



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with John Held, Jr.,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with John Held, Jr. on September 28 and October 3, 2017. The interview took place at the home of Paul Karlstrom in San Francisco, CA, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, this is it, John. We've waited a long time for this interview. Many obstacles, but we have been sort of patient and surmounted them. This is an interview for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, my former employer. And I'm now working as a government contract interviewer interviewing my friend, the artist John Held, Jr. The date is September 28, 2017, and we're located at my dining room table in San Francisco.

I would like to start out with a question, I guess I now know the answer to. But it's an interesting story, and somehow I think it has relevance by way of introduction. So, you were actually born, according to this, Jonathan Norton Held in Brooklyn. And we'll get into Brooklyn and so forth very shortly, but I've always wondered how you decided to appropriate the name of the wonderful old '20s series, I guess, cartoonist John Held, Jr. What's the story?

JOHN HELD: Well, before I answer that I have to say that I'm mindful of your interviewing history and what you've done for the Archives in the past. And I researched you before I, you know, undertook this, and the Archives of American Art has 129 interviews that you've done over the years—[00:02:04]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: —with such people as Imogen Cunningham and Bruce Conner, Jay Defeo, Wally Hedrick. I mean, it's an eventful record, and a distinguished record, which I say I am mindful of. And I'm honored to be included and to kind of take you out of retirement, too—because I know that you're doing this kind of as this favor to me as we are friends and everything. But to get you out of retirement to do one more interview for the Archives is a great honor for me, and something I'm very grateful for. As to John Held, Jr. —

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] Moving right along.

JOHN HELD: The—you know, when I got involved in mail art in the mid-'70s I noticed that a lot of mail artists, correspondence artists, had pseudonyms to kind of protect themselves, protect their privacy. Some of these things like R. Dick Trace It Tool Company Anna Banana—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Judy Chicago. Well, that's a city. Okay, go on.

JOHN HELD: Right. But like Anna Banana, her name is Anna Long, but she changed it to Banana for, you know, whatever reason. There's a lot of mail artists who have pseudonyms and stuff. So, when I began—my name is very close to John Held, Jr.: Jonathan Held—and I thought it would be kind of interesting to confuse people, you know, to make them wonder if they were corresponding with a man who was 137 years old.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: So, I took his name. And I did write his widow—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. [00:04:01]

JOHN HELD: —in the early '80s and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, you mentioned that.

JOHN HELD: —and told her that I was, you know, using her husband's name, that I admired his work. And she got—answered me and told me that I should cease and desist or I'm going to be sued. And I wrote her back, and you know, said that I meant no disrespect, and the conversation kind of ended there. But years later, I was talking to my mother on the phone, and she says, "You're free. I read in the paper that Mrs. John Held, Jr., died." So—

[They laugh.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so, you celebrated.

JOHN HELD: I didn't celebrate, but at least I wasn't going to be sued by her. And—I don't know. You know, it just seemed to go along with my art practice, because I was using rubber stamps, and, you know, there's a repetition factor in using stamps, and I like the John Held, Jr./John Held, Jr. thing. It's kind of like the thunk-thunk of a rubber stamp.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Huh. I've never thought about that. I did, though, as I mentioned to you the other day, go on Wikipedia, and look up the former John Held, Jr. Some people, of course, would say the real one. He was pretty famous. But at any rate, what I noticed—and I guess it tells you something about me, the interviewer—that in the '20s he—I guess—well, he was drawn to flappers and women.

JOHN HELD: He originated the look of the flapper girl. He was very famous back then, and he continues to have a certain amount of fame. As a matter of fact, some, I don't know, five or so years ago they put out a sheet that—the Postal Service put out a sheet of stamps on American illustrators, and he was included in that. [00:06:01]

But he developed a look of the flapper girl, and, you know, did covers for Life magazine. It was said that people just sent him blank checks to do something for them, and he could name, you know, the price. Unfortunately, he put a lot of money into the stock market, like a lot of other people, so—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —when the stock market crashed, his fortunes somewhat declined. But he lived up in Connecticut, and he turned from flapper girls to, like, dogs.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, he illustrated a lot of dog things.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's disturbing [laughs].

JOHN HELD: I don't know. I mean, you know, he did—illustrated a lot of books. I've, you know, collected books he's illustrated—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —and everything. He also did wood blocks that were really fantastic, and he would—underneath the wood blocks he would say things like "Engraved by John Held, Jr.; read what the critics say," or "By John Held, Jr., who sometimes wonders what it's all about." So, I made a lot of rubber stamps from those sayings that he did on his wood blocks, and those were the things that I sent to Mrs. John Held, Jr.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, she could have looked at it a very different way, as an expression of respect, admiration.

JOHN HELD: Well, that's the way it was meant.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, and I'm—I believe that.

JOHN HELD: I'm not sure she took it that way, but that's the way I meant.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The other thing that immediately struck me, and this is why I said, "Tell something about me," is that, right off the bat, you go online—and it wasn't on Wikipedia, I think—but a long site with many examples of his work, including Flapper magazine covers. [00:08:02]

And I'd never heard of the Flapper magazine, but it was, I'm sure, very popular. But he had some pretty erotic stuff as well.

JOHN HELD: Well, he was known for like skinny-legged women with garters, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, well—

JOHN HELD: But the whole thing was he was kind of caught up in a woman's liberation, because women were kind of coming of age, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure. Yeah.

JOHN HELD: You know, getting out of their long dresses and getting into like miniskirts and everything, bobbing

their hair, cutting their hair short and everything. And he was the one who, you know, illustrated the changes that were going on in women's fashion, much like William Gibson did with the Gibson girl—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

JOHN HELD: —in the 1890s. John Held, Jr., was doing the same thing with women in the 1920s.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, also—and we have—we can drop this part; we can talk about sexuality and eroticism if we want later if it fits—but it did strike me that he was—of course, this was pre-Code in terms of the Hollywood code and so forth, and it was a more open time, and the flappers were part of all that. But he did, like, scenes.

There was one cartoon—the first one that they show under his name when you go online is this couple, very cleverly and stylistically interesting—a couple in the back seat of a car, and it's pretty—it's all there, all the things that are going on. And then I saw some others as well, which in a sense makes him more interesting and sort of transgressive, I guess. And that's, I guess, kind of what I'm getting at. Was any of that in the background of your being drawn to him? [00:10:04]

JOHN HELD: Not really. I mean, he was suggestive, and he was giving—he was illustrating the mores of the day, you know, like—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

JOHN HELD: —people making out in jalopies, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right.

JOHN HELD: —in the rumble seat type of thing. But he was suggestive. He wasn't really—I don't know if you would call it erotic. I mean, you know, he didn't show breasts or anything like that. He was still very kind of conservative in that and everything. But you know, for the day —

PAUL KARLSTROM: For the day.

JOHN HELD: —it was, you know, mind-bending.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: You know, and it certainly set the fashion, you know, for the flapper era. Yeah, he's fallen out of regard. You know, he's brought back here and there with a magazine article now and then, but he's pretty much out of fashion now, although he has a great role as an American illustrator, and I am very respectful of, you know, his talent. And I often play off of him, just because the names are so similar and everything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, it certainly works for you. People probably—

JOHN HELD: Yeah—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —remember your name. I mean, they remember your name.

JOHN HELD: Well, you know, it's a layer of confusion. I—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, now we're getting at it.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. It's—it's like—it kind of adds to the mystery somewhat. They go, "John Held, Jr.? The guy who did the flappers? Or is it John Held, Jr., the guy who did the rubber stamps? He"—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just who—

JOHN HELD: "Can he possibly be 127 years old?" You know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: So, you know, it adds to the mystery, and I like that aspect of it. [00:12:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: That fits you, I think. And also—well, you do acknowledge him as part of your background, of the background of your thinking and the direction that your art took, and to its—we're going to talk all about that—but conceptualism. And in a sense, it's almost—again, I say transgressive in terms of what art should be; outsider. But there's the whole matter—issue, if you will—of appropriation, which is a term that I think you might embrace in terms of your own practice.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. I mean, I've appropriated his name, obviously, and I've appropriated some of his textual usage, you know, in the rubber stamps I make up, where I say, "By John Held, Jr., who sometimes wonders what it's all about." You know, it's one of my more popular rubber stamps, but it's taken from John Held, Jr.—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —the illustrator. I certainly don't appropriate his art, per se—

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

JOHN HELD: —you know. A drawing is not part of my art practice, which was what he was about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: But he was a humorous guy who didn't really take art seriously. I like that approach of his. And like I say, my name being Jonathan Held, his name being John Held—I mean, it just seemed like I had to play off of it. So, I was compelled in a way, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: —to do so. And—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, so there—this is good, because there is clearly a reason. There's meaning behind that name beyond just the accident. [00:14:08]

JOHN HELD: It's led to the problems, though, because like my bank account—you know, my checking account is under John Held, Jr., you know, because sometimes I get checks that way. But some people write just "John Held," and then the bank won't cash the check because they think I'm John Held the elder and not John Held the junior, you know. So, it becomes problematic financially sometimes, and bureaucratically. As I say, I think the confusion that I've sown by appropriating his name far outweighs the drawbacks.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, remind me of—it was in the '70s when you did this. I forget exactly the year.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, it was about 1976, I think. I don't know if you want to get ahead to—

PAUL KARLSTROM: No—

JOHN HELD: —the '70s.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —no, I don't [laughs].

JOHN HELD: But I did start mail art, you know, in the mid-'70s, and that's about the same time that I began appropriating the name of John Held, Jr.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Yeah, I guess I would ask is this. It was in the '70s, and I'm just curious to know where you were, where you were living, what "chunk" of Held residence in different places.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. Well, I was living upstate New York—[00:16:03]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, that's where you were.

JOHN HELD: —in Utica, where I went to college in, you know, 1965, from 1965 to 1969. But I met a woman there who I married. I went to Syracuse University to get my master's in—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —library science—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which we will go into. But—

JOHN HELD: But I—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —the date was 1976, according to your chronology.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. I mean—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —we can go into this at greater length later if you want to, but you know, I went to Europe for the first time in 1976, I guess it was.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: And while I was there I found a rubber stamp store in Amsterdam, Holland, and when I came—I was—I bought the stamps—some stamps, visual stamps, to give to my children. I had two children at the time. And I never gave them the stamps. I kept them for myself and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: —began integrating them into my work. And then, I thought I had discovered the wheel, so I did some research about rubber stamp usage in the arts, and I found about mail art. So, I mean—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's—

JOHN HELD: The two things are—come together.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's an important year, then, in your—

JOHN HELD: It—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —was the big year.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so, you were in Amsterdam when you discovered these stamps. Is that correct?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, there was a store that had a wooden sign over the front door of a man holding a rubber stamp in his arm—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: —you know, like one of those old medieval store, you know, signage. And the name of the place is Posthumous Rubber Stamp Company, which is interesting—[00:18:09]

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean—

JOHN HELD: —in itself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —posthumous.

JOHN HELD: But they were the royal stamp and seal makers of Holland.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: And they got a royal charter because during World War II the Nazis were using them to make rubber stamps, and the company would make duplicate rubber stamps for the Resistance so they could forge documents. And in honor of that, the, I guess, Queen of Holland bestowed a royal charter on them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, my God.

JOHN HELD: So, it was a very well-established rubber stamp company.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, you have in your origins then, origins of your practice, this sort of high—this elevated, aristocratic, European element [laughs].

JOHN HELD: Absolutely. I mean, it was very important, not only the original finding of the stamps, but I entered into a conversation, correspondence, with the director of the stamp company who I had met, you know, when I was buying the stamps. And I told him that I had been doing this research on rubber stamps. And at the same time, there was a European mail artist—Ulises Carrión actually was a Mexican living in Amsterdam—who had a store called Other Books and So, and he showed rubberstamp art there, and mail art, and he was a big proponent of artist books.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: And he talked to the director of Posthumous about rubber stamp art as well, and so Mr. Vanderplaats, the director, decided to open up a segment of the store as a gallery of rubber stamp art.

[00:20:10]

So, I went back the following year, which I think was 1976, and had the first show at this gallery at—the gallery, which they named "Stempelplaats"—"stamp place." So, I went back over there with the work that I had been doing to have the first show there, and it became a very successful place. But even more important than showing there was spending time with Ulises Carrión, who was very knowledgeable about the mail art scene and viewed it as a conceptual art form. He said that mail art was a cultural strategy to democratize art, to de-commodify art, and to decentralize art.

So, previously I had been talking to Ray Johnson who was kind of a master of Dada, and so American mail art at that time kind of followed the lead of Ray Johnson. It was kind of a humorous, almost frivolous activity at the time. But Ulises Carrión took it to a whole new level.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: And so, I cut my eyeteeth, you know, listening to him philosophize about the mail art movement.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Perfect. Let's pause the track.

[Tape stops, restarts.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: All right, a brief pause, and that's actually a good early, now, introduction to what's important to you in your career, and that, after all, is what this is going to be mainly about. [00:22:08]

But we're not going to let you off the hook. And as you know since you've read some of my interviews and used them—and thank you, you used them very well, like with San Francisco Art Quarterly, the Beat era, and those artists, based on these interviews.

But I take very much in all my Archives interviews, and the ones I do since the Archives, a biographical approach, and it represents my own position. I'll be clear on this, because it forms an interview. I'm not one of those art historians or art critics who believes that art is fully independent from the maker. I revere the maker of art, and the products are wonderful and transcendent and all this kind of thing. So, that's by way [laughs] of a cautionary—a warning.

So, what I'd like to do, and this will help us, I think, go through—is work with this kind of outline I did, just moving on through. And the first area is biography, and you—I know this much, and then you can, I hope, expand upon it. You were—you're from Brooklyn. I'm not even sure prior—we're pretty good friends—that I even knew that or remembered that, and now I won't forget it, because our grandchildren are Brooklynites [laughs], just like you are. And you were born—well, why don't you just say, you know, the year? And then, I know you were born in—I can't remember the name of the hospital that's over there.

JOHN HELD: Brooklyn Jewish.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, Brooklyn Jewish Hospital. But—[00:24:00]

JOHN HELD: I'm like a stereotypical baby boomer, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: Born right after the war 1947. My father had been in the war. He never shipped out overseas, but he got married right after the war. And my mother—I think they lived in Brooklyn first, and then they got into Peter Cooper Village, which was a big housing development in Lower Manhattan.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

JOHN HELD: Yeah. And we lived there. And it's —

PAUL KARLSTROM: How old were you then?

JOHN HELD: —still there and everything. You know, I think we moved there when I was one—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, okay.

JOHN HELD: —and then a second brother was coming when I was three, so they wanted to get to a bigger place. Actually, they had a pretty big apartment from what I understand. But all their other friends were moving to Long Island, to the suburbs. So, we moved to Wantagh, Long Island, not to be confused with Montauk, which is at the end of Long Island. Wantagh is on the South Shore, known as the gateway to Jones Beach. So, my father

was a dentist, and he established his practice in the house in Wantagh, which was right next to Levittown—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

JOHN HELD: —New York. And Levittown is like the stereotypical suburb, and believe me, I had a completely typical suburban upbringing, although I was Jewish and most of the other children in town were, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Other things.

JOHN HELD: —Catholic or Protestant.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, right. Christian.

JOHN HELD: So—Christians. So, you know, that was the anomaly in my life, you know. [00:26:05]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, then, let's pause there a moment and not be quiet, but pursue that a little bit. I was—I guess I didn't pay close enough attention to that wonderful chronology. I didn't realize that you didn't spend some years in Brooklyn, and what you just said—and know. And—was the area of Brooklyn in which you were born in any way essentially a Jewish ghetto? Because Brooklyn certainly had neighborhoods that were largely Jewish, and that makes for a different kind of growing-up, perhaps.

JOHN HELD: You know, I only know about my family history because my brother Peter, who interviewed my father right before he passed away—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Good, good.

JOHN HELD: He never—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not that he passed away.

JOHN HELD: —opened up —

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —to me, my father. I never knew anything about—or very little—about his background. But Peter did a very thorough interview with him, and so I do have a lot of information about that. And my grandparents might have lived in, like, a Jewish ghetto at first—in Brooklyn, not the Lower East Side, you know, like Flatbush Avenue, around there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right. I know it.

JOHN HELD: But I think my grandfather was a successful cigar maker, and they moved into a primarily—and they weren't—they were Jewish, and they practiced Jewish customs, and they ate Jewish food, but they were not religious.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: Especially my father, you know. So—and they lived in a primarily Christian area of Brooklyn near Coney Island in a pretty well-to-do—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now—

JOHN HELD: —neighborhood.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —the grandparents lived there? [00:28:00]

JOHN HELD: My grandparents, and then—so my father was there, you know, with them—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know. And my father had two older sisters who were both teachers, and this is in the '30s now, and you know, everybody was poor. But they—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —were teachers. And so, they had, you know, an income, and they were able to put some money aside to put my father through dental school. So, yeah, he was a dentist, and he was voted Don Juan of his class.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ooh.

JOHN HELD: So, I mean, it doesn't fall from the tree, I guess.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: But he was very secretive about his—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Dalliances?

JOHN HELD: —early life and everything. But basically, his parents came from Russia—I think like Latvia—and about 1890 or so. So, I'm sure that was all sort of these Soviet—or not Soviet, but Russian pogroms going on, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —where they were wiping out entire Jewish villages and everything, and they were all escaping. You know, this is a great age—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, they were born in Russia, or they escaped to Latvia?

JOHN HELD: They—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean—

JOHN HELD: —were born in Russia and in Latvia, but it turns—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because the Latvians don't allow that they were ever part of Russia, you know. Like Staprans, our friend [San Francisco painter] Raimonds Staprans.

JOHN HELD: Right, right. Well, you know, I mean, later on, you know, the Soviet Union incorporated—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —Latvia—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right.

JOHN HELD: —and everything. But the family, I think, came from Germany to Russia to escape, you know, anti-Semitism in Germany to go—[00:30:06]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, you have a German-Jewish background—

JOHN HELD: Yeah—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —on your dad's side.

JOHN HELD: And as a matter of fact, my father changed his name, because—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —his name when he was growing up was Rubenstein, but when he graduated from Columbia Dental School, he changed his name to Held. And he says that Held was the original family name, that they had to change their name from Held to Rubenstein when they went to Russia because there was anti-German feeling there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: All of this gets very complicated politically, you know, convoluted.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, they were—we're talking fraternal[ph] side of the family, and it sounds like they were not exactly nomads, but they were—well, in an ongoing way, moving—trying to get away from persecution, you know.

JOHN HELD: Absolutely. I mean, that was the whole story of the Jewish people—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —around that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. So, they were typical in that respect, yeah.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. I mean, you know, that whole wave of immigration to the Lower East Side of New York, you know, took place at the same time and everything, and there was a lot of, you know, anti-Semitism at the time. And so, one of the reasons I think my father changed the name from Rubenstein to Held was to overcome some of that anti-Semitism and everything. I should mention that when he started his practice in Brooklyn, he was the dentist to many of the Brooklyn Dodgers.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh—

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —he was a baseball fan.

JOHN HELD: He was a big baseball fan, and he had a lot of friends who were on the Brooklyn Dodgers, and they got him autographed baseballs and everything, you know. [00:32:05]

And we used to play catch with them, you know, with these autographed baseballs signed by, you know, Peeewe Reese and Jackie Robinson and Duke Snider and all these people. And eventually all those baseballs were donated to the Brooklyn Dodger Hall of Fame. So, that was kind of interesting.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, your dad donated the—

JOHN HELD: Baseballs, later on—uh-huh [affirmative]—when they left Long Island to—and they retired to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Kind of jumping ahead now, but—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's interesting, though that's less your story. That's their story, but that's what we're talking about now, so that's that—yeah.

JOHN HELD: Exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That—

JOHN HELD: But here's the interesting thing, though. As I say, we were one of the few Jewish families in Wantagh, and they were not particularly artistic, although they did participate in community theater and, you know, acted in plays—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —and things like this. And they enjoyed the theater, and they began taking me to Broadway when I was like five or six years old. You know, I remember seeing Mary Martin in *Peter Pan*. I think that was about 1954 or something like that. And I saw all those plays: *Oklahoma*, *South Pacific*, *My Fair Lady*, *Camelot*. You know, I could go on and on, every play, you know, we go see. It had a real big effect on me, and none of my other friends ever did that. It was kind of a Jewish thing in the '50s—Broadway—you know, the creators as well as the audience. [00:34:16]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, did this stimulate interest on your part for perhaps a career in the theater?

JOHN HELD: Well, I pursued it somewhat. You know, like in high school, I did some theater. Not a lot of theater, because it was not really the cool thing to be in the dramatics club, but I did so anyway.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But there were probably a lot of girls in it.

JOHN HELD: There were a lot of girls, and it helped, believe me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] Okay.

JOHN HELD: But—and then when I went to college I acted. I had the lead in several college plays, and I was an English major, which we'll get to, I'm sure, but—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, absolutely.

JOHN HELD: —but I minored in theater. So, I pursued that interest.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You minored in theater in undergraduate school, is that right?

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: At Utica College. And actually, as long as we're on this right now, one of the biggest events in my life that stimulated me to get more involved in art happened—I think it was in 1968, when the Open Theater, under Joseph Chaikin, came to Utica College and put on a production of *The Serpent* written by Jean-Claude van Itallie. It opened me up to a completely different world. It just opened my eyes. It had a big effect on me, and I started following all their plays at the Open Theater. You know, they were kind of colleagues—[00:36:04]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, this is avant-garde theater, basically—

JOHN HELD: Yeah—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —in a way?

JOHN HELD: Chaikin was previously in the Living Theatre—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —under Julian Beck and Judith Malina, you know. So, I was kind of drawn to that communal type theater—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: —you know. And then, after that my love of Broadway plays kind of fell away.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, this is what you're—and we are talking; then we'll move on from this—about your early family, domestic life with your parents. And what I wanted to ask you—all of this is good and relevant, but what about your mom? And then, what about their marriage and so forth and so on? The circumstances—

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —for you.

JOHN HELD: No, I didn't mean to jump ahead so rapidly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, I don't care.

JOHN HELD: But my mother—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know me [laughs].

JOHN HELD: —her parents also, you know, came from Russia. They settled first in New York, but soon after moved to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. And my father—my grandfather, Saul Solomon—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, that was her, as they say, maiden name.

JOHN HELD: That was my mother's—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Solomon.

