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Oral history interview with Stephen Antonakos, 1975 May 9

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Transcript

Interview

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW WITH
STEPHEN ANTONAKOS
MAY 9, 1975
INTERVIEWER: PAUL CUMMING

SA: STEPHEN ANTONAKOS
PC: PAUL CUMMINGS

PC: You were born in Greece, in 1926?

SA: That is correct.

PC: In what city?

SA: It is in southern Greece, up in the mountains, and it is called Saint Nicholas, but it is hard to locate specifically.

PC: You were very young when you came here.

SA: I was four, four years old, and it was 1930.

PC: Right. Did your family come, or part of the family?

SA: My father had made four previous trips to this country and on his fifth trip back to Greece, he told my mother that he was going back to New York and that my mother should be ready to leave for New York in a very short time. So, the time came when my father wrote to my mother and we all came to this country, to this city. "We all" meaning my three brothers, and my sister, and myself. I am the youngest.

PC: Oh, I didn't know that it was such a large family.

SA: Yes.

PC: So, you came to New York City then?

SA: That is correct. We lived at 116th Street and Lennox Avenue first.

PC: Did you live there for a long time?

SA: I think we lived there for about four or five years, and then we moved to East End Avenue and, I believe, 81st Street, and then to 79th Street and Second Avenue >til 1939. 1939, we moved to Brooklyn.

PC: So, you really started school in Manhattan then?

SA: Grammar school, yes, and then junior high school and high school in Brooklyn.

PC: What schools did you go to? Do you remember those?

SA: High school was the Fort Hamilton High School which is in Bayridge.

PC: Well, you grew up in at least a bi-lingual house, more or less.

SA: Oh, yes.

PC: Did you learn English first, or Greek first, or?

SA: Well, since I was four years old; of course, at home we spoke mostly Greek but my older brothers and my sister of course spoke Greek from Greece and it was a little difficult for them in the beginning to learn English, but for me it was very simple because of my age, and what I learned in grammar school, and so forth. I am sorry to say, though, it was my parents that kept the language alive, and when they passed on my brothers and I communicate mostly in English so I have forgotten quite a lot of the Greek language. But I

understand Greek very well.

PC: If somebody was talking, then --

SA: Yes, that I understand.

PC: Do you read it too?

SA: No, I cannot read it.

PC: Have you been to Greece?

SA: I went to Greece about nineteen years ago. I made a hitchhike trip throughout Europe, went to England, France, Switzerland, Italy and Greece. Stayed in Greece for one month.

PC: What was it like?

SA: Well, there were a lot of things my parents and the rest of the family spoke to me about, and for a long time I thought I had remembered these things, but actually they were other peoples' memories. [Laughter] Going back to Greece and finding the area or seeing the house that I was born in, and meeting my aunt who is the sister of my mother, the only one who is left in Greece now that is very closely related to me, and being in the house where my mother and father lived and the rest of the family, it was kind of a situation where I did not have to speak to anyone, just move around the property and the house.

PC: Your own experience.

SA: My own experience, and it took me several weeks to be able to digest all this because I began visiting people and areas that my father and my mother told me about. I just had to announce myself and everybody opened up and told me everything about me when I was born, and about themselves, and about the family when we were still there.

PC: It must be an extraordinary experience.

SA: It was, and because of that feeling I think I achieved something because I convinced my two older brothers to make a trip in September. They have never been back either, since 1930.

PC: Oh, really?

SA: I think they blackmailed me. I think I have to go with them too, which I wouldn't mind, but --

PC: [Laughter]

SA: -- it would be interesting to go with them also.

PC: And see what happens to them. Well, what was life like growing up in Manhattan before you moved off to Brooklyn? You obviously had a busy household with all those people.

SA: Yes. One of the main problems, it seems, was in education. I was in the sidelines watching all this. My oldest brother, who was an excellent student in Greece, spoke four languages before he ever went to college, there was, like, a big future waiting for him. My second oldest brother was also -- not a great student, but an interested student. My last brother and my sister who were just growing up, it affected them, moving here as a group. My oldest brother felt very insecure with the way of life here. He was not able to cope with it for a long, long time, and because of that, did not continue his education. I feel kind of bad about that because he lost quite a lot from it, you know, by moving. My mother would not allow anyone to stay in Greece. She said that we must all go as a family to New York.

PC: Why is that?

SA: Well, I think because . . . not all Greeks feel this way.

PC: I know that a number of people that I have interviewed, who came from Greece, had the same kind of . . . .

SA: I think because they know that if a part of the family comes here, and another part stays in Greece, it will be years before they will see each other. You must remember too that it isn't like now. People can go to Greece in a matter of six hours.

PC: It used to take from six to eight weeks.

SA: Also, my father made several trips back and forth and it cost him a tremendous amount of money. So I think that she did not want to separate the family for that reason. Also, my father -- specifically my mother, actually -- she is a farmer, a person without any schooling, and her family was everything to her. She did not know what New York was going to be like, so she did not know if she would ever come back to Greece, so she . . . .

PC: She wanted all of her people there.

SA: Yes. To separate the family not knowing what the future would hold . . . .

PC: What are your brothers' names?

SA: My oldest brother is Basil, my second brother is Tony, my third brother is Peter, and my sister is Canella. Canella in Greece means Cinnamon.

PC: So we get all the statistics down here as we go along. [Laughter] So you started grade school, then, in New York?

SA: In New York. I sometimes pass the grammar school that I went to.

PC: Which one was that and where? The one on 82nd Street?

SA: 78th Street.

PC: Well, what was it like for you? Because, you know, here you were, going to school in one part of the world and where you were living was quite something else.

SA: Well, it didn't take long for me to see how to survive as a youngster in New York. I made friends. But in relation to my family, I saw that my oldest brother was not continuing his education. I didn't realize it at that time until I grew up and put it together and tried to analyze it. My second brother, Tony, like the whole world opened up for him, you know, experiences like he could never have in Greece. He ran around with a lot of questionable people. My third brother was a person who was fascinated by the movies and was not too interested in attending school, and was constantly playing hooky from school. One of the reasons he was disturbed by thoughts of school was not the school itself, but silly things would occur where a teacher would have him do something like draw or something for the class, but he would miss another class to do this.

PC: Oh, I see.

SA: My brother Peter was a very big influence on me in doing artwork. He was very handy. He was able to build things with his hands, with wood, and he was able to draw quite well by having something to copy from. He was one of my early influences for picking up a pencil and putting something on paper.

PC: Did you draw as a child?

SA: I drew. I remember that is all I've ever done and I thought of doing nothing but to draw. I had no other interests.

PC: Did you get involved with any school activities as you got into school more?

SA: Well, junior high school I got involved in activities, art activities anyway: working on the yearbook. Then, in high school, I began to direct myself now that I was very interested in art, and there was what we call a "major," and I was a major in art.

PC: Oh, there was?

SA: At Fort Hamilton. But, to show you, though, what was happening, Fort Hamilton was a new school, and they wanted to fill the school with new students. My advisor during high school did not indicate to me that there was this other school in the Bronx, for music and art,

and you must understand also . . . . Some people said, "Well, why didn't you know about it?" I did not know about it because that kind of school is different that it is now. For instance, my parents did not know anything about it and, as you know, a lot of these advisements that you get from people in schools, really your parents should know also, as they could advise just as well anyway.

PC: Right.

SA: My parents and my friends did not know anything about music and art, so I was forced to go to this school which was a brand new building and had a lot of new students from all over Brooklyn. But thank God there was a teacher there, Miss Anna Dick, who got interested in me and helped me to develop my mind and my hand in just plain old drawing. But in that school I was involved in a lot of projects for the school, and for myself, but I got drafted in 1945, so I never really finished high school. I just had a few more months, or something like that. Thank God, as I would have to take English, can you imagine? [Laughter]

PC: Now, why did your family move to Brooklyn?

SA: My father bought a restaurant called the Alpine Restaurant on Bayridge Avenue, there and so we moved to Brooklyn because of that.

PC: To be closer.

SA: Closer to the store, yes. And also, I suspect, because there was more of a Greek community there, but that is only my own suspicion. Basically I think it was the restaurant, so he would not have to travel so far from Manhattan to Brooklyn.

PC: Well, that would take a lot of time.

SA: Yes.

PC: In order to get from 80th Street all the way to . . .

SA: To Bayridge, that is the tip of Brooklyn.

PC: That is over an hour and one-half on the subway each way.

SA: So we moved to Brooklyn and that is where really I remember most of my activities in high school and --

PC: What kind of things did you draw under the influence of your brother?

SA: Well, I will tell you first of all how my brother got interested in drawing: we were passing a store one day where a man inside a shop window was transforming something on a wall and he did it with squares.

PC: Oh, right, right.

SA: Like you do a mural. And, he noticed what he did and caught on right away. We stayed there all day watching this man work. So, he in turn came home and did the same thing with advertisements. I began copying what he did, but freehand. Then, in grammar school they realized that I was interested in doing this so they began doing the same thing to me. Instead of going to assembly, they made me do some illustration on the blackboard for the next lesson. So, that is the way it developed. What I drew mostly in high school were very naturalistic objects -- a bottle, fruit, my hand. I would go to the park and draw the trees or the bushes and sometimes the surrounding area of the buildings, and so forth.

PC: How did your parents react to this?

SA: My parents were very excited about it, specifically my father.

PC: Oh, really?

SA: Yes. My father had . . .and I don't mean this as an insult to other people . . . you know, I must clarify this . . . a very good education and also I think that, in his own way, he was a liberal thinker. That is, in his own way. [Laughter]

PC: What does that mean? It always means something. [Laughter]

SA: He was very, very excited and helped me in may ways when he found out I was interested in drawing, and maybe painting. He thought that he had achieved something also, because my older brothers ended up in the restaurant business. So he was very happy that I was always going out into another field. I really shouldn't say another field, just . . . . He had read a lot of books about art and artists, either Greeks or the French, and he thought it a very good thing for a person to express himself. He never saw this as money. We never saw it as making a living this way, either, by the way. I never even gave it a thought, like what I would do, so there was no problem, per se, from the family, neither with my brothers or my father.

PC: It was your thing and they let you do it.

SA: I must tell you they gave me great encouragement. They did not just let me do it.

PC: Well, that is important, great, great. Did you have any other instructors in high school that were important to you, besides this one woman?

SA: No.

PC: Did she take, you know . . . ? What was an example of her . . . ?

SA: In one way she was very helpful but in another way she was a little too concerned about me making a living. Near the end of my high school . . .

PC: The Depression years were over with.

SA: . . . career, she stopped talking about making a living, but she started indicating to me that there are these places -- advertising agencies and studios -- that hire people to do work, to do art work, or whatever it was. It was not too clear to me exactly what she was talking about because, that this time, you must remember, I didn't even know what a gallery was. I didn't know what . . . .

PC: You were what, eighteen, nineteen?

SA: Well, younger, seventeen.

PC: Seventeen, yes.

SA: The only museum that I ever went to was the Metropolitan, and of course the Museum of Natural History.

PC: Why do you say and the Museum of Natural History like that?

SA: Why?

PC: Yes. Was that an important place?

SA: Because I lived in Manhattan and every two weeks we would go there as a group.

PC: Oh really? The whole family would go?

SA: No, no, no, no. From school.

PC: Oh, from school.

SA: And the Metropolitan Museum, I don't know how I have been there. I don't remember if it was a group, with the school, or my family. I don't remember. So I saw later in life that she was directing me into advertising. She kept saying, "You have to make a living, so this is the way to do it."

PC: How to use your talent.

SA: How to use your talent. But she never indicated to me that there are these places called galleries and these people actually paint what they want to paint, and they put them in shows and people buy them maybe. She did not go in that direction because she felt I was a certain income class, and it was a working class, so there must be a way of me making a

living, you know. Then, it was after the war, I think maybe the late 1950's, that I began to see a completely new picture of what the whole art thing is. But she was instrumental in the sense that she encouraged me, not only emotionally, but taught me certain ways of working that helped me that was very important to me for my future for many, many years.

PC: Do you mean in terms of drawing, and images, and these things?

SA: Not only the actual images, not the actual technical part, but somehow, the desire to do it. She was more than a teacher who gave out problems.

PC: She was like a muse, yeah. Did you paint at that time?

SA: I did some painting, but not too much. It was very difficult for me.

PC: It was really drawing?

SA: Yes, mostly drawing. It was very difficult to paint. We never went onto oils. It was always tempera. Tempera was not really handled to well by me. It was always flat areas and it was difficult to actually paint. I was able to put color down okay but not to manipulate it like a painter. One thing I must tell you about her: at that time, when I was sixteen or seventeen, the WPA people, or the Federal government, gave permission to different schools around the city to go to a warehouse here in Manhattan and select works to bring to the school. I only bring this up so that you know that there was an effort made at that time to distribute some of the WPA work to any institution that wanted to go there and select works.

PC: Right, right.

SA: I went with her but I do not remember what we selected or even if we selected anything. But I do remember it was a warehouse just filled with work. I walked around like in a daze.

PC: [Laughter] Wondering, what was it all?

SA: Yes. Well, one of the things that I feel very bad about . . . a lot of things were not really explained to me and as students at that time we never really probed. We never asked for answers. We only did what we were told. Like, it was a long time before I knew what the WPA was. It never was explained to me what the WPA was, or simple things: like we go to New York to look at this work and maybe bring some back. It was never explained what it was all about which would be of interest for the future, for myself anyway.

PC: Were there any other students there who were interested in art? Who were friendly with you?

SA: Yes, and I forget their names. One, I understand, became a very good dress designer and one is now in advertising. I forget his name, also. I see him around here once in awhile. What is interesting is that he knew quite a lot about -- he was only like a year older -- painting, about art history and so forth because he was going to classes at Pratt as a young student and a lot of people looked up to him because he was a painter and they knew what the hell they are all talking about, and I kept probing my teacher, Miss Dick, and she said, "Don't worry about it." The funny thing is that he graduated from high school and I think he achieved something. I forget his name, I don't know what he did but his name kept coming up every so often. Then, I lost contact and I never heard of him again. >Til recently, four years ago, I saw him walking around the street here and I remembered and I said, "What are you doing?" and so forth. He lives in Long Island and he only brought his daughter over to go to dancing school or something, and I said, "Are you still painting?" and he says, "Painting?"

PC: [Laughter]

SA: He said, "No, I have been in advertising all these years." [Laughter]

PC: Yes, yes. That is fascinating.

SA: Then I got drafted.

PC: Well, what happened? You were in the Army?

SA: I was in the Army in the Philippines. I was in the Army for two years and when I got out of the Army . . . .

PC: What was the Army like?

SA: Well, I was eighteen years old and I was very discouraged because, when I first got drafted, I ended up in Florida and I ended up as an infantryman, rifleman. I did not have to be too intelligent to know that that was not a very good idea.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: But I wasn't in that outfit more than a week when I was transferred to an artillery outfit. They trained me as an artillery man, and I got shipped to the Philippines.

PC: How did you like being in the Philippines? It was a new exotic world, wasn't it? Or not?

SA: I guess at that time, and also my background, I don't remember how exotic . . . . I look back at certain things and I am glad I had certain experiences. It was exciting being a young fellow and traveling.

PC: Seeing the world.

SA: Seeing the world and tramping through the jungles. But you get tired after a while, you know. We were not really achieving anything. You would have some emergency and that would be taken care of in a few days, and all of the sudden you are sitting around . . .

PC: It gets boring. So what . . . ? You came out after two years which was what, 1947?

SA: 1947, and then the state started up community colleges so I went for two years to a community college in Brooklyn. It's on Pearl Street. But now I think it has expanded and is quite a big school.

