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Oral history interview with Clifford Amyx,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Clifford Amyx on December 28, 1982. The interview took place in Lexington, Kentucky, and was conducted by Estill Curtis Pennington for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: December 20—on December 28, with an oral history with Professor Clifford Amyx, of the University of Kentucky, retired. And he's going to talk today about the WPA project in San Francisco and various, and sundry other observations. Shall we just start with—let's start, at the first, with just some basics and just birth and education—

CLIFFORD AMYX: Well, okay [laughs].

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: —just a little bit, if that's okay.

CLIFFORD AMYX: I was born in Jackson County, Kentucky. So I'm a genuine hillbilly. My father was the—practiced medicine in Hyden, Hindman, and McKee, Kentucky, which is a—probably in the running for the three poorest counties in the United States. But very early, I got out of Jackson County and went to Livingston, to go to grade school, and traveled about a lot. Because my father suffered from bronchitis and he insisted on going south every winter. And we also had passes on the railroad, so that we could go free. So we spent a great deal of time in Mobile, New Orleans, Pensacola, when I was a child. And I ended up, finally, going to Barton Academy, in Mobile, for first year of high school. And then I came to Lexington when my father retired, to go to old Lexington High School and the University of Kentucky, where I did a major—joint major in philosophy and art. Then I went on to San Francisco, by way of Hollywood. Because I was offered a job, right in the middle of the Depression, in one of the Warner Brothers sound stages. I had worked on the—onstage at the old Opera House, as an apprentice set designer for Gil Crowell [ph], who had worked with Gene O'Neill at the Provincetown Playhouse. And that gave me delusions of maybe working onstage again. [00:02:01] But the movies we—by that time, were killing all the stock companies. So that I had an opportunity to meet a man who had worked with Joseph Urban, in New York, and who's on the way to Hollywood to become a designer for the Warner brothers, one of the soundstages. But by the time I arrived there, that stage had been closed. And my friend, who was a friend, in turn, of a Vaudeville performer, Gus Edwards, whom—not Gus Edwards—Gus Bartram, whom I had known in Mobile as a performer in—on the Mobile Vaudeville circuit. He had offered me, flatly, a job. Because he liked Gil Crowell and he knew what I had done with him. But when I got to Hollywood, as I said, the job was no longer there. So I went on and went to school in San Francisco, as a part-time student—and never more than a part-time student—at the San Francisco School of Fine Art.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: This would have about 1930—

CLIFFORD AMYX: —yeah, in the early '30s, and in the—right in the midst of the Depression, when Harry Bridges was really creating hell in San Francisco. And I was afraid to walk on the waterfront, for fear that I might get clubbed. But I worked in the cafeteria at the art school. That was after Diego Rivera had been there and painted a fresco in the exhibition room. And after he had painted the Stock Exchange, and was right in the middle of the great fresco binge at Coit Tower in San Francisco. So the aura of Rivera was already spread all over San Francisco. And he had already come a cropper, I suppose, in the East or was about to. I've forgotten my dates here. [00:03:53] But for a while, I worked in a coal yard in Berkeley, for my wife's uncle, and hung around the University of California, and met Joe Danysh, who was later to be regional supervisor of the Federal Art Project, and Ansel Adams, who were running a gallery together then, although it was mostly Danysh's gallery, and Adams was a kind of attendant figure. How much of a partner he really was, I don't remember. But I went off to Mill Valley to live and practice photography as a freelance photographer—nothing ever published, mostly just chores in photography, to keep alive. And I was offered a job as a graphic artist for the—for the Education Project in San Francisco, by Lou Weis—Wasser—excuse me—Lou Wasserman, who was later professor of political science at San Francisco State. But my work as a graphic artist there attracted the attention of Joe Allen [ph], who was the San Francisco area supervisor, the—that is, the actual administrator supervisor of the project, not the art supervisor. But he wanted to give me a job, as a kind of, let's say, consultant for all the graphic works, for the silk screen and the lithography and printmaking in general, and maybe some other chores to go with it. And Joe Danysh, who was original supervisor, actually teased me with a prospect of becoming one of the

