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Oral history interview with Louise Nevelson, 1964 June-1965 Jan. 14 and undated

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Louise Nevelson in June 1964 - 1965. The interview was conducted by Dorothy Gees Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This transcript has been reconciled with an earlier, partial transcript. It has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

This is tape number one of five side A.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [00:00:00] This is—this is Dorothy Seckler introducing an interview with Louise Nevelson. Took place in June 1964. Miss Nevelson is speaking.

[Audio break.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: I was going to say that I think that you're asking me another question about, uh—when did I know that I was going to be an artist—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes, yes.

LOUISE NEVELSON: —and how it happened, and so on and so forth. Well, of course, I think artists are born. There's a certain kind of chemistry, wavelength, temperament. All these ingredients go in to make an artist. [Inaudible.]

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I—I was, uh, intent on what you were saying before about the artist being born.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I knew I was an artist. Or may I say it in another way. We don't know—oh dear. Let's start fresh. May I?

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: All right.

LOUISE NEVELSON: I'm sorry.

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: You feel then that, uh—is something in that, uh, code or DNA is already established when the baby is born? It's all there?

LOUISE NEVELSON: I believe so, just like someone has brown eyes, or black eyes, or blue eyes. I think there is a whole structure like a temperament, wavelength, [00:02:00] conditioning, the way the mind works. All is put together to make a creative mind. And then of course we call that an artist. An artist—no one gives us a title other than, as we continue growing into what we are doing, we are labeled an artist. And so, I recall from the very first my earliest recollections were that almost everybody said I was an artist. And I was fortunate in my schooling and in my environment, because I never had anything but a, uh, acknowledgement that I was creative. Not only in my words, the way I dress, the way I move, the way—the things I wanted. All constituted a creative mind.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Was there any, uh, uh—were some of your family artists or was there anything to account for this particular heredity in your case?

[Audio break.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: —back, way back. And I think all of them constituted some interest in creativity. And of course, I also believe that every human being, given a chance, has creativity. Only some are squelched by environment, family, and many more things. And, uh, some feel this so strongly that no one on earth can squelch them. They must express this. It's a must, or they couldn't live. It's like a bird that must fly or a fish that must be in water. And if you don't permit this to flourish, the, uh, people that can't fight naturally probably pass away. And some just are determined to have this creative thing. [00:04:00]

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Louise, uh, the people around you then when you were a child recognized this creativity of yours. And, uh, was this including your own family?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: They were most sympathetic—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —to your first—uh, well, do you remember how early it was that people first noticed the—this unusual quality in you?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Right from the beginning. And I—yes. I recognized it, too. Because the minute I touched crayons and saw color, I was just overwhelmed. And then I was about four and a half when my family brought me from Russia. And we were at the London station. And there was hard candies in jars. And I was overwhelmed with this *Alice in Wonderland* dream of a new world, uh, through color and form. I was already totally aware of this magnificence. And it stayed with me until I began using it and using it. And still stays with me.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: You were born in Canada. Then your family took you Russia.

LOUISE NEVELSON: I wasn't born in Canada.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Oh, I mean—I'm sorry, Maine. Excuse me.

LOUISE NEVELSON: I was—yes. I was born in Russia. And my family brought me to Maine.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Oh, yes.

LOUISE NEVELSON: And I stayed there until I got through school. And then I came to New York. And I've always done work. There isn't a time in my life that I haven't done creative work.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And you went to school in a—was it a small town in Maine? Or farm—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Very small town. Rockland, Maine.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Yes.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Very small town.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And, uh, did you have any memory at all of those first four years in Russia? Anything, uh, that comes back to you?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, but very little. And, uh, I wouldn't say that it pertains to my creative life other than that in London, at the—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes.

LOUISE NEVELSON: —station. And then when I got to Rockford and went to school. The minute I was in school, all the teachers knew I was [00:06:00] creative. And that's a long time ago, when teachers overlooked these things. But it was never overlooked in my life. Evidently, it was so evident that it was just never overlooked.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Were you, uh, the only one in your family—were your—were there other brothers and sisters who were—

LOUISE NEVELSON: I have an—I have an older brother and two younger sisters. And they, I would say, were all creative. But they didn't carry it—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —to the point that I did. With me, it was a must.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Live or die.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And your family recognized this. And did they begin to, uh, imagine that you would go to an art school when you grew up or that you would be an artist?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I told them that. They had no alternative. [They laugh.] But they were very sympathetic.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: They were.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. As a matter of fact, I think they were rather proud.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes. That's wonderful.

LOUISE NEVELSON: And so that I didn't have any problems.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: They didn't worry about whether you would be able to make a living as an artist. So many parents do.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, they were. But I told them that if I had a full creative life, that that was more important to me. And of course, I knew there were old ladies' homes and all sorts of things. And it didn't matter, as long as I had this creative life.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: It's wonderful that they were sympathetic enough to go along with that. As you say, you gave them no choice. So, you went to school—high school and, uh—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —all that and finished.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, of course. And then I came to New York. And, uh—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: By yourself? Alone?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, more or less at the time. And, uh, then I went to the League. And I went to Europe and studied with Hans Hofmann the year before he came to America. Then I continued studying with him in New York. And then of course, I also studied with other people like—before that I studied with Kenneth Hayes Miller. And, uh, also studied with, uh [00:08:00]—who was that artist that did the—that terrible things [ph] from Germany?

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Grosz?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Grosz.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Uh huh [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I took watercolors from him. But even Hofmann and all of them recognized there was something.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: So that my, uh, average was very good because they all encouraged me.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Right. Were you painting and sculpting both? Or what kind of work were you doing in your early studies here?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I painted. I did a lot of drawings. I wasn't particularly interested in studying sculpture, because I didn't see any teachers at the time that I wanted to study with. So I thought if I got the basic principle, that I could do it. And that's about what I did. As a matter of fact, I didn't study sculpture.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Would you recommend that in general? You think that's a good way for an artist—or I suppose everyone must be somewhat different.

LOUISE NEVELSON: I don't think it matters. I think creative—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [Inaudible.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, will come out. And I don't care if you make a hat, or a dress, or look at your linens, or study your silver, it's all creation. I think 24 hours a day is creative. It's not only the time that you are performing. So, you take into account all of this. Now, in Maine as a little girl, there's so much nature it overpowered me. And, uh, I got very tired of nature and green trees. Because I couldn't handle it. And it was only after I studied art that I could go back and see light, and shade, and cube. And so, it became a very exciting thing to me.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: But not until I studied art. It was too—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Before that did you draw?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Oh, I drew all the time. All my life.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: But people or what? What were you—?

LOUISE NEVELSON: People. Oh, yes, I drew people, landscapes, still life. [00:10:00] All the things that young people do—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —in the schools. I went through it. But there was never a doubt in my life that I wouldn't find my avenue of expression. There never was. It was great despair. The search was great despair. The economic problems that confront you. Then also if you are becoming so subjective and subjective, you don't understand many things about other human beings. And so, you really find it more complex—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —to adjust to the world as we understand it, or thought we understood it. But I had made my decision. When this was a problem to me, I said, I know—I was very conscious that I'm going into a world that I don't understand yet. But I said, rather than to accept this world, and if the other one takes me to an unknown world, and even if it's insanity, I choose that to staying on the principles of this one, of the concept of reality.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: When did you think—what—at what period in your life did you formulate that? [Inaudible.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, from time to time. Because I do think that having been brought from another land, and being thrown into another culture, and the handicaps of language and customs and all the other things that confront you, is overbearing and overpowering. I met them. And I graduated my schools with honors. And every one of my family did. But it was still like you were a thing apart. And, uh, when I was, uh, about 12 I was the captain of the high school basketball team. I was considered a remarkable player. And with all of these things, [00:12:00] it somehow was that you are a thing apart. And instead of defeating me, naturally, it made me strong to go and get what I want. And I knew New York was the place to come and get it. And so, I did. It was never floundering. It was a straight line. I knew what I wanted on earth. So, I didn't have any great complexes or frustrations about it. Now, my whole life might have many complexes and frustrations. But not because of lack of purpose and awareness.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: What art did you have a chance to see when you were in Maine, Louise? What things did you admire?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Oh, well, I admired the casts of Michelangelo's things. That was in the library. And we saw in almost every home the reproductions of the, uh, Greek sculptures, of the Venuses and all. And somehow the whiteness, and the plaster, and the forms really just overwhelmed me. And so, I knew I was going to be an artist. And I recall I was about nine when I went to the library. And I was looking at this great piece of sculpture, reproduction of Michelangelo's. And, uh, the librarian asked my little friend that was with me, "What do you want to do with"—I think—whatever she said. And then she turned around. And she said to me, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" And I said, "I'm going to be an artist." And then I got frightened. I said, "Oh, I'm going to be a sculptor, because I don't want color to help me." Well, I got so frightened at this concept at my age that, uh, it overwhelmed me. That it wasn't anything I thought of. It was something [00:14:00] about the character. And I recognized it. And many of the things that I have touched were not things that I thought with the mind, but something faster and deeper, rooted in the being.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Some people call it mysticism. Some people call it extrasensory perception. But I never had time to think everything out.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I just saw it. Like, clairvoyant. And that gave me my courage. And when you think that for 30-odd years I didn't sell anything and was not discouraged about art. I was discouraged about life, but not art. And if I had had to live a million years, I wouldn't have given up that concept. I can't tell you how difficult other

things were, but somehow, they seemed minor by comparison.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: This was so necessary. For the sum total of my being, it was so necessary to express this creativity. And in the creativity, there are many things that an artist has that you only recognize later. An artist is creative. An artist is a teacher. An artist communicates with other people on that level. And an artist also wants to really make the world a better world. So, you see that all these ingredients constitute one harmonious pattern, or awareness.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: There's a great awareness of these things.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That time when you were, uh, speaking with the teacher and you said sculpture rather than color, uh, was that when you were in high school or—[inaudible.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, that wasn't a teacher. That was the librarian.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: The librarian, yes. The librarian.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. Well, no, I was about [00:16:00] nine years old. And—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Nine years old.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. And I—as I said to you, I was frightened. And I knew what I was going to do as I grew older. And I was very shy. Because all of these things really frightened me and made me shyer, and shyer, and shyer. And the value in a small town, New England town, that, uh, really wasn't too advanced—naturally couldn't conceive that someone was coming along from another place, like another planet.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And not too brilliant at school. And yet different. And so that was quite difficult, the adjustment. And of course, candidly, I never made that adjustment. Because I left as soon as I could—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —and just went back for a few days at a time to see my family. But now I don't even go back.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: So really, uh, I never made that adjustment. And I can understand why. Because the people who were living there at the time had a—their values were so entirely different.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And, uh, I knew that art would be difficult. And I was willing to make all sacrifices, uh, as far as economics or any other thing that stood in my way. And I began to make my clothes, make my hats, to be independent of economics. And all along the line. And fortunately, I was very energetic and had a lot of energy and good health, so that, uh, diet didn't enter into it, or anything. It was just that one thing of the mind that was all-consuming.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Louise, you didn't have a chance, I suppose, in—in Rockford to—to meet artists. Or did they come up there for the summer? Did you occasionally [00:18:00] see any artists?

LOUISE NEVELSON: No. But we had good art teachers. That was the funniest thing. Our art teachers came from different parts of the world, naturally including New York. And there was a communication. And they recognized it. So naturally they were wonderful to me, and they encouraged me. And I recall when I was a freshman in high school that the winters in Maine are cold.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And I don't like cold weather. And I'd go into the art class that I selected. And I'd warm up. And I'd feel warm. And I often wondered, why is it I'm cold in other places and so warm here? And so instinctively I just was in oneness with the creativity.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Were you, uh, a read—much of a reader as a child?

