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Oral history interview with Tom Wesselmann, 1984 January 3-February 8

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Transcript

Interview

Interview with Tom Wesselmann
Conducted by Irving Sandler
At his studio on the Bowery
1984 January 3 - February 8

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Tom Wesselmann on January 3-February 8, 1984. The interview took place at his studio on the Bowery, and was conducted by Irving Sandler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

IS: Irving Sandler
TW: Tom Wesselmann

IS: I think last time we got you down to the Cooper Union, when you'd come to New York. Perhaps you could speak a little bit about that. First of all, last time you said you began at Cooper Union in cartooning, and then at one point the art curriculum and art itself began to impinge on you.

TW: O.K. Now it's beginning to come back, what happened to me at Cooper Union. I was continuing my very, kind of cocky way in my attempt to be a cartoonist going to Cooper Union to stall for time, again on the G.I. Bill. I'd taught myself to draw cartoons, and the art school I viewed as a completely separate phenomenon. It had nothing to do with cartooning or with me. It was just something I had to endure to get my G.I. Bill. What happened though was I fell in with the wrong crowd, with people who thought and had ideas.

IS: Who were they?

TW: It doesn't matter, because the wrong crowd becomes the environment of the wrong crowd, an environment that for the first time in my life stressed things like thinking, examining your values. Actually, I'd begun to take education courses just before Cooper Union, and so I began to read. Now I'd read in college some, but I was a kid. Reading in college didn't mean anything. Now I began to read as a part of required education courses and I read meaningfully. I read John Dewey. It was very important to me. It was the first time I can recall being made to think so rationally, so specifically. And then going to Cooper Union and encountering students who were all oriented toward art and therefore a little bit precocious from that point of view. They tended to think and examine their values -- and teachers who would stress that kind of thing. I began to read. That was the first step. It didn't happen right away. It happened after a while. I guess the earliest thing I can remember is the idea of being excited by some of the teachers -- like David Lund, Charles Cajori. These are from the first year, I think. I don't remember whether it was the first year or not -- and the general environment, and the idea being to approach painting -- not to accept everything. Like Marsicano said.

IS: He was the second year?

TW: No, Marsicano was the third year. They didn't let us paint in the first year. We didn't paint until the second year.

IS: So you were doing drawing with Lund and Cajori.

TW: Lund was two-dimensional design. Lund was the first year. That was an important class to me because Lund was an articulate man, and he had something to teach that I'd never encountered before, which had to do with composition. He was very involved with composition, a very inventive kind of composition. There were no rules. Sometimes I couldn't figure what the hell he was getting at, but I seemed to succeed at it. I think that he gave me my first sense of confidence -- that maybe there was something that I could accomplish on some creative level. It was my first experience except for cartooning. And Cajori was challenging because he was so damned hard to figure out. He was just, oh, God, like he had an axe to grind. He had a really kind of specific thing to get across to us. Hard as hell to get that across to some kid who that had never encountered art before. In fact, I think I got the only C I got in the whole thing . . . .

IS: From Cajori.

TW: At the same time the teachers were talking about the importance of not accepting -- because they were aware of what was happening in the art world; it was the Fifties -- the Abstract Expressionist, the New York School, was rising and there was a lot of excitement about it. The whole premise of that in a large part was not to accept everything that had come before it, but to be open to something new. And John Cage and all these other things and you hear stories about it. Ippolito saying -- I mentioned that in my book, I guess -- he would put his brush into his paintpot not knowing what color, he didn't want to know what color -- it was just suddenly up there on the canvas, and he had to be able to respond to it. And all those kind of things you'd hear made a climate that really was very encouraging of examining. I started to examine everything I was ever taught about anything. For me it became a crucial personal thing -- to examine God and all that. I had grown up irreligious but with an idea of God. I grew up avoiding Sunday school because I didn't like the social ill-at-easeness. So I went to church with my parents and daydreamed all through the sermon. I got very turned on the first year at Cooper Union to the idea, the possibility, of becoming an artist. It was still just an idea; it was just an abstraction at this time. I hadn't even painted yet. I began to get excited about it as one might be a writer, a poet or something. So I was thinking about it for the first time; and I'd go back to Cincinnati and say, silly things like, "It's important. You've got to be able to pick your nose in the subway." [Laughter] It's O.K. You've got to be able to not be afraid to do something of what people will think. I'd go through all these things. An architecture course taught by two guys, a man named Stone and a man named C-- went on to be a-- One of the most important courses I ever had was architecture. It taught me about design and composition. Shall I ramble on like this or do you want me to stop?

IS: Sure. You're fine.

TW: Because I've got all kinds of details.

IS: Go ahead.

TW: They seemed important to me at the time. We had to . . . a little weekend house. This is a big lesson for me. It sounds like a silly lesson, but I did a wonderful little weekend house, kind of shaped like a triangle, all glass on one side facing the light. I put the roof on in little, hidden columns, about a dozen of them punctured the roof. And one of them also was a chimney -- it came through the fireplace. I presented this with great confidence, and Stone said, "Hey! That's terrific! If one of those things can spout smoke, think how great it would be if all twelve of them could spout smoke!" [Laughter] So I realized my first lesson in design. He was right. You can't do it that way, and I learned a lot of things like that from the non-art courses. Like the calligraphy course.

IS: Who taught that?

TW: Standard. I didn't learn anything in the class, except that I learned something about being. I don't know quite what I learned. His sense of integrity communicated itself to us even though we didn't intend to be using calligraphy; it didn't have much of a purpose. It was just the integrity of what you do on a piece of paper.

IS: But to finish the other thought, Tom -- it sounds like you were kind of really moving into a crisis if it involved a religious crisis for yourself and then at about the same time you were about to go through a marital thing.

TW: It was a true crisis. I told you the last time that when I was in the Army and I took my wife down to the Army camp that I'd begun having something; I didn't quite know what it was. Later I understood that they were anxiety attacks; they were frightening and rather disabling. And that was something I'd never known before, really, and I began to experience it at Cooper Union. In the second year when they let us paint, I was on fire to paint. I'd come into class - one day a week was all we could paint -- and I'd take my brush and make a vigorous stroke on the canvas a la de Kooning and with that one outlet of emotion I would have a full-scale anxiety attack, unable to paint for the entire day. I'd just sit there and look at the paint. It was so debilitating and so horrendous. So I was in tremendous conflict, conflict about what to do about my marriage, conflict about what to do about God and all those other things -- at the same time believing that I was involved in a struggle to throw out everything my parents had ever taught me, not to throw it out but to examine it and throw out that which I felt wasn't true and try to keep certain things. Those are all so abstract now that I can't remember what in the world I was talking about, except the idea of God was important. I had to take a stand there -- it was either yes or no. I began along in here psychoanalysis. No, that comes later. I got ahead of myself.

IS: What church did your parents belong to?

TW: We went to whatever one where for some reason or other my father liked the minister and we'd switch later if he liked another minister. It was always Methodist or Presbyterian. One of the courses at Cooper Union that was perhaps the most stimulating and enlightening of all was taught by a man named Cortina. Did you ever know him?

IS: No.

TW: Boy, what a guy! Three dimensional design. Nobody in the class ever had the slightest clue what he was getting at. But he inspired us to try to understand what it was that he was getting at. I forget, now, what the problems were. But they were so abstract you couldn't begin to come to grips with it. So abstract! But it was there I encountered for the first time really the idea of abstract thought. Trying to make a physical reality out of abstract thought. I never had to think abstractly in Cincinnati. You don't do that sort of thing. I wasn't trained that way. I wasn't equipped for it. I remember one of his problems was to have us walk around New York City and record something about space. All I can remember is that I was struck walking down Thirty-fourth Street and walking under a Macy's marquee and suddenly I was inside the store. It was very exciting to me to realize what kind of space you'd forgotten. The first year was what they called the foundation. I think we took sculpture, too.

IS: Who was that? Do you remember?

TW: I can't quite remember his name. But the thing about the first year that was interesting was that it opened me up. I still was completely committed to cartooning. It opened me up to all these other things I'd never been exposed to -- it exposed me to all these things. So when the second year came along they continued that idea. They made us take advertising. It was a very interesting course. They let us paint the second year. [I had] Charlie Stide for painting, and I think Charlie was good for me because he didn't teach anything. It was, if I recall, a technical kind of thing. He didn't get involved in philosophy; he was more involved in technique. In a way I kind of appreciated it because I had no philosophy. I had no technique either, but I needed some technique. Gregory Gillespie was in my class. He was precocious. He'd been painting for years. I was doing in that class the very first painting I'd ever done, and he'd been painting for years. He didn't want to participate with the teachers; he'd go off the corner and do his moody cityscapes, very gray, slatey gray and brown, turgid things and ignore the teacher. I was there to get as much as I could from the teachers so we were quite different. I looked up to him because he was experienced; at least he'd made paintings. Crisis I was beginning to encounter really it was in this year, I guess, mainly. The first year I don't recall too much. The second year when it began to occur, I'd try to paint and couldn't paint. When I was excited about Abstract Expressionism, Pollock, de Kooning, painting like that -- that's the way I painted.

IS: Then you were on Tenth Street? I mean you would go to the galleries there and other galleries here?

TW: First of all in the second year I was still a cartoonist. I didn't know about painting. I really didn't know about it. When I started painting -- I think my first painting was more like Paul Klee than anyone. I didn't know what I was doing. I had no point of view. I hadn't seen paintings. I hadn't seen anything. I hadn't gone to galleries yet or to museums. But as the year progressed I began to get a little bit drawn into painting and I decided to take a walk to Tenth Street. I think because Alex Katz was having a show then and I saw those little collages.

IS: Was he a teacher?

TW: No. I don't know quite why I knew him, except that he did teach at Greene Camp. He was an assistant at Greene Camp that year. As a matter of fact, maybe I saw his show after that. I've lost my sense of time. Alex, as I said in my book, was very important to me. We went to Greene Camp the end of the second year and did landscapes, real landscapes. That was the first time I had taken a serious position in relation to art. Up until this time I was still a cartoonist; I wasn't a painter. I was riding right on the surface of art school. I went away to Greene Camp. It was raining for the first five days and we were painting outside from inside. I'm painting this tree - I'm trying to design this silly tree. And Alex gets frustrated trying to explain something to me, and takes the brush from my hand and says, "This way; this is what I mean." And he showed me something -- and all of a sudden with that one thing I understood the difference between painting and design. I'd been designing all this time. Suddenly I thought, "What an enlightening feeling! Now I know!" You don't design a painting; you create a painting out of some other thing. You don't design it. So I started to paint with a kind of earnestness about those landscapes. And by the time of the end of the spring term I felt like I was going to be a painter. In the two weeks I made that kind of transition, and I was proud of what I had done. I came back from Greene Camp, took my easel and canvas and went up to Westchester and sat down to paint landscape one day and realized that I didn't have a clue. I was confronting reality. I didn't know what I was doing. I was nothing, nothing. It was at that point that I kind of decided that I couldn't be a painter. I was going to have to wind up in advertising design if I couldn't make it in cartooning. My personal crisis at this time has probably been building within me. I had a conflict about the marriage; what to do about being a painter. I realized that, if I didn't have a strong enough need to paint, there was no sense even bothering. I didn't think I had that much need. That was a serious issue, by the way -- feeling that I didn't have a need to be an artist, that it was a choice. It was like choosing a career, and I don't think you choose to be an artist that way; you're driven to it. You have to do it. But the fact was that I couldn't make the clear commitment within myself. I felt depressed because I was going to do something I didn't want to do -- advertising design. By this time I'd lost my cartooning ability because I'd lost my sense of humor. I kind of skipped ahead a little bit. The thing is, I got so involved in my intellectual personal crisis that it became my delayed adolescent rebellion. I never had an adolescent rebellion; I never challenged anything, anything! Oh,

maybe while I was in college. While I'm on that subject, it was an early lesson. I went to a little college named Hiram.

IS: Yes, you mentioned that.

TW: I don't think I mentioned anything about the religious class.

IS: No.

TW: I guess it was a trivial detail, but it did tell me something about the world. It was one of the early lessons I got. We had to write a term paper about our feelings about God, I guess, including things like the hereafter and all sorts of stuff. And I really laid it on the line, the way I felt. I still acknowledged that there might be God and all that, but couldn't go very far with all that stuff I'd gotten in class. It was a church kind of school. My roommate, who was my best friend who was a complete con man, wrote a whole lot of bullshit because he knew what they wanted to hear, got an A. I got either a C or a D. I thought it was a very good paper and I really wrote it from the heart. But the guy said -- wrote on the paper, said, "These are dangerous views." Dangerous views! So, back to Cooper Union and New York City and trying to make this decision about marriage and painting and throwing out God and finally deciding, yes -- throwing out God. John Dewey had a lot of intellectual clout with me,plus my own feelings. I've kind of gotten lost here. Rambling too much.

IS: No, no. You were talking about this whole sort of coming together . . . .

TW: Let me go back just for a moment. The problem with my sense of humor was that I'd gotten so involved in serious matters in my own personal crisis that I lost my ability or any desire to make fun. So I couldn't be a cartoonist if I'd lost that. I lost touch with it, walking on the streets now, deadly serious about life for the first time, on fire by the end of the third year toward graduation. I was on fire. The good thing about Cooper -- they didn't teach us very much, but they set us on fire to do something. And I was really on fire by the time I graduated. I decided I wanted to be an artist. My fear was that I didn't need to be an artist. So there was this adolescent kind of self-created conflict. I think the separation from my wife . . . .

IS: That took place after you graduated?

TW: Yes. Literally immediately, and it was almost ridiculous in its timing.

IS: And when did you go into analysis? Before that?

TW: After that. I'd gone to see an analyst in Brooklyn, a guy named Rockala which was a hideous name for a hideous man! He spent a session with me and said, "You don't need psychotherapy; you need shock treatment." That was the end of that. I wasn't about to have electrodes. He was quite dead wrong. I did need psychotherapy, but not from a guy like him. But he said to me, "If you don't come to me, your marriage will be through in a very short time." Which was true. I think I must have unconsciously decided that anyway.

IS: But that all took place after the psychoanalysis.

TW: The visit to that first psychiatrist was in Brooklyn where we lived for two years. I was still in art school; no psychoanalysis yet. The marriage breaks up. It was very upsetting to me in two ways: because it was so cold on my part -- it was something I knew I had to do; it was cold, awfully cold. So I felt badly about it. I began psychoanalysis because I think I was somewhat desperate. Ah, yes. O.K. Teaching school. I spent that first summer after graduation from Cooper Union, taking required classes to be a school teacher.

IS: Where were you teaching then?

TW: Hunter College. They were the basic education courses to be a teacher. I found the courses quite stimulating. I liked them. I just had a hard time getting used to this strange existence, on my own for the first time ever, my own apartment. Desperately lonely. I didn't know anybody. Anybody I did know was out of town for the summer. The place was in the village, a studio about ten feet square. I need to get my bearings here. O.K. So I started teaching school and I began having these anxiety attacks about teaching. Jimmy Dine told me about a friend, I forget who it was, but this friend was having severe trouble emotionally, so severe that he was even having trouble controlling his bladder and he'd gone to a psychoanalyst. That literally saved his life. He said this psychoanalyst was terrific. So I got his name and I tried him, and he was very good. He was so good that he assumed kind of a major role in my life from the point of view that he was brilliant, I thought. He was a brilliant man intellectually in his ability to deal with intellectual and emotional things at the same time. And to make poetry of it. I mean poetry -- to this day I regard psychoanalysis as kind of a branch of poetry.

IS: Yes. I regard it as a branch of history and art.

TW: But the imagery they deal with and things the guy came up with you really could have made poetry out of

it, just the thoughts -- it was very touching. [TELEPHONE INTERRUPTION]

IS: Let's put off the discussion; I want to get back to that -- the psychoanalysis, the break-up of the marriage and the teaching and the decision to be an artist. I want to pick up some other things. Of course this . . . unless you want to continue in this vein.

TW: I don't even know where I was. I get carried away.

IS: That's fine. You were just beginning to talk about the psychoanalyst, but we had jumped over the chronology. We're still back at Cooper Union, and just to pick up on the third year and some of your teachers, you talked about Stieg and the courses you had to take, including advertising. But you haven't talked about Marsicano yet or other painting teachers. Incidentally, did you manage to get over -- these anxiety attacks had taken place in the second year, and obviously you were painting. You must have been through painting in the second and third year.

TW: Let's change this chronology, I think. The anxiety attacks began in the third year, because it was the second year that I was doing these non-existing paintings. They really didn't exist. The third year I began taking things so seriously and that's when all the anxiety could be lumped into the third year because it was the third year -- now I've got to go back and change the chronology here. I didn't start seriously reading challenging things until the third year. It all came at once -- the challenging reading, the stimulating ideas . . . .

IS: That would have been '58?

TW: The fall of '58, yes. And it was at that time I began to feel that I could be a painter. I'd just finished Greene Camp.

IS: With Alex.

TW: Yes, and Marsicano.

IS: They were both there and then you continued with Marsicano.

TW: Marsicano was the main teacher there. He's the only one I remember except Alex doing that one thing. But by this time in the fall of '58 I was then a completely transformed person. Now I wanted to be an artist; now I was reading, now I was throwing out things, now I was challenging. Before I think I was beginning to challenge things only on a more cerebral level when I said I'd go back home and say, "pick your nose in the subway," and that sort of stuff. Maybe that was late into the second year. I don't think I did any of this in the first year because I wasn't that involved. So, to set the chronology straight, first you could use benign art school exposure continuing the emphasis on cartooning; second year cartooning still the emphasis, but beginning to be pulled into some other philosophical thinking; the third year was explosive, really explosive. I almost came apart, literally came apart at the seams.

IS: Talk a little about Marsicano, because he entered the book.

TW: Marsicano was such an important teacher for me. I feel he was the teacher. All the other teachers were interested in challenging, but Marsicano was more important than all of them put together in that he was so damned bright; he's a very articulate man, very bright man, very literate man. So to have that kind of person to start with as a teacher and then have such a nice man on top of it, was important. But what was important was that he didn't try to teach us anything; he just simply tried to nudge us into higher levels of awareness, which [he] was very good at. It was literally the truth to say that we would be working on a painting, Marsicano would come by and sit down and talk fifteen minutes about that painting, deeper and deeper -- and you'd get more and more insight into it, "Yes, really, really." He would walk away and it was like a bubble had burst.

IS: He's still doing it.

TW: There was nothing left, but somehow it was the journey he took us on was so important that it gave me the feeling that somehow I had the capability to get up on those planes he was dealing with. I didn't know if I could or not, but he was inspirational. He didn't teach me a damned thing, in fact he put a few stumbling blocks and little prejudices he had that he communicated and I said that in my book. One day in class I stuck a thing onto my painting, and he came over and actually took it off and said, "Now do it in paint because you're a painter." So when I got out of art school, I took that prejudice with me. For at least three years I didn't do any of these dimensional things because I was a painter. And it wasn't until I found this loaf of bread that was-- So I simply couldn't resist it. It had to be used. So I let myself break that barrier. I knew I was going to break it, I guess, because I'd been accumulating things like that, that I was drawn to.

TW: What I have to say about Marsicano I guess comes down to that literally, because I wasn't that receptive by

and large or that involved with my teachers that I could say too much more about Marsicano than that. Except that I liked his painting.

IS: What about fellow students? Were you close to any of them?

TW: A few. I would say I was closest -- I'm picking third year -- to Mark Ratliff Do you know Mark?

IS: Yes, I did then.

TW: Mark was a precocious painting student. He was the best painter at Cooper Union by far. He could paint rings around everybody. He was so talented, a really gifted painter. And I couldn't paint at all. When he graduated though, he stopped painting, and I started painting. An odd sort of thing.

IS: It's not infrequent.

TW: He was so good he was almost too good; it was so easy for him.

IS: Is he still around?

TW: Yes, he's doing very well. Doing advertising graphic design mostly for the art world. Like Emmerick catalogues and ads. In fact, half the New York Times ads are done by him. A very successful businessman. He was, I suppose perhaps the most serious painter friend I had at the time. It's funny, there were a couple of other students -- they were just students. That's all they were, students. My current wife -- my wife -- that's a cartoon, my current wife! [Laughter]

IS: Thurber did something like that where he said, "And the first Mrs. Brown is over there and she's crouching on top of our bookcase." I still use that, "The first Mrs. Brown."

TW: Claire was in my class and we became somewhat friendly during the advertising class. That was a class we shared in common. I thought she was the best female painter in the school. She's quite a good painter. She also, when she graduated -- maybe because of my presence -- she simply didn't paint. She did a couple of paintings -- she was very good. She did a painting of her father that Michael Abrams saw and said, "Hey, I'm in big trouble." He thought she was better. One of these days I still think she's going to paint. Other than that, my contact with the other students was rather casual because I would go home at the end of the day being married, and work on cartooning. I was still doing some cartooning in my third year. My teachers were understanding enough to let me take off every Wednesday morning and come in late because Wednesdays was "look at" for cartoonists at the magazines. And I was beginning to sell some. The Saturday Evening Post for the first time let me come in person because it was basically a mail-in magazine, but the woman for some reason was going to be in town. I guess they let it be known they'd see people. I'd been rejected by them all along in the mail, but she saw me and she bought two right off. I began to have a little success finally, and within about two or three months I'd given it up.

IS: About your style at Cooper -- you said you were working in an Abstract Expressionist style. You mentioned Pollock and de Kooning.