PC: It is a big place, now, yes. Did you go there to study anything?

SA: Yes, I took advertising. I learned about advertising: how to do a layout. I did a lot of drawing on my own. They didn't push that too much. And I graduated in 1949 and I got a job working for a studio that did government work. In the studio we did training manuals and posters for the service. That was the beginning of the government being involved with atomic so there were a lot of posters about how to educate people who worked with certain equipment. At that time another friend named John Machellari [Phon. Sp.] who lives a few blocks from here, enlightened me to the other world of museums and galleries.

PC: Now what was he?

SA: He was a painter.

PC: He was a painter. Was he in Community College?

SA: No, no. I just met him somewhere in New York here and he enlightened me on all these places, galleries and museums, and then I saw a whole new world opening up for me.

PC: You had never been to the Modern or . . . ?

SA: No. At that time he took me to the Modern. I began to get very interested then in pursuing the kind of work that I saw in certain galleries. Then, in the meantime, of course, I was working as a free-lancer in the advertising world.

PC: Did you work for this one agency, though, very long?

SA: Two years, I think. And then I began to free-lance for different agencies and studios. My name got around, and they used me for a lot of illustrations.

PC: What kind of work did you do generally?

SA: Illustrations.

PC: Of what kind? Anything or everything?

SA: In the beginning it was anything and later on I became known as . . . . if you needed an older person or you needed a person crying, if you needed a house with a tremendous amount of detail, then they would call on me. Don't ask me to show you any. [Laughter]

PC: Oh, they must be around in a thousand magazines, right?

SA: [Laughter] Well, I have not been in it for a long . . . I mean, I left a long time ago. So, I had a kind of reputation where I would be called, mostly by pharmaceutical houses, by the way.

PC: Oh, really?

SA: Well, because . . . .

PC: Oh, they do those very intense ads.

SA: Yes. They would have a product for an older person or for a person that is sick and somehow I was able to handle that very well. Also, if they were not to look like Americans. All my illustrations were either Greeks or Italians or Jews.

PC: Oh, really?

SA: [Laughter] You could always pick them out.

PC: Oh, that is fantastic.

SA: It became quite limited, you know, who would use me, but I was able to draw very well. When I say "very well" I mean that I could represent a flower, or homes, but in my own unique way. They weren't the crisp, advertising look.

PC: So you had a style.

SA: I had a style.

PC: Did that develop consciously or just . . . ?

SA: I think just over the years from working and looking at other peoples' drawings in newspapers and so forth. But then, of course, when I started visiting museums and galleries, then it began to develop even more. A lot of the early influences in that aspect, in advertising, was Ben Shahn, for instance, and there was David Stiller Martin and from those two accumulated what I wanted and developed my own style. I went along like that for a long time in advertising, but this work was **never** shown to galleries. This was strictly a private business situation.

PC: But, now that you discovered the world of galleries and museums, what did you start doing? Did that produce an effect?

SA: Well, it did produce an effect on me and I saw that these people had no restrictions. I saw that people were doing things like I'd never seen before. These were the days of the abstract expressionists, you know.

PC: This was what, starting in 19 . . . ?

SA: Fifty-ish.

PC: Fifty, right.

SA: And I began to experiment myself with certain ways that they were working in, but never kept them. Until the time the Stable Gallery had the first show of Alberto Burri. That work just fascinated me to such a point that I began doing collages myself. Fabric.

PC: That was the beginning of collage.

SA: Yes, for me.

PC: But before we get into that, I heard that in 1945 you went to the New York Institute of Fine Arts and Sciences, or something like that.

SA: New York Institute of . . . .

PC: Fine Arts and Sciences in 1945. Was that an advertising thing?

SA: In 1945 I was in high school.

PC: Yes.

SA: What could that be?

PC: I don't know. I thought . . . .

SA: The New York Institute . . . . I remember the name.

PC: I just saw it in some printed . . . .

SA: Yes, I remember the name now, but what is that? The New York Institute of Applied Arts and Sciences. Is it a school?

PC: Yeah, it must be.

SA: I really cannot help you. I don't know.

PC: It was some class or something, maybe.

SA: Maybe it was a class. I don't know how or where it came from, but the name is very familiar.

PC: I mean, I did not know where it was. I just saw it in the chronology.

SA: The community school was called Brooklyn Community College at that time. I think it has changed since then. But that name is very familiar but I cannot quite figure it.

PC: The abstract expressionists . . . were your paintings large? Did you use the kind of things they were doing or was it different?

SA: No, they were small and on paper and they were thrown away right away. I felt almost . . . . At that time they were secret works of mine because I didn't know what people would say, but there were these other people who had them on view. For myself, my background was such (and this I analyzed later) that I was almost embarrassed. Like, when I first started seeing Jackson Pollock I began to drip on paper to see what was really happening. I could see how one is able to control the drippings and so forth, but they were thrown away right away because I was embarrassed that other people should see what I was doing.

PC: What of those painters interested you?

SA: What other painters? At that time?

PC: Yes, at that point. Besides Pollock.

SA: Gorky interested me later in life. At that time it was basically de Kooning and then, a few years later, I saw early works by Kline, for instance. I would never miss a show by Kline. De Kooning was okay if I missed it, but I would see his work, but I think Kline was very, very exciting for me.

PC: Do you know what appealed to you?

SA: What appealed -- was the boldness and the freshness of it. When I say freshness I mean the unrestricted brush strokes. They may be restricted but at the time I saw them they looked that. And also Burri, who came in later. I forget when she [Stable] gave him a show, but those people specifically. Then, a fellow I used to know in advertising named Bob Kato told me about these two guys, Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg and they had a show at the Time Magazine lobby, I think. I am not too sure now . . . it was the Life or Time building.

PC: Right, in Rockefeller Center. The old one.

SA: I think they had a show there in the lobby, or they had a room, because I remember seeing "Combines" by Rauschenberg. I don't know if he ever has influenced me. His work is extremely adventurous for me. When I saw his work it was unbelievable that . . . . You must remember that I did not have a lot of background.

PC: Right, right.

SA: He was using chickens, and birds, and found objects from the street, and so forth.

PC: And people were taking it seriously.

SA: I did not look at it that way because I was not that refined as people taking it seriously. I just took it for granted these people were showing it. It was not in the gallery though. It was some sort of a display that this fellow, Bob Kato, told me about >cause he used to know them because they did works for department stores on Fifth Avenue.

PC: Right. Who did he design for?

SA: Bob Kato . . . .

PC: Record design.

SA: He was in the record business for many, many, many years and he did a little painting on the side. He had his fingers on a lot of things.

PC: I have not heard that name in years. [Laughter]

SA: He is in California now.

PC: Oh, that's why.

SA: He is working for a big record company. So then I began to refine myself for what I wanted to do, and for many years -- that is when I met you -- I was involved in fabric collages and found objects and so forth.

PC: Right, right.

SA: In the meantime, of course, my first wife was not going to go along with this and I got a divorce.

PC: Where did she come into the picture? Was it right after the Army, or . . . ?

SA: It was several years after the Army. I really blocked my mind out for that. [Laughter]

PC: That was one of those things that went away.

SA: I have got a nice son, but then I decided that this is what I really wanted to do and that I would stay in advertising as long as possible just to survive financially. I got a studio on 29th Street in the garment district, the furrier district, and I supplied the studio with found objects from the streets and got involved with the particular work I was doing at that time. I began to show, a lot of shows -- at group shows, anyway -- with Allan Stone, when Allan was having all those group shows.

PC: But, you had shown things before with Allan, I think.

SA: I met him . . . remember the Avant-Garde Gallery?

PC: Right. That is what I was going to ask you about.

SA: There I began meeting other young artists and painters.

PC: Did you go to 10th Street ever?

SA: I used to go to 10th Street, but I never showed there until later on. But yes, I used to see all those shows. To me, and I guess to a lot of people too, that is where most of the interesting work was done. At least for me. But still, you know, Eleanore Ward was still showing very good work, you know, and it was a kind of young people and older people . . . .

PC: But it was uptown.

SA: That was still uptown as we consider it now. I remember first meeting Al Held there. In fact, he has not changed. [Laughter]

PC: [Laughter]

SA: Yes, I used to go to 10th Street quite a lot. That when, in fact, I saw Hallex there and Krushenick. I could hear him a mile away.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: Also, Louise Nevelson. Remember, she used to show down in the basement of one of those galleries? You would go four steps down.

PC: Oh, right.

SA: She showed . . . I don't remember the name of the gallery or if it was maybe just her place, but she showed . . . . Before she got involved with the cathedral forms -- free-form constructions. So I was beginning to move around now. I knew where the galleries were and it did not take too long to be very specific about what galleries I was going to look at. A that time, as you know, a lot of us used to go to the Modern.

PC: Right.

SA: Especially on Sunday afternoons. We would drink coffee and read the paper upstairs. It became a hang-out for me with some of the people in the mornings, on Sundays.

PC: Oh, really? Who would you see there?

SA: Krushenick used to go a lot there with his wife. I tell you --one of the problems is like you go through certain friends and then you go in different directions and then you do not see them any more.

PC: Right. You change.

SA: A lot of the people I used to go with then, or see, have not continued. They have disappeared and I do not know what they are involved with.

PC: Well, you own life moves in certain ways and that's what you have got to keep track of. What did 10th Street mean to you in terms of a place to see things, a possible place to show things?

SA: I did not see it as a lot of people write about. I just took it for granted as a place where some people got together and rented these stalls, you know. I did not realize how really important it was until many years later. I know that at that time a lot of people saw it as a threshold, a new beginning for some people, for new ideas. I just somehow took it for granted that there were these places and I hung around there. I knew there was a difference between them and the uptown places, you know, but I didn't see them as a revolutionary direction or something new was happening.

PC: How did you come to take a studio in the garment district?

SA: Only because I just walked the streets and found it. And that building, in fact, I brought other artists into that building. It was a small building. And --

PC: Who else was there?

SA: Well, you know, she is a dancer. I cannot remember her name, Schmellen, Schvellin.

PC: Schneller, Carol Schneller.

SA: She is still upstairs.

PC: Oh, really?

SA: She is still upstairs, and some of the other people. I forget their names. Shirley Burton was doing burnt objects with a torch until she turned around and the building was on fire.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: I think she is still there. But the other people, I have forgotten who they were. Just people who I heard needed space. I stayed there for several years.

PC: So that was really like the first studio.

SA: For me, yes.

PC: Did that make a difference to you in terms of living and working and thinking about art?

SA: Yes, because I used to go there, start maybe about six-thirty in the evening and I stayed until maybe two or three at night and just worked. There was a big difference. There were a lot of things I wanted to do. I never thought of going to classes. I did try that once or twice. But I wanted to somehow learn on my own, experience it myself, and solve my own problems on my own time, and that life was going on for many years.

PC: Did you find it difficult doing the advertising and then doing the art at night?

SA: No. The only time . . . No, I was tired, but that's all. It was very much divorced from work. Then I realized that it was not right in the sense that I was spending my best hours doing something I really was not too crazy about and what I really wanted to do was done when my mind was tired. Then I decided that I had to rearrange my life and, because certain changes were happening in my work also, I left that studio and moved to Greene Street.

PC: I was thinking yesterday about putting some . . . . I remember seeing in the old studio some of the collages, some things with buttons, and some very rough things too. I don't remember very well.

SA: I did a couple of neons there also.

PC: That's right. There was one . . . it was a small piece with neon in it. How did you come to the buttons and all that? Was that because it was the garment district and available?

SA: No, no. It was a fluke, to tell you the truth. An artist friend of mine whose wife may still work for a Jewish organization on Broadway -- it is for disturbed children -- she is the director of this group, or this organization. It is crazy. It is Amentally disturbed, blind children.Can you believe that? Anyway, a lot of corporations would give her things for the children to play with.

PC: Products.

SA: Products. And some of the products that they gave her were buttons. In the meantime, I have acquired like four or five pillows at the studio for some reason. I do not remember how. Somebody gave them to me to store for them, or something. I don't remember how I ended up with three or four pillows at the studio. They were not mine. So this friend of mine said, "Would you like some of the objects these companies gave me?" I said, "Sure." She gave me a big box of buttons and one day I was sitting on my bed and I said, "Why can't I sew some buttons on these pillows?" This person never came back for the pillows. I don't . . . very strange.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: So that is how I got started, and I started sewing buttons on the pillows and I became involved in other things besides pillows. At that time I was very troubled, with my first wife, there were a lot of personal problems. I didn't realize it until many years later, I met some doctor. I did not have to tell him anything as these pillows were like an autobiography for him. But that is how I got involved with in pillows.

PC: You also started using words on them at one time. Was that then or was that much later?

SA: That pillow thing was like a year and a half only. That is all and I stopped.

PC: Oh, really? And then objects going through them. There was all kinds of acting out with the pillows in a way. Maybe that is what he was using. Was this also the period when you decided to change your life and you were now going to recede from the commercial world?

SA: Yes. A lot of things happened at that time. Not only my art was changing, my life had changed in relation to my wife and I saw that also my way of making money had to be changed. So all of this was happening at one time. I don't know what year it was. Then I moved to Greene Street.

PC: It must have been the latter fifties . . . sixty.

SA: Yes, that is right. That was at the end of 1963, I think. So, when I left the old studio, Paul, I just walked out. I just took what I wanted and moved to Greene Street.

PC: You left everything?

SA: [Laughter] Yes. I think our landlord did not like that. You should have seen the rags and the found objects.

PC: Oh, right, right.

SA: But, then when I moved to Greene Street, I decided that I was going to do only neon works.

PC: Now, I am trying to think of things just before this. For example, the exhibition at the Avant-Garde Gallery?

SA: Yes, yes.

PC: How did that come about?

SA: Oh, yes. Meantime, I began meeting other young painters. In fact, one was Alice Adams. You know Alice, don't you? She was showing at the Avant-Garde Gallery, and they introduced me to Bernard Davis.

PC: Oh, right, from Miami.

SA: Right, him. And he had this little gallery called the Avant-Garde Gallery.

PC: Oh, right, and then he had the Miami Modern later.

SA: What happened was he did not stay in business too long, maybe two seasons and he decided to show me. I asked him, "Why do you want to move?" I guess he was like everybody else. People were not recognizing him as a substantial gallery and so forth. And he had donated one or two Gorky's. He was also trying to save Gorky's house. They were going to tear it down -- where Gorky lived, they had a studio. That kind of thing, you know? Nobody appreciated him, and he decided to move off and go down to Miami and open this so-called museum.

PC: Museum, right.

SA: You know he died recently.

PC: Oh, he did? I didn't know that.

SA: Yes. I think a year and a half ago. So he decided to leave New York and then, at that time . . . .

PC: But that was your first real show though, wasn't it?

SA: Yes. Artist's Space; remember Artist's Space?

PC: No, no, that is a new art gallery?

SA: On Lexington Avenue?

PC: Oh, right, right, right, right.

SA: I showed there twice, I think. They were a gallery that showed works of new people.

PC: Right, right, right. What was that like, I mean, finally having your own exhibition of your own work? I mean, a lot has happened in a few years, here.

SA: Yes. I really did not think too much about it because it did not take me too long to see that it meant more than just having an exhibition.

PC: In terms of what?

SA: Well, in terms of people buying, first of all. I used to put up the show and take it down.

[Laughter]

PC: [Laughter]

SA: And I realized that there was something missing someplace. I did not think the work was so bad and it was difficult for me to understand why some people were not buying my work. But I did not think of it too long. One of the mistakes I had made, because I was living off advertising, I always used that as a crutch, you know.