JOHN HELD: Solomon was my mother's maiden name. Her father, Saul, and her mother, Rose. And he was a traveling salesman at first. He was one of the first salesmen in the country, a jewelry salesman. He was one of the first salesman in the country to pursue his trade by car.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: He traveled around in a Model T Ford. He used to love to show us his legs, which were all scarred, because before the cars, he drove horses, you know, a horse-drawn wagon, and they would always kick them in the shins. [00:38:10]

So, he loved showing us his scarred shins, but then that was one of the reasons he switched to a car, because [laughs]—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, wow.

JOHN HELD: —he was getting kicked by a horse.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: And so—yeah, so, you know, there were newspaper stories that I had seen about him being one of the first traveling salesmen to utilize a car. And when we were young, we would, you know, go visit him in Lancaster, and by this time he had like a five-story, you know, warehouse full of jewelry.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Full of jewelry?

JOHN HELD: It was horrible in a way, because, you know, my—you know, I was like six, seven years old. Me and my brothers would just pillage through the five stories of, you know—and look through boxes—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You just pick up whatever you wanted or—

JOHN HELD: Take a ring here and a pin there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: I mean, it was not good.

[They laugh.]

JOHN HELD: But he lived—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were—

JOHN HELD: —in a very beautiful house. It was right down the street from Wheatland, which one of the presidents lived at. I can't remember his name right now. [James Buchanan -JH] But, yeah, it was really interesting going there, because, you know, we would see the Amish people with the horse-drawn buggies and all that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: But my mother was one of three children. She had two brothers, one of which died in the war—Norton—and I bear his middle name. So, he died in World War II. Her other brother, Melville, continued in the family business, and eventually my grandmother came to live with us after her husband passed away.
[00:40:09]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, I'm gathering, then, that it was a fairly tight family in terms of the relationships with your grandparents perhaps. I don't know if that applies all around, but you're describing a situation kind of like that.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. I mean, on my father's side I knew—my grandfather really passed away before I got to know him, so I don't have any recollection of my father's father. But my father's mother, you know, was still alive when I was growing up, and you know, she was, you know, pleasant and everything, and—yeah. And then, you know, as I said, my father had two sisters, and one lived in Brooklyn, and she worked at the D.C. comic factory, so she brought us all the Superman comics, you know, like that—

PAUL KARLSTROM: God, what a rich background—

JOHN HELD: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —you have. All these things fit.

JOHN HELD: [laughs] I think so, yeah. And then, his older sister Pearl lived in Buffalo, and she was married to a guy who owned the big movie palace in Buffalo, Max Yellen, and his brother wrote "Happy Days Are Here Again" for Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which is—you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: We need a song like that now.

[They laugh.]

JOHN HELD: Really. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, so I think I'm getting—

JOHN HELD: But let me—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

JOHN HELD: —just continue in that—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Vein.

JOHN HELD: You know, it was really a great childhood. My parents, you know, were very loving. You know, that was no death surrounding me at all. It was—when I look back on, it was kind of idyllic—[00:42:12]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know? You know, this '50s suburban upbringing, really good school system—excellent school system, so I really got a good schooling. You know, I had three brothers, you know, so we all played sports together. My home was kind of catty-corner to the elementary school where I went to school, with big, you know, athletic fields around it, basketball courts, and baseball diamonds. And so, you know, we played a lot of sports growing and everything. But really, I didn't have an artistic bone in my body except for the theater, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —the love of the theater and everything. But I never drew. I don't remember ever taking art courses.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I was going to ask that.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, no—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were they even available, or do you even know?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, they were available. I took art, you know, but it made no big impression on me, to tell you the truth.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that was in primary school—

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —correct?

JOHN HELD: And in high school, too, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In high school, too.

JOHN HELD: We had, you know, art courses in high school. They had no impression on me, but the reading did. I mean, I was a voracious reader.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's pause, though, just a moment here, because this is an important question. I always have to ask this. I expect there were not—there was not art in your family, in your house, and of course maybe I'm being presumptuous in saying that. But I mean art, kind of serious art, you know, or even reproductions of serious art.

JOHN HELD: Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, visual stuff that you could have lived with. [00:44:00]

JOHN HELD: There were no Rothkos. Let's put it that way, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I don't think too many people—

[They laugh.]

JOHN HELD: But you know, they had friends who were artists and, you know, who made portraits of us kids and everything, so we knew, you know, the people who made those portraits and everything. I remember, you know, reproductions of Utrillo in the house—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —and we did have some original art, and I still have a sculpture that was always in the house. It was a wood sculpture of two parents with a child clinging to them. It was done by a relative. I don't know who. I don't know the name of anything. So, they had artists—

PAUL KARLSTROM: In the family?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, you know, in the family and everything. So, I was aware of art. And I have to bring this up

now, because—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: —you know, I did do some research in preparation for this, and I went through some old, you know, papers, and I found a letter—more a report than a letter—from my first-grade teacher to my mother. And I'm going to get this right because I have it here. And so, she's writing to my mother about my development as—you know, over the course of the year and everything.

And she says, "One of my many priceless "Jonny-dotes"—as in anecdotes—"concerns his reason for putting his name at the bottom instead of the top of the page. 'Artists always put their signature is at the bottom,' says Jonny," J-O-N-N-Y. [00:46:10]

So, upon reflection, I have no thoughts about becoming an artist when I was young or anything like that, but I was obviously aware of it in the first grade by saying something like that to my teacher. I mean, I was shocked when I saw that—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, wait a minute.

JOHN HELD: —absolutely shocked.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you say that artists do that?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I said "artists always put"—

PAUL KARLSTROM: She didn't notice that and say it?

JOHN HELD: She asked me why I put my name at the bottom of the page instead of the top, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: "Johnny Held, Grade One," you know. It went at the bottom. And when she asked me why, I said, "Because that's the way artists, you know, do it."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, see now, how can you deny that?

JOHN HELD: I don't know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That suggests—

JOHN HELD: I mean, I—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —subliminal—

JOHN HELD: —can't deny it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —interest [laughs].

JOHN HELD: I mean, I have no recollection either of that particular incident or of my—of any interest I had in art, but I cannot deny what was there, you know, on the page.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, and you proved it to me—well, I didn't look closely, but it's in your little notebook here.

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And—

JOHN HELD: You know, and I—yeah—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [inaudible] little notebook—

JOHN HELD: I had it here to remind myself of facts and—yeah, I thought that was pretty significant.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, you don't recall during those formative years an "A-ha!" moment where "Art, you know, this is really something interesting." And that just didn't happen, so we can sort of abandon that in terms of your formation or your youth in that regard. [00:48:02]

JOHN HELD: When I look back on my memories, I had no particular interest in art—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: —during my elementary, you know, school years or high school years. I was way too interested in just becoming popular and being a social animal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, you were normal.

JOHN HELD: I was kind of normal, yeah. I was a civilian.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Johnny Normal we'll call you.

[They laugh.]

JOHN HELD: The new Johnny Normal. Yeah, I mean, you couldn't get more normal than suburban Long Island, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: There's just no way to be a character in suburban, you know, 1950s.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember any events—and remember we're not going to squeeze this any further trying to locate you back in the past, or rather, your art interest—but like events that you recall that, in one way or another, may have—I don't even mean stimulated specifically an interest in art, but helped to form you in some way that you now would look back and say is important? I'm thinking of relationships with your siblings, let's say, or parental interaction. Anything like that?

JOHN HELD: I mean, the only thing that really comes to mind is the Broadway theater thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, yeah.

JOHN HELD: Because, I mean, it was so wonderfully creative, you know, and there was so much talent being portrayed, you know, with the singing and the dancing. And I remember just being in tears, you know, watching some of that, so I was very empathetic, you know, with the creative process of the theater. I mean—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you presumably thought about that. You would say, "I can't believe that these people do this wonderful stuff." [00:50:04]

JOHN HELD: It didn't seem to have any practical value, though, because, you know, I would just go right back to my friends and, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, what was it at that point practical? Or are you just thinking from this point back? You say, "practical value"—

JOHN HELD: Well, I mean it didn't, you know, propel me into—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anything.

JOHN HELD: —wanting to take special art classes—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh, yeah.

JOHN HELD: —or you know, to become a dancer or anything like that, but it was just the feeling I got of the creativity, you know, that was being generated.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What—well, what about your siblings? You have three brothers?

JOHN HELD: I have three brothers. I'm the oldest—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —and each one is two years apart.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

JOHN HELD: So, Freddie was on Wall Street for most of his life and Peter is a museum director, retired—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So—

JOHN HELD: —now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —he's the one I've met.

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: And Peter is one of the great curators of contemporary [ceramic -JH] art in the country and has a very good reputation in that regard. And then, my younger brother David is kind of a disappointment, because when he was going to school in Buffalo at Media Studies in the '70s, he was studying with Hollis Frampton and Paul Sharits and these really innovative filmmakers, and he got involved in computers and sound. And when he was, like, 23 years old, he did a soundtrack for Nam June Paik—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, wow.

JOHN HELD: —for the—for his video "Merce by Merce by Paik." [00:52:04]

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is David?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, this is David Held. But then, he became very interested in the computer, per se, and became an instructional technologist. Is that what they call them? You know, he works in schools, primarily private schools, and runs computers, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well—

JOHN HELD: —computer labs. So, he kind of went in a different direction, you know. He forsook his creativity for the computer lab.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it sounds to me as if you [had] have positive relationships with your brother—okay, your brothers.

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, you're a little disappointed that maybe David didn't take full advantage of what he could have had.

JOHN HELD: He had some early opportunities.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: There were—that could have, you know, amounted to something, not that he, you know, has squandered his life by any means.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

JOHN HELD: But—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know, a really happy family relationship is enviable, but of course it doesn't give us much to hang on to in terms of storytelling [laughs].

JOHN HELD: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, I could deal with this in one short paragraph.

JOHN HELD: Well, I know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Although we have given it—we've honored it by talking about it further.

JOHN HELD: I mean, it was nice having, you know, a family that was kind of—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course it was.

JOHN HELD: —together. And you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: A lot of my subjects can't say that.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. No, I mean—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I'm sure you've—in your interviews have found that.

JOHN HELD: The only thing—when I look back on my childhood I was always worried about grades, because my parents—that's what they pushed. They wanted me to succeed in school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you do that for them primarily or for yourself? Did you—[00:54:00]

JOHN HELD: For them, you know. I loved reading, I loved, you know, going after knowledge, but I really didn't like the classroom too much, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: And it—

PAUL KARLSTROM: What —

JOHN HELD: And the thing was that I was a really good reader. I was a fast reader, and I memorized what I did read, so I could always get by, you know. I could always get my C, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I got a few of those, too.

JOHN HELD: But that wasn't really enough for my parents. They wanted more than Cs, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I would think.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. So, you know, I constantly struggled with that, but I had a very happy childhood. I had lots of friends —

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know, and I was very popular. I did sports. I was never great at it, you know, but I did them. You know, soccer, and track and field, and wrestling. But there was no artistic inclination, you know, whatsoever in high school except for the theater aspect.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Well, let's set that aside, and we won't claim too much for your growing up and your early education in terms of John Held the artist. But on the other hand, you know, we can set primary school aside, but in high school—and now we'll talk in a moment about your collegiate life—but in high school it sounds as if you were—you had literary tendencies, that you were interested in literature.

And I guess my only question here would be—and I think it is important. I don't know if it started in high school, or in most cases, you know, you don't think about it. You just have to do your assignments and so forth. But what kinds of books did you read? Do you remember any that were influential? [00:56:08]

JOHN HELD: I mean, I almost hate to bring this up—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: —because it seems so—

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, please.

JOHN HELD: —you know, mundane. Not high school so much, but elementary school. There was an author called John Tunis, T-U-N-I-S, and he wrote sports books.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: And it was always, you know, the little man, you know, who was excluded from the things but somehow excelled in something and was able to rise above the calamities that he perceived in his life. I loved those books, you know. And it led to an interest in science fiction, because it was very similar—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ah.

JOHN HELD: —to science fiction in that the little man, the forgotten man, the man nobody noticed, through his own devices rose above the fray, you know, to—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Horatio Alger.

JOHN HELD: —conquer a world or save a world or, you know, something like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that I think was pretty common with many kids.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I mean, it was—

PAUL KARLSTROM: It provides examples of lives that can go further than maybe one would expect.

JOHN HELD: When you're, you know, a child you have no control over your life—

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, of course not.

JOHN HELD: —you know. It's all your parents and, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —your teachers and all that, so you feel like you don't have any control. And that's what these kids, you know—in the John Tunis books they had no control, but somehow they rose and they gained control through —[00:58:11]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And they turned into important figures in one way or another.

JOHN HELD: In one way or another. They made a success of the things. They rose above their situation, you know, and I was always trying to rise above my situation. Like, the kids that I grew up with, they didn't have this Broadway influence that I had. They didn't know anything or care anything about art. At least I had the theater thing in the back of—in my background.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well—

JOHN HELD: So—but you know—but I stuck with that science fiction thing, and when I went to library school, I did most of my coursework kind of around science fiction, science fiction bibliographies; this and that. And I was at Syracuse University, where they had the Science Fiction Writers of America Depository Library, which I volunteered at, so I saw all the correspondence between the science fiction writers and their editors from the golden age of science fiction—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: —in the '30s and everything. But then I got so full up with it, that got me out of science fiction. But I was also interested in other forms of literature, especially, you know, experimental literature like Thomas Pynchon. You know, when I was in college Thomas Pynchon was a big thing for me, and a friend of mine who became a big Pynchon scholar—so literature always had an appeal to me. Although I never wanted to write. You know, eventually I became a writer. [01:00:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, right, and so—

JOHN HELD: But—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's why we're fishing in that particular pond—

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —right now, to see how that came about.

JOHN HELD: Right. And I did some writing for my college, you know, literary journals and stuff like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, do you feel, jumping ahead or not, that—it should be mentioned that you're a good writer and that you are a critical writer. You bring critical thinking to your writing, and especially as focused on art and where it belongs and what does it bring, what does it bring to us, what does it accomplish. And to do that, and to do it well, and in a way that you don't lose your reader—because there's always a danger, you know, in—what shall we say? Kind of lecturing to people about what they should understand.

That came around somehow, and maybe that'll just unfold as we talk further. I don't want to say anything more about it, but you are distinguished in this area as an art writer. You and I are art writers, and we came at it in different ways, and so forth, and so on. And I'm—the only thing I'll really ask further at this point is, when did you find that you liked writing, that writing served your—perhaps need to express ideas and to tell—

JOHN HELD: Yeah. Well, it was through mail art, basically.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, so—

JOHN HELD: You know, I got—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Came later, then.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. You know, it wasn't early. I—after I'd been participating in mail art, I was enthralled with it. [01:02:05]

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JOHN HELD: And it was a very underground art form.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean—just words is what you're talking about, or stories?

JOHN HELD: Well, I mean, the whole field of mail art—it was, you know—it was totally disregarded, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, and we're going to probably talk about that at length—

JOHN HELD: Yeah, and nobody was writing about it. So, I knew the history.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: The only way to know about mail art was to participate in mail art, so the only people who could really write about it were people who are participating in the field, and I took it upon myself to do so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: But I don't want to get too much ahead of the game while we're here.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, this is—but it's okay. I mean, these are—we can look retrospectively, and we don't—we're not obliged to stay at a point where we have to pretend that we don't know what comes later [laughs].

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We're allowed, you know, to deal with this whole phenomenon. Okay, I think we know quite a bit now about everything about those early years. And so, finally we have you—unless there's something else you want to introduce—into your collegiate years. Now, you went to Syracuse when you were an undergraduate. You always refer to it as Utica College. Is that a branch of—

JOHN HELD: It was a branch of—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: —Syracuse University.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it was—not independent, but it was—

JOHN HELD: It wasn't independent. It was under Syracuse University.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: So, the strict title is Utica College of Syracuse University.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: And when I got a degree, it was a Syracuse University degree, but that was a real stretch, because Utica was a much smaller town than Syracuse, located maybe 60 miles away. [00:02:03]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: You know, along the Mohawk River, the Erie Canal, in upstate New York. And Utica was a very interesting town. It was a dying mill town, you know, of basically Italian immigrants. But you know, it was a small town, and it was a college town to a certain degree. And I mean, it was a good enough education. As I say, I kind of found myself in a, you know—you know, now we're talking about '65 to '69, so we're talking kind of about hippie years. And I was kind of developing into a hippie.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs]

JOHN HELD: You know, I was involved with the SDS, Students for a Democratic Society, more socially than politically.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, well, that's—

JOHN HELD: You know, but—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —that's important, and that's again leaping ahead, but now you've brought it up. And it's very interesting what you say. More socially, like people you wanted to identify with, because that was exactly at the time that Vietnam was.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: By the way, did you watch any of that Ken Burns documentary?

JOHN HELD: Some of it, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We've watched it all, and it's a great way to depress yourself.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: If you really want to be depressed and angry at your country and so forth—

JOHN HELD: Well, it was a pretty depressing time, you know, and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, why don't you just quickly say that—I mean, if you're in SDS, then, you know, that fits into the whole protest world and so forth on many levels. [00:04:03]

JOHN HELD: Yeah, well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anything you have to say about that?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, you know, one of the great turning points in my life was I had—I think just going home after my sophomore year, about 1967 or so, and I was talking to my best childhood friend.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: And we went to buy the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's* album—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

JOHN HELD: —when it first came out. And he hated it, and I thought it was the greatest thing in the world, and that really was the cleft between my childhood years and my young adult years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is *Sergeant Pepper*?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, because it was like a break between the friends that I had that were basically going to become businessmen and salesmen like their fathers. It was pretty conservative. I really don't know any of my high school friends who fell into the hippie thing—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well—

JOHN HELD: —like I did. So—

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you know, think about it now. What year—what—

JOHN HELD: '67, you know, '68.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because you didn't have to be, believe me, a hippie to love the Beatles. I mean, we—Ann [Heath Karlstrom] and I started—you know, were a bit older, as you know—

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and started just being absolutely amazed when "I Want To Hold Your Hand"—

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —came out, and then *Sergeant Pepper's* is like this highly refined, consummate, consummate accomplishment of music. [00:06:01]

JOHN HELD: Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so, you're—what—I guess what I'm suggesting is you're didn't have the right friends.

JOHN HELD: Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: With respect.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. Well, it's not that I didn't have the right friends. It's just that we somehow became different—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, well.

JOHN HELD: —you know? I—or we—you know, we hit the road not taken, you know. So, they took the, you know, the main road, you know, that led to New York City and a professional career—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I'm interested—I get it, and I'm interested in what music they preferred. Oh, let's put it this way. What about the Rolling Stones? My guess is they wouldn't like the Rolling Stones at all.

JOHN HELD: You know, to tell you the truth, I wasn't that close to them at this time, because I had gone to college—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —you know, and they had pursued their own life either in a different college—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —or, you know, staying at home and everything. But like I said previously, you know, I had this theater thing. I loved the theater. They didn't think about the theater at all, and so there was a little bit of a breach there, but it just progressed more as I got older. And I just saw this break, you know, when *Sergeant Pepper* came out, and I was just taken with it, and it didn't have very much of an effect on, you know, someone who I was very close to in my childhood. And it just—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, and I don't want to make too much—

JOHN HELD: Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —of that, but you—

JOHN HELD: —maybe I'm making too much of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: But you know —

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it is interesting, because all of—virtually all of my friends celebrated, were really into the Beatles, and into even Big Brother. You know, that was our time—[00:08:10]

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Big Brother and the Holding Company, and Jefferson Airplane—

JOHN HELD: Yeah, no, I—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —Jimi Hendrix, you know. And we were not hippies.

JOHN HELD: Right. Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: We were hippie wannabes, though.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. Well, I mean—

PAUL KARLSTROM: But this is about you. Okay.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, but this is between—this is about us, too. And not to stress the point, but you're what? Maybe seven or eight years older than I am? Something like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were born '47. Six.

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: So—but there was a big difference back then—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —because I—like I say, I was Boomer.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: You know?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: You were not Boomer.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, and neither [inaudible]—

JOHN HELD: You were a war baby.

PAUL KARLSTROM: War baby [laughs].

JOHN HELD: And it was—there was a big difference—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know. So, not to, you know, bemoan the point or anything, but—I don't know. But anyway, I was definitely—the point of this whole thing is I was definitely falling into kind of an alternative path.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well—

JOHN HELD: You know, I mean, with the alternative politics, with SDS—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —alternative lifestyle, where maybe I was taking drugs and my other childhood friends were not. So, you know, I kind of felt myself headed into a different direction, and it fit very well with the mail art thing because that was kind of an alt—art alternative.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But this, of course, was prior.

JOHN HELD: This was prior.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: But—

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it's background, and that's what I'm asking for.

JOHN HELD: Right. But it was leading towards that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, this is your entry into the counterculture.

JOHN HELD: Exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. I mean, that's—we could figure that from this point—[00:10:05]

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and what we know about your life, that's—

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —definitely where you are, yeah.

JOHN HELD: And there was a big event in mail art that took place in 1974, which is right after I kind of graduated from school, from college and everything. But Rolling Stone magazine did a big article on mail art. It

was written by Thomas Albright, who was the art critic for—

PAUL KARLSTROM: The *Chronicle*.

JOHN HELD: —*San Francisco Chronicle*. But it was the first time that mail art kind of emerged in a major print source. And so, previously, mail art was composed of like New York City artists and their—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —you know, in the art world. And when Rolling Stone publishes an article about mail art, a wider audience came in, composed of, you know, people who were in the counterculture.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's take a break. I'm going to stop this as a track.

[END OF held17_1of1_sd_track04]

PAUL KARLSTROM: After a little pause, here we go again, John.

JOHN HELD: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We have you now at Syracuse, Utica College, and I suppose—and I mean, one can spend an hour on one's college years, I suppose, and you've mentioned several things—SDS would be one thing—that distinguished your time and experience. But what interests me the most is your choice of a major. You were an English major. I was an English major; Ann was an English. And all the better people are English majors—

[They laugh.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: —as far as I'm concerned.

JOHN HELD: All the impractical people are English majors.

PAUL KARLSTROM: None of us, though—that's another thing. I mean, we were earlier in the '60s. It was amazing. Everything seemed open, and that you could make those kinds of choices. I mean, even at Stanford, where we went, I had a fellowship. I could not have afforded to go otherwise, of course. But you would think that—with that kind of an investment in an education, you would think in terms of job opportunities. And I was an English major.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, but you know, at that time the economy was good.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: So, you know, I didn't feel any way that I was pressured into going to school so I get a good job. I felt like I went to school so I can learn. [00:02:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: And you know, and damn the torpedoes, you know, what came ahead. So—and like you, I didn't have a fellowship, but I had a trust fund from my grandfather.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, great.