LOUISE NEVELSON: No. Because even then I decided—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [Inaudible.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: —I didn't want to take in and distill minds.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I wanted to keep myself sort of free and kind of place of innocence somewhere. Not that you can't be sophisticated in life. But somewhere in the mind I recognized that it had to be taken care of.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: So I didn't do a great deal of reading. But I began searching in a philosophical way. And one of the great people that I understood even as a sophomore and freshman in high school was Shakespeare. And I was the top student when we came to Shakespeare. Because there we get things moving. There Hamlet talks about if he was in a walnut he would think he had infinite space. Or then when Macbeth goes in the trees and takes the trees in front of him to walk. That immediately made a rapport.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And so my teacher recognized that. And so there for the first time, I had established [00:20:00] that I liked English or liked—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —English classes. But it was only because I understood these things. And it wasn't only imagination. But they were great realities and great crescendos. And so, I've always loved Shakespeare.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: How about music?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I studied music all my life.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And, uh, I studied voice and piano. And, uh, I studied modern dance for over 25 years just to free my body. So I would free myself and have no handicaps. I knew all this. Not that one is a scholar, but you know your tools and what you need to say—what you have to say. And of course, I told you that basketball was a great release, a great pleasure. Then I was, uh, in the glee club singing in high school. Then I was vice president of the music club in Maine, in Rockland as a young girl. So, I was active in—only in creative things. It seems funny that today I, uh, am active in many art societies. And I'm naturally the national president of Artists Equity. But when I was younger it was all art. But I feel at this time in my life, I can afford to give some time to make the laws that will give creative minds a little freedom to say what they want to say. And of course, I think there is—the visual world is the world I understand best. And I also feel that it is the greatest way of communicating. That as wonderful as the ear is, it hasn't the power of the eye. The eye is our greatest intelligence. And it has the movement of that. We—we can close them. We can open them. [00:22:00] They have great activity. And then in mysticism and in all the great teachings, they always talk about the inner eye, which is between the two eyes, two physical eyes. And so, it's the eye. And then when you talk about the eye—we use "I am" and the eye almost all the time. And so that seems to be the root of consciousness.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That's a very interesting, uh, emphasis on the visual, particularly living in a world where the verbal is given so much—a higher priority in almost every field of endeavor.

LOUISE NEVELSON: But they're not the artists.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: No, no the artist then becomes unique and aware of his own uniqueness in exercising that visual faculty, I suppose.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Of course, I believe, too, that the artist is still in our times the last of free people. While he can't be totally free, he's the last of wanting that way of living and saying what he has to say. And when that is lost, I think it will be a great tragedy. Because the spirit will not be alive. And, uh, who was it that, uh, said we cannot live by bread alone?

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I don't—I thought perhaps it was the Bible. But I'm not—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I think it is the Bible. They talk about the spirit. And of course, uh, people that think they're realistic, they'll say, well, the—what is a spirit? We've never seen a spirit. Well, that doesn't matter. The

sum total of consciousness is certainly greater than the parts.

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [00:24:00] Coming back to that period, then, of childhood. Let's talk a little bit more about, well, your development of character.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. Well, of course I was going to say I think that in our times people don't talk about character as much as they used to. But I recall that when I was about six in school, there was a lovely girl in my class. And she was a bright girl. And she was rather petite. And her neighbor—other children, neighbor's children—lived next door to her. And their stepfather was a policeman. And they came to her during the rest period. And they said to her, You walk home with us or we'll tell my father. And he's a policeman. And I recall running up to her and saying, "Dorothy, you don't have to walk home with them." Because I knew they were trying to either bribe her or con her into something. So, I was thoroughly aware of this all my life, how people are conned into things, and how they're misused through fright and all. And so that—that was a big part in my life. Because wherever I saw injustice—and of course the great problem today between the races. And I just spoke in Boulder, Colorado. They had a conference on world affairs. And this is only about three weeks ago. And in the college there, they, uh—some people said, but—yes, but if we let civil rights come in and our neighbors are negroes, our property will go down. And I said, If you wait much longer, you won't have any property to go down. So you see from the time I was a little girl until now, which is a span of certainly over a half a century, [00:26:00] my thoughts are pretty much the same. And so, I think—it isn't that you're looking for character. But something—the way you are made. You resent certain things. And you rebel against the injustices. Because you see them, not in one way, but in many ways, daily life. And so that, too, made me want to be somehow by myself. And I also told my family when I was younger, I said, "I will never work for pay. I will never work for anybody." And of course, they thought these were childish thoughts. But in principle, I have never taken a job. And I certainly have never, on that principle, worked for anybody. It is true that I have taught art here and there. Or it's true I've done these things. But it was because I wanted to communicate with younger people about creativity. So, I never considered that in the nature of getting a job or taking one. And I've never entertained that idea, and still don't. It seems to me and my kind of thinking that if man belongs to himself, and was born, as we were educated, in freedom, then he had a right to select almost every move he makes. It is true we communicate with people, and we give a little and take a little. But in principle there isn't that truth. You have to stand with that. And I think that is the thing that makes an independent mind, a creative mind.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: It must take great strength, however, to stand, uh, alone against all of the, uh, forces.

LOUISE NEVELSON: May I—may I say this? I have never considered it [00:28:00] great strength to do these things. I couldn't live any other way. So, this was my way of survival. It wasn't a matter of thinking strength or not strength. It was my only way of survival. And certainly, I didn't think of myself being different on that level. But I certainly felt I had a right to do, and say, and move the way I wished. Because I was paying the price all along the way for my survival. Then I wanted it on my terms.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Paying the price, you mean in the sense that you were doing with very little in the way of—of clothes, and food, and housing, and—and—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: How did you manage it in any case?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, there were many ways. First, my family, who were sympathetic, had given me an allowance. Then I was married. And I, as you know, have a son that's a sculptor. And, uh, so somehow you survive. And then my family were always sympathetic. And by the time I was what I call a professional artist, I was living very, very modestly.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I was on the PWA [ph], and, uh, I lived in a loft. I think at that time I probably paid $15 a month. It was a cold water loft. And so, there is a survival. But when you have this concept, no matter how tough it is—the star is so brilliant ahead of you that it, uh—there's no questions asked. So, you must follow that star.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: The WPA, was that, uh, something that you were involved with for quite some time? Were you on the easel project, Louise? I'm—I'm covering this particularly, because it is a concentration of the Archives right now.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. Yes. Well, I was—[00:30:04]

[END OF TRACK 1 OF 5 SIDE A.]

This is tape number two of five side A.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: When our previous tape ended, Louise, we had been talking about your first box sculpture which had been made in an empty carpet box and in which you had assembled pieces of wood that had caught your attention in various ways, including their nail holes; and I wondered if we might pursue that first experience and how it opened up, and how it developed from there, a little more.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, this box was rather long, it probably had a rug 9 by 12 in it but it was very narrow. I didn't use small pieces of wood but I found lumber on the street that had nails and some nail holes in it and different forms and different shapes and I just nailed them together and I knew this was art, and I began to learn more about the technique, learn more about the forms; and went right on. But before that, even at the Norlyst Gallery, as I told you, I already used furniture and already used imagery of, say, mankind, with broken glass strewed in and furniture perhaps, and electric lights for eyes. So I was already familiar with these forms, but I enclosed them. And then, as I got more in it, I wanted to enclose them more, and until now, I'm using glass in front of them. There's something—they get closer to me, I want to embrace them more and I don't want to expose them, like putting them on a stand and in the round. And, year after year and time after time and all the time, they're getting more and more enclosed. And now I'm using glass in front of them. And, in my coming show this fall, I will use other things so that they themselves are growing. In other words, it isn't I imposing altogether—but I'm recognizing things and using them to create a completeness. It's like a marriage; you are not the total actor; you play with another actor, and my play with the other are my materials. Sometimes they tell me something and sometimes I speak to them, so that there is a constant communication toward a oneness, for that unity, for the harmony, and for the totality. And they are changing. It's very strange. I will look at a work that I did, say, some time ago, standing with work I'm doing today, and the great difference to me is overwhelming. It may not be to an eye that's not discerning, or not acquainted, but for the one who is doing it, for me, I see great changes all the time. That's what fascinates me. Otherwise it would be repetitious. And that's what drives me, too, to do more.

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Before you did your first box—let's say, had you been carving wood? You had not been assembling it?

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, I had assembled it.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Oh, had you even then?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Oh, yes. At the Norlyst Show they were all assembled woods, and there were different kinds of wood put together. Oh, yes. Because I wanted the forms and I didn't care for the carving. I wanted something more immediate because my creativity was faster and so I wanted a way of saying it and I said it then. But as time went on, I just said before, it became more enclosed and more enclosed. And now it's even more enclosed. I haven't done a piece in the round, so to speak, that could be seen from three dimensions since I have been enclosing. There's something about it that I can't come out in the open any more. It's become enclosed.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: You had spoken before last time, too, about your special interest in the quality of the shadow and that seems to be something that belongs in the enclosed form particularly.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I think that the shadow, let's say, for a better word, is the fourth dimension. That shadow I make forms out of is just not a fleeting shadow but it has as much form as a Cubistic form would have. It has forms and I give them forms and to me they're much more exciting than anything that I see on earth. That is another reason that I don't particularly need to travel because I'm always fascinated by these forms; they mean something. I call it, for clarification, the fourth dimension. I don't need so much material and matter to tune in and identify and recognize that fourth dimension. To me that's remarkable and very wonderful, very wonderful. And probably night and day are very necessary for my kind of thinking, the light and the dark: very important.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Did you start painting—the first one, you said, was painted black?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And had you been painting your sculpture black before that?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Pretty much. Pretty much. There was some experimenting with painting them, and also different woods put together, the tonalities, but not very much because I didn't want to make sculpture and I didn't want to make form as such and I got through that very fast—I wanted really to get beyond that. I never

thought I made sculpture or made anything. I'm not looking to make anything. I want something else entirely. I want that extra dimension where you don't make things, but you live with that place and you give that place a form. And in that place where you give form, you bring back here and hope to communicate on that level. Some people do get it. Even if it's a little late, they get it. I don't know if I've said it well, but I'll say it again: I don't want to make sculpture and I don't want to make paintings; I'm not looking to make anything. I myself need, for my place of consciousness, a form. It's almost like you are an architect that's building through shadow and light and dark. You are really an architect in that place, but you don't want to make buildings for people; you are—in another dimension—you are the architect, you see. But it's a very real world. I never use a word like "imagination" because that word "imagination" means to me that you extend immediately to that great dimension. So it's not imagination. It's a great reality but the material you are using is in that place instead of in this place, you see. So it isn't through the intellect, it's through vision that you give form and structure to that place. And so, naturally, you are an architect in that place.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: How do you arrive at your scale? A "certain place" is interesting there. Your boxes, of course, are within the limits of what one can reach—up and down or within, perhaps with a ladder or a box—and still it has a sense perhaps of being of a dimension that's unlimited to some extent; it's very real. How do you arrive at these? Well, partly these pieces that are available, I suppose, or that you worked with before. You could make them larger if you wanted to, or you could make them smaller.

LOUISE NEVELSON: I told you I have made them larger.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, within your being you have a sense of scale and measurement, because anything outside in the world you have inside in your consciousness and consequently you identify with this scale and weight and measure and you're there with it; you're just there with it. For example, I had the straight walls and somehow it came to me that I would like to give circle to the straight. And, before I knew it, I did it. And then I wanted greater enclosure, so I thought of black. It's very simple. Everything is here and it's up to you to use it. It's not any great shakes to do these things. And again, you can think of modern dance, the way the body flows. I told you that, for many, many years, I studied modern dance. Well, that modern dance also has all this; you're not just jumping, but you have space and the body has space. Look, all these places are empty; there's air in them and they have space and, if we recognize that this is architecture and we recognize what we are made of and how we are made and put together, the rest is an extension. And I can still go back to say that it's your consciousness and your awareness of all this. It is kind of a remarkable grandeur and you use this because you identify. So all that I have said all along the line is that I don't want to make anything; what I am doing is living the livingness of life, the livingness of the livingness, and using all these things to extend this awareness.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Do you sense that in other artists too, or do you feel this is a unique experience of your own?

LOUISE NEVELSON: I feel that any artist who knows what the word means has to have these things. I have never seen a Picasso figure—when he's used it—or object that wasn't in the right place; they never fall out, they never fall in. They are there to stay. Now that is the body's awareness of the rightness of weight. When he used that period of bone structure, they were right. Or whatever he does. Now I know, everybody knows, that he's a great artist and all, but I wonder if they are aware of these things that he is aware of and that are at his fingertips. I don't think he has to study. He's aware of these things and he uses them so well. But how could he not use them well? It would be impossible. There are different ways of expressing it. For instance, look at some of these wonderful chess players, what they tap; or even ball players. I think they all are aware or they couldn't run for the ball and catch it. Or they couldn't study it. Of course, they study the technique to perfect these things and also, in studying it, they communicate it on that level. A ballplayer wants to know what a ballplayers does. An artist wants to know what an artist does. That's a communication and also it's very enlightening. But you have to know that. You're born with it. Why are some people two feet tall and some six feet tall? They're born with these things. It seems to me we come pretty ready-made, but what we do here is fulfill it. I'm not talking about religion. I don't know where this comes from but—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: But you have been very much interested in comparative religion at certain periods in your life?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: How has that entered into your work? Could you define that at all?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, in some ways, all my life I didn't feel quite that I belonged here. I didn't really, in my closer being, identify too much on any level, so I just had to fill something in myself, and there was that great hunger, great search. And so, at one time, I thought maybe religion would do it; at one time I thought philosophy would do it; at one time I thought heroic things would do it. I didn't care where I could communicate with it as

long as it somehow gave me a measure, some measure, of just contentment. Not really contentment—gave me some measure of peace between the storms, you see. I had to have my rest period. And so I would search desperately, and search desperately. But I must say that not one yet has fulfilled what I'm searching for. Consequently, I don't stay with it; it isn't that I thought it all, or understood it all. I'm not saying that. It just doesn't quite seem to fit this thing. But it fed me at certain times in my life and, at least while I was searching and hoping to find, it gave me a little contentment. And also I think it absorbed my mind enough to move with it, you see. That is the whole thing in our times that is really difficult for mankind on earth, no matter where, because so much has been broken down and I don't think there's been enough built up. So there's great chaos. But that may be in the world, but I don't want that to be with me because I need more structure than that. And so that was a search on that level. But I never found it totally.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: You're not aware of it having affected the kinds of forms you use?

