



Smithsonian  
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**Oral history interview with Bill Berkson, 2015  
September 29-October 2**

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Bill Berkson on September 29-October 2, 2015. The interview was conducted at the Archives of American Art in New York, NY by Annette Leddy for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Bill Berkson and Annette Leddy have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets appended by initials. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

ANNETE LEDDY: All right, this is Annette Leddy interviewing Bill Berkson in the Archives of American Art offices in New York City on September 29, 2015, card number one. Okay. You were born in 1939 in New York City. So how did your family come to New York?

BILL BERKSON: They came separately. My mother was born in Crawfordsville, Indiana in 1903 and she—late in life she said all she could think of was going to New York. Partly I think because her father had left the family. He never remarried or anything. There was no divorce but he left the family to make his fortune—if not fame—as a theatrical producer in New York. Actually, before she was—a couple of years before she was conceived even and then—obviously—paid a visit to the family and she was conceived and she was born in 1903. She always said she wanted to go to New York as quickly as possible, which probably was following his pattern not necessarily to see him. So, when she finished high school and she was interested in art and she had some ambition for herself to be a sculptor. She left quickly for Indianapolis and went to the John Herron Art Institute there for maybe a year. And I think that's where she met her first husband who was always described as kind of a ne'er-do-well. That marriage didn't last very long but anyway, they met in Indianapolis and went together to Chicago where she enrolled at the Art Institute of Chicago to be a sculptor.

MS. LEDDY: What year would that be then?

MR. BERKSON: 1920 or so. 1920 or so. I think she was in New York by 1922 or 23. Anyway, there they were and she said that at some point while she was at the Art Institute she realized that the world didn't need her sculpture. So she was—I think it was that she realized she wasn't going to be number one and she was a character, it was in her character to want to be the best at whatever it was that she was going to do. So she wasn't sure what she was going to do but she started—she had a taste for fashion I think and she started writing for one of the Chicago papers. I think it was the Chicago Tribune, a column on what's in the stores. And, you know, like at Marshall Field and so forth. Which is interesting because at that point my father would have been probably—he was two years younger than she—probably enrolled at the University of Chicago as a political science student and already beginning a career in journalism. But they didn't meet then. And, um, so I think after a year or so in Chicago she went to New York and she got a job doing, um, publicity in a public relation or press agent's office doing publicity for writers and publishers. And at one point she said—she really should have been interviewed by the archives about this—at one point her boss said, "You know, you know so much about art, why don't you do the same thing we're doing here for writers, do it for artists and art galleries?"

So she did. She started doing that in I guess the mid-20s.

MS. LEDDY: So who were her clients?

MR. BERKSON: Well, a lot. I mean, 57 street galleries. She had clients eventually like Noguchi, Alexander Brook—I know the names because we had their pictures. Often I think as typically like even with dentists she was paid in kind. You know, maybe the galleries—

MS. LEDDY: They would give her a work of art?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, so we had works, I mean there were two portrait heads that Noguchi did for her. We had Abraham Rattner, Walt Kuhn, Arthur Davies, John Curry; you know the one who did the circus? She arranged actually for him to do his most famous series which was of a circus—John Steuart Curry was his name I think. And oh various other artists of that time. And Doug Kingman eventually and so forth. Anyway, um, so she was doing that and then, um, I guess she was doing it well enough that when the Whitney Museum was starting either Juliana Force or Gertrude Whitney or both of them asked her to be the first publicity director or public relations director for the Whitney. And so she was starting in I think that was 1929. And so she did that. There she was ensconced in New York and eventually she stopped doing that—though there was a little overlap—and got more and more involved in American fashion. And eventually her mission was to be the public relations person for high couture American fashion, you know, starting sometime in the [early –BB] 30s.

MS. LEDDY: And so high couture American fashion in the 20s would be?

MR. BERKSON: Well, like Claire McCardell, Valentina, some of the more immigrated people—Norman Norell, you know, Adele Simpson, Lily Daché, Hattie Carnegie, people like that. And then eventually, you know, on down through the years she just worked until she died at age 100 in 2003, or I'm sorry. Is it 2003—yeah, 2003.

MS. LEDDY: So you mean she worked for Calvin Klein and all the American people?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, some of those like Halston for sure and Bill Blass and Oscar de la Renta and Norman Norell, and you know like that. And she was involved with, you know, Charles James. Just had a show at the Met I think recently. She worked with him and so forth. And there was a sort of an overlap with that also and show business. So, for instance she worked with—it's hard to tell who were really her clients. Many people she just sort of was interested in them or believed in them and she was a great introducer. I mean she had two things that I think I sort of inherited actually, which was a sense of who should know who. Oh, you should meet—if you want to do this you should meet this person, you know? And the other is the idea, you know, I get the—I mean I get a lot of ideas that I—for things that should be done but I don't want to do them. This is one of them, okay? [Pointing to *New York School Painters & Poets: Neon in Daylight*, by Jenni Quilter, 2014 –AL] Things that should be done but I don't want to do it. But you should do it, right? And so, you know, she'd do that and pass the ideas along gratis, you know?

But, so that was—and then in the midst of this my father was born in Chicago to Jewish Russian immigrants—Russian, Lithuanian, who knows? "From czarist Russia" they stamp your passport in those days. A family—his father was a tailor. His mother wrote poetry actually and taught English to immigrants. Bertha and William, so I was named after my grandfather William whose father's name was also William apparently. So they came—I'm not exactly sure. I think at least one of them came at the end of the 19th century. And one of them I think—it's unclear. One of them may have been born in Chicago. But anyway, this was a Jewish immigrant family and he grew up in Chicago, born in 1905 and as I say, went to University of Chicago. They lived in this area—they lived—I think their

address actually was Dorchester which is now the area that Theaster Gates is doing those houses in which is now—I mean, until he got hold of those houses—was a completely decrepit black neighborhood on the south side of Chicago, you know, near the university. Anyway, he went to the University of Chicago, began working very young on the newspapers, I think on the *Herald Examiner* in Chicago. He knew people like—he knew Leopold and Loeb, Leob was a fraternity brother of his in the Jewish fraternity. He told me that whenever Leopold's name came up for possible membership Loeb would put him down, black ball him. "You don't want that kid in, you know—very—you know."

They used to go out on double dates and he said at a certain point Loeb would send his girl home or take her home and go out and meet Leopold. So he had that connection. He knew a lot of the gangsters too, you know? It was like that high—

MR. BERKSON: What did your father study? Philosophy or?

MS. LEDDY: He studied political science. He had a political science fellowship at University of Chicago. I guess both my parents set the pattern for me as being college dropouts. Because he quit at a certain point—I think just a year short of his degree and maybe because he was offered a job in New York by the Hearst Corporation. I'm not exactly clear on how that worked but he left the University of Chicago at a certain point. He's working for the *Herald Examiner* and then he's off to New York. And, um, Universal News Service was the Hearst News Service and I think he was immediately working for Hearst for the Universal News Service and he was sent as the Bureau Chief to Paris first and then to Rome. And then he—when he was in Rome he—that was the high time for Mussolini and he did a series of interviews with Mussolini, which were arranged by Mussolini's mistress, Sarfatti, because she liked him. My father was—my parents were really good looking and my father was very handsome and sort of suave for a kid from the, you know, the Jewish ghetto of Chicago. He established some sort of style for himself pretty early on. And because this woman who was Mussolini's mistress said, "Oh, you should not be this journalist, you should be a gigolo." And she got him entrée to Il Duce and he did a series of interviews with him and he also wrote a book.

Well, the interviews were collected. I mean there was a series of articles called "The Rise and Fall of Mussolini" that weren't collected as a book but as a kind of a, I don't know, portfolio that my father had. And then he wrote a book called *Their Majesties*, which was about the oddity of royal families in the 20th century, you know, all over the world.

MS. LEDDY: The oddities of them?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, well I mean how odd it seemed that you were in the supposedly democratic 20th century and there were these people like King Zog and of course the British Royal Family and the Danish Royal—

MS. LEDDY: But you mean how they lived and what their attitudes were and what their—

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, because of the—this was written in the late 30s, early 40s. I think it was written before the war. And you know, there was still Victor Emanuele in Italy and so on.

MS. LEDDY: And so what was—first of all, what was the title of that book?

MR. BERKSON: *Their Majesties*.

MS. LEDDY: T-H-E-I-R?

MR. BERKSON: Uh-huh [Affirmative].

MS. LEDDY: That's good. And his name was William?

MR. BERKSON: Seymour. No, no—his name was Seymour. S-E-Y-M-O-U-R. Berkson.

MS. LEDDY: And your mother's name was?

MR. BERKSON: Eleanor, E-, E-L-E-A-N-O-R. Lambert. L-A-M-B-E-R-T. So they met and this is also relevant. It's in your files, but not about how they met. There's an account of it, the short form for this not to take up too much time. Avis Berman's *Rebels on 8th Street* about the Whitney Museum—the early years of the Whitney Museum—has an account of this scandal and how my parents met within the context of this scandal. Which was that, okay, my father is a bureau chief in Rome. My mother is actually not—no longer the public relations director of the Whitney but she's attached. She loved, idolized Juliana Force who was the chief of the Whitney. I mean, Gertrude Whitney was the money and, you know, sort of inspiration but Juliana Force was—

MS. LEDDY: And Juliana, J-U-L-I-A-N-A, F-O-R-C-E?

MR. BERKSON: Force, as in force of gravity. Yeah, yeah.

MS. LEDDY: Force of nature, yes, I get it.

MR. BERKSON: Force of nature. So, 1934 the Whitney is, like ever somebody's got to put together the American section at the Venice Biennale. And I guess the Whitney had been doing it for some years. And, but always like today, trying to raise the money for the show. And this show was going to be as my mother said, the "top" American artists and she—I think she said to Berman a number of names like, you know Thomas Hart Benton. You know, people like that. I think she said Hopper. He may have been in the show. Anyway, like that. And so into Juliana Force's office walks William Randolph Hearst. "Well, I hear you need some money for shipping and other arrangements for the American section. I'd be willing to help if you just do me a small favor." "What's the favor?" Well, I have a portrait of a friend, beautiful painting which I would like to have included in the show and it's a portrait by a Polish society painter. This is not Hearst talking, this is me. [He –AL] names Styka, S-T-Y-K-A. Tadeusz I think. T-A-D-E-E-U-S or something like that I think there's a Z on the end of it. He wasn't even an American citizen and it was this huge, tall, very tall—seven foot I think—portrait of Marion Davies the movie star who was—

MS. LEDDY: Yeah, of course, who was his mistress.

MR. BERKSON: Who was Hearst's mistress. And, you know, I have and you have somewhere in your archives images of that—of that painting. Who knows—who knows where it is today. That's an interesting question. But, of course Force said, you know, being a stand-up curator with a lot of integrity, "We can't do that, I'm sorry Mr. Hearst." "Well, okay." Hearst leaves. Contacts Count Volpe who is Hearst's man in Venice and says to him, "You know, we would be happy—we've been very impressed with what Il Duce has been doing for the people of Italy and we could see doing a series of articles letting the American people know of the benefits of the regime, of the fascist regime and so forth. And I would like a small favor in return." Perhaps he wouldn't say quid pro quo, but you know, "I wonder if you could do me a small favor?" Which is this thing and Volpe is, "Of course, done. Consider it done." So, my mother is off on a ship on the way to Paris I think. Juliana Force is vacationing in Greece. A man named Gerald Kelly is with the Whitney team in Venice. They open the doors of the American section, which is the same building that's there today. Same building

that's there today and in the atrium, right here is hanging the—what the fuck—and so the cables go flying and Juliana Force gets it in Greece and cables, my mother—I think my mother is on this ship at that point. "You've got to get to Venice and get that thing out of there." And of course, Hearst is anticipating trouble so he wires his man in Rome to go to Venice and make sure the painting stays.

MS. LEDDY: He could have put it in the Italian pavilion.

MR. BERKSON: This is—this is—I mean, I see it as Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell meeting, you know, kaboom.

MS. LEDDY: It does sound like.

MR. BERKSON: Katherine Hepburn. Anyway, that's how they met and, you know, how it all shook out I don't really know, you know? I imagine my father saying, taking a look at her and saying, "Why don't we talk about this over lunch or dinner or both?" But there was complication because they were both married. She had been separated from her ne'er-do-well husband for many years but all the same had never really gotten divorced and he was married to another journalist, a very interesting journalist named Jane Eads, E-A-D-S who he had met in Chicago. She was a journalist in Chicago and they married there and now they had a daughter on the way.

MS. LEDDY: Oh dear.

MR. BERKSON: So it took two years. This is 1934. 1936 my parents finally got married after a lot of duress and painful, I think it was for a lot of people—for everybody. And yeah.

MS. LEDDY: Well sure, this person's pregnant. But so they were madly in love it sounds like.

MR. BERKSON: Madly in love and stayed that way, you know? It was, you know, it was—

MS. LEDDY: They were very happy together always.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And so, um, that's how they—then they married in New York and I was born three years later and they—and we all lived together first in the Oliver Cromwell on 72nd Street and then in 1943 moved to 1060 5th Avenue otherwise known as 1 East 87th Street. The entrance is on 87th and that's where—that was the family home until my mother died in 2003. And so that's where I grew up, and—

MS. LEDDY: And you were an only child?

MR. BERKSON: I was an only child. Well, there was my half-sister who I saw very irregularly who lived in Washington as her mother did. And her mother—

MS. LEDDY: Washington state or Washington, D.C.?

MR. BERKSON: Her mother remarried, I think she married a man who was maybe the head of Voice of America.

MS. LEDDY: So, and so—well, what kind of a household was it to grow up in?

MR. BERKSON: Oh, it was terrific. It was, you know, lots of journalists. Actually, well my father was alive it was mostly journalists. A few of the fashion people. Lots of show business people because

of for instance, my mother had done publicity for, you know, or somehow or other helped out Vincent Minnelli when he was working at Rockefeller Center. I know she did publicity for the shows and Leon Leonidoff was the stage [producer –BB] for the Rockettes and so forth. And, um, so she knew Minnelli and when he went to Hollywood, um, and married Judy Garland then Garland became a family friend. So people like Judy Garland and Mary Martin and other people in show business and the movies and so forth were friends too. And then there were a few like, social people. And other people who were family friends were Albert and Mary Lasker. Albert Lasker was a very inventive, early—some people say he really invented public relations. And he and his wife Mary amassed quite an interesting art collection. A lot of Impressionists and so forth. And she's the woman who—and I think she died within the last decade. She was a tremendous philanthropist for heart research, cancer research, and she also put all the flowers on Park Avenue every year, you know, spring time, whatever they were, daffodils or something. And—nice woman. And so those were some—some of the family friends, so I think that a lot of—that was a pretty sizable apartment. Eleven rooms and it had a big, big living room and a big dining room and so there were parties, you know? So I remember a lot of interesting people and a lot of laughter, you know?

MS. LEDDY: And so you, what kind of kid were you?

MR. BERKSON: Horrible I think. [Laughs.] I don't know. I recently learned that I could be just terrible sort of a beast. But I also had this side of being very sociable at parties like that.

MS. LEDDY: Like a beast, what do you mean?

MR. BERKSON: I don't know. Just maybe misbehaving or hard on other kids, or, you know? I had a—oh, I had a—my mother's niece, Jeanne Ann—what was her—um, Jeanne Ann Lambert, she was one of my mother's brother's daughters. She died this past year about six months ago at age 96 and beginning at about age 89 or so—I guess it was soon after my mother died she and I began to have a lot of phone conversations and she loved to, you know, tell on everybody including me. So she said, we thought you—we thought you belonged in Alcatraz. So, that was how bad I was. She was worried about my playing with her son. I don't know. I don't know what I did. But I also know that at those parties, you know, my mother was fond of saying, you know, "Everybody was so impressed with you, you're so mature." I think my mother was sort of like an English mother who can't wait, can't understand infancy or adolescence at all and is just waiting for you to grow up and be an adult.

MS. LEDDY: An adult and be part of her adult world.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, the rest of it is sort of savagery or something. Maybe I was especially savage, I don't know. But then she would say you were, you know, "Everybody thought you were so mature." Well, I could sort of—I learned to talk political talk and things like that pretty early. You know, I was interested in things like that. So—

MS. LEDDY: And what about art though? So there was all this artwork in the house—

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, yeah, it's funny. All this artwork was in the house and I had, you know, maybe it was like osmosis but I didn't really pay a lot of attention to it. It was kind of there. One thing that—I sat a lot in the library. There was, you know, there was—you go in there was the foyer then directly ahead was a room we called the library. That was the room where the books were and TV and it was next to the living room. And above the bar. There was a bar with liquor and so forth. I guess signs of the times. Neither of my parents were big drinkers but that was, you know, for parties and guests and so forth.

MS. LEDDY: Right, you were supposed to have that.

MR. BERKSON: There was a Tibetan thangka, which you've seen. We have—I have in the dining room in San Francisco. And it was one thing that I knew I especially wanted after my mother died. And I had spent a lot of time looking at this thing with this fierce black figure with a sword and flames and the figure was stomping on another figure and a pig, you know, which was supposed to be desire, you know? And this is the figure actually as I learned, that Yamantanka, which the figure, the deity that defeats death and but looks like death itself, you know? And I remember asking my father, "What is that—what is that figure?" And he said, "Oh, some kind of god." Well, we didn't have God in the house. It was—

MS. LEDDY: Because neither of your parents—?

MR. BERKSON: No, it was a completely secular household. I mean my father had sort of—didn't want any more of Judaism. His parents were sort of religious and I mean, his mother's—my grandmother's father I think had been some kind of if not a Rabbi maybe a Talmudic scholar or something like that. And I knew nothing about that and my mother had been vaguely Presbyterian. I went to Christian—you know, I went to Trinity School, which was an Episcopalian school. We sang hymns. I sort of got the idea that there was a God and there was Jesus Christ and things like that sort of from that but it wasn't heavy. It wasn't, you know, you weren't receiving Bible instruction or anything like that. So this was God, this flaming black sword-bearing figure, you know? And but otherwise, no. And, you know, it's—I mean, a really off thing because we were three blocks away from the Met. I went to the Met. I was entranced by the Egyptian, particularly the tomb you could walk in and there is a niche where you could see the mummy through the window, but I mean, that was—I don't know, sort of glamorous or something spooky. And there were the armor, you know, the old armor.

MS. LEDDY: It seems like a typical boy. You like armor, you like the mummies, and you like the wild and crazy guy.

MR. BERKSON: Same thing for my son. He was crazy about Egypt the minute he found out about it, you know? There's something about that that draws us, you know? But I never went into the old master galleries or anything like that.

MS. LEDDY: And you mother didn't take you to the museum on Sundays or anything?

MR. BERKSON: No, nothing like that. No, we went to the movies.

MS. LEDDY: You went to the movies.

MR. BERKSON: I mean, my cultural life with my parents was movies.

MS. LEDDY: And they were working, right?

MR. BERKSON: Movies and shows.

MS. LEDDY: They were working a lot, right?

MR. BERKSON: They were working a lot.

MS. LEDDY: So you had other people?



MR. BERKSON: There were—we went to Broadway shows. We went to movies, sometimes two on a Sunday with dinner in between. I went to movies with my friends. I went to, you know, the usual Saturday morning cartoons and, you know, Disney movies and stuff like that and then westerns and, you know, war pictures and all that kind of stuff.

MS. LEDDY: And did you have art lessons like many kids?

MR. BERKSON: No, I had art class in school and I remember that I got this commendation from the art teacher, it would have been fifth grade, something like that maybe. I drew what I thought was—I had been, you know, in 1949 or something we took a trip to Mexico and I drew this profile figure of a Mexican in a big hat. Not really a sombrero but a big hat, like a, you know, a peasant's hat. In profile with the sun. That was my—the first—I mean other than everybody was drawing airplanes. I was pretty good at that, you know, airplanes where you could draw them in some kind of foreshortening. And horses, cowboys and Indian horses, you know, that kind of thing?

MS. LEDDY: Right.

MR. BERKSON: The planes I could manage. The horses I couldn't manage. The Mexican I did and the art teacher said this was really good and I was very proud of that but it didn't spur me to thinking—I never considered being an artist. I really wanted—there were certain, you know, there's always a kid or two in the class who could draw like crazy and I was envious of that but mainly that like, you know, so many American artists, you begin with this ambition to be a good cartoonist. To be as good as, you know, Al Capp or Milton Caniff or, you know, George Herriman, or whoever. So that was—that was it. And the connection with art really, really didn't happen until I connected with art.

MS. LEDDY: So but you never went to galleries with your mother? None of that stuff?

MR. BERKSON: No, no.

MS. LEDDY: Zero? It was zero cultivation in that way.

MR. BERKSON: It didn't occur to her or them and it didn't occur to my governesses, nannies, what have you, either.

MS. LEDDY: It was the movies, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: It was all movies and show biz and music—records. All the records that came into the house came into my room because my parents didn't listen to music. I once asked my mother why. She said, "I hear—I'm on the phone all day long. I'm talking to people all day long. When I get home I want quiet."

MS. LEDDY: There was no piano?

MR. BERKSON: My mother when I was ten years old said, "Would you like to take piano lessons? If you want we'll get a piano." And for some dumb reason I said, "Nah."

MS. LEDDY: Because most kids would say that's just another—more work, right?

MR. BERKSON: I don't know. I don't know what it was; it just didn't mean anything to me. It was like my father—my parents were sort of awkward as parents. I mean, I think that it had something to do with their households. My father's father was very, very quiet and his mother was kind of a Jewish

mother. And so they didn't have very good examples of how to be parents. My mother's father had left the family so there was no—her father was in a way her second oldest brother. And her mother seems to have been sort of vague too. So, in adulthood I realized that my parents really didn't know what they were doing, you know? They thought it would work out and thank God they were nice. They were not oppressive. They were permissive, you know?

MS. LEDDY: Right.

MR. BERKSON: And, I mean I was given a lot of leeway but I was not, you know, I mean we went on vacations together and they were like family vacations going to Florida. We went to Jamaica. We went to, you know—

MS. LEDDY: You weren't neglected. You were included.

MR. BERKSON: No, but I didn't go to Europe with them when I was old enough to go with them, it had reached that point what would it be—10, 11, 12—you know, what do I want to go there for? I'll miss all the things with my friends. You know, so I didn't go to Europe until I was 18 years old. And on my own, you know? So the whole involvement with art—writing was something a little different.

MS. LEDDY: Because did you begin to think of yourself as a poet when you were still say in elementary school?

MR. BERKSON: No.

MS. LEDDY: No.

MR. BERKSON: Oh no, no, no. Nothing like that.

MS. LEDDY: So high school?

MR. BERKSON: Elementary school and first two years of high school I'm—it's sports, and girls and what else is there? There must be a third thing. But it sure wasn't—it wasn't academics. I was passing fair. Are you okay?

MS. LEDDY: Yes, I'm just looking. [At the tape recorder read out. –AL]

MR. BERKSON: Okay. And, no—we memorized Shakespeare and other, you know, John Masefield's "[Sea –AL] Fever" and various poems. We memorized lines from—speeches from Shakespeare plays. Things like that, you know? I had a very good education because I had Latin starting in probably the fifth grade. I had French starting in the second grade so that, you know, was—and you know, the English classes were there. I had a lot of trouble with mathematics. It wasn't until I left Trinity, went to Lawrenceville in 1955 that, um, I fell in with a literary crowd.

MS. LEDDY: Okay, Lawrenceville. So that is your third year?

MR. BERKSON: Oh, the third thing was dancing. I liked dancing, but that's like liking girls. I liked to dance. I liked music.

MS. LEDDY: Sports was girls?

MR. BERKSON: Sports, girls, dancing, yeah. And like that. And then, you know, I had this kind of—you know, I was—by the time I was in high school probably I was interested in—I certainly had

gotten interested in politics because I got sort of politicized over the Korean War and how this happened I don't know. But I knew the Korean War was wrong, that the whole business of its being a "police action" was phony, that the Army-McCarthy hearings were devastating. I mean, I watched the—get home from school and watch these things. And I remember whatever election it was, or convention, Alvin Barkley gave a speech. I stayed up late listening to it in my room and I got up immediately and wrote him a letter and I got a letter back. So I was kind of engaged all of a sudden in this way. And there was, you know, so I had that idea that I might be a journalist like my father. But it was inchoate. But then when I got to Lawrenceville I immediately fell in with a kind of literary crowd. People who were reading, you know, mostly modern literature.

MS. LEDDY: That would be Joyce and Hemingway?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, you know, Stein. Also, there were teachers we had—you know, this Lawrenceville was a boarding school so the assistant [housemaster –BB] was an aesthete who had gone to Harvard at the same time as Frank O'Hara and John Ashbury and so forth and he was a gay man who I guess certainly the housemaster knew it because he obviously didn't like him very much and he was, you know, a Navy man, the housemaster. But this guy turned us on to Proust and Stein. Would wake everybody up first thing in the morning with terrific jazz records and Mel Torme and all kinds of cool jazz he was into. And that was kind of an education in itself, you know? And then there were these fellow students, one of whom I'm still friends with in San Francisco who's a Jungian therapist, who were just reading—I think the idea was to read the whole Modern Library series. And so that was there. And then I read T.S. Eliot. Somehow that fell in my hands, "The Waste Land." And I sort of set about becoming an expert on "The Waste Land" and that was my first modern poem. And that was very interesting because—

MS. LEDDY: You mean learning what all the references are and the different—the Latin?

MR. BERKSON: Exactly. So I educated myself backwards through "The Waste Land" following those notes and then so forth and then also reading Eliot. And then another teacher gave me his copy of [Pound's –BB] early poems and his copy was annotated so that there were translation of all the foreign words, Greek and so forth. I didn't have Greek. I took some Greek while I was in Lawrenceville and I was writing. And I wrote my first poem as I like to say on a dark and stormy night when I thought that the girl that I loved didn't love me and that I'd lost her and I wrote this poem that was kind of unconsciously modeled on Shakespeare's sonnets that I had memorized. I mean, it just came out that way. They were rhymes and it had a certain rhythm.

MS. LEDDY: And paradoxes?

MR. BERKSON: Yes, very paradoxical actually. And I took this to—I took this to my friend next door in Dawse house at Lawrenceville. A man named Mike Victor and I—it was like saying, "Is this really a poem that I've just written?" And he said, "Yes, it's a poem. You should take it to the editor of the literary magazine,"—*The Lit* it was called. And I did and he said, "Oh, good. Well, we'll publish this in the next issue and have you got any more?" And I said, "Yes." Which was untrue but that sort of meant that I had to write more poems.