JOHN HELD: So, I could go as far as I wanted to in school, you know, financially and everything. I took out loans, so I could, you know, support myself and everything in other ways. But I loved reading. I didn't have any—I didn't know what I wanted to be, so I just did what I wanted, and that was, you know, become an English major and keep reading, you know, fill in the gaps.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well—

JOHN HELD: You know, in the history of literature, and I really enjoyed it, and—yeah. So, that's what I did. But when I graduated, I had a family—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —because I—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay—

JOHN HELD: —got married right—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —let's talk about this.

JOHN HELD: I got married right after college, in 1969, and I had a daughter soon afterwards.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Didn't you have one previously?

JOHN HELD: I did, but I had never met that one, because I had a child by a high school girlfriend—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —who I only met when she was 35 years old. I mean, that whole other adventure we could talk about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wait a minute. She's—which—okay, which one did you bring to Tom's? [Tom Marioni's weekly studio salon. -PK]

JOHN HELD: The one by the high school girlfriend.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Okay, so—

JOHN HELD: Elizabeth.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —we all met her.

JOHN HELD: Right, right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs] She was very nice.

JOHN HELD: She is very nice—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: —you know, and it's great because we have no childhood baggage whatsoever, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs]

JOHN HELD: We're just kind of friends now and everything. But like I said, I didn't meet her until, you know, she was 35—[00:04:06]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —or so. And so, I—but I had two children very quickly in my first marriage, and I did have to, you know, get a job and support them and everything. I had no idea what direction I should take, but my wife's mother was a librarian, a public librarian, and she suggested I go to library school. And Syracuse University had a very good library school, so that's what I did.

I worked in Utica while I went to library school during 1970, 1971. And it was this time then I first started doing artwork that—I didn't mind becoming a librarian. I enjoyed the job, but it wasn't my life's pursuit.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: You know? And I had been doing a lot of reading on art. I admired artists, and I wanted to feel like an artist felt. So, I started doing artwork, and I started with the simplest thing I knew, pen and ink, black and white, and just making lines. And I would just fill up page—it's like what Bruce Conner did.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh—

JOHN HELD: And it was—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —obsessive.

JOHN HELD: It was about the same time. And the reason I was doing that is to learn patience. You know, you're working with a pen and ink, you know. It could drip in any time. And I'm working on, you know, works that took three months to do, you know, just tiny, little lines and everything. [00:06:00]

But the act of sticking to it, you know, finding time to do it, that was very important to me and eventually developed into something. But at that time, I was pursuing art, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: —after I'd graduated from college.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe we could clarify this a little bit, because this is a big moment. This is a big thing, because from no real interest in art, except theater perhaps—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and then literature—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's art.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: But at any rate, you—was it—were you in library—the library program at Syracuse when this happened? And how did it happen? Why did it happen?

JOHN HELD: Because I was reading about art—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: —and especially Picasso and his circle in the teens and '20s. I was fascinated with that period of art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: Just the freedom that they appear to have, the lifestyle that they had. You know, at this time, everybody my age wanted to become a rock star.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: But to be a rock star you had to have a certain skill with an instrument, which I did not have, or a singing voice, which I certainly did not have.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: And rock-and-rollers had to travel all the time, you know, and it was hell on the family life and everything. But artists could just do—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, you—

JOHN HELD: —art—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —were married now.

JOHN HELD: So, now I married.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, which—

JOHN HELD: And I didn't want to be, like, a married guy with a job. I didn't want to go—

PAUL KARLSTROM: There was—

JOHN HELD: —to be stuck in that rut.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, a crappy job just because you had an obligation to a family.

JOHN HELD: Exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: That really rubbed me the wrong way. [00:08:01]

PAUL KARLSTROM: '69 was when you got—

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —married and had daughter, Amanda.

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: And graduated from college and went to Woodstock.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Everything. Everything.

JOHN HELD: You know, lots of things happened.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Woodstock?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, that happened in 1969.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's hear about that in a moment.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. But, you know, so I wanted to become an artist. I wanted to know artists, and the only way to know artist is kind of to *be* an artist and know how they feel.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, this amazes me. This is one of the more interesting things so far in our wonderful [laughs] interview, is how—so, reading—through reading about, you—rather than looking, you wanted the life of an artist.

JOHN HELD: Well, I was beginning to look as well, because, you know, I didn't live near New York—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —and I started going to galleries. You know, I remember going to Leo Castelli Gallery, you know, and an early pop art show, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, were you interested in pop art, then?

JOHN HELD: A little bit.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sort of?

JOHN HELD: Not too much.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

JOHN HELD: You know, my big thing was Dada and surrealism at the time. And I did have the big Abrams surreal—Dada surrealism book, as well as the big Abrams Marcel Duchamp book in 1969. You know, so I had those two big books, so—which kind of indicates to me that I did have a big interest, you know, in art at this particular time. And I was reading a lot on Picasso and his circle, and now I was becoming serious about art. [00:10:05]

I didn't know in what direction to go, but I did have another revelation through—this is a little bit later, but I was very interested in video art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah, later. Yeah.

JOHN HELD: That's a little bit later. But I was very concerned about, you know, making an impression in art, you know, for pushing it further, and I heard this interview that Nam June Paik did with Russell Conner, who was a video art critic. And Conner asked Paik, "What are your principles?" and Paik said, "Actually, I have no principles. I go where the empty spaces are."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow.

JOHN HELD: And that was huge for me, because it meant I didn't have to start at the top with a big idea of what art and what I wanted to do, that I could just go into an empty space, which was my life at the time, and kind of find my way through it. So, it took a lot of pressure off of me, you know, that I didn't have to make a big splash right away.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, why—forgive me, but I must interrupt—

JOHN HELD: [laughs]

PAUL KARLSTROM: —briefly. You say your life was an empty space. Now, that's a big statement. Can you explain that?

JOHN HELD: Well, I mean, I was 22 years old, you know, and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That suggests a rich future—

JOHN HELD: So—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —ahead of you.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, so I had a rich future, but it was a blank future, you know. I didn't know how to fill it, and it was all right not to have to fill it right away, that I could just kind of find my way through it. So, that's what I did. [00:12:12]

I just took it one step at a time, and I started with the pen-and-ink work, and then I found the rubber stamps, and everything exploded from there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe the pen-and-ink work interest came from John Held, Jr.

JOHN HELD: Somewhat, although it wasn't figurative work at all, or representational. It was just tiny lines. It was hatchings. It—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, it was abstract.

JOHN HELD: It was abstract.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: And it wasn't even headed anywhere. It was just making little lines, making little lines, watching them grow, and when it filled the page that was it. You started a new one.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That sounds just like Bruce Conner.

JOHN HELD: No, it was—and it happened at the same time Bruce Conner was doing—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interesting.

JOHN HELD: —his work. Not that I knew, you know, anything about Bruce Conner at the time, or maybe I did. I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year?

JOHN HELD: '72 or so, '74, around there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you were where?

JOHN HELD: I was in Utica, because—what happened—I went to Syracuse; I got my library degree; I went to Watertown, New York, way upstate—

PAUL KARLSTROM: On a job?

JOHN HELD: On a job—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: My first—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [inaudible], yeah.

JOHN HELD: My first public library job. And then I came back to Utica and—no, as a matter of fact, the—yeah, I came back to Utica. And then, I separated from my wife, and I went down to Maryland for a while, for a year.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, why did you separate? Or we can save that, actually. I'm sorry, that interrupts your flow. [00:14:04]

JOHN HELD: Well, I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or we could dispatch it easily [laughs].

JOHN HELD: It's kind of a one ball of wax, you know. It all flows into each other and everything. But I don't know. We were just having troubles at the time. I wasn't very good or satisfied being a father, quite frankly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You had two—

JOHN HELD: I had two kids—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —by now, yeah.

JOHN HELD: —and I guess I felt a little trapped by that. For whatever reason, it wasn't working out. But I did have a great love, you know, for my first wife, and I did go down to Maryland, but we got together again. I brought the family down to Maryland. We lived there for a while, and then came back up to Utica, where I got a job at the Mid-York Library System.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, you were in Maryland?

JOHN HELD: I was in Maryland for a year.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: Salisbury, Maryland.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, it's in there, I bet.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. And you know, that was fine, and I was continuing to do art, and there was a couple of newspaper articles in Maryland about my artwork and everything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's starting a career.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, it was the start of a career, actually. And then, when I came back to Utica I started entering artworks in—I think it's called The Art of Central New York, sponsored by Munson-Williams-Proctor, Institute. It's a very good museum in Utica called Munson-Williams-Proctor—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, right, we all know that.

JOHN HELD: It's a fantastic collection.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I have never seen it, though.

JOHN HELD: It's very good, and it's a Phillip Johnson building. And I was very fortunate in that I formed a very close bond with the director there, Edward Dwight, who kind of took me under his wing. And I did several exhibitions at Munson-Williams-Proctor. It was the first curatorial work that I did. [00:16:07]

It was a little bit after I started with the mail art, and I exhibited some letters that I had been receiving from a place in Italy. And then we get to something else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But—

JOHN HELD: I did a big show on Oneida Community.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: And that's a whole other phase of my life—

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, I mean, that—

JOHN HELD: —which we haven't raised yet.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That sounds like worth some time. We got on—I took us off track a little bit by asking you about what went wrong in your marriage—[they laugh]—and somehow that—

JOHN HELD: Somehow, I—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Before, it was about Bruce Conner and timing or something like that.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I mean, you know, I was—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, whether you maybe knew his work or—

JOHN HELD: I don't think I knew his work—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: —at the time. But he was doing, you know, those little pen-and-ink works—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, right.

JOHN HELD: —and everything, and then—but it was also very similar to what Jasper Johns was doing with his hatching—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —the hatching painting. Not cross-hatching, because they weren't crossed. They were hatched.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: Hatch marks. So—and that's what I was doing with pen and ink, just doing hatch marks all over the page and everything, but I was also interested in, you know, Dada surrealism, so—and artist books. So, I got interested in artist books a little bit and, you know, I was rubber-stamping matchbooks, you know, just a whole bunch of stuff.

So, the first big show I had was that rubber stamp show in Amsterdam, but the first one locally was at the Kirkland Art Center in Clinton, New York. It was called Post-Dada: Relics—Documents and Relics, and I showed not only the works, but you know, the ink bottles and the pens—[00:18:12]

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: —and you know, little ephemeral things as well. So, I was very—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [inaudible], yeah.

JOHN HELD: —interested in the process. I was just as interested in the process of art as I was the product of art, and that became even more pronounced down the line.

But I really do want to mention now my library work, leading into archival work for the Oneida Community Historical Committee, because that was major. So, I was working for the—I was married, in Utica. I was working for the Mid-York Library System, which covered three counties in upstate New York, including Oneida. And Oneida was the site of a major utopian community in the 1850s, about 1850 to 1890.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were you hired then—

JOHN HELD: I was hired by the Oneida Community Historical Society to conserve the old newspapers that the community printed, because they were in the basement of this big mansion house. They had a Mansion House that housed 300 members and was upkept by Oneida Limited, which was a big silverware company that grew out of Oneida Community. And so, they had this Mansion House. They took the drains off the Mansion House, and the water ran straight down into the basement, and all the old newspapers started growing like orange and purple mold all over it.

00:20:05

So, I was hired to dry them out and take them to the New England Document Conservatory Center and have them gassed. And after the papers were conserved it went—they went to Syracuse University Library.

But I became very close to the descendants of Oneida Community, and in particular a relative of Jessie Kinsley, who was an original member of the community who started doing these braidings. And they were pictorial braidings that commemorated everyday scenes of communal life. They were fantastic, you know, big braidings, some of them nine foot long, you know, that were in the boardroom of Oneida Limited.

And so, I gathered all these braidings, both from Oneida Limited and community members, and had a big exhibition at Munson-Williams-Proctor in 1980. And that opportunity was given to me by Ed Dwight, who was the director of the museum. And as I say, that was my—one of my first big curatorial projects.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it sounds more—well, the conservation aspect is not necessarily curatorial, but then you put on a show. Is that correct?

JOHN HELD: Then—yeah, I mean—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of those materials?

JOHN HELD: No, not of the—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not of that?

JOHN HELD: —of those materials, of the braidings by Jessie Kinsley, who was a descendant of—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: —who was a member of the community.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What's his name?

JOHN HELD: Her—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] Oh, her.

JOHN HELD: —name. Jessie, J-E-S-S-I-E—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: —Kinsley, K-I-N-G-S-L-E-Y [sic]. [00:22:02]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Thanks. Okay.

JOHN HELD: But do you know who Kenneth Hayes Miller was?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: You know, he was an instructor at the Art Students League—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —in New York for a long time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He's well-known.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, well, he was well-known.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: You know. But he was a descendant of Oneida Community. So, that kind of ties the art thing—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you then come in contact with him or were aware of him because of working on the Oneida material—

JOHN HELD: I was aware of him, but he was deceased by the time—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, but I mean, in—did you know about him prior to the Oneida connection?

JOHN HELD: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, so—

JOHN HELD: So, I was learning all these things about Oneida Community, and in the course of that I became very interested in utopian communities as a rule.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, boy.

JOHN HELD: So, when I found out about mail art—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: —everything came together, because I viewed mail art as this kind of international utopian community, or a community, and it had the makings of a better world.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, boy. Okay [laughs].

JOHN HELD: Yeah. So, I mean, now it gets very complicated and everything, because everything is starting to come together now. The artwork, the participation in mail art, meeting Ray Johnson, who also had a healthy interest in utopian societies. And one reason I became close to Ray Johnson—and I should mention soon after I met Ray Johnson in 1977 or so, he came up to the area where I was living in upstate New York. We did an interview together, a video interview, which was one of his rare interviews. [00:24:07] So, he was the start of my interview career, yeah. You're not the only interviewer in the room.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: You know, I'm a novice compared to you—

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, if you'd waited I would have sung your praises about your interviews.

[They laugh.]

Quid pro quo.

JOHN HELD: But back then, I interviewed Clement Greenberg, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I remember.

JOHN HELD: He—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean—

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —I know that [inaudible] so.

JOHN HELD: —met him. He came to the library; we did a video interview together. And so, yeah, I mean, by this time I was really getting into the art scene.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're launched, and—by any measure. You're launched in your career. See, it happened right here.

JOHN HELD: Yeah—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or here—

JOHN HELD: It was all coming together about 1980 for sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. You—I don't know if I—I can't remember if I sent you my essay on Moral Rearmament, a utopian religious community or movement—a big movement—that—you talk about Oneida Community, and it brings that to mind.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm not going to say more than that, although I've written an essay about it and delivered it at my Chit-Chat-Club.

JOHN HELD: Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And the point is that what you're describing, and especially this idea of building a better world, a better future, is something that to me is extremely interesting. And the only thing further I'll say about it, and I write from—as a child, my own experience. Somebody should interview me. Oh, well. [00:26:04]

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that every one of these—well, the community I was writing about, the movement I was writing about briefly, my question to myself—was it a cult or not a cult? And I ended up thinking, even though it was well-intended in the extreme, it's a cult. And—

JOHN HELD: Well, Oneida Community was a cult, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: I mean, it had—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, that's what I was leading to.

JOHN HELD: It had a central leader, John Humphrey Noyes—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah, John Humphrey Noyes.

JOHN HELD: —and eventually they broke up because, you know, they—the local clergy was against them and accused them of sleeping with, you know, underage, you know, members.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, was it a religious utopian community?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because not all of them were.

JOHN HELD: They—it was called "perfectionism;" that they were born without sin.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: But it was a very interesting—I mean, I don't really—

PAUL KARLSTROM: It sounds—

JOHN HELD: —want to go into all the—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —sounds—I'm fascinated, but we of course—

JOHN HELD: Well, I was totally, you know, wound up with this. They believed in complex marriage. They—

PAUL KARLSTROM: What's that?

JOHN HELD: Complex—that everybody in the community was married to everybody else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, oh, yeah.

JOHN HELD: And they had some of the first adult education in the United States. There was a lot of innovative things going on. I mean, this is, you know, the 18th—the mid-19th century, when upstate New York was called the "Burned-over District," burned over because there were so many preachers going through the area trying to recruit members to their particular cult.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: The Mormons—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —the Shakers.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, the Shakers—

JOHN HELD: The Brotherhood of the New [. . . Life -JH] They were all upstate New York, you know, communities and everything. [00:28:03]

And—but Oneida was central to this, and there were historians in the Oneida Community who wrote about all the other, you know, utopian efforts or intentional community efforts in the country and everything. So, it was—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because they were—

JOHN HELD: —absolutely fascinated, and while I was working on the archive, there was somebody there my age who was writing an opera about the Oneida Community, so we were constantly bouncing ideas off each other. And it was—it completely overtook my life for about four years, you know. But this was the same time that—

PAUL KARLSTROM: As a study, though, not—you were not attracted to the belief system—

JOHN HELD: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —or to anything like that.

JOHN HELD: No. To the religious part? No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: That left me cold. But the social aspect of it. The—everybody living together, you know, in an intentional community. That had great, you know, interest for me, because at this time I was immersed in the mail art community—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: —which I saw as kind of a manifestation of an intentional art community that was international in scope.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, mail art—to you, there was an overlap, a connection between the Oneida Community and the mail art community.

JOHN HELD: Absolutely, absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which I think anybody who knows—everybody who knows anything about mail art would get that right away in terms of community. [00:30:01]

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I mean—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think.

JOHN HELD: Well, when you describe mail art, it's very difficult, because when you describe mail art, you're basically describing yourself, you know. It's one of these things that's so broad that whenever you try to, you know, describe it, define it, you're basically defining your own interest in it and everything. So, I always talk about mail art as a communal activity, but there's plenty of mail artists who don't think that way at all. They just think it's a fun type of activity, kind of—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like me.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, like pen pals, you know. I mean, mail art is very much like pen pals, but "pen pals" kind of indicates a hobby.

PAUL KARLSTROM: See, I still—oh, if you want to look at it that way—

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: —what's-her-name, that nice person to whom you introduced me, and I actually sent her a mail art with a picture of you in it. I think she's Chinese-American, perhaps. Anyway, you introduced me, and so—and she was keen on getting correspondence going.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that's, you know, I need to say about it. And I gave it my one effort, but that's called a one-off, because it's too big a commitment.

JOHN HELD: Well, it is a big commitment—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —mail art, because here's the other thing that we haven't—I—you'll probably bring this up later, but, like, how does my library work fit with the mail art work? It was incredible, because

when you're working for a library—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah.

JOHN HELD: —you've got photocopy machines. Photocopy is very important in mail art, you know. [00:32:05]

And I had mailing privileges, or maybe I misused those mailing privileges, so I was writing—also, you know, you would sit—I would sit on a reference desk and answer questions, but you have a lot of downtime, so I could answer letters then. So, I could write letters and, you know, to fill in some downtime, and I had the mailing, you know, department to draw from. So, I was writing 20 or 30 letters a day.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow.

JOHN HELD: I—my collection, which I inventoried last year, is composed of 64,000 letters and postcards. That's

a lot of mailing, and most people can't be bothered to write letters, especially now with email.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know, I know. It's terrible.

JOHN HELD: But it's a particular activity that some people can handle, and some people can't. And it's usually, quite frankly—talk about letter writing—it's usually women who write the letters in the family and not the men. You know, it's women who answer the thank-you notes and who compose the thank-you notes and everything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Would it be wrong of us now—or for me to ask this question? What has the internet done to the mail art movement?

JOHN HELD: Well, if anything, it's enlarged it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It has?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, because you would think—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because you don't to write it. You just have to send it online. Is that right? [00:34:01]

JOHN HELD: No, it's that—it was very hard to find out about mail art before the internet.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: You know, you either stumbled into it, or you see a mail art show, you know, and you would get involved through that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: Or you had a friend. But there wasn't very much written about it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well—

JOHN HELD: You know, so it was hard to get involved, or hard for people to learn about it. But now, you just have to Google mail art and there's all this stuff, and there's, you know, sites that list people you could write to, or exhibitions to, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, but does mail art—is it still understood as described as writing words and hand to paper? Because—

JOHN HELD: That—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —you know, the internet is, as far as I am concerned, has a coldness to it—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —that's not at all the same as the, say, Jay Defeos and Wally Hedricks and—

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —all of their little postcards.

JOHN HELD: Surprisingly enough, mail art was really never about the postal system—

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

JOHN HELD: —directly. It was about communicating with other artists cheaply.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: You know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, now they can do it for free.

JOHN HELD: —and broadly. So, like Ulises Carrión said, it was a cultural strategy, so you could do it through fax. There was a lot of fax mail art—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

JOHN HELD: —which wasn't mail, but it fell into mail art. Mail art's like an umbrella for a lot of, you know,

different marginal art forms.

So, the—a lot of older mail artists who have been participating in mail art for 30, 40 years are on Facebook now, and Facebook is just like mail art. I mean, if anything, mail art is beginning to become known as a predecessor of the internet—[00:36:05]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: —because it's a cheap, efficient way to communicate across, you know, geographical barriers and cultural barriers with other artists. And it used to be that the mail was a cheap way to communicate, and now it's the internet is the cheap way to communicate. So—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —it's—as a matter of fact, another term for mail art is the eternal network, which was a concept developed by Robert Filliou, French artist. And he described—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Spell it, okay? Last name?

JOHN HELD: Filliou, F-I-L-L-I-O-U.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. This is for the benefit of the transcriber, see.

JOHN HELD: He was a Fluxus artist—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —and we haven't even discussed Fluxus yet.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, of course not. But we can't discuss everything yet.

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's all [laughs]—

JOHN HELD: It's all one ball of wax, you know. But where were we? Let's see.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, my question—and maybe, since we're on it, it's good to dispatch—it has to do with, I guess—and you're on that—defining mail art in terms of what are the essential requirements to make it—

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —mail art?

JOHN HELD: Yeah. And it's not the postal system, because mail artists also do performance. They also do cassette tapes or, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, right.

JOHN HELD: —music exchange. So, you know, there's all sorts of ways to communicate under the banner of "mail art," and they don't necessarily have to be through the postal system. It's more an attitude than anything else, mail art. [00:38:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so, it isn't, in a sense, object-related the many of us old-timers think of art.

JOHN HELD: Well, objects happen, but it's more process-oriented, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: The act of communicating.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, in other words, it's conceptual art.

JOHN HELD: I think it's a conceptual art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: To me—

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —in my naivete, that's what I think it sounds like.