operators of the Sacramento Art Center then, for which I had no training whatsoever. And he finally realized that. And—but he also declined to approve Allen's desire to hire me as a consultant for the printmaking. [00:06:01] Now, Ray Bertrand, with whom I'd studied lithography in San Francisco, at the School of Fine Arts, was about to leave the project. And the—that was later on in the history of the project, after a great deal of the major work, of art, had already been accomplished. Aquatic Park was nearly finished. And Benny Bufano's statue of Sun Yat-sen was practically in place. And a lot of the other major works, the mosaics and the murals and other things, were pretty well completed by that time. And I came in at the late stage, when the project was transferring from federal sponsorship, that is, when it was legitimately called the Federal Art Project and was to become just another WPA project, under local sponsorship. And Geskin [ph] was so affrighted by that possibility that he resigned as art supervisor of the project. And Beck Young, who—whom I had known very briefly at Berkeley in Cali—in California, came in as art supervisor. And as I said, Ray Bertrand, with whom I'd studied lithography and who was actually the major praetor and director of all the printmaking, was leaving, under what circumstances, I don't know. But I was given Ray's job, in a sense, to be supervisor of printmaking, and certain other projects related to it, like the *Index of American Design*, the local community centers in San Francisco, and whatever I could, let's say, organize and promote, as a kind of extended, co-sponsored project. Because the project, at that time, needed very desperately to find co-sponsors who would bear material expense. [00:07:57] The government was—continued to be willing to pay wages, as relief measures, but they were not anxious to assume a lot of material expense. And congress, in its wisdom, decided that we could no longer buy, for example, pigments from Winsor Newton in England but every artist had to use American pigments. Now, this is where things get sticky. Because I remember one extremely long and bitter controversy with a gentleman whom I will not name, who was a pretty good watercolorist but who had used Payne's gray, which I considered retrograde, [they laugh] and insisted that he would not paint watercolors without Winsor Newton Payne's Gray. Well, here I was either in the middle or as a supervisor entitled to sign his pay vouchers, determining that, if he really used minimal intelligence, he could make a decent Payne's gray from whatever the components are. Because it's a mixed color. It's not a natural color or even a chemical color. It's a mixed color. And since we were forced by law to supply only American colors, this meant that he either mixed his color or found a school tube of paint—which was dirty—or gave it up. [Laughs.] These were the bitter leavings of a transfer from federal sponsorship, where the materials were supplied to the artist, and whatever materials were needed and useful and standard, to local sponsorship and congressional fiats, like signing loyalty oaths, for example, swearing that you were not a communist, and the bitter realities of having to seek local sponsorship for a great number of projects. One that I remember. [00:09:59] And these are usually remembered well because they happened to friends of mine. Arthur Murphy, for example, had created a series of very large and bitterly dark, I would say, painting, oil paintings, of the harbor area in San Francisco. And with Art's usual finickiness and aplomb, he had demanded that we make velvet frames, inset frames, with silver corners, for these things. And they were made. And in my opinion, even though Art's a good friend of mine, they were gauche. But there they were. What was to be done? Were they to be burnt up or were they to be allocated? Well, obviously, they were to be allocated. And my bright notion was that they should go to the Harbor Commission, because they were harbor paintings. So I negotiated with the Harbor Commission, for, let's say, three weeks. And at the end, they found themselves unable not only to not pay part of the material costs of these leavings—I'd put leavings in quotes. Because this meant that these things were done under the easel project and had no specific location. And they were simply unable to work up any enthusiasm about them or to even consider paying any part of material expense. Benny's—I mean Beniamino Bufano, who was the sculpture project and person, had created a small Pasteur, in black granite and stainless steel, which was essentially like the great Sun Yat-sen, which is a heroic figure, now in Portsmouth Square in San Francisco. [00:11:54] But as we were moving from one place to another, I suddenly found this granite figure on my doorstep, with the promise that it was to go to San Rafael High School. And the only marble craftsmen that we had around were mostly elderly Italians. And one of these Italians, whose name I cannot remember, had never really worked with power tools. And in the process of setting up the terrazzo base for that figure at San Rafael High School, he got a chest-full of stone dust and came down with virulent silicosis, which he had been harboring for many, many years, no doubt. And my whole role in this allocation was to get this man into Letterman hospital, if I could, the army hospital, in the Presidio. And that took a great deal of negotiating with the city fathers and the army and finally, I think, go—a phone call to Washington, to see if some leverage couldn't be brought, save this man's life. I found myself drifting away from art, in that sense, and over into supervisory roles and management, and taking on the moving of the project from the Pacific Building down to the Jackson Street warehouse, which was near Montgomery Street, in San Francisco, which became the later headquarters of the project. And yet, all the time, I was engaged in running the printmaking project and looking for outlets for the use of silk screen, which was really in another building, not in my building, in Washington school—and doing chores and legwork more than being any kind of a supervisor related to art. [00:13:50] Benny's great or, as I say, heroic Sun Yat-sen, which is—probably will be his memorial and which was bitterly fought by so—certain local groups, who assumed that everybody on the project was communists and that Sun Yat-sen was not a republican or a democrat after all, was finally in place. But when the Kuomintang, a local office of the Chinese, was asked to sign the form accepting legal co-sponsorship and due respect and care, which was simply a formality—the city would take care of it—they refused to sign. They couldn't find the man who had agreed to sign. And I had had my lunch every day in Chinatown for three years, by that time. And I thought I had gotten to know the Chinese, in a—certainly in an informal way, and to be able to figure how their mind worked,

