of 1832.

[They laugh.]

But Dixon had already been established by that time, in the 1830s, because it was on the Rock River where there was a navigation and pathways, roads to Galena, which at that time was a major mining center.

MR. SILVERMAN: I know Galena. I've been to Galena.

MR. CONGER: But my family history there was not deep. My father had a few small stores in the area in that town and a few other neighboring towns devoted to auto supply and home appliances and the like, and I think we lived in Dixon only three or four years until his business failed and then moved on.

MR. SILVERMAN: To Evanston?

MR. CONGER: First to Wisconsin, then to Indianapolis, and finally to Evanston and then Chicago.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, so you moved around quite a bit as a child?

MR. CONGER: As a child, we moved around a lot. Those were still the Depression years for many people and it was a difficult life for my parents. You had these businesses which failed, and one after the other. And largely because he was in—heavily invested in home appliances, like refrigerators and stoves and things like that, and people would buy them but they couldn't pay for them and so he—

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, it was a boom economy sort of, after the post-war, '50s.

MR. CONGER: Well, this is in the '30s.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, this is earlier? That's the other way around. So that's when things were very young. That's why they couldn't pay for them.

MR. CONGER: Very tough, yeah.

MR. SILVERMAN: I thought you were talking later. So, yeah. This is a little earlier cause in the '40s after the war, there was a sort of a—

MR. CONGER: Well, in the '40s, he was no longer working for himself. He worked, for a while, for Spiegel's, the merchandising company in Chicago. And then after that, he worked at Encyclopaedia Britannica where he prospered, you might say, and so '50s until his death in the early '60s, it was a prosperous life—no longer the hardscrabble life of the '30s.

MR. SILVERMAN: Now, your mom was a painter. An amateur, I guess.

MR. CONGER: My mother was an amateur artist, amateur painter, who never really developed, you might say.

But she loved painting and I guess some of my fondest childhood memories were going with her to the Art Institute from Evanston and we'd take the elevated and that was the opening of the subway. I'll never forget it. One of the very first rides was on the subway that had opened in 1941, I believe, and we took the subway—the L and then the subway to get to the Art Institute, I think almost every week.

MR. SILVERMAN: So do you remember any of those shows?

MR. CONGER: Oh, I remember almost everything. I could—I had the place memorized as a child. I could tell you what rooms certain paintings were, like Seurat's *Grande Jatte* and others. I was totally in love with the place and really had all of the—many of the exhibit halls memorized and then I saw a number of the exhibits that were put on there. I think one of the most memorable for me was 1946 or '47, there was an exhibition of Van Gogh paintings, and that really floored me. I was a little bit older by then. I was in fourth or fifth grade.

MR. SILVERMAN: So how old were you when your mom was taking you to the Art Institute when you first started going?

MR. CONGER: Well, five or six?

MR. SILVERMAN: Wow, that's really early.

MR. CONGER: Yes.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's amazing.

MR. CONGER: And mainly because she liked to go there and I was with her? But I really loved it and she loved it, so we had a good time there.

MR. SILVERMAN: Now this is probably we're getting into the at least '40s, if not the '50s, which was a time when there weren't that many female artists. I mean, there still is that issue. Do you think—here you are living out your mother's, perhaps, fantasy? —[Laughs]. I've done the same a little with my parents. So I guess the issue for me to ask is, was your mom an amateur because there just weren't many possibilities? Or she just wasn't as serious as she would have liked? What do you think was her barrier or she was raising children? How did that happen, that she was—

MR. CONGER: Well, my mother came from a little town in Iowa. Clinton, Iowa—on the river, so it wasn't a little town, but—and her father was involved in the furniture manufacturing business.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, wow.

MR. CONGER: That's one of his chairs right there. It's one of the early reclining chairs.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's very nice.

MR. CONGER: Yeah, it's—so he manufactured furniture, but again, that business, which was quite sizable in Clinton, went out in the '30s, too, with the Depression. So she really didn't have much of an opportunity. Her horizons were, you might say, narrow. But she loved art and painting and she just really never had a chance with a—as a young woman with children and—

MR. SILVERMAN: Different times.

MR. CONGER: —doing things. Yes, at that time it was difficult. She tried and she did—she tried pottery later and she did things like that. She was really a creative person. She had wonderful ideas, but they never really developed and she died very young. She was only 47 when she died.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, that is young. What was her work like? Did it affect you in any particular way, consciously or unconsciously, subsequently? She wasn't a landscape painter, I take it?

MR. CONGER: She wasn't doing anything that we would say is original. She copied images that she saw in books and things of that sort—landscapes.

MR. SILVERMAN: So she did do landscapes?

MR. CONGER: Her own mother was a painter of some merit, and I used to [have a painting -WC]—I don't have it anymore. I don't know what happened to it. We for a long time had one or two of her paintings of flowers, which were, you know, ordinary, but nicely done. So I think she was stimulated somewhat by her mother, who was an amateur painter, and then her father was a kind of an inventor type—with furniture, things of that sort. So she had a background that might have encouraged that development, but she never really pursued it.

MR. SILVERMAN: Now, do you think she provided a role model for you of what an artist is, or do you think that came later for you?

MR. CONGER: Well, I sort of—one of my guilt complexes is the day that—one day she was painting and I, of course, would make suggestions—

[They laugh.]

—unwelcome suggestions about, "Well, why don't you try this and do that." And of course I didn't really know anything, but I thought I did. And she became a little bit exasperated—she closed the lid to the paint box and she said, "Here, you take it."

[They laugh.]

And, you know, I still have that paint box.

MR. SILVERMAN: Wow.

MR. CONGER: And so then it was, in a funny way, like handing me the obligation to do what [she couldn't do - WC]—

MR. SILVERMAN: Everyone's a critic. "You're such a critic, why don't you make something?"

MR. CONGER: Exactly.

MR. SILVERMAN: Instead of talking so much [laughs].

MR. CONGER: Exactly right. So I think by the fifth grade, I—actually, even in the first grade, I had decided to be an artist.

MR. SILVERMAN: I was going to ask you, when did you decide, "I want to be an artist?"

MR. CONGER: I think I made that decision because I had been going to the Art Institute, even at that time. And that was the most exciting thing in my life. And so when I was asked in school one day what I wanted to be, my playmates, or classmates would say, "Policeman" and "Fireman" and I said, "I wanted to be an artist." And then I thought, "Well, now I have to live up to this!"

[They laugh.]

MR. SILVERMAN: That doesn't go over so easily. How about with your parents? Fortunately your mom, possibly—you got to live out her fantasy, perhaps, so maybe that was encouragement. I know—I grew up in a later time, but I know that it was very difficult to encourage a child. My parents were amazingly supportive, but artist is not one that you want to hear as a parent. When you decided—made this pronouncement—were your parents supportive of that or?

MR. CONGER: Well, my mother was somewhat supportive in the sense that I felt, you know, to go back over this once—I, for years afterwards, I did feel that I was, in a sense, fulfilling her short-circuited life. You know? That she didn't have the opportunity that I had to do it, so in a way, I paint, of course, for myself and for others. But in another way I feel I'm, in some way fulfilling her destiny. But there was some support from her and I did get support from other people outside of the family and in our building where we lived—not far from here, actually, on Barry Avenue.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's where I think we've had that conversation before. You lived around there.

MR. CONGER: The granddaughter of the Chicago architect William Boyington lived, and, of course, he was gone, but she took a great interest in my childhood interest in art and she gave me tons of books and magazines and things of that sort that—on art. Which really, like opening a whole new world for me.

MR. SILVERMAN: So what was your childhood work like? I knew somewhere maybe in the interview with Julie Kara—what's her name?

MR. CONGER: Karabenick.

MR. SILVERMAN: Karabenick. I know in the interview with her, you talked about copying all the pieces at the Art Institute [laughs]. Other than the copies and doing Donald Duck pictures—I can appreciate that. I did Disney things, too. We have a lot in common. Actually, I guess the question I have for you is, apart from those things, what was your early childhood work like? What were you trying to do apart from copy other works?

MR. CONGER: It was mainly copying and trying to imitate colors and shapes and so forth. It wasn't really that inventive. But it was imaginative in the sense that I would think of figures. For example, I did drawings. I remember doing a bunch of drawings of the postman.

[They laugh.]

You know, carrying his bag of—in those days, postmen carried leather bags and hunched over. I would see him hunched over under this load, and I remember trying to get that sense of weight in the bag and the hunched over postman—fourth or fifth grade. I was—when they put up the work of the students in the classroom, the drawings and such, I could tell right away that my work was miles and miles away from the little polka dot and stick figures and things that were being made by the other kids, and I realized that this was really mainly due to my already somewhat concentrated focus on works of art in the museums and in books and magazines. *Art News* magazine was—I had dozens of those that were given to me by Mrs. Boyington. Which these were not children's books or magazines, but I immediately noticed everything in them. So I tried to imitate established art.

MR. SILVERMAN: And you were probably, as most children are, most concerned with technical skills and trying to be a realist—trying to make it look the way it was, like you mentioned the bags.

MR. CONGER: Absolutely.

MR. SILVERMAN: That was the first concern, was getting the—

MR. CONGER: No, it was all about, you might say, illustrational realism. And my father was much more hostile to the idea. At Britannica, in those days they actually had illustrators for the encyclopedias in-house.

MR. SILVERMAN: So he could see a possible role for you—

MR. CONGER: No. No, no. He wasn't interested in that at all. But because of my interest, he, one day, introduced me to one of the illustrators who actually was a pretty good artist and whose work is known today—William Nichols.

MR. SILVERMAN: Name sounds vaguely familiar.

MR. CONGER: He's known as kind of a regionalist and he did beautiful romantic farm scenes. He was famous for his barns and fields and farm equipment. And I just loved his work because I had seen it in some of my schoolbooks. And then when I discovered that I could actually meet the man that was something. So for a few times—not too many times—I was taken down to the offices where, on a Saturday, I could spend some time with William Nichols, who gave me little tricks of drawing and that sort of thing.

MR. SILVERMAN: Also, I guess, that provided you with—if you were so inclined, I was trying to steer you toward what the plan was for survival. Because your parents got out of the Depression, so they obviously had to be concerned, but you could at least see a working role model that, even if I can't become Van Gogh, I can at least —[laughs]—be an illustrator or something along those lines.

MR. CONGER: But as a child, I didn't make the distinction. I didn't know that there was a difference between illustration and painting in the museums. I—that was something that still hadn't occurred to me. That there was such a thing as high art and art history. Now, Britannica did have a sizable collection of art. I became very familiar with all of that work. In fact, there are four Reginald Marsh paintings here that were given to my father by William Benton. It was Benton who owned Britannica and who had amassed this huge collection at a time when corporate collections were of rare.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah, that's not a common occurrence.

MR. CONGER: But it mostly centered on American regional paintings—regionalist paintings. Thomas Hart Benton, Reginald Marsh, Hopper, Burchfield. And I loved all that work, and I could see it close up. And so that work, too, had a big impact on me.

MR. SILVERMAN: Now you mentioned Mrs. Boyington as sort of a mentor—

MR. CONGER: [Affirmative.]

MR. SILVERMAN: And I wonder, were there any others? Your mom, of course, by way of the fact that you were directly watching her make art.

MR. CONGER: I think all during this time, my father was extremely perplexed by this kid who was so interested in art and had very little interest in sports or—I was kind of a loner, you know. I learned solitude at an early age. I

would spend all—most of my time drawing in my room or building model airplanes and doing things like that. And I was perfectly happy with that. So I was kind of a loner kid. And this perplexed him, and so he was trying to wean me away from that—at the same time, trying to show some sense of empathy for it, if that makes sense.

MR. SILVERMAN: So you got mixed messages, kind of.

MR. CONGER: Yes. And later on, he introduced me to Walter Yust, who was the editor-in-chief of Encyclopaedia Britannica. A very erudite guy, very learned scholar type. Now, he occupied a funny position in the firm because Britannica, as a firm, was a highly intense merchandising company. I mean, they—this is in the days when people went out door to door to sell encyclopedias—they were [doing -WC] high-pressure selling. But here was this kind of scholar who was the editor-in-chief. He had nothing to do with the business, as such. His job was getting people to write good, cogent articles for the *Britannica* editions and to edit them and be sure that things were sensible. He was an amateur painter.

MR. SILVERMAN: Ah, there we go.

MR. CONGER: And he had some real talent. And so I would spend Saturdays with him in his studio in his home in Evanston— kind of a makeshift studio. But he was very much interested in encaustic. And, of course, I knew nothing about encaustic. But he taught me that, and he would—he was not an original artist—he would copy post cards freely—travel post cards. And [... -WC] then he would enlarge them and fancy them up—

MR. SILVERMAN: Did he—my father taught me. My father was the artist in the family—how to make enlargements by gridding it out? Did you learn how to do that?

MR. CONGER: Well, I didn't get into that, but he did. And I was very impressed by him. I really liked Walter Yust and he liked me and he—the idea was that Walter Yust would teach me or work with me with the idea in mind that it's okay to be an amateur artist and still be a successful businessman, which he was, as editor-in-chief—and even though he was not a merchandiser as such. So that was like a role model.

MR. SILVERMAN: So you could see a possible balancing of—

MR. CONGER: Well, I didn't. And neither did Walter Yust.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: And Walter Yust was completely supportive of my ambitions to be an artist and he actually told my parents to leave me alone.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's great.

MR. CONGER: And let me be, which didn't help.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, you have to understand their particular concern, coming out of that era; it was a major survival with economic—

MR. CONGER: Absolutely. I fully understand.

MR. SILVERMAN: Particularly for a man—for a guy in that era.

MR. CONGER: Absolutely, and besides, my father, by this time, was a—a successful businessman, and he could provide opportunities for me. And that's what he envisioned. But I was, for better or worse, I was focused on this ambition. Walter Yust encouraged me, which went against his—it went against my father's wishes. I went to the School of the Art Institute then.

MR. SILVERMAN: I was about to ask about early schooling. Let's go back before you get to the Art Institute. Let's go chronologically. I know that you are—you mention being a loner, but it also sounds like—from what I know of your early past—you had a difficult relationship to schooling. Maybe that's why we're skipping that. It's the part that's probably a little harder to deal with. You didn't deal so well with it. First of all, you had experiences in art that showed you not only the way, but showed you technique and supportive of just generally of figuring out what it is you wanted to do. But school was not the same thing. School was more—

MR. CONGER: Well, I was keenly aware that this was a field that was more or less ridiculed by the social structure that I was involved in. I was sent to Loyola Academy for high school and I immediately found myself at odds there. It was run by Jesuit priests, who had absolutely no interest in art. I later discovered it's really part of their philosophy to downplay "work with one's hands," you know, as opposed to work with one's mind.

MR. SILVERMAN: In theory, that sounds good, but that sort of leaves out a large part of the world [laughs].

MR. CONGER: And they—and I—one day I was caught drawing in class and he—the priest ridiculed me in front of the class and told me I should go to Lane Tech if I wanted to draw. And he said it in such a way that if he had told me, "If you want to go clean sewers, you know, go someplace else."

[They laugh.]

And I thought, "Well, okay." And I decided, well, that's what I would do. And I flunked out of Loyola. They did not invite me back. And my parents were so exasperated. They let me go to Lane Tech. Totally exasperated. And, of course, I immediately fell in with the wrong crowd and was truant most of the time—although, I was in the architectural program, which I loved.

MR. SILVERMAN: Which is a practical sort of application. My parents wanted me to be an architect.

[Crosstalk.]

MR. CONGER: And I loved it. And it was very sophisticated. And I realized that exactitude was very high-value there. First, a lot of these kids were never going to go to college. They were going to become, if anything, a technician at an architectural firm or they might draw—

MR. SILVERMAN: Draftsman or something, yeah.

MR. CONGER: —draw plans for the rest of their lives. And, of course, they're being trained to be very good at that. And I actually became very good at it, although I didn't want to go to any other classes and I was truant a lot. And so at the age of 16, I quit without telling my parents. As soon as I turned 16, I was out of there. And that was a big shock to my parents that I came home and said, "Well, I quit school." And they sent me off to Wisconsin to live with my grandmother and get me away from the bad kids I was hanging out with. And there, I got involved with my cousins who owned a beer distributing company. They were only in their 20s. I had a great time with them. And then I came back and I went to another school, a Catholic high school in Chicago. I was later asked to serve on its board. But at the time, I was a marginal case.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, let's go back to the architectural thing. That seemed—we'll get to this much more when we talked about your actual work, but do you think that had any influence on the way you work? Because you have a sense of rigor and of composition that's very—

MR. CONGER: You know it was very satisfying to do a beautifully rendered architectural drawing with the proper point on the pencil, the inking. There was something very satisfying about doing something that turned out well. And I had—long before that had done model airplanes. [... -WC] You know, the idea was to do it well. And so there was a system. It was a process and excellence was expected, and anything less than that was rejected. There was very little room at Lane in those classes for any kind of failure. You either did an excellent job or it wasn't any good at all.

MR. SILVERMAN: It's interesting that you narrowed your field—you found your passion and what you love doing and you managed to find the right places to get training and support for that, even though, as you say, probably even more so than when I grew up, which was about ten years later, that it was sort of an alien field. There weren't that many places to get this, yet you managed to get a lot of support and a lot of training.

MR. CONGER: Well, in those days, Lane Tech was still a tradesman's school. It was a school where one went to learn the trades. It wasn't a college prep school. It later became that. In fact, I was appalled when my own daughter demanded on going to Lane Tech—

[They laugh.]

—when I could send her to any private school and she was a very good student. Well, she went to Lane Tech and she graduated number three out of 700 and went on to get a Ph.D. in physics, so I guess it was okay. And she's happy that she went there. But when I went there, it was kind of a tough kids' school, who—if they were any good at all—would learn a trade.

MR. SILVERMAN: Now, wasn't this the place that had the murals that were done in the '30s and '40s and stuff?

MR. CONGER: Yep, beautiful murals everywhere, which I looked at.

MR. SILVERMAN: Was that when you were around?

MR. CONGER: Yes, they were there. Some of them had deteriorated, but they were—I looked at them carefully. I—yeah, I mean, it was still part of that regionalist narrative art that was quite dominant.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, we'll get to narrative art in a while, because that's something that will come up, I'm sure,

a lot in terms of our further discussion. You mentioned the Art Institute. I guess it's about time to get up to there. What got you into the Art Institute?

MR. CONGER: Well, when I finished high school, I was at the bottom of my class. I had focused on art there. There was a nun at that school that took a great interest in me; in fact, we're still friends after all these years. And she encouraged me a great deal. But I finished high school with no prospects. I hadn't even done anything about going to college or anything and finally one day on my own, in the middle of the summer, I got on the bus and I went down to the School of the Art Institute and I said I wanted to enroll. And I was told by a nice lady that I had to present a portfolio. I came back a week later with a portfolio.

[They laugh.]

MR. SILVERMAN: That you had made that week, I take it?

MR. CONGER: And, well, partly. I think some of them were drawings I did in high school and so on. And about a month later—it wasn't until the end of August, I got a letter admitting me! And this was a shock to my parents. They'd had no idea. My father thought that I was such a terrible student that I should go to a junior college or maybe I should even do high school all over again—something to that effect. He had kind of written me off.

MR. SILVERMAN: Written you off, yeah.

MR. CONGER: And so he was a little bit shocked that I had gotten into the school on my own—that he still didn't regard it as having any value. But he paid the tuition and I went and I loved it. But my home life was just horrible. And so I would go to school at the School of the Art Institute. I loved it there. I did very well. I got all A's. But I came home to a miserable home life and I decided I just had to get out.

MR. SILVERMAN: You were living in Evanston at that—that's where your parents were?

MR. CONGER: No, we were living in Chicago on Barry Avenue.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, Barry. That's near here. Yes, [Inaudible.]

MR. CONGER: And so then I applied to the University of New Mexico, because—

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, before we get there, go back to a little bit of the Art Institute, because obviously the Art Institute has a very strong sense of community. After you—the thing is, at the point that you went there, who were some of your teachers? Do you remember some of them?