MS. LEDDY: You were 15? 16?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, 15 or 16. Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: And so that—that's how it all began?

MR. BERKSON: That's how it began, with a big—with a little lie. A little white lie. And so I was writing, you know, sports stories and I was writing poems and I began writing some short stories. Sports stories for the—and theater reviews for the literary magazine and also the newspaper. And, you know, reading everything I could get my hands on and I had absolutely no taste and all of us were reading way ahead of our experience. We were reading these great, depressing existentialist novels, Camus and Sartre and Dostoevsky and everything. And later I came to realize that it was because we were depressed and confused but it wasn't for the same reasons. It was because we were 15-16 years old and the culture we were in and it was depressing and confusing.

MS. LEDDY: Well, you know, but I think also I remember reading *Mrs. Dalloway* when I was maybe 20. And like, I didn't—I mean I understood that it was great in some way but I did not understand one single thing it was about in terms of life experience. And then I read it again 20 years later and I thought this is the most amazing novel ever because—

MR. BERKSON: Well that's what happened when I was about 45 or so. I started—I thought, what were those things all about we were reading? I said, "Oh my god, you know? What did I think was going on here?" I had no idea. But we were also trying to get all the sex books we could get, you know? And that meant Henry Miller or Radclyffe Hall. Any kind of, you know, anything whether it was sexual or homosexual or anything. Anything that had good sex in it we were wanting to find out about that. And it didn't end up being very educational but it was kind of like exciting. So that was—that was my education but it was still no real awareness of anything going on in New York. Some awareness of Picasso, that Picasso existed and probably just because it was in *Life* magazine, the Jackson Pollock, the scandal of Pollock's drip paintings, you know? I probably saw that.

MS. LEDDY: And they didn't teach art history at this school you went to?

MR. BERKSON: At Lawrenceville? No, but then, you know, that was the thing. The first hit really before I became aware—awake in New York in, around 1959, was I went from Lawrenceville, I went to Brown and my freshman year at Brown I took an introductory art history class. It may have been a prerequisite, I don't know.

MS. LEDDY: Everyone had to take those, right? So it starts with the Egyptians and so on?

MR. BERKSON: Yes.

MS. LEDDY: So western art?

MR. BERKSON: But the only things I remember—I remember the hits. There were three hits. One was the Raphael wedding with the sharp perspective going into the black door. And a Mondrian from around 1930 and Arshile Gorky's *Agony*. And those three slides—wow, you know? Gee, that's really something. And then Pollock was—the awareness of Pollock was I had this friend who was amazed by Pollock so he was making Pollocks using I think they were pipe cleaners of something. It was more like art. I think he was actually just dropping the paint-soaked pipe cleaners or threads onto big pieces of paper and then, you know, making patterns. But they weren't really anything. And, but there was one artist at Brown who's an artist who's still going and who's in New York. I also at Brown sort of fell in with a group of literary but also artistically inclined people. And that was, the one who I'm still friends with and who taught me a lot I think was John Willenbecher who's an artist not many people know but he lives, you know, at lower West Broadway near the Odeon, you know, the restaurant.

MS. LEDDY: Yeah, love the Odeon.

MR. BERKSON: He's a very interesting artist and a very interesting, civilized man.

MS. LEDDY: W-I-L-L-E-N?

MR. BERKSON: W-I-L-L-E-N-B-E-C-H-E-R.

MS. LEDDY: Oh, CH, not CK.

MR. BERKSON: And I remember he spoke about—oh, he spoke about Harry Bertoia who's a—because I think John was from Philadelphia.

MS. LEDDY: B-E-R-T-O-I-A.

MR. BERKSON: You got it, right.

MS. LEDDY: But you know, it's interesting to me. I think now and certainly in my case it seems people's entre into, you know, traditional art or art history is usually the surrealists. It's Magritte, it's Dalí, and it's those people that the high school kids first connect to.

MR. BERKSON: We knew that, that was for instance, the pinup—the standard pinup for high school girls in the 1950s, my time, was Dalí's, it used to be—have pride of place in the modern section at the Met. Dalí's *Crucifixion*, which was a young boy with big, gold blocks for the cross. And instead of nails he was just affixed to the cross with the—it wasn't like the William Jennings Bryan cross of gold politics or anything like that. But that was this image. And I remember two or three girls, you know, having that poster probably in their bedroom, you know?

MS. LEDDY: So it's not like you didn't—you were—it's not that you didn't see those, but you—

MR. BERKSON: No, my mother—my mother had—yeah, I knew that some—I didn't really know much about surrealism. But Dalí, my mother had worked with Dalí and you know, done some sort of publicity or whatever and involved him in some of the fashion shows. So her prized possession over the mantle for as long as I can remember was a Dalí, a kind of procession of female figures but they were butterflies, okay?

MS. LEDDY: Oh yeah, I've seen that one.

MR. BERKSON: My son has it to this day and when I graduated from Lawrenceville, my parents thinking that I was still involved—at a certain point I got involved with the Episcopal Church. I became a communicant of the Episcopal Church but I left it over the politics of Korea and McCarthy and what not—long before I graduated Lawrenceville—but they, somehow this didn't register, or we didn't discuss it. So they gave me for a graduation present a Dalí crucifixion, an ink drawing of a crucifixion, so.

MS. LEDDY: So, that was it? So you were already an owner of fine art, yes.

MR. BERKSON: I knew what that was, yeah.

MS. LEDDY: And so you're there at Brown and did you take studio art?

MR. BERKSON: No.

MS. LEDDY: You never took studio art?

MR. BERKSON: No.

MS. LEDDY: Okay, but you took creative writing/

MR. BERKSON: But I'm beginning to wake up to it. I mean, there was a man named Walter Feldman who was teaching at RISD. The most interesting people and the best parties were at RISD. You know, Rhode Island School of Design.

MS. LEDDY: I knew it.

MR. BERKSON: Well, you know, but they may not know. And so there was a lot of education that came out of just going to those parties. There was a man named Harry Smith. Not the Harry Smith who did the *Anthology of American Music* and his films and so forth but another Harry Smith who later did a magazine called *The Smith*. And I think he was older. I think he may have been a Korean war veteran and he—I remember going to a party at his house and he had Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thompson, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, the RCA L.P. on the turntable and that's the first I knew. I mean I knew of Stein but I didn't know that and that was exciting just to hear that even at a party. And I think I promptly went out and got a copy of that. And so, you know, that was happening. But I didn't really—I don't—I mean, John was probably practicing some kind of studio art, John Willenbecher. I didn't really—I don't remember seeing what he did. And so it was all, you know, around that time that was when the beat generation thing hit, and so maybe in the last year I think what it was, was not while I was at Lawrenceville, but the summer after I graduated I was working at *Newsweek*. I worked two summers at *Newsweek* as kind of a, not a copy boy, but a researcher, what they called replacement researcher.

And I was working in the Book Department, which was right next to the Sports Department. This was a wonderful nexus of smart people. There was a man named Wilder Hobson who was a book reviewer. He was also an expert in Jazz and the sports department was Roger Kahn, who wrote *the Boys of Summer* about the Dodgers—great sports writer—and Dick Schaap who you may know because he was on TV a lot and so forth. Anyway, this was the brain trust of the back of the book of *Newsweek*. And Wilder Hobson at a certain point handed this book to me. He said, "You know, this might interest you." I don't know if he was going to review it or not but he lent it to me and it was *On the Road*. I already sort of knew about Kerouac because the Steins, Julius Stein and his wife were friends of my parents and—the guy who headed the Music Corporation of America. And their daughter, Jean Stein was an editor at the *Paris Review* and I met her at probably one of my parents' parties. She was a bit older, probably five or six years older, and she said, "We've just discovered a new writer and we're publishing him in the next issue of the *Paris Review*." And that was Kerouac. And there was a story I think it was called "The Mexican Girl" that was in the *Paris Review*.

So, you know, and that was, you know, the introduction to this exciting writing that was exciting because everything else around it seemed so dull, you know?

MS. LEDDY: Convention bound anyway.

MR. BERKSON: Convention bound, yeah. I mean, the poetry. I had been writing poetry long enough that I began to check out what the contemporary writers were doing and in most of the magazines, and there was one anthology, it was so depressing I thought one can't be a poet in this age because the poetry is dull.

MS. LEDDY: But was it like John Crowe Ransom? Was it—

MR. BERKSON: No, no, no—those were the older people. This is more post—even post Robert Lowell. I didn't even know about them.

MS. LEDDY: But maybe Robert Frost?

MR. BERKSON: Oh no, no. This is—you know, I remember looking into an anthology and I was looking for somebody who was the closest one to my age, somebody who I guess was born in something like 1930 or 32 or something like that. His name was Robert Mezey. It was all kind of what later I learned to call "boring academic poetry." It was sort of a school-bound poetry and it had nothing to do with your life and it had no—nor did it have any invention or fresh energy in the writing, you know? Yes, as you said convention-bound. And so, Kerouac, Ginsberg, Corso, and so forth became, wow, you know? Before then—because City Lights Books and *Evergreen Review* came to the Brown Book Store. So there was Ferlinghetti, there was Kenneth Patchen—that was happening.

MS. LEDDY: So that's around 1960, right? That's where—

MR. BERKSON: No, I'm at Brown in 1957.

MS. LEDDY: 1957. Okay.

MR. BERKSON: And, um, so you know, it got so that we had a—there was a Classics professor at Brown named Boardman who encouraged a number of us, five or six, to form a little club that was like a reading club or discussion club and I remember two presentations that I made. One was that I had some idea, a cyclical theory of history. How, you know, it comes around, goes around really. And I made this presentation and you know, it was like you—the great thing was no professor in the room. We just met on our own. He encouraged it that way. And then I did a session on Gregory Corso who I was particularly enthralled by, you know? His poetry. So that was going.

MS. LEDDY: So it wasn't—so in a sense you're saying that what you got from Brown were kind of your peers and your association with your peers and that excitement about literature and art comes from that and not—I don't hear so much about the professors.

MR. BERKSON: Oh yeah, that's what school is eventually.

MS. LEDDY: Okay, so you didn't really feel like—

MR. BERKSON: Well, there will be—all a professor needs to do is say—here's an example. Gerald Weales who I think was basically a theater critic somehow or other was a professor at Brown. One of the great things about Brown was that they had a program called Identification and Criticism of Ideas. You could take this as a—you could take these seminars as a freshman. Here was a seminar about—tragedy.

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That was the topic, tragedy. What is tragedy, mostly in theater in plays? And first session, and it's a seminar, it's a roundtable. Gerald Weales comes in. He is probably, at that point, a man around 30 and he sits down at the table, looks around the room, and says, "You may not know it, but you are all existentialists." And I thought, oh boy, this is great because I knew it, because I had been reading all that stuff before.

[They laugh.]

But the idea that this was some sort of commonality was kind of wonderful. You know? And then he was the—so he was the professor and there's always one who you—one or two of you. There was a guy named Pincus. I forget his first name. Anyway, Ed Pincus, I think. Um, and Pincus and I and Gerald Wheels would go for coffee after class and so we would continue the conversation. You know? And so we were, Pincus and I being kind of young guys test—testing our, you know, our capabilities in a way as intellectuals. What's this all about and philosophizing and so forth. And, you know, totally sophomoric. But—

MS. LEDDY: It sounds so totally great.

MR. BERKSON: But learning in the process. You know, it was great.

MS. LEDDY: But then if it was so great, why did you leave is the question?

MR. BERKSON: That's interesting. That's exactly—I'm beginning to get—I went with my parents. I'm enamored of the Beat Generation. I've read a book by Kerouac called *The Subterraneans* which schnookered me. I mean, it fooled me into thinking that everything that I thought I wanted to be a part of or to know about was happening in San Francisco because *The Evergreen Review* had had this issue, the San Francisco issue, that had "Howl" in it, Ginsberg—

MS. LEDDY: Oh yeah. That's pretty great. Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: —and these people. And so my parents were going to go to San Francisco during what was, for me, Thanksgiving vacation, 1958. My father had meetings there with various newspaper people and my mother, I think, was just going to go along and maybe see friends there. I don't think she had any particular business to do. I wanted to go because that's where the Beat Generation was. So we go to San Francisco. We stay in the Mark Hopkins Hotel. We go out to dinner and we're there for three days, maybe for me.

MS. LEDDY: Go to North Beach and see the beatniks.

MR. BERKSON: And after dinner I go back to the room, get on my jeans and fatigue jacket and go down the hill—just down the hill—and down the hill is Grand Avenue.

MS. LEDDY: Right.

MR. BERKSON: And then up to beyond to—upper Grant Avenue. I'm going to all these places like the Coexistence Bagel Shop and The Place and so forth. And it's already—it's not over but it's—Grant Avenue is full of giant tour buses.

MS. LEDDY: Yeah. Beat Tourism.

MR. BERKSON: "Look at the people in the berets," and so forth. And I go into the place and I sort of mutter something to the guy at the bar who I later realize is probably, because people told me, was probably a man named Knute Stiles, S-T-I-L-E-S, who was a painter, who was the typical bartender at The Place, which was the big hangout for the poets still and I probably muttered something. He was a painter and he also wrote art criticism. And I muttered something about "Kerouac, Ginsberg, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." And he says, "They're all in New York, man."

MS. LEDDY: [laughs]



MR. BERKSON: Yeah. Because Kerouac had written this story about subterraneans that actually happened on McDougal Street with this character Mardeaux and characters who—are we out of time?

MS. LEDDY: I'm having trouble reading the readout here in this light so I'm trying to just figure it out because it usually says how much time is left but I can't read it.

MR. BERKSON: Does it beep?

MS. LEDDY: No. It doesn't do anything like convenient that. I think we still have 15 minutes.

MR. BERKSON: Okay. We'll get to just the right place, I think.

MS. LEDDY: So they're really in New York?

MR. BERKSON: He had written this book about something that happened in Greenwich Village with Mardou Fox and Corso and, you know, Kerouac and Ginsberg's in it. They made a movie with George Peppard and Leslie Caron that was called *The Subterraneans*. You know, Roddy McDowell.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: There's supposed to be a new version of this coming out sometime soon. Anyway, so that's it. "They're all in New York, man." And I go back to Brown and my father had a heart attack in San Francisco and—

MS. LEDDY: You mean?

MR. BERKSON: After I left, I returned—he and my mother stayed on.

MS. LEDDY: Stayed in San Francisco. You went on.

MR. BERKSON: And after I got back to New York and then back to—no, I'm in New York. Yeah—no, I go back to Brown. Thanksgiving is over. My father has a heart attack and is forbidden by the doctors to travel so he stays in San Francisco. Christmas vacation comes. He's still in San Francisco and my mother's with him, and I guess in and out of the hospital being monitored. And I guess at some point they must have said, "Well, [we –BB] think you're okay," and I talked to him on Christmas Eve. I was at a friend's house and suddenly the friend's father says, "Someone's on the phone for you." My father. And that was the last conversation we had. We wrote letters a little bit back and forth. I gave him *Dr. Zhivago* to read. I sent it to him while he was there and he wrote me this beautiful, you know, his take on Zhivago, you know—

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: —which was really interesting because it was the only literary conversation we ever had. And then January 4 I returned to Brown where I was living in an apartment with two friends. I go up the stairs, enter the apartment, the phone is ringing. It's my mother. My father has died. He had a second heart attack and just died. Keeled over, I guess. And she's in tears. We get off. Then I'm talking to her secretary who makes arrangements for me to get on a plane.

So I'm going to, I think—it's all a blur, kind of—but get to New York, get on a plane, fly to San Francisco, deal with things, get my mother home, all that. I leave the apartment. I'm going down the stairs. One of my roommates or housemates is coming up the stairs. And I said to him, "My father's

died. I'm going to San Francisco and then New York and I'm not coming back." It all just became this package. "I'm not coming back." I knew it was time to be in New York. I left Brown. I took some examinations in March, you know, retakes of the midterm examinations, and arranged to go to Columbia in the fall. So then some friend of mine said, "Well, you're not going to school until the fall, why don't you pick up some credits at this place called the New School for Social Research because you don't have to get admitted. You don't have to matriculate. You can just take classes for credit." Okay. So I look at this catalog and there are all these things like I didn't know anything about John Cage. John Cage teaching experimental music composition, teaching mushroom identification, going up to his place in New City or wherever, somewhere outside New York, and walking through the woods, you know. And then all these people who were, you know, going to be—Dick Higgins and so forth were [studying –BB] in a setting with John Cage. And there's a poetry—there are actually a number of poetry workshops but I look at this one being taught by Kenneth Koch whose work I didn't know. I knew nothing about him. He mentioned—was it the description of the class? What was it that made me choose his out of the three or four that were happening? But I did. And then I took a literature class with a man named William Troy who was an editor at *The Partisan Review* and a philosophy class called "Zen and Existentialism" with Rollo May and, you know. So Kenneth was this great teacher who yeah—

MS. LEDDY: Before we go forward—just something I wanted to ask.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah?

MS. LEDDY: Do you feel like that you left Brown because you felt your mother needed you in New York?

MR. BERKSON: No. Not when I said that to that friend. I said it in the way of New York's calling. I mean, it's like it's time for me to be in New York. Everything that I'm about to do is in New York. You know, my destiny is New York.

MS. LEDDY: But it does seem clear though that if your father hadn't died, you wouldn't have made that choice.

MR. BERKSON: Probably not. I don't know. I don't know. It just all—

MS. LEDDY: I don't know. It just happened.

MR. BERKSON: It just all fell into you could say a sentence. It was a sentence.

MS. LEDDY: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: It was just the sentence that I said to the—or the set of three sentences that I said to that friend. And, you know, I think I was beginning to be aware of everything that was going on in my backyard, you know. One of the oddments about it is that even New York, even if you've grown up in New York, it's hard to believe that the exciting things, the meaningful things that you're looking for in your life are actually in the place that you grew up. You know, why didn't I know it? Why didn't I know it all along?

MS. LEDDY: So you really transferred. In some way, you supposedly—I know there's more to this story, but you were going to go to Columbia. But your point is—

MR. BERKSON: I was going to go—I did go to Columbia.

MS. LEDDY: Oh, you did?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. I went to the New School. I had this tremendous semester of enlightening classes and contacts and contacts in the way of—I was in Kenneth's class and I met all these poems and him—

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.]

MR. BERKSON:—and not only did he encourage people to read William Carlos Williams, and Auden and surreal, you know, not so much surrealism as such but poets like Mayakovsky, or Apollinaire or Lorca, you know. But then he's talking about John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara. Not himself. He sort of kept his own work out of it but I managed to find his work. And in the midst of that, he'll be talking about an Ashbery poem and he'll say, "Well, an equivalent to this in experience would be a painting by Jane Freilicher or a painting by de Kooning."

MS. LEDDY: Oh yeah. That's great.

MR. BERKSON: Or Fairfield Porter or—and these names are suddenly coming at me and I'm aware that, you know—then I'm beginning to be aware that there are these shows and there's the Museum of Modern Art and there's the Met and there's the—not the Guggenheim—the Guggenheim, yeah, the Guggenheim opened that year, 1959.

MS. LEDDY: So was his class—that was the place where you, in essence—

MR. BERKSON: That was New York culture.

MS. LEDDY:—could use your background in literature and it could essentially be transformed into an art critical vision too?

MR. BERKSON: Well.

MS. LEDDY: Because those cognates, you know, for example, just to say—

MR. BERKSON: I didn't know that there was such a thing as art criticism yet.

MS. LEDDY: I see.

MR. BERKSON: I mean, you know, you have to think that how quickly within one year, literally a year, things fell into place or fell into my head, and, I mean, I began to know that there was a magazine called *ARTnews*. I began to know, and this was important, that poets like Frank O'Hara and Ashbery and James Schuyler and Barbara Guest were writing reviews for *ARTnews* that then maybe they were presumably making some kind of, ha-ha, living—

MS. LEDDY: Yeah right. It was 1959 at that point. Okay.

MR. BERKSON: '59. That's the crucial year.

MS. LEDDY: That's your crucial year.

MR. BERKSON: And one thing that was important, you know, if you're a poet, now I'm going to be a poet. Now largely because of Kenneth, I really am convinced that it's possible, that the life of a poet is possible.

MS. LEDDY: So that class is what changed everything, that one class?

MR. BERKSON: It really did. It really did.

MS. LEDDY: Yeah. With Kenneth, okay. And it also seems like it introduced you to working contemporary poets—

MR. BERKSON: That's it.

MS. LEDDY: —where before that you had books in the bookstore but you didn't actually know them.

MR. BERKSON: He is—he is a working contemporary poet, you know?

MS. LEDDY: Right. But at that point, not as known as someone like Frank O'Hara.

MR. BERKSON: But to be a working contemporary poet, you have to have some kind of—if you're not independently wealthy, which I wasn't. I mean, my parents were well off but they weren't going to support me. They didn't have enough money.

MS. LEDDY: So you did not have an inheritance?

MR. BERKSON: I had to think about something to do.

MS. LEDDY: I see.

MR. BERKSON: No. So the standard thing for a poet in those days, and it hasn't changed all that much, is you're writing poetry. What are you going to do for a living? You get a job in some college as a poet, you know, teaching literature, teaching grammar or something like that.

MS. LEDDY: A teacher, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: And the college is probably in the Midwest somewhere or somewhere not New York.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.]

MR. BERKSON: But I wanted to be in New York. So this alternative of somehow being connected to the art world in a working capacity—O'Hara was already working at the Museum of Modern Art, there was *ARTnews* and so forth—

MS. LEDDY: I see.

MR. BERKSON: —began to take shape. But then—

MS. LEDDY: But you could also have thought of becoming, let's say, a reviewer of literature or film but that was not what came to mind.

MR. BERKSON: No, no. And I didn't want to be—that was the other thing, I went to Columbia. I'm majoring in literature which was probably a mistake. If I'd majored in history of philosophy or something, I wouldn't have felt oh, I'm reading this stuff anyway and I'm reading it my way and not—and I'm not reading it the way I'm being taught at Columbia, which is to be a teacher of literature because the standard way of teaching literature was you're teaching students how to teach it.

MS. LEDDY: It's teaching you the academic framework and discourse—

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. I didn't need that.

MS. LEDDY: —which at that point which was what, New Criticism, right? It was like the close reading of the poems—

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, yeah exactly. Like close reading—yeah, yeah. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren and all that. Yeah. You know, the teachers were perfectly nice. The history of English literature and working your way down from, you know, the 16th, 17th, and 18th century and so forth is fine. But, you know, it was let me out of here finally and anyway, by the end of the first—that semester at the New School, Kenneth had introduced me to the New York School. I went to a party where I met the New York School. I mean he said—

MS. LEDDY: Where was the party?

MR. BERKSON: He said, "It's Saturday night, why don't you come to this party at Jane Freilicher's, Jane and Joe Hazen's [ph]. He said, "Frank O'Hara," who—he already knew I'm crazy about O'Hara's poetry—"will be there," and he didn't say so will everybody else, but everybody else was there. I mean, for all I know, de Kooning might have been there. But it was that kind of party.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative].

MR. BERKSON: The painters, the writers, the musicians, the theater people, you know, they're there.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative].

MR. BERKSON: You know, it could have been—Albee could have been there and so forth.

MS. LEDDY: But the ones you remember being there were?

MR. BERKSON: I met O'Hara there—

MS. LEDDY: O'Hara.

MR. BERKSON: —and—

MS. LEDDY: Larry Rivers?

MR. BERKSON: Oh, undoubtedly.

MS. LEDDY: Rudy Burckhardt.

MR. BERKSON: Undoubtedly. Rudy Burckhardt. Edith Burckhardt.

MS. LEDDY: Elaine de Kooning.

MR. BERKSON: Elaine de Kooning, probably.

MS. LEDDY: Was Elaine there?

MR. BERKSON: Probably. Sure.

MS. LEDDY: Probably but you don't remember. Okay. John Ashbery?

MR. BERKSON: Fairfield Porter. Ashbery was living in Paris.

MS. LEDDY: I see. That's when he had that 10 years.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. So I didn't meet him until 1960 in October of 1960.

MS. LEDDY: Joan Mitchell? She was probably in Paris, too.

MR. BERKSON: She was in Paris. Yeah. I met her then too in October 1960.

MS. LEDDY: And where was—was Philip Guston there then or was he upstate?

MR. BERKSON: Maybe. I didn't meet him until later—in ['60 –BB]. I went with O'Hara to his studio and that was extremely inspiring. You know, we should probably get to that later.

MS. LEDDY: Later. Yeah, yeah. So maybe, I'm trying to think if we want to stop now or how do you feel? Well let's see, because we've got—it's kind of a good stopping point.

MR. BERKSON: Where are we at?

MS. LEDDY: Let's see, it's 11:45 so—

MR. BERKSON: Well I could go until noon.

MS. LEDDY: I think we could go until noon.

MR. BERKSON: All right.

MS. LEDDY: And if I could just get a readout on this, it would just make me feel so much better.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, you may have—it couldn't have been an hour and 15 minutes.

MS. LEDDY: No, it couldn't be but it says time remaining, I think it says 27 minutes. I mean, it's great to have all this information on a read-out you can't read because it's so dark. You know?

MR. BERKSON: It's crazy.

MS. LEDDY: Anyway. So that's good. So why don't we keep going then.

MR. BERKSON: Okay.

MS. LEDDY: So this is so amazing.

MR. BERKSON: I'm already sort of in the course of things. March—I don't remember the—I remember the sequence but I think it was March 1959 I went to the Sidney Janis Gallery and saw the show of de Kooning's landscape abstractions.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative].

MR. BERKSON: And one of the curious things about this education in New York art, specifically painting, is that—well not specifically painting, New York art, is that at that point, everything is simultaneous.

MS. LEDDY: I know. It's amazing.

MR. BERKSON: There's tremendous simultaneity. So in March I see these de Kooning's and this seems like the most adventurous thing that could be done in—

MS. LEDDY: March 1959?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. I'm pretty sure of that date. Anyway, you know, as painting—but very soon after, the Stable Gallery had a show that was probably based on a book that B.H. Friedman did called *The School of New York: Younger Artists*, or *Some Younger Artists*, or something, that Grove Press published. And I walked into that show and it was when the Stable Gallery was on Sixth Avenue, I think, between 57th and 58th, I think—

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.]

MR. BERKSON: —and I saw Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* with the angora goat and the tire around its middle and the platform—

MS. LEDDY: Oh yeah. The combine—early combine, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, it was a combine or assemblage. And, you know, and they didn't seem contradictory.

