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Oral history interview with Tom Robbins, 1984 March 3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Tom Robbins on March 3, 1984. The interview took place in La Conner, WA, and was conducted by Martha Kingsbury for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

[Tape 1; side A]

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I was just asking Tom Robbins about where he grew up and how he got to the big city and so forth.

After going to high school and college a couple years in the South, you ended up in Greenwich Village, when you were around 20years old [born July 22, 1936--Ed.]. Is that right?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah. I was really out of place. I mean I really came from the sticks. It was quite an extraordinary experience.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You were starting to tell me that's when you saw your first painting?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah. I'd never seen a painting, in my whole life.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Did you see them in commercial galleries down there, or you went to the museums in the big city?

TOM ROBBINS: Saw them mostly in galleries, and almost on the street. I didn't know anything about the Museum of Modern Art.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Really.

TOM ROBBINS: But they were paintings in street shows-- not very good, of course, but at least they were real paintings. I mean, they weren't reproductions.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: This would have been mid-fifties?

TOM ROBBINS: Umm, yeah.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: If you were twenty, it would have been about 1955?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Do you remember whether the stuff you saw on the street included a lot of nonrepresentational and abstract work?

TOM ROBBINS: No, the stuff on the street was not.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: It was real street fair art, then?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm. But later on, I began to hang out at the Cedar Bar. I recall it was on University Place, around the edge of the Village, and that's where the Abstract Expressionists School, the New York School, [had] their own official meeting hall.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Um hmm.

TOM ROBBINS: There were always artists in there, many of them either famous or soon to be famous. And great debates raging.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Did you hear some of those?

TOM ROBBINS: Oh yeah! I was just floored. I didn't understand a word of it, but I was enormously attracted to it.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Were you quickly attracted to the more avant garde paintings of those people? Did you learn what Abstract Expressionism was pretty quickly, and how it was different from that stuff you saw out on the streets?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah. I reacted against it at first. It was just a part of my heritage, I guess. I sort of reacted to it right off the bat the way my parents would have, [immense gulf too]. (laughs) But after a while I was completely seduced because I've always been attracted to rebellion and that sort of thing anyhow.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And you were practicing it yourself as much as you could?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah! So I became a great fan, particularly of Jackson Pollock's.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Let's see, when did Pollock die? 1956?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, '56.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: He was alive?

TOM ROBBINS: He was alive when I was there, because I actually saw him in the Cedar Bar once.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: He was living out on Long Island by that time.

TOM ROBBINS: He was living on Long Island, but he was a frequent visitor in the city, as I found out later. Later, I spent a year researching Jackson Pollock in New York.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Did you become personally acquainted with any painters, not necessarily the big names, but others.

TOM ROBBINS: Oh yeah. Big names: Barnett Newman. This was my second trip now. On that first time I spent in New York, which was only a period of about eight months, I didn't meet any famous painters. I met a painter who became a big influence. His name was William Phillip Kendrick , and he was a portrait painter and weight lifter. He was a real character.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: But it must have been on that first trip that you would have seen Jackson Pollock, bcause he [wasn't] alive when you came back.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, I saw him in the Cedar Bar. And who knows who else I saw in there. I might have seen every single one of them. But I didn't know it at the time. I didn't know who they were; I just knew that they were kind of wild and fiercely intelligent, and I thought they were all just mad and crazy geniuses and I loved it.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: At that time when you met them-- or not met them, but when you overheard their conversations and were excited by it-- did you begin reading about their works, that early?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, you know, once one pays some attention to something, then you begin to see evidence of it everywhere. So I'd look through a Time Magazine, and I would see the name Jackson Pollock, and I thought, "Oh, that's that bald guy (chuckles) who was down at the Cedar Bar the other night." So I began to make the connections, but...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Did you think of painting yourself at that point?

TOM ROBBINS: No. See I was very naive. I came from school, some educational background that you just would not believe.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Well, I grew up in Catholic girls' schools myself so I can believe a lot of backwardness.

TOM ROBBINS: The teachers in my high school weren't even college graduates.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Really?

TOM ROBBINS: But I had literary interests my whole life. I decided at the age of five I was going to be a writer. So I had done a great deal of reading. I suppose I was more at home in Greenwich Village than, say, any of classmates from Warsaw High School, _____. But in any case, it was an overwhelming experience for me. It took me some time to begin to assimilate it.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You were in New York when you were around twenty in '56, and then you went in the Air Force?

TOM ROBBINS: Then I went in the Air Force. This was the time of the Korean war, of course.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You were in for four years?

TOM ROBBINS: For three years. I guess the Korean war was just winding down, but the draft was still on. I got

my draft notice while I was in Greenwich Village and decided I didn't want to go in the Army. And at that time, of course there was no big antiwar movement or avoiding-the-draft movement. And it didn't even occur to me that I could go to Canada or something. It wasn't an option. But it was an option to go in the Air Force and maybe do something nonlethal. So I took that, and was sent to the University of Illinois to study meteorology. And ended up teaching meteorology to the South Korean Air Force.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh. So you were not practicing as a meteorologist, but teaching them what you'd learned at the University of Illinois.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah. I did practice, for a while. I practiced in Florida for about six or seven months.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: After you got out of the Air Force?

TOM ROBBINS: No, this was while I was in the Air Force, before I went to Korea. I went first to Florida. I was there a little less than a year. Then I was in Japan, Korea. And then came back to Nebraska. But during that time these seeds that were planted in Greenwich Village were beginning to sprout. And while I was in Tokyo-- I lived in Tokyo for a little over a month before I went to Korea and began teaching. And there was a school there, run by a man named Manfried Darjeeling, who was...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Spelled like the tea?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm. I don't know if that was a phony name or not, but he was supposedly half Austrian. His mother was an Austrian countess or something. And his father was a Hindu, an East Indian who dealt in Oriental art. He had a little school in Shinjiku section of Tokyo, in the back of an old stone building, where he offered two courses. One course-- I think they met twice a week for a month-- he introduced people to Japanese aesthetics, to the philosophical ideas behind the Japanese art forms. And then the students would begin to study with a Japanese and they would study ikebana or the tea ceremony or origami or any of those little Japanese arts. The people who took that course were the wives of American servicemen. They were army officer wives, almost exclusively, although I think there were probably some from the diplomatic corps, and just wives of American civilians working in Japan. They learned to do a tea ceremony and fold paper and make flower arrangements and all that. It kept them off the streets and it was probably very nice. But he [gave] another course which lasted twice a week for four months. The first two months he concentrated on aesthetics in general.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You mean, with reference to paintings and gardens and all kinds of things?

TOM ROBBINS: No, not gardens; it wasn't Japanese.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh, by generally you mean...

TOM ROBBINS: ...just the philosophy of aesthetics, but that branch of philosophy which is known as aesthetics. It was completely Western.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I see.

TOM ROBBINS: I mean, it was universal, I guess. Didn't have anything particular to do with Oriental thought. Then in the second half of that course he would begin to concentrate on Japanese aesthetics. But this of course was for more serious people, not hobbyists.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: With heavy reading and...?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: So did you go to either of these?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, I went to that, too. I enrolled in that course soon after I landed in Japan.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: In the second one?

TOM ROBBINS: In the second one.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Which part of it did you hit if you were only there for, you said, a month.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, I took from the beginning, which was just the regular aesthetics, and I completed all of that. But then when I went to Korea, I had a wonderful schedule-- I worked four days and had four days off, and there was even a time there where I worked four days and had five days off. And having access to the weather station, through which every pilot who left that particular city to go to Japan had to clear-- and there was a lot of traffic-- it was very easy for me to hitch a ride to Japan and back. So I continued with those classes for a while, sort of

commuting from Korea to Japan. But that became expensive, too, after a while, because there was food and lodging involved and I was making, of course, miniscule amounts of money. So I eventually gave it up without completing the whole course. But I got into the Japanese section enough to learn about yugen and shibui and a number of the concepts that were used in the Kabuki, Noh drama, and painting. That was a great experience for me.

After I left there, the Orient, I was in Nebraska at Strategic Air Command headquarters, four stories underground in a nuclear bombproof building-- a real Dr. Strangelovian environment, for about a year.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Ooh. A long time.

TOM ROBBINS: But I kept my interest in art. Omaha has an art museum. The Joslyn Museum. I used to go there a lot, and they have quite a good Impressionist collection. The rest of it was nothing, but they had a fairly extensive French Impressionist collection. I got to know that collection pretty well and spent a lot of time there.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: By that time did you think less and less of being a writer, or not at all of being a writer, and think more and more of the visual arts?

TOM ROBBINS: No, I was still convinced I was going to be a writer if I could do it. I was never 100percent convinced that I would be able to do it, but that was my real dream. But I was certainly fascinated by the visual arts.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Is it true when you got out of the Air Force you went to art school?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Where?

TOM ROBBINS: In Richmond, Virginia, at a school that at that time was known as Richmond Professional Institute of the College of William and Mary. It was a division of William and Mary, but completely separate. It was sixty miles away from the William and Mary campus which was in Williamsburg. It was essentially a professional school of art, drama, and music. And it was very exciting; it was so different from Washington and Lee [Robbins's first college--Ed.], with all the fraternities and the Joe College atmosphere.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Was there a lot of interaction between the music and the drama, or did it tend to become separate?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, they were fairly separate, but certain individuals would interact. I took courses in all three, because...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh, you did. How long were you there?

TOM ROBBINS: Two years. I'd transferred my credits from Washington and Lee, and took a great many hours while I was there, and I got a degree from there. I think it was in 1960.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Then did you go right back to New York? Or there was a hiatus?

TOM ROBBINS: No. I started writing about art while I was there. I worked on the newspaper and was in fact the editor-in-chief of the campus newspaper for a while. I started covering the drama department, reviewing the student productions, and then started writing about paintings.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh! So when you came out and worked on the Seattle Times as the art critic across the board, you'd already had writing experience?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, on an undergraduate level.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Well, it's worth something, isn't it?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, I guess that's what got me the job, but... By that time I had begun to read a lot about the visual arts, and William Phillip Kendrick, the weightlifter/portrait painter who was my mentor, was in Richmond at that time. He was a native of Richmond, which was how I happened to meet him in New York.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I see.

TOM ROBBINS: There actually was-- and still is-- a lot of good painting going on in Richmond.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You still have friends or family there, and keep in touch with Richmond?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I noticed your article [in Commonwealth Magazine--Ed.]...

TOM ROBBINS: I don't subscribe to that magazine.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: But you have a piece in it?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm, yeah.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Implying that you go back there, and are somewhat in touch.