TW: I was doing women. I was doing nudes. I was very oriented toward de Kooning. In art schools in those days they were really painting like Kandinsky. We didn't know it. But it was a kind of combination abstract and figurative shorthand language. I was taken by de Kooning's paintings of that year. I think I'd seen his show of '57 and '58. He was in a show at the Janis Gallery, and I was quite taken by de Kooning. It was in the third year, '58 to '59. First of all, I didn't know what else to paint except nudes. I didn't know how else to paint because I had no historical relationship to art. I painted like what I was immediately encountering -- which was abstract painting on Tenth Street. I tried to figure out what the hell they were doing; I don't think they knew what they were doing either in most cases. But I sure couldn't figure it out. I could tell that de Kooning knew what he was doing, but I'd see some of the guys on Tenth Street and I'd figure they didn't know what they were doing. It just didn't seem right. I'm trying to go back in time and get a hold of something.The thing was as a kid I would walk into the art class,I would want to make a painting. I didn't know anything to make except what I was inspired by immediately which was de Kooning. So I had to paint that way, and there was a nude model up there. So I would paint the model trying to make an exciting de Kooning kind of composition out of it. Once I deliberately took a de Kooning Merritt Parkway painting and used that painting to get compositional frame for a nude of my own. I mention that in my book.

IS: Yes, you do. The de Kooning show at the Whitney Museum . . . .

TW: There's not a single Merritt Parkway painting in it.

IS: I know. Well, they apparently couldn't get them or didn't try hard enough. They didn't have the Met's picture;

they didn't have Gotham Nudes. The only picture that represented that style -- there were two styles, you know. There was the Guggenheim picture, that beautiful red one, but from '57 to '59, that four-year period when de Kooning was at the top of it! Of his career and the top of the world!! They only had three pictures: Park Rosenberg, Rosy Red-fingered Dawn and the Lost Point and the Guggenheim, red picture.

TW: Dali almost gets into that era, but to me it wasn't quite as . . . .

IS: He did a similar thing. I'm glad they put that little painting where he just pasted a head on top of that loose landscape.

TW: But I was astonished because those are by far de Kooning's best paintings. And I kept waiting and they only had three in the whole show. It was shocking! It was a great show, wonderful paintings of genius and all that, but there should have been more. It wasn't balanced right. It was those paintings that so moved me when I was a painting student. I also have to keep saying "as I said in my book." I'm self-conscious for having said it already.

IS: No, no. You're actually saying very little . . . I mean you're elaborating in a way that you simply couldn't in your book because of the nature of the book.

TW: What I'm about to say is what I did say in the book. I really would go to the Met and look at that Easter Monday and be torn to pieces because I was so angry that this man had done my painting before I could get to it. Of course, I was robbing him of all the genius of doing this ring. The implication was that I should be doing that painting. Of course it was his painting, not mine. That's what I came to realize, finally. After I graduated and I was confronted with this fact . . . . What do I do about this? I can't build a career out of somebody else's painting. I realized that, so I tried to work from de Kooning. Someday I'll have to show you some of those ones.

IS: Thank you.

TW: I tried to work from de Kooning into something else, still abstract. Actually I went back more to Kandinsky, really. I'd do those shorthand things. This piece of collage was a bridge. And this piece of blue was a . . . . lake -- that's my way of making shorthand notations much more like Kandinsky than de Kooning. But always with the idea of de Kooning there. And that just wasn't quite satisfying, I felt. I was getting a little bit too frustrated by it. And this is while I'm taking education courses in the daytime; I don't have very much time here either. I was very gloomy, I guess, having to study a whole lot to get through these courses, being completely alone and lonely, and occasionally trying to paint. It was just as if I didn't have the resources to bring to bear at that point. So when I did try to paint, it wasn't fulfilling to the painting or to me.So I tried a few experiments. I tried to learn where I was. I did this one collage one day that was totally abstract; it was rather nice. I didn't know what I was trying to do. I didn't know why I was doing it, what I was even trying to accomplish. I didn't know anything. Now this was all determined probably from my emotional state as well, because I was going to be getting in trouble at this point, close to some kind of a serious breakdown of some sort. But literally with a flash of insight which was important, my reaction to itthe proper one I realized that since I didn't know what I was trying to do; it was just somebody else's work I was trying to do anyway. I had to throw it all out -- like I had recently denied God; I threw God out there. I had to throw out de Kooning, because he really was after all a god to me in terms of art. I had to throw all his art out, as much as I could possibly throw out and find my own ways of doing it. Something Marsicano said, too, is, "You have to find your own way of doing everything. Matisse found his way of drawing eyes; you've got to find a way of drawing eyes. You can't do what Matisse did." It was a hell of a challenge that you had to find you own way to do it. Really! Scary as hell. But I had to find my own way of doing all that stuff. And that kind of saved my life, because for the first time I began to have something that was mine. I really felt this. The very first work that I did was that little portrait Collage Number One. It literally was the first; and it saved my life emotionally as well as artistically, because now I could make my own rules. I was like the king of the turf. I wasn't inhibited by de Kooning or anybody else. I could go on in too much detail about this.

IS: We'll get back to it. Were your fellow students mostly painting in the Abstract Expressionist vein at Cooper Union?

TW: I would say my memory is that everybody was trying to do it in one way or another. When I look back on it now, I call it Kandinsky kind of feeling, not so much Abstract Expression, but more like a Kandinsky kind of abstraction. But not look like Kandinsky. Leonard Frye was quite a good painter. He alone went off in a completely different direction. He's the actor, you know; quite successful one. He was doing a kind of color field. I'd never seen anything like that before. I don't know where he saw them or where he got into them, but I don't think anything was being done quite like that at the time. They were rather diaphanous but good.

IS: What about the other Abstract Expressionists? You mentioned Motherwell in your book.

TW: I mentioned Motherwell only because I went to the Modern and looked at a Motherwell -- one of the Elegy paintings on the stairway landing and had the first aesthetic experience -- the first time I got a physical thrill, actually a thrill in my stomach. I never had that happen before. It's quite exciting to be able to react that way to

a painting, because before that I could look at paintings and record them but I couldn't experience them. That's the only reason I mentioned him. He was no figure to me otherwise except when I finally saw his show at the Modern, I was quite impressed.

IS: What about Kline and Guston?

TW: Kline I wasn't quite ready to appreciate fully enough until he did his color painting. I liked that a hell of a lot. He did his first black and white -- but I wasn't advanced enough to really get excited by it. I could respect him, but he didn't have any impact on me. Guston was on the scene. He was part of the scene -- he didn't stand out as a painter to me. He stood out as an important part of the scene. And that's still the way I look at him. It's not a very fair attitude towards his work.He was so beautiful that he could almost singlehandedly hold up the value of beauty in painting. He was a beautiful painter, and this is in a time when we were beginning to think about ugly as a virtue and beauty as a sin. So in a way Guston helped to make beauty sort of legitimate and not to be ashamed of it.

IS: Let's see. Hofmann. You wouldn't have been interested in Newman. Well, Newman wouldn't have been known. Rothko is . . . .

TW: That didn't exist as far as I was concerned. I didn't know anything about that at all. I began to see some of the paintings up at Lootz-Hofmann and some of the others. I wasn't advanced enough yet. I was just beginning to get involved. When I finally did see that Newman show at the Modern, boy, was I impressed with that! Wow! I'm not a great Ellsworth Kelly fan. A lot of people like him immensely; but when I saw Newman, I thought he knocked Kelly right out of the box. I was really very impressed with Newman.

IS: You did mention that you went form theology to existentialism in the book. Did that tie up in your mind at all with de Kooning's paintings? Did you make that connection?

[END OF SIDE ONE]

IS: ...from that session that you obviously hadn't taught. So that when the kids asked a question you answered without having the protective layers that teachers build up. In other words, they hold a lot back and you didn't know. So you were completely candid. The kids were just overwhelmed by it. It was just wonderful.

TW: I don't remember that aspect of it.

IS: Oh, you were just absolutely open. That was the high point of the sessions. But we were talking about whether you had connected your own interest in existentialism and the move from theology to existentialism -- with rhetoric around the painting of de Kooning and other Abstract Expressionists or whether that was your own . . . .

TW: There's no relationship at all.

IS: Had you at all begun to read Sartre?

TW: Yes. I guess in the third year, the last part of the third year, and then after I got out I started to read more. I had read a little Sartre and a couple Camus. I was impressed by Camus. But I was primarily moved by Kerouac's *On The Road*, anything by Kerouac was very important to me. I identified with the emotion. Like *On The Road* really tore me to shreds because that was me on an emotional level -- I was stranded and set adrift at the same time. I was kind of between engagements -- I was between home and wherever I was going. I didn't know where I was. I had no place, no identity, no being. In a sense I was literally adrift in a huge city and lost in this idea of suddenly finding myself a schoolteacher and wondering, "Is this my life? Am I going to be a schoolteacher for the rest of my life?" It was a terrifying prospect -- and in a tough school in Brooklyn. And reading these things and I was beginning to read some poetry -- Howard Hart's poetry moved me quite a bit.

IS: Did the Americanism of the Kerouac books strike true?

TW: The Americanism?

IS:*One the Road* was an American experience -- or was it more the rootlessness of it?

TW: I suppose so, but I don't think I was that aware or that I had that kind of discrimination.

IS: Go on on the poetry.

TW: I got involved with the Beat poetry to the extent that I got involved with almost anything that came my way in those days, unlike as I am now -- I don't get involved with those things now. But then I was very sensitive to dance, poetry, reading -- all those things I'd never done before -- suddenly were very important to me. Very

important to help me get started as an artist. Once I got started as an artist, got a big head of steam up, I had less and less time, less and less room in my body for that. Now I have no room. I was very impressed with the theater. I'd read Becket's Trilogy which really I thought was sensational. The third one was so damned abstract it was a little bit tedious reading; but I took it as a religious experience to get through it. I forget now what the name of it is, the third one. What was it? Maybe it was the unnameable.

TW: Yes. The thing which I admired immensely for the achievement whereas I didn't want to go through it again. And I mention in my book the plays of Ionesco. It was my latent appreciation for humor -- Ionesco caught my appreciative humor and my visual interest, because he was humorous and he was visual. It almost didn't matter -- anything I read in those days. I selected the right things. I was open to so much and I selected the right things, I guess. Everything I read or encountered seemed to have some kind of effect on me.

IS: You also mentioned Henry Miller.

TW: Oh, yes. That comes a little bit later. That's clearly after art school by another year or two. He was important, too. I don't know why . . . .

IS: So at the time that you're building towards this crisis everything's literally opening up.

TW: Yes. I was losing control in the sense, too, that I was encountering so much that I never encountered before. It took me off on all kinds of avenues that I'd never been on before. Even Henry Miller becomes like On The Road in that respect; he was in kind of the same kind of spot -- a crummy telegraph job he had and kind of hanging around and he was kind of lost. So I identified with that aspect of his work as well as with other things. And Becket's work, in a sense that's what his work was about -- being lost. And I felt very lost even though when I found this work, these things It's kind of like the idea of being lost was a transitional course, as it was -- and I got found by art, I was sort of saved by art, by the fact that I got a hold of this form for myself and by my relationship with Claire which began. And since I was saved by her and by the art at the same time . . . . [INTERRUPTION]

TW: Are you going to organize this material?

IS: It will be transcribed. The material will go on file at the Archives of American Art.

TW: You don't have to edit it?

IS: No, it just goes in raw. And you have the discretion of letting anyone you choose or not choose who wants to use it, use it. However, I want the material for myself. In other words, I'm fascinated by this material. I may or may not be able to use it. It doesn't matter. I'm not saying this very elegantly, Tom. I'm interested in your work; I'm interested in you, and I'm interested in anything that illuminates the shaping of this body of work. And everything you're saying now is right on the point; it's right on a lot of points. There's nothing wasted. There is really nothing here that is beside the point. In fact you may think you're going too slowly, but in many ways you're going almost too fast.

TW: I feel like I'm hopscotching around . . . .

IS: No, no. That's fine. I've got kind of a structure here, but I'm also taking off from things that you say. So I'm building another kind of structure as we go along.

TW: Before you go on, I'm going to get back to where we left off. I was making a point I want to complete. I was aware, growing up and in Cooper Union, of something about being a boy and being immature and lacking real strong identity, that sort of thing. Through the process at Cooper Union, a more demanding intellectual process and all the reading, I began to feel the experience of beginning to mature, feeling more like a man. And when I became a painter and was just beginning these collages, I felt that I'd done something of my own. I began to feel a sense of identity and greater confidence in myself. And in my relationship with Claire. I felt instead of loving her like a boy, I was loving her like a man and she was a woman, a complex and beautiful woman. It was at that point I began to grow. It was as though I'd been a boy until I graduated from Cooper Union and suddenly I entered this transition into the adult phase. It was rather exciting and at the same time it was all too difficult for me to handle. That's when I began analysis, after I graduated.

IS: Let's talk little bit about the collages that you started to make. Part of it as you indicate in the book was a reaction against the kind of aggressive, tough raw painting that you experienced in de Kooning's work that you felt attracted to but at one point began to realize that it wasn't of your nature. One of the things that you don't talk about in the book, but I wonder how important it is -- you spoke of the time when Marsicano takes the little piece of paper off your surface and tells you, "Paint it!" But at one point you simply moved more and more toward a collage, collage and painting. Painting the "Great American Nudes" had collage elements. But before you really begin painting from what I gather from the reproductions even that one, the first one, the figure by

the window -- the collage element becomes very important, and in a sense it's a denial of painterly gesture. Was that in your mind at all? You said there was a reaction on your part against Abstract Expressionism.

TW: I believe everything I'm about to say is in my book.It may be in answering it, I'll elaborate on it. Maybe I will; maybe I won't. I don't know. Two things: first, when I threw out de Kooning I tried to throw out every influence I was conscious of, including Matisse. So I wanted to find a way that in a sense was the opposite of it. De Kooning worked big; I'd work small; de Kooning -- also Dine and all the guys I knew worked sloppy; I'd work neat. I wasn't all that neat, but I was neat by comparison.

IS: You bet it was.

TW: They worked abstract; I'd work figurative . . . . At the same time there are other things here, like I deliberately wanted to work figurative because it was the one mode that I so scorned . . . . It was the only way to go . . . .I had no point of view, and I was really approaching figurative art as a naive . . . . I had no point of view about figurative art. I had never seen any, except Norman Rockwell. And that was kind of intriguing to start off that way.

IS: And the same way you introduced collage because that's sort of anti-gestural.

TW: There are complications here, too many to try to get out at once. I introduced college, I think, mainly because I was impatient, terribly impatient, and I had no point of view about painting. That was the main thing. If you have no point of view about painting, you can't paint. You can't paint a tomato without having some point of view about a tomato. And I literally didn't give a damn. I didn't give a damn about the tomato. All I wanted to make was some kind of exciting painting . . . . I didn't care about what I was saying. That was a very liberating thing for me and I liked that. It's somewhat schizophrenic in consequence. But I was in a position of being able to take literally anything I wanted and put it down without caring at all. So when I say it was literally caving in -- maybe in a good way -- to the influence of John Cage only just as an idea . . .wanted to know what color I was putting on and by extension I said, "I don't give a damn what tomato I'm cutting up; I'll take the first tomato that comes my way." That's it. All my collage elements in the first pieces were born with that very cavalier attitude. Since I was embarked on something that was so exciting -- I mean, I could hardly contain myself -- that is, creating my own art form. Also, I was much less inclined to care about the details of it. Couldn't care less about any of these things. But I remember the day quite clearly that I decided I had to throw out all this stuff. It happened literally in one day. I went out in the morning walking in the Greenwich Village streets, and in the gutter was a piece of gray wood. It looked like a nice piece of wood to work on; so I took it home. I suppose I wouldn't say in one day; more like one week, because in the preceding days I'd run across that Pharaoh cigarette in Washington Square. A couple of nights before I'd gone to an Hawaiian restaurant and brought that leaf back. I guess I can't remember whether I did all this deliberately or I knew what I was going to do or it was beginning to think I was going to do some thing like it. At any rate, in a matter of a few days I had accumulated a few collage materials....out of envy of Jimmy Dine who worked with staples at the time, because he was fast. God, he was just so fast! So I wanted to retain some of the looseness and abandon, so I imitated that. I smudged up materials. I still couldn't get away completely from the painterly idea. I had to do something to it. I put charcoal on it and smudged it in and made it dirty here and there. What . . . later I construed . . . to be a kind of a poetic thing I had to get rid of. I didn't want to deal in poetry. I got rid of that after a few months. I began to anyway. I guess it took me a couple of years to get rid of that. In fact, I guess it waa a good two years before I began to come around to the idea that was also voiced and reinforcing myself by Alex Katz when I heard him say one time that his paintings looked brand new, like they'd just come out of a box. This was part of the climate at the time. It was all coming together in about 1962, I guess. More and more, I mean, because you had Lichtenstein coming on the scene, and Warhol and Rosenquist. Things were kind of clean and slick. It was just kind of in the air at the time. Quite naturally it affected my show in '61. I had a one-man show at the Tanager in '61. I was still involved with some idea of painterliness. By the time my show opened at the Green Gallery a year later, I'd gotten rid of about seventy-five percent of that, not all of it by any means. I used collage primarily because I was impatient and secondarily because I didn't have any point of view to paint the things myself and I felt very unskilled -- I'd never done this before. I'd never painted anything -- never painted or anything before. So I was quite content to take other people's work since I didn't care anyway about the subject matter. I approached subject matter as a scoundrel. I had nothing to say about it whatsoever. I only wanted to make these exciting paintings. I was doing these strange little paintings, these collages; I guess I'd done about four, five or six. The first living artist to set eyes on them was Jimmy Dine who came down one day. He said "You may be one of America's great painters." That never occurred to me. It was a very important thing he said to me. It was quite helpful; gave my morale a boost because I wasn't sure.

IS: To jump ahead for one second, in the book you stress when you turn to the early nudes, you stress the erotic character of these images, but you tend at least to play down the fact that you were using things cut out from advertisements, DelMonte cans -- these common objects. I remember being far more shocked by the use of those images than I was by the erotic character of the nude when I saw your work at the Tanager Gallery. Matisse had prepared me for the nudes; so had de Kooning. But I wasn't prepared yet to that -- because you just

would cut a DelMonte can and put it on the surface.

TW: At the Tanager Gallery the only thing I cut out really was a *McCall's Magazine*. There were no cans yet. I take that back. In the little ones there were. In the big works there were none of these things that later came to be called Pop. In fact I thought it was the *McCall's Magazine* only that got me pushed into a Pop Art movement at that time because I hadn't done anything yet that had used common objects except on the little things I had to a small degree, but they weren't very much.

IS: Then I may be telescoping the Green show and the Tanager show. But when you first began to use those common images, those advertising images cut out, did you have any reason for that, because obviously as you said in your book, you went to great lengths to find just the images that you wanted?

TW: My first Green Gallery show I was reviewed by I think Natalie Edgar.

IS: Oh sure.

TW: She's still around? I thought I saw her name, but I don't read the magazines so I can't . . . .

IS: I don't think so much as a writer now, as a painter.

TW: I thought I ran across her name a couple of years ago.

IS: She had a show at the Ingber Gallery.

TW: She came down to review this first show at the Green Gallery, and I was pretty full of myself. I really thought I had something special. She cam away and basically the review said, "Nothing new; the same old stuff," which was good for me to be sort of thunderstruck about it. Apparently the world wasn't to be swept off its feet. Let's see, what was i getting at? I was aware that other guys before me had used collage, nothing new in using collage. The only thing that I was trying to bring to it a little differently was I was trying to be inordinately literal about it. A tin can was going to be used as part of a still life, and it was going to be almost inhumanly literal, right down to the end. That was really all I had to offer-- kind of inside out, intensive -- play it by rules. What made it somewhat different though was the scale, really. It was important. Maybe the same thing. I don't know. I can't think right now. I don't know enough about art history. It could be that some other guy fifty years ago made a still life collage just like I did or even similar things. But somehow the scale was important to me. To do it that size transformed it into a whole different existence -- especially with the billboard. I discovered the billboards. I realized that the scale was a critical, crucial factor. It's still an idea which hasn't been explored enough either, a big still life.

IS: Yes. Really big. I deal with it a little bit in my book on Alex Katz. I suggest that one of his major contributions to American paintings on one level is to use billboard scale perceptual realism, and on another level to make that convincing and make pictures, realist pictures that can compete with the huge Abstract Expressionism works in visual impact. I go into a rather rudimentary exploration of the whole notion of scale, and scale in figuration.

TW: What's interesting about scale, and I confronted it especially with the nudes, is historically still life has a certain reality and scaled to real life generally . . . . Cezannes and all that, but it's as though you are literally looking at the real thing only in painted version. But when you paint real big you're throwing away that whole pretense. You're no longer suggesting it's real life, it's completely different. And I realize a twelve foot nude has no erotic meaning, no erotic appeal whatsoever. And it becomes something almost dangerously thin. It is almost like a big blow-up from one of those Italian movies.

IS: What was it? A Fellini movie?

TW: Maybe that's all it is -- just some big old thing. Of course, I was desperately trying to make it something more. And a big still-lifes, the same kind of thing -- obviously no longer a still lifes, but they are using still life as an excuse to make some kind of peculiarly intense sort of thing. This was 1964; I was doing collages and still lifes. I was getting sort of sophisticated by this time but I still didn't give a damn about still life. I was fascinated I guess with the end product, whatever it was, whatever validity its strange intensity had.

IS: I want to still stay back in this period. We'll probably come back to 1958 at the beginning of the next session, but I wanted to introduce another topic in this session. At one point you become a founding member of the Judson Gallery. Mark Ratcliff and Dine and Oldenburg were very quickly involved in that.

TW: I think that Dine was there from the start.

IS: Yes. Talk a little bit about how that happened, and about the formation of that gallery, and I also want to keep in my mind the potential role of Lester Johnson and how Grooms fits in, if at all.