MS. LEDDY: That's funny because [other artists have –AL] said the same thing that seeing that particular piece by Rauschenberg was just this mind blowing experience.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. See, but the thing is, it wasn't like the Rauschenberg even seemed ahead of the de Kooning. They, you know—

MS. LEDDY: It's like happening—

MR. BERKSON: The world that I had entered accommodated these things at once. That was the great thing.

MS. LEDDY: And did you all see Allan Kaprow's happenings?

MR. BERKSON: I went to one Happening but I think it couldn't have been before 1960 and I don't remember what it was except that I remember that Duchamp was there and was like a chicken. I've seen two people who had this kind of attention, like a kind of a chicken pecking at—he was just kind of looking into every aspect of this installation—it was combination installation-happening. I don't even remember whose it was.

MS. LEDDY: It's—well, it could be—what is it? *Eighteen happenings in six parts*, that work?

MR. BERKSON: It could have been. It could have been. I wasn't even so much aware of that as a thing that was happening.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.]. Yeah but that is actually—

MR. BERKSON: It was just—it was just something that somebody did.

MS. LEDDY: Then Pop is also starting.

MR. BERKSON: It was something that somebody did. Well, that's the shocker in a certain way two years later—three years later. Because the shock of Pop was one, the shock that the older artists—and the artists that I knew best at that time experienced, and in some cases, it was such a negative shock. Like the second generation abstract expressionists, you know. This just pulled the rug out from under them. It pulled the rug out from under them. And within two years of '63 and '64, I remember Joan in Paris, being with her and she's storming around her studio saying, because there—and there had been an article in *ARTnews* of all places, "Is AE Dead?" And she's going, "Is AE dead?" And she's trying it out in different intonations.

MS. LEDDY: [laughs]

MR. BERKSON: "Is AE dead?" [laughs] Yeah, that hit, you know, the Mike Goldbergs and Norman Bluhms and Joan and in some ways, you know, it was very difficult. And it was difficult for me at first to accommodate that but that's another—

MS. LEDDY: That's later.

MR. BERKSON: That's a later story. All this was, you know, de Kooning. Then I'm getting more familiar with Pollock and Rothko and so forth. And then the ballet, so it was a whole New York culture. New York City Ballet, Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, Jimmy Waring. I became friends with, you know, I'm beginning to find my poet friends—beginning to find poet friends my own age like Diane di Prima who is five years older but all the same and who was together with then LeRoi Jones publishing a newsletter circulated free to about 300 people across the country and maybe in Europe called *The Floating Bear*. That was, I think, the first magazine publication for me. She took some poems of mine. And so we became friends. We're still friends. I see her in San Francisco. But that was—see, what Pop destroyed was the nucleus the, um,—it made it diffuse. You had an art world that probably dated back to the—even the 1930s, that was probably a world of 300 or so people that included the painters, the sculptors, the theater people, the poets, the novelists, the dancers. You know? And they all—the composers, you know? They all knew each other so there's Morton Feldman, there's Cage, there's Earle Brown, there's Wolpe, you know, all these people. They were the audience, too. You know? They didn't depend on or even so much invite in this other mass thing. If they came, fine. They were what Dave Hickey calls the lookeesees, right? I mean, you know, or they were the patrons or there were the enlightened millionaires as happened—

MS. LEDDY: The collectors.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah and the psychotherapists and the dentists and the professionals. Abstract expressionism was an art that somehow or another appealed where it did within the middle class, to the professionals, you know, the professional class in that way, educated professionals. And Pop was pop. Pop just became this thing kind of beautifully for everybody. You know? It was accessible.

MS. LEDDY: So you mean it actually destroyed elitism in a certain way?

MR. BERKSON: In a way it destroyed elitism. It—I mean, it didn't completely—those friendships, those, you know, small audiences continued just like they did for poetry in a certain way. I mean poetry was within that. And as O'Hara and Ashbery had said, the audience for the new poetry was largely from the art world because the official literary people didn't go there.

MS. LEDDY: That's so incredible.

MR. BERKSON: So they had the painters as—I mean, Joan Mitchell was a great reader of poetry.



MS. LEDDY: But also it feels like a time where's the big—kind of a big separation between the academic world and the art world. I mean, all the arts are kind of, you know—

MR. BERKSON: Oh yeah.

MS. LEDDY: There's a different aesthetic there that art just—

MR. BERKSON: Well it's also art—you know, it's interesting. Think about what happened to art criticism. We can talk about this a little more. This stuff. *Artforum*, et cetera. *ARTnews* was mainly artists and poets and amateur people and occasionally you get, you know, a Mark Roskill or T. Grace Sharpless, trained academic art historian who's hip and writes well, actually. At *ARTnews*, the rule was the poets don't get edited. The real writers don't get edited. Art historians have a hard time writing. For the most part, they need editing. Okay? So that was Tom Hess' rule, for the most part. But Mark Roskill and—

MS. LEDDY: How do you spell that name?

MR. BERKSON: R-O-S-K-I-L-L. And T. Grace Sharpless, who became the head at the ICA in Philadelphia, I don't know what's happened to her. She was terrific. Anyway, you know, they were interested in contemporary art as was, say, Leo Steinberg who was amazing and also had—was a beautiful writer and had this fantastic openness to—but I didn't even know that at the time so put me too much ahead. I learned how good, how interesting he was later. But *ARTnews* was mainly the artists and the poets and kind of—that wonderful kind of amateur elitism, yes, and a lot of it is old boys' club business, just like the Museum of Modern Art.

MS. LEDDY: But I didn't mean that as a criticism so much as just a kind of observation.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: But it feels like it opened this door—

MR. BERKSON: It sure did. You know, even if the Museum of Modern Art was mostly an old boys' club, it had people like Mildred Constantine and Dorothy Miller right in the middle of the action and doing the great shows and so forth. So, you know, but the thing is that as far as art history was concerned, it's the same thing in literature. I remember when I got to Brown and I was all on to T. S. Eliot and I wrote a review for the Brown literary magazine of Eliot's then new collection of criticism and a professor from the English department came up to me on the campus and said, "Gee, you seem to really understand this Eliot." I mean this is 50 years down the line from Eliot's appearance, you know, from "Prufrock" and so forth. Literally 50 years, you know?

MS. LEDDY: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: So in other words, modern poetry wasn't even—I mean it was quite actually probably amazing that this particular professor in—well, the Brown art history department was pretty advanced. That man showed Gorky, a Gorky from 1948. And I don't even know if he showed any Pollock's. He may—

MS. LEDDY: Or Rothko or anything—

MR. BERKSON: No, I don't know if he did. You know, but the—I think what happened was, we can get into this a little bit more next time, by 1960, Rubens and even the earlier modern art, Picasso and—from Giotto to Picasso was used up. There was no more—there was nothing more to do

there. In other words, the revisionist art criticism, the contextualizing art criticism of the '70's hadn't happened, right?

MS. LEDDY: Right.

MR. BERKSON:

So there was nothing more to do in the connoisseurship department of that span of art. And so the young, eager, ambitious art historians, Rosalind Krauss, Michael Fried, et cetera, took on contemporary art and that was a totally new thing. I mean, you know, it was tantamount to—you know, but Roger Fry was an amateur. He was not an official art historian, right?

MS. LEDDY: Right.

MR. BERKSON: I mean it was like—

MS. LEDDY: Neither was Alloway. You know what I mean? There were a lot of those people—

MR. BERKSON: Well Alloway came over from England. He had been part of the—

MS. LEDDY: He was self-educated. He was not trained as an art historian.

MR. BERKSON: No. He was a very interesting—he was really a belle lettrist. He was such a good writer. He was the clearest writer of all and I don't remember exactly when he came over. What's the name of the British—the thing—oh, the Independent Group. The Independent Group. So he was sharp to that and he, I think—I think he called them Pop. He used that word "Pop" unless Peter Blake did. Anyway. Yeah. I mean—but you had this incursion, you know, once [the] *Artforum* moved to New York, of people like Fried and Krauss and others.

MS. LEDDY: But you know, there's also the expansion of the American university system in the 1960's—

MR. BERKSON: Sure. Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: —so there were just so many more people drawn into that.

MR. BERKSON: The whole thing. The art school—

MS. LEDDY:

And then the collapse of—actually, the real estate market in New York and the fact that you couldn't live here if you didn't have—well, you couldn't live as a journalist or a freelance writer anymore.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: I mean, there were a lot of things. And then, of course, in a way the '60's itself.

MR. BERKSON: Well that happened in '70. I mean, you could still—up until about 1970, you could live what I call gloriously poor in New York. I mean, people had—I had an apartment on 57th Street on the top floor of a brownstone, 57th between Park and Lexington, \$62 a month. And when I moved downstairs. And I got that apartment in 1960. When I moved downstairs to a slightly bigger apartment, because that was really a one-room apartment, it was not much more, maybe \$75. You

know, and then these people who are living on the lower east side, like O'Hara, you know, well the thing—you know, very cheap rents. The thing that I didn't know about this economy was that they probably could just make their rent with what they were earning from *ARTnews*. It was a question of that, you know, writing something like 15 reviews a month, some of them only two sentences.

MS. LEDDY: That's what Fairfield Porter says in his oral history is he says he wrote—he had a flat, a cold water flat, that was exactly paid for by what he got writing from writing the *ARTnews* reviews.

MR. BERKSON: Or *The Nation*.

MS. LEDDY: Yeah, that's right. And then he wrote for *The Nation*.

MR. BERKSON: That figures.

MS. LEDDY: Well one thing, maybe we should talk about this next time, but one thing that I'm very curious about—about this circle and really the circle that you talk about meeting initially. Okay, it's their relationship to politics that I don't quite get. I mean in some ways, someone like Fairfield Porter who is from this kind of patrician background but then becomes like fascinated with Marxism, especially the kind of German version—

MR. BERKSON: And then also he becomes a very early environmentalist. You know, I know his friends would complain that he got a little boring on the subject after a while. But he was, you know. And anti-nuclear plants and stuff like that. All kinds of things. Anti-industry in some ways. The politics, we really do have to talk about. It was stunning to me, and frightening in some cases, Harold Rosenberg being one of them, the degree to which the disappointment, the bitterness over the disappointment of the dreams of the '30's—

MS. LEDDY: The American Communist Party and all that?

MR. BERKSON: Yes. Or not. I mean, I don't think Rosenberg—but it was leftist politics, you know, usually identified glowingly as Trotskyist or Trotskyite.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative].

MR. BERKSON: And the degree to which the bitterness, the sense of embattlement continued into my time.

MS. LEDDY: Kind of morphed into the late '60's political debates too to some extent.

MR. BERKSON: You know, most of the people who had the '30's experience, like the guy that I met when I first moved to Bolinas, California, who had been in the Lincoln Brigade, who if you tried to talk to him about radicals in the '60's, and this was 1970, "Those kids don't know what they're doing. They're not serious. They're just playing." You know?

MS. LEDDY: Well, I mean it's not the same as being in the Spanish Civil War but it still is something —

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. No, but that's the way—and I don't think—I never got a whiff of anything from —Rosenberg was kind of such a bully in a way and so embittered in a way about politics that he wouldn't have had any—somebody like Paul Goodman, perhaps, whose ideas were taken up by a lot of the New Left.

MS. LEDDY: Well maybe if those *Partisan Review* people, for example, kind of morphed into—

MR. BERKSON: Into neo-cons. That's right.

MS. LEDDY: I mean, really, he only went—someone like C. Wright Mills, you know, someone like that, didn't change.

MR. BERKSON: Right.

MS. LEDDY: But there's so many of them—

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. But there were people, you know—

MS. LEDDY: Even Clem. Even Clem became that way.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. I'm sure. Yeah. There's a whole story there.

MS. LEDDY: But in the time when you are first—in the 1960's when you are part of this crowd of people and you're with Frank O'Hara and Larry Rivers and all these people, now do they talk about politics? Is politics part of everything?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. Sure. But it's a question of—well, you have to take it person by person.

MS. LEDDY: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Frank O'Hara was—I think of him as a baby communist when he was a baby. He was way ahead intellectually and in terms of awareness and espoused leftist ideas really early on. And then in whatever way modified but he was radical politically and radical artistically and vocal that way and the poems show it without, as Ashbery said, without his joining any movement or party or anything like that. Probably a little bit on the side of anarchy but, you know, when he reviewed *Zhivago*, he reviewed *Dr. Zhivago* for *The Evergreen Review* and he said, "Well, *Zhivago* shows the disappointment over the revolution but at least they tried, where America didn't." Okay. So that was his take on it. You know, Frank was—I remember, he was way ahead of me in alertness to what was going on in Vietnam early, early on. Because I remember we had a sidewalk fight about it because I thought he was just being a baby communist and I had sort of swallowed the line that China was—

MS. LEDDY: The domino theory.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. Something like that. And I learned, not through him, but I learned better later. But then everybody was your basic liberal line mostly in the New York School.

MS. LEDDY: The liberal line then would have been pro-Kennedy and—

MR. BERKSON: Probably. Look—well, you know, not too much ahead, but Kenneth was your basic liberal. Kenneth wrote a parody of the Living Theater production of *The Connection* called *The Election*. 1960, November. It played for a week during election week including election night. I played John F. Kennedy.

MS. LEDDY: I saw a picture of that.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. And Larry Rivers played Lyndon Johnson and made the big speech —while I'm sprawled on the stage —about the people. And so, yeah, Kenneth did that. John's respectable

liberal politics. Larry, Rivers, fascinated by history. Fascinated by—he did a big mural-size work and assemblage called *The Russian Revolution*, but who knows what—Frank called him a demented telephone. Who knows what Larry's real politics were, or Lenny Bernstein's for that matter. It's all kind of a—probably me too. I mean, your basic rather helpless liberalism, you know, with flashes of "off the pigs." [Laughs]. You know, from time to time.

MS. LEDDY: So I guess it's more asking that because of thinking then, you know, when the kind of political activism of the '60's happens and, you know, feminism—all these different, I mean, how—that's—that's an aesthetic and political revolution—

MR. BERKSON: What you have to understand over and over again is how much of a statement it was to be an artist in America. It was a statement in itself.

MS. LEDDY: That's true. That's a good point.

MR. BERKSON: So that, in a way, covered a multitude of sins or omissions, sins of omission or whatever.

MS. LEDDY: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: It was a statement in itself and that did carry over from the—in a way, it's always been the case in America, but in the 20th Century, you know, that was really a story how being an artist in America was a political statement, a social statement in itself, and it wasn't until really—I think in the '30's the question was "was that good enough or did you have to tackle the big themes?"

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MR. BERKSON: and my computer here. It's really ridiculous seeing that I didn't put it in my thumb drive. So, I'll have to send you an even better one when I get home, but anyway.

MS. LEDDY: This is Annette Leddy interviewing Bill Berkson on October 1, 2015 in the Offices of the Archives of American Art in New York City, Card Two.

MR. BERKSON: Okay.

MS. LEDDY: Okay. Now, last time, you said something that I've just been thinking about ever since. It was fascinating, this idea that when you first came to New York, you know, after Brown, that there existed in New York a nucleus, a world of 300 some people who were artists, writers and composers who were one another's audience and were a self-contained world that essentially was destroyed when Pop came around. So, what I would like to understand is that you really communicated a sense of loss about that. And what I really want to understand is exactly what was lost. Like, what was there and explain that experience of being within that nucleus because that's so unique that you had that.

MR. BERKSON: Yes, well, I didn't have it. I mean, I had it—I had a glimpse of it because, you know, I was so much younger and this had existed—this kind of world had existed in New York at least since the 1930s. I mean, there's a period that fascinates me historically and personally of say between 1935 and 1955, when this New York art world took shape and there was—there was what you could call the downtown nucleus, sort of the downtown scene.

MS. LEDDY: But where—where was downtown then?

MR. BERKSON: Well, downtown was Greenwich Village, but spilling over already into the Lower East Side. Now, actually, it was—it was below 23rd Street—

MS. LEDDY: 23rd Street, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Because a lot of this is happening in Chelsea.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: We have what I think of and you can get into that is the Chelsea Ethos beginning in the years when Burckhardt and then, you know, Rudy Burckhardt and then Edwin Denby and de Kooning and numerous other people were living in lofts—

MS. LEDDY: Right around here.

MR. BERKSON: —and around 21st Street. Well, Edwin [Denby –BB] was—

MS. LEDDY: But not all the way out to 9th Avenue, not what we call Chelsea now—

MR. BERKSON: —no, no, not today's Chelsea. No, it was—

MS. LEDDY: It's Chelsea around 7th Avenue.

MR. BERKSON: —the Chelsea of the old sweat shops and other kinds of lofts that then began to be inhabited by artists and they were still there when I began to meet these people. I mean, Burckhardt and Denby were still there and Alex Katz was living in that neighborhood. And Joe Fiore and I think, Red Grooms and Mimi Gross and lots of people, you know. De Kooning, of course, had the moved to 10th Street and then out to Long Island, you know, but his—something of his spirit was still around there, you know.

In 1959, Pat Passloff organized a show called *The Thirties*, which had works in it—paintings, I think almost entirely by New York artists in the 1930s, including de Kooning and Milton Resnick and so on. And Pat Passloff asked Edwin Denby to write an essay. And that essay spells out the Ethos as Edwin observed it and as Edwin felt it and sort of defined it for what was around de Kooning, but also, as you said, what was in—what was felt in all the lofts and streets that they lived in, you know. And it was despite all the deprivations of the 1930s, the depression and so forth. And maybe because of them because people gathered together, you know, for comfort in those years. There was this tremendously intense sense of—oh, it was an Ethos. There was an ethic to it.

MS. LEDDY: And this is part of this nucleus experience?

MR. BERKSON: Somewhat, I mean—

MS. LEDDY: But what is the Ethos?

MR. BERKSON: —not across the board, I mean, you know, one of the things that interests me is how in those early years, you can find Edwin and de Kooning and, you know, they're mixing with people like Orson Welles and John Houseman and you can say—John Houseman might say to Edwin or Virgil Thompson might, "Well, let's go uptown because George Gershwin is giving a party," you know, so there's that kind of thing. So, you know, there's some mix—

MS. LEDDY: Interdisciplinary kind of wealth.

MR. BERKSON: —of the uptown and downtown and just this incredible flourishing of New York culture in those years. And when I say New York culture, I sort of—I'll use "Art World" as a short term, but Art World includes music, dance, theater, painting, sculpture, poetry, you know, theater, all that.

MS. LEDDY: So, it's an intense sense of a shared ethic about art and about creating art that this—

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, and I think also that people are doing, you know, are inventing and innovating and doing new things and being expansive. And there's a little, you know, there's a consciousness and sometimes, you know, hyperconsciousness, self-consciousness about being American and, you know, sometimes it looks a little embarrassing. I mean, it's one thing to have a consciousness about being New York because that's where you live, you know. But when you get into the terminology of things like "the new American painting," or "the new American poetry," or "American-type painting"—

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: —that kind of national self-consciousness seems to me—I find it a little embarrassing. I [unintelligible] why—you know, you wouldn't—you wouldn't have, I mean, you had this "school of Paris," whoever called it that, you know, which a mix of people of different nationalities. I mean, if you just think if Picasso and Miró and, you know [laughter], Mondrian and whoever, you know, Balthus or whoever wanders into Paris and sets up a studio begins writing poems or so forth, but they're not necessarily French in that way. It's understandable that there's emphasis on the sort of the exact location of the city.

MS. LEDDY: So, when you think about this world that existed before Pop art, do you feel that there is a quality in the artwork?

MR. BERKSON: Well, there's a quality of interchange. I mean, when you have—when you have people gathering at parties and you have people, you know, let's say, the same people show up for *Four Saints in Three Acts*, you know, when it had its Broadway run, as they were showing up for the very early years of Balanchine—

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: —you know, or Broadway shows like, *Oklahoma* or something like that, you know, where—and these are in a way, or cabarets at the Village Vanguard which would mix in people like Judy Holliday and Comden and Green and Leonard Bernstein and Jerry Robbins, you know, incredible mix of people. Comedians maybe like, Martha Raye or something, you know, interesting. And then whoever the poets are of the time. And you can say pretty much the same audience is going to all these things and that makes for an interesting kind of conversation. And to this day, you know, that carried on through the '60s and to a certain extent, you know, within Pop-art and Pop-minimal, which I see—keep seeing as aspects of the same thing, you know, with Judson Church dance and so on, clear to about the end of the '60s where, for one thing, politics, heavy anti-war politics and other politics of race, ethnicity and so forth intervened, the conversation was, you know, there was a lot of sharing of ideas and audience.

MS. LEDDY: And you think that, that interdisciplinary was lost—has been lost. It's not there at the same level?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, you don't—it came that the new artists—the new visual artists and dancers

and so forth didn't know—didn't know poetry. The theater got less interesting eventually. I mean, there was the burst of things in the '70s with people like, more specifically like, Sam Shepherd. The, you know, the, yeah, you know, I think, you know, they—the separate arts went into cubby holes—

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: —or mouse holes, or, you know, jazz was happening in the loft swells, you know. Dance—things got in some ways sort of almost privatized. I mean, you know, dance was in lofts, jazz was in lofts, but they weren't the same lofts—

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: —right.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.]. I see what you mean, yeah, but is that just because there's more people—

[Cross talk.]

MR. BERKSON: You know, Robert Wilson developed in his loft, the Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, for instance—

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: —burgeoning, but there wasn't that crossover except to say, Edwin, who was very close to Robert Wilson would bring people like me to see—he wanted us to see what Wilson was doing and to be aware—to be alert to it. And so, briefly, there was that special audience for him, which was across boundaries.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.]. But what year is *Einstein on the Beach* that's—

MR. BERKSON: That's later. That's—I mean, in a certain way, that certain—that's going public and that's the end of—the end of Robert Wilson being, you know, there was a certain glorious feeling of "He's our secret."

MS. LEDDY: I see [laughs].

MR. BERKSON: I mean, he's a downtown secret. And [with] *Einstein* for Wilson and for Phillip Glass, you know, the secret is out.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: And he's not ours anymore. I mean, there was kind of a—I know people who once someone like that gets famous and begins to draw a big audience, feel almost instantly, not only have we lost him, but he's lost it—and us.

MS. LEDDY: Well, really, Laurie Anderson—there were a lot of people who came out in the '70s, you know, first it was just the private downtown—The Kitchen—

[Cross talk.]

MR. BERKSON: Right, exactly, sure. Laurie Anderson and Patti Smith and Sam Shepherd. Yeah, joined that the same time the people like Phillip Glass and Phillip—yeah, Corner and so forth and—



MS. LEDDY: So, that's like by the end of the '70s, that has happened. They've become more mass  
—

MR. BERKSON: More mass, you know. I don't think—I don't think Laurie Anderson ever—you know, some stay with—stay with it.

MS. LEDDY: It's not that she changed, but that her audience grew much bigger.

MR. BERKSON: The audience grew, right.

MS. LEDDY: And the—yeah, I think that's—that, that certainly happened.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: But—and we can say, even some of the artists that came out of that same time, like, Cindy Sherman, or whatever—

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: —that her audiences got really big at a certain point, but that's a later generation. They always talk also about how their world, you know, the SoHo crowd—their world was really special and it was just them and it was interdisciplinary.

MR. BERKSON: Sure.

MS. LEDDY: They say many

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: —of the same things you say.

MR. BERKSON: Well, there you have that thing where every—everybody, including you—everybody is in—in his or her twenties and there's this aspect of being, you know—

MS. LEDDY: But you were the youngster in this nucleus group, right—in this group?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. Sure.

MS. LEDDY: You were kind of the young one.

MR. BERKSON: I was kind of in a way, I was—I wasn't the—I mean, there were people who were just a little bit older than me, like Diane di Prima, who, you know, had been the new young person and I was just a little behind Diane in that way. And, you know, came into it. And so, I had—because I met this world in 1959 and I see a lot of it ending by 1962 because of Pop. At least in the cohesion, in the sense of being in the vanguard, sort of way. Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: I see, yeah, because Pop changed the meaning of what the vanguard was?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: And then how did that change these artists and writers that you knew?

MR. BERKSON: Well, as I said last time, there was—there was a short history of art, particularly

painting being oppositional to unconventional, in a way, from the '40s with the abstract expressionists and then at the end of the '40s and the beginning of the '50s, the second generation abstract expressionists New York School showed up and with shows like the 9th Street Show, which Greenberg and I think Sam Kootz had to do with. And there was a kind of a melding of the older and younger and because the older still hadn't gained critical—general critical or musicological acceptance and they were still being called, you know, communists on the floor of the Congress, you know, or just artists who were just making a mess of things, the younger artists joining with them had this feeling of being in a kind of avant-garde situation, or kind of a pushing against some sort of wall of resistance.

MS. LEDDY: And those young artists would have been like Joan Mitchell—

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: Larry Rivers and Ernest Briggs and those people?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, yeah and—but when you say people like Larry Rivers, you can also say people like Alex Katz, who in a way are different because they're doing things a little bit in advance at least as far as publicity is concerned of Rauschenberg and Johns or doing things that also the older generation and some of the second generation, their own people, people their own age are looking at [unintelligible] or even feeling that's—

MS. LEDDY: Returning to the figurative in some way.

MR. BERKSON: Returning to the figure or doing things like taken to be sort of anti-art or Dada-ish and all those things they weren't.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.]. That is true. That's why they kind of stay current is that they anticipate that.

MR. BERKSON:

So, those people and Alex said—is he'll tell you to this day, people who were—didn't feel he was doing anything right by making this kind of figurative and, you know, increasingly smooth in its technique painting, and so, that complicated things.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: I mean, it's interesting that at the same time, he got—there were abstract artists who—the division can be exaggerated. They're abstract artists who knew well enough to not divide things up abstract/figurative, you know, and could see what people like Larry, you know, de Kooning liked what Larry did. Was open to Jane Freilicher and probably to Katz and then, also, there's a wonderful double portrait that Alex Katz did of Rauschenberg. Well, Rauschenberg wouldn't have sat for him if he didn't have some respect for him. And vice-versa, so, you know, that was there and it's been largely exaggerated how completely divisive those two terms were.

MS. LEDDY: Well—

MR. BERKSON: You know, it depends on, you know, by 1950, I guess, the critical divisions happened and the divisions were the critics' division, not so much the artists' divisions. So there was Greenberg, there was Rosenberg, you know, and there were later critics all ready to embrace not just Alex Katz, but Andy Warhol and so forth. But then you have, you know, a really interesting—

interesting because revealing connections like the one between Al Held and Alex Katz, that, you know, at a certain point in the '60s, their pictures had many of the same qualities, but Alex's were blatantly pictures of people and sometimes landscapes, but increasingly people whether they were in landscapes or not. And Al Held's were abstract, but they both had qualities of frontality, qualities of big areas of bright, clear paint and the size of their pictures often—size and dimensions of the pictures often matched up. And they had lofts one on top of the other, you know.

