Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with William Nelson Copley, 1968 January 30

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Interview

PC: Paul Cummings
WC: William Copley

PC: It's January 30. Paul Cummings talking to William Copley. You were born in New York City?

WC: Actually yes.

PC: But I always associate you with California.

WC: Well, I was an adopted child. And I think at the time I was adopted my father was in Congress; was a member from Washington for a few years. And I grew up in Illinois until I was about ten. And then when my mother died my father moved to California. And I got sent to see, I got sent, nobody asked me. I got sent to Andover and Yale.

PC: How did you like Andover?

WC: I hated it. I didn't like Yale very much either because I didn't feel I had any choice in the matter anyway and my father was of the class of 1887, was always having reunions and was a very strong personality. And he felt that I should be a Yale man. So I was at Yale for three years and was a very bad student. And had one art course which was on Saturday mornings. Which was the only class I had on Saturday morning, so I never saw any art. You know, they turn out the lights, start the slides, and I'd sleep it off.

PC: Who was teaching that? Do you remember?

WC: Yes, I think it was George Heard Hamilton. That just might get me in trouble. So when the war came on I wasn't doing terribly well. And I had a beautiful draft number. 609.

PC: How in the world did you get such an exclusive number?

WC: I don't know. I usually do very badly on lotteries. But on this one I did pretty good. I got drafted very early. The Army and Yale sort of talked it out and thought it was the best solution to the whole thing. I had a few months to go when the war broke out. So I was actually in the Army almost four years. I was overseas most of the time.

PC: What did you do?

WC: Well, I started off in an anti-aircraft outfit. And then I managed to break my arm and I got put in an MP company. And that bored me so much I volunteered for combat and got sent to Italy. And finally got rotated home because I had gone overseas so early and I had been drafted so early. So I got rotated home and got out of the Army. But I never, never looked at a picture in my life until I was out of the Army. And when I got out of the Army I didn't know what to do with myself. I first got mixed up in politics, which I found rather boring.

PC: Before we get into all this sort of thing tell me some more about your family. You've lived in all these places you know.

WC: My father was a newspaper publisher. He had been in Congress for twelve years then. Before that he'd been in the utility business. He retired. And then got bored. And went into the newspaper business.

PC: That was a California paper, right?

WC: California and Illinois both, yes. I worked for the paper for about a year. The whole idea was that I was going to start at the bottom and work up and sort of take over with my brother. But, well, our politics differed. And it was about that time that I got interested, not in painting, but in writing. And I wrote my war novel, which I guess everybody else did. And then I met up with a girl who had a brother-in-law. And I married the girl. And the brother-in-law got me interested in Surrealism.

PC: Who is he?

WC: His name was John Ployart.

PC: Oh, he's the one you had a gallery with.

WC: I had the gallery with him. Actually he died last month in an automobile accident.

PC: Oh, really?

WC: But he taught me everything I knew really. He had a very engaging personality. And I was quick to pick it up. So I got a very complete surrealist background in a very short period of time. And then of course learned much more after we had the gallery. We showed Magritte, Tanguy, Joseph Cornell, Man Ray, Matta and Max Ernst in that order. And I think I sold two pictures. I was trying to sell Cornell for $200. Just couldn't do it. So I just went out of business. And about that time I got divorced and I went to Paris for, well, I came back for one year. I lived in Paris for about twelve or thirteen years. Where I just painted.

PC: I want to get some more early things. We're jumping ahead.

WC: Yes.

PC: You have what, one brother?

WC: Yes.

PC: No sisters?

WC: I had a half-sister.

PC: Were you a close family? You seemed very busy.

WC: No, we weren't really terribly close. None of us were blood-related. Though we had more or less an identical environment. There wasn't any real closeness. Well, he went right and I went further left. You know, we never really came to any agreement. So it was impossible to think of working together on the newspapers. I got out of that very early.

PC: Were you interested in writing when you were young? Or was it just because ....

WC: I always had been actually, yes.

PC: Any particular writers that interested you?

WC: Well, in those days we were raised up on the Victorians, which I adore I must say. And I think English is the only course I ever passed.

PC: You didn't like school very much?

WC: No, I was afraid of it. The whole thing frightened me.

PC: Oh really. Why?

WC: I don't know.

PC: All the organization?

WC: It was much too organized. And it was always looked like everybody else knew what they were doing except me.

PC: You were the different drummer.

WC: Yes, yes.

PC: Well, you grew up in different places then, didn't you? You lived there and you lived here.

WC: Yes, it was Illinois and California. And then of course schooling in the East here. And then the war, and then Europe.

PC: Did you have anything around home, no painting, no art at all?

WC: No art till I was about twenty-six. My father had a collection of very bad paintings. Most of them I think were fake. And I've always suspected the reason I like art so much is that I looked at those pictures an awful lot because he had so many of them. And they were bad, but I would find terribly interesting things in them.

PC: What kinds of things in them interested you?

WC: Well, it would be hard to say, just details you know. And my interest in them was almost abstract. You

know, I liked things that would change, you know, were one way one time and one way another time.

PC: What kind of paintings were they?

WC: They were either bad old masters or reproductions of bad old masters.

PC: Later editions?

WC: Later editions, yes.

PC: So there were paintings around. And there were books and things. Did you have any music? Were you interested in music?

WC: Yes, I became quite interested in the standard classical music when I was about twelve. I was a lot to myself. Did a lot of reading in those days too. Very standard stuff. I had a kind of lonely time and I liked reading more than anything else.

PC: Did you have a library at home? Or did you go to the public library or that sort of thing?

WC: Well, no, but there were a lot of books at home. But they didn't interest me. I bought a lot of books.

PC: Were there any favorite authors that you remember?

