



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Robert Breer,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Robert Breer on July 10, 1973. The interview was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is Paul Cummings talking to Robert Breer on July 10, 1973. So let's see, you were born in Detroit, Michigan, to get a chronological sequence here, in 1926. How did you get from there to Stanford? Give me some background about . . . Did you grow up in Detroit? Did you live there a long time?

ROBERT BREER: Well, we will have to go back to my father, who was born in Los Angeles. His father migrated from Germany in 1840 or thereabouts — about the gold rush time. Also, when Bismark was unifying the army there was a military draft threatening a lot of young Germans and they left. So he went West, to Los Angeles. He was a bachelor.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And his name was what?

ROBERT BREER: Louis. He was known as "Iron" Louis because he was a blacksmith and his brother was a carriage maker. His specialty was harnesses and so they called him "Leather" Bill. Somewhere I have a newspaper clipping mentioning both of them. I think "Iron" Louis was one of the three blacksmiths in Los Angeles and the one voted least likely to succeed, but he did well enough to survive and my father was his youngest son.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And your father's name was what?

ROBERT BREER: Carl. When he was 16 years old — the dates don't matter too much but let's see, he died three years ago and he was 87 and that was 1970 so he was 16 years old in 1900. Well, somewhere in there, with the help of his older brother who was a blacksmith as well — they had a foundry in their back yard in downtown Los Angeles — he built a steam car, the first automobile to be built in California. He was a young kid so that is an impressive achievement, I guess, and on the strength of that he got a scholarship to Stanford. He was in a trade high school of some kind and got sent to Stanford along with his car. I went to Stanford for obvious reasons. My older brother was sent to Stanford in the '30s and I went out there in 1943.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You have five brothers?

ROBERT BREER: There are four. My younger one died a few years ago. There are three of us now and the other two are businessmen of sorts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your father obviously went into automobiles.

ROBERT BREER: That's right. He went to Stanford and came East then. He was an inventor. He invented a lot of different things, strange items that helped pay his way through school also. One of them was a hair brush. You could pull a lever on the side of the hairbrush and it would flatten out so you could put it inside your hip pocket. Everybody needs one, with a little place for the comb to slide in. And that actually brought in royalties. And another thing which is no longer used, a safety clip which locked something called a watch fob on your lower vest pocket and put in one pocket and then over to the other pocket and there was a clip for that. This was a foolproof clasp. That brought in money, anyhow. In that meantime he was studying engineering and he had various jobs as an engineer and eventually went into the automobile business and he moved to, I think it was, somewhere in Wisconsin and then to New Jersey with a man who turned out to be my uncle eventually, another engineer, and a third man. The three of them had an engineering team. Walter Chrysler in 1927, I guess, wanted to form his own company, and he brought them in as consulting engineers. So they designed the first Chrysler automobile in New Jersey because of liberal corporation laws. So my older brothers were born in East Orange or some place and then we moved to Detroit when the business went there. That was how I got there. I probably didn't get there that way. [Laughter] Automobiles . . . everywhere, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were born there and you lived there until you went to Stanford?

ROBERT BREER: Yes. I left when I was 16 and that was during the war in '43. I went right away to school from there without any intervening summer gap because of the war. The idea was that eventually I was going to go into the army so the hope was to get more education.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was it like growing up in Detroit?

ROBERT BREER: Oh well, I guess if you ever talk to anybody, Detroit is a two-class town, blue collar and white collar. It's got the automobile industry and an awful big labor force and all the managing body live outside in the suburbs. Eventually that was where we lived, in a place called Grosse Pointe, infamous suburb. It's incredible. I guess it is well known — I don't know, I guess I don't have to describe that place. You know, it's all so monolithic in terms on one industry. It's a fairly simple business, and the people that run that business are fairly simple, so it shows. I don't think anybody can manage to live there with any complex thoughts at all unless he lives in total isolation. It's a place to flee as soon as possible and of course, it is interesting now. It is a phenomenon and I guess kind of interesting to a sociologist who wants to study what happens in the industrial revolution and the fattening of the bourgeoisie and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how did you like it? Your father was an engineer. He was sort of upper echelon.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, we lived pretty well, I must say. Had this house on the lake there. I was just vaguely aware of some — as aware one is at the age of 16. Most of this is in retrospect. At the time there were a lot of instances as far as we were concerned, I think not too much with the local society as such. I think where we lived on the lake made for a lot of sports and a lot of fishing, ice boating, swimming, and stuff of that sort. I wasn't interested in engineering at all. I started out drawing at age five or something and I was always encouraged — that's how I became an artist, by not being discouraged but by finding something that was different from the others and it was reinforced enough. I remember he took me to art school on Saturdays. He used to take me to the local art school when I was about ten years old.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you remember what school that was?

ROBERT BREER: Yes, the Society of Arts and Crafts in Detroit. It was the only school there. I don't know what is there now. I went back there when I was older and a guy named Sarkesian — you know him?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've heard of him.

ROBERT BREER: It is a famous name. I think there's a very well known rug — it is Armenian, I guess. Anyhow, I did not have much interest and no particularly ability either, no penchant for math and all that. It was very bad news because when I went to Stanford it was understood that I was going to become an engineer. I don't know how they understood it. I didn't understand it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did . . . ?

ROBERT BREER: Well, it was a crisis. I suppose because I guess I was indulged in the art thing as long as I didn't take it too seriously. But it wasn't considered a suitable career. I think it's as simple as that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Nice as a child, but not

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, I think probably in certain circles it is all right. I think that the artists that they might respect and admire would be the industrial designers and such are considered beneath It is pretty much judged on the basis of money-producing ability. Don't you think? Except that I don't want to leave on the record that the old man was so much oriented that way. I think he appreciated inventions and that's a thing in its own right. And I think some of that rubbed off. There was a crisis when he asked me when I was being sent to college right out of high school — and as I said, I was only 16. I was going to go way out West on my own, which was kind of an alarming prospect for me. He asked me what I was intending to major in and I said, well I didn't know. And then was the only time I saw him almost lose control. He sensed that I didn't know at this point what I was going to do. I apparently had overlooked that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He knew what he wanted to do at that age.

ROBERT BREER: I guess that is right. I'm getting wiser, as Mark Twain, you know, vis-a-vis parents. He frightened me into becoming, at least in the beginning, an engineer. That didn't last long.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of schools had you gone to in Detroit?

ROBERT BREER: I started out in a Catholic school. My mother is Catholic. My father had a little German thing. My mother was half German and half Irish. Her mother was from Canada some place and spent a little time in Upper Michigan and so you know, if the church will have it you are a Catholic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know about the way they operate.

ROBERT BREER: You know how they operate. If there is one Catholic in the family they are all Catholic or it's hell's fire and so forth. And so my first was downtown Detroit. We hadn't yet moved out to the suburbs and I was sent to a parochial school. Is that the right word for it? I've never understood what parochial means except provincial; I always thought as in the parishes. I guess it was a big Catholic school I went to and I don't know how

long it was for. I ran away from it several times; the police would bring me home. I hated it. They were sadistic and the nuns used — I checked this out with other rebellious Catholics and it used to be standard procedure and they were always sadistic. Are you enjoying all this? I'm surprised all this is coming out. You're a very good interviewer with just the right attitude.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the time that you were in that school? What was that, from first grade to . . .

ROBERT BREER: I don't know. It must have been kindergarten and first grade. Something like that. I pleaded with my mother not to send me back to that torture, and she agreed. I went from that to whatever other school where they actually played and cut out paper dolls. It was euphoric. It was incredible. I couldn't believe it. The Catholic school made you sit and raise your hand to go to the bathroom but nine times out of ten they wouldn't allow that to happen so I remember a mixture of urine and corduroy, corduroy knickers that I wore and bleak five-thirty chapel things in church, being terrified of all this. That was the way it worked at the beginning of my life. I had to work out a lot of those things later with the church and so forth. It haunted me for a long time. I was about 12 when I made the formal declaration of no more church, that I didn't believe in God. I had read Sinclair Lewis — was it Main Street? In any case, I had heard about him standing up and defying God and telling him to strike him dead if there had been one. And that seemed to suit me fine. He survived that and I tried it myself and it seemed to work. So I went downstairs and announced to the family that I didn't believe in God and I wasn't going to go through this hypocrisy any longer. And there was a great hush and from that time on I think I had a certain moral space around me. My brothers came to me to plead with me to reconsider. My mother from then on never really could face the situation. She would pretend that she just misunderstood me. I never went to church after that. Now my father was a self-styled atheist — he must have been Lutheran, German I suppose but he never — and in this case he was probably on the spot and couldn't really openly defend me and he didn't. But that was important announcement of independence.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have access to books to read? Were there books at home, cultural interests, music? With the German background there should be music somewhere.

ROBERT BREER: My father was a heavy that way. I think acultural. I don't know how he got through school. I am sure he was a good student in the areas that interested him and he had funny ranging interests. But he took a course from William James, who was teaching at Stanford, believe it or not. He audited a course from William Jones but had nothing to say about it afterwards, only the fact. But my father was a relatively old man by the time we ever talked about these things and this was going way back in his memory and he lost track of some of that. But he was strangely lopsided in his education. He couldn't express himself very well in words. It was a most painful business. His letters were always incredibly pompous. Comical. I'm trying to think who it sounded like . . . Anything official always had to be through a secretary or "as told to." Not that he was crude, he wasn't an automobile mechanic — it wasn't that so much as maybe it was a personal thing. I think it was partly education lacks of some kind. He managed maybe to evade all the courses in culture and literature or whatever, but what he did when he made a lot of money — he must have had some kind of . . . We moved into a better neighborhood and in the middle thirties he bought a house from a man who was wiped out in the crash and he must have made a killing of some kind then. It had a library with many shelves with no books so he bought a complete library, I think probably by the colors, just books to fill up the shelves. Because when we tried to unload this library (we always had been impressed by the bindings) it turned out they weren't worth much. There were a few special editions, mainly these pretentious second and third editions with very ornate bindings. Complete works of Thackeray, complete works of — but sometimes very bad things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you read any of those books?

ROBERT BREER: Sure. When I was a kid I read all of Edgar Allen Poe and . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why did he appeal?

ROBERT BREER: I illustrated Poe. They were terrible things. I have them somewhere. I did that for the House of Usher, poster things. So I had some access. And I guess at the school I went to after the Catholic business called the Detroit University School, which was a private day school. Heavy stress on manual training, sports, and the like, really a kind of nice school, a boys' school. Now it has become an incredible plant, like Westchester High School or something. You know, it was a brick building, the rudiments of the twenties and thirties, a lot of playing fields.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you interested in sports and all those activities?

ROBERT BREER: Not really too much. Football. I ended up a kind of high school football hero. I was too clumsy to do anything else.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That is pretty skillful, isn't it?

ROBERT BREER: No. Well, taking out aggression, I guess. Sure, it could be. I wasn't really that skillful. I had not been playing the backfield; I was too blind. I was just dynamic. But it was a pleasant experience. I guess after that start anything would have been pleasant. So I didn't have any grievances with my education.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Going out to Stanford when you were 16 was a little early, wasn't it?

ROBERT BREER: Well, I skipped a grade of school. The school was small and I think what happened was in the second grade that they didn't have any students so they decided to cancel the second grade that year and put me in the third. I think they did something like that. I know I didn't skip third grade. In any case, I didn't get the multiplication tables down very well and that's what probably queered my engineering career.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You couldn't do all those numbers. Well, how did you like Stanford? Going halfway across the country to your new milieu or situation — did that allow you to explode into something?