MS. LEDDY: But, you know, de Kooning is not completely abstract.

MR. BERKSON: No, never.

MS. LEDDY: De Kooning is never—

MR. BERKSON: No, there's a whole bunch of—you know, in a way that there's a division among the artists who were absolutely pledged to the idea of abstraction and the artists who were uneasy with abstraction as an absolute. Guston, I feel Pollock was part of that. That's why you get the late pictures. We begin from the black and white pictures on to when he died. They begin to bring some kind of figuration forward. It was always there, as Pollock, "I choose to—

MS. LEDDY: Underneath—underneath, yes. But the main difference, it really seems, is not between abstraction and figuration, but the attitude about what art means and what it means to be an artist.

MR. BERKSON: True.

MS. LEDDY: Because it's really the Johns and Rauschenbergs and certainly Warhol bring something totally—a different attitude to art making and that whole, you know, the AbEx person—

MR. BERKSON: They do, but to—you have to listen to them and not their publicists—

MS. LEDDY: [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: —and you have to why Rauschenberg says quite explicitly, you know, why he had to do an erased de Kooning, you know and you know, maybe because he didn't have a Leonardo handy, you know, didn't have access to it, but it was de Kooning that he was going to erase and because de Kooning meant something and if Johns said, "I realized at a certain point that de Kooning didn't need me to make his paintings"—to make paintings like de Kooning because Johns was doing his de Koonings, you know—"he didn't need me to do that." So, you know, and on down the line. I mean, Warhol too, de Kooning set the standard in a certain way. And then Pollock set a kind of standard, but Pollock was—there was no way to do Pollocks. You could go around or out from Pollock, the way Frankenthaler did. You know, in the way Greenberg encouraged other people—other people—people other than Frankenthaler to do, to explore the soaked-in color and so forth and so on and continue this kind of, you know, blatantly abstract no, you know, no referent—supposedly, no-referent type of painting.

But the thing is, the—Johns and Rauschenberg, and Warhol and Lichtenstein, and all these people, Rosenquist—it wasn't like, turning against—even say, some of the remarks that Donald Judd would make. It wasn't turning against what the people had made. It was looking for what they could do to add to the conversation.

MS. LEDDY: Right.

MR. BERKSON: And, you know, if like, Stella or Judd, well, you'd say, "There's been enough—you've done as much as you can in terms of balancing the elements of a canvas, a little bit here, push, pull. All that kind of stuff." All right, that's become mechanical, so now, let's just have one color across the field, or, you know, certainly just the plain symmetry. Some basic design that you can then fill in with a paint.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: That's just to say, "This other method of working has been exhausted."

MS. LEDDY: Yeah, and a lot of—this goes a little later, but there is that—this feeling that a lot of the artists who start out as abstract, then go in this direction of becoming like landscape painters or nature painters in some way. That almost like they're just coming back out of abstraction slightly into the landscape.

MR. BERKSON: Who are we talking about?

MS. LEDDY: Well, in one way, Jane Freilicher seems to do that, but I was thinking more like—

MR. BERKSON: Well, she was never—I don't think she ever made an abstract painting in her life, you know, she was a Hofmann student. She might have tried it, but that was another thing that's interesting, which is that there are people who had tremendous respect like, Freilicher or Katz, say for Pollock, for de Kooning, Kline, Barnett Newman and so forth, but temperamentally, they found they weren't suited to that, you know. They weren't satisfied with just a stripe down the lower left hand edge, or—

MS. LEDDY: [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: —you know, or a, you know, what they used to call in art school pushing the paint around. But they liked the idea of that touch and showing the paint and so forth. So, people like Freilicher and Katz certainly had that. And Andy Warhol, see, then it became an interesting aspect where the drip or the slashed paint, or the dragged paint, big, big paint became a sign and became a sign of serious art. So, you get Warhol, the earlier images from newspapers and so forth have drips and a lot of brushy paint in them. He continued the brushy paint, right, through the Mao pictures and so on—

MS. LEDDY: Were all the silk screens have that kind of—

MR. BERKSON: But the drips are there and so the drips are—become a serious painter, not a graphic designer.

MS. LEDDY: [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: And at one point, I think it was Ivan Karp—it was either Ivan Karp, you know, because Andy was always taking advice from people—Ivan Karp or Henry Geldzhelder said, "Andy, the drips have got to go." And when the drips went, Andy really became Andy—the Campbell Soup cans and so forth and the Marilyns and it was just like the silk screen process. No, no messing around, you know, and—yeah.

MS. LEDDY: So, now, in relation to all of this, let's talk about art writing—

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MS. LEDDY:—because in effect, you're an art critic and you start out working at *ARTnews* around 1960.

MR. BERKSON:

Yeah, in 1960.

MS. LEDDY:

In 1960, so, tell me really, first of all, what it was like at *ARTnews* in 1960 and then, what art writing was then and how it changed over the course of that decade.

MR. BERKSON: Well, you know, *ARTnews* was everything that the people around *Artforum* say it was [laughs]. It was, you know, for the most part—if it was about contemporary art, the writing tended to be—a lot of it was written by poets or else by artists, like Fairfield Porter. And poets like Barbara Guest, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, or else it was written by highly literate and sharp, as in hip, people, Thomas Hess, the editor, being one of them. And who brought us a strong sense of the world and everyday life and everyday conversation into their writing.

And, you know, senses of irony and certainly senses of humor and it was in a way sensibility writing, that is to say, tried to account for what it felt like physically and mentally and sort of in your skin to look at a sculpture by David Smith, or a painting by de Kooning, or one by Alex Katz or whomever. And, see, *ARTnews* had gone on since 1902. At some point it was—the publisher became Alfred M. Frankfurter. I don't know what the M stands for.

And he had been there for quite a while and at some point, I think, around 1949 or '50, he hired this young Yale graduate, Thomas B. Hess, to be the Editor of the magazine and Hess seemed to have already been aware of what was happening in downtown painting in those years. And so, opened the magazine up, probably struggling at first with Frankfurter's belief, but I'm not entirely sure. But anyway, it became, as some people would say, the house organ of, was it abstract expressionism or the New York School, or the de Kooning Club. You know, but there it was and so, it was this really exciting magazine, in any case for many, many years.

MS. LEDDY: Who did you most admire of the people there?

MR. BERKSON: Well, you ask what the place was like. For me, it was like graduate school. I mean, I had dropped out of college. I was getting my undergraduate education in the Cedar Bar—I say that jokingly. I mean, I was getting it partly through Frank O'Hara, continuing with Kenneth Koch and myself going from gallery to gallery and museums and to concerts and to the ballet and so forth. And that was my cultural education. And that had been happening since 1959, but you see it's all happening—it's all coming into view and into falling into place very rapidly. I liken it to being a 9-year old—and 8 or 9-year old and beginning to learn about baseball and within six months, you know all the players present and past, you know. You know Mickey Mantle and you know Ty Cobb and Christy Mathewson and like that. And, you know, it could be anything. You could be studying movies and suddenly, you know, I'm probably a bit ahead of myself and cocky, brash and talking the talk.

And I think, probably, I was talking the talk at some party at—I'm not sure where. Maybe a friend of my parents' house with—I went to it with my parents or with my mother because my father had already died. And I met Alfred Frankfurter and his wife, Eleanor Munro. And the next thing I knew, I guess, I had already dropped out of Columbia and he called me up, Frankfurter and, "I'd like you to come work for *ARTnews*." And my job really was—I don't think I was ever on the masthead of

*ARTnews* proper. My job was really to be a kind of associate or assistant editor on *Portfolio and ARTnews Annual*, which was kind of an annual book that was something that Frankfurter liked to do and was going on for maybe 10 years.

And it used to just be called *ARTnews Annual* and then it was called *Portfolio and ARTnews Annual*. And it included, you know, articles on different things. It was like an expanded *ARTnews* in a way, but—and so, I was situated at the—you could say, at one point of a triangle. I had this cubicle with partitions and to my right—if I swiveled my chair around—was Alfred Frankfurter, his secretary and then a little hallway and then his big office, like an executive office with a big desk and a cushy chair.

And to my left, I guess, was the entranceway to the magazine and Tom Hess' desk, which was right by—in was in completely open space right by the entrance from the elevators. And so I'm over the partition from Tom hearing his conversations with whoever's dropping by. Harold Rosenberg, or Charlie Egan, or some—and de Kooning, maybe even Bill de Kooning, et cetera, et cetera, whatever. So, one thing I'm privy to these conversations, which is pretty interesting. Philip Pavia, the editor of *It Is* and so on.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: And then, the reviewers and as it happens because I'm also sort of seeing some of these people socially outside of work, sometimes or Irving Sandler, so forth, they'll come around and we'll chat in my office, you know. And have these conversations and there was these wonderful people, like Jack Kroll, who later became a critic for *Newsweek*, I guess. And Sandler and Edith Burckhardt would be coming in and Mark Roskill—

MS. LEDDY: Edith Schloss.

MR. BERKSON: —so forth. Schloss, but I think that she wrote—

MS. LEDDY: Because she changed—

MR. BERKSON: I think she may have written under the name of Burckhardt in those days.

MS. LEDDY: But here's my question. When you read the history of *Artforum*, it's like one big, you know, struggle and battle for different critical positions. Was *ARTnews* like that?

MR. BERKSON: No.

MS. LEDDY: Or was it—it was very—

MR. BERKSON: No, because—

MS. LEDDY: —everyone agreed about what good criticism was there?

MR. BERKSON: Oh, I don't know. You know, there wasn't a collective—it wasn't—it was Tom and Alfred, you know, Alfred, at that point, I think pretty much taking care of the Old Masters.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: And, you know, if there was a—if the Giotto's in Padua were being cleaned, he would get an article by somebody reputable about that.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: Eve Borsook I think, was the person who wrote the actual article. And, you know, Tom is dealing with the contemporary scene. In between them, they might converse as to who's going to talk about—there was going to be a show of Braque or Matisse or somebody who's going to do that number? But it's not like you had a bunch of editors as it seems to have happened with *Artforum* sitting around hashing it out.

MS. LEDDY: Struggling to really determine what—

MR. BERKSON: No, no, no.

MS. LEDDY: —criticism should be.

MR. BERKSON: No, no, nothing—

MS. LEDDY: So, that's not there. It's pretty much what Fairfield Porter says, "The best criticism is simply the best description." Everyone would have agreed with that.

MR. BERKSON: I'm not so sure. I mean, you have some people who, like Jill Johnson eventually is coming in and I don't know how Gene Swenson, who was a really interesting figure at that time, the younger critics, how they would have approached that, but that was pretty much Porter's idea. But, then again, Porter's not telling the whole truth there because if you look at his criticism, much of it is description, but some—he's—there's—

MS. LEDDY: There's a framework that he's bringing to it.

MR. BERKSON: A lot of it is very philosophical.

MS. LEDDY: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: And he intuits. He makes—sometimes very daring remarks about what must be to him the implications of a—he'll describe an artist's belief system in his writing and you look at it and you say, did he tell you that? Or are you seeing that—

MS. LEDDY: He deduces it from the work.

MR. BERKSON: —in the work? And that's very similar to that kind of thing that absolutely astonished me with Rosenberg, for instance, that feeling that he could look at a totally or putatively, totally abstract painting and see a spot of mauve in the lower right-hand corner—

MS. LEDDY: [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: —and say, "That's a Trotskyite patch of mauve." I mean, in other words, he'd make a political interpretation of this. "What?" And [laughs] astonishing. So—

MS. LEDDY: So, actually, you didn't find it credible or you did find it credible?

MR. BERKSON: No, I just—I found it baffling and scary in some ways.

MS. LEDDY: [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: Because it would carry a judgment with it and there again, you have the critics are

—and they're there, including Hess—heavy on judgment, you know—

MS. LEDDY: I noticed that reading some of those, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: And Fairfield is very judgmental and you have the people like, say, John Ashbery, who aren't, or, you know, or like, O'Hara whose critical stance often could—wonderfully could be of the moment. I mean, one of the great lessons, I think, is in a description that Joe Brainard made of Frank viz-a-viz Andy Warhol—Joe said something like, "I remember Frank O'Hara one day attacking Andy Warhol with everything he had, and the next day, defending him with his life."

MS. LEDDY: You mean, in conversation, or—

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, in conversation—in conversation, but you could do the same thing in print. In other words, this whole business of judgment and opinion could be very moment-to-moment, should be moment-to-moment. The idea of having a fixed opinion about something, this is just it. You know, and it is as if you could never change your mind. It's ridiculous, you know, but there were people who were, you know, cut and dry about that.

MS. LEDDY: And what was the attitude about, for example, Clement Greenberg during the period—

MR. BERKSON: Well, in—at *ARTnews*, I think that there was, you know, Greenberg for the most part was—he wasn't the enemy the way, say John Canaday and the conservative critics of the *New York Times* and other newspapers and some other magazines, I suppose, were. But he was the, I guess, the old friend who'd gone sour, old Clem and so, for instance when Clement Greenberg—Clement Greenberg's first book, *Art and Culture*, first collection of his essays came out, it was assigned to Jack Kroll, who quoted the most thorough description Greenberg had come up with so far, for what modernism was and he called it "an intellectual malted milk with egg." [Laughs.] So, you know, it was a joke and it was a put down and that was before the arts magazine, you know, essay—what is that one called? "Modernist Painting," which had a pretty thorough going definition of what modernism was in all the arts.

MS. LEDDY: But now, you also worked for *Arts Magazine*—wait a minute, Hilton Kramer was the editor.

MR. BERKSON: He wasn't my editor.

MS. LEDDY: He wasn't your editor.

MR. BERKSON: I think he was gone by then. I don't even remember who the Chief Editor was. I worked with a nice man named Jay Jacobs, who was my line-for-line editor. I delivered my reviews and articles to him and we went over them in the office. And that's when I really started writing reviews and articles. I mean, *ARTnews*—for *ARTnews*, I wrote two "Paints a Picture," one for—one on Mike Goldberg, another on Norman Bluhm and some spotty reviews. I think I got to review a John Button show. Maybe a few other shows of contemporaries. Mostly, I was assigned to this dusty, tiny African art gallery, the Segy Gallery, S-E-G-Y, on Lexington Avenue. It was kind of down the street from where I lived. Lexington and something like 58th Street and I would go in there and I knew nothing about African art. Nice Mr. Segy would try to educate me. And mostly, I wrote sort of probably, if I looked at it now, embarrassing, sort of snide reviews, you know, probably what would you call it? Racist—or something [laughs] just not very educated reviews of African art, African sculpture and, you know, then otherwise, I was working on *Portfolio* which was interesting because I got to work with John Ashbery on a—on a—I think that was my idea to have him write about



Raymond Roussel. Then Larry Rivers did illustrations for—Frankfurter became aware of a unfinished novel by Ronald Firbank and so, called, *The New Rhythm*.

MS. LEDDY: F-U-R-B-A-N-K?

MR. BERKSON: Oh, no. F-I-R—

MS. LEDDY: F-I-R—

MR. BERKSON: —B-A-N-K. And Larry did the illustrations for that and I was asked to write an introduction to it and I had a fight with Alfred Frankfurter about a phrase in my essay that he changed and I fought against the change and then when I couldn't win because he held fast to his view of things, I said, take my name off the essay. So—

MS. LEDDY: Did you write for *Art International*?

MR. BERKSON: No.

MS. LEDDY: No.

MR. BERKSON: Uh-huh [negative.].

MS. LEDDY: So, it was *ARTnews* a little. It was arts mainly in the 1960s.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, and I wrote a couple of articles, I think, for *Craft Horizons* for Rose Slivka and that was pretty much it. I wrote a couple of catalogue pieces. One for a show of seven sculptors that T. Grace Sharpless put together at the ICA in Philadelphia. I wrote a piece on David Smith just after he died.

MS. LEDDY: And what—tell me about that.

MR. BERKSON: The piece?

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: It was a one-page piece and I wrote it sitting in his living room at Bolton Landing because I'd gone up there maybe—I don't know how it was that I went up there after he died, but I remember that maybe to see the work that was going to be in the show and I just—thinking about what it means to have a room with David Smiths in them.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: And so, that was it. Then, you know, while I was writing for *Arts*, I was working—because I had started working on projects that Frank O'Hara had at the Museum of Modern Art, after he died. I was—and also because I edited this commemorative book of 30 poems by him with drawings, or anyway, art works by 30 American artists for the museum. I became kind of a guest editor in the publications department. So, I was working there up until about 1969.

And also, I was supposed to do the biographical outline on Pollock for the Pollock show that O'Hara was going to curate that then fell to Bill Lieberman and then there were complications with that and I ended up not finishing that job even though I had gone some lengths towards it. And then there was another project which was a biographical outline—very expanded—on David Smith, which was for a book that Rosalind Krauss was going to write some of the text and I forget who else. And that

was going to be a MoMA production and that somehow fell through. And so that biographical outline never got published, but it exists.

MS. LEDDY: And so this was all happening—I mean, this takes us up almost to the end of the '60s when—

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: —when Frank O'Hara dies. And—

MR. BERKSON: Well, he died in 1966, yeah.

MS. LEDDY: And so, how did that change things, both for you and both for that world?

MR. BERKSON: Well, Frank, as many people say, was a catalyst and that—in the way of bringing all kinds of people together under the rubric of his friendship, and when he died there was a kind of—as happens, I've seen it happen with lots of different artists, there was a kind of diaspora. You know, the whatever cohesion there was, there was no reason for it anymore. Frank had died and a lot of people that I knew because of him, I didn't know anymore, although—

MS. LEDDY: So was it really as much of an impact—so you're saying Pop destroyed the nucleus bit. Also, it seems like the death of Frank O'Hara was really a significant part of that destruction, too?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, I mean, I've seen that happen in different instances. For instance, when Jack Spicer died in San Francisco, there were a lot of people who were part of what was called the "Jack Spicer scene," which would be put in quotes. And, you know, when he died then suddenly they all went off in different directions. Some went to Canada, some went to Northern California, and elsewhere, you know, that kind of thing happened.

MS. LEDDY: Is it also true that a lot of the people, the painters of this, you know, the school that was pretty cohesive around 1960, ended up moving out to Long Island or just spending more time—they start to just leave the city?

MR. BERKSON: The older artists, you know, there is a thing that happens with people as they get older, which is they have families or they have reasons to want to be off in a quieter location than the hubbub of the city. One of the reasons is that if you're in New York, for instance, there are openings, there are all kinds of events, and if you want to get any work done, you have to sort of begin to choose between them, which is like choosing between friends, and that becomes difficult. And some people just sort of say, "I'm not going to anything, and I'm going to stay home in my apartment," or they move out of town or they spend as much time as they can out of town.

I think de Kooning and possibly—people leave town for different reasons. I think de Kooning partly had to get out of New York because it was getting toxic for him, not just in terms of people coming up to him and wanting something from him because he was Willem de Kooning, but also because he had a serious alcohol problem, and that maybe being out in the country was going to resolve that. And I think it didn't at first, but I think eventually it did, but it took until the end of the '70s for him to really quit in the drinking area.

And Guston left because he felt New York wasn't with him anymore, and he had had this place in Woodstock for many years, going back, I think, into the '40s. But he gave up his New York studio and his New York apartment eventually, and just woodshedded there, and sort of sweated out the second half of the '60s, and stayed in Woodstock until he died.

So, you know, there were people, yeah, I mean a lot of de Kooning's friends, I think, the Lassaws, for instance, moved out to East Hampton and so forth. But not so many of the younger generation.

MS. LEDDY: So then if we think we're still, say, in the mid '60s or around there then, I'm really thinking about also about how *Artforum* comes to New York. And, you know, at the same time all these other kinds of art, you know, minimalism and performance art, all these kinds of things are becoming more and more, you know, they're rising. Just tell me about that.

MR. BERKSON: Okay. Well, that is—I have to say that I personally was—in the years that I was so close with Frank O'Hara, I was therefore so close to the artists he was especially close to, which were people like Mike Goldberg, Norman Bluhm, and, you know, a lot of second generation, so called second generation abstract expressionists, and then Alex Katz became a friend, and very much a friend of mine.

And I think that was very good because it broadened my horizons. I mean, Alex actually took me to other artists' studios like Tom Wesselman, for one. And I think Alex was responsible for my going to my first Rudy Burckhardt film, you know, show at his loft, and knowing about those things. And also through that, I think the same show, was the Kuchar brothers. So I'm beginning to get things that are, you know, being done by people my own age, and marvelous things.

The beginning of Pop and most of the beginning of Minimalism, the beginning beginnings I pretty much missed because I was in this other environment, and I mean, I just happened to be at a happening or two. How, I don't remember. And as I told you last time, I didn't really sense so much what it meant. It just seemed interesting, you know.

And Minimalism to me was probably not the strict Minimalism. I think I really became aware of it—well, it was kind of on time with Kynaston McShine's show *Primary Structures*. But that included things that weren't strictly of the, you know, wasn't strictly Judd, Morris and so on. It was people, so like Ronald Bladen and the people of the Park Place Group, you know.

[. . . –AL] And with Warhol, even though I was present for the first Stable Gallery show with—I remember the Elvies in the hallway and the Brillo boxes in the backroom, or, you know, I guess it was the big room, and being really impressed with it. The Warhol scene I wasn't part of, and I kind of took a distance from it. I think I was invited to do a screen test, and it didn't mean anything to me, and I didn't do it.

MS. LEDDY: And did you see him as kind of this person who had sort of ruined the world of art?

MR. BERKSON: I didn't, no, no, but I was skeptical, and I was skeptical—I think '65 was the turning year for me because '65 was the year I believe of *Primary Structures*. We should check that out at the Jewish Museum. And '65 was the year that Warhol had his retrospective done by Sam Green at the ICA in Philadelphia. And I went to down for the opening of that, and nobody had expected, you know, that was the opening at which suddenly there was this mob scene, and Warhol wasn't prepared for it.

"Oh, gee," he said, you know.

But because I knew Sam Green, I went to into the show early before the actual opening, and I got to be virtually alone with that show. And it was really an epiphany. I mean, I just, "Wow, this is really something," you know? And it meant something, you know. I mean, it was moving.

And then I went to the actual opening, and this mob, and I remember some Philadelphia TV crew

stuck a mic in my face, and I said something, you know, about how great it was. And later, I think it was Sam Green told me Andy had seen the broadcast. They actually used something I said, you know, and Andy was happy that I had said this thing.

Well, we had been, you know, at parties together, but with him I don't think I ever really exchanged sentences, you know. I mean, it was like, "Hi." And then eventually in the years before I left New York, the late '60s, he always had a video camera, you know, so it was like it wasn't even "Hi." It was like I'm talking to somebody and he's taping.

MS. LEDDY: That's incredible.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. So I never really got to know him particularly. I remember being at the Factory one time. It was some kind of big party and Judy Garland, who I think I mentioned before was a family friend, she was there. So we sort of hung out together. It was very funny hanging out together on Andy's sofa. But, you know, it was kind of—we brushed by each other it seems.

One thing that is interesting in terms of criticism in all that time that the, you know, there was the reigning formalism, raging formalism of, reigning I mean as the reign of Queen Victoria, of the '60s, and it, you know, descriptive, for Fairfield Porter often mean formally descriptive. But there appeared in [1966 –BB]—and again this had to do with the ICA in Philadelphia, which was so vital. Gene Swenson, G. R. Swenson, did a show in Philadelphia called *The Other Tradition*, had a catalogue and an essay. It was remarkable.

And he was a remarkable person who, you know, you know, *The Other Tradition* was—to a certain extent it had to do with surrealism and it had to do with what now would be called outsider or other art. In some ways, art of different civilizations or ethnicities. But it was very anti-formalist. It was one of the two strong anti-formalist essays. The other being Leo Steinberg's one, which was like a frontal attack on Greenberg, properly.

And I went to see that show. I guess it must have had something to do with Sam Green or I don't know, maybe it was T. Grace, but for some reason I went down to Philadelphia again to see that exhibition and the catalogue. And I never knew Swenson particularly, but I was so impressed with both that I mentioned it to Frank, and Swenson was—I think asked to be considered for a curatorial post at MoMA, but then he—he—he died.

I wrote out some notes about this. Yeah, I think he was invited to do propose a show, and the show was actually called *Art in the Mirror*, but he flipped out. You know, this was supposed to happen in 1966, and *The Other Tradition* happened in 1966. And then he kind of flipped out, and then he died at age 35. But he was the person who did all the interviews with the pop artists. You know, the original one with Andy where he said, I think, you know, "Everybody should be a machine," you know.

So anyway, I thought I should mention Gene.

MS. LEDDY: But as far as the poet-critic, it seems like when Frank O'Hara's dies, is this true that then the poet-critic, I mean, the only one left besides you would be John Ashbery at that point?

MR. BERKSON: Well, no. Schuyler sort of continuing, though he had psychiatric troubles, which made it hard for him to continue writing, but he would resume off and on, especially I think sometimes for *ARTnews* when Ashbery became editor there when he returned from Europe in 1966 I think that was. No, no, no. And also it was picked up by the younger people. I mean, Ted Berrigan was writing regular reviews for *ARTnews*, and eventually took over after O'Hara died

writing the art chronicles for *Kulchur* magazine, Kulchur with a K, K-U-L-C-H-U-R, the Lita Hornick magazine.

And then of course Peter Schjeldahl—

MS. LEDDY: That's true.

MR. BERKSON: —was writing for *ARTnews*, and Tom was his editor. And Peter went on to write for *The New York Times*, and then he was *The Village Voice* [art critic –BB], and so forth. So that kind of criticism—

MS. LEDDY: Is he still a poet as well, though? Didn't you say—?

MR. BERKSON: Peter in the 1980s made a proclamation that he was an art critic and only an art critic, and that he was leaving poetry because poetry had no cultural currency. And Peter was a very good poet, but he got swept into what I think of as "the turnstile mentality" about whether, you know, it's numbers of people or numbers of dollars, pay attention to a particular art or not or kind of art, visual art, poetry, theater, what have you. And he decided that poetry was out to lunch, and so no more of that.

And it had something to do with his disappointments over or his regrets over what had happened to him in his life when he was a poet in the late '60s, and we needn't go into that. That's his private affair.