PC: You could always go back and work a few days.

SA: Yes. So using that as a crutch and never gave it too much thought. I did not push the gallery people to sell something. So I learned that pretty fast too.

PC: In the collecting of all the material and all the, you know, the buttons, and pillows, the rags, and the wood, and everything else, you did have that early use of neon.

SA: Yes.

PC: How did that come into it? I mean, this was . . . .

SA: That was on 29th Street, where I began with my constructions, I began to put in fluorescent lights, small units and light bulbs with little timers and works like that.

PC: What led you to use those?

SA: I guess, in one way, maybe I saw it someplace. I really cannot answer you. I just found over time that I wanted to put a light bulb in a particular box that you open and the light went on under a collage to light the collage.

PC: I see.

SA: You know, not the bare bulb yet. It is the effect where the box is opened and you see the collage lit up from the back, and then the light went off and the collage looks different, and off and on again, so that kind of thing. I do not want to be pretentious and say that it just came from the top of my head. Obviously I saw something like it, or a sign. I don't know how it developed. I was not too happy with that. It was okay, but I got very bored with it right away because I could not control it too well. Going home at night all the time, I began to look up the street and I said Athese tubes. I spent a couple of weeks on 42nd Street and Broadway just investigating to see how they are made. I saw one thing that I loved very, very much right away -- which I really was not too involved with before or even aware of -- were the garish colors that we can get from neon tubes.

PC: Oh, yeah, it can be incredible!

SA: Then, one of my pillows, I decided to use neon. It says "dream" on it.

PC: Right.

SA: It is at the Newark Museum now. That was one of the early ones, and then I made a couple more with constructions, wooden objects and so forth. I never showed those -- they were destroyed quite early. I made one, two, maybe three neons with found objects. Only one survived and it is down here at the studio. At that time, I saw that a whole new world was opening up for me, and I saw that I wanted to simplify everything and not work with found objects any more, but just work with neon tubes.

PC: Well, how did that shift come about?

SA: Very fast.

PC: I mean, did the neon just all of a sudden offer more possibilities?

SA: I think so. I think the neons offered a tremendous amount of possibilities and there was a sharp cut. I left, like I said, the old studio and that is when I began to only work with neons. I saw that it was wide open. But not realizing until later on, and Naomi brought this out, a lot of my early neons were very closely related visually with my early collages and constructions, form-wise. At that time I was doing many constructions with tremendous

amount of dowels projecting in all directions. My early neons are similar. Maybe a little simpler, but a lot of projections of tubes.

PC: --the lines --

SA: Yes, tubes. A lot of these things I never realized until either Naomi brings them out later in life or somebody brings it out, but it is a more natural way for me to somehow go from one area to another.

PC: How did you get to Greene Street? Was that through Paul Waldman?

SA: I was looking down here and I saw a sign and Paul was outside or something, and he took me to his place.

PC: Because he was in that same building . . .

SA: The same building. And then I took the floor above him.

PC: Well, this brings us to an interesting social situation which is kind of SoHo before it was SoHo. There were some studios down here but not what it has become.

SA: Yes.

PC: Well, that was not legal living here, then was it?

SA: No.

PC: So you had all sorts of . . . ?

SA: It was not that bad. The police knew we were down here. Even some housing inspectors knew we were down here. In 1966 or late 1965, if I remember correctly, a couple of artists were evicted by the city. If you remember that there was a big demonstration in front of City Hall with artists, marching down there?

PC: Oh, yeah.

SA: Paul and I made a big *papier mache* head and we carried that. It was crazy. I never did anything like that.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: And, God damn it, it worked!

PC: Yes, yes.

SA: Wagner told the city people not to bother us anymore. Even Stamos was down there with us. He walked with us. It was very interesting to see that happen.

PC: Spontaneous.

SA: Yes. I forgot who organized it. We all got together on Greene Street. When I say "we all," it was like a hundred of us, maybe. Some people from uptown came. I think some gallery people walked with us. I don't know. Stamos was there, and it was amazing how it worked. Of course you remember that it was very, very quiet at that time. Friday, three o'clock, when everybody left until Monday morning. [Laughter] You tiptoed around the neighborhood. But then, we had some great parties. [Laughter]

PC: [Laughter]

SA: I am told they still have them but I do not know. I don't go to them anymore.

PC: The neighbors would not complain, if they were not there. [Laughter]

SA: [Laughter]

PC: Well, you know, I am curious about the effects of the move because you moved from this small to this all of a sudden large, open space.

SA: Yes.

PC: You began working with this new material.

SA: The large space also had a lot to do with the direction I was going into. At that time I was involved in some very large neon forms. They were very expensive and physically very large, so the studio was very helpful. I also was able, because I lived there at the studio, to divide up part of the studio to live in. Then I realized that that was the way it should have been a long time ago.

PC: You mean living in the studio?

SA: For me, to live in the area that I work in because I can move around at different hours at night or morning, and so forth, and see what has been done and I can rehash everything in my own mind that way.

PC: How did you like living, you know, in a building with other artists because this was another new . . . ?

SA: Well, you know there was only Paul there so it was quite pleasant.

PC: Somebody else was there, wasn't there?

SA: Next door, I think, somebody moved in. But it was pleasant. Sometimes we saw each other too much, but I enjoyed it because, for the first time, everything was art. Nothing else interfered with me. I made it that way too, don't forget. I decided that there would be no interference from anything else.

PC: Right, right.

SA: It was, for me, a very productive period when I moved to Greene Street for the next four or five years because I was involved with learning a lot of new ideas from myself. I pursued the neons to the point where I was able to show them and have people . . . . Let me put it this way. I guess what I am trying to say is that people became more aware that I was around. That was very nice for me. It built my ego up a little bit. I still was not making too much money from it but . . . .

PC: But it was beginning to be productive.

SA: Well, except only this small group of people, don't forget.

PC: But I mean people know something is happening here.

SA: The young people, that is right. They came up and they wanted to see what I was doing. In the next two years there were constantly a lot of people coming in to see what I was involved with, what I was doing. It was not until, I think, late 1966 that Don Droll took me on to show at Fischbach.

PC: Funny, but I remember that some of the earlier pieces had sort of large boxes and timing devices and a lot of complicated things.

SA: That is correct. Yes. The early neons were quite large but all the neons at that time had timing devices. The reason for the box was to put the equipment in. I tried very hard to have the boxes somehow relating to the neon form. I tried to make an issue of that. When I say an "issue," I did not want it to be looked upon as that is where the equipment is. I also used the boxes as part of the sculpture. That went on for several years until I began to go back to one of my early neons, just a blue cube, which I did in 1965, and I dropped it and broke it. Somehow, I was not up to thinking that simply, but I did this one and I went back into my complicated, large constructions. Slowly I began to one: get away from the timing devices; and two: changed my specific problem that I gave myself and started working with the architectural space, and that automatically began to cut down the amount of tubes. By doing that, somehow the first box, cube, idea that I did began coming back to me without even realizing it until I started doing the same thing, as you can see over this door, where there will be incomplete cubes and incomplete forms to point where it is what I am doing now. But, in relation to all this, Paul, when I was invited to do different shows around the country, I also took advantage of that and worked with specific spaces.

PC: When did that start, though? That is a little bit later, isn't it?

SA: 1967.

PC: Yes, yes. When you had the large box with the timing device, how did you develop the programming? Was that arbitrary?

SA: No. I developed the programming of the devices through my own mind where I would use myself as an individual looking at this particular neon sculpture.

PC: Right.

SA: With a watch or a clock in front of me, I would experiment to see mentally how much time would it be for my own mind to begin to get a little nervous about something going off or going on.

PC: Oh, I see.

SA: It really is not as complicated as I am making it sound. In the middle of this, when I see something on, my mind is restful. But when should I then bring another light on to ease the fear with this restfulness?

PC: Oh, I see.

SA: Do you follow me?

PC: Right, right.

SA: I am glad we are talking about this because it has never been put down. Too many people, and specifically people that should have known better, always saw these lights going on and off. Very few people saw that they had a specific pattern because I am afraid that too many people go through shows and look at people's work too casually, without investigating, especially the time when there were a lot of things happening, you know, lights and so forth, timing and sound. Certain writers or people working for magazines, or what have you, would step into an area for three or four minutes and it would be all over for them and they'd walk away, "Well these lights are going on," when those things were not really happening. It was more than the lights going on and off. So what I did with my own mind and with a clock in front of me, I tested myself out at what period or how long will it take for certain things in my own mind to happen. And then how long will it be bringing something else into the picture, and then how long will it be when, maybe, I have all the lights go on, or off. So I used myself as a guinea pig and these things were put down on graph paper and were given over to a friend of mine, Norman Dolff -- maybe you know him -- who would transform it into the machinery.

PC: Oh, I see. It is very hard to watch these and ascertain when the change would come.

SA: It takes a long time. I tell you, the piece the Whitney owns, in a way I am glad that they always bring it out like July and it goes back in October.

PC: [Laughter] Yes.

SA: There are some people who have been looking at my work for a long time and only now do they understand what in the hell I was doing because they see that neon downstairs, you know. Even Lucy. Many times and for a long time I would say to her, "Lucy, did you ever look at my work?" She said, "Well, yes, you know, the lights go on and off." [Laughter]

PC: [Laughter]

SA: So I did not want to push it, fine.

PC: [Laughter] Yes, yes.

SA: One day, this is only six years ago, I still had a few neons here that would go on and off in the studio. They were painting her loft and she stayed with me with her son in that room. At that time, when Edison was not too expensive, the lights would go on and off by themselves automatically. They would go off at twelve o'clock.

PC: Oh, I see.

SA: So she is lying in bed by eleven-thirty and she saw the reflection of these lights on the walls and she could not go to sleep. So she said to me the next morning that she caught on what I was talking about. She said, "I notice that there is some sort of interesting pattern. I never saw that before." I said, "Lucy, that is because you never stopped to look for it." I know why, and that is because she was violently against this kind of work anyway, so she could never pay attention to it. I am sorry that not too many people took time to analyze it.

PC: Yes, yes.

SA: A lot of people at that time that I was involved with, a lot of other artists, people working with sounds, people working like the way I was working with timing devices, there were quite a lot of interesting situations going on. But the setup of the art world critical situation was set up in such a way that they did not accept us and they would not want to accept us. They saw us as . . . .

PC: Well, but there was a period when there were many exhibitions with lights and all of this kind of . . . .

SA: That was a problem. They put us all in the same bag.

PC: Various people came out of nowhere.

SA: I realize that a lot of them did not take it too seriously I am afraid.

PC: How did you select the colors? I mean, there is a certain range of colors.

SA: Yes. I stayed with the same colors basically all of the time.

PC: But, I mean, how would you decide, say, to use this much red or that much blue, or this much whatever?

SA: It had a lot to do also about how much timing, how aggressive I wanted that particular timing to be. I would select a particular color that would answer the problem. I tried not to get involved with too many colors. At that time maybe there were three colors that I was working with. I did not want to confuse the issue by adding too many colors, so either I would control the colors by timing where I X-timed all the red to go off and then it would come back on again to overlap something else.

PC: Right.

SA: But I did restrict myself to those three colors.

PC: Did you think of the colors in terms of what the color was or what it would do or the shape of the tube?

SA: Basically, what the color would do to the mind. To me, certain neon colors are more adventurous or aggressive or what have you to a person's mind.

PC: Like red over yellow.

SA: Red over yellow.

PC: Yes.

SA: I did not see how they react to each other but how they react to the mind. I did not get involved with what one color neon tube would do to the others until many years later, when I began using individual tubes by themselves. The early neons were specifically amended to the situations and that is why I selected X colors in relation to other colors.

PC: Did you make drawings of the pieces.

SA: Yes.

PC: In terms of how long the tubes are, what shape and all that kind of thing? I mean you had to form them, right?

SA: First of all, I used to draw a lot in sketch books and I still do. From the sketch book it would go onto large sheets of paper, and then when I do enough of sketching or drawing, I would select a specific neon to make. At that time, when they were very large and complicated -- I don't know if you saw them -- I made large marbles with dowels, wooden dowels.

PC: I remember one of those.

SA: From that I would make patterns on a large, brown piece of paper and take that to the neon shop. But if there was a complication where there would be a three-dimensional tube, I would make that out of dowels and take that to the neon shop and work with the shop to develop some sort of a form to follow so the man could make the tube.

PC: Did you have problems in terms of the inherent factors in neon tubes and working with these people, or did they follow you . . . ?

SA: I learned very fast about that and one thing that I learned very fast about, and I try to tell other students that what to get involved with fabricators, I learned very fast in the sense that I did not go into a shop with a superior attitude. I handled them in a way that they were doing something for me, and I would talk in away that they would understand me, and that is to understand their terminology.

PC: So you learned their vocabulary, in a sense.

SA: I understand and speak their vocabulary so they will understand what I am talking about. Also, you have to go in with some confidence so that they will know that you know what you are talking about. You must have a very good idea of what you want and know what they can do. But also you must be adventurous, go and be more practical sometimes than they are. The neons they made for me -- they never thought that they would survive.

PC: Oh, really?

SA: No, because I put neon tubes in certain positions that they thought "Antonakos will be back because they are going to break," and so forth. Within a year, this particular shop that worked for me for a long time, for five years . . . .

PC: Who was that?

SA: It was The Last Neon. They retired recently. I don't use them any more.

PC: You have another one?

SA: Yes. But they saw within a year that there would be no more question about how I wanted certain things made. I am really not that difficult to work with or deal with. I am always interested in suggestions.

PC: Right.

SA: Even now, I think I know quite a lot about fabricating. I could go around the country making neons. Everybody has got a suggestion. Sometimes I have heard the suggestion many times, but I try never, never to be rough with these people. They have the right to suggest something just like anybody else. Sometimes I can hear the same suggestion four times and the fifth time, somehow, it is a little different.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: A little better.

PC: Right, yes.

SA: Because we are working with the kind of material that is not really a set size. Everybody that blows glass, everybody that knows about glass, does it a little bit different than the next person. So I am always ready to listen to anybody in the sign business to tell me something, suggest something, and I will use it or not use it. Everyone has something to offer. It did take me half a year or so to get them to not be so difficult at times and not to always question me and my desires, specifically when I would take chances -- where a tube will be going up nine feet with a support on the bottom. They would say, "Well, it will break." I would say, "Let's

try it." And we will make it and we will survive. They would be very surprised. It was very nice for me because they began to have a little more respect for me in a sense that "Stephen knows what he is talking about," even if they may never use that as a sign.

PC: You really made the first kind of free-standing tube that was quite high?

SA: Yes, and that particular piece which you have mentioned, in relation to working with a shop, I was able then to call them in any kind of emergency and they would respond without question, which is very good, you know, to have that kind of understanding with the shop.

PC: Yes. Did they understand what you were doing, outside of their own craft?

SA: It took them a little while.

PC: Yes.

SA: At that particular shop the owner was kind of harsh and all he saw were dollar bills, but the glass blower, who was also their electrician, was very sensitive to the situation. I made him aware of his glass blowing, that glass blowing is glass blowing. I tried to make them aware that when they blew glass for me that the person will be like a foot away from it, so I wanted certain . . .

PC: Qualities?

SA: . . . certain qualities to the bending which was again very good, and I respected them for that. When they saw me coming in they knew that it was not going to be a sign one hundred feet away in which case you can get away with a lot of bad workmanship.

PC: Oh sure, right.

SA: So we had a very good relationship for a long time until they retired. I will say that they taught me quite a lot and I think that they learned a little bit from me also. But what I am trying to say is that that was like a schooling period for me because now I can go around the world and I know what the setup is, how to speak to them. I know what can be done and what cannot be done and it makes my fabrication much easier.