JOHN HELD: No, no. It's—I mean, and that's the way it kind of was branded in the, you know, '60s—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —and early '70s. It kind of fell under that conceptual art, you know, framework, and I guess it still does.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, process-oriented also—we can save this for the later [laughs]—the later discussion, but where the idea, and maybe the communication of, a network perhaps that sort of separates it a little bit from more standard art. But conceptual art—in many cases, it doesn't actually seem to be where the art is overly concerned with the artifact—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —that there is an artifact that comes from thought process and so forth. And I'm trying to—maybe we should have saved this, but I'm trying to make that fit in a way that I can understand it.

JOHN HELD: Well, I mean, the products of mail art come out of the process, obviously.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: You know, so—but it's not the main thing. The main thing is the participation, I believe, you know, in mail art. Like right now, I'm doing a project. I'm pulling all the photography out of my mail art collection. Okay? There are certain people that send photographs, you know, snapshots, basically. [00:40:13]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: And they may do something on top of it like, you know, cut out of a cartoon, you know, bubble, you know, where somebody's saying something in a cartoon.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah.

JOHN HELD: Cut that out, and you put that—you paste that to the photograph, and you send it through the mail.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: It's a way to communicate for some people, but it's not really the object that's the important thing. It's communicating with somebody else. But when I gather all this material by one person—say I have 50, you know, photographs that they've sent over the years. It becomes a real body of work, and you never see it in its singular form.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: You can only get a sense of it, you know, when it's gathered after a period. So, the important thing is the relationship between the people sending back and forth, not the photograph. That's just a means of communication. It's a communication that is important.

[Brief interruption]

Yeah, so, I mean, I just can't stress enough that the important thing to me is the participation and the process of mail art, not the product of mail art. [00:42:06]

I mean, there's so many things we haven't gotten to, like the people that I have communicated with over the years, and how I made it a practice to communicate with a lot of foreign artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well—

JOHN HELD: And, you know, artists in South America and Eastern Europe who, in the '70s and '80s, you know, were struggling under repressive governments, and the only way they could get their art out and communicate with other artists was through mail art. So, it became very important, and it was important—not the art that they were sending out, but the fact that they wanted to send it out and wanted to communicate with other artists across different cultures. That was the important thing. But later on, you know, 30 or 40 years later, the objects do become important. But—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Everybody has, hopefully, documentation. There are documents. Sometimes art is really only a document of something else.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, and this is why the mail art thing and the library thing go together so well.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, absolutely.

JOHN HELD: You know? Because—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You gather. You organize and—

JOHN HELD: We mentioned earlier—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —interpret.

JOHN HELD: —I became a writer because nobody else was writing about art. I became—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, about mail art.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, exactly, about mail art. But I became a collector because I didn't feel that too many people, in the United States anyway, were taking this seriously enough to want to collect and store, as opposed to recycle. [00:44:17]

A lot of people, you know, they receive something, they do something on top of it, they send it out, and that's probably mail art in its purest form. But, you know, that the buck stops with me, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: You know, when it comes to me it stays with me so I can preserve it. And I do have that librarian/collector/documentarian streak in me—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

JOHN HELD: —that compels me [laughs], you know, to put together this collection that I have now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, [laughs] I think that's a great statement, and I think that makes sense. And you, I think—we'll talk further about this, because I need to think about it as well, but you emphasize participation, communication, as key elements of mail art. And seldom, actually, have I heard you—well, this isn't true, because you've devoted [laughs] part of your career to gathering documents artifacts—artifacts—that I would say—I would suggest can't possibly be—they can represent, but they aren't the original idea of mail art. Communication, participating, and so forth.

And then, whatever you get, do something else to it, and recycle it, and send it away. That is very different. That's very contemporary, very conceptual, I suppose. [00:46:10]

JOHN HELD: Well, it's very participatory.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: It's social practice, you know. Social sculpture, like Beuys says, you know. I mean, I see that mail art as kind of social sculpture.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Look at what happened. We jumped right ahead to the heart of the beast [laughs].

JOHN HELD: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But, you know, that's good, because I think that we can, you know, move on a little bit, and in fact, I think it's really good.

JOHN HELD: Well, it's all part of the story.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it's all part of the story, but there are certain parts that, in connection with this interview and with you, need to be clarified or described as well as we can. And luckily, I'm really interested—

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: —because you're my friend. I mean, and I now—through this process, and then others will have the benefit of it, and whatever finally comes out, to understand better these aspects. And I think one of the things that we—and more could be said about it—but I think English, which means you're dealing with ideas represented by artifacts that embrace ideas—English major. That's one thing. [00:48:00]

Then you move on to librarianship, and there's that and how that, then, connects, obviously, with books and literature and reading, *and* writing, I suppose. Then you move and somehow get into mail art through reading partly, I think, and in terms of the impulse. Sorry, I'm sort of summarizing what I've been getting from all this. And then, this, you know, I think, is achieving what we're trying to do here. So, this is a like a little pep talk at this moment. You can see you're resting a little bit while I—

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: —talk. But we definitely will return to this. I have—the next area is early career. The—and I call it an evolving professional life with a librarian framework, but I think we're—we have—we put that out there to a degree.

JOHN HELD: If I could only add one thing—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anything, yeah.

JOHN HELD: Because in the library work, an area we haven't really touched on too much yet is video, because one of my big responsibilities, aside from reference work, was distributing video to cable television stations—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: —in upstate New York. And I was bringing in some early video art, people like Bill Viola—[00:50:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, sure.

JOHN HELD: —John Sanborn, you know, a lot of people, and distributing this challenging art to cable stations for, you know, broadcast. So, I was really, you know, very involved with video and community access television and that type of thing, which was another aspect of my professional librarian life.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, did you ever—

JOHN HELD: So, I was doing a whole bunch of things all at one time, you know. The mail art, the Oneida Community, the video art. You know, and I should say that I never tried to pursue one avenue of art. I wasn't just an art maker who turned out products. I was also a curator. I was also a writer, you know, and to me it was all the same thing. It all kind of came from the same place, you know, this interest in art, this interest in communal activity, art as a social practice, art as a lifestyle. You know, to me, you know, that's what it was about, you know.

And the families faded away; the jobs came and went. The only constant in my life was the art, and the mail art people became my closest friends. You know, even though I had never met them, and even though they lived in Poland or Uruguay or Russia. They knew me better than anybody, because I was in constant contact with them, you know, and I have been with some of them for over 30 or 40 years. So, that's been my saving grace.
[00:52:14]

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, this is a lot. We're now putting a lot out there, and so our poor—my poor little mind—

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: —has to go around this and try to pick up parts that will help me and others understand. The virtue of mail art for you, in your career, and it as a focal point—certainly the early focal point for your art activity, but that doesn't disallow other things—becomes very, very important, and so your community then becomes international.

And many people—some people you haven't met, and over the years I guess you had the opportunity to meet some of them. And they knew you—what you said was that they knew you better than many of your so-called friends here. That's a really important statement, if I heard it correctly.

JOHN HELD: You heard correctly. I mean—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then the question is, why is that so? What is the content of your art that can really tell who you are to these other people so that they truly know you?

JOHN HELD: Well, you know, there's not a lot of people that are interested in what I'm interested in, to tell you the truth, you know.

[They laugh.]

So, you know—and it's the same thing as—you know, I was interested in the theater when I was in, you know, elementary school and high school, but none of my other friends were interested in that. When I was in upstate New York, you know, college, after college, I was really interested in art and mail art, and nobody else cared about it around me. You know, they put up with it, because it took up so much of my time and interest. [00:54:14]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: But it was those correspondents who I could really relate to, because they were interested in what I was interested in.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's—

JOHN HELD: You know, art historically. They were interested in Dada and surrealism and Russian futurism and, you know, this type of thing. Maybe beat art, you know. They were professionals, and that's where I was headed, you know. Civilians don't pick up on that thing, so you have to form friendships where you can. And we talked about—you mentioned, you know, meeting them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: Which is a whole different avenue, you know, whatsoever, because I've done a lot of traveling to meet mail artists. The thing is that I've built up all these contacts around the world, and I'm able to exhibit—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: I'm able to lecture, and I did a lot of performance, too. So, I would have people arrange for those three things: exhibit, perform, lecture. They would put me up in their homes, so it was kind of reasonably—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Inexpensive.

JOHN HELD: —inexpensive, you know, for me to do the traveling and everything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I always wondered about that. So, that's partly how it works.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. Yeah, no, I would buy the airplane ticket. You know, I don't wait for people to, you know, offer me the financial backing to give a lecture, because it happens so infrequently. I mean, you look at my resume, and it's extensive, you know. [00:56:11]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: It's because I just do it, you know. I don't do it for the financial reward.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: You know, I do it for the experience, and because that's what I do, you know. I—that's what I live for, you know, those—bringing those people—bringing in my correspondents into contact with me.

And I like going to exotic places, you know. So, I've been to Cuba and the Soviet Union when it was the Soviet Union, South America, you know, Asia. I've been to Japan six or seven or eight times, and it's all because of the mail art, you know, contacts and everything, and a willingness to put myself out there without having the financial wherewithal to do so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, because you've—well—

JOHN HELD: I mean, how I get by financially is a whole [laughs] other section.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's in here somewhere, yeah. Well, you know, all of these things—it's like introducing—finding a topic that—or a question—that should be pursued, and it becomes large. And this we will do to the best of our abilities. The reason I'm looking over here is I'm just watching us go into another hour.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. It's—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so, we'll stop in a minute. But maybe we can get a starter answer to this question, and it goes back to being a librarian, which makes total sense to me in terms of how your career and interests have evolved. [00:58:20]

And I'm trying to figure—now, maybe this has been answered, but I'm keen on—no, I think we've answered this—how the shift to art activity came about. I think that we've covered that pretty well, but I'm interested in the

critical writing and historical perspective, as well as the practice of art, you know, being an artist. Because it seems to me you don't distinguish so much between all of that.

JOHN HELD: No, I don't.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And can you say a little bit about that?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I mean, it all comes out of me—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know, the performing, the writing, the art-making. You know, so it comes from a central focal point. As I said, I got into the writing because nobody else was writing about mail art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Smart, smart.

JOHN HELD: And I've always written for like small magazines, you know, that maybe 30 people read—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —until I can to San Francisco. Then it expanded somewhat.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, yeah, that's very special, very elite [laughs].

JOHN HELD: Yeah. But you know—but I enjoyed the writing after a while, and the process of writing. And I've tried to become a better writer, and I think I have. [01:00:03]

You know, I should mention I have never taken an art lesson in my life—a visual art lesson—and I have never taken an art history course in my life. I've never taken—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're an autodidact.

JOHN HELD: I have never taken a writing course in my life, and I kind of stay away from that stuff, because I feel that you just get caught in the commonality of it all, you know. You kind of—I don't want to turn out like everybody else.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, don't worry about that. I don't think there's a danger of that.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I know, but I like going it alone, you know. And it's funny, because you know, we'll talk about maybe Tom Marioni [later -JH].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Later.

JOHN HELD: He's a good friend of mine in San Francisco. But Tom says that you can't be an artist if you never went to—if you haven't gone to art school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He does?

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What a nerve.

JOHN HELD: But you know, that's something I don't believe at all. And—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I—

JOHN HELD: I've, you know, tried to find my own way in the field. I have not done it conventionally at all, and yet, you know, here I am talking to the Archives of American Art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, how did that come about? That will be another thing we discuss.

JOHN HELD: That is one of the great mysteries. Let's leave it there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, let's take a break. This is over two hours. This is the second hour, and we'll start at a new track.

[END OF held17_1of1_sd_track05]

[sound check]

[END OF held17_1of1_sd_track06]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, recording. This is going to be good. Session Two with John Held, Jr. Paul Karlstrom managing the equipment and asking the questions. And we—again this is for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and the date is October 3, 2017. Location, again, my dining room table at my home in San Francisco.

So, John, we—we're doing this, I think, in the right way for our purposes, given our relationship, our friendship, and what we do know about one another. And I'm learning much more about you. And the idea—the goal is to, you know, in the limited—basically, the limited time we have available—I'm hoping we do say four hours.

But anyway, to get the specifics about you, your perspective, your point of view, your understanding of yourself in the art world, and then more general things, because you've been involved in various movements, I mean, in a very perhaps unique way. And since you're a great chronicler and documentarian of—well, mail art especially and so forth. So, that's the context. That's the framework. And I wanted to go back to our last session, the end of it. You said something that, when I just glanced over these notes that I took, popped out at me. And basically, you said—this isn't a direct quote—there are many sides of John Held, Jr., but they're all the same. [00:02:03]

Now, that of course begs the question, if you will, but then you went on to say the only constant, presumably, in your life and work is art. You mentioned mail art, people, friends.

Okay, what I would like to start us out with is this. Based on that quote, my question is, so, for you, what is art? Sorry about that, because that is the huge question, period, no matter if it's you or me or anybody else talking. But specifically, from your perspective—and also, it's the second part of the question for me—is how does all your activity fit into your notion of what is art? In other words, narrow it if you can, if you will [laughs].

JOHN HELD: Well, art perhaps can be defined in many ways, but for our purposes, my purposes—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —maybe describe it as cultural work and my role in it as a cultural worker. Number one, I find it kind of presumptuous when people call themselves an artist. I think that's something that other people should call a person, not the person calling himself. So, I prefer calling myself a cultural worker, and that work in the cultural sphere takes many forms: writer, rubber stamp artist, interviewer, bibliographer, collector, cataloguer, librarian. [00:04:04]

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] Is that all? Isn't there more?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I mean, it keeps going. But what I've tried to do is, you know, be as broad as possible in my approach, because I have many areas of interest. And so, they're all important to me. I mean, just interviewing people like Clement Greenberg, Ray Johnson, Allan Kaprow, Anna Halprin, Lawrence Ferlinghetti—I mean, that's an art in and of itself, as you well know, being the ace, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: —interviewer-slash-interrogator of artists on the West Coast. And I mean, that's one reason we're such good friends, I think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: But that's, you know, one aspect. There's—then there's the art. I mean, I do visual art every day, sometimes paint. More recently, just working with rubber stamps that I've, you know, newly acquired in a recent Japan trip. I'm going through my collection now, you know, to inventory my mail art collection. I'm pulling photographs from it right now to form a mail art and photography collection for a noted curator. So, it's a cultural work, you know. The art thing is—the art terminology is, you know—it's—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Misleading.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, it's misleading.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Tricky.

JOHN HELD: Tricky, you know, calling yourself an artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's right.

JOHN HELD: As I say, I don't like that. I prefer the word "cultural worker," and I think a lot of mail artists are in

the same boat. I mean, although the field is mail art, you know, it's—it branches into social activism, performance, and other things as well. [00:06:11]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, so, following you and understanding—trying to understand specifically your role, I think that's clear. You like to call yourself a cultural worker, but you create products that are visual art, and then that helps, I think, to call—say visual art. When you say art, that's pretty much what you mean.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: But apparently not all. And what I like about it is your interest. You don't see to separate your product. What comes out of—what is the manifestation of your interest? It certainly isn't just a formalist approach where it is what it is and that's all it is, because you have deep interest and, I guess, personal experience in cultural phenomena.

JOHN HELD: Well, there's—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And political/social activism and so forth. Is that right?

JOHN HELD: Well, there's, you know, an art of interviewing. There's an art of collecting. There's an art of making visual notation. There's an art of writing. So, there's no one art—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —as we all know, you know. Cooking is an art, you know, can be an art if it's taken to a certain level. So, the point is that you have to take these things beyond the mere craft of it and put it into another realm that elevates it above craft into something else, and I guess that something else is art, as hard it is to define.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Well, I—that's fair enough. And as I said when I asked the question, I know that it is a huge question that's debated all the time. Nobody fully agrees on that. It has to become specific, and that's what you're doing. [00:08:07]

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: But a cultural worker is interesting, and in a sense, that's pretty grand, because our culture is us and our world. And I think that—I understand what you mean because you're dealing with creative culture, if I may put it that way, you know, to get more specific. And then you have chosen—you have come to modes that work for you in—and allowing you to explore and reveal what you discover along the way. Is that close to it?

JOHN HELD: Well, art is a community, too, you know, and there are many houses in the community, you know. I failed to mention being a curator as well. So, I mean, there's all these different aspects, you know. But to me, it's—basically it all comes from the same spirit.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Impulse, would you say?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, impulse, the same approach to life. You know, I've got a rubber stamp that reads "By John Held, Jr., who sometimes wonders what it's all about," which I took from the original John Held, the flapper artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, he said that?

JOHN HELD: He said that.

[They laugh.]

But I reiterate it daily, because that's the thing that drives me. That's the impulse—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —you know, the wonderment of it all. If I have any firm belief at all, it's that—and the belief is my enjoyment of inquiry, and I think that's what—[00:10:05]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —keeps me going and drives me forward. I've had a lot of help along the way in doing that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When do we get to talk about that? I'm thinking specifically people. In your chronology, you list important people, and there are quite a few. But why don't you choose several of the most important ones in

helping you to—what shall we say—hone your approach, your methods, sharpen your tools?

JOHN HELD: Who put me on my path.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, how's that?

JOHN HELD: So, I have to mention one of my library school instructors, Antje Lemke.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you spell the last name?

JOHN HELD: L-E-M-K-E.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Lenke?

JOHN HELD: Lemke.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: And she was a very noted art librarian who held summer symposiums on art librarianship for, you know, 20 or 30 years at Syracuse University. I mean, she was really the top of the field, and so I learned a great deal from her, plus I learned a lot from her just by her personality.

And when I say that people are influences on me, it's not so much that they taught me certain things, but they personified certain things. And Antje Lemke was a very open person, willing to meet everybody at their own level and elevate them from that level.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What's her first name? I'm having trouble with—

JOHN HELD: Antje, A-N-T-J-E. Her father was the noted German theologian Rudolf Bultmann. [00:12:07]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I've heard of Rudolf Bultmann.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. And she was very good friends with Albert Schweitzer, and she became head of the Albert Schweitzer Foundation. And she died just recently in—I believe it was June of this year, 2017. So, I mean—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you keep up with her at all?

JOHN HELD: Yeah—

PAUL KARLSTROM: A little bit?

JOHN HELD: We did, but not in the last couple of years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: But she must have been into her 90's, you know, high 90's, by the time she passed away. So, she was very important to me in library school. And another important woman in my life was Jean Brown.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: I had already discovered rubber stamps and had been in contact with Ray Johnson and was doing mail art, but then I read an article by Katharine Kuh—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —on marginal art forms, and she centered on Jean Brown and her archive in Tyringham, Massachusetts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, she was an archivist?

JOHN HELD: She was a public librarian—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —who developed a collection of Dada and surrealist ephemera in the '50s with her husband Leonard. Then when Leonard died she began—someone took her to a Fluxus event and she became very good friends with George Maciunas, the impresario of Fluxus, and she supported a lot of his projects. And when Maciunas—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Majunas?

JOHN HELD: Maciunas, M-A-C-I-U-N-A-S. [00:14:00]

When he left New York—and he was a settler of Soho. He was developing artist housing in these warehouse spaces, so he had both the Attorney General of New York State after him for breaking zoning laws, and he had the Mafia after him because he was loan-sharking with them. And when he didn't give a payment to them in time, one of the henchmen put out his eye. So—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ooh.

JOHN HELD: —after that, he left New York and settled in upstate—in Massachusetts, western Massachusetts, to be near Jean Brown. He lived in Great Barrington. And I would often stay with Jean after, you know, I initially met her, and look around in her archive and discover new things, and I would stay at the house, you know, over the weekend. But at some point—at some time she couldn't put me up, so she had me stay with Maciunas, which was an incredible opportunity for someone in their late 20's. I mean, he was—has become one of the giants of 20th century art—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: —in my mind anyway. So, that was an invaluable relationship formed through the auspices of Jean Brown. But she was very important to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did she introduce you to Fluxus, or had you already discovered Fluxus?

JOHN HELD: No, she was the one who introduced me, I would think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: I mean, I might have heard about it a little bit and—but I hadn't been able to put it into any context —

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know. But through her, you know, I was able to meet a lot of the Fluxus artists like Dick Higgins and Yoshi Wada. [00:16:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yoshi Wada?

JOHN HELD: Yoshi Wada, who became a good friend of mine.

PAUL KARLSTROM: As it sounds? Spelled as it sounds?

JOHN HELD: Yeah. Yoshi, Y-O-S-H-I; Wada, W-A-D-A.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's pretty straightforward.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: But he's a sound musician, and he was Maciunas' right-hand man. But later on in life he moved to San Francisco and we became great friends, although we met as early as 1977, when I was doing research on Fluxus Island that George Maciunas was trying to establish—establish.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Tell me about it. You've got to tell me something about that.

JOHN HELD: Oh, well, this is a great story, because he wanted to develop this Fluxus Island, and he plotted out, you know, different lots and—but they were going down to survey it. So, it was Maciunas, Yoshi, Milan Knizak, who is currently the Director of the National Museum of the Czech Republic, and Robert De Niro, the film actor. Because Robert De Niro's mother—his mother was an artist, as well as his father, and she was thinking about buying a plot, so they sent Bobby to help Maciunas survey the island.

And supposedly, De Niro took film of that trip, which was eventful, because the first night they slept under a tree for shelter. This was in the Virgin Islands, the British Virgin Islands. And in the morning, they woke up, and they were all swollen, because the tree was poisonous and dripped—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sap.

JOHN HELD: —you know, sap on them. And so, like, Maciunas' eyes were all closed and everything, and they had to be airlifted off the island.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What—which island was it?

JOHN HELD: It's called Ginger Island. [00:18:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I've heard of that. It probably got flattened by the hurricanes.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, probably. I mean—yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ginger—

JOHN HELD: But, yeah, so that was a great adventure. And I mean, Maciunas had all sorts of great adventures. I mean, I could go on and on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, you were—

JOHN HELD: But let me just say one thing that—you know, things lead in mysterious ways sometimes. So, you know, I had this, you know, my inner—I wouldn't even call it a friendship with Maciunas, but I met him. Years later, I met Anna Halprin, who was very instrumental in the beginnings of Fluxus, so it's funny how—but I didn't meet Anna until 2010 or so, or '12, you know, years—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't know—well, I guess I don't know that much about Anna Halprin, but I didn't know of her involvement with Fluxus.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, let me try to put it in a nutshell. Anna was teaching dance in the late '50s to people like Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Robert Morris, on her dance deck in Kentfield, California. And they were joined by La Monte Young and Terry Riley, who was providing sound for them. After these—and what Anna was doing was post-narrative dance. It was events structures, like "move a log from A to B," you know, and it was up to the dancer to do the intermediate steps between the instructions.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, that's the improv part.

JOHN HELD: Right, that's the improv part of it. But she would lay out an outline of—to improvise from. [00:20:02]

So, she had all these event scores written down which La Monte Young took to New York, and he was going to publish it in a magazine, but Maciunas encountered him first and said, "I want to publish these." So, they collaborated on the first Fluxus production, which was a publication called *An Anthology*.