TOM ROBBINS: But Richmond Professional Institute was combined with the Medical College of Virginia and became Virginia Commonwealth University, which I think is the largest university in the state now. At that time it was very Bohemian and it was thought of by lawmakers and the general public in Virginia in much more disparaging terms than, say, the hicks around here think of Evergreen State College.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Much more polarized.

TOM ROBBINS: Oh, it was just seen as a den of drug addicts and homosexuals and...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Depravity and viciousness. (laughs)

TOM ROBBINS: But I found it very exciting and I got to making friends with the painters. Hans Hofmann had come down there and about half the painting department were disciples of Hofmann's. They studied with him in Provincetown in the summer. And there's a wonderful Japanese sculptor, Joseph Goto, who taught there. Will Barnett, from New York, was coming down all the time. And so I really got the smell of turpentine in my nose, and I studied some painting...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Does that mean that when you graduated you were specifically an art major?

TOM ROBBINS: No, I really wasn't but it's hard to say what I was. (chuckles) They gave me a diploma, which I believe said "Social Science" on it.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: In other words it was possible to get a degree that was fairly generally dispersed among what you wanted to do?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah. I studied in all three departments, but I studied mostly history courses and theory courses. Like I never learned to play an instrument, even though I took some courses in music and art.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I see. Then after you were there, you came out to Seattle and you were here a while before [going--Ed.] to New York for a while. Is that right?

TOM ROBBINS: Yes. I graduated and hung around for a while, and worked for the Richmond Times Dispatch. Got some newspaper experience, professional experience, under my belt. And then just got in the car one January, middle of winter, drove across the northern United States because I couldn't afford to take the southern route. Wrecked some poor farmer's car in Farnham, Minnesota. And arrived in my bashed-up, dented-in car...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: What do you mean you couldn't afford to take the southern route?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, I mean, I just couldn't afford the extra gas.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: So you had to take the shortest route?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah!

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Why Seattle?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, we had studied at RPI about Morris Graves and Mark Tobey and the so-called Northwest School. And at that time I was also getting very interested in mysticism, something that I dabbled in when I was in Japan, and I was doing a lot of reading in Zen. I was very curious about what kind of American environment could have produced a school of mystics. So that attracted me. And Seattle was also the furthest point on the map from Richmond, without leaving the United States, and I couldn't afford to leave the country. So that also was an attraction.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: (laughs)

TOM ROBBINS: I was able to put 3,000 miles between me and my relatives in the Virginia conservative nature

of...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: So you came out here when? '62?

TOM ROBBINS: '62. And arrived in town one Friday afternoon, with $100 in my pocket. I crossed the Mercer Island floating bridge and just sort of aimlessly went down Boren [Avenue--Ed.] and took a right off of Boren on Minor, saw a sign in a window said "Apartment for Rent," went in and rented it for $85 of that $100 (chuckles) and moved in. But I'd done some pretty good work in my short time on the Richmond Times Dispatch, and I had a letter of introduction from the managing editor there to the managing editor of both Seattle newspapers. And Saturday morning I went down to the Seattle Times, talked to the managing editor, and I started to work there on Tuesday, which was very fortunate, considering my economic situation.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yes! Very nice.

TOM ROBBINS: I replaced a man who was going on leave of absence for six months to Europe, in the feature department. Then I enrolled in graduate school at the University of Washington. This was in January and I was going to go to school in September. I was accepted in Far Eastern studies. I was at that time very interested in getting back to Japan.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Did you go?

TOM ROBBINS: No, not for a while.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Did you go to graduate school?

TOM ROBBINS: Yes, I did for a quarter. But in the meantime, Anne Todd, who was the visual arts critic for the Seattle Times, quit. And my office, the feature department office, was right next door to the office of the arts and entertainment section. Louis Guzzo, at that time, was the arts and entertainment editor. I didn't have a whole lot to do, and I sat there and watched these little old ladies coming in and applying for Anne Todd's job as art critic. And after a week or so of this, I thought, "I know I can do a better job than they can. I think I'll apply for it." So I went next door and talked to Lou. I had written a couple of feature stories for the Times at that time which had attracted some attention, and Lou had admired them. I showed him some of my undergraduate art criticism from the school paper, and he took me on. I, of course, was not qualified for the job at all. I was probably as qualified as a lot of the people who were applying, but in terms of a real professional art critic, I was not qualified for the job. I got by for a long time, just on my writing ability. I could write well enough to write an articulate column, even though some of my pronouncements were just awful. They were impressionistic, and impressionistic criticism is the same thing as public opinion and therefore worthless. But I did my homework; I went out to a second-hand store, bought all the back issues of Artforum, and then subscribed. I read every single one of them, from cover to cover. Read Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, read those people day after day after day, until... By the time I was ready to quit being an art critic in Seattle, I'd become to be a fairly good one. But it wasn't until right at the end, when I was working for Seattle Magazine, that I think I could legitimately call myself an art critic.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: But when you came to Seattle and you started working for the Times, you started working as an art reviewer before you interrupted that stint and went back to New York?

TOM ROBBINS: I did it for two-and-a-half years, I believe. Certainly two years.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Before you went back to New York?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: When did you go back to New York the second time?

TOM ROBBINS: It was...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: So what you're suggesting is you came in '62 and then maybe you wrote for the Times in '63 and '4 and...

TOM ROBBINS: No, '62. See, I came in January of '62, so I was in Seattle for that full year of '62 and the full year of '63. I think it was mid-year '64, if I'm not mistaken.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: That you went back to New York?

TOM ROBBINS: When I went back to New York. But I'd had two years of the Seattle art scene.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Then when you returned to Seattle after being in New York, did you go back to the Times

at all before you started with Seattle Magazine?

TOM ROBBINS: I started with Seattle Magazine. I actually wrote a few pieces for Seattle Magazine while I was in New York.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I see. I can't remember when it was founded.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, it was founded in '62, I think, or '63. Oh, I think, it was founded just before I left the Times. I'd say late '63 or early '64.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And how long were you in New York for the second stint?

TOM ROBBINS: I was there for a year. I was researching Jackson Pollock.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You went with the intention of doing that?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: For...?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, that gave me a project, you know. My Protestant ethic required a project. I really went there because I had taken LSD and it totally changed my life. And I didn't know anybody else in Seattle who'd had it.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You'd had it in connection with controlled experiments at the U?

TOM ROBBINS: No. It was in connection with the U, but it was not a controlled experiment and it was sort of extracurricular, under the table.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And nobody else that you knew was doing it under the table and so there was literally no one?

TOM ROBBINS: No, no one in Seattle at that time. There had been the controlled experiments going on at the University of Washington.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: That's what I thought, yeah.

TOM ROBBINS: And the man who gave it to me was involved in those. But it was such a literally mind-blowing experience for me, in that all I had been reading about mysticism, for example, and had understood, perhaps on an intellectual level, suddenly became real [slaps sofa--Ed.] and concrete. It was the single most rewarding day of my life.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Did you do it again?

TOM ROBBINS: No.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Why was it single? It's only necessary once?

TOM ROBBINS: I did it again later on, but not for quite a while. I spent probably a year just mining the nuggets of that first experience. And that's really why I went to New York. I didn't fit in too well at the Times anymore after that. I began to change. A psychedelic experience, which is truly-- can be-- an enlightening experience, provides one instantaneously with a new cultural background. Just as if suddenly, after having been a WASP all of your life, you became one day suddenly totally and thoroughly Jewish. It's almost that dramatic, and I felt that I was part of a different culture, but there were no other members of my ethnic group around. (chuckles) So I went to New York to look for them. But I had to have a purpose to satisfy something in me, and that purpose was I was going to write a book on, on Pollock and Soutine. I was going to compare them, and I still think there's a legitimate ground for comparison.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah.

TOM ROBBINS: To my knowledge it has never been done...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: No, not to mine either.

TOM ROBBINS: ...even in an essay. But I think Pollock got a lot from Soutine, which has been unacknowledged. And I think Soutine in a way was an ancestor of Pollock's-- on the [picture plane] at least. But I was going to compare their work and their lives. So I had a very great time, for a year in New York, not doing any work except researching this project. I got to know a lot of old European artists who had known Soutine, including-- oh, my

head is all stopped up from this cold, I can't think-- Jacob Epstein? The sculptor?

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah.

TOM ROBBINS: And a number of Rumanians, and old French guys who were not terribly well known, but who were nevertheless artists and contemporaries of Soutine's and had known Soutine. But what was more exciting was I got to know the Abstract Expressionists, particularly Barnett Newman and especially Tony Smith. I got to know Tony Smith quite well. And Tony Smith had been Pollock's closest friend. Pollock said once, "I don't really feel that many people in this world are alive." He said, "That's why I like you, Tony. You're alive." So I hung out with those people, and a friend of mine was on the staff at the Guggenheim museum and through him I got invitations to all the openings. I was at Jasper Johns's openings and Kenneth Noland's openings and all the Guggenheim museum openings. It was just a wonderful year in terms of really learning something about art firsthand. So when I came back to Seattle a year later I really was ready, I think, to do some serious writing about art.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: When you were there did you meet any art writers, as well as artists? Like did you get to know Clement Greenberg, or...?

TOM ROBBINS: No.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Let's see. Mike Fried wouldn't have been publishing by then, and Rosaliind Krauss was later.

TOM ROBBINS: I think Fried was publishing then, because I know I was reading him in the sixties.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Let's see. You were there in '64. He did that thing, Out of the Fog, on Washington school painters, I guess about '64.

TOM ROBBINS: Let's see, it was late in '65 when I got back. I'm sure I was reading Fried by then and Rosalind Krauss and Barbara Rose and all those people. And so I came back, and wrote a monthly column for Seattle Magazine. And then I wrote some for Artforum, and Art in America, and Art International, and actually did a few pieces of pretty good, serious criticism. I got involved a lot in the Seattle art world and knew enough by then to have some valuable opinions, which I shared with those artists who respected them and... In fact, became so immersed in the Seattle art world that when I tried to break away to begin my first novel, what I'd wanted to do most in my life, I had a very difficult time extricating myself from that milieu.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Um hmm.

TOM ROBBINS: Finally had to move out of town to accomplish that.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I wondered whether that was related. I was going to ask, during these years of off and on writing criticism, did you have the feeling that you were satisfying your ambition to become a writer, or that this was in a sense a holding pattern or a digression because you wanted to write novels or something else.

TOM ROBBINS: I always hoped it was just a holding pattern. In fact, being around painters made me all the more sensitive to the the fact that I wasn't doing my creative work. And it was good. It was a grain of sand in my oyster. It started irritating me and making me want to do something more creative.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Did you live in Seattle until you began work on your first novel, and then move up here?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, I lived in Seattle for a year after I started the first novel, but wasn't making any progress. People would call me with all these interesting projects. Like the Kirkland Arts Committee called and said, "We want somebody to stage a happening at the Kirkland Arts Festival. Who can you recommend?" And I would think, "Well, gee, you know, nobody could do that any better than I could."