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, not affected my form but it affected me as a being. Then naturally something happened to the form because we can't be aware of anything unless it affects us. So you can say—I don't like the word "indirect" either—but it's like you say: I'm living, you're living, you eat every day. Well you don't remember if it's the apple or the chicken, but something there gave you life and it sustained you until the next time. So it gave me life, an awareness of life and naturally that would affect what I was doing.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Louise, in the very recent past, of course, you've been involved with Artists Equity, and I know that, as you said before, in earlier periods of your life, you had been reluctant to become so much involved with this knowing a great many people and being involved organizationally. But now you've come to accept that as something you can give at this period. Is there anything you'd like to say about your experiences all along the line with your fellow artists or with the art community and the way you regard it?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, now I find that I can communicate better with artists. I just happen to be able to communicate better. Also, at this point, I'm in a position where I can be of service and it's not a great effort on my part. On the contrary, the thing that it has given me is just so remarkable: it's opened another consciousness and I feel, there too, it's on a certain kind of level of awareness. And so it's just been very important. The National Artists Equity is not the only thing I'm with. I'm active in other things. But it seems as if it's important to me. And I also think it may be a time in our history when artists must stand together. While in my work and myself I stand alone, in this there is a sort of pooling on another level, and in that level it isn't only that artists will be recognized for certain things, but I think art itself may have more to say creatively. That's what interests me about it.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: One of the things that's of interest to me and fascinates me perhaps about you is your ability to be very sympathetic to and interested in many manifestations of contemporary art that are very different from your own, even including such movements as Pop art and so on. This may be rushing ahead of our story too much but I think your openness to the possibilities of many kinds of expression is unusual in someone who is so completely and highly individualized in her work.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, now, I see all these movements as very real in my kind of thinking and they are just another side of life. For example, if you open a book and you go through it and on every page is another vision, you don't destroy it; you've recognized it. And I certainly think all these new so-called faces of art are very vital, very living, and very important to my vision. I don't think that one should close themselves off because that just doesn't make much sense. I want to see more and more sides. And a strange example: a diamond, you know you can shape it into many forms and it gives off many lights. That doesn't mean that one shines a little more or a little less, or that a little light can't be as important as a big light. It's light. I don't know of any new vision that hasn't its place in the sun.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: One of the interesting aspects of your life is, of course—we haven't mentioned very much—is your role as the mother of a son who is also an artist, Mike Nevelson. I wondered if there's anything that you'd like to cover as far as that relationship is concerned, and how it grew.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I was just blessed to have a wonderful son. I don't think I gave him any particular attention. I don't even think I understood what being a mother meant, as such. And that, too, became an interesting thing in my life—to not just communicate on that level but to try to understand another human being. And, as I say, I just happen to have been blessed because it grew into a great communication. Somehow there's nothing closer on a human level than a parent and a child. And it's a great, great, great satisfaction to me, and it's a great satisfaction that he is doing the work he is doing and has found his own avenue of expression, because I can understand how it must be and how difficult it must have been for him to do it. But he has shown his strength on that level and he stands as one individual and I stand as another individual, and I think it's working out very well. And, as far as raising him—as a mother I found him to be a very gentle person and I didn't have great complexes with him. Somehow, at times, I thought he was older than I because, when I would get into a frustration, he seemed to be the person with the wisdom. And so that was a very remarkable

experience; and I think it is remarkable.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: He's married now and has his own family?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. I have three granddaughters and they all show signs of creativity. I don't quite know why, but it just seems that that's where life is to us. And I just feel extremely blessed with my son as a sculptor and with the three growing grandchildren, three growing granddaughters. And they happen to be pretty besides.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That's pride. Louise, one thing we should fill in for the record is something more about various shows you've had in your gallery activities. We had followed you through to Nierendorf and Norlyst and then, of course, later on I know you went with other galleries. During the middle '40s, what galleries were you showing with at the time?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, Nierendorf went to Europe for two weeks after the Second World War, and he stayed a year and a half. I was ready for a show and he came back; in a few days he passed away. After that I didn't show for about four or five years. I was working all the time and it didn't seem to matter. I didn't recognize this quality of being professional and on the scene. So I thought—well, this is lovely; I have a lot of time for myself. And then the Grand Central Moderns—Miss Roberts, the Director, came up to me in the Museum and she said, "Would you like to have a guest show in our gallery?" I said, "Well, I'll think about it." And I showed a few pieces. And then, since no one asked me and I had not asked anybody, I said eventually, "Yes." That was also a show that I called *The Royal Family*. And it also had this theme and it was all ready. It was rather big. I used beams from big houses for kings and queens, and I used these old materials for things; but they were more in the round. So, step by step, there was not really a great difference, you see. But anyway—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: What year would that have been, Louise? *The Royal Family*? After the war?

LOUISE NEVELSON: After the war; but it was four or five years after. So I would say it was in the 1950s.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Early '50s probably?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Probably. I have my records upstairs, dear, if you want to see them.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Well, this is close enough. We can correct it later.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. And then I had another show, and another show; I had several shows with the Grand Central Moderns. But I was also showing around, like with a group show or wherever I was asked. And then, since the Grand Central Moderns is really an unprofitable organization, they expect eventually that you go into another gallery where sales are made. And so Martha Jackson asked me to come with her. Then Cordier—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: What—that was with Martha Jackson—?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Martha Jackson, yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Was that mid-50s or later '50s—I suppose?

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, it was late '50s. And Cordier came here from France and asked me if he could represent me in Europe. So I had those shows. But then, you see, I had been showing around different places anyway. And then I went with—what's his name? Sidney Janis.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Before we get to that, though, where did you show in Europe? I want to fill that in.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Oh, yes, I showed at the Cordier Gallery in Paris. But then, you see, we had been sending shows from the Sculptors Guild and the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors and National Women and, oh, there were other New York Women and other groups. They were sending works of ours though South America, through Japan, through all the different countries; and through America particularly, in different museums and all. So they were really shown quite a bit. And then the Biennale two years ago.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: You were very important there.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. Well, then I was asked by the Museum of Modern Art to show in Paris where I had three enormous rooms.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Three enormous rooms of the—

LOUISE NEVELSON: My—yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That was 1962?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. 1962—June.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: June in Paris?

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, it was Venice.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Venice, that's right.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Paris—that was the year before.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Paris was '61?

LOUISE NEVELSON: I think '61, yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I'm sorry I interrupted. I just wanted to be sure—

LOUISE NEVELSON: That's all right. After Janis, I went to the Pace Gallery in New York, had three shows last year and this year, one in the Hanover Gallery, London, the Gimpel-Hanover in Zurich, and another show in Italy—Turino. And of course now this month I will show in—what's the name of that place in Germany—Documenta.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Oh, yes—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Oh, yes, and, of course, you knew I was in the *16 Americans* in the Museum of Modern Art. And I've shown at the Whitney. You also know that I am in many museums. I also had a one-man show in Caracas where there's quite a bit of my work. And also Martha Jackson will have a show of my work in Japan.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mmm!

LOUISE NEVELSON: In about a month, or this summer—this summer.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Is there anything you'd like to say about any of these shows?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I had about three or four shows with Martha Jackson.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes. They were important ones, too.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. And I had a show last year of etchings and drawings at the Balantroub. I've had, you see, all these shows. I had bronzes with Martha last summer in the garden.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And the museums—I suppose it would be too much to list them all—the most important ones—how about the ones abroad?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, Tate, London. And I think we are going to be selling to a few more—the Museum of Modern Art here, the Whitney Museum, Queen's College, New York University, Riverside, Caracas. And I'm in others—Norfolk Museum, the museum down in Venezuela—and I don't know—it seems to me all over the place.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Europeans have apparently received your work very warmly, as well as Americans and you have been a particularly favored American, I think, abroad.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I would say that I think the European artists were almost the first to recognize me; and among them, Mathieu wrote a forward for my exhibition in Paris for Cordier. He came to America and he wouldn't even fly back until he acquired one of my things and took it on the plane with him, and he asked *American Artist* who I was. In other words, he alerted them. And then, when Arp [ph] had his big show at the Museum of Modern Art, that was the first evening of my opening of the big black wall there. He was so wonderful and I had not met him. I still haven't met him but he wrote an important article. It was a poem and it was published. And so really I feel that my heritage and culture is pretty well rooted in the Western World and I certainly feel very close to their thinking. But then I also feel a vitality in myself that's very close to this continent. And I love the American Indian work. Have you seen my things with Parsons?

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I have seen some when I was here before but I haven't seen them recently.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. So that, there again, I understood the American Indian work and I love the American Indian and what he has done.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Louise, your home itself is a museum and has always been such an exciting place for artists; and it certainly has for me. I wonder if you'd like to talk for a moment about the kinds of things you've brought together in this great house and loved and cherished here.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, truly, by nature I didn't want to be a collector, but my kind of—what would you say?—my communicating with these things; somehow they just come to me and, before I know it, there's a collection. I have even tried not to collect, but then someone will give me something because somehow we attract certain things by our nature. And so it's just sort of a natural for me, just a natural. It is true with, say, for instance, almost, the jewelry. Now my jewelry—there are things like jade, or they're chunky or they're very refined; they're the two extremes. Well, somehow it was natural and I identify with these things and they mean something. There's a kind of a recognition, like one friend recognizes another. Well, these things I recognize and they seem to belong here. So there was never a great feeling of collecting because too many collectors don't collect the right things. These things, somehow, I do love living with, I do feel they belong. For example, I think my acquaintance with silver—now silver like, we'll say, Sheffield, that is in a way a poor man's luxury—but the etchings that were done on them, the work that was done on them—when you think of the mind that created them through time, they are works of art and my living with them did something for me. I even clean my own silver so to see the forms in them. And the same with linens. I've made some linens of my own and worked on them. Somehow, I think that I learned more through these things that I've been living with than books. If you go to a museum, you really walk through a museum, but with these things you live and if you want to look at them again or touch them, or clean them, or not clean them, they're right here, and there's a sensitivity about your sense of touch with them and there is communication with them, and they have been somehow, I think, integrated in my being for creativity.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That's a very, very interesting expression, Louise, that feeling that things around you form you and you form—and then you almost have a conversation with them, I suppose.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, yes, on that level you can say that. You don't have to talk verbally—not that kind of a conversation, but you certainly have a communication with them.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I remember, of course, the first time I came to your house, the enormous collection you had of the works of Eilshemius.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And then the American Indian things and—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Great collection of Ralph Rosenborg's things.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes.

LOUISE NEVELSON: I have a great collection of his.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes. And George Constant—wasn't he in it?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I don't have many of his, but I have some, yes. I have some different pieces of different works of art by many other artists, but I really have quite a collection of Eilshemius's and I have a wonderful collection, that I think is wonderful, of Ralph Rosenborgs who I think is a very great artist in our time.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And of course, your house is full of wonderful pieces of wood that are getting under way to becoming Nevelsons—becoming works of art.

LOUISE NEVELSON: There again, you see, I feel, by having used old wood and by my understanding them, and being in oneness with them and giving them really to the world, is an avenue where there's another communication—that it doesn't have to be what the world thinks are expensive materials. Because how many times do people abuse expensive materials? But the creator feels that everything is on a level, it only depends on how he or she likes it, not the price of it. And so you can take materials naturally and you give them their position and you place them.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That is an unusual aspect of your work. Some artists have used discarded materials and they have emphasized their pathetic character as discards. You seem to do an opposite thing sometimes. One can still see that it's a simple material and that it might have been part of something else and yet it takes on a new kind of dignity.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, in that place that I'm talking about, that place of consciousness doesn't have a price tag. Also, I did say in the beginning that a creator—what makes the character of a creator are many ingredients. And among them, one is that you want the other eyes to see what these things are; that all things are wonderful if you see them that way; all things are important if you see them that way; and you can shine them up to that place, you see. I think it's even more than that. I think that—not to quote the Bible, but on one level, they do say that the meek and the humble shall inherit the earth. And so why shouldn't these inherit the earth? They start on a humble note and they become as much of a unity as any other law that we understand. And so they can stand.