PAUL KARLSTROM: *An Anthology*.

JOHN HELD: *An Anthology*, which published a lot of these event scores, and Anna was included in the second project, which was a Fluxus yearbook, *Yearbook One*. So, she was included in that. So, Anna had a big influence on Fluxus, and not many people know that. You know, her—the emphasis on Anna's history is that she's, you know, the mother of post-modern dance, which her students—you know, Brown, Rainer, Forti—developed into Judson Church Dance Theater in the early '60s. But anyway—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well—

JOHN HELD: —getting back to Jean Brown, so, I mean, she was the one who introduced me to these Fluxus artists, and not only that, but Maciunas had built an archive for her on the second floor of her Shaker seed house. She had a Shaker seed house moved to her property in which she lived. So, she was living in the Shaker style, so to speak, with chairs hung on the walls, and upstairs Maciunas built an archive in the style of the Shakers, with cabinets built into walls with just little knobs to pull out and everything. Very unobtrusive. A long table in the center with objects on it. [00:22:03]

But you know, Jean would just let me have free run of the place and go into these cabinets and pull out what I wanted, you know. So, she was very well informed of mail art, and actually was funding a lot of early mail art projects. Like the Mohammed [. . . -JH] Center of Restricted Communication, which was run by a Turkish guy in Italy who would do color copying, and sending out—I think I mentioned this earlier, actually. But it was a very mysterious way to send out mail art without you doing it directly. He would do it indirectly for you, very mysterious.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, I think you did mention that, yeah.

JOHN HELD: And I put on a show of his work at Munson-Williams-Proctor in Utica, I think about 1979 or so. About

the same time, I was also curating another show for them on Oneida Community—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ah.

JOHN HELD: —which was, you know, of course, another influence that we talked about earlier.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And we will talk—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —maybe a little bit more.

JOHN HELD: Right. But another big influence at this time was Ray Johnson, too, who also—who had come up to central New York to give an exhibition, a performance at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York. And after his performance, the next day he came to the Mid-York Library System, where I was working, and agreed to give—to do a video interview with me. But—so we had a personal meeting—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And what year was that?

JOHN HELD: Something like 1977, I believe.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. So, well, that's interesting he wanted to do an interview with you. That suggests that you had already established—were recognized as an important figure in this broader movement. Is that right?
[00:24:13]

JOHN HELD: Well, I don't think I was an important figure at this point, but I had—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, then why—

JOHN HELD: I had established contact with him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: We had—we were writing. He was very interested in my work with Oneida Community because—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, okay.

JOHN HELD: —he was, you know, interested in community as well in a lot of different ways. But this meeting kind of intensified our relationship. I mean, we had a lot of correspondence between us, and we met several times after that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where has that correspondence gone? Which collection? You have three main repositories.

JOHN HELD: Well, you know—

[They laugh.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: You'd better say Archives of American Art [laughs].

JOHN HELD: Well, I mean, some of the letters did go to the Archives—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —of American Art, but another collection went to a Silicon Valley collector.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, to a private collector?

JOHN HELD: A private collector.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: Yeah, who had been buying his works, his more formal works, and wanted a collection of the letters, too—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —to give some content to that thing. Yeah, I mean, we get into my collecting and dispersal activities later on, I think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's pretty important, though.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I mean, you know, my things have gone all over the place. You know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, mainly Museum of Modern Art; the Getty Research Center—

JOHN HELD: Right, and the Archives of American Art, and private collectors here and there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That—well, since you mention private collectors—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —how do you feel about that—[laughs] it's nice, because you get paid, then—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:26:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and I guess the Getty paid you, and MoMA. Archives is the only poor organization that hasn't, I guess. But at any rate, you are an archivist. I mean, this is one thing you clearly are. It's like it's in [laughs] your DNA or something. I mean, that's—I noticed this from when I practically first met you, because, you know, because of my work.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And the idea of letting anything, as a matter of fact—like works of art of course are going to go in private collections and all that, but what it does, presumably, is take it out of the public domain, not available or accessible. Do you—I guess the way to ask this politely is, do you discuss that with these collectors and just say, "Well, you know, will they be available at all to serious people who are interested?"

JOHN HELD: Well, I think the materials should be available, and that's why I don't mind placing it in institutions. I mean, better there than my closet, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.].

JOHN HELD: It's a bit controversial in mail art, what to do with the mail art—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —because of course it comes as a gift to you. But then again, you're gifting the same person in return with the works that you send them, so it's kind of an even exchange as far as I'm concerned.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, ownership is not a real factor in that, in mail art? It's just a temporary possession of—

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I mean—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —you know.

JOHN HELD: —things flow through you—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know. I'm not one to regret, you know, letting things loose, because I think they're let loose for the better, you know. Much better than my collection of mail art magazines are available at MoMA New York than—[00:28:06]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know, sitting in boxes, you know, in storage at my place.

PAUL KARLSTROM: On Eighth Avenue [San Francisco].

JOHN HELD: Yeah. I mean, I think mail art is important, you know, and I think it's contributed to the culture of our day, and I want people to realize that. And they're not going to realize it until they see these collections after they surface, you know, through or at major institutions that they can gain access to it. So, I have no compulsion about holding back work for the sake of holding back work, because it shouldn't be placed in institutions when it was meant to go to an individual, you know. That's part—it's all part of one process as far as I'm concerned.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well—

JOHN HELD: You know, the exchange between artists, and then that exchange eventually winds up in an archive, so it can be examined by other people so that they—so that the public can better understand the shifts in cultural history, and mail art provided a big shift in that it paved the way towards the internet, basically.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's interesting, because the way you describe mail art has—it's not schizophrenic, but it has several separate aspects, depending on the moment, let's say, and one of them is as document. And this is very important in connection with you. I know this much since I helped get your—these documents, some of them, into the Archives of American Art. [00:30:07]

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And yet—and so a document is a document. It tells a story that helps us understand and explain times and activities and art expressions and so forth. And then, there are then the objects, and these people who collect these objects, these documents, probably aren't collecting—it isn't first and foremost in their minds that it's a document with information to help people understand. It's because they want to have it. And these are kind of conflicting. Maybe, in the end of the day, it all washes out.

JOHN HELD: Well, the other conflict is that, you know, mail art is supposed to be a practice outside of the official art establishment—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, we'll talk about that.

JOHN HELD: —outside of the gallery—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —and museum system. And it pretty much has stayed that way. I mean, as we speak, in 2017, there has not been a major or even a minor exhibition of mail art in a major, you know, museum. That's something, you know, I'm still waiting for, much as I waited for Fluxus to rise to the surface. You know, I met Jean Brown; I fell in love with Fluxus and what they were doing, but it was, you know, 15 or 20 years before the public became conscious of that. And—[00:32:02]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I—yeah.

JOHN HELD: —only—it—they only became conscious of it because my dealer friend Steven Leiber bought a collection and sold it to the Walker Arts Center, who did a major exhibition, *In the Spirit of Fluxus* which had an incredible catalogue accompanying it and which garnered, you know, reviews in major art periodicals, and then it surfaced. That's yet to happen with mail art, but I'm trying to pave the way towards it by placing the material in institutions where it becomes available to academicians.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How would you describe mail art within a Fluxus context, or is it entirely separate? Because I think this maybe is a really important thing—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —for you to comment upon.

JOHN HELD: Well, when I first was doing mail art, everybody was harping on Ray Johnson as the father of mail art and giving him really the major credit in the establishment of this network. People were interested in Fluxus, don't get me wrong, but the attention was going towards Ray Johnson and his activities.

When I began writing about mail art, I heartily acknowledged Ray Johnson's influence, but I didn't want people to forget the Fluxus influence as well. And, you know, Maciunas tried to incorporate Ray Johnson into Fluxus, and he did have him participate in certain activities even pre-Fluxus at a gallery that he had. But Johnson was iconoclastic and really wasn't a joiner, you know, so he wasn't going to join Fluxus, much as Allan Kaprow was recruited but refused to, you know, operate under Maciunas. [00:34:23]

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, within—being defined then by Fluxus. Kaprow was not going to have that.

JOHN HELD: Exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: Johnson and Kaprow did not want to be defined by Fluxus. They were their own, you know, entity. But Fluxus did a lot of mail-based events, especially Robert Watts, George Brecht, who developed a Water Yam Festival, much of it which took place through the mail in the early '60s. Fluxus artists used rubber stamps heavily, especially Ben Vautier, the French artist—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ben Vautier—

JOHN HELD: V-A-U-T-I-E-R. And Ken Friedman. Ken Friedman was really kind of the link between the older Fluxus artists and the younger generation of mail artists that were coming up in the late '60s and early '70s, and he put on a very important mail art exhibition called Omaha Flow Systems in Kansas, I believe it was. Omaha, Kansas—is that Kansas or Iowa? I don't know. Whatever.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Omaha—geez, isn't that funny?

JOHN HELD: Anyway—but anyway, people were sending in you know, mail, and he would just put everything up on the wall. It was Ray Johnson who really developed that strategy, because he curated a show with Marcia Tucker at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970—[00:36:10]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, Marcia Tucker.

JOHN HELD: —the New York Correspondence School, where—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is Omaha in Nebraska?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, Nebraska [laughs].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yay.

[They laugh.]

JOHN HELD: I'm glad we figured that out. Yeah, so Ray Johnson established the strategy for a mail art show. He put out an invitation. Anybody was free to enter without fees. There was no jurying, so everything that came in was put up on the wall.

One reviewer said of it, "It's sad to see a butterfly pinned to the wall," meaning that it was maybe unbecoming for this personal correspondence to be shared publicly. Maybe it lost some of its energy in that procedure. But mail art shows became very popular, because it was one way to extend the medium to the public. So, there's always been two faces to mail art, the private, one-to-one correspondence and the public exhibition which introduces people to the field and extends the field.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hmm.

JOHN HELD: So, I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, this is good. Naturally and not accidentally exactly, but we're now touching upon the next points in—on this list which we refer to, which was sort of outline or summary of what we were going to talk about. [00:38:16]

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And full disclosure: I find this now extremely useful, and a framework.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: But so this business of important people, influential individuals, and so forth we've covered pretty well, or—not completely. I realize that. That's going to change, though, when we go to—we still haven't talked about Texas, and we haven't talked at all about San Francisco, California—

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —which is huge.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, no, we should get to it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And—but can we talk about—briefly—about your time in Texas? How many years was that?

JOHN HELD: I was there, I think, 14 years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow, that's—

JOHN HELD: I moved there from 1981, and I was there until 1995. I had gotten divorced during the end of my New York stay, and it was a pretty small town, and it wasn't big enough for the two of us. So, I—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, what do you mean by that?

JOHN HELD: Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Come on

JOHN HELD: —I still had very strong feelings about family and, you know, losing, you know, day-to-day contact with my children and everything, you know. And I had just reached the point where it was time to move on. So, I applied to various places, including the Dallas Public Library, in the art division, and I was accepted there. [00:40:00]

So, I moved down to Dallas with, I think, two boxes. I sent two boxes down there, a box of rubber stamps and mail art and a box of clothes. That was it. But—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: —I enjoyed my stay there. They had a very small but lively art community in Dallas, Texas, which I enjoyed immensely interacting with. I went down there with a lot of video, because I was doing video art in the library in New York, and I started a video art study group at the Dallas Public Library.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When you say, "video art," this was within the context of your job as the librarian?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, it was like—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, what does that mean? You're just documenting....

JOHN HELD: Well, I was distributing video art through cable systems in upstate New York, so I had gathered a pretty good library of video art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, this was not your own video art?

JOHN HELD: No, no, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: This is other people's video art, which was a field that was just developing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: I mean, you know, Nam June Paik purchased a Portapak—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —and I think it was 1968, you know. So, it was a relatively new field, video art, and a lot of artists were using it to document their performances as well as make, you know, artworks from, you know, like Nam June Paik scrambling video with magnets and stuff like that.

So, anyway, I took that down to Dallas with me, and that was my entrée to the art community in Dallas, by presenting these video art pieces. And down the line, I was asked by the, you know, Dallas Museum of Art to put on a festival of video art. And that festival was taken over by a friend of mine, Bart Weiss, and it continues to this day. I think it's in its 30th year. So, that was maybe my main contribution to my stay in Dallas. [00:42:06]

But when it happened I was on my own. I did meet up with the exhibits librarian at Dallas, Paula Barber, who—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean at the museum?

JOHN HELD: No, at the library.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, well, you were working at the museum.

JOHN HELD: I was working—no, no, I was working at the library.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, at the library. Right.

JOHN HELD: Right. And she—

PAUL KARLSTROM: She was—

JOHN HELD: I was in the Fine Arts Division; she was head of exhibits, so we did a lot of collaboration.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: Like, for some reason, sports fell into my bailiwick, so we did like a—I don't know, twentieth anniversary celebration with the Dallas Cowboys, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: And so, Paula and I collaborated on—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean America's team.

JOHN HELD: America's team. We showed all the Super Bowl rings, the championship rings, the Super Bowl trophies, Tom Landry's hat, you know. I have broad interests.

So, you know, we would do things like that. We had an exhibition of rubber stamp art—not rubber stamp art, rubber stamps and libraries, where we solicited unused rubbers stamps from libraries around the country and broke them up into different categories and, you know, did that. It was on the cover of Library Journal, so we got a lot of—and then we—Paula and I opened our own gallery called Modern Realism, and we brought in a lot of, you know, innovative artists, including the work of Ray Johnson and performance artists like Anna Banana and Jurgen Olbrich from Germany. Mail artists who were traveling on a circuit, you know, around the United States would stop in Dallas and give their performance, including Shozo Shimamoto, the Japanese Gutai—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Shimamoto? [00:44:02]

JOHN HELD: Shimamoto, S-H-I-M-A-M-O-T-O. [Laughs.] And so, we did a lot of, you know—sponsored performances with local people like Doug Smith, who is the Reverend Ivan Stang at the Church of the SubGenius. You know, just things that struck our fancy. At first, the gallery was in the smallest building in downtown Dallas.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not in the library?

JOHN HELD: Not in the library. This is separate from the library. And then when I was living with Paula. We married eventually, living together in a building that she owned, and there was space enough to put in a little gallery, so we transformed—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, wait a minute. Is this the exhibition curator at the library you're talking about?

JOHN HELD: Right, she was the exhibition—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Paula?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, the exhibition—

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was her name? Paula—

JOHN HELD: Barber.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —Barber.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, my second wife.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, so that was going on in the Dallas years. You know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —these continual exhibitions at Modern Realism. And as I say, it became a real stopping-in point for visiting mail artists and everything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But that had no connection with the library. It wasn't like an extension or an adjunct or anything like that.

JOHN HELD: No, it—

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was independent.

JOHN HELD: It was an adjunct, but I was doing mail art-related things at the library as well, because I was doing research projects through the library, like making a list of all the mail art exhibitions from 1970 to 1985. That was a publication that the library sponsored. [0:46:00]

And after I did that, I did another project through the library, a *World Bibliography of Mail Art*, where I asked mail artists to send in articles that they had been mentioned in or had written themselves about mail art, and I compiled that into a bibliography which I expanded later into an annotated bibliography, which was published by Scarecrow Press in 1991. And that's really the book that established me as a documentarian of mail art, and it still is by far the largest bibliography of mail art, even though it's, what, 30 years old now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think I have a copy of that.

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You must have given it to me.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I mean, there was only 800 copies published, but it was published in hardback by—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah.

JOHN HELD: —legitimate, you know, library publisher. Beautiful book. So, that was good. But the other thing that was happening during these Dallas years is, you know, I had a stable income, and I had some disposable income, and I did a lot of traveling. And it was easy for me to travel, because I traveled to places where I can meet up with mail artists. They would sponsor, you know, exhibitions and performances and lectures, and they would let me stay, so I didn't have any hotel expenses to put up with. It was just, you know, a matter of getting there by train—you know, by airfare.

But one of the first trips I took was in—I did a lot of, you know, domestic traveling at first. I was in San Francisco in 1984 for an Inter-Dada 1984 festival where a lot of mail artists met. I went to Tallahassee to do some performances there. [00:48:06]

You know, there was a lot of national travel. But in 1988, for the first time I went to Nishinomiya, Japan, where Shozo Shimamoto was based, and we did performances with a number of mail art people from five different countries. And I mean, I could just kind of rattle off other places. From 1988 to 1995, I was in Milan, Italy; Biograd, Yugoslavia; London, England; Eeklo, Belgium; Milan; Novi Sad, Yugoslavia. I was in Estonia when it was part of the USSR.

I was in Hungary; at Budapest there was another big art archive there called Artpool that I went to. I lectured at the V&A Museum in London. I went back to Nishinomiya in Japan; Osaka; Kyoto. And then, in 1995, I went to Havana, Cuba, where I curated a show of mail art at the National Palace of Fine Arts. So, I mean, those were—you know, I was in Paris that same year at the Musee de La Poste to attend an exhibition and do performances there. I was also in Holland and Belgium. So, I mean—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well—

JOHN HELD: —that—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —that, you know, seven-year period was composed of extensive travel.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, so that's quite a laundry list.

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it is—I should mention this—available in your very complete and I think pretty much up-to-date chronology that you made available to me, and I bet you make that available to people upon request if they need that information. [00:50:18]

So, there are all these interesting places, and one thing that we learn from that is you had this kind of surprisingly exotic—based in Dallas, this exotic travel experience, all of it connected and made possible by your growing reputation, partly because the book, no doubt, is a mail art authority.

And it's—we can't talk about each one of those trips, but this makes it clear that you really got around. I suppose a question is—all this unexpected activity and travel, I mean, it's quite wonderful. And how would you describe what it provided for you, how that impacted you, and how it contributed to your career and your maybe shifting interests? Because it had to do that. Those kinds of exposure, staying with those people, and so forth.

JOHN HELD: Well, I mean, I became an "artist," in quotes, cultural worker, so I could meet other artists, because I thought they were the most fascinating people, you know, there were.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: So, I mean, this afforded me the opportunity to meet a lot of artists, you know, mostly emerging artists. They weren't well-known artists for the most part, but they were people like me that were deeply immersed in the arts, in cultural work. Yeah, I mean, I haven't even named all the places that I've been. [00:52:02]

I mean, I was in Uruguay and Argentina and Chile on a Latin American tour. But I just really enjoyed meeting the artists, seeing how they lived rather than what they wrote on paper.

You know, sometimes after you meet an artist, you never write to them anymore. You know, it kills the mystery of the relationship, but sometimes it makes it even better. So, I—it was really an attempt to bring reality into my mail art activities. You know, I didn't want to be doing mail art in a vacuum, you know, just sitting in an ivory tower and writing letters out into the world, you know. I—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's a really good observation, and one could say you didn't want to cast this romantic cloak over all of these people, all of this correspondence, and then create what you want it to be rather than maybe what, in many cases, it is. So, it's a reality check, which is a positive thing. There's still room for romance, by the way.

JOHN HELD: Absolutely, but I mean, you have to remember, too, that one of my main focuses and interests in mail art was notion of the establishment of community—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know, and this was my community, the mail art community.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: And it was of interest to me to meet the community, you know, rather than just read what they had to say about themselves. I wanted to see the actual situation and get to know the real possibilities of cultural interaction. And that's why I made a point to go to these exotic places like Estonia, you know—[00:54:10]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —in the USSR, or Havana, or Montevideo. You know, places to me that, you know, rang of adventure and mystery. I wanted to jump in there and see it for myself, and my contacts in mail art provided me for the opportunity to do that. So, it was really, I mean, a fantastic situation to be placed in. You know, it was one of the perks of mail art which you don't anticipate at the beginning—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —but when you involve yourself so deeply into the field as I did, things naturally expand. So, they expanded from the page, you know, to the travel aspect.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you this. Thinking back, can you choose one or two or three places, but then also people who—well, who were memorable and somehow where you really connected? You know, I don't want to hear that you connected with everybody equally. I—nobody's going to believe that. But you know, there must be some, and maybe even incidents that really were meaningful and memorable for you.

JOHN HELD: Well, the thing that comes to mind immediately is in Cuba—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —in 1995. It was very difficult, you know, to get there. I had to jump through a lot of bureaucratic hoops. The trip was sponsored by Stanley Marsh III, who is an eccentric Texas millionaire who sponsored the Cadillac Ranch—[00:56:08]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: —by Ant Farm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: And you know, he was—he had some television stations and major properties. And he had a work by John Held, Jr., the original John Held, Jr., so—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I almost said the real one, but now you're the real one.

[They laugh.]

JOHN HELD: Well, the alive one anyway. But—so he was interested in my name more than anything else at first. So, you know, we got in contact, and then we became friends, and he gave me a certain—

PAUL KARLSTROM: His name again?

JOHN HELD: Stanley Marsh.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: M-A-R-S-H, the third. And—who passed away the last couple of years. But he provided me the financial wherewithal to go to Cuba.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

JOHN HELD: And actually he was supposed to come with me and—but we weren't able to get a visa for him, and it was very difficult dealing with—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why—

JOHN HELD: Because I was trying to do it legally, so I had to go through the Treasury Department, you know. It was a whole rigmarole. But when I got there I was really—I had been talking to one of the curators of the National Palace of Fine Arts, Abelardo Mena, M-E-N-A-, and he arranged the trip for me. And we had—you know, I issued invitations to the mail art community. Over 700 mail artists participated in this major show. I think it was the first show of mail art in a national museum of art. And it was a fantastic experience, because Abelardo Mena was part of a group called Banco de Ideas. [00:58:00]

So, it was a group of about 20 artists and writers, and they welcomed me into their home and were extremely generous with me. And you know, I was there for two or three weeks, and I was on national television, you know, explaining, you know, mail art nationally to the country. And I kind of fell in—I was single at the time. I was kind of fell in love with one of the members of the group, and the last day I was going to be in Cuba, I had an invitation by the Young Communist Party to go on the viewing stand with Fidel Castro.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: You know, or I get to go to the Tropicana nightclub with this young lady who, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And let me guess. How did you choose?

JOHN HELD: I chose wisely. I went with the woman—

[They laugh.]

—to the Tropicana. But you know, that was what was important to me, you know, the relationships made along the way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You weren't going to have a relationship with Fidel Castro.

JOHN HELD: No, no. I mean, and that would have been nice and everything, but you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You would have a picture, maybe.

JOHN HELD: I prefer this ending, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: This kind of personal ending to the trip, because it was a real friendship made and everything. And —

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where did she live? Was—she was—

JOHN HELD: She lived in Havana.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, so she was Cuban.

JOHN HELD: She was Cuban.