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Right. (laughs)

TOM ROBBINS: And I says, "Oh, I'll do it." You know, there goes another three weeks.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: So you moved up here about 1969?

TOM ROBBINS: No, it was earlier than that. Actually I moved first to... I couldn't find a place up here. By that time I'd gotten to know LaConner pretty well and spent a lot of [book] weekends and vacations here, but I couldn't find a place to live here. So I moved to South Bend, Washington, which is down in Grays Harbor, and which physically is very much like LaConner.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: But intellectually is not the same, huh?

TOM ROBBINS: The human climate is almost diametrically opposite. It was full of wife-beaters and loggers who got drunk and fought a lot. But it certainly provided the solitude.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: So you lived there a while.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, I lived there for two years. Cold turkey.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Wow. And then a place here opened up and you moved up here?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, I lived there until I finished my first novel, Another Roadside Attraction. Once that book was done I came up here again, this time determined to find a place, and I found this house. That was in 1970; I moved into this house April Fool's Day, 1970.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh, wonderful. So about '68 you moved out of Seattle and never went back then.

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm.

[Break in taping?]

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Go ahead.

TOM ROBBINS: Once I began to write novels and was fortunate enough to have them be sucessful, I quit writing art criticism. Well, even before they became successful I quit, but I did do several catalogs. I did some catalogs for the Seattle Art Museum and for some gallery shows in other places. But then pretty much that petered out, and...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And would you just as soon it stays that way?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, I would. I don't have a very high opinion, actually, of the world of criticism--or the practice of criticism. I think I admire art criticism, criticism of painting and sculpture, far more than I do that of say films and books, literary or film criticism. But I don't much like the practice. I think there are an awful lot of bad people in it.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I'm tempted to ask you how you like the current criticism scene in Seattle. Seems like an inevitable question. But maybe it doesn't ___ter.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, I don't [pay] much attention to it, really.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: That's legit.

TOM ROBBINS: Maybe we can talk about that later, when we talk about the Seattle scene as it was when I arrived and as it is now.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Okay, that'd be great. We'll hold that then. Shall I turn it off?

TOM ROBBINS: Sure.

[Tape 2; side B]

MARTHA KINGSBURY: When you were recounting your own history, you said you first came out to Seattle partly because you'd encountered works of Morris Graves and Mark Tobey, and they interested you in the notion of mysticism-- was interesting you. Could you go back and explain more what you meant by mysticism or what you thought they meant by it? And also I'd be interested to know: when you got here, what did you find out about either them or their works that fit into that.

TOM ROBBINS: (chuckles)

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Or didn't.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, boy, we heard some pretty wild stories. The rumor around art school in Richmond was that Morris Graves lived in a hollow tree. And I met him not long after I arrived here and found out that Morris absolutely adores luxury. He lives in the most luxurious circumstances that he can and of course still maintain some connection to nature. But the idea of him being an ascetic who lived in a hollow tree turned out to be pretty much of a joke.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Was there really a widespread interest, at least on the part of some people, in these people back there?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, no, not really. They were much more oriented toward New York and particularly toward the Hans Hofmann school of Abstract Expressionism.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Were these rumors just, you know, kind of lightly and amusingly told stories about the crazy people in the Northwest?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, they were believed. And there was a certain amount of respect, but it wasn't the kind of painting that interested anybody that I knew. I wasn't even particularly interested in that kind of painting myself, but I was interested in the idea of an American mysticism.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And what did you understand by that? What did you mean?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, I didn't know. My concept-- and I still sort of carry around the idea, the notion of an American tantra. I'm attracted to so many of the Oriental ideas, but I don't think that they are for Westerners. Then I did; but I had a suspicion even then that Zen was not the proper area of study, or the proper orientation toward life, for someone from a Western heritage, that it would always be artificial and, as Robert Bly was later to point out, degrounding, that you cannot ground yourself in somebody else's culture.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Did your awareness of these issues and your understanding of them really stem from your experience in the Orient, or did it predate that? Did it come out of questions of religion in your earlier life?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, I'm sure it came out of reaction to a Southern Baptist upbringing. When I began to read and explore a little life of my own, I began to see this huge discrepancy between what I was taught as a child and what I began to find out was really true. And then I began to just rebel passionately. And the Taoistic ideas-- which still mean a lot to me-- and Zen and Tantric Hinduism all seem to be areas of philosophy, ways of relating to life that have a lot of depth and resonance for me. But even at that time, I thought, "This really isn't one hundred percent satisfying..."

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Um hmm, or assimilatable [sic] even.

TOM ROBBINS: And I don't see how it can be, to a Westerner. You know, we've got to connect with our own heritage, but still keep something that is in that kind of profound relationship to nature, for example, and is that irreverent. The thing that appealed to me about Zen was this irreverence. In Zen they ask, "What do you do when you meet your master coming through the woods?" And the answer is, "You hit him over the head with a stick," which is a far cry from kissing the Pope's ring! So, when I heard that there was a school of mystic painters in the Northwest, I thought, "Here's something happening in America that perhaps embodies the best of the Oriental ideas, but which is more distinctly American." So I really wanted to investigate that.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: When you were an art student and you had a lot of teachers and fellow students who were, as you say, impressed with Hofmann, and knew about Abstract Expressionism and so forth, were those things perceived by you and your friends as essentially secular forms of culture? I mean, maybe European-derived and predominantly secular and therefore not addressing philosophic needs the way a mystical art might?

TOM ROBBINS: I guess...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Was there some big distinction there or not?

TOM ROBBINS: I don't think it was a very big distinction. If it was it didn't last too long, because I became convinced fairly early on that-- and Matthew Kangas would not agree with this-- that there was a great interest in Oriental philosophy among the Abstract Expressionists in New York. I mean, I know this to be a fact because they have told me so. Tony Smith has described to me Pollock's interest in Oriental philosophy. In fact, the book that he was reading at the time of his death was a book on Zen. So I think there was a far greater similarity between the thought processes that motivated the Northwest School and those that motivated the Abstract Expressionists than people like Matthew would be willing to concede. I think they were pretty much tapped into the same energy fields: new developments in science and new developments in literature or in music. Maybe it was a little more provincial out here, but the artists were aware of those things and it was that same current of Freud and Jung which was just beginning to filter into the public consciousness. All of that was influencing everyone, and the artists were reacting to that in a metaphysical way. So I think that the New York School was just as metaphysical in its own way as the Northwest School. It wasn't as overt and it certainly wasn't as Oriental, in that they were facing Europe and drawing images and color and everything from Europe, whereas here Graves and Tobey, in particular, were taking it from the other side of the world. So that there was a very definite stylistic difference, particularly in color. But a lot of the energy was the same. And I don't know if I realized that at the time. Certainly there were indications of it.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: When you came out here for the first time, did you begin immediately to become

acquainted with the artists and their work?

TOM ROBBINS: Oh yeah.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And did you find them rewarding and what you had hoped for?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, I was very excited. Betty Bowen, who at that time was the publicity director for the Seattle Art Museum, took me under her wing and took me around and introduced me to as many people as she could, because I was very anxious to meet all artists. So I very early on got inside most of the studios and met a great many people. Some of them I became good friends with, and some of them didn't hit it off too well with, and some are still my friends.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Was the art scene, if I can use that term, that you dealt within essentially a Seattle art scene?

TOM ROBBINS: Oh yes.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And can you describe in more detail where it was located, whether it was the Blue Moon [tavern near the University of Washington--Ed.], or people's studios or...

TOM ROBBINS: It didn't have much to do with the Blue Moon, unfortunately-- or fortunately, as the case may be. (chuckles) I had hoped that the Blue Moon would be another kind of Cedar Bar, but it wasn't. There are only two artists who even hung out in the Blue Moon: Richard Gilkey and a sculptor, whose name escapes me at the moment.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I had the impression when I came to town that people were very eager for there to be a Cedar Bar type of place and they were always telling me that that's where the artists hung out. But they could never tell me who they were.

TOM ROBBINS: No. Not the Blue Moon. I spent a lot of time in the Blue Moon. I know the Blue Moon scene inside and out. There were some poets and some novelists and a lot of graduate students, but no, it certainly was not an artist hangout. Lubin Petric hung out in there.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I see.

TOM ROBBINS: Gilkey was a legendary fistfighter, in the Moon.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh yeah?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah. He was the Billy the Kid of the Blue Moon, boy. Anybody who wanted to fight he would challenge-- I mean, they'd challenge him. He didn't go looking for fights, but he sort of had the reputation as the gunslinger, so people would challenge him.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: If they needed a challenge then there's where they could test themselves?

TOM ROBBINS: And he would generally try to avoid it, I must admit. But if they pushed it too far, he laid 'em low. (chuckles) He was incredible. But there was no art scene; there was no real, no arguments raising, raging about art.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Nothing like the New York scene.

TOM ROBBINS: Nothing, nothing in that verbal level of the Cedar Bar. In fact, almost none of the really good artists in town were ever there. You'd see Bill Cumming in there once in a while.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Were there places they met?

TOM ROBBINS: No! There wasn't. That was the whole thing. And that disappointed me that there...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: So they saw each other in their own homes and studios and...

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm, and there was very political, and very compartmentalized.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Political in terms of art world divisions?

TOM ROBBINS: There was the university artists and there were the downtown artists, and then there was the old school artists, and then a little later there was the young Turks, I guess you would call them.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: What do you mean by the "old school"?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, Graves and Tobey, and even Gilkey was part of the old school, and so was Bill Cumming and everyone who had been associated with what is now called the Northwest School.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And who was left at that time of the downtown artists? Those people like [Jacob--Ed.] Elshin, or _____ that old by then?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, Elshin was-- I don't know where Elshin fit in. The king of the downtown artists was Bill Ivey.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And who else was there?

TOM ROBBINS: Oh, I'm trying to think now. Haven't thought about this in years.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Was he as reticent then as he is in recent years?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm. Probably more so. See, there's a guy, Neil Meitzler; he was associated with the old school.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah, all we can think of are names associated with the old school.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, I can think of the university people, but of course the downtown people there was Patti Wagoner. There was a guy named Jim Johnson. Bill Allen. Bill Allen went to San Francisco and made it pretty big. He was an influence upon William Wiley. There was the guy who does the frogs. [David--Ed.] Gilhooly?

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh. I didn't realize he was...

TOM ROBBINS: There was Willard Parker. Some of these names are starting to come back.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Were there one or more galleries that these people tended to show at?

TOM ROBBINS: No.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: There were so few galleries.