But, yes, but anyway, no, it didn't peter out and it didn't have to do with Frank O'Hara's dying. *ARTnews* continued on through the '60s being *ARTnews* in the hands of Hess until he left for *People Magazine*. No, *New York Magazine*. And then he became briefly the curator of Contemporary Art or Contemporary American Art at the Met. And then he died at his desk, suddenly. And he wasn't very old. That was a terrible thing.

And he was having a good time. He told me that the Met had a rule that he didn't have to go to an acquisitions committee if a work was under \$10,000 dollars or something like that. So he was buying a lot of things that didn't cost a lot of money for the Met collection.

No, I mean, it continued. Ashbery went from *ARTnews* to *Newsweek*. So he continued writing criticism there until—and also he did *New York* at a certain point. I don't remember exactly how the chronology worked. And then he stopped pretty much when he could. I think it's when he got his MacArthur, which was back in the '80s I think. He was one of the earliest MacArthur fellows.

MS. LEDDY: Well, *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, that's in the '70s.

MR. BERKSON: I don't remember, but I think it was the '70s, yeah.

MS. LEDDY: That's kind of what really established him.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, but that didn't necessarily make him rich. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars wisely invested can make you, you know, sort of. And he had an appointment at Bard and so forth.

MS. LEDDY: Right.

MR. BERKSON: But no, the poetry, you know, and you had people like one of the best critics of the

'60s, and it turned into vocal criticism because of his talk, his *Art of the Talk*. was David Antin. But absolutely first rate essayist, and he wrote for *ARTnews* in the '60s, in the second half of the '60s. So, you know, that was continuing. You know.

MS. LEDDY: And so when you were—all of that was quite—but you were really focusing it sounds like mainly on writing poetry in the later part of the '60s. I'm not hearing so much about—

MR. BERKSON: Later, later I had a kind of a bad period in the middle '60s. And I found a letter recently that I'd written to Maxine Groffsky, who you and I talked about, in I think it was 1967. And she was asking me if I could send her some poems for *Paris Review*, which I did, but I said, you know, "I haven't published any poems for four years, and I've been writing very little."

And my, you know, my life was in kind of—my writing life was in a lot of disarray, and my life was a little dissolute. But I did—yeah, I was otherwise engaged in doing a lot of art writing. I was working at the Museum of Modern Art. In '64, '65 I worked with a man named Colin Clark, who was the son of Sir Kenneth Clark, on a TV show called *Art New York* for educational television, WNTV, channel 13.

And so I was kind of involved in all that, and then around—and I was teaching at the New School. I was teaching a poetry workshop and a course in modern poetry, eventually, at The New School for Social Research between 1964 and 1969.

But there was a time there when I, you know, even though I was teaching poetry a lot, I wasn't really writing a lot of poetry. Certainly what I was writing wasn't very good, but in '67, '68, things began to change, and I began to get my focus back on writing poems. And then also my social life changed in a way that had a lot to do with the change in my poetry. Much more on the Lower East Side, much more with poets my own age, and, you know, sort of new friends, and revolving around the same St. Mark's Church Poetry Project, and the little magazines that were developing then.

MS. LEDDY: Such as?

MR. BERKSON: Well, *C Magazine*. Let's see, what else? There were a lot of, well, *Floating Bear* was earlier. *C Magazine*, which I think I never really appeared in but I learned a lot from it. *Mother Magazine*. And what were the others? And I did a one shot magazine called *Best in Company* just before I left New York for California.

MS. LEDDY: Okay, and then I also wanted to talk a little bit about the art galleries, and especially how this nucleus group, which maybe was starting with Tanager, you know, goes to Tibor and then to Fischbach, all of those kinds of changes I've observed but don't quite grasp as an insider would.

MR. BERKSON: I'm not exactly sure how all that shaked out. It wasn't, you know, Tanager was one group. There was the Hansa Gallery, there was the Brata Gallery, which was run by the Krushenick brothers and some others, and Ronald Bladen had to do with that. And Tanager, I think, was specifically people who were inclined towards what was called at one point gestural realism, which included Alex Katz at that point because his paintings were much brushier, and Cajori perhaps, yeah, and maybe Lois Dodd and others. And so there were these—that was all downtown. I mean, Tanager was on 10th Street.

And Fischbach had sort of interesting history. I don't remember exactly how this happened, but I believe that Marilyn Fischbach had a sister whose name was Thiebaud, I think it was spelled differently than Wayne Thiebaud. Her name may have been Marie. Anyway, I remember Kenneth Koch calling me up around 1960, it must have been '60 or '61, saying, "There's this woman who—I

told her that she should talk to you about artists because she's going to open an art gallery."

And that art gallery was opening on Madison Avenue. I think it was in the '60s or '70s. That gallery became Fischbach, and I think it was Marilyn's sister. Anyway the name changed from the Thiebaud Gallery to Fischbach. And I told her about Alex, whose work I already knew. And I don't know who all else, but I remember that it had early on Katz, Robert Mangold, I think Robert Whitman and/or George Brecht for some reason. It was a really interesting gallery from the get go.

And, you know, Tibor de Nagy had been going under the direction of John Myers since 1950 or '51 in various locations. So that was, you know, and he has his memoirs, which pulled far too many punches, but, you know, how all that developed was all in there. I don't really know because I wasn't around. I mean, I know a little bit about it.

And of course the Tibor people have kept a good archive, so, you know, that's there. And they've published various books that cover the history of the gallery. But, you know, they started out with people. A lot of it was John Myers, John Bernard Myers, getting advice from Clement Greenburg. And so they showed Frankenthaler alongside Hartigan, Freilicher probably right off the bat. You know, there's the great photograph of Hartigan, Frankenthaler, and Mitchell together.

MS. LEDDY: Yes, wonderful.

MR. BERKSON: But I don't think Mitchell ever showed with John Myers.

And then John was interested in poetry, so he published the first books of O'Hara, and Ashbery, and Koch, and me, and eventually Schuyler, and other young poets going on into the '60s. And, you know, he's a whole interview in himself. I don't know if he was ever interviewed by—I hope he was.

See, what happened with John Myers, there's a review that I wrote of his memoirs *In Search of the Marvelous*. When I wrote the review I said, "This isn't the John Myers book of memoirs that we could have had. This is a man who has all kinds of stories and he's not telling them in this memoir." And I said, "Otherwise, he is a terrific [art lover –BB], a terrific person, and the gallery was marvelous," and all this.

And so I'm in Bolinas. I wrote this when I was living in Bolinas, and about two weeks after the review comes out the phone rings, and the voice on the other end is saying, "Bitch, bitch, bitch."

And I said, "John, how are you?"

Let me tell you what happened. The publisher, whoever it was, Random House, or, you know, had just published the Kitty Kelly biography of Sinatra, and Sinatra's lawyers were all over them. And so the publisher's lawyers went over John's memoirs with pincers, and anything that was going to bring a lawsuit was cut. And he explained that to me. That's why it was the way it was, you know. It's really amazing. But, you know, he—I mean, that's the story that should be told.

What I learned in Kenneth Koch's class about people like Fairfield Porter and Jane Freilicher, and Larry Rivers because the first time I heard these names was from Kenneth talking about them in the poetry class. I inherited a small sum. I think it was \$500 dollars from my grandfather, my father's father. And I went to the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, which was then off Madison Avenue. I think something like 60-something Street, between Madison and 5th, top flight.

And I said—I didn't know John Myers then: "I liked to see works by these three artists." And I bought three paintings: a Porter, which you've seen and hangs over our mantelpiece in San Francisco; a

Rivers, which at one point because of a legal problem, I had to sell; and a Freilicher, which my first wife has. And all within the \$500 dollar range.

MS. LEDDY: Pretty great.

MR. BERKSON: Pretty great, yeah.

And then, you know, and then on knowing John Myers in the context of the poets and the Poets Theatre, the shows that he has, and the wonderful gallery, which eventually was on 79th Street between Madison and Park, and then, you know, moved to 57th Street.

So one day I'm in the gallery, and there were times when I'd just went in and I was hanging out, you know. And John said, "I want you to give me a manuscript. I'm going to do a book of yours." This was 1960.

And I said, "John, you know, I don't think you even know my poetry. Why would you do a book of my poetry?"

He said, "Doesn't matter. You're in the air."

I mean, that was, you know, that's an attitude. That's the—"you're in the air."

MS. LEDDY: Right.

MR. BERKSON: So I did give him a manuscript, and he—and we had a—this is kind of interesting because I was talking about this with Carey Bluhm, Norman's widow. We had a tussle over the cover, and he said—I don't know who it was, it could have been Red Grooms, it could have been Robert Goodnough or even Gorchov. In any case, "No, no, I'd like Normal Bluhm to do the cover," because I was close with Norman at that point through Frank.

"Well, Norman's not in the gallery, so that doesn't make sense." So we arrived at an impasse.

And that next summer, the summer of 1961, June, I think it was June 6th to be exact, there was a big party at John Gruen and Jane Wilson's house in Watermill. And that's a famous photograph I think is in there.

MS. LEDDY: The group photograph?

MR. BERKSON: The group photograph, otherwise known as *The New York School*, which it really isn't, but a lot of people are in it.

And across the lawn comes trotting John Myers with this package in his hand, and it's advanced copies of the book, which he had printed in Venice, which had an American flag design cover on it, red stripes on white and a blue square with the title. And I think it's in there. I was, I mean, I was excited and at the same time I was appalled because what's this American flag thing doing here? Oh god, Jasper Johns' *Flags*, even though they went back to 1954 had just been shown. And, uh, you know, disaster in a certain way.

But, you know, on the other hand, here's this book, and it's exciting. I think I said something about it to Myers, and he said, "Your poems are as American as apple pie," in this great lurching manner that John Myers had.



So and then that night, you know, in that group photo you see de Kooning is there. And that night—that daytime party was for Julia Gruen's sixth birthday or some birthday, okay, a big lawn party. And that night Larry Rivers had a big party, and de Kooning was there, and I handed him—I don't think I'd ever met him before. I handed him the book, a chance to, you know, give him something.

And he said, "Hey, I did a painting called *Saturday Night*."

I said, "Don't I know it."

Because I sort of got the idea of titling poems, like "Russian New Year," "Saturday Night," "Saturday Afternoon," things like that, from "Easter Monday" and, you know, "Saturday Night" and then so forth. And that was something he was doing, and O'Hara did to a certain extent, you know. Yeah. So.

MS. LEDDY: Well, so is it time to move to this issue [pointing to *Artforum* –AL] and to move to the change of *Artforum* or do we move now to California?

MR. BERKSON: No, we can do a little of *Artforum* because it affected what happened to me in the later '60s.

MS. LEDDY: Okay, why don't you talk about that?

MR. BERKSON: By about 1967 I felt the impact of the kind of criticism that was being written in the magazines, mostly in *Artforum* and in *Art International*, and I guess some other magazines had—you know, everything had—it wasn't just Pop art. You know, the whole thing had exploded. I mean, by 1960, you had the boom of the art schools, universities, and colleges, were all the sudden it was incumbent on any self-respecting university or college to have an art practice studio department all of a sudden so that, you know, and people are getting these MFAs, you know, and this industry is proliferating as never before.

Also, in the course of the '60s, the phenomenon of the contemporary art museum develops, you know, like the kind of the La Jolla Museum, that kind of thing where any self-respecting city is supposed to have not just a modern or a museum that includes modern art, but some kind of ICA or contemporary museum. And, you know, it's busting out all over.

So as the 60s go on, yeah, there's *Art International*, there's *ARTnews*, there's *Artforum*, that begins in, what, '62 in San Francisco and then goes to L.A. and whenever it goes to New York.

MS. LEDDY: In '68 I think it comes to New York.

MR. BERKSON: As late as '68? So, yeah, it's in L.A. in the meantime.

And as I say, there's this influx of, or invasion if you like, of young ambitious, you know, rabidly ambitious art historians into the contemporary art criticism scene or market. And in order to make your mark in that your criticism has to stake out, you know, not just turf, but in a certain way, a program, or call it theory as it'd later would be called.

MS. LEDDY: Theory?

MR. BERKSON: Well, program, programmatic.

And I began to feel by '67 that it had gotten so that if you were going to write art criticism you had

better have a program and be deadly serious about it or get out of the game. And I sort of thought, "I'm out of here. It's not interesting to me."

MS. LEDDY: And why was that not interesting? Explain that.

MR. BERKSON: Because I'm not programmatic in any way. I don't have any principles. I'm on a case-by-case basis, and, you know, I'm not interested in kinds of art.

MS. LEDDY: Was it like antithetical to a poetic, you know, sensibility in some way this—

MR. BERKSON: In some ways, I guess you could say that. I mean, it was antithetical to my sensibility, you know. You know, I follow, I suppose I follow along the lines of something that John Ashbery once said as what he shared with O'Hara, which was an attitude that art is already serious enough; there's no point in taking it too seriously.

And these critics, no brief against the artists, but the critics were taking it too seriously. I think they were taking it, you know, seriously because they had to stake out territory.

MS. LEDDY: Well, I mean, it's also true that most of them did come from these academic backgrounds, not all, but let's say Alloway didn't and Max Kozloff, he did actually, but—

MR. BERKSON: He did.

MS. LEDDY: —was anti-academic, himself.

MR. BERKSON: I remember, you know, I mean, with that went—with all of that went the sense of what was social position and what was the economic position of the critic, you know. I think that in —then and now there was no hope for an art critic unless you had a contract with *The New Yorker* or you were the regular critic, the frontline critic for *The New York Times* or some other big time newspaper to make a living writing criticism.

MS. LEDDY: So that was a change, you mean? It had been possible before or was it never possible?

MR. BERKSON: They didn't make a living writing criticism. They made a living being professors, and I wasn't going to be that kind of professor either. I mean, The Art Institute thing was kind of a fluke and it wasn't about being a critic either. It was being an art historian strangely enough. I mean, I was hired as an art historian at the Art Institute, you know, an art historian without portfolio.

But Max Kozloff and others started to form what they called an "art writers guild." This probably was around 1966 or '67. It may have been later but I think it was then, maybe even earlier. And I remember going to a meeting and, you know, because I had worked at *ARTnews* and I knew pretty much how the economics worked, I said, "You know, they don't need us. They can get other people to do what we do if we say we're going to strike for higher wages or, what, benefits or more leverage with editorial policy or something like that."

And, you know, these magazines run on ads, you know. It's the ads where their money comes from. In the large measure, people—and this is truer today—people buy the magazine to look at the ads, and they hardly ever read those articles. How many people do you know who say, "I never read those articles in *Artforum*. I look at the ads to see what's going on"? It's like gallery guide in a certain way, you know. I mean, it's true.

And Kozloff leaned forward and said, "You're an obstructionist."

And suddenly I felt like I was in some, you know, Bolshevik cell meeting in 1913 or something. It was absurd.

And that thing dissolved, but it was a sign of, you know, this kind of political organization that was coming, some of it quite good. I mean, with the women's groups and the Art Workers Coalition and so forth, but I didn't have any part in any of those things.

MS. LEDDY: But as far as reading the articles, I mean, at least in the—I mean, even now, I look at those 1960s *Artforums* and I actually want to read the articles. I mean, they seem interesting in a way that they aren't now, and they have an energy and a kind of something.

So what I kind of wonder is did you—was there any writers for *Artforum* during that period that influenced you as a critic in any way?

MR. BERKSON: No.

MS. LEDDY: So, like, Rosalind Krauss—

MR. BERKSON: I really—I became an art world dropout, you know. I mean, I really—it partly had to do with my rediscovering myself as a poet, and sort of in a way reinforcing myself as a poet, and being much more in the company of poets than of artists except for the artists that I felt very close to, like Katz and Al Held was another, and Ronnie Bladen and some others.

You know, I mean, I went to Max's [Kansas City –AL]—in a certain way I regret missing something like these intense conversations I understand happened among people like Robert Smithson and others in the front room of Max's. I was never—I would stop in the front room, Bladen would be at the bar, and I would stop and say hello to him, and then my friends and I, who were mostly the poets, Ted Berrigan, Jim Carroll, and others, would head for the backroom where Andy was, but we weren't at his table either. I mean, it was like, "Hi," you know, but we were—

MS. LEDDY: I love this idea of the different camps.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, it was that way. I mean, I'll tell you, you know, how—

MS. LEDDY: Max's Kansas City, not Max's—

MR. BERKSON: —how different things—this is a sign of the split.

MS. LEDDY: Okay.

MR. BERKSON: Because also even though people like Ted Berrigan and others were alert to, maybe more alert than I was, to, you know, what was happening in the art world like with the minimal artists and maybe pop artists, and, you know. We had our own artists like Joe Brainard and George Schneeman and so forth.

But I remember one night—oh, it was the night of Tom Clark's wedding at St. Mark's church, and there was a party afterwards at Anne Waldman and Louis Walsh's on St. Mark's Place, and I went on with some other friends to Max's. And I'm heading for the backroom and at the last table in the front room is Barnett Newman and Annalee Newman and Tom Hess and maybe somebody else in a big booth. And I stop and say hello, and I think because I was all dressed up for a wedding, I was in a suit or something, I was actually in an embroidered sort of Nehru kind of jacket because I have photographs of—

MS. LEDDY: You were stylish, yes.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, yeah, and maybe beads. We were in 1968 or something like that.

And there's Tom Hess. So, you know, "Where've you been?" like that.

And I said, "Oh, I was just at Tom Clark's wedding."

What did Tom Clark mean to Tom Hess? The attorney general was named Thomas Clark.

He said, "The attorney general?"

I said, "No, the poet."

MS. LEDDY: So in other words, there was no awareness—

MR. BERKSON: No, no.

MS. LEDDY: —at that moment, between the art world and the poetry world.

So they were at that table, and then you would go to the back, and then Andy would have his own table?

MR. BERKSON: He would have his own group with, you know, Jackie, Ultra Violet, all those people, and Jackie Curtis, and Gerard, and, you know. Yeah.

And, you know, there was that wonderful—I don't know who was responsible for it, the laser beam that came from the front near the front window that buzzed right back to the rear wall of the backroom. So there was this red line that you were always aware of.

MS. LEDDY: And then who was the other group you said was there? There was someone—

MR. BERKSON: Well, in the front room where famously—I've only read about it. I didn't know these people. I never met Smithson. I realized later that he was somebody that I saw in the Cedar Bar in those sort of late years of the Cedar Bar, brooding at the bar, sort of like Ronnie Bladen, keeping very much to himself, thinking it over, maybe listening to the talk around him, you know.

MS. LEDDY: Did you read his articles in *Artforum*, those ones about the Cube and—

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, that was the great stuff.

I mean, the great things, I think, in the early *Artforum*, which was early for me. I don't think I was even aware of it in its West Coast manifestations.

MS. LEDDY: So '67 was actually the year Smithson wrote?

MR. BERKSON: The year of the Smithson pieces, you know, particularly for me, *Monuments of the Passaic*. Such a great piece of writing, but, you know, all of it.

And then I became more aware of them when they were collected in that first collection of his writings.

MS. LEDDY: So that would be the *Artforum* group was its own group, the *ARTnews* group was its

own group, Andy was its own group, the poets were their own group, and it was all separate. And that's such a great description of what—and that's all at Max's Kansas City.

MR. BERKSON: It was. And I knew Rosalind Krauss because we were both working on this David Smith book, and she was, I think, just out of Harvard. Eventually, within the same year, she and Jane Livingston did a show of David Smith for the, I think it was for the Fogg with a small catalogue with an essay by her [Krauss –BB].

Rosalind Krauss and I went to Detroit first to look at David Smith material in the Archives of American Art, which was housed in the basement of the Detroit Institute of Art, under the auspices of Bill Agee, and that's how I got to know Bill Agee. And that was the only place the archives were then, and we had access to all these papers of David Smith then. So spent a day or two going through papers, you know, looking for what we needed.

And then we moved on to Washington where Rosalind had to talk to David's widow. And I think I maybe went to the door and met her, but I didn't have to interview her.

MS. LEDDY: What was your impression of her?

MR. BERKSON: I don't really remember. Blonde?

MS. LEDDY: Rosalind Krauss?

MR. BERKSON: No, Rosalind? Oh, that's different. All I can say really is we started off the trip friendly and it soured.

MS. LEDDY: Because you have such different—

MR. BERKSON: No, it was boy and girl sour. We started to get close and it didn't work out.

MS. LEDDY: I see.

MR. BERKSON: And, you know, it was sexual politics.

MS. LEDDY: I get it. Okay.

I think we need to stop now because we're just about at the end of this card. We're almost to the hour and 50 minutes, so.

MR. BERKSON: Oh.

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MR. BERKSON: I think you—you do have clear demarcations—divisions like between *Artforum* and *ARTnews*, you know, about the poets' writing for *ARTnews*. Barbara Rose once said that *ARTnews*—the writers for *ARTnews* were a lot of unemployed poets. That's a funny phrase. I don't know what she meant by that. I mean, I guess, they didn't have any employment otherwise. But, you know—

MS. LEDDY: She probably meant they were doing it as a way—as a job, in other words—

MR. BERKSON: Yeah—

MS. LEDDY: But their real interest was really poetry.

MR. BERKSON: Otherwise—otherwise unemployed, perhaps.

MS. LEDDY: But their real interest was poetry, where their real interest was—was criticism.

MR. BERKSON: Was criticism. Right.

MS. LEDDY: And that was really a focus of their lives.

MR. BERKSON: But, you know, it's—sort of—again depends on what your idea of seriousness is. So, there was this other division, which was really interesting to me. It doesn't exist anymore, I think. It exists in some ways in literature, in poetry. But it was the uptown/downtown split, as it happened in the—probably sometime in the 50s, and I saw it in the 60s, which was between the downtown, which was sort of identified with 10th Street and de Kooning and Kline, and the uptown, which was identified with Motherwell, Rothko, Newman—that group, maybe Stamos, as well. And, so that's identified a little bit more with Greenberg, and the downtown might be identified more with Rosenberg, but I don't know that the critics really were—presided over these distinctions. Uptown tends to be more literary, more latter-day symbolist, more focused on than in some ways definable meanings. And anti-popular culture, very much along the—

MS. LEDDY: That's a key thing—

MR. BERKSON: Very much along the lines of Greenberg's [essay], "Avant-garde and Kitsch."

MS. LEDDY: Right.

MR. BERKSON: Whereas as downtown, de Kooning, Kline, and also the younger artists who responded to them and sort of continued from them were much more attuned to the movies, the comics, popular culture you could call it, and really interested in it and, you know, not in some sort of studious way. It was part of the culture, it was part of their environment, it was a delight. George Herriman, for instance, was a deep source for Guston, and de Kooning and Burckhardt used to cut out Krazy Kat from the papers, you know. The paintings were full of the movies and drawing from the movies and so forth, whereas that just wasn't done on 94th Street. [Laughs.] And it's a funny kind of distinction because, you know, it was a distinction about what it means to be a serious artist, you know? And—I obviously feel a lot closer to the downtown aspect. You know it's funny to think of where Pollock fits into all of this because he was always downtown in his—where he lived. And I don't even know how what he thought about all of that—you know he's not on record about it as he is about what a painting was supposed to be and so forth, so it's hard to tell. You know. And it wasn't so categorical, that is to say, Barnett Newman was a very humorous man, had a wonderful social manner of irony and humor and some of it's sort of acidic-type humor, but also just straight, New York Jewish funny. And, you know, and he especially, he and Annalee were especially welcoming to young people. They were curious about what young people thought, and they folded them in, I mean, I remember how welcoming he was to Larry Bell, for instance, and Larry Bell was in New York at some point, and I was with them and him at a point maybe for dinner or something. And, you know, Helen Frankenthaler is a terrific dancer [laughs], which is a point in her favor [laughs], because she was otherwise so obligated, so often to—as time went on—to have this sort of heavy and somewhat programmatic stance about art. You know, and Robert, he was a kind person; you know, he, too, had this sort of gravitas that was sort of exasperating for everybody, you know? And so, you know that was the difference; I mean, de Kooning and Kline had this lightness. These were the guys who told stories and joked and had a wonderful, what Rauschenberg said about de

Kooning; his ["beautiful lingo," Rauschenberg said –BB] because, you know, he would say, "I'm no country dumpling." He would make up his own—

MS. LEDDY: [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: His own American—his own American idiom, you know?

MS. LEDDY: [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: And he was charming, and, you know, I think that, his biographers sort of caught it, but the charm, that falsetto voice was something, you know, like kind of a trick with him. There was a lot of rage in Bill, as I discovered, but luckily I never was the brunt of it, and I never saw him soused. I've never had the—

MS. LEDDY: [Terrible stories about what he did. –AL]

MR. BERKSON: I never got the bad Bill. He was always so sweet to me, and welcoming, and interested, and, you know, I would visit his studio occasionally. One time I remember Joe Brainard when I was living in South Hampton, I think—I imagine in '79/'80. He—Joe called me up and said that —Joe was staying with the Porters, and Joe said, "Why would he do it with me? Maybe Fayfield didn't want to do it." He said, "Would you take me to de Kooning's studio?" And I could call de Kooning and say "There's this young artist who'd like to visit with you," you know, "would you—could we come over?" He'd say, "Sure," you know, "come over." And we did, you know. And I looked at what he was doing, and so forth. And there was never a lot of conversation, I remember. I was in awe of him, and I remember Joe—who was quiet anyway—was, and, you know, I like to say that with de Kooning the conversation was, we walk in and de Kooning looks at me and says, "Hi Bill, hey, you look great," and I say, "You look great, too, Bill."

MS. LEDDY: [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: And that was about it [laughs], and then we'd sit down and think about it. [Laughs] Or, just look at the pictures, and sometimes he would make remarks about what he was doing, you know, like that.

MS. LEDDY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.].

MR. BERKSON: You know, but—and—but, the—it was probably after he died that I realized something about his lightness that wasn't so light, that was in some ways, protective, even though Edwin famously said, "self-protection bored him." But, you know, that he made himself lighter for other people. The famous remark that he made to Guston, I see, as ironic that in Guston's opening in 1970 at Marlboro in the show that shocked a lot of people by returning to recognizable imagery. And de Kooning went up to him and said, "Well, Phil, we know what this is about. It's about freedom," you know. And I thought, actually on the basis of something that de Kooning said to me later that actually what he meant was "freedom to fall on your face," you know, because we spent —my first wife and I spent quite a bit of time with Elaine and Bill. Elaine had come back to take care of Bill in many respects in around 1979, and I was living there in Southampton through that year —'79-'80. Saw a lot of them—I was arranging events at Southampton College, and they would come to some of those events. There was show of Rudy Burkhardt's films that they came to with the Lassaws. And—but there was one night when I had them to dinner, and I remember because I had never really been with de Kooning when he was drunk, I was apprehensive, and my then-wife Lynn said, "Well we got to put some drinks out for them," and I said, "No, we don't, and just don't do

it." And almost right away they came in. And one of us said "would you like some—" and Elaine immediately said "soda water."