TW: All right. Bud Scott was the assistant minister at the Judson Church. Mark Ratcliff lived there in the dorm. So he and Bud spent a lot of time together. Bud Scott was interested in using the space down there for something and Mark was a good painting student, and I was a painting student. so the idea was basically Mark's, quite possible to make it a gallery, I'm not sure. But Bud Scott was the main factor here in that he wanted to make some kind of cushion here, he wanted to get the church involved in the arts. I don't think they were doing anything at the time. They didn't have the theater or dance yet.

IS: That happens after '62.

TW: So they had this space. We fixed it and we painted it and put burlap on the walls and we painted it white.

IS: That was the cellar space?

TW: Yes. IT was a little tiny room but we wanted to have a gallery. I guess Mark felt that he was good enough to show; so we did have a show. It was a two-man show, he and I. I was still a student. Much too soon to have a show. It was meaningless on my part, but he had these very good student paintings and he sold some.

IS: This would be your third year, now. This would be '59?

TW: I can't be sure. It could have been the second year, because the work was so bad; it was meaningless, so student-bound that I can't quite put it in my third year. I would have to think it was probably second year.

IS: Probably '58.

TW: Yes. It was much too soon . . . silly. But that's how the gallery got started -- with that show. There may have been another one-man show; I can't remember what his name was or who he was, some guy we knew.

IS: Were there other people involved?

TW: Andy, who was a friend of Jimmy's. I think maybe Andy showed some prints. My memory is quite vague until we get to shows that are more serious. We had a Christmas group show. We invited all kinds of people that we were just beginning to know, like Red Grooms, Lester Johnson maybe. I still remember Red's paintings -- it was most amusing. It was just a red tee-shirt with a tobacco pouch with the label hanging out. It was just the actual shirt. He was a most amusing guy. But there were . . . .a lot of painters. Most of them I couldn't remember now.I guess that was probably my third year at cooper -- no, no. I'm graduated, I think. Let's back-track here. I don't remember anything about the Tanager Gallery until I graduated from Cooper, because I then had a two-man show with Mark in which I showed these little collages.

IS: Tanager?

TW: I was talking about the Judson. I'm so screwed up in my ability to keep things in order that I have to go back yet again.

IS: It's a long time ago, too.

TW: Yes. Well, here's what happened. The Judson Gallery is formed; we had this little, dumb, two-man show that was much too soon to have. It actually got reviewed by somebody, maybe even *Arts Magazine*. It shouldn't have counted. Somebody else showed there. My memory is completely blank. The gallery may have been relatively inactive until I graduated frOm Cooper Union and we had a group show. I put a couple of these early collages in of which I had a review -- the first review I really ever got -- Irving Sandler?

IS: Really?

TW: It said, "Wesselmann shows weird collages of women."

IS: Was I the one that said that? God help us! I read it in the book, but I didn't check to see.

TW: I think what you were referring to was that one up there which I recently reacquired. That may have been the only one in the show or there might have been one other. And I didn't take the review as being bad because I thought it was really right to the point.

IS: [Laughter] Really weird! Oh, dear me! I had forgotten that.

TW: But that was part of a group show. The next show was a two-man show in which I showed these things in depth along with a show of Mark Ratcliff. I didn't feel strong enough on my own as an individual to command a one-man show. In fact my things were so little that I was willing to have a two-man show. It was kind of like when Mark and I used to sing at parties. I like country music. I would play the guitar, but I couldn't sing unless I

had Mark singing with me. I needed somebody else to accompany me. I was shy. Then we had the group show in which Red Grooms showed and a lot of other people. Then the gallery became more serious, because we began to attract people. We had the Oldenburg show. I guess I bypassed that. That was the first serious show. Damned good show. Very interesting show. And then the two-man show. Then Jimmy Dine began to attract like a magnet other elements which took over the gallery -- much to the good of the gallery. Kaprow . . . .

IS: He and Oldenburg began doing Happenings.

TW: Oldenburg and Dine really vitalized that place with those Happenings and made the gallery come alive. Of course, then it became a Happenings gallery almost exclusively It became very theatrical with the Happenings and performance.

IS: I attended that two-day -- or was it a whole week thing? When Jimmy Dine did "The Smiling Workman," which I still think is the greatest single act.

TW: I don't remember that. I remember others more keenly.

IS: Did you get to know this group then? Did it constitute a kind of loose group? Yourself and Dine and Oldenburg?

TW: I was so busy painting that I didn't get out very much. I painted as much as I could. I knew them and I liked them and all that, but I didn't branch out beyond the immediate guys -- like Oldenburg and Dine.

IS: You did know them?

TW: Yes.

IS: Were there discussions where ideas were kicked around?

TW: No. I knew Dine because he was from Cincinnati, and Mark Ratcliff was too.

IS: I didn't know that. So the three of you were from Cincinnati.

TW: Yes. Jimmy and Mark were friends at the same high school. I didn't know either one of them in Cincinnati. But because they knew each other they continued their friendship here and I became a part of it. I was the kind of guy who if Jimmy got a new apartment I would go help him paint it. I was always doing that sort of thing. So I was friendly with him, always giving him a hand with those kind of things. I found him a most amusing fellow. He'd come out to visit me in Brooklyn once in a while. But at no time was art ever talked about that I can recall. My relationship to that whole scene was like this: first of all the Reuben Gallery came along then. They did the Happenings and had regular art shows. I had no gallery. I was beginning to feel that I was losing my grip, out of touch. I was doing all these little collages and getting no feedback. I wanted some appreciation. I wanted some response. A lot of my friends were getting shows at the Reuben -- Jimmy Dine, Oldenburg and a few other people, and I kind of somehow was thinking Anita should give me a show. Although I realized that I wasn't in her vein, somehow I felt like it was my gallery and I was entitled to it because all those others were there. But I was to remain frustrated in that respect. Oldenburg by this time had started doing Happenings on Second Street. It seems to me there was another place before that, too.

IS: The reason I asked that question was because the two of them, and that's where Lester Johnson comes in, were thinking of making figuration in art a kind of program for themselves in a sense and I wondered whether you remember any of that -- because at the same time you're suggesting that your own thinking involved the figure as a way to move way from what you didn't want to do. Incidentally, very quickly, there were other people working in collage -- Rauschenberg, for example, as early as 1955. Did they influence your thinking at all?

TW: I kind of draw a blank with that because I don't recall seeing Rauschenbergs until I went back to Cincinnati one time and stopped en route at Carnegie. There was a Rauschenberg there. I was rather impressed. I don't think it was a collage as I recall. I must have been oblivious to some of those things is all I can say. I was certainly aware at some point though that he did things with objects -- like clocks. But it was almost as if I missed that whole period in his career and then suddenly stumbled on it when it was in full bloom. I'm very good at that.

IS: Another quick question before we go back to the Judson Gallery. Did you attend the Club at all?

TW: Once. I didn't quite know what to make of it. Guys standing up shaking their fists. I fled the scene. I just wasn't part of it.

IS: Do you remember who was on that evening?

TW: NO. I have no memory of that at all. I seem to remember one guy was shaking his fist -- a guy you think of shaking his fist.

IS: Resnick?

TW: I think it was, but I can't be sure.

IS: But go on back. I'm sorry I cut you off.

TW: While I knew Dine and Oldenburg, I had nothing to do with them in any kind of meaningful way, except Oldenburg would always be short of actors and he would call me up and ask me to be in a Happening. But I would never have time. I was too jealous of my time to do it, unless he had a part that required no rehearsal. So he would give me these bit parts.

IS: Yes.

TW: my relationship was formal in that respect. We didn't talk about art or anything. Dick Tyler was always on the scene. Do you know him?

IS: No.

TW: He was an interesting guy. Every Sunday he would put his push cart outside the Judson Gallery. He had a press. Did you ever run across him at all?

IS: No, I didn't run into him. Dick Tyler -- tell me a little.

TW: Dick Tyler and Dorothy somebody -- a couple. A big mustache. He was something of an anarchist -- not really, but that's the way I remember him -- a slightly demented, creative genius of sorts, printing on his own press these tracts that were his art works. You had to run across him. You couldn't not. He was always there. I'd go there sometimes just to see him. I lived just a couple of blocks away. I'd go to the Judson Gallery and hang around. Sometimes Oldenburg of someone would show up. It was always just socializing, never talking about art. Dick Tyler once supposedly took a plate of spaghetti and mushed it all over the TV set. It struck me at the time as a really unusual thing to do. I mean to really do. Ask me something else.

IS: What about Matisse? We didn't talk about him. When does your interest in his work begin?

TW: I think Matisse comes in right around the time of graduation from art school. I'd acquired some little, cheap book of his reproductions. I'd seen a few here and there before. Obviously I must have. I just didn't remember them. But having a book in my hand I got a look at them and they were meaningful to me. I was stuck by various aspects of them. I didn't have too much to say about it except that I was awed by him as I was de Kooning. I can sort of look back at whom I was awed by; just by saying Matisse and de Kooning. What got me about Matisse -- and put me on my guard at the same time -- was how overtly, stunningly beautiful his paintings were. They were exciting. You couldn't look at a Matisse without feeling some kind of excitement. You just couldn't do it! And I was taken by all kinds of things. I looked at the Matisse paintings in this little book and it was the same thing I did on Tenth Street. I go to East Tenth Street paintings and say "Now why did you do that?" I never could answer the questions very well, partly I think because the answers weren't there. Matisse had the answers but I had a hard time clearing them up. But I came up with answers. I would insist on finding out, like why did he make that hand so big? I had to come up with a reason. Even if it wasn't the right reason. I'd tear these paintings apart that way and trying to figure them out. Whenever I came up with an answer I'd resolve never to do it that way. That was just part of my process at the time -- I was denying it at the same time. But sometimes it got very silly, like the little things -- just because Matisse did it that way. So it got my goat when people would say to me, seeing my painting of a nude: "Aha! Matisse." I didn't like that because that was involved. Leon Polk Smith came to my show at the Tanager. I was quite pleased that he got my message. He said you're very involved with positive-negative shape. I like that because that's what I was doing, making oversimplified curves to make the negative shape break away more easily from the nude. Much stronger that way.

IS: One of the things that may be my own feeling about your work -- along with the erotic quality of the nude and of course the Pop element and we'll put that Pop in quotes, is . . . there is an American motif or attitude or feeling. For example, the background paper there -- one can almost point to it in nearly any one of your collages.

TW: You know, somebody at the Times called me and in effect said that, "Everything you do is so American." I remember at the time being somewhat defensive about that. And my answer was that that's what I had. The things that I got were from America; they were all American. "How come you don't use a bottle of Compari from a Sunday magazine section?" I said the paper's too bad. That was the truth, too. I wouldn't use it. But I believed that I was free of that particular prejudice because when I first did still life collage, I put some little European

bottles in it because the paper happened to be good stock.

IS: I don't want to overplay it, but every now and then I am struck [by it].

TW: I speak English. But there's more to it than that as time goes on, obviously. Especially as time goes on and I feel more and more negative towards European art. I'm much more inclined to move toward American images. I feel that may have been occurring around 1964. I opened up more to the American identity.

IS: Were you still thinking of some relationship of existentialism to these early collages? I should really ask and I probably will at one point, are you still interested in that stance?

TW: No. Psychoanalysis took care of all that. It's perplexing question. I don't know how to deal with it; I can't get a bearing on it. I'd say no.

IS: Let's hold that and we'll put that in another context. **End of Session 1Session 2**

IS: Tom, We pretty much last time got you out of Cooper Union and into the world, but one of the things that I wanted to get back to because we were talking around it and because it constitutes such an important moment in your life. You leave Cooper Union; your marriage breaks up; you decide to become an artist. You begin teaching, that you don't like; you go through a spiritual, or religious crisis -- all happening at once. And you also enter psychoanalysis. Now, we touched on some of that, but we didn't touch on the psychoanalysis at all. And I wondered if you just wanted to comment a little on that because you indicated that that process was very important to you.

TW: I guess the first thing for me to say is that when I began psychoanalysis it was out of desperation. It wasn't causal or curious. It was a severe need.

IS: These anxiety attacks?

TW: Anxiety attacks, yes, including while I was teaching. When that happened, I realized that was the last straw. I couldn't conduct a class that way. One day I can recall I had an anxiety attack in the morning -- and being an art teacher was somewhat easier because I could make up problems and kind of keep the kids busy. In fact, a lot of my career I was very creative and inventive as a teacher and part of the creativeness and inventiveness was designed to make things easy for me, but also fun for the kids. I mean they had a good time and I had it easier. And I would do that sort of thing. For example (this is way off the subject but I'll just wander around), I can recall one day I had an anxiety attack and out of that anxiety attack I believe I hatched a teaching technique that stood me in good stead for a long time. I just sat on my desk and told them a story, slowly, and they had to draw the story as it was taking place. And I did other things, too. I forced them to erase and all that because I would say, "There's a mountain." They'd all draw the mountain. "Gee, there's a tree on the mountain." They'd draw the tree. "There's a house on the mountain, and here comes a cloud." They'd all draw the cloud and I'd say, "Now the cloud is gone." They'd all groan and have to erase the cloud. We'd go on with a whole drawing lesson. It was quite an interesting thing, but it would get me through the day because I wouldn't have to do really anything except sit there and sort of tell those little stories. But I realized I couldn't survive too long this way so I went into analysis. I was very, very poor at the time so I could only afford one day a week, I believe, to begin with. But the analyst impressed upon me it was important that I see him as often as I could afford. So whenever I could afford it, I would increase my going to twice a week and so on. This is the period where I was very poor; I was desperately poor. I was surviving on some borrowed money.

IS: Were you in Freudian analysis?

TW: Yes. Well, I think so, but my analyst is too good to be pinned down to that kind of thing. When I said, "Are you a Freudian analyst?" He said, "Well, all analysis comes from Freud." That's as far as I could get, but I would say he's quite classical in his own way of dealing with it. At any rate, what soon made analysis so important to me aside from the fact that it produced dramatic, quick improvement in my condition although it was to be a long. long road, what impressed me so deeply about it was for the very first time in my life, I mean the very first time, I was forced to deal with myself on some very deep terms I'd never considered before. I'd gone through already this process of challenging my beliefs and that sort of stuff. This was the same kind of thing only at a much more primal level, much deeper. I had to look at, as one has to in analysis, my relationships with everybody -- my mother, my father, and analyze it and look at them in a kind of a way that I'd never looked at them before. And that was so important to me to learn how to deal with the truth. That was the truth. In other words, what I'd always been taking as the truth was what I thought I thought, or what I thought I felt. But to come to terms for the first time with what really was the way things really were, like in my family and the effect of certain things on me and the way I affected certain things, that was a profound experience for me. It was the beginning of my education. I mean I really felt that was the first day of my education. College was nothing. I didn't learn anything in college. I learned a hell of a lot in analysis about people through myself. I don't have a whole lot more to say about it than that except that I can remember little things such as being afraid at one

point it would ruin me as an artist, afraid if I got healthy or got well, I would no longer need to paint -- viewing the need to paint as somewhat neurotic. My analyst contended, of course, that wasn't the case. I wasn't completely convinced, but I do feel that a little neurosis goes a long way. You get too much and you really get crippled in a bad way. Maybe if you get too healthy, you're crippled another way. I don't know.

IS: Did your work change as a result?

TW: I don't think that at any point in my analysis I noticed any relationship whatsoever between the analysis and the work, the analysis and the quality of the work, because from the beginning I started doing these little collages. Right from the start he asked me to bring some in. I brought in three of them to show him.

IS: Then when you were doing the Great American Nude, there was already an erotic content in your work when you brought it in to him?

TW: I don't recall if I'd started that particular series yet. It may have been just portrait collages at that time, if my chronology is correct, I'm right. I hadn't started anything really erotic yet. Erotic paintings really began well into the fall when Claire came back from vacation and we began a relationship. This was after graduation. She'd gone off for the summer. My analysis began right around that same time, I believe.

IS: That was the fall of what . . . ?

TW: '59. At any rate, the only thing I can say for sure is that the portrait collages were underway. I took them in to the analyst just to show him what kind of things I was doing.

IS: What did he say?

TW: No comment at all. It was the kind of thing that I think he would not comment on. He just wanted to get a better handle on me.

IS: Then you would say he kept that part of your being away from . . . ?

TW: No. He was willing to deal with it or whatever, but I didn't have that much occasion to make it central to the work there; it was only peripheral because these things are, after all, current, relatively minor matters as far as analysis is concerned, because we were after more important, deeper, older things. Also, his approach was very heavily on dreams which have a foot in the past and a foot in the present, but the foot in the past is far more important. So I learned how to dream and how to write down my dreams and remember my dreams, analyze my dreams. That became the central tool, and there seemed to be not much room left for trivial matters like my paintings. I could deal with them in analysis, but usually they were not as important as other things. But at no point, though, as I said, did I feel that it had any effect on them except that, as I felt I got better and better every year emotionally, I also felt I got better and better as a painter -- but I would assume that I would have done that in any event unless I would have been really unhealthy I might just have fallen apart. I was not too far from a nervous breakdown I would say at that point.

IS: How long did you remain in analysis?

TW: I had three children. The birth of my sister was the crucial event in my life, I've come to learn. As a matter of fact, I avoided children. In my first marriage I deliberately went way out of my way to not have children. I did not want to have children at least not until some very far point down the road. The second marriage came about with analysis. In fact, I wasn't sure when to get married again. My analyst forced me to realize I wanted to get married. Then he forced me to realize that I wanted to have children really, Rather than avoid having children, I really wanted to have children. I suppose he was right about that. So the important thing was to have some analysis going on whenever I had a child. We had three children. So I would quit analysis at one point but go back in to work through another birth. Then quit; then go back in to work through another birth. So that kept me on much longer than just some sort of ordinary thing. I would say I didn't really quit until two or three years ago, but I took hiatuses.

IS: Yes.

TW: I consider myself done now. I feel like a graduate. It's over. But it's never over. Have you been in analysis?

IS: No.

TW: It's never over, but mine's over as far as I'm concerned.

IS: Were there things that you could carry from your analysis into your art or do you think that you naturally carried in, say, this occupation of dreams? Or does that remain more or less removed or unconscious?

TW: Very removed or unconscious, I don't know. No conscious application whatsoever, not even the most remote. Nothing, that's all.

IS: The art activity, except, of course, for things like the erotic content that one can certainly track somehow into your psyche, even that wouldn't have any conscious connection to . . . ?

TW: No. I could explain a lot of my erotic involvement in terms of analysis, but I couldn't explain the analysis in terms of the erotic [paintings].

TW: I can look at the paintings and understand them because of what I know now about myself. But what I know about myself doesn't determine what I paint or anything. That's the conditions given in my situation. Analysis just helped me to understand better. I never deal with it. Like when I wrote in my book, I deliberately didn't go into it because it's too personal and nobody's business to go into those kinds of things. They're not that important to . . . .

IS: Yes. I'm not interested in it necessarily from a personal point of view except as it might connect with your work or your attitudes to your art. Now, you get out of school in '59 and you continue working. At one point you break the, I guess taboo, the curse that Nick Marsicano put on you. You got back to physical materials which truly are at least the physicality of the and that now takes you into about 1960?

TW: That really takes me into '62.

IS: '62. When is the show at the Tanager Gallery?

TW: The Tanager was '61, December. The very end of '61.

IS: So how long would you have been working on the collages; that would have been about a year and a half?

TW: The summer of '59, the summer of '60, the summer of '61. Two and a half years, almost.

IS: Two and half years. Well, let's possibly use that as a focal point, the show at the Tanager Gallery. How does that happen? How do you get introduced into the Tanager group? There's a period of time when you're also voted in as a member of the Tanager.

TW: Well, what happened to me was I decided . . . there was very little art gallery activity then, unlike now. There was not very much of "I'll take my slides around to galleries," but it was being done. There was something about that that was so distasteful to me I vowed I was going to wait until the world found me. [Laughter] I was going to let them find me. I figured that if I was good enough they would find me. And I was just lucky; they found me. They found me because I was willing to be at Oldenburg's happenings as I told you last time, I think. He was desperate for bit players here and there, and I would be in the things as long as I didn't have to attend rehearsal. I did one with Henry Geldzahler. And I'd never known him before. He asked me what I did. I said, "I'm a painter." He said, "Can I come and see you work?" I said, "Yes." And he came. He saw them and he told Alex Katz. Alex Katz came and offered me a show.

IS: You had already known Alex from . . . ?

TW: No.

IS: Green?

TW: Oh, that's right. I had known Alex, but it was cursory that I didn't really know him. But that's right. I'd known him. And when he came down to my little, tiny, apartment on Bleecker Street in the Village I had just finished the first few big Great American Nudes, the four by four foot ones, number one and number two and so on. He offered me a show on the strength of those. What with the Tanager just about the time that things were beginning to break generally, Henry Geldzahler was on the scene now. So was Ivan Karp. So was Dick Bellamy -- all at the same time, all three communicating with each other and going around to see artists in common. I committed myself to a show at the Tanager. Dick Bellamy in the meantime came down and was interested in having me at the Green Gallery but wasn't too sure about me yet. He took some things I had in the back room to hang onto for a while. At one point I had to make a decision whether to at the last minute drop the show at the Tanager and have a show at the Green instead which would have been better for me I suppose, but I felt it was not fair. Anyway, I went through with the commitment with the Tanager.

IS: I'm not sure it would have been better.

TW: Well, it delayed my entry, anyway.

IS: It did, but it also made you independent of that particular constellation to a degree.

TW: Maybe, I don't know, because at the same time also there was the Sidney Janis New Realist Show coming along. I remember, in fact I sat one day at the Tanager Gallery during my show -- I think it was during my show. I may be a little off on my chronology here, but I had to make a decision -- I'm getting a little ahead of your plan here . . . .