although no one's ever sure, of course. This is a cliché.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [Laughs.]

CLIFFORD AMYX: But it's a sound one. You play poker with a Chinaman, you watch out. It's a sound cliché that you have a great deal of trouble finding out exactly what's going on. And it took me some three weeks to get a signature, which was in Chinese and I couldn't read anyway. I assume it's valid. I assume that the inheritors of Chiang Kai-shek's mantles, whoever they are, in San Francisco may have some care of this monument still, if that signature means anything. About this time, I came down with a diaphragmatic hernia, which reduced me to nothing. I was starving to death. And I was forced to go to a hospital for major surgery. [00:15:52] When I came back to the project, of course, Allen was in firm control, Joseph Allen, who—a man whom—for whom I have considerable regard but was not an artist and simply a scrounger and an administrator. And I—it's my sound conviction that from that moment, when you—when the art supervisors no longer had any measure of sound control, the project began to go downhill rapidly. If I were anyone to wear sackcloth and ashes, I would blame myself for part of this, because I was perfectly willing to accept the role of director of the printmaking project, with very little experience as a printmaker, and to take on a chore for which I had never really had a liking, of trying to place or allocate certain works of art which were done on the easel project, to arrange exhibitions, and to carry on a kind of normal easel project administration since the—by that time, art supervisor of the project had no interest in this kind of thing at all and it was devolved on me or it would have died. And, in fact, it did die. And the death should not be mourned. My feeling about the whole project is that I never again want to settle for a relief project in arts. I am firmly of the belief that the PWAP, that is, the later PWAP, the commissioning of works of artists by artists of substantial merit, however much they may miss the highest levels of greatness, is better than to take on the chore of rehabilitating or reconstituting arts which have lost their vitality. [00:17:55] Now, I say this with the—without hoping to have lost any of my compassion for these people who were literally on relief. There were a number of elder artists who had substantial academic training. A lot of them were foreigners, that is, not native-born Americans—but naturalized Americans—who—I remember one old German whose portrait of George Washington on a print which he wanted to make came out looking like the Iron Chancellor.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [Laughs.]

