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# Oral history interview with Irving Blum, 1977 May 31-June 23

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## Transcript

### Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Irving Blum on three separate days: May 31, 1977, June 15, 1977, and June 23, 1977. The interview took place in New York City at Blum's Blum-Helman Gallery and was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

### Interview

IRVING BLUM: I was born in New York, in 1930.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you grow up here?

IRVING BLUM: Yes. And I went to school here. I left when I was about 11 or 12 years old, when my father was ill; he had arthritis. I was born in and went to public school in Brooklyn. We left, and we moved to Arizona during the War, 1942.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So, you really have only –

IRVING BLUM: A dim recollection of Brooklyn.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are there brothers and sisters?

IRVING BLUM: I have a younger brother, who manages a radio station and lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not involved in the arts? It's just mass media?

IRVING BLUM: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened in Arizona – Phoenix?

IRVING BLUM: I went to high school. After graduation I went on to the University Of Arizona, where I was an English major and a drama minor. I stayed at the University for three years and then left and enlisted in the Air Force.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you get into English and drama?

IRVING BLUM: It just – I seemed to kind of gravitate to it, it just seemed an interest of mine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was your family interested in theater?

IRVING BLUM: Not really; just something that happened. I was very interested in the theater when I was younger. I worked in the theater in high school and in college. Then in the Air Force I was in the Armed Forces Radio Service as a disc jockey – read news, sports. I was stationed in Heidelberg, Germany, and in the Azores, and then back in San Francisco. Finally I was a discharged in San Francisco; lived there for years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's what got you to California.

IRVING BLUM: That's really what got me to California, that's where I had my first look at California, when I was in the Air Force. I'd been to California from Arizona on trips; I had an extended stay when I was in the service. And when I was discharged I decided I would come to New York and spend some time here. And I did. I was interested, maybe, in getting involved in the theater here in New York, or perhaps going back to school. At that time I wasn't really sure. Then when I was having lunch with a friend, he said he was meeting a Hans Knoll next day for lunch and it might be fun for me to come along if I was interested. Hans Knoll at that time was the founder and president of Knoll Associates, the big furniture house. I thought it would be interesting to meet him, and I went the next day and did indeed meet him. We had a wonderful hour or so and he invited me back to the show to see it with him, and I did. I liked very much what I saw of the furniture, which was really extraordinary and very interesting. It was my first "brush" with Modernism. (laughs) As you know, they represented the furniture designs by people like Marcel Breuer, Mies van der Rohe, Harry Bertoia – on and on.

I was very intrigued to see what I saw there. Mr. Knoll then said to me that if I were interested in going to work for the company, he would very much like to have me work for them. I thought about it. It was very oblique and would have been a strange thing to do. But I didn't have very much money at the time, and I thought, well, if I did it for a short period of time, for a year or so, I could possibly put enough money aside to make whatever else

I was interested in doing possible. He made a very attractive offer, with bonuses if I would stay for a full year. He thought that by then I'd really be hooked on doing that or I could then go off and do – whatever. It made a lot of sense to me and I went ahead and did it. I adored it. I really loved working for him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do?

IRVING BLUM: Sold furniture. Worked in the showroom.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was mostly contract sales, though, wasn't it?

IRVING BLUM: It was mostly contract sales, and gradually became very close to Mrs. Knoll and did a lot of planning-unit work. For example, when Knoll Associates would take on the furnishings a big corporate situation like Seagram, a job I worked on, or Connecticut General Life Insurance, another job I worked on, they would do all planning in terms of color in terms of the paintings. And that's really my first brush with the New York art world. I began going to galleries and advising her on certain things – we bought a lot of Albers because the size was right, the color was right. [PC laughs uproariously]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Albers comes in all the fall colors!

IRVING BLUM: Exactly. I mean, if you want blue-green, you can always find one. Then I met several people in the art world through my visits to galleries, particularly – at Betty Parsons, I met and got to know David Herbert who was working at the Janis Gallery –

PAUL CUMMINGS: By now this was in the '50s, right?

IRVING BLUM: In the middle 50s. Roughly, now, we're into '55, '56, '57. I'd come back to New York in '55.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long were you in the Air Force?

IRVING BLUM: Virtually for four years – three and a half years. I spent six months in San Francisco, then I came back to New York. I entered the Air Force in '51, I believe. I was in California for just six months after discharge, then I came on to New York – thinking that New York would be more fertile and more interesting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: California didn't offer a lot then?

IRVING BLUM: No; not then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: After you started with Knoll, did you continue your interest in the theater?

IRVING BLUM: No, I dropped that entirely. It just didn't seem to make a lot of sense. And the art world people, strangely, that I met at that time seemed much more interesting to me than any of the people I knew in the theater. I gravitated to an art world milieu.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you must have gone to the theater and all those places –

IRVING BLUM: Did all that; absolutely. Went to the theater, went to a lot of artists' parties, went down to the club several times, met Ad Reinhardt, got to know a little bit of him at that time; got to know him better when he made trips out to California and showed at the Dwan Gallery, which coexisted with my gallery out there. But in any case, while I was at Knoll, as I say, for roughly a three-year period, two years after I started with them, Hans Knoll was killed in an automobile accident. He seemed to embody, at least for me, all the energy and the excitement of that company. After he died, it became more of a business, and much less creative and much less interesting, much less inventive. It was all those things while he was there and it became less that when –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Had you had any interest in art before? Had you been to museums, or read books in college, or –

IRVING BLUM: No; nothing, nothing. Like a brand-new career, it happened very, very abruptly and it happened, really, during my stay in New York in that three-year period. It happened through visits to all the museums here in the area, which I would do in a very regular way through visits to galleries. I really educated my eye as much at Sidney Janis's gallery as anywhere. I remember going to Kootz particularly, and Janis at the time, and being familiar with the Green Gallery, which you know. I met Dick Bellamy and got to know him rather well. I got to know a lot of art world people. One would introduce me to the next. I'd go to a party and meet others, and so on. They seemed very alive and very interesting, very fascinating to me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What appealed to you?

IRVING BLUM: Well, what appealed to me was the extraordinary experience of first- generation American painting, which I somehow quickly gravitated toward, for reasons I can't even begin to tell you. In other words, I knew that something extraordinary was happening. I could see it at Janis's gallery – that people like Pollock and Rothko and de Kooning particularly, who was really a celebrated figure among his peers in the art world. I could sense that there was something I thought very remarkable happening to painting in this country at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it was also the ambiance of the Tuesday night opening –

IRVING BLUM: Absolutely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - from gallery to party to gallery to party –

IRVING BLUM: Absolutely. And there was an enormous excitement, an enormous energy. Not at that point, public. Really private. Pretty much reserved to the art community, which was at that time minuscule compared to what it is today. [PC laughs heartily]. But at the same time you could get to know the major participants very easily.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you go to Tenth Street ever? Because that was sort of the last years of Tenth Street –

IRVING BLUM: Yes, I did, very definitely. I met Al Leslie and got to know him. I became very friendly with the "second generation," with the people like Leslie, like Mike Goldberg, whom I got to know at the time. And I would bring people who were interested in acquiring larger paintings to their studios. So I was acting informally as a dealer, and enjoying it enormously. I had incredible entré – anybody did: anybody who was interested in anything had entré could get anywhere. For example, Joan Mitchell, who was absolutely delighted to have you come by.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you had Knoll behind you, in a way.

IRVING BLUM: And I had Knoll behind me and was often able to utilize that. That was a real advantage, and people were absolutely delighted to see me for that reason.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who were the people you got to know and learned the most from, would you say? On a person-to-person basis.

IRVING BLUM: I would say that I picked up a lot of information on my own, a lot of information from artists, a lot of information from people like Bill Sharp, who was a friend of mine, Ellsworth Kelly whom I met briefly through David Herbert at that time; Jack Youngerman, who was then married to the movie actress Delphine Seyrig, that wasn't her name at the time, her name was Delphine Youngerman. But I must say that I really think that I put together most of my information simply by going to galleries, going to museums, reading as much as I could possibly read, and looking at as much as I was able to absorb. I was still very naïve. I still didn't have an extraordinary amount of information. I knew that something was happening here in New York. I began to see how the art world was functioning. I began to be more familiar with the workings of it and sympathetic –

PAUL CUMMINGS: You weren't interested in painting of the older "generation?"

IRVING BLUM: Not really. It was really only what was going on at that time, the people I knew, and that kind of involvement.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do after the three years at Knoll?

IRVING BLUM: Well, by then I came to two decisions: I decided (1) that I would leave Knoll, it was no longer as interesting to me as it was when I began, and (2) that my focus by then, also, after living here for three years had very much gravitated to the art world and was very much an art world orientation. I decided that I wanted, really, to pursue that in some way. After thinking about it for a time, I came to two conclusions again: I decided that I wanted to become a gallery dealer, that that was an interesting direction for me to go; and also I decided at that time that I missed the West, having been raised in Phoenix. California at that time was not too disparate – bigger but certainly the climate was sympathetic. And I missed that kind of easy ambiance and weather and so-and-so. I decided that I might want to go to California. Also I decided that to do a gallery in California might be a provocative thing at that time; would be far simpler than attempting one in New York, where the competition was even then beginning, no question. I had limited resources and I thought I would give good Californians a test. And did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you pick between L. A. and San Francisco?

IRVING BLUM: Having visited both places, Los Angeles seemed to me a little less conservative and consequently a little more challenging in terms of what I had in my mind to do. I could have gone to either place, I suspect, but some how I did elect Los Angeles –the weather –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have a program or any particular idea when you went out there?

IRVING BLUM: No. The only idea I had was that to somehow get involved in the art world and to do it from that base.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had no intention of bringing New York artists out, or of wanting to discover new people in California, or –

IRVING BLUM: No. I had no idea what I'd encounter in California. It was just to go and chance it and see what might evolve.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you go out there?

RVING BLUM: At the end of 1957.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was still right in the midst of all the Abstract Expressionism activity.

IRVING BLUM: That's right. I had been to Ben Heller's apartment through David Herbert. Ben Heller had fabulous first-generation things then and it was the one place where you could see a range of that material. Even at that late moment, as late as '56 and '57, you couldn't see it in museums but you could see it privately. You could see it certainly at Heller's and at one or two other places. But my really intense brush with the material occurred there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How does David Herbert come into this?

IRVING BLUM: Because he worked at that time for Sidney Janis. And I worked at Knoll, which was around the corner. He acted, really, as an adviser to me. And I found him very knowledgeable and extremely informative and very easy to chat with about all these things that were a new interest to me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And he loved ____.

IRVING BLUM: And he adored ____, right! And David and I were very friendly that last year I spent here in New York. I found him extremely reliable and extremely informative, and as I say, very easy in the exchange of information.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So, anyway, you went out to Los Angeles.

IRVING BLUM: Yes. And looked around. At that time I decided that – well, there were three or four galleries in existence at that time. There was the Esther Robles Gallery; Philip___ had a gallery; Paul ____ had a gallery. And they all seemed fairly well established at that time, in one way or another. But the gallery that seemed to me the most provocative and the most interesting, the one that I identified with right from the very beginning, was a gallery that was started the previous year by Walter Hopps and Ed Kienholz. Called the Ferus Gallery. They represented some 40 artists all of whom were from California –some from up north and some from south. For example, people like Frank Lobdell from up north, Jay DeFeo, Jim Kelly, Wally Hedrick, ____ Smith, Wally Berman certainly was part of the scene but he was from south; Billy Al Bengston, Craig Kaufman, Ed Moses, John Mason, Peter Voulkos.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was a coop wasn't it?

IRVING BLUM: It started as a coop and then – it always had at least a part of that cooperative aspect. The artists always participated to a larger degree than was true in most galleries. Their opinions were always valued and always asked for.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you now any of them before you got there?

IRVING BLUM: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A start from zero experience.

IRVING BLUM: A start from zero experience. I walked in, introduced myself to Walter Hopps, chatted with him, told him about my experience in New York, told him about my ambition. And after several meetings and getting to know him, slowly but surely, he informed me at one point that Kienholz's share of the gallery might be up for grabs, and it might be something I might want to explore with Kienholz himself. I agreed that that was exactly what I wanted to do. I met with Ed. He'd been in the gallery for about a year and at that time decided it was taking up too much of his time, that he wanted very much to leave the gallery –

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was working there, wasn't he?

IRVING BLUM: He was working there part of the time and seeing to the management, both. I think he had a backroom studio where he could whip a few things together [PC laughs] and wait on whoever came in – there weren't too many people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was on La Cienaga, wasn't it?

IRVING BLUM: Yes, right, behind a shop run by a man called Streeter Blair who subsequently became well known as a "primitive artist" but he was selling early American furniture up front and in the back a little like the situation in the back with Ferus took root. And Kienholz admitted that he would be prepared to sell his share of the gallery to me. And we fixed on a sum of money – it was very little – and I bought his share of the gallery. Walter and I became partners. As soon as we became partners, we sat and we talked again, and we decided that the gallery was too primitive as it was – in terms of the physical plant; that we needed a more sophisticated space and we needed also to hone down the number of people the gallery represented.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I thought some of those other people owned parts of it or had –

IRVING BLUM: No, absolutely not. It was just two people, just Kienholz and Walter, with a great deal of help from his wife at that time, Shirley, who was teaching and they were putting small sums but virtually most of the money they had into keeping the situation going. And I could see that that wasn't very healthy and I could see that certain changes had to be made. One of them was another plant, as I say; the gallery was primitive. And something else that needed to happen was that we needed to be financed in a sounder way. And we talked about the different ways that that could be achieved. I felt that I might explore that with certain people that were familiar with the gallery on the West coast, with certain people who would come into the gallery. Walter gave me several names – Gifford Phillips was one; Vincent Price and some of the ___used to come in. I thought of these well, perhaps I'd speak to one or two of these people, and see if we couldn't get a certain backing from them, because they were clearly interested in what we were doing. And I began. And worked down my list –went to see four or five people, all of whom expressed a great deal of interest, none of whom were interested in becoming backers of this new situation. And finally got to Mrs. Oscar Moss, whose husband had died the previous year, who was a lady of some means living in southern California; her husband had been an attorney, rather prominent. She was indeed looking for an enterprise that could engage her, and we brought her in as a third partner.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was she active, or in finances, or –

IRVING BLUM: She was active only in terms of money and never in terms of inflicting her own opinion on any decisions that Walter and I felt strongly about. She was very reasonable always, always wanted to be kept informed, always was interested, always wanted a situation explained but never tampered in –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was she a collector?