MR. CONGER: Well, this fellow by the name of Jerome Walker, who was kind of a surrealist artist—he was pretty good, actually. He had taught at Yale. And then there was a fellow by the name of Briggs Dyer—an American regionalist who happened to live in my same neighborhood. We would run into each other on the street. And I liked him very much. He was a very personable, quiet guy. And then there was a fellow by the name of Mr. Lane who was—taught design. And I liked him because design was like architecture.

MR. SILVERMAN: You're making the transition.

MR. CONGER: Everything [design -WC] was—every stage had to be perfected before you went on to the next stage. And I liked that idea. Parsing a concept into all of its parts and then perfecting each part as you move along.

MR. SILVERMAN: Now the education you got at the Art Institute is—a big question is whether being an artist can really be taught? But what do you think you did glean from the Art Institute particularly from those people or others? Technical skills or—

MR. CONGER: I really think I got the idea of excellence. That excellence was something to strive for and that you could always do better. And you were around a lot of competition. The teaching pedagogy or the curriculum was very structured in those days. We actually marched from class to class—

MR. SILVERMAN: You're kidding.

MR. CONGER: —in a group. It was nothing of this—well, I don't want to overstate it. But we would go in a group from one classroom or studio to the next. And you stayed with your group for the whole time and so you got to know your classmates pretty well. Both for good and bad. And you could size up the competition and, of course, I did that. And there were only one or two others that I really admired and I hung out with them.

MR. SILVERMAN: I was going to ask you who you hung out with at the Art Institute.



MR. CONGER: Well, one—my best friend there was a fellow by the name Robert Lewis who—I've got one of his paintings in the living room. He was an extraordinary draftsman and a very smart fellow. We actually became friends and remained friends even after he got out of the Army and we went to the studio together in the early '60s. But he eventually moved to St. Louis and I think he's had a career at a junior college. But he's had no career—for a while he had a pretty good career going with Richard Gray Gallery back in the early '60s. That was different. And then he just kind of dropped out. He was very jealous of competition.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well as they say, there aren't that many spaces, particularly in the post-war period. There aren't many places for people to be artists, other than the teachers. How many art positions are there?

MR. CONGER: He was an extraordinary draftsman and drawing was really the main thing there. You spent four hours a day drawing the figure every single day. And then the other classes were centered on composition or design, things of that sort—really the fundamentals.

MR. SILVERMAN: How about developing a voice? Did you feel that you were mainly getting your chops, getting the technical skills? Or do you feel like you got a sense of what it is you wanted to say in art?

MR. CONGER: No, no. I think—I remember this is my first year and the first year was devoted largely to fundamentals of composition, of color, but mainly drawing. Perceptual drawing was number one. And if you weren't any good at perceptual drawing, you were really kind of—

MR. SILVERMAN: You're in trouble.

MR. CONGER: —invited to not come back.

[They laugh.]

And you either learned to draw the figure well—maybe extraordinarily well—or you moved on to something else. And most days there was something else to turn to. There was a large component of the school devoted to industrial design.

MR. SILVERMAN: They still have industrial design.

MR. CONGER: Do they?

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah, there's a—

MR. CONGER: Those—that was a pretty substantial program. But I didn't have any interest in it and—no, —by that time I was totally immersed in high art, you know. And I wanted to draw like Rembrandt, if I could.

MR. SILVERMAN: Now was there—in terms of periods of time, I know Chicago, the museum, the Art Institute itself, and Chicago, by the way of collections, has a very strong influence of surrealists and things like that. Was that an influence? It sounds like the School of the Art Institute was very good from that in terms of its teaching models and—

MR. CONGER: I'd say the general attitude I got from the faculty was anti-abstract.

MR. SILVERMAN: That was where I was headed next. Was that it was pretty—I mean that was not—that was New York. This is Chicago.

MR. CONGER: It was anti-abstract. It was pro-narrative, pro-figure to the point of being bitter. I remember one day—well, because the classrooms were scattered throughout the museum in basements, attics, elsewhere—not in a separate school so you couldn't really go to class without wandering through some of the galleries so very frequently our teachers would take us up to the galleries to look at things and to examine things that were either in shows or the permanent galleries. And I remember one day in particular, there was a show—maybe it was an American show, which was the common yearly show that showed mainly New York trends. And there was a big Jackson Pollock, which I thought was fantastic. It was the first one I had seen in the flesh and a teacher just ridiculed it. You know, he couldn't say one thing good about it. And that was Briggs Dyer, as a matter of fact, who I actually admired. And he had a work of his own in the show, which was, by comparison—I don't want to be too critical—was a very timid little figure painting. [Laughs] Here was this magnificent Pollock, you know, just knocking me out. So I was conflicted by this. Although I was, at that point, I was still—I was not doing abstract art, other than in design.

MR. SILVERMAN: We're going to come to the University of New Mexico, where I think that probably changed quite a bit. But it sounds like, at that point, the Art Institute was a great way for you to get drawing and sort of technical skills and the ability to just sort of, as you say, excel at the technique.

MR. CONGER: And the pursuit of it—every day was totally intense, I recall it. I mean, there was no fooling around. And, in fact, the—you were expected to be there on-time. If you weren't in that classroom from the moment the class would begin, you were told to go home. It was almost military. And, of course, I loved it because it was so intense. You knew that when you walked in the door of the school every day, boy, today was 100 percent. You had to do 100 percent. And that nothing less would suffice.

MR. SILVERMAN: What got you to the University of New Mexico? What made you—

MR. CONGER: Well, once again, that was my association with Walter Yust, who had been friends with Raymond Jonson in Chicago when Raymond Jonson was here as a young man as—who did stagecraft or stage designs for what was called the Little Theatre, which had quite a history in Chicago down in the Fine Arts Building. And Walter Yust knew him in that capacity and he was telling me, "Well, you know, stage design is a good field."

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs]. This is another application.

MR. CONGER: "And the guy to talk to is Raymond Jonson. He's at the University of New Mexico." Well, what I saw was a word I could barely spell—Albuquerque—and pictures and travel magazines of this desert where you could see for hundreds of miles and it was cowboy land and it was Raymond Jonson. I mean, there was no other choice. I didn't even think about any other school. I applied. Of course, I was admitted because I had all A's at the School. And I remember telling Briggs Dyer that I was going to leave the Arts Institute and he was very disappointed. He was, in a way, sort of condescending to me. He said, "Well, you know, mostly people who come here really want to be artists." As if to say you're going to go to a university, you're giving up. You're giving up. And I have to admit that I was already interested in academics for the first time. I was interested in literature, philosophy, and history and, of course, I was getting nothing like that at the School. There was—at that time, only an after, end-of-day program at the extension school at the University of Chicago. So you got there totally exhausted and—

MR. SILVERMAN: You were at the University of Chicago before too?

MR. CONGER: When I was at the School, yes. But we went there for courses in English, composition and such.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, because I was—the question I had, just backing up—we'll get to New Mexico, because that's very important. I was curious about, when I was looking over your CV I forgot that you had gone to the U of C, or had some—

MR. CONGER: That was later.

MR. SILVERMAN: That was later. Oh, we'll get to that later, then. Cause that's a whole other—

MR. CONGER: No, the Art Institute, in those days, had an arrangement with the University of Chicago extension school—

MR. SILVERMAN: To get some academics?

MR. CONGER: —to provide basic minimum academics for those students who wanted to pursue a baccalaureate degree.

MR. SILVERMAN: Okay I got it.

MR. CONGER: But the school itself offered nothing—

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh so they didn't have—

MR. CONGER: —outside of studio and art history. And art history was basically [Kathleen] Blackshear—famous.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah that comes up in the—

MR. CONGER: But her approach was completely ahistorical. Didn't help at all if you needed to know something about what period followed which.

MR. SILVERMAN: And here's a lesson for educators. You became much more interested in academics when it was a means to an end. You get someone interested in doing something and then they realize they need to learn stuff about the history and about what others have done and all this other stuff, so you get a better relationship with schooling.

MR. CONGER: I became a great champion of history and tradition, which I think I first acquired at the school. Because of the museum was there and because of my early childhood of loving to walk through the galleries of

the museum. And I could hear the creaky floors. In those days it was all parquet floors and they creaked when you walked on them. It was great. And I even impressed other people then. I remember one time a man—I was in the gallery and I think we were looking at the *Grand Jatte* and this man began to ask me questions because he was interested in how this little kid was. And I guess I impressed him, whatever I said, because then he saw my mother and he went to tell her, "Now, you really should pay attention to this kid." And, of course, I don't really know what I said. But, at any rate, when I went, then, to the University of New Mexico, the first thing I did before I even went to a class was go over and introduce myself to Raymond Jonson. And he became a mentor.

MR. SILVERMAN: And bought a painting—that painting you had in the show. That was your first —show.

MR. CONGER: But he had just retired, so he was no longer teaching. That was a little bit of a disappointment but, you know, he made sure that we—he had his home and his gallery was on campus. And so, it was a small school in those days. Only four or five thousand students so it was easy to go over there on Sundays and talk to him and so forth.

MR. SILVERMAN: So he was kind of a mentor, too.

MR. CONGER: He was, yes. Yes. He was a wonderful guy. I mean, although he was scary. He was very arrogant and domineering. And I don't—but I was, I was very interested in his—he had his studio there and I was interested and he would show me how he worked and his technical process, which was very meticulous.

MR. SILVERMAN: Now, this is where you started, for your work, this is where abstraction began for you. And sort of your early paintings seem like—

MR. CONGER: But at first—but interestingly, at first I hated his work.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, really? Well, because you'd been indoctrinated by [laughs]—

MR. CONGER: So meticulous and so formal and so geometric. And of course, I was already keenly aware of what was going on in New York. I mean, I'd seen the magazines. I'd seen what was going on in some of the shows that were coming up in Chicago. So I was aware of Abstract Expressionism, and that's what I liked. And then when Elaine de Kooning showed up, that was it.

MR. SILVERMAN: That further won you over. And she was very supportive of your work, Elaine.

MR. CONGER: Very much so. She—I thought she was just spectacular because she was probably the first really smart, tough New York woman I had ever encountered and she was completely self-assured and walked around in leather skirts and boots and she knew her way around, so to speak. And she took a great interest in me and mentored me. You know, we became friends, really. And she made other friends, too, but she was that kind of a person. Through her I became aware of the intimate side of the New York art world, which, in a way, took away some of the idealism but also made it more real.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, for sure. And actually I—from what I remember probably in that interview, she had offered to help set you up some in New York if you wanted. Do you ever regret not doing that? I mean, it's kind of a path you could've taken.

MR. CONGER: Yeah. There've been a few things in my life that I could—I'm not sure if I would make the same decision again. I don't—t—that was one. I mean, where she really told me, "You have to come to New York." [... - WC] And of course, I fell completely unprepared for anything. I had no job. I had no income. I had nothing. And to go to New York and be a helpmate in somebody's studio—

MR. SILVERMAN: At best.

MR. CONGER: —and maybe learn to do a little plumbing. Fix sinks and do that—

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah, that's what I was thinking more of, yeah.

MR. CONGER: And I just didn't come from that kind of a background, I mean, it was just—

MR. SILVERMAN: You had higher goals.

MR. CONGER: Well, I mean it just was alien to my way of thinking. But it—I mean, the way we lived at home was we lived an affluent upper-middle class life. And all of a sudden we're talking about fixing sinks in somebody's studio.

MR. SILVERMAN: And living in a hole in the wall with no space, or—

MR. CONGER: I mean I don't know if it was—it was fear. I was just terrified. But I realize now that she probably would have helped me. She did put me in a show in New York and, as a matter of fact, today or soon in Albuquerque there's—in the—I don't know if I should say this or not—

MR. SILVERMAN: Hang on, let's go back because I actually, in terms of the University of New Mexico—in that Julie Karabenick interview, you called the "Transcendent and abstraction and viewed with fear," you called this the "Transcendent Painting Group," which is Raymond Jonson but also other people as well. But that quote caught my attention when I'd wondered what you meant by "The fear" [laughs].

MR. CONGER: I think the—I'm not the first to say this, but the landscape of New Mexico for a kid coming out of the Midwest, was overwhelming. All of a sudden the first thing I was aware of was there were no trees.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs] Just space.

MR. CONGER: It's just space. Just open space. And I remember being with a pal—we were on the roof of a building at the university and looking out to the West and he was pointing out an extinct volcano, which is still there, of course, obviously you can see it. And it was 200 miles away. And it just flabbergasted me that I could see something on the horizon that was 200 miles away.

MR. SILVERMAN: And you're—you're an urban rat. You're used to living in high rises and urban density—

MR. CONGER: So there was the awesomeness and the immensity of space.

MR. SILVERMAN: How about light, because that's important, too.

MR. CONGER: And the geologic time was—there was something fearsome about it that you—it's a cliché, I suppose, to recognize your tininess in the universe, but when you're a young person full of ambition and you're confronted by that enormity and the indifference of nature—

MR. SILVERMAN: That's a big realization.

MR. CONGER: And that's what some of that Kandinsky-esque abstraction seemed to get at —the spiritual kind of awe. I think that's what I meant by that.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah, we're going to come back to Kandinsky. Now, you mentioned space. How about light? Because for someone like Georgia O'Keefe or other artists from the Southwest, light as well as space is also important. Do you think that affected your work as well, the different sense of light?

MR. CONGER: It turned all the lights on.

MR. SILVERMAN: Turned the lights on. Color and palette?

MR. CONGER: In Chicago, everything was gray, as my friend Bob Lewis said. "Chicago has the color of a burnt out lightbulb."

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: And it was exactly right—that kind of grayness. And some of the painters in Chicago that I was aware of at that time, the so-called Monster Roster artists, were into gray and drab. It was probably a post-war anxiety—

MR. SILVERMAN: It was a mood—it was a mood as well. There was a certain amount of—

MR. CONGER: And the regionalists were also very much into this kind of nostalgic, gray moodiness that seems to permeate—you rarely see a really bright regionalist painting. Maybe a Thomas Hart Benton or maybe a Burchfield now and then—I mean, or a Hopper, but essentially, there's a—

MR. SILVERMAN: Modulating color at best. It's not really the bright colors—

MR. CONGER: It's an overcast world. But New Mexico—you go outside, you're squinting. I mean the brightness.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, the painting I'm thinking of—the one that Raymond Jonson bought—the one that we had in the Cultural Center show—is very bright. And it has a lot of Hans Hoffmann push-pull thing going on. Is that something you learned from Elaine or from school? Or is that—

MR. CONGER: Well, I got it from Elaine and I got it from Robert Mallory and they were very—these people were very up to date on everything that was going on and—plus they were full of stories as to how things happened,

how things really happened. And so it took a lot of the mystery out of it. But at the same time, it added—it gave one a sense of being an insider.

MR. SILVERMAN: So you had a feel for what it meant to be an artist all of a sudden —an artist in New York, which was at that point, the capitol of the art world pretty much.

MR. CONGER: For example, when Elaine spoke of Arshile Gorky, she talked about how he would put tracing paper over reproductions of famous paintings and he would trace, not the shapes, but the negative shapes all about. And then he'd end up with these very curious convoluted shapes.

MR. SILVERMAN: Did he use those for paintings?

MR. CONGER: And would use those—

MR. SILVERMAN: That sounds right but I didn't know that's how he worked. That's very interesting.

MR. CONGER: Well, whether--it's not the whole story, but it's part of the stimulus.

MR. SILVERMAN: No, but it's a technique that he used for good ideas.

MR. CONGER: You know, the invention of—instead of copying the outer contours, the convex contours, he copied the concave contours of the negative space.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs] Of negative spaces. That's wonderful. So you were in—how long were you in New Mexico? In Albuquerque? For—

MR. CONGER: Well, I was only there three years. But it was three full years. I stayed there—well, not every summer. I stayed there, I think, two summers. And during that time, I was mostly involved with Elaine de Kooning, Robert Mallory. I was really hanging out with them more than other students. I really didn't have many friends.

MR. SILVERMAN: You were a pretty private person, I take it.

MR. CONGER: Yeah. And I think, you know, I was kind of a lonely kid. I got a girlfriend and I was very devoted to her and she to me and she was a very, very smart girl in mathematics.

MR. SILVERMAN: I was going to ask what field. So, yeah, it was a different field entirely.

MR. CONGER: Yeah, very bright girl. And she was a very nice person. And so we were very tight so to speak. And that was my life there. It was painting, and Elaine de Kooning, and Robert Mallory and hanging out with them whenever I could. And that meant going to bars and everything. And Elaine would call me up at 10 o'clock and say, "Well, we're at this such-and-such a bar. Get over here!" Like command performance. Here was this drippy nosed kid sitting around the table with all these august people. People were coming in from Texas and Santa Fe and anything to hang around with Elaine.

MR. SILVERMAN: I'll bet.

MR. CONGER: And there was me. And I wasn't much of a player, so to speak, but I was there and I—

MR. SILVERMAN: You absorbed, I'm sure, lots of things from that.

MR. CONGER: Yeah, I did. And then Raymond Jonson was a mentor. And next door to Raymond Jonson lived a philosopher by the name of Archie Bahm. He taught philosophy. And I became very involved in philosophy. I almost—I was one course short of a major in philosophy as well as art. And I admired him tremendously.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's interesting, because that's part of that turnaround. Whereas before, education was a difficult process—

MR. CONGER: No, what I loved about it was that Mickey Mouse stuff was gone and we went right into the heavyweight stuff and I loved it. I was perfectly happy reading Montaigne, but I never read any of the little classics like *Black Beauty* or any—the Hardy Boys. I couldn't care less.

MR. SILVERMAN: You had very specific goals.

MR. CONGER: Well, I don't know if I did, but I became intrigued by—

MR. SILVERMAN: Your passion led you in directions that, whether they were goal-directed or not, led you sort of places.

MR. CONGER: Yeah, and then I had a friend that I rented a house with. His name was Randy Gresens and he was a geologist and he was a—like a lot of students were at that time, they were veterans. They were older than the usual college-aged kid. He was in his 20s. And he had completed his four years in the service and he was in school. So he was very serious. He was a very bright guy and I really admired him tremendously. And we would go off into the hills and do geological stuff.

[They laugh.]

You know, I'd hang out with him and collect fossils and do things like that.

MR. SILVERMAN: Now, that sounds like that could have maybe directly or indirectly—natural forms, things like that, that that influenced.

MR. CONGER: Oh, yeah, I loved all that. I loved the—and he was such a smart guy, but he was also a great billiard player. We would spend hours playing billiards together, and then one day I'll never forget, towards the end of the year, he was awarded Phi Beta Kappa and they had a fancy ceremony and he was invited. He didn't want to go. He wanted to play billiards. So we spent the afternoon playing billiards while—I was quite impressed that he would give up, you know, the award of Phi Beta Kappa ceremony—

MR. SILVERMAN: Over just playing billiards.

MR. CONGER: Yeah. Later, he became a professor at the University of Washington out west and then, unfortunately, he and his wife both were killed in an airplane, a private plane accident. Terrible.

MR. SILVERMAN: So back to the—since that area's just got some amazing geological formations—

MR. CONGER: Yeah, and Indian art.

[Crosstalk.]

The pottery. The things—I acquired a great love for that. I took courses in anthropology and went on digs. Until all of my—I have to say that the art intensity was less. As soon as I got to the school there, I realized that this was a softer place.

MR. SILVERMAN: More laid-back. No militaristic approach to art.

MR. CONGER: It wasn't do or die. It wasn't measuring up every student every day. You would draw the figure for four hours, then you'd look at the result. You'd go around the classroom. You'd mentally size up and write off.

MR. SILVERMAN: Who's leaving next?

MR. CONGER: Write them off. Like they don't count. That didn't happen anymore. It was more—and I remember being a little bit sorry that the intensity of the notion of excellence was not there. But instead, I got a richer education in the humanities.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, you got to see some different ways that artists work and schools work. Different ways of approaching education.

MR. CONGER: And I acquired a great interest—I mean, I was really interested in anthropology and geology and literature and philosophy. I got into it. Because it was all new to me.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. This is something that, earlier on, was more problematic, as I was saying. Now, when it was a lead toward something that you could integrate with your world, it became—

MR. CONGER: I became a better writer and I just became a better student all the way around.