TOM ROBBINS: Ivey showed at Woodside. Most of the downtown artists didn't show anywhere.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I see. Would they show up in Northwest Annuals occasionally?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm. Occasionally. Their work really wasn't seen very much, certainly the younger ones, until Don Scott opened his gallery on Eastlake, the Scott Galleries. And Gene-- what's his name, the architect? Gene Zema. It was his building, but Don Scott had the gallery in it. Gene backed it. That was a very exciting gallery and for the first time these people had a place to show.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: It was where? Down on Eastlake.

TOM ROBBINS: It was on Eastlake. And it was a very strong gallery; it was committed to strength and originality and really shook things up. But prior to the Scott's, the so-called downtown artists weren't seen very much. Except just the better known of them. But the whole scene was very political in that the Seattle Art Museum controlled most of it, and any time there was an exhibition-- say if there was a juried show-- there would be a juror from the university, and there'd be one from the old school, and there'd be one from downtown. And any time there was a traveling show that was organized here, and was meant to give people elsewhere a notion of what was going on in Seattle or in the Northwest, that show would [have an--Ed.] equal number of artists from the university, the old school and downtown. It was like Dr.Fuller, for political reasons, wanted to cover all of those bases. That's really sort of how everything went. It was quite rigid. And that offended my sense of justice right off the bat.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Because you thought some groups were much better than other groups?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, I believed in looking at people as individuals, not in groups. I hated groups; still do. And I saw particularly the university, the university artists really acted as a group. The others didn't so much, but the university people took advantage of that and behaved like a group, rather than as individuals. They had a lot of power that way. They had the power of an organized group and were able to have more say-- and more sway-- over the Seattle art scene than I thought was warranted.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Did the Henry Gallery, and the fact that it was on campus and showed their work occasionally, play any role in that?

TOM ROBBINS: Not a whole lot, because if I'm not mistaken, the policy of the Henry Gallery was not to have one-

man shows by members of the faculty. I think that policy still exists.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: It certainly does now.

TOM ROBBINS: And it did then as well. But there was definitely a power structure and the university artists took the most advantage of it. And the less talented of the university artists-- and there some who were very good-- but there were some who had become extremely academic and who were obviously just drawing their paycheck and were not in my estimation real artists, whatever that is. At least they weren't very serious. They had taken on too big a load of bananas, had their mortgages and their comforts and were not interested in rocking any boats. They were the ones who took the most advantage of their position of political power. In other words to get into shows. I'm not being very articulate about this, but I saw a lot of people getting into shows, and getting into traveling exhibitions and things who I didn't think were qualified.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I see.

TOM ROBBINS: And too many decisions were being made for politcal reasons rather than aesthetic reasons. I guess that's what it all boiled down to.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Let's see. If you came to town in '62 or so, then you came at the time of the World's Fair, is that right?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm, yeah.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And if I remember, at the World's Fair there was an exhibition of world art, and an exhibition of-- it was either Northwest art or American; I can't remember which.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, there were both.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Maybe all three.

TOM ROBBINS: There was a Northwest Indian, and I don't think there was any contemporary Northwest art.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: There was a contemporary American.

TOM ROBBINS: There was a contemporary American show which just blew everybody's socks off. Nowadays, we look back on that as a cultural watershed-- at least that was the way Matthew Kangas viewed it in this show that he did for Bumbershoot [Seattle September festival--Ed.] last summer. And I think he's absolutely right about that; it was a watershed, but it was roundly and soundly criticized. I mean people were enraged over that show.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Now are we talking about the part of the show that brought in works from Europe? These very recent things?

TOM ROBBINS: They were recent things. They weren't from Europe. They were from New York almost exclusively. Some from L.A.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Are we talking about the part that Jan Van der Marck organized?

TOM ROBBINS: Yes. There was a European show and that was older stuff. More tame stuff. That was more old masters and they were Impressionistic and German Expressionists. It was a fairly tame show. But the new stuff: there was Warhol and Rauschenberg and Johns and Ad Reinhardt and all those people.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: That's what I'm remembering. And did it...?

TOM ROBBINS: It had a tremendous impact, but there was also a lot of reaction against it. And I was reading with some interest the newspaper coverage of Matthew Kangas's show, the Art Since the World's Fair show, and the newspapers all kind of acted as if that had been a wonderful thing. And it was, but at that time the newspapers...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Didn't think it was wonderful? (chuckles)

TOM ROBBINS: Oh! You can't believe their reaction. It was like Teddy Roosevelt when he went to the Armory Show in 1913 and described Marcel Duchamps's Nude Descending a Staircase as an explosion in a shingle factory. Well, there were statements like that in the press almost every day, only usually not that witty.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: As someone watching the art scene carefully, did you have any sense that this material at the fair either loosened up the way artists worked here, and led to entrenchment of certain parties and _____.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, it certainly loosened the really young artists, the ones who were students at the university.

I don't know if it loosened up anybody on the faculty.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: The first group would be like Bob Maki's generation...?

TOM ROBBINS: No, a little earlier than that. There was a group of guys and I wrote about them a lot, and then they all sort of went their separate ways. Couple of them ended up teaching at Syracuse, I know. Larry, um, can't remember their names now, but they were the first pop artists in Seattle. They just started doing wild things and pretty derivative, very derivative, but at least they were loose. They were the ones I call the Young Turks.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I see now; I was going to go back and ask you who you meant.

TOM ROBBINS: That was that fourth group of people. And that pretty much came out of the university, but the students in that group were not influenced by the university faculty. In fact, they were mostly in reaction, and in rebellion, against the university faculty. And [a] very seminal event happened, I think it was the following year. No, it was even later than that. It was about '65. I attribute Bob Maki and Larry Beck and those people more to this than to the World's Fair show. A man named Gabriel Kahn and another man named Hans Haake came to teach for a quarter each.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh, I didn't know that. Kahn?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I don't know him.

TOM ROBBINS: He was quite well known. He worked in laminated wood, and had done New York shows and was probably in his late fifties, close to sixty by then.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And they taught at the U for a quarter?

TOM ROBBINS: I think each one taught there for a quarter, and they really turned things around. Up until that point, the sculpture department in particular had been just bad news. There were some good painters around. I don't think Spafford was there yet, but there were a few good painters. Alden Mason was there.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Right.

TOM ROBBINS: But the sculpture department was just really conservative and dull, dull, dull. And then Haake came and then Gabriel Kahn, and then I mean boy did they blow things apart. Gabriel Kahn's first class meeting, showed up late. I don't know what the rule is, how long students have to wait for a professor to show up, but there's something like five or ten minutes and then if they aren't there by then you're free to leave; it doesn't get counted against your attendance record. Well, that time had come and gone and...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Attendance is optional anyway, but there was this kind of understanding that the professor needn't expect anybody.

TOM ROBBINS: I'm not sure it was optional then.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Well, maybe not.

TOM ROBBINS: Things are much more liberal, you know, than they were 20years ago.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: (chuckles) Okay.

TOM ROBBINS: But people were getting up and getting ready to leave, at any rate, and Gabriel Kahn walked in. He had his overcoat that reached down to the floor and it looked like he had slept in it for weeks and he hadn't shaved, his hair was tousled. He looked like he had been drunk all night, which he probably had, since he stayed drunk most of the time he was in Seattle. But he walked in and his piercing bloodshot eyes just fixed everyone in their places. And he stared at them until everyone set [sic] down, and someone started to say something like, "Well, Mr. Kahn, you're late and I think we're entitled to go now." And I think that person got about two-thirds of the way through that sentence and (chuckles), just the electricity coming out of him zapped 'em like a fly. He looked around the room for about ten minutes, until he stared down everyone in the room. And then he said, "What I want is a pitch next to madness." And he turned on his heel and walked out of the room and left, didn't come back that day.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: (laughs) Yes...

TOM ROBBINS: Well, from then on, things began to pop in the sculpture department. And Bob Maki's early wood pieces and Larry Beck's early pieces which were in wood, and Ted Johnson's early pieces which were in wood, all

came out of that class of Gabriel Kahn's.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Do you think that had a kind of overflow effect to young painters, also?

TOM ROBBINS: Probably did. Hans Haake?

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah.

TOM ROBBINS: Now he was more of a conceptual artist, but he influenced a lot of people too. And I'm sure he had an overflow into all the departments. Just his approach more than anything else. I don't know if anyone...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: By the time he came to visit that quarter was he already doing conceptual pieces?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm, yeah. He was using unusual materials and... Conceptual is really not the word I want.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Was he doing site pieces, installations?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, installations is what I'm trying to say.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: That was early _____.

TOM ROBBINS: And working in water.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh, he was, then?

TOM ROBBINS: He was doing a lot of things in plastic, you know, water enclosed in plastic. The artist who was most directly influenced by him, whom I can still remember, is John Geise.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh!

TOM ROBBINS: He was really turned around by Haake. Because he was doing very very conservative bronzes, figurative bronzes at that time.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Of Dupin, in a sense?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm. And Haake turned him around just overnight. He began working in plastic boxes. So those two men were very influential. And that generation, Maki's generation, I think were more influenced by these people coming in from New York, than they were by that earlier show. That show certainly left its mark. And then a year after it, maybe two years after that show-- can't get my time frame narrowed down-- but there was a mysterious exhibition, a mystery exhibition at Henry Gallery of pop art. All the tags said, "From a private collection." Well, it was Bagley and Jinny Wright's collection, but they didn't have the nerve at that time (chuckles) to have their name attached to it, because they were afraid of ridicule. And they would have been ridiculed.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I didn't know that.

TOM ROBBINS: So for social reasons, they put their pop art show on exhibition incognito.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: That must have done for a lot of painters and other artists what the visiting sculptors had done _____.

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm. That kind of came along, probably was seen by more of the young artists, even than the World's Fair show.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Why? Because there was more art, more interest? Different environment?

TOM ROBBINS: That was it; it was the environment more than anything else. That World's Fair show was in such a large context, that was pretty much lost except for...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: The tourists caught on their way through, to look at anything else.

TOM ROBBINS: And if you wanted to see it, you had to go and stand in line behind a lot of people making unintelligent comments.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Now, that gives a sense of there being this university group, including the older faculty, and their having a lot of students who maybe got nothing more than permission from them in some cases, and were actually influenced by outsiders. Parallel to that in the sixties, when you came, what was happening with regard to the old school and any legacy that they had? Some people, when I came here in the late sixties, were

convinced that they were the greatest thing in the world and that their legacy was immense. And that all the young artists who counted were their disciples, as it were. But what was your sense of of that in the sixties and seventies?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, by '64-'65, there was quite a bit of reaction against the Northwest School. I suppose that young people have to go through that. It seems that that cycle, once we know that that cycle exists, that it shouldn't be necessary any longer.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: [It doesn't work quite that way?] [said simultaneously with TOM ROBBINS's next phrase--Ed.]