IRVING BLUM: Hardly; kind of a tepid collector. She owned three or four things but she never collected in any vigorous way, so there was never any danger of her skimming off the best material.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did she later collect?

IRVING BLUM: Never in any vigorous way, never. Her interest was much more people, much more people involvement. She became very involved with myself, very involved with Walter. It gave her a milieu. We confided in her brother as to various difficult situations and gave her, I must say, a great deal to think about and to mull over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did she know people who were collectors?

IRVING BLUM: Yes, she did. And she was able to bring certain of those people, including some relatives, a sister of hers who began collecting; she was an early collector of Bob Irwin and John Altoun – into the gallery. She had a son who bought several things; people in the community she knew who subsequently collected on her information. She was very useful to us. She gave us enough money to do a new plant. It wasn't a very expensive situation but it was enough to get this new situation off and going. And for the first several years of the life of the gallery, she made up our deficit at the end of every year. We did what we did operating generally in the red, losing money for several years, which she compensated the gallery for. I never could have done what I did without her help. It was a miracle, at least, that we found her.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long did that take from the time you began until the time that she became affiliated?

IRVING BLUM: It took six months.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's pretty good.

IRVING BLUM: Yes. Six months after I arrived in California we had the new situation going and we had Mrs. Moss squarely involved with us.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened when the two of you sat down and decided that you needed new space – this was going to be the space, and you were going to___ the artists live.
That must have been rather difficult.

IRVING BLUM: That was extremely difficult, because Walter felt very close to – he was friendly very friendly with everyone he represented. I was able to explain to him that by showing the number of people he was showing at the time he was doing a disservice to everyone, and it just wasn't effective. And that running a gallery meant that there were certain difficult decisions that had to be made and among those decisions was pawing down the numbers of people that the gallery represented. I felt that we couldn't succeed –

PAUL CUMMINGS: It would take years – You'd go around in circles with the shows –

IRVING BLUM: Yes; exactly. And so we sat and both of us did a lot of that rat-killing, we really did. It was very difficult, it was extremely hard to kind of confront some of those people and say, "Look, you're no longer part of the situation." But we did it. And when Walter absolutely couldn't do it, I did it. I just felt it had to be done, it needed to be done. So we proceeded. It was____, as I say, and difficult and sticky, but we did. We came up with a list of roughly, oh, I would say 15 people, down from roughly 40. Less than half, which I felt was viable.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you decide? I mean, you've got 40 people and you can't use that many. What points do you take into –

IRVING BLUM: The only points that are possible. You decide according to your own intuition and according to your own instincts and according to your own information. And you hope that you're finally right. It's very complicated, and I'm sure that mistakes were made. As I look back now I can tell you that mistakes were made. However, at the time it had to be done and we could see it. Based on what Walter was able to tell me about the various artists, based on his assessment, based on my assessment as well –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you go around and visit much with artists?

IRVING BLUM: Yes, absolutely. Spoke to the artists, examined what they were doing, examined as much of their past as I could – I did it as carefully as I knew how to do it. But I did it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Within a year, then, you were set up.

IRVING BLUM: Yes, absolutely. The only other aspect that Walter had never attempted that I brought to bear was a decision within a year's time that I wanted the gallery to take on not so much a California aspect – it necessarily had that, being in that place – but I wanted it to be considered in a larger way. And I thought that the only way I could achieve that would be to bring in people from back East.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did he take that?

IRVING BLUM: He absolutely agreed. He decided that it was exactly the right way to proceed. So he looked on that idea very favorably. And we began.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you start picking people from the East? Where did you go? Who were you interested in?

IRVING BLUM: It took a while until I really began to test my own ideas, but the way I would do it – I had to hit on a formula, and it took a while for me to hit on that formula, maybe a year or two. And the formula that I hit on was this: Since money was in very, very short supply, it meant the trip to New York could only occur once a year, virtually. And I had to do every thing that I needed to do back East in that one trip.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long would you come for?

IRVING BLUM: I would come for roughly a week to ten days, never more because I always felt nervous about leaving the gallery and I could never afford to stay for very much longer than that. What I would do is, I quickly hit on two or three people whose opinions at that early moment, in the late 50s and early 60s, whose opinions I really valued. Those people were Bill Sykes, who was taken on by the Museum of Modern Art after teaching at Princeton and whom I met in California and with whom I struck an enormous rapport, whom I liked enormously. I talked to Bill – he himself was a painter and loved to visit studios; he did a lot of those visits. He was very free with information he had and was very willing to share his information with me. Henry Geldzahler at that time was also very focused, also did a great deal of the studio visits. Dick Bellamy, who was director of the Green Gallery; it evolved as the Green Gallery, it was the Hansa, the gallery he started with Ivan Karp. Ivan was another person I would talk to.

But by and large, between Ivan and between Bellamy and between Henry Geldzahler and between Bill Sykes, I was able to evolve a list of "must visit artists." I would delete names; I would examine various lists, and if a name appeared on more than one list, I would make the visit absolute. I gradually began to formulate a notion of what was going on in New York in the late 50s and early 60s. I showed in the late 50s, Joseph Albers, for example, having to do with my previous Knoll experience. It was a natural way for me to gravitate. The paintings were very, very cheap –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Five hundred dollars.

IRVING BLUM: Five hundred dollars, $600, $700, and Albers was absolutely delighted. Cornell was a favorite of mine from my New York years and I contracted with him for an exhibition early on. So then there was Albers, Cornell – I was very interested in Morandi, I had a Morandi show which I contracted to do with the World House Gallery here in New York. So I did a lot of that kind of thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were these shows successful out there? What happened when –

IRVING BLUM: They all cost me money. I would sell maybe one or two things; three things at the outside, which hardly paid for my ____ when you consider the little salary I was taking, the little salary Walter was taking, the gallery expenses, etc. As I say, we operated squarely behind the eight ball. Really in the red year after year after year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do to bring people in? Here was Albers, who was then a man who was, what, 70 years old or something? World-famous in many ways.

IRVING BLUM: Not so famous at the time. Famous, really, subsequently, but at the time his paintings were selling cheaply, as you know, which gives you a very fair indication of the degree of his fame. [laughs] As you were saying, $500 or $600 doesn't always indicate an enormous interest; if the interest were greater, the prices would have been higher, as they certainly were in years to come.But I simply did everything I knew how to do. I did some advertising. We gave classes in California at which –

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've heard about those. What –

IRVING BLUM: Well, Walter, who was able to lecture very easily, and his wife, who had had art historical experience and was a teacher, and myself for what I was able to contribute, got together and we started with several people. And it grew to certain other people who were interested, who had the means, who were curious about collecting. Roughly a group of, oh, I would say 15 people. And that entire first-generation of California collectors I think came out of those classes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who were some of those people?

IRVING BLUM: Some of the people –the Gersches, Fred and Marcia Wiseman, Polly and Nell Hirsch, Betty Ascher, the Facters both Monty and Betty, Lynn and Don Facter were in those classes; Bob Rowan on occasion would surface. So that whole beginning experience, I think, was formulated.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now, what was a class? What happened?

IRVING BLUM: A typical thing would be these people sitting in the study of someone's home and Walter would bring slides of either particular artists and talk at length about the work of a particular artist or talk about the New York experience, and what his understanding of that experience was at that time. With the focus maybe on de Kooning or the focus maybe on Barnett Newman another evening, maybe on Pollock another evening. And talk at great length and answer whatever questions these people had and show transparencies of their past work, their current work; etc.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was very personal activity in terms of the promotion and the method of teaching –

IRVING BLUM: Right; very personal, very tailored.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Very few people coming in off the street saying "How much is that? I'll take it."

IRVING BLUM: Very few. It never occurred; hardly ever. I would say it virtually never occurred.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How was this group formed? Was it people that he knew, that you discovered, or heard about you?

IRVING BLUM: Both; it really had to do with something taking hold at a certain moment as the conditions were right, that there was a certain curiosity. The New York experience was gradually becoming better and better known even as far away as California. A certain level of museum activity – the Pasadena Art Museum was

surfacing and doing interesting work. It was just all pioneer work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But this was also the time that *Artforum* started, wasn't it?

IRVING BLUM: Later. It started not too much later, about 1962; so it was a bit later.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do – you said that you did advertising. Where did one advertise in those days?

IRVING BLUM: Newspaper advertising, or certain vanguard magazines that were published.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because there was no reason for you to take an ad in *Art News*.

IRVING BLUM: No. It would have been absolutely meaningless. It would have been very attractive but it wouldn't have meant very much that one could really calculate. Mostly local newspapers and vanguard newspapers; the *L. A. Free Press*, I expect that's something you've never heard of, which was very popular at that time. We'd advertise there in hopes to locate an audience.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that worked? Space advertising like that?

IRVING BLUM: No, I really don't think that worked particularly. I think it's complicated; it's a combination of factors; you can't put it at the doorstep of any one –

PAUL CUMMINGS: You can't not do it, but then again you can't prove it doesn't.

IRVING BLUM: Exactly, exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: "Keeps the name there," as they say.

IRVING BLUM: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do in terms of – as time went on, you started lending exhibitions. There would be some from the East, some from the West –

IRVING BLUM: We did quite a lot of that, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did your local artists react to? What was their feeling about that?

IRVING BLUM: To begin with, I think they were very, very pleased. But as a lot of the New York people that I took on and was showing at that time, as they began to outdistance and outprice a lot of the West Coast people, the West Coast people became more resentful, to the point of really making it really difficult for me. In terms of dealing with them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think that happened?

IRVING BLUM: Very natural.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, no, I mean I understand the competitive nature, but why do you think the California people wouldn't increase in price the way the Eastern people would?

IRVING BLUM: Well, I think it's a combination of different qualities. I think the promotional aspect is one thing. In many instances, what was happening in the East was simply more powerful, more convincing and more intriguing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And more people got involved with it.

IRVING BLUM: And certainly more people got involved; yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: For example, there was the Warhol show in '62.

IRVING BLUM: Yes. During one of my trips – this was late in '61 – I spoke to Henry Geldzahler and he suggested that I visit Andy Warhol's studio. I did. A rather interesting experience. Andy at that time was doing unfinished big cartoon-like paintings –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Kind of free-brushy –

IRVING BLUM: Yes. Which didn't seem very interesting to me, although I looked at several of them – he'd finished several of them by that time – and I said I would think about them and get back to him. He was very grateful for the visit, and I left. He had no gallery representation at that time. I had occasion six months later to come back

to New York – Ed Janns, somebody I'd begun to sell pictures to, was looking at a painting of a small Giacometti – a painting, as a matter of fact. And he wanted me to look at it and wanted my opinion of this picture which he was thinking of acquiring back for himself. And he said he would pay my way back to New York if I went along with him, and I said I would be very happy to do that. And I went back to New York and walked into Leo's gallery and Ivan said, "Take a look at these" and he showed me some transparencies. This was very early in 1962; end of '61, beginning of '62. Ivan said to me, "This is a young man who left these, what do you think of them?" And I looked at them and they were the big cartoons much more finished than Warhol's. And I said, "Oh, these are by Andy Warhol. I saw this work in process a few months ago." And he said, "No, they're by a guy whose name is Lichtenstein; lives over in New Jersey." And I said, "Let me look at them again." And I looked at them again and they seemed really interesting to me. Léger-esque and fascinating and very well done. And I said, "What are you thinking about doing?" And he said, "Well, we're not sure." And I said, like to show him in California." And Ivan said, "Well, we'll probably show him here in New York as well." And I said, "Fine, let's work some – work something out." He said yes, that we could; and indeed we did, later on. As soon as I left the gallery, I called Andy up, because looking at Lichtenstein's things made me think of those earlier paintings of Andy's that I'd seen, as I said. So I called Andy, and he said oh, he would love to have me come by the studio, and I went by, and he had started on the Campbell's soup cans. I saw them as I walked into his little house on Lexington Avenue where he was living at that time. As I walked through the foyer, I could see lots of these soup can paintings leaning against the wall. I said to Andy, "Where are the cartoons?" He said, "Oh, Ivan showed me some transparencies of a guy who's doing them and lives in New Jersey; I don't know his name." And Andy said, "He keeps doing them better than I did them. So I'm doing these now." [both laugh heartily]

I said, "I think they're terrific, Andy. Would you think about selling them in my gallery?" He said oh, he'd be thrilled, that he had no gallery at that time, had absolutely no commitment then. And I agreed right then and there to show the series of 32 Campbell's soup cans in my gallery in Los Angeles. And did indeed do that in July, 1962.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened? Because that was his first show.