MR. SILVERMAN: I also think that informs—we'll get to this in a while and maybe this tomorrow or the next day—but it informs your work. It's one thing—there are—I have friends who are artists who are sort of hermetically sealed. Their work is all about them and we can all name names like that. The work is all self-contained. It doesn't include—I know you have a lot of interests in the outside world—politics, literature, all the things that you're talking about. And those, I think, enrich your art. If you're just doing art about art, which is true, perhaps, of some of the AbEx things, it's very hard to have a sense of content or a sense of—it's hard to find a way in.

MR. CONGER: Well, Robert Mallory was an influence because he was a very erudite man. During the war, he had served in the intelligence services and he was—had been at MIT and he was an intellectual artist and he did write some and he did this highly experimental kind of sculpture with polyester resins and such. In those days it was very toxic and ultimately killed him, but he was an innovator. And a real intellectual and, of course, Elaine

was a great intellectual, too. I was very much attracted to that notion. And now that we're talking about it, I realize that really did form a model for me that I thought, "Well, that's the way to be, as an artist. You know, be an intellectual. Live"—

MR. SILVERMAN: — curiosity about the world and about everything.

MR. CONGER: "Live the life of the mind." And art is a part of that.

MR. SILVERMAN: Let's go back to something I was just saying about content coming into work and about your being interested in things. I was going to do something else first, but it seems to come up naturally, which is the notion of—you mentioned Kandinsky. And the notion—and this gets into the AbEx stuff that we're talking about in terms of your beginning to pick up that style—is there such a thing as pure abstraction? I mean, there's that whole Greenbergian thing and is it just with the object in front of you, or is there other stuff that seeps in? Personal—even Pollock, in addition to just having the physical course and how he worked through it, it's got to have stuff in there. He was psychoanalyzed blah blah blah, but I guess the question is: pure abstraction versus content. For me, abstraction, Kandinsky-like, very formal abstraction is very hard—or purer abstraction—is very hard to have the window into. It's hard to—

MR. CONGER: Well, it's very interesting that you said—I mean my whole career has been centered on this issue.

MR. SILVERMAN: I know. This is a big one. We were going to get to this eventually.

MR. CONGER: This is my whole career.

MR. SILVERMAN: This has been the balance of that.

MR. CONGER: And, if you look at Raymond Jonson, you see that he did a lot of landscape work, a lot of abstract work that is obviously landscape, symbolic, and this and that—typical of a lot of earlier American abstraction, which included a lot of reference to landscape, a lot of illusionistic devices. It wasn't until after World War I that you begin to see this clearing out of reference—

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: —in favor of pure geometry or whatever the case might be. Elaine, too, was wavering all the time. She would do paintings that were of—well, one of the series that she did down there a lot were bull fights. And, then, she did a whole series on, of all things—which I thought was really kind of trite, frankly—basketball players.

[They laugh.]

But they're wonderful paintings. And, then, of course, she got into portraiture. Now, I'm looking forward to seeing her show in Washington next month.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, yeah. That's coming up. Yeah.

MR. CONGER: But—so, she was abstract, and then she was referential—went back and forth, back and forth—

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, is there even something that's—it's very hard to empty out completely.

MR. CONGER: —and, of course, Willem de Kooning was the same way.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: None of these artists ever really abandoned the obviousness that everything looks like something else.

MR. SILVERMAN: It's—I think the human mind and emotions want to attach meaning to things, even if you have something that—look at the Rorschach patterns, or whatever—

MR. CONGER: At the time I hadn't articulated it, but in later years I think I did—that it's impossible for the human mind to confront something and not name it, even if it's an arbitrary name.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: By that I mean connected either to an emotion, or to some other thing that they know, or they invent. But, you cannot do it. You cannot retain an experience of something where it remains nameless or unknowable. You must give it meaning. And, of course that means that everything that has meaning—it's been attached to it. It doesn't have it inherently.

MR. SILVERMAN: Right.

MR. CONGER: It's something we attach to it.

MR. SILVERMAN: And, I think we'll get to this later, because I was going to get into that whole balancing act, which you say is your whole career.

MR. CONGER: That's my whole career.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. Which is that—

MR. CONGER: And, I think it's—this is why, in a way for—to get back to the idea of going to New York—

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: At the time I don't think I realized it, but after that I did, because I had another opportunity later—and we can discuss that later—of going to New York when I was offered a tenured position at NYU. And, I turned it down.

[They laugh.]

Which—

MR. SILVERMAN: Knowing more than you knew at the other point.

MR. CONGER: And, I'm not—and I don't say that with absolute conviction. Like, that was a dumb thing to do, maybe, but I did. And, partly it was because I was afraid that the peculiar flavor that inspired me in Chicago would be lost.

MR. SILVERMAN: It's interesting too, because you're—

MR. CONGER: And I know that's a scary—

MR. SILVERMAN: You don't fit in—we're going to get to this later too. You're an outlier. You don't exactly fit—just like Evelyn—you don't exactly fit into either the Monster Roster, or later Imagists. You don't exactly fit into most of the prevailing trends in Chicago. And, yet, you certainly don't fit into the New York trends either.

MR. CONGER: But, I do feel that what I have contributed if anything—maybe it's a very modest contribution, but I do think I have contributed something about abstraction that is different, but hasn't occurred elsewhere, except maybe more recently, where there seems to be a much broader embrace of abstraction that is wavering between figuration and abstraction, and employs all kinds of referential hints. But I was doing that in the '60s.

MR. SILVERMAN: So this is a big—this is your career. This is a big theme for us. We'll get back to that when we talk more about the work.

MR. CONGER: That is a big theme. And that's rooted in the—in Chicago Surrealism, and even in the Imagist work.

MR. SILVERMAN: Which also has a strong feel—I mean some of it is fairly abstract. There are people that were fairly abstract, but if you look at Gladys Nilsson, or you look at people that did things that are abstraction, there very based in figure and content, very much based in a narrative sensibility, which is a whole story too. Let's go back to—I think we—you were done with University of New Mexico, and you went to the University of Chicago next.

MR. CONGER: No—well, I did, but not—there is—a four year period.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, so there was a time lapse between that?

MR. CONGER: I came back to Chicago—

MR. SILVERMAN: [Affirmative.]

MR. CONGER: too scared to go to New York, because I had no support or anything. I got home. My mother had already died, a few years earlier. My father was—had remarried. And, I remember him meeting me at the door, and he said, "Well, where are you going to live and what are you going to do?"

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, yeah.

[They laugh.]



MR. CONGER: And, I was given one week. And, he still had an apartment, even though he now had moved in with his new wife in her apartment. He had an apartment that he was renting—or about to rent. He said I could stay there for a week. And—which was the place on Barry Avenue. And, I stayed there for a week. And, during that week I had to get a job and find a place to live. And, I did.

MR. SILVERMAN: Is this the Montgomery Ward copywriter job?

MR. CONGER: I got the Montgomery Ward copywriter job.

MR. SILVERMAN: You know that I worked there too? We share that. I actually had a brief interim. This wasn't my panic moment, but I—when I was between jobs I worked at the same—I was an entry level copywriter at the same place—that building that was by the Gallery District. It wasn't that far from there.

MR. CONGER: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

MR. SILVERMAN: That—I think Joe Mantegna's brother worked there at that time.

MR. CONGER: No kidding.

MR. SILVERMAN: You didn't see him there. No?

MR. CONGER: I wouldn't even know him.

MR. SILVERMAN: I'm not sure I would either. I'm not sure if that was apocryphal, but—

MR. CONGER: Well, I got the job by accident, because I went—I was terrified. I didn't know what to do. I went to an employment agency, and they asked me about, "Well, you had a college degree." And, remember, in those days only 10 percent of the population had a college degree.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, yeah. That's a good, yeah.

MR. CONGER: That's a big—

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. A big difference.

MR. CONGER: A big factor. You could have a college degree in tiddlywinks, but you had a college degree.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: And, so, if you had a degree in the humanities in those days it wasn't looked upon as some kind of crippling blow.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs]. You were literate. That was a sign.

MR. CONGER: You were literate. And, the man asked—he discovered I was interested in painting, or had majored in painting. Well, then he was not interested. But, he did say to me if I—he did ask me if I could type.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh. I didn't have—I don't think I typed for this—

MR. CONGER: They asked me if I could type, and I said—I thought, "Well, I've never typed a"—I always had a girlfriend do it.

[They laugh.]

And my girlfriend Diane who was with me most of the time in New Mexico was—she could do this in an instant.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's because women had to learn that for their fallback position at that point in time. Yeah.

MR. CONGER: And—but I said to myself, "I can read. Therefore I can type."

[They laugh.]

Relying on my philosophy—simple syllogism.

MR. SILVERMAN: I don't know about that, but yeah—[laughs].

MR. CONGER: If there's an R there, and I can hit the R, then I get an R. And I said, "Yes. I can type." And, he said, "Well, go see so and so." So, I wander around until I find so and so, and he talks to me. And, he—I'm a nice

young man, you know, in a suit and tie, and so on. And, so, he has me talk to somebody else, and before I know it I have a job as a copywriter, and—which didn't require any more typing than plinking.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. I don't remember doing much typing, because I can't type very much either.

MR. CONGER: You didn't have to type fast.

MR. SILVERMAN: No. No.

MR. CONGER: Because what I had to do—I had to come up with simple, like one paragraph explanations, and descriptions of products—mostly hardware products. Meaning a refrigerator, stove—things like that. Air conditioners, tires, and it was an intensely boring job.

MR. SILVERMAN: I do remember that. I don't remember much, but I just remember it—

MR. CONGER: Because your options were very few. There were a certain style to it, and there were certain phrases you had to repeat over and over.

MR. SILVERMAN: It was pretty mechanical as I remember. Yes.

MR. CONGER: Like, "Buy now and save," was the—

[They laugh.]

Every single ad had to conclude with that sentence. And, then, of course, it all to fit a certain visual form. Well, I did that and then I rented a studio. I worked in my little apartment, which was on Deming Place. And, then, I rented a studio and I did that for two years, and then I was so bored I applied for their management training program.

MR. SILVERMAN: At Montgomery Ward?

MR. CONGER: Yes.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, really. You were—

MR. CONGER: And I was instantly accepted.

[They laugh.]

On what grounds I have no idea, because they gave me an aptitude test, and I remember reading it and there were questions like, "Do you like to do this or that? Do you prefer to be this,"—and my answer was, "Sometimes." You know, I'm sometimes this and sometimes that. And, I thought, "Well, the hell with this." But no, I got the job, and they wanted to send me to Woodstock, IL to be the Assistant Store Manager. And, I was terrified of this, and I had applied for another job in the meantime at the Skil Corporation, a power tool company.

MR. SILVERMAN: I know them. Sure.

MR. CONGER: And, they called me in just a few days before I was to show up in Woodstock, and within a day they had offered me a job. And, I took it. My father was absolutely beside himself with anger. He just couldn't see why I would do such a stupid thing when I could have become a manager of a retail store—

MR. SILVERMAN: Was your fear of that just being swallowed up by it and never coming up again for air? I mean just becoming a—

MR. CONGER: Yeah. In Woodstock, I didn't know where it was.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah, that too.

MR. CONGER: And, I was doing paintings on my own. Well, I got to Skil, and it turned out to be a pretty interesting job, because it was a very diverse advertising job. We did writing. We did TV. We did all kinds of things. But, again, I realized this was not for me, and one day my boss said you have to decide what you want to do—be an artist or do this, because they knew I had—and I was accepted in one of the shows at the Art Institute, one of the Chicago and Vicinity shows.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, yeah. That's a long tradition.

MR. CONGER: And, then I met Kathy. And, one day, during our courtship—and we were already getting serious and I told her that I just couldn't do this job anymore. I had to quit this job and I had to go to graduate school,

and change my life. And, I thought, "Well, this will be the end of this relationship."

[They laugh.]

Because she knew me as this young executive. And, I was doing very well. I was making good money. And, I was saving money, even.

MR. SILVERMAN: And, this is at best an unknown, not only the school, but the future as an artist.

MR. CONGER: Yes. And, she said, "Fine. Do it, and I'll go work as a nurse and we'll do it."

MR. SILVERMAN: Wow. So, you were at U of C, and the work you were doing there—that's what interested me in terms of comparison of schools. I forgot that it was later, but I think of the U of C as being sort of a very conceptualist, conceptually based kind of school, and—at least now, or more recently—at that point. And the work you were doing was very—this is where the tangled muscles and tendons come in, in terms of your abstraction.

MR. CONGER: I was doing both figurative and abstract work.

MR. SILVERMAN: Parallel?

MR. CONGER: I would do—yes. I would do a figure painting and then I would do an abstract painting. I was back and forth, back and forth. And, the work that I was—that I was having any little bit of success with was the abstract work at the Chicago and Vicinity show, and so on. And, then I had another show at a place called George Williams College, which was in Chicago in those days. And—but—so, I was conflicted, but the U of C in those days was notable for its absence of structure.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh. That's very different.

MR. CONGER: There was only the Midway Studios, and you were given a studio and were told to do something interesting.

MR. SILVERMAN: Okay. So, it's very different than it is now. Yeah. Okay.

MR. CONGER: Yeah, absolutely. And, mainly it was painting. Some sculpture. Virginio Ferrari was there, brought in by Albert Pick, and installed at the Midway Studios. And, he was a nice fellow, and he did sculpture. And, he taught. Then, Ruth Duckworth was brought in and I became—we became good friends. And, then, there were mainly part time painting faculty—Seymour Rosofsky.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, yeah.

MR. CONGER: But, mainly, there—I was left by myself. There was no instruction as such. I just had a studio, and did work, and once in a while somebody would come by and look at it.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's surprising given what it's turned into in terms of—

MR. CONGER: Yes. And, then, the structure came in art history. And, I loved the art history. I just loved it. It was so intense, and it reminded me in the way of the School of Art Institute in its intensity. There was only one way to do it, and that's excellence.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: Nothing else would count. And, so, it was very, very intense, and I became acquainted with a level of inquiry and research and knowledge that I hadn't ever experienced before and I—

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, that's what U of C is known for, too—it's intellectual rigor. That's what I was getting at. Even in the Art Department, carried over into the arts, which are very practical—

MR. CONGER: Just really intense and I—

MR. SILVERMAN: But, at that point—

MR. CONGER: Kathy was working as a nurse, so that meant she had to be at work at 6:00 o'clock in the morning, or 6:30. So, I would be the first one on campus. I'd be the first one in the library every day. And I would have the place to myself—the art library—for two or three hours before anybody else showed up. Then I would go to my studio. And I really immersed myself in it. And that was—led to the funniest experience I had there. And that was the Hyde Park Art Center.

MR. SILVERMAN: Those were the early days of the Hyde Park Art Center. Yeah.

MR. CONGER: The first show of the so-called Imagists—

MR. SILVERMAN: Don Baum's?

MR. CONGER: Don Baum's show of—one of the very first shows. I forget what it was titled.

MR. SILVERMAN: *Who Needs Art?* Is it *Who Needs Art?* Or something like that, or—

MR. CONGER: 1965, or 4—in there.

MR. SILVERMAN: I don't know. Anyways—

MR. CONGER: So, I went over to the Hyde Park Art Center to look at this show that I'd heard about. I thought, "What in the hell is this stuff?" You know—ice cream cones.

[They laugh.]

Silly crap. I just thought it was the most ridiculous stuff I'd ever seen. And, later, I realized why I felt that way—because, when I left the world of advertising, I left behind the whole world of popular culture. I was completely turned away from anything that had to do with mass culture, popular culture. This was the marriage of intellectual life at the U of C with my earlier fascination and devotion to the high art of art in the museums. That was me. And, philosophy, and literature—

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, New York had a parallel in terms of, you know—before art Imagists there was Pop Art which was big in New York, but that was not something—

MR. CONGER: Yes, but I could care less about Pop Art.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. That wasn't your avenue.

MR. CONGER: And, Robert Mallory, and I exchanged some letters in those days. And he was appalled by it too, and the turnover in New York was very sudden, almost in a matter of a year everything was gone, and Pop Art was in.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: And, people like him were shoved to the side. So, I was aware of all of that, but what I—what had stuck with me though about the Imagists, was they—the design, the color, the wiggly line, and later that—well, not long later, but not long afterwards became a part of my sensibility.

MR. SILVERMAN: So, that's an interesting question. I guess we can get into now, too, since you were at the Art Institute—you were more—at the time when you were at the Art Institute it was more Monster Roster sort of influence, if there was any, or what was there?

MR. CONGER: I would say American Regionalism, and narrative art. Maybe the Monster Roster, but I don't know if I was aware of it. Surrealism was still a dominant force.

MR. SILVERMAN: Big influence. So, now you're—you've got the impact of the Imagists. And, that was a big thing for Chicago—certainly at U of C area, too, by way of Don Baum and that became something that was sort of a signature style for Chicago. And, yet, you're on the outside of that kind of. You're friends with some of these people and you actually—you know them.

MR. CONGER: Well, I didn't know them at the time.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, not then, but later.

MR. CONGER: But, I—they were a little bit younger than me.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. This is another generation.

MR. CONGER: And, they would wear these outlandish costumes. I remember Karl Wirsum would show up with neck ties down to his ankles, and clown shoes. And they did everything they could to disassociate themselves from notions of high art. And you're talking to a guy who was on campus with the gargoyles and the rusticated architecture.

MR. SILVERMAN: It's a different world.

MR. CONGER: And high art and German, and French, and—you know. It just didn't—it didn't even register to me. I just thought it was ridiculous. But, I did come to greatly admire their formal expertise. And, it reminded me of the rigor and the excellence that came out of the training of the school of the Art Institute.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, there's a couple—no—

MR. CONGER: These artists were all expert craftsmen.

MR. SILVERMAN: Definitely. Look at Jim Nutt in terms of the composition, in terms of technique—unbelievable.

MR. CONGER: That was something you noticed right away—

MR. SILVERMAN: You could appreciate that excellence.

MR. CONGER: —and, that appealed to me, and I just wanted to separate myself from that—from the subject matter and the content without giving up that formal rigor and kind of—which, of course, gives the—gives Chicago Imagism a kind of melancholy seriousness. It elevates it above the ordinary.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, there's a sort of disconnect between—there's a certain kind of very serious sense of style and composition, and the technique. It's—they haven't abandoned that. But, it had something to do—I think—I grew up then, so I mean I—in the art world the influence of the '60s and '70s—there's not just a psychedelic color in the—there's comic book art. There's Robert Crumb. There's that whole breakdown of pop—of high art and popular culture, and all that coming—seeping into our world. There was a real revolution going on in terms of that, even if you were on the sidelines of that, it's hard not to be influenced in this world.

MR. CONGER: Well—but, remember. I was a little bit older, and I came from a earlier—actually, even though I was only maybe five or six years older, it was a different generation.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: I was much more a part of the post-war generation of seriousness, of existentialism, of angst. The abstract expression, the—the spiritual yearning. That—I was more of that than I was of popular culture. And, then, my experience with advertising—I just wanted to get as far away from that as I possibly could.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, that's capitalism too. That's a whole other—that's marketing—

MR. CONGER: Yeah. I just had a distaste now of it, and I rejected it, and I thoroughly rejected it. And, I've never really gone back to it.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, it's interesting too, because there's a difference between the way the Imagists—there's a difference between Pop Art and Imagists, I think because of the—and there's also between some of the things that are happening now, in terms of the sense of irony—a lot of the Imagists, I think really loved—you know. Look at Ray Yoshida. They loved some of the junky [stuff -WC]—

MR. CONGER: [Affirmative.]

MR. SILVERMAN: —the downside and the—not toys, as I collect toys like Karl—there's not just toys, but popular culture, comics, imagery. Some of that stuff—it wasn't meant with irony, which is what a lot of people have taken up, and it wasn't meant to be critical.

MR. CONGER: It was a pure delight in the honesty of it, but at that time, I don't think I was looking that close. And, I recognize it later—not long later. I mean, soon afterwards.

MR. SILVERMAN: It's easy to misread, because it looks—

MR. CONGER: And, it became, really, a part of my work. And, that's why now I do feel a certain affinity for the formal approaches of the Imagists, if not the content as such. But, what you call a kind of embrace of the honesty of it, I see a melancholy. There's a kind of recognition of man's inability to truly comprehend what he's up against. And, so, I think—yeah. There's that. So, I really came around to admiring it, without ever wanting to be a part of that.