ROBERT BREER: I ran into a lot of social problems because the West Coast, like the East Coast, has its own established social situation and the kids that were local kids going to Stanford knew each other. They had already a system and I felt very much like a hick, which I was I suppose, and this put a damper on some of my social ambitions. And there was a kind of fraternity systems going at that time; it was during the war, and half the fraternities had to close down and there were a few that were left and I was expected to go into a fraternity. If you could make it, that would give you a stab at better than nothing. There were about two choice ones that the friends that I made out there went into and I managed to be on the tail end of that trip and wasn't quite asked to go to the most favored one there, and it was a kind of a devastating blow to me. I got offers to go to a couple of lesser ones but they seemed rather strange to me and they were based on something that had to do with my being a football player. I couldn't understand that that was worth anything. I was too small to play college football. I went out for freshman team and went right back in again. And so the only way to handle that situation was to turn against it, which I did. I decided that fraternities were all for the birds and I managed to handle that situation all right so that I wasn't wiped out. I have never changed my mind about that. Then, I guess I suddenly, I started drawing cartoons for the daily paper.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you continued drawing from the age of five all the way through school?

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, I drew all the time. It was kind of uncouth. Grosse Pointe was really on the city limits. Where Detroit turns into Grosse Pointe, at the end of this street there is a little art supply store. The man who owned it painted genre paintings there — dogs, playing cards and smoking pipes and wearing hats and all that, and landscapes, Vermont snow, fir trees, like mashed potatoes, but that was my introduction to art. I really didn't have much The Arts and Crafts School was a little more sophisticated than that but that wasn't such a heavy dosage that I escaped all the effects. So what I saw around me was automobile designs or cartoons, and I guess I was always a fun kid too. Humor was a way of dealing with my problems with family and so forth. So I cartooned and that sort of appealed to me abstractly as a nice way to make a living because one could stay home. We banned sororities at Stanford. I don't think they have ever come back. The reason was because it was such a system of elitism that the girls that didn't get in one were so many that it was an unacceptable situation. There were too many crushed psyches.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like living away from your family and making your way in a new world? You didn't have any friends who went there, did you?

ROBERT BREER: No, I didn't know a soul and that was kind of disturbing in a way. I did quite well in establishing myself as somebody there as a freshman, part of it through this cartooning and part of it as — well, I don't know, I was elected to some kind of class officership and so forth. I don't know how I did it, charm I guess. It was important. I suffered great loneliness out there and I really ended up hating the school and carried that feeling ever since. I had a different experience. I went into the army finally and spent two years in the army.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When was that?

ROBERT BREER: '45 to '47. It was right after the war had ended. I was drafted. I wasn't fit for military service before. I was about to flunk out of Stanford at that point. I had been in the art school and doing very well there. It was like swimming in water.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who did you study with there?

ROBERT BREER: Well, who could one mention in the Stanford Art Department that anybody had ever heard of? I had a curious experience there. The two main professors, one was Daniel Mendelowitz.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A drawing man.

ROBERT BREER: Is he a drawing man?

PAUL CUMMINGS: He did a book on drawings. It is quite good.

ROBERT BREER: Is it? Good.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Academic, quiet little drawings.

ROBERT BREER: He was a friend of the New York - again, I use the words genre painter, I don't know what you call them. Who painted a famous painting, drawing, that was titled High Yella, and it was a Harlem street light?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Reginald Marsh?

ROBERT BREER: Reginald Marsh, right. Mendelowitz was a friend of Reginald Marsh's and had some of the same leanings. He was an intelligent man, and I liked him. However, he was only interested in drawings of Reginald Marsh. The other man that was in our department was named Victor Arnautoff. He was kind of interesting. He's dead now. Another man's name was Farmer. All of them were realist painters. Arnautoff had been a white Russian who escaped across China and married the daughter of the Russian counsel in Peking or something. He went to Mexico and was very impoverished in the '20's sometime after the revolution in Russia. He stood around and admired Rivera and hung around so much that Rivera finally gave him a bucket of plaster. He became Rivera's assistant, and he became an expert muralist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Muralist?

ROBERT BREER: Muralist or what you call a fresco painter and got appointed to the Stanford faculty and in the meantime became a red. So a white Russian became red. He became a communist and joined the party probably through Rivera, I don't know. In the McCarthy era after I'd left Stanford, there was some purge in all the California faculties, and they did something to him that was disgusting, that whole business. They demolished his career, and it rushed him into his grave. He was sort of a neo-realist, Russian style painter and Mendelowitz. Farmer, as I remember, spent days and days on super realist still lifes that were on his desk all the time. That was the bent of the art department when a new man was brought into Stanford from Cranbrook Academy or some place like that who had a higher post in humanities that included art, but he had a higher post than these people in the art department when I came back out of the Army. In the Army, I was hauled out of basic training several times to do things like paint "Headquarters Company" in old English on garbage cans. I was used as an artist, and I finally got into a training aids department and was used as a kind of commercial artist. We had a big silk screen session and made posters . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Whereabouts were you in the Army?

ROBERT BREER: . . . how to defuse bombs. I ended in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. I went all through the South. By then, I was regular army, and it was miserable. I was a dog-face. I did a hell of a lot of KP pots and pans. I was in basic training four times because every time they would haul me out because I had two years of college. They would haul me out and give me a desk job, and then somebody would look through my records and find I hadn't finished basic training. Then, I would go back to basic training, and they would haul me out again to do another job. But I ended up in this art department at Fort Jackson, and I began to get a little status. I had three stripes, and they offered me a commission. If you can imagine that. The last thing I wanted to do. It gave me a complete, thorough disgust with commercial art and anything associated with it. I didn't know anything else, I had developed, I guess, a tremendous yearning for anything else, and I had what amounted to a religious revelation when I got out of the Army towards fine art. I went back to Stanford very reluctantly. I just didn't know what else to do. I had the GI Bill, and so I went back there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How much original art in terms of fine art had you seen up to this time?

ROBERT BREER: Everyone at Stanford was confined to what they considered . . . I took an art history course which probably took me up to possibly Paul Klee.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you been to the Museum in Detroit?

ROBERT BREER: Yeah. Now a couple of things happened, I don't know at what time. I have been listening to these goddamn Watergate hearings, so I have the feeling that I have got to say everything truthfully.

PAUL CUMMINGS: On the third of July 1953 at two o'clock.

ROBERT BREER: I feel like saying things like "at that point in time." I don't know. But, a couple of things happened in Detroit, and I don't know when they happened, before or after the Army. One of them was a Matisse painting of a window, goldfish on a table, called "The Window." There are many windows and many goldfish so I am not sure which one, but it was a splendid piece. That excited me for years. I still conjure up those first feelings. They were very strong. That was very important for me. There was a man named Tannerhill,

who was a big collector, a relative of Ford somehow, who had just died recently, and he bequeathed his collection to the Museum. They built a new wing for it, and he had a fantastic collection. And, there was a lady in Detroit whose son was a friend of mine, and she was a bright woman, Isabel Finnie. She was a printer out of Chicago Institute way back, and, anyhow, she represented one of the intellectuals, and their family was the bright light in an otherwise very dreary scene. The time I spent with them was very stimulating, and she had gotten me to visit this guy's collection. I remember he had a small dog that latched his nose on the cuff of my pants and stayed with me the two hours I went around this collection, but it didn't seem to bother him at all. But anyhow he had the Picasso white period, he had Cezanne. By this time I knew what I was looking at from my art history courses so this must have been after the war. I got very turned on anyhow. I went back to school and took the standard art courses. I took time in the afternoon, started painting abstractions and left one of them in the classroom. The next day in Armentoff's class, figure painting class, he turned this thing around from the wall and asked who did it, and I confessed. That started a whole chain of events.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the reaction?

ROBERT BREER: He was very hostile, and he took me into his office and looked funny at me. He thought that I had some special merit and was concerned that I would get interested in what he considered evil, and we spent three hours, him trying to persuade me to recant and not get interested in this stuff. Of course, that made it more interesting. And, the other teachers likewise, and the only man who came to my rescue was the new head of the humanities department, Ray, I should remember his name much more sophisticated I always thought than these people and at the same time he seemed to have less. I remember his less vividly. I didn't have much to do with him, but he arranged it so I could quit all my courses. He gave me a faculty studio in an old building, and all I had to do for the last two years was take a couple of courses outside of art. All I had to do was paint. A young faculty member named John LaPlatte didn't know what was happening and would come once a week just to check on me, and we would shoot the breeze for an hour or so. Then, he would go away, and I would go on painting. I did all kinds of experimentation; it was very orthodox experimentation at that time. I went through everything I had ever seen.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But when you started painting, you started painting abstractly then? Or had you started doing figure paintings?

ROBERT BREER: Oh no, I started figuratively. I started in school. I did still lifes and figurative at the art school in Detroit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean in the University situation.

ROBERT BREER: The University was figurative. In fact, the system was to go from drawings to watercolor to oil. This was the standard progression, presumably getting more deeply involved, and that was the orthodoxy. First draw from nature, and develop your skills. They made open fun of my work. Mendelowitz kidded me about my abstract paintings. Yeah, I was kind of offended.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There were no traveling exhibitions around?

ROBERT BREER: I saw a show of Mondrian's paintings in San Francisco, and that knocked me out. That knocked me out and perplexed me. I couldn't reconcile that with what I had been told. Again, I lose this time thing, but Paul Klee impressed me very much. And, you know how kids learn then and probably still do, maybe less because it was more mobile, but my art history course took place in a huge auditorium at the University at the end of which was a screen, and slides were shown. Mendelowitz was teaching. I saw Paul Klee on a screen the size of Lincoln Center, and I was completely floored when I saw the first Paul Klee the right size. That is a case where the scale is very important. Less important in other cases, less discrepancy so I don't know. It is only in retrospect that my art education was pretty sketchy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there any students around there that you remember, that you were interested in?

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, there were three. Two guys like myself who became mavericks, and so we identified with each other. One of them is now a faculty member at UCLA. He is a sculptor, and his name will come to me sooner or later. The other one's name was Wilson. He lives in San Francisco, and he has got strange problems. He is a very handsome guy. He had all kinds of problems. We had a girl friend in common, and he lived off campus and was kind of a guru for the art students there. I had a kind of different situation; I am not the guru type, but nevertheless, I had that kind of special status too. He is a very good with animals. He does certain orientalism in his work, animal stuff. He had a kind of very small but deep reputation out there, but he has terrible drinking problems and other things too. And, he's very self-destructive. What the hell is his last name? First name I don't know. And the other guy, I will think of his name. There was another boy. I think the other one is one the faculty at UCLA, and I cannot think of his name. I had a catalog if I could find it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oliver Andrews?

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, he's on the faculty at UCLA. He does water sculptures with fountains with slabs of metal, and water bubbles out of them. But, Wilson was an interesting guy. We didn't work alike or anything so there wasn't any group. It was just a very poor art school. What was really going on was at Berkeley or at Cal. School of Fine Arts. Sam Francis was up there. I was out of touch with them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That whole group of people still was teaching there.

ROBERT BREER: Imagine I was that close to it, but no one told me. I didn't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There was no communication?

ROBERT BREER: No, it was probably my fault, but you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you finished at Stanford and got a BA in '49.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Then you went to Paris? Why did you decide to do that?

ROBERT BREER: I was going to New York, and I just kept going. I had a friend who was going to Paris so I went over there as a tourist. Again, I had the GI Bill. I had accumulated three years of it, and so when I got over there I signed up for that. I got a small stipend from home. I lived on that GI Bill for a couple of years \$75 a month plus books that we could sell. We had a book allowance.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, I remember.

ROBERT BREER: I know people who were on it, and they used to get books, run across the street, and sell them. And of course, we didn't go to school. I didn't go to school even a little bit then. We just signed up in the school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who'd you go to?