IRVING BLUM: Well, what happened, that was absolutely his first show. I think he'd contracted to show with Eleanor Ward during the Fall of '62, although he might have done it as early as the summer; I don't remember the sequence. In any case when I showed him, he had no other representation. I dealt directly with him. I had sold six or seven paintings. They were to cost me $50 apiece and I sold them for $100 apiece; 16 x 20 inch pictures of soup cans, each one different. I remember ringing the gallery with 32 of these paintings, looking at them. Having sold five or six of them, I decided after I was into the exhibition some two weeks, that the series was just incredibly compelling and really intriguing, and really fascinating as a group. And I called Andy up and I said, "I'll tell you what I think. I think the paintings should stay together as a series, in toto. If I can manage that. I've sold five or six but I going to try and get them back. If I can manage to keep them together as a group, will you give me a special price on the group?" He said he would adore to do that. He said they were conceived as a series and that's really the way he thought of them; as a group. And he would love to have somebody keep them together. If I were to assure him that I would, he would give me a special price.

So I called the six people and explained exactly what had occurred. Dom Factor was somebody I sold a picture to; Bob Rowan another one; Marcia Marson another one; Betty Ascher another. And I explained to all these people what I'd done.

[End of Tape 1 – Side 1]

IRVING BLUM: [continuing] And everyone said they would give up their painting. They were very generous. And I called Andy up and said, "I've got them together, I'd like to keep them." Andy said, "Fine." I said, "What will you charge me for the 32 paintings?" He said, "$1,000." I said, "How long will you give me to pay?" He said, "How long do you want?" I said, "A year." So I sent him about $100 a month until I'd paid him a thousand dollars –

PAUL CUMMINGS: [gasping] Ohhhh –

IRVING BLUM: - and kept the group. I still have them to this day, still have them intact. That's one of the more extraordinary gestures.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - of an early major acquisition.

IRVING BLUM: [both laughing] "Early major acquisition." Exactly right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did the public say? What did the artists say when they walked in and –

IRVING BLUM: Everybody was – people found them compelling, everybody found them – they were very controversial very often. A lot of the local artists found them curious; some found them uninteresting; some were very hostile; others were intrigued, curious. The reactions ran the gamut, they really ran the gamut. Public

reaction, when there was a public reaction, was either scandalous or indifferent.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, my reading of California in those days was that there was a little tiny art group here, and a little tiny art group there, and the public never paid much attention.

IRVING BLUM: That's absolutely true. There wasn't much of a public, there really wasn't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The newspapers didn't seem particularly interested –

IRVING BLUM: And the local reviewer really never knew in any kind of straightforward way what it was he was looking at, and he was no help. And all his tendencies were extremely conservative. The audience was minuscule – it began as an audience composed mainly of artists. And it filtered up very slowly from that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did the collective bring in other people over the years, or eventually?

IRVING BLUM: They did but it was slow growth; very slow growth. And gradually I found my audience and was able to survive by selling outside of the city, by selling to the people from New York who did pass through; and that was happening more and more in California – people from the Midwest who passed through who'd heard of the gallery or were told about the gallery and made a stop at the gallery part of their itinerary.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When you became affiliated, of course when the gallery opened, there really weren't that many galleries in Los Angeles.

IRVING BLUM: There weren't that many galleries, and there were very few collectors. They were a few kind of European expatriates like Billy Wilder, like Otto Preminger who bought paintings, like Edward G. Robinson who bought paintings. There were no modern collections when I started. The only modern collection in Los Angeles when the Ferus got rolling was Gifford Phillips, whose connection with his uncle Duncan Phillips in Washington gave him an entré and a certain insight that nobody else in California had. And he was supportive of a lot of local people – he was supportive of Dick Diebenkorn, of Lee Mulligan, of Richard Blooben, of Emerson Woelffer, of Patrick Smith. Gifford was certainly supportive of these people, then and later; as well as buying works by Robert Motherwell, by Ken Noland, by Ad Reinhardt.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did the other dealers think of what you were doing?

IRVING BLUM: Very little! (both laugh) Very little. I think they were bemused by what I was doing, as most of the community was. It was pretty complicated stuff and the audience was minuscule – and remained minuscule for years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

IRVING BLUM: Yes. There was never a lot of support.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that it's just that there's so little visual arts tradition in that part of the country?

IRVING BLUM: Certainly. Also so little museum activity, so little good critical writing. The incredible thing about New York is the support system that is part of the situation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your term, "the support system" reminds me that it's so important, I think, for any group of artists who get together to have a very ambitious proselytizer for them –

IRVING BLUM: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - an art critic, a historian, a writer or something.

IRVING BLUM: Absolutely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I often wonder why it's been so hard to find somebody like that in California. They pop up, then they disappear right away. No sustaining –

IRVING BLUM: Well, the place has a kind of transience, it really does. Do you know that Arensburg lived there, in the '40s and '50s I think, or '30s and '40s –

PAUL CUMMINGS: He went out there in '27 or '29.

IRVING BLUM: Is that so? And I wonder whom he saw and whom he dealt with while he lived in Hollywood. He didn't leave very much of a stamp on that place and the collection, as you know, went to Philadelphia. But I think

possibly he saw a lot of friends he had made while he lived here in the East who went out and visited with him. I know Marcel went out several times to spend time with him; Man Ray and his friends who lived in Hollywood and spent time. But there was no residue of that when I got there. Beatrice Wood was up in Ojai, for heaven's sakes, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the movie people bought French art – big bold things.

IRVING BLUM: Exactly; they bought French paintings. The transplanted European movie people who had a background of that kind of culture. The American movie people didn't buy anything. They bought calendars, ____; they bought big motor cars, and beach houses. They didn't buy paintings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No art.

IRVING BLUM: No. Well, they don't buy art today; very few of them; it's the exception that really does.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think that is? Maybe it's just a different way of living?

IRVING BLUM: I think it's another style. I think, also, there's no cachet among their friends. The work isn't known, it's not understood, the collecting impulse is not understood. It gives them no cachet, whereas a motorcar or a beach house does; that's something everyone can understand. And I think they're very involved with that. But collecting is often very private, often expensive; often that. And these people are not that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But even you find some of the Rockefellers, who made such incredible amounts of money –

IRVING BLUM: Lots of money.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - don't know what to do with it.

IRVING BLUM: Don't know what to do with it; no. And big houses, again –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Full of junk.

IRVING BLUM: Full of junk. Bad furniture, bad this, bad that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. No taste, no interest, no desire to even go and find –

IRVING BLUM: Somebody to help them. Of course, they could go to some – they go to Stare & Co. and say to Stare, "I'm doing a house, I want some excellent British furniture. They don't do that. Anybody could do that. All you need is the money to do that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And a lot of it. [he laughs]

IRVING BLUM: And a lot of it. Well, they have a lot of it!

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think there's something that I know from all my years in the theater I knew was that the people I knew who had good careers in the theater, who were established, bought their furniture, their art, their decorative arts – they were all basically thought of as props–

IRVING BLUM: Aha, aha –

PAUL CUMMINGS: - to their own ambiance. You know?

IRVING BLUM: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: If it was an important picture, conceal it.

IRVING BLUM: I agree, I agree.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think they really wanted effect –

IRVING BLUM: A background.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - you know, that they could ____ and say, "Hello, everybody" –

IRVING BLUM: "Here I am." I think you're absolutely right, I think that's a very important aspect of what we're talking about.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And it's the European who comes from another tradition and different background system, but you know, nevertheless –

IRVING BLUM: Right, right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They're more secure in themselves, in a way.

IRVING BLUM: That's exactly right. At least, that's the way Hollywood was as I recall it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've often wondered about the outdoor living aspect of California in terms of collecting –

IRVING BLUM: How that can be a hindrance, you mean?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

IRVING BLUM: Absolutely. I agree with that as well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it hasn't – for example, there are lots of sculptors out there but where does it go??

IRVING BLUM: I know....Gets swallowed up. It just doesn't go anywhere.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It comes East. [he laughs]

IRVING BLUM: That's where it goes. And it's bought finally here. And finally, you know, those people with real careers on the West Coast with very few exceptions, are people made an Eastern connection, or a European connection. People like Diebenkorn, like Sam Francis, like Wayne Thiebaud who's very well located here in New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Absolutely.

IRVING BLUM: You know, there are people who've done it. But boy, it's a tough situation. By the way, I've seen, in the 15 years I was there, fifty – no, more – a hundred galleries come and go.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, someone starts them. They why don't they sustain –

IRVING BLUM: Various people start them, and then it's too expensive or too difficult to sustain them. Virginia Dwan for a time had fabulous exhibitions. Poured a fortune into the gallery. And came away with certain paintings of her own – I must say, didn't do too badly. But had a fortune to pour in. But what about the Herb Palmers and the Everett Ellins and the Ralph Nelsons, and on and on and on, you know. They came and went after two years or three years or four years. And it still goes on in Los Angeles, it still goes on. The mortality rate is treacherous, terrifying.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it is here too, in some ways.

IRVING BLUM: It is here too. But think of how many galleries there are, at any one moment.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [sighing] Well, it's a staggering number – [laughing]

IRVING BLUM: It is, it really is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - in terms of the income , and the proportion of the population.

IRVING BLUM: That's right. Well, this is the marketplace, finally. It's finally what brought me here from Los Angeles. Just that knowledge.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You were there until when?

IRVING BLUM: I was there until 1972, and came here in '72. I operated under the name Ferus until 1967; in 1967 I merged with the Pace Gallery for a very short time. Ideologically we were on two different plateaus. We disbanded very quickly. We could see that wasn't getting anywhere. I opened then in another location on La Cienaga under my own name, Irving Blum, in 1967 and stayed there for five years until 1972, at which time I came to New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One of the things that interest me a great deal is the atmosphere of the early 60s in Los Angeles in terms of the museum people and who was working at contemporary American art then.

IRVING BLUM: Well, very few people were really looking at contemporary American art in Los Angeles. But the 60s were fiercely innovative; a fiercely exciting moment. People were ready for virtually anything. New

experiences kept coming, you know, fast and furiously – not only in art but in style, in fashion, in music, in theater, certainly in cinema, on and on and on. It was an absolutely wide-open time here in New York and in California. It allowed some room for someone like myself and for a situation such as I established. It allowed me to penetrate in some way that allowed me to survive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long did Walter stay involved?

IRVING BLUM: For a very short time. Actually from 1958 when I surfaced to 1961. He left the gallery in 1961 to take a curatorship at the Pasadena Art Museum. I bought him out at that time and operated independently from 1961 on. And Mrs. Moss was involved until 1967, when I merged with the Pace Gallery. She was there for ten years. Made up our deficit for ten years. We operated in the red for ten years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

IRVING BLUM: Yes. We lost money, over a ten-year period.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did the artists make any money out of –

IRVING BLUM: Oh, we gave them stipends, salaries; yes; they did. The artists were taking $200 a month – no staggering sum but John Altoon was living off the gallery, Bengston was living off the gallery. I mean, enough so that they didn't have to do anything else. Ed ___ was living off the gallery; Craig Kaufman, Larry Bell, Edward Ruscha –they were all living off the gallery, you know, taking $300, $400, $500 a month, whatever they could, depending on how their sales went. And if there were no sales, well, we would always give them a minimum sum. Like a blood bank. [both laugh] My blood. Mrs. Moss's.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like that? Because that was a new thing in America, the monthly stipend, draw –

IRVING BLUM: I found it ultimately destructive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: For what reason?

IRVING BLUM: [after some hesitation] Well, number one, I think artists should be paid exactly in proportion to what's sold rather than given advances. I think those advances come back to haunt you. I think they're difficult for the gallery to do, if the gallery isn't a total kind of tax write off situation; very difficult for the gallery to do. And also, they get the artist in over his head, in ways that's very difficult for him. It seems like a free ride at the beginning but finally you have to pay the piper, no matter who you are. I think it's complicated for that reason. I would much rather give an artist exactly what he sells. If I sell brilliantly, then he's paid brilliantly, and deserves to be. I much believe in that system, rather than in extraordinary advances.

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PAUL CUMMINGS: You talked about the Ferus and the changing of the artists and going through all that evolution. There are a couple of questions – not necessarily about those particular people but I think would sort of reflect on later developments. One is: when you got out there, you essentially had a New York point of view, right?

IRVING BLUM: I had, to all intents and purposes, pretty much an open point of view, pretty much an Eastern point of view. Pretty much no really formed points of view, I think that would be more accurate.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think in that time you developed a point of view that was either West Coast or East Coast? How would you describe it? Or is that a hard thing to –

IRVING BLUM: Well, that's a hard thing to say, because I went through a lot of changes. Initially I had really a West Coast point of view, I think that would be fair to say, since all the people I was showing, all the people I was dealing with and talking to and the people I was really focused on were from there. As a consequence, that's where my greatest sympathy was, that's where my greatest allegiance was. But as I began to show more and more people from the East, my allegiance, so to speak, began to shift not necessarily away from the West Coast but it became more inclusive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Broader.

IRVING BLUM: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The hardest question to answer, I suppose, is how does one make selections or judgments. You know, you decide, here's an artist, I will show him in the gallery –

IRVING BLUM: I think the criteria are very complicated. I don't think that's an easy question for anyone to answer. In my case, I can tell you that I think it has to do with a combination of things that somehow come together, and those things have to do, ideally, with your own experience, your own exposure, the fact of your being in a certain place at a certain time, the fact that the artists that you represent are about as old as you are and so you're concerned across the board – a parallel concern. So that gives you all kinds of in sights that you wouldn't have ordinarily. It's like – I'm simply reminded of a lady who came into the gallery a year or so ago and she said to me, "Well, you know, I heard about your history and I've heard about your experience in California and the fact that years ago you showed Roy Lichtenstein and years ago you showed Frank Stella and Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol, Ellsworth Kelly and so on." And she said, "But I really only have a limited amount of money. I'm really a 'young collector,' so to speak, I have just so much that I can spend on art. How would you advise me to proceed?" I said, "I can tell you very clearly. Find a young dealer –

PAUL CUMMINGS: And grow up with it.