CLIFFORD AMYX: There were certain craftsmen who—a Czech artist—I believe he was Czech—who was a wiz at copper repoussé. And he did a huge copper panel, repoussé, for the—for the firehouse at Ross, California. I assume it's still there. But laying a huge sheet of copper down on a bed of Burgundy pitch and pushing it around with tools is a craft that's not ordinarily practiced today. And we were under orders from Washington, which hung on, to see that all these older craftsmen were preserved. Now, the San Francisco project was very, very strong in fresco and mosaic. Part of this was due, as I said, to Rivera's aura, the god in the machine of fresco painting as a way of life, and wanting to do, as George Biddle had said at one time or another, fresco at \$3 and a half a square yard, which was a living wage according to him and—

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [Laughs.]

CLIFFORD AMYX: —and was a carryover from the Mexican ideas about what artists should do. [00:19:58] Reuben Kadish, who was the supervisor of the mural project, was a man of some inventive and even brilliance, I think—he and I didn't get along very well together at times, because he had no use for what he called visual aids. He didn't even want to publish a catalog of the easel project detritus, which I had inherited and wanted to allocate. But Reuben painted and constructed, I shou—there's an element of constructivism in it—some frescoes in San Francisco which deserve to be better known than they've ever been now. And, of course, the mosaics were a constant care. And the related work to mosaic and mural painting with Hilaire Hiler at Aquatic Park are the monuments to the—to the Federal Art Project. And those are great, in my estimation, and will be monuments, I hope, forever. But it's the peripheral aspect of the project, that is, the relief part of it, in which many people who were peripherally artists—were too old to retread. And it was probably better to try to recreate an old craft than it was to invent something new for them to do. I remember one case in which two of the artists on the *Index of American Design* proved relatively incompetent. And someone, not me, thank God, had simply transferred them to hand-coloring lithographs for the California series of wildflowers, which were still under way when I came to the project. And they had not done very well even at that. [00:21:51] But you have to wonder whether it's plausible, even as a relief measure, to reconstruct the hand-colorings of lithographs, pushing it back to, let's say, Switzerland in the early 19th century, where there—where every alpine scene was hand-colored, if it was a lithograph, and there was nobody around pushing toward color lithography that early. I mean, we were going back 150 years, so to speak, in order to give someone a job. So here's where your crises come. And they're—no matter what system of government sponsorship you have or no matter what system of private enterprise you have, these conflicts between the past and the present are going to occur. Now, the younger artists, the artists who were, as Daumier says, of their own time—it must be of its own time, he said, "*Il faut être de son temps.*" It must be of its own time. The younger artists, who were of their time but had no job, people like Dong Kingman, for example, who became a—let's say, in quotes, a famous illustrator or an art school dean, in

quotes, and—but really matured his watercolor on the San Francisco project—and then there are people like Charles Howard, who was a member of the noted Howard family, Adeline Kent and Bob Howard—and Charles, who was a member of the Surrealist gang in London with Henry Moore, in the great '37 exhibition in London, came back to San Francisco. And he was approached by an arts advisor, a consultant for the project, and took it on willingly. I don't know how much he did. But then—there's a man of stature, who, if he needed the pay, which was minimal supervisor pay, about \$148 a month, which was what I was getting—was a light, a beacon light in the history of the project. [00:24:01] I don't know whether any of Charles Howard's works are left, whether he did any works allocated to the project or not. But his mere presence was enough to give it a little bit of stature. A lot of other younger artists, of course, chose the occasion to simply stay drunk, permanently.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [Laughs.]