Of course, when we speak of silver or works of art or linens or architecture or whatever, it slipped through some conscious mind, or it may not only be one mind but it may be hundreds of years of minds pooled until it comes to an essence; and of course in that place you give that consciousness to everything, that you will do as much as you can, as much as you understand, as much as you're aware of.

[END OF TRACK 2 OF 5 SIDE A.]

This is tape number three of five side A.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [00:00:00] This is Dorothy Seckler continuing an interview with Louise Nevelson on January 14, 1965. Louise, uh, at the end of our previous tape—[side conversation] oh, hello there—we had, uh, been talking about the period of the early—late '40s, early '50s and trying to fill in the details of your life and, uh, changing ideas, methods, and directions in your work. And, uh, I think that's where we might take up again, unless you have something else.

LOUISE NEVELSON: No.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Coming into the period—let's, uh, consider you a little more in relationship to the art world itself for a moment. I know that in some ways you're very independent of it. But the period after the World War, the period of about '46, '47, '48, was a very active one in the New York art world, as you know. The—some of the Surrealists and other—and Marcel Duchamp, Chagall and others from Europe were in this country. Some of the artists who had—that you had known and were on WPA were now coming into, uh—well, they had formed a club. And they had issues before them that they were very much concerned with. Uh, were you a member of the club? Did you get involved with that at all?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I was never asked to, uh, join the club. I didn't even know anything about it until it was almost ready to be folded. No, I didn't.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Did you know any of the European artists who came here?

LOUISE NEVELSON: For, uh, example, who?

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Well, Masson, Léger, Max Ernst. Magritte came for a while. Chagall. [00:02:00] Uh, Mondrian came. You know, it was a terrific group of people who were refugees from the European world, Nazism.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well—yes. Well, I had met, uh, Peggy Guggenheim and, uh, Max Ernst at that time, and Mondrian. But, uh, I had just met them. I wouldn't say that I knew them very well. And as far as the others, I—I didn't even meet them at the time. No, I was busy.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: At this time you didn't know De Kooning, or Rothko, or Gottlieb?

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, no.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Or—

LOUISE NEVELSON: I might have met them, but I didn't know them, so to speak. No.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And their ideas were not of course—

LOUISE NEVELSON: No.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: You didn't get *ARTnews*—

LOUISE NEVELSON: No.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —and devour the latest—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I got *ARTnews*, but I don't know—I don't read very well, I guess. But I didn't know exactly what—in other words, I was not too aware of these things.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Because I was sort of digging my own way, you see. And it seemed it was a full-time job. And then I didn't know them very well. And they probably were finding their direction. Maybe they didn't even know how serious I was, you see.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And, uh, we never got to the point of knowing each other well enough to find out.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: One of the things some of the artists in that group were being, uh, involved with at that time was psychoanalysis. And it had occurred to some of them, first having been exposed to the ideas of Surrealism, and then going into analysis themselves, that there might be ways of drawing directly on the unconscious in their art. Uh, had this kind of thing occurred to you independently?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Never. Because of [00:04:00]—somehow or another I must say that I didn't particularly like the pictures that I saw that were being painted by the Surrealists.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I think the only one that really, I liked was that wonderful Italian. What was his name that did these, uh, greens, and he had the figure—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: De Chirico?

LOUISE NEVELSON: De Chirico. Now, he was the only one out of that whole group that interested me.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Because his subject matter and the mood he was creating. But, uh, I wasn't very excited over the other things.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I didn't particularly like the, uh, quality of paint. I didn't like breaking up so much of the plane surfaces. And the, uh—the, uh, canvas is what I mean. And they were too literary for my taste. So, I wasn't really involved.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: De Chirico had done something which, uh, I wondered if you might have noticed at any point. When he was in Ferrara he had painted—made paintings in which he had set into sort of shallow box-like shapes things like, uh, those oddly-shaped Italian, uh, biscuits, and curious things like that that he saw in the, uh, shop windows of Ferrara. Some—they took on geometrical shapes, but they were sometimes biscuits, or parts of toys, and so on. But you don't recall those particularly?

LOUISE NEVELSON: No. I'm sure—not don't I recall them. I'm sure I never saw them.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Because had I seen them, I would have remembered. They would have interested me. [00:06:00]

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I just happened to be writing an article on de Chirico after I had, uh, talked to you last spring. And when I came to these boxes with these curious things inside, I thought, well, Nevelsons!

LOUISE NEVELSON: Now, where were these boxes? Were any of them ever in America?

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: They're not—they're painted boxes. They're paintings—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —where the illusion is very concrete, you know.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: But they're still rather abstracted in the sense of geometrical composition. Uh, well, I suppose some of them have been shown here. I don't remember just where. I'll show you some in a book I have on his work. I think it's by Silby [ph].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Oh, well, I'd love to—I'd love to see it. But you see, there's another thing. I've never been that conscious of books. And books—and books on art really don't mean that much to me. Because almost the total day has been giving to doing—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —in my case. And that goes for my thoughts in other ways. I don't particularly feel so close to, uh, things that another mind has left. I think it's wonderful if you can identify with it. But, uh, I haven't been

able to do that easily. It's been much easier for me to do the work than try to—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [Inaudible]—somebody else.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But as I said, I think he would be the one I would have said that I liked. And because there was this great mood in his work that appealed to me so much.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes, there was a strange brooding—

LOUISE NEVELSON: That's right.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —melancholic quality.

LOUISE NEVELSON: That's right.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Beautiful, many of them, I think. Just hauntingly beautiful—

LOUISE NEVELSON: That's right.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —his early work.

LOUISE NEVELSON: That's right.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And of course—

LOUISE NEVELSON: At that time.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes, not now. [00:08:00] Poor guy.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: You mentioned, of course, Picasso. I guess Picasso is everybody's grandfather in a way, except for the younger ones who don't seem to, uh, feel it as our generation did. What—what—uh, what part of Picasso had you liked best? What aspects of Picasso's work appealed to you?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I'd like to say that all aspects of Picasso's work. Because in back of his work is Picasso.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: This strange, wonderful quality of his of transforming everything, of—you know, of making it—recreating it in his own way. Now, apparently the younger men today don't feel any urgency about transforming. They'd just as soon, uh—you know, just take. And, uh, the idea of invention is much less important, I would gather, to them than it was to all of us who kind of—you know, for whom Picasso was the big mover.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I think in our times—and I think it's valid—that the artist is taking another role. He really is concerned with ideas. With ideas. And, uh, somehow, to me, as I see it, oil paint has become sort of old-fashioned.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That's true.

LOUISE NEVELSON: As such.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: From that point of view [ph].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. And I don't want to at this point bring out names, but it seems to me that the most prominent young—younger, uh, so-called artists are the—are the artists that have ideas. They're projecting ideas more than executing work, [00:10:00] as such.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's very true, Louise.

LOUISE NEVELSON: You see.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And, uh, it's in a way, perhaps—in this country we felt it very particularly at the beginning of abstract—or after Abstract Expressionism came really into focus. It was then apparent that what we had was an art of concept more than percept. Whereas when I was younger and going to art school, the assumption was that the art was sort of like a sensitive, uh, fluctuating wire that went out and perceived the world. Now the artist conceived it. He had a basic way of coming at whatever he did, which, uh—which informed everything that he did, everything he made. He wasn't—he was imposing a concept, almost, rather than reflecting a percept of the world. And maybe for that reason, oil paint seems less, uh—and it's less palpable, less tangible when making something that isn't there.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Particularly we'll say oil paint. Because new paints have come in that dry faster and then do things on a different level. In other words, oil paint, uh, I think gives a luminosity and a beauty that other paints may not. But our time, uh, demands another performance, a vaster one. The mind pertaining to the canvas or to creation—in that dimension—is—the approach is quite different. The approach is different. And it's very possible that, uh, we will be coming as we go along into new things. Now, I [00:12:00] have gone to a few shows. I don't see many. And it's remarkable that these shows may not be profound, but they are inviting a new observation. And they are giving us another kind of an image.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Could you mention any of them that—?

LOUISE NEVELSON: I'd rather not do that.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I'd rather not. But—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: What kind of thing? Could you just talk about it from that point of view?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. Well, for instance, if you take—first you see the flat surface—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —like painting and sculpture, have become closer. Now, I went to—to a gallery. And the, uh, objects, or the material, or—what would you say when you use—the subject matter is what I was going to say. The subject matter came out of the canvas. Say if it was an apple.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: It would be the apple was, uh, blown up to, say, uh, two feet and coming out of the canvas. And they made a whole arrangement of this. Well, it's very interesting. I don't feel it's profound. But somehow, it's interesting. And it is, uh, also giving us, for the moment, the eye—it's giving to the eye anyway a new way of seeing this.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: You don't think it might be, uh, at the same time, robbing the eye of a certain, uh, sensitivity? I mean, if you see an apple blown up several times its size and painted a flat color, well, this makes it very readily recognizable and very, you know, identifiable. And you don't have to look for any subtleties of light or space. It's just there. You know, appleness. [00:14:00] Uh, that doesn't seem to you as possibly a blunting of sensitivity?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, may I say, I did say in this case that the apple wasn't flat. It might come out of where painting and sculpture have become one.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I wouldn't say that. I—I do feel that we can't have everything. And so one thing's been given up, and another thing has been gained. I do feel it may be lighter—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —lighter, in—in the being to do this. But there is room for it. Because all music, also, must have rest periods. There isn't always sound.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And so this may be a quieter period in some ways. But this also is transitory and may be leading to something. So I certainly wouldn't, uh, reduce it. But nevertheless, I think there is a period where—we have surpassed—where we need light, and shade, and this, and that, of the old school. I think there will be new ways of seeing these things.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: You mean you think that we will not return to the light, and shade, and space, and so on, in time?

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, not that way. Because I use the word architecture.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: You see, that—there will be different performances. The architect—the, uh, artist will

somehow even be more of a composer. Even more. He will take shadow. He will take reflection. He will take the objective, or whatever he does. And he will become an architect of this. And he will give it his stamp of the way the sum total will come [00:16:00] together.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And I don't think there will be a return. Because we don't return to, uh—say, in science, things that have been very important, very valid, that have been discovered and used, we don't return to them as such. We may return to them and use them in another way.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: So that means we won't give up these things. But I think we're going to have to compose them in another way. We're going to have to give a meaning in another way. Our structure will be another kind of a structure.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Do you think that there's any implication of this when Clement Greenberg says, for instance, that sensitivity is a bore? Would you imply that he means sensitivity to the older ways of looking and feeling? Or does, uh, that have any particular meaning to you at all?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I don't know Mr. Greenberg. I've heard a lot of things he said that I don't go along with. And I'd really have to know what he means. As a matter of fact, I go along with so little of what he says, that I don't know how he would mean this. If I knew what he meant, what—sensitivity is a bore, it—do you think he knows what sensitivity is?