IRVING BLUM: Yes. Find a young dealer who is in a regular way visiting studios, who does talk to a younger generation of artists, who does heed what they tell him, who is able – still in the face of everything he hears – to sort through for himself and to come to certain personal conclusions about all that. And I think that's the way it's done.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what do you do –

IRVING BLUM: Well, first of all, I was unencumbered. I had no allegiances. I didn't owe anybody anything, I had no money, I was very free. I had nothing to protect because I didn't have anything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the artists didn't.

IRVING BLUM: Exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: If you went to, say, ten studios in a week and sat down on Sunday afternoon and said, "OK, I've got to pick two people out of the ten." What elements did you look for? I mean, a certain amount of work, a certain development, changes, no changes –

IRVING BLUM: You look for a multiplicity of events.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, somebody who would understand the business side of handling his works? Or was it your gut reaction to –

IRVING BLUM: Well, I think it's everything along with your gut reaction.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [laughs] As much as you can get.

IRVING BLUM: As much as you can get, right. You simply can't, there's no way you can reduce it to this or that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There are not ten little things that if you can –

IRVING BLUM: No, no. The interesting thing about the situation is that it's so difficult to categorize, so difficult to analyze. Everyone's different. Dealers are different, artists are different, and there's a kind of chemistry that either works or doesn't. The ingredients are very complex. So it can't really – you know, there's your own feeling, your own experience, your own intuition about ways you think painting should be going. Or if somebody is able to strike a kind of responsive chord in you for one reason or another. That's all part of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: As the gallery proceeded in time out there, as it developed, you began showing more and more Eastern people –

IRVING BLUM: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did this affect the group of collectors that you were involved with? Were they interested? Or did you want them to become interested in these people?

IRVING BLUM: I think it's much more that I wanted them to become interested in those people. It's much more the fact that I really wanted to show the best of what was going on in this country, and that meant both coasts. I wanted to be considered a national gallery, that I was located in one place but that I didn't have allegiance only to the people from that place. I wanted very much to be thought of in a way that New York galleries were thought of – New York galleries represented people from Texas, represented people from Chicago, from California, from New York, from everywhere. And I wanted that same prerogative.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why did you want that?

IRVING BLUM: Because I felt it was correct. Because I didn't want to be tied down, I didn't want to be considered a provincial gallery. I didn't want to be considered a gallery that showed only West Coast activity and had no interest in anything else. I didn't want that "stigma." My ambitions were greater than that, simply.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the influence of someone like Dwan when she opened her gallery and did those lavish –

IRVING BLUM: Well, it was very scary, because she somehow was interested in a lot of the same people I was interested in. For instance, I had my entre to Lichtenstein, showing Roy early on, and I had my access to his work. Now, here comes this new lady with quite a lot of money and a very lavish, big, new situation. And I felt very threatened by her situation at the time, I remember. But I simply held my ground and didn't permit her any excess [both laugh] –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which would have been easy.

IRVING BLUM: - which would have been easy, for her. I had to do that several times in my career – that people who were better financed than I was came along – Virginia Dwan is certainly one example, Everett Owen who had a gallery on the West Coast is another example, Feigen Palmer is another example as you know – he was involved with an Eastern gallery as well. I had a lot of competition during the 15 years I was in business in California.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you find that stimulating, or helpful?

IRVING BLUM: I found it distracting to my best interests. I found that I had to be that much surer, that much more confident, that much more professional. So actually, in retrospect –

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was an aid to you.

IRVING BLUM: It was an aid. But at the time I saw it as much more threatening than it actually was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But didn't they influence the same collectors? There weren't that many people –

IRVING BLUM: There weren't that many people and that was part of the problem. The same eight people that I had painfully developed were then distracted. I could see them focus on the situation —

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you didn't see that as an enrichment of their –

IRVING BLUM: I didn't see it then particularly as an enrichment, although it was an enrichment, that's certainly true, but I didn't read it as that. I read it as a threat –

PAUL CUMMINGS: As business competition.

IRVING BLUM: That's right. It was more threatening than anything else. I thought they were absorbing as much as I could give them, as much as they could handle. And I thought that the other was –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what about people who'd been there, like Sins Landau, who dealt in European things, and Elma Teese –

IRVING BLUM: Well, Felix had a real role. I think everybody out there had a role. I think Paul Catter had a role, I think Frank Puns who was out there – everyone had a role and everyone had a slightly different role. Furls, for example, dealt in European Masters material, in Picasso particularly, in Matisse particularly, in works on paper, smaller examples very often, but nevertheless he brought a lot of that material into the city. But nobody was focused in the way that I was. I was "particular" in that regard.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But they were a different circle of collectors –

IRVING BLUM: A totally different circle of collectors. Very often there was no way that the situations would overlap, no way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A Matisse collector wasn't about to buy a Warhol.

IRVING BLUM: Absolutely not, absolutely not! And still isn't, I rather think, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the museums? Hopps had gone off to Pasadena, right?

IRVING BLUM: Right. But there was very little money. There was always very little money, there's still very little money.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, still ___ exhibitions which would generate –

IRVING BLUM: Important. That was important to my situation and to the gallery. The L.A. County Museum was never a solid supporter of my situation –

PAUL CUMMINGS: What have they solidly supported?

IRVING BLUM: They solidly supported their own survival [both laugh] and as far as I can determine are doing exactly the same thing. They really have never meant a great deal to anybody in that community and I suspect won't for some time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What's the main museum, then, in terms of dependence or influence –

IRVING BLUM: There isn't any, now. There's Henry Hopkins up in San Francisco who's doing I think really interesting work and is doing a lot in terms of galvanizing that community. Pasadena and the ____ Art Museum did that when it was alive, it's now the Norton Simon Museum, and it plays the same role in California, it seems to me, that the Frick plays in New York: it's marvelous that it's there, it's wonderful to dip into, but in terms of stimulating collecting activity, no. I mean, you're not going to "stimulate" anybody into buying a Rembrandt, for God's sake.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hard to get new works.

IRVING BLUM: For one thing! [both laugh] It's lovely that it's there, it's lovely that the Gay is there. But it certainly doesn't mean a hell of a lot to living artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One of the things that interests me is something that people always refer to as "California taste," whatever that it is.

IRVING BLUM: Yes. "California taste" has come to mean a kind of chromium taste, or a plasticized taste. California taste is often called "caviapple" taste and has that implication. So it isn't necessarily positive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you have problems with people who'd come in and say, "Well, I'm interested in that, but how am I going to put it in my house, what's it going to look…."

IRVING BLUM: Absolutely. It was a complete educational thing, it really was, having to do with my showing them articles, my teaching them that very often one could bunch furniture up in the middle of a room and free walls. And you live a little more sparely that way but much more rewardingly that way. It was just a process of education, I had to start, really, from the beginning.

PAUL CUMMINGS: To be a teacher and a decorator and – [laughing]

IRVING BLUM: And an art dealer and all the rest. Psychiatrist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm sure a lot of that.

IRVING BLUM: A lot of that!

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's a word you used before is "information" and the accumulation, the use of information. What does that mean? What constitutes information? Biographical information? Political information?

IRVING BLUM: I think what constitutes information to me – I'm not quite sure how I used it before, but I would just tell you that I think what it means is exposure, as much as anything else. So in a situation where these things are not familiar, where there isn't a heightened museum activity, or there isn't critical writing, or there isn't a number of galleries – not merely two or three or a half-dozen, but rather a hundred; in that type of situation, it's hard to get verification for what you're doing. It's hard for the collector to verify what he does.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Like he's out on the end of a board somewhere.

IRVING BLUM: Pretty much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: By himself, in other words.

IRVING BLUM: Pretty much listening to what you have to say and pretty much leaning very hard on your opinion and on the information that you've put together – there's that word again. That's really what I mean. By "information" I mean structure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it's all the things that you would offer, as opposed, say, to somebody down the street who

was doing –

IRVING BLUM: So it's always things that I would offer, as opposed to, say, for example, to somebody living and collecting in New York and being reinforced constantly by a Kenneth Noland show at the Guggenheim Museum, by articles about the art, by all kinds of collecting activity revolving around that particular artist, by having friends whom he could consult regarding his conclusions and decisions. So it's really about operating in a vacuum as opposed to operating with –

PAUL CUMMINGS: I guess a lot of what you did was aimed at making your collectors more secure about their decisions –

IRVING BLUM: Correct, correct.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - because there were so few of them.

IRVING BLUM: That's true.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And many of them were business people involved with the community in certain ways. People would visit their house and say, "What have you done there??" [laughs] And they'd have to supply some verbal response. I suppose that initially they got that from you.

IRVING BLUM: Absolutely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And on and on and on. As you showed more and more artists from the East Coast, how did they fit into the California visual milieu? Did people find them easier to take, or was their name that someone wanted –

IRVING BLUM: Initially, I think the West Coast artists and the art community was absolutely thrilled – I don't think anybody was displeased by my doing that to begin with. But that shifted in time, gradually, as the people from East began commanding higher prices for their work. As soon as Frank Stella began commanding $6,000 or $7,000 figures, and Billy Al Bengston kept it around the $2,500 level, you could see where differences would crop up. Oh, severely. And as that became more acute, the situation became more acute – it became almost intolerable to me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way? You were in the middle.

IRVING BLUM: Because I was in the middle. Very often they would say bizarre things, like "the reason East Coast people are getting the prices they're getting and are in such demand is because of your focus." I'd be very flattered by that accusation but it was wholly inaccurate.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But several of those people had New York galleries –

IRVING BLUM: But without much success. Without, say, for example, the success that Lichtenstein had virtually from the beginning –

PAUL CUMMINGS: We-e-ell –

IRVING BLUM: Virtually. I mean, you know, there weren't very many people buying Andy or Roy but they did have their partisans and they did have strong support from certain quarters here in New York. And that had never happened with that degree of intensity with the California people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think it was so hard to get New York partisans for them? It still is, I think, in many ways.

IRVING BLUM: I think in a lot of instances the quality wasn't there. Not that quality always wins out, not that you can't promote somebody who isn't really a first-rate artist, because of course you can. But I think in terms of the West Coast, very often the people simply want comparable to the best of what was produced here on the East Coast. I think they just simply weren't as good.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So ultimately it came down to the market response and the critical response and –

IRVING BLUM: Being greater in favor of what was going on here than what was going on on the West Coast. I think it was accurate. That's also not to say that an artist on the West Coast who had put his time in and who did have quality couldn't find an international audience. Diebenkorn proved that that was possible. Wayne Thiebaud, Ed Kienholz again – all those people proved that they could find an international audience from a West Coast base. But at the time, 15 years ago or so when I was in California, that still wasn't true and there was a lot of jealousy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When I meet people from the West Coast, the artists particularly, still seem very defensive about –

IRVING BLUM: They are, they are very defensive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - and they won't, except an occasional one, will do anything to go to Europe to set up a situation in New York with somebody who will really promote his work.

IRVING BLUM: That's correct.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The motivation for the business part of the activity doesn't seem to be very focused.

IRVING BLUM: No. That's true.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wonder if it reflects the way of life generally out there, which is a little more relaxed.

IRVING BLUM: You might say that. I think it does. I think the situation in California is much more relaxed. I don't think you have the angst that you have here. I don't think you have the pressures that you have here, and consequently people tend to be a little easier and the work tends to be, maybe, a little less interesting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because it's a little less –easier.

IRVING BLUM: Because it's easier and a little less intense.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And their friends are all alike.

IRVING BLUM: And their friends are all alike. That's the kind of West Coast condition, it's endemic to that place, I think. Not that it must, necessarily, hold true time and time again. There are exceptions. Diebenkorn, I think, is a –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Diebenkorn has been showing for 20 years.

IRVING BLUM: But he can show that he has a 20-year history that he can lean on. And during a lot of that time he was ignored.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, absolutely.

IRVING BLUM: I mean, his success is really new-found. It's a relatively new-found success.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A couple of years, virtually.

IRVING BLUM: I would say in the last three or four years. That's correct.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think that is? What provoked it, do you think?

IRVING BLUM: In Diebenkorn's case?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

IRVING BLUM: Oh, I think that Diebenkorn is now being critically written into the first- generation American experience. I think that work of comparable quality is much more expensive. I think that's certainly part of the reason, aside from people really adoring the paintings. And I think they really adore the painting, I think he paints very beautifully and people adore them. But I think also there's the added edge of the fact that he's being written into the first generation I feel.

PAUL CUMMINGS: As his place in history becomes more secure –

IRVING BLUM: Secure. And as demand goes up and the prices go up. Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Some time in the early 60s –'62 or '63, whenever it was –*Artforum* began in California. And they gave a lot of space to West Coast people. Was that helpful to you?

IRVING BLUM: Enormously helpful, enormously helpful. It did a great deal for me, it really did. Theirs was the beginning of a certain kind of confirmation. The only kind of criticism that we ever got in California came from a local reviewer by the name of Henry Seldes, who's still there, who wrote for the *L.A. Times*, and was totally prejudiced against my gallery and against what I stood for and against what I represented. The guy had a hard time with abstract painting. He's come around since then, but at the beginning he was hostile to virtually every exhibit I ever had in my gallery. That never helped me. And for *Artforum* to surface and to be sympathetic to a

great deal of my activity, to the activity around the Ferus Gallery, was enormously important and gave me a real leg up for as long as the magazine was on the West Coast, with Phil Leader at the head, who was also a great personal friend of mine – it was much more than useful.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you come to know him?