MR. SILVERMAN: It's interesting too—

MR. CONGER: I always wanted to do it with abstraction.

MR. SILVERMAN: And, you've managed to—just like they have lots of content. Their work is exploding with content.

MR. CONGER: Yeah.

MR. SILVERMAN: Your work is unique in that it has a real formal rigor, and yet, there's lots of stuff of the world seeping in. That's what I wanted to talk about a little—

MR. CONGER: To me, there's a lot of content in my work, and although it's open ended.

MR. SILVERMAN: I was going to talk—that's the next topic I have, is about content in work, and about narrative versus ambiguity. You prefer some ambiguity, which is interesting, because sometimes that can be frustrating, because people aren't exactly sure what you're getting at. You don't want there to be a clear message, or a didactic point. And, yet—

MR. CONGER: I don't really know what it is. I mean I don't have, even, the—all of the thoughts in mind that a shape or a color might evoke. I mean, it's personal for me, but then, when someone else looks at it, it becomes their personal experience. So, it has to do with their subjectivity as much as mine, if not more. And, so, I don't really try to steer viewers to any particular conclusion about what I paint. Although—

MR. SILVERMAN: You add titles.

MR. CONGER: —I do think that everything—that anything I do is going to evoke reference.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's what we talked about.

MR. CONGER: And, that reference becomes—is both public, cultural, and private, and subjective. And, we manipulate that kind of information and create meaning for things. And, the other thing I try to do often is to turn around the usual way in which we think about shapes and colors, and so forth. We tend to think that, "Well, a circle could stand for, or evoke, a head or a planet, or a dish." Something either profound or mundane—possibly both. But, it also could suggest something of—a dish could suggest a circle in a painting.

[They laugh.]

MR. SILVERMAN: It could go either way. Sure.

MR. CONGER: It could work the other way around, and that sometimes we like to have it both ways. Whereas—so that what happens in a painting is like what happens in real life. It's not—

MR. SILVERMAN: It's a parallel world.

MR. CONGER: —it's not that what happens in real life is like a painting. It's the other way around. For example, one of my—one of the paintings that was in my show at the Cultural Center was called *Lion Act*.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh. Sure. I was going to get to that. I had questions about that—

MR. CONGER: And, the idea of where the lion act, or the performer sticks his head in the lion's mouth. A defiance of death. But, that's really like a metaphor for the artist.

MR. SILVERMAN: I was going to get into the artist as a sort of circus master. That's coming up soon.

MR. CONGER: And the art—and art too is like sticking its head into the jaw of history. You make a work of art, and you are really—

MR. SILVERMAN: You're in.

MR. CONGER: —taking a big risk. It's either going to get its head chopped off, or it's going to survive it. And, we hope it survives it, but there's no guarantee. Otherwise there wouldn't be any act, right?

[They laugh.]

So, it's that. It works both ways.

MR. SILVERMAN: I'm going to come to that later, because I had some questions about that series, but I guess—you know. One of the things for me—oh, I was going to ask you about titles. You do—you give points of—you give a little navigational tools. I know sometimes there are specific references to things that you encountered, or sometimes, like the Nelson Algren one, *To the East Were Flowing Waters*—the opening line of the Algren book. So, in that case, that was a commission piece, correct?

MR. CONGER: Yeah. Well, the way that happened was I was brought over to this apartment of Lake Shore Drive in the Mies Building—

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: And, they said they wanted me to do a painting. And, they showed me the wall where it would go. And, I sat there, and I—"Okay." And, I looked out the window, and, of course, you have Lake Michigan in front of you, and whole horizon. And, of course, I knew that behind this building was the city. And, then I—being a fan of Chicago history and such, I just remembered that Nelson Algren had written this book, *City on the Make*, the same year that Mies completed that building, 1950—thereabouts. And, so, I thought that was interesting—and then I said to him, "I'd like to do something that connects the two somehow."

And, then, I looked at the book and I remembered the first line, "To the east were the moving waters as far as the eye could see." And, I thought, "What a beautiful line as an opening of this poem." And, then, he said, "To the west—the prairie." I can't remember the rest of the sentence, but the prairie and the moving grasses and such. So, I thought of this painting as being half way between the east, of course—the moving waters as far as the eye could see, and what was behind us, the wind and the swaying grasses, and the city itself. So, I thought of the painting as an intermediate.

MR. SILVERMAN: So, the painting is between the two—the sort of—

MR. CONGER: It's an intermediate zone where they're passing back and forth. So, it has a lot of grid work, almost like—

MR. SILVERMAN: There's a lot of—for people that are, obviously, not going to be able to see it with the same time necessarily—but, there's a lot of indication of—windows are very big. We'll get to that in your work.

MR. CONGER: Windows, and steel structures, and skies and water.

MR. SILVERMAN: So, that's another question in terms of content. Your work could easily be called landscape abstraction in a way.

MR. CONGER: Oh, yeah.

MR. SILVERMAN: A lot of your work is landscape based, at least—

MR. CONGER: Yeah, absolutely. I've often wondered why. I get a little angry. I mean some—there have been some interesting shows out there of abstract landscape. I've never asked—been asked to participate.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, that seems to be like a major theme of your work.

MR. CONGER: And, I think a lot of my work is pretty obvious about landscape. And—yeah.

MR. SILVERMAN: There's a sense of place, and the Chicago architecture, which is just so wonderful.

MR. CONGER: Yes. And—but, it's a mixture of place and figure, which goes back to what—my interest in the figure, and anatomy, and so forth—tendons and muscles.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. I mentioned that [inaudible.]

MR. CONGER: There's something about the shapes that are—I mean they strike me too as being like muscles moving around.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, there's that sort of—there's some quote or other about the muscle—is that—that's not Nelson Algren, but there's that sense of Chicago, of having that sort of muscular—

MR. CONGER: That was Carl Sandburg.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's Carl Sandburg. Thank you. I knew that was coming from somewhere, but, yeah. And actually sometimes the content in your work—well, it has a lot of sense of architecture. I guess I—something else I wanted to ask you that—we'll come to the things I was just thinking of, but I wanted to ask you how you make the transitions. You went from the sort of tendons and muscles, and you then went to something that's more hard-edged geometric shapes. What—do you sort of go down a path and you exhaust it, and then you move on, or how do you make—

MR. CONGER: Well, I think there're probably several themes in my work that I come upon over the years, and I tend to go back and forth among them. Some are more organic. Some are more—I mean the organic category is one, where things are—there's a lot of circular whipping lines, and bending shapes. And, then, other times there's almost an overdone rigidity of geometry. And, I think—I hate to admit it, but I think I'm partially, or strongly motivated by a skepticism of my own impulses.

MR. SILVERMAN: Really?

MR. CONGER: Yeah. That—if I do a painting. It's like I don't really trust it that much, and I want to—I have to—

MR. SILVERMAN: You need some distance?

MR. CONGER: —I have to make sure that it's—that it's authentic. Because part of—well, it's true—the whole process of making art is a matter of doubt. Right? You do something and then you—

MR. SILVERMAN: Some people just spew it out, and don't have any critical facility. But, you have enough of a critical facility. You don't—you doubt everything you do.

MR. CONGER: Everything I do I doubt and that leads sometimes to—reworking—

MR. SILVERMAN: I was going to get to that and the studio practice—how do you decide when something—

MR. CONGER: Two days ago, I took a painting I did five years ago and sanded it down.

MR. SILVERMAN: Wow [laughs].

MR. CONGER: It's on wood, so it could take it. And, I sanded it down. I'm doing it over.

MR. SILVERMAN: So, you reassess your past even, or even recent past, but it turns—

MR. CONGER: Well, because if the paintings are hanging around the studio—

MR. SILVERMAN: They stay there too long you—

MR. CONGER: —they're vulnerable.

[They laugh.]

MR. SILVERMAN: That'll come in. It's funny because they're so beautifully composed and so beautiful, and yet it's funny to hear the amount of doubt coming out of you. I've heard this before from you. It's funny, because so—what I'm asking in terms of is like, how do you decide when you're done with something. Is it you just—you decide it's all failure? It's just—you're just bored with it? Or, is it time to just come up with a new idea?

MR. CONGER: It's a very subjective thing. You get to the point where I think the painting doesn't need me anymore, that I—there's not something about it that's nagging me anymore. It's tired of me. It's done with me. It's telling me to go home and it's doing fine on its own, and just—you can go now. [Inaudible.] It doesn't need my nurturing. But, I do—after I finish a painting it does hang around for a month, and I do find little things that I go back to, and little persnickety things. Maybe I'm over doing that, but I like the work to be really independent of me. As I said, "The work doesn't need me anymore." But, I like it to be independent too of the viewer. Now, I know that's counterintuitive in a way—

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. I'm wondering about that.

MR. CONGER: —in terms of Modernism, or—we think of works of art as, sort of, engaging the viewer to paint it. Almost vicariously. An Impressionist painting you can almost put every dab in yourself. And, that's a large part of the experience of the work. And, that's certainly true of Picasso, and Cubism. He wanted people to participate in the creation of form by leaving things unfinished, or possibilities of connection, and so forth. But, in my work the tendency is for the work to be completely resolved and finished, and it doesn't need you. It doesn't need me. It's completely self-sustaining.

MR. SILVERMAN: It's got a formal exactitude. You've talked about this already. It's got formal—not just composition, but color. Everything is worked out. It's like that puzzle. It's almost like the draftsmen skills that you were talking about.

MR. CONGER: Yeah. It goes back to the architecture. Yeah. I hadn't really thought about that, but that's true. And, it goes back to that, and to the model airplane. It doesn't need me anymore. You know. It's completely self-sustaining. And, the emotional connection is the yearning that one has for that participation. You yearn for it—the desire for something that—and the emotional engagement with something that resists you.

MR. SILVERMAN: So, you're almost putting up a barrier in a way.

MR. CONGER: Yeah. I've heard psychiatrists say that to me.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, really. I didn't mean [laughs] to come on that heavy, but in a way you're admitting to that



in a sense that that's intentional, almost—

MR. CONGER: Well, not—it's not people who—but, one friend for many years was John Gedo, a very famous psychoanalyst—

MR. SILVERMAN: I think we borrowed something from—didn't we? I think yes.

MR. CONGER: —who once asked me, you know, "Why do you have all these fences and bars and everything to keep everybody out?"

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, there's that metaphor, too. There's that layering. We'll get to that more formally, but there's a sense of a space and point of entry through. I don't mean it physically, but there's also physically—

MR. CONGER: Yeah. You climb over fences, and everything to get in. And—

MR. SILVERMAN: That can be seen as—

MR. CONGER: —it's true that there're all these barriers, and that—it may be true that there is like an inner psychological state of vulnerability that I am protecting with my paintings. I don't know. And, I'm perfectly open to that. I don't—

MR. SILVERMAN: You don't come in with that as a goal. That's, obviously not something intentionally—

MR. CONGER: No. And, it doesn't concern me, but I wouldn't deny it. It seems plausible. Because there is a kind of an element to making art that is—you might say damage control.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: You know. Where you are repairing yourself.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, there are a lot of people that look at art—the process of making art is very therapeutic, that you do art because you almost have to do it, not because of the career aspects, or other—there are a lot of reasons to make art, but—

MR. CONGER: Well, there have been very—I read this fellow Winnicott, who developed a whole psychological philosophy based on the notion of what he called "the transitional object," where infants go through a period where an object is either a part of them, or not part of them. And, they finally separate these things from themselves as objects in the world, and that's their first real encounter in realizing that they are not—the world is simply not a projection of their own self.

MR. SILVERMAN: That whole thing about object attachment is a whole other subject, being a collector, and a curator. We can get in—that's a whole long conversation. I—

MR. CONGER: See, I don't deny any of that. If someone were to say that to me as a serious interpretation, I'd say, "Fine. You know. That's fine. The work is open. I'm a human being, and I'm not trying to hide anything. Otherwise, I wouldn't be a painter."

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, let's—I was going to do this later, but I'll come back to this. Sometimes there's some very personal content. The painting—what is it called? *Flossy's*—

MR. CONGER: It's right here. I would never sell it.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's interesting, because that was about the death of your mom. And there I was going to ask it in relationship to color. There—and sometimes color really informs a lot of the feel of your paintings. There's ones that are very brightly colored, the circus ones. That one's a darker one. It does have a window, but I notice that the window in there is actually a cloud in there. It's kind of a blocked off—

MR. CONGER: Yeah. It's a cloudy sky. Yeah.

MR. SILVERMAN: It's a blocked off one. So, there's an emotion feel to that.

William Conger: Yeah. Very tragic. That was a very tragic ending to her life. I was—we had a summer home in Wisconsin, and this summer home was on a lake, and it was—there was a hill in front of it. So, you had to go down a hill in order to get to the dock, and the water. And, she was very ill that summer, and I would take her for a boat ride in the evenings. She liked to go for a boat ride. So, I—and put-put around the lake in a small—very slowly. She didn't like to go fast in the motor-boat. So, it was one of the things I did every evening and was nice. And, this one evening she—I was down. had the boat ready, waiting for her to come down the hill and she fell

and she rolled down the hill, and that was—she didn't die that night, but the next day.

MR. SILVERMAN: So, *Flossy's Night* refers to that?

MR. CONGER: Just the ill—her last illness as a nightmare.

MR. SILVERMAN: So, it's sort of more metaphoric—sort of the night of the—

MR. CONGER: Yeah. A terrible tragedy of illness. And, so, it was really—I called it *Flossy's Night*. Meaning her darkness.

MR. SILVERMAN: So—and, that is a window in—or no. That's probably a bad choice of words. A little more pun than I wished. But, that's an avenue into the personal content, which if you were looking at—you would sense from that painting that it's a darker painting. And, it may not be real clear exactly what's going on, but you hint at—so, you're no quite—contrary to what your therapist friends were saying [laughs]. You aren't always blocking off the personal content. That's a very personal painting—

MR. CONGER: But, sometimes, I'm not even aware of it. I mean it wasn't until my friend John Gedo, and his wife Mary Gedo, who was an art historian who took a lot of interest in me in the '70s and '80s—until they pointed out to me certain things, I wasn't even aware that I had sublimated them into this kind of abstract composition.

MR. SILVERMAN: You gave it—

MR. CONGER: I mean I did title the painting.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. I was going to say. You did give it the title, so you must have known that it was about that.

MR. CONGER: But, there certain shapes in the painting that are reminiscent of the siding that was on the house that didn't even occur to me that I had done apparently subconsciously, and things of that sort. And, that is true of a lot my work, I think. And, now, I just accept it, whatever it might be. I realize that if I feel a certain compulsion to put something in I may not really want to think about it that much. Maybe I think about it just in formal terms, like, "Well, this fits."

MR. SILVERMAN: It works. It solves the problem, but—

MR. CONGER: But, I realized at the same time there are probably ten thousand things that would work, but I feel compelled to do that.

MR. SILVERMAN: But, there's a reason why that one came in and is—there's something else—

MR. CONGER: And I pretended, "Well it's only because it works," but I don't really—I don't really know fully.

MR. SILVERMAN: So, when you look back on the work do you often reexamine things from a long time back and see it completely differently? In other words, if you looked back at let's say the work you did 10 years or 20 years ago do you—can you see it more objectively, now? Or do you see some of the things like the Gedo's were seeing, in terms of things—the things that weren't apparent to you when you were making it? Do you have some distance from the work—

MR. CONGER: Well, sometimes. And, other times no. I'm not—I'm more interested in not examining that too closely, because I feel, "Well, that's my personal subjectivity, and what really matters is how a work of art evokes other people's narratives, and how it relates to culture as a whole, of which I'm only a tiny part. I'm like merely the actor."

MR. SILVERMAN: And if they—this is somewhat the exception—the piece that—the *Flossy's Night* piece, because other pieces have personal content, but it's not nearly so obvious. Usually there's some reference—often there's some reference to place, or to situations, or there's a certain physicality. Let's get back to the balancing act though, because I think I wanted to talk a little bit about the circus paintings, where you talk about the metaphor of the artist.

MR. CONGER: [Affirmative.]

MR. SILVERMAN: There's a balancing act that's always very interesting to me between flatness and the illusion of space, which is something you very much deal with. And, between the realness of it being an object—and, you know, there's whole Greenbergian thing, which you came out of I know. Or, at least, you responded to [laughs] which is, you know, looking at it as, "It's a painting. Darn it. It's a 2D thing, even it's got a slash in it like Fontana, or whatever." It's physically in front of you and it's there, but it's also—it evokes things. It's also—it's an illusion

of—in terms of content and in terms of something in the real world. That's been—that's the theme of your—and, the circus paintings are very brightly colored, so they're obviously influenced by that sort of sensibility, that—

MR. CONGER: I'm doing that again now—

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, really?

MR. CONGER: —for some reason. My newest paintings are very bright—almost too bright. But, I don't know why. I'm not any happier than I ever was, but—I think one of the things about illusionism and painting that I'm interested in is that there's always the paradox in my work that a shape or a color has a certain illusionistic reading, that you can perceive it as if it were something else. It's not just a painted stripe, but it could be a bar, or it could be a rope, or it could be a line in space somewhere else. It could be like the cables of the streetcars I remember as a kid on Broadway down where the—

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh. There's that streetcar piece. I was going to ask you about that.

MR. CONGER: The network of lines that form the electrical cables for the streetcar over the streets is just such a vivid thing in my head that I think some of these lines come from that. Or, struts when I was building model airplanes, like little balsa wood things. I mean something very stupid and simple. Or, it could be very profound, but it's always a suggestion. It could be what it is, but it could be something else. So, allusionism—but, then, you can take an extra step with allusionism, and you can make the whole painting—again, like a window that contains an illusionistic space. So, everything in it is really something else. But, I contradict that by normally having shapes that are very crisp, hard edge—

MR. SILVERMAN: There's some modeling on some of them.

MR. CONGER: Yeah, but it's contradictory.

MR. SILVERMAN: It's like a push and pull. It's almost like there's—you got two things going on—

MR. CONGER: And, people would criticize me saying, "Well, since you're showing this shape bending in space, why don't you fuzz the edge and do it like an atmosphere,"—but what I want to do is contradict that so that it comes back to—

MR. SILVERMAN: So you're aware of it.

MR. CONGER: —a kind of irrational space. Because, it occurred to me once—I don't know where I got the idea, but I made up a little rule for myself saying that "The logic of pictorial space is not the logic of real space." And what happens in a picture does not have to follow the rules of what we expect in the real three dimensional world.

MR. SILVERMAN: It's got its own logic, its own—

MR. CONGER: And, it's got its own logic, and it's irrational.

MR. SILVERMAN: And, you contradict the logic, because sometimes I've got to say that sometimes of light—"Oh, yes. This looks just like looking out the window on Lake Shore Drive." Sometimes there's a very specific feel—

MR. CONGER: That's right.

MR. SILVERMAN: —but then--and sometimes the sense of space--we talked about the layered planes. I was going to ask you if you were influenced by Asian art. Sometimes there are these layers—we talked about that in terms of metaphorically. But, sometimes they're not—you're very capable of producing that illusion of deep space, and yet sometimes they're flattened out planes.

MR. CONGER: Flat—so that you don't know if a shape goes behind another shape, or if it just simply ends.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: And, I love playing with that paradox, because it engages us in the fiction of art that we have to create some kind of story for it.

MR. SILVERMAN: And, there's a certain level, which we create perceptually, because the world isn't—is determined somewhat by our eyes, and ears and our senses—that we also create 3D in some of these things—

MR. CONGER: That's right.

MR. SILVERMAN: Because, if you start to lose some of the senses, or have some impairment, you start to realize how much it's dependent—how you perceive it is dependent on the set of stuff we have.

MR. CONGER: One time—for a while I was painting rocks.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: Kathy and I went out, made a long road trip to find rocks, and we picked up a whole bunch of little rocks, brought them back to my studio, and I started putting those in my abstract paintings—where there'd be a perfectly abstract work, or these typical shapes—maybe a sky. Maybe not. Maybe a circle that looks like a head, maybe not. Maybe this, like, looks like an arm, but you're not sure. And, then all of a sudden there's a rock.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: And—but, I love painting the rock—a very meticulous, realistic—just realistic as I can make it. And, one day Jim Yood came by the studio and he noticed the rock and he said, "Well, there's no shadow under the rock." And it was perfectly rational question.