IS: No, we'll go back.

TW: Sidney Janis had come down now to select works for a show, and I was quite impressed. Here was Sidney Janis. This is the guy I used to peek at in his office when he had de Kooning and Kline shows. So here he was in my studio and responding favorably to the work. This meant for me a way out of teaching maybe. At the same time I feared being lumped with all these other guys, and I really didn't know what to do. I spent some time deciding whether I wanted to be in Sidney Janis' show or just decline gracefully. I recall being at the Tanager Gallery when Ivan Karp was telling me about Lichtenstein and Rosenquist. They hadn't shown yet, but he was telling me about their work and that I should see it because we really had something in common. I got uneasy feelings. I didn't want to have anything in common with anybody at that point. I mean, my grip on whatever it was was fragile enough that I felt it had to be really something uniquely my own or maybe I wouldn't have any grip on it. I don't know. I wasn't too comfortable, I suppose, at the time. Well, maybe it was a mixture. I guess I was in conflict about that; on one hand I was very confident and on the other hand I was quite insecure. But when I finally did see Rosenquist and Lichtenstein, I was quite relieved to see that, indeed, in every effect, we didn't have very much in common. Other people didn't agree with that assessment, maybe, but I felt quite a lot of relief. I liked their work very much, though. I remember Warhol's work was just surfacing then, too, and I felt sorry for Warhol because he was such an underdog. He was having such a hard time. There was a lot of scorn that immediately came on Warhol. His comic strip things he was doing a little bit but not as well as Lichtenstein. He was starting one of these Campbell soup cans or whatever it was.

IS: It was the Campbell soup cans.

TW: There was a lot of scorn for it. I was very taken by the blatantness, I guess, blatant simplicity of the thing. So I was a defender of Warhol. But again felt there was no relationship at all. I was quite relaxed about it. There was nothing between he and I at all. Sidney Janis imposed that first threat of lumping us all together in some kind of entity, and I decided, "Oh, the hell with it. I'll let fate take care of itself." I wanted to be out of teaching school. I wanted to make some money so I could paint. I was actually about to quit teaching school for six months, all on account of a bluff. I was going to bluff fate until I could make it, until I had saved up enough money so I could quit and then I was going to paint for a year. Luckily I never had to go through with that.

IS: Most any other job you might have managed to get yourself fired and gone on unemployment. [Laughs]

TW: You know, I was very lucky because I started off teaching junior high school in a very tough school in Brooklyn. I had some rough times out there and some good times. But basically a pretty rough two years. I just managed somehow to take these little collages to the High School of Art and Design to a most sympathetic man. I heard there was an opening in the school and I went there and he hired me immediately, a man named Ben Clements. He was very sympathetic, and a really good man. He hired me and left me completely alone. And he had enough confidence that he didn't check up on me; he didn't anything. I could do whatever I damned well wanted. It was like teaching in college without the challenge, without the intellectual rigor of it. It was so nice. It was kind of a proper introduction for me into the real world from being out in Brooklyn at a tough junior high school for two years to get back into this thing. And then the Sidney Janis show. It was kind of a nice transition.

IS: Let's go back to the Tanager. Did you get to know the members of the Tanager group at all? I mean, it couldn't have only been Alex who offered you the show.

TW: I got to know them all on a social, cursory level because I didn't mix very much. I still don't. I work and I haven't got much time for anything but work. It was that way even more so because I was teaching school in the days and I was doing my work at night and on weekends. So I met them all; it was social and, just as always with me, I didn't talk much about art with any of them. But I met them all, Raymond Rocklin even; Sal . . . .

IS: Sally Hazelet?

TW: Sal Sirugo.

IS: Loid Dodd?

IS: Alex and Philip Pearlstein . . . ?

TW: Pearlstein, of course. He was doing cliffs at that time.

IS: Cajori?

TW: Cajori. I don't remember.

IS: Was Marcicano still a member?

TW: I don't think so.

IS: Pearl Fine?

TW: Possibly.

IS: They may have left by '60.

TW: I have a feeling that they weren't there. There was somebody else. David Lund, I think, might have been or was it . . . ?

IS: IT was Angelo Aphol? Angelo was really the key pin there.

TW: You see, when I came, I don't even know if I met him. He was either out or wasn't involved.

IS: He would have been in Rome. He'd already have gone on a Fullbright . . . .

TW: The only thing that I remember about the time there was that I had to sit like once a week.

IS: That's right.

TW: I sat there. Actually I bought a nice little Marisol sculpture there, too.

IS: "Coca-Cola?"

TW: Yes.

IS: Oh, damn. I wanted to buy that. [Laughter] Do you remember what it sold for?

TW: Something awful.

IS: Fifty dollars.

TW: Fifty or seventy-five. It's one of those two.

IS: Yes. So you own that. I wanted to buy it, but it was gone.

TW: that was a great buy. I snapped that one up immediately, but I gave it to the Modern eventually. I can't think of the woman who used to work there.

IS: Enid. Was she English?

TW: My only memory is sitting there for an Alex Katz show anyway where he has his cut-out figures around the room. I was sitting there and suddenly got the feeling that somebody was looking over my shoulder, and of course, it was this roomful of figures.

IS: What was the public response to the show as you remember?

TW: I seem to remember only one occasion where a man came into the gallery -- no, two guys came in. One guy was like an anarchist; he was very angry, very upset. He wanted to destroy the whole show. Another guy came in who I somehow felt might have been John Canaday. I think this was even before John Canaday's time, but somehow when John Canaday came along, I thought, "God, that sounds like it must have been John Canaday."

IS: It would have been. He would have been there.

TW: I don't know if it was him. I really don't know. I don't know why I formed that association, but this man thought the paintings were interesting, but thought I should get serious, quit clowning around. That's really all I remember about response. I have no other memory except that we had sold one of the paintings beforehand that was in the show -- we sold two of the paintings, I guess, to the Tremaines. And we didn't sell any from the show except a big drawing to Reggie and Mira Cabrall of Provincetown. So I was a bit disappointed because I was primed for this success that suddenly didn't come. Nobody bought anything.

IS: I didn't realize the Cabralls were collectors. They own the Moore's.

TW: I don't know, but they were active in a way for a very brief time. I think they separated not long after that -- maybe it was long after that I remember I went up there once. The whole Atlantic house was full of all kinds of art. I don't remember now what it was. They were pretty active. But there is not much more I can say about it because my memory about such things tends to become one big blur and all I remember is those few little things.

IS: But it's interesting because I remember the show. There was a great deal of ambiguity about it. If I remember correctly, the show did have some of the nudes in it, and the nudes. . . [TELEPHONE INTERRUPTION] . . . looked like advertisements, either Matisse or advertisements, and I think the Tanager people tended to want to look more at the Matisse side. They sort of found the advertisement side as sort of an enhancement or an enlivement of the Matisse aspect or, say, the Cubist composition or the compositional aspect in the work. Do you remember any of that? The reason I'm asking is you find yourself in a rather curious position because, obviously, this group which would have had no -- in fact it did have no sympathy toward Pop Art, you know -- had accepted your show. I remember your show was problematic and shocking to these people I knew on Tenth Street.

TW: You have to bear in mind my show came before any of the other Pop shows.

IS: Yes, it did.

TW: So there wasn't that kind of thing established yet. I don't think I got a review so I don't have any responses that way and nobody from the Tanager voiced any opinions to me. So I'm operating in the dark on terms of that.

IS: It's interesting that you weren't a member until after the show.

TW: Gee, I don't even remember that. I don't remember when or how.

IS: If I'm not mistaken, it was a guest show and then you were brought into membership.

TW: That could be. The relationship meant so little to me from that point of view that my memory is that I assumed that when I had the show I was a member.

IS: It may have been.

TW: That's just my assumption in looking back because at no point do I have any reason to remember one way or the other because it didn't mean anything to me to be a member. It meant something to me to have a show there and to be a part of the gallery than to be a member.

IS: Do you remember anything about Alex's response when he saw the work?

TW: Nothing particular. Wait just a moment. You raised something that I don't want to let get by. I want to get back to the Tanager show because I was aware -- first of all I was all over the place then about what I wanted to do, so there was a great deal of variation in approach with the nudes and even more the year before that, the little ones. I mean I could be Bonnard one day, Soutine the next, or worse. So that whole period to me was a sorting out for myself. I would start my paintings with no preconceived notions either. I would start with a shape like a four-by-four foot piece and a drawing, and I'd put the drawing on and make up a painting. So there was no stylistic foundation within me yet to make things very consistent nor did I care to be. So I'm just commenting about what you noticed in the show. Yes, I noticed it too, and even at the time I was aware, I realized I wasn't established within myself yet. I didn't know what I wanted to do or at least which direction to take. After the show I began to make very concrete decisions about that -- about style, in a bigger sense.

IS: You say that even before the Tanager Show, of course you had met Geldzahler because he had introduced you to Katz, and then I guess it must have been Geldzahler who told Bellamy and Karp about your work, and they came down. Can you talk a little bit about Bellamy and Bellamy's response? When did he incidentally give you the first show at the Green?

TW: That first show at the Green was '62, and I forget what the month was, but I seem to remember it being November.

IS: Would that have been before or after the Janis New Realism?

TW: It was so close as to be almost simultaneous.

IS: I see. What was Bellamy like?

TW: First of all, let me start with Geldzahler because I have a lot of rancor towards Henry professionally since he excluded me from that big show he had at the Met years ago. That was really . . . .

IS: The show in 1970?

TW: I suppose, but he stuck it to me. But I have such fond feelings for Henry because he's the guy that found me and got me found and I'll always kind of have a grateful feeling for him. First of all, he stood out more than the others because Henry was so funny, so amusing and so interested in what was going on, and my memory is he brought down Bellamy. The two of them came together. I can recall we were looking at "Great American Nude Number One" which is a big version of that little one up on the top up there. I remember Henry saying about that blue sheet, something about it was just like a piece of stretched something -- I forget what. But they were both there together. Now, like almost everything else, all my memories are a blur I can't sort out. What I can remember is me and my paintings and the problems I had at the time and all that. All the other things that happened just go by in kind of a blur. So my memories of Bellamy: first of all. he's from Cincinnati which I knew.

IS: No, I didn't know that.

TW: Oh, yes. I didn't know him there, but I knew he was from Cincinnati. There's a lot of us from Cincinnati.

IS: There were a lot of Cincinnati persons. There was yourself, Dine, and Bellamy. We almost got a Mafia.

TW: There's somebody else I ran across recently, or maybe it was just the model I had here Saturday. Anyway, and I knew that Bellamy was a failed poet. So he came to me, and I knew that this was a man of some sensitivity and he was from my own hometown. He seemed like a nice guy, very, very soft-spoken and very gentle, and certainly interested in what was happening. He would have a tendency -- not the first visit, but when he would come for a visit, Bellamy wouldn't so much enter the room as he would suddenly be in it. I mean you don't remember his coming in, but, before you knew it, he'd be there lying on the floor and he'd just sort of meld into whatever the scene was.

IS: Or go to sleep.

TW: Yes, whatever. He'd lie there. Other times he would get used to the situation; he'd get used to the environment. He'd look all over somehow and he'd comment on things before he'd even look at the paintings or he'd look at the paintings and he'd look at everything else and he wouldn't say anything for maybe half an hour about the paintings. He sort of wanted to let them soak into him a little bit. He didn't seem to go too much with first responses. I recall more than once getting him a pillow to lie on, to put under his head on the floor The only thing that bothered me about Dick in the beginning was that he was very unsure about whether to offer me a show. In fact, I had to be a little bit aggressive and phone him once or twice and say, "What are you going to do? I've got to know." Finally he decided.

IS: Now, Ivan then would have been working for Castelli.

TW: Yes. Ivan was interesting because he was a -- Bellamy was so soft, so gentle, and had a gallery. He was sort of looking about for the gallery. Ivan was involved with collectors. Ivan brought the Tremaines down. Whether he brought anybody else down I tend to forget. But anyway, Ivan . . . .

IS: The big collectors would have been the Sculls, the Kraushaars . . . ?

TW: I forget who and how the particular people came down because by that time it's a little bit confusing -- probably Bellamy because everything went through the Green Gallery except the first Tremaine sale. I do recall the first. It was rather amusing at the time. Ivan brought down the Tremaines who looked at my things and were very interested. They asked me prices. It never occurred to me to put prices. But I had prices to give them. They asked me how much for this little piece which was about eight inches around and I said, "Eight hundred dollars." And, "How much for this piece?" It was a four foot square, and I said, "Six hundred dollars." Then they went away and then Ivan called me up and explained the facts of life, and told me how things were done. So we started pricing by size. [Laughter] I'd been pricing by hoW much I'd liked the things. Ivan produced the first money. I was so excited to get some money and painting so I could support myself. It was really very exciting to be able to stay home and paint all the time. It really came true almost immediately. It was so instantaneous. The Sidney Janis New Realist show produced an outpouring of money. It just came roaring in, and in my own show, when we sold the show out -- everything I did we could sell -- a couple of things we let go from the show and I painted new pieces to take their place. It was like a machine, kind of.

IS: And that happened with the Green show?

TW: Yes, but right at the time of the Sidney Janis show.

IS: In conjunction with the Sidney Janis show?

TW: I forget what the chronology was exactly, but I do recall there was an overlap.

IS: Would this have been a great many collectors or a few? Was it people like the Sculls?

TW: In those days you bought little things or you bought big things. Some collectors bought just little things; that was nice enough, but they wouldn't even consider buying big things. But the ones that bought the big things you can name on almost one hand. The early ones are the ones you already named plus the Buchwalters from Kansas City were very important because they were the first ones outside New York City, and it made us realize maybe there's a market beyond this thing right here. And Dick Bellamy and then Virginia Wright. Dick Bellamy brought all those people down with the exception of the Tremaines who first came with Ivan.

IS: What about the Sidney Janis show? Now seeing your work in the context of American and also so-called "international?"

TW: I resented the international aspect of it. The Europeans had no relationship whatsoever to what we were doing, none! There was virtually zero relationship. I didn't know what the hell they were doing there. I thought it was very confusing and silly of him. I guess he really hadn't thought it out or he didn't care that much anyway. And the English contingent -- I scorned almost all the English contingent and almost all the European thing. I think I overdid it. I don't scorn Arman, but it was just something else; it was just different. I do recall being somewhat smug about my own accomplishment. I felt so full of it inside myself, so self-pleased at that particular moment, that when one gallery person who had come from Europe -- what was her name? -- had a gallery in Switzerland, a rather attractive woman. I'm sorry; I forget her name right now. Anyway, she looked at my work -- she'd seen everybody's work -- and said, "You're going to knock them all right out." And I thought to myself, "You're damned right! This stuff is good." [Laughter] Well, it didn't work out that way at all. That was my first real introduction to the real world. Things don't always work the way you think they're going to work. A lot of times I would have a show in subsequent years and, boy, I'd think it was a sensational show, anticipating almost a standing ovation when I entered the gallery. It doesn't work that way.

IS: I want to get back to that point in a minute, but how would you characterize the American component? What made the American art on the whole look different from the French and the English?

TW: Oh, boy! That's hard for me because I'm not an intellectual and I don't analyze things that way.

IS: No, I know, but you could recall as you looked that there was a difference, there seemed to be a difference, and that difference was important to you.

TW: I know the difference, but I'm not sure that I can verbalize it. I'd have to make a real hard effort right now to do it and I'm not even sure I could do it. And I'm not sure I'm up to that effort. You see, I was in part by this time so down on almost all European art for what seemed to me chasing a kind of an empty, leftover idea of some sort. As far as I was concerned, de Kooning and our guys had established art now. What they were trying to do in Europe increasingly was a kind of a copy of it -- I thought third-rate kind of imitative sort of the gestural guys and all that sort of stuff, what I thought was so decorative and so foppish, I couldn't tolerate it very much, and while this work wasn't that kind of work, it had -- I'm only going on my memory now -- I recall it didn't convince me; it had an artificial something about it. But, of course, maybe it would because it was from another culture, and I felt that it wasn't what I was so ferociously involved with and what these other guys were. Lichtenstein convinced me, even Warhol convinced me. Rosenquist, Dine. None of the Europeans, none of them. I really can't; I'm at a loss for words to try to describe them.

IS: I want to talk about the artists. I wanted to talk about them as people came up, so that's fine. You had already known Oldenburg and Dine from the Judson days, and now you would have then met Warhol, Rosenquist and Lichtenstein. Could you talk a little about them and possibly other artists at the time.

TW: My main memory of artists starts with the artists at the Green Gallery because they're the ones I got to know the best, such as this guy George Segal. I measured important collectors in museums by whether they had a Segal or not, because he was so difficult. You had to buy those plastic figures in a booth and all that sort of stuff after you'd bought it. If you buy a Segal, you're all right; if you don't like Segal, there's something wrong. Lucas Samaris -- I guess up to that point I'd never run into a really strange artist and that was a really strange artist and interesting. When they started having Pop shows all around the country like Washington, Boston -- we did a lot of traveling; we took a train and we'd all be on the same train, a lot of us anyway. It was sort of social. We'd go to so many openings; there was so much socializing. We would always meet in these social situations. It was like a cocktail party. At no point do I remember talking art with any of them. We, none of us, talked art. None of us.

IS: You didn't visit studios?

TW: No. Well, I'd have dinner at Lichenstein's, but I wouldn't . . .I still don't. I don't visit studios.

IS: What about places like Max's Kansas City, the bars.

TW: I never went in for that sort of thing. At that time there was no Max's Kansas City, but there was a Cedar Bar. It was, I guess, still in existence as a place. I might have gone there once. God, it was not a very inviting place.

IS: No, it wasn't; deliberately not inviting. But go on about Lichtenstein, Warhol, et cetera.

TW: It amused me. Here we were artists and we didn't talk art that we wanted to talk. So we would talk about things like: What time do you get up? What time do you go to work? How long do you work? Occasionally we talked technical matters, like Rosenquist wasn't using any varnish which was quite a shock. So we talked about varnish and things of that sort. Warhol is the only guy I can remember talking art with at one point. I was telling him I was doing still lifes. He knew I had wanted to be a cartoonist and had been a cartoonist. He said, "You ought to paint what you know best. You ought to paint your cartoons real big." And I dismissed that as nonsense. But it was an intriguing idea in a way of painting a big New Yorker cartoon six by six feet. It was not a bad idea actually if you were a cartoonist.

IS: You didn't go up to the Factory?

TW: What?

IS: Warhol's Factory?

TW: No. I was there one time. It must have been a party. It wouldn't have occurred to me to have anything to do with any other artist in order to talk art or to see their work because we saw them when we had a show. So it didn't matter. I remember only the socializing and spending some time with Lichtenstein in the Hamptons, a weekend guest, I guess, and he was with Luddie Lou Eisenhower.

IS: What did -- and I guess this would have to be talked about over a period of time -- you think of the notion of being a Pop artist?

TW: It is kind of strange that everything you've asked me I feel like I've already talked about because it's in my book, and sometimes I get this feeling that I've nothing to say that's not in the book except its elucidation. I feel like I've covered everything I've got to say. I don't feel like I've got that much to say, so I wind up saying the same old thing. It's almost an automatic response. My memory is quite clear. Ivan Karp made the first thing. He referred to us as "Commonists" because we use common objects. I didn't quite know why because the only thing I'd done at that time was use that McCall's magazine. It was the only thing I'd used at that point. That was a cultural reference. Everything before had been fruit or flowers or generalities that had been used through the ages, rather deliberately. **Break in taping** So I didn't think too much of any particular label at that time because there really wasn't a label at first, because there was this "Commonist." But nobody really used that. It was just something that Ivan had suggested. I don't even remember when I first heard "Pop" Art. The first thing I heard of, of course, was the New Realists. That set all right with me because I liked the idea of being a realist, whatever that was, but the idea of being lumped in with the European contingent -- if they were "new Realists," then I didn't want to be called a "New Realist." I didn't want to be called anything as far as that goes, but I understand the ways of the world. So, whenever the Pop Art thing came up, at first I thought, "Not bad, not bad at all." It was a simple, concise emphatic way in which [to sum it up].

IS: There was also Swenson's "The American Sign Painters."

TW: No, I don't remember that.

IS: Go ahead.

TW: I remember reading an article but I don't remember taking it seriously as a characterization.

IS: Yes, it was Pop art.

TW: Well, at any rate, I thought, "Not bad." I thought it was a pretty good way of describing the current evolutionary step in art, and I embraced it to the extent that I didn't resist it, and I took it to be an aesthetic thing. So I took it to be somewhat synonymous with what I was doing or what anyone else was doing at the moment in terms of aesthetics. What I hadn't realized was the emphasis people would put on it literarily. I'd grown by this time to really a complete disdain of everything literary. I was only interested in visual or literal things. I was involved with a visual form and not a literary form. I had no bones about that. So when people began to talk all the time about Coca-Cola or the Campbell Soup cans and all that sort of stuff, I began to get very uneasy because that was subject-matter talk, and I was involved in important, aesthetic matters, I felt, not subject matter.

IS: Than you didn't see your work at all as American or social commentary or satire?

TW: American, yes; social commentary, no. Satire, no. My first memory of the conflict that was arising which wasn't much of a conflict, I suppose, was a party at Sculls once, and Rauschenberg said to me, "Look, you've got to accept 'Coca-Cola.'" I was just leaving he party and I didn't want to get involved in a discussion about it, but I realized I don't have to accept "Coca-Cola." not as being important aesthetically. I accept it as being an important object to us culturally or psychically. God knows, I drank more than my share of Coca-Cola when I was a kid and all that and the importance of the bottle and the shape and all that, but it didn't mean a damned thing to me as an aesthetic matter.

IS: But you did suggest that, as a kind of part of the American scene or American realism, it might have had?