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [Laughs.] That's very nicely put. I won't answer it on the tape. Uh but, uh—but what you were saying, I think, is very fascinating. The forms that are coming into being replacing the older perceptions, and so on. The curious and sometimes, I suppose, disquieting [00:18:00] things about—as one rushes to meet the future, and, you know, at the same time, as you say, you're forging a new link to the chain. And the old link, of course, has to be lost. And I suppose that's why it is that a great many artists whose work has been rooted in, uh—in the older perceptions of space, and color, and light, and tone, suddenly feel as if there's nowhere to go. You know, that they are now pushed back into the past in a sense.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, now we see artists who are using old forms. We—let us take an example of a man like Hopper. Hopper.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Hopper.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Now, Hopper is not truly an innovator, you see. He's not an innovator. He's a man of 82, and he's painting. But in his work, there is a quality that's eternal. And that is why he's not old hat. And that is why he's valid. So, some people might call it soul. Some, intangible. Some—some will call it the sum total of a consciousness. Whatever you call it, there is something in—an awareness in some creative minds, that their tools, no matter what they may be, does not overpower this quality.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And this quality is rare. And that quality goes on, in spite of the technique they use. Of course, I think the technique—it's not really in spite. Because the technique is—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Is—

LOUISE NEVELSON: —them. But it's in spite of the times, [00:20:00] I should say—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —that we live in. So, I think that goes through the ages. There must be things of integrity in the being. Now, once they are very solid, and they are not in doubt, but that they are really strong and believed in, I think they just will go on.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It's really, I suppose, the second- and third-rate artists, who have always been somewhat hesitant as to whom they are, what their own identity is, they are the ones that suffer.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I don't know whether they suffer. If they didn't have convictions in the first place, maybe they don't have the great capacity to suffer.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes. Well, I mean, they—they suffer a sense of a lack of

confidence.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. Yes. That's right. I think art is tough. And I think that, uh, it's tough. And, uh, naturally, an artist is sensitive and is tough all at once. It's like a beautiful instrument that has the fortissimo and the pianissimo. You can't be shouting all the time. You can't be whispering all the time.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Man has that range. And I think that the more magnificent the range and the bigger the range, the more you get the extremes that there is where great art would lie.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I, uh, became so fascinated by what you were saying about the forms that are emerging today, that I, uh—I somehow lost what we were talking about in the '50s. But, uh, here we are, coming along to the period of, say—you know, the early '50s. [00:22:00] Uh, was there any, uh, other important change? Let's say—I think I did come down [ph] parts last time. But when you began to work with the boxes, the—the day you found the right box, let's say—what had you been doing just before that, Louise?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I was using plaster and working right along daily. And was actually making rather big abstract forms. They were not totally abstract. But I had abstracted the universe. And the material I was using, I'd abstract it. In other words, if I used the human form, so to speak, I abstracted it. But I didn't do it coldly. It was done freely, you see. So that goes for all the other living objects on earth. And then you can do it by addition and subtraction. And then you come to—you can reduce all these multiple forms, say, into one. Or you can multiply it from one into the infinite. And that's a personal thing. I never just mechanically do it, like a geometric thing that leaves it cold.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I would gather that plaster forms you were working with were more about a reduction. And then once you began working with the boxes, it was more of a matter of—of multiplication—of, uh, diversifying and extending. Would that be true?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Was it a change of association for you when you began working with the boxes? I mean, as far as the kinds of things you associated with the forms you were using. Could you pin that down at all?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, it's a funny thing. I suppose I've lived so much with [00:24:00] form that, uh—for example, I might go to bed, and all these forms would take on as if they had a life of their own. And I—they'd move as if you plugged in electricity. And they would all move. And you can do so much with these things in the mind. And I don't remember any great revolutions in my consciousness when I went from one thing to another. It just seemed natural for me, like a tree. I was the root. And another branch developed, and another branch developed. There was no great mental surge in that direction. Many happened. But I think what always was wonderful was my eye would affirm it.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And would stamp the approval. This was right. Right for me. And I didn't question art. I never had that great, uh, struggle. Art was here. And I felt that it was right. It was living. Art is a living thing. Art is as alive as our breathing and as our own lives. But it's more ordered. And it has more order. And it's kind of like the essence of life, but the great essence.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And every piece, to some extent, to you is as if you had to—uh, or enjoy the process of making that whole concept in this single thing. It had to have the qualities—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I have felt, and feel, that in the work you are coming closer and closer to this great order.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And this great order, uh—nature, too, has this great order. And humanity [00:26:00] has—well, humanity, to me, is nature anyway. And, uh—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: You don't distinguish very specifically in some ways, do you?

LOUISE NEVELSON: No.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: It wasn't too much of a jump for you to go from—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Never a—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —the figures in class—

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, no, no.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —to the box forms, which were not figures.

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, no, no.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Or were they figures sometimes?

LOUISE NEVELSON: No. Well, not really. Not really, no. No, I think that, uh, for me all of creation basically is that you are searching for a more aware order. Order. Now what is this order? Some people will say order—this clean house you make order. But for me, it all meant a great structure—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —that was right. All the parts were right. That it was like a great symphony where there was nothing felt out. It was right. Now, it could all fall out and still be order. But then that would be right. The all-over pattern would be right. And, uh, I guess it is hard to speak about these things. But I worked every day and all my life, because there I find the livingness intensified. And none of the unnecessary things that man lives in most of his life—in other words, most people live from day to day in a certain level of mentality. And that's it. Well, in this creativeness, there is this great order. And it is somehow necessary for my awareness and consciousness. [00:28:00] Some people at one time probably in life needed great religion. Or someone needed great wealth to—to fulfill what they were wanting to do. But for me, the whole thing have great meaning—and has great meaning when I am working toward this great unity. There is no waste there, or the awareness of consciousness. There is no waste. That you are really becoming more and more aware.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you can begin in a, uh, piece of sculpture. It doesn't matter where you begin. Uh, because then each one calls for another—you start with a series of curving forms and organic forms. And then it calls for a intensification and then a contrast. Or is there any way at all of the—can you remember any specific one that you might trace through the way the chain of thought developed? Maybe one of the recent ones [ph]?

LOUISE NEVELSON: I always depend on my eye.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes.

LOUISE NEVELSON: I always come back to the eye.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: It's like a building, a beautiful thing.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: You might—well, say some of these wonderful pyramids in Mexico, or the Greek wonderful architecture in Greece. You know they stand. And they're valid. And they're right. And that's the way I think what we do should be. These are examples.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: They stand. They're valid. Now, you know in Mexico—I don't know if you've seen the pyramids. But they have these heavy stones. They never connected them. But just by [00:30:00] laying them down, they've been there thousands of years. You knew this?

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [Inaudible.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, anyway. So these slabs stayed there for, you know, thousands and thousands of years. And they somehow had the dimension of gravity and weight.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And they are magnificent, palatial buildings with these great carvings. I mean, anyone that might say that that's a primitive race really makes me laugh. Because they were so highly developed to what they've left for us to see. You must recognize the high development and the high order there. And so that is kind

of the thing that I would like to be aware of in my being and live with. And that gives me kind of a well-being—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —well-being. The awareness of things. I only gave those examples. There are many. It might be sometimes an inch piece of jade that might have that. Or—or even a piece of wood you find on the street. Doesn't matter. But that awareness gives you the order of your life. Gives you the—the structure. And, uh, otherwise, one would lose their reason. You get that—your reason has to be hinged to something in order for our sanity, and for our well-being, and for our beliefs. And of course, I said I was an optimist. I don't start on the premise that everything is chaotic, and why are we here, and all that. There's some things I don't want to answer. All I want to answer is for [00:32:00] my life and how I live my life.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's very interesting and profound, Louise. Well, it—it seems like an anticlimax to add anything else there. But I suppose I still should round out a few more of the, uh, events of the '50s. Uh, after you did begin to work with the boxes, uh, what was the, uh—were they exhibited after a few years, or did that—[00:32:37]?

[END OF TAPE 3 OF 5 SIDE A.]

This is tape number three of five side B.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [00:00:00] It works if—[inaudible].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Thanks a lot.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I have this theory about machines needing rest.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Oh. [They laugh.] That's probably—Dorothy, I don't think I've been very good today, but—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I think you've been marvelous today.

LOUISE NEVELSON: You know, you—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I jumped around too much.

LOUISE NEVELSON: I wasn't self-conscious—yes. I was going to say, I'm not nervous. Oh, thank God [ph]. But you're a little self-conscious. Now, if I thought you were in the way, I would say, Dorothy, you wait, you do—now, all these things, they didn't come a time. I was here. You were here. None of our business [ph].

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Don't worry about it. I like material we've gotten today. And it doesn't bother me that we've jumped around a little bit.

LOUISE NEVELSON: All right. All right.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: It really doesn't. Because I don't think it matters to most people at all.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Good. But we don't care, because if people are late that's too fucking bad.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [Laughs.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: We were here on time.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Well—

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, what I mean by—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I'm delighted to be able to get along with all this.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Good, good.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And I don't want to have to chew up another afternoon of yours.

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, I don't care about that either. I've got time at this point. And I've done a lot of work, so I'm not [inaudible]. And since the house is being done anyway—you know, through the year I don't spend 10 minutes shopping and doing other things people do. And the hell with it. And I do my work and, you know, stay with everything. And so, I—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: So then when you do take off and you've got all this going on—

LOUISE NEVELSON: That's right.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I'm glad at least I didn't break into working time.

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, you didn't.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That would have been really bad.

LOUISE NEVELSON: You didn't. You didn't.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: We were just at the point where—let's see. We were talking about the, uh—we did these. And—oh dear. Do you remember where we were [00:02:00] at that last moment?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: What were we talking about [ph]?

LOUISE NEVELSON: You asked me whether it made any difference—and I—the last things I said was that, like a great symphony, we really want order in our lives.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes, yes—[inaudible.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: And we are living—you see, living this—in that place of aliveness. Listen, Putnam [ph], go across the street and get cigars.

[Side conversation.]

UNKNOWN: [Inaudible.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, you've been—

UNKNOWN: Right now?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yeah, you've been putting up enough fight. Look who smokes the

cigars in this house.

UNKNOWN: I stole them from her [ph]. [They laugh.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yeah. I think after the dinner—[inaudible]. I'm going to bring my pocketbook. No, we have them, dear.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I'll bring some cigarillos.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Don't bother. We've got them.

UNKNOWN: [Inaudible.]

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [Inaudible.] [They laugh.]

UNKNOWN: She's very fussy.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: All right. I'll remember to [inaudible].

UNKNOWN: Fussy. Fussy.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Now are we ready to go down there?

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Well, it's on already.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Oh, well—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [Inaudible.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: Turn yours down a little in the other room, dear.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: So we had—we were back—I gather we're up around 1953 or '53. And we're still, uh

—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I was asking originally whether after you had been doing this for a while—you must have gotten at some point some appreciation, some reactions from other people, some attention, and, uh, began to feel at some point that this was really, uh, it. This was—you had really arrived at something, which was a kind of culminating direction? I mean, when would that—when did that recognition come? When did you get it from other people? When did you get it from yourself?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, that, uh—those questions have nothing to do with me. I don't recognize them. I was going to live my life—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —as I understood it. And [00:04:00] it hasn't been easy. But I've lived it as I understood it. And I'm living it as I understand it.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Not only medicinally [ph].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I understand.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: From the point of view of the art world—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. I know. Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —existing outside of you—

LOUISE NEVELSON: I understand.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —you became a different dimension, and sometime around this time. You established a way of thinking about form that then became a kind of trademark, something recognized, at first nationally and later internationally, as Louise Nevelson. Which was a kind of new face for the world outside, even though for you it was a continuation absolutely organically from everything that you had built before. Still, the world didn't know about all that. But suddenly they did know. Now when did that happen?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, of course it didn't happen overnight. I think there was something—you see, it's hard for me to really talk about these things. Because I like to talk, but, uh, my concept at present of a world is in a transitory period. A world, the world.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Consequently, it's hard for me to say many things. Because, naturally, there was a battle for recognition, too. And yet, as my world becomes more fulfilled, the other world is taking on another tone—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —you see. And so, as I said, it's a little bit transitory. It's no problem to me. But my values, my feelings, naturally are changing about myself, my work, the world, [00:06:00] and its work. You see?

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: So there isn't—it isn't quite as static as it appears. Nor did the change come about as it appears. I had never questioned my ability or what I recognized about creation. There was no problem there. There was no fight within me. Because I just lived with it and knew there it was.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Now, I wasn't the one to judge where there was A, B, C. My problem was that I recognized it and wanted to be one with it. I am one with it, to the best of my ability. And somehow, I suppose the sparks began to fly. And, uh, how it happens, one doesn't know. But I never knew it didn't happen. As far as I was concerned, it was always there.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: It was there, yes, that's true. I see what you mean. Well, I suppose as far as the documentation of the particular shows that you had, or critics had discovered you, and so on, that that must be in publication somewhere.

LOUISE NEVELSON: That's right. And as I—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I'm going to have your scrapbooks to fill me in in many cases.

LOUISE NEVELSON: That's right. That's right.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Except perhaps it's not too important to belabor that too much on a tape.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Not only that, but we have them upstairs. And also, my gallery has quite a lot of, uh, documented—what is it? Documentary things?

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And I'm sure whatever you wish that they will be more than happy—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And I could probably—

LOUISE NEVELSON: —to cooperate with you on this.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Marvelous.

LOUISE NEVELSON: You see.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That's the Pace Gallery right now.