CLIFFORD AMYX: And they usually don't remember, because they didn't do anything. But—one of those, incidentally, was the fellow who argued about the Payne's gray with me and with whom I argued. But they were obligated to make token works. That is, people on the easel project, for which I finally became racked with the sole responsibility, were obligated to make a certain number of works. And this is tokenism of a vicious kind. Because if you can't judge the value of work and say that a man who's making good work needn't make a certain number, you've lost your marbles. And that's essentially what happened in the project, is that you were—Danysh mentioned the fact that a certain supervisor of his just signed a timesheet absentmindedly for a man who'd been dead for three weeks. These things happen under any conditions, have nothing to do with art. But they make life miserable for supervisors. And they give the communist chasers an a—a good opportunity to find a red under every bed. This was an era of great political leftism. The officers at Hamilton field, of course, are not going to take a fresco done by a student of Rivera's, who wanted to put a portrait of Lenin—as a matter of fact, I remember this, not because I proposed anybody do a fresco with Lenin in it—

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [Laughs.]

CLIFFORD AMYX: —or would even think of dictating to an artist about what he should put in one of his own frescoes—[00:26:02]—I thought, in my own mind, that George Harris, who was in Oakland, working with Glenn Wessels, and who was doing a fairly abstract kind of art at that time, would be an excellent man to do a mural at Hamilton field, because he could understand aerodynamics and make a mural out of it. And the fact that he did one in Sunnyvale—I've forgotten whether that was ever completed or not—was what gave me the idea. But would you believe it? The officers didn't want any part of aerodynamics. They wanted a view. And the view that they finally got, much to my horror—and I approved it to Joe Allen, who finally gave the final word—was that Maurice Del Mue, what didn't have anything to do at the moment—and he could do a view of Tamalpais in the Officer's Club at Hamilton field. [Coughs.] The irony of that is that the officers could turn their head and look out the window and see Tamalpais.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [Laughs.] Or they—

CLIFFORD AMYX: If Maurice had been, let's say, Cezanne or even a good re-interpreter of the actual structure of Mount Tamalpais or even the Indian myth, if he had been Clay Spohn, for example, and had surrealized Mount Tamalpais, I would have been happier. But Maurice was a good old-fashioned view painter, and whatever that connotes to the good or the bad. And he was a very competent painter. I have every respect for him, in his day. [00:27:57] But so I had for Percy Gray, who was a late Impressionist and wanted to found an art school to teach Impressionism, and gave it a lot of money in Marin County. But this is retrograde. And if you have any sense of what's going on in the world, you don't want to do retrograde. You want to do whatever the time dictates that you do need to do.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Was Clay Spohn on the project, when you were—was Clay Spohn on the project, when you were—

CLIFFORD AMYX: Oh, yes. He did a very sound mural for Herbert Hoover High School, in Palo Alto. Although if you gave him a lithographic stone, to do something which he wanted to do, he would do a kind of modified Tanguy surrealism. I'd say it's awfully hard to describe a man's work in this left-handed way, by referring to Tanguy. But it saves about two paragraphs of description as to what Clay was doing.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: We have his papers.

CLIFFORD AMYX: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: We have his papers.

CLIFFORD AMYX: You do? I'm glad. Because I respected his work.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Was Perkins Harnly involved with the project, when you were there?

CLIFFORD AMYX: I didn't know him.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: We've just gotten a whole set of the watercolors that he did for the *Index of American Design*, that are interior scenes, kinds of things.

CLIFFORD AMYX: Well, of course, there's a Southern California project. And then there—the Oakland project was pretty autonomous, under Glenn Wessels. And I never really knew what they were doing. Except that I find it odd that the Massachusetts project was working on the refining of the federal standards for artist pigments—I—the work is in the bulletin, I presume, with the standards for the artist pigments—for the Bureau of Standards. And we had a—let's say, a cook, in quotes, doing old-fashioned natural dying, and in Oakland. [00:29:59] Now in San Francisco, the weaving project, for which I was responsible, we were doing tapestries. Clay—or Dave Park's tapestry, which is somewhat like a modified André Lhote, for example, out of Paris—because Dave studied in Paris with Lhote—was woven for Piedmont High School. It was a headache for me, because, when the loom was taken down to move from one building to another, the warp got unevenly drawn and we had to use all kinds of strange devices to get that warp reset on the loom. And I've never seen the tapestry in place. I don't know whether it hangs evenly today or not. But it was nine by 12—very large tapestry and took almost two years to weave, with about four people working on it. But our dying system, for which I spent hours designing the plumbing, by the way, in the Washington Street school—it's where I learned plumbing.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [Laughs.]