TW: Let's put it this way. I was aware that I would use it, but it didn't mean anything that I used it. What I was doing was denying that it meant anything -- using it. Literarily.

IS: Other than in aesthetic terms?

TW: Yes. Other than a very intense presence. My God, it was very intense. As I said in my book, I once did use it to solve a problem where I needed something stronger than red. I had red up there anyway, but I needed something to make that red even stronger. And a bottle of Coke really kind of set it up, but I became increasingly defensive because I was using these things to such an extent. By this time I'm doing a big billboard collage -- the damned thing's over twenty feet wide. First of all, like this piece -- this nude which doesn't exist really until you plug it in. [Wesselman plugs it in.]

IS: Yes.

TW: People that would see things of this sort would say, "It's a comment on gas station culture," which is off the point. The point is it's a comment on the beautiful intensity of gas station signs. It is taken from gas station signs, but it's the intensity of the visual fact of those things, not the cultural fact of their presence or their consumption or what they imply or that sort of stuff. Things began to get skewed too much in the wrong direction. It kept accelerating; so when it got to billboards, it was even more. The assumption was that billboards were being used because they were a commentary on our consumption and our advertising and all that stuff. It wasn't. It was just here was an incredible, visual object. I mean, you'd get them in your living room and unwrap the thing -- it was literally staggering for days to see these things. I had a thirty-five foot hero sandwich in the living room. I had to cut it in half. Used one half in one piece [of the room] and the other in another piece. Or a woman's smile where the mouth is as big as your living room rug! Wow! Made up of all these dots and things. So I was swept off my feet by my environment -- but by the visual intensity of it, not the literary implications of it, culturally or psychically . . . .

IS: Oh, but there is one other dimension of it. There is the psychological dimension.

TW: Psychological is one, you'd be aware of, but it is beside the point to me.

IS: Except that, if anything separates you from the other "Pop" artists, it's the erotic dimension in your work.

TW: Yes, well, that's something else. To me erotic -- that's another thing. It doesn't come up in billboards even. There might be a woman or a face but it's not part of it.

IS: Well, it would come in occasionally, "Men and Girls."

TW: Well, it could. I didn't happen to use any of those billboards. The psychological aspect is one which I think I was always appreciative of, but I was a naive as far as I was concerned. I reacted to things I saw. I didn't know why I reacted to them. I just thought they were beautiful or intense or exciting and I had to have them. I had to put it in the painting; so I tried to get it. And I'd get it and I'd put it in the painting. It was that simple -- no fancy stuff, no intellectual thought, no psychological reverberations. Maybe along the way an awareness of the power of these things I was using, but all rather beside the point. I think to a great extent I am, or was, at least, a primitive painter because I'm wrapped up in my own excitement without being too aware of the implications of it. I know my life has been sort of that way anyway. I was never too intellectually oriented. I was never too aware of the implications of all those things. Psychoanalysis began to awaken me to the implications of things. In my book, too, I mention the fact that I was so naive or whatever that some of the early still lifes I would take a bottle, I would get a bottle for a collage, from a billboard and it was a straight bottom, like it was taken at eye level, and I'd put it on a tabletop or the tabletop was tilted. And I literally wasn't aware of that discrepancy, that I was violating perspective, because I was so excited about the presence of the bottle and everything. I was blinded to those things. I was excited. I was terribly excited by my work, by what was going on. I was so excited that at times it got the best of me. I'm still that way. I get so excited about what I'm doing that sometimes I forget to notice that she's got a big lump on her nose or something. Strange things go by me.

IS: But then you pushed it in the most obvious way by actually introducing at least a part of the anatomy into

one of your works, the breast, and in a very sophisticated and ambiguous way in these lips smoking . . . . Would you talk a little bit about the introduction of the breast, a real breast, into that work? That was very shocking at the time.

TW: I don't know why that occurred to me either. I really can't quite -- I sometimes try to remember the origins of that particular jump, but I think all it was . . . . I know what it was exactly. It began very early when I was doing the Nudes, and I thought, "Gee, it would be great to have a real nude, a real, live nude." This is like a memento, "Study for live nude, 1966." It must have been around '64 or '65. I ordered three of these window casements. Imagine, I had a carpenter build me a window, a sash window. I used two of them in works and the third one which I still have here I was going to use with a live nude, and I did these works in '64. So I must have started the idea of the live nude in '64, a most interesting situation, because at that time, as I also had mentioned in my book, when I was doing these nudes with their legs spread, there were no "girlie" magazines. There might have been a Playboy, but they didn't have leg spread shots. There were no beaver shots, not that you could buy anyway. Or see. When I finally got a hold of one, in 1966 I think, maybe '65, it was very tame. It was a girl that had her legs spread and water was coming out of a bathtub onto her cunt. I mention this to cite the climate at the time. Now, the climate was so strange that when I thought first of all that I would do a nude in a painting, I called up my lawyer, a guy I knew who was involved with censorship things and told him what I was contemplating and asked him what might be the legal problems of it. I told Sidney Janis about it. Sidney was kind of interested in it, but Sidney wanted to do it as a kind of tableau. The model would be behind a curtain and you'd open the curtain and there she'd be in a pose; pull the curtain and maybe she'd change her pose. That was the old-fashioned kind of idea that you did those things in that way. My lawyer approached the district attorney and said, "Hypothetically, what would happen if an artist had a work in which appeared a real, reclining nude?" The district attorney said, "We'd make an arrest!" He was quite emphatic about it. "And furthermore, if it was over before we got to it, and we could make a case, we'd make an arrest retroactively." Everybody was concerned about it. Public nudity was quite shocking still. So we were going to draw up an agreement where Sidney Janis wouldn't be arrested. I would be arrested because I didn't want Sidney being thrown into jail. I even approached this guy -- I forget his name now, a tall, skinny guy at a gallery up on Fifty-seventh Street -- about doing this show because I wasn't sure that Sidney wanted to do it. And then I started putting the show off because I was aware that the complexity of the piece was such that I'd probably have to give up half a year's work just to get the thing done. I felt that the problems were so big to work out. By the time I finally realized I could handle it with aplomb -- in fact I started to order everything. I ordered this shape for the nude to lie on. It was a little more sophisticated by this time. It was a much more sophisticated realization than this would have been. All of a sudden "Oh, Calcutta!" came or "Hair" . . . .

IS: "Hair?"

TW: They both kind of came at the same time. The idea of public nudity -- I think it was "Oh, Calcutta!" that came first, but it might have been "Hair" -- was so clear that I felt if I did it in an art gallery, it would just bring me such contempt that I wasn't sure I wanted to endure it, like I'd jumped on the bandwagon for public nudity. So I abandoned that project completely. And suddenly, when I started doing the bedroom paintings which I decided to . . . see, I'd gotten over the years excited about scale, coming closer on the nude. I'd gotten a little tired of doing full length nudes because everything else in the painting had to be so small. It wasn't exciting enough to my eye. Everything was little, too much like a Barney Tobey or something. I wanted to deal with these big shapes; so I came in closer and closer on the nude and kept coming in so close that finally I did the whole tit or the whole face or whatever. That was really when my work began to me, when I made that realization of what I'm excited by. So having then done bedroom paintings where the tit took the place of the nude in effect [and] was the whole subject of the painting and suddenly remembering the live nude I wanted to do, it was quite obvious to make that jump, to do a real live tit. I couldn't do the live nude because of the scorn I felt still [would exist], but I felt the live tit was off of that subject enough and isolated into my current preoccupation that I could do it. And at the exact moment I met a woman on Cape Cod who had just the right tit. It all came together literally on the right weekend. So I made a date to draw her as soon as we got back and got the piece started. And that's really all there was to that -- no special meanings or implications in the situation except for the first time I was aware that I was playing with a very delicately loaded gun here because it was something that could be too cute. So I tried to do it just as straight as I possibly could. We set it into a doorway so you didn't know the woman was there. I tried to do it just as straight as I could.

IS: This was already after you had done the television set?

TW: Oh, yes, long after that.

IS: There seems to be some connection there.

TW: Yes, I guess so. This was a situation, too, whereby . . . no, I was about to say that this was the first time I was thrust into a carnival atmosphere because it was a bit of a carnival kind of thing that Time Magazine played it up and that kind of thing. As a matter of fact, because of what they wrote, I came in on Saturday and the

whole gallery was full of people just waiting. She hadn't come yet, the model. She was a political science major and I didn't want to impinge on her time, so I asked her only to work on Saturdays. I didn't want to demean her as a feminist to spend her time, all her time. She was willing to do it on Saturdays. But what was important about this piece for me was it represented a frustration which never did come to pass. I wanted to be asked by a museum to do an environment. I wanted to do this kind of thing, big. I wanted to do a room. I liked the idea of doing these big things. It wasn't just the tit. There were other things in it. It was like a big Cornell to me in a way, looking into this thing. I would like to have done a whole room that way. I never got asked.

IS: I want to come back to that in a minute. But just to round off our discussion -- your work has very frequently been seen as humorous. I mean even the idea of the tit struck many people as being very funny. Other things that you've done, the incongruous juxtaposition of things -- the introduction of the television set, for example -- it's sort of shocking, but shocking with a humorous edge. And you yourself have not seen your work in that way although one might relate that to your early preoccupation with cartooning. Would you talk a little bit about at least your own response to that "take" on your work?

TW: I was aware early on that I was dealing with a dangerous medium in collage because you can do all kinds of instant juxtapositions in collage, things that leapfrog from one to the other without you even being aware of it. It's easy to make jokes in collage, and it's so easy that it's a trap. Early on I realized that I didn't want to make jokes, so I tried to avoid jokes. Once in a while I did make a joke, when I had a woman in a view out the window there was a woman running in a Maidenform thing. I was taken by that vision; that's why I did it, but at the same time I was aware I was kind of joking. I did resent it though when the critic -- I forget his name now -- referred to my big erection paintings as jokey. I didn't think that was called for, no more jokey than the tits. At the same time, I was aware that a big prick painting -- it's not that easy to stand there with a straight face, I think. I think it is rather amusing. But I always smiled at Rousseau and I smiled at a lot of Matisse's because they were so good I'd smile at them. Sometime I'd smile at them because they were so good they were funny. This is off the subject of really anything, but looking at my own work I tried to avoid jokes. In dealing with nudes it's certainly easy to make jokes, especially with collage. Early on I was aware that since I was willing to try anything -- T.V., light -- anything -- there's an implied willingness . . . I don't know what I want to say here. There's an implied humor right away in my work from the beginning because I was willing to try anything in the beginning. And some of those things -- I mean, a T.V. set in a painting -- I'd smile at that; even if I didn't like to so much, I'd smile at that. There are a lot of things that are amusing even though they weren't meant to be; they just were because I was willing to do it. A live nude -- I would have laughed over that. I was willing to do it. But I've always denied a kind of conscious attempt to be funny. I guess that's the kind of distinction that I want to make. I never tried to be funny; I still don't. I try to avoid it because I always felt the work was dangerous enough -- that's why I title things with numbers because the works were fraught already with all kinds of poetic possibilities that you could make all kinds of titles or you could read things into it. I didn't want to have people reading things into it, some of these things, so I just gave them numbers to neutralize that effect. The same kind of things with humor. Humor would be intrusive to the work if I acknowledged it or even tried to use it. I don't know; I don't quite know what I'm saying at this point.

IS: There is a sort of paradox because you've indicated that your primary purpose is aesthetic and yet you introduce subject matter that is almost considered anti-aesthetic at least because of its kitsch quality or anti-aesthetic at least because of the power of the subject matter in itself.

TW: You know, I was just thinking, as you're talking, of my series of the dropped bra in sculptures, and they weren't meant to be funny. I thought that was an important discovery on my part to provide me with a meaningful sculptural image anyway. It was an important discovery to me of something that I could make [as] very serious and moving, but at the same time I have to admit it's damned funny -- a six by twelve foot bra in steel. I mean, it's funny, but it's not meant to be laughed at. I'm a funny guy, but you wouldn't know that because I don't make jokes. Socially I'm deadly serious most of the time, but I can sit down and -- well, I got interested in cartooning about six months ago. I started writing jokes. I must have maybe two thousand in six months, cartoon ideas, not all first rate. But I would say four or five hundred of them are first rate. I have the capacity to be very funny, but not socially, not performing. So I think that, since that's a part of my nature, I'm suggesting, it's automatically a part of my work to some extent; but it's not that I mean it to be. It just sort of is. People tell me my book is sort of funny. I didn't really write it to be funny, but I guess here and there there's a subtle thing. I'm deeply interested in humor. That's one of my biggest interests. Painting, sex and humor -- they're the biggest things in my life. Because it's a part of me, I guess it's a part of my work, although I've always denied it as by intent -- because I don't want it to be. Therefore I say it's not. I'm defensive about it, my sense of humor.

IS: I'd like to talk more about the environmental aspect because, of course, the collages have an environmental aspect in which you introduce chunks of environment. And your work has in many other regards as well, like introducing the television set or even the tit piece. When you had a chance to, I guess, make "happenings" because you were part of the group, you didn't. However, early on you did make environments and I want you talk a little bit about those early environments because we haven't touched on them much.

TW: Also, I didn't think of them as environments in any respect, not even remotely. I made quite a point of that, too. First of all, I didn't do any "happenings" because it never would have occurred to me. That wasn't my thing. Maybe I'd secretly admit that I have a vague memory of trying to wonder if I might have done one or tried to think of one or something, but if that's true, it never came to pass. There was a time there when people were talking about environmental art and I was doing these pieces that had objects on the floor including a rug and so forth, and I think also I have to confess I was still under the influence of something Marsicano once said about sculpture. He didn't want people coming into a sculpture and taking a shit. That struck me as something. He wanted people to be put off by it, forbidden. He didn't want them to feel too at home inside his sculpture if he were theoretically doing sculpture. You could say the same thing about a painting maybe. And I kind of had this same feeling about my paintings at that time -- they were to be looked at; they weren't to be played with. I was definitely involved with the idea of brand new as Katz liked his painting. I wanted my rugs to be non-poetic, that is, no use, no shadow on them, no sign of wear and tear, no story, no history -- no nothing, just a rug, brand new. I needed a table -- I had one built brand new. I went very carefully about the matter of deciding how wide to make that rug, a lot of trial and error, because just a little bit too wide and it became an environment. I had to get it at just the point where it was not an environment. It was an important concept to me at the time. I was very excited by the truth of it. Even though these things were three-dimensional, they were really two-dimensional. The third dimension was just an illusion to intensify the two-dimensional experience. In other words, I was saying they were three-dimensional, but they weren't supposed to be three-dimensional. And I didn't want people messing with them. So we finally had to put tape on the floor, then even a string. People thought they were supposed to walk on the rug and experience the feeling of walking on the rug. I didn't want them walking on the rug. They were supposed to look at the painting. We had a medicine cabinet which they kept opening and stealing things from. The museum that finally bought the piece had to put a plexiglass shield over it because people were always stealing the things inside. People thought because it was like an environment they were supposed to participate, participate with the painting. This ringing telephone I have with the wire and the receiver in it, people kept trying to take it off the hook to answer it. I didn't want them messing with the painting. One guy almost pulled the painting off the wall. Of course we had the thing wired on. So I viewed environmental preoccupation with disdain, as something that wasn't a part of my work. I felt it was something too impure, too "unintense." All it was, was just too different from what I was pursuing. It went backwards to me. Well, maybe it went back to Kaprow or something. I wasn't interested, and therefore had no pretensions to it and maybe even denial of any kind.

IS: But over the years your work has very frequently come out into the room. Yet it's still planar. You've sort of moved the picture plane six or eight feet into the room.

TW: Even when I started doing sculpture a few years ago, the sculpture was all conceived as flat planes as though it were not really sculpture, like that one right behind you there -- it's a case in point. It pretends to curve but doesn't curve; it's just flat planes. I took that as a restriction on myself. I was a painter so I was going to paint in flat planes. Painters painted in flat planes. Of course, I quickly had to realize this artificial restriction, but that was done as a frontal piece. All those pieces were done frontally as though they were still paintings that stood against the wall and weren't to be walked around. The Big Dropped Wall -- the same thing. I stuck it in a corner so you couldn't get behind it, because you had to go behind it only at your aesthetic risk. It wasn't meant to be looked at from the back. Only recently, I've done my first full round works that were meant to be looked at from all around. And that's a big change for me. It's the first time ever, let's say two and one half years ago, I've done a work which was meant to be seen as a three-dimensional work. Every other work I'd ever done had one vantage point; it was to be looked at from one central point and, in effect, sometimes the studio put a mark on the floor where it was to be seen from. If anybody wanted to see it, they could see it from that one spot and photograph it from that one spot. That made it like a two-dimensional painting; there was only one way it could be true. So I stuck to that for a long time, even in the sculpture.

IS: How did you respond as a private person without any conception of success or even, I imagine, not much the possibility of it, when suddenly, around '62, there's this enormous hoopla. How did you respond to that?

TW: I was amazed. First of all, every time we sold a painting, I bought my girlfriend a dress. It was not that long before that I literally got my newspapers out of the garbage cans. I used to go the subway stations to get my New York Times. I couldn't afford to buy it. One day I found a five dollar bill on the street in front of a bank and we went to the movies. We really had just so little money to operate. It was just . . . and my diet, yeech! I used to fry cornflakes with flat noodles. It was really good, actually. So to suddenly find money coming in like that . . . . In the beginning what it meant to me was instantaneous satisfaction of my wishes -- a bigger studio, bigger canvases, better materials, better paint, better brushes. So it was all translated that way like a businessman who immediately plows his money and profits back into the business. That was the only way I was oriented because I had no use for money. I hadn't discovered vacations or anything. I didn't know about that sort of thing, so I really didn't need money, except to get a bigger space and bigger paintings and more paintings and all that. So that's all I really remember.

IS: Were you suspicious of it at all? Of course, you would have grown up in a milieu where there would have

been a good deal of suspicion.

TW: I think I've been suspicious about it always. Right today I'm just as suspicious, maybe even more suspicious than I was then. It's almost as if I'm wondering when the bubble is going to burst. It may have already burst. My last show didn't sell any -- the major works. That makes me very uneasy, because I'm aware that I exist -- what's that? It's like the guy who serves at the "pleasure of the President." I exist at the pleasure of the public for this grand life I lead. And also, too, I feel so fortunate. The life I've led has been one of such keen excitement and pleasure, such deep pleasure and great satisfaction that I really can't believe the good luck. I'm just afraid that it'll get taken away. But in those days it wasn't quite the same. I didn't have the overhead I have now. Now I have a tremendous overhead to feed. Then there was almost no overhead so I didn't need that much money. And now I need a lot of money just to get by, to build the things I want to build, to pay the rents I have to pay.

IS: Tell me a little bit about what happens at Green? How many times do you show with Dick?

TW: Also, I'll just say as I got more money it mean more analysis so I could get better quicker. That chewed up a lot of my money. With Dick? You know, I produced so much work in those days. I produced twenty or twenty-two works year, which I've never really done since except last year when I produced more than that. It was the most productive year I've ever had, last year! That'll balance off this year. I won't do a single major work this year because of my neck. I seem to remember showing every year with Dick. I'd have to look at the record. My memory is that I showed every year, which was quite frequent, but I had produced so much it was all right. I had a show in '63. Then we showed the still lifes in '64. Then I showed in '65 -- I guess it was every year for a while. The prices were so low that we couldn't make very much money. It was just that we made some money which was better than it had been, which was no money. Still the money wasn't present very long. Imagine selling these major works for six hundred dollars or seven hundred dollars!

IS: And that would have been as late as '65?

TW: '64. In '65 the prices would have started to go up a bit more. And Dick had problems, also, as a dealer. I think there probably always was a conflict there between the artist wanting more money, wanting higher prices because the prices weren't very high, and Dick maybe feeling he had trouble getting the higher prices. So we were always a little bit tense there, and the money never seemed to be quite there. The gallery was always short of money. I didn't get a salary like I do now from Janis. I didn't get an advance. In fact, when I first went with Janis I said, "I don't want an advance. I want to be independent. What you get in for me, you give me." That gave way finally to the reality that it's much better to not give a thought to whether you're going to get it or not -- just get it.

IS: It was just more conducive for the kind of peace of mind that you need to work.

TW: Yes. I found peace of mind, that sense of security, very important. First of all, I create in an emotional atmosphere of extreme happiness and optimism. If I'm sick, it's hard for me to work. Right now with my bad neck I'm working, but not with my usual zest, my usual creative fire. I'm usually on fire with the joy of being alive. People who have known me probably wouldn't think that's characteristic of me because I don't act that way, but I go around in a state of intense excitement about just being alive -- as long as I'm working. In those days, too, I felt the same way, but there were too many distractions. Now there are not so many distractions. Now I just have the emotional pleasure of my work. Then there were all kinds of distractions including where was the next buck going to come from. Sometimes I'd run out of money and I'd take a painting around to try to hawk it. I'd go up to Castelli and give Ivan a little thing and say, "Try to sell this for a little bit. We need some money." Then he'd do it and I'd get enough money to get through the next couple of weeks or so. That was well into '62. Sometimes things were rocky even though things were very successful -- they weren't that successful. I suppose it's a lot like the golf professionals now. You get sixty thousand dollars for a tournament that some guy used to get two thousand dollars for. Sad story, those guys didn't make a penny on it -- those great golfers! So it's kind of like that way -- it was not quite as lucrative as it is now. The idea that this guy Schnabel starts off with the prices he starts off with -- it's just unheard of!

IS: Talk a little bit about the closing of the Green Gallery and then your moving over to Janis.