MS. LEDDY: [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: You know. And then she and Bill had been—had been probably both going to AA.

MS. LEDDY: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: And were on the wagon. Well, at the dinner, there were two interesting—most of the dinner Bill was talking with Lynn, and I was talking with Elaine. And there were two moments when Bill leaned over and said "Hey, what was that? What were you talking about?" And Elaine would say, first it was Clyfford Still. Somehow we gotten on to Clyfford Still and probably badmouthing him for, you know, representative of the overly serious pretentious artistic attitude. So Elaine says, "We're talking about Clyfford Still, Bill," and he says, "Oh, yeah, Clyfford." So at this point, de Kooning sort of has a little bit of a repertoire, I think, and he says, "Oh yeah, I always admired him because he didn't compose, and I have to compose." You know, that's pretty revealing. Bingo, store that. And then, well, we're talking about Guston. Who is that? We're talking about Phil Guston, Bill. And he says, "Yeah, yeah. I don't know why he's started doing all those clocks and shoes."

MS. LEDDY: [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: "He was doing all right doing that abstract stuff."

[Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: So that's why I thought the freedom remark was—you know.

MS. LEDDY: Not right.

MR. BERKSON: A little misinterpretation there, or he got away with it in some way, making light of it. But before that, there was a dinner at Patsy Southgate's, and she was sharing a house with Frank O'Hara's one-time apartment mate, Joe LeSueur. And the de Koonings came to dinner and it was—it was actually Frank O'Hara's birthday. And that's when I realized that Bill was losing it a little bit, because he walked in and immediately Joe said something like, "Do you know, Bill, what day this is?" And Bill said no, and Joe said, "It's Frank O'Hara's birthday," and Bill said, yeah, you know, and this is 1979, 13 years after Frank died, "Oh how is he?" "He's dead, Bill." [Laugh.]

MS. LEDDY: [Laugh.]

MR. BERKSON: And then we went on to dinner, and—because, one thing about de Kooning, was whenever I did get an opportunity to talk to him—there are not really that many—I was always interesting in what he had been reading and what he said about it. And so I said at one point, you know, "What have you been reading?" Something like that. And he said, "You know, I don't read much at all. I paint all day long, then I sit down in front of the television set, and I have a drawing pad on my lap, and I draw while I'm looking at the television."

MS. LEDDY: What does he draw while he looks at the television?



MR. BERKSON: Well, he drew the drawings that he did, you know that, he—

MS. LEDDY: No, but—

MR. BERKSON: He developed that in the 1970s—he did a series of closed-eyes drawings, and he developed, you know, it was sort of against his own facility, to work against his own facility at drawing because he was a master draughtsman to draw, you know, not looking—or looking at the TV and drawing maybe shapes that he would see on TV.

MS. LEDDY: Yeah, so I was wondering. Is he drawing from the TV or is that just kind of—

MR. BERKSON: Well, I don't know, whatever it was—

MS. LEDDY: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: But a lot of it was—you know, it—from the late 60s—actually from the middle sixties, the drawings that he did for the O'Hara commemorative book *In Memory of My Feelings*, he did 18 drawings, and many of those were of hats, crucifixions, a kind of character who looked like he was running, who turned out to be this sort of character he remembered from the Rotterdam waterfront called Black Max, who's sort of a Mackie Messer sort of character, you know like a Brechtian character—criminal type. And some of those drawings even were done closed-eyes, you know. Just imagining the shape—it was a little bit like, you know, the right brain kind of drawing, but anyway—memories of Bill.

MS. LEDDY: One person I have a question about is Rudy Burckhardt, you know, the relationship between all of these different art forms he pursued. You know, in other words I've seen all of these photographs, I've seen some of the films, and I've seen these paintings.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: And it's—the paintings I'd say were actually nature paintings, although very powerful, almost surrealist.

MR. BERKSON: Close ups on tree bark.

MS. LEDDY: Tree—[Laughs] Yes.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, and then also some paintings that also take on the motifs of the city, photographs across the rooftops, and so on. And, yeah, he—you know—the style looks more primitive than it is. He had studied painting with Ozenfant, I believe, and who knows what—maybe he had some sort of background in Basel when he was younger. But—so he had photography, painting expressing first the love of being in New York, a fascination that he Edwin Denby shared. "We live among noble proportions," says one of Edwin's poems. Just the subtleness—the scale of the buildings, the light between streets, the glimpses of sky, the way people—the various ways people behave in the streets, you know, and he began to film and to photograph, you know, films and still photography, and sometimes paint. And then he was writing, too—diaries and plays and so forth. So, he had all of this stuff going on, and, you know, this was part of—so, a lot of it looks—you know he's scandalously, I feel, the photography especially is left out of the photography history. And, you know, not to put people like Bernice Abbott down and certainly not Helen Levitt, but, you know, they don't get New York the way he does, and they—Rudy gives you the feeling of what that air is like, you know? As nobody else does.

MS. LEDDY: [Inaudible.] He has some amazing photographs.

MR. BERKSON: And he has a—and he doesn't push his humanism or the humanism that's possible in photography, maybe that's too possible in photography. You know, the point of the person sitting on the subway, the point of this person in the street. It's like he gets the gesture and—of that person, and you be the judge of what it is that their social status is or the feeling and so forth. It's so open, but it's mistaken for amateur. And then I asked him, I asked the curator, one Sandy Philips, at SFMOMA, why more wasn't done about him, why she wasn't doing more about him at the museum, and she said, "Well, you can't get any good prints," you know, because he was supposedly lackadaisical about making exquisite prints, you know? I don't think that's a good enough reason, and, anyway, Edwin and Rudy were, you know, fantastic. You know, in a way, they were teachers for all of us. They were models, they, what—you know, looked modest in some ways, about career, you know—certainly, they didn't push their art, and to some ways—in some ways one regrets it because—you know—and I think Rudy at a certain point wanted a little bit more. He liked it when he got more attention later—late in his life, you know? Edwin was slow about writing, slow about publishing; that was part of the Chelsea ethos. You didn't—there was a kind of a feeling—O'Hara had it, too, I think he even said it. You know, if it's interesting enough, they'll come for it.

MS. LEDDY: Not to push your own work, in other words.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, yeah, if interesting enough, they'll come for it.

MS. LEDDY: Mm-hmm [Affirmative.], that is interesting.

MR. BERKSON: So, you know, Frank sent poems to all kinds of little magazines, if they asked, you know? But then, when he died, there were all these unpublished poems, you know? And so there was this 500-page book of his collected poems, and then more of poems that he—so-called poems retrieved—that he had left with friends or sent to friends and didn't even keep copies of, and so, it wasn't really carelessness, there was a certain casualness about it but probably about a third of what's in the collected poems had not been published, you know? And of course, you only add—he had a pamphlet, the collection from Grove Press, another pamphlet, and livre d'artiste. So it was like four books. Some of them—

MS. LEDDY: *Lunch Poems*? Was that—?

MR. BERKSON: *Lunch Poems*, yes, so, of course, I left that one out. So there's five, you know, publications, but one was a deluxe special thing, two were pamphlets—*Love Poems* and *City Winter*—so, you know, sparse, you know—so where else shall we go?

MS. LEDDY: I think you've felt that you wanted to say more about Philip Guston.

MR. BERKSON: Oh yeah, well, I met Guston—I was taken to Guston's studio in 1960 by O'Hara. I think O'Hara had some reason to go there probably on account of the museum, or else Philip had just invited him to come over and see what I'd been doing. And Frank may have said, is it okay if I bring this young poet along. And it was a—it was a real eye-opener. I felt that I'd never been in the cave of making—before—there was this aspect of the cave. I think it was 19th or 18th Street in an old firehouse, and he had the second floor. And I remember going home and writing in big letters in my notebook, "INTEGRITY." And that's what the presiding figure was in Guston's studio. I don't even remember what the pictures were on the wall. And then he had a show at Sidney Janis soon after of pictures that had names like *Traveler*. They were where the sort of the marks had expanded and congealed in some way into gobs of paint. So they were still abstract, but they were

—now, when you look at those pictures as you could with the pictures of the mid-fifties, you can pick out the shapes that later they would be revealed as "shoe" "hand" "head"—

MS. LEDDY: Really?

MR. BERKSON: And so forth, retroactively.

MS. LEDDY: Uh-huh [Affirmative]. I see.

MR. BERKSON: You know, and so they were there all the time, and they were, you know.

MS. LEDDY: But did he think of them as that? Or are you saying in some vague way he was thinking that?

MR. BERKSON: I'm sure that he—I'm sure that it was very—very close to the same thing that Pollock was doing in the drip paintings, which was Pollock laid down those glyphs, those shapes that were animals—

MS. LEDDY: But primitive, yeah. The Egyptian stuff, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, stick figures and whatever they might be—sometimes out of the book of Jung or whatever he knew or was in this, would have come out in the drawings that he did which were more or less automatic drawings, but those were figurative in some way, and, you know, schematic. And then, as he said, "I veil the image." Well, Guston kind of caked over the image, you know, made it—submerged it in that kind of thick paint in those thumb-sized marks. And then progressively in the sixties, and when I got to know him—began to know him well, just at that moment when the shapes began to expand into things that began to look like heads. Or, loaves of bread and such like around 1965-66, very dark paintings, often with grey erasure areas, and then a black form, or two or three. And there's actually a painting that's called *The Three* that I think is particularly great, and we did an interview. The first thing was 1962. I wrote about—let's see—I wrote about his [. . . -BB] show at Janis—and he liked the review. It was in *Kulchur*. I—O'Hara didn't have time to do his art chronicle for that issue, so he asked me to do it, and I got to write about De Kooning and Guston and something against John Canaday and, you know, who'd come out against something—had made some proclamation in the *Times* that was egregious. And so Guston wrote me a postcard probably—in those days, people wrote postcards a lot—and appreciating the review and invited me up to Woodstock. So that was the first visit to Woodstock, and he gave me a drawing, which is in the dining room in our house to this day. It was a drawing from 1961—an abstract drawing, a wonderful thing,—and which is one of those drawings that's an interesting thing, the playing between recognition and not where you can see a line of ink, say, done with a quill pin begin to define a head or a leaf or some a recognizable shape, and just veer away from that recognition, that recognizability, just at the point at which it might become some definable thing. So it's playing the margin of recognition and abstract. And, so and then, in—I did an interview with him for *Art and Literature* in 1966, I think it was, and probably the same year wrote a piece called "A New Emphasis" for *Arts Magazine* on the paintings, which were the dark pictures, and so that's really where we started to become close friends. And in 1968, I was at Yaddo writing a lot of poetry, and that was close enough—Saratoga Springs—to zoom down—I had a car and I could go down and visit Philip which I did two or three times—and that was the time—during the time when as far as I could see, he was doing only drawings, and he had, as he famously said, gotten down to one line, you know, very reduced. But secretly he had been painting. He just didn't—I think he thought even I wouldn't go for it—those paintings of clocks and shoes and so forth, and usually I think on small masonite panels—square-ish masonite panels. And he came up and did crits at Skidmore, which is

down the street from Yaddo. And so then, that summer, Clark Coolidge, whom I didn't really know very well, but he knew that I knew Guston, wrote me a letter and said did I think that I could be an intermediary—that was the gist of it—to ask Guston if he would do a cover for a book of Coolidge's that was being published by Anne Waldman and Lewis Warsh, who are *Angel Hair Books*. And I either talked to Philip about it and I wrote him and he said "Well, have Clark send me the manuscript." And it was a book called *ING*, I-N-G, and it was very abstract poems. Really sometimes just poems that were made of syllables, even syllables like "ing" or "er" or something like that, and sometimes word words, whole words scattered about the page. And they're being reprinted in Clark's early selected poems actually before which I wrote an introduction this year. But Philip went for it. And that was the beginning of his involvement with the young poets, who became in a way his main society, an artistic connection, and in a way support group for the rest of his life, certainly through the first half of the seventies before the world began to accept what it was that he had been doing with these images. And what happened was that in before the book was published in February—early February of 1969, he said, "Well, it would be great if Louis and Anne could come up and you, too, to Woodstock and we could talk about the cover." This was kind of typical. It was like Barney Newman who always loved to if there was something, you know, like the TV show that we did with him that O'Hara did interviewing him for Channel 13. There were lots of lunches and dinners around this. We've got to talk about what we're going to do and how it's going to be set up, and there was a kind of ceremonial sense of the thing, and Guston had that, too. So we all—Lewis and Anne and I drove up. I had a car, I guess, and I—and we drove up and it was a—who knew? Suddenly we're on the highway on probably the Taconic Parkway, and we're in the middle of a blizzard, and ours is the only car on the road. And we're going—swerving from side to side on the road, and Lewis and Anne are going—"Aaaah!"—[laughs], you know, "maybe we should stop?" and I had this sense of, no, it's okay, I can handle this, and I did. And we got there and, you know, we had sat down and probably had some drinks and so forth, and then at one point, Philip says, do you want to go out in the studio, and we're into the cinderblock studio which I think had just been built. And around—leaning against the walls were all of these panel paintings of these objects. And all three of us immediately got it. I mean, Lewis and Anne got it like "This is—these are wonderful," and all of us began to make stories from one panel to the next as if it was a comic strip or a film with shots. And I got it in an extra way, which was I saw that it was a continuity. I saw that these images had been there all along, and it made perfect sense that they were there. And it wasn't—it was surprising, it was enlightening, but it wasn't shocking, and it certainly wasn't—it didn't give me any pause, the way, for instance, it gave Morton Feldman, who famously, you know, Guston went up to him and said "Well what do you think?" and he said, "I have to look some more," and that was the break in their friendship.

MS. LEDDY: Well, that's not a very—I mean it's not a very judgmental thing to say. "I have to look some more," [laughs].

MR. BERKSON: It was—Philip needed—needed approval for that. I mean he needed reassurance. I mean this was one—it was a tremendous lesson. Because here it was, he did this thing in his work that he felt was—not only was nobody going to go for it, but maybe he was crazy, maybe he'd made a huge mistake, maybe he had taken this risk and it was all wrong, and he was going—it was like what Ashbery said about Pollock. "Either he was the greatest painter in the world or he was nothing."

MS. LEDDY: [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: He could have been nothing.

MS. LEDDY: [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: You know? And, you know, I wasn't there for that opening at Marlborough. I was asked by Tom Hess—I was already in California—I was asked by Tom—Tom Hess called me—somehow got to me. I had to go to a pay phone because I didn't have a phone, wherever it was that I was living at the time, in Bolinas to call him back. Hi, he said, would you write an article for the October issue—this must have been July—on Guston? It must have been Philip's idea for me to do that. And I said okay. So I wrote it from out there. Alex Katz got in the elevator with a bunch of people. I think Ted Berrigan was in the elevator at the same time and overheard Alex say, "They're not going to go for it, okay? He blew it." And this was true at a certain level, you know. The reviews were 60-40 against, you know, not as bad as the history books will tell you, the critics tell you, you know? John Perrault wrote a positive review for the *Village Voice*, Harold Rosenberg wrote a positive article for the *New Yorker*, there were others—Robert Hughes was sort of a little 50-50, maybe, you know? It was the Hilton Kramer "Mandarin Pretending to be a Stumblebum" review that was really insulting and some others were likewise. Peter Schieldahl didn't get it, you know, and so forth, you know? But—so, that was true, and there was the museological response and there were no pictures sold, I think. Nothing. Nothing. But there were the younger painters like Susan Rothenberg, Elizabeth Murray— what became known as the New Image painters— who got it because they were already doing their kind of figuration.

MS. LEDDY: And that makes sense, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: And it wasn't like they were influenced by Guston, they got encouragement from the fact that Guston would do what he did. That it was a kind of confirmation for them that he would be— that it was possible—that he would do this. That it was possible

MS. LEDDY: So to somehow have intersection of generations, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: So, Susan with her horses.

MS. LEDDY: Horses, right.

MR. BERKSON: And so on, you know? And or Elizabeth with her kitchen paintings. And those people went on to be—you know, both of them—I mean, there's a conversation that Murray, I think, did with Michael Kimmelman. It's just superb about, I think she went to the Modern or at the Met or something, and standing in front of Guston, and some of the best criticism is what she said about what going on in these pictures, so—are we out of time?

MS. LEDDY: I think we probably need to stop, but I think we need to talk about Alex Katz next time.

MR. BERKSON: Okay.

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And the people I knew how they considered not New York artists. People like—

MS. LEDDY: This is Annette Leddy interviewing Bill Berkson for the Archives of American Art on October 2, 2015 in New York City at the Archives Offices. Okay, I have to do that at the beginning of each one. This is card three. Okay, so. Now, I was thinking that we would move on to discussing your move to California.

MR. BERKSON: I think that's premature.

MS. LEDDY: But if you would like to continue in the New York 1960s I'm fine with that. What do you

have to—?

MR. BERKSON: Well, there are—you know, there's some stories, and some events and so forth that I think need telling. I mean one of them is the opening night of the assemblage show, *The Art of Assemblage*—

MS. LEDDY: Seitz.

MR. BERKSON: William Sietz's show—which was an amazing show and had a tremendous effect on all kinds of artists. You know, Joe Brainard being one of them. I remember going to the opening. I think I was with Frank O'Hara and we got out of a cab on 53rd Street and someone was there with Marcel Duchamp. Someone we knew. I don't know who it was. It might have been Monroe Wheeler who was at the museum at the time who would have known Duchamp in the so to speak, "old days." Anyway, we were—the first off outside the museum introduced to Marcel Duchamp, which, you know, for me was a big deal anyhow and he's smiling and pleasantries were exchanged and then I remember he sort of gestured to the doors of the museum and said, "Go, go. See the show." Like that—and then we were inside and I remember being alone in a fairly large gallery with Rauschenberg's combine painting *Canyon* [. . . –BB] on one wall, the far wall and I was standing there looking at it. And suddenly at my right shoulder behind me I felt a presence and this voice said, "Pretty good, huh?" And it was Rauschenberg.

And I said, "Oh, yes, I was just thinking so myself." And then he said, you know, and he was a little tanked. "And it's no joke either." You know, which was—I mean, this is 1961. It's right in the midst of what he and other people like Jasper Johns particularly—he and Johns especially—what they were doing was not being taken seriously. I mean, it was being taken as an affront. It was being taken as this is the old art world in a certain way, you know? As a joke. You know, Dada. And, then the evening went on. I never forgot that. You couldn't really call it an exchange, but, you know, that assertion. And somehow or other I found myself at the King Cole Bar at the St. Regis sitting with Jasper Johns. I think other people were in the party but they weren't at the table at the time. And I made some remark to Jasper about something like, "Gee, those Duchamps are really knock-outs. You know, what about him?" And you know, this is 1961. The [Robert] Lebel monograph on Duchamp, the English language version had come out in 1959. So Duchamp is not, you know, the currency on Duchamp generally never mind the artists, you know, de Kooning spoke of him as "that one-man movement," you know, pretty early on in an interview.

But, Jasper said, "Oh, I think Duchamp is as important as Picasso" and that was like the Beatles saying, "We're bigger than God," you know? Which they didn't say anyway for another four years, but you know, I mean it was like a shocking remark but it also seemed, "Oh yeah, he's probably right, you know? But that was one, two, three, you know, opening, enlightening stuff in one evening, you know? And that's the kind of thing that could go on, you know? I mean people made enlightening remarks. I don't know if it was more so in those days or not. Following up on that there's another story, which is much later on, and it does have to do with moving to California and we could conceivably move to California in the conversation from there, but—with John Cage. And it's sort of a loop between the two places because it's about that. Cage, you know, came for a number of years every January to Crown Point Press to make prints and in certain years he worked closely with Connie [Lewallen]—who would be the sort of supervisor on the project. And the only time that I saw him there was one of those times when she was working with him and I went to an opening, which was, I think not of his prints.

MS. LEDDY: You didn't know her then?

MR. BERKSON: I did so. We're talking about something like 1989.

MS. LEDDY: Oh, oh—I see. Oh, so why have we jumped so far ahead?

MR. BERKSON: Because I'm—because this is relevant and it doesn't matter when it—I mean it matters when it happened but it has to do with the climate and it has to do with de Kooning and it has to do with Cage and with New York and California. Cage had written—Rackstraw Downes and I edited a special issue of *Art Journal* for the College Art Association to celebrate a significant birthday of de Kooning's. I can't remember which one it was. It might have been the 70th or 75th or something like that and we invited Cage to contribute and he contributed a mesostich, which went something like—"you think art should be great. I don't. I think you're great" was the poem and then de Kooning's name "de Kooning" went down the spine, the middle of the poem, the mesostich. And so, this was some years later—I think that the issue of *Art Journal* was sometime in the early '80s maybe and I think the conversation started off with John saying, "Did you like what I sent for the de Kooning book?" And I said, "Yes, I liked it very much. I said I thought probably a story went with it and Cage said, "It does." And then he told me this story about exchanging drawings with de Kooning and he said he and de Kooning had agreed to exchange drawings and his drawing was going to be of course a score, you know, but Cage's scores were drawn in a certain way.

And he said, "The minute I walked into de Kooning's studio,"—which I guess was the 10th Street studio, anyway, it was in Manhattan—"we began to argue about whether an artist should want to be great or not and de Kooning was arguing, yes, you know, an artist should want to be great. And Cage was arguing that an artist should not want to be great. And there was a funny twist to it which he said, "So we looked at a whole bunch of de Kooning drawings—sort of like Rauschenberg going through the drawers with the de Kooning to find the one to erase"—but in this case it was going to be, you know, an exchange and Cage was going to keep this drawing but he couldn't find one that he liked [laughs]. So he left without a drawing but I think de Kooning kept the score and so it was. So that was funny and that was what was behind the poem that Cage sent in. So then the conversation went on and at one point I said to him—because I planned to actually ask him this at some point—I said, "John, I came here to California from New York X number of years ago." I think then it was something like 20 years. "And you went from California to New York. Do you ever think that you might want to go back to California? Do you miss California or feel that you're a Californian really and should be there?" And he said, "Oh no, for a composer there's only New York." [By] which he means, a great composer.

So there was this wonderful irony in that conversation which I always appreciated. Anyhow—

MS. LEDDY: So, let's talk about that. In 1970 you moved to California, you moved to California. Is that true?

MR. BERKSON: Yes.

MS. LEDDY: And why? Why did you leave New York? Here it was this incredibly exciting scene and you loved every minute of it.

MR. BERKSON: It was an incredibly exciting scene that I had already been in for 10 years—11 years and, or different scenes, many different scenes actually because my life in New York was various, you know, often compartmentalized three or four fold. I mean I had a whole uptown life sort of in the fashion world or café society and clubs and stuff and my downtown life and my art world life and my poetry life and it was—it was pretty complicated and sometimes pretty confusing. So, in one respect I felt that—I had been in this lower East Side scene for three or four years living on—

eventually living on 10th Street near St. Mark's church very much in the swim of that scene which was mainly a poetry scene and I began to feel as I had earlier with the kind of New York school elders—the O'Hara, you know and the second generation artists, painters, and so on. I need a little more space for myself, you know, clear my head and my own passage in a way. And I had friends who were living in California particularly in this small town north of San Francisco, Bolinas, which is actually not even a town. It's a village on the coast and they were writing me these very enthusiastic letters what was going on there encouraging me to at least visit which I did over Christmas and New Years '69 and '70 and it was very impressive. I was there over that time and you know how it can be in Northern California. It's Christmas Day and the sun is beating down on the waves of the Pacific Ocean and it's warm and everybody's high.

It was terrific, you know? And there were some very—some very intense personal relations having to do with one of my friends having a romance with somebody who was already attached and so there were sides dividing up, you know? And I thought, this is for me, you know? And it wasn't really a scene. There were three or four interesting writers in Bolinas.

MS. LEDDY: Who were they?

MR. BERKSON: Well, there was Joanne Kyger; there was my friend—my friends Lewis Warsh and Tom Clark. There was a young writer who was really not much known outside of that town named John Thorpe and like that. And so, I went back to New York. I was teaching at the New School. I was also teaching at Yale one day a week. And—poetry in both instances. And I thought about it and I had been thinking that I really needed to get out of New York and for me my perception was that I had exhausted New York for myself and so I left, drove across America for the first time with three friends, one of being Jim Carroll and two women, his girlfriend Devereaux and a friend of mine named Jayne Nodland. First time driving across America, which was something else. And to—we headed for San Francisco and then eventually the target was Bolinas. And it was true that I think I had exhausted New York for myself but New York was going perceptively, I spoke with someone—I forget who it was—just a couple of days ago who had the same experience.

Oh, I know, it was Nathaniel Dorsky, the filmmaker. That New York was exhausted. You're right, there was this tremendous high energy that occurred at the beginning of the '70s with people like Laurie Anderson and Sam Shepherd and all kinds of new young poets and theater and dance and everything like that. But the city was going down the tubes. This is the economic catastrophe of New York City, which didn't get resolved till Felix Rohaytn and then the Arabs and the Japanese bought everything and turned things around somewhat, you know? And, but I went back the following year and actually stayed in the Chelsea Hotel. I just decided I wasn't going to stay at home so to speak—at my mother's apartment. But I wanted to, I don't know, have some kind of perspective where it would be interesting to take a room at the Chelsea so I did. I remember walking out onto the 23rd Street and seeing people walking down the street. They looked as though they thought they were walking at a Manhattan pace but it was like they were in slow motion walking through some kind of gas. And I realized yeah, something's wrong here and I was right to get out. And in some ways then thinking of what was happening in the sort of conceptual art scene and the development of the—SoHo and you know, 112 Green Street and Paula Cooper and so forth. That, oh, you know, that was all really terrific and it would have been nice to be around that. In fact, sometime that Winter of '69-'70 Alex called me up—don't forget you were the one who talked about him anyway.

MS. LEDDY: Yes. Alex Katz.

MR. BERKSON: Alex Katz. A bunch of us or—I don't know if he said a bunch of us but some people



are taking a building on West Broadway and Prince Street and we're, you know, going to take lofts and in some cases share floors and how would you like to be part of this? And I thought about it. I think maybe it was the summer before. And you know, and I kind of asked him, "Well, what does this involve?" "Well, you know, it's these old, industrial lofts and they're going to be kind of gutted and you'll have to put in sheet rock and put in wiring and this and that. And I thought at the time, "I don't know anything about anything like that." And you know, it was a matter of buying something, which was probably unbelievably inexpensive, you know?