MR. SILVERMAN: Sure. If you're looking for that—

MR. CONGER: If you're looking at a rational space. But, the painting is not—it could be—doesn't have to be—an imitation of real space. It's only an imitation of what it is, a pictorial space.

MR. SILVERMAN: But, it's a game, too, because the game of painting is to make something look three-dimensional. You're doing something completely opposite to reality. To make something that two-point, three-point perspective—any of that stuff, you know all the technical games. But, those games are games. They're not their parallels to universe. It's a fascinating.

MR. CONGER: Well, I think—see. I want to indulge that to a certain degree, but never to the point where it flips into that magic of looking like an open window. You know to me, it's always going to be a contradiction, because it's that contradiction that compels us to wonder about our identities.

MR. SILVERMAN: That gets deeper into everything. Look at—examining everything, not just—

MR. CONGER: I'm doing a painting now that is a commission for a library, and I became intrigued about a year or two ago looking at old maps. But I mean maps of like the year 1000.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh really, early maps.

MR. CONGER: And, I discovered that there was a map that was very common then. It was called the OT map, meaning it was a circle. And, then there was a bar, horizontal bar, through the circle. And, then, there was a vertical bar dividing the bottom half of the circle into two parts. And, so, it looked like a big O, and a T in it. And, this was actually a map of the world—typical map—formulaic map of the world around the year 1000 to about 1200, during the time of the crusades even. Right in the middle where the horizontal bar intersected the vertical bar, that would be Jerusalem.

MR. SILVERMAN: Interesting.

MR. CONGER: The center of the world.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. That's a very—

MR. CONGER: So, it was a symbolic statement, not a physical statement, not a geographical statement—a symbolic statement. Down in the lower left was Europe, just a jumble of shapes. Lower right was Africa, a wiggly line for the shore of the Mediterranean. They assumed nothing could live beyond south of that. It was too hot. And, then, everything above was Asia, whatever that was. They didn't know what that was. And, people could actually navigate across Europe with these maps, knowing that they were down here and then dot by dot they could work their way toward Jerusalem, without any geographical sensibility whatsoever. But, everything was symbolic of something else. I thought, "Well, this is interesting." So, I decided to do a painting that I called Mundi, meaning Latin for world.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: And, those maps were called Mappa Mundi, meaning maps of the worlds. So, I called it Mundi. And, so, it's an abstract composition within a circle and—

MR. SILVERMAN: And, things that are important and symbolic and have those kinds of—those are so much—so

much is told by maps, and by—in terms of history and who is writing the history.

MR. CONGER: Yeah. And, this painting has kind of a convoluted shapes that are suggestive of bodies, in a way—and not, in other ways. Space, and land boundaries, and such. But, to me, it's the same kind of thing as the medieval map that was an adventure of discovery. You used this to sort of discover your way to the center of the world, which was Jerusalem.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, Judea. That was just so fascinating, because that says so much about, you know, what's important, and what isn't—

MR. CONGER: Yeah.

MR. SILVERMAN: Because, you could equally have it be any—

MR. CONGER: Which is why, of course, the Europeans wanted Jerusalem, because it was the center of the world, dammit. They wanted it.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, they're still fighting over that.

[They laugh.]

That's not going to end anytime soon.

MR. CONGER: So, you know, that's an example of where work—a work of art is like a world, but it's a world that you have to invent as you go, as you examine it, which I thought was suitable for a library.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Affirmative.] Well, maps can be interesting in terms of abstraction—Nancy Graves. Some other people have done interesting things with that, because they—they're a way of display of information, but they're also kind of beautiful. Topographic maps are—I once worked another interim job. I once worked in a library with topographic maps, and I just thought, "God. These are just beautiful."

MR. CONGER: Yeah. And, I think a lot of times my paintings do suggest maps, with the wandering, meandering lines and such, which is fine with me. But, I'm all for a multiplicity of—

MR. SILVERMAN: Readings?

MR. CONGER: —of readings. Because, I think that whenever we look at something ambiguous—by that, I mean things that are not carefully illustrated, or defined, or depicted, then meaning is allusive. And, we don't know what it is. And, so, we're in a sense, grabbing at straws, and we either rely on likenesses we know about, which are culturally learned, or we rely also on individual experiences—maybe even emotions could be evoked by just a shape or a color.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, some of these things that are interactions between your personal history and stuff that you bring, and metaphors that you set in motion, like the circus—

MR. CONGER: That's right.

MR. SILVERMAN: —and ours, which is—you know. We pick up on some of that. Along those lines, I want to get back to something you just eluded to briefly, which was that trolley car painting, where you talk about it. Somewhere else you talk about the colors being sort of indicative of the sounds. It's kind of a synesthesia in a way.

MR. CONGER: Yeah. I do have that.

MR. SILVERMAN: You have a sense that colors read out certain—

MR. CONGER: A sense of color and shape and sound. Yeah.

MR. SILVERMAN: They do—you know there—is it Rimbaud that did the vowels that had the different colors for different vowels. I believe there's a famous poem—

MR. CONGER: Yeah. Well, there was Symbolist poetry in the—

MR. SILVERMAN: Symbolist poetry.

MR. CONGER: —late 19th century that—

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. So, do you have that sort of sense of synesthesia?

MR. CONGER: Well, I wouldn't make a claim that I have a sharpened sense of it, but when I do—when I'm doing my paintings and I get these day dreams of—when you're painting it's kind of tedious, and it's—you're isolated. You're alone. And, so, you have this private conversations with everything that goes on that has no real structure—kind of free association. A smell or a shape will evoke a certain sound. Mainly sounds. And, it's—and I think of it as music a lot of times, that the painting is a—not necessarily music in the sense of an orchestral composition, but a kind of a—a tonality.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, that's so interesting though with that particular painting that when you painted that were you thinking about that trolley experience as a kid?

MR. CONGER: When I think of my childhood it's mainly sounds, because in the mornings—the early mornings—we had a dog for a while. It was my job to walk the dog at 6:00 a.m., or 6:30. And, then I was a—going to a Catholic school, and I was an altar boy. And I was always serving mass over here at Mount Carmel, and so I'd walk the streets early in the morning. In those days it was nothing for kids to be out by themselves.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: It wasn't unusual. And, the sounds of the city starting up in the morning are something that just sticks with me—a grinding, clanging sound. You can almost—I mean, this whole area—not here. But, just west of Broadway and by Ashland was just loaded with little factories.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's right. There was an industrial sort of corridor.

MR. CONGER: An industrial—

MR. SILVERMAN: Like Ravenswood, around there?

MR. CONGER: All throughout the city. There were all these little factories. You could hear the pounding of machinery, and then you'd hear the ding-donging of the street cars, and the screeching of the wheels. And—

MR. SILVERMAN: So that made a big impression?

MR. CONGER: —and, then on the lake, during the war, there was so much lake traffic, and these fog horns were just ubiquitous. You know, all morning. I was just alive with this stuff, and—

MR. SILVERMAN: Now, at that time--this is--not to be too literalist, you didn't think of—in terms of synesthesia—you weren't seeing colors associated with it at that point—later—

MR. CONGER: Well, shapes and colors went together.

MR. SILVERMAN: Shapes and colors? So, even when you were a kid, when you were hearing all those sounds.

MR. CONGER: Shapes, colors, and sounds all work together.

MR. SILVERMAN: They all work together for you back then?

MR. CONGER: Yeah.

MR. SILVERMAN: So, that's interesting, then. So, then—

MR. CONGER: [Inaudible.]

MR. SILVERMAN: Maybe not in a developed way, but it's something that you sort of—it sort of brought to mind something. You were—there was something percolating.

MR. CONGER: I can't use certain colors without hearing sounds.

MR. SILVERMAN: Wow. That's interesting.

MR. CONGER: And, that—and I hear the sounds more than I see the colors, almost—

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, there's a—

MR. CONGER: And, they guide me to the exact nuance. I mean, I'll change colors just to—almost can't discern the difference myself, until I put it down. And—but I'll do it just to get the right sound on the—

MR. SILVERMAN: The right sound. That's interesting. So, you do sort of maintain that, even if, you know, it's not literal synesthesia, it's a certain kind of way you work.

MR. CONGER: It's a certain kind of synesthesia.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. It is in a way.

MR. CONGER: It's a—

MR. SILVERMAN: I didn't know that. That's interesting.

MR. CONGER: The sound has to be right. Like, I change—this painting I'm working on—I changed the red. I changed it three or four times in ways that ordinarily you couldn't tell the difference, but I—but when you paint it you do. And, then I—but then it was just a certain ringing sound. It had to be this red.

MR. SILVERMAN: Wow. That's wild. That's kind of fascinating in a way.

MR. CONGER: So, it takes—I mean that's—well, and that kind of leads to the notion of exactitude, doesn't it? That's one of the reasons I get a lot of satisfaction out of doing what—to many people—would seem almost a killer in terms of tediousness. That you kill the spirit.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, you're a formalist.

MR. CONGER: You kill the spirit by doing this, but, on the other hand, maybe not.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, even—it's a structure—the formalism that you're—in terms of color, in terms of composition. You're very exacting, as you say. But, that allows—the structure can sometimes allow you to express things, and things to come through, which you're saying sometimes you don't even realize at the time.

MR. CONGER: Well, even the shape has to be—the contour, or even the measurement of the shape has to be just so, even though I couldn't tell you beforehand what it should be.

MR. SILVERMAN: You don't know why.

MR. CONGER: I don't know, but again, it's that consonance of sound, and colors. Certain colors have to have a certain shape.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: And, it's crazy. Yeah. I know. And, I—sometimes I'm skeptical of it, you know.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, from what you said, you have skepticism and doubt about everything you do.

MR. CONGER: Skepticism and doubt about everything.

MR. SILVERMAN: Do you think that's generational? We're going to probably wrap up for today in a moment, but do you think that's generational? Or, do you think that's your personal take on the world, or something? Because, I know some artists, they just go through and think everything is wonderful.

MR. CONGER: It might be both. I mean, you have to remember—I think if I were to look back on my childhood, I think I grew up, you know, in a very insecure situation. I was a troubled teenager. I was a quiet, probably neglected kid. I didn't—I was insecure, shy. I was not well adjusted. Let's put it that way. And, I think I was a—until I became an artist, or became—until I went to the university and somebody said I was smart, I didn't—I had no idea. My parents would say, "Well, you know. If you're going to be a ditch digger we just want you to be a good one."

MR. SILVERMAN: Be a happy ditch digger.

MR. CONGER: They thought I was—I was hopelessly, mentally impaired, or something, and when I got to the University of New Mexico, in particular—when I started studying philosophy, and they immediately made me a member of the honorary society, and all of this, and—

MR. SILVERMAN: Who knew what was lying there beneath the surface of the—

MR. CONGER: I had no idea. It was like it was a surprise to me. And, so, I became—I found a certain security in that, that I didn't have otherwise.

MR. SILVERMAN: You found your niche.

MR. CONGER: And, I probably—I probably still feel the same way. I'm only secure when I'm in my world of the mind. I don't feel particularly competent in the society at large, even though I had jobs that do that.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, feeling comfortable in the society—in this society, probably any society, is not an easy matter.

MR. CONGER: Not an easy thing.

MR. SILVERMAN: Not an easy matter. Especially if you're not cookie cutter, don't fit in with the general mean. [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: Yeah. It's not that I set out to be weird. I didn't—

MR. SILVERMAN: No. How many people do? I think usually it's an adjustment—

MR. CONGER: I don't—I was never—I never practiced being a bohemian, or I never experimented with drugs. [... -WC] As I said, was kind of boring, I guess. But, I just devoted myself to this work all the time.

[END OF SD01, TR01.]

MR. SILVERMAN: This is Lanny Silverman. I'm at William Conger's Studio and it's May 20th. We're doing an interview for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art. Well, I'd like to pick up what we were talking about the other day, William. The question was about, you were talking about Chicago abstraction and I was saying that you're kind of an outlier even though you sort of fit into, there's a number of people in Chicago, Miyoko Ito, Vera Klement, younger people like Julia Fish, Richard Rezac. There's a lot of abstraction in Chicago despite some of the stereotypes. But how would you talk about abstraction and how you fit into Chicago and that was something I think you wanted to go further into.

MR. CONGER: Well if you recall, we were talking about my early years of art study, which I was mainly influenced by the regionalist's narrative, regionalist's tradition and then by the Abstract Expressionists period in the '50s. And in the 1960s, I became more aware certainly of the development of Pop Art, and then the counter movement to that recognizes post painterly abstraction, which was really a rejection of the furious physical engagement toward something cooler and more remote and more intellectualized and certainly more reductive. So abstract painting in the 1960s from the standpoint of a mainstream was essentially reductivist or pop oriented in some way. I was not interested in any of that for some reason. I really was so heavily imbued with a kind of an art historical tradition of painting that was so effulgent with figures, with modeled form, with illusionism, with referential content.

And of course, in Chicago, even in the early 1960s, probably the most famous artist in Chicago was Ivan Albright. And he represents a kind of iconic idiosyncratic view that brought together that Surrealism, that attention to detail, a kind of an imaginative belligerence, if you will. So that too is part of my emerging sensibility. So I was against the notion of post painterly abstraction. I thought it was too narrow and going to a dead end, although I was attracted to some of it. I very much admired the work of Larry Poon, for example. But I wanted to do something that was somehow more engaged with what I consider to be an art historical tradition. So when the Imagists came on the scene, I was at first turned away by their low culture subject matter, but I was very much attracted to the finesse and sophistication of their formal and technical approach. So I really found myself attracted and interested in that, and also, they were modeling forms. They didn't just paint a flat shape. It bent around and curved into space and there was an illusionistic atmospheric quality in much of it that also attracted me. So I think as I developed my own sense of abstraction, it was really a combination of those earlier influences and preferences, plus a desire to find my own way around the reductivist approach in painting.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well it's interesting too because I think at some point, maybe it was in one of your articles, you talk about Mondrian who started from nature, those wonderful trees and then he saw the form and structure behind them, and it was very much a reduction of the form from the content. Whereas, you're adding back, you're taking geometric and other kinds of pure, shall we say platonic forms and putting in content in personal and emotional and other kinds of meanings, metaphoric and otherwise.

MR. CONGER: In some ways I was encouraged when I saw the work of earlier abstract artists. That is the period around, well before the Second World War in the '20s and '30s particular. There was a kind of American geometric painting that was very much involved in the illusionism and the appearance of the third dimension and a kind of tactile surface and a sense of narrative. I think certainly my mentor, Raymond Jonson, but there are also people like Emil Bisttram and others, you have [John] Ferrin—well, one could name a bunch of them, but that whole—

[... -WC] Ferrin was an abstract painter who tended to paint things that would bend and twist around in space.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh I don't know him so.

MR. CONGER: And so true with others, they were all derivative, or rather, I shouldn't say derivative, but they all



came out of a post Kandinsky attitude. And of course, Raymond Jonson back in New Mexico was one of the members of the so-called Transcendental Painting Group, which in itself was something that, well, their work was imbued with a kind of mysticism of nature you might say. So there was something cosmetic about it that was special and deep and serious. So I look to those artists generally as allies. You might say whose work encouraged me, although I didn't want to imitate what they were doing and I purposely stayed away from studying it too carefully.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well it's hard to avoid having influences when you're steeped in the art world. It's hard to not have those things come out in some way or other.

MR. CONGER: That's right.

MR. SILVERMAN: We talked a little bit yesterday. It may have been a little bit yesterday may have been off camera, so to speak, or not on the record, but we were talking a little bit. You had showed me some recent work that you had done. We were talking the genesis of your ideas and that's going to be something that we get into next in terms of your studio practice, how you generate ideas. And you mentioned you'd been reading Proust and you had come up with a painting that was based on *Swan's Way*. We were talking, whether or not it was on the record or not, we were talking about your exacting use of color and how forms and colors. There was this red that had to be exactly right. I don't think we caught that on the record, but I was fascinated by that, but then when I looked at that, briefly looked at the painting that you were showing me, or the reproduction at least, what I noticed was they made a point that you were making which is that so much interpretation is personal and I come up with—it's like when you see a movie of a book, I was mentioning of Proust, and they're always so disappointing because in your head, you have something else. When I saw that painting, the colors, for you, the colors were the, you know, Swan's trip along the garden path that he was going to visit his little girlfriend or something, whatever it was. And for me, it didn't register. It wasn't the same thing.

MR. CONGER: Right.

MR. SILVERMAN: So that just brings out the point that as much as that pace, that shows some of the genesis of your ideas. Sometimes they come from books, which is something we started with. Not usually, but that one to you reads out as the first book of—

MR. CONGER: Sure, I'm not trying, I would never claim that there's anything in my work that is literal in its relationship to a text and certainly to Proust.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: But what I so admired in reading him was the obvious craft that he engaged in in writing his novel. And I've seen some of the original manuscripts. They were on display somewhere recently and last year too, and he rewrote and rewrote and even when the galleys were presented to him, he still rewrote.

MR. SILVERMAN: There were even different editions, I believe, even at the time when he was alive.

MR. CONGER: And so he was continually revising the work and in a way, that was encouraging because, unfortunately, I find myself doing that a lot.

MR. SILVERMAN: We're going to talk about that too. That's another topic.

MR. CONGER: I'm always revising my work even though I think I have the concept and the composition settled, but I just keep changing it because there's always something else I want to get. The other thing about Proust was his whole thesis of the deconstruction of time. That time itself was a fluid kind of experience that one reconstructs every time one engages in a memory or in retelling something or even in experiencing something. The kinds of thoughts and ideas that support our thinking when we relate an experience are constantly shifting. So that kind of fluidity of memory is something that I thought was akin to the fluidity of the feelings and the expressions of color and form constantly changing. So I look for that kind of support when I think of people like Proust and others who were such great writers. I see a kinship in their way of working and the way in which they examine experience and thought and language is similar to the way I try to examine my own work as I make it.

MR. SILVERMAN: So that brings up the subject that I was going to ask you in terms of studio practice. We had just begun that yesterday, which is where you get your ideas from. Rarely from books, but those are always in the background. Memory? Dream? Any of those things or do you come in with ideas? I think I started to ask this, or do you improvise. You come in with sketches. So are they formal ideas or are they ideas for paintings?

MR. CONGER: When I begin working, each day I'll sit here in the studio and I'll usually spend an hour or more on making little sketches at random just on any piece of paper I have. I usually have a lot of paper sitting around. I just make little drawings every day, dozens a day, and they add up. I don't have any particular thought in mind

when I'm doing them. I just begin with whatever impulse I have and I try to make some kind of linear composition out of it. Later, I may go through them and discard most of them and keep a few that I want to develop further. But it's at that point I begin to see some kind of connection between the drawing and what I recollects in me, the kind of experiences I may recall embedded in recollecting reading I do. I read a lot in history. I read some novels, but probably most of my reading is history. I'm always finding ways in which the composition seems to resonate or relate to these thoughts about what I've read and what I've experienced. Some of them from childhood, some of them just this morning. They're all embedded together. So it's kind of a horizontal array more than anything you might say, which is linear or constructed.

MR. SILVERMAN: You had—

MR. CONGER: For instance—

MR. SILVERMAN: Go ahead.

MR. CONGER: Well, I was thinking, I did a painting a few years ago, which was very full of arcs and circular shapes and undulating lines and it was really a rather furious painting. It was a big painting and I didn't know what I was really, what it was about, or anything, except one day as I was painting, I was painting this long line, and it ended in a triangle. Then I looked over to the left side of the painting and there was this sort of dome-like shape there. All of a sudden, I couldn't resist making the connection between what I was doing and something I had recently read about the Battle of Hastings.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: In 1066 when the English King was shot in the—the English King Herald was shot in the eye with an arrow, supposedly. Historians dispute that, but that's the legend that persisted and he was killed. It put the English defenders in such disarray that the Normans, under William the Conqueror, quickly ended the battle and victory. While this big long line with a triangle at the end was pointing right at that dome-like shape that I thought of all of a sudden as a helmet, a medieval helmet, and this arrow going right into it and I thought of it as the death of Harold, the King of England.