TOM ROBBINS: You know, why do we all have to kill our fathers?

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah.

TOM ROBBINS: Which is what it is. I mean, they kill Tobey, they had to kill Graves. They're still murdering Guy Anderson, in order to give themselves validity, in their own identity, validity. I think it's unnecessary, but it happens; it's universal. So by '65, a lot of that had set in.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: But do you think there were also people who were genuinely drawing on their precedent to do good work or _____ work?

TOM ROBBINS: Not for really young artists at that time. A few years later, a few came along.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Who do you think they were?

TOM ROBBINS: Charlie Krafft. And Joe Goldberg, few people like that. But there was a time when if you were young and strong and adventurous it was almost required that you make fun of Tobey and Graves.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Neither of whom was on the scene any longer in actual physical fact.

TOM ROBBINS: Or Anderson or any of them. I mean, it was a rejection that I guess was necessary for their growth.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: What importance, if any, do you attach to the continuing presence of Kenneth Callahan's works on the scene? He keeps working.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, I was never a big fan of Callahan's. I always thought Callahan was overrated. There seemed to be a awful lot of undigested elements in his work, and, you know, I couldn't stand the color.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Particularly as he got more colorful.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah. So Callahan never meant much to me. I wrote one column defending him against the politicians in Olympia, because I'll defend any artist-- In any battle between an artist and a politician, I'll take the artist's side every time. And he had done some murals for some government building in Olympia which were suffering the same fate as Spafford's did recently.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: But you don't think that his presence has meant much to any younger artists?

TOM ROBBINS: Generally no. I mean, I can't speak for every artist in the Northwest. There might be some young artist somewhere who was knocked out by Callahan. But I've never seen any record of any influence he's had on anybody.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Can I shift the focus of what we're looking at from Seattle up here to the Skagit Valley, and ask you how that fits in? Or is different from any of the things we've been talking about? I mean, the Skagit Valley is where you eventually moved to and where, as you said earlier, you find some real intellectual community that you don't ordinarily in a fishing [town--Ed.]. And I remember that in some of the passages in your novels, you made in passing-- I think in Another Roadside Attraction there was a very derogatory account of Seattle in comparison to here, but you didn't elaborate and I wasn't sure what you meant by it.

TOM ROBBINS: Well...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Who's up here and when did you make contact with them and what's the significance of that?

TOM ROBBINS: Another Roadside Attraction was meant to invoke-- or evoke rather-- the psychedelic sixties. Instead of writing about the sixties I wanted to actually evoke the sixties. And I think that's why the book was so

successful. A lot of people wrote about the sixties, but I actually tried to create the sixties on the page instead of describing it. To have even the structure and the form based on, say, a psychedelic model. And one of the ideas, one of the feelings, that was prevalent in the sixties was a rejection of urban life and in, oh, sentimental and romantic and even dangerous embracing of rural life. So that comparison of Seattle and, say, the Skagit Valley in which Seattle was unfavorably compared was a part of that evocation.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh.

TOM ROBBINS: And not necessarily the feelings in my heart of hearts. I love Seattle, and I've always loved cities, as much as the country.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Here you are living in the country the last ten years though.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, although I have to go to the city frequently or go crazy.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh, really.

TOM ROBBINS: I would hate to think I had to live and never get into the city again. Plus, my work takes me to Los Angeles and New York...

[Tape 2; side A]

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You were saying your work takes [you], where, to Los Angeles and New York both?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, I get to Los Angeles quite a bit. You know, like eight or ten times a year.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And you have for a number of years?

TOM ROBBINS: Past four or five years.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I see.

TOM ROBBINS: And I get to New York about once a year, so I'm able to get in just to charge my batteries with some of that energy.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Does it make a big difference to you that you're now living in a small town that has a lot of artists in it, as opposed to a small town that doesn't?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, that made a difference to me in the beginning. Now I don't think that it does have a lot of artists in it. When I first started coming to LaConner in summer of '62, there were a number of serious artists who lived here.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Like who?

TOM ROBBINS: _____.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Down in Conway too, I suppose.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, by the early seventies there were a lot of artists over on Fir Island and around Conway. But most of them have gone now, too.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Have they left the area or gone back to the city?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, they've gone back to the city.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: By left the area, I mean left the Northwest.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, some have gone to California. Larry Heald has returned to California. But in '62 there, I think there were more serious painters. And, of course, earlier than that, too, back in the thirties and the forties...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Now talking about the Guy Anderson generation?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And people like Ruth Penington who came up in summers and...

TOM ROBBINS: Oh, and Tobey had spent some time here and Callahan spent time here. Morris Graves, of

course, was the first artist in LaConner, and he really broke the ice for everybody else.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Is it true that his old house is just abandoned, and all locked up now?

TOM ROBBINS: That's what I hear.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Do you have a sense that during any of these periods in LaConner, particularly during periods when you've known LaConner, there has been some real community among the artists that was sustaining or valuable to them?

TOM ROBBINS: Not really. Not, again, in that Cedar Bar sense. There was no place...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Or in a Fir Island sense, or...

TOM ROBBINS: No. [drawn out; appears to be hesitating--Ed.]

MARTHA KINGSBURY: ...any other kind of sense?

TOM ROBBINS: People will get together socially occasionally, and they used to in the early seventies. They would show up to play volleyball together, or they might show up at a salmon barbecue. But as far as an actual group of-- there'd be a lot of other people besides artists at these functions.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh.

TOM ROBBINS: There might be, say, 60people at a salmon barbecue and maybe eight of them were artists. So it's not quite the same thing as you would find in East Hampton, where you would have a party and 90percent of the people are artists, and the other people are connected somehow to the art world. There was never anything like that here, at least in the 13years that I've been here. There was no particular place where the artists would gather and talk about art, for example. There was not any kind of interchange like that. They were friendly to one another, but it was not an art colony.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: It was not an art colony in the _____ sense.

TOM ROBBINS: I don't think it's ever been an art colony here.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Did there even develop a social intercourse among them that they regularly saw each other's work and followed each other's progress and found that sustaining?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, among the third wave there was. Larry Beck, Gertrude Pacific, Larry Heald, Paul Havis. That whole group saw each other socially and saw each other's work. But that group very seldom, say, spent any time with Guy Anderson, or with Richard Gilkey. And that may be one of the things that attracts artists here-- those who stay-- is the privacy. Maybe they...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: But somehow they'd rather have their privacy here where there are a few other artists around than to have it in a totally isolated place.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, see, but it didn't happen that way. That's after the fact. Artists came here for a particular reason: It was charming.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh.

TOM ROBBINS: It was cheap.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: It was accessible.

TOM ROBBINS: It was hospitable. It was accessible to Seattle and Vancouver.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: That's true, both, isn't it.

TOM ROBBINS: It had this energy, this river delta sort of energy. You know, most major civilizations have sprung up in river deltas. So there was a good energy here, and it was just happening in other places. It happens in Provincetown and it happened in Sausalito and Mendocino and even in Greenwich Village. A place first of all has to be inexpensive. And then it has to have some kind of charm. And one artist will move into that area, an artist will discover it and he will invite his friends and maybe one or two of them will move in, and then it attracts others. But they aren't necessarily attracted because they're attracted to the other artists. They're attracted for the same reasons that attracted that first artist.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Right.

Do you think it's the case that there never has been in Seattle any group that engaged in artists' discourse, you might say, in a way that was significant to their work or their development. You think that's something that has happened occasionally in Paris and has happened a few times in New York, but hasn't happened to happen here.

TOM ROBBINS: No, it doesn't [seem] to have happened anywhere on the West Coast, really. I think that's a European tradition.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Including San Francisco and the San Francisco School of Fine Arts?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, I don't think there's very much of it there either, from what I can learn.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Um hmm.

TOM ROBBINS: Oh, people in L.A., I know Billy Al Bengston and Ed Ruscha and some of those people have been friends for years, and I guess they have a small scene going, particularly those artists who used to live in Dennis. But I don't think there's ever been anything on the West Coast quite like that. It's more of a European phenomenon, and those who were closer to Europe seem to have it more in their sensibilities than the Western artist, the West Coast artist.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: But your sense was that it really did happen in New York, because you were on the edge of that?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah.

[Break in taping]

TOM ROBBINS: So when I, when I began to write art reviews in Seattle, it was my intention to demolish the political structure.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh! Back to what we were talking about before.

TOM ROBBINS: I wanted to get people used to looking at individual artists, to look at an artist on his or her individual merit, without any regard to whether they were at the university or whether they were downtown or whether they were part of Guy Anderson's entourage or whatever. Just to look at each one on their individual merits. And in order to create that kind of atmosphere, I sort of went in with a broad sword, in the beginning, and tried to clear away a lot of dead wood. And I probably chopped some (chuckles) live wood as well. I'm sure I was quite indiscreet and probably quite often wrong in my judgments, but I was a knight with a mission, you know. And I think as time went by, it did bear some fruit, although I made a lot of mistakes along the way. But that's how I set out to kind of clear the dead wood and separate the serious artist from the Sunday painters. That was, I guess, even more of my mission. Because there wasn't any general acceptability of standards, not even in the museum. You'd have a show by a really first-rate artist one month, then the next month a show by an amateur, you know, a Boeing engineer who painted on Sundays. There just wasn't any high set of standards of quality operating in the community-- which is not to say that there weren't plenty of individuals who had those standards and probably with more expertise and justification than my own. But there was a lot of confusion, I thought. Particularly among the gallery-goers, among the museum-goers, about what is good art and what isn't, or what is serious art and what isn't. Nobody was making the distinctions.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh, I was just going to ask. From what you said earlier, was it a question of their even being confused or their just not even thinking in those terms?

TOM ROBBINS: No, they looked at everything as if it were of equal quality. They might say, "Well, I can't stand this; this is awful." But they wouldn't say that-- I mean, it was a matter of...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: They were more apt to mean that it was an awful type of thing that they couldn't stand.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Not that this person's work was not good.

TOM ROBBINS: A lot of education seemed to be called for.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Had there been any serious art criticism in Seattle before? I don't think there had, had there?

TOM ROBBINS: There really hadn't. I know Bill Cumming talks lovingly about Margaret Callahan's reviews in the old Town Crier. But from what I can gather-- and I think I did read a few of those; I looked them up in the library once-- it was...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: It was just presenting the material.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, and it was more like the notes of a fan, the notes of an admirer, than anyone actually trying to fulfill the role of a critic.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah. Right. I have looked those up too.