ROBERT BREER: Grande Chaumiere. You know Paris? Well, you know Montparnasse. Collarissi was the next one. A sculptor Zadkine. I went there for three weeks. I had an encounter with Zadkine, and I left. It was funny. I had a friend, George Spaventa, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh yes, sure.

ROBERT BREER: George was studying with Zadkine. I don't remember what I said to him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You hadn't made sculpture before?

ROBERT BREER: No. I went into the class, and we worked with clay. There was a model, and I did a small perfectly well done nude. The only thing special about it was the kind of surface held together by skin rather than bones, maybe it was legitimate criticism. When he got around to me, he suggested that I do a formal anatomy study of a plaster cast. I wasn't about to do it. As far as I was concerned, I was much further than that. The piece of sculpture I had done was a straightforward copy, but the idea of going back to the plaster form was out of the question. I said that I really didn't have time, and he said what are you doing in the afternoons. I said I paint, and he pretended to be horrified by this. And he said well, you have to make up your mind. So I did; I quit his class, and that was the end of that. I saw Zadkine around all the time. His prize student was Bob Bazinsky. Never heard of him after that. He was a painter. He was picked up by Life magazine. Funny how we thought . . . he was a competent what would be expressionist fauve.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like that milieu in Paris with the GI's running all over?

ROBERT BREER: Well, I liked it very much. There was a lot of heavy drinking and a lot of feeling of . . . Well, people have said of all the guys there that I was the only one who worked all the time. That has been said of me, so I can repeat it. It might have been true. Most of the people that we knew were kind of going to public baths, taking a bath, doing laundry, buying bread. The way of life was . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like living with the French language? French people? Parisians?

ROBERT BREER: Oh, well, eventually, I got to sort of cordially despise the French, but in the process, I learned the language. I do have a few very dear likeable French friends. Exceptions in general. No, that isn't really quite true. I lived there for ten years, five years of which I was married to an American. All sorts of life became more and more involved with expatriate Americans, and I found that kind of tedious. There was too small a selection. The art seemed again to drift to New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you aware of that then?

ROBERT BREER: Well, I became aware of it in the middle fifties or so. I had a few American painter friends. Jack Youngerman was over there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who else was there?

ROBERT BREER: There was a guy named Leo Zimmerman who someday will be dug out of his home in Kentucky, I guess, because he was quite an amazing guy. Jack, Leo and myself were shown with six other artists at Denise René. I could look up the catalogue. In '50 or so. I have a René biography at the Yale show. They put together a thing. Have you seen that? Anyhow, as for other Americans over there: I didn't know Ellsworth Kelly. Jack knew him quite well. It is funny that we never met. Oh, there was that guy John Koenig who ran - I don't know - is he still functioning at his gallery?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Cimaïse.

ROBERT BREER: I'll be damned. I haven't seen him for years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He just had a show in Washington. I got a little announcement.

ROBERT BREER: You know him?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Through correspondence.

ROBERT BREER: Most of the people I knew I got involved with through Denise René.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that happen? She had been in business for a little while by that time, hadn't she?

ROBERT BREER: Oh, yes, she started in '45. I was there in '49. Edgar Pillet, who was one of her stable at that time, was a friend of Leo's, and they were in the popcorn business together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the popcorn business?

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, yeah, he was very successful for a while selling popcorn in France. He had three street stands, and then he sold it in packages. He had a farmer growing it. People were stealing from him. They passed a law prohibiting a machine that high on the pavement, and the other businessmen cleaned them out. He was a funny guy. That's a Leo Zimmerman, the painter. His wife worked for ECA, the Marshall Plan, as some of these people did who were supported by their wives.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who were you married to then? You didn't mention it.

ROBERT BREER: My connection with Denise René came through her sister Lucienne. I wasn't married but might as well have been. I got officially married in 1955 to my present wife back here in New York. I came back here on a visit, and I looked her up. I had met her in Paris before. She used to work for Arnold Fawcus Press. Do you know anything about that?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

ROBERT BREER: He did things like Piranesi books and Huxley. I remember going to lunch with Huxley because I had a little car, and he used my car. I always had wheels of some kind. So, a complicated story. But Denise René and the painters I saw most of were Vasarely, all of those people, Mortenson, Deyrolle. Those names mean anything to you?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Deyrolle is dead, I think.

ROBERT BREER: Deyrolle is dead? Hard to believe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think I heard that.

ROBERT BREER: Dewasne had a show. You know that. He's not well know here at all. In Europe at the time they were the stars, and I was kind of their young American mascot. I was the only American in the gallery, the youngest artist there. When I got married, it dawned on me how intermingled my private life and my professional life were. I was about to have my first one-man show at Denise René as a big send off. I was first to have a show in Brussels, which I did have at the Museum there. When I went back before that show to New York, it caused some hostility in the René family and a switch in my career. I was no longer with the Denise René Gallery. I've seen her since; everything is fine. She just bought a bunch of my things, in fact.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really? Good.

ROBERT BREER: [Inaudible] creepy crawlies.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find being associated that way with the French gallery? Because not many Americans have had French gallery associations.

ROBERT BREER: Well, I can't blame them. I didn't see Americans. I saw these people. They weren't French; they were Europeans in general. So I didn't even speak English from one year to the next very often. I had American friends over there, but it was another life, another world. I was really away. I came back here after I got married here, and then I began to make more American connections. When the big swinging show went to France, that was the death knell on the French art scene. I was pretty much out of it by then, in a sense. I had one more show at the American Students Artist Center. It was the first show that they had had, and I don't think anything since then because it is more of an art gallery. I don't know recently what has happened to it. And, I started making films, and there was a lot of interest in my films.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did the films start? You had been painting the kind of flat geometric — not really geometric, overlapped images.

ROBERT BREER: Well, I don't know. The first film I made was 1952. I guess I've answered that question several ways but I really don't know what the right answer is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was it through somebody? Were you interested in motion pictures?

ROBERT BREER: No, I wasn't. I think it was kineticism. I think it was, I don't know. I really can't honestly say what the influence was, but I know the first film I made was — you didn't see it. They don't have these films at the Museum at all. They don't have any of them. The Anthology Archives has them. They were like these paintings you saw, geometric forms involving very crude animated films, like Mickey Mouse but without personalities. The first thing I did was to make a flip book. Now my father comes back into this picture because one of his major hobbies was film making.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, home movies. In 1940, I think it was, here or at the World's Fair in '39 or '40, the Chrysler Company commissioned some people to make a three-dimensional film for their pavilion at the World's Fair and it was one of these red and green power-house spectacle types of things. And that stirred my old man to do the same thing, only he decided to use color film. And he knew Ed Land, who was the Polaroid guy at the time. I guess he had just come out with Polaroid glass and put together — I have it right in my bag there, his camera made in 1940. From then on all our home movies were made in 3-D. When we went down to the basement to look at home movies, we had to wear glasses and there was a long business of adjusting it so it was right and you couldn't tilt your head or it would distort. So that was all in there. Movies were one of the more excruciating things to do. A good way to spoil an evening is to have to go and look at home movies — it always is and in three dimensional didn't make it that much better. I had an aversion to film, really, if anything. But I knew he had a camera, so in '52 I guess I was planning a visit back to the States and anticipated borrowing a camera from him and made this bunch of drawings that would be for the first film. I went home and I did use that camera.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you studied animation or drawing, film techniques or anything?

ROBERT BREER: No, it was really shooting blind. I had notions about it but not much. I might have looked at one of these manuals how-to-do-it, but those things have always disgusted me because of the little dull stick figures that they use and because of the general commercial, dreary

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of films did your father make?

ROBERT BREER: Long epic travelogues, his travels. My mother advancing towards the camera holding a flower, kind of Kodak award-winning amateur studies of trees with ice on them, really corny home movies. He did all the things that you were supposed to do in the manual. He used slow motion when you're in a car so the camera jolts were dampened and he occasionally would use some of the tricks, reversing, turning the camera upside down, so you have somebody coming out of the swimming pool into the diving board, you know. But really very little of that. Most of it was just in the interest of recording travels and so forth. Very steadily composed. I don't know how I'd see them now. We have it all stored, thousands of feet, three-dimensional movies. Hollywood people were interested in them when they thought that 3-D was going to be big. Before cinerama or before cinemascope became the standard, there was an attempt right after the war to use it. Well, I guess it was a switch over to the mechanistic and didn't seem justifiable. They were threatened by television and looking for something. My father was convinced that the movies that were made to promote 3-D were so abominable that it turned everybody against three dimension. So up until he died he thought still that 3-D movies would find their

proper place. He consulted the Bolex people and tried to persuade them to get interested. They did make up a 3-D thing, didn't find many people interested, and dropped it. For me it provoked all kinds of negative thoughts about pursuing realism in general, you know, which I already had but even more so then and questioned why one should do it. But occasionally I was curious about what one could do and how one could use it other than simply trying to recreate what you were looking at, transport it someplace. And then I got philosophical. Somewhere I wrote something — there is an interview for Film Culture, a couple of interviews.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing I am curious about. When you went to France you were painting abstractly already and you continued that way. So the classes that you went to there were just

ROBERT BREER: Oh, the classes there. I never went to a class. This would get me in trouble with the Federal Government, but I painted in my hotel room. In the winter it was very cold but that was where I worked. I never painted a single thing in a class under anybody's tutelage in France. No, they were doing figure stuff. The Grand Chaumière was like peeling away fifty or seventy years, still 1900, and the Detroit school was more advanced in many ways than that so I had no interest. Besides all the painters for me were all those people around Montparnasse — all these people who were still living you would see from time to time. The biggies, you know. Giacommetti was always around there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you find those people accessible? Did you meet many of the established artists?

ROBERT BREER: Oh yeah, I did through Denise René, but I didn't seek it out. I had all my own pretensions you know. I lived in the same building that Léger had a studio in for a while. I got to know Corbusier quite well because he was with Denise René. I got to know Arp quite well. I was a great admirer of Arp. And I had a chance to meet Picasso a couple of times and didn't take it because I knew I would just stand there with egg on my face. I had a chance to go over to his studio on business with Denise but I just didn't feel like it. You know, it is an American attitude So I missed opportunities. I don't know whether I regret it or not.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There were enough other ones.

ROBERT BREER: There were enough others. Yeah, I got the idea. Like Brancusi lived around, he lived right next door to Tinguely. And of course Tinguely and I got to be close friends.

[END TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE]

[BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO]

PAUL CUMMINGS: So the first films were really started in Paris? And concurrently with the paintings?

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, and I gradually tapered off from painting. I was disturbed by — I guess disturbed, I don't know — anyhow, my first abstract painting in Paris, I had done a few attempts I guess at Stanford, but mainly it was still abstract in the American sense of the word, the real first neo-plastic paintings. You know the way this happens, you have interviewed enough artists so you know, is that I suppose the most obvious direct influence is the least obvious to that person being influenced. So my first pure abstract paintings were certainly influenced by Mondrian, but I cannot trace, you know. I told you that I had seen the show in California but it was so many years before. It had left such a vague impression. Anyhow, it was a turning point for me and I guess I went through the throes that Kandinsky went through when in 1913 it became a revelation that abstraction was possible. I got very excited and that was probably in 1950 or something, a few months after I had been in Paris and my friends got Denise René over to look at my stuff. Those were the people that came to look at it and they got interested and they made up this group show and I showed in that, and picked up a few of their collectors there, very few. That is the way that happened. What did you ask me?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the painting tapered off.