TW: Dick began to get into so much financial trouble that he couldn't give us the money he owed us at one point, and that was very unnerving. I began to hear stories that he was in difficulty. Dick had personal problems that I didn't know that much about, but I always sensed that he had some kind of personal problems, difficulty here and there. I liked Dick. I was impressed with Oldenburg's analysis at one point, saying that he liked Bellamy because he was like a "brother gallery," that Janis was like a "father gallery" and maybe he even had somebody else being an "uncle gallery." Bellamy was a brother gallery kind of like relationship, and I liked that because Bellamy seemed like one of us. But I began to get the feeling that, as nice as Bellamy was and as good a soul as he was and as perceptive as he was, that maybe it was better anyway to have a businessman who could take care of business better since Bellamy was having a little difficulty taking care of business. So when he went out

of business, I needed another gallery to go to and I was interested in Castelli and Janis. Castelli wasn't interested in me; Janis was. I remember I wrote a letter to Sidney about my availability and what I felt I had to offer. And I went with them. There's nothing special to say. I was doing the foot paintings at the time. I had just started the foot paintings. They were very important to me because they were so unusual. It was a preoccupative image -- a big foot. It was the first paintings that I felt were kind of anachronistic, worldly. They were all odd but I was excited about it because they were so unusual. It's unusual to take a foot and make it the subject of a painting, I thought then. I have nothing to say about that except that I was impressed with the fact that Sidney was a businessman. Sometimes he was too much of a businessman in terms of details here and there. I respected the fact that he knew how to do business and write things down. I learned a lot of things from him in that respect -- put things in writing and make sure there's no confusion about the thing, although we didn't have things in writing between us; we didn't do a contract. He doesn't do contracts. What I liked about Sidney I guess, too, was that Janis and Bellamy, too, as far as that goes, weren't pushy galleries. I still had that kind of old-fashioned idea of the artist having dignity -- the artist doesn't sell paintings; he paints paintings. He doesn't try to push them or sell them or find a market for them. I kind of liked the gallery not doing that sort of thing, too. They're there. If people want my paintings, they go there and they buy them -- a dignified process. I didn't like the feeling that I was in business and when the I.R.S. finally made me declare myself as being in business, I didn't like the filling out that form -- business.

IS: You went with him, then, in what . . . ?

TW: In '65.

IS: With Janis.

TW: I don't know when I had my first show there. I'd have to look up my records -- probably in '65 or '66. I showed the foot paintings; I guess that was my first show there, the foot paintings. I remember when I showed the first prick paintings with them. There was a rebirth of erotic concern on the city government's part and they were sending around from time to time vice-type squads to check on things. And they checked me out. It was most amusing, too, because the guy who may still be involved, Inspector Fallick -- I remember Inspector Fallick [Laughter] came around to look at these big prick paintings and Conrad Janis or Carol said to him something about it must be sort of amusing to him, his name. [Laughter] He purported not to know what he was talking about. I don't know what else to say, but now that you've got me talking about that particular show, I do recall that that was the show where I did the most vivid vagina I'd ever done and there were some women that were offended by that. It might be one of the reasons why the police came around. Maybe they got a complaint. I don't know.

IS: Did you get any complaints on your mouth paintings at all?

TW: No. A lot of people refer to the mouth paintings -- I think it's a cliche -- as being erotic, because the smoke is erotic. You see, erotic to me is sex; erotic isn't convoluted curves to me or things like that. So I've always had that difference of opinion with a lot of people out there.

IS: Oh.

TW: Now, I could find the parted lips somewhat erotic, I guess. To a certain extent I'm fooling myself because I'm saying these things aren't erotic because I don't want them to be erotic. Because I didn't create them to be erotic. It's true I've maybe spoken of them as being potentially erotic -- no, that was another thing. It was a post-coital hand, a painting I still haven't done yet. It was a hand lying there with a cigarette in it, like a post-coital cigarette, a corny cliche sort of thing. That is more erotic to me than the smoker's eroticism which is an accidental by-product because I didn't do them to be erotic. I did them because I was intrigued with smoke and coming in close on the mouth. I didn't start the mouth paintings to be erotic. I started them to be just a mouth, that's all. In fact they weren't erotic -- they were a smiling mouth, a grinning mouth, and then there was an open mouth. That was meant to be erotic. I was doing a mouth with a tongue out. I never finished that thing. That was meant to be erotic. So the erotic came into it, but it was always, as far as I was concerned, as all my paintings -- erotic runs in and out of it, but never . . . .

IS: Well, they had all sorts of other aspects to them that got mixed in with the eroticism. For example, -- I don't know exactly what adjectives I want; of course, they related to the smile, the ubiquitous billboard smile, but they can be very nasty. They can have sort of an edge. They're very expressive of something that involves a variety of responses -- I guess each one depending on the viewer.

TW: I was thinking the other night, just about two nights ago, I was mulling over something at the dinner table with Claire. A major museum has already said to me, in effect, "Your work is too dangerous. If we gave you a show, we would be afraid we'd arouse too much controversy from our supporters." I was just mulling that over the other night. Now all my work is about is nudity. That's really all it is. Virtually everything I've done that's erotic is just nudity. Now it's true there is suggestiveness or there's implication. I haven't done a single thing yet

where there is anything taking place. It's true you might find a woman with her head thrown back and her tongue out or her mouth open, and it's clear she's probably having an orgasm or being eaten or whatever like that, but there's no reason to assume that, no reason whatsoever to assume that other than what you know is in my mind which is in my mind -- somebody's eating her pussy or something like that. Something like that is taking place; that's why her head is that way. But it's not depicted. The only thing objectionable about the work really is just the fact that there's nudity or suggestiveness, but the suggestiveness is so vague that you can't hang a man for being suggestive. You can't do it because it's all too innocent in that respect.

IS: We talked about the sense of danger.

TW: I don't know what I was getting at. But one curator also said to me about the show I just had recently, a couple of shows ago -- that he liked the sculpture better because frankly the painting's too sexual.

[Break in taping]

IS: Tom, there are a lot of things we left unsaid. And, as I said while the tape was off, one of the things that I'm assuming in our conversation is that the book exists about your work and what's in the book we needn't necessarily repeat; we will want to talk about work you've done after the book. But what I'm interested in is material that doesn't appear in the book. We've spent a lot of time talking about your early life, your early career, what happens in the Fifties, and Cooper [Union] and on Tenth Street in the early Sixties and then the Pop experience. We've sort of taken you through the Green Gallery and into the Janis Gallery. We talked a little about that. But there's about a twenty-year period we still have to deal with, at least in some regard, after that having to do with your own life. When do you marry Claire?

TW: [In] 1963.

IS: So that would have been pretty much just the time you were beginning to achieve recognition.

TW: Pop had just broken out and I started to have shows outside New York City. In fact, I think that was our honeymoon, a trip to Cincinnati, my hometown, in conjunction with a show there which had to do a lot with Pop Art. I remember when I married her it was the bathtub, Collage Number Three, it was 1963, and that was her. It was the first time that her mother came to one of my shows and realized what was happening between her daughter and me. We weren't married yet. So I got hell from her mother.

IS: Then after you married, that would have been in and around the time you were in intensive analysis.

TW: I associate the beginning of analysis roughly with the beginning of my relationship with Claire. Yes. Not necessarily the marriage, but the beginning of the relationship.

IS: Right.

TW: Actually it was my analyst who really kind of impelled me to get married, who made me realize -- whether it's true or not, I really can't say, because you know how those things are -- that I really wanted to be married. I wasn't sure I wanted to be married again. He made me realize I really want to be married. And I didn't think I wanted to have children, at least not for a long time. He made me realize the fact that I wanted to have children. So he kind of made me realize all those things he wanted me to realize, I guess. I think it's for the best.

IS: [Laughs] Well, [even if] I can put this in an elegant way, it's going to come out funny, but your life sort of straightens out. You get married in a stable relationship, become a father, you're working very intensively; your work achieves recognition and, indeed, more than that -- you get written into the history books as one of the four or six or seven founders, originators of Pop Art. What happens in your life in the next twenty years, aside from family life or family work. What happens? It's such a hard and a funny question to ask.

TW: Let's see. Let me just try to run through this span. I'm going to answer that question by the only way I really can do, by giving a kind of chronological summarization of that time. First of all I got married. I might as well be a little more thorough than that. I have this small apartment; I'm single, seeing Claire and I'm doing the small collages and then I'm doing the bigger ones, four by four footers. Then I'm "found" by Karp, Geldzahler, Bellamy and Janis. My success begins. I move to a bigger studio; moving to a bigger studio I work bigger. I'm now not having to teach so I work more. I expand even more into marriage, but that was a part of the whole expansion I was undergoing. I'm in analysis, of course, by this time, which is certainly helping the general expansion and my concentration at the same time. Nothing has occurred to me other than work because I work all the time, twelve months a year. I don't realize that people take vacations. It sounds naive, but it never occurred to me to take a vacation or just stop work for a period.

IS: It occurs to my wife, but we don't.[Laughter]

TW: I learned not to do that after a while, but there was a period there of two, or three or four years where it just simply didn't occur to me, and all of a sudden I was invited to Cape Cod to visit Ivan Karp and his wife. Actually they were just separated; it was a kind of a bad time to arrive.

IS: That would have been around '67.

TW: It was a little bit before that, I think, maybe '66. Seeing Cape Cod made me realize that one could go someplace other than New York City and take a little time off. So I found a little house by a lake and I arranged to go the following summer, I think, for a week, on vacation. Things occur to me slowly anyway. Finances sort of helped, too. As I got more money, I discovered I could take more time. Then the next year I think I took two weeks and then I took a month; then I took two months and then I took three months because I was working that well. The longer the vacation was, the more work I would take with me to do. [Laughter] I was beginning to catch on to something here. I didn't have to stay in my studio in New York City all the time. And in 1970 I bought my own lake. This was kind of a lifelong dream, to have my own lake. I could raise the fish my way. What I did was carry out a kind of scheme whereby I was going to stock this lake with bass, the fish I like to fish for. I wasn't going to fish it until they were all grown into five pound or more bass, and I was going to fish it and have the kind of fishing that men only dream of, create a paradise for myself. It didn't work that way. But that was what I [wanted to do]. It was sad. It's a long story. It's a long, ecological, "you can't screw around with Mother Nature" story.

IS: Oh, you mean the bass wouldn't take to your lake?

TW: Well, no. They took to the lake. I'll give you a real synopsis of this. What happened was: I had a seventeen-acre lake, full of minnows and catfish. The minnows, I figured were a ten- or twenty-year or maybe even a permanent supply of food for the bass -- there were so many of them. There were billions of them. I put bass in. Some I caught elsewhere and brought over and stocked. And the bass ate them so lustily -- this was quite intriguing. We would hear them, first they'd nail -- this is kind of boring, but this is interesting to me. The bass nailed the minnows to the shoreline. There was like a black band of minnows all around the shoreline, and the bass spent twenty-four hours a day, literally, going through those minnows. You could hear them. It sounded like deer running through the lake. You could hear them at breakfast, at lunch, at dinner. You'd wake up at three in the morning and you could hear them.

IS: They were eating the minnows?

TW: Yes. Just devouring them! Now, two things happened. One thing, they didn't grow very much while they were eating these minnows, and the other thing is, they ate all the minnows. They literally ate all the minnows. Now, while they were eating all the minnows, they weren't eating themselves. So soon I had an overpopulation of bass, little bass that got too big for the big bass to eat. So soon I had too many bass; I had to start thinning. I had to fish the lake and I didn't want to fish it yet, but I had to fish it. So I fished it in the middle of the day in the bright sun and in the most unlikely spots. I wouldn't catch those big bass; I was going to protect them. Bass are very smart. Fish are very smart -- if you don't know about fish it may sound a little silly, but fish are very smart. They learn like any animal; they learn very fast. Catch them once, catch them twice -- they get very smart. So then, anyway, my bass weren't growing; there were no more minnows. So I started buying truckloads of minnows which Claire was upset about -- seven hundred fifty dollars for a load. I was dumping these three thousand dollar loads of minnows into my lake and the bass would eat them in a week. As a test, I would catch a bass and open the stomach and there would be nothing in it. There would be no minnows left. So they weren't growing. The bass were beginning to look like pickerel. Awful. My dream was just falling apart. Other things went wrong, too. The weeds came in and the bass ate all the frogs. They ate everything. They cleaned everything out. They ate the frogs, the tadpoles, the salamanders and they even got the catfish. They took everything. We used to have these wonderful big bullfrogs. All night long -- Vaaroom. Vaaroom. All night long. We loved it. It's been about eight years now and no bullfrogs. One turned up last year. I hope it'll stay. I even tried to stock them, but it didn't work. So the whole thing kind of fell apart. While we're on this -- you've got me on a sidetrack now which I'm going to have to pursue. Well, I'll go back to where I was and then pick this up. The thing was in 1970 I bought this lake. We had our baby. This was a kind of another expansion. It was a very big event for me to have my own property. It was terrifying. When the call came from the real estate broker I was in the bathtub on Cape Cod and he said, "You're now a property owner, four hundred acres of ground and a twenty-acre lake." And then my wife got pregnant, a really major expansion. I discovered something about myself that I'd always known. In fact, this was what I was going to mention to you one time before. When I was a kid I was not artistic in any way, but I had some kind of desire to create some kind of thing. I was very big with pets. I had snakes and lizards and I would build environments for them. I would spend as much time on the environments as the care of the pets. So that was the only thing I could say [in answer to] what did I do creative as a child -- nothing except that almost sculptural predilection. When I got my hands on my own four hundred acres of property and my own lake, God, this was like the culmination of all that sort of thing. So the first thing I did was spend six months up there which is a long time. I did some work up there. But the first year I must admit I hardly did any work at all because I was so deeply captivated by nature. I discovered nature. I was wildly excited about it. I read about it

voraciously, just as I did as a kid with fishing. I devoured the things I could get my hands on. I set out to reshape the land so it would carry more of everything, more food, plants, animals and more everything. I devised all kinds of ecological schemes -- raccoon den houses. I hired a man with a bulldozer and we cleared old meadows; we did all kinds of things. I designed squirrel houses, raccoon houses which didn't lead to anything. I became very fecund about the property and what I wanted to do with it, having babies and all of that. It was a very intense experience. I didn't lose the enthusiasm for nature; the second year, though, I only went for three months, maybe it was for four months. Each summer I cut down one more month, cut back farther, because my child was in school. But something occurred to me in my life at that time -- maybe I burned myself out with nature, four years of deep involvement with nature and all these projects: osprey nesting platform. You name it, I was doing it all over the place, all those things. I planted hundreds of apple trees which the deer ate down immediately. It was a constant battle with the deer. Everything I would plant they would eat. Then finally everything we planted we put wire around. We had enclosures all over the place. The place was half steel. And the beavers were cutting down; as fast as we could do other things the beavers would come out of the water, cut down apple trees and other stuff. So every tree you can see around my whole lake has got wire around it, chicken wire. And after about then years the wire began to rust and the beavers discovered they could get through the wires. So now we're putting heavy steel gauge wire around them. It's a constant battle between me and the beavers. It's their instinct to raise the water level. So they plug the spillway up with all kinds of debris. And we've got to have a spillway; so every morning I'd go down and push it off with a special rake. And the next night they'd fill it up again. The next day I'd go down and push it off. If I missed three days, I literally couldn't budge it because it was rocks and mud and they really built a whole thing on it. It was a constant struggle and I think, after a while, as intriguing as it all was, it did begin to get to be a hell of a lot of work and an awful lot of intensity got poured into it. I think I poured so much intensity into it that maybe it was taking too much away from what was reserved for my painting. So I began to switch back and realized my prime factor in my life is my work. My work is in New York City. I began to switch all this enthusiasm back to New York City and my studio. I spent less and less time in the country, down to two months a year which were stabilized, and now I'm taken away to the country kicking and screaming by my family. I don't even want to go. I want to stay here and work. But once I'm up there, I like the place. It's just that I'm schizophrenic about the fact that I'd like to be both places at once, but I'd rather be here.

IS: And then your second child would come . . . .

TW: Our children are five years apart, 1970, 1975 and 1980. The second child came at the lake at the same time as we tore down the house that was there and I designed a house myself in conjunction with an architect but I feel I was a major part of it. Again it was like doing a piece of sculpture. I really like the house, it serves me just the way I want it to serve.

IS: Does New York serve only as a place to work? Is there anything else important about it, say, the art world? How is the art world important? Certainly there are the galleries here.

TW: You know, I don't know how to answer that, but my analyst said something about being a parent or at least in my case about being a parent and taking it seriously. That's a thing I learned about myself, too. I take parenting very seriously. I'm a very serious father. I'm not the best father but I'm a very serious father. He said that being a parent gives you identity. I don't know exactly what that means necessarily, but being in New York, in some strange way, gives me a psychic identity which means something to me. Whereas back in Ohio I had the feeling that I could never have quite gotten something together, but it was possible to get it together here because there's reinforcement everywhere you turn. It feeds that identity.

IS: Rauschenberg once told me that he used to go to the Artists' Club in the hope of being recognized as an artist.

TW: You can go to places like that when you're younger and feel like an artist. When you're not so sure whether you are or not, at least you feel like one.

IS: So it has to do in a sense with affirmation of your . . . ?

TW: Here's one of the problems I have. When I go away to the country I have a hard time working because I can't get into a deep level of concentration. I'm too aware of what's going on around me, the birds, are the fish hitting, what the weather is, and I also look down the lake. I have a view right down the lake. Here in New York City I shut the blinds to the street. I can get into a very deep level of concentration here. And yet, in a moment's notice of having the telephone or visitor or a show I want to go see. It's easy to deal with it and then come right back to the concentration because it's not an ongoing interruption. Like in the country I might go off and go fishing. I feel like I should fish. Maybe the fish are feeding. I'll see signs out in the water. The fact that I can get deep concentration in New York City and yet have at my elbow anything I want, whether materials or shows, is what's most important about it to me. I've become a recluse; I have no time for friends. All I do is work. I go home at night and spend some time with my children and so forth and then there's not much time left but time

with my wife. And that's my life. I come back to work the next day. I seem to like it that way. So, the more I can be left alone to do that the better, and New York City lets me do that, I guess. I don't know. I guess I've lost my place here.

IS: What is your attitude towards what I once had called the art support system? I prefer to call [it] the art support network, as it exists, this loose art world composed of galleries, dealers, collectors, critics, museum directors and curators, editors. Do you think it works, as an artist, now?

TW: Gee, I don't know. I'm so naive about those things. I stick to myself so much I'm not too sure what to say about any of that. I don't have much to do with museums at all, virtually nothing, and not much to do with galleries except that I go to certain galleries quite often because I like to see what's going on. I have my routes and so I miss a hell of a lot with so many galleries. But . . . . I'm very conscientious about seeing what's happening much as I was. This year I'm breaking down a little bit. I'm more aware of it from a selfish point of view what takes place between me and my support thing which means the people that make things for me and the people that sell things for me [like] Steve Steinberg at Central, a very knowledgeable art supply dealer, very helpful, a very important guy; and people I can draw upon to make things with special skills: people who can fold canvases and all that. The other things you mentioned all seem to be after the work is done which is a little bit beside the point to me because I don't really get too involved with that.

IS: Then in a sense the gallery is your big deal with the world.

TW: Yes. I try to in fact let them deal with everything in the world. I never sell things out of the gallery or give prices or anything because I don't like to get involved in those things. It makes me very uncomfortable to deal with people who come in and say, "What's that?" or "How much is that?" I'm better at it now than I used to be. Mainly I just don't tell them, but I used to feel that I almost had to apologize because I knew it was so expensive. Of course, it was never all that expensive anyway.

IS: Do you think it more or less works from your experience of it? In other words, do you think that the best artists tend to come to the top?

TW: I guess I've always believed that, not necessarily to the very top. Since I'm doing the speaking, I have to say I think I'm at the very top. I'm aware that some very bad artists get very close to the top. I'm thinking about over-priced artists and so on. But I always believed and that's why in the beginning I wasn't going to take my work around; I figured that they would find me, but I was lucky. I always tend to tell young artists not to be in too much of a hurry, because if they're good enough, they'll be found -- because I kind of believe that. I'm a little down on the way things have gone. The quantity of art galleries is not, I think, very good for the world. Too many galleries -- maybe, too many artists! I don't know. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I suppose, is the quality of the people opening, the lack of seriousness about these people or serious involvement, like one gallery -- I won't mention the name. It was a bizarre thing. They opened up a gallery this past year. One of their major artists, in fact, one of their earlier one-man shows was of this artist -- he began to notice they weren't sending him invitations to their openings. He said, "Would you please put me on your mailing list?" They said, "No. We don't put any of our artists on our mailing list because it means a twenty-cent stamp. It means printing extra things." There's something wrong. It was a most bizarre thing -- as though the artist didn't matter anymore. In the old days it was a pleasure to go to the Sidney Janis Gallery. They don't do this anymore because they've gotten jaded, also. But in the old days, when you visited the gallery, it was like you were an honored dignitary arriving for some special treat. They would literally roll out the carpet for you. They would order lunch in for you. It's not like that now. The critics . . . I really dislike critics very much. I have a very bad time with critics. Almost exclusively because what I resent about critics is that they're literary people; they have to make a living. But they're writers and they are literary. I haven't seen a critic yet . . . there're probably some around, but I don't read too many of them. John Russell is a perfect example because he'll wax eloquent about all kinds of literary things but you'd never have the slightest idea of what he's looking at, visually, physically.

IS: But he's better than most.