TOM ROBBINS: And the other people, well, like Anne Todd-- she was too nice to be a critic. She probably knew a lot, but didn't have the courage to say what she really meant. She minced her words a lot. And she was a soft-hearted woman. Some artist would come to her and say, you know, "The support of my family depends upon the success of this show, you know. I have children to feed." And she'd just...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yes, and she would be moved.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, sure! It's really unfair of artists to do that, but they do it still in many different ways.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Do you feel you succeeded at some of what you set out to do?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, I think I did. Like I said, I made a lot of mistakes. I wish that I had been ten years older, with ten years' more experience under my belt. I wish that I had known in 1963 what I knew in 1973. Then I think I could have really done it-- well!

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Done it better, done it more quickly, or...?

TOM ROBBINS: I could have done it better, a lot better. Because my own judgment would have been much sharper. I mean, I was really young. I was young chronologically and I was also young emotionally. And young in terms of experience. So, even though I was a good writer and a pretty perceptive person, I made a lot of mistakes that an older, more experienced person would not have made. On the other hand, I had the fearlessness of youth, too. I just chopped things up right and left (chuckles) with a big samurai sword. And maybe if I had been older...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Because the first thing you did was accustom people to lively reading, or give them the idea that this was something one might look for, I think. And then a second stage...

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, that not only was art exciting, but that reading about art could be exciting, I think.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah. But when I came to Seattle in '68-9, you were just leaving your critical writing to write your novels, and I became very quickly aware how much the art community was missing that. They were almost in a state of desperation, it sometimes seemed. That someone must carry on this role that Tom Robbins had begun, and we must find someone somewhere, import someone, whatever's necessary, to keep this kind of thing going, because it's so crucial to the character of the artistic community. The people I'm talking about were people who were in their mid-thirties, or early thirties.

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And the young Turks that you were referring to earlier.

TOM ROBBINS: The newspapers, unfortunately, never seemed to care. They didn't really care whether I did a good job or not. And when I left... I might have established a beachhead within the art community itself, but as far as with the newspapers I (chuckles) might just as well never have done a thing.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: That was also the feeling among the art community.

TOM ROBBINS: When I left I gave them the names of some young critics who were writing for Artforum, real young people who did small articles. They weren't on the staff of Artforum, and many of them were probably little more than graduate students, or they were artists themselves, but they were people who were interested in critical writing and doing a pretty good job and I knew didn't have any money. And I said, "Why don't you bring one of these people to Seattle and make them a film critic as well as a critic of painting and sculpture, because the gap isn't that wide. Pay them a decent salary to turn in a couple columns a week, but don't make them come in and work every day on the newspaper, and you'll get some high-quality criticism and it will benefit everyone.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I didn't know that. They had no interest though?

TOM ROBBINS: No. They didn't check it out, didn't even look any of those people up.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Well, I never knew that. That's a shame.

TOM ROBBINS: Because I'm sure they could have gotten some of those people.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: There were people dying for that _____.

TOM ROBBINS: These people were broke.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Sure.

TOM ROBBINS: They could have come in and made themselves a living and had plenty of free time, and in a community which is quite livable and... But they didn't care.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Nevertheless, it is the case in spite of the lack of any continuity with the newspapers and so forth, that since you began writing, the number of galleries and the number of artists showing seriously has vastly expanded. And there has been, now more recently, other fairly serious writers appearing._____ and Matthew Kangas...

TOM ROBBINS: I think that there did begin to be a sense of, a notion of serious art, that all art wasn't serious and all art was not the same. Those distinctions began to be made.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And they continue to be made now, I think.

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And the distinctions regularly now are made between the galleries that are in the first categories in these respects and artists that are...

TOM ROBBINS: I tried actually [to] get done in the gallery listings in the newspaper, to...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: To split them up.

TOM ROBBINS: To somehow list the serious galleries in a different space than the driftwood galleries, but they wouldn't go for that either, and they still don't.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: No. I suppose it has to do with the advertising budget, or some notions related to that; I don't know.

TOM ROBBINS: So, I look back at those years and I don't have any regrets. I don't have any regrets about much of anything I've done in my life-- even the terrible things. (chuckles) But, you know, I was really glad to be able to give it up and move on to something maybe a bit more honorable.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: But, even though you've given it up technically, can I ask you a few more questions?

TOM ROBBINS: See, I think that one after a while begins to resent art, when one has to write about it all the time.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: It was ruining art for you?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah! And now I'm much more relaxed about it. I go into a gallery or museum, and I realize that I don't have to formulate any opinions if I don't want to. I don't have to think this thing through and write about it at any great length. I can think about it if I want to; if not, I can just walk out. So I can enjoy painting really a lot more than I could when I had that sort of pressure.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Sure, sure.

TOM ROBBINS: So I like to think of myself as a writer, a novelist, a fiction writer. I'm a fiction writer who liked painting a lot. I had a love for art and I still do. And during that period [when] I wrote about it, I guess you say I was a critic but I don't really like that term.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You wrote some other kinds of things, like the piece on Guy Anderson. As we were saying earlier off the tape, you could have been an art historian in a sense also.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah. I like to think of myself as a fiction writer who liked art enough to write about it for a while, and then went on to his fiction. I think there are others, people like Donal Barthelme, Robert Coover, and John Ashbery, other novelists and short story writers and poets who also happen to like art a lot and write about it from time to time. And I'd rather be identified with that group than with a group of real critics, like Rosenberg and Fried and...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Greenberg and that sort of thing.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: During the time you were writing about art here, or even since, who do you think were some of the Seattle artists then that deserved the most attention or that you would have wished to give the most attention to.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, I still think that Guy Anderson is one of the strongest painters in America. And I wish I could convince Matthew Kangas of that, although I'm a little suspect of some of Matthew's reasons for his judgments.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: In what sense? You think he has hidden agendas?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, yeah, I think Matthew knows a lot and he's very entertaining, and I like him. But I think, at least in the beginning, he was more interested in calling attention to himself than in telling the truth about any particular artist. And maybe this is still true; I don't know. I don't pay that much attention to it. But...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I think he's mellowed a bit. That's my impression, but...

TOM ROBBINS: I mean, if you want to make a name for yourself, the oldest trick in the book is to attack what everybody else reveres. I've been guilty of that myself, I'm sure. So I think there was a lot of that in Matthew's diatribes against Anderson and his people, and so it was a way of attracting attention to Matthew. And maybe in the long run that will be justified, because by attracting attention to himself he gets people to read him and then when he no longer feels it necessary to attract all that attention to himself, he will have the audience and then he can say, "Well, this is the way it really is." He can really be truthful and know that he has a large readership [for, or] people who are going to pay attention to what he says. So I don't want to be in the position of putting anybody down, but I think...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You _____

TOM ROBBINS: I still read a lot of art magazines, you know, not in the way I used to, but I sort of know what's going on. I go to the galleries, once a year in New York, and I don't have any axes to grind any more. But I look at paintings all over-- West Coast and East Coast-- and I see Anderson right up there in the upper echelon of American painters. I think he's completely original in the... There's no one quite like him anywhere. And his pictorial powers are pretty dynamic. He's done a lot of very moving pictures. And he seems, with age-- He's like Robert Motherwell; he seems to be getting even looser as he gets older.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah. Do you think there's anyone else here that is close to him in quality? Do you think he's the peak...

TOM ROBBINS: Oh, let's see, let's see.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: ...standing out above everyone else?

TOM ROBBINS: No, I think there [are] probably a lot of other good people. I hate to make a list, because then I know I'll leave a lot of people off. I think Spafford is really strong. Ken. I like a lot of the younger people, you know. Joan Bloedel and what's her...?

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Joan Ross Bloedel?

TOM ROBBINS: Joan Ross Bloedel. And I think Paul Heald is starting to do some very beautiful paintings, and that one show that Bill Haake had, down on Fifth Avenue... Was it Hines? [Hines Gallery--Ed.]

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah. [hesitant]

TOM ROBBINS: I thought that was one of the strongest one-man shows I've ever seen in the Northwest. His recent stuff at the Virginia Inn didn't seem to be up to that quality, but... There are a lot of good people.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Let me me ask you a couple more abstract-sounding questions while we're still talking about these things. These questions probably come out of things you've written and a desire to know how elaborately and how thoroughly you might mean them. Whether they're partly views articulated, you know, as one does the view of a character and not necessarily a view you share. For example, you spoke a number of places in some of your fiction about the relation of styles and content, in fact, the primacy of style over content and the power of style to, in a sense, determine or alter content. Do those notions, when you articulate them in your fiction, come from your experience in the visual arts?

TOM ROBBINS: I'm sure that in an indirect way there is a relationship. I don't consciously think about it, but one of the reasons I don't regret ever having been a critic is that I think it did heighten my powers of perception, it heightened my analytical abilities.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You're speaking verbal as well as visual analytical ability?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah. The ability to look at something, to really look at it. Because when you like the visual arts, and especially when you're in a position of writing about the visual arts, you spend a great deal of time in front of a particular painting or object looking at it from a lot of different angles, and making connections between it and a lot of unlikely events and images and ideas. And those things can not only be used as tools by the fiction writer, but just that kind of sensibility, that way of relating to inanimate objects, or relating to the world around us, is a sensibility that I think can heighten the power of a novel. What I tried to do in my last novel [Still Life with Woodpecker--Ed.] was to write about an inanimate object in a way that had never been done before. A lot of people, or a number of people-- and I'm I'm talking about fiction writers now, novelists-- have written about objects in a symbolic fashion. But I couldn't recall a single case where a novelist had written at great length about a particular inanimate object at face value, or as if that object had a life of its own. It didn't symbolize anything else, and it didn't necessarily mean something in an emotional [sense?] to the characters, but a lot, an object with a life of its own. My original idea was to write a novel that took place in one room, in an empty room, with one character and three inanimate objects. And to somehow make that interesting enough to sustain an entire novel.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Uh huh.

TOM ROBBINS: And then I had an unhappy love affair with a red-headed Aries, and that was on my mind a lot, and I needed to write about it, so I wove that into it. And I eventually dropped two of the objects and decided to concentrate on just one. That would be the the Camel cigarette pack, and I chose that particular object because it is so loaded with pictorial content. But that homage to the object I'm sure has-- perhaps the seed of that has been in my sensibilities since birth, or certainly since early childhood, but it was honed by looking at art.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Can I ask if it's also the case that this sense that an object can be treated not as an emotion generator, and not as a symbol of something, but just in its own is-ness. Does that owe anything in your thinking to your experience in the East?

TOM ROBBINS: Absolutely, yeah.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: To tea ceremony, _____ objects, and...

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, because in a certain sense that's a very Zen concept.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Sounds like it to me, when you articulated it, and that's why I asked.