PC: What did you do in terms of transformers and the electrical problems?

SA: Most of the time shops do it all together.

PC: Right.

SA: The electrical wiring for one item really is not that difficult. The timing devices were made by this friend of mine, Norman Dolff, and sometimes I would bring the timing device to the shop and they would wire everything up. The actual electrical wiring for the work . . . .

PC: It is a standard circuit on most of these, isn't it?

SA: Yes. It is not that difficult.

PC: Yes.

SA: Even now, I really do not know too much about complicated wiring. I really don't. I know how to wire my work but there are certain young people around that are like electrical engineers and are unbelievable, you know. If you go around the Midwest and go to see some of these schools where young people are doing electronic work. It is like people working on Model-T Fords and these old cars. That is the way they are.

PC: Right.

SA: They know everything. It is amazing. Sometimes it is a hindrance, but still . . . .

PC: Yes, it is too much. Well, the forms shifted and changed when you started using circular forms and things that went . . . ?

SA: They changed because the early neons . . . . I had one philosophy at that time and I wanted to put neons in situations that they had never been put in before. To put tubes in a

physical position, knowing that these are glass tubes and knowing that, well, I have never seen a neon tube indoors to put the person in a very uneasy situation. After awhile, when I was getting a little tired of this situation, I began to try to, in my own mind, push away from it, to begin to, maybe, solve other kinds of problems, and I began to simplify my neons.

PC: I remember one you built which was incredibly complex when you were still on Greene Street.

SA: It came from the wall down onto the floor?

PC: It had a lot of colors in it.

SA: Yes.

PC: You built up the Baroque period with a lot of things and then it started to . . . .

SA: Yes, that is right, and then I began to drift away from these complicated forms.

PC: When did you get involved in the actual color of the neon in terms of . . . ?

SA: I would say, this is going to sound silly . . . .

PC: [Laughter]

SA: . . . as soon as I moved here.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: [Laughter] It has something to do with moving.

PC: You have been here how long?

SA: About six years. [Laughter]

PC: I see.

SA: When I moved here I only made one large neon, what is considered large, which was a carry-on from the old studio. I was not able to finish it on Greene Street. Then I began to use a lesser amount of tubes and I began finding out, like, what happens to a red tube when it is touching a blue tube, or when it is very close to a blue tube.

PC: Right.

SA: I became aware that we have not only red and blue, but we have a mixture of these two colors and we have this other color thrown in.

PC: Right, right.

SA: At that time, two things happened. That happened, and also working with corners, inside and outside corners and situations like that. And then I began to be able to manipulate them. You know, put them in situations when I knew quite in advance what was going to happen.

PC: You have never gone off and tried to find unusual colors, have you?

SA: No. I use colors that are commercially made. I have never wanted to learn how to bend the tubes and I never really wanted to get too involved with electrical wiring or . . . . There are a couple of people who experimented with mixing colors and mixing their own colors, gases. That meant a lot of research that I was neither equipped to do, nor did I have the patience to do. I wanted to stay with the manufactured colors because it would be a difficult situation to repair something or to have an exhibit in California so I thought it was more of a hindrance to me personally.

PC: What have you done in terms of breakage problems, because there must be some with all the glass?

SA: In the early days there was a lot of breakage and it took me quite a while to get over that. In those days I would get nervous every time something broke and there was a fight with the insurance company because the insurance company also took a long time before

they accepted us as artists, or art work, these glass tubes.

PC: What was that about?

SA: They did not want to insure neon tubes.

PC: Oh, really.

SA: Yes.

PC: How long did it take before they would?

SA: A couple years. The galleries and museums were constantly having an argument with them. They would spend a tremendous about of time talking to investigators. They would come over to look at the tube and ask, "When did it break? How did it break? It looks like it broke before this," and so forth and so on.

PC: [Laughter] Right.

SA: They were playing detective. Many times I would lose my patience and I would have a big argument with the inspector. But it was also time for galleries and museums to educate insurance companies for the kind of art that I was involved with. Now, of course there is no question.

PC: I would think that, from the time you started doing those things, it must have been very difficult to sell.

SA: Very difficult. Somehow I got the feeling that I started the wrong way. When I first started with neons I was making enormous, gigantic pieces, as you know, because my head was in that direction, and we have only sold a few. We still have some in the warehouse. [Laughter]

PC: [Laughter]

SA: Now I am making small ones, physically small ones, and it not too bad. But it is not really wrong because what you do when you do it is right for you at that time. Because of what I was doing at that time, it opened some doors for me, or should I say, how I was doing, you know, it opened some doors for me. So, in one way, I got paid off.

PC: Did it take a long time before a collector would buy one?

SA: Yes. I still have difficulties.

PC: What is the problem: the size, what?

SA: Well, at that time I think it was the size.

PC: They did not know where they would put it?

SA: Where they would put it, and so forth.

PC: It would kill everything in the room.

SA: Yes. But I really was not thinking about that. I was thinking about just doing what I wanted to do. One or two I did in museums but that is all. I was more interested in solving my own personal art problems than I was in thinking about selling.

PC: Well, what were you doing then to live on during that time?

SA: I began then to be invited to the Artist in Residence around the country. I was still doing some high-priced illustrations at that time . . . .

PC: You could make a little here and a little there.

SA: I could make more, at that time, for some illustrations.

PC: How did you like the Artists in Residence?

SA: For me? For me personally?

PC: Yes.

SA: Forgetting, of course, that I would be away from home and from Naomi, which was not too good, but every time I went out as Artist in Residence, because I mentally would not be involved with anything else, but only with myself and the telephone. There would be nobody to see me and only I would see the student or whatever teachers were there.

PC: Right.

SA: I was able to do some new aspects in my work or get involved with another idea for long periods of time and develop that so, when I got home, there would be a new direction, a new environment for me.

PC: It was like a research, a reaching-out period.

SA: A research, that is correct, especially when I went to Fresno, California in 1971, I think, where -- I mentioned to you before -- I got involved with these packages.

PC: Right, right.

SA: They are indirectly influenced from my early timing of my neons.

PC: Oh, really?

SA: It is very abstract, I realize that. As the neon timing had a lot to do with a person's mind and imagination and desires, by asking somebody to put something in a package and mail it to me, I put that person in a position where he had to mentally try to understand one thing, and that is, "What am I going to do with the package?" The other thing was, "What am I going to send him?" Another thing was "How am I going to wrap it?" Again, "What is he going to do with it?" put this person in a kind of a state he will be thinking about my project for a while if he wanted to be involved with it and physically, to get this person involved with wrapping it and going to the post office, and that did not stop. After he had mailed it he would still wonder, at times, what happened. Then, when I would notify him that I had it on exhibit but I would never open the packages, it starts up again in a more aggressive way.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: You know, well, "How come?" "What a lousy thing to pull," or "That is not a bad idea," but all these different things . . .

PC: It is like feedback, in a way.

SA: . . . where the package on the wall is really not the whole project. Each individual person is his own little project in himself. That opened a lot of doors for me in my own mind.

PC: How did that come about? I mean, what started the packages?

SA: I just told you.

PC: I mean, in terms of your . . . ?

SA: Before I went to California . . . . I see what you are talking about. Like why?

PC: Yes, yes.

SA: That is a good question. I began to be aware of the New York art scene, and of the art scene, as a whole, restricting the individual artists from being involved in other things besides that thing that he does.

PC: Oh, I see.

SA: I fell into that pattern where I do neons.

PC: And you cannot do anything else.

SA: You can't do anything else. But I was frustrated because, with my personality, my background used to come back to me, my construction periods.

PC: Collages.

SA: Collages, and I was still involved within my own head.

PC: Yes, yes.

SA: So I had to put myself within a restricted area where I would draw and somebody would make the neon tubes for me, and I can make only a certain amount of neons for sale or what have you, and I began to want to do other things, but I saw that the art world here, in the city, was very hesitant, or looked upon a person differently when they did that. Not a person that started from the beginning like Rauschenberg, who was able to do all kinds of things and get away with it, but he did it from the beginning of his career.

PC: Well, he was also handled in a way that allowed that, too.

SA: Correct. So I decided at that time and said, "Fuck it," you know. I wanted to get involved with other things. If I never showed them, I did not care. I began to also be socially conscious of the art world where I saw a hindrance to the artists about certain ways of what they did or how they were accepted, or gallery situations and social problems with museums, and so forth. I became aware of that in my own way and so, when I went to California, I thought I would try to continue this basic idea of what I had about mentally getting a person involved with me and the idea was: "How can I do it when I am in California and these people, most of the people I knew, are in New York?" I said, "The only way it can be done is through the mail," and that is how that project started and it got bigger when I came back to New York until now, and I am very, very involved with it. I still have not shown these.

PC: What happens now? I mean, this is, what, 1971? What has it grown into? The packages?

SA: It has grown into a situation where they have become very, very personal. Before, they were related to a person doing something for me and wondering what was going to happen, and those will never be opened. How they are involved now is that I am getting involved by putting something in the package to be opened in the future. So the selection of the object, or whatever, that is put into the boxes is very important. To have a person accept one of these packages, to ask a person to put down money and to accept one of these packages and to open this package in the future, becomes another problem where, I find, people are very strange. They are very weak and it is very difficult.

PC: Well, their imagination and everything works away.

SA: So, I am working with a lot of things. My own personal problems are a particular project, but then what I put in is very important to me and then I am aware that people are very anxious to open it up.

PC: Curiosity.

SA: Curiosity that I do not know how they will survive in the future. I have written out small, personal contracts for each package that I have made, that they will promise not to open them until that particular date. So that continues. That timing continues with that person who is living with this package, saying that, "I am aware that there is something in there, what it is I don't know, but I am anxious to find out." Then I will have people tell me, "What if I am disappointed with what happens when I open it, that I like that box as is?" "What if I am disappointed when I open it up and it does not come up to what the outside looks like?" So these are the problems which are current now and which I never thought were. Sometimes I do not realize . . . .

PC: All the permutations.

SA: Yes.

PC: How do you then select the times?

SA: Oh, those times are personal times for me. It has noting to do with the other person. The time that I select for the certain package has a lot to do with what is inside of it and how this package is to be opened in relation to this other package.

PC: Oh, I see. So, the recipient does not count.

SA: Does not count any more.

PC: But the packages are all related?

SA: Some of them are related but a whole bunch of packages there may be related to each other but they will be opened at different times in relation to this other package, when this should not be opened before this. Do you know what I am saying?

PC: Oh, I see.

SA: So that is why I am a little nervous about people.

PC: But how do you know in terms of, you know, let's say, a series of packages, if everybody follows the program? How will you know what the response is?

SA: I don't know. That I do not know.

PC: And, of course, they do not necessarily know the response of the other people.

SA: No. I have asked them . . . if, well, some of them have too many packages, like twenty. Some have nineteen, but no, that is for the future. I don't know.

PC: You have done a series of, I mean, you have done a lot of things maybe as an outgrowth of these Artist in Residence things, one of which is sort of a fire hose theory.

SA: Yes. I was interested in fire for a long time. I was invited also to do something in Texas but they didn't like my project so never did it, with fire. I was an Artist in Residence in Madison, Wisconsin, and there were others there. I decided to do something with fire but I could not figure out what to do. I did not want to repeat some very fine fire works by Heath Kline, and that is like the obvious thing. I did not want to burn down a building. I did not want to be a physical part where I put an object and burned it. I thought I would just experiment so I got some very good paper and I started working with a blow torch, a welder's torch, to see what I could do with this paper. With about twenty odd pieces of paper I made different kinds of holes, I scorched it, I did this, I did that. They were okay. When I say they were okay, I was learning from them what to do with the torch but it was not that important. I kept them in the studio at Madison for awhile and looked at them. There is an art center there and I was invited to show them at the art center but I said, "Well, I am really not too happy with them yet. Let me think about it for awhile." So, I thought a bit and more and more I realized that I could show them and have something else happen to them as an end project. I showed them as they were -- twenty some odd -- in the art center, but then I asked them -- because I was going to leave pretty soon -- to put all the drawings together and put a can of lighter fluid and burn them all, as a bunch, and then, whatever was left, to mail back to me. So, that became the final project, which was to burn whatever I showed in the gallery and mail it back to me. That is as far as it went. I am still very interested in . . . .

PC: But they did?

SA: They did that, and the end result is the burned paper that I received. This is the only project that I have ever done with fire but I am still very, very interested in it.

PC: How did they react to all this?

SA: I don't know.

PC: I mean, when you told them what you wanted them to do, they must have said something.

SA: They did not say much.

PC: Really?

SA: Yes.

PC: They just said, "Well, okay?"

SA: Yes. I understand that the show did not go over too well. It did not go over two well with anybody. Even when I got back the project, none of my people or my friends would say anything. Part of the exhibition was not too . . . . It was interesting to see what you can do with these torches but I kept seeing the Heath Kline's back there, you know, and it was disturbing for me which is why I did not want to show them. But when I got the idea of what to do at the end of the exhibition, I saw that was right. I thought that it was a successful idea but I never followed through again with it because it is, for me, very difficult to work with that idea of fire without being obvious.

PC: Well, it is kind of a closed end situation.

SA: Yes.

PC: If you took something besides paper, it would just be the same thing with another product or object.

SA: Yes, so I have never pursued it. Then I started thinking, don't actually make a fire but can we work again, with the mind and the word "fire?" It is still in the back of my mind but nothing has ever come out.

PC: You did a signature piece or something once, didn't you? What was that all about, because I never heard anything about that?

SA: You didn't get a catalog? I sent you a catalog. That was at the same time that I did the packages. I invited people like yourself, collectors, writers, if they would put the word "neon" on a piece of paper, and that is all the letter said. One day, when you have time, I will get it out of the storage. Again, it is mental.

PC: Yes, yes.

SA: How you wrote it down, and how somebody else wrote the word "neon" on the paper and notes that they mailed me, everything, was an exciting situation. Unbelievable.

PC: It is interesting. There is a curious dichotomy here. One is that you make an object that very often stands by itself somewhere and has light and does things, and another is that you do these directly personal things with people you select. You have pieces, neon sculptures in museums and who comes and goes is just who comes and goes, but when you say, "Okay, here are twenty people who I will do this project with." It is a different, whole other approach, you know.

SA: It is. I think that, in a selfish way, in my own selfish way, I am getting involved these X amount of people to participate with me. [Laughter]

PC: Right.

SA: Even though some people have no communication at all. It is a way of getting -- besides the specific problem that is also very important to me -- it is also a cheap way of getting an end result.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: Do you know what I am trying to say?

PC: Yes, yes. But you do not always know what the end result is.

SA: No, of course. No, no. The end result is what happened. They don't answer you or you get these particular things.

PC: Right, right.

SA: That is what I mean when I say that it is possible to do certain projects but you cannot overdo it.

PC: Right.

SA: It can be overdone, and getting people to participate with you in a very honest way and ending up with an interesting solution, I think that all of this has to do with timing, with the

mind. I know that I could say that with only a few words but, if we analyze it, we can see that a man's mind participating in a situation is quite interesting, as we take it for granted. Here you are, and I am talking. You are forced to be here to listen to my talk, you know. [Laughter]

PC: [Laughter]

SA: You could be bored or you could be interested.

PC: Right, right.

SA: That is also interesting. But if we control that or force you into a situation to only think about this particular object or this event, for me only . . .

PC: Right.

SA: You know?

PC: Right.

SA: . . . it becomes a capture of you for myself, at that time, to do something for me or say something for me. And then, of course, what is also important is what you are saying or what you are going to do for me but you cannot wipe it out.