TW: I used to think that, but now I think he's worse than most. I really am getting terribly impatient with him. I used to think he was better, but each year he's getting worse and worse. Even just his style begins to grate on me. His review of the recent Johns show is a good case in point. He gets so eloquent, so carried away with all the literary aspects of it, and he got down to describing Johns -- "his loving rendering," or something of that sort of this guy's pottery. It was a completely inaccurate statement. It wasn't a "loving rendering." It was just the crudest kind of little replication of it, which isn't a criticism of Johns -- but he didn't do it the way Russell said he did. Russell gets carried away with this kind of idea of building up these things. Anyway, I've always had a hard time with critics. I was looking through one of my early notebooks this afternoon for something and I ran across a statement . . . . I never read the art magazines, mainly because I hate rejection. I was so used to getting a bad press. I've felt I've always had bad press.

IS: What about museums and curators?

TW: I have a very hard time with most museum people. I don't know if I mentioned this to you before. One major museum in New York City, a major museum man said about my work in effect that he really couldn't show mine, give me a retrospective, because it would offend too many of his public, the people he relies on for their good will and for their contributions.

IS: The patrons.

TW: And I guess that hadn't occurred to me that my work was dangerous, before, because to me it's just nudity. That's all it is, is nudity. Did we talk about this before?

IS: Go ahead.

<<font face="Times New Roman">**TW:** I was talking to Claire about this the other night. I was aware of the fact that in not one single painting have I done is there anything salacious. I maybe had it in my mind, and it's implied, but there isn't anything actually salacious. It's all just nudity. Even the Supreme Court has said nudity is all right. So to find a major art museum saying that and then one of the curators even went further to say that my work disturbs him because of the sexual content. He finds it disturbing. Now I expect that from homosexual curators because I've gotten that from homosexual curators. But this guy is heterosexual and I was surprised at this.

IS: At the time that "Pop Art," in quotes, of course, because it gets much of the substantive work merged, there were other things happening in the world. For example, there were several varieties of abstract art that and sometimes were considered antipathetic to "Pop," for example, the new Color Abstraction. It tended to relate in that it was all so without painterly gesture and rather precisely defined as was "Pop Art." I'm also thinking possibly of the work of Frank Stella or the work of Ellsworth Kelly as well as Louis and Noland. What was your response to that work? Did you see it as relating to what you were doing or people that you were identified with as the Pop Art.

TW: I'm listening to your questions, but I don't seem to remember those works at that time. It's as though I were oblivious of them and didn't know about them yet. But that couldn't be the case because I get around a little bit, not as much as I subsequently did. So that can't quite be the case. But I guess what I'm saying is that when I began what I was doing, I was oblivious of almost all of them. When I was doing those little collages, I hadn't seen Rauschenberg at all. My first Rauschenberg I saw at the Carnegie on my way to Cincinnati. I stopped off to see the Carnegie International on my way home for vacation and visit. I was quite impressed with the Rauschenberg. Of course, I've subsequently begun to see them. But still, I guess, I don't associate any of those kinds of works with my awareness of my own work. If I have, I've suppressed it. I was aware . . . I read one time in the Modern they had a little brochure out saying that my work was influenced by Stella. I didn't know what they had in mind. I really didn't like that. What they were referring to was my shape works and that my shape canvas works were influenced by Stella. I didn't know what they meant, whether the Stella right angle paintings influenced my thing. If that's what they're saying, obviously he didn't. If that's a shaped canvas, an L shape, obviously he did those before I did my shaped things. In fact, in my book I mention that I was aware of shaped canvases long before that, because of those two women who had shown at the Reuben Gallery.

IS: Yes. I know who you mean.

TW: Was it Marty Edelheit and one of the Reuben sisters, maybe Anita?

IS: Yes, Anita.

TW: Let's see, I missed the point of your question.

IS: I was thinking of people who were sort of associated as the abstract artists of the Sixties. There would have been Louis, Noland, Stella, Kelly, Reid -- the so-called hard edge or field painters.

TW: Those painters that you're mentioning, my only awareness of them comes after I've already gotten into my work. So that I can't seem to relate to them like in any suggestive way or reinforcing. I don't know. The only memories I seem to have clearly are of the work I was trying to go against like de Kooning, my idol and all that, to go against them. And Dine and Oldenburg and some of those things that were right around me -- I don't seem to be able to associate anybody else's work.

IS: What we haven't talked about: You said generally you didn't like the idea of the New Realists show at the Janis Gallery because you didn't see how -- I forget exactly how you put it -- the category seemed too broad and somewhat irrelevant to you. But there were artists that you were identified with. I guess primarily Lichtenstein, Rosenquist and Warhol. Did you feel any sense of identity? We talked a little about this, but I wondered if we

might just talk about it. They must have been artists who interested you. Would they have interested you more than most other artists at that time?

TW: I would say, yes; probably, yes. To a great extent, yes. But they certainly didn't interest me any more than de Kooning and maybe a few other people. I can't think of anybody I liked. What it comes down to was that the artists that interested me most were in that show, except for de Kooning, Pollock and Kline. I wasn't yet particularly aware of Kelly, certainly not Noland or Louis. I'm still not very interested in Louis or Frankenthaler. I wasn't aware of them. My awarenesses were somewhat naive and somewhat limited, I think. My memory is as well. I didn't feel very involved with those guys, Rosenquist and so on, aesthetically, so much as I did feel involved with them on a more emotional level. It was almost like we were in the same boat. It was a societal grouping, but not an aesthetic grouping because I felt very different, very.

IS: [If] I'm reading you correct, in the notion of the "Pop" component of the work, you didn't consider terribly important.

TW: No, I also felt rather old-fashioned because I felt that I came so definitely out of a European tradition trying to force it into an American kind of thing. And they seemed to grow right full born, right as some kind of American phenomenon.

IS: You're talking about the compositional component of your work and also the use of the nude?

TW: Yes.

IS: I guess in that regard you probably might have preferred Rosenquist to . . . ?

TW: There was no question about that. Warhol I liked, because I liked his work at the time, primarily because he was so reviled in the beginning. I felt sorry for him. I felt he was an interesting artist, but my opinion of Warhol tended to decline with time and it didn't with Rosenquist. Well, it did later on with Rosenquist to some extent. But, Rosenquist -- I thought he was terrific. And Lichtenstein I liked a great deal. But, as I said, I felt we were so different. Those guys were really Pop Artists from my feeling of what "Pop" art is. I felt like I got in the back door. I wasn't sure that I wanted to be there, but I was just standing around, my hat in my hand and shuffling my feet a little. I wasn't really too comfortable in that category, but societally I was delighted to be a part of the group and for the emotional security it gave me and the reinforcement, not to mention the money and not having to teach.

IS: The attitude, though, wasn't embattled. Did you feel embattled?

TW: No. I didn't mean to suggest that.

IS: What was your response, then, to tendencies that emerged after, I guess . . . ? Op art had emerged and then Minimal Art would have taken the limelight for a period of time.

TW: I was aware that the first thing that came were the second generation of Pop Artists, my first awareness as of right now. I felt somewhat scornful of these guys who were doing this imitation of Pop Art. I was very contemptuous of them. It bothered me that an artist who I admired as much as Alex Katz at the time seemed to me to be drawing too much into what we were doing, what I was doing. I liked Alex's works a lot, but he seemed to be reacting to it in a way that was drawing him closer to it. A lot later I came to accept it, but at the time I remember a show at the Fischbach up on Madison Avenue -- some big heads that struck me as rather abruptly changed for him, I thought, because of the scale and the simplism. I thought it was a sudden "Pop" painting for him. It didn't ring true to me for Alex Katz.

IS: Too much like billboards or influenced by billboards and to a degree by "Pop."

TW: Yes, I thought by "Pop," and I thought somehow it didn't ring true to Alex to me. But with time he's made it true. I'm accepting it. At the time it seemed to me that it wasn't just quite right. But it was a memory that I had that just kind of bothered me. Those kinds of things bother me. "Op" art I was so scornful of I can't even speak about it, because we did that in art school until we were blue in the face. I had enough of that crap.

IS: And the Minimal? Judd?

<<font face="Times New Roman">**TW:** It was certainly interesting at the time. I like a lot of things. I'm glad to see different things come along, not all different things; just some things. Figurative Expressionism and Neo-Figurative Expressionism I'm rather contemptuous of. But I'm glad to see different things; I don't like things all the same. So I enjoyed seeing those. That's why I always liked the old Whitney annuals. God, they were fun! I like to see as many different kind of things at one time as possible. I like variety. They don't have those annuals that they used to. They were great fun!

IS: No, they don't. There were two other tendencies that emerged in the Sixties that came to be considered "of the Sixties," however one defines that. And one you alluded to to a degree, that was the work of Alex Katz and the so-called New Realism. It would have also involved the work of Philip Pearlstein. These were artists whose work you would have begun to know, I guess, at Cooper Union in the case of Alex Katz or certainly at the Tanager Gallery in the case of both Katz and Pearlstein. What was your response toward their venturing toward Realism? Did you consider your art Realist?

TW: Not at that time, no. I tend to more now or I've tempered my definition of what Realism is, perhaps. I can't even speak about it. I don't know what I want to say except that Alex started off -- I saw those little collages, those wonderful little landscape collages. And everything he's done since has just evolved naturally from that. So it's an organic evolution; there's nothing really to react to along the way, because he was that way when I met him and he's still that way.

IS: I think the reason I asked the quesiton is that when you talked about not feeling any strong affinity to the Pop artists, I assumed it was because of a more traditionalist aesthetic thrust in your work, not only with regard to the compositional element but also with regard to the attitude to the human figure. And that made me think of their more perceptual realism -- in Alex's case, but more in Pearlstein's.

TW: More in Pearlstein's. I really don't know how to answer that. This is not quite what you're looking for, but I'm aware that I envy an artist like Hockney, for example. Hockney has the great good fortune not to be a part of anything -- just an artist. He's Hockney. And that's what I wanted to be and still want to be.

IS: And you've succeeded in being.

TW: I've succeeded as far as I'm concerned, but I'm perceived as part of something else.

IS: But not any more, really.

TW: I'm also still perceived as a painter of nudes. Of course, I do a lot of nudes, but when it comes to nudes per se, I've done an average of barely one a year for the past ten years; hardly any nudes, all kinds of other things. But still, people think of me as a painter of nudes and, when they want to buy a "Wesselmann," usually they want a nude.

IS: Yes, but your work always implies the nude figure. It'll be either a breast or a foot or a hand.

TW: I'm sensitive to words like "always" because, after all, I have some seventy still lifes that don't portray anything but still lifes.

IS: But many of those still lifes . . . .

TW: No, not very many. There's a nail polish bottle here and there.

IS: How do you differentiate or distinguish between, in your own mind, the fragments of anatomy and the fragment in the still lifes that you do?

TW: I don't. They're all equally exciting to me. There's no question that the nudes of women are more exciting to me as subjects than anything else. I spend more time with them. But I'm just as excited when I make a still life as I am about the nude, just as excited about one element that I've chosen to work with -- working on a thing there with my blue hat. That's terribly exciting, as exciting as any breasts or any cunt or anything I've ever worked with. But I admit it's a smaller portion of my work, but no less important to me, and equally engaging to me. I've done all those smokers and people think, "O.K., that's sex. That's erotic." But to me it's just an organic evolution that started with just a mouth which may suggest sex. But it was just a mouth. So that becomes like an extension of my nudes, but to me it's not. It's something completely separate. I did these studies about five years ago. I haven't had time to get around to the paintings yet, something to do with women smoking -- most intriguing paintings. They have to do with women, but they don't have to do with women; they don't have anything to do with women. Well, someone will say, "Why don't they have men?" Well, O.K. You've got me there. I surrender. I just can't deal with men.

IS: [Laughter] I didn't say that. But what happens, happens quite naturally, Tom, is, I guess, when people look at a body, look at any individual work, they also at the back of their mind have a body of work. At least the sophisticated viewer would, simply because he knows the body of work. And the "Great American Nudes" -- I guess it would be impossible to dissociate -- they were the first and certainly the most commanding initial images.

TW: Also, people forget. They remember certain aspects of things. Somebody came here recently and said, "My God, I'd forgotten all the different things you've done," because he'd thought I'd just done nudes, and there are

all kinds of things here.

IS: That's right.

TW: That's what a retrospective is very nice for, because it reminds people that you're not just this, you're all these other things, too.

IS: Yes. Just to round off this, because I wanted to ask a few general questions, around '65 I guess we get into Malcolm Morley's work. There's the emergence of so-called Photo Realism.

TW: Yes. I liked Photo Realism work very much.

IS: You did! Why is that?

TW: My eye loved it. I kind of respond to what my eye responds to. I loved looking at it; I couldn't get enough of it. I liked it super Photo Realist and less super Photo Realist. Bechtle I think is a terrific artist. I always liked Bechtle. I haven't yet seen a Bechtle painting that didn't make me feel good to look at. I feel good looking at it. It looked good. Something about it comes through. Some of the guys I don't think too much of, but the good ones I think are all good. Some of those oddballs that -- I just use the word kiddingly -- Ivan would come up with just never got much of a notice. He's got some terrific guys down there. He's got Mendenhall. He's terrific.

IS: You're talking about artists who prefer middle class subject matter -- Bechtle and the suburban life of Mendenhall and those . . . .

TW: Yes, they happen to be. But the guy who does the buildings I happen to like.

IS: Estes?

TW: No. Portraits of building; where they've fallen on hard times. I can't think of his name. He was with O.K. Harris. He started off with Hundred Acres. He did the First National Bank Building.

IS: But working from photographs?

TW: Yes. As a general thing I liked their work very much. I could never understand why in the hell they didn't get more recognition, especially from a museum.

IS: Well, a few did. Estes I guess, and Close.

[END OF SIDE ONE]

IS: I want to stay with Photo Realism a little bit longer. Do you find an attitude, any affinity, between their work and your own, Tom -- because they're Realists, too? They're American Realists certainly making use of a very contemporary way of looking in the way that your treatment of the nude does in their use of the ubiquitous photographs. Do you take photographs yourself?

TW: I do lately; I didn't use to. I used to work from the model only. The last few years I've worked from the model and taken photographs and sometimes put them together. As far as that goes, I learned early on that you can't rely on photographs very much because the proportions don't work out right, and also it's not you. There's something about the Photo Realists -- I was always a touch envious. I admired their skill. Those guys were terribly skillful in a way I probably could never do. If I really applied myself to paint that way, I was never sure I could. I didn't want to, but I was not at all confident that I could do it if I wanted to. I thought they were very skillful, and I like skill. At the same time I was aware that I was relieved that none of them tackled my particular imagery, because somehow I felt like if they did one of my "Great American Nudes," rendered the way they render and all the other things in the painting -- my God, that could be an intense experience.

IS: It couldn't be. That's the interesting thing. Notice that very few of them ever tackled the figure and that's because the photograph freezes it, and it comes out looking awkward.

TW: Yes, I know. Hielo Chin (SL) is the only one I can think of right now who really got into nudes.

IS: He tried it, yes.

TW: And it's very tough.

IS: They look too girlie.

TW: It's very difficult. Ramos -- no, he's something else.

IS: He's still working more from advertisements and Chiquita girls than he is from photos. It's an interesting problem, the difference between perceptual realism and photo realism, and what the photo will do to the figure as against what the eye will do to the figure. I find your enthusiasm for this tendency rather interesting. I find it rather surprising.

TW: What interests me about Photo Realism is the fact that I like to spend time in front of a painting and get drawn into the detail of it. And I never get drawn into the details of paintings. I just tend to like to take them in like a camera. You just take a quick picture of it and you get the whole thing and look at it, feel it, experience it, whatever. Then you move on. I have a hard time moving away from Photo Realism paintings. I stand there and I study and I study and I say, "How the hell did you do that?" [TAPE INTERRUPTED] The tricky branch, like all the reflections in the store windows and all that, left me just a little bit cold because it got a little bit fussy or something.

IS: Tom, let's go to some of your questions. I do have a few more, but I want to make sure that I've got yours down.

TW: I apologize for this list.

IS: No.

TW: Simply because, as I say, when I looked the list over, it all appeared as silly points, and why bother making those points? But these are things that did occur to me; so perhaps they do have a certain validity in terms of my wanting to get them out. So many people ask me over the years about Claire being my model or who was the model [for the "Great American Nudes"]. I was aware in the beginning that I didn't just do nudes. Let's see if I can really try to convey this, because it is an important reality to me. I didn't do nudes; I did Claire in the beginning, the early "Great American Nudes." It was my discovery of adult sex. I got married when I was nineteen, twenty; I was an adolescent still. And in my first marriage of seven years I think I stayed pretty much of an adolescent through that whole thing. So when I became an artist and went through art school and went through all those changes I went through and the evolutionary things, I began to be an adult for the first time. And when I resumed sex, it was on a different plane, level, and Claire was a different woman, a different kind of woman. And my painting the nude, while I was just painting a nude, it was terribly important to me that it was Claire and it was my great excitement personally about her, about sex, about being an adult, about being in New York City, about being an artist -- about all these things. I was trying to put it into that one moment of doing. So she was the "Great American Nude" model. The only model that I used for quite a long time. That's not true. There were a couple of others who were friends who popped in and out, but Claire was the model.

IS: So that was a specific nude. That's an important point, in the back of your mind.

TW: Yes. It wasn't a specific nude in terms of -- because I denied specificity in my painting because I didn't want a person there; I didn't want a face. But I can look at it and say, "Boy, I really got her." It's Claire -- the mouth is her, everything. I can still draw her much better than anybody else. I could just draw her in my sleep practically. Other models I'd struggle and strain.

IS: That wouldn't have occurred to me. That's an important insight.

TW: Well, I must say it almost didn't occur to me until this very moment, to put it on quite that plane. But, as I'm saying it, I realize that was exactly the case.

IS: That would be one very sharp, precise distinction between yourself and Lichtenstein and Rosenquist and Warhol -- that in the back of your mind there was that kind of specific charge.

TW: Speaking of them, one thing that I was aware of that separated us also -- I can't help putting some value judgment here though it has no place, a value judgment is meaningless. I swear that they had ready-made styles. I'd have to sweat and strain to come up with a style. Warhol just simply reproduced a can of soup. That's not quite true because, of course, he simplified it down. Lichtenstein had a comic strip style, ready-made. All he had to do was evolve it. Rosenquist had the billboard style. I'm saying that critically and also enviously in a different kind of way as if they didn't have to work as hard as I had to. I thought I really had to . . . .

IS: Earn it?

TW: Yes, but of course, that's what you have to do anyway. I find a couple of these points we've already talked about today such as my interest in environments as a kid and then the lake, being a father. I wanted to comment on being a father.

IS: You've not used your children as models.

TW: I don't know how those guys in history did it. I don't see how Matisse could get all these different things in. I can't get it all in. I want to paint my kids, but I can't get it in. I've got too much to do. I painted Jennie once. I was so wildly in love with her that I just simply had to paint her. I thought, "Gee. I'll paint all my kids." But I can't do it. I haven't got the time. I guess my weakness is I do too many of certain things. I get drawn into it -- I'll do six or eight of something instead of maybe just doing two. I'm still trying to pare down that aspect of myself so maybe I can squeeze a few other things in that get delayed for years.

IS: It's interesting about using Claire in the way that you have, because it introduces, although it may not be that evident to the viewer, a component of a factuality with that person in mind. It seems to be there certainly in the work of Philip and Alex; in the work of Photo Realism -- it's that photo. It's also in the work of Warhol. And that's interesting to me.

TW: I also used Claire as a metaphor, if I'm using the word metaphor correctly, because as well as that woman is her, it's my relationship to her. I'm also using her on a deeper psychological level as woman to me -- as being the unattainable woman. I can't get her, but I wish I could. She is a symbol to a certain extent. I was about to respond to something you were saying -- that's what got me off the subject. Where were we just ten seconds before that?

IS: I had asked you rather a little facetiously why you hadn't used your children.

TW: Let me just think for a moment. It was something about nudes, I guess, and Claire.

IS: I think the last thing I had mentioned was this specificity of that image and that I had related it to the specificity of images and the work of Katz and Pearlstein and Photo Realism.

TW: Whatever it was, it's gone! I had some thought I was holding.

IS: It'll come back. [Laughs]

TW: After you're gone. [Laughter]

IS: Yes, I know.

TW: I'm going to take a shot at it anyway, just by reopening that subject because I seem drawn into this matter of recollection of what it was like. It's almost coming back to me now. It had to do something with the drawing of Claire and the presenting of Claire. I touched on this in the book. It annoyed the hell out of me that I would do these paintings of my wife, and this is the way I saw her: she would lie in bed and spread her legs, an enticing gesture; so I would do that. That's something that in fact she did or might have done or in fact something I wish she would have done or it becomes a symbol to me of what I want -- all those things one could just go on and on about on a psychic level. It had to do with my real relationship to this woman, but people would simplify it down to just pin-ups. It was like pin-ups. The frustration to me was how to make this different, how to make it be a pin-up and yet take it out of the realm of being a pin-up. It's a hard problem. I'm not sure I ever really came to grips with that one. I guess I was kind of overwhelmed with my own sincerity. I didn't know what else to do. At that time there weren't so many pin-ups. Of course, there were pin-ups and they weren't obscene ones like that with the legs spread. They just didn't have those things. They did have the concept. Anyway, that used to frustrate me. In fact, once I even wrote to somebody about that, commented about that, "This is my wife. She lies in bed; she spreads her legs. It's exciting. That's my wife." Then they'd take her individuality away -- don't let my wife do that; she's got to be some symbol of pin-ups or something. Anyway, let's see what else I have here. Okay. This is the most trivial point you can imagine, but I have over a period of time mulled something over: one thing interested me is how in the hell I became an artist, coming out of the background I came out of. How and why? It was an accident of evolution, the fact that I started as a cartoonist and just happened to be drawn into it. It struck me as interesting that at no time in my life, in my upbringing, did I ever have any relationship to any art form whatsoever, except I played the harmonica. You can look back and see how dreadfully commonplace I was. There was nothing that stood out about me in my whole childhood including adolescence, nothing I can put my finger on that would make me different from any dopey kid that hangs around the block. I start thinking of little things that made me different from some of the people. I was always aware that in our high school we had Black kids in our high school, but I think they kept them in their own classes. So we never saw them. They played for the school teams, but we really never saw them much. But I came to learn in time that the Black guys had swimming on Friday afternoon. After everybody else had used the pool all week, they let the Blacks swim in it. Then they'd drain it over the weekend and fill it fresh. I used to argue, I guess, with people, including my family. My brother was pretty vicious with me. I was arguing always in favor of Civil Rights.