MS. LEDDY: And now sold for a mega-fortune, yes.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, but it was—gee, I don't know—I wouldn't know where to begin, you know? I mean, I suppose Alex did and there were people like Al Held who had carpentry skills and so forth.

MS. LEDDY: But didn't they also just hire people or pay people to do it?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, maybe they hired Richard Serra to fix it all up or whatever. But, I passed, you know? And of course I've often thought, what if I had done that instead of moving to Bolinas? But I moved to Bolinas. And so I, you know, made that trip in June of 1970.

MS. LEDDY: Well, if you had done that you would have been Peter Schieldahl.

MR. BERKSON: Well, remember, I was already—yes, because of the context in that building with Lucy Lippard, Al Held—

MS. LEDDY: In other words you probably would have focused a lot less on your poetry, right?

MR. BERKSON: Possibly because of the context of that building. Yeah, I mean, I would have been back—I would have been sharing the building primarily with a bunch of artists and then and Lucy Lippard who was an artist critic in a way or a critic who was an artist as a critic. But anyway, I made my choice and it was right, as all my choices have been right, you know, because—

MS. LEDDY: Because why think about—

MR. BERKSON: Well, I mean, things turned out pretty good anyway and Bolinas was fine and confusing of course at first, I mean.

MS. LEDDY: So it's a completely different life?

MR. BERKSON: It's a completely different life and I—

MS. LEDDY: And didn't you tell me in fact, that you did become a do-it-yourselfer, that you built—?

MR. BERKSON: Yes, after a year somebody told me and spread the—the word was spread that if you wanted to stay in Bolinas the rentals were going to go sky high because more and more people were moving in and for one reason or another. Not necessarily artists or poets. There weren't many artists there. There were only, you know, two or three visual artists in that village. And if you wanted to stay you had better buy a house. And so eventually in 1971 I bought a cabin which had belonged to some people who were asparagus farmers from Sacramento who used this cabin and the garage to come down weekends sometimes or extended weekends to go abalone gathering and the garage was mainly a fishing shed and I remember walking into this place with another writer who had lived there for a long time named Bill Brown who looked around and said, "Now you have a cabin." So I knew this was a cabin not a house. And then eventually I did learn sheet rocking skills

and roof tiling and, you know, septic tank, you know, digging and clearing and pumping and all kinds of stuff. I became a real—I mean, I thought I was sort of being a country gentleman. But, you know, so that was my real rural education.

MS. LEDDY: And that was before you were married that—this cabin?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, yeah. I bought the cabin. I was living in it by myself and my first—the woman who would become my first wife I knew by then. You know, we were sort of friends—friends with benefits. And, but then we got together in 1972 and we were married in 1975, so, you know, it was all—as far as visual art was concerned there was hardly any. I mean, there was a nice painter named Arthur Okamura, very talented who had been in Chicago and he had lived in Majorca. He knew Robert Creeley in Majorca. I think he had spent some time in New York maybe, very little. He was Japanese-American. And he painted sort of landscapes and things that had to do with Buddhism as in ox herding, the ox herding images literally hooves going across the canvas. And I remember one particular seascape it was, a kind of a beachscape that he had painted that I thought—I saw it in his studio and I went, "Gee, that's really terrific." And then the next time I visited he had put sort of dots all over it. And that was my introduction to the sense that artists in California, or anyway, in Northern California had much too much time on their hands and then I would go into San Francisco and look at things like—I was not acclimated. So I would see things like Wiley and think, you know, what are all these feathers?

MS. LEDDY: Oh, so you didn't get the California aesthetic at first, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: I didn't get it. I mean, even though I was, you know, I was kind of—I mean, you couldn't avoid what was nominally hippy culture in Bolinas that was the baseline culture as it developed in the early 70s, a lot of people came in there fleeing the cities, wanting, you know, some sort of paradisiacal edenic life. There was a big oil spill that threatened the lagoon, which was a refuge, you know, for rare birds and blue herons and seals and so forth. So a lot of people came. Many birds, grebes, and so forth were, you know, caught in the oil. So people came trying to save these birds and also to save the channel, the lagoon and actually they were pretty successful though I think there was a piece of luck in it. The tide turned at just a crucial moment. And a lot of those people stayed and a lot of those people were young environmentally conscious people, you know? And it became kind of a revolutionary setting in this town. I mean, they took over and what they took over was the only government in town which was—because it was only, as I have to keep saying, a village—there was no mayor. There was no city council or town council. There was the water board. There was the public utilities water board. And at one point that water board became what some people called the hippy-fascist water board and they saved the town. Orville Schell wrote a—

MS. LEDDY: That's why it still has all these signs pointing away saying—

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, Orville Schell wrote this great book that—called *The Town that Fought to Save Itself*. And full of photographs of the oil spill and so forth. And it was true and it was quite a wonderful, you know, certainly energetic. I mean, it was like a daily—I've never said this before—but it was like a daily Woodstock or as Ed Sanders said, "It was like a psychedelic Peyton Place." Which it was.

MS. LEDDY: That fits more what it seems like to me.

MR. BERKSON: But, you know it was—it was nice. Everybody's door was open. There was a free flow of visiting and a lot of poetry collaboration and so forth. And you know, that was nice. And as it

happened exactly what I had not counted on occurred, which is that more and more writers began moving there. I mean, Robert Creeley came and Robert Creeley was sort of a magnet for lots of young writers to at least visit and some of those who visited came. But the thing is I would go to San Francisco. The one place my—there were two refuges I had for my New York eyes. One was the Berkeley Art Museum where you could walk in and in this big, cavernous area here is a Joan Mitchell. Here is a terrific Rothko. Here is a little de Kooning. Here is this wonderful Frankenthaler called *Before the Caves* and, you know, things like that. You know? And then there was Dan Weinberg's gallery, which showed people like Mel Bochner and, you know, but kind of conceptual art with stuff there, you know, objects there. And I didn't even know very much about conceptual art at that time. And then there was the New York, or—California funk work or more or less like that for which I had—well, like Wiley. For which I had absolutely no, then had absolutely no taste or awareness for what context it was being done in. But and then of course what was really going on was the stuff that Connie [Lewallen] is deep in scholarship about and experienced starting from my suppose her early days in San Diego which was the conceptual stuff.

But nobody was writing about that, so—and I had no word of mouth about that. So Tom Marioni's museum of conceptual art and all the stuff like David Ireland and Terry Fox and Howard Fried—all this stuff that now I realize was the really interesting stuff that was happening then was—I was completely ignorant about and had no source for it.

MS. LEDDY: I think conceptual art was a little bit of a secret or an insider thing at the beginning. You had to know somebody who was into it in order to get into it.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, I don't know if, you know, if Tom Albright or Alfred Frankenstein who were the lead critics in San Francisco were writing about it at all.

MS. LEDDY: I don't think they ever wrote about it.

MR. BERKSON: You know, but there it was, and I had no sense of the art schools. I had no sense that the San Francisco Art Institute was there and California College of Arts and Crafts was, you know going. I mean I went to the San Francisco museum and again it was like really they had this great Pollock, early Pollock—1943 *Guardians of the Secret* and things like that. And they weren't, you know, under the leadership of Jerry Norland, paying a lot of attention to—you know, they had a room full of Clyfford Stills that Still had given them.

MS. LEDDY: Right, no, they were still—it was all still the 1950s there.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, yeah.

MS. LEDDY: Like the most current thing would have been Colescott or something like that.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, oh—if.

MS. LEDDY: That would be it. Everything else was still really Ab Ex.

MR. BERKSON: Right. So I was pretty ignorant of everything visual in Northern California—

MS. LEDDY: But can I just say something though?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: Okay, so when I was at NYPL I looked at your book of poems *Serenade*.

MR. BERKSON: Right.

MS. LEDDY: Which is I thought a very lovely book by the way and that has—what comes through though is this life in the country and there's nature and family and so on. But, also a lot about being married to an artist. So in other words you're not—

MR. BERKSON: I was married—Lynn is a painter and photographer.

MS. LEDDY: So, what I'm trying to say is even though you weren't active as a reviewer or whatever in the art world you were kind of learning about art in a different way. Does that seem possible?

MR. BERKSON: Well, you mean by marital association? I suppose we talked—

MS. LEDDY: Well, I do think that art making, you know, that process of art making that you live through when you're with an artist is very instructive. I mean it's a whole different way that you look at it than when you see it as something finished you know? [... -eds.] So, that didn't alter your relationship to art in any sense?

MR. BERKSON: No.

MS. LEDDY: All right and you were starting to say something about L.A. Art?

MR. BERKSON: Well, I first went to Los Angeles I think sometime in 1971. I drove down and I think that time the first—before going into L.A. I went to San Diego and David Antin had moved to San Diego and he had arranged a poetry reading for me there and David was also running the art gallery at UCSD and he had the Alex Katz retrospective that had been organized by the man in Salt Lake City, Sanguinetti. So it was wonderful around the—I guess it was in the library there was a kind of rotunda or maybe on a balcony and all these pictures which were familiar to me.

MS. LEDDY: And you had known Antin in New York?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, yeah. We saw each other a lot at parties, particularly at Marilyn Fischbach's I remember in, you know, we'd sort of get in a corner and trade witticisms. I mean, he was a terrific conversationalist. Wonderful to be with and still is, you know? I mean, I love him and I love his writing and his talks and so forth. And so I stayed with him and I think I stayed with him and Ellie that time and I saw Alex's show and I got a poster for it that I still have in one of our bathrooms.

MS. LEDDY: What work was it? Was it the Ada kind of paintings at that point?

MR. BERKSON: Oh, well Ada was part of it. In fact, the poster was Ada with sunglasses on and yeah, there was some landscapes. I mean, it was a retrospective. And you know, it was the retrospective that changed Alex himself said, seeing the work in a big space, which may have been first in Salt Lake City. I don't know if he even came out to La Jolla for that one. Changed his idea about what he could do, big painting—that he could do bigger and bigger paintings and I think that eventually it changed to making big paintings progressively from smaller sketches but once he got to the big painting the paint would be smoothed out. There would be less paint in front of the image. First there was much more—there was much more paint. He was influenced by people like Guston, and de Kooning—of course, and Kline, and Rothko.

MS. LEDDY: But how do you see—I mean, but his work represents such a break with those people. I mean, how—

MR. BERKSON: Well, yes, but—

MS. LEDDY: What do you see that work as being about? Why don't you tell me that?

MR. BERKSON: Well, again, it's you know, what I said about people like Jane Freilicher—they had tremendous respect for those abstract artists but temperamentally they weren't suited for it. Alex would talk about the, you know, he wouldn't have meant de Kooning, but—you know, it was like de Kooning saying that when he went to art school in Rotterdam, fine artists were funny little men with berets and beards, you know? And he was being trained as a commercial artist. And Alex had his training was at Cooper Union and it was drawing from plaster casts and it was mostly, you know, kind of graphic art training and he had that very good training that American artists had right up to the 1960s. It was mainly in graphic art—commercially oriented art which is a tremendous good grounding, you know? And there wasn't any better grounding available except if you went to the Pennsylvania Academy, a few other places. The Art Students League was okay. And so, you know, he admired all—I mean, I heard him in those days in the 60s talking about Rothko's surfaces or the opacity of the—of Rothko's color or you know, the interview that I did with him for the catalog for that retrospective. It's like you say, I say de Kooning, he says Mozart. In other words, that's the standard that de Kooning set. So he had tremendous respect for those people and—

MS. LEDDY: What do you see the work as being about? Let's take those.

MR. BERKSON: Alex Katz's work?

MS. LEDDY: Yes.

MR. BERKSON: Well, it's about—I have a kind of a motto which is that surface—which is partly what I learned from Alex but I could have learned it from Pollock too—surface is the great revealer. I mean, it's about showing a surface that tells—that tells you a lot without intruding a lot of interpretation, you know, imposing a lot of your own interpretation of what that face means or that tree or anything else. Sort of rendering it in a kind of clear schematic, somewhat graphic way like Japanese wood blocks, you know? He went for those. He went for Milton Avery who's behind Rothko in that way. And, you know, he liked to say—and I was sympathetic to this too—you know, right up to becoming a 20 or so he would say I was interested in sports and dancing. And then there were all these people who were talking about Kierkegaard. That wasn't—it was fine for them but that wasn't what he was doing, you know? And that wasn't—didn't mean that he was illiterate either, you know? It was just a different turn of mind and you know, it had to do with no—well, not kidding yourself or no bull. I mean, I can—everybody knows what Alex says about his own work. Then there's what you feel about it and Rene Ricard said as far as the portraits concerned, he said, "If you sit for a portrait for Alex Katz he'll give you a college education." In other words, he makes people look good. He gives them—he gives them—I mean, good in the sense of character. You know, he puts them in their best possible light in a way as a kind of almost ideal modern person.

And then you have the landscapes—the recent landscapes. When I say recent I mean over the last 20 or more years he's been painting these tree branches and blossoms and bare trees and so forth and its life. You know? It's like a sign or symbol for the passing moments and I find them extremely moving, you know, as images of transience, you know, and also of these sort of seemingly accidental forms—that nature, even city nature—fall into. You know, they're really remarkable. I mean, I think that he—he and Pollock—Pollock because you're trying to find your way around those skeins, in those skeins, got me to look. And then I had my opportunity with a big willow tree in my backyard in Bolinas to look for hours at tree branches against the sky, you know? And I—there's a lot there, you know? And so what you're looking at is actually what the last conversation I had with

Rudy Burckhardt in his studio was he came in with a painting of a tree—I think it was a fallen tree and a lot of leaves around and probably what you would call weeds. Various kinds of foliage anyway, in Maine. He said, he put it up on the shelf and he said, "It's the last painting." Who knew that he meant that, "It's the last painting." And I didn't hardly even register. And then I said, "Yeah, chaos." And he said, "Yes, chaos." I said, "It's getting friendlier all the time" because we were getting more—you get more and more used to it in a certain way of understanding how to negotiate it.

MS. LEDDY: This is—this is what he said the night before he killed himself?

MR. BERKSON: Yes.

MS. LEDDY: When you were visiting?

MR. BERKSON: Yes, in Searsmont.

MS. LEDDY: So here's the thing though, you know, when I see those paintings he did I don't know the full oeuvre but the ones he did of the trees, the way that the little knots look kind of like little eyes, the whole thing is really disturbing and has but very, you know, in a kind of good way. But also has a sort of surrealist edge to it, you know? And that's very surprising.

MR. BERKSON: Well, he did those close ups of bark or tree trunks in photographs too which are among my favorites of his. But—

MS. LEDDY: No, very powerful.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: So anyway, we go from—I also want to talk to you a little bit about Big Sky Books and magazines and that whole, you know, enterprise. And you know, because you'd been involved in these publications in New York I'm just kind of wondering how you saw this activity relative to the aesthetic of the New York School and kind of did you feel that you were carrying it on in California or you were kind of moving—you did? You had the feeling—

MR. BERKSON: Well, no. I don't know how—how I—if I thought that way. I was told that there were odd things that happened between—about New York and Bolinas in the '70s and going on a little bit into the '80s. I was told that or I saw people writing in print that I was making a bridge between New York and California or between New York and Bolinas specifically. And of course there were a lot of New Yorkers—Tom, more or less. He didn't—he never really spent that much time. Tom Clark.

MS. LEDDY: We need last names here.

MR. BERKSON: Tom Clark, Lewis Warsh who was from New York—various others whether they visited or not. I mean, people like Anne Waldman or Larry Fagin or Ron Padgett and so on, even Phillip Guston visited, you know? Came out to see me or came to see Creeley or came to see everybody. That there was—by 1980 there were some people who referred to negatively, you know, as a sort of hostile terms, the New York-Bolinas axis, as in the Axis of Evil.

[Laughs.]

As if there was this power play that New York-Bolinas had accomplished, had pulled off. I just—for one thing looking back on it starting a magazine was a way to orient myself and to ground myself and it was something concrete to do. I was—it was really like a kind of a second childhood if not

infancy being in California. I was so confused. Part of it had to do I'm sure with psychedelics. And part of it had to do with not realizing that I really was somewhere else. And by 1971—for one thing there was a kind of a lull in the little magazines, in the world of little magazines and small press publishing. I mean it may have just been a three or four month or six month lull but suddenly I'm looking around and nobody's doing anything. And I had done this one shot magazine, *Best & n Company*, before leaving New York and I thought, you know, I would start a magazine.

And I had it—what I wanted to do was do a magazine that was in comic book format, that was in pulp paper and I thought I could get it printed at Last Gasp Comics which was an underground comics press that various people, I think Crumb was associated with it but, you know, Spain and a lot of the underground comics guys some of whom I knew a little bit. And then it turned out that their press warmed up at something like a 1,000 copies and I only wanted to do something like 300. There was no point in doing 1,000 copies. And so I found that there was a mimeograph, no, not a mimeograph, an offset press in somebody's garage on the mesa in Bolinas and I found somebody who knew how to run it. A guy called Mickey Cummings a very nice, tall, gangly guy and he helped me print the first issue except for the cover, which was done at Last Gasp Comics. No, it was called Rip Off Press near Potrero Hill. And Greg Irons who was an underground comics person who collaborated a lot with the poet Tom Viche, designed the cover and actually also did a cartoon with Tom Veitch inside the magazine which was called *The Beast from the Bolinas Lagoon*. And that was it. It started. And the first two issues I think—partly because I was sort of in a daze and partly because of the friendliness of everything around me, putative anyway, my editorial policy was to print anything that I was given—given that I was inviting people to give me things. So whatever they give me I'm going to print.

That didn't work out all that well. Third issue was a special issue dedicated to the work of Clark Coolidge so that was a breeze. By that time I had begun publishing books and broadsides and postcards, too. So at the end I don't know how many broadsides and postcards there were—maybe three or four. There were 20 books. There were 12 issues of the magazine if you count the last issue, which was the homage to Frank O'Hara, which was actually numbers 11 and 12, and it went from 1971 to 1978. By the fourth issue I began to get a handle on editing. I began to be a little choosier and I think that I sort of became a real editor by the fifth issue, which had a cover by George and some drawings by Guston inside. And so that was.

MS. LEDDY: George?

MR. BERKSON: George Schneeman. Yeah. Yeah, so I had Alex Katz did a cover for the second issue. That was actually an ink drawing that was a sort of a monster portrait of Edwin Denby.

MS. LEDDY: And you know, you've done a lot of these collaborations really with artists. Now how does that work? Do you say to Alex Katz, you just do whatever you want and you react to it?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: Really? You just give them total leeway in those cases?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. I—yeah. I guess I could have said to somebody or other—there was one cover that didn't work out and that was with Norman Bluhm and he gave me a number of drawings and he had the idea that the drawings which were black and red on I think some sort of—it could have been on mylar, yes it was on, they were on mylar—that they could, that one could superimpose on the other. And it jut didn't work out. It was kind of Rudy Burckhardt said something like, that was the issue number six that Rudy had a portfolio of photographs in it and Rudy

Burckhardt said, "Well, it's nice to get the issue but that cover is ugly." And he was right. You know, it just didn't work out and it's sad because Norman—I probably should have gone back to Norman and said, "This isn't working." But I didn't. But otherwise it was Greg Irons, the first, Alex the second. The Coolidge issue was a drawing by his daughter, Celia, which was sort of paw prints I think. The fourth was—

MS. LEDDY: So you don't expect there to be a correspondence at all between the poetry on the inside and the—

MR. BERKSON: No.

MS. LEDDY: Because I always find myself trying to construe a connection or something. But your idea is more—but it still does set the tone. I mean, you see an artwork and it sets you. It kind of creates a sort of—a sort of.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, well you think that the Zeitgeist will take care of that. I mean, you know—

MS. LEDDY: I see. Well that's interesting that that's how you approach it, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: You know, yeah, I mean it's like—it's almost like the font or what we used to call the typeface, you know? What font is this in, is it appropriate for the poetry or prose or whatever? And usually it's just a font that you think is decent enough but obviously it has something to do with what it's presenting as text.

MS. LEDDY: So who do you think of now in the current day let's say—or is there anyone who's kind of carrying on that in a way you come to that from that early, the Tibor collaborations, right?

MR. BERKSON: Yes.

MS. LEDDY: I mean, do you feel that that's continuing on now in any way?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, it's much more—

MS. LEDDY: Like who for example?

MR. BERKSON: I mean, for one thing, you know, we discussed and discussed that Jenni Quilter and I and Ali Power and the other people who were involved in this book *New York Painters and Poets - Neon and Daylight*. You know, Jenni had the feeling that the whole thing was over and I said, No, no, no—it's not over. Things happen. People get older. People—the community gets more diffuse as it did partly because people get older. Once you're into your 40s if you have a family then you know, various things, you've seen it happen in Los Angeles you know? You don't hang out so much and therefore there may be less—certainly less impromptu collaboration. I mean with George Schneeman I can—there was a, for me a big hiatus of about 10 or maybe 20 years of not working with him at all. And then in the 2000s we began to work every time I was in New York continuously hands on and you know, in his studio. And Joe—in the case of Joe Brainard, Joe stopped making art at a certain point when he, you know, he just stopped making art at a certain time so there was no more. Those drawings that are in *Serenade* were drawings that he did but he didn't feel—you know, I took a chance publishing that—those drawings that way. That was the book pretty much that we were going to do for somebody who was collecting Joe and eventually gave a lot of Joe Brainard work to the Mandeville Library; Robert Butts. But then Robert Butts sort of disappeared from the project.



And Joe didn't really—wasn't really behind the drawings that he did but he sent them to me. And then Joe died and then years later I thought, do the book. The drawings are wonderful, you know, and in a way it was against Joe's judgment to do it but I think it worked out okay. But, you know, I have collaborated more with more various people in the last five or six years. I mean, I did a book with Alex. I did a book with Colter Jacobsen. Colter Jacobsen is somebody who's really interested in collaborating with poets and does, you know, broadsides with poets and covers for their books and so forth. He was a student in a class of mine at the Art Institute the year that Connie's show of Joe Brainard, the retrospective of Joe Brainard, the posthumous retrospective occurred—1991 I think that was. And Colter and various other students in that class which was Interdisciplinary Seminar at the San Francisco Art Institute I said "Go see this show." And it was what they needed at the time and Colter, you know, so Colter became kind of a Joe Brainard scholar. And, you know, I did a book with Léonie Guyer. I did a book with John Zurier. All of these people are artists younger than I, you know, except for Alex. And, you know, so as far as I'm concerned it just goes on. Anne Waldman does a lot of work with Pat Steir. They'd really connected and people work with Trevor Winkfield who's having a show at Poets House now. So, you know, it's not over. I mean, there's another artist named Will Yakulic who happens to be the nephew of Alice Notley who's really interested in working with other poets. So, you know, that happens you know?

It's not as—as far as I know there's nothing like what we had on the Lower East Side in the years of Joe Brainard and George Schneeman where it was down the street, you know?

MS. LEDDY: Well, that's the thing. Where it seems in a way a shared aesthetic is operating in both poetry and art.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, but we don't know—I'm not privy necessarily to what's going on in Bushwick between some poet I don't even know and some painter I don't even know.

MS. LEDDY: Well, what does seem true though is that it wouldn't—that the kind of art and poetry being produced wouldn't have the connections to that early 60s aesthetic that yours still has.

MR. BERKSON: For the most part.

MS. LEDDY: You know that it might be—some might be photo-based work. It might be something totally different.

MR. BERKSON: You have—but you have to trust—you have to trust that the young—because I've seen this happen, you know, as in the case of Colter. These young artists and young poets come up and they are—they get really interested in the history.

MS. LEDDY: Well, that's true.

MR. BERKSON:

You know, then you have that other aspect in the world today which is I think something new which is the contingent that, you know, is the permanent now or what they call "the forever now" in painting which is that there isn't any history. They're not interested in history. There's nothing to learn from history. They don't look into it at all.

MS. LEDDY: Well, but also there's that because of the way the Internet flattens everything, you know, it's just like a sequence of images. So often I find that people, younger artists or whatever will be attracted to these images that are historical but they don't really think of them that way because they're seeing them in the moment on the Internet.

MR. BERKSON: They're right. If that's the way they think they're right because the key to it is simultaneity. I mean, what—you know, that's a—that's a—

MS. LEDDY: Right, but that's basically, that enhances that.

MR. BERKSON: That's a 20th century—

MS. LEDDY: 21st century.

MR. BERKSON: But it's a 20th century invention.

MS. LEDDY: Oh I see what you mean. Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: I mean in other words, you know, whether you're Ezra Pound or Picasso—

MS. LEDDY: Or the future of simultaneity—

MR. BERKSON: Or the idea—no, no. I mean, the idea of saying, all history being all time being present now, you know, that sense that Homer is as alive as Duchamp, you know?

MS. LEDDY: Oh, I see the ontological view or something. Okay, so, then let's talk a little bit about you go back to regular art writing in the 1980s. So, and you go really into what you had probably considered the enemy camp at one point. You go into *Artforum*.

MR. BERKSON: Well, *Artforum* had changed because I never considered them the enemy, it was just foreign. You know, know, *Artforum* had changed.

MS. LEDDY: And describe that, define that.

MR. BERKSON: Well, I wasn't present for the occasion, I mean, I wasn't present for any of it. For the sort of take over for *Artforum* under Philip Leider of people like, I guess Krauss and Fried and then Max Kozloff and so forth and so on that just happened. You know, it happened when I was—in any case I was out of it and then I was in California more out of it. And, you know, the magazine that I saw in California, thank god Willoughby Sharp, who I had gone to school with at Trinity school in New York was—somehow graced me with a subscription to *Avalanche* so I got *Avalanche* and I got *ARTnews*. I don't know if I received it regularly but I saw it. I saw *Artforum* much until I studied—what happened was from about the first few years in Bolinas I just did *Big Sky*. I did maybe some guest teaching, I don't know. Then I got involved in Poets in the Schools which I had done in New York which was going into public schools and also some private schools and especially finally at the Bolinas school I became kind of "Mr. Poetry" they called me, the kids. I was doing that kind of teaching, which was my favorite kind of teaching. I loved doing it but it was very little money, very little income from it and I had to, unlike the New York poets in the schools and teachers and writers, I had to go out and convince the people in the schools to hire me to do it. And I felt like, you know, one of those preachers on a donkey riding from town to town trying to spread the word, you know, and get somebody to build a church for me.