IRVING BLUM: *Artforum*'s offices were above my gallery. [PC laughs] Very simple. *Artforum* moved in above my gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's right, there were five little staircases.

IRVING BLUM: Exactly right. And so I used to hang around up there. There were long dull afternoons when I would walk upstairs and Phil and I would drink coffee and cut up the art world, have arguments or come to certain precise conclusions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who else founded that?

IRVING BLUM: The magazine was really started by (trying to recollect) – there was a man who published the magazine who was bought out by Charlie Cowles. His name just went out of my head, I'm afraid I can't recollect.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was on about two or three issues or something.

IRVING BLUM: That's right. And then Charlie Cowles paid him whatever he paid him for the magazine and secured it. And Phil remained as editor and John remained as a reporter for the magazine; critic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you meet Coplans?

IRVING BLUM: I met John when he was in San Francisco. He decided that he wanted to stay close to the magazine. He was an artist at the time and he decided that he might want a studio in Los Angeles. I went down at his invitation to see his work and I liked him very much personally. We got on very well, and Phil Leider and John Coplans and I became very friendly. After all, there weren't that many people that one could refer to, then, who knew exactly what it was you were dealing with; and we were friendly early on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you think the whole *Artforum* publication evolved as it became – if you look through the first half a dozen – well, until it came to New York?

IRVING BLUM: Well, the same thing happened to *Artforum* that happened to my gallery, in a way. In a way, the magazine began on the West Coast, it dealt almost tot ally with West Coast activity, it became, then, more interested in what was going on east, or it became interested in what was going on East. It then included material from New York, and gradually the balance shifted. The same thing happened to me in the gallery. I began by showing a few people from New York and then more, and then these people began really doing –well, they began to receive in extraordinary ways and I simply was along for the ride.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It always fascinating to me how that magazine changed so much once it came to New York.

IRVING BLUM: It had – oh, but those are other issues. Those have to do with New York pressures; had to do with the New York situation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think in the early years it did a great deal for the West Coast.

IRVING BLUM: Oh yes – well, there was no other criticism, you see. So it did a great deal not only in terms of what it was able to inform one living in California but also to inform somebody living elsewhere about what was going on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And it was simply Americans' love in that spot.

IRVING BLUM: It had a kind of substance when it was printed. [Paul Cummings laughs] "It isn't just hearsay."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Of the original group of artists that were there when you arrived there was the weeding out session.

IRVING BLUM: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who were the ones that remained the longest time?

IRVING BLUM: The ones that remained as the major figures for the longest time were Bob Irwin, Ed Moses, Craig Kaufman, Billy Al Bengston, Kenny Price; and then later, Larry Bell, Edward Ruscha, John Mason, John Altoon.

That was really pretty much the tight nucleus of the Ferus situation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you try and place those people with galleries –

IRVING BLUM: Very definitely, and succeeded in a lot of instances. I placed Craig Kaufman, Robert Irwin, Larry Bell with the Pace Gallery. I placed Billy Al Bengston with Martha Jackson and arranged for that first exhibit he had with her. And Edward Ruscha with Aeolus through Bill Copley.

[End of Tape 1 – Side 2]

IRVING BLUM: [continuing] So I did a lot of that work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But ____ means a lot –

IRVING BLUM: Not a great deal.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - to the art world here. Do you think it's because they lived there, because of the gallery, or –

IRVING BLUM: I think it's a combination of reasons. I think it's largely because they had no constituency here at all, were completely unknown here. I think that accounts for a great deal. I think you can be – certainly as good as they were, live here, and have a constituency here, and come to some recognition in ways that they really didn't. And I think that was largely because they were not known in New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So even if you have leverage in California it doesn't really count that much.

IRVING BLUM: Right. No, it doesn't seem to count.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because ___ started doing rather well fairly soon on.

IRVING BLUM: Yes. Voulkos had enormous ____ on the West Coast, and somehow still hasn't been able to –

PAUL CUMMINGS: To people here, it's always been as a craftsman –

IRVING BLUM: I know, I know, but he's more than that. He's really a sculptor. And a really – I think a very highly qualified sculptor. He isn't really thought of in those terms on the East Coast. For a combination of reasons. He isn't known, the work isn't known and he's never made a really big effort.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, to ask you about some of the artists, what appeals to you particularly about the work of, say, Bengston?

IRVING BLUM: Well, in most instances, after weeding out the number of artists that I did and coming to a real conclusion about those that I kept, there were aspects in all their works that I really liked enormously. But the over riding aspect, it seems to me, is that they all had – at least in my mind – the qualifications to go on and to extend and to grow as artists. That was the overriding quality they all shared in my mind. That's really why they were part of the gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about somebody like Irwin, who began making not optical, making things –

IRVING BLUM: All through my relationship with Irwin, he was making paintings. He was painting, then he did the dock pictures –you remember those –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

IRVING BLUM: - then the discs. And as long as he was involved with me there was always a commodity, always an object, always something to sell. Then he gradually drifted away from the gallery. In the late 60s he gradually drifted away from making objects.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think provoked that?

IRVING BLUM: His own voyage. In his case, I think, a metaphysical voyage that he is still on, having to do with the nature of art as he perceives it and his own notions about product and objects and evolution, et cetera.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because I find what I've read about him seems a little flakey, not very well put together – it doesn't really match –

IRVING BLUM: Well, I think Irwin has a large measure of the process in him. And a lot of it is a little flakey. I think he's a little flakey. I think one really has to be in order to get out on the limb that Irwin is on. I think he's doing nothing less than in his own way attempting to change the nature of how one thinks about painting. How one

thinks about art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Don't you think a lot of artists try and do that?

IRVING BLUM: Yes, but not in the extreme way that Irwin has done. [laughs]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But he keeps pushing harder.

IRVING BLUM: Yes. He's pushing the boundaries harder. Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He sees an edge, well, let's push it a little harder.

IRVING BLUM: That's right. He'll follow even bizarre inclinations.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Phil Leider was doing what, when the magazine started out?

IRVING BLUM: I think he was working for a gallery in San Francisco.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh really?

IRVING BLUM: Yes. As an employee for a gallery in the Bay Area. He was asked by this publisher, whose name I still can't recall, to start the magazine; this man would find the backing and would supply the backing. And Phil thought it was interesting. He'd had a literary background. He was very interested in poetry, very interested in writing, and had a great number of friends who involved him in those areas. That was always an interest of his, writing. He picked up the ball and ran with it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: If *Artforum* in the early days published an article on one of your people, would you see a response from that?

IRVING BLUM: Yes. Yes, there was absolutely a response. I think it was a one-to-one.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was that direct.

IRVING BLUM: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, in interesting collectors, other dealers –

IRVING BLUM: Yes. That's why I kept trying to urge museums to a greater level of activity. I tried to urge anybody I could. I tried to get people to write more lucidly about what it was they saw on the West Coast. I felt all that – and still feel – that it's all terribly, terribly important, that it all plays a role.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think the museums seem to lack motivation?

IRVING BLUM: [hesitating] I can't answer that. I think in terms of Los Angeles, just a general hostility to anything new. In the one place where that hostility had no right to exist, one encountered that kind of hostility. It was appalling, and somehow it was there. You couldn't fight it and you couldn't deal with it. There were damn few galleries in Los Angeles I would rarely, infrequently, if ever have visits from trustees or visits from staff. Even curators. They would come by only rarely and would never –

PAUL CUMMINGS: They could do all the galleries in one afternoon a month!

IRVING BLUM: Easily, in a regular way. Just to find out what was going on. Sometimes six months would pass before I would see them. Other than to see them socially at some party.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about selling outside the Los Angeles area? Did you go to northern California or –

IRVING BLUM: Yes. I tried to do that. And did it as successfully as I was able to do it. It was not very successfully – there simply weren't a lot of people focused on that kind of material.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've always had the feeling there's a certain competition between northern and southern California.

IRVING BLUM: Oh there is a certain competition but it's largely manufactured, it doesn't amount to very much. The life styles are quite different in both places but substantively there's no radical difference between the two places, I think. There's pretty much the same energy level in both places. [laughs heartily]

PAUL CUMMINGS: One of the things that is interesting, I guess, in terms of what's going on in this gallery, Blum-Helman, has sort of carried on several things that began at the Ferus in many ways.

IRVING BLUM: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the years that you were there – what was it, ten, about?

IRVING BLUM: About 15.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One would think it would be possible to develop more than eight or ten collectors, which doesn't seem like very many.

IRVING BLUM: I did develop more than eight or ten. Especially towards the end – towards the end of my stay at Ferus I was selling all over the world. I was selling not only to the East Coast but I was selling to Germany, to France, to Texas; I was selling nationally and internationally towards the end of my stay. But that took 15 years of concentrated activity and 15 years of getting myself established.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think were the greatest aids in doing that, in getting yourself established?

IRVING BLUM: Doing the same thing over and over for a long time. Simply the repetition, absolutely. And making people understand that you were really squarely behind the artists that you were showing – who were evolving and changing and growing, as artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Would your newer collectors, excluding that first group that one lectured to – how long did that go on, by the way? The lectures, and the –

IRVING BLUM: Oh, I would say roughly five years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That long?

IRVING BLUM: Oh yes. Four or five years. It was a long-term project.

PAUL CUMMINGS: People have told me about them and it sounded like something that had gone on for a year or two.

IRVING BLUM: No, but then there were other groups. And some people stayed, and these things extended in kind of funny ways. I think the Contemporary Arts Council which exists in Los Angeles really had its origins in Ferus classes. It's a long time ago, and people might debate that, but I rather think that's true. And that goes on year after year, and they bring people in – critics, museum people, historians.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you still have collectors from the early '60s that you deal with?

IRVING BLUM: Yes. But I mostly buy from them rather than sell to them. So, times change.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [laughs] Well, that's part of the cycle, isn't it!

IRVING BLUM: Right, right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mentioned selling works of art abroad. When did that begin?

IRVING BLUM: That, I think, began in the mid-'60s, around 1966, I would say. Really, with the Pop artists, and it began really in Germany and with an almost immediate sympathy that the Germans had for Pop materials for strange reasons. They recognized it, they saw it, and they may have misunderstood it, but they adored it; and bought it early on. And as the Germans bought it and it began to infiltrate into German museums, the French became more interested, the Swiss became more interested, the English became more interested. And interest grew. But it began with the Germans, who traveled and whom one would correspond with.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Probably because of the economy too.

IRVING BLUM: Yes, they had a terrific economy too. And also, you'd hear from German dealers. Somehow there was a great deal of information that was exchanged back and forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did that change your own operating procedures as you started dealing internationally, or was it just one more –

IRVING BLUM: Yes, everything. Things did begin to change, yes. The pressures became a different – I didn't change radically but I began to be able to buy more things. It gave me a greater freedom, I would say.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A bigger cash flow and more –

IRVING BLUM: Exactly. More activity.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What I'm really trying to get at, in a way, here, is more about the ambiance of the time as though it were involved.

IRVING BLUM: It was extremely thin, and mostly what you hear about California 20 years ago is really a fabrication. I remember that I began speaking early on as the country having two major art centers – New York and Los Angeles. And people began imitating that idea. Gradually it took hold, and gradually one heard it from a dozen other sources. But the real truth is that the situation on the West Coast was terribly, terribly thin. It was thin then and it's still thin. I think that the biggest thing on the West Coast and the one really extraordinary thing that one can say that exists out there is the community of artists. I think that they like the life style, their studio activity, there's art activity out there. That's what makes it so unique. There's very little of anything else. There's very little gallery activity, there's no museum activity to speak of of any consequence –

PAUL CUMMINGS: They need some patronage to keep alive, or does that now come from –

IRVING BLUM: That now comes from other quarters. I think Los Angeles is on the circuit internationally. English dealers, at least up until recently; German dealers, New York dealers in a regular way go to scout activity.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I remember once being in Los Angeles some time in the mid-'60s. The galleries had openings on Monday nights, wasn't it Mondays, from five or six to eight, up and down La Cienaga –

IRVING BLUM: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - several would open. And the contrast in terms of the numbers of people and the kinds of people, as opposed to what one would see the same year on Madison Avenue on Tuesday nights, really kind of astounded me. It was more of a social activity, and not serious. The few times I visited, not many people would really talk about the exhibition. Whereas in New York, you would see somebody you hadn't seen for three months and say, "Well, what do you think of the de Kooning show?" Or something like that.

IRVING BLUM: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There was a kind of insecurity, I felt, that was going around, and they would all rather stand out in the street. Drink wine rather than really go in and confront the works. Was that an accurate reading? A typical situation?

IRVING BLUM: Yes, I would say yes, that's absolutely true.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmmmm. They wanted to but they couldn't?

IRVING BLUM: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You must have had lots of horrendous situations with people in terms of selling things.

IRVING BLUM: Oh, I wished for horrendous situations. (PC laughs) There just wasn't a heck of a lot of activity. There wasn't a lot of movement, there really wasn't. And the awful thing about selling out there, especially at the beginning, was that there was simply no pressure. So if somebody said, well, if you told somebody the price of a painting, they would say to you, "Fine, all right, let me think about it." You'd say, "All right." And they would think about it for a month, or two, or three and be relatively sure that when they came back into the gallery, that thing would still be there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

IRVING BLUM: And virtually every time out, it was still there. So they could take as much time as they liked to consider buying whatever it was they had in their head to do. Whereas in New York, if you see something and it's really terrific, and if you say to the dealer, "Well, let me think about it," the dealer will generally say, "Well, certainly, take 48 hours. I have other interests, I have other people coming in to look." And you know that that's true. In California, it simply wasn't true. I couldn't say, "Look, I can only give you 24 hours." They would laugh! They would say, "Who else would buy that, for God's sake?" (PC laughs uproariously) And you couldn't answer. And they'd be right, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did that change later in the '60s?