CLIFFORD AMYX: I've enjoyed knowing about it ever since—even though I had to pay for a lot of the materials out of my own pocket. I couldn't get the city to furnish the materials. This system of dying that we used is a Dupont ABC system. That is, they're primary dyes, old-fashioned primary color dyes. And yet the number of swatches for that tapestry, as I remember it—now this is just off the top of my head—was 149 separate dyes, all of which came out of an ABC system of dying. And we had every color in the world that anyone needed. Maya Albee, A-L-B-E-E, was supervisor of the weaving project, although Dorothy Leavis [ph] had done a considerable amount of designing for the project. Maya was the actual supervisor of weaving. And she was extremely good. [00:32:00] And she could interpret anything from Ben Cunningham's very abstract desert skull scenes to this softer, low color in Dave Park's tapestries. And anything that Dorothy Leavis wanted woven, I'm sure that Maya could weave it. I'm probably forgetting, of course, a great many things. But I was relieved of a great deal of this scrounging and allocating and promoting and supervising by going to the San Francisco fair in '39, where I became the administrative supervisor for all the federal workers at the fair. This brings me to the close, in the sense that Diego Rivera came back to San Francisco and did that huge fresco, which is at San Francisco State College now, one of the largest ones, I suppose, he ever did—on separate panels, of course. And I saw the thing from the beginning, when he used his dynamic symmetry, whirling squares, laid out—

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [Laughs.] His [inaudible].

CLIFFORD AMYX: —pretty close to the close. It's unfortunately my slight opinion that this is the worst fresco that Diego Rivera ever did. We supplied the plasterers. And Diego was paid, of course, by the fine arts fund from the fair. We didn't pay his wages—or his commission. But his work habits drove me crazy, in the sense that I could never tell who was going to be at work where, and I couldn't certify the hours with accuracy. Although I didn't actually sign the slips. So I guess I'm not committed to anything that's a lie. But I enjoyed the fair. [00:34:00] We—the *Art in Action* and the—and the general art, which was all in the same hangar, the art exhibitions, including Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, by the way—

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Hmm!

CLIFFORD AMYX: I walked b—right by the *Birth of Venus* every day, for one whole summer. And I still regard it as a privilege to do that, when I go to Florence, although the color is—it was under a glaring light. It was washed out by the light. And I never did succeed in finding out how it really looked. In the Uffizi, it's not nearly as dark as the *Primavera*. But it's certainly not as light as it was there. But I enjoyed the fair, because I had very little to do, frankly, except enjoy the fair and visit with visiting firemen, writers from Hollywood who I'd come to know, and even some of the Hollywood crowd, Jay Warren Curry [ph], good-looking as red as a lobster, and Connie Talmadge and—who else? I mean, it was fun to show those people around the *Art in Action*. Because they appreciated the slam-bang atmosphere. On the other end of the *Art in Action*, Raddy Volz, Herman Volz, did an opus sectile [sek-teal]. And I'm pronouncing that the California way. I know that in Italian it should be opus sectile. But almost everybody in California called it opus sectile [sek-teal].

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [Laughs.]

CLIFFORD AMYX: That's a huge—marble inlays, if you want a name for it, which is in San Francisco now, I presume. I haven't s—ever seen it in place. But it's almost as large as Diego's fresco, except that it was vertical instead of horizontal, and may be, in fact, one of the largest marble inlay works in the whole United States, if not the largest. [00:35:57] Raddy had worked in lithography with Ray Bertrand, and was a printmaker from

Switzerland, originally. And I liked his work initially. And I liked that opus sectile [sekteal]. Because it seemed to have a great deal of power in the design. And this was done at the fair. And then we had these things like carving a huge figure out of a 32-foot redwood, if that's the proper height, by Carter, from Carmel. A lot of—two of my printers, Frank Edel [ph] and Leroy what's-his-name—I've forgotten his name—who printed for me at the printmaking project, were working there at the fair off and on and demonstrating lithography. And Suzanne Scheuer was creating a fresco panel. So it was "art in action" in a very commonplace sense. But we outdrew Sally Rand.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [Laughs.]