PAUL KARLSTROM: She wasn't—

JOHN HELD: No, she wasn't—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —another traveler like you—

JOHN HELD: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —from the U.S.

JOHN HELD: She was Cuban. And yeah, you know, and then we kept up the relationship for a while, but you know, it was impossible because there was no, you know, postal service directly between the United States and Cuba. It was very difficult to communicate through a third country, although the internet was just coming into play—[01:00:06]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —then in 1995, so we were able to do some internet communication, because they had access through the Young Communist Party headquarters. They had access to the internet.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was your—let's just pause and then very briefly—you were in SDS. You were an activist and would be viewed in the U.S. among conservative circles as being a Communist practically.

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so, what at that time—what were your views on Communism and your relationship to it as a system, as a solution to problems and all? Because you were right there in Cuba where—a major test case.

JOHN HELD: You know, the politics wasn't the important thing for me. It was the, you know, one-to-one contact with others in different cultures that was important to me. I'm really not a very political person. You know, I lean towards the left. My parents were big Roosevelt fans, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: We had Eleanor Roosevelt to our house. I mean, that's a whole other story, I suppose. But my mother was president of the PTA at the time, and Eleanor Roosevelt was speaking to the PTA, so she came to dinner at our house before the—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember that?

JOHN HELD: —meeting. I remember it. She told me that—it was near Halloween, as I remember, and she told me that I should trick-or-treat for UNICEF, if anybody remembers—still remembers that. But instead of getting candy at Halloween, you were supposed to get pennies that you were supposed to then donate to UNICEF. And my mother wrote back to her that "Johnny went out and trick-or-treated for UNICEF"—[01:02:06]

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JOHN HELD: —but not very many people knew about it, so she wrote about that in a column to kind of pump up the awareness of, you know, trick-or-treating for UNICEF. So, I mean, you know, that was in the background. And you know, I have liberal leanings, but that—politics has never been my main—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —focus. You know, I mean, I was an activist to the extent that I joined SDS, but you know, as I said before, it was more the circle that I was involved in at the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, the social aspect.

JOHN HELD: It was a more a social thing—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —than a political thing, and the travels to the USSR and Cuba were more social oriented than they were politically oriented.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, moving along here, we're hovering on the brink of a big decision, and that is—that took you to California. I don't want to miss anything, but that is—the move was from Dallas to San Francisco. Is that correct? So, I guess the big, not all-encompassing, but the big first question is, how and why did that come about? What was the draw? Other than, well, maybe free speech or something like that in Berkeley and all the hippies and—

JOHN HELD: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] None of those?

JOHN HELD: Nothing to do with free speech or hippies. No, it was—you know, I've kind of got a built-in temperature gauge when I know it's time to move on. I knew it was time to move on from New York, and I knew it was time to move on from Dallas, especially since, again, I was recently divorced, you know—

00:02:03

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —from Paula Barber. And we remain, you know, great friends. But my time there had, you know,—was done. So, I had a friend in San Francisco who had a rubber stamp company, and it was doing well, and so he asked me to come to San Francisco and curate for the rubber stamp company. So, we started a gallery called the Stamp Art Gallery.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: This is Bill Gaglione, who had been a correspondent of mine since the beginning of my mail art activities and who I was really on the same wavelength. And he was a big advocate of rubber stamps, as was I, and he had had a show at Stempelplaats Gallery in Amsterdam, just as I had. And so, we were both familiar with Stempelplaats, and as a showplace for rubber stamp art who published catalogues in connection with those shows, and we wanted to replicate that in the United States.

So, I left the library, and I went to San Francisco. Previous to my relocation, I had been in communication with another mail artist from Chicago, Illinois, Ashley Parker Owens, who was the editor of a mail art magazine called Global Mail. She went to San Francisco first to establish a base for us, and then I moved there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, wait. How did that come about?

JOHN HELD: The—well, Bill had this rubber stamp company—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. [00:04:01]

JOHN HELD: —that I went to work for.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: But I needed a place to live, and Ashley was moving there at the same time, so we decided we'd live together, and—platonically, I might add. So—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] Why is that hard to believe?

JOHN HELD: Well [laughs]—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Never mind, never mind. That's [laughs]—

JOHN HELD: They—so we moved into the Mission. I started work at the Stamp Art Gallery. It was the most productive two years of my life.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Wow.

JOHN HELD: We were mad men in our production. Number one, we had three exhibitions a month. We had a mail art exhibition, a rubber stamp exhibition, and an artist postage stamp exhibition, which were the three fields that we were, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this is what? '95, '96?

JOHN HELD: This is '95 to '97.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Seven, yeah. Okay.

JOHN HELD: Because after '97 the whole thing went bankrupt and everything. The company went bankrupt. But before it did we had published 50 catalogs and done 50 box sets of rubber stamps to augment—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Geez.

JOHN HELD: —the exhibitions. So, all those catalogues have been placed in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, thank goodness. It was extremely productive. Then we would sponsor performances, so we'd kind of reconstruct Fluxus performances as well as come up with new ones of our own. You know, we had major retrospectives of, you know, Yves Klein's, you know, Blue stamp. He was one of the first artists to use an artist postage stamp. I visited with Arman, his friend Arman—[00:06:07]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, Arman, yeah.

JOHN HELD: —and interviewed him in New York. He made up some drawings that we turned into—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —rubber stamps for him. You know, it was really, really productive. We traveled together, Gaglione and I, to Paris to perform at the Musee de La Poste, opening up a big rubber stamp art exhibition.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What's his first name again? Gaglione.

JOHN HELD: Bill, or William.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Oh, I see I had that here. Okay.

JOHN HELD: And—yeah, so—but then, as I say, the company went bankrupt, and I took a job at a Borders bookstore.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I remember that.

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I met you when you were at Borders.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That was the—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I said, "God, that guy looks familiar."

[They laugh.]

JOHN HELD: That was the end of the '90s. But we had met at Tom Marioni's.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: That's where we first met. And as—

PAUL KARLSTROM: About which—not our meeting, but about which any time along the way we can talk about.

JOHN HELD: Well, this is as good a time as any—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: —because, I mean, as soon as I moved to San Francisco I hooked up not only with Gaglione, but with Mike Dyar.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mike—

JOHN HELD: D-Y-A-R—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, we know Mike.

JOHN HELD: —who was also an active mail art person who I had been in correspondence with, and who I had stayed with in previous trips to San Francisco. And he attended this art salon hosted by Tom Marioni, the conceptual artist, every Wednesday, which was kind of an outgrowth of his early '70s performance "Drinking Beer with Friends is the Highest Form of Art." [00:08:18]

So, a lot of the conceptual artists who he was hanging around with in the '70s were still active in the mid-'90s—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So—

JOHN HELD: —people like Paul Kos and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right

JOHN HELD: —David Ireland—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. Great people.

JOHN HELD: —Howard Fried, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: So—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, I met him when I started my job. He came to visit me in my tower at the old de Young Museum at—I'm only mentioning this because I [laughs] didn't know who he was, but I was just starting my job. I did learn a little more, but there was something called Fluxus he was involved with, you know.

JOHN HELD: Howard Fried?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: Uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And which he mentioned, and then somebody else said, "Well, he's important"—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —"he's an important figure." Right?

JOHN HELD: Well, I think he is. I mean, I think that whole group around Marioni centered around his Museum of Conceptual Art I think was really important in San Francisco in the early '70s.

PAUL KARLSTROM: There's nothing modest about Tom Marioni.

JOHN HELD: No, no, I mean—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Museum of Conceptual—

JOHN HELD: Yeah, exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —Art.

JOHN HELD: Well, you know—but you know, he was certainly an influence on the conceptual art scene on the whole West Coast —

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know, during that—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes.

JOHN HELD: —time period, not only, you know, hosting the Museum of Conceptual Art, but you know, curating shows—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —for the museum. But anyway, you know, Dyar introduced me to Tom, and we had a natural affinity for one another.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:10:00]

JOHN HELD: And—because Tom is a scholar as well as anything else. He knows the history, and I know the history.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And he knew your book, I'll bet. Or did he? [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: I'm not sure how much he knew about me, but—he wasn't like a big fan of mail art—

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

JOHN HELD: —at all, but he—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because he accepted—or did he accept it as a legitimate art form? Because he has very—or he claims to have very definite ideas—

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —about what's in and what's out.

JOHN HELD: He has a pretty sharp focus, Tom.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sculpture, yeah.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. But like I say, he's not completely sold on mail art, but he was willing to give me a chance, I suppose.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: But it was really important for me, because it established a base of friendship for me—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —in San Francisco. And you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, would you say—

JOHN HELD: And Tom's wife, you know, Kathan Brown, owns Crown Point Press, which was right above the—Tom's studio, where we met. So, we would meet a lot of the artists—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, eventually it was there, yeah.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, by the time I moved there—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know, that's where it was located, on Hawthorne and Howard Street in—South of Market District, I guess—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —we would call it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: And there were a lot of visiting artists there, you know, like Sol LeWitt and Chuck Close, you know, who were doing prints at Crown Point Press.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, everybody.

JOHN HELD: You know, I mean, it was just fantastic. So, when they had some free time, and if it was a Wednesday, you know, they would come down and schmooze with the locals like myself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like Ed Ruscha—

JOHN HELD: Ed Ruscha, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —who is a California luminary.

JOHN HELD: Absolutely. And then one of the other regulars at Tom's salon is Kent Roberts—[00:12:04]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —who's the exhibition manager.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, or head preparator or something like that.

JOHN HELD: Head preparator. I think he's like the exhibition designer now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: He's not a preparator.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, he's not a preparator?

JOHN HELD: He's a designer. But—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sorry, Kent.

JOHN HELD: But when the—when people came to SF MoMA for the retrospective or a show, he would bring them over as well. People like—I don't know. Who's the South African artist?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, you mean the strange one?

JOHN HELD: No, the guy who does the video, too? Oh, God, I can't remember his name.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I didn't meet him. [. . . William Kentridge -PK]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, he was there?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: A wonderful artist.

JOHN HELD: You know, him and—who's the guy that climbs the walls and everything? [Matthew Barney -JH]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Climbs the walls?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, and then draws.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's cool. I'm not sure I know who that is.

JOHN HELD: No, you know who it is. I just can't remember his name.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] You're doing pretty well with names, by the way.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, yeah. But anyway, lots of interesting people—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —would come to that art salon, so it was inspiring not only, you know, the local artists who participate in it, but—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's a good point.

JOHN HELD: —the visiting artists, you know. And I mean, that's where I had the opportunity to meet you—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —and you know, after we got to know each other for a couple of years or so, I imposed on you and asked you over to my house to see, you know, part of my collection.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I came [laughs].

JOHN HELD: And you came. You know, you responded, you know, positively, and—[00:14:05]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well—

JOHN HELD: —you know —so, you know, it was the start of what's occurring now and everything. So, I mean—so that's been a main thing. But, of course, you know, being in San Francisco, there's a rich cultural history.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: And I had been previously aware of Wallace Berman.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: Wallace Berman was a big hero of mine, I mean, in the Dallas years as well. You know, there were good books written about him, and Berman did participate in mail art, and he was a friend of Ray Johnson's, so there was a natural affinity there and everything. And so, I did a lot of reading about Berman and, you know, the Ferus Gallery—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —in Los Angeles and what was happening when he came up here and, you know, had a houseboat at Larkspur and interacted with the San Francisco artists like Bruce Conner. I met Bruce Conner fairly early, actually.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, how did that come about? Tell us—

JOHN HELD: Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —because Bruce is a major figure.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, well, I met—

PAUL KARLSTROM: He never went to Tom Marioni.

JOHN HELD: No, no. I met him at another social meeting—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because you can't have two top dogs.

JOHN HELD: No, no, no. They would have a wrestling match probably.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] And who would win?

JOHN HELD: Well, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: —Conner could flatten anybody, I think, you know. But I met him socially at Vesuvio's bar and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, you hung out in North Beach?

JOHN HELD: No, not really, but—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not really?

JOHN HELD: —an opportunity took me there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: And I met him, and I was talking about rubber stamps. You know, I told him, "We're this rubber stamp gallery," and I asked him if he ever used rubber stamps, and he said, "Well, I had this stamp, the rat bastard protection society"—[00:16:02]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —"but I lost it, and I can't get it made up anymore." And I said, "I'll have it made up for you." So, you know, because I was working at the rubber stamp company, and that's what we did. And so, I found an image, you know, of the stamp and had it reproduced, and Gaglione had a edition of three and mounted it on wood, and he numbered it or editioned it one, one—one, three; two, three; three, three. Right? And I give Conner the one-three stamp, and he said, "What happened to two-three and three-three?" And I say, "Well, I have two-three, and Gaglione has three-three." He says, "No, I want all the stamps." And—

PAUL KARLSTROM: What?

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why am I surprised?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, exactly [laughs]. I mean, you know, you're dealing—

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's Bruce Conner.

JOHN HELD: —with Bruce Conner.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Exactly.

JOHN HELD: So, at first Gaglione didn't want to give up the stamp, you know. I really thought it was the end of our friendship, because, you know, he went on about this for two days. And I said, "You don't mess with Bruce Conner," you know. But eventually, he says, "Here, take the stamp. You know, I'm only kidding." So, we gave him the stamp —

PAUL KARLSTROM: But he made you suffer, right?

JOHN HELD: He made me suffer for it a little bit. And then, as a result, when I finally gave over two-three and three-three to Conner, he invited me to dinner with his wife Jean.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: So, you know, that was nice.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ann and I—shortly after we arrived, I was opening up the Archives. Very early on, Conner sort of discovered me, or maybe I figured out, "Ooh, I'd better be in touch with this guy." He said—I already knew about him from L.A.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, he was like the biggest people up here that I knew about.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: But sometimes he could be very conventionally—sort of civil, so he invited us to come over, had a nice dinner, and—but his interest was in being interviewed. And guess who ran that interview? [00:18:13]

JOHN HELD: You.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, ostensibly. But in reality—

JOHN HELD: Oh, you mean he ran the interview?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. I mean—

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —it was all—well, it was supposed to be all about him.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anyway, that—we all have—many of us have our Bruce Conner stories.

JOHN HELD: Absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not an easy fellow, I think, in many ways.

JOHN HELD: No, but important. And you know, he had a certain sense of integrity, and you have to respect that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: It was the same thing with Ray Johnson. They were artists' artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Oh, no question.

JOHN HELD: You know, they had this high sense of integrity and purity about their art that was inspiring. You know, I mean, kind of pissed off a lot of people, and you know, maybe he could have pissed me off, but I didn't feel pissed off at all, because, you know, that's his thing, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know, if—

JOHN HELD: You know? I mean, he had this built-in orneriness, you know, that was really part of the art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, did you ever interview him?

JOHN HELD: No, I never interviewed him.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. That was before you—well, you were doing interviews by then. You had been doing it in New York—

JOHN HELD: I'd been doing interviews—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and so forth.

JOHN HELD: —but at that time, I had no platform—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —for it. It was only, you know, 10 years after I came to San Francisco that Andrew McClintock—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —began San Francisco Arts Quarterly —

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —and I started writing for him in maybe the third issue or so. And that gave me my first major platform for getting my writing out there. Because the other writing I had done, you know, about mail art and everything, you know, I would do it for small, you know, mail art magazines, maybe—[00:20:05]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —you know, in Serbia or Finland, you know, that would be seen by 10 people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I didn't know you knew all those languages.

JOHN HELD: I don't.

[They laugh.]

But luckily—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Nobody does.

JOHN HELD: —they all know English. So, you know, this gave me my first platform, San Francisco Arts Quarterly, and I did interviews and, you know, feature stories for them. And—who did I interview? Ferlinghetti—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah, you did one on Anna Halprin, right?

JOHN HELD: And Anna. And you know, I became very friendly with Anna after that, and she's one of the godsenders in my life. I mean, she's like a mother to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really? You feel that's kind of the relationship?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I do. Well, I lost my mother, you know, maybe five years before I met her or something, and you know, both Jewish mothers, you know. And I had a real appreciation for what she did, and I think Anna appreciated that I knew so much and cared so much for her history.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: You know, most people were just concerned about her dance activity, but as I mentioned her previously about her connection to Fluxus, which is very misunderstood or unacknowledged at this point. So, I think she appreciated that, and just personality-wise we, you know, were able to get together with one another. And so, I've become very friendly with her and her—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're part of the family, is that right?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sort of.

JOHN HELD: —Daria—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does she think of you as a brother?

JOHN HELD: No.

[They laugh.]

No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, well.

JOHN HELD: But I confine the relationship part to Anna. [00:22:00]

But I've been working with Daria recently, and you know, she's inspiring in her own way, because Daria was like the ultimate hippie chick—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

JOHN HELD: —you know, I mean, appearing in *Zabriskie Point* and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know. Everybody remembers that who was in—

JOHN HELD: Anna was really important, too, in that she really did set the tone of the '60s in a way that—like, she was at the Human Be-In, which kind of started the whole hippie thing, really. And her and her dance troupe—she was in the San Francisco Dance Center, was it called? And her troupe—I mean, she had a troupe at that point in the late '60s, and they would be dancing on stage and then go into the audience and kind of set the tone of how the audience was supposed to react, you know, to the music and the events going on.

So, I believe she was very important to that, too, as—the same kind of person as Conner. And Conner and she were very good friends. But Anna, too, you know, went through these kind of beat periods and then a hippie period and then a post-modern, so she would go through different stages just as Conner and everything, which—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was her husband—what, Lawrence? Still alive—no, he was gone by the time you met Anna.

JOHN HELD: He had passed away—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —yeah, a couple of years before I met Anna. So—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because—yeah.

JOHN HELD: So, I mean, he was important, too, you know, and I've learned a lot about him, as I've learned a lot about San Francisco art during that time period, especially the '50s. I'm really taken with San Francisco art history in the '50s and centered around the Art Institute, which was—[00:24:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know, you're associated with that. You're kind of prominent in connection with that whole area, those years, and—

JOHN HELD: Well, I—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —beat art—

JOHN HELD: Yeah—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and culture and so forth, and you've done several shows, I think.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I've become friendly with some of the players during that period.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's fun, because it's possible.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. Fred Martin—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: I interviewed Fred Martin, too, who was president of the Art Institute, but you know, went to school with Jay DeFeo and Sam Francis, and who participated in some Gutai activities, surprisingly enough. But Fred and I became, you know, very good friends. I put on a show of, you know, his art and art from his collection. I did another show on beat era galleries, you know, showing the exhibition invitations and posters and photographs.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was that at the Art Institute?

JOHN HELD: No, that was at—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Center for the Book?

JOHN HELD: —Andrew McClintock's Evergold Gallery—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: —and where I did several shows. And I had a show there of my own collection at Evergold. The show at the Art Institute was the Gutai show that we did in 2013, and Andrew and I co-curated that show.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: And that grew out of my relationship with Shozo Shimamoto, who I'd—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Shozo? Okay.

JOHN HELD: —been, you know, corresponding with for a number of years. And Shozo [was -JH] like a brother to me. That was a very important relationship. I traveled to Japan several times to perform with Shozo. And yeah, he passed away right before that show at the Art Institute. [00:26:03]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let's—you pretty quickly—you were looking—you got here; you were looking around; you paid attention. I mean, you certainly knew something about the scene here, especially the northern California art scene, which is, by the way, not the only California art scene. We'll talk about that in a minute.

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And what I think doesn't matter. It's what you think that matters.

[They laugh.]

But meeting Tom [Marioni]—I mean, you were really—it was fortuitous, these encounters, and then becoming associated with some of the members. Mike, I guess, introducing you to Tom. David Jones, by the way, introduced me to—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —Marioni's, and we're both bartenders, but you have a doctorate—

JOHN HELD: I do have a doctorate.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —from Tom Marioni's drinking club.

JOHN HELD: I'm not exactly sure why, but it is an honor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know, what you do is you put it in your C.V.

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And which—and I think that's very revealing of your attitude towards all of these things, that they're sort of the same, that it's a—

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —legitimate honor.

JOHN HELD: No, it's like a graduate degree.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: One of my graduate degrees.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Tom would never give me a Ph.D.

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.] Well, you have your own Ph.D., so—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, right. That's—I do. But honorary, in some ways, is even more special. It shows that

you're really special—

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: —to somebody or some place—

JOHN HELD: I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —some institution. You're associated with the beat era and beat art, and you have the privilege—it came a little bit late, because you missed some. I was fortunate, because I came in '73, and many of them were still around, and so I got to interview them. [00:28:01]

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: But just for a moment let's talk about—and I don't know if we need to say more about Tom's—I mean, obviously that was a wonderful opportunity for you—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and no wonder you're so well connected there. But I'm thinking about—particularly about these aspects of your multifaceted career which you describe, you know, many things, many things. And it is the interviewing and the writing from interviews, not just reproducing them, but using it as—it's oral history. Now, the kind of oral history you do is—I don't want to say mini, but it's not as elaborate as even what we're doing now, and I'm not as inclusive. It has to [laughs] be more disciplined and more focused, perhaps.

But as one oral historian to another—people ask me this—what was the one—to make you really have to think on it—interview or—let's allow you two or maybe three—that you feel you're most happy about in terms of succeeding in the goal of getting information, and who was the subject? And was it for Andrew's publication—or maybe [Clement] Greenberg?

JOHN HELD: Maybe Ray Johnson.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: Because Ray Johnson didn't give very many interviews at all. And so, you know, maybe, you know, three or four during his lifetime. [00:30:05]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

JOHN HELD: Yeah. And the ones—he did have someone who did a lot of video on him, but I think this is perhaps the only video interview he did. Very poor production quality, I might add. But you know, he was ornery and iconoclastic, but I felt I was smart enough to shut up and let him do the talking, you know.

And I mean, to get along with Ray Johnson and conduct, you know, an hour-long interview was pretty remarkable, just because he had such a fascinating personality, and so few people realized it at the time. I mean, he's getting the due that he's—deserves now, but he was known as the most famous unknown artist in New York for a long time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, I remember that.

JOHN HELD: I interviewed John Cage, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's right.

JOHN HELD: And I mean, that was a good interview, but I found out later that almost everything he said he had said before—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —in previous interviews and everything. That was kind of his style—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That is—

JOHN HELD: —I think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —a problem.

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And they get it so well honed that you say, "Oh, my God, this is fabulous!"

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: "Look at what I'm getting!"

JOHN HELD: Well, I mean, he was interviewed so often—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —that you have to—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well—

JOHN HELD: —rely on cliché sometimes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Subjects—this gets into a discussion of oral history—but subjects create or recreate their own reality sometimes by repetition—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —because their memories aren't necessarily much better than anybody's. And this is where it's really hard, where you have to take it for what it is or what it can be—[00:32:03]

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —but not imagine that it's the only story. And I've run into that, and then I find that—well, some of it sounds not canned. Anyway, you can tell when you're doing the interview, don't you think?