PC: Right, right.

SA: As soon as I mention it to you, as soon as you do it, it is in the back of your head.

PC: Right.

SA: The mind is made that way, you know. So, these few projects that have gone through the mail, you know, cannot just be forgotten. They may be forgotten for that moment, they can be forgotten for a long period of time . . .

PC: They may be forgotten but then something will go click.

SA: . . . then something will click it back.

PC: Yes, yes.

SA: You know?

PC: Do you get feed back months after? Somebody will say . . . ?

SA: Yes. Like I sent a whole bunch of packages to California. Some people I never met before but I liked their work and I sent them a package. I have gotten feedback when I go to California, or here in the city. I was going to say that it is interesting sometimes that these little projects that are done in a personal way, without having an exhibit and so forth, somehow, they stay with that individual because I am hitting that individual personally. By the way, we are finally going to exhibit them, I think.

PC: Oh, really?

SA: Yes. It took me a long time to come to this decision, but I think I am going to.

PC: You have mentioned, or inferred, rather, that it was difficult for somebody to buy one of these.

SA: It is, yes.

PC: What kind of situation arises? Somebody says, "Well, okay, I am interested. What is the story?" I mean, what do they generally say?

SA: The generally like the idea but then they hold back when they begin wondering now . . . . They usually select a package that they like the outside of, you know, the visual part of it.

PC: The different kinds of wrappings and the way of wrapping things?

SA: Yes, whatever it may be, and they wonder then will they like what is inside. Also, they say, "It's not a joke? There is something inside?" It is difficult for them to believe me or to understand that to me it is not a joke, that there is something that is valuable and that it means something to me, that it is not just air inside.

PC: And there is an object or something that is important?

SA: There is an object, or whatever is inside there, and it is important in relation to Stephen Antonakos. When we clear that up, which takes about one hour, believe it or not, then -- this has only happened with a couple of people -- they begin to wonder, as I said before, that, "Maybe I don't want to open it. Maybe I like the outside too well and I done want to take a chance." I said, "That is fine. Don't open it."

PC: But then, out of curiosity . . . .

SA: Curiosity is always there. There was one person and we talked for quite awhile and he still is interested. It is really amazing. They are really not . . . . This person can afford the whole collection there, but it is not the money . . .

PC: Yes, really.

SA: . . . but, the idea that you may be disappointed or it is something that he never expected and then he got to a silly point and I said to him, "I tell you what. If I am still around at that time, you can have anything in my studio if you are disappointed." [Laughter]

PC: [Laughter]

SA: So, it gets to a point where, as the packages are interesting to a lot of people, they will very rarely put down dollar bills to live with it.

PC: Are they expensive, or inexpensive?

SA: No. The most expensive one is . . . . It goes from $500 to $1,500. Those big boxes there are projects where four other artists are involved and they belong to them, which is my project. I don't know what the prices are of those. I did not get any prices from them yet. When people put down money to buy something they want to know everything about it, and this is very unusual for them to buy something that they only own a part of.

PC: Right.

SA: I mean, you can't blame them in a way.

PC: But it does question one's attitude towards money and objects.

SA: This particular project is the most obvious way of how people react towards it. I am not saying that $1200 is not a lot of money. It is, but we are talking about people that can afford or can afford even more, if they have all the answers on a table, you know.

PC: Right.

SA: This gets pretty weary, which is okay.

PC: You did a series of airbrush paintings?

SA: That again was Artist in Residence in North Carolina.

PC: It started down there?

SA: I started on Greene Street. North Carolina had a nice studio that they gave me and for a couple of months I just did airbrush paintings on board. Marilyn Fischbach sold quite a few of them and I still have a few left. I have not shown those since Fischbach days. I think they are related, to some extent, to the neon tubes.

PC: Was that a way also of sort of getting patterns, or ideas or . . . ?

SA: It was several things. One, of breaking up a particular space, playing color towards color and, in a way, imitating neon tubes. It wasn't the greatest idea, but what I was interested in

was to airbrush one color, and, as is, it could have been a very, very strong orange and then, by blowing two inches away, a blue or a green, a part of the orange would change because of the slight spray of the other color that would go on.

PC: Right, the optical thing.

SA: The optical thing began to work on it and it was quite interesting. I never developed it because . . . . I was interested in it and I am still interested in it but there are a lot of other time-consuming things.

PC: Right.

SA: I am not really that interested in that problem at this moment.

PC: Just to continue on the drawing idea, you said that you had worked from sketch books and then threw out the sketches?

SA: Yes.

PC: Were those small; kind of pencil drawings?

SA: Yes.

PC: They are really sketches?

SA: Yes. Then I would go through my sketches, maybe every three or four months, and select ideas that I want to follow through on in a more detailed way, and those ideas would be followed through on good paper, on good drawing paper. If they were successful, I would save them and, if they were not, they would be destroyed. Then, after several months of that, the time would come when I would want to do some neons. I would go through these ideas and select different areas that I want to follow through with neon tubes. So, by the time the piece is fact, it might be months or years from the sketch to the drawing to the piece. A lot of the work that I am doing now has been in a sketch book over two years. There is always a physical reason or like a financial reason, like how many can you make and for what reason.

PC: Right, right.

SA: But, in between them, Paul, you extract ideas that you have physically made and utilize it with something else so they always help one another.

PC: When you work in a sketch book, do you think of it in terms of shapes, or colors?

SA: Mostly shapes. I am very specific with my problems. For a long time I would work only with corners and would think only of solving problems within these areas, an inside corner or an outside corner, and I could go on like that for about a year, and then work only on straight walls, and solve problems with that. The problems could be a square, or cube, or an incomplete cube or an incomplete square. I restrict myself within those areas for long periods of time.

PC: Do you find that that is easier for you?

SA: I don't know if the word "easy" should be used.

PC: I mean, setting up a program?

SA: Yes. I think we should follow into a program where we solve specific problems. It should make some sense.

PC: I see.

SA: At least for me, that I have some answers to some questions.

PC: So, it is like a sequence.

SA: A sequence if you want to put it that way.

PC: Yes.

SA: It has nothing to do with making it easier or harder. It has specifically to do with giving yourself a situation and you try to solve that situation in X amount of time. When you get tired or bored, and when new things come in, you can drop it and move into something else.

PC: Right. As the pieces came, I guess, off the bases, the earlier pieces, and they became part of . . . growing out of the wall, did you then start thinking in terms of how the color looks on the wall and the floor and ceiling and other walls?

SA: When I started putting them on the wall I began to be aware of what happens to the tube when part of it is touching the wall and part of it is projecting from the wall. It may be the same color but the effect is very different with the same tube.

PC: And it depends on how you look at it.

SA: Yes.

PC: I mean if you see it straight on or from an angle or from the corner of the wall.

SA: There are so many aspects to it.

PC: In a way it is like painting, with lights and color.

SA: Many people have mentioned, specifically now that I am working very close to the wall, it is almost like painting. I suppose it is like painting except it is a little more in dimension. Also, we must remember that not only does it flow on the wall itself, but it affects the opposite walls.

PC: Right. It kind of fills the air.

SA: Yes. So it does not become like a mist of light in an area.

PC: What did you do when you were in, say, a group show in a museum with other works, where they may have light or may not have light? You need your own space almost.

SA: I have not been in too many group shows lately, and the group shows that I have been in, there are only maybe two or three people involved. So the amount of space that I have been given is quite a lot so I become an individual as the other person is an individual and we don't affect each other too much. Thank God, gone are the days where group shows were very, very large. At least for me, anyway. Most of the so-called group shows now are three or four people, maybe five people.

PC: Right, and they have a number of rooms.

SA: Yes. They have enough room or us to move around by ourselves. Those were old days. Probably you remember.

PC: Oh, I remember that people . . . .

SA: Sculptors used to complain about the lights reflected from the tubes near their pieces.

PC: Right.

SA: I know the Whitney, a couple or three Annuals ago, there was a lot of fuss about, not my specific piece because it was quite a way from everybody else's, but one was a flame and somehow the flame in these tubes, light, was able to pick something up, some steels some place else, and the artist got upset. What can you do?

PC: Does that ever appear as a problem in terms of the collector acquiring a piece?

SA: Yes, I think so, specifically the way I work where I have to go through a wall, becomes a problem.

PC: Right.

SA: I think that they are always aware or concerned about . . . . I may wipe out their collection, which is a problem.

PC: When did you start going through the wall? That is more recent.

SA: Well, I did some of that in the old studio in 1965 when I began to -- 1967, I shouldn't say 1965. 1967 -- think about getting rid of the equipment box.

PC: Right.

SA: The only thing I thought about was the wall and I had to forcibly use the wall in relation to my neons. Then I saw a possibility of using the architecture of the wall, the corner, or the wall itself, to do the whole form. So that is where it really began. Thank God, Marilyn Fischbach had a false wall.

PC: [Laughter] And, you could do it.

SA: That is still a nice space. I like that big room up there.

PC: Yes, yes.

SA: A very good space.

[Break in recording]

PC: This is the 20th of May, 1975 and this is Paul Cummings talking to Stephen Antonakos. Stephen, do you want to answer the unanswered question, then, and we can . . . ?

SA: The last time we met you asked a question about the New York Institute of Fine Arts and Science.

PC: Right, right.

SA: After you left, I realized that that was the name that the community college of Brooklyn was given when it first opened and several years later it was changed to Brooklyn Community College.

PC: That is what it was.

SA: That is what it was.

PC: Just the name changed?

SA: Just the name changed, right.

PC: Oh, fantastic. Well, we have gotten somewhere up into the sixties, chronologically I guess. One of the things, or one of the exhibitions that you were in -- it is interesting -- was the one of Martha Jackson's, that Kaprow was involved with the new forms, New Media.

SA: Yes.

PC: That was one of the first public, group adventures for you, wasn't it?

SA: Yes.

PC: How did you like being in that exhibition? Did anything come of that? Did you know Kaprow?

SA: No, I did not know Kaprow. I knew a fellow who was not even involved with the exhibition but he knew my work and he suggested that Steve Joy . . . . Steve saw what I was doing and then invited me to the exhibition. I was invited way after the list was made. Do you remember that poster that Oldenburg made?

PC: Right, right.

SA: I was invited after that poster was made and I exhibited a construction made of fabric and found objects. It was kind of a construction you could walk around in. It was interesting for me as I had never participated in a very important group show as that one was. Of course now, looking back, it is more interesting what has happened to the majority of the people.

PC: Right, right. But was that a particularly meaningful exhibition for you to be in, considering who and where and everything?

SA: It was for me because I had met a few people in the exhibition whom I had never known before. I did not realize how meaningful it was until later, by the way.

PC: So, it took a number of years or something to make itself apparent?

SA: Yes.

PC: Yes.

SA: But I knew that it was an important exhibition and I did want to participate. And the fellow who invited me to meet Steve Joy was Art Brenner, who lives in Paris now.

PC: Who is he?

SA: Art Brenner, oh, who is he? He is a sculptor. He does welding sculpture in Paris.

PC: He has not been here for a long time?

SA: He left about ten years ago. So it was interesting. I felt good anyway that I exhibited in an exhibition like that.

PC: That got a lot of notice at the time, I think.

SA: Yes. I do not have any clippings about it but I have saved the catalog which is one of the best catalogs around which I have.

PC: Now, as things progressed -- we are jumping around a little bit here -- the gallery you got involved with really was Fischbach, right?

SA: Yes.

PC: That was the first one.

SA: Yes, yes.

PC: How did that come about?

SA: Well, I don't know if I mentioned to you, but when I moved to Greene Street I decided that I wanted to work with neon only. I worked fora year, or two years, just doing my neons. When I had a studio full of works that I was interested in showing to somebody, I began inviting people to come and see these works. I invited gallery directors who I thought might be interested. I invited some writers for magazines and anybody who I thought might be interested in seeing what I was doing. Fischbach was then on Madison Avenue.

PC: Right.

SA: I went there and I spoke to Don Droll. Donald came down a couple or three days later, saw the work, and he was interested in the neons. He spoke to Marilyn and Marilyn came down a few days later and she invited me to the gallery. At that time she was in the process of moving to 57th Street. I had my first show in 1967 with Fischbach.

PC: That was on 57th Street?

SA: On 57th Street.

PC: Gosh, you have been there that long? [Laughter' Time flies!

SA: [Laughter] Bob Mangold I think has been there the longest because he started on Madison and he stayed on until even after I left. Now, I think, Ronnie Bladen is the last.

PC: The last of the old crowd. How did you like her as a dealer, because she was there years, and years, and years?

SA: Well, there are a lot of negative things about my relationship with Fischbach but also a tremendous amount of positive things about Fischbach. The positive thing about Fischbach

was that I had certain ideas that I wanted to pursue in making neons, and Marilyn helped me without any questions, financial speaking, on what I wanted to do. Of course, that was very helpful to me because I was not held back, financially speaking.

PC: Oh, that is terrific.

SA: So, if you remember those years, I had some very large neons and they cost a lot of money. She did give me the opportunity to, of course, show the neons, but she also helped me out financially, too, to produce these. There were other dealers who were interested -- I'll have to tell you some of the stories -- but they asked me to go to their gallery to use it.

PC: In terms of what?

SA: Well, I should go and ask certain collectors for money, to make me offers for me to show at their gallery. That kind of thing.

PC: Oh, I see.

SA: But Marilyn was the only one who did not ask anything from me (except to show, of course) to help me to produce some of these things.

PC: Did she ever comment about your making things too large, or that they were too hard to sell, or . . . ?

SA: Never. She never questioned that.

SA: She just let you work and that was that.

SA: I never heard her say anything to anybody about their work. I do hear stories about other galleries. Now even about specific galleries but artists complaining that their dealers have said certain things. I have never had that experience with Marilyn that I can remember. Maybe in her mind she thought it but she never mentioned it to me. It is understandable, you know, if you are making these big monsters -- who is going to buy them, and so forth.

PC: Well, weren't they hard for her to sell?

SA: She never sold any.

PC: No?

SA: Any of those large neons. She sold one neon -- I don't know if she sold it but one neon was sold from her gallery -- but not a very big one. Some neons were sold from her gallery but not those big ones.

PC: Right, right. Those smaller ones.

SA: Yes, small ones.

PC: Well, it must have been expensive even to do an installation that way.

SA: I must say . . . . I'll tell you one experience. One installation that I did of a twenty foot barrier, 2 feet by 2 feet by 2 feet, cost a thousand dollars just to bring the electrical line from the basement up to the gallery.

PC: So you had enough power.

SA: To have enough power.

PC: That is fantastic.

SA: I know she was not too happy bout it but she never came out and said anything to me. I think I heard it indirectly from people. But I wanted to do this piece and there were no objections.

PC: Was it useful then to even show pieces that were not able to be sold in those days? I mean, would it attract attention for other pieces, museum installations? I mean, it is . . . .

SA: I never even thought of selling it. I only thought of the pieces I wanted to do, to solve

certain problems with space and with myself. That is the way I handled it then and that is the way I still handle it.

PC: When did the space come into it? Because it seems that at the beginning the pieces were kind of all of themselves.

SA: That is correct. Then, if you'll remember, there was one show where I used the inside corners of the big, big, big space, then I began to utilize the space.

PC: Oh, right.

SA: Also, the barrier that I just mentioned -- I used the large room by dividing the large room in half, and utilizing one half of the room for this enormous barrier. So that is when I began indirectly getting interested in actual architectural space. The other ones, as you have mentioned, there were other pieces where they were just free standing.

PC: Like the Whitney has a piece.