IRVING BLUM: Yes. But not by much. It's still a condition on the West Coast. It's still a problem, and I hear the dealers there, when I go back, complain about kind of thing still. There's more activity, there's more collecting, there's more buying. But the pressure that I talk about that exists here in New York simply doesn't exist on the West Coast.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Would you still have the collectors argue over price and want discounts and all that other-

IRVING BLUM: Yes but they do that everywhere. They do that here as well, you know. It depends, too, on pressure. I represent Richard Diebenkorn here on the East Coast, now, along with Knoedler. And if somebody wants a Diebenkorn painting, I tell them exactly what the price is, and if they say, “Fine, will you give me a discount?” I say, “NO! I don’t give discounts on Diebenkorn paintings, there’s just too much demand and you’re lucky to be given the privilege of acquiring one.” And they say “Thank you” and then secure the picture. And there’s no ___about it. And it’s terrific. I must say, I’m enjoying it. [Paul Cummings laughs] But it’s highly unusual.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It’s nice to have it the other way around.

IRVING BLUM: I’ll say.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think about – you have oh, different kind art movements, the Funk thing that went on, and the Beat thing, and all the Zen ideas.

IRVING BLUM: Not very much. I think they’re largely fabricated. I don’t think they’re – I think the Funk thing was something invented by Peter Sells and never very interesting. It took whatever turn it took and now it’s hardly ever referred to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Some of the artists are still interesting and some have disappeared and that’s it.

IRVING BLUM: That’s right. It’s like frozen yogurt – in three years it’ll be replaced by something else.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There are lots of people – well, a few, actually – one associates you with. Like the one with John Coplans for years and years and years.

IRVING BLUM: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where has John been? He’s been a friend for a long time but you –

IRVING BLUM: Yes. John has been a friend but he’s also been a strong moral force, as far as I’m concerned. He’s absolutely unbuyable. Even his closest friends are unable to get a particular professional advantage from him if he feels it isn’t warranted. He’s one of those really special people. And so I always used him particularly, aside from the friendship we developed, as a really accurate sounding board. For a whole combination of issues. I would just play off John in that way. I’d get a take, then I was free to I had do whatever it was I had in my head to do. But I knew always that the take I got from him was sound and valid.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Give me an example and reasons.

IRVING BLUM: There have been so many examples, it’s hard to give you particularly just one. But it may have to do, perhaps, with my notion of putting together three or four disparate artists in some kind of combination. And I would say to John, “This is an idea that I’m entertaining,” and he would say, “Well, it’s a valid idea but you’re reaching too far. It’s just not coherent enough.” But I would always trust what he tells me. And if he disagrees with something I had planned, I would absolutely rethink it. I might go ahead and still do it but I would certainly rethink it. And that’s been his role in my life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it’s been a kind of give-and-take conversation, ideas –

IRVING BLUM: Exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was it like that with Leider? Or different?

IRVING BLUM: Different with Leider. Much less “give’ with Leider and more “take” with Leider.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - must be a writer. (He laughs.)

IRVING BLUM: With John there was a certain equivalency. With Phil it was different. Phil was a little, always a little more kind of autocratic in his opinions. Less of a dialogue with Phil; more a kind of attitude of hearing him out, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And if it was useful, or whatever ——

IRVING BLUM: You could pick and choose. Exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I suppose one of the things that becomes obvious after a while is your involvement with Castelli.

IRVING BLUM: Oh yes. That a very close and very –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Began when? When you were in New York?

IRVING BLUM: It began, really, when I was in New York, before I even moved to California. I was aware of the gallery, knew that the gallery seemed to me the most substantial new gallery in New York when I left to open my gallery in California.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you friendly with Leo?

IRVING BLUM: Yes. I had several conversations – not really friendly but I had several conversations with him, and had a regard for the man and a real affection for him. And when I opened the gallery in California, did everything I could to cement that relationship. And as you see, have. We're still very close and we still enter into projects together and do things in concert. I hope that will continue and extend.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you find that? Because until recently, when he was around the corner and you shared several artists –

IRVING BLUM: Well, what I tend to do here, in terms of the artists he represents, what I much more tend to do, is specialize in earlier works by Lichtenstein particularly, by Frank Stella. For example, if somebody wants one of the early stripe paintings of Frank's, Leo is in no way able to supply it. They come to me and I really am much more equipped to do that –

PAUL CUMMINGS: What does that mean, in terms of knowing who has them, or….?

IRVING BLUM: It means knowing who has them –

PAUL CUMMINGS: It means who has them –

PAUL CUMMINGS: - and financing the resources to go out and negotiate –

IRVING BLUM: It means all that; exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the thing you don't do – you don't really represent people in that way, do you.

IRVING BLUM: No. I do Diebenkorn, and I have a half-interest now in Ellsworth Kelly with Leo, we share Kelly. So that everything we sell, Leo gets half and every thing that Leo sells we get half of it. It's a direct sharing of that one artist. And I hope to be able to do that with him and it seems profit able for him to do and it's profitable for us to do, and my hope is to be able to do that with maybe one or two more artists in his gallery. And to take on three or four younger people, such as Brian Hunt, the young artist we took on this season for the first time. And extend in those ways.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's become more of a trading gallery, almost.

IRVING BLUM: Yes, I'd like to be able to do both. I'd like to represent some younger artists and to continue trading.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Back to the madness! [bursting into laughter]

IRVING BLUM: [laughing heartily] That's right. But I'm not doing it with the same naïveté I did it years and years ago, I can tell you that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Speaking of the naïveté, how has – this is complicated – how has your attitude toward the art business changed, say, in the California years as opposed to here?

IRVING BLUM: Well, one becomes older, one becomes more experienced, one becomes more cynical. And I think I've changed, probably, in all those ways. I'm not as naive as I was when I started. If I knew then what I know now, I probably would have had other thoughts about doing the gallery business. I probably would have gone ahead and done it in any case, but at least I would have had a sounder base from which to operate. I would have known that it would have taken me six or seven years just to get even for example. That was something I had no idea of at the very beginning. And I would have understood that showing younger people or unknown people takes forever and is largely a thankless, difficult, expensive matter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But don't you think the business in the 60s changed a great deal?

IRVING BLUM: Sure it did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, American art became international –

IRVING BLUM: Sure it did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - the price level went from $20,000 to $30,000 –

IRVING BLUM: Oh well, you could gauge the change simply by measuring the kind of activity that existed at the Museum of Modern Art openings 20 years ago – there'd be altogether people milling around, and that was the New York art world, pretty much, as contrasted by what goes on today. And the thousands and thousands and thousands of people that are involved on different levels.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think produced all that?

IRVING BLUM: A complicated set of circumstance – affluence, more money; "the American experience" which is much better known now, which has been written about, speculated about, shown, examined, researched, and understood; everybody knows that first-generation painting begins roughly in the middle 40s with Pollock – the great people in the first generation, like Pollock, like Clyfford Still, like Barnett Newman, like de Kooning, Rothko, Kline are practically a litany by now. If you're a museum, if you're documenting the American experience, that's how you proceed; there's absolutely no question about it. That's known in Basel and it's known in Frankfurt and it's known in Vienna and it's known in Paris and it's known in Milan; and it's known, certainly, all over this country. There are no secrets, and it's very exciting. And a lot of people have access to this information and it's excited their interest, and it sells.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And it grew.

IRVING BLUM: Right. [both laugh]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But do you find that, say, the publicity generated by the art world, particularly, I guess, in the middle to the late '60s when the parties and the fancy collectors were trying to do something –

IRVING BLUM: Big Sotheby sales and all that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Could you see any response in that except (laughing) exhaustion for several days afterwards?

IRVING BLUM: No. Just that. And yes, there is a response. It's a very veiled one, I can't tell you specifically. But I think a greater interest generally. It's clearly one of the responses. People reading about the enormous prices that certain things fetched. I think it attracts more people, maybe for base reasons to begin, maybe those reasons change and root. As I know that they do and as I can tell you that they do. The initial engagement is for one reason or another, but in time, the reasons change, they become more complex. It happens that way.

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PAUL CUMMINGS: In verging into the mid-to-late 60s, I still have some general questions or specifics leading to general as I referred to about California and the whole – I guess it's more specific about you and the development of the art business from your point of view. What were the clues that you picked up? Who were your people you kind of bounced things off of to develop the business side of it as opposed to – [overlapping voices, laughter]

IRVING BLUM: You're going to have a hard time believing but I was so unconcerned with the business side of it that I simply learned by doing. I must say that I can't attribute an extraordinary-

PAUL CUMMINGS: No peer group.

IRVING BLUM: No, no, somehow not. That my whole focus from the beginning was trying to put together as much information about the art world and about artists vis-à-vis dealers and about that aspect of it rather than – the business aspect of it seemed to me very straightforward, fairly simple: someone came in, bought a painting, you agreed on a price, and you then collected some of the money. You did that however you did it and sometimes it was complicated and sometimes not. But in any case, what really mystified me, and what I was very naive about, was artist and dealer relationship.

PAUL CUMMINGS: For example….

IRVING BLUM: Well, how to put a gallery together, how one responded to artists' requests, were there boundaries that might be exceeded – if so, how was all that to be treated. Very complex-

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happens when the artist starts playing games with somebody else and all that other

kind –

IRVING BLUM: [emphatically] Exactly right. What's the general rule, how do you bend, how hard do you bend, how often do you bend –

PAUL CUMMINGS: How much can you sell out of the studio –

IRVING BLUM: How much can you sell out of the studio – all those myriad issues.

PAUL CUMMINGS: "Can I do a little print edition for somebody?"

IRVING BLUM: Exactly, on and on and on, as you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But there wasn't anybody out there with whom you could really talk shop. Norton Simon didn't come in for an hour or so.

IRVING BLUM: No. There weren't even any dealers I could talk shop with. There were other dealers there but you couldn't lean on their information, you had to put together your own. You simply had to put it together by doing, that was the only way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the only one who was close to what you were doing was Dwan, at one point, and that was –

IRVING BLUM: Yes, and they came later, on a different level, with different problems. A big, elaborate situation, you know. And she had problems that were very different from my problems. I was mostly concerned with money and putting money together and survival. And Virginia, at the beginning, had that taken care of.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you find in the mid- and late 60s that there was much bargaining on pictures with somebody – a lot or a small percentage –

IRVING BLUM: Depending. As you got better known, as my attitude hardened and as my point of view hardened – I went through every conceivable situation. I can tell you one situation, which will amuse you, maybe, and may be interesting to you. The Ferus Gallery from 1958 when I arrived functioned rather like a cooperative gallery. By that I mean very often before any hard conclusions were drawn, Walter and I would consult the artists and get an opinion from them vis-à-vis something we were thinking of taking out of the gallery or some exhibition from back East or up North that we were thinking of having. We would refer it to the artists in the gallery for an opinion. And one time during – we would meet very informally, perhaps once every month or once every two months, but really for the express purpose of setting policy. At one such meeting several of the artists stood up – in this case Ed Moses and Bill Bengston – and said that they'd consulted among themselves and they'd decided that there were to be no discount from the gallery and that I had to adhere firmly to that attitude. "Well," I said, "people are accustomed to paying discounts and you're making it very tough for me when you say that." And they said, well, that wasn't their interest, theirs was a moral precept and that precept had to do with selling at the quoted price, with no discount. Their idea of what the value should be was just an absolute idea. You would then explain to the person that the gallery had that policy, and if they decided to proceed and buy, fine; if they decided not to, that was their concern. So we established that policy and I can remember operating with that policy for a very short period of time. And during that period of time, towards the end of that period of time in any case, Joe Hirshhorn walked into the gallery and we had an exhibition of work by Edward Shea – essentially one painting: a picture called "The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire" and attendant small drawings and works relating to that larger picture. And Hirshhorn asked the price of everything. I calculated the price of everything and told him and he offered a price substantially less than half, about half. I said, "No, Mr. Hirshhorn, I know that you're offering to buy all this material but I'll tell you that we've formulated a policy here, this is essentially a cooperative situation, we very often adhere to the ideas of the artists; and in this instance, their attitude and from now on here in the gallery has to do with stating a figure and maintaining absolutely that figure in the face of any offer." He said, "Well, yes, I understand what you're doing. Good luck!" And out he went. In any case, that concept left with him. (PC laughs heartily) I could see the reality…. So I was able to convince the artists subsequently that that simply wasn't workable. Although it sounded like a marvelous idea, it just wasn't –

PAUL CUMMINGS: In a fluctuating market.

IRVING BLUM: Right. So we switched, subtly, to another policy –a policy of selling at discount. Which most galleries do. Right now I kind of have formulated a policy many people say here in the gallery I have now, and it's something I've been doing right along because it suits me – I'm not sure how other galleries operate on this level but I know it suits me to quote a price, stay by it. Very often people say, "Well, you know, we've bought from you in the past, will you give us ten percent?" My response to that request is always, "Yes, if you'll pay cash." I don't care whether people have bought from me in the past or haven't, if they pay cash I will give a

discount of ten percent; if they don't, there's no discount off the quoted price. And I stay with it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why did you start that?

IRVING BLUM: It just seems like – it's not when it started, it's really what I've been doing for some time now. It's a policy I've evolved over time and it seems sound to me, it makes sense and I proceed that way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you meet much resistance to it?