LOUISE NEVELSON: At the Pace Gallery, yes. [00:08:00] Anything.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And there's really more than meets the eye. Because naturally it was building up and building up. And I have also told you that for instance, in America, I always got beautiful reviews. And I was recognized, and so on and so forth. But it was really the Europeans that began to really feel this creativity and originality and all. And so, America got me by reflection.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That's—

LOUISE NEVELSON: You see. Because the European artists—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Where did they see your work?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, for instance, Mathieu and Soulage began coming to America. And they began calling me as a matter of fact, and coming down, and, uh, going back to their own countries and talking about it. And then when Americans and museum people began coming to see their work and would see something of mine, and hearing these fine artists talk about it, took notice.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: You see.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: You mentioned once a rather difficult time when Marcel Duchamp came down.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Oh, yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: But that was a—not quite the same thing. But, uh—

LOUISE NEVELSON: I have never doubted that what I have to do wasn't where it should be. I never doubted it. Because somewhere in my inner being, I'm a builder. Now, a builder doesn't necessarily mean a house, to build a house. There is a—something about the builder. And it had to be right, and it seems to be right. I wished I would say it better to you. [00:10:00] On the—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Think of your last show a bit.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, well—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Could you give some examples?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. Now you see, when we speak of the three-dimensional world, uh, there is one language. But when you speak of another world, there's another language. Now to give you an example. Uh, I was having dinner very recently in the house here. And there was a guest here. And we discussed an old acquaintance of mine, say 25, 30 years ago. And this party that was having dinner with me said, "Oh, you know

so-and-so. She said you had a grandiose complex 30 years ago." And I looked into her face and her eye, and I said, "And is there anyone on earth that had a reason to have one any more than I did?" Naturally, I had these dreams, if you want to call them dreams. And fulfillments. All of the things that I conceived of are being fulfilled. Now, three dimensionally, you can say grandiose. But if you can have a grandiose complex—uh, concept, and if you can work with it, I don't see why not. All the things that you want to travel, to see on earth, were these things.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: So, why shouldn't we have them? Man is heir to them. Man should have the courage to have these concepts and make them come true. They are true. But make them visual. And I think we have every reason on earth to conceive of them and fulfill them. [00:12:00] And without it, I can't conceive of wanting to stay on this earth. Because I don't know what is meant by this world.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I know a world that I contributed to because it's my world. And that's the world I want to see.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: It has such a striking continuity almost from the time you were a child. It's as if you had—uh, you found the real, uh, sort of experience and meaning in certain ways of thinking about forms, uh, in a kind of visual way. Uh, you know, even that story you told me about when you were—I don't know, three or four years old, being brought from Russia. And you saw these candy sticks. Uh, wanting, uh—here was a form. I mean, later, of course it would be too facile to say, well, now you're working with sticks and boxes and so on. I mean, that kind of a jump I wouldn't make. But still, here was a form that took hold of your imagination in a very striking way even as a child. And, uh, you seem to have found your location and security, inner light, in relationship to forms that were strikingly apprehended in some way at each point, and grew organically from one stage to another.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I think that, uh—is it—is it saying too much to say that some of us were ready made when we came here? And we brought our tool to fulfill our needs on earth?

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That's a nice way to think about it. I like the—I like the [00:14:00] idea, if I could [ph] —

LOUISE NEVELSON: If there have been complications in my life, the work was not the complication. The complication was the world and its blindness. And if I may say so, its stupidity.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Not the creative quality in man. And not the visions that man has. And naturally, when you're young you may not have the courage of your convictions. And they can be broken down. But somehow you—nature gives you many chances. You pick yourself up. So, you tumble down. So, you pick yourself up. And you go on. So, you tumble down. You pick yourself up and go on. And I often think it was—nature has a way of veiling some of us, too. It was the fool that found the Holy Grail. It wasn't King Arthur. And I think nature made it that way, so you wouldn't be too obvious until you established—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —what you had to say and do. You see—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: You had that long gestation, in a sense, here in this—in New York, without being crowded by people publicizing you and so on. Do you feel that—that the generation who doesn't have that—as many of the young artists now do not, do not have that privacy and so on—will that possibly be destructive, do you think?

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, because I think that—that the whole approach is going to be different. And I don't think that it's a healthy thing to go too long. You [00:16:00] see, everything in nature—there's a timing. And if it can go too long, it can go sour.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Or something can happen. I would think that, uh, the whole approach to art is certainly going to be from a different point of view. They're not going to go back to the other things. Man, as a whole, has become aware of creation. I don't think there's—uh, young people in schools that aren't interested today in the visual arts—most of the world is aware of it and interested. So, our whole approach is going to be entirely from a different point of view.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That's a very, very profound point, I think, Louise. [Inaudible]—we're on the verge of some kind of a birth into a really visual, uh, response and understanding that we never had before.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I'm quite sure of it. When I mention the extrasensory perception—you see, I—regardless of appearances, the world of consciousness is going ahead. And it's going ahead at such a pace that it's remarkable that man is living full of more awareness, on any level. On any level. There was an article I read, I think today in the *New York Times* or the *Post*. There was this article on commerce that—everyday people that go into the stores—are asking for quality. Their taste is rising. Well, if you think that that taste is rising, you parallel that with the consciousness that's creating that. And you see they're charging ahead. [00:18:00] Now on the other hand, I don't think that I—in my life I've met five people that I think have real grand taste. I don't think so. Or consistently grand taste. Because to really have that is not just a style. It is something deeper. It's a structure. A structure of taste. A structure of style. And that can be a world. And very few people have it.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And you feel people will come to have—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Come closer.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —approach that?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Come closer, yes. Yes. Come closer. They're more aware. Now, there are still people that'll go into a home and never see a thing in the home. They've never learned to look around or anything. But people are becoming aware more, and more, and more.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And it's important. It isn't only what they're seeing. But that's where the mind is active. That's where reason enters. That's where satisfaction enters. That's where man becomes more total, more magnificent. That's where his greater heritage comes in, you see. And therefore, you can see that every second can be vital and important. I'm not using words like happiness, and gladness, and all that. It can be a tragedy, too. But why not have a grand tragedy if it's going to be one? Or have it in this grand concept.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: In the arts of the—the younger people where you're talking about—like whoever it was that—you know, we were discussing this big apple [00:20:00] projecting from the canvas, and so on. Uh, do you foresee a period in which there will perhaps be fewer masterpieces but many fresh spontaneous statements of ideas? Uh, as if, in a way, the audience almost completed the image in—in themselves rather than having it—you know, presented with a complete, finely worked out, uh, masterpiece of a grand style?

LOUISE NEVELSON: I conceive of people coming to higher heights, greater heights. And we'll always—and they will always do so-called masterpieces. There will always be some people, on—on the creative level and all levels, that will rise above the norm.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And that will bring to us these things. I believe there always will be. There will always be the great discoverers.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: There'll always be the great leaders. No, I think that, uh, there will always be that.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Perhaps one reason that, uh, unconsciously I—I phrased it that way was that I recently heard discussion in which one of our brighter young woman artists said that we may possibly be entering a period when the role of the artist will be not to make something complete, but almost just like walking around with someone, the audience, and just saying, you know, "Look there." Or maybe look—walking around with sort of a finder, a frame-like device, and saying, "Look here."

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, you're talking about a teacher.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Uh, she was—[inaudible]—the role of the artist.

LOUISE NEVELSON: She's more of a teacher. Well—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And she is [00:22:00] one of the, uh, supposedly very avant-garde younger artists whose work is very much talked about right now. But from her point of view, the artist's, uh, role was less of one of producing something finished than it was in just sort of making a statement conveying an attitude in the quickest and, uh, most economical way.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, it's nice to be quick and economical. But I think you have to also do something about it. That wouldn't be enough. No, I think there will always be great leaders and great gifted people. There will always be great gifted people. For example, in the present time there are some people that are born beautiful, some born ugly. They're not all going to be born the same. There's some that are going to be highly gifted, highly intelligent. Uh, there's no such thing as leveling these things. No. And when a great leader comes along, he will lead. And when a great gifted person comes, they're going to express that and give it back to the masses. No, I—I can't believe that.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Well, possibly one—I don't know that she said this—but one of the things that happens to works of art today is that instead of just—you know, someone taking it home and putting the work in a great mansion and—where princes might see it, it's, uh, immediately reproduced and circulated. And thousands of people see it, but quickly. In other words, they just look enough to get the kind of impression of—well, you know, this is that kind of thing. Or, uh, this is an attitude. And it isn't a matter of lingering, and contemplating, and admiring, uh, and relishing. It's more a matter of recognizing and, you know—now I—now I know this. Now I see that, and so on.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I don't think we are going to be concerned [00:24:00]—too concerned about these things at this moment. Because maybe there is something of that that is in our times. And it may be there is in our whole attitude of life that kind of approach. But that too is only present time. And something else will have to take its place. Because that won't satisfy people.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: That is the wonder of it, that people will naturally never be satisfied, and rightfully so. So, this may be a moment. But I don't think it's going to be satisfying the total being, satisfying to the total being. I can see what you're saying. And I can understand it. And naturally, we are throwing out a lot of things, even to see—for instance, uh, take for example, uh—some time ago—the romantic, where there was gushing between an engaged—engaged couple. Or something of that nature where there was always holding hands and this and that. And today people get married—I never see two people kiss each other when—like bride and groom. They—they fall into some pattern. And you never see these things. Maybe it's just as well. I don't know. I'm not setting myself up for—as a critic on it. That doesn't mean there are less children being born.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [Laughs.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: And so, I mean, their attitude on looking at these things may be different. Nevertheless, that, as I said a moment ago, is not going to stay that way forever either. And maybe at this moment, mankind doesn't need more.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: But it won't be satisfying [00:26:00] forever.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: For long, yes.

LOUISE NEVELSON: You see. I'm sorry dear, I don't think I was very good here.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: No, I think you're—you came through. I—I think what you say is a very good comparison. But—and of course it particularly reminded me of something that I've been in contact with myself, with young people recently, seeing that same kind of abbreviation of the relationship.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And maybe it is related to the abbreviation of our appreciation of art objects. Or sort of—it's there, but it's in a different form. It's more condensed.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, for example, I went to a party. And where they were dancing—let's say the twist. And this boy and this girl danced beautifully. They didn't speak. They didn't touch each other. They were dancing. And I thought it had more power by its negation—no touch and no talking—than anything I had ever seen. Because it was like white heat. It was like two beings that practically could eat each other up. And I thought it was fascinating. And it seemed so right for the moment in our time.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Beautiful. Louise, I think that's almost the end. And I—[00:27:27]

[END OF TRACK 3 OF 5 SIDE B.]

This is tape number five of five side A.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [00:00:00] This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Louise Nevelson on June 3, 1964. Continuing our, uh, discussion, we had, uh, touched upon your having been involved with the WPA. I wondered if you'd like to talk a little more about that now.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. Well, when I came back from Germany where I studied with Hans Hofmann and also did some moving picture work at the studios, I, uh, got on the WPA. Now, that gave me a certain kind of a freedom. And I think that our great artists like Rothko, de Kooning, Franz Kline, uh, Harold Rosenberg, and all these people that are prominent today and creative, have that moment of peace, even if it was in a loft, to continue with their work. So, I feel that that was a great benefit, a great contribution to our creative people. And very important in the history of our artists.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And not only in the visual arts, but in the theater, and, in, uh, the folk arts. There wasn't a thing that they didn't touch on. Then the wonderful buildings that came up, and the highways at that period when people in our [00:02:00] country didn't have jobs. And our—the head of the government was able so intelligently to use mankind and manpower. I think it's a highlight of our American history.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Uh, Louise, were you on the easel project?

LOUISE NEVELSON: I was on teaching at the time. And I was on the easel project, yes. And also, the sculpture project.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Uh, were there, uh—are there some works anywhere around public buildings that, uh—[inaudible]—the easel—

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, but—no, because already, you see, I was sort of abstract. And I think my work was probably more difficult to communicate with in young America.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And so I didn't get on any public buildings. And I still haven't. I've been asked, but somehow, I still haven't. And I'm sitting here laughing. Because I think when the time comes, and they'll ask me, I question whether I'll even do it.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Uh, then you were doing your own sculpture—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —in a loft—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —in your own place.

LOUISE NEVELSON: That's right.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And pretty much according to your own ideas without any interference from anyone at all.