And that got really tiresome once I had this instant family when I married Lynn O'Hare. She had already had three children and eventually they all moved in. Then we had Moses together and I was doing *Big Sky* but I was getting grants from the NEA and the coordinating council for literary magazines. It was that great time of support for the arts in the NEA but there was also something absurd about it. I would get the—I forget what the amounts were and the money would just sort of go by and into the magazine maybe I would take a little for myself which I think was okay to do. And

so my domestic economy was a shambles and I had to do something. I worked in a bookstore for a while. I did various kinds of odd copy editing jobs. One was a book on the history of reggae. I learned a lot about reggae. Another was for the California Weed Conference where I learned a lot about how to kill weeds—weeds being plants in the wrong places and you know, traveled up and down from Fresno to Davis, all kinds of places interviewing you about getting them to articulate what should go into this *California Weed Conference Manual* that I was supposedly the editor of. And that was like two years of that. Then it was quite well paid but still this was a difficult time. It was post OPEC when, you know, the economy was tough and you couldn't get by on odd jobs. The doggy days were over you know?

And so a lot of people left Bolinas looking for work. You know there were people like Lewis McAdams and Aram Saroyan who went to LA to become screenwriters, you know, and Lewis ended up being the friends of the L.A. River, you know? That's his thing. Anyway, Arthur Okamura who was teaching at the California College of the Arts said to me, "Look, you know all this about art and the art world and art criticism. Why don't you teach in an art school?" And he arranged for me to have an interview with Philip Linhares who was directing the graduate program at CCAC, California College of Arts and Crafts and I was hired to teach—this was really bizarre. I was hired to teach a graduate seminar in art criticism which I really wasn't doing and hadn't for 15 years except for an occasional piece on Alex Katz or Guston because I had written about Guston's show. The moment I arrived in Bolinas I wrote—Tom Hess called me up and I wrote this piece for *ARTnews* about Guston's new paintings. You know, that opened in the October 1970. So I thought, "Well, okay, I guess I can do this." And I put together a kind of syllabus. And for two years I taught that seminar and that went all right.

MS. LEDDY: Well, also you were obviously having to read a lot of criticism at that point. You started thinking more about it.

MR. BERKSON: I kind of—yeah, yeah, I'm refamiliarizing myself with the magazines, you know, and I kind of figured out what had happened in, you know, the criticism of the 40s, 50s, and 60s and then what—and now we're talking about 1982 or '83. So what had happened and also the art of that time. I had a lot of catching up to do because I hadn't really paid a lot of attention to it. And then—in 1979 Philip Guston came to San Francisco to talk with Henry Hopkins about this possible show at the San Francisco Museum, this first retrospective since he had changed to painting recognizable imagery. Philip visited Bolinas. There was a big party given in his honor by a man names Byron Meyer who was a big collector and who has a great Guston called *Flatlands*. And at that party I met a woman who then was the wife of Henry Hopkins, Jan Butterfield.

[...—eds.]

MR. BERKSON: Jan Butterfield. She was married to Henry Hopkins and she was a critic and she did an interview with Philip around that time. And we sat at that party and talked some and Philip was there and so on. And the show happened but in the summer of '79 I went to Long Island to Southampton. And so I missed the San Francisco version of the show and in the winter, in early 1980 Philip died. 1984 the phone rings. Jan Butterfield says to me, "I have been teaching at the Art Institute. I'm leaving the Art Institute. How would you like my job? I said, well, what is it? She said it's teaching a contemporary art class and attached to the art class is organizing a series of lectures. The art, the class was called—it was a lecture class called the *Art of Now*, which eventually became *Art Since 1960*. That was my class that I taught for many years, a lecture class. And so, I said, "It sounds like regular work." She said, "It is." What was happening was that Jan was leaving Henry Hopkins and going off with Sam Francis and she was going to edit. Not only was she going to live with Sam Francis but she was going to edit Sam's Lapis Press, which was involved with surrealist

text, send, and Jungian texts and also published *Inside the White Cube* by Brian O'Doherty. And so I had a series of interviews with the administration of the San Francisco Art Institute and I was hired to do this class and then I taught there for 24 years.

So that was 1984. And in 1985 a very nice woman whose name I'm shamefully forgetting who was the managing editor at *Artforum* called me. I have never figured out how this happened—why she called me. "Would you write regular reviews, monthly reviews for *Artforum* from San Francisco? And I said, "Well, give me a few days or a week or so to think about this because it's really, do I want to do that? And am I capable of that? You know, 15 years out of it and resuming writing regular criticism in that way. And I think less than a week I decided, yeah, it's interesting. It would be interesting to do it.

MS. LEDDY: Well, why not?

MR. BERKSON: Well, I thought of it as—I actually, but that time I was pretty familiar with what was going on in the magazines. And I thought that it was rubbish, you know, the level of criticism and the level of writing was really—

MS. LEDDY: And what do you mean by that? What was rubbish about it?

MR. BERKSON: It, you know, we had begun the semiotic turn—

MS. LEDDY: So it was the post-structuralist kind of infection of inflection?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, I mean I had already seen the structuralist and knew there was the post-structuralist and it just seemed like nobody was looking and telling you what anything looked like. It was, you know, sort of preemptive in this way. You know, the ideas were in front of your eyes, were sort of blinding. And so, I really thought that I was going to provide a corrective and, you know, but, you know, surreptitiously or, you know, I wasn't going to declare that that was so. Though in a way I did because *Artforum* initiated—I wonder why they never collected this. They initiated a series of essays, short essays by critics about criticism. I forget what it was called but I did one. ["Critical Reflections"—BB]

MS. LEDDY: What was it called?

MR. BERKSON: Well, it's in the—it's in one of the books. I forget now the title of it but I used the title, which was the title of the series for my piece because that's the way it was. You just had the series title and then a thing signed by you.

MS. LEDDY: But is that the essay that's in *The Sweet Singer Modernism*?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MS. LEDDY: It's the title essay? The first essay in that volume?

MR. BERKSON: It's not the title essay,

MS. LEDDY: It's not the title essay, you're right, but it's the first one.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, it may be the lead.

MS. LEDDY: Because there are several things, I mean I wrote down several quotes from that for

example, where you say, "A review covers a host of secret, ephemeral, and often unspeakable perceptions."

MR. BERKSON: Yes, right.

MS. LEDDY: So that seems still very much in keeping with in a way the philosophy of *ARTnews* in the early 60s, the idea that it's an experiential—trying to be as faithful as possible to that experience of a work of art and interpersonal.

MR. BERKSON: Well I had two attitudes. One was yes, that you were trying to communicate what you experienced, you know, optically and mentally and emotionally if that was called for, you know, however it worked, you know? I mean some things work. There's something to look at unless there isn't, you know? And then you, I realized that I had entered an age where there were artworks that weren't really visual works, you know? They were works to be read or they were works to be even imagined. You know. But then I also realized that, you know, a lot of things that were supposed to be purely conceptual like a Lawrence Weiner phrase or something across the wall was actually a sensational experience. Just like wow, you know? These letters are hitting me in a particular way and that's where the excitement and that's where a lot of the meaning was. So anyway, I did that for five going on six years.

MS. LEDDY: And they were very, I mean, there was no—I sense that what you were writing was not part of their program?

MR. BERKSON: They didn't have it. The program—you know, there was the prevalent kind of criticism, but luckily I entered into at a time when Ingrid Sischy was the editor of the magazine. And then later—what's her name? The Italian—Ida Panacelli, David Frankel became managing editor I think. Or anyway he was somebody that I worked closely with. And this was the time of Edit de Ak, Rene Ricard, Carter Ratcliff who was writing a column for the magazine. It was very open.

MS. LEDDY: That's right, it was a different place.

MR. BERKSON: It was very wildcat and terrific. It was a great time. Those pieces of Rene's were absolutely superb. And so, and you know, you had—Donald Kuspit was writing for them and, you know, so you had the very serious, the very portentous prose of some critics but you also had this fast moving thing. That was Ingrid Sischy's style, you know? Because she had some in I guess—had she been at *Interview* already? I think so, you know? Anyway.

MS. LEDDY: She was—yeah. But you know, it's funny because when I read your—those reviews they do seem a little like poems to me, yours, in the sense that you know, there's a kind of just, like, an evocation of the work. And then there's this point where there's like this really succinct statement that's almost like a little explosion in the review. And that's kind of the moment I'm kind of waiting for as I go through. I know he's going to make this one statement. It's not a judgment exactly but it is some kind of a—it's usually a fairly poetic, you know, or metaphorical kind of phrase or something. Which is the—the summation—almost like it comes down to that phrase, what you really are trying to say.

MR. BERKSON: Ida Panacelli, who, you know, is Italian said toward the end of her tenure, "I love your writing because I always learn a new word, a new English word." I don't know how many English words she knew. She was a very nice editor. She was pleasant to work with and everything went pretty smoothly there. We, you know, did these prolonged phone edits and there was one—the piece that I sent you, that long reaction to, a response to *Made in USA*, Sidra Stitch's show, was

the one piece that I was very proud of and I had a lot of trouble about it with Ingrid. And we actually did a phone edit on that. It was very long and it had to be cut back significantly, which was a shame as far as I was concerned because the points that I wanted to make in there were kind of cut out or abbreviated anyway. But mostly it was a good association. And I think the issue was in pretty good shape. My model actually in those—most of those years, the book of criticism that I would reach for to get inspiration and sometimes look for a model of "How am I going to write this thing? What do you say about this?" Was Fairfield Porter's *Art In Its Own Terms*. What—Fairfield gave me courage and then later I learned that he had been chided by Tom Hess for this very quality, which was that his sentences were non-sequential. That one sentence—it was like the Charles Olson idea of "One perception must follow another."

And one perception I see this, I see this, I see this—no ifs, ands, buts—no however. No development.

MS. LEDDY: No conjunctions.

MR. BERKSON: No development. No development. And simply assertion, assertion, assertion. And that was a way of writing that was extremely congenial to me and I remember, you know—

MS. LEDDY: It's more like an accumulation of observations rather than an argument.

MR. BERKSON: Concurrently with and even maybe because of this. In 1979 Betsy Baker—Elizabeth Baker at *Art in America*—knowing that I was in Southampton called me and asked me if I would write a review of an Alfonso Ossorio exhibition that was happening out there in Long Island on the East End. And I did that and it may have been that somebody at *Artforum* may have—that may be why—but then again, that reconnected me with Betsy who I had known at *ARTnews*.

MS. LEDDY: Because what was she doing at *ARTnews* then?

MR. BERKSON: She was an editorial assistant with Tom Hess. She worked with Tom Hess and now she's editing at Hess' writings for I guess, I hope a big book of his writings.[. . .-eds.] So through all that time and after my association with *Artforum* I'm writing for *Art in America*, mostly articles. But sometimes I would write a review if *Artforum* didn't want me to write that review. Or anyway, I was not—they had no exclusive on me. So I was writing essays, articles for both *Art in America*, *Artforum* and then one for *ARTnews* and then there was one for *ARTnews* that didn't work out on Pollock's *Guardians of the Secret* and that went into a magazine called *Art Space*, that yeah. So, the—

MS. LEDDY: I want to get to this—okay. Let's talk about just your process, okay? I'd like to know how you write a review, what your process is. How art writing interacts with or affects your poetry, if at all, and how your process in writing an art review compares to the process of writing a poem. This is a big topic but I think it's very important. Because really I see you as a kind of—you're part of this small but kind of very important poet art critic, you know, contingent.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. Well, I thought I would start writing this kind of writing. I wanted it to be writing. I mean to say I wanted it to be really writing not art criticism. I wanted it to be satisfying to me and my imaginary reader, addressee as a piece of writing that could be read that was interesting and entertaining. That was my rule. And, I thought that I could start doing it and get into shape in a way and that it would become easier. It never became easier. It was always a struggle. The process for me is to go—assuming there's something to look at—to go look at it and to try to see it, which means all preconceptions and all that language which I construe as a mass of flies or mosquitos.

MS. LEDDY: You mean like the wall text for example?

MR. BERKSON: No, no, no. The language that's in my head and the memory of what this is—what this is or what this is supposed to be and all the history and all the stuff and what other people have said is like a swarm of insects in front of my eyes. I have to bat that away and look and I spend a long—I still do this—I spend a long time looking.

MS. LEDDY: And you look at the work itself, you don't look at the like image online?

MR. BERKSON: Right. Yeah, I mean, no, no. Assuming there's something to look at and that something has some degree of physicality. For instance, I got to writing a lot about photography and one of the things that I insisted upon whether the reader would notice it or not was to encounter the photographic print as a physical thing and that it had a particularity of its own, a visual particularity, that it wasn't just this thing that you sort of—you bypass the silver nitrate or whatever it is, whatever emulsion or whatever is there and sort of go to this subject, you know, which is somebody's face. Or, you know, the back of a cow or something, and, you know, try to engage this thing to see it as a thing and, you know, whatever it shows you. And I take notes, lots and lots of notes which I, you know, try to decipher later, you know, on some kind of pad. And—scrap paper, whatever it is. And then I go back and try to make sense of all that. Memory. You know, this is 1985. By the end of that year I think having written say five or six reviews I found myself—because it didn't get any easier, surrounded in my 10 by 10 studio shed where I'm writing in Bolinas still, surrounded by crumpled up pieces of paper. You know, this didn't work, that didn't work. Even if it's a lead, you know? I got to get me one of those machines. The computer, a word processor, a computer or something.

So I had a friend, a poet friend who was—there was an interesting divide in that time, early 80s where a number of poets who were in San Francisco particularly the ones who were associated with the so-called "language" poetry school—some went off to get advanced degrees because they were going to take over the academy and some went into the computer industry as people who wrote manuals or advertising or programs or whatever. And there was one of them—there is one of them named Tom Mandel who I think now lives in Washington who I asked about a computer. He said, "Well, I have an old IBM clone." It was this enormous thing. You know, people would look at it and say, "Jesus it's like a Mack Truck you've got." Because the Apple had already, you know this was this old fashioned computer and that's what I started with. And so you know, that—I mean, I had to get used to that I mean, I had to get used to that, acclimate myself to that, learn it as an editing tool and so forth, you know? And so, you know, I sweated out writing these reviews and articles and I worked really hard. And so much so, well, so much so that I wasn't really writing very much poetry. I was doing this and teaching. And reading a lot of art history because then I started doing a course, which was the History and Issues of Painting, and I knew, you know, I'm not an art historian.

I was hired as an art historian but I proposed to do this class. What did I know? Maybe a half. Maybe more. And I had to read up on what I didn't know which was great. I think the students are getting the benefit of somebody learning on the job too. Anyhow, and you know, my models were there. I learned to like Sanford Schwartz's reviews—Sanford Schwartz's reviews as they were coming out and some were collected in a book. Porter, Edwin Denby's writing on dance and his memoirs of de Kooning were always in my mind. You know? And, so that was the method I would cobble together really out of bits and pieces, some piece of writing. Sometimes I would get on a roll and the thing would just flow. Well, then there's also what am I reviewing? So, I'm going to—you know—the job is to review what's being shown in San Francisco galleries and museums. So I reviewed—one of the early reviews, it must have been quite early because the woman who proposed the job to me was

still there and I remember I had to call her up about this. One of the—oh, that's right. It was the first review. Once we settled that I was going to do this she said, "Okay, we know where we want you to start the first review."

And it was with an artist named Robert Hudson. And I said to her, "Please, don't make me start there. I don't want to start in a negative vein. I don't have any taste for his work." I knew that already and he was showing at the Fuller Goldeen Gallery, Diana Fuller and Dorothy Goldeen on Grant Avenue. And I went to the show. She said, "That's the job, you've got to do it. Positive or negative." I went to the show at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. I spent a lot of time and when you spend a lot of time with something you begin to see what the possibilities are, you know, what can be good about it, what is good about it. So I wrote a review. I remembered when it came out there was a colleague of mine at the San Francisco Art Institute named Mark Van Proyen who was very familiar with Hudson's work and you know, he's also an artist. He said, "Boy, you really handled that wonderfully." And but then again, I went into the Fuller Goldeen Gallery to see something else that was there and Dorothy Goldeen called me into her office and it was like being called on the carpet if you know that expression.

And she led off with, "Do you hate California art?" And I said, "No, what do you mean?" "Well, the review was kind of iffy, you know?" It was like, not 50-50 okay, maybe 60-40 with the 60 being kind of negative. But it was like this dealer was complaining to me frontally about my take on an artist in the gallery. And as I recalled, I knew enough about criticism and the history of critic-gallery relations that that wasn't done. So we finished our conversation, I having said, "No, I don't have a grief against California art at all." Went downstairs and right outside that building was a phone booth and I called that woman at *Artforum* and I said, "Would you tell me if being called on the carpet by a gallerist for a review is still a no-no or not?" She said, "Yes, it's a no-no." I said, "Well, it just happened. I just wanted to check with you that, you know, I didn't have to, you know, knuckle under." And so, that was sort of a marker.

MS. LEDDY: But can we finish really this idea of process? What I'm trying to say is when you—breaking it down more so say you have the experience of looking? You sit down at your computer and you—what you're trying to do is somehow duplicate the various layers of experience you went through.

MR. BERKSON: Well, what you're trying to do is to, you know, make a parallel, an analogy to your experience in words. And you know, I mean you could say, "I'm trying to give you the feeling of what it is that I saw."

MS. LEDDY: And so the process of doing that then is you—I assume you write down your impressions and then you continue to build out from that in some way until you get it where you cut it down, until you get it to a level of compression that contains more—is more resonant. Is it something like that? And then—

MR. BERKSON: I suppose, yeah. I mean, there's, you know, as I say in that piece on criticism as a poet—particularly the way I write poetry—for the most part I don't know what I'm talking about. I don't know what my subject matter is so to have a subject matter or a topic, this is Robert Arneson's or Robert Hudson's work in front of me—something that stays put if it's painting or sculpture or photography—something, you know, it's not a video. Or even if it is, it's there. You can take the ride and you have the opportunity to say what it is and to a certain extent describe it. I like that. It's a luxury for me to describe something because I don't ordinarily write descriptive poetry and so, that's that and it might make me write more descriptive poetry possibly but the real benefit to my poetry I thought in advance actually and it turned out I think fairly true that there would be



anyway the opportunity for more continuity in my poetry which had been pretty regularly a kind of riot of—or, a series of riots of discontinuity, you know, because I'm writing ordinary prose in fairly ordinary syntax even if the sentences don't necessarily follow one another in a logical manner and the poetry tends to be—tends to blow syntax to the wind and be a scatter of, you know, phrases and sentences and so forth so I thought maybe this would help me make more connections, more syntactical connections, maybe even tell more stories which I like to do.

MS. LEDDY: And did it?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, to a certain extent. I think it was good—I think it was good for my poetry except it took—the writing criticism and teaching and so forth took over for two or three years I think and then I had to—then I had a sabbatical and I decided that the sabbatical from the Art Institute was going to involve finding out whether I wanted to write poetry anymore or not. And I started writing poems and then I found out that it was the most interesting thing to do and that shifted my emphasis, my focus really back to poetry and that's continued, you know? And the way it is now, somebody comes to me and asks me if I will write—mostly I write catalog — pieces for catalogs. And somebody will come to me and ask me if I will do something and I will say, "Will you take a poem?" And the amazing thing is they will. "Oh, we'd be delighted they say." And that's happened, you know? And so that's fun. Though I still do, you know, some straight—I don't write for the magazines anymore. I mean, what happened with *Artforum* was the signal in a way and I think things have gotten really bad in the magazine department. In *Artforum* I knew that I was going to stop after a certain point. At the end of 1990 or the beginning of 1991. Also, there was a reason to stop, which was that Lynn and I—I got to be a visiting artist scholar at the American Academy in Rome and so that was going to happen in January of 91. And I don't know if I announced it or not and this just happened to coincide with the end of Ida Panacelli's tenure as editor in *Artforum*. I wrote a review, I think it was a review of a show of Elmer Bischoff's or else it was the one of Frank Lobdell, two Bay Area painters of pretty much the same generation.

And, well, the normal thing was David Frankel or something would call me and say, "I've got your review. I've got your article. I have a few suggestions can we go through it on the phone?" This time someone called—someone I didn't know—who said, "I have your article and it's been edited and I'd like to read it back to you." And this person started reading the review and got about a paragraph and a half into it where I said, "Well, wait a minute. That's really interesting but it sounds like you've written your own review." It was so other than what I had written and the voice on the other end sort of, "Well—what?" And I said, "Well, the way this usually works is somebody calls me from your office and says, We have a few suggestions and what do you think of them and we negotiate and you know, leave that, change this. Okay, we're trying to make the piece better. That's the reason for copy editing. "Oh, okay." And I think maybe we—maybe there was another phone call—something. It was sort of fixed, but I could tell that this wasn't good for this person. That was Jack Bankowsky who became the next editor of *Artforum* and I was never invited to write for *Artforum* again.

MS. LEDDY: How do you spell it? M-E-N?

MR. BERKSON: Jack Bankowsky. Bank-ow-sky.

MS. LEDDY: I'm hearing M.

MR. BERKSON: No, so that was a sign of things to come. I mean, I had already been through a thing with Milton Esterow at *Art News* where he's hovering over a very nice copy editor named Nicholas Jenkins saying, "Our audience doesn't, our readers don't know that word." And it happened three

times. This is about the Pollock—the piece on Pollock and *Guardians of the Secret*. Third time I said to Nicholas, "You know Nicholas, I can't do this. Let's kill it. Just get it out. It's over." And he said, "I understand." This guy was insufferable. So I took that piece and I published it in a magazine called *Art Space*. And it seemed that—I don't know what it was about *Artforum* but as *Art in America* went on over the years that same kind of intrusiveness happened. And a couple of times it happened in this way which was that I had a piece that was edited—this happened in a really bad way with Bruce Conner—there was a piece on Bruce Conner's *Angels*. You know those photographs. And I was assiduous about getting the details about how those prints were made from Bruce and also from Edmond Shea, who he worked with technically, the, you know, photographer anyway. He was the guy that knew how to do this to get those images together. And so I explained that in the review and that was all good through the copy editing process and then the magazine came out and there was a complete—there was a sentence that was turned upside down and inside out and got the fact completely wrong.

And I called up and I said, "What's going—what happened here?" And Bruce Conner, you know, was going to call the lawyers. I mean, Bruce Conner was furious about institutions, you know? And so immediately I called him first and said, you know, there's this mistake and it's not my mistake. I understand that and I'm going to write a letter publishing it, which was published eventually. But I think I called Betsy or I called someone. And they said, "Oh, you know, it goes into a process where before when they get into what they then call the blue lines which is the final proofs it goes to a round table of the editorial staff and people get to pick at it." And somebody thought, "Oh, this can't be right." And turned it around. And that was sort of the beginning of—that and the incident with Bankowsky was sort of the beginning of the end for me with the art magazines. I don't know, it's not worth it, so you know? Anyway.

MS. LEDDY: Yeah, I see. I think let's see, I think that might be the end unless there's something else you have?

MR. BERKSON: Well, it's up to you, I mean in terms of—

MS. LEDDY: I mean, time-wise that's it but also I'm thinking that that's it for my questions.

MR. BERKSON: Okay.

MS. LEDDY: More or less. I do have one question — why you never wrote poetry reviews?

MR. BERKSON: No venue.

MS. LEDDY: [Laughs.] Really?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, there's no place. I did write poetry reviews in the '60s. I wrote two or more times for *Poetry* magazine. You know, there's one review I did of 14 books of poetry. There was one review I did of Allen Ginsberg's I think it was *Planet News*. And I may have written a review or two in *Kulchur*, I don't remember and I wrote reviews for *the Poetry Project Newsletter*. But, you know, *Kulchur Magazine* was started by Lita Hornick as a place where poets could publish criticism in the various arts—music, art, poetry, literature, all kinds of things. And there hasn't been a magazine like that since. And the—most poetry magazines, the little magazines don't—you know, they don't include criticism. There's some—now, online there's *Jacket* magazine and there's various others that do—*Hyperallergic* does, *Brooklyn Rail* does and so forth. But, you know, it just hasn't been something to do. It hasn't come up. Nobody's asked for it. So mostly my criticism responses to poetry as prose responses have been blurbs. You know, I write a lot of blurbs and then I wrote an

introduction recently to Clark Coolidge's *Selected Early Poems*. So, you know, I'm game in a certain way. But you know, I make it clear that writing about art is—even though it can be difficult in another way it's kind of, not a vacation but it has the luxury of being about something else and also about something that you can describe.

MS. LEDDY: Don't you find that once—

MR. BERKSON: Describing a poem is rather difficult.

MS. LEDDY: Right, although I find personally that, you know, when you're in the gallery or whatever and you're looking at the work it feels like something outside you and objective and all this. But once you've started thinking about it it becomes fairly subjective, you know what I mean? You're dealing with your subjective responses to the subject that becomes almost, you know, as elusive as, I suppose writing a poem. It becomes, you know what I'm saying? Once it becomes writing it all becomes that way.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, but I like to make it, it's an imaginative process and you'll notice that I mean, there were certain things—are we still rolling?

MS. LEDDY: Yeah, we are actually.

MR. BERKSON: There are certain things that happen in a criticism. One is that as in a lot of my poetry, I decided to keep myself—I—out of it. I don't say "I" in the criticism. I don't say "I" much in my poetry unless it becomes a kind of extension of self I, an imaginary I, an expanded subject in that way. And but that's for me. I mean, I like very much Rene Ricard's way of writing very personal art criticism and but I like the Fairfield Porter model. I like Frank O'Hara's way too which was very personal. But Fairfield Porter's model was a way of making a kind of set of statements that seemed like they weren't exactly oracular but they were sort of statements that took their place in the world, you know? And without declaring a lot of subjectivity and it was like in a way something to give you the feeling of the work, give you the feeling of the experience of the work, and to give you some ideas. And also to give you this language experience, which was, you know, the sentences as such. And people would come up to me and say there was another aspect to this because subjectivity is going to be your judgment call and your opinion on this work. And people would come up to me and say, "That was a very interesting review but I couldn't tell whether you liked the work or not." And I said, "You're right. Liking or not liking is not so much the point. What is the work, is the point." I'm very uninterested in my own, and really in anybody else's opinions.

I mean, I have my reactions, you know, I walk into a gallery and I think, this isn't for me. Or I walk in I get curious, you know? And sometimes I say, "This is marvelous," you know? Which means it struck some chord in me I suppose, you know? But it also might—I might feel differently about it tomorrow. I think of opinion and judgment and evaluation as being really ephemeral, you know? And what—

MS. LEDDY: Yeah, and on that note.

MR. BERKSON: Okay.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]