SA: Yes. Those are free standing pieces you can walk around.

PC: Right, right. What happened once you started using the room as a part of the work? Was it the relationship of the tube and the light, or was it the light to the walls and . . . ?

SA: It was the relationship of the physical parts of the tube to the walls and to the floors. Some of the neons that I did there were quite large that I related to the walls and to the floors, that had an architectural relationship to these areas. As I got more and more involved with emphasis specifically on the architectural problem, the physical part of the tubes became smaller, as they are now. I got involved with two items being the architectural relationship with the neons and the actual neon shapes. I seldom got involved with what most people talk about, which is the actual reflection of the light.

PC: On the walls?

SA: On the walls. That just happens. I was specifically involved with those two things: the relationship of the form of the tube on the wall, or on the floor, or wherever it is located.

PC: Like that one piece which is that sort of rod which came out and doubled back on itself.

SA: Oh, you saw that in the bathroom.

PC: Well, there was one piece like that at, wherever it was. Where was that? Rosa had one.

SA: Oh, yes, that was a small one. I had one in the bathroom also, where the one that Rosa had was a red one that came out and it had a turn-back of about two inches. The one in the bathroom had tubes that were very close and came out six feet and then made a half inch turn and back again.

PC: What makes you decide the difference of that turn? Whether it is a half an inch or two inches or . . . ?

SA: I can have the tube touching so the thickness of the tube will determine the width of the turn.

PC: Oh, I see.

SA: If the tube is a half inch I can go just a little more than a half inch. I suppose it really is an experiment. What I did for Rosa was really an experiment with that red projection tube to see what it would look like when it is only a couple of inches away. As most of the work of that type is to see what would happen, I would even do for an exhibition. I would just take the chance. I sometimes utilize areas just to see what is going to happen.

PC: To go back for a bit to some of the exhibitions, you were also in that Light, Sound, Silence show in Kansas City which was one of the great light shows involved with various kinds of light. What did you do for that again?

SA: The one that Ted Cole did in Kansas City?

PC: Right, right.

SA: That really was not a great light show. That was something else. You are thinking of another show. You are thinking of the Walker.

PC: The Walker, right.

SA: That was the light show.

PC: That was the big one. But, Kansas City had . . . .

SA: Kansas City had, titled Sound, Light, Silence. I really did not understand that group show too well, what it was all about. It had something to do with silence, and light, and space.

PC: It was kind of everything.

SA: Art Shargro was in it, Marco Mouley, myself and some other people.

PC: It did not gel for you?

SA: No, no.

PC: Now, what about the Walker, because that was . . . ?

SA: The Walker was one of the first museums that got involved with "light shows," which I resented, like right after that show for museums to put on shows like that, light shows. But, to speak about the show itself, Martin Freidman . . . . I think Murdoch, in fact, I think he was the curator of the show.

PC: Was he there?

SA: I am not too sure, but I think he was.

PC: I can't remember.

SA: The show was organized and people were asked to either do an environment or bring a piece that he had done. All I can tell you about it was that we had a great party.

PC: [Laughter] Did you do a piece specifically for them?

SA: No. I submitted a piece that was done here while I was at Fischbach and that particular piece which I did was called "White Line Neon" and is owned by Minneapolis.

PC: How do you arrive at the titles?

SA: Usually it is either the color of the neons and the forms of the neons. It is just identification. There is no other reason for titles. Or, if I do a neon for a specific person, then I name it after that person.

PC: Oh, I see.

SA: It is just identification numbers.

PC: Have you had many commissions like that to do?

SA: Not really.

PC: Here and there.

SA: Not as many as I would like to and not as many as I should, but I have done commissions.

PC: Do you like them, or are they difficult?

SA: No, they are not difficult. I would like to do more, but there seems to be some sort of a problem. I can't make it out. Either a gallery problem, or an interest problem. There seems to be a tremendous amount of interest as I show all over the country. When it comes to buying -- and I am not talking about large neons, but specifically what I am doing now --

somehow it is difficult.

PC: Isn't that strange though. I mean, you do have all these exhibitions.

SA: It is very strange and . . . .

PC: One would think that would generate a certain amount of . . . .

SA: It is a very good question. I can't answer you. I had long talks with Marilyn Fischbach and with Donald when I was at Fischbach. I have had several talks with John Weber that I am with now. Of course, both galleries are different personalities. The strange thing is that both galleries that I was involved with are the kind of galleries that do not go out looking for people who are interested in Antonakos. If there are people interested in Antonakos, they wait for them to come to the gallery. Most sales that I have made to people that own my work I have made the sales myself. The majority of them.

PC: But that is true for a lot of people, don't you think?

SA: I don't know. I can talk about, for instance . . . . True by what?

PC: I mean for many artists I know, you know, particularly the ones who do things that are a little more challenging.

SA: Yes.

PC: It is really their contact with somebody who then will do . . . .

SA: Yes, but you would think, though, that for people who have shown a tremendous amount of times around the country, you would think that the gallery would take advantage of it and try to stimulate an institution, or try to stimulate an individual collector who is interested in that area, to buy an Antonakos. I find that, just to speak about John Weber, it is very difficult for him to go out and find a person, to stimulate that person to buy art. Now, I am not just speaking about myself. He waits until people come in.

PC: Right. But I think that most dealers do that, don't you?

SA: Not really, no. I have had other dealers that wanted to take me on who are different than that. And, in New York City. They went out and stirred up business and then the problem occurred between that person and John Weber. It got so ridiculous that I had to drop it.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: You know?

PC: Yes.

SA: There are galleries who are not big-time galleries now who go out and stimulate interest in a specific artist and where they are no favors taken. Do you know what I mean?

PC: Right.

SA: No, John Weber Gallery . . . and he is going to find out pretty soon that he cannot push or expect his four people, you know, Carl Andre, Mangold, Riman, and Sol LeWitt, to constantly sell. But he is not developing other people in the gallery.

PC: Oh, right.

SA: Like you can tell that to him and he might not understand or believe what you are saying. Not that those artists are going to dry up.

PC: No, but they just don't fill up what there is for the money.

SA: That is correct, and also they will go to a certain bracket financially and that will only attract X amount of people.

PC: Right.

SA: Weber Gallery does not understand that.

PC: How did you come to go there? You have been there for, what? A short time?

SA: This will be my third show there.

PC: Yes, but that is what? How many years now? Just three years, right?

SA: Yes, that is right. It is three years now. When I left Fischbach I decided that I was going to just do it alone and just work for a year or two and not worry about a gallery situation. Somehow, I was in and out of Fischbach too often when John invited me into the gallery. After he invited me into the gallery, as you probably know, he invited me only to be director of the gallery which looked kind of spooky, you know?

PC: [Laughter]

SA: You know Naomi (?) is leaving?

PC: Yes, you told me that, yes. Now, where does she come into your life?

SA: Fourteen years ago we were together at Gallery. Then she got a job at Fischbach Gallery. [Laughter]

PC: [Laughter]

SA: It looks very funny. The funny thing is that I have these questions for myself too. At least, the John Weber Gallery cannot do it for me financially. I have always got to go and stir up something for myself, so even in that respect I have been thinking about . . . . While I have been with the John Weber Gallery, I sold one neon by myself. I got another big commission by myself. It is not done yet but it will be. You wonder, like, why do I have to give John Weber a fifty percent commission for an exhibition, you know? I don't know. If this continues for another couple of years, you know, I don't know if it is worth it.

PC: It is interesting. That is a crisis a lot of people come to.

SA: Sure.

PC: Sometimes artists have said to me, "Well, you know, it is really worth having the gallery to do all the paper work and loans to people, you know?"

SA: Paul, I have news for you. I do just as much paper work.

PC: You do?

SA: If I want certain things done correctly, I end up doing them myself anyway, because I find -- let's say, the Weber Gallery, they are extremely busy for paper work. They do not have enough people there to help out.

PC: Right, right.

SA: I am now involved with an exhibition in London which will take place in November. I am doing the paper work myself because I know it will come out better and faster and on time.

PC: What do you do in cases when you go abroad like that? Are neon systems compatible or . . . ?

SA: I do all the neon work there.

PC: So, whatever the local . . . .

SA: Yes, I do it on the set and usually it is either destroyed or given to an art school. I do not bring it back. But, this gallery system: in its own way it has helped me specifically but in other ways it has not done me any good financially.

PC: Do the exhibitions attract a certain amount of activity, though?

SA: A tremendous amount of activity. They do. I have no complaint there. But it is not the activity of the John Weber Gallery. All the activity I have been getting all these years has been stimulated from the Fischbach Gallery.

PC: Really?

SA: Yes.

PC: Oh, that is fascinating. So what they started half a dozen years ago still continues?

SA: It is still continuing for me because the shows I have been invited to all these years are related to the Fischbach Gallery because they know what I was doing there. It sometimes takes a year or two for a program to get out and into a museum.

PC: That is fascinating. I think she did a very good job promoting the gallery, the name, you know? You knew that name.

SA: Oh, yes.

PC: You knew that name.

SA: That is right. Do you remember when Donald and Naomi were there? All those people were in very, very good shows and also every museum director when they would come to the city always went to the shows. I don't know if they still go there now.

PC: You know, I am curious about some of the people. You mentioned Donald Droll. You got to know him through Fischbach, right?

SA: Yes.

PC: Do you maintain a relationship with him now that you are somewhere else and he is somewhere else?

SA: Well, you know, this building that we live in, Donald was also involved with this building. He lived below us and he moved about three years ago and now, of course, he . . . . We don't see each other only because of circumstances. We still like each other. I think he is a very nice person, very helpful to a lot of people. We just happen to be in different circles now.

PC: Right, right. Changes. What about Lucy Lippard who has been around for a long time and seems to be a very good friend?

SA: What about Lucy? Well, she also lives in this complex.

PC: She has never written a great deal about you, has she?

SA: No. There has not been too much interest in what I was doing. Lucy and people like Lucy saw my work as vulgar and uncontrollable and specifically my program.

PC: Oh, really?

SA: Yes.

PC: Why is that?

SA: She never understood that program, or even took time to evaluate what my early program was all about visually. I think I told you this, didn't I?

PC: Right. You mentioned it only that once when she was staying here one time.

SA: Yes, and then she realized -- when she stayed here a week -- what the program was about. It had it out with her about that because I said, "It shows that you, and many people who write about art, do not give yourself time or give the artist the time to evaluate what he is all about."

PC: Right. You see twenty shows in two weeks and you write them all up. It is impossible.

SA: Right. I never had any articles . . . . Betsy Baker once wrote an article on three people, Flavin, Crisse and I, but that is all I ever had.

PC: Right.

SA: I used to be concerned about things like that. I find that I cannot worry about things like that any more.

PC: There are too many other important things.

SA: Well, for me there is. But it would be nice if somebody wrote an article on me.

PC: Right.

SA: I find that it takes too much energy, it takes too much out of me emotionally to worry about it. I try to simplify my life by doing the work that I want to do and try to make a living from it. That is as much as I can do.

PC: Well, you taught at various schools and you have mentioned some before. You taught at Brooklyn Museum School at one time.

SA: I think for three years.

PC: For three years. What did you teach there?

SA: I don't know what the course was called. It was a combination -- mixed media, I think.

PC: Was that a good place for you to teach? It was apparently useful as a source of income.

SA: Yes, it was okay. I enjoyed it. It was a mixed group. There were older people and young people, and that was interesting. If I go to teach again I would really rather teach in a regular college. The students are more set up.

PC: The continuity is better?

SA: Yes.

PC: Yes. How do you like the Artist in Residence program that you have been through?

SA: I like it. As much as I hate being away from home, from New York, I like it. It broke my year up where I was alone and I could think for long periods of time and do some interesting work for myself. Of course, in every school that I went to I met interesting people and some people I still see.

PC: You had the advantage of not being part of the curriculum.

SA: That was a very good advantage. I could open my big mouth and get into all kinds of trouble and not worry about it.

PC: Because you knew that in three weeks you were gone. [Laughter]

SA: That is right [Laughter] That is right. In the beginning I thought, "Why aren't these people speaking out when they know it is wrong?"

PC: The want tenure and all the other . . . .

SA: Right. They do not want to upset the apple cart.

PC: Teaching does not interest you as a full-time career actually, does it?

SA: Oh, I would take a teaching job tomorrow if it was within walking distance. But you said as a career. No, not as a career.

PC: Well, but I mean, you know, continuing.

SA: No, I would not mind but not to move from this area.

PC: [Laughter] That is the catch. Let's go back to some of the larger neon pieces which we vaguely talked about before in terms of your using commercially available colors.

SA: Yes.

PC: Most of the pieces that I remember offhand are fairly geometric.

SA: Geometric, yes.

PC: You have never thought of going in for freer forms?

SA: No, I never, no.

PC: Anything like that?

SA: No, I never thought of going into much freer forms as a lot of people do who get involved with neon. I see it as too seductive. Neon is, first of all, a seductive material. If I go into a freer form it can get out of control. So I restricted myself to basic geometric forms and lines, even in my early work. Lately, I am beginning to break away and have started to use circles and half-circles.

PC: What do you mean seductive?

SA: Seductive is that it can force a person like myself, if they are not careful, away from the immediate problem. You can get neon tubes, any letter forms, any straight tubes, put them all together and then light it and it is very, very beautiful.

PC: You mean just in terms of the light and the color.

SA: Just in terms of the color and the lighting and the reflection. So, from my early start, I restricted myself only with geometric forms. Even those were a problem in controlling because the tubes were very, very beautiful and very, very strong. Also, one of the early problems I gave, which I don't know if I have mentioned before, was the physical situation of the neon tube.

PC: Right.

SA: We were bringing a tube indoors, and one of the problems that I wanted to work with was to stimulate a person's mind and eyes being so close to a neon tube. So, I did that for several years and I have gotten over that and I am involved with a completely different problem.

PC: Have you made pieces for outside?

SA: There was a show recently at Fort Worth Museum where I was invited to do ten outdoor neons on the outside of the Fort Worth Art Museum. I just came back from that about a month ago.

PC: Oh, I did not know that.

SA: I think there are going to be some photographs or a photograph in Art in America, the next issue of the magazine.

PC: Now, what do you do in a situation like that? Do they give you a commission?

SA: They invited me to work on the outside of the building. I went down there and spent a couple of days looking at the building. They sent me a model of the building. I worked with the model of the building for two or three days and then I shipped the model back. I went down there, to Fort Worth, and worked with neon for approximately five days to actually bend the tubes.

PC: Right.

SA: Then we spent eight days actually putting the neons up. They paid, of course, for all the expenses.

PC: Right, right. Was that successful from your point of view?

SA: Extremely successful.

PC: Since that was the first outdoor piece, wasn't it?

SA: It was and, I am trying to be as objective as possible, it was very, very successful as to

solving my own problems with my material. It was successful for the idea of breaking a lot of rules.

PC: In what way?

SA: Well, to bring neons outside the building. It sounds corny to watch a neon on the outside of the building, but this time it was not just a neon on top of a building. I utilized the architecture and was able to work with the architecture.

PC: So, the wall was like a plane.

SA: That is correct. So that was very important. It was important in the sense that it brought the community closer to the Museum by doing that. It was important to me, specifically, that even before the show was on, that people around the country, museum people, already knew about it and a couple of them invited me to go and work on their museums.

PC: Do a piece for them.

SA: I did not do it. Some of them wanted their neons very fast. It was rather successful. Everybody along the line was very, very happy with it.

PC: Now, were these very large pieces?