ROBERT BREER: Okay, so then my painting I think went into a less original phase for a while under the influence of Vasarely and — I see it now, I didn't see it then — neo-plasticism. Mangelli was a big important guy. Herbin became an important person. Herbin was very stimulating to me. Way back in 1950 it was rare to see those things and well, he had a good period at the time for me, the less serpentine figures, very simple, geometric forms.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Simple?

ROBERT BREER: The simplest. So that was the influence then. Now I felt that I was working my way out of the very rigid notions that a lot of these people had. The Denise René group used to meet in my apartment occasionally and they had the close knit group — most of them were communists, strangely enough, and Denise's brother was secretary of the Trotsky Party, Jacobsen the sculptor. It's funny he isn't that well known, but through that period he was the important young sculptor at that time. But most of these guys were in their

forties. I was in my twenties. Mortensen, another Dane, Jacobsen. Anyhow they had an ideological falling out a few years after I got tied up with them in the gallery and they had a meeting in which they regretfully acknowledged that they were all becoming successful and that they were splitting away from each other because they couldn't share the same ideology. They weren't really a group any longer. And I remember sitting there as a witness to this and it seemed kind of devastating that the thing was crumbling.

PAUL CUMMINGS: To you?

ROBERT BREER: Seemed devastating to me just as a witness, especially because I was associated with some kind of dying scene, you know. I regretted that I wasn't really one of those guys. They were really quite successful. Denise René comes through, you know. She was the gallery. She was Leo Castelli of Paris. Paris was supposedly the place. This was important. But anyhow, that happened. I became disenchanted with some of their orthodoxies. I couldn't believe all this crap about avoiding configuration. It seemed to me strangely unnecessary. Some of the absolutism I couldn't buy and one way out was kinetics.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like being the youngest artist of all these people and being the only American in a European group?

ROBERT BREER: It seemed natural to me. I think I didn't have any connection with the American art scene when I left America so I wasn't tearing anything up. I didn't have very much of a point of view when I got there so I think I became Europeanized.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You sort of were beginning.

ROBERT BREER: It didn't occur to me. I didn't feel like an American so much until afterwards, after I had been there a few years and after I had married an American and after I found myself with Americans more. I became a kind of professional American and I didn't care for that. But at that time I was just one more foreigner there. They were all foreigners too. We all had our language problems. With the Danes we used English as a common language sometimes, or French, so I don't think I felt that American. I had nothing to identify with.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Vasarely's Hungarian.

ROBERT BREER: Hungarian, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the Denise René Gallery like?

ROBERT BREER: Well, it was a very tight ship.

PAUL CUMMINGS: She has a very specific aesthetic.

ROBERT BREER: Well, I never understood that she has a specific aesthetic. I always felt that it was Vasarely using her. She became a kind of oracle — or was it the other way around. I know she always had — I never felt that her aesthetic convictions were all that personal. She is a very strong woman, little, but she is small and dynamite. I think she worked out convictions, but I think that her convictions were more female intuition, good political sense and so forth, rather than any deep sensed kind of aesthetic attachment to

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, she's a good merchandiser too.

ROBERT BREER: Exactly. I think that she got her aesthetic input from the people around her and Vasarely was a major influence on her, to the disgruntlement of the other artists. We always felt that he had too much to say about what was going on and choice of other artists and so forth. There was some resentment.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But he had always been so apparent in her galleries, the manifestations of her gallery.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, well, he is the big star of her gallery. It is almost as if she were working for him. They were, of course, very close anyhow and I think they were together when the gallery started. It's all intertwined.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You have made quite a number of films, sort of one or two a year, one after another, all being made in Paris. You did live there for the decade. What do these derive from? Were they still associated with the images of the paintings?

ROBERT BREER: Well, I worked out of that and just got interested in film per se. I guess I gradually became acquainted with the whole experimental film movement, you know, and I identified myself with that. I do now anyhow. This Englishman just sent me an early Ruttman film. I don't know whether you know him, his work, but simultaneous with Richter. In fact there is some question about who was first, Egging or Richter. There is some question about — Richter's still alive — anyhow, there is an area of doubt in there. Those questions being very important in those days, less important now of who did what when. But Ruttman was well known in Europe and a

successful commercial film maker. I think he did titles and things for people and special effects in Germany and made some — they are called Opus 1, 2, 3, 4 or something like that. Abstract geometric films very much like Richter's films, more suave I guess, a little more accomplished technically and so forth in the middle twenties. And so I was aware of these people, gradually became aware of them anyhow: Leger, Duchamp, Man Ray, all of their activities. The whole Dada thing interested me and so film was a natural. I mean, it also was in an area — well, I suppose others were more interested in what I was doing in film than in my paintings so that might have pulled or pushed me in that direction. One is susceptible to that. It is hard to measure. I got very excited just dealing with this material. So I could — it's very exciting business. One of the things that also interested me was the idea of reproduction. The fact that one painting I had sold a few paintings and they disappeared and they're gone and I was excited about that — they were never seen again by me. And in that whole area I have a lot of notions like that that I think are more rationalizations than anything else. But anyhow, there was a lot of effort to make multiples in those days that fell short of being acceptable, you know, and there was a painter, a protégé of Miro's — what was his name — who talked a lot about this and tried to

PAUL CUMMINGS: Spoerri was one of them.

ROBERT BREER: No, not Spoerri, he was no protégé of Miro's.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know, I couldn't think.

ROBERT BREER: No, no, this man was an older French painter and I don't remember. It's not Talcoat. I can't remember his name but he had a show of paintings that were very similar one to the next and it was a kind of philosophical effort to pose the question of multiplicity versus the one original act. It was in the air and I thought, my god, film, here it is and the original is worthless. It's always prints of that and the prints themselves don't have value except as they're shown on the wall, so I got interested in that. In escaped the usual route of collectors' anility and so forth adding artificial value to things because of their uniqueness. And so that philosophically was tempting. Then also, film opened up a new public for me and that public wasn't subject to the same, you know,

PAUL CUMMINGS: Whims, rules.

ROBERT BREER: Rules, right. Limitations as the art public, so I felt freer. So when I got into the film public they weren't — in many cases they were louts. You know, they knew my relative sophistication and then they'd get lost in a film world and so I found myself between a couple of chairs there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you know Kenneth Anger in Paris?

ROBERT BREER: I didn't know Anger and Brakhage and all those people I met in 1958 at the Brussels Experimental

PAUL CUMMINGS: You didn't know them before?

ROBERT BREER: No, I don't think I even saw their films. That was how we met each other. They came over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Richard Roud? Any of those people?

ROBERT BREER: I met Richard through, what is his name, Stein? Elliot Stein. You don't know Elliot Stein?

PAUL CUMMINGS: It doesn't ring a bell.

ROBERT BREER: And Noel Burch. Do you know who Noel Burch is?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've heard that name from somewhere.

ROBERT BREER: Well, he's here, he's here. He is an American who became a Frenchman. He lived over there. He is a friend of Annette Michelson. You know Annette?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

ROBERT BREER: Annette sent him to see my films at the American Culture Center and he became very involved with that. He ended up forming a film school in Paris and writing for Cahiers du Cinema and television programs in France. He is here teaching at NYU.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing that interests me is that since your films run from a minute, minute and a half, to sixteen minutes and thereabouts, what was your idea of how they would be exhibited or shown to people? Did you think of doing a program of your films as part of other programs? Going into commercial theaters?

ROBERT BREER: Well, that was a painful problem and still is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you handle them in the world?

ROBERT BREER: Well, what beautifully has happened is that in this country there is a new market for this kind of film that has grown in the last ten years to a large proportion and that is the universities. Before that, Cinema 16 was the one outlet for this kind of film and one place that was even aware of the existence of this kind of film. In France there were two or three ciné clubs where I was invited to show my films. There is one commercial theater, Studio Parnasse, that put together experimental film programs. In that case, we'd always be lumped together, and my films being short, they would have to fill out the program, or I would fill out the program, whatever. I didn't think in terms of commercial distribution. Yes, I did. I thought gee why not at first, and then gradually it dawned on me that that was a whole other world and that the public at large would never be taken by my films. How it did happen finally in this country briefly. I had one successful commercial run with "Last Year at Marienbad" when that came here. A little film I made called "Man and His Dog Out For Air." That ran for about nine months here exclusively with that film which was the most heralded film of the year, and I guess the most disappointing film, too. Do you remember when that arrived here? The Modern Museum had five private screenings, it was a big thing, and little old me, my film was chosen to run with this, a three minute film. and then the lights would go up and then they went down and on would come Marienbad, you know. Well, I was really incredulous, I guess. They'd stretched it to Cinemascope. I hadn't had that kind of treatment ever. I was very impressed by myself. I enjoyed, that but that was it as far as commercial runs go.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How had they found you? Who found you?

ROBERT BREER: Oh, it was Jonas Mekas and the Village Voice. There were screenings downtown at Charles Cinema. There was a lot of noise being made about so-called underground cinema during the early '60's, and every time it was investigated by journalists and the people who like the idea and sound of it. For one thing, the idea of films that were what you call X-rated films now, then they were mildly so. Like Ken's films were sensational, and so there were commercial people hanging around hoping to somehow capitalize on these

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see, and Jack Smith and all that.

ROBERT BREER: Jack Smith. I think my film, I don't know when it got tied up with Marienbad. You would have to look up the dates but we had showings anyhow, and there was a certain amount of noise around. And, there was a young girl Ellie Silverman who became, I still think she is still, an agent. She picked up that film and the Marienbad film. The theatre owners screened, I don't know, X number of films, and Ellie Silverman slipped mine in with them and the usual commercial shorts, and I guess it was different enough so they were tired at the end of the day, I don't know. It got chosen. It was a fluke, I think, and then they were pleased enough. I think the reaction was positive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they kept it for the whole run.

ROBERT BREER: I think it was the idea of avant-garde. They kept it in the theatre for that run and she said the whole theatre could be turned over to me, and I made a subsequent film which she didn't pick up on and now she is showing That's a marginal enterprise. But when "Last Year at Marienbad" left that theatre, whoever the people were that distributed that film dropped "Man and His Dog," and they put much more commercial films with it. I resisted becoming bitter and cynical. I had my moment of glory. That opening night it was pretty good because I didn't know about it. I was out here at our other little house we used to live in. The phone rang, and they said if you can get into town there is an opening tonight at Carnegie Hall Cinema of "Last Year at Marienbad," and your film is being shown. We raced into town and sat down in the red plush seats flushed with various feelings and watched my film come on. Afterwards, there was a long letter that arrived complaining about how they stretched that film into Cinemascope — don't you have any more respect than that for Breer's work and so forth, but I never answered the letter. I was tickled pink to see it up there at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, in shifting it into Cinemascope did that change it for you?

ROBERT BREER: No, that didn't bother me at all. You accept distortions. Once the distortion is established — I think that is an important point in general — that distortion, stretching it, is so quickly assimilated. It is such a minor change, really. It is one shift that a human being so complex can quickly accommodate.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Of course, they haven't seen it in normal.

ROBERT BREER: It wouldn't make any difference. I didn't really notice the difference. It is an abstract film. There is only one little figure that shows up and it is already so stylized that it doesn't make that much difference. It was really kind of sweet. I thought it was beautiful seeing against the wall. Then the scale always changes in film. You go from small to unknown size. Probably if I had seen a closeup of that — and I think the brain and the eyes adjust to all these things all the time. So Paul Klee painted a house as small as a postage stamp. I don't

think there is a difference between those two experiences in that area. I think probably that Paul Klee distortion took place in the fact that it was a projection of light in a dark room on the wall, whereas the thing itself was intangible surface. I think that is probably where the biggest change took place. Much more complex surface in the real thing than the projected image of it, so the same thing there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did your sculpture start? How did that begin? Because there is a curious kind of graphic quality in the films which seems to be related to the way some of the early sculptures look and move.