MR. SILVERMAN: So sometimes you free associate from that.

MR. CONGER: So I free associate and all of a sudden the whole painting seemed to be nothing more than the Battle of Hastings. And—

MR. SILVERMAN: Did that change the color scheme because I know color is so important to you? In other words, did you start out with different colors?

MR. CONGER: Well I had already thought, because I had been reading a lot of medieval history, I was already pretty much involved in trying to relate some of my work to heraldic colors and shapes.

MR. SILVERMAN: So that already was in there? So it was all fitting together?

MR. CONGER: It was already there. I was already going in that direction.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.] That's funny.

MR. CONGER: But only in the most general way. But the idea of banners and coats of arms and the heraldry of medieval warfare is an interesting subject in itself. But I have for several years been interested in trying to capture some of the anxiety and the drama and the make believe of that kind of heraldic imagery. I guess it wasn't a very big step to go from that to be suddenly reminded of my reading of the Battle of Hastings and then see something in my painting that seemed to be all about that.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well that kind of relates to where I was going with this topic which was, how do you develop—how do you decide which ideas to develop and which ones to discard? In other words, some of them resonate, obviously, like that one you got something going there, and everything fit together. Are they're ideas that you sort of—

MR. CONGER: I like to—well as I said, my whole upbringing as an artist was deeply endued with high art. Beginning with my childhood visits to the Art Institute and later on my serious study of art history as a graduate student—my interest in philosophy. I was always interested in the bigger themes, the bigger ideas. The more difficult notions of humanity and what it is to try to accommodate oneself to society or to a culture and what it signifies in terms of human meaning. So I like the grand themes, so I would not be interested in making a painting of something that I consider to be too trivial, although I don't discount it. I think there's a kind of triviality even in the grand themes. I mean, there's something sort of ridiculous about the Battle of Hastings being decided because the king happened to be in the midst of battle and was wounded and died as a result.

That was not unusual. It was a commonplace. So it's almost banal, but in a way, it does signify something of the magnificence of human aspiration, the tragedy of it. Big themes is what I like and I try to get that even though I think there's a lot of the simple and the silly and the banal embedded in it as well.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well we were talking about color yesterday somewhat extensively and you just mentioned medieval colors. Your color pallet has changed out a bit. Some of it makes sense in terms of like the circus ones being bright, sort of less modulated, less mixed color, but sometimes the reasons for the color change, I gather, I remember that Kathy had bought you a new set of paints for that one.

MR. CONGER: [Laughs.]

MR. SILVERMAN: What changes, your colors can change from dark and moody to mixed to attempted to medieval to you're going back to bright colors I see, which is from an earlier period, and I see some that are—you have different color—is the color dictated by the content, by your mood, by formal concerns? What changes the color?

MR. CONGER: Well I think, first of all, content is not something that is, that I know about a head of time. I mean, I have an aspiration. Again, it's modeled by whatever it is about high art that attracts, big themes, serious subject matter, et cetera. When it comes to color itself, I guess my own feeling, my own mood, my own—it's almost a physical thing, the way I physically relate to the painting. Whether I'm standing close or far away or whether I'm tired that day or not or whether I have a tube of paint that I haven't used for a while. It's something as silly as that. I just say, well, I haven't used any raw umber for a while, so I'm going to put some raw umber in everything. Other times, the last thing I'd want to do is have an earth color in my painting. There's nothing, other than the immediate experience of the materials that probably prompts me to do one thing over another. It's true that at one point in the past Kathy did give me as a gift a bunch, a whole box full, of very expensive paints that I never dared to buy on my own. And I found them so compelling that I wanted to use them just as they came out of the tube and not to modify them. Normally, I would modify colors a lot by intermixing them with their compliments or tinting or shading them, but with that, I started using them as pure as I could. Sometimes I still do that. I find that to be more of my—well, I'm doing that more and more.

MR. SILVERMAN: Interesting. More of your comfort zone? Something that's more of your sort of home base?

MR. CONGER: Well again, there's something theatrical about it. There's something artificial about it and it sets it apart. When you see these colors displayed out on a canvass in such a pure way, it is like the medieval heraldry, which is theatrical and artificial and kind of a way to pump up their bravery, you might say, to do what they, the messy business of trying to chop the other guy's head off.

MR. SILVERMAN: So there's quite a contrast there, yeah.

MR. CONGER: Yeah, so there's that kind of glorious drama to cover up the sordidness and the awfulness of that kind of existence. It probably wasn't only in warfare that their lives were brutal, nasty, and short, as the saying goes, but in daily life was pretty miserable too. And so the people who could afford it in the medieval period loaded themselves up with very beautifully made clothing, richly died and put together with the most vivid fabric, colors of fabrics and such. So in a way, painting might have that same role to play today that needs to kind of dress itself up to compete with a world that in many ways is becoming more and more antagonized by something almost medieval too.

MR. SILVERMAN: Going back in terms of, let's see, the circus, just in terms of the way you work, did the colors lead you to the circus or were you thinking about circus paintings and the paint set that Kathy got seemed really appropriate? Was it all just coming together?

MR. CONGER: It all happened at about the same time. I was in a very moody period in my life. A very dark time for some reason. Kathy was trying to cheer me up and she bought these colors, but then we also visited the circus museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin. And it was a combination of what affected me there, the painted wagons, the old circus wagons. And, of course, as a kid I do remember going to the circus in the summertime when we lived in a small town in the summertime. And the circus wagons would come through town. It was really very colorful and very exciting, of course. So it was really the combination of not only the imaginary of the circus wagons and again the artificial theatricality of it all and the paints that I suddenly had. And so it was really all of that.

MR. SILVERMAN: It all came together. It's a little like the Battle of Hastings.

MR. CONGER: And of course, we mentioned before where the metaphor of the circus has a kind of death defying activity, but it's one that's highly ritualized. Nobody intends to die performing in the circus, but they have a highly ritualized act that makes it appear as though they could. And of course, sometimes tragedy does occur, but generally, the notion of risk as an artificial and theatrical display that commemorates the most profound

notion of life: that you are going to persist in the face of certain death.

MR. SILVERMAN: Sense of illusion.

MR. CONGER: That itself is what the circus seems to symbolize and I think in a way, I think that's what art can do too. That's what it does.

MR. SILVERMAN: It's also that sense of illusion and that playing that game, there's a sort of—

MR. CONGER: Playing the game—it's all of that. I mean, anyway you look at it, it fits. It's a perfect parallel to what painting is about.

MR. SILVERMAN: It's funny too because you were talking about Pop Art and about Imagists and about the vulgar versus high art and those issues. At the same, that wouldn't have been a theme that you would have thought that would have been attractive to you at a certain point, but I guess—

MR. CONGER: Well, I think that's true. I think that I did after the circus phase, I was more comfortable with doing things that previously I would have avoided but now the vulgar, and the overtly theatrical, and artificial attracted me. So in a way, I did finally assimilate something of that aspect of culture. Then I began to think a lot about the playfulness of color and shape and how some colors and shapes, it struck me as ironic that some shapes have acquired a very serious kind of demeanor like a square. Through modernism, somehow the poor square got loaded with all the baggage of seriousness and at the same time, there's nothing about the square in itself that that shouldn't be playful.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well it was adopted by Malevich and the Supremacists. They were looking at it as a spiritual symbol.

MR. CONGER: Right.

MR. SILVERMAN: It became very heavy laden with meaning.

MR. CONGER: It came—it just had such a burden. And so I think that a lot of modernism is overly burdened and I think too, well, sometimes when I'm making my paintings, I like to do things that are quirky or sort of against the rule, eccentric to the point of being awkward or even vulgar. Not that I really want to indulge the lull as such, but I want to suggest that even in the so-called high, there is that element of the vulgar.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's funny too because it's not platonic. One could see the great sense of formalism in your work, but I was asking you a little bit yesterday about humor in your work, which is just what you've expounded on which is something the fact that you break the rules or that there's things that are playful or that are meant to not just be spiritual or evoke memories, but also just be sort of the joy of existence and the earthliness.

MR. CONGER: The kind of silliness when you see the images or older paintings of kings and nobles painted up and dressed up in their official costumes. They're ridiculous, but there's something profound about it at the same time. This represents the aspiration of the human being to rise above his status as an ordinary creature. So it's a combination, it's a paradoxical relationship.

MR. SILVERMAN: I was going to ask you some about not only the fact that you change color palette, we skipped over some of the other things that you've done that are not maybe so typical of your work. You've done some sculpture and installations. You mentioned Robert Mallery and, of course, he did collage and assemblage, and you've mostly done collage as well, which is a much looser way of working. What made you take on, apparently, that was much later when you did those mylar and other wood pieces. You did that way after Mallery, so it may not have been directly—

MR. CONGER: Well, remember when I was a student in the '50s, I was doing very loose and expressionists things and I was dealing with assemblage and findings things out in the street and the countryside that I would put together and assemble. I was aware of people like Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns and Jim Dine and people like that who are just coming on the scene and I, of course, wanted to pick up on that energy. So, yeah, Robert Mallery, and being aware of that kind of alternative work going on and then of course came the happenings. I was alert to all of that and I think I assimilated some of it. Later on, I became much more focused on my painting and less engaged in that kind of work, but every once in a while it comes back. I'll go through a period of a few months in which I just indulge myself in doing these collages mainly, but also I've done little assemblages where I nail wood and metal together and add sticks and stones and glass and other sorts of things, debris.

MR. SILVERMAN: So you've come back in some way. You circle around. You don't necessarily—one of the questions was going to be how has your work evolved and I was also going to ask you a little bit about how's it

been affected by digital or other sort of moderate technology. Sometimes you go back to what you did earlier and sometimes you revisit things that you were doing in abstraction and different ways of working. Color wise I see—color wise you're going in circles too at times.

MR. CONGER: Yeah. I'm looking away from what I'm doing, looking for something that I shouldn't ignore too purposely, you know. I will look at it and I will make it. I will do things and then I'll eventually come back to the paintings because the paintings are so, for me they're so demanding; whereas, making the collages and the assemblages are something, they have a time element. You do them in an hour or two hours and that's it. And then you do another one the next day. For a long time I was doing these collages. I was trying to do one a day and I did, but, and they were either successful or not. With a painting, I keep going back to it day after day. It's a longer term engagement and for that, it just seems to be more, it's more demanding and it takes everything I've got. I can't just hope for a lucky break in making a choice.

MR. SILVERMAN: So are the collages and assemblages, are those closer to improvisation or to a faster—

MR. CONGER: They're very improvisational, totally. I'll just do whatever I have handy, I'll put it in and not even think about why I'm doing it. I'll just do it and try to say to myself, well, now, how do I make this work? What do I do with this? When I make the collages, I start off with a lot of painted paper as a rule. I'll surround myself with lots of paper that's been painted usually with acrylic paint. That's the only place I use acrylic and then I'll just start ripping and cutting and I'll start gluing it down after another, one piece after another without any, the composition emerges out of this. They generally end up looking a lot like my paintings, only a lot looser. Then, of course, I have to confront that and say to myself, "Oh, maybe I should do the paintings like this." I've tried that a number of times, unsuccessfully.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well I did like—when I saw the collages that you showed at one of your gallery shows, one of the things I liked is you brought in more texture and a different feel for the surface—going back to your AbEx roots and to that illusion of looking at the actuality of the painting. I like seeing that.

MR. CONGER: I can get very painterly.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah, they got more painterly as a result.

MR. CONGER: Of course, that's all part of my background, so naturally it's going to come out once in a while. And I hope that it does inflect my paintings which may seem in many ways a denial of all of that, but I think it's somewhat sublimated somehow. In little gestures with paint, for example, my newest paintings tend to be more about texture than I have been engaging for a long time.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well you talk about this a little bit, maybe you talked about it yesterday or maybe I read it, I'm not sure, but you talk about loving to play with that contradiction between modeling and texture and the flatness and going back and forth.

MR. CONGER: Right.

MR. SILVERMAN: That sort of strange coexistence of sort of two different ways to read it.

MR. CONGER: Someone was talking to me about this once and I said, well, my paintings really begin about an inch below the surface.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: So if you were to imagine the surface as a watery surface, you'd stick your finger in half an inch or so because you'd run into a shape. But now I'm getting closer to that surface, sometimes popping beyond it so the texture becomes in front of the surface a little bit, but it's very, very subtle because I like the idea of the autonomous painting that it's separate and self-contained, self-resolute. That it doesn't rely on me or some other viewer to vicariously finish it.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well it's interesting that you're talking about how your work is developed. As you get older, has aging affect how you, I know with Leon Golub, some people, [inaudible.] Evelyn Statsinger talked about this too how it changes maybe the scale of how you work or the mediums that you work. Has that changed? You're in good shape, but has that changed—has the physicality of your existence changed the way you work at all?

MR. CONGER: Well as I get older I find that it's more daunting to do a big painting.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, yeah. [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: Not only to do it, but getting up and down ladders, or steps, and so forth, but also just moving the canvasses about and even stretching them. I generally work without any assistance, so I do it all myself. So just

physically I find some of that to be more difficult. I have done a lot of smaller paintings in recent years, but on the other hand, I've always done small paintings. I think I worry more about the control of the paint, just the physical ability to concentrate and make the mark I want to make, whether I'm physically as adept as I once was, I don't know. I notice when I do some repair work around the house or something, I tell my wife, "Well, I'm not as good with tools as I used to be," and I think that may be true. And then I wonder if, well, I wonder if I'm not as good with paint as I used to be. And I worry about that. So I overcompensate by being very exacting. So I don't know, those things do worry me. I notice that when we're talking about color. A few years ago, I had cataract surgery.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh, yeah, vision is very important for that.

MR. CONGER: So both of my eyes were done and I was astonished by the clarity and the vividness of color after my surgery. Now after a while, you begin to forget what it was like, so you take it for granted. But when you first have that surgery, and I'm not alone in saying this, everybody says it, there really, it's astonishing how clear, and vivid and pure everything is again. I think that affected my color.

MR. SILVERMAN: And what period of time was that? That's a couple years ago? Did that lead to a different kind of work that you did?

MR. CONGER: Well since then I have used more and more pure color—

MR. SILVERMAN: I've seen you going—

MR. CONGER: —and less and less of the intermixed or modulated color. That is where in the past I would always mix compliments together to reduce the saturation of each color and take a little more toward a grayness. But now I don't do that as much.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well you don't want to be, speaking of a reductionist, because people look at El Greco, rather, and say, well, it's because he had a stigmatism. All these explanations, this is why you—I don't want to come off sounding like that explains the work, but that seems like a major change in terms of—

MR. CONGER: Well, but again, I think once you get over your surgery, you don't remember what it was like before, so it's just part of, you've normalized it so much that you don't realize that it's—the shock of the initial awareness wears off. But I have been more interested in a stronger color lately. Maybe it's, as I get older, it's a little more of a rage against mortality.

[They laugh.]

But—also I'm so attracted to the idea, for better or worse, of the theatricality of art. I don't mean it in a bad sense or in a trivial sense. I think of it in a very significant way, symbolic way. It's theatrical, like a religious ritual or something. It's meaningless in and of itself, but it has a kind of concentration of energy and aspiration against the awareness that we're—we actually don't have a clue as to what the heck this world is all about.

MR. SILVERMAN: So you've lived through a lot of art changes. We talked a little bit about this, but I noticed, I was going to cover the topic of irony. We talked a little bit about that, but you've seen conceptual work, irony. What are some of the changes you've seen and how do you evaluate what's happening today in the art world? You've seen a lot of changes. You started out in—you talked about regionalist work and a certain kind of narrative sensibility that comes out of the Midwest and AbEx. We've gone through all that, Pop Art, images. What are some of the other things you've seen? What are you seeing these days? What do you make of the newer work or what do you make of irony? I saw you had written something on that too.

MR. CONGER: Of course I'm fascinated by everything that's going on in the art world, even things that I find myself rejecting. I'm still guiltily attracted to it in some way because after all, it's something. I realize that the art world has changed so much in terms of its structure, in terms of the roles that artists play. I realize that over time, it might be true that different kinds of people become artists at different periods in history. The kind of person that became an artist when I did in the '40s or '50s, may not become an artist today. That kind of person may choose to do something entirely different. And so when I look at younger artists today, I sometimes wonder, well, are they, do they have the same kind of makeup as I thought I had when I was a young person, that is one who is devoted, you might say, to the life of the mind and to philosophy and high art and ideas. Knowing that there's a mercantile side to it and there's a kind of social side that one has to contribute in some sway to society. But the urgency was really for ideas then far more, I think, than today when the urgency is for kind of institutional ratification.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, you also mentioned yesterday existentialism; you came out when there was this romanticized notion of the artist in their loft battling against this Don Quixote like artist against society. It's a very romantic notion. Nowadays, I think kids are much more interested in careers. They see someone like

Damien Hirst or Jeff Koons and they see Koons came out of not only the marketplace. He came out of the stock market. He came out of very rich in Mercantile, a very different notion of what it means to be an artist.

MR. CONGER: That's right.

MR. SILVERMAN: So that's what you're referring to.

MR. CONGER: Yeah, I think, in my day, when I was forming myself as an artist, it was really the artist as the outsider, as the one who was a critic of culture and society, not as one who was a participant. You know, I turned away from that—purposely turned away from it. I didn't want anything to do with it after a while, although I knew I had to make a living and I luckily was able to survive in a university as a professor. But it wasn't—it never occurred to me that one could become as successful an artist as some people are today. It never dawned on me. I thought there might be a place for an artist getting a reputation, having some of his or her work collected, and being recognized and so on, but not to the extent that some people have today. And again, it's only a very few. And the great middle, you might say, the great majority of artists, and frankly the pool of artists from whom the new ideas really come are being ignored. They won't be able to have careers in the same way that I did.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well you might appreciate what I'm about to say which is, because you came from some of the commercial jobs you had and your view of popular culture and commercial world. Nowadays you look at a Target ad and some of them are amazing—the amount of artistry that goes into it. That's where some of the art is. It's been mixed together. This high-low stuff is no longer even an apt way to analyze culture.

MR. CONGER: No, I agree with you, I agree, and I think the art world has changed and the education of the artist needs to change too. For example, these artists recently at the Roski School of Art and the University of Southern California have all quit their MFA programs over a dispute with the administration as to what their education would consist of. I think—I applaud them on one hand, but on the other hand I think they're all wrong. I think that the modern, that the future of the artist is going to be far more engaged in the technical world and in the world of commerce and industry than they imagined. The idea of the artist as an outside rebel is diminishing.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah, I think that's an antiquated—

MR. CONGER: I think a good education for the artist would have to somehow balance the two, however. That the new artist will be an insider in this global technological culture and at the same time will have to retain a criticality. I don't know how to do that, but I think that's the challenge.

MR. SILVERMAN: I briefly sort of asked you about digital technology. Kids, little infants are now very facile with computers and drawing through computers and through their I-Pads, whatever, have you messed with that at all?

MR. CONGER: I'm extremely incompetent with technology. I have been using computers since the early 1980s, so I'm not ignorant of them, but I never was up to speed. I was always behind and during the time I was at a university, there were always a great number of people around who could fix anything that went wrong and I could get by being ignorant, as it were. But now I find myself just completely befuddled by technology. I can't seem to operate my computer properly. I can't manage the—

MR. SILVERMAN: Well I wasn't even referring to information, which I'm sure you've used it for in terms of teaching, which we'll get into, but I was thinking more just the ability to draw to make films and to do this all directly—

MR. CONGER: No, I don't do any of that.

MR. SILVERMAN: You haven't tried that? Because there's a certain kind of pure color that you get on the screen, which is different.

MR. CONGER: Yeah, I understand that and I have talked to people who do that, who are very sophisticated with it and I am completely outside of that. I can admire what they do, but I don't see any relationship between what they're doing and what I'm trying to do as a painter.

MR. SILVERMAN: I figured that, but I was curious what you made of that.