CLIFFORD AMYX: That's all—that's not much to say for history. But it's a fact, I think.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: How long were you with the actual project itself?

CLIFFORD AMYX: Well, off and on for about three years and a half.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Yeah. And then you were with the fair.

CLIFFORD AMYX: Yeah. Well, I was at the fair—I was still with the project—and came down again with physical disabilities, on the aftermath of the operation, and was on and off for a while. It's very—it's getting unclear to me, unfortunately.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: And then did you come here after that?

CLIFFORD AMYX: I came back here and rested up, so to speak, after that last bout. And the project was about ready to fold up. Came back just before Pearl Harbor, sold my house in California just before Pearl Harbor—and decided, while I was recuperating, to do a master's degree here at the university. Then I went back to California and did a year's graduate work, at the University of California. [00:38:00] Then I came back here to teach, in '46—and then went back to Berkeley on a Ford Fellowship, for a year, studying the interrelation of the arts. And I've switched over to the academic world ever since. I don't regret the enormous knowledge of art that I've picked up. It's been very helpful, in teaching studio and even in administering an art department. I've acted as head of the art department three different times, always avoiding it like the plague but somehow getting trapped into it, one time for as much as a year and a half. But I never wanted another administrative job.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Do you—how do you feel about these days, when art has become such big business, really, really big business?

CLIFFORD AMYX: I don't know that that's any different from big government or big European patronage. I just don't think you can ever qualify art in that way. Art has a certain inner momentum, and artists have a certain inner drive, which it seems to me either goes down or triumphs over any of these systems. And if you look at state patronage, in Russia, for example, they can rigorously enforce their directives, whereas the WPA was loose in its directives and you could get away with murder. If you would take the official social realism, which was behind the whole thing, you could qualify it in almost any direction you wanted to, towards surrealism or toward hard-bent and leftist surrealism with a Trotsky overtone.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [Laughs.]

CLIFFORD AMYX: And you could get away with it, in a sense, if you could stand the gaff. Of course, later on, one of the last PWAP works was done by Anton Refregier, who's an avowed leftist that has a mural in the University of Kentucky medical center, by the way. [00:40:00] But that mural was—I've forgotten whether they whitewashed or erased it, because it was leftist. But this was a common complaint about all of the mural painting. And, of course, the theater project got axed, as a hotbed of communism. And—

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: *Triple-A Plowed Under.*

CLIFFORD AMYX: Yeah. We all—we all lived through leftism—I call it. And I voted socialist once myself, in despair.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [Laughs.]

CLIFFORD AMYX: And m—one of my good friends was, of course, a member of the communist party. Several, as a matter of fact, were.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: But that was so much more prevalent in the '30s. Now you—

CLIFFORD AMYX: Was—it was *the thing*, in the '30s. I mean, you think of all the tours that people like Muggeridge and—well, some of the English poets, for example, made, how far left they went.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Stephen Spender.

CLIFFORD AMYX: And yeah, Spender especially. I met Spender not too long ago. And I was surprised at how similar the history of our attitudes were. I found out that, for example, that he had been reading Spengler, in German, while I was reading it in Kenneth Burke's translation, out of the die [ph]. We're almost exactly the same age, by the way.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Hmm. Wha—

CLIFFORD AMYX: And his son was going to school in San Rafael and, since I lived in Mill Valley, we had a great deal to talk about, as—not only England in the '30s and Germany in the '20s but—I frankly, don't now Spender all that well. I just had an evening with him, at a gath—at an informal gathering.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: [00:41:57] Do you think that the role of the artist in our culture is changing, these days?