ROBERT BREER: I tried to keep all these things connected just for my own sanity, you know. So some of that is conscious, you know, from one thing to the next and sculptures were earlier, before the floats. They're on wheels and move about. Apparently I made some kinetic sculptures on the basis

PAUL CUMMINGS: With motors.

ROBERT BREER: Hand cranked motors. I had had aversion to motors as well as film. I mean, I backed into all these areas, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You seem to react against your background and then pick it up and use it after a certain time.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, I guess. I wonder if we all do that or if it's just me. I think one might. I think rebellion might be a necessary distance-taking to permit you to capitalize on the things that are already there. That's what happened in my family. I had to back away from my old man and his long shadow to find myself and so anything that was opposite to what he did would serve that purpose. But once I got further away I could compare my shadow with his and then the shadows were then basically the same thing. They had to do with combinations and foundations and sensitivity in various area and so forth. So I ended up identifying quite strongly with him, accepting the different areas that we worked somehow in many ways. That doesn't sound like it makes any sense, but that is how that works. What was the real question?

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start making the sculptural objects? You had stopped painting at one point and just made films. Or did it all overlap like a three-layered cake?

ROBERT BREER: Oh, I see. I left France. I was beginning to make what they called "tachism" with great scorn. Denise René would never accept Pollock. He was the thorn, you know, his approach and other painting like that fell into the realm of what they called tachism. You know about tachism. It means spotism and it was just about descriptive as cubism is. It doesn't mean anything. Soft edge was the culprit, I guess, and that was one of Denise René's kind of convenient orthodoxy. I don't know how many painters bought that hard line, but Vasarely promoted it also for his own purposes so there is a big confusion. Anything that was soft was immediately identified with a vast thing called tachism. Actually, what Pollock was doing and Tobey and the few West Coast people had more access, or vice-versa, the Europeans had more access to what they were doing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, Tobey was living in Europe.

ROBERT BREER: Tobey lived there and there were some connections with that kind of lyricism like the other European painters.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Small scale and sort of wrist rather than the whole arm movement.

ROBERT BREER: Right, always a kind of earnest rejection of American expressionism; the French at least couldn't accept that. Anyhow, they were all together as tachists and in my painting I wanted to explore that area. Somehow I tried to do something with my hard-edge geometry that would seem more American to me. The show of 1955 I had in Brussels was completely misunderstood. I have a painting right there. It was a slight switch, not going toward soft edge, but towards a kind of much more floating geometry, a one-shot painting like a Rothko, Still and so forth. I understood that and I was attracted to that. Those paintings don't look like that but relatively they're in that direction. There I felt my American-ness as against the Europeans and I wanted to turn it on them. They show was a wipe-out as far as By that time I'd split with Denise and I got going into film more. I think that was a turning point. The interest in my film got me into film. The painting was headed out of the European school but in no specific direction and by the time I moved back here I was really only making films and I haven't painted since 1960, painting as such. Of course, I do for the films. You saw 69 and 70?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

ROBERT BREER: Well, they had paintings. Those little images of course are dealing with the same problems that I'd dealt with in those other paintings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What caused you to come back here?

ROBERT BREER: I came back on regular visits, every two years or so, and came back this time with my wife in

'57. Anyhow, when I did Jamestown Blues, I did that back here. We were at a cottage up in Rhode Island on the island up there, near her family in Rhode Island.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What is her name, by the way?

ROBERT BREER: Francis, Franny. Last name Foote. And in that little cottage on the bed springs . . . I made a camera stand out of that and took the mattress off during the day and made a film. I like to do that now, very primitive working conditions. Keep my [inaudible] There's a challenge too. Well, film making is so gimmicky that one can get lost in the . . . I've always tried to clear out all of the technical apparatus and make drawings or paintings or pictures with simple means that will be absorbed by the cinema process somehow or other. Technique is always secondary. So anyhow, I made a film there. Then I came back on another visit, I guess in '59. I was looking around for some work for some income. That was one of the problems. I was trying to promote a flipbook that I'd made in 1955 that Denise René had helped me publish. She paid for it, about 500 copies of that little book. Seen it? I probably only have one copy. Okay, I came back to America hoping to get a publisher interested in making a book like this. I went to Abrams, I went to Praeger, and my god, I don't know who I went to. Was sent from one place to another and of course, they all said this wasn't a book.

PAUL CUMMINGS: We can't sell it.

ROBERT BREER: We can't sell it. And there were some that were excited and others that, you know, once in a while . . . It took me a month or two. I finally ended up in Long Island City with a guy who makes children's playing cards and he persuaded me to animate the back of those playing cards for kids; he felt that was an idea that would sell. I started working at that and we kept the cottage in Rhode Island and I commuted back and forth and somebody gave us a house up there and fall came. I'd never seen a New England fall and — Detroit, California, Europe, I'd never seen anything like this. And it happened to be a special one. Right on the bay up there and the trees all changed colors and I went out of my mind. I'd never seen red, orange trees. I walked down an alleyway to the house through this expressionist landscape, Fauve, too much. Really everything happened to me then. Anything about America hit me so hard that it all came back. After ten years in essence, you know, it came over me and I decided I wanted to stay. It coincided with getting this little job I had and so I started that. That was in '59 and '60.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just one more thing about France. You had not lived in Paris all the time, had you?

ROBERT BREER: Oh, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I thought you were out in the country on occasion.

ROBERT BREER: No, I went out to the country, but . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you travel around Europe much or not?

ROBERT BREER: Not a terrific amount, but I did those first years quite a bit. I was off someplace — Spain, Italy, England — from time to time. I did but less and less. I had a thing about working all the time since I was always on vacation, in a sense, so the idea of just traveling for . . . I'd go where I had something to do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were in a number of film festivals. Did you find them interesting or useful?

ROBERT BREER: Well, I'd have to remember which film festivals. I don't even know. Couldn't have been very rewarding, huh?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, some places you got awards.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, I got awards sometimes. Being in the film festival means the films weren't bad. Well, the only one that had any real impact was in 1958 at the Brussels Fair when we were invited . . . Jack La Doux, who runs the Cinematheque in Belgium, invited all these filmmakers there and we all met and that was the basis, I think, of the beginning of the American underground film group. Amos Vogel came over from Cinema 16. The British Film Institute bought my films. And then there was a lot of fun there. We were all wined and dined and were taken out to the chateaus, taken to the Gaevaert Film Factory and girls came with tutus on and trays full of film. And cigars after lunch. And I took all these boxes of film, stuffed my pockets with them, and when I got home I found out they were 8 millimeter. So that was like an orgy of an ego trip in 1958. That's the only film festival that I ever — other things were, you know, my participation was so tiny or I wasn't there. More recently, like the Oberhausen Festival, I didn't go.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The films go and you don't anymore.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, I don't. There are film festival openings once a week, application forms. I don't send films anymore. I just don't bother. If someone asks me specifically, okay, that's about the way I go. I don't know, I

suppose in the interest of self-promotion one should but I've had some pretty bitter disappointments too. I've been turned down by festivals whom I felt were beneath me and then, you know how that goes. Like Poland. They sent telegram after telegram to send a film over there and we found it was a great amount of trouble to send a film and then they sent me a notice back that it wasn't accepted. And then the man who had seen the film, whoever that fellow was, was fired I guess, I don't know. But things like that are an annoyance, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Going back to the sculpture again — we seem to get sidetracked.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, well that's what I do, I go back and forth. Sculpture. In 1960 I came back here and I'd been making films. I found that the real public for my films was the art public but that they had no access to them. The galleries showed paintings and sculpture but not films. So I met with Jack Meyer — do you know his gallery? He was running a gallery, somebody sent me to him and he was agreeable to my showing films in his gallery. He was kind of interested and the idea was different. And putting on a couple of programs — one of contemporary films like mine and featuring my films and another was historical going back over experimental film. And they were very successful, those two programs. And I was very pleased. I wasn't with a gallery but at the same time I felt that I was getting to that public I wanted to and also to have a cinema bridge. I've always felt that making a connection . . . I don't know; it's not so much the public. It has to do more with the intangibility of film, finally, and the fact that you turn off the switch and it's gone. I wanted to make objects that embodied the same history as film but in Paris I had been making mutascopes way back. I was granted a show at Iris Clair. After the Denise René fiasco I went . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: To the other wild lady.

ROBERT BREER: The other wild lady, yeah. And I had a slot between Tinguely and Yves Klein and I was going to be in the spring. I was going to show mutascopes. I have then around here, and films. I had a film I was going to show in her gallery window because she had a little tiny gallery and so people could see it out on the street, you know. That was called Eye Wash. I don't know if you saw that. And the Tinguely show was in June sometime or April, maybe May. I don't remember. And then I was going to show and then Yves Klein. It was sort of towards the end of the season, so Klein wanted to move back a little more into the season and Tinguely couldn't shorten his show and I was beginning to get squeezed between these guys. I complained to Iris that I wanted the show to last longer than it finally got down to. I don't know, first it was a month, then it was three weeks and then it was to be two weeks or something like that. And I got mad and decided that I wasn't — I didn't like that idea and didn't know what was going on. I didn't like being bullied by these two guys so . . . We're friends, I knew her very well, so I said, let's put it off and have it in the fall. I have the paper somewhere I kept to the effect that she would guarantee me a show in the fall on such and such date and everything. I guess that must have been '59. I came back here and never went back so I never had my show at Iris Clair. But I had been making mutascopes. They're on paper and as such they're very impermanent and that seemed to be serious problem, that they would fall apart. What's his name, Hulten, about that time got together with Spoerri, actually took it away from Hulten, and went to Stedelik with Sandburg.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Carl Sandburg, not Carl the other Sandburg.

ROBERT BREER: That was his movement show. Did you hear about that?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, right.

ROBERT BREER: For that I made a couple of small mutascopes and I put together film images, all drawings from Inner and Outer Space. You probably haven't seen that either. Abstract drawings. Anyhow, I made a whole wall display which went over and then went into that show and traveled from Stedelik to Stockholm. It was a big, big kinetic art show. And the mutascopes went along and they were in festivals. We just had one reconstructed somewhere. The remains of them are here. Shortly after that we made the mutascopes and used plastic cards and really worked into that and got a semi-permanent art form out of it. But I became bored with that. It seemed subsidiary to film, really. But those were the first sculptures. Then I began searching for other connections. The Bent Wire is kind of crucial. It's just a long wire that undulates and not in any regular way, except it revolves around an invisible axis. When you revolve it slowly it does seem to undulate, although actually it's a wire that is turning. When you see it in profile it looks like a wavy line and this was the way of solving the problem of kinetic drawing. My line that come out of films, you know, . . . So I made few of those and I still consider those as transitional important hinges, I guess. And then there are some others. Did you read that thing in the Times on Calder? I know him. We went to see him last summer and the way he repels his interviewers, you know . . . I don't know what kind of pose that is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The papa bear pose.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah. I can't do it, but you're working the way I'm working and I wouldn't think of offending . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: I remember one of those rods that was bent and you turned it and it had three or four things

hanging down.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, right, damn. I lost that. That's with Bonino. I have to recoup that. Yeah, that was a variation on the thing, in its pure state. That became a kind of Dada — the wire coming out of the box is motorized. I have that upstairs. It isn't working now; I have the wire here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that an early use of the motor again?