IS: Yes.

TW: I looked back at my whole life and the only thing that I can say that was different about me from the people

I grew up with was that they would say, "Yes, yes, Blacks should have freedom, but in not such a hurry." And, of course, I didn't understand that because you either have it or you don't. So I made a note of that. That was the only thing that made me different from everybody else. Otherwise I was exactly the same as everybody else, no difference whatsoever. It struck me as odd, until I got excited -- I never had ambition. Maybe that was one thing about me. I had no ambition my whole life. I was the most unambitious person you could imagine until I wanted to be a cartoonist. And once I got turned on to that, nothing could stop me. The only other thing I have written down here is to comment something about Women's Lib. Did we talk about Women's Lib at all?

IS: No, we did not.

TW: I don't have too much to say about it, but I should say something about it because I get attacked from time to time for obvious reasons, I suppose. The worst attack was at a cocktail party where the woman actually took me on face to face which was kind of annoying.

IS: Attacked you for being a sexist?

TW: Yes. So I just want to make a couple of brief comments to get it on the record. It bothered me because, I expect, I guess, I deal with this in my book to an extent the same, because I view myself a naive. This particular person was referring at one point to the fact that isolating a breast was castrating which I think of course, is ridiculous and stupid anyway because I was just focusing in on it. That's why I say in my book that I feel naive and I imagine myself lying in bed with my lover, my wife, and I look up and see this beautiful breast, beautiful, hanging there and I become aware of other things around it, and that's all there is to it -- just a visual moment, an intense focus.

IS: You could have gone the other way and talked about "breast envy." [Laughter]

TW: I'm just maintaining a strict, simple thing. This is really all it is. But we get embroiled from time to time because Women's Libbers tend to have a feeling that really makes art seem more like Social Realism, as if it has an axe to grind. So if you present the woman, then you've got to present aspects of her personality, her character -- more about it than just the physical -- which, of course, is ridiculous because art doesn't have an axe to grind. We don't have anything to prove other than just making paintings right through the years -- true or vivid or exciting or tense or real or whatever. So the few arguments I've had about that and the scornful kind of things that have come my way have become because of a misunderstanding about what the point of art is. I think they always have this feeling that art has to have an ulterior or higher purpose.

IS: Or a social purpose.

TW: Yes. Some other purpose, which is really very unfair to art, They don't do that to music. And then, of course, I tried getting cute, saying that they shouldn't go to me, that they should go up to a guy like Mondrian. He's the most intense anti-feminist because he doesn't even include women -- at least I deal with them. He doesn't deal with women at all. Not only that, but no curves; all straight lines. You can get as silly as you want to about this sort of thing. I just feel that somehow for the record I've just got to just make a statement, because I am sensitive to it because I am as sympathetic to women as I was to Blacks.

IS: What you're saying, then, if I read you right, is that ultimately it's the aesthetic part of art that counts and anything that'll lead me to cultivate that.

TW: Oh, I've always felt that, very intensely. I've always felt that, first of all, subject matter got in the way. And subject matter for me was always an excuse to make a painting anyway. That's why I think still lifes are just as exciting as the nude because it's just an excuse to make a terrific painting. And art subject matter isn't the idea. I'm trying to remember what it was. I wrote this in a notebook some years ago, and I just read it this morning. I wish I could remember just what it was, but it was something better than that.

IS: I think it comes through clear enough; but in your own life do you take an active interest in politics and social activities?

TW: I did; I don't anymore. I find I've gotten very selfish the last few years. I stopped voting; I stopped writing letters to the editor.

IS: You used to do that?

TW: Yes. I would write funny letters, like I got so angry when they were running shorter subway trains -- they were experimenting. I said, "How short could they run these damned trains and still get the public to ride them?" God, they had these four-car trains come in where everybody was rushing to the center trying to fight their way on. So I wrote a letter to the Times which they published about how finally the T.A. [Transit Authority] was going in the right direction. Obviously, what they should do is try one-car trains and then they could sell T.V. rights to

the fights or something like that. It was that kind of a thing. Then I got self-conscious and I stopped writing. I still have several in my desk that I was going to write -- income tax letters, post office letters. But the fact that my name was known, I felt self-conscious about it, so I stopped doing it. I contributed to politicians things and all that sort of stuff, against Nixon and so on. I don't do any of that anymore. I say "no" to all politicians.

IS: Tom, you suggested that you might not have too much to say about works that you've done since this book was published but possibly if you'd just go through some of these last pictures in the book and should anything occur, I wish you would talk about it. These are the nudes of '77 -- or, if you want to go through the slides, that would be better still.

TW: The book came along just as I was beginning sculpture. I really hadn't started the sculpture. I started maquetter for the sculpture. I'd done some little models. That was a major change in my work, really a major change.

IS: In what regard?

TW: The fact was that I'd never done anything that was meant to be three-dimensional. I'd done three-dimensional things that were meant to be two-dimensional, but now I was doing things that were meant to be three-dimensional. I still insisted that they be images, though. In fact they were all frontal, so you didn't walk around them. As a matter of fact, I wouldn't let you walk around them. You had [to] see them from one viewing point. The first ones, as I said in my book, I did all with flat planes and made an allusion of completing the curves and so on, but they were still three-dimensional. It was a big change for me. The only sculpture I had tried previously was this illuminated nude up here. That was when I realized I'm not a sculptor. I had no sense for that form. I didn't want to do it. When I started sculpture, I got carried away and got some plastilene and started doing a sculpture of a . . . I wanted to do a bronzed dropped bra, but I wanted to do a three-dimensional, full around. I realized again I'm not a sculptor, but I do sculpture. I make a distinction. It's only recently that I've started doing works that you can walk around, but I'm still not a sculptor. I'm doing sculpture from time to time, but I don't want to dignify it as much as to say I'm a sculptor.

IS: What prompts those works? In other words, how do you see them as . . . ?

TW: Curiosity.

IS: You just would like to see what they would look like in the round?

TW: Well, again, like everything with me starts so innocently. I was working with my belt as an object for a painting, a coiled up belt. It was an intriguing element in a still life and I thought, "Gee, that would make an interesting sculpture." So it got started. For me the hard part about sculpture is what objects to do, because the sculpture has to -- Oldenburg has this problem, too. I see now he's dealt with it. For example, I want to do a sculpture of a shoe. I can't just do a big shoe -- it's just a big shoe; that's all it is. I can't do a big hat; I can't do a big anything, because it's just a big something -- a big piece of "Pop" crap. So there are only a very few things that I can work with that can be abstract enough so the abstract aspect of it can dominate its form. For example, I'll show you want I mean. I realized early on I could do a woman's shoe, only this kind of a shoe where I can do the sole and it may have some straps that could just hang loose and do something. That no longer is just a shoe; the abstract aspect can dominate. So I've got such a limited repertoire that sculpture to me is a nightmare, because I've got belts; I've got smoking cigarettes; I've got brassieres; I've got this woman's shoe which I haven't done yet and one or two other things -- and that's about it. Because everything else for me is just doing a big something or other, unless I do groupings. That's something that I've got in my mind to try to get around to pushing two or three things together so they become one lump -- like a brassiere over a shoe over a something.

IS: You're suggesting then that the image actually suggests whether it should be two- or three-dimensional, and that it was the belt and the shoe and the brassiere that suggested that it might be done in "sculpture" rather than another form of doing it.

TW: Yes. I abhor so much the idea of just doing something that is just a "big something or other" that I'm rather strict about what I get involved with with a sculpture. This belt, for example, which I want to do big, I'll be doing soon, I think.

IS: Where would you fabricate it?

TW: At Lippincott. That's got a certain monumental presence that to me transcends the fact even that it's a belt, so I don't feel apologetic about the fact that it's just a belt.

IS: It coils a little bit like a rattlesnake.

TW: Yes, it does have a certain . . . . But the sculpture is a big change and the fact that more recently I've acknowledged that I could be a three-dimensional sculptor so you can walk all around it; like with the dropped bra I pushed it into a corner so you couldn't get around it. You went back there at your own aesthetic risk. But then the next major change -- there were minor changes -- came, I think, in the still life from the image or change that came out of the sculpture, paintings like, for example, this pink bra and blue shoes.

IS: Oh, yes.

TW: I went back to less compositional still lifes, just one or two objects, but I put them together in a way that I've never put them together before. And it was the combination that to me was terribly important and rather exciting.

IS: Sort of leather and silk, blue and . . . .

TW: Whatever, I don't know what. I've got two more back there to make that I can't get around to . . . . One is a red belt and a pink bra coming over -- I've got this red belt that's been haunting me for years. I've got some lovely things that nobody has ever seen. But I was very excited about those and then at the same time I got excited about portraiture, not portraiture, but women's faces. Maybe I might even get up the nerve to do a man's face one of these days; but I started doing a couple of women's faces. I got very intrigued in that, big heads, rather intrigued with funny little smiles, too.

IS: Were they done from a model or . . . ?

TW: Yes.

IS: From a model.

TW: That one up there is of a woman named Nancy, and it was through her that I got intrigued with the idea of these quirky little smiles, odd little smiles. So I started that, but then I got pulled off into the work that's the main change since the book, and which has dominated my life for the last two or three years -- things from my last two shows, three areas of work. I went back and revitalized and drew upon the drop-outs, sheer negative shapes -- those things I had started in '67 and dabbled with here and there and wouldn't do because my brain said, "Too contrived." But I finally went back to it with a force. I really committed myself to it and went into it heavily and, because of the drawings from the model, that led to projections where some of the lines come off and continue on the wall in steel. I'm terribly excited about those. God, I can hardly contain myself. I was reading my note about something, too. I find sometimes I get so excited working, especially when starting new ideas; I get so excited that I get uncomfortable. It almost feels dangerous, like I'm flirting with something dangerous. Sometimes I've gotten so excited that I'll come home early -- just too exciting. I had to get out of here; I couldn't stand it. Then I'd go home my head swimming because I've got forty things I want to do all at once tomorrow. And then, God, I've got to take them one at a time -- frustrating. Then, the other major thing which I guess I got most excited about of any of the work since the book is the steel drawings that were in my last show where the works are cut out by somebody else which is always fun -- delivered to me finished. I always liked that kind of thing that somebody else does. I don't do that very often, so it's nice to experience it. We cut out the lines. It seemed to me that this was something very new and very different until I realized that it was just nothing more than the old wrought iron gates -- that form, anyway. So I liked those very much and now I'm extremely excited to get some new ones going where they're colored instead of black. The lines are in color. I've got some studies back there I'm quite excited about. I just don't have the money to produce the damned things yet. So those are the major changes since the book. That sort of compresses it all, but that mainly says it. The women's faces, too, is another thing like painting the children. I want very much to do it; I'm very excited by it. I've got one woman I started with two years ago, I think. I've got her studies started, but these things get pushed out of the way by my excitement about other involvements and I can't get back to them. It's very hard to get back to them. I find that for various reasons, including the fact that I do need some money right now, that I'm going to let myself do some works that I wasn't going to do because they might sell better and at the same time I'm doing it because they do intrigue me. As I said in my book, I was always going to do a color T.V. piece. I did black and white T.V. pieces because you couldn't get a color T.V. because they were so big.

IS: Yes, I remember that.

TW: Now that they're making them smaller I'm suddenly intrigued with the idea of going back and doing the work that I never did. So I find myself in an almost embarrassing position of planning right now at this very moment two works with T.V. sets. It's like an attempt to go back and recapture an era that's long gone. That's 1963 and '62 that I did those, but I'm going to go back and do it and update it. I've got myself interested enough that I'm really rather excited about it, moderately excited, not wildly excited. Other artists do this sort of thing, too. Johns is going back and doing the same thing. I'm trying not to be apologetic about it -- I'm apologetic because I feel that I'm going back to try to cash in on something that wasn't quite done. The same thing as in the book I mentioned that copper interior that I always wanted to do. I've been swearing every year I'm going to

do that thing. As a matter of fact, one year I even got the model for it put together. I don't think I'm going to do it this year, but I'm still going to do it. And that's an attempt at the same kind of thing, except that would be impossible to sell. Nobody would buy those interiors.

IS: But it would be impossible for you to know until you do it precisely what your real motivation was. That color T.V. may really even become something.

TW: Well, what interests me is what's happened to me since then, and how I'm going about the paintings is going to be very different. The way I'm going about this work and the way it's going to be executed is very different from earlier [works]. First of all, it'll be all paint. It won't be collage. I've been intrigued with the idea of painting it in a similar way; so it won't be the same feel. One of the objects here might be painted completely different, as though it were a collage. I'm going to paint it in a somewhat modified collage technique. Anything I do is going to engage me and be terribly interesting ultimately. It's the initial impulse that's different. I have the impulse to do other things right now, but I can't afford to.

IS: Yes, that is a consideration; but on the other hand you certainly can't predict that something that you think is saleable will in fact be saleable.

TW: Yes. And it may wind up being kind of embarrassing. Somebody may be contemplating buying a piece that's so rooted in a past time and doesn't belong to now -- but might be very difficult.

IS: And probably a great challenge because of that. Johns, of course, is different because his work has always been a rumination of related images; occasionally he'll add one or two. Well, your work has been like that, too.

TW: Yes. I tend to do that a lot, too, not quite as obviously or sometimes maybe more obviously, depending on how you look at it. A lot of people, of course, don't see the subtlety in my work that I do. John Russell once wrote -- I had a show where I had these big women's heads, lying down in the bedroom heads, at the Janis Gallery. I was very impressed with the big change taking place in my work, a big change in color, the form and all kinds of things -- a major change in my work. People that knew my work would come in and say, "Wow! That's really -- what a big change!" Russell's comment was, "Viewed from the eye of a white fly up on the ceiling" -- he was taking this long view -- "no change at all. It's the same old stuff." And here I thought, "What a big change!" [And he wrote] "the same old stuff." [Laughter] So it depends on what your point of view is.

IS: One or two small things, just out of curiosity and my own interest and my own nostalgia -- do you remember Gene Swenson?

TW: Yes.

IS: Tell me a little about him back in '61 and '62.

TW: The only thing I have to tell you about Gene is when he did this article called "The Honest Nude," he was intrigued with something about me and my work. I don't know what it was that intrigued him because I don't remember the article. It was called "The Honest Nude." So whatever his point was, it had something to do with that, but what I remember about Gene that impressed me the most was I had a show at Janis -- I'm not sure which show -- and he came back to the back room to congratulate me and he was shaking, trembling. He was obviously in a state of deep anxiety. He said the show had affected him terribly. The show must have triggered something in him, maybe some kind of castration anxiety. I don't know what, but something very upsetting. So I was struck by the ability of my work to do that to somebody, and I was struck by the fragility of him to be affected by it that way. But I never really talked to Gene that much and didn't have much to do with him except that interview that he did.

IS: Because he was one of the first to commit himself the way he did.

TW: It seems to me that he was the one, maybe in the context of "The Honest Nude," wrote from the point of view, to be honest, about the ungainliness of my work. In those days especially, I would do a drawing and tend to let -- it might be a little awkward -- that drawing be in the painting instead of trying to smooth it out or clean it up of whatever. I just let it be rough and a little awkward. It was about that time as he was preparing the article that I was beginning to change to much more slick nudes, much better proportions. I think it threw him for a little bit of a loss in dealing with the article because I had sort of changed his point. I forget now how he dealt with it.

IS: Did recognition or lack of recognition, I guess in your case it would be more recognition -- did that affect you?

TW: Let's start with lack of recognition first. Maybe all painters feel this way except, of course, if you're Johns you can't feel this way. Or if you're Lichtenstein. I always felt the lack of recognition more. I learned early on that

I tended to thrive on rejection. I always felt rejected because I got bad criticism most of the time. I think if the reviews weren't bad sometimes they were just so neutral that the -- like Russell's last review of my show. He didn't know what the hell he was looking at, first of all. It was like a non-review, nothing. So I would always tend to find rejection and it would, if anything, make me angry and I'd use the anger to work more, work harder, work better, as if I was involved in some kind of a fight. So I was affected by it. I'd like to say I was unaffected, but I wasn't. I was affected at least in a good way as far as I was concerned. Recognition didn't pose a problem for me except in the beginning I think there were some problems -- I can't even put my finger on what they were. Sometimes I wonder about that. There's a tendency to take something for granted in the beginning. In the very beginning, which is the first show at the Green Gallery, I think, something happened for the it worse. I don't even know what I'm trying to say here. I remember Grace Glueck was interviewing me about my first show uptown. She said, "What are you going to do next?" I was doing "The Great American Nude," and I said I didn't know what I was going to do next at the time, really. But I was carried away with something, so I said I was going to paint the "Great American Nude" outdoors or on different sites. It was sort of a dumb thing to say, but it occurred to me later on that that's not what I was going to do, that wasn't the right answer. There was a period of time there where I almost sort of lost focus. Very quickly, early on and ever since, I'd been such a ferocious producer that I know, and I really know literally -- I can tell you in four years what painting I'm going to make and sometimes five years, because they're just lined up waiting. And other things go on. But at that time I wasn't that way at all. It was almost as if I lived from hand to mouth, partly because the success stopped me in my tracks somehow. I didn't know what I was going to do tomorrow. Maybe that was because I was just beginning and I was younger and all that, but I had the feeling it was having a negative effect of diffusing my focus and arresting my development in ways, too. I stuck with the nudes that I was doing at that particular moment a little longer than I would have. I was just sort of stuck there for a while. Then I went on. Then I was are that what happened from then on [was that] people would buy my work quite eagerly, but always the work I'd done last year. They didn't want the newest things. They wanted things last year. That went on for several years. I'd do the newest things. They'd want last year's. It took them a year to catch on or something.

IS: Yes. There is that lag. Other artists have told me.

TW: You hear about that all the time. I guess that still goes on. I hope it still goes on because my last show didn't sell a single major painting. Those are good paintings. I hope they catch on through the years.

IS: I guess someone else who would have been fairly early on would have been Lawrence Alloway.

TW: I had a lot of dislike for Alloway, a lot of dislike. Of course, my dislike for Alloway came to a head when he had the show at the Whitney Museum and relegated me to being a minor figure in the Pop Art thing. Of course, it's the irony - - I didn't want to be in the Pop Art thing, but when he made me a minor figure, I got pretty put out. [Laughter] So also in his catalogue he had some actual factual errors which kind of hurt me. I found Alloway to be what I kind of didn't like about critics or people who confused the term Pop Art. He seemed to be very involved with the surface of the thing. I thought he was a very surface guy as far as I was concerned.

IS: Do you have any more questions?

TW: We should at least use up the tape.

IS: Yes, we will indeed.

TW: I've got nothing else in my head.

IS: About the new work? Anything . . . ?

TW: I'll tell you about the newest work which is on the wall over there. In my recent show, one of the elements to a certain extent was a piece of a painting coming down into it, a generally Abstract Expressionist kind of thing. And I had these new works where the painting not only was a major element but, in fact, in some cases, the entire element in the painting with a piece dropped down. When I saw Litchentstein's recent show I pretty pissed off because that was what his show was about, a big piece of a chunk of a painting coming down. I thought, O.K. I'll have my show where these things have long been planned. And people will say, "Oh, God, he's just taking off on Lichtenstein." I told that to Roy last night at a party. But also where I'm doing these paintings -- did I mention to you what bothered me about these paintings [was] that I had the whole world to choose from. It was a bit of a problem. And I feel that someday the critics will look at this and say, "This is where Wesselmann began to go insane and revealed his basic insanity." [Laughter] Isn't it crazy doing this? I think I'm getting a few things narrowed down. It's kind of playful and rather harmless, I suppose, innocent but kind of dumb -- but that painting up there, the one in the middle which is my own image, the smoking cigarette -- that's one of my favorite paintings. "Bedroom Painting Number Two," which I sold. I didn't want to sell it, but Sidney sort of talked me into selling. I wanted to keep it because it came to me so hard. It was a very hard painting to work out and I liked it very much. It meant a lot to me. It summarized a lot of things I'd been involved with for some years. It was around 1967. I'm rather intrigued now to take that painting I wish I had back and repaint it just with the

nude dropped out of that one part. It's kind of a playful thing, but I really liked that thing. It's a little bit crazy, I think, but anyway I'm going to do that thing for sure.

IS: At the very beginning of our discussions you were talking about putting someone else's picture in your picture and paint that picture.

TW: Would you say that again?

IS: That you were thinking of using another picture of someone else that you would introduce into your painting and you would have someone else's picture as part of your painting and you were wondering whose to do.

TW: Well, it was a question of wondering of doing it in their style. I wouldn't use a particular painting, although it has occurred to me to do a particular Matisse, but then I never felt up to it. I never felt like copying Matisse. That makes me very nervous. [Laughter] But there are a few of my very early little collages that I've always wanted to make -- let's say, for example, that little early collage of the woman up there taking her dress off. There was one somewhat similar to that. I always wanted to make a painting of, only very big, like maybe eight feet high: make it part of a standing still life. It would be as though that little thing was leaning against the wall. So I have this interest in painting my own works which I'll be doing now with these things. These other paintings I've finally selected what to do -- they will be just in the style of nobody in particular, these kind of linear kind of abstract things.

END OF INTERVIEW