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: That "this is just too pat."

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: "This is like reciting from memory, but not the memory that you've created." Okay.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I'm trying to stay away from that, but—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well —

JOHN HELD: —I don't know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —but what can we do?

JOHN HELD: But anyway—

PAUL KARLSTROM: But—mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: But the Anna Halprin interview was very important, too. And you know, Greenberg—you know what I'm proud about the Greenberg interview? Was that, you know, I had the courage after we completed the interview, which actually, you know, we went in the library stacks and we talked about the different art books, you know, in the stacks, so—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interesting approach.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, so it wasn't really a formal interview, but—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You have a little handheld recorder or—

JOHN HELD: No, you know, we had a Portapak—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know, recording us and everything. And then I took the—after it was recorded I took it around to different libraries—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —in the area and gave programs on it and everything. But I had the nerve to ask him to look at some of my artwork, you know, after the interview.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Whoa.

JOHN HELD: And so, I had this rubber stamp art, you know, laid out and everything, because I was working with rubber stamps at the time. And he told me, "Oh, John, you know that's just a gimmick." You know.

[They laugh.]

And so, you know, I mean—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, Mr. Formalism. What did you expect?

JOHN HELD: Exactly. But later on, you know, we continued a correspondence, and I would decorate the envelopes. And I put a rubber stamp on the cover of the envelope that said, "Ephemeral," and he got back to me and said, "That was original." [00:34:09]

PAUL KARLSTROM: He liked that?

JOHN HELD: He liked the ephemeral rubber stamp. So, I—and you know, to this day I'm still doing rubber stamp art—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: So, it's not like I was dissuaded by the foremost art critic of [the era -JH], you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know, he's—remember, he's been cut down a little bit—

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —to size. I mean—yeah. But he—

JOHN HELD: I'm going to tell you a very revealing story, okay?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Tell me, please. That's—

JOHN HELD: So, we met at a picnic in Utica, New York, given by his roommate at Syracuse University years back who I knew a little bit, and I was there with my wife, and he really took a hankering to my wife.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] I've heard stories like this [about Greenberg -PK].

JOHN HELD: My first wife, Claudia. And he did have a hankering for the women, you know. So—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sounds like somebody we know very well here [laughs].

JOHN HELD: Yeah. So, I continued, you know, a correspondence with him, and he invited me down to his summer house, and he said, "Make sure you bring your wife with you." And I knew what was going to happen if I brought my wife down to—for an overnight with Clement Greenberg. So, although I was ambitious, I found out that I wasn't that ambitious, and that was a good lesson [laughs] that I wasn't willing to do anything for art—

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, of course not.

JOHN HELD: —that I did have certain scruples.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, besides, it's not you doing it. It's, you know, trying to get her to do it, right?

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.] Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean—

JOHN HELD: Yeah. No, I mean—

PAUL KARLSTROM: She wasn't that docile, was she?

JOHN HELD: No, no, no. That would have been problematic. I didn't even want it to reach that stage, though, you know. [00:36:02]

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] She could be nice to him.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But—well, you know, he's notorious for that, just like—well—

JOHN HELD: Don't even name names, but he was—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, no. I mean, this is—I've written a biography of somebody—

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and that's Peters Selz, who was a dear friend—

JOHN HELD: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —but was known for his—used to be avoided if nobody else was on the elevator.

JOHN HELD: His womanizing. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And Greenberg—I have this from other—like graduate students or Ph.D. candidates—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —who would tell me stories about that, yeah.

JOHN HELD: Right. Well, I've had my own episodes, and as a matter of fact, I have a good friend who's a playwright—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

JOHN HELD: —Jeremy Greco, you know, who wrote a play called *Withheld*.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know that play.

JOHN HELD: You know, you've attended it, so you know the content of it, which was him dragging out all my amorphous—

[They laugh.]

—not amorphous. How do you pronounce it? Amorous?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Amorous.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. He pulled out all my amorous—

[They laugh.]

—you know, episodes from me, so I don't feel we have to go into that, because that was covered by Jeremy quite well, sometimes to my own regret.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, we don't have to go in regard to you unless there was some relevance. But with Clem Greenberg, I mean, these are—or Peter Selz—Selz didn't mind, by the way, in his biography.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was sort of proud of it. He said, "Yeah, Paul, that's"—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm going to see him Thursday night again.

JOHN HELD: Well, I think Greenberg—you know, doing some reading on him, you know. He was—he had fallen in with a psychiatrist from Boston who believed in free love, and so he kind of dragged the artists he was involved with into this—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: —you know, circle with the psychiatrist, and they would, you know. [00:38:07]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sounds like Oneida.

JOHN HELD: It was a bit of [laughs]—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, really—

JOHN HELD: What—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —I've been doing some reading now.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, no, no, no. Oneida had complex marriage—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

JOHN HELD: —and it was very similar to complex marriage, actually.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And supposedly, the founder invented—coined the term "free love."

JOHN HELD: Really? John Humphrey Noyes?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I wouldn't doubt it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: But he was—I mean, I don't know if we want to get back to Oneida Community or anything, but—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, it's very interesting.

JOHN HELD: —but it is interesting. I mean—and I'd say it's—it had such an impression on me, you know, that idea of establishing community—

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know—

JOHN HELD: —in some form.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I—excuse me, but I have to comment on this. I now understand, since we've talked further, and the whole notion of community, and the value and the importance of it, and the interaction with the individuals. Now, I don't imagine that you picked up too much specifically from the Oneida creed because—well, I read as much as I had time to do. This is all about it here. It's in Wikipedia.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it sounds—well, it's described as maybe the most important—certainly one of the most important utopian religious communities.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that's a very interesting topic. But you approach that, and I'm quite sure this is the case, with the interest of an observer, a documenter, and you were involved in that from that standpoint, in that way. Correct?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I was, you know, an archivist for them—[00:40:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —so I—you know, along the way I read the papers as well as—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —conserved them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: But I mean, the religious tenants were of very little interest to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: But the fact that they establish an intentional community—

PAUL KARLSTROM: For perfection.

JOHN HELD: —to—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Perfectionism is the term, right, that they were using?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, they were perfectionists in that they were born without sin, so they were already perfect. They didn't have to wait till the afterlife—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And Christ came back in AD 70.

JOHN HELD: You know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] I just—

JOHN HELD: At this point—

[They laugh.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm just showing you that I actually read it.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, yeah, I know. At this point, you probably know more than me, because it's been, you know, 40 years since I was, you know, steeped in this.

But it was the communal aspect of it, not really the utopian aspect, you know, because I didn't really care about the religion, you know, at all. But I cared about their new way of relating to one another, you know, in a social way. That was important, you know. And I mentioned before, like they were one of the first aspects of adult education in the United States, because they would have weekly—I mean, nightly meetings, you know, where the whole community—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —gathered and someone would give a talk on a specific subject, and then they would break up into groups, you know. So, they were constantly striving to improve themselves.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, didn't they— isn't it true that they did more for women than almost any other organization? That women were—most cults, because Oneida is a cult—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Most cults end up not treating women that well. They're run by one man, one founder—
[00:42:06]

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —just like Oneida.

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, it fits comfortably into the cult definition—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —but setting that aside—the cults are interesting to study [laughs] to me. But I would think that you might have been drawn, other than a conservation project and working with documents and so forth, to what sounds like a very liberal and kind of farsighted approach to communal life, or social interaction even, if you wanted to extend beyond that.

JOHN HELD: Absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Certainly regarding alternative to domestic relationships.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it sounds so hippie. It sounds like communes—

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —up in Mendocino County or something like that.

JOHN HELD: Right. Well, I don't want to take up too much—

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, no—

JOHN HELD: —on this and everything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —well, that's just fine.

JOHN HELD: But like the complex marriage, you know. They had a very interesting way of proceeding with sexual relations, because the older women—there was the issue of birth control.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: So, older women would go with younger men. Older women who were past menopause would go with younger men—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —because the younger men couldn't get them pregnant. And the older men would go with younger women—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right.

JOHN HELD: —because they were able to control their orgasm. They had learned how to control their orgasm in something that they called male continence.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: So, I mean, this gets very involved and everything. But it was a very sophisticated, you know, system. And you know, almost impossible for me to, you know, replicate in mail art—[00:44:17]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —certainly. I mean, nothing—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —in mail art is that complex or, you know, sophisticated. But—

PAUL KARLSTROM: But what about this? And then, I'll drop this. And the reason I—I don't usually bring up things that are unrelated, but for me, in your discussing the importance of community—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —in connection with mail art, immediately I begin to think on what you described as a big influence on you, the study of this organization of this community. That's what it—Oneida Community.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And aspects of it are very like the '60s, and very like the communal experiments, which generally failed.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oneida at least had a track record that lasted longer.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I mean, it lasted from, like, 1848—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Something like that.

JOHN HELD: —to 1895, maybe, and so—what's that? Like 40 years or so?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hey, very good. 1848—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —until—

JOHN HELD: 1893, maybe, '95? But it was a pretty good run. I mean, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Dissolved in 1881, yeah.

JOHN HELD: 1881?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: Oh, okay. So, you know, it's almost a 40-year run, let's say, and, you know, none of those hippie communities from the '60s lasted more than five or 10 years, you know. So—[00:46:01]

PAUL KARLSTROM: They don't have any—we can't even get into this. I'm sorry I'm even saying it, but I—one of the differences, that they had an imposed discipline for arranging their lives. And we—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —we may or may not find it interesting or productive in the long run—

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —but it's community, and the community is defined, then, by certain characteristics. And I don't think the '60s people had it much.

JOHN HELD: Right. The other thing, too, is that Oneida Community had a really good business sense.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: And they started out producing animal traps, and they were the largest producer of animal traps in the United States, which is surprising for a religious community.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: But they were very practical business-wise, and then they grew out of animal trapping when it wasn't fashionable anymore and went into silver—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes.

JOHN HELD: —smithing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was—their silverware is—

JOHN HELD: Silverware.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —is pretty famous, is that right?

JOHN HELD: And that continues to this day.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: Oneida silversmiths. So, you know, they had a good business model. Maybe they had a better business model than they had a communal, social model.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, anyway, just—I realize that's kind of an aside, but I think it's helpful in understanding your considerable interest from that time when you had that job, the conservation of their records. I mean, obviously that has to do with [laughs] what you continued to do when you became a one-person documenter and so forth—

JOHN HELD: Exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —preserving—

JOHN HELD: It got me started. I mean, previous to that, I was, you know, a public librarian—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —who was doing reference work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: You know, this expanded my knowledge of the library field into, you know, archival work, which I'm still doing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm going to ask you a few questions, then, from our list, because there are areas, some of which have really simple answers [laughs]—[00:48:08]

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —like one-word. But I was curious about how you chose a form of art expression—media—and activities that are not remunerative, you know. And so, the big question is, other than Borders Bookstore, what—how did you support yourself all these years—

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: —until you finally got collections that you could sell? Can you answer that?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, now we're kind of getting to and everything, because it's not easy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: And fortunately, I'm not—I don't mark success by financial reward, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I understand.

JOHN HELD: It's just that I have a lot of facets to draw from, you know, really. I write, I collect, and I deal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, yeah, that would make money, but writing generally in our field [laughs]—

JOHN HELD: Yeah, that doesn't make money either.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

JOHN HELD: But when I—let me put it in in a nutshell for you, because it's an oft-said phrase that the only way to survive as an artist is either to marry well or to deal drugs, and—

[They laugh.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: We know you didn't marry well [laughs].

JOHN HELD: Exactly. So, I—you know [laughs]—so I've never really followed up really deeply in those two things, but you know, you do what you have to do to survive. But after Borders, what happened was I put together a small collection of artist postage stamps and was able to sell that to a private dealer for like \$10,000. [00:50:08]

And—which I live very frugally, simply, and so that could last me a long time. And so, I put together a collection of mail art exhibition catalogues and sold it to the Getty, and that was for another, you know, chunk—

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was that?

JOHN HELD: That was 2001.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: So, since 2001, when I left Borders and started placing collections, I haven't had a boss, and I'm—except for Andrew at San Francisco Arts Quarterly, which isn't much of a boss at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: But yeah, so I'm proud of that. But it's—you know, it's a constant hustle, because—especially since I don't have a lot of retirement money. Because, you know, I do get Social Security, but when I worked in Dallas—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: I paid into a private pension plan which I took out when I moved to San Francisco, so I have—I'm not retired by any means. I, you know, hustle every month here and there to support myself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, your Social Security must be—and this is nobody's business, but just as an observation. Since you didn't work for wage for many years—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and that is, as I understand it, how a certain amount goes into Social Security, and then that's what you draw upon—I worked for the feds—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and nothing went into Social Security, so I don't have any to speak of except from little jobs—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —way back when, like college-age jobs.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so, that would be—[00:52:00]

JOHN HELD: Well, I have enough, you know, from Social Security to pay my rent. Let's put it that way.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: But I have to, you know, struggle to pay bills, and I usually do that by, you know, trying to bundle a collection—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —that I can place in an institution. Hopefully I can place it and have enough money to work, you know, on another collection. Right now, I'm working on a photography collection, pulling out all the photography from—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

JOHN HELD: —my mail art collection—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

JOHN HELD: —for a photography curator who's just gotten interested in photography and mail art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I see.

JOHN HELD: So, you know, little things pop up. And also, I should add that another important person along the way was a San Francisco art dealer called Steven Leiber who I had been working with—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, you mentioned him, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I've been working with him since 1990, when I was still in Dallas, because he is the only art dealer in the country interested in mail art. And his claim to fame now, I guess, is his acknowledgement of artistic ephemera; ephemera that was created by artists, like artist-designed invitations or stickers or tickets, you know. Kind of like the stuff that Jean Brown was interested in her Dada and surrealist period. She didn't collect the artworks of Dada and surrealism, but the ephemera, the periodicals, the exhibition catalogues, the correspondence, the posters. [00:54:04]

Those are the types of things she collected, and that's the kind of thing that Leiber was interested in as well, as well as conceptual art. Unfortunately, he died young. His collection of conceptual art is at the Berkeley Art Museum. His collection of sound recording—artistic sound recordings are at MoMA New York. Just a very influential person in the field of, you know, art dealership, and he bought a lot of stuff from me. You know, we had a strong relationship.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where is he?

JOHN HELD: He was—he lived in the Marina —

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, here?

JOHN HELD: —in San Francisco.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. And he taught—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is he gone now?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, he passed away—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Recently?

JOHN HELD: —five or six years ago.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Five or six years.

JOHN HELD: He was in his 50's.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, wow.

JOHN HELD: He taught at the curatorial studies program at California College of the Arts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh.

JOHN HELD: CCA. And—yeah, so, I mean, that's a very sad story, because he died way too young and was among the most knowledgeable people of conceptual art in the world. So—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, was it AIDS?

JOHN HELD: No, no, no, no. He had a brain tumor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh. That here is a normal question.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. No, no, it wasn't that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because I don't know him at all.

JOHN HELD: As a matter of fact, right before he died he married the head of the curatorial studies program at CCA—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, okay.

JOHN HELD: —Leigh Markopoulos, who also passed away too young. [00:56:01]

PAUL KARLSTROM: I wonder if I knew her. Not sure. Leigh Markopoulos?

JOHN HELD: Markopoulos. She—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, Markopoulos.

JOHN HELD: She was of Greek ancestry.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh—

JOHN HELD: Anyway, so, you know—but making a living—yeah, it's difficult, but I like having the time during—I don't want to be pinned down by—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —you know, a steady job, because I like having the time during the week to do my thing, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Here's—making a living and using your collection as a means to generate income, which is—I would be surprised if when you started doing that that was an objective.

JOHN HELD: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Certainly, over time you could see that as a possibility. This is an appropriate question since this is an Archives of American Art interview.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Remind me when it was—how this came about, not with any kind of detail, but how we started talking about your materials, which maybe in the very beginning I said, "Oh, really? You know, these things are good? They're interesting?" But anyway, how that came about and—I guess the question is, why did you leave an important group of beautifully organized records to the Smithsonian? And I'm sure it wasn't just out of generosity, because the Archives, unfortunately, doesn't have the means to purchase collections usually. [00:58:02]

JOHN HELD: No, it was generosity—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —and it was my friendship with you.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: I mean, I was flattered that you thought—

PAUL KARLSTROM: God, I can't believe—this is terrible that I cut away part of your potential income.

JOHN HELD: No, no not really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: Because, actually, I was kind of shocked when I brought you over to my house, I showed you this big collection, and I said, "How much do you want?" And you said, "About five boxes," and then I was shocked, because I've got what?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hundreds.

JOHN HELD: Now I've got 420 boxes, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: So, you know, five boxes doesn't even put a dent. But what I did was select from the full archive some of the more important correspondence I had and a selection of their—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —correspondence. So, it wasn't a collection of catalogues or—you know, which I have many.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: It wasn't a collection of periodicals, which I have many, and which went to the Getty and MoMA, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, those are published materials, so it sounds like, thinking back, that what you chose—and this is, of course—fits perfectly with what the Archives really goes after—well, letters.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or in different forms.

JOHN HELD: Which is a dying—you know, I handled the papers of M.C. Richards, who was an instructor at Black Mountain College.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hmm.

JOHN HELD: And Nancy Perloff came up from the Getty to see if they wanted to take the papers.

PAUL KARLSTROM: She's Marjorie's daughter, right?

JOHN HELD: Right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —Marjorie.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, Marjorie from Actors Conservatory Theater?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No—

JOHN HELD: ACT?

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's Carey [Perloff, Artistic Director of ACT retiring end of 2017/18 season]—

JOHN HELD: Oh, Marjorie—Marjorie—[01:00:01]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Marjorie's—

JOHN HELD: —from Stanford?

PAUL KARLSTROM: And USC. She taught at both places.

JOHN HELD: And then she has another daughter, you know, Perloff at ACT

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Yeah.

JOHN HELD: So, that whole Perloff family is pretty high-powered and everything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: But this—Nancy was at the Getty —

PAUL KARLSTROM: Same Perloffs, so that's what I'm saying.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. And she came up to look at these M.C. Richards papers, and during the course of the, you know, discussion she was saying, "You know, this is the last generation for correspondence going to archives—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —because now people do emails, and you don't archive emails, you know." So, I gave the correspondence to the Archives, and then subsequent to that initial contribution—donation, I gave them some artist postage stamps—a collection of artist postage stamps, and then I printed out a lot of my writing there. And

PAUL KARLSTROM: Good.

JOHN HELD: —you know, fortunately, over the years, you know, they've procured resources to digitize the collection, so now it's available online. So, it's fantastic. But—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That is amazing. Well, I'm impressed that—I suppose, first of all, I'm impressed that even though I didn't quite fully get what you were doing, I had enough imagination to say, "Yeah, this sounds like it could be good." So, that started something that I think in some ways may have been a first step, or among the first steps, for the Archives in terms of its collecting program.

JOHN HELD: Well, I mean, your strength, as much as interviewing, is your openness, you know, your acceptance of different aspects of art, you know. I mean, just to go—[01:02:06]

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JOHN HELD: —head to head with Bruce Conner.

[They laugh.]

You know, it takes a certain amount of chutzpah, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I was, like, naïve. I mean, I see what you're saying, and I was kind of surprised at how bossy he was, but he was the host.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And besides, I was there—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and so I view that as a big success, my early professional success.

JOHN HELD: Well, you've dealt with other—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Bruce Conner.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, you've dealt with other difficult people, too, like Claire Falkenstein, you know. She—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Claire, oh, my God.

JOHN HELD: She wasn't an easy interview, I don't think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, it—you shouldn't go, actually, and try to her interview around lunch, because she serves you lunch with big jugs of wine—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and she will not—

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: —[laughs], you know,—

JOHN HELD: Yeah. But—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interesting woman, though.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, but I mean, the fact—I mean, I think I started this interview by saying that, you know, I'm cognizant of your history and that there's 130 of your interviews, you know, online at the Archives of American Art. It's an incredible legacy. And I'm so honored to be now part of it. I mean, it's a huge honor for me, but it's due to your openness and acceptance—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, thank you.

JOHN HELD: —you know, of different facets of art. I mean, that you—basically, I'm a nobody, you know. Conner is a somebody. So, for you to put the nobody together with the somebody, I mean, that's a feat in itself, that you can acknowledge they both have their place, you know, in the art world.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know, it's a collection of stories, and I—this is not about me, but I did work for them for 30 years—I mean, for the Archives, for them.

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it's not, I think, any major insight on my part, this openness, as you describe it, and I—this is—well, this is now speaking to my own career with this kind of activity. [00:02:16]

And I basically, for one thing, was aware of the fact that I didn't know that much, and I didn't have this huge breadth of deep knowledge on—I had to, you know, race to get up to speed with the Bay Area arts scene. I knew more about L.A., and even then, I would say in many ways it was superficial, which is the way you start.

But I believed that in these documents there resides information, and you can't always know at the time what information will be valuable. And I was thinking in a cultural history, much broader cultural history, which art history is all well and good, you know, but cultural history is huge, and so there would be some connections. I have no idea what they now, in Washington, think about the collections that I brought in, or Dennis Barrie, or Bob Brown, my colleagues from the earlier days.

And bringing this to you, I said, "I don't know much about this mail art," except that I had collected some materials from Jay DeFeo and Berman and people like that, so that gave me—I said, "Oh, yeah, this is interesting." And so, it's like maybe I said five boxes because I thought that sounded an awful lot for the kind of stuff you had in those. But that's the way it goes. That's the way it works. And it's nice of you think of you as openness. I suppose maybe that's true. [00:04:05]

JOHN HELD: Well—and it's not only openness. It's driven by curiosity.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: So, like John Held, Jr., you sometimes wonder what it's all about, and I think it's important to keep wondering what it's all about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think that's an important statement. It'd be great for ending this interview, but, you know, what? What is—what's it all about, Alfie? Johnny?

JOHN HELD: [Laughs.] Paulie.

[They laugh.]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what's it all about? We're in California, and we need to do a little more justice to this amazing place and this little and very creative city. I always—as critical as I may get of my longtime home, since 1973, I recognize and, you know, celebrate the amazing cultural life, and I don't mean institutions. I mean, sure, there's the opera and all of that. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about these people who assemble here—

JOHN HELD: The cultural history.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and—yeah, and they assemble here—and we're talking mainly about the visual arts, of course, this sort of thing. But dance—it's amazing the number of dance companies, and then small theater. One could argue about ACT or Magic Theater, which we go to, but that there's so much.