ROBERT BREER: Yeah. Actually, the first wire was a handcrank. Just like the mutascopes are handcranked. I didn't want to put motors — I knew I could put motors on them, but . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's a different association.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, and actually a motor is better for all that. But then to put a motor on a mutascope you might as well have a film, it seems. I couldn't reconcile the two things and I finally went over to motors because I felt that the participation of somebody turning a crank . . . They get involved in a kinesthetic thing which isn't necessarily related to what they were seeing. I think that set up suggestions that I wasn't interested in resolving. I really wanted the attention to be fully on what they visually . . . So I reluctantly motorized the thing and I don't know if that's the answer. The story of my sculpture was very experimental in that way. I mean, once in a while I take, like, a rotating broomstick when I want it. And that belongs to Oldenburg. It's just a broomstick with a motor on one end and it rotates. The only reason that you can see that it's rotating on its own base that hangs on the wall is because the broomstick is discolored here and there. If you pay attention, you see it's rotating very slowly, quietly, on the wall. It seems to me that that's full circle. It answers all the requirements of something that's formally composed, self-contained, and so forth. But other than that a lot of those sculptures were transitional things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did the floats appear? How did they get to be styrofoam and move around?

ROBERT BREER: I was looking for bulky material that's light weight that I could manipulate. So there it was. I didn't like it because it was so damn fragile. But then I did like it because it was fragile. Because if it was fragile it was an expression of the ephemerality. Anyhow, that's how I chose styrofoam — I could deal with it. And that meant I had to use very small motors. It was all in the interest of actual economy, physical economy, every kind of economy. I took a year to make thirty pieces. One after another. As I made one then that would influence what the next one would be and I kept them all running. As I made them I'd add a new one to the group, and that was that first show — that was what, '66?

PAUL CUMMINGS: They weren't in the first show?

ROBERT BREER: No, the first show was all these other things. No, this was a great breakthrough, putting wheels on a thing and sending it out on its own, for me. There wasn't much stress on the wheels. None, in fact — you couldn't see them. It was the idea that the thing departed and went to parts unknown, that it was going in a straight line somewhere.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it would stop and go.

ROBERT BREER: The first piece I made had no such switching at all. It would just go. And that was what I was interested in. I realized that when it got to a wall it would stop and that would be the end of my experience, you know. And I had to resolve that somehow. So the switching was only to constantly keep recreating this situation of freedom, and then, when I had two pieces, I realized that they might bump into each other. That created a kind of anecdote that I wasn't very interested in at the time. That bothered me. I didn't care I wasn't very interested in at that time. That bothered me. I didn't care that they collided. I wanted more of the essence of the thing that it was . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Drawing a line again, in a way.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, maybe but then again that would be closing. For me, the adventure was the fact that this thing was autonomous, I think, and I couldn't predict it's trajectory, and I wasn't really interested in it. I remember I got a suggestion once a month from somebody that I should record their travels, you know. I can see the best of these might be interesting, but that's another effect.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you decide on the shapes of them because of that kind of arc, and then they got into various other geometric . . .

ROBERT BREER: Well, I think a lot of the shapes are part of my brand of . . . these are biases that developed out of contact with art. You could say Arp because a kind of whimsy that Arp has that lends itself to my . . . Part of it's there, and part of it is some notions about formality and purism. These are influences; the shapes generate

themselves, each other. One begot the other, and I thought in terms of collage, of fragments, so that this shape wasn't complete without the other one. I was making a family of shapes, and families are kind of incomplete. You know, an individual in a family is somewhat more complete with the other members around, right? I don't know if that holds up but at least one shape If I made the shape that took care of that, I wouldn't make another one slightly different. I didn't really, so I was planning minute variations on a theme.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There are variations on the same shapes that you see on the film.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, sure, I suppose they're cubist or, you know. It's a certain dosage of arc to straight line. Why does one have these, I don't know. I like Nicholson in his quiet way, I don't know why. That's one of the influences. As I say, Arp may be another. One of the things I didn't know that I was going to run into was the effect of the floor on these shapes. The fact that they're sliding across the floor that this meeting of two surfaces you see in motion made for an effect of something being sawed off. I think that there's an implication that they're floating objects, that they penetrate the floor, and that can be exaggerated or diminished by whether it's a cube that's been truncated on the bottom plane so that it looks like it's partly under water, you see. That's one of the factors. And the fact that that bottom base never rested so that you've got a very - what's the word - insecure situation there, two planes facing each other but one plane is always moving away from the other, in relationship with the other. So that made that part of those pieces that made them already fragmentary. The other planes are complete in relationship to the rest of environment, and that was one of the big factors. The other thing was the surfaces that were meeting each other. There were some practical considerations, too, about switching ideas and some shapes function better than others and promptly help me avoid, or in some cases, I had a piece hit a desk, go under a desk and tip over, and that was just to keep the secretary awake there. And I had some that were perverse, one or two of those. And of course the whole thing is a matter of keeping my own interest in it and playing terrific battles with myself. It doesn't show, but you get these funny lines going as a nervous . . . different vibrations, and you can lose the whole lining in your stomach over a question like whether I should curve a little more or less this way or that way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, then did they start to grow larger? Because the first ones are fairly portable and small.

ROBERT BREER: Well, when I have an idea like this which I had, it came as the usual coup de Foridre, you know, the lightning bolt, I went into it right away. There's no time to lose, and that means doing something that was possible. Maybe I begin to wonder if I'm not just basically awkward, that I find difficult solutions to simple problems, and although I think they're simple solutions, they might not be. So, that character fault is such that makes for some interesting results, you know. I really think so; it may lack grace in certain areas, and I tend to punch things through which means they come out in different shapes than they otherwise would. I have to go out of my way to resolve it. So those first floats probably were as pieces of mechanical engineering. I had enough acquaintance with that to know that they looked like they're made by a shoe clerk, you know, or whatever a non-engineer would be. And that was part of my conceit of not how may rebellion against that whole area - where are you now when I need you. I had problems. Once or twice when I had someone tell me where to get a motor, I didn't know. And I have students now who realize that sometimes the biggest boost you can give somebody is where to buy a toothbrush. So the EAT came into it somewhere along the line, and I called Billy and had engineers offering me all kinds of motors finally. Billy gave me the first little tiny motors from Japanese toy turntables, I think. Incredibly underpowered machines for my first floats. I remember Jasper Johns came out with Billy one time to look at my things well before I had shown them. I had a few pieces around. I had bumpers on them in those days before I discovered how to make the whole piece a bumper; there's another obtuseness in my work, you know. I suppose I mean there were times when I was very upset by not being able to think clearly through a thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, do you think clearly, you know to pick this thing up in the process of cutting a shape and the physical assembling of it, or is it kind of an idea that is vague?

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, it's an idea that's vague. It's a feeling. I have to work out the feeling, you know. It's a matter of It's just like painting. You stand back and give it a special squint that makes it. You know, they have all these gimmicks, the corner of the eye and so forth. The same thing there — it's a matter of dancing around the thing until it settles and so forth. It's intuitive, but I'm mentioning influences because I recognize those afterwards and at the time I'm not thinking. No, it's very much a question of feeling. Right now, anything I do is certainly that way. Occasionally, I'll throw on something consciously, but I don't think I permit that really, or I'm sorry if there is anything too self-conscious if that's the word.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how did you get associated with Bonino? How did you meet Bonino?

ROBERT BREER: Well, Bonino originally had a partner named DelJunco, a South American adventurer of sorts, I don't know. And Deljuco and Bonino started up off Madison Avenue I think, their first gallery. No, I'm wrong. They took over that gallery I guess the way it is now, upstairs in the same building, wherever it was. DelJunco had a gallery in Canada, in Toronto. Bonino had his gallery in South America and another one in Rome that was run by

Bonino's brother, I think, and Bonino's former wife ran the one in Buenos Aires and another one in Rio. Anyhow, they had South American artists, but they wanted to introduce some other nationalities into this gallery. I had been looking out for a gallery at this point. Jack Meyer had gone to Europe, and I had been to see Leo Castelli years before with some things which he had said he liked better than Tinguely's things and that he'd look me up in Europe when he went over there, which is "I'll call you," and he never did. I was fishing around. Dore Ashton sent me around way back when. My God, I went to Betty Parsons. The other night, John Cage, Betty Parsons, a guy named Ben Patterson, three or four of us were playing poker, and I reminded Betty Parsons of that time, and she didn't remember. I was a young kid really. That was in the early fifties.

PAUL CUMMINGS: She's a good poker player?

ROBERT BREER: Great. No, we were all bad poker players. The only one that made money was Sari Dean. Do you know Sari Dean? It was her party in New York. She called us up. Low stakes, I lost ten or twelve bucks that night. Well, I went around to galleries, and I hated it. It was awful. I had introductions, but I just didn't go in. I didn't have much to show. I really had a few mutascopes, some fold-down kind of scroll drawings, some films and some good intentions, you know. I had some of those early drawings, some films and some good intentions, you know. I had some of those early kinetic pieces that I showed. DelJunco was that guy that, oh, Mary Bauermiester — they picked her up. I think she got a big review in the Times by somebody. She suddenly was on the map. And then, they were looking around with kind of high powered American gallery techniques of supporting the artist and so forth. They got a hold of Mary Bauermiester. Mary, I think, sicked them on me. I forget how I met Mary, but Mary said she wanted me in that gallery, so DelJunco came to see me. He was very persuasive, he and Bonino, and they set up my first show. They gave me the best contract, and it was better than I could hope for. You take Janis, I played with Janis. I knew some of the people like Oldenburg, Rauschenburg, but you know it's just impossible to use those friend connections, and I didn't know how to handle it. I was the only American in the place again.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how do you like them as dealers over the years?

ROBERT BREER: Now, I'm getting into other areas. I feel like I like John Dean now very much. Oh, I liked them very much. I'm not saying I didn't agree with their choice of artists. In many cases, I felt very much that I liked the other artists too, but I never felt that anyone else that they showed had anything to do with what I was doing, and I was specifically offended by the kind of Europeaness of most of their artist and by the I guess I don't like galleries anyhow. I don't like the people that come in and go into the back room to buy things, and the atmosphere, the jewelry cases, the special privilege, and the whole thing. I don't like that. I don't like 57th Street and Fifth Avenue for that reason. It's more like walking into a jewelry store. It wasn't robust enough, bare enough, hard enough, or tough enough.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But they sell things for you?

ROBERT BREER: Yes, they did. They had problems. I know they had problems selling. I have problems selling them. They were very kind to me commercially. There was finally a settling of accounts last year, and I don't want to go on record. I can only say nice things about them. The only disagreements I had were probably my ideas on how they should run a gallery. When the Green Gallery split up, I specifically told Dick Bellamy that I wanted to get Bonino to pick any of those artists that were floating around. You know, they were all floating in different directions, so he sent Dan Flavin. Flavin wrote me a letter, a couple of letters. But Bonino wouldn't have anything to do with Flavin. He couldn't sell fluorescent lighting, he felt. And I was so embarrassed I ever wrote Flavin. I was totally embarrassed about that, and I have been ever since. I even apologized to him since then. But Bonino couldn't see it. Now that was an example; I had a chance then to make something out of Bonino Gallery with Dick Bellamy's people. The guy was selling Bauermiester's work and stuff like that. So, they, at that time, were doing very well. I was embarrassed. I didn't know how to do it, and I wasn't very pally with the right artists at that time that were floating around, and so nothing worked.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Also, I think that a dealer shouldn't take on an artist that's selling if he can't relate to

ROBERT BREER: Sure, it wouldn't make sense. I guess I sensed that. I guess I knew it. Sure. I'm in no position to impose my will on Bonino, but I felt afterwards that he made decisions that finally were unacceptable to me. I don't have a gallery now, actually, and you can put that on the record. Put that on your tape. But, I also got slightly disenchanted by the gallery, the whole gallery scene. Sidney Janis came to look at my show. Maybe Claes sent him there. Claes made some overtures at dinner after his own show with Janis that I should be in their gallery, and they agreed. But, it was that kind of slightly boozy, noisy propositions that I couldn't follow up, and they didn't. And, I feel that's totally the wrong space for me. I couldn't use it as a space, you know, for all their prestige and color. John Weber's an old friend, but I have certain hostilities. There's some kind of . . . I don't know. I'm getting too old for a gallery. I told Hultan I was going to show only in museums, and he offered me a retrospective in Stockholm. Now he's moving to Paris, so But, that's really what I've done since. I haven't had any shows. I had a show in Detroit just because I started to have one there at J.L. Hudson, their little branch

gallery. It was a disaster. I was supposed to have one at the Institute, Sam Wagstaff, a small show there. He split me, and that didn't gel. Films, Hammerskold Plaza, at Yale — the show was kind of a boost. I don't know. You know this gets into the confessional area, about my own status and concern. I don't know what it is. I'm flattered by this kind of attention. Revered in some places. I had a girl doing her Ph.D. thesis on my films, and things like that. Anyhow, is this time to wind up the tape?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just a short question about the films. Are your films shown abroad a great deal? Or mostly in this country?