IRVING BLUM: Yes, on occasion. But I'm not that interested in bending.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But then you have more of a trading situation –

IRVING BLUM: Much more.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - than a representative –

IRVING BLUM: Exactly. And no artist to refer to; just my attitude. It's the way I do business, the way I prefer to sell. It just makes sense, so I operate very much that way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you have many people who would buy things "on time," so much down and so much-

IRVING BLUM: Yes; very definitely. Sometimes I would carry people for as long as a year or two. I did that fairly regularly in Los Angeles.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not in New York?

IRVING BLUM: Not in New York, no.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you were still preaching out there. [laughing]

IRVING BLUM: That's right. And I had, as you know, a limited number of people that I was selling paintings to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did the circle of collectors develop? Were they people who came in cold? Or were they sent in by people you knew who'd bought from you? What brought them in?

IRVING BLUM: Different people came in. A lot of people attended those classes because there was a certain curiosity on their part. These classes did a great deal for us in formulating a kind of core of collector interest. So a great many people came in because of their own curiosity, and we were able to persuade them. A great many people came in and we weren't able to sway them. It worked, however, it worked.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's rather interesting, I talked to somebody in LA. last week and asked them about the circle of collectors that you had. And he said, "Well, there aren't any new ones. It's basically the same group of people who are –

IRVING BLUM: There are a few new ones. But essentially – You're counting on one hand – you're talking about Ed Janns, who's still buying, and Bob Rowan who's still buying, and Steve Gersh who's still buying – those are the people I sold to. Buddy Rogers and –

PAUL CUMMINGS: There aren't many new people who've started.

IRVING BLUM: No. There aren't too many new substantial – but there are, quite a few. Not vast numbers, but I'm selling now to people in California that I've never sold to in the past, who are new, who've begun collecting I would say in the past three years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But they began in New York, probably.

IRVING BLUM: But they began in New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But he was making the point that –

IRVING BLUM: - nobody's doing that in California. Well, there's always one problem or another in California. [Paul Cummings laughs]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I don't think the viewing situation's very strong out there now.

IRVING BLUM: It isn't. It's never been very strong and it's still not very strong.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes but a lot of them are retiring now and –

IRVING BLUM: Is that so?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, Robles and all those who have been there for a long time and are pretty much about it. Landau's in Europe a lot and –

IRVING BLUM: Yes. By the same token you have Doug Christmas and Corcoran and you have Nick Wilder. I've just heard that Rico Masuno is opening a small, private situation. So, it's about stops and starts more than an overwhelming trend.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you see many people who are very occasional picture-buyers other than collectors, who come in and buy something, maybe in a year come in and buy another one?

IRVING BLUM: Yes. There are people who want a specific thing for a specific place; paintings that had a certain attitude, to hang in a certain place; and you wouldn't see them again for a year or two. But not very many. Most of the people I sold to were really collectors in the true sense – repeat buyers.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who got involved with the whole thing and met the artists and the museum people and that sort of thing.

IRVING BLUM: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about during this time of your own collecting? Because you mentioned you bought the Warhol, for example, and one or two other things. Were you doing much acquisition on your own part?

IRVING BLUM: Yes, I was always buying things, right from the start. To begin with, I bought a lot of West Coast material, a lot of West Coast things. I owned works by Bengston, by Irwin, by Bell, by Rachet. And gradually, as my focus kind of shifted to New York milieu, I began acquiring things by New York artists and began showing them and began keeping them. Very often one or two things from every exhibit – as I could, as I was able. In other words, Bengston was very cheap, and Frank Stella could be bought for $800 or $1,000 or $1,200.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not for long, though.

IRVING BLUM: Not for long. However, as late as 1967, nine years after he surfaced, I bought ten paintings for $10,000 – $1,000 apiece.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?? That's fantastic.

IRVING BLUM: A lot of people don't realize that. It took him a time to achieve high levels. Ten years after he surfaced, with all the intense publicity and all the in tense commotion, he was very cheap. There was a painting for retailing at $3,000.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

IRVING BLUM: Yes. A lot of people don't realize that. But the jump came between 1967 and 1970, a real jump. Prior to '67, all those people – Lichtenstein, all those people, Andy, even, could have been bought very cheaply. Peter Brandt put together his collection of Warhols, I think, in 1967. Very little money, yet masterpieces by Andy, great, great stuff.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So the publicity doesn't necessarily mean the market comes through.

IRVING BLUM: No, the publicity doesn't necessarily mean the market – absolutely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you need the publicity to get the market going.

IRVING BLUM: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think one thing that's always interested me, I guess, about California is the sort of conflict between what normal art history seems to do in most places in the Western world and the kind of life people live in southern California. I mean, closer, say, to the south of France. It doesn't have a great art community although artists go there at a certain point to live. And I just wonder if your observation, having been there and been involved with them is that the general way of life isn't conducive to people getting involved – there aren't the frictions or whatever it is.

[End of Tape 2 – Side 1]

IRVING BLUM: I'm inclined to believe that. California is really "about" life style. It's a certain ease and a certain manner that doesn't really make for anxiety. [laughs]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Art means anxiety?

IRVING BLUM: It seems to me that very often it does. It means a certain kind of stimulation. Unless you're a very private, rather eccentric individual, you need a milieu, and it needs, somehow, to be a surging one, a kind of exciting one, a stimulating one. The support system on the West Coast is terribly, terribly fragile. There's very little museum activity, very few galleries, very little writing about works. Consequently, no real urgency, you know. I think the work tapers off. It blossoms, as it does often, and then some how the artists seem to retreat, seem to be less eager to commit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think it's also that they don't have any sense of accomplishment even if they do something.

IRVING BLUM: Right. Very hard for them to get that. But this is all very general. There are always exceptions. Diebenkorn, I think, is clearly an exception to what we're talking about. But generally I think these remarks are accurate.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the museums out there? Pasadena was active for a while, and some of the others –

IRVING BLUM: Oh, terrific, but Pasadena had short kind of extraordinary life and still it stimulated a lot of people, there's no question. But California institutions have a way of surfacing and then somehow disintegrating.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Such as California artists.

IRVING BLUM: Exactly, exactly. It's all of a piece.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's kind of BOOM, and then – there's nothing left.

IRVING BLUM: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wonder what causes that.

IRVING BLUM: The fact that energy isn't sustained.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's no new input –

IRVING BLUM: No. It isn't supported, finally, and isn't sustained. And I think it's typical of the California situation. I think the reasons are very complex but I think – if you want to talk about something shocking in terms of the West Coast, to me what has always seemed shocking is that southern California is really a one-industry "town:" big as it is – it's becoming a little less so but for decades it was a one-industry town. And that industry was the movie industry; no question about it. And the fact that for all this time, a cinemateque has never surfaced of any significance, or a cinema museum of any significance, I think is a shocking sign.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the fact that cinema may make movies – [voice overlap]

IRVING BLUM: Y-e-e-s, I understand, but the industry is there and the industry hasn't been able to somehow work together towards this end.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But ____ are not interested.

IRVING BLUM: That's the point. The point is that certainly money – you can't say there isn't enough money – but you can say there enough energy, there isn't enough interest.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They don't value what they do.

IRVING BLUM: They don't value it somehow. They have no sense of history regarding it, it's all about making money and about the present. And somehow when that's over, everything's over. And I think that filters into the art world, filters into –

PAUL CUMMINGS: The drug culture. It's an instant fantasy.

IRVING BLUM: Absolutely. I think it filters into dozens of other areas, it really does. And that's very true of the West Coast.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's strange out there, isn't it. [laughs]

IRVING BLUM: Yes, it is; very strange. A lot of people try to analyze it. You can up to a point, and then it somehow disintegrates.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The sun comes up and –

IRVING BLUM: And then there's no time! [laughter]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you would find, though, that if Pasadena or, say, Berkeley or somewhere did an exhibition, that would create a certain amount of activity?

IRVING BLUM: Oh no question, absolutely. Say, for example, we showed the work of Haskell Smith, who was a first-generation Abstract Expressionist from the West Coast; very interesting, I think, very worth-while artist. We really had a great deal of difficulty selling Haskell, and then the Pasadena Museum mounted a retrospective exhibition, say around 1961, and out of that exhibition we were able to sell works – not a great many things but certainly a significant amount of the works. And we were able to promote the artist in ways we weren't able to, prior to that exhibition.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So, you received a certain amount of official –

IRVING BLUM: Credence; credibility, right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Your gallery never published catalogues or anything did you?

IRVING BLUM: We did announcements but no, we rarely did catalogues. Couldn't afford them. For all exhibitions there were announcements all pretty much in the same for mat. Very often we reproduced one thing out of a show. I have all of these put away somewhere. We didn't do catalogues.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Also, there were no auctions out there, were there, in those days? There isn't a great deal now, but there are a couple that –

IRVING BLUM: No, but there was nothing then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you couldn't try New York because nobody knew what the people were.

IRVING BLUM: Correct.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So that didn't really affect your ability to sell, I mean the auctions.

IRVING BLUM: Correct.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you get involved a little bit later, in the '70s? Or don't you use the auctions very much?

IRVING BLUM: Never used them very much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Didn't buy or sell, either way.

IRVING BLUM: No, never used them very much. I find – the thing about auctions for me is that every now and then you can buy something very cheaply. So they're interesting for that reason. But I find that if a really extraordinary picture surfaces, it doesn't generally go the route to the auction house. Generally the person will take it to a dealer. And the viewer can nail down what needs to be nailed down without a great deal of difficulty. That's why much of the material that you see at sales, auction sales, are not interesting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they're also very familiar sometimes –

IRVING BLUM: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had mentioned that you had a brief association with the Pace people. Was that your activity or their activity, and how did it come about?

IRVING BLUM: Well, actually, it was unusual activity. It had to do with Arnold W coming to California and determining that he was interested in three artists that I represented – specifically, Barbara Wynn, Larry Bell and Craig Kaufman. And then we had several talks and it seemed to him that it might be interesting to open a branch on the West Coast. He said, "Would you be interested in combining with me?" And that seemed like a very interesting idea, mostly because I thought it would give me access to New York material, it would give me money and access to New York material that I didn't then have – certainly funding was of extraordinary interest to me. But after we had hit on a partnership, I discovered that he was really interested in me not so much to buy work by people like Stella, Lichtenstein or Jasper Johns, people I was very interested in, but rather to sell people

out of his stable, like Trova and Marjorie Strider and Louise Nevelson. And that didn't interest me enormously. So, very quickly I could see the direction the thing was taking, and we dissolved. And I reopened – you see, after I changed from "Ferus" to "Ferus Pace" when we operated under that name for a very short time, and then after three months we dissolved and he went his way and I went mine and opened – again on La Cienaga – under my own name, "Irving Blum." I was in business then for five years under my own name.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that much different under your name than "Ferus" – everybody knew that –

IRVING BLUM: No, everybody knew that it was essentially the same, the continuity was pretty much there. As soon as I opened under my own name in '67, late that year I began to make sums of money that had eluded me up until that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's when the market began to go up –

IRVING BLUM: Exactly. It was an excellent moment, an absolutely excellent moment.

PAUL CUMMINGS: About half a dozen really fat years.

IRVING BLUM: That's right. And towards the end of that time I decided that maybe it would be really worth coming to New York, and I proceeded to do exactly that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now, while you were out there and operating under your own name after the Pace adventure, you began showing almost all New York people, didn't you? Or East Coast people?

IRVING BLUM: I had a few West Coasters, but really pretty much focused –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were those one-shot exhibitions? Or did you buy contracts or parts of contracts?

IRVING BLUM: No, I was too busy with ____ from the beginning. I took material on consignment, sold what I was able to sell, and what I couldn't sell, sent back. I operated mostly with Leo Castelli on that basis. With other dealers I would get less commission. Leo was always very generous to me; other dealers would give me significantly less than he was prepared to give me at that time. So I found myself, for financial reasons and also for reasons of commitment, closely allied with Leo –

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know he would often split his commissions –

IRVING BLUM: Sometimes he would even be more generous than that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And from other people you would get ten percent, which really wouldn't pay for – [laughs]

IRVING BLUM: Sidney Janis would graciously allow me ten percent which would barely cover my shipping one way –

PAUL CUMMINGS: On the fifth choice item –

IRVING BLUM: Exactly right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find all this – well, for quick reference, the East Coast people as the 60s proceeded, as the whole Pop business grew, as the artists became more international, and you obviously were selling outside the Los Angeles area, because if somebody wanted a Lichtenstein or a Warhol, they didn't care where they got it, they'd go anywhere.

IRVING BLUM: Correct.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So, if you had it, you could –

IRVING BLUM: Correct. I began seeing that in the way I'd never seen it before – people coming to me. I was selling a lot of material to people coming from New York who were passing through, who were somehow not able to buy Lichtensteins in New York. Because the demand was so intense, but ways to procure them – Harry Abrams was one, Mrs. Tremaine was another, Philip Johnson was another. I was selling to lots of New York collectors.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You would think they would see it hot off the griddle, as they say.

IRVING BLUM: That's right. But a lot of them didn't have it, quite the access that they wanted here. So they would come and see me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was a long way around to buy a picture!

IRVING BLUM: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: To your advantage.

IRVING BLUM: That's right. You always try and work it that way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So I suppose the business increase gave you more leverage for other things.

IRVING BLUM: That's correct.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why did you finally decide to say, "Enough of Los Angeles" and come to the East Coast? Because it seems that things were going rather well.