TOM ROBBINS: Now the true follower of Zen wouldn't feel the need to make all those...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: To make a fuss about it. (laughs)

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, to make such a big fuss about it. (laughs)

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah, but in a Western context, where people don't do things that way...

TOM ROBBINS: You wouldn't carry it one one-hundredth as far as I did.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah. (chuckles)

TOM ROBBINS: You would simply see it in its is-ness and that would be it and they wouldn't have to elaborate.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: To stick for a minute more with the question I originally raised of style and content and how they relate to each other... How do you see that, or do you see that, as bearing on the painting that you came out here to hopefully find? In other words, when you were younger and you came out here thinking that there were these artists here who did mystical things, and then I presume you got here and there were some people writing about them and saying they guess they do do mystical things and that, that there are, is about so and so. There were writings about, oh, Morris Graves' work that would always, essentially be talking about its content, I mean its romantic emotionalism and so forth. Did you by then have a sense that style perhaps is different from that and more important than that, or...? Did this become an issue in thinking about the painting of Tobey and Graves and what you found here?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, one thing that occurred to me early on was that Tobey and Graves, as opposed say to the Abstract Expressionists, were trying to do things with paint that paint couldn't do. I think the Abstract Expressionists were probably doing the same thing, but in Abstract Expressionism, the struggle became the painting, whereas here it didn't.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Hmm.

TOM ROBBINS: Here it became a kind of failed poeticism.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: So the struggle stayed a struggle and the...

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, they didn't show the struggle on the picture plane, at least not overtly.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah.

TOM ROBBINS: All they showed was the failed result. You know what I mean?

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Of there having been a struggle.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah. That they were trying to paint poetry, but you can't paint poetry; you can only paint paint.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Uh huh.

TOM ROBBINS: I think their effort to paint poetry was valiant, and I'm not criticizing it in any way. I think it was definitely worth trying. And I think they probably came as close to doing it as any human being could.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: But in a sense that still meant that they were struggling to get down from that a content--poetry--

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And they weren't letting themselves go with the style, which is what the painting could be.

TOM ROBBINS: Right. Whereas in New York, the style took over, and then style became the content.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah.

TOM ROBBINS: But it never quite happened here. There were a few paintings of Tobey's where he came very close to that, but never quite did it in the same way. So I always had a sense that there was something that didn't quite work, about those paintings. That they-- Matthew [Kangas--Ed.], if you could only hear me admit this-- (chuckles)

MARTHA KINGSBURY: (laughs) We'll restrict this part.

TOM ROBBINS: ...that they never really quite came off with as much power as was potential in them.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah. And you don't think this is inherent in their choice of waterbased media or paper or anything like that; it's just characteristic of their...

TOM ROBBINS: No, because people have done things with waterbased media that didn't have that problem at all.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Um hmm.

TOM ROBBINS: I mean, that added to it; that gave it perhaps a certain built-in kind of effete quality.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I'm afraid it seems that way to many people with a broad perspective today; it inevitably looks fragile, in a sense.

TOM ROBBINS: Yes, it does, but...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: In a contemporary kind of reference.

TOM ROBBINS: I think it looks more fragile to people without a knowledge of Eastern aesthetics...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yes, I'm sure you're right, yeah.

TOM ROBBINS: ...than it does to... Because that kind of energy, that is operating in the Northwest School-- at its best-- has its parallels in Chinese and Japanese art, and while it may have a certain fragileness about the edge, you know, that is really powerful stuff. That energy is very close to the energy inside the atom. I mean, we're talking...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Very small-scale, high-intensity energies.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah! We're talking about megawatts here.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I recently saw the big Morris Graves show at the Whitney, and...

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, I saw that too.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: ...first I thought about the whole exhibition in the context of Abstract Expressionism and it read one way to me, and then I made my mind switch and think about the whole exhibition in the context of the Chinese section of the Met, where I had just been half a day before.

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And it makes the Morris Graves read completely differently, to switch contexts.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah. I think that's the problem with a lot of people from New York in particular, regarding the New York School [probably means the Northwest School--Ed.], is that they don't have that knowledge of Eastern aesthetics. And so the work actually appears to them to be more fragile and more effete than it really is. But I think there is-- all things considered in looking at things from a universal perspective-- there is a quality of failure in it, for reasons that we've just discussed. Where the struggle never became a part of the style.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Um hmm. I think I _____ that.

TOM ROBBINS: Which might have made a great deal of difference. When I was on that panel at the museum with Matthew, there was an exhibition of the Northwest School at the museum, and then there were a few paintings in the room, actually where the panel was held. You may recall-- a DeKooning and Franz Kline and...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I don't recall. I repressed a great deal of that panel, but I know the one you're referring to.

TOM ROBBINS: Matthew was comparing the two quite unfavorably...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Right.

TOM ROBBINS: ...and I didn't mention it at the time, but I spent a lot of time with the Abstract Expressionist painters in New York and got to know some of them quite well. I could never presume to speak for them, but from what I know of them, I think that they would have found a geat deal more to admire in the Northwest show than Matthew did. In fact, I know they, I can say that with almost absolute certainty, just knowing them as I do.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Um hmm.

TOM ROBBINS: So, I don't think you have to reject one in order to embrace the other.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah.

TOM ROBBINS: Then I remember Matthew that night going on and on about the pinks in the DeKooning and how there were no pinks like that anywhere else in all of art-- and he's right. Although Tamayo, there in Mexico, had some pretty great pinks.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Um hmm.

TOM ROBBINS: But the thing is, you look at the whites in Guy Anderson, and there are no whites like that anywhere else in all of art, either. Soutine had some great whites-- and maybe his come the closest-- although his were much more goopy. They had maybe a similar kind of dynamic quality, but no painter ever that I have discovered has used white in the way that Guy Anderson uses it, in quite the same way and with quite as much power and knowledge, total knowledge of whiteness and what it really means. So, I think we should laud DeKooning for his pinks, but let's also laud Anderson for his whites.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Since you've brought up the question of Guy Anderson, I heard him make a remark once which has intrigued me since about the importance he thinks should be attached to texture in painting, the importance he thinks it has and which he thinks is overlooked in painting. After he said that I of course could see some application of that in his own work, but it also made me think about that characteristic of a lot of Tobey's and Graves's work also. And I wonder whether you know any more about the importance of that in their thinking, or...

TOM ROBBINS: No, not really. Of course the waterbased works on paper don't have any of that.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Well, they don't seem to in reproduction, or they seem to have so little of it compared to the amount of texture we're used to in oil paint... It seems like an irrelevant question, but it more and more seems to-- but maybe it's not.

TOM ROBBINS: Um. Well, see, Morris Graves's oil paintings were extremely textured. They were done with palette knives and, as a matter of fact, that's where Richard Gilkey developed his style. Richard Gilkey's whole style of painting with a palette knife came from the early Graves palette knife paintings. And that's very, almost pugnaciously textural style.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: It seems an interesting question to me partly because these painters of course are often critiqued as having little or nothing of color in their work. And the thing that almost always gets discussed, because of the absence of color, is their use of light, but one gets the impression sometimes that that's the only other thing there is.

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: If there's no color, we better talk about value relationships, and that's as far as we can go.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, no, I think Morris Graves was a great colorist, and I think he was a color field painter, and still is.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: In what kind of works do you mean?

TOM ROBBINS: I think like [Melissa, ballisa]. Even in his recent works at the Whitney-- in fact I commented on that at the Whitney to the young woman who was at that show with me. I said, "Just put your hand up here and cover this vase of flowers, or put your hand in front of your eye and cover this bird, and then look at that painting."

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Uh huh.

TOM ROBBINS: "And when you do that, you will see a tremendously successful color field painting." I mean, it's intense and subtle and varied and just enlivens the whole picture plane, and no one has ever discussed him in that light-- to my knowledge.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh, really. That reminds of last quarter taking a group of students to the Henry Gallery, on campus, to look at some works done in waterbased media. One of the things that we looked at was a Morris Graves prepared ground, which he had never added anything to, and the students-- as well as myself-- found this immensely gratifying, because it had all the characteristics you're describing.

TOM ROBBINS: Absolutely. Yeah.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: It was wonderful. There was no bird or anything, just nothing.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, you look at even his early paintings in the forties and fifties and you will see color fields, long before anybody else did them. He just happened to have put a bird in the middle of a color field. If he had left those birds out...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Which unfortunately does make a difference. (chuckles)

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah, that does change it.

TOM ROBBINS: But, boy the color's there.

[Tape 4; also marked tape 2; side 2 -- 45 minutes]

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Now there's the idea expressed someplace in one of your writings, and again I never know whether you're kind of throwing things off or whether you mean something fairly serious by it-- and you weren't speaking of painting per se; you were speaking in a more general way, of light as having precedence over color and color as being a kind of parasite on light, which I thought was a wonderful notion. But again, I wondered how much it, in your mind, had to do with, with issues raised by Northwest School painting.

TOM ROBBINS: Oh, I don't think it had much connection to that.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Okay. (chuckles)

TOM ROBBINS: It had more to do with quantum physics and the personal relationship I developed to quantum physics after taking LSD and realizing that light is first cause, as they say in metaphysics. That light is where it all began and what is described in the Bible as the fall of man-- and in other myths as well-- was really the condensation of light into matter. And that anything that has been added to light, including mass, has in a sense

been a pollutant of light.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: So color is just one of these many pollutants of the essential energy. If you had your first LSD trip that generated this kind of thinking and changes in '63, then is it fair to say that that kind of awareness-- I started to use the word colored, which is the wrong word...

TOM ROBBINS: (chuckles)

MARTHA KINGSBURY: ...colored your awareness of painting, illuminated your awareness of paintings you looked at in the sixties?

TOM ROBBINS: Well, it certainly made me looser in the way I looked at everything in life and it allowed me to see connections which heretofore I could not have made.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: But it didn't lead in any explicit sense to a liking for value structures over color relationships or any explicit like that?

TOM ROBBINS: No, I don't think so. It just loosened me up considerably, [one of these, OR: with its] great values.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yet another question I wanted to ask that bears or doesn't bear on Northwest painters, is whether you think in fact the environment, the landscape, the weather, and so forth, had a little bearing on what they did? A lot? A determining value? You comment in your own descriptions of this area on the Chinese nature of the landscape. You know, that nature _____s, you say the Chinese landscape of the Skagit Valley, the Chinese, oh, mounds of rock and the greyness of the light and...

TOM ROBBINS: Well, all artists-- verbal and visual, and musical, too, I suppose-- react to their environment, because artists are sensitive people if they're any good as artists.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: But some are more outward looking than others.