ROBERT BREER: Well, mostly here. They do get around though. I just talked to a girl last week who's setting up with her husband. The two of them are Argos Films. They produce and shoot films in France, and they just leased a theater in which they are going to show this kind of film. They're setting up a kind of cinematographic rival to Langlois on a much more moderate scale. But, they want to distribute and show my kind of films. So, we're talking about contracts now. That will happen, and I think I had a film that was playing in Sweden, Vienna, London and so forth. They get shown. They get around. Occasionally, I get a check in some strange money. The most is real beans, you know, in terms of income. But, there is probably pretty good distribution among those people interested.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the Anthology Film Archives? The just did a whole

ROBERT BREER: Well, that's every month. Yeah, that's been going around. They're moving. Lost some of their backing, I think. Yeah, I think that's a delightful thing to happen in my lifetime, that they put together this group of films. Very controversial as you know. But, I think it's a marvelous thing, and that's like home to me in a way because it's a place where you get the proper respect and where the films are available. I can tell somebody when they ask me where can I see your films. I can say next month. Then there's big traffic in schools. That's quite big. But in Europe it's slowly happening, and they don't have the ground base that we have here in the schools. They hope, and they plan, and they expect that it will happen.

[TAPE TWO SIDE ONE]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the 1960 film "Homage to Jean Tinguely" at the Museum of Modern Art?

ROBERT BREER: You didn't see it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, I didn't. How did it come about that you made that?

ROBERT BREER: Well, I was a friend of Tinguely. How did that happen? Well, I'm trying to think. When was that, 1960? I had just come back, and he had a show at Staempfli. Well, he was an old friend. Staempfli picked him up and gave him a show here. I was back here. How did it happen? I don't remember. I guess he suggested that I make a film. I remember going up there to the Museum with Peter Selz, and one way or another people were talking about making film at the same time he did his thing. Not a documentary film of it but something at the same time with the Museum to finance it, and they were telling us that they didn't have any money for such a thing. And so I said okay, I'll go ahead and do it anyhow. I didn't think I'd use much more than three reels of film. I saw a lot of Jean when he was here. For one thing, I was a translator. He was beginning English, so I ended up doing a lot of translating for him and whoever he was dealing with, and so I went down there a lot. I helped him. Billy Kluver at that time, Billy had looked me up I guess through Hulten. Hulten was an old friend, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you meet Hulten?

ROBERT BREER: In Paris. We made a film together when I went back there, the one on the Pope. Well, he made a film on my camera stand, an abstract film. He might have made his first film on that camera stand, I don't know. And then I wanted to do a little collage film and ended up using some photos out of the Pope. I assisted him as collaborator on that film. It went to Sweden, and it somehow got confused that it was his film - when I got up there, he was embarrassed. But anyhow, it's called the "funniest film in the world ever made" or something like that. Lasts 30 seconds. Not funny any more, but in those days collage was new. Anyhow, Hulten sent Kluver to meet me and Kluver to meet Tinguely, I guess. Kluver was a Swede and a scientist not content with ferns and Bell telephones. It's pretty dreary out there. So we got together helping Tinguely. He was helping drill for him and stuff, and I started making this film. I lived over in Tarrytown. I had rented a house for six months. Went into this museum, and shot this film while he was working outside in the Fuller Dome where he built that thing. And I didn't normally use the camera in any other way but for animation, and I didn't know exactly what I was doing. I had a zoom lens, and I had a tripod, and I used the zoom lens, and it did single frame shooting. I had done some; I had made a little film which had never been distributed because it never got past the sort of rough stage. In Cassis where we had spent the summer a few months before we came back there - you know where it is, it is next to Marsailles. You go there by train, it's a nice little town. I modified my film. And the camera that I had first borrowed from my old man became my camera, his old Bolex. The trouble with it was I like to shoot single frame and normal speed and mix it all up which just comes down in practice. Jonas Mekas does it all the

time, it all moves this way. I don't know, all kinds of people go around thinking that the shutter's a single frame. I don't claim to have invented the process. I just did it before any of those people did. I don't even know if they knew how much I did of that kind of thing. But I went so far as to change the apparatus on the front of the camera to correct the exposure setting for the single frame. If you click single frames, it is overexposed, you know, if you shoot continuous with the others. So, I had a device on the outside that actually physically turned the stop on the lens so I could switch back and forth, so I could moderate the speed. When I wanted to, I could run it slow or fast.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You could almost do the editing of the film in

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, sort of. And so I shot some footage with it this summer. The whole point of the film thing was to somehow break out of the confines of the small experimental film. I had visions at one point, and some pressure by my small fan club, to really take it in my teeth to make a film that would be known as just a film. I wasn't sure about that distinction, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean like 33 millimeter?

ROBERT BREER: 35 in Europe is not like doing I worked on a film over there with Michel Fano who is a well established sound engineer for a lot of French films. He made himself an experimental film which is an absolute atrocious bomb, but it was a serious full-fledged production and the last short film. And, I went out on location, and his producers had bought a small village on a mountain top down in Savoy where he proceeded to make this arty art film. And, he used a girl who was in, who became a starlet in the next film, she made a Chabrol, I guess. I forgot her name, she had pretty blue eyes, and she was dumb as hell, you know. Oh, she kept getting phone calls, and they were trying to get her released to make this big film, you know, and the whole shit and shamroll of film production. I got a taste of it, you know, and I knew they were making a bomb, but I was curious about the process and found out about script girls and all of that. It all seemed incredible that they were infatuated with their own activities so much so that they had no overview of what they were doing. And, he admired me and admired my films enough to set me up to make inserts in his film — kind of an hallucination sequence and you can imagine how they would treat my material — which I set out to do and found a 35 millimeter camera. So I got a taste of this and felt from there to becoming D.W. Griffith was only a question of getting the right backing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Money.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, but it just wasn't really any of those things. It just was really how I could artistically encompass all those ingredients, and I didn't think I could, never did, finally. But, there was a point in time when — I didn't say Point in Time, that was Watergate stuff — I entertained a notion of becoming a big mogul, you know, with a swimming pool for myself, all that glamour and stuff. I don't think I ever took it too seriously, but I did want enough prestige. I wanted to be taken seriously. I didn't like the idea of being known as a nut experimenting off on the fringe, you know. So, let's see, this was apropos of something. How did that . . . oh yeah, I sure did slide off there. Tinguely. Well, okay, so I had some notions of using the camera and other people and putting together a non-narrative feature film. This had nothing to do with Tinguely, with my Tinguely thing. The Tinguely thing just developed as I shot film while helping him. I had shot a little film of people before, and I guess that's how I got off on that. And I was sort of interested in - I use stop-motion a lot in my film, and I had one glorious accident otherwise I wouldn't have ever put it together as a film and ever let it be seen. In excitement and nervousness the night of the opening of the thing, I cranked back the film through the camera and shot it so - double exposure — which I abhorred as an idea. I would never use double exposure consciously, but it was so nice at times, and it saved the day because the footage I had was otherwise kind of pedestrian, most of it was. So now I got interested in the editing of it, and I think the result was okay, it was kind of interesting. And it was a relief from all the fussiness I had been used to in the films that I had done where I could use longer time sequences and much more attenuated rhythms and so forth. But researchers would be disappointed when they look at it to find out about Tinguely cause it's

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's something else.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, it really doesn't reveal that much that way. It wasn't even supposed to have as much documentation as it does. It was an exercise in editing, though. So that's the film. He was delighted with it. And at the time, he was a friend of Hulslenbeck, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. He stayed with them.

ROBERT BREER: Stayed with them. And that's how I got to know him, from that. They all came out to dinner after - I haven't seen him in years - is he dead?

PAUL CUMMINGS: He's living in Switzerland.

ROBERT BREER: Well last time I saw him - he's quite old.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh yeah. Still tops.

ROBERT BREER: Tough. Jesus. Well, I find that in a way but I don't buy all his fustering about Dadaism.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well how did the EAT thing - Pepsico and Osaka - how did you get involved in that?

ROBERT BREER: That's a book you know. It is a book.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that was against your ability right?

ROBERT BREER: No. On the contrary, I started that and got the little end of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? I didn't know that. Ah ha!

ROBERT BREER: Yeah that was through [inaudible] in the book. I'm not making it up either but it doesn't matter much. Because again, like all things, you know, it's accidental. I feel accidents are fatal, that the Pepsi-Cola Vice-President, an Englishman, was given charge of this pavilion project . . . I haven't even read the book. I don't have a copy right here, but anyhow it's all there. I've forgotten a little bit the history of it, but he was put in charge of doing something with it. The pavilion which Pepsico managed to get from the Japanese in return for another favor for the Osaka fair - that fair was intended to be non-commercial, more than all the other fairs, but of course every fair has that intention you know, supposedly. This one and so forth and the last one and so forth. I know that the fair officials consulted Hulten; they had at one time intention of dedicating the fair. He suggested they dedicate the whole fair to one major problem in society such as pollution, you know. They didn't take him up on that, and it finally ended up as a fair like all other fairs. Very much like the Expo '67. Anyhow, the V.P. Pepsi-Cola guy was a neighbor, a friend. This is kind of a fat community here, and he's down the hill, a friend, a great entrepreneur, and also has a kind of an interesting background - a father who was a Zen priest for some time in Japan, and his wife's father designed the Ritz Hotel and the Queen Mary and things like that and so he's a little more sensitive than any of the other people. And I knew him, and he knew I made films and so he came to me to get ideas about the pavilion, and one thing led to another. I found that I could maybe sway him to get my floats around. Eventually he got in deeper, and I suggested Billy Kluver being brought into it because it was on a scale that needed a lot of elaboration technical men, artists, and so forth. So that's how it happened.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you pleased with the results?

ROBERT BREER: Yeah. Well, I was pleased with some of the results. Delighted with some and disappointed in others. There's a disagreeable aftertaste because of the way things turned out - a little hard to follow the development of the thing up through its various channels to see what really happened. It's all in that book. You know the inevitable confusion of interests and non-confusion of interests which was industry and commerce. All to be expected. The thing was built to our specifications and such. Fantastic that it happened. I was impressed, and I got to see my things floating around. I had a disappointment in terms of public reception of the thing. I expected it to have some impact, and apparently, there was none. Apparently, there was none, you know. People didn't even notice the damn things. And, I also went for this fantastic inside mirror that we had where it was such an unspecific experience that at least they could not come to terms with that experience. It was new to everyone. It wasn't new in any given order of experiences.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Shock.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah. It didn't shock. It was very stimulating, that dome. My things of course are on a different order - very discreet and floating around. We don't have good pictures of the inside. They'd have to be three-dimensional pictures. It's very impressive what happens inside that thing. But because it wasn't - we considered it enough in itself to be explored - I don't think this agreed with people who wanted to have their experience defined in the terms that they understood, you know. There wasn't any brochure to satisfy them that way or anything. So I think that probably I don't know what impact it would have. I hope that it would have a late-blooming impact, you know, maybe begin to wonder what that was all about and had forgotten all the other things that did impress them at the time, who knows?