MR. CONGER: Very early on in the '80s, there was a program where you could draw on a computer. It was very simple. It was long before Photoshop. There was something on the proto era before Photoshop when it was quite simple and I did some of that, but I never liked what I did and never did anything more. Nowadays, I have to rely entirely on others even to send somebody an image of one of my paintings. It's costly and it's frustrating and I'm befuddled by it and every day I say I hate it.

[They laugh.]

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, there's good and—like any technology, there's a lot of clichés in the digital art world and a lot in digital photography, but it is a tool like anything else.

MR. CONGER: Oh of course, absolutely.

MR. SILVERMAN: It can be used well, but it remains to be seen what comes out of that.

MR. CONGER: No, no, I'm entirely, if I was a young artist today, I would embrace it. I'm sure I would and if were still teaching, I would tell my students to embrace it. It's just that I realized that I'm not going to do it because I just don't have enough time to learn it either by desire or capability or whatever. I'm so engaged in trying to do what I can do.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, you love painting, the act of painting has probably been your major quest.

MR. CONGER: I'm keenly aware of the sense of mortality. At a certain age, you realize the clock is ticking louder every day and you really don't have time to do all of the things that you might have done and you try to do one or two things well, really well. I feel an obligation not only to all the people who have acquired my paintings in good faith, but also I feel an obligation to my idea to see it through as best I can. I know there are many other ideas—

MR. SILVERMAN: The notion of excellence that you talked about. That was certainly instilled in you at an early age. The sense of going for—

MR. CONGER: There are many other good ideas out there and I'm all for them and I'm sometimes attracted to the very thing I don't do or can't do. But I feel this enormous sense of obligation to see this idea through as well as I can. I've done maybe, well on my database that somebody helped me set up, I have about 600 paintings, which isn't very many, so if I did a few hundred more—that still is not going to be enough to pursue—to exhaust the idea.

MR. SILVERMAN: So what are you working on next? What do you think you're headed in terms of, as you're aware of your legacy and of your mortality, what do you hope to achieve in the end game? What's your hope to go to next?

MR. CONGER: In terms of my work?

MR. SILVERMAN: In terms of your work, yeah, yeah.

MR. CONGER: Well, you know, another painting, a good painting.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.] It's always the next painting.

MR. CONGER: They'll be some discovery in it that will encourage me. I've done—lately I've—I find myself being more engaged in a kind of straight line geometry. Lots of diagonals and pointed shapes and things like that, that are suggestive of swords and spikes and vegetal spear-like leaves and the like. I'm interested in that because there's something incipiently violent about it, but at the same time the way I painted, it's all on a very calm—

MR. SILVERMAN: Balanced.

MR. CONGER: —it's very calm and distant, which gives an almost scarier authority. I don't know what's scarier, the loaded gun sitting on the table or somebody waving it in their sweaty palm. I don't know what's scarier. It might be scarier as a potential.

MR. SILVERMAN: The fact that it's a hidden sort of potential as opposed to the actual—

MR. CONGER: It has a potential violence that you don't know yet what it might be. So I'm interested in that contradiction between a kind of violent composition, but it's very calm and serene, which gives it more authority in a sense. So whether I'll be able to go any further with that than I have, I don't know because I'm always torn between this ying-yang of very geometric structure and a more organic and biomorphic structure. I keep going back and forth. Sometimes they blend together nicely and other times they separate. And I'm really not as much the orchestrator of all of this as it may seem. The painting has its own, it's a cliché, but the painting has its own problems that it presents to you and then you have to be somewhat pragmatic about it, you have to invent something that makes it work.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's what you were talking about, enjoying the discovery. That's what you look forward to, is just working through.

MR. CONGER: That's the whole thing.



MR. SILVERMAN: So you're not--you don't have a life plan, a game plan or a—even if you do revisit things and think about things and analyze them, you pretty much just see where it leads you. In other words, you're—you come into the studio and you don't know what's going to happen.

MR. CONGER: And I would like that to be in line with something to do with the context of our history and, you know, what is painting of our time. I would, of course, like that, but I can't be sure which way that crowd's going to go. And it may be that all of this ends up in a kind of a backwater little eddy. You know, in some marsh someplace where it's just irrelevant, but I would hope that's not the case. I like to think of my work as trying to—and succeeding once in a while—and contributing to this dialogue of what is possible as a painting, today.

MR. SILVERMAN: And you talked about your own brand of abstraction where it manages to blend formal issues and content issues, and that balance is, I think, unique to you.

MR. CONGER: I think that's more evident across the board nowadays, but when I started out thinking that way, it was not evident, and I ran into—

MR. SILVERMAN: That's what you were saying.

MR. CONGER: —a lot of, well, the polite way is to say confusion on the part of the audience—the serious audience I was trying to address which would include of course the gatekeepers.

MR. SILVERMAN: I was about to ask critical reception of your work. That was my next question. Perfect lead in.

MR. CONGER: Yeah, and I was just constantly frustrated by what I thought was a naïve and uninformed way of looking at it, because people seemed to come at it from a certain canonical point of view that well, A and B and C, you know there's no room for A-1 or A-2, or something. It just annoyed me enormously to be—well, early on in the late '70s and '80s I really felt excluded from the context of what abstract painting was. In Chicago, there was a whole contingent that was, in my mind, a kind of a derivative minimalism that was just soup of the soup.

[They laugh.]

That was the way I looked at it. But, they looked at me as if I were some kind of eccentric Surrealist hanging on to the past, and they didn't know what to make of me, and I didn't fit into their group, and I felt isolated and I actually did a couple of paintings which I referred to as *Exile*.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: I was really kind of in a mode of self-pity. That was me being exiled from the art conversation. But, then I began to think more about it and took a more aggressive approach to what I was doing and tried to articulate it in some way.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, I think as you were hinting at, it's a lot easier for people, art critics, or whatever, to have an easy way to look at the work to look at it—this A looks like B because of this art movement.

MR. CONGER: Right, exactly.

MR. SILVERMAN: And your whole notion of somewhat of a trickster and somewhat—the idea of, sort of, playing with—

MR. CONGER: And there was nothing in New York that would accept us, either. Nothing. And I knew that—you know I always would say, "Well, how come I couldn't get a foothold really in New York?" And I realized that what I was doing just wouldn't fit at all the kind of conversation that was going on there in any serious way. And so I thought, "Well, Chicago's not a bad place to be because at least the richness of the artistic soil here nurtures me."

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, even though there's the Imagist, sort of, heavy dominance of the Imagist sort of load, there's a lot of—we talked about this—a lot of alternatives in Chicago, including abstraction, conceptual, all kinds of things. And they let you be. You're not having to fit into these categories. Getting into the area of critics in terms of the marketplace: How did you fare in terms of galleries? What's your history with—I know you showed at Roy Boyd until recently and now William Lieberman.

MR. CONGER: Well, actually, for a long time I was pretty successful. I mean, I would routinely sell everything I made through the dealers I had. Douglas Kenyon was my first dealer.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh so that's in Chicago.

MR. CONGER: And that was a very successful relationship for a few years. But, then he veered more into

photography and he became more interested in that and so then I went to Sonia Zaks, and I was very successful there. And then I went to Roy Boyd and had similar, long-time success. I would say, now, in the recent years my sense of acceptance has tapered off.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, you've got certain kinds of validation. You've gotten shows and sort of acclaim, and I know you were hoping that Donald Kuspit's essay in our catalog would help bridge that gap to New York. But, that's not so easy it's because it doesn't fit into the prevailing narrative, whatever that might be these days.

MR. CONGER: Yes, I—well, of course I had a show in New York, finally, last year. And it was fine and people did respond. People who, who were gatekeepers, you might say, but not much has developed from that. I have had my work accepted into more museums and, of course, the retrospective at the Chicago Cultural Center was a major achievement and honor. But, I think the—it's only natural that—it's very difficult I should say, for an artist to skip generations in terms of his or her audience.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Affirmative.]

MR. CONGER: Generally, the people who respond to artists tend to be of the same generation. And when you get to as old as I am and so many of them have already made their last trip to the cemetery, you know, I don't have as many—my audience has thinned out, but the challenge to any artist is to bridge that gap then, and to get into the next generation somehow, and that's difficult to do for a lot of reasons.

MR. SILVERMAN: It's also difficult, the whole notion of Chicago versus New York, this regional issue—

MR. CONGER: Yes.

MR. SILVERMAN: —because there's some artists—the Cultural Center did a lot of retrospectives not just Verd Klement, Michiko Itatani, those are people that work, somewhat similar parallel to you, but they've had shows internationally, but Chicago museums—without naming names—hadn't really given them their due, not to mention New York. Or you look at Leon Golub who moved to New York, and then he was seen as a Chicago artist or someone who is too political, or whatever the problem was.

MR. CONGER: I talk about this with my artist friends now and then I say, "Look, I'm in my deep '70s and the same gatekeepers that were there when I was young are still there." I mean don't these people ever go away?

[They laugh.]

Isn't it time for another person to be a gatekeeper at the MCA or the Art Institute, or someplace? I mean, why is it that they may be wonderful people and they have very sophisticated views but—

MR. SILVERMAN: But, it's the same people that are recycled that get the grants.

MR. CONGER: We're all embedded in our own identities and their aesthetic identity has been shaped and is not as flexible and as open as the circumstances might demand.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, look at our political system, look at the old, white men that are completely adverse to change, even though the younger society around them. Even though, you know, gay politics, everything else is just completely accepted by younger generation, they're still living in the same inflexible mold.

MR. CONGER: Right. Exactly. [Gatekeepers -WC] they're still there. And they never go away! I mean you would think that when they get to their mid-70s if they're—some of them are my age, it's time for them to take up golf.

MR. SILVERMAN: Let some other people in. And actually, I think there's hope, just like with the political world, hopefully younger people have a different way of looking at things, I don't know about the younger critics and curators, everyone's now a curator, the term has been bandied about in ways that make me just crazy. But, I mean, and everyone wants to be an artist. There are all these, everything is artisanal there are certain things that are changed and culturally, this is how we've sort of—curmudgeonly conversation.

MR. CONGER: One thing I notice in contemporary painting that is both attractive and repelling to me, is the reemergence of what I would call "patterned painting."

MR. SILVERMAN: [Affirmative.]

MR. CONGER: Where systems of surface division are devised and then are plotted out and then filled in with variation. And it tends to have a decorative—it draws on that decorative tradition, which is fine. But, it has—it's limited to, in my mind, to that kind of vivid, decorative display. It doesn't have that deeper conflict. You know, and I think good art is filled with—

MR. SILVERMAN: It's got to be more than pretty. It's got to have something, I mean—

MR. CONGER: —there's something in really good art that is very conflicted.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: And there's something about it that, it could turn bad real fast.

MR. SILVERMAN: There needs to be some tension there, it can't just be about beauty.

MR. CONGER: The great painting could turn bad real fast.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: If you turn away from it for a second and look back quickly, it might be all horrible.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: So I think, you know, that inner conflict of the paradox that it could go bad right away, very quickly and very easily, is something that I don't see as much. I find a kind of euphoric confidence in this decorative patterning.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, I hate to say it but some of this patterning that you're talking about may be influenced by algorithms. The ability to generate patterns, and that's a very cool formal—that there's no really hand involved.

MR. CONGER: Well, there you go. These people may be using their computers in ways that I don't know how, and it may provide them with that impetus. But, see it's again it's a different sensibility from what I grew up with and I'm still deeply engaged in something that has to do with that paradox of something very attractive and repellent all at once. I'm thinking of—there's a great painting by Goya that I've always loved so much and that's the first of the two-part painting he did the second of May 1808, it was about a strife, a riot and it shows people dragging these people off their horses and killing them, like a people's uprising. And this fellow, this Moorish guy is on his horse and he's got this resplendent robe and such on, but he's been yanked over by this fellow who is plunging a knife into him and you are observing the last moment of that man's life. And yet, it's so beautifully rendered. And so there's kind of a sweetness and exquisiteness to something that is actually horrible and very violent.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's what you're talking about with the Hastings thing, with the aestheticizing of violence.

MR. CONGER: Same thing. Yeah, I'm attracted to that.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah, that's an interesting thing that tension between beauty and aesthetics and then applied violence and angst.

MR. CONGER: The horror of it.

MR. SILVERMAN: And horror, yeah.

MR. CONGER: It's that paradox that I find myself mostly engaged in which I think is, in a way, the human condition. This is what troubles us and causes us to be quizzical all through our lives, to try to figure that out. Why should that be? But, it is.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, it is interesting. Point of view is everything here, because you look at football when it's been aestheticizing and you look at it through slow motion cameras, which were invented for football, not for dance in our culture. But, if you look at it at the point of view of the ground, you hear and see people's bodies being thumped and it's disgusting and it's probably not something you'd be comfortable with. You get some remove and distance and it becomes beautiful. That's the kind of tension, that kind of stuff is—that's what gets you going.

MR. CONGER: Yes. Yes. Exactly the same. I had that experience once in going to the ballet where I thought it would be great to sit up close and we did. And all we could hear was the thumping and the banging of the bodies coming down from these beautiful—leaps. They flowed up, but they'd come down 100 pounds hitting those boards makes a noise.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, sometimes it's best to be up in the balcony you can see the choreography, just what you love, the pattern and the sense of whatever it is that the grand design of it is more apparent from a distance.

MR. CONGER: Yeah, I've always been very suspicious of systemic art. This is why I haven't really worked in

series or working out the permutations of a given plan. It just—

MR. SILVERMAN: Too mechanical?

MR. CONGER: —I always want that kind of conflict. There's something—a new threat involved in every painting that has to—it changes it.

MR. SILVERMAN: I started to ask you about humor and we talked a tiny bit about music, yesterday.

MR. CONGER: Yeah.

MR. SILVERMAN: Do you ever listen to music when you make art?

MR. CONGER: I'm always listening to, usually classical music. I have to admit, I don't like opera.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: And when the opera comes on—which is too frequent—then I turn to the opposite. I have a whole collection of folk music and ballads and the things of that sort, blues. And, I'm not very informed. I've listened to classical music all day long. Kathy and I for years went to the symphony every week, and I really can't tell you that I'm informed. But, I do love it and it does affect me in some ways when I'm working.

MR. SILVERMAN: There are some of your precedence, some of the people like Kandinsky and Klee, some of those people, there was a real relationship between music and their art, maybe not always literally, literalist. But, do you ever feel like there's a—you talked about a certain kind of rhythm in terms of color yesterday—

MR. CONGER: Yep. I do. I think sounds and the sounds of given instruments and—well, before you came I was listening to some piano, I love that. There's something about—I can almost anticipate the next note even though I may not know the piece and it is like a line or a color for me, it's the same.

MR. SILVERMAN: We were talking about that yesterday.

MR. CONGER: A certain kind of yellow or blue, I know the note that that is. And if I've got to get that note on my canvas.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's what you were talking about with the red; it's got to be exactly the right shade of red.

MR. CONGER: The right note, just the right sound coming from a violin or a harp or a French horn, I've got to get that sound. And that's really what guides me. Instead of looking out the window at the landscape and having that as my guide, I have a sound or something like that that guides me.

MR. SILVERMAN: I'm going in a circle in terms of—you just mentioned looking out the window—you don't tend to work from either photographs or from newspaper clippings or external things like that? You rarely bring something like that to the—

MR. CONGER: Never. I sometimes think I should. I've tried sometimes of layering things on a illuminated glass so I could see through things transparently so I could pick up different contradictory shapes as they go through each other, but I never—I can't just, I just can't do it—and I've never worked from photographs or I don't use imagery that is out there in the world. I find it, actually, the other way around, I find that when I look around in a room or it's shadows and light or things in nature, even when I remember it stuck me once very strongly, when I was driving down the street and a big truck came up next to me and just the fender, the way the fender was bent and the way the metal was turned around and then, just like one of my paintings.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.] You see validation of your work in the world.

[They laugh.]

The world is confirming your point of view. It's there.

MR. CONGER: No. I think, you know, the artist becomes so hallucinated by his or her own imagery that all of sudden they project it on to the world and every little thing that would allow it or accept it, even minimally, all of a sudden snaps into place and so the fender all of a sudden looked like one of the shapes in my paintings and I'll see shadows or the way tables and chairs are lined up sometimes even in the studio. Yeah, that's just like one of my paintings that the nature is—

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, it's permeable. It's like there's a—the membrane is sort of very flexible because you've mentioned the opposite, the sort of converse almost, in terms of like *Flossy's Night*, you mentioned how certain objects, years later, seem to be very appropriately coming from your, maybe, deep unconscious or memories.

MR. CONGER: So I don't know if it's—I mean I do think that all of our shapes and colors and compositions do have their origin in nature. I certainly agree with that. But, it can be so extenuated that after a while—and you're so deeply embedded in a certain kind of configuration—that I suppose it's normal to begin to apply it to everything you see. And it all falls into place. I can do that at will, just sitting here and seeing all these pipes and lines and everything in the studio. But, I never really thought about imitating them.

MR. SILVERMAN: So, yeah, your work isn't about—in any sense—imitation, even if it comes from the world or those permeable—

MR. CONGER: You know, as I've said many times, I wanted to allude to and evoke and bring to mind all kinds of things in layers, in ambiguous layers of experience of the world, but I don't want to depict any of them. I'm not illustrating anything. I'm trying to stir up, but not to point to. I think that's a big part of my work.

MR. SILVERMAN: —big issue for you.

MR. CONGER: And I think that's the only way that I can hope for a kind of universality of abstraction, that it has to transcend the particular and there has to be something about shapes and colors or parts of things that provoke us, and provoke our memories. And of course this gets right back to Proust; it's exactly what he did in his writing. He would speak of this or that or the glint of light on a person's nose or something. And that would send him into a reverie that would go on and on. And that's why I liked him so much and I think that's exactly what I think painting is about—for me.

MR. SILVERMAN: I wanted to also ask you about some other influences that we didn't get into it all, both travel. Have you traveled a fair amount? Has that had any—I mean we talked about the Southwest versus, you know, Chicago and that sense, sort of how it pervaded your work. Any other travels that you feel like—

MR. CONGER: I have not done a lot. I mean, compared to many of my peers, university people who travel all the time, I have not traveled a lot. I've traveled almost everywhere in the United States and I have traveled to Europe three or four times. Canada. A little bit into Mexico. But, I am not an experienced traveler, as such. Different kinds of landscapes and experiences do have an impact on me, but usually—of course when I'm traveling, I'm not working. I'm in a period of passive assimilation, you might say. And so when I get back to the studio, sometimes these experiences do imbue, possibly expand, the way in which I work. I know once we went to the Grand Canyon and spent some time in Arizona traveling around to some of the Indian reservations and the like and when I came back I did find myself emulating some of the color and shapes that I remembered that stuck with me.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh definitely.

MR. CONGER: So that's natural, but I don't really look to travel or the travel experience as inspiration.

MR. SILVERMAN: You know what you would love that I just discovered—I just saw the Grand Canyon for the first time last year—Antelope Canyon. Did you go there? It's a place where you're walking through what I guess is the result of erosion and it's sort of like as if you were walking at the bottom of the Grand Canyon. But, every vista is completely different and their abstract patterns—I'll have to send you a link.

MR. CONGER: I have not been there. No. I'm glad you mention that because I would like to have an excuse to go back to the Grand Canyon.

MR. SILVERMAN: I'll send you some pictures. You know, as a matter of fact, you—someone said to us, the Native American guide said, "You could stick a camera on a dog and you'd get a great shot." Every—there's different light, there's dust in the air—

MR. CONGER: Well, that's it. The color.

MR. SILVERMAN: —and there's all these compositions that are very much like your work and they change every moment that you go through it. It's like an installation of a—a natural installation.

MR. CONGER: Of course, I'm reminded of a famous statement by Renoir when you say this. He said, "Well, when you take your theories of nature, she knocks them all flat." If I went to nature to find reinforcement for my shapes or some new composition, I would be so intimidated and so outclassed by the tiniest corner of nature that I would walk away in defeat."

MR. SILVERMAN: It's hard to compete. Yeah. I mean that is a very intimidating thing when you look at the beauty

of nature and you look at some of these organic—

MR. CONGER: But, it has a residue that sinks in. I think my experience in the Southwest, of course, did affect me more than I ever imagined, later on. And my fascination for Native American art and pottery and particularly of the Southwest that has stayed with me. And we do go back to the Southwest, now and then, every few years. And I always enjoy that. I do like going there.