LOUISE NEVELSON: That's right.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: You had no experience of people telling you how you should work or of anything like—

LOUISE NEVELSON: No, on the contrary. I had the, uh, people—like Mrs. McMahon [ph], who never knew me. And I was on the teaching project. And every so often they used to come to our studios to see what we were doing. And she turned around to the timekeeper, and—and she said, "You put this artist on the creative project." And so not knowing her, there was a great service done me. And then [00:04:00] all the other people connected with the projects were particularly wonderful to me. And as I said before, that I don't recall of having anything but wonderful experience where creative people worked together.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And, uh, that gave me my great strength and courage to go on. Because wherever I went, it was recognized. Maybe they—it was different, but it was recognized. And, uh, so that gave me my great courage. And it did take great courage to sit it out for 30-odd years. And if it had taken longer, I still would have

gone on. And I worked every day intensely. And so there it shows that you're a soloist. And you're alone. And you believe in this. And you go with it. I'm sorry that there weren't people around that might have helped me financially a little bit, so to have made my life a little easier. Which made me feel that in our society, evidently, they were limited. Of course, in our time today, I hear the word "humanities" so much. I don't quite know where it came from, but I think probably psychiatry and different things. They recognize that they are not living alone. And that—well, that part of my life certainly leaves its stamp. You don't eradicate it. You recognize it. But on the other hand, it gave me my strength, too, and a way to command what I wanted. And so naturally, I never sold anything so to speak for 30-odd years. But it still [00:06:00] did not mean that I didn't have what I needed to express myself.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: During, uh, the period, uh—first of all, let's get the period of the WPA a little bit, uh—how long did—was this a factor in your life? A year or so?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I came back from Germany in 1931. And I think I got on the project, say, 1932.

[Audio break.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: —all along the way. And—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Did you get to know some of the other artists during this period?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, I did.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Were you close to anyone that you'd particularly like to mention, that was a—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I don't think I got that close to anyone.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I was so busy myself. And naturally, I had my son. And so, I couldn't give—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Oh, your son was already—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, already, yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: How old was he at this time?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Oh, I think about nine, I think.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And so I didn't have too much time to cultivate too many things. And then I was searching for a better way of life, for a fuller way of life. And, uh, I don't think I'm the type that got too intimate. Even as a girl, I didn't have too many girlfriends or boyfriends. Because I was mature. And—and knowing what I wanted, there wasn't room for that. Now, someone like myself says they didn't want to read novels and things, because the mind was already almost totally, uh, aware of wanting to know how to utilize one's time.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And for me, to have, uh, created something, or draw, or paint was so much more important than if I read what someone said. And then I don't think that I [00:08:00] get what people write about. Because if 100 people read it, 100 people get different opinions.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And so I got my own opinions. But of course, that doesn't mean that I didn't look at Picasso, and didn't study the groups, or that I didn't know surrealism when it came in. I knew all these things. But I didn't have to study it. I guess I got it, as I said earlier, through the eye. So—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Now, during this period of—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Let's take the—this is the decade of the '30s, let's say.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Well, were you a part of the American Artists' Congress? Did you go things like that,

get involved—

LOUISE NEVELSON: No.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: You didn't. You were sort of not on the political—

LOUISE NEVELSON: I wasn't surrounded by political.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: The work, and my mind, and the physical work connected with it, and the materials, used up all my time, almost all my time. Plus the fact, if I was teaching that took time. And I had to get some things in the home.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And then—well, could you describe a little bit—some of the work that you were doing in sculpture? Or were you also painting a little at this time as well?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: What form—uh, well, your sculpture was already abstract.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Uh, could you characterize a little bit more than that? Or could we fill that in with photographs perhaps?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, well you can. I was going to say that the Modern Museum I think had a show of sculp—of, uh, PWA artist work that they sent around the country.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And they took one of mine. I think I might say that my greatest influence was Cubism. And it clarified so much for me. And [00:10:00] so, uh, my sculpture was immediately Cubistic, but on a more personal level. And then I painted my sculpture in different planes. And I recall that, uh, some sculptor said, "They are having a, uh, competition at the ACA on 8th Street. Can I take some of your work there?" I said, "Well, of course." But I didn't feel very enthusiastic about it. And it was already in planes and different colors. Reds, blues, greens, and all. So at that time, Emily Genauer wrote that, uh, she felt she had found an original artist. And felt that naturally that, uh, I probably was outstanding. And also, Max Weber was one of the jurors. And he felt my work was outstanding. But I've had that blessing all along, even when I wasn't searching for public recognition at the time. I still had it.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Artists recognized—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —there was something in your work that was original.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Was this, uh, Cubism—Cubism, uh, applied to a figurative reference at all? Or was it—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, to a—yes, to a figurative. Monumental, actually. And, uh—but it—it was remarkable because I found that when the project was closing, there was a timekeeper—and I think his name was Stein. He was a sculptor. And he said, "You know, we're giving up this project. Do you want your work back?" I said, "I'd love to have it back." He said, "Otherwise we—we [00:12:00] have trucks. And we're throwing it into the East River." And so, I said, "No, send it back." And when he did, it was in despair that I walked into the Nierendorf gallery. And that must have been in 1940. But to be accurate, I think it was 1941. And I met Mr. Nierendorf and told him that I want a show. And he said, well, he was going down to Osenfarms [ph] for dinner that evening. And I lived on East 20th Street, next block. I lived on East 21st. And Osenfarms was on 20th. And he said, "I'll come in and see your work." Well, the work was the work that was sent back to me from the WPA. And immediately, he said, "You can have a show in a month." And consequently, I had that show. And I was naturally the only American artist to my knowledge that was with Nierendorf. And he had great confidence in me. He recognized it right away. And so, the only reason I took a month was when they sent it from the PWA [ph], it was filthy and dirty, and so on and so forth. So I, uh, had to clean it up. And so that's how I got with Mr. Nierendorf.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And you showed those works.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Those works, yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Were you—at that time, were you still working in that same vein and those—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —colors or planes in Cubism?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: So that was your first, uh, New York one man show.

LOUISE NEVELSON: That's right.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Nierendorf 1941.

LOUISE NEVELSON: That's right.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: How was that received? Was it—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Very well. Very well.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: The, uh, [00:14:00] critics were wonderful. And, uh, as I said to you, that problem is there wasn't any great problem.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I was very well received. And then I think it was a little later—I don't quite remember the year, but I have it upstairs—where I had a second [ph] show at the Norlyst. I was still with Nierendorf.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: But I had this second show. And already I was using forms like I use now. So I was a little bit ahead of myself, you see. And I used electric lights, and used glass [audio break] on the figures, and used furniture and life-sized. And my title, then, of the show was *The Circus*. And that man was the center of the universe. So, I had a symbol of that in the middle of the room. And I recall that already I had what we call an environment and a solo title, title for all the works.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: So that, uh, I don't recall having any shows without that. And Nierendorf said, he said, "You know you're a little bit ahead of your time. If you could go to Europe and live where they would understand you better." And of course, I couldn't. And also, I didn't want to. I thought if this country was big, and coarse, and raw, and I was a product of it, and grew up in it, that I wanted to contribute something to it. And I felt that I didn't want the easy way. I wanted to establish something else and be part of a higher culture. [00:16:00]

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That was a very important outlook to have expressed to yourself at that point.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Evidently, I never looked for the easy way.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You hadn't, of course, been back to Europe. Except for the study with Hans Hofmann.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Oh, I've been back several times.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Since then. But I mean, at that time.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, I went back the next year, too.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Oh, you did.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, went back the next year to observe the museums.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: What years—

LOUISE NEVELSON: 1932.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I went back to, uh—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: To France? Or to—

LOUISE NEVELSON: France, England, and Italy. Several places.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And when you were in Europe, was there any, uh, particular experience as far as artists or work that you saw that was formative for you?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. When in Paris I was taken to the African Museum. And somehow, I understood their forms. And then in London I went to the, uh, National Museum, that wonderful museum that has so many magnificent things. Those Egyptian things. At that time, even at the Met we didn't have anything equivalent to it. And I felt an empathy. I felt a great rapport. It seems to me I understood those forms as if they were as close as my skin. And also, I recognized their power. Which—it just seemed as if I understood it. And it almost makes you think that there's a reincarnation. Because how could you instantly understand it without studying? But of course, through the times, [00:18:00] you saw pictures of things. So you had a—somehow an identity and a vision. But actually, until this day, I am—feel the wonders of the Egyptian art.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: And this is something that in the '30s was really a sort of revelation.

LOUISE NEVELSON: That's right. Yes. And I don't think other people that I heard of would have had such a reaction. You see, I think my reactions come through the senses, and not through the mind. There's a kind of place of consciousness.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And it makes you think—you've seen them before. You identify yourself. And they give you the courage and the strength to know they exist.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And that you have a right to exist on their level, you see. I don't say all this is easy. But I wouldn't want anything less, at no time. And I certainly wouldn't want it now or at any time in my life. Because I knew that level. I recognized it. And I'm utterly unorthodox about art. Because I don't say this is all there is. Because I can identify with all the different movements. Now, a lot of people say, well, they like this part of art, or they like that part of art. I think the whole thing is wonderful. But of course, I have my selection and preferences. And love the great movements that have even taken place in my lifetime and how important they are to me. And, uh, I just think it's just magnificent to have seen them and recognize them, and feel they are [00:20:00] like something—or like a great grandeur, a great grandeur. Because I know how the mind must sift through so much to come to these essences.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And of course it's—for me, I wouldn't want to live without them. And I certainly wouldn't want to live without my own work. I certainly wouldn't. I don't like a leisure life. And I don't even like the leisure class. Consequently, I like an active life. Because I feel great activity is great aliveness, great livingness, you see. And so I'm never afraid of work, because if I have nothing else to do, I'll rearrange something. Because I get another vision. I get another vision. And it always seems that vision is important. Because it's like a hunger. Just because you ate last year, doesn't mean you don't want to eat now. And so for me, I like that. And I also know that there are artists like, say, Cornell, who is of a different type. I love great abundance. Great abundance. Let it flow. The more the merrier. Because always that that last look gives me another look. And it seems important to me. So, every artist has an attitude toward life and to his work. And mine is let it flow. Just let it flow, and let it be abundant. Because after all, when you think of the sun, and the moon, and nature, and man's awareness, and through the ages, well, there's nothing [00:22:00] skimpy about it.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [Laughs.] That's beautifully put, Louise. Well, you had this sense of recognition in terms of the primitive forms. Uh, I wondered if you could—if you could come a little closer to the—uh, well, to the quality—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Oh yes, yes, yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: What you think of kind of primitive art—[inaudible]—and what you felt.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Oh, yes. That's important.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Now, they weren't necessarily the masks and these things. But they had, for instance, great dogs, great animals, out of bronze and different materials. And they must have come from, uh, the great cultures there. I don't know all the different periods. But you know how—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [Inaudible.] Very—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. Like the Ivory Coast, and things.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes, uh huh.

LOUISE NEVELSON: And their materials were rich. And they—there was something solid about it. And also, simple at the same time. Now, another thing that has always fascinated me were the Greek vases. Because their drawings are simple. But the multiplication of all, and the way the whole thing's put together, and the color and everything, I think, there's grandeur. There's just grandeur. And then the Etruscans—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [Inaudible.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: —always fascinated me. And, uh, I—I just have been sort of intoxicated all my life with these things. Because they seem so natural to me. I don't have to study them. They are there.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It's remarkable that you can have that extreme closeness—well, this wasn't, of course, the first time you'd seen primitive art, I suppose. But it was the grandest primitive art. Was that—?

LOUISE NEVELSON: That was the first time that I got acquainted with [00:24:00] primitive art, yes. Because we had very little of it in America—or—or I, anyway—it wasn't places where I could see it.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: It wasn't—yeah.

LOUISE NEVELSON: And what we saw here wasn't of that quality, you see.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yeah.

LOUISE NEVELSON: So that, uh, there wasn't that much. And then don't forget that almost all my life until now—I don't go out a great deal to see things, because I'm busy. I'd rather do the thing than see it. I'd rather write my book than read a book. I'd rather make my art than look at art. And consequently, I'm dizzy. When I take a day out to go uptown, it just seems like pulling me away from something. Like a cow in a stall. It seems foreign. Why go and look so much, when you can do so much? And the doing is the excitement.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: So your days are really filled to a large extent with work.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, oh yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I mean, your—your week is—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —given over most to work, more than anything else.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, yes. And now I wouldn't travel just to go see things. And—because it doesn't seem necessary for someone like myself. But I do go—like for instance if I have a show in London or Paris, I might go. Because that is identifying with my own work, and also communicating with people on that level. And so that is, in a way, my pleasure. And also, sometimes I get too introverted, and it's an excuse for getting away from my own work, you see. But I don't go to Europe just to go see Europe. I go because [00:26:00] I go to communicate.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Was there a time when you did, or was it never?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well—well, first I told you that I studied art.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Then I—in Europe. So naturally I wanted to go to the Louvre. Naturally I wanted to go to these places. But, uh, I can call on my understanding of these things, and I don't have to see them. Now, I happen to love architecture. To me, architecture is so important, and archeology. I'm just so excited about those

things. And they're very living, and somehow very important for my well-being. But I don't have to go to see everything.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I'm just not even curious that way. It doesn't seem to be necessary to enrich anything. Because I recall, when I was extremely young and went to certain places, it wasn't that I was so happy over being in these places, but that I was able to make it. That I was able to—in other words, it somehow was associated with something else. And then I realized, well, I don't have to convince myself. They're there, and that's fine.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And I've enjoyed things, of course. But wherever I've gone, it was because of the art. When I went to Mexico, I went to, uh—to see their work and also—you know, they have these wonderful stel—S-T—how do you spell? Stelae? Steale? You know, the big—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: I know, yeah.