SA: Very large. We are talking about one unit, which was a quarter of a circle and was 48 feet long and that was 48 feet long four times because I had four strands of tubes. Other neons were 20 feet by 20 feet and two strands of tubes. One neon by the entrance of the museum was 8 feet by 8 feet. I made up the 8 feet by 8 feet with 87 green tubes so we are talking physically about a lot of tubes. One of the most important things was that I was working with the architecture of the building. I must stress that. To me that was very, very important.

PC: How? In what terms?

SA: First of all, that building, for me, is very, very beautiful. It is very simple and it has a lot of right angle corners and inside corners and outside corners. It worked very well for me because it was the kind of problem I have been working on for the past two years before I did that exhibition.

PC: It was inside so you had a scale change.

SA: That is right, a scale change. I also had the opportunity to see the neons outdoors again, which I already had that opportunity in Grand Rapids with that show I had. I saw it on a different scale.

PC: How long can you make a single tube though?

SA: Not too long. That 48, I made it into two sections.

PC: I see, I see.

SA: They have to be made in sections.

PC: I was wondering. That would be an incredible piece of glass to try and move, you know? [Laughter]

SA: NO, that was done in three sections.

PC: It is so pretty. That is what? It is 16 feet, isn't it?

SA: Yes, 16 feet. 16 feet is not so bad. So, it was very successful. I was just a little disappointed that a new director took over the museum that invited me to the show, who was Richard Kashalik, and he instituted a new policy for the museum about catalogues. They weren't going to have catalogues for every show but at the end of the year make one large book of all the shows that they had. Which was very peculiar. I tried to explain to him that for the artist it was not a very successful idea.

PC: No.

SA: It was not a very good idea, but he was concerned about the museum.

PC: Well, there are money problems so that is maybe one of the reasons.

SA: I don't know. I think that is going to cost just as much. For the end of the year he will look good. The museum will look good when the book is made.

PC: One big, fat book. Right.

SA: Of course, the catalogue would have been very, very good for me to have but every museum director has his own way of working.

PC: But in many of the group exhibitions you have been in museums you have done special pieces.

SA: Yes.

PC: Do they pay you a fee for your time and everything else?

SA: That is a good question.

PC: It is hard to figure out?

SA: No, that is a good question because the first show you mentioned at the Walker Art Center, several of us got together and we said, "Well, look. Here we are. We have spent four or five days, maybe a week, putting the show together. We are losing time from it." When I say "we," we understood each other that at that time that when we were invited together we were to ask for a fee. So, in shows after that I had to make a point that I needed a fee for me to go . . . .

PC: For the time.

SA: For the time . . .

PC: Yes.

SA: . . . I took to install a piece. There was a lot of flack from other museum directors about that. Also, at that time there were a lot of problems about blacks showing, women showing. So some of the museums, some of the young museum directors, caught on very fast so they instituted on their own a fee paid to any artist who went to their museum to install any kind of work.

PC: Oh, I see.

SA: And, I must say, it was the -- this is going to sound silly but at least as far as I know -- electrical artists that instituted that or at least made a fuss about it.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: And now some museums still give me a hard time about that, you know, when I request a fee from them. A lot of directors are very considerate. They know the problems and you don't have to say anything to them. They bring up the subject because it is not a time where you send a painting or something from your studio.

PC: Right. You have to physically go there and supervise and work there.

SA: Right. So the majority of the museums these days are very understanding about that and there is a set fee that some of them give to the artists.

PC: Sort of honorarium.

SA: Yes. That is all it is. Of course, they pay other things such as hotel rooms and so forth. And a lot of us, for the kind of shows we do for these museums, they are not salable but fun. It is a show that we do specifically for them. Of course, we both get something out of it.

PC: Right.

SA: So, I just hope it continues. I hope it does not go back to its old ways.

PC: It depends on how the economic situation changes.

SA: I find that a lot of museums though have that in their budgets now.

PC: Yes, they do.

SA: There was a show recently, I think in Cincinnati, that had Mel Bochner, and some other people, Bob Morris, and they all got a nice fee for the three or four days they spent there putting on the show. Without them asking for it. So, there are some institutions that . . . .

PC: Well, if they want to do that kind of exhibition they have to budget for it.

SA: Yes, they have to budget the fee.

PC: One of the things I wanted to ask you some questions about were the packages. I noticed, as I was looking at them for awhile there, you have a date when it was packaged.

SA: Sealed.

PC: Then you have a date when it is to be opened.

SA: Yes.

PC: How do you pick the times?

SA: The time itself . . . .

PC: I mean, they don't seem to have a consistent time like five years or seven years.

SA: No, they don't have a consistency. I want them to be opened a long, long time from now so it is either fifteen years or twenty years, or some packages after my death. I want them to be opened when a lot of these problems have died out. And, if they are distributed around, I want them to come back as fresh ideas because five years or three years is just around the corner for me. They don't mean anything to me then but I want them to be opened at a time when I may not be involved with this kind of project, you know. so I want them to be presented again or be opened at a time when I may be involved with completely different works and be looked at with a fresh eye.

PC: You know, one of the things that I find interesting is that the packages sort of go back to the collages and all of that.

SA: Naomi has been thinking about all the work I have done all these years, and somehow they are all intermingled with one another, these neons with my old constructions, these packages with my old collages. I did not realize it at that time but they are all related to each other.

PC: Do you talk about the work with her or does she just kind of make comments now and then?

SA: No, oh no. We have big conversations about the work, specifically about the present work. Yes, we do converse. We relate to each other about the work. But then, on her own, she does a lot of thinking and some writing about the work and how it is related to older work. I never really thought of it until she brought it out.

PC: Do you find that makes any difference to you, the fact she thinks about it or writes pieces now and then?

SA: No. I am just happy that she is concerned about it. That is about all.

PC: Yes, yes. Because sometimes people get very nervous and feel they have to see it this way or look at it that way.

SA: She does not show, if I may use the word, fear, while I am doing work. I may ask her opinion or criticism and so forth but she never interferes to inject ideas while a work is in progress. She may inject ideas or feelings after the work is finished and then she will give me her opinion.

PC: Well, that is the only way to keep it going. Now, have you worked with things other than the neons, but before you started the packages? Are there other things that have been happening or have you really been doing the neons for a number of years now?

SA: I have been doing the neons pretty steadily.

PC: A number of years now?

SA: Yes.

PC: One thing that is apparent and which we have not really talked about here is all the traveling from universities and museums. You have done some traveling in Europe. How do you like that? I mean, are you congenial to traveling?

SA: No, I am not congenial to traveling and I really do not care to travel but I am afraid it is the only way I can look at new spaces and solve new problems. That is the only way I look at it. Specifically, in this country I try to get my show up, look at it, study it and leave because I get very lonely for Naomi and I get lonely being away from my surroundings.

PC: When you go to a city to do an installation in a new space where you have to design a new piece for it, you have to work very quickly then, don't you?

SA: Yes. If I may say this about myself, that, first of all, they do give us some plans or maybe some photographs. That is helpful sometimes.

PC: But it always looks different in real life.

SA: I will say that my mind works very, very fast. I have trained myself, I have disciplined myself to be given a space and zero in on that problem immediately. I study it for a day, a few hours, two days, and then go home. I can do that very easily. In fact, that is one of the most exciting things about a new space. To go and look at it and see what you can do.

PC: Now when you have a situation like that at a museum, do you give them a variety of possibilities, or do you say this is . . . ?

SA: No, never. I want to solve my problems my own way. Either I tell them that this is what I want to do or I send them a plan or I send them a model, but I never give them a choice.

PC: Kind of a variety of solutions. There is one and that is the one for that particular space.

SA: Yes, because that is a specific problem I want to solve and I cannot think of any show that I have done that I did not follow through on a specific problem that I designed. But I will tell you what is the most exciting thing about going to a new space. It is the immediate response that I have to a space. Sometimes it is very exciting and sometimes it is amazingly difficult.

PC: What would make a space difficult?

SA: Well, the space at the San Francisco Museum would be different. [Laughter]

PC: In terms of . . . ?

SA: Space.

PC: Of what? The shape of the room?

SA: The amount of the area that they gave me. Ronnie and I shared a very large space that they had at the museum there. The space, do you know the space?

PC: I don't know that space.

SA: It is about forty some odd feet high with a sky-light. We divided it in half so I think it is 160 feet. So, I got half of it and Ronnie got the other half. They gave us some money to work with so within that money we have to do a show.

PC: Right.

SA: Right. So that becomes a ticklish situation and I solved it by designing a large room

within that space so I could contain all that space that they gave me to a more human scale.

PC: I see.

SA: So that is when I did my first room where there was no ceiling to the room but with one door into the room. There was a neon on each outside corner of this particular room and, as you walked in, there was this big neon inside the room. So this way I took this whole big space and reduced it to whatever size I wanted this room to be. That is exciting.

PC: Kind of a space within a space.

SA: A space within a space.

PC: Right.

SA: And then Ronnie was very close to me and we worked very well because . . .

PC: Ronnie Bladen?

SA: . . . Ronnie Bladen, right. He had a wedge form shooting at me and I had a box form, you know, next to him. We worked very well together.

PC: Oh, I see.

SA: His was black and white and mine was a white room with neon colors. They almost were related to each other.

PC: But still separate.

SA: Still very separate.

PC: Oh, that is marvelous. I did not know that room was so immense.

SA: It is very big.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: Yes, it is.

PC: What do you think of the business of the last few years of museums having these enormous rooms?

SA: The rooms have always been there, Paul.

PC: Yes, but, you know, the more traditional museums did not have the immense rooms . . . .

SA: Paul, this museum was . . . .

PC: Oh, that is an old museum.

SA: And what did they put on the walls? Twenty-four inch paintings. I can only talk about some of the new museums that have gone up. Some of the new museums that have gone up are not done as museums to show works of art. We have one museum in Madison, Wisconsin, which is part of the university. I do not remember the name of it. It looks like a mausoleum. It has marble floors and I forget the walls, what they are made out of. The kind of art that is done today and even yesterday, you can't use that building for art. You can only put pictures on the walls. Then we have the Lincoln Museum in Nebraska.

PC: How do you like the Whitney, with those walls?

SA: The Whitney is probably one of the better museums that I know of. I think the Fort Worth Museum is an excellent museum. I guess I am saying this in a selfish way because it does not compete with anything that they put in there. It is blank walls for what those walls are made for -- either to hang something, or lean something, or to put something next to it. Like the Modern. It has that feeling. Just white rooms.

PC: As opposed to the Guggenheim which is always in the present, you know.

SA: Well, the Guggenheim. We have learned to live with it. We can now zero in on what we want to look at.

PC: But it still impinges, I find, in art exhibitions.

SA: Sure.

PC: Sort of going back again about the neons and the colors and using what is commercially available, have you evolved any theories about your use of the color? Whether, for example, that cube that is there, is that color or any other color . . . . Why did you choose that one at that instant?

SA: I still see, for instance, red neon as very, very aggressive, and blue and green as nonaggressive colors, as neon colors go. That specific neon which is there is green, a green cube, I wanted a quiet glow of light from there, not only because it is a cube but the kind of light I wanted from that area. When I select green, or red, or blue, it has a lot to do with location, and the shape of the neon, the form. That is how I decide on the colors, which I think I mentioned before. I also, sometimes, when I do a commission, I take into consideration the people who are going to live with it. What kind of people they are. Sometimes . . . . Like I did some commissions in Europe and most of them were blue because the people that I did the commission for . . . . First of all, I must tell you that blue is a favorite color of mine. I did it in blue because they are kind of quiet people, reserved people, extremely intelligent and very sensitive and somehow, to me, blue was the right color for them.

PC: Rather than red.

SA: Rather than red.

PC: Do you ever use yellow and orange? I don't remember that.

SA: I did a few, one yellow, years ago. A large neon orange I did which is now at Hartford Museum. What is the name of that museum?

PC: Wadsworth.

SA: Wadsworth.

PC: Yes.

SA: I don't use orange because of technical problems.

PC: Oh, really?

SA: Yes.

PC: In what way?

SA: Sometimes those tubes that have orange, that produce orange glow, in a few years something happens inside the tube. They become impure. They become dirty.

PC: Oh, really? You mean the glass oxidizes?

SA: Not the glass but the powder inside. It changes sometimes, not an even color throughout. So I stopped using that. Green, you see, now, is much clearer and much cleaner than the orange. I do not use yellow because it is not too interesting a color for me but also it does not have a glow affair. It just has a line affair.

PC: Oh, you mean it looks more of a line than . . . ?

SA: It looks much more like a line than a tube that has a glow that is supposed to be flowing out of it.

PC: I find it very interesting that, as you describe these, it is a very kind of painterly idea, almost, with the glow and the light.

SA: In some of the pieces, which I said the last time we met, people do consider some of the

neons, like the show I had last year at John Weber's, a lot of people saw that as painterly walls and I see them less as painterly than, for instance, some of Flavin's corner pieces. They are more painterly.

PC: Oh, yes.

SA: It is something you cannot avoid. I am sure Flavin does not think about that. He thinks about the construction of the actual form, as I do also, and what happens to the wall of course happens. For myself, I am less interested in the glow of the color on the wall or whatever than the construction of the tube.

PC: Do you see many exhibitions? Are there many contemporary artists that interest you or do you just see your friends' shows?

SA: Well, I see quite a few shows when I am in the city here. Most of them, I suppose, are my friends, but there are other people who are not friends of mine that I see also. Specifically at this point I . . . . But there are some galleries that I do not go to at all.

PC: For example?

SA: Well, for instance, I will go to Antigone maybe to see Al Hale, you know. I am not interested in what he does generally.

PC: Well, what galleries do you frequent then?

SA: Well, we will say, in this area I do frequent Castelli and of course John Weber, and then, also, Paula Cooper. Once in a while 112 Greene Street and whenever I have a chance I go to AIR or 55 Mercer. Sometimes I have friends who show at Susan Caldwell, but only if I have a friend showing there. Very, very seldom do I go to John Gibson's. I find his shows quite boring. If I go uptown, I always like to go by and see, without ever know who is showing, Sidney Janis. I used to go to Pace a lot but I seldom go there now unless to see a specific person. The last time was Agnes Martin. I went to see her show specifically.

PC: Do you read any of the art magazines or books?

SA: I am a bad reader.

PC: You don't?

SA: I read, maybe, some articles. For instance, I just finished, I think I finished, Alloway's remarks in the last issue of Artforum about curators.

PC: What did you think of that?

SA: Well, I agree with a lot of the things he said and I disagree with a lot of the things he said. I find Alloway just constantly out chopping people. You know, being extremely critical without coming up with much of a solution. I find him sometimes extremely unfair. I find that whereas I agree with a lot of things he has said, he knows also that there are specific problems in institutions which he does not seem to want to talk about. Now you would think I would agree with him completely because I am an artist and it is like picking on the curator. I feel that some of his remarks are unfounded. I have a feeling that Alloway has been put on this earth just to be bitchy about most everything.

PC: [Laughter] Oh, I think it is partly the fact that he did not succeed doing a lot of things that he wanted to.

SA: That is very obvious, isn't it? Especially the Guggenheim. And a lot of things are correct except that if you are going to . . . . It is not easy . . . it is like a corporation. You are dealing with a lot of people.

PC: It is always easier to knock something over than to build it up.

SA: It is very big, you know. We will say the Whitney. There is a curator, and there is another advisor someplace, there is the board. And so you are dealing with a lot of personalities and who gets the axe is the curator. Even if I agreed with a lot of things he said about the Whitney, I can see where the problems are, you know. Of course, outside New York it is a little easier than the city but they have their problems too.

PC: Yes. It is much more public here.