MR. SILVERMAN: That makes sense.

MR. CONGER: But, I like a lot of place. I like going anywhere in America, frankly, there is always something.

MR. SILVERMAN: It gets out of your routine, if nothing else.

MR. CONGER: Well, I'm a great history buff. I love to re-trace the pathways of pioneers or—Kathy and I for—it took us about five years to re-trace the pathway of Jacques—

MR. SILVERMAN: Louis and Clark?

MR. CONGER: —Marquette and Joliet in Illinois and through Wisconsin and Michigan up to Quebec. American history, I love. I like going on, visiting historic sites and so forth.

MR. SILVERMAN: We haven't—I haven't asked you anything about your teaching experience or your teaching philosophy. And I know that was an important part of your life, not just for survival in terms of economically, but I think it informed a lot of the way you think about art, the way you present art and your relationship to the art world. You want to talk to me a little about your teaching career? Because we haven't gotten into that at all, oddly enough.

MR. CONGER: I never planned to become a teacher. I never dreamt of being a teacher when I was young, I dreamt of being an artist. It never occurred to me that I would be a teacher. Somehow, that just didn't occur to me; how I would survive and make a living or somehow it just didn't happen. And then when I was faced with it, I was completely terrified. I completed my graduate study at the University of Chicago in 1966, of course then I had to get a job and I applied for various jobs and teaching and finally got one in Rockford, Illinois at a junior college that I was thrown into a teaching situation where I had absolutely no preparation whatsoever. None.

And the summer before I was to begin teaching, Kathy and I worked together. She helped me, I planned out all of my classes, I tried to foresee every day because I was just terrified that I would show up one day and not have a clue as to what to do. And I had to teach a kind of general art history and one of my professors at the U of C told me, "Well, write your lectures out and then you read your lectures for a while and then you'll eventually get to know them well enough that you won't need to do that anymore." And I thought that was pretty good advice and that's exactly what I did. And it took me two or three years to become a little bit more comfortable, but I probably over-taught for the first few years. I over did it and planned everything and went overboard on everything. I had students do and painting and drawing and design. Of course, I was imitating what I had learned. And I think over a period of four or five years, I became fairly good at it.

My philosophy? I never really had one except that I expected students to be attentive, rigorous—I wanted them to put everything into what they were doing. I did believe in my students acquiring certain skills and knowledge. I mean I came out of that era when skills were important.

MR. SILVERMAN: That was the big thing. That's what we were talking about the difference in terms of—

MR. CONGER: As we mentioned the other day at the Art Institute that was the big sorting out process. It became very evident, very quickly who had the chops and who didn't.

MR. SILVERMAN: Exactly.

MR. CONGER: And that was it. The competition was so keen, that you worked like crazy to make sure that you could be competitive.

MR. SILVERMAN: I'm afraid it's very different now. The kids hand you a disk and they say, "Here, you make this." [Laughs.] Prefabricated or whatever.

MR. CONGER: And I became aware of the lapses in my own education because I was probably more self-educated than anything and so I tried to fill those gaps, I tried to become better at writing and at my general knowledge and my speaking ability. I thought I was not very good at any of that and so I tried hard to be good at that. And so I worked hard at it and so my teaching attitude throughout my whole career—even though the art world changed, I was aware of that, and student perceptions changed and I tried to be cognizant of that, but at the same time I did care a lot about discipline, I mean artistic discipline.

MR. SILVERMAN: Sure.

MR. CONGER: Working hard, trying to achieve something, being cognizant and being aware of our history and of philosophy generally of knowing what's going on in the world of the mind, as it were. Those were the things that mattered to me.

MR. SILVERMAN: So how about studio practice? Studio classes? You've obviously taught the skill of art. Is that something you feel can be taught? Is that something you can just be supportive of and sort of teach what technical skills you can? Or how do you help develop a voice for a young artist? Help them develop their voice.

MR. CONGER: Well, I do believe that some people can become artists and some can't.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: And I don't know if it has anything to do with their natural ability or their alertness. I think it has almost everything to do with desire. A desire to improve, to achieve, to be really good to have good models to match, or beat. A fire in the belly is really--and that's probably true in every field, you've got to have that keen desire that motivates you more than anything else. And we've all seen people who have a natural facility and a natural talent, but they really aren't invested in it, they don't care.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. I've seen many of those.

MR. CONGER: And that's fine. They may even care about something else. At Northwestern, I taught a lot of students who majored in other fields and who would come in and take an art class and did exceptional work. And they were proud of what they did and so forth, but they really were more interested in computer science and that's what they wanted to do. Or biology, or something else. And I think that's fine.

MR. SILVERMAN: Sometimes someone can come in, and walk in the door who has no experience of art and do some of the most amazing things because they don't have any of the rigmarole, any of the baggage that we were talking about in terms of—did you ever see students like that that just sort of amazed you by their freshness of approach?

MR. CONGER: I did. Yes, I did. I remember over the course of my career, I can think of three or four students who seemed to have absolutely no ability whatsoever, and everything they did was awful, but they just wouldn't quit and they kept coming back almost like a little animal that kept sidling up to you and, you know, bringing you the slipper every day until finally—then, all of a sudden they would start doing something very interesting. And other times, there were people who seemed to have a taste, or a touch, or a kind of a leaning for something that is remarkably astute. I've had several students like that. I had one student who was--she had such a natural affinity for color, I just couldn't believe it, it was just incredible. And she had no background whatsoever in it.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's always what's most interesting to me. To see people that don't even know where value is.

MR. CONGER: She went from nowhere to the top—in terms of color sophistication—overnight without anything in between.

MR. SILVERMAN: So many students are looking at art—they're so careerist that they're looking at art magazines and what the prevailing trends are, and the fads and they are looking at the outside thing rather than the inspiration, as you talk about. Or the insides, and they're so much trying to be like Mike. They're trying to do something like somebody else and when you see originality, that's just always wonderful.

MR. CONGER: That never really appealed to me, and I never encouraged it [... -WC].

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, your students were probably busy looking at all those models.

MR. CONGER: Because it's a trap to do that, of course. And another thing that I think is important for students, is to constantly question their own abilities or question their own facility. And to subvert it.

MR. SILVERMAN: Having a critical facility is really important because there are artists that everything they do they think is wonderful, and you don't improve without some sense of critique or—

MR. CONGER: And also to subvert what you can do.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: If you're very good at doing this, well then what can you do that undercuts it?

MR. SILVERMAN: And you've played with that a lot as a matter of fact.

MR. CONGER: A lot. And I think that's very important because while I do think it's good to go with one's strengths, at the same time I think it's very good to maintain a high degree of skepticism and criticality. And here I am, you know, in a few days I'll be 78, I can't believe it, I'm going to be that old. And I'm still—in many ways it troubles me—but, I'm still very unsure of almost everything.

MR. SILVERMAN: You're still questioning your own work.

MR. CONGER: Every day I think, you know, "What kind of stuff is this?" And, "Who are you trying to kid with this?" and "Why don't you do this? And do that?" You know, this criticality, it can be very troubling. I mean, it doesn't make for a happy life necessarily.

[They laugh.]

MR. SILVERMAN: But it does make—you mentioned the life of the mind, but it's critical facility that moves you forward and curiosity that puts you to the next thing, to explore more and to grow. Otherwise, you're in the same place.

MR. CONGER: Yeah.

MR. SILVERMAN: There are artists, we could name them that get two or three ideas, even some people we know well in town. I know one artist that you mentioned the other day that just painted the same painting over and over again and it's a good painting, but it's like okay, already. You can do that.

MR. CONGER: Well, I mean I sometimes worry that I am close to that. I do the same painting over and over, but I keep pushing its boundaries, it's like I keep spreading it out, I hope. You know, pushing it away from its original narrowness because it's—if an idea has any life, it has that capacity to be pushed beyond its ordinary limits and not lose its own internal integrity, if you will. And so I've taken that risk.

MR. SILVERMAN: So how would you like your work to be seen? I know this story and where someone looks at reproduction 50 years from now, what do you hope you've achieved in terms of your legacy which I think you're pretty aware of. I think you're starting to think a lot about, like what, you know, what's the point of it all, is what you were hinting at, and what do you think the point of it all was for you? What do you hope someone to get from your work?

MR. CONGER: Well, I think when I was a young fellow, it did occur to me that I wanted to do something that I thought would be very hard to do in my life—maybe when I was 12 or when you start thinking about things like that.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah.

MR. CONGER: I wanted to do something that was really hard. And I told myself that being an artist is probably the hardest thing you can do because I was aware of this. I looked at these things at the museums; I saw that they were impossibly great, I wouldn't even have a clue as how to begin to do a Rembrandt or something. So I thought, it's impossibly hard therefore I want to do it. And so, I think I can say that I tried to do something for me that is the hardest thing I could think of doing and making a work of art—trying to make a contribution to what it is, what is possible as a work of art in our time. Whatever that is. I mean, that's a very big issue and it's a hard question to deal with.

MR. SILVERMAN: And it changes over time.

MR. CONGER: And it keeps changing and nobody really has the answer.

MR. SILVERMAN: And there are the gatekeepers that sort of have one view and then this long view of history, too.

MR. CONGER: And so your own investment in that is very, very important and very risky. You could be wrong. And I'm willing to be wrong, but I don't want to be wrong. And I would like my work to be recognized and seen and thought about in the future in some way. I think it's going to be a more limited way than I had fantasized about. Just because of the nature of life and the way things happen. Everyone has certain advantages and disadvantages that are either self-made or come to you. And, so I think I made a contribution in my time in a way that does answer the question to some degree in certain ways, "This is what is possible as painting in this time." It's not *the* possibility, it's a possibility. I recognize that.

MR. SILVERMAN: And even within abstraction, this is just one particular avenue.



MR. CONGER: It's one of many, but it's one. And, how it ranks or stacks up with others I can't, of course, no one knows. I also feel that—as I've said—I wanted to live the life of the mind. Ideas. What other people have thought about in terms of, what is the ultimate meaning of our existence? And why are we doing this? And what do we intend to achieve by this? Why bother? I mean all of these are important questions. They sound kind of corny, but they are important.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, you hope to communicate something of your exploration and what was your—

MR. CONGER: Exactly. And I think, yes. I still feel like I want to do more writing about art than about my experiences as an artist. I tried—I kept a journal for years, for 30 years and one time I was asked to present one of them in an exhibition that had to do with artist's writing and I thought, "Oh, sure that would be great." And so I pulled out one of my journals and I opened it at random and I realized upon reading it that, "No, I don't want this to be seen." Because it's gossip. It's all ridiculous gossip. Because I would write each day about my experiences and how this artist said this stupid thing, and that artist did that and how I wanted to do this and I realized that I wasn't being very philosophical, I was being just an ordinary complaining artist and so I didn't do that. But, I still would like to do a little more writing about how I think about art and what I think are important issues, not just for myself, but—

MR. SILVERMAN: There are different kinds of voices and different kinds of writing, just like there are different languages of painting. There's the talking about yourself memoir kind of stuff, well you had mentioned Proust, there's that, but then there's also the use of language to communicate other things and it's a little like your painting, there's a parallel there; there's all kinds of writing. And I've seen you do discourse, philosophical discourse, you are obviously underplaying your abilities, you are quite good at that and ability to also talk about art, those are all—there's different ways to write.

MR. CONGER: Well, yeah, I mean, I love language. And so I'm attracted to it, I love it. And I love writing sentences, I try to write good sentences, I—people laugh at me, but you know I realized that a long time ago. For a hobby I buy books on grammar.

[They laugh.]

And I actually read them. [Laughs.] Not that it helps me much. So I have an interest in that just from a technical standpoint, but I think that my form of writing would take the form of the personal essay more than any other form. In fact, if I envision some kind of manuscript, it would be a collection of essays—perhaps on different topics—but all related to art in some way.

MR. SILVERMAN: Did you ever get a chance to do that in terms of your teaching? Did you ever get to communicate some of your feelings about—I mean—

MR. CONGER: Well, yes, I have because, well, I gave many lectures, you know, dozens and dozens of lectures on my own work and sometimes on other things or other issues to academic or quasi-academic audiences, so I was challenged by that. And for a long time I proctored the graduate students who were asked to write a thesis paper. Usually I was appalled at what they did. So, I've been engaged. And then, one of the things we didn't talk about too much was my association with Mary Matthews Gedo who—an art historian.

MR. SILVERMAN: You mentioned it on the psychoanalytic approach more than you mentioned her.

MR. CONGER: Yes, and her husband John the psychoanalyst of some note and she was an art historian critic, who took that psychological approach in her writing and it's kind of a branch of art historical writing that's not too popular, but—she engaged me in a number of projects that involved my writing and publishing on various topics that sometimes in collaboration with her or her husband. And that was encouraging, and I liked doing that. I might do more of that now.

MR. SILVERMAN: You're very comfortable with that. It doesn't take away the juice the sort of—it doesn't take away the love and the passion for making the art when you start to get too analytic? You can do both, you have the ability to turn it on or off or—

MR. CONGER: Yeah, because I tend to deal with topics that are not directly related to my work.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh.

MR. CONGER: I like to—well, like this one on language, for example. When I wrote the article about linguistics and abstract painting, I was thinking more of the analogy between this mode of thinking of language and a mode of thinking of abstract painting, I recently wrote something about Jackson Pollock, and because I visited one of his paintings at the National Gallery and I decided to take a real good look at it because, like everyone else, you've become sort of habituated to Jackson Pollock [... -WC].

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. You can take it for granted.

MR. CONGER: But, to really look at one for a long time—I was astonished at what I saw in that painting and so I wrote about that, but then I tend to do a little research too, and I was able to write about his painting in relation to some of the biographical stuff that's been published about him. So I like that kind of quasi-scholarly approach to doing writing. I like that.

MR. SILVERMAN: Right. What I was hinting at was something a little different about your own work. Some artists don't like to get too analytic with their own work because it's a little like a novelist talking about what their working on. It can take away from the vital energy of making the work. So your own work, you don't tend to analyze quite as much as what—

MR. CONGER: You can't really rehearse or recap a lovemaking session—

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.] Exactly.

MR. CONGER: —without losing something.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah, something changes in the translation.

MR. CONGER: Yeah, you lose something vital here.

MR. SILVERMAN: Definitely.

MR. CONGER: But, I think, as a separate activity, yes, it is possible and I do tend to think about why I do certain things but—and I could write about my work in that way and sometimes I do a little bit, but not too much. I don't like to because I feel like I really can't understand it well. For example, I hate writing artist's statements. I'm not a fan of it, I think it's bogus, because it puts the cart before the horse. Most artists, when you talk to them, they haven't got a clue as to what they're doing. They do it and if they're lucky they come out alive. That is, there still standing and the painting or the work of art has got some life of its own. And they can re-cap, but they can't predict. I forgot who said it, but it was said succinctly, "You cannot make a work of art by recipe. You can't predict a work of art."

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah. I was doing crits at the USC—UIC rather which is what I was hinting at in terms of their intellectualized approach, it was in Phyllis Bramson's class who is a real painter like you, and it was ironic, but she was having them read statements first and these were these highly intellectualized statements and I said, "Can we just look at the art and then come to the--?" In other words, the primacy of the act—

MR. CONGER: Yeah I know, I hate that. I ran into a lot of difficulty in my last years of teaching because of that attitude that has now become ubiquitous.

MR. SILVERMAN: That's kind of what I was hinting at this sort of—and I was talking about that with you—

MR. CONGER: This is now. You explain or declare what you're going to do and then the work illustrates it.

MR. SILVERMAN: Yeah and I'm sorry, I'm with you there.

MR. CONGER: Which is exactly the contrary to what creativity is about in my view and I know that one gets pushed into a romantic corner if you take that position, but you really can't make a work of art by recipe and that's what it comes down to.

MR. SILVERMAN: And knowing how to talk about--I mean, I agree with you--artist's statements are deadly. There are artists who are very articulate about their work, but it's a very separate quality.

MR. CONGER: Yeah, and that's a separate kind of thing.

MR. SILVERMAN: And there are people that are capable of doing really good work and really talking well about it, but how few are those?

MR. CONGER: And that's a case of where different people become artists at different times in history.

MR. SILVERMAN: Exactly.

MR. CONGER: I mean, I think personally if you take Josef Albers as an example, you know, one could say well he makes a square and he puts another square in it and he determines the relationship of the two by the color he uses then fine—so that's his artist's statement. But, every painting, I'm sure, required a different sensitivity of adjustment, of surface, of this, of that. Because otherwise they wouldn't have the impact that they normally

have. The same is true of Rothko. Or anyone else who did the same kind of thing over and over. You could say they worked by a recipe, but they didn't.

MR. SILVERMAN: No. There's a huge difference in front of one of those than the other one.

MR. CONGER: And I think you can't really say ahead of time that you're going to create a work of art. You can have that desire, but as I've said to other people, at other times, "Well, having an intention may be necessary, but it's never sufficient."

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs] Yeah.

MR. CONGER: Yeah. We all have intentions. When I start my painting, I have an intention to do this or that, or to make a good work, but whatever I declare, whatever I intend, may not be sufficient.

MR. SILVERMAN: The path takes you the materials that the process takes you along on a journey that's indeterminate.

MR. CONGER: Yes, exactly. And some little thing may happen that changes everything.

MR. SILVERMAN: Or it might be a so-called mistake and then you decide to learn from that and change it.

MR. CONGER: When I started painting, I normally photograph it at the end of the day. This is as far in technology as I go.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs.]

MR. CONGER: I take a digital picture and I look at it and sometimes I'll have 50 or 60 pictures of the painting every day and sometimes, I have to admit at around number 35 or 40 I should have stayed there—

MR. SILVERMAN: Knowing when to stop is important [laughs.].

MR. CONGER: I went the maximum that was the mistake.

MR. SILVERMAN: Oh yeah. Knowing when to stop is a very important thing.

MR. CONGER: Well, it took me off on another path. And maybe I made something out of it, but the point is, there may have been a point when I should have gone a different direction to see where that would have led me. So I'm always troubled by that too.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs] Well, that's the difference between process and product. Perhaps the best product would have been at point X, but the process, you've got stuff from going further even if it went past the point where for posterity maybe that wasn't the best painting at the end.

MR. CONGER: Well, there's always the danger of the relationship between the initial impulse and the final work. Now the initial impulse on a canvas, I can get it down in maybe five minutes and then I spend two months developing it. Now for some people, they'll say, "Well, that's where you kill it." And yet for me, that's where you create it.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs]. That's an important distinction. Yeah.

MR. CONGER: That's where you create it. It's like the difference between dumping a pile of bricks on the ground and actually building a building.

MR. SILVERMAN: And there's that whole school of action painting which is based on this very romantic sort of beatnik notion, you know, first thought, best thought. Just spew it out and it will come out and that's it.

MR. CONGER: That's right. And don't look back and don't recap and don't change. Of course, de Kooning found himself mired in that problem where he changes paint every day, but--and I change my paintings a lot, more than I want to. I do have the ambition to get done with it as soon as I can, but it never happens.

MR. SILVERMAN: [Laughs] You have an ideal, and then you have the reality.

MR. CONGER: I keep saying that sometimes I'll get all excited—I tell Kathy, my wife, that I'm going to finish this painting in five days, but then it turns out to be weeks and weeks and weeks.

MR. SILVERMAN: Well, we covered a fair amount of ground, is there stuff that you would like to say that we didn't cover? I mean, we have a little bit of time left, I'm just wondering—we talked a fair amount about your process and the way you work.

MR. CONGER: Well, I just think it's one of the greatest privileges that one can have in life is to be an artist when we know that within blocks of here anywhere in the world, no matter where we are, within a few feet, there's somebody who is struggling, who is being abused, ruined, enslaved, murdered, ruined by something. And I've been very, very fortunate that I've been able to spend my whole life as an artist and struggling to be a good artist, hoping to be a good a artist, but most importantly that I feel I did my best. I did everything I could possibly do and I'm still trying to do it. To be worthy as an artist, and that's my whole thing—that's my whole life.

[END OF SD02, TR01.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]