LOUISE NEVELSON: —wonderful things. Well, the United Fruit found some. And reproductions of them are in the museum of Natural History. Well, when I saw the Museum of Natural History, it was no time be—before I went to Mexico to see [00:28:00] them. Because I wanted to see them in their original—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —form and in their original position. And therefore, I would do that.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Was that satisfying when you did?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. Yes, it was satisfying. Because somehow it did bring me closer to what they were about, too. And the civilization that they were created in. And I have great respect for the Mexican art. And, you know, it always strikes me so funny that we speak of primitive art, and Mexican art, or African art as primitive. Seems to me we're the primitives, and they are the highly cultured if we judge them by their works.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Of course, I'm fascinated by Chinese art and Japanese art. I don't think there's a period in civilization through the ages that I'm not fascinated by what happened to these creative people, and what they left us. Their cultures. That I think is very important to me. Because that in a way is my history of myself up to now, you see.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And it certainly makes you believe in humanity. And it certainly gives you a great heritage. And I recall, since we're talking about that, that I was in great despair. And the only way that—when people are in despair, they think of somehow not continuing life. And I happened to pass the [00:30:00] Metropolitan. And this was even before I went to Europe. I was pretty young. And I just couldn't seem to adjust at that time to New York, or my life, or anything. And I had been pent up for a long time. And when I went into the Metropolitan, they were having an exhibition of kou [ph] coats. Now, are they kimonos, kou coats, these wonderful things. And they had this beautiful exhibition. No heads. Just these forms. And I was in despair and thought life wasn't worth living. And I looked at the weave of these gold materials and these magnificent materials. And I recognized the refinements of even the weaving and the forms in them, and the design in them. And I sat down and started to cry. I must have sat there for hours, just buckets of tears. Because it restored to me the feeling that life was worth living. Because of even in time—in those times, they could have given us these magnificent things, then I must say again, it was—well, it just restored my feeling about humanity. And then I began to see those magnificent bronze vases, the better periods of the Chinese.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And I began to go to the Metropolitan and listen to some of the lectures there on these things. What period was the important period. And then I began to look into [00:32:00] and hear lectures at the Metropolitan. Because at that time the Modern Museum was just forming, I think.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And I recall they were telling us about the porcelains, and how they had got certain colors of these porcelains, and what civilization had to come through to arrive at these things. And of course, that

constantly restored my feeling about humanity.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That's beautiful. Beautiful experience. You're encouraged. You're seeing the fineness of the spiritual quality of another people.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. And here we had always thought about the Chinese here in America, or at that—earlier than that yet, in my little town, in Maine, we knew and identified that an Italian was a laborer.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Because in our history in America, we had many Italians that came over. And of course, what a great revelation it was to me the first time I went to Rome and Florence and recognized their heritage. And so, I think this word primitive is sort of misused. And when we see the wonderful things that the Chinese have given us, and all the other cultures, then of course that gives me my feeling of, uh, survival. And also, I—I guess I'm not afraid of the word beauty. I think that's beauty. But not on a three-dimensional level. It lifts you into another level.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: For a better word, I'd say another planet. [00:34:00]

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: It just lifts you. And it goes faster than airplanes. You see, with one instant you are transcended through space and time. And I think great artists must have that and be aware of it. You can't work for that. You either have it or you don't. And that's why I always feel that artists are born. Because of course, when you think that in a fleeting second you can encompass space and time, I think that is one of the reasons that really, I don't care for travel. It's—even with airplanes, it's too slow. And then it's somehow too earthy. It's the soul and the creation of man that fascinates me. Not the landscapes so much.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Was it through your contact with the primitive forms, or perhaps through the Chinese, uh, bronzes, that you moved out of this—of Cubism or gradually modified it in a different direction?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I never was a Cubist in that sense. You have to jump off to swim.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Yes.

LOUISE NEVELSON: And at that time Picasso fascinated me because of his strength and purity. He always amazed me, and still does, that his things to me are virginal. They're always as if he did it. And it's a quality. And therefore, naturally, I jumped off from there. But certainly, that's the root. And I still go back. And I don't think there's an artist living today, if they thought back [00:36:00] in time, that hasn't a debt they owe to that period. That was a great, great period, and is a great period. You can jump off into other places. But certainly that—to have lived in a time in history where there were such important movements. And I think that probably is the most important. Seems like the root of things.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: Because it gave you your space, your dimension. And look, Picasso's still looking for some extra dimension in his last things. And he's past 80. Now that I think you cannot deny.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Well, to come back to the, uh, evolution of your, uh—of your own works, and—let's see. We had such a beautiful digression there. And, uh, you were, uh—I think you really sort of left us, as far as your life story is concerned, back at the end of the WPA period having your first show at Nierendorf. And then another show following in which you had the circus theme.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, I had another show at Nierendorf. In other words, I had two shows in 1941 and 1942. And I think it was 1943—now I'm not sure—that Art of the Century came. The Second World War was here. And they came back. And then there was the Norlyst gallery, which is identified, somehow, with that kind of work.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And so they gave me a show. But at the same time, I was having a big drawing show with Nierendorf. So, I was having two shows in New York at the same time.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: That was at Norlyst?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Norlyst, yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: L-Y-S-T. And—and then of course, Nierendorf for the drawings.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: So that brings us [00:38:00] into 19—

LOUISE NEVELSON: I think '43.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Forty-three.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yeah.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Now, in your drawings were these, uh, drawings for sculpture? Or, uh—

LOUISE NEVELSON: They were free form nudes, more or less. But not all nudes. There were also people with clothes and different things.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: But they were sort of classic in that way. Because they've always said, you know, that I, uh, have a free hand. And—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Were you painting at this time, too?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Uh, what form had your—I was sort of interested in—thinking of your studying painting with Hans Hofmann back in Germany, that the direction of the pursuit of this intense color juxtaposition must have been perhaps something that was not, uh, very attractive to you.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, when I was in Germany studying with him, we were still on black and white. So, I didn't paint with him. I drew.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: [Inaudible.]

LOUISE NEVELSON: But you see he did give a foundation to the mind of Cubism and how the figure was not static—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —but was moving in planes. And so, then when he came back to America—when he came to America 1932, and I had already gone to Europe again and came back, I began using watercolors in his classes—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —and in planes. So really, I never studied oil painting with him.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Then did you—uh, as you went on and continued to, uh, paint, you were working, I believe, somewhat figuratively for a while—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, yes, yes, yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: —rather than stylized figures. And, uh, were those ever shown? Were you—?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes, I had a show in Nierendorf's and paintings, too. Yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. This was later in the '40s? In—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, about that same time, I imagine.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: About [00:40:00] the same time. But as I got deeper into sculpture and deeper into sculpture, I've never quite cared to go back to painting and color. But I have done, as you know, etchings, and have had one-man shows.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And I've now—a year ago I went out to Tameron [ph], where I did 26 editions of lithographs

that will probably be shown this coming winter. And there I could express something else again that seemed closer to what I wanted to say. Also, it gave me sort of a breathing spell away from my sculpture.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And it showed me another medium. And my other medium, so to speak, gave me another image, you see. It was never just going on to—for another medium. But the medium spoke to me. The minute it speaks to me, I didn't superimpose on it. And the minute you have a paper, and you have ink, black and white, and you have to wipe your, uh—what do you call it? Well, if you're doing etching—the stone, or your—what is that other thing? Zinc or the other—[inaudible]. Well, you know something goes through you. You're with it all the time.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And it invites another kind of a statement. And then when I go back to my sculpture, which is another material, it seemed as if I would become refreshed. [00:42:00] And it—one thing sort of lived into another. And I hope someday to do something else where I can see another facet to all of this. It seems all of this is important to me. I don't know, but, uh—I never thought I'd love etchings. And, uh, somehow, when I got into it, I just loved it. So—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: When did you get into it actually?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Oh, when Mr. Hayter [ph] was here.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You worked with—[inaudible]—Hayter?

LOUISE NEVELSON: And—yes, yeah. He'd come.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And I did. And I actually had thought of etchings as being something that was very tight.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And it didn't appeal to me. And he said, "You come, and I will show you certain things." And he was very generous with his time. And I just fell in love with it.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I was just fascinated that you put the—use materials—like I did with laces—put them in the acids, draw into them while they're in acids. Well, they fascinated me. And there was so much excitement and mystery to them, that, uh—well, I had just kind of felt that this was a whole new world for me, great world.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Well, I want to see some of those, too. Louise, what other materials did you get involved with at some point? I mean, now, of course, you're using wood a great deal. Was there ever a stone period?

LOUISE NEVELSON: I did some stone. I did some, uh—had some bronzes made.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Working directly or, uh, casting from other forms?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Uh, cast from my forms. And I had, as a matter of fact, one bronze show with Nierendorf.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: But, uh, [00:44:00] somehow, I wanted a material that was more immediate, and a faster material. Because there was no reason why I should sort of tickle the, uh, stones and polish the stones. It was too long a duration. I am much more interested in just where creation is.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And so—well, I had thought for a long time, These things on the street are so beautiful. Why don't we use them? And one day I decided to do it. And it was as simple as that.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Well, what—you saw things on the street. You mean pieces of wooden board?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Wooden things, yes. But I had also picked up, uh—I'd also picked up iron and different things, and had used in this show I told you, the circus—

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: —center of the world—I had all—I used roller skates iron on these animal forms. And I used in the hardware all sorts of things. And used way back [ph] nails for eyes. And I used all the material at hand. For me, it was remarkable. And it was immediate. And I was looking for the immediacy. Where creation—you and the work are one. Time is not to enter into it. That you, when you're doing a piece, you're with it. You don't want to wait until tomorrow or next week when something—your experience of life has given you another thing. And so, I liked the idea. You start, and you finish.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: You start—so in my walls, you see, I finish. I don't finish a whole wall. But I finish the thing I start on. And then I finish and finish. So, it isn't like [00:46:00] taking a canvas and, say, working six months on it, coming back. With me, it is just immediate.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Well, how did it actually begin? Did you begin with a small—a few boxes and then combine them? Or were there other forms that you first—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well—well, uh, I was already in my studio. And on the street, there were carpet boxes. And they—in other words, they—someone got a carpet in them and threw away the wooden boxes. And I thought how magnificent. And naturally I took them in my studio and began filling them. And it—it didn't seem like a great, overpowering thing. It seemed natural for me.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: I can only say that, as I said earlier, I found life very complex. But somehow, I was so close to the work all the time that there wasn't a thing that was worrying me. And daring—it was no problem to be daring, because I knew it was creation. I somehow knew what creation was. I recall that I had been invited to a sculptor's—a noted sculptor studio in New York. And I saw the armature for a life-size figure. And then I saw a life-size figure. And I said to myself then, The armature is the thing of importance here.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And I never forgot it. And of course, now, I began working on that. Because I recognized that. Because when a thing is finished and polished, really it doesn't interest me. It isn't how a person says a thing to me as much as what a person knows [00:48:00] and says it however he can, you see. So, I didn't need the polish all the time. I just wanted the creative foundation. And I was blessed to have found it, and naturally multiplied it. And it's a blessing. And I love it.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: When was, uh, roughly the first time that you remember the—this carpet box and so on?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, that must have been about 1940. It must have been. Because I had moved into a studio. And it was on 10th Street. And I recall that the place was bare and big. And it permitted this expansion. And I was alone where I could just move as I wished. And, uh, I don't know, but it just seemed as if I was looking for this creative thing. I wasn't looking to make a figure. I wasn't looking to paint a picture. You can learn to do these things. But I wanted something else. I wanted an essence or a consciousness that is really identified with all living things as we understand them. I was going to say on Earth. But now, since we want to reach the moon, I can't limit it.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Uh, when you—the first box you came home, and you filled it with things, what kind of things did you fill it with then?

LOUISE NEVELSON: Well, they were black.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And they were different kinds of woods that I found.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Different shapes of—

LOUISE NEVELSON: Different shapes, yes.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Also fragmented pieces of things at that time.

LOUISE NEVELSON: Yes. And I recognized the nails in them [00:50:00] and left them.

DOROTHY GEES SECKLER: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOUISE NEVELSON: And I recognized when someone took a nail out that also that was a form. So that the texture of the wood, the, uh, different—what—the materials, what do you call—nails, different nails, and how—[00:50:34]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]