TOM ROBBINS: But the question today, in 1984, is what is our environment? And there are an awful lot of people-- well artists-- in this area now who are painting paintings that have nothing with the Northwest landscape, but which come from looking at art. They come not out of nature but out of art. But art is a part of the landscape; I mean, it's part of the environment, too. So all painting really is environmental. Back in the early days in the Northwest School, there wasn't as much from outside to look at. There weren't any Matisses, except in rare magazine articles or occasional book would fall into someone's hand. But that Matisse color, which is so wonderful and so glorious, and which I carry around with me in my luggage everywhere I go-- I've turned dozens of apartments into Matisse paintings in my lifetime-- that sense wasn't here! Plus, it was fresh to look at a landscape which was not that far removed in its geology and its meteorology and even in its philosophical ambience from the Orient. It must have been very refreshing for an American artist in the thirties and forties, when everybody else was looking to Europe. And it gave them...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Refreshing to have a whole new context?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, some material. It gave them something of their own, some of their own territory to explore. But because of the weather here, I think people do tend to be more introspective, turns us inward. Even the artists in Seattle, for example, who are painting in styles that are currently in vogue in New York and Europe, may owe the fact that they are painting at all to the fact that they live here where the weather turned them inward. So even though they aren't painting the Northwest landscape, and using so-called Northwest color, or Northwest light, this environment has made them an artist. You see what I mean?

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I see the possibility that you're raising, yes.

TOM ROBBINS: That having to spend a lot of time indoors, you know, having to find indoor pursuits, being in a situation where they might have to think and be introspective and get in touch with their inner self, all that might have made them an artist to begin with. Whereas if they had lived somewhere else, they wouldn't have been. So in a sense they are a Northwest artist, a product of the Northwest environment, even though you could never establish that by looking at their work.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah. So you're agreeing with many previous people who think that the power of the environment was probably fairly extensive in one way or another, for many of these people.

TOM ROBBINS: It would have to be. I know when I walk out of the house every day, the first thing I do is look at the sky, and it's always changing, and it's very dramatic. And I find myself writing about skies in my novels, and occasionally critics will say, one critic in particular said something about "all this hype about the clouds." Well, the man who wrote that lives in the city.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: In the city in some other part of the country?

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah. And he probably couldn't see the sky if he wanted to. The sky doesn't mean anything to him; it's just kind of something that holds the lid on the city. But here, it is part of the daily routine. You walk down to the post office in the morning and you'll see people
standing out by their cars looking up at the sky. You notice it every day.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Uh huh.

TOM ROBBINS: When I lived in New York, I didn't notice the sky for months at a time.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Really true in New York.

TOM ROBBINS: So it's bound to have an effect. And in the old days, you know, artists could relate to that directly and immediately, and perhaps that time is past. To do that today would maybe be regressive, or to have yourself identified with a school that has long since shot its bolt. But nevertheless, even though an artist today cannot react to the Northwest environment in the same way that he could have 30years ago, you still react to it in a more indirect way. Everything comes out of something else, and I think the amount of sophistication about art in Seattle is probably greater than anyplace in the country, just among the general populace.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You think so?

TOM ROBBINS: I think so. And among, say the third- or fourth-rate artists, there is a sophistication about surfaces here.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Literally? Surfaces of their work?

TOM ROBBINS: Painting surface, yeah, that is not true of, say, an artist in Santa Fe or Laguna Beach or in Richmond, Virginia, the art scene I happen to know something about.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Um hmm.

TOM ROBBINS: Philadelphia. There are artists there, but they don't quite have that sophistication. And I'm not talking about the best artists; I'm talking about the Sunday painters and the third-rate artists.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You're talking about the general awareness among people who make images and who are artists...?

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm, who have any interest in art at all. Of course there're hundreds of thousands of people in Seattle who couldn't care less about any kind of art. But I'm talking about the people who have some interest in art. Their level of sophistication is higher than that of, say, people who have some interest in art in Houston.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Why do you think this is?

TOM ROBBINS: I think it came out of the success of the Northwest School, the fact that Tobey and Graves became internationally recognized at a time when they were still here and still fairly closely tied to the community. See, a lot of times, you have to get recognition from outside before you can recognize what is there on your own. You have to get approval from somebody else. And when Tobey was lauded in Paris and Morris was recognized in New York, people then began to have more faith and more confidence in the quality of this work, and began to really pay some attention to it. And one thing you can say about Tobey and Graves-- for whatever ultimate weaknesses there might be in their work-- their surfaces were extraordinarily sophisticated, and...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Well, that's what I was going to ask you, whether there was something owing to the character of their work as well as to the approbation and recognition they received.

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm. So you had a lot of people who maybe didn't study with them personally, but who grew up, who cut their artistic teeth on those paintings and so became aware at a fairly early [stage] of their careers of what a sophisticated surface was like.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I guess it's in that more broad and fundamental sense that I was probably taking Guy Anderson's comment about texture. You know, not meaning just [furrowedness], but qualities of surface, which are sometimes very subtle as well as sometimes more obvious or more overt.

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I couldn't have formulated it, but I would agree with what you've just said, that it's better here than what I see in Chicago and Kansas City for example, to pick out art scenes that I know.

TOM ROBBINS: You know, that's true, and I think there are probably... I've heard it said that there are more artists here per capita than in any city in America. But then I...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: We're supposed to have more of all professions per capita.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I don't know whether it's true, but more lawyers, more dentists.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, I'm not sure that that's true, because I got my pocket calculator and figured if there are 250,000 artists in New York, which is what I've heard-- and I'm not sure that's true either, but I read that somewhere supposedly as a fact-- if there're 250,000 in New York and there are say 8,000,000 people in New York, how many artists would there have to be in Seattle for there to be more per capita?

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh yeah? (chuckles)

TOM ROBBINS: And it came out to a hell of a lot of artists, I'll tell you that. More than enough, than I've ever seen.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: (laughs) I wonder if there's any significance-- with regard to what we were just discussing, the character of surfaces and awareness of artworks as real and sophisticated in that sense-- I wonder if there's any significance to the breadth of good examples that are set by there being simultaneously a number of, maybe not particular wonderful, but fairly competent works in oil media in the area and this other kind of surface that Tobey and Graves set an example by.

TOM ROBBINS: I don't know.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: I don't either. It does make one more aware of that as an aspect of a work of art than when everything in the museum is done in the same media.

TOM ROBBINS: Um hmm.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And I think the general public then sees structure of the image more than they see the material.

TOM ROBBINS: Well, in that sense, I suppose, we could go back to the beginning and say that it was perhaps a good thing that there were these different schools operating in Seattle at the time when I got here, these different groups.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: The old school, the...

TOM ROBBINS: ...the university people, and the downtown artist.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: It made certain issues _____.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, the only problem was, there wasn't the distinctions in terms of quality.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yeah.

TOM ROBBINS: And if there had been, say, three separate schools of, and which quality was recognized, then it probably would have been quite salubrious.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yes.

TOM ROBBINS: Instead of being debilitating and, and restrictive.

[Break in taping]

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You're talking about Tony Smith, and Jackson Pollock.

TOM ROBBINS: I don't want to go all the way back to the beginning, but...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You're talking Tony Smith doing a _____ [all night] and telling you about Pollock's Blue Poles.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah, Tony Smith told me how Blue Poles-- the Pollock painting that many people considered his masterpiece, and Bryan Roberson said was the culmination of his career-- turned out that it was only partially painted by Pollock. And I sat in a loft in New York one night, having bought Tony Smith a fifth of vodka, which I

used to do in those days, every couple of weeks just to hear his stories, because I was pumping him for information on Pollock. And this one night he said, "I'm going to tell you something that nobody knows." And it seems that one night out in Springs, Long Island, Tony Smith and Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman got drunk and they decided they wanted to paint, and they went into Pollock's studio where there was a stretched canvas and there happened to be a lot of blue paint around and they started to work on it. And those blue "poles" were put in by Barnett Newman. Pollock didn't touch them, which makes sense! Because Pollock never used verticals in his whole life, and of course that was the crux of Barnett Newman's work. And Tony Smith worked on the painting. All three of them worked on it. I have the notes on that in minute detail about... Pollock didn't have any shoes on and they broke one of their bottles and he cut his feet and his feet were bleeding all over the floor. And it was a pretty depraved scene. I guess they were very drunk, just bleeding and falling down drunk, but they did this picture! And then later on, Pollock did go back to it and refine it some. He touched it up a bit and worked on it and signed it. But it was a collaboration between those three artists. Which was significant, I think, and for a couple of reasons: one, the fact that there was in existence a collaboration between three major artists; and, two, the fact that art historians had singled out that picture...

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Yes! As so astonishingly powerful and exceptional.

TOM ROBBINS: Yeah. But Tony Smith said, "Now if you write this story during my lifetime, I will deny it." So I asked Barnett Newman about it one night, and he turned sort of the color of that painting himself-- he turned blue and red and purple and wouldn't even talk about it. So I filed it away and thought, "Some day after Mr. Newman and Mr. Smith have gone, I'm going to write the story, not as any kind of scandal, but because I think it's something that needs to be told."

MARTHA KINGSBURY: You say it has been told now?

TOM ROBBINS: Yes. Oh, eight or nine years ago, the young woman, the model from the Art Students' League, who was in the car with Pollock in the fatal car crash, wrote the story of her affair with Pollock, and in that book, she told the story. I don't know how well she told it, or if she had all the details that I have in my notebook, but she let the cat out of the bag. And at that time, Tony Smith was still alive-- Barnett Newman had died.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Did he deny it? Or do you know?

TOM ROBBINS: I don't know.

[Break in taping]

TOM ROBBINS: I'd always planned that after Tony Smith and Barnett Newman were dead I was going to write the account of Blue Poles and submit it to, oh, I especially wanted to submit it to Artforum because it would have had the greatest impact there.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Um hmm, true.

TOM ROBBINS: And probably a lot of people there wouldn't even have believed it. But I have one witness to the story.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: Oh!

TOM ROBBINS: To Smith's telling of the story, at any rate, so I can prove I didn't make it up. I don't have it on tape; I had to take it all down in longhand.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: But there's other material out of your Soutine and Pollock researches that you've remained interested in?

TOM ROBBINS: Um, no, I still like both of the painters, and I think that a comparison of their work would probably make a pretty interesting article, but it's not something I'd want to do anymore.

MARTHA KINGSBURY: It's not book length.

TOM ROBBINS: I tell you, being able to create your own work, being able to indulge your own fantasies is so much better than journalism, so much more fulfilling than journalism, to me, that as long as I can continue to write fiction, I shall. Of course, a lot of people said that my journalism was fiction anyway, so... (laughs)

MARTHA KINGSBURY: And so creative criticism it was called, yes?

TOM ROBBINS: (coughs)

MARTHA KINGSBURY: A [synthetic] mode.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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