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did Oldenburg come into this? Did you meet him when you came back? In '60?

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, well I met Claes and knew a lot of people through Billy. It was during one of the Ray Gun Theatre stuff, '61? That's where I met him. He wanted Billy to do some work with somebody, and I said I made movies and Claes wanted to have a movie made of his happenings, and I said I didn't make that kind of movie. And then Bob Whitman and Oldenburg came out to my place, and they saw films. They were at a party out here and saw my films. They got interested in them. I didn't want to shoot film of his things after that but by the end of that season I thought we could get together. Maybe he could do a Happening out in the country. Did you see

that film?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No. Oh yes wait a minute.

ROBERT BREER: That's got Oldenburg and the golf business in it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Right.

ROBERT BREER: We came out here and shot film for about five days and put it all together. It was my film in the sense that I edited it. It was his film in that he supplied all the events that took place and the actors. He directed little things, and I shot that, and then I edited the film and with my emphasis on editing I assumed it was my film but Claes would get equal billing if we put the titles together. I still consider it my film because making a film is gluing it together since it's a non-narrative film. There wasn't any scenario or anything. But of course, the film reflects my understanding of his ideas of simultaneity and everything that is special about that, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you make scenarios for the films?

ROBERT BREER: No. The first film I made I told myself — not the first the film, but the second or third film — I got very pretentious and made a long scenario and thought I could work that way. It eventually became just a log of what I was doing rather than a scenario for what I would do, and it just gradually transformed into that and after that I didn't even need a log I had films. Right? So they just grow and make more of that. Eventually they have to be I can't see any reason for writing out a film except to overcome technical difficulty, and with this kind of film, there really isn't that sort of stuff. Occasionally, I have to plot a movement or something that's not in my vocabulary, and I have to lay it out a little bit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You don't seem very interested in making films of people or places or things like that. You like the animated. . . .

ROBERT BREER: Well, the Oldenburg thing and the Tinguely were the only two times I've gone in that direction at all, and in those cases, they were collaborations more or less. The Tinguely film isn't about people either. So I guess only Oldenburg. Yeah, well I'm an abstract artist and I'm interested in let's say stimulated by pure visual phenomenon. I don't know what to say. The strongest impulse in my career is to make some kind of pure aesthetic statement, a kinesthetic statement, you know, and that's what I respond to. If I involve things on different levels such as human relations or projections of anything at a distance, I'm still working in concrete terms. This is what it is. In fact, I wrote all around the walls of a place where I made one film, "This film is what it is what it is what it is what it is," you know. That's the basis of my work. If I bring in any illustrative material, it's always subordinated to the design, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had mentioned that you're teaching.

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, I teach at Cooper, and I do an awful lot of traveling around to schools. I'm going to Pittsburgh for three days in the fall and Harvard. I do this a lot.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, when did that all start? When did you get involved with Cooper?

ROBERT BREER: This will by my third year coming up at Cooper. The irregular kind of dropping in at places has been going on for years. I've done a lot of that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you like that, traveling around?

ROBERT BREER: Well, I like a certain dosage of that. It gets tiresome, but it pays well, you know, and I enjoy it sometimes. You can go to a place and do your number. You're on the best possible terms with everybody, and then you leave, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you usually do if you go somewhere for a day, two days, three days, or something?

ROBERT BREER: Well, the three day ones are something new that I've worked up, animation workshops where I go into a place and give . . . this is experimental right now. I don't know if I want to encourage that or not. I don't like that much traveling around. One day, okay. I get back where I started from. How do I like it? What did you ask me?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, do you find it provocative? What do you do with

ROBERT BREER: It's almost down to a routine. I had an initiation with Jack Meyer the first time I presented films. He insisted that I present the films. I had incredible stage fright. I had it before in high school in my famous football days. I was captain of the team, and I had to give the rally in the morning, the pep rally you know, in a small school, but nevertheless I was scared stiff looking at all those faces. I always managed to look out the

window and talk about the weather for the game, you know. I hated it. And, the only course I flunked in college was speech, and my speech was about the guard position in football. I was my specialty, and I managed to get in a crouch and run around the stage a lot, but it still didn't keep me entirely away from the podium which frightened me just as an object, you know. So, when I started this business, I was terrified. The Modern Museum put together some of these independent films a long time ago. I had to go up there, and a peculiar thing happened. I was so goddamn stagestruck that I overcame it in the shock, you know, just like that, by one of those conclusions that nothing could be worse than this so what have I got to lose. And I said something that was funny although it wasn't intended to be funny particularly, but it turned out to be. It relieved them, and it relieved me. I was able to continue, and that was a breakthrough. I'd get invited back to places assuming I'd be funny again, and I wasn't always, you know. And so I've been on a lot of panels, and I guess I became inured to it. I no longer get stomach cramps or other problems associated with speaking before large crowds, and now it's very easy. I put together packages. I don't repeat myself, it's very natural, the way I am now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you like teaching?

ROBERT BREER: I like what I just described better than continuous teaching because continuous teaching is much more serious. You know you have to get involved with that other person, and that's a huge responsibility. I have four kids already, you know, and so that makes much bigger inroads into my privacy and my

PAUL CUMMINGS: Energy levels?

ROBERT BREER: I don't really like it too much. I'm just doing it. I like the kids. I can't close that door. I need that, in fact I was thinking of expanding it somehow.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you teach? Animation film process?

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, and I try to open it up to any kind of expression involving movement and motion. But even so, I'm not just that interested in motion either. Change, okay. You have some skeleton for the class. It's pretty much run by the students' interest a lot. I conduct their interest, but I'm just learning to teach that way. I don't really know much about it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you start off when you talk?

ROBERT BREER: What I've been doing is getting the kids together and presenting myself to them in case they don't know me, which is often the case, and I show them my work and explain to them this is what I do and this is what I know about and this is what I can talk about and this is what you can fight against or work with and it's in these areas, what we will or would be doing and so forth. But that's the way I start. It starts with my presenting myself, and then they present themselves. Little by little, I get to know them and I guess everybody works this way. It's a workshop situation, and the kids teach each other, you know, and I step back.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How many students do you have?

ROBERT BREER: It's kept down to about fifteen.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's manageable but not too few.

ROBERT BREER: No, I don't know. I think three or four good ones would be better. Getting all those others — they don't pay for that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's the only teaching you've really done, isn't it? At Cooper?

ROBERT BREER: Regular teaching. I've always stayed very clear of it. Sporadic kind of teaching, short seminars, and workshops but I've always been afraid of it. Even now it takes a hell of a lot of my time. I kind of resent it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How many days, or how many hours?

ROBERT BREER: Just one day a week I go in, three hours a week. It takes time to get up, and I have to

PAUL CUMMINGS: Preparation.

ROBERT BREER: And coming back, it makes the week very quick, and I can't trace my pace working on a project or anything. Then, there's a sprinkling of all those other teaching things thrown in which I can't refuse, so I don't know how I got into it. There is some notion that keeping in touch with kids and what's going on, you know, is an excuse for doing this. I suppose it's all right. I suppose there's some of that that rubs off. I don't know to what end.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about travel? You've traveled to Japan for Expo, right? And all these little things in

Europe. Have you traveled a great deal?

ROBERT BREER: Well, I went to Japan three times and spent some time there, and I had a chance to go to India. They invited me to go to the design school there for a two month, three month period, but I can't do that right now. And, I was invited to go to Berlin for a year with everything paid, this year, but it doesn't enchant me particularly. I don't have any wanderlust. I don't travel unless there's something specific to go for, a show or something. I had a film in Germany in 1968 at Ricke Gallery. I'd opened this gallery in Colonge. That's why I go to places, and whenever I do I tend to forget where I am. If I go away for three or four days, I'm liable to forget I have a family or anything else and that frightens me, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long have you lived here?

ROBERT BREER: Well, we've lived in this place five years. And we had a little house further down the road before that since '60. So that's thirteen years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Been in this neighborhood?

ROBERT BREER: Yeah, we just love this place, it's incredible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've got all the right room.

ROBERT BREER: Oh, yeah, it's beautiful. Well of course it was a mess. All the windows were broken and it had been abandoned. It was a mess.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've been doing a project at Lippencott, right?

ROBERT BREER: Oh, that's done.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, it is?

ROBERT BREER: That's part of the Swedish collection. You know about that? You know about that don't you? The New York Collection for Sweden?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that.

ROBERT BREER: Kluver is putting out, you know this is a selection made by Rontus Hulten. The whole collection will be shipped to Sweden. They're able to pay for it. They're raising a million bucks or something. That's a heavy collection. It's a big eight foot diameter dome.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, I didn't see it.

ROBERT BREER: It was at 420 Broadway, John Weber's.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Is this one of the largest pieces you've built then?

ROBERT BREER: Well, in diameter. There's one that's this high I call a rider float. It's meant for you to ride on. You can do that on those little ones at Hammerskold Plaza also.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ROBERT BREER: You can sit on it if you want. I worked as long as I did to be able to get on the thing and ride around on it. One person — that's not public conveyance or anything — can have that kind of experience. It's a bit different to lounge on the thing, presumably go out in your yard, you know, and climb on this thing and drift around, and experience how it would back away from obstacles. That's the vision of it. The reality of it is something else. I designed it with large tires, and it was expensive. They build it out there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, one thing that I was curious about was the installation you had at Yale this last Spring.

ROBERT BREER: Did you see that?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, with sorts of long rods and tubes and pieces. That seemed very different from other things.

ROBERT BREER: Well, I don't know how you saw it up there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it kind of moves around behind a little.

ROBERT BREER: It was very disagreeable to me. Also, the floor was two-toned. I don't know who was responsible for that, and I don't care. But it just wasn't ideal presentation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are they meant to work in a series or individually?

ROBERT BREER: No, it was meant to be a clutter of those pieces. It's just the way you saw it. Ideally, a larger area is needed so that one could wander off, but not so much larger. The size of this room maybe would be enough so that you can see them present in a field of these objects, see them all at once.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But they were very strange because they were so long, some of them.

ROBERT BREER: The idea is an animated drawing. There are lines represented, lines. I should say that rods represent lines, and the ropes squiggle. I guess it's another kind of approach to kinetic drawing of sorts, and it's the one thing of it's kind. It started with one piece; it's just a long flat piece of aluminum with a wheel at one end. It's six feet long and at the other end is this blob which contains the motor. I thought of it as something akin to a painter carrying maybe one of the planks of his thing across a yard. Carrying this long white plank along, and the painter himself was the motor unit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have you done other pieces like that?

ROBERT BREER: Well, I did a piece that was at a Bonino show way back when, before the floats. That was a wall piece. It might be forgotten now. There were two pieces there, and they were panels really. That's what they were, and they had squiggly lines drawn on white panel. In some cases, I made it with one drawn line. The others were black coat hanger wire that came off and had a twist, and they rotated very slowly so there's a whole feeling of being in motion. They cast little shadows, but the shadows aren't so important. That might be close to that thing or least the spirit of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay, we've come to the end here. Do you have any last words to say? Anything we've missed that you think we should go into?

ROBERT BREER: Well, probably not.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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