IRVING BLUM: Things were going well, I was doing rather well, but at that time I really felt – one always thinks about New York as being the center, and I always had thought about New York as being that. You like to think that you'd like to test yourself against the best of what there is. And for me, in my business, this is where it is. And also the fact that the material I was selling, like Lichtenstein, like Stella, like Ellsworth Kelly was getting very very expensive, and people were more and more reluctant to buy from two or three examples that I had on hand and I couldn't afford more than two or three examples. And they always thought that if they came East, they could see more. So that wherever you are, and whatever your position, there are always problems attendant. But I began to realize that if I stayed locked into those others that had always interested me, I would have to come to New York to find really an international audience. And in order to get the greatest range of choice of material by those artists, I would have to be in the East. So all those reasons, plus my own curiosity, predicated a move.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see. Did you find that as the prices went up, was there a leveling-off in California? Did people say, "Well, it was nice at $10,000 but at $25,000, I don't know. And at $35,000 I can't consider it."

IRVING BLUM: Absolutely. You were really locked into a provincial audience in California, infinitely more than you are in New York. In New York, your audience is truly international.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh well, the airplanes –

IRVING BLUM: Right, they come and go. So at least that problem is done with. There are other problems – living is tougher, everything is much more expensive, it's dirtier –[Paul Cummings laughs]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Its charms differ. [laughter again]

IRVING BLUM: Yes. But I go back to California still – I go back in the summer, I go back for a month in winter. So I spend quite a lot of time – I still have ties back there and I don't intend to give those up. With any luck, one day I'll go back there and live. But in a much different way. So I kind of have that in my head to do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What decided you to come to New York? Did you have an arrangement with Kimelman, did you know him?

IRVING BLUM: No. After having virtually come to the conclusion that I wanted to sample what was here, I went to the opening of the Kimbell Museum while I was still living in Los Angeles and sat at a table with Frank Lloyd. We struck up a conversation and struck up a kind of relationship, and he said that if I would be willing to come to New York, if that was an idea that I would entertain, he would pay me X-amount of dollars a year –really an extraordinary sum of money, plus bonuses, plus move me, plus –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Keep you out of jail –

IRVING BLUM: - keep me out of jail, in so far as he was able to do that. And it all sounded really perfect. And of course it was precisely the idea I had in my head. So I went to work for Marlborough. But he promised that he would extend into contemporary art in ways that I suggested, and he never did. So I could see that there wasn't very much for me there. After staying for six months, we both agreed that it wasn't significant to me and he felt it wasn't significant for him because my attitude had been always for me to stay on. So we dissolved a year-long contract that I had with him and after six months I left, and met Bill Helman.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you meet him?

IRVING BLUM: I'd done business with him when I was in California. I met him here in New York, he was wandering around, thinking about doing a gallery, and at that point I was certainly entertaining that idea – to do a gallery on my own. We decided we would pool our resources and do it together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like the Marlborough experience? Because that was certainly a totally different –

IRVING BLUM: Oh, I found it very strange and very riveting. It was totally different from anything I'd ever done. I found it extraordinarily shrewd and very _____.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You'd never had your own pet telex before. [laughs]

IRVING BLUM: No, you're quite right. It was a corporate thing – in terms of selling art. That was something totally unfamiliar to me. I found it riveting, on the one hand, and on the other hand, completely untenable. Not my style.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's always struck me as a rather impersonal operation.

IRVING BLUM: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: "These are the artists," and half or three-quarters of them are dead.

IRVING BLUM: Correct.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And there's this many pictures, and a great many are in museums –

IRVING BLUM: And he's always referring to index cards. [laughs]

PAUL CUMMINGS: We-e-ell, I've seen a lot of index cards! [both laugh] But somehow, it attracted people. I mean, they sold.

IRVING BLUM: They sold in the most extraordinary way. They helped put Diebenkorn on the international map. They did for Alex Katz what no gallery could do for Alex Katz.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Absolutely.

IRVING BLUM: They did for Rothko what would have taken somebody else a much longer period of time to do. They did for Still the same. They're certainly to be complimented. I would be the last person to criticize them, in a general way. I think that they had their strengths, no question about it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And all that money.

IRVING BLUM: And all that money. And I found it fascinating as long as I was there. But I was glad to leave when I left.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was enough. The money that they had just seems unbelievable.

IRVING BLUM: It was unbelievable, it was that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Endless.

IRVING BLUM: Yes. And Frank spent lavishly. He was never tight. He always spent money lavishly. He entertained lavishly, spent lavishly, with great style.

PAUL CUMMINGS: With great care, too.

IRVING BLUM: With great care as well, you can be sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There was no access, anyway.

IRVING BLUM: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's the only time you've really been involved with a large gallery, then, other than your own activity.

IRVING BLUM: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When you set up with Helman, what did you decide to do? Because his interests were, I gather, similar.

IRVING BLUM: His interests were absolutely similar to mine, and what we decided to do was exactly what I had in my head to do, which was to make a second market, essentially – in other words, well, two things: take on some younger artists, which we'd done and which we'd intend to do more of as time goes on; and at the same time, make a second market in people like Ellsworth Kelly, like Lichtenstein, like Frank Stella, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, etc. In other words, the same 60s people that I've always been focused on – stay with the early works by

these people since they're all virtually represented by other galleries in New York and difficult to get to otherwise. But I had the kind of experience I've had with them,____'s had the kind of experience he's had. So when somebody wants an earlier example, this is where they pretty much come. And that's what we pretty much specialize in.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Going back to the auctions that involve earlier works, which one sees more and more of as time goes on, do those things come to you first, or do you hear about them, or –

IRVING BLUM: Very often.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - or does something surprise you sometimes?

IRVING BLUM: Once in a while something will surprise me. Once in a while an estate will surface or something like that; all the material will have been given to an auction house, none of it will have come here. But very often, as often as not, I do hear about the material, I do know about its availability. And it just means that the price was too high or I wasn't interested or something like that – and so I let it get away and go to an auction house.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Doesn't mean it won't come around again, though. [laughs]

IRVING BLUM: Doesn't mean it won't come around again, and it doesn't mean that I'm not going to bid on it myself, doesn't mean that I have absolutely no interest.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the international aspects that you mentioned before? Has that increased? Do you find more in the last few years or –

IRVING BLUM: Very definitely. I think that that's inevitable as time goes on and as we pull away from the experience of the '60s; and as people can see it with greater and greater clarity, the demand grows. That's just the way it works. So I look forward to a much stronger period over the next few years than we've even had over the past few.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the past few have been rather rocky, in some ways.

IRVING BLUM: The past years have been rocky, that's true. But I certainly look forward to a stronger period. For lots of reasons – I think the economy's better, I think the country's in a stronger position. And I think the interest in the '60s will just naturally expand.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, because many of those artists are only, what? in their '50s, '40s, still producing a lot-

IRVING BLUM: Still producing, still doing extraordinary work. Kelly is really at the top of his form right now. Roy is working in the most extraordinary way, I think. There's still a lot of work to be done, and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It interests me that, for example, you do represent so many people that Castelli has. Why doesn't he trade more in earlier works, though? Or doesn't that interest him?

IRVING BLUM: It's difficult for him to do. There are large sums of money involved and he's really stretched, just in running his operation, it seems to me. It's so costly. It's very difficult for him to buy material back. He has an extraordinary budget that he has to exercise every month. He has enormous expenses, having to do with his big situation with staff, with artists' stipends also. So there's very little left for Leo.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It gets to be enormous some of those –

IRVING BLUM: Absolutely. It's just difficult for him, very difficult, it's not that he wouldn't want to do it if he could, I just don't think he's able, in a way that we are more able to do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's a different kind of dealing.

IRVING BLUM: Yes, right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, he travels a lot but doesn't have that much mobility.

IRVING BLUM: That's true.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Even with his enormous staff there –

IRVING BLUM: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing that I've noticed here is that you don't have many California artists in the gallery.

IRVING BLUM: Well, there's no second market in them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Except for Sam Francis, maybe.

IRVING BLUM: Except for Sam Francis. I do represent Diebenkorn, as you know, and you don't see any material around because it's all gone, it's all sold. I wish I had a couple of Diebenkorn paintings, I'd love to have them. But the demand is such that it doesn't permit of a lot of exposure. We've taken on Brian Hunt, who's a young artist from the West Coast. And this summer I expect to look around and maybe do a little more in that area.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I also note that the way you advertise this gallery is very subtle. There's not a lot, there doesn't seem to be a great deal of, say, magazine ads, newspaper –

IRVING BLUM: No, that's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now and then there's a little something here and there –

IRVING BLUM: That's true.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it looks as if it's really a personal contact situation that grows and grows.

IRVING BLUM: It really is. It's not only the opinion that we give, it's really the truth, I think. We sell to really just a few people. It's just hard getting material. I t's very difficult. Getting a great Stella – and you're talking about enormous sums of money, getting a great Lichtenstein you're talking about just a very few people who might be interested in paying as much as $80,000 or $100,000. Those are large sums of money. You don't attract those people by advertising. You do it by personal contact and by word of mouth. And reputation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you don't have ten Frank Stellas to sell!

IRVING BLUM: And I don't have ten Frank Stellas to sell, yeah. Exactly right; I don't have that much material. It's just too costly, it's too difficult to get, it's too rare.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it's really finding something and then turning it over, rather than putting it on the racks.

IRVING BLUM: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It ties up too much capital.

IRVING BLUM: Correct.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find in the last couple of years many pictures going abroad? Or are works coming back now from, say, the German collections or Italian, Swiss, places like that.

IRVING BLUM: I think the biggest collectors now, from my experience, are Americans. That wasn't true up until very recently, but I think now the activity, the ballgame, is back in this
country. I would say so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that will attract works from the European collections?

IRVING BLUM: Yes. If you're asking will American material be sold out of European collections –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

IRVING BLUM: - back to American collectors, my feeling is: absolutely. It's already happening.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because so many Europeans like to just collect and collect and collect –

IRVING BLUM: Well, there are also economic problems, and currency problems. For example, Italy bought lots of work – for instance, Twombly, particularly Warhol –

PAUL CUMMINGS: Rauschenberg.

IRVING BLUM: Rauschenberg, right. Lots of that material found its way to Italy, and I find that that material now is surfacing again. It's becoming available again and is now being resold to American collectors.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [reflectively] Hmmm.... Works of art move around.

IRVING BLUM: They move around, they move around. (both laugh) They're like treasure, they go where the power is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's right. There are a couple of people I've wanted to ask you about that we touched on only briefly during the California period. Jerry Nordlund was one of them, I think. He was fairly active.

IRVING BLUM: Yes. Jerry was always around. He's always had people that he ____ in, always had people that he was passionate about. Liked very much second generation Abstract Expressionist painting, was very close to people working in that genre, along with people like Dick Diebenkorn and Haskel Smith, Emerson Woelffer. He was strongly partisan to that style and those people. I understand he just left Los Angeles, that he's gone to direct a situation in Minneapolis, if I'm not mistaken.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really??

IRVING BLUM: At least I heard that – the Institute.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Amazing. That's new.

IRVING BLUM: He's left UCLA.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the shift of *Artforum* from California to New York? We talked about that a little bit in the last interview session.

IRVING BLUM: It was an extraordinary loss to the West Coast –another loss; like ___ Art Museum. And the history of situations and people that scurried up on the West Coast somehow and gravitated to those places – Jerry Nordlund, Bates Lowry, Walter Hopps, John Coplans, Tom Le ___, museum people, critics, writers, who spent a time – the West Coast has a hard time sustaining either people or situations.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmmmm....It comes back to the same old question. [laughs]

IRVING BLUM: That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Are there any people I haven't asked you about? Or influential people that you would say something about, in terms of collectors, or dealers you've worked with, or artists who've been close or influences?

IRVING BLUM: Not really. I think that the really interesting thing about my years on the West Coast is that the "Ferus Group," so to speak, in quotes, surfaced at a certain moment, along with the gallery. We leaned very much on each other. The artists that were there leaned on the gallery, the gallery leaned on that tight group of artists. We were very much in a vacuum, we were very alone – at least I can remember feeling that. There wasn't an enormous support. There were a few artists, a few collectors. It was a small scene. It had all kinds of problems but it had all kinds of lovely aspects, in truth. And the situation on the West Coast has been very different, much more complicated situation today. There are certain generalities which you can think about but the situation is, in any case, infinitely larger than it was when I started. It's infinitely richer; and I think that for that one could be grateful. Or should be grateful.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were some of the nicer aspects?

IRVING BLUM: The nicer aspects were the contrasts – the extraordinary intimacy that existed among the artists, among myself vis-à-vis the artists, among myself vis-à-vis certain collectors like Betty Asher, like Don Practor, like Bob Rowan – people I was enormously close to and felt very strongly about.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was there a man called Bright, who was –

IRVING BLUM: David Bright. Yes, he bought earlier things. I knew him but not in any intimate way. Pam Shriver the same. Fred ____ started pretty much with our gallery and then gravitated to first generation Abstract Expressionist painting, so I lost contact with him, although I would see him socially, still do see him. But it was a warm, small experience. [laughs]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Small meeting of bonny beaners [?]

IRVING BLUM: That's right. You could seat everybody involved in the art world at a certain moment 20 years ago in California in one room – and still have room to spare. [both laugh]

PAUL CUMMINGS: La Cienaga has always intrigued me because the times I've been there – and it's always been several years between visits – always seemed to somehow be the same but somehow different, in a way that New York doesn't change. New York gets bigger in some sense.

IRVING BLUM: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I can’t really define it, it’s like another kind of little carnival –

IRVING BLUM: Yes, that’s right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: - but a different one. A strange little street, that.

IRVING BLUM: I think your statement is accurate.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I don’t have any other questions.

IRVING BLUM: I don’t have anything I want to add.

[End of Tape 2 – Side 2]
END OF INTERVIEW

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