JOHN HELD: I'll give you one example, okay?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, go ahead.

JOHN HELD: Jim Newman. What an honor it is to know Jim Newman—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —went to school—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sat right here—

JOHN HELD: —with Walter Hopps, you know, at Stanford—they had a gallery together before Ferus—who started Dilexi Gallery in San Francisco in the early '60s and was the first kind of commercial gallery to show the beat artists and everything. And he's still alive, and he's still active, and he's still willing to share his history. What a joy. I mean, we're mutual friends of his, you know—[00:06:24]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —and—but what an honor that is, I mean, to me, that—because it goes deep into the roots of San Francisco's cultural history.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, no question about that. And just coincidentally, last Thursday, I suppose, or maybe it was Friday—I'm not sure—Friday we had a little dinner party here, and where you're sitting, that's Ann Karlstrom's chair, and there were two couples. And I realize this is like show-and-tell sharing, but seated just to the left of where I am as I talk with you—we're kitty-corner, is this called? Was Jim Newman; across the table was Enrique Chagoya; then to Enrique's left and to my right down here was Jane Ivory, the gallerist Mrs. Jim Newman. And then here was the ever-adorable Kara Maria, the painter and wife of Enrique. And I mention this because it's—for me, Ann and I realize my job introduced us to these people, many people. [00:08:00]

Some—far from all; some, though, are lasting over the years, and you—and what I share with Enrique and Jim—what they have in common isn't—well, they liked one another. They had never met before, and so I could bring—Ann and I could bring them together. Community. See where I'm going—drifting with this?

JOHN HELD: Exactly, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it's community, and also both of them were pretty early interview subjects of mine. And so, I realize the interview and the information—that's what you're going after, but finally, what's rewarding isn't the artifact, or entirely the artifact. It's the human interaction.

JOHN HELD: Absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And in San Francisco—I don't think of San Francisco as—I'll let you say a few things more about it—an overly friendly city. A lot of people visiting don't find it that way. Some of them find New York, the streets of New York, more friendly and so forth. And it is fun to—all of this is anecdotal to compare these places, which I want to do in a minute, and that's north/south California. But I have to say that the people—we're really lucky, the people that we've become attached to, and it doesn't happen necessarily all at once. So —

JOHN HELD: Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —it's a good life, and you—my point is I think you would probably say the same thing. This has benefited you enormously.

JOHN HELD: Oh, absolutely. I mean, you know, my interest in intentional communities—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —utopias—it's kind of theoretical, maybe—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —when it gets to the mail art aspect and everything. I could use that as a base. [00:10:03]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: But it's really nice to have a community of artists in your personal life, you know. Because to me, being in San Francisco, it's almost like a utopian society when I know people like you and Jim Newman and Fred Martin and Anna Halprin. What more do you want in your life, you know? To have those great people, you know, share moments with and interact. To me, that—to me it's utopian.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, I think that answers—I mean, like there's several questions here that, fortuitously, we got into and actually dispatched, so we can pass over them. But it has to do with what I take out—what I take from this. And my one of my questions is, how do you see what may be—we get in a general sense what your activities and interests have been and how you understand your own art—your role as an artist, and your achievement.

JOHN HELD: Cultural worker.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's right. And the focus—all of that's well and good, and it leads me back again to a subset, if you will, of conceptualism. And what I would—what I ask here—I'll just ask it how I wrote it down. Since I wrote this, I get to use it again, you see. But as I discuss conceptualism as a broad movement and category—you know, art movement—what led you initially, and what was reinforced to it, and what was reinforced in San Francisco? Some of this we've done. [00:12:05]

Bring in description of Fluxus and other movements you have engaged, and you've done some of that. What about—okay, conceptualism briefly. *Your* understanding of it, *your* particular view. What about movements such as Gutai? Explain the importance. How's that for—that last part—a lead thing? Is that something you want to talk about? You've had—

JOHN HELD: Well, I don't think we've mentioned Marcel Duchamp at all—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, why—

JOHN HELD: —during this thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Doesn't he just—is everything assumed?

JOHN HELD: Exactly. But—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Duchamp. Okay.

JOHN HELD: That's probably the start of my conceptualism, you know. Duchamp—I mean, I'm a huge fan, as many are. I had that big Abrams book on Duchamp—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —by Arturo Schwartz—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —at a very early, you know, stage in my life, which my mother donated to the—my local library when I was at college, unfortunately. But—

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.]

JOHN HELD: I mean, that's where my conceptualism, you know, begins. And I'm somewhat interested in conceptual art, and mail art is kind of a part of conceptual art in late '60s and early '70s. But the conceptualism is really secondary to me to the social practice—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —of art. And I mean, I start with a concept, but I'm more interested in going directly to the participatory—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —interaction which my conceptualism has stimulated. [00:14:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it's not just the making of something, but that's part of it, and I gather if I were to interpret on everything we've discussed so far from that, it's moving out of the brain, out of the realm of ideas, into the reality, the real world, the community in which you're surrounded.

JOHN HELD: Exactly. I mean, you start with the concepts, you know. You have a broader conception of art than just decorative objects—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —that it could help you interpret the world—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, yes.

JOHN HELD: —or—for me, it's helped me find my place in the world. And Gutai—it's so interesting that you brought it up, because Gutai's been associated with, you know, Paul Schimmel's exhibition *Out of Actions*.

So, actually, from the conceptualism come the actions. And Gutai is interesting to me because, number one, my good friend Shozo Shimamoto is one of the founders of it, but also, I love what they were doing, which was having the art come out of actions, much as like my art comes out of the actions of participating in mail art. You know, it's kind of a natural outgrowth of concepts and actions that you're, you know, integrated with. But I— [00:16:02]

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's as good as anything. And what, of course, we're interested in, or I'm interested in, is, specifically, what does it mean for you? Because I ask people, "What's conceptual art?" and it's almost a waste of time, because everybody has their own notion.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so, its shortcoming as a description of a movement with certain qualities is that it's so broad. And you know what? Andrew, your boss, your former boss—

[They laugh.]

—McClintock—I said, "Andrew"—he was doing some show over at—maybe it was a Gutai show with you over at SFAI. But anyway, I said, "Andrew, I need to know something. I'm writing a review of conceptualism for the California Historical Society—two big shows." I said, "You know, frankly, I can't do a very good job of describing conceptualism. I understand it is coming out of the realm of ideas, but what's—that doesn't tell you anything at all, because everything comes out of the realm of ideas. I mean, it's uber." And I said, "What about art, specifically conceptual art?" He said, "You know, Paul, as far as I'm concerned, if an artist makes it or thinks it's art and calls it art, then it's conceptual art. It doesn't"—and so [laughs] that helped me not at all that Andrew said that. What do you think?

JOHN HELD: Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, the generality of it.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. I mean, you're right. I mean, the concept is so broad in conceptualism, just as it is so broad in mail art, that when you define it you're not defining *it*, you're defining yourself—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know. So, Tom Marioni would say that conceptualism is social sculpture. [00:18:04]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

JOHN HELD: And that defines Tom as much as it defines conceptualism, you know. So—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's a good point. Yeah, I think that that's right, and so you take it back to the individual. To understand things, you have to understand that, in some respects, not as an abstraction, but as an individual

activity and interest. Does that sound right for you?

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I mean, you know, I'm kind of a practical guy, you know. I'm a librarian, so I don't like to dwell on the conceptual aspect of art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: You know, I like to start with the conceptual action, you know, the conceptual aspect and move on quite rapidly until—into the practicality of it, you know, what that concept is going to produce.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, we're coming down to the finish line—

JOHN HELD: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —of—

JOHN HELD: I could tell.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's—well, I think it's important to get this idea of how you regard conceptualism, and then mail art and Fluxus and all that as part of it. And I think that—do you have something more to say on that?

JOHN HELD: Well, just, you know, my basic concept is the breakdown of art in life, the blurring of them. I mean, that's step number one for me, you know. I want one to go into the other.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, breakdown of the division between—[00:20:00]

JOHN HELD: Right, breaking down the division, the blurring of art and life, as Kaprow put it, and Rauschenberg, and Duchamp, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: For sure.

JOHN HELD: You know, Duchamp—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that sounds—

JOHN HELD: —described [himself -JH] as a breather, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] You have aligned yourself with something that is convincing.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, but that's—you know, that's my main concept in art, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, let's—and well described, I think. I mean, I feel that I know much more about you within the framework of all of this. There's a big discussion that we're not going to—I mean, it would be a topic for more than one session here. Okay, California. We're in California. You presumably, but not necessarily, describe yourself as, in some ways, a California artist, or perhaps not. So, what does that term mean to you, if anything? It's a regional concept, but—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, how does that apply in your view?

JOHN HELD: Well, you know, I say West Coast art is maybe more casual, less formalistic—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —than East Coast art. I'm trying to think who the West Coast equivalent of Clement Greenberg is, you know, the East Coast artist critic Clement Greenberg. Maybe Walter Hopps could be, you know—[00:22:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Could—

JOHN HELD: —the—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —be.

JOHN HELD: Not a critic. He wasn't a critic, really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, he was—

JOHN HELD: He was a curator.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was a curator.

JOHN HELD: But you know—but—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, Henry Hopkins was close to Newman and Hopps, and was more verbal and, you know, wrote and so forth—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —with—about it, you know.

JOHN HELD: But I—maybe I'm just contrasting like, you know, the more formalistic approach of Greenberg—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —against kind of the more freestyling of Walter Hopps, you know, and that West Coast art is maybe more casual than East Coast. And you know, I'm reminded of, you know, Hilton Kramer's diatribe against Arneson and the funk artists, you know. He just did not understand, you know, their casual approach to art, you know. And mail art is certainly not a formalistic approach to art, you know. It's a more casual approach to art, so I feel very comfortable in the California milieu, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It seems more permissive, now that I think about it.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. Permissive, more open, more casual, you know, because you're more concerned with, you know, personal object making coming out of personal concerns rather than coming out of conceptual ideas—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —on the East Coast, maybe. Also, East Coast I think there's more scrambling for reputation, you know, more concern for reputation.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Careerism.

JOHN HELD: Careerism—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —yeah. You know—[00:24:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because this is discussed, of course, has been for a long time, and out here—and I certainly have been a party to this, have been an observer, because I have to believe that there's something important out here that I'm devoting my whole career to in writing about it and so forth. But I view that the east/west divide—California or L.A. against New York, you know, however you want to look at it; against/against—and this artificially constructed antagonism is very interesting, because it's about art-making.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's not a battle. And that's why Sandow Birke is so interesting in his battle between northern and southern California.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I should stress that, you know, in mail art you've got this idea of cooperation rather than competition—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —like the whole thing of, you know—about mail art shows in the beginning was it was adversarial to the juried show. If you'll remember, in the old days, if you wanted to be in a juried show you would have to send in a fee, you would have to send in slides, and then you could be rejected, you know. So, there's a competition set-up and everything. So, mail art shows were set up in opposition to that, where everybody who entered the show was shown, was exhibited, and there was no fee to enter the show. [00:26:06]

And everybody who participated got some sort of documentation back in return. So, the whole thing about the mail art network, it was a cooperative—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know, enterprise—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —as opposed to the museum/gallery structure that set up, you know, different status for different artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, perhaps—it's interesting how this is opening up in general, it seems to me. The *New York Times*, for instance; all you have to do is look at that. It's paid virtually no attention to the West, and now that's not true.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: The *New York Times* sometimes—they actually extol the virtues of California art, and right now particularly L.A., and we'll just talk for a few minutes about that in just a moment. But you've got Holland Cotter and Roberta Smith, both of whom I think are really good. I mean, they're better critics than what we have here, that's for sure.

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: As much as I like my friend Charles Desmarais, you know, he's just a different level. And they seemed fascinated and talk about the originality now and the significance, the importance, of those shows, like in *Pacific Standard Time*—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —the latest version in L.A. Holland Cotter just absolutely praises—I can't remember which particular show. You know there are like 70 venues and different—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —shows. But it's—the whole theme is Latin American art, which has huge presence in L.A. [00:28:09]

But sort of scolds New York for not being able to get together in a communal, cooperative way, as those galleries [and museums -PK], which are competitive ordinarily—

JOHN HELD: Well—

PAUL KARLSTROM: See what I mean?

JOHN HELD: It's been said that New York is pretty provincial—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —in its own way, you know, and self-assured, to be sure. But I don't think it's just the West Coast getting its due against the East Coast. It's everywhere getting its due against the East Coast. I mean, this whole idea of multiculturalism now, and you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —elevating women to the same status as men, you know. And—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which some of us did anyway. Let's be clear.

JOHN HELD: Of course. And you know, different cultures, too, or foreign movements like Gutai. Gutai is finally getting its due, you know, with the big show—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right.

JOHN HELD: —at the Guggenheim in 2013.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: And—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I knew nothing about Gutai until you told me about it.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, well, it was very underground, you know. There was no book, you know, until—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —right before that, you know, 2013 show. I mean, I didn't know a lot about it until this book by Ming Tiampo came out, and it kind of blew the cover off of it. So—but there's a lot of movements like that, a lot of Japanese movements—Mono-ha and Hi-Red Center, you know. All these new groups are being discovered, and not just in Japan, but you know, all over the place. Now, I mean, I'm in contact with this contemporary artist in Malaysia, you know, whose works now are being sold —

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know, through Sotheby's and everything. So, a lot of different cultures are starting to join, you know, in the greater art community—[00:30:06]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —global art community. So, it's not just West Coast/East Coast anymore. It's East Coast, West Coast, Japan, Malaysia, you know, Soviet Union—

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's true, but I would suggest that New York has owned the writing. They've owned the publishing aspect of it—

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —and we do know that that makes a difference.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: And also, you know, they have just more publications—

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —like the *New York Times*. And so, I think it's changing, but—which is all to the good. And everything you say is true. Of course, it's silly to imagine that something is so important it can only be created there. It's like Susan Landauer. Her big claim to fame is that she talked about the San Francisco Art Institute, did a whole book on this in abstract gestural painting, abstract painting, Expressionist painting, where New York had just disdained anybody, well, who wasn't working in New York. And so, they owned the movements; they [writers, curators -PK] named the movements and everything else.

JOHN HELD: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so, Landauer went to Yale, but she's from here, from Berkeley. Go, girl, you know. And this has had an impact. There may be grumbling in New York, say, "Well, of course, it's not of the same scale, the same quality," or it's imitative, and that's what California artists—and many of them are sensitive to this, have been, I've noticed in my many, many interviews, sensitive to this, that they're copycats, that they're not original, and New York gets to decide, which—still a little bit true. [00:32:17]

JOHN HELD: Well, it's still a lot true, because Gutai gets slopped off because they say it was repetitive or just copied happenings, you know, but actually, Kaprow himself says that Gutai—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Influenced him.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, influenced him, you know. So—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know, isn't it exciting, though? Because you can just—it changes our view of how things come about, so.

JOHN HELD: Well, that's why art history is really kind of interesting, because—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —it's not a set history.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

JOHN HELD: It keeps changing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right, and it's also hard to over-define it, which of course I try to do a little bit in an interview. Let's just take a look at something, and forgive me for introducing this, because one can say, "Well,

you know, how important is this? How important is the topic?" One of the things—and I'll just introduce the question this way—one of the things I learned when I moved here, I was hired to open the Archives' office at the de Young Museum, 1973. And I was finishing a dissertation not on a California subject at all, but there we were.

And coming from L.A., what I ran into—and I won't say so much among the artists, by the way, but by collectors and museum people, and maybe not the curators; maybe not—but that there was an attitude—this is the north/south divide, you know. [00:34:06]

Two different countries; Los Angeles or the greater Los Angeles area, which is huge, and the Bay Area. You know, forget, for the moment, about Seattle and Portland, or even Santa Fe.

So, this is what I encountered, and I was surprised, and I've never really gotten over it or understood it fully. Even among artists, there's this [lingering -PK] kneejerk resistance to anything that has to do with L.A. Most of the good artists I know don't feel that way; they're happy to go back and forth, and you know, you've done that as well. Quickly, could you give sort of the art historical perspective of what you see to be the differences or possibly similarities between the art of the two competing regions?

JOHN HELD: Well, I think Los Angeles has tried to model itself after New York recently, you know, as—you know, to show that they have as much influence in the art world as New York. San Francisco, I don't even think, tries to challenge New York. It just kind of accepts itself for what it is. I'm not sure this is answering your question at all, but—

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's part of it.

JOHN HELD: But I don't really see the—you've been immersed in both scenes and everything. I pay very little attention to Los Angeles, quite frankly, you know, but if I think about it I just think, you know, it's so much bigger, you know. There's so many more universities or art schools, and where artists can be employed, you know. [00:36:07]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, a lot of teaching jobs.

JOHN HELD: Museums, you know, a lot of—yeah, it's—you know, like Diebenkorn was drawn down there for teaching, and—I don't—I just think it's a much—I think it's a bigger, you know, center, and—but San Francisco has its charm, you know, and it has its artists who are making contributions. I don't—I really don't see the competition too much between L.A.—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, you think it's overplayed? I don't think the New York—the view from the East makes that big a separation.

Here—well, here's my sort of final observation to elicit a kind of response. Take it beyond the art world. There is this self—no, I don't want to describe it really except to this degree. Put in an extreme way, the Bay Area, which then thinks of itself as San Francisco—that's another thing; it gets prestige from saying, "Oh, I live in San Francisco," and they live in Brisbane or someplace like that, but anyway—has [had] pretty broadly an antipathy for L.A. "Oh, L.A. this; L.A. that."

And they say, "Oh, how could you be from there?" And that's sort of how we were greeted when Ann and I moved here, but that's—set that aside. People of L.A. don't care. They're the ones who don't care. San Franciscans do care. "Well, there's no culture down there. It's all here." I don't know if you've run into that, but I have, a lot, and I'm just curious if you have any observation on that. [00:38:09]

I mean, to dismiss this giant down there that has plenty going on, and you know, plenty of problems, too, but so do we. It is a more general question, I realize. You don't have to have an answer.

JOHN HELD: No, I mean—I guess I just have to reiterate that I see the competition between L.A. and New York, not L.A. and San Francisco. I mean, there used to be, perhaps, especially, you know, the various gallery days and everything—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —where the artists were coming back and forth with one another, and you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, they did—

JOHN HELD: In L.A., there was—admittedly second-class to New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: You know? So, you know, the two were fighting it out on the West Coast and everything, but I think the victory was won by L.A. just by sheer size and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, they—

JOHN HELD: —and financial resources, you know, especially with the Getty. I mean, the Getty is financing this whole, you know, Pacific Standard Time and everything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Well, I know. My God, it's amazing.

JOHN HELD: Yeah. So, I mean, they have resources down there which I don't think we have here in San Francisco, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, we—

JOHN HELD: But maybe that's coming with the, you know, Silicon Valley thing and everything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well—

JOHN HELD: But I don't think it's there yet, because they're not really big collectors at this point.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it's, of course, always changing, and it's in flux but you know, one has to acknowledge like the new much-expanded San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Fishers—

JOHN HELD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL KARLSTROM: —with their big Cirrus there hovering near.

JOHN HELD: It's the biggest Museum of Modern Art in the country now—[00:40:02]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —you know, so—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

JOHN HELD: I mean, you know—you know, we've got our—

PAUL KARLSTROM: So—

JOHN HELD: —drips and drabs for sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —all of this, I guess—this is a topic that I've even written about and so forth, because I think it's frankly silly. But why can't—[laughs] Rodney King; "Why can't we all just get along?"—that—why does one place have to be able to get respect—own everything—and why can't we just move around and enjoy the different, let's say, character of places?

JOHN HELD: You know what? I don't even worry about it, because maybe San Francisco art and artists don't have the respect, but they deserve the respect, and eventually they'll get the respect.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, it's happening.

JOHN HELD: Because they've got the integrity—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —you know, to deserve that respect and everything. You know, people like Diebenkorn and Bruce Conner and Jay DeFeo, Joan Brown, and Fred Martin, and Sam Francis, and—you know, the list goes on and on and on. Not to even mention the contributions ceramics has made—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: —to the country, you know, from the Bay Area, you know, with Richard Shaw and Arneson—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JOHN HELD: —and Viola Frey. And you know, I mean, the list goes on and on and on just in ceramics.

PAUL KARLSTROM: All of these people we know, see, because it's a small community.

JOHN HELD: Exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You have a better chance of knowing them.

JOHN HELD: And you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or knew.

JOHN HELD: —they may not be widely known in the broader world, but things will change, just because there is quality here. [00:42:00]

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's a positive note, a high note to leave this at, and I guess that we can feel good about the artists themselves who tend to, as community, come together. They share certain challenges and all that, and so I don't distinguish the artists north and south that much at all. So, basically, I was setting this up for you to make your comments.

[They laugh.]

JOHN HELD: Well, I appreciate it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: No, this is probably a good place to end maybe—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

JOHN HELD: —but before we do, I just want to thank you for the opportunity, you know, to converse with you and—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, it's not like—too much like an interview, is it? It's like talking—

JOHN HELD: No, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: —conversing.

JOHN HELD: No, we're—you know, we're friends and everything, and it's just—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I prefer this, actually. This is the way I do my interviews pretty much.

JOHN HELD: Yeah, I mean, you're pretty casual in your interviews anyway. It's not like—

PAUL KARLSTROM: I guess so, yeah.

JOHN HELD: —I'm a test case or anything like that.

[They laugh.]

You know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anyway—

JOHN HELD: But you haven't done it for a long time for the Archives.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, it's been a while. Yeah.

JOHN HELD: And I'm, you know—

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, they're not more demanding than you or I are in what we expect or strive to get—

JOHN HELD: Exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: —out of interviews. That's—you know, that—and it's something that—I might even say it here. That is—the Archive of American Art has been a little slow in acknowledging the role of interviewers, especially if they're on staff. And this is something I've, I hope politely and quietly, in the background brought up through some of the people who have been working out here, you know, sort of contract work for the Archives. But it seems weird. [00:44:06]

And my—I'll mention Ann Karlstrom, who does publications a lot, and how the Archives identifies—I mean, they acknowledge that so-and-so has done an interview, but—and they rightly emphasize the subject, of course. But

as you and I know, it makes a difference who's doing the interview.

JOHN HELD: It takes—

PAUL KARLSTROM: And sometimes it makes a lot of difference.

JOHN HELD: It takes two to tango.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

JOHN HELD: It takes two to tango, and it's been a great dance, so I thank you for that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs.] And I thank you for—well, we did it, you know. We did it. So, 44:45. Stop.

[END OF INTERVIEW]