CLIFFORD AMYX: Well, what disturbed me most, I suppose, was my radical bias toward a constructive work. And I'm bothered by happenings. As—when art in Dusseldorf and New York became happening, which is the last gasp of action painting, so to speak, I felt that the visual arts were losing their autonomy to the dramatic arts. And that bothers me more than anything else in the world, either—any form of patronage is nearly, to me, irrelevant compared to the way art is going, which may supplant the visual arts by the flicker on the screen or the happening. And you know how widespread that is.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Yes.

CLIFFORD AMYX: And when I was in Germany in '64, at *documenta*, for example, there are already signs that art was going to—going to be happening. And Sam Francis had one of the big rooms in the *documenta* exposition. And that's a kind of explosive post-Pollock painting, you see. And I got enough of the Federal Art Project in me to appreciate the permanency of a work on the wall. And besides that, I have the bias of having been interested in the Renaissance and having glorified true fresco, in quotes, *buon fresco*, as a stable, permanent form of art. Of course, it isn't. I mean, Donatello's *Zuccone* is worn practically to a frazzle, to use an old Kentucky phrase. And Michelangelo's *David's* left toe is completely eroded by the wind. And fresco can shed right off the wall, right down into the—to the second layer of fresco—it's—not the final *intonaco* but that undercoating. [00:44:04] I've forgotten the proper name for it. Fresco is a—I've been in places where I could run my hand down the wall of a Fra Angelico mural and scrape off a whole lot of water and paint, before I knew what I was doing. I shouldn't have done it. But when—in San Marco, for example, when the weather is very warm, damp and the building is ice cold, you find water running down the wall. Well—in Piero della Francesca's *Sheba and Solomon* panel, on the right side, the leak in the roof eroded a great part of that, as a river. So there's no guarantee in any media.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: But you're talking about—

CLIFFORD AMYX: But the permanence and the stability of the medium, the loss of that is what bothers me. Because w—if you put everything on tape, it becomes performance, you know.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: You're not, here, necessarily talking about installations, sculptural installations. You're talking more about art as, oh, where—for example, the lunatic man who shot himself and when—like Kunterbasser [ph], staging his various things—

CLIFFORD AMYX: Yeah.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: —which are true performance.

CLIFFORD AMYX: Emasculation, practically, in Germany—

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Because we do—

CLIFFORD AMYX: —or at least faking emasculation.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: —we do get a lot of this installation business, lights and atmospherics—

CLIFFORD AMYX: Yeah.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: —which I think is also another interesting phenomenon. What do you think about the turn back to—that we're witnessing this turn back to realism—or I prefer the term the representational—

CLIFFORD AMYX: Yeah.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: —and away from the abstraction of the '50s?

CLIFFORD AMYX: [00:45:57] Well, I don't make anything of it much, except that it's almost bound to happen from time to time. Almost every age has its realism. And if we're going to mistake the literal copying of transparencies, that is, Kodachrome or Ektachrome slides, onto a large canvas and the faithful copying of that, call that realism—that's one kind of mechanically, optical realism. And that will be it, for the time. But I don't make anything of it, especially. You've still got to wonder whether the thing has anything to say or means anything, beyond the mere craft of the representation.

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Yes.

CLIFFORD AMYX: I mean, I suppose Giotto must have been shockingly real, when he was new. But it was take-able. As far as I can remember, there's no rejection of Giotto's realism. In fact, there was praise for it. And I've heard the dean of our college walk into that recent show in our museum, saying that he's glad to find that artists can paint. What he meant was he was glad to find somebody who could paint a form of literal representation, which he could understand, even if it didn't mean any—anything important. But—

ESTILL CURTIS PENNINGTON: Which, there was verisimilitude.

CLIFFORD AMYX: Yeah. And that—realism is a compulsion and a habit and a craft and everything else you can say. But *il faut être de son temps*. It's got to be of its day, to have its validity. You don't make a statement in a vacuum or to the winds, unless you are very far out. [00:47:46]

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