SA: I think that Alloway allows a lot of his personal relationships and dissatisfactions to come out too easily in his articles. Or the talk, if you were there, after his pop art show, where he lost his cool and called Chamberlain a shit. You know, things like that. It is uncalled for. I mean, we are past that stage. Marisol in front of her face. We are past that stage.

PC: It is kind of shoddy, isn't it?

SA: Yes.

PC: You know, there was a point in the mid-Sixties when there was all this interest, well, you were in the New Forms show which maybe was the beginning, in the early 1960's, of new forms and new materials, new mediums and whatever. Was that ever a concern of yours or were you just trying to . . . ?

SA: I must explain something about myself. You know, my background . . . how am I going to say it? I never thought of it as a concern. I never saw it that way. I just saw it as a normal stepping stone from one area to another. You know, Paul, I never said to myself, "This is it," for whatever reason. If I said this it was for a reason that I wanted to work with and to solve certain problems. When they said "new forms and new material," I did not see it as new forms and new material. I just saw it as forms and materials that I was working with, or what other people were working with. I realized there were some "intellectuals" in that area, in that group, that were able to foresee certain things. I am not intellectual or a person that plans strategy in the art world. I plan only my own life, and not having an art education I think is one of the reasons that I work this way.

PC: What do you mean by that?

SA: I know for a fact that a lot of artists who have an art education, an art history background, use the art history for their own work.

PC: Oh, really? The kinds of criticisms that are around are intended to make people do that anyway.

SA: That is correct. Well, I was never able to do that or wanted to do that. I never even thought of that. If I used art history, or if I used references, it was within my immediate circle of people that I have seen in museums and galleries, and that does not go back too far.

PC: You mean so it is really a contemporary dialogue rather than one that is, say, 500 years old?

SA: Yes. I must say though, that in the past few years I have been doing some investigating quietly to see what the Russians were doing, and so forth. I have seen a lot of the influence that the Russians had on a lot of my contemporaries. I know, for a fact, certain contemporaries of mine went into the Russian history to help them.

PC: Well, people look everywhere to find what they want.

SA: Correct. I never knew that it even existed at times. So, as they said, new materials and so forth, I never even thought of it that way. I did not even know at that time what was done in the past. I knew about , I knew about that, but it never really projected into me. I got influenced by Barri as I told you and he got me started. When a person like that starts you out, and if you have the desires, you can jump and run very far in all kinds of directions, and all kinds of solutions and problems.

PC: Now that is very interesting because you started with somebody who was really only about fifteen years older.

SA: Barri was what?

PC: He is, chronologically, maybe only fifteen or twenty years older than you.

SA: Oh, yes.

PC: So it is not like going back to Cezanne or, you know.

SA: I never understood Cezanne, shall we say, as people understand him.

PC: But you were starting with somebody who was fairly contemporary.

SA: Very contemporary and not even accepted, by the way.

PC: Yes, yes. And then, going your own way.

SA: Yes. That is as far as my history went but, as I said, as I got the ball rolling, the ball just kept going.

PC: Well, it gets bigger and moves in momentum.

SA: Yes, and sometimes it switched its road and went in another direction or came back again.

PC: Have you ever thought about what a neon piece of yours communicates to people? What does it say if somebody comes in a room and sees a green cube or . . . ?

SA: I have never thought of what my work communicates to someone. Some of the early neons where there was a lot of timing, I obviously took the viewer into consideration and thought of the viewer because the timing would affect the viewer.

PC: Right.

SA: Then I was able to control his mind, shall we say, at certain times, but that was the only time I thought of the viewer. When I stopped using the timing devices, I slowly began to disengage from the viewer and began to only think of how I saw the neon, the form, as I would react to it.

PC: Did you ever have a piece change over the years?

SA: Did they what?

PC: Say a piece that you did five years ago, do you think of it differently now than you did then.

SA: Yes, yes.

PC: How is that?

SA: I have lost interest in a lot of those neons I did in the early days. Like, for instance, this very big neon up in Connecticut, in Wadsworth . . . . We go to Connecticut quite often because my in-laws live in Connecticut, and they always what to stop by the museum.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: I have yet to stop by the museum to go look at that neon.

PC: [Laughter] It is just finished.

SA: Yes.

PC: It always fascinates me because some of the people ask me that same question, you know, "What about the artists and their relationship to their work?" Most of them really are not interested in what they are doing with it.

SA: I hope it is taken care of. I understand that it is working okay and so forth, but I really have no interest to go and see it. I have been invited to go and see the one that is owned by Milwaukee and I have no interest to go and see that either. La Jolla Museum owns a piece of mine and the director is a very dear friend of mine so he keeps inviting me out there to visit him but I am forced to look at the neon.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: Actually, I am not forced, only it is there.

PC: Right. The piece becomes part of the . . . .

SA: Or people that I know in the city that own neons of mine, if I am invited to their homes, I just see it. I don't communicate with it any more.

PC: Do they kind of just fall in with everything else around the place?

SA: Physically do you mean?

PC: Yes.

SA: Yes. My mind is too involved or too concerned with what I am doing now. I remember that, when I was in Paris about eighteen years ago, Picasso had a show of all the work that was owned by Russia at that time. They had an exhibition there and Picasso made a remark and he said, "Oh, it is like looking at my children come back." I thought that was all so very nice until now. I cannot believe that. I am sure that people feel the way he felt but I really do not have too much interest.

PC: Do you always have a piece up in the studio? I see a green cube.

SA: I have pieces all over but I don't have them on. I have one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, I have about ten neons up but I do not have them lit up. This goes on automatically though. Before Con Edison's rates went up all these neons would go on automatically and would go off at different times but now it is too expensive. Con Edison is so expensive now that I only have this go on automatically and it goes off automatically. It was nice to have them go on at different times of the day and go off at night. I could even tell the time of day after awhile.

PC: [Laughter] What went on, what went off?

SA: Yes. Don't tell people that Con Edison is expensive.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: Not that these don't use a lot of electricity but in relation to spotlights and so forth I pay a lot of money. In fact, I am cutting down. For instance, I bought that little lamp now so I don't have to use the big one.

PC: Right.

SA: I bought a couple of little .

PC: Oh, incredible, I mean, some people have these great banks of light they paint with. You have not had very many collectors who bought work over the years, have you?

SA: No.

PC: But, even the idea, you know, you would have to have a separate room because they affect so many other things.

SA: Not really. For instance, there is a friend of mine who owns a neon of mine in her living room. It is a small living room with a lot of work around and the neon does not occupy that much space. It does not affect, also, the other art work.

PC: It doesn't?

SA: No.

PC: It doesn't change somebody else's colors or . . . ?

SA: No. Other people . . . . There is one in California that is quite a big neon, and that one affects the room because it is a very small dining room but they did not want anything else in that room anyway except the neon. That would affect something in that particular room. If the room is small, it will affect in a way, but if the room is large enough, it does not affect other work. I think that may be one of the problems, you know. I don't know.

PC: [Laughter]

SA: I can say this: that I can always find an area in someone's home or apartment that I can

install something specifically for that area that will not affect other works.

PC: Other things, yes.

SA: Yes.

PC: What do you think of . . . . You know, you use, really, in one set of lights you are really using color, you are not doing things in terms of traditional sculpture. You make a rectangle or a circle. I mean, that is the shape of the tubing but it is not necessarily what is happening.

SA: No, but, for instance, the problems I am working with now . . . . Yes, it is part of a circle but it is first the idea. It is like incomplete forms or complete forms. The idea is first and then the physical part. For instance, my show that I am going to have at in a week or so, are incomplete squares and incomplete circles. The idea too is very important and then, applying these incomplete forms on the walls, architecturally speaking, how they will look on the walls, you know, so you know what I am talking about, Paul. It is not just saying, "We will do a cube and put it on the wall," but the idea is to do a complete cube and locate it on the wall, so all these factors are very important to me. As before, I would do a piece, a sculpture, and let it walk around. I wasn't too concerned about location. I was concerned only with these tubes and what they were going to look like and what they were going to do. That was, I think, very limited on my part.

PC: So, you mean, the pieces, the current ones, are more open?

SA: More open.

PC: Yes.

SA: Correct. More open to me and more open to the viewer. The viewer must see and they must know they are incomplete forms so they, in their own minds, they must finish, I would hope they would finish the form and see that form in relation to the location where it is located.

PC: You mean, on the wall or the floor . . . ?

SA: On the wall, the floor, wherever it may be, so that is very important.

PC: One thing that I keep coming back to is do you conceive them after a form like that. Are they conceived really as tubes or the light or . . . ?

SA: As tubes.

PC: As tubes.

SA: I know it is hard for people to believe what I am saying when I say that. They say, "Well, how can you disregard the color?" The color is there and there is nothing I can do about it. I just select the color. The thing is that I select the color, but if I have a square, for instance, and I select a green color, what happens within the inside of the square is very important with green. What happens to the inside of the square with a blue or a red?

PC: Oh, so it is different with each color.

SA: It is different with each color so If I want a certain kind of look within that square, I select the color.

PC: I see.

SA: If it is another shape, let's say, a part of a circle, I know that part of a circle done in blue would look a certain way and part of a circle in red would look another way, so I select the color for that particular time, area, for what it may be. For an exhibition, of course, I play it differently. I try to do the exhibition as a whole.

PC: The whole room?

SA: All the neons together so they have some relationship as a person walks through.

PC: Oh, I see, because otherwise you could have a lot of optical problems.

SA: At times I am concerned with the color and at other times I am not concerned with the color.

PC: So, for all the simplicity, there really is an awful lot of . . . .

SA: For the simplicity . . . . No, I am glad we got into that. [Laughter]

PC: [Laughter]

SA: With all the simplicity, if a person really looks at the neons when they are on, I think there will be a lot to see and understand. They are simple when you say, "a square, a tube, a square box, a cube." The words are simple but look what happens to simple forms with neon tubes at certain locations on the walls. It is very different and they become very complicated then. It takes, I think, a person who must be interested in evaluating the problem. Of course, a person just casually seeing it as a tube and not analyzing it, he walks away happy, of course. It is just part of a tube on a wall and that is it.

PC: Is that what happens? I mean, the piece over there, say, which is off . . .

SA: Yes. Let me put it on.

PC: It is just . . . what is that, the way it is now? It has to be on.

SA: I was working with neons that had programming.

PC: Right.

SA: The neons then worked for me when they were off.

PC: Oh, really?

SA: Yes. In other words, the tube was on, a blue tube was on and when that particular blue tube went off, the glass itself was blue so there was another color of blue.

PC: Oh, right, right.

SA: So I always took that into account. When the tubes were off, how did they look? What color were they when they were off?

PC: Because it changes when the light is off?

SA: It changes.

PC: Right.

SA: Not only because of the color of the tube but optically they were affected. Now these particular neons that say "on," they only work when they are on. They are off now because of the cost of electricity but, when they are off they are just pieces of glass on the wall. When these tubes have a timing device that works on and off, of course I take into consideration that, when it is off, it must be doing something. So, Paul, they neons that do have timing then, I look at them also as they are off. What color the glass was. If they are two different tubes next to each other and are different colors, I look at how they would affect each other when they were on or when they were off. So that is very important. The neon there that is off is just a tube that is off.

PC: Now, you know, some of the large pieces, as time goes on they seem to become simpler. [Laughter]

SA: Paul, you really are saying things and I am glad that you are saying those things because they are simple. But, what happens, see, you must remember when I was doing this. When I was doing this, minimal was like big and strong so what was I fighting? I was fighting artists that work in the minimal stage and then I was fighting curators that were interested only in that. I was fighting writers that saw nothing but minimal. So, there I was, you know, "Oh, my God, those tubes and all those forms." But, you are right, you are right. They are simple. When I say "simple," they are not complicated. It is because people, a lot of people at that time and a lot of people that I was very surprised at, did not take time to analyze.

PC: To look at them.

SA: To look at them, right. Well, remember at that time it was a difficult time for that kind of work.

PC: But, you know, since the pieces now . . . . I don't know what the Texas Museum's shapes were like. Were they simple shapes?

SA: Yes.

PC: Yes.

SA: If you could only see some of these forms that I have now, an enormous part of a square, right angle and part of another square, U form, but enormous, twenty feet, and a corner of a circle so . . . .

PC: The pieces or the shapes have been getting simpler. What do you thing is going to happen? Where do you think they are going to go from where they are now?

SA: Me?

PC: Yes. I mean, will they get larger? Will they get, you know . . . ?

SA: No. I don't think they are going to get larger. They will get larger only if the space changes. I think they are going to get simpler.

PC: In terms of what?

SA: Physically, like one straight tube or something. Or, they could go the reverse. I have been thinking about lately, for instance, doubling, using, for instance, an incomplete square with one color and adding another tube of another color to make another incomplete square next to it. Double it. I have only been thinking about it on paper. When or how or what, I don't know exactly when. The immediate situation with my neon tubes is that, so far, physically I have been working with basically what they are now because there are still a lot of locations I would like to put the neons in.

PC: What do you mean?

SA: Locations. To squeeze a part of a square in an inside corner. I have not had that opportunity yet.

PC: You will take different shapes and put them in different situations like that.

SA: Locations, situations, yes.

PC: Yes.

SA: But, something can twist, say, two months from now and change my whole direction.

PC: Right.

SA: I have no control.

PC: Are you influenced then by the environment do you think, more than . . . ?

SA: More than before. People before thought that I was influenced by environment and so forth. I did not see it, but now I am. Maybe not only the environment but a physical situation.

PC: Yes, so that in some ways if somebody gives you a long, narrow room . . . .

SA: I would do something because of that long, narrow room.

PC: Because of that shape rather than one, let's say, that is a large white cube with windows on one side.

SA: Right. Before, somehow, people thought that I am involved with today's technology because I am using neons, but I don't see it that way. Again, it is the same way as I said before. I just saw it as another material. But, in the directions I have been working in the

past few years, my immediate environment is very important.

PC: You have not used any other kind of light sources, have you?

SA: Just neon. In the early days some collages. In my early constructions I have light bulbs.

PC: Right.

SA: I used to have fluorescents.

PC: But none of those interest you any more?

SA: No.

PC: Neon tubes are all the same diameter too?

SA: They vary from 3/8 of an inch up to 5/8 of an inch and the diameters are very different. They react differently. The narrower the diameter, the stronger the light. The wider the diameter, the softer the light.

PC: Same gas?

SA: Same gas in there but because it is compact it is much stronger when it is narrow.

PC: Because that takes more pressure?

SA: More pressure and even the transformer, it is a bigger transformer to handle a narrow tube.

PC: That is fascinating.

SA: I did not get involved with other light situations because it is only confusing. I wanted to be as simple as possible. Simpler also, for myself, because there are a lot of things I have not done yet.

PC: How do you mean, in terms of what?

SA: A lot of things I have not done? Well, I can only make neons when somebody gives me a show or something comes up, so there are a lot of possibilities I want to do.

PC: Oh, I see. It is really not like paintings where you can just keep making one after another?

SA: Then you can always look at a painting, right?

PC: Yes, yes.

SA: I only have so many walls here and I can only put so many tubes up. The neons that I am going to do now were put on paper a year ago. Or maybe more.

PC: So, it takes time between the idea and the . . . .

SA: Sometimes it takes a long time and other times if I want it right away, I make it and put up the neon.

PC: You make it here?

SA: I make it here.

PC: Now, I have covered pretty well most of these topics.

SA: I don't know what else we should talk about.

PC: Is there an area we have not gone into and you think we should, people, activities or events?

SA: Not that I know of. I cannot think of particular people or subject matter that might be interesting.

[END OF INTERVEIW]

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