WC: Of course Conrad I adored. And in those days I adored poetry.

PC: Oh, really? Could be the seeds of surrealism.

WC: Yes, Emily Dickinson was my favorite for a long time. And of course Poe. I actually adored Poe. And a few other poets. Poe started a lot of things that I wasn't aware of.

PC: Yes, that's interesting. Good old Poe. he's one of the good guys.

WC: Yes, wonderful.

PC: And Phillips, you didn't really like at all.

WC: They frightened me. They were much too organized. They made me feel that I had to be organized too. And I didn't feel like I knew how to be organized. The whole thing.

PC: You didn't like the social life and all that kind of thing?

WC: It was too much for me. It wasn't my cup of tea.

PC: What about Yale though? That should have been quite a change.

WC: Well, it was. But it was such a liberation in the way of behavior, that for the first time I was granted this much freedom, which I abused in a very pleasant way. I didn't work very much. I was a very bad student.

PC: What did you major in?

WC: I was an English major. I always did well in English all the way through school.

PC: And were there any special things, were you active in any kind of student activities?

WC: None whatsoever. I chased girls most of the time.

PC: And no art with the exception of that one.

WC: Well, it happened because when I did come out of the army I was so starved for something to really be mentally involved in that the time was perfect.

PC: Well, you had the GI bill and all that other sort of thing that was going on. You didn't study painting ever did you?

WC: Never studied it, no. My painting never developed just through the painters I knew. Actually we were talking about it today. It was Duchamp and Max Ernst who really encouraged me to continue painting. I really started painting as what I thought was an exercise to writing. Because I had read Joyce and decided that my writing was not sufficiently visual. And I though that by painting I could sharpen my visual perception and be

able to transmit that into my writing. And once I got started painting I never returned to writing really except for a brief period of journalism.

PC: Well, you started painting then were you trying to do very realistic things? Or poetic things? Or how would you describe it?

WC: Well, when I first started painting first I was just trying to make a painting you see. Which seemed like a very difficult thing to do. And these paintings were jumped upon as primitives. And I was told that they were good and that I should do more of them. Which did encourage me. And then meeting people like Max and Marcel and eventually some of the others, Man Ray was a great friend of mine in those days. I began to see the possibility of poetry and painting. Poetry and of course humor in painting are the areas I'm really most interested in.

PC: Let's see. You were in the Army, and you came out, and you started painting in what, about 1946, 1947, or something like that?

WC: 1946, yes.

PC: Was that when you met Ployart?

WC: Just after I met Boyart, Ployart, yes.

PC: Everything happened at once.

WC: It all happened at once. I married his sister-in-law and the whole thing happened at the same time.

PC: Well, let's see, was Man ray living there then in California?

WC: Man Ray was living in California at the time.

PC: And of course they must have known each other?

WC: Yes, and I've always found this which after I got involved that it was very easy to meet an artist. It still is. If you know on an artist's door and say you like what he does could you come in, you seldom get thrown out.

PC: Yes, that's true.

WC: And I taught myself that. I contacted Marcel and Max myself and they became very close friends of mine.

PC: How did you get the idea to start the gallery?

WC: I don't know.

PC: Because there were not very many galleries in California at that time.

WC: There was none. It was absolutely folly.

PC: This was in Los Angeles.

WC: In Beverly Hills. And it happened I guess over a lot of beer and things like that. Both my brother-in-law and I were terribly excited about Surrealism and felt that - and it was just beginning to be presented in New York, and we felt we wanted to try it there. And I must say it was a wonderful experience because you lived for a solid month with a room full of Tanguy's. And then you lived for a solid month with a room full of Magritte's. And the process of osmosis was quite something . And the Max Ernst show was actually the first retrospective ever held of Max's.

PC: Oh, really?

WC: And of paintings and drawings we had over three hundred pieces.

PC: I must get that catalogue and put it in my archives. What else was going on with you at that time in your painting? Were you painting all kinds of things? I've only seen photographs of a few early things.

WC: Well, during those days I was really only painting on Sundays because I was at the gallery most of the time. But the gallery only lasted a year. It was open six months and had been a year of research before we opened it. And it was only after the closing of the gallery and my going to Paris that I worked full time.

PC: How did you happen to go to Paris after that?

WC: Well, my marriage broke up. And I was still interested in Surrealism. And I sort of wanted to run away from everything. And I was disappointed in the failure of the gallery. And it was a very romantic thing to do.

PC: Go to Paris?

WC: To grab the next plane for Paris. And the first time I stayed only about three months because my mother died. But I came back six months later and stayed for twelve years.

PC: Well, what kind of reaction did the gallery get? I mean did you get a lot of traffic, a lot of people? Was it written about?

WC: We were almost totally ignored. We were attacked by most of the critics. And totally unattended. And it's only now when I go back to California. And it really was a damn fool thing to do I mean business-wise, and every other way. When I go back to California now I'm treated as a person who had insight. Which I must say I lap up. It's a lot of nonsense. I didn't know what I was doing. I was enjoying it very much, but it certainly wasn't the greatest business venture you ever thought of. It was suicide business-wise. There was no interest whatsoever.

PC: And you really so, what, two pictures?

WC: Yes.

PC: That's incredible.

WC: What were they? Do you remember?

PC: Yes, they were two pictures that I sold to Stanley Barbie who paid for them on the spot. And then I think that he sobered up and forgot that he bought them. When I closed the gallery I fought my conscience and sent them to him.

PC: That's incredible, now everybody is saying, oh, if we only knew.

WC: Yes, you could have had a Gouache for $100. And you could have had a large painting for $600.

PC: Not anymore.

WC: They were too expensive in those days. And the Ernsts. The largest Ernst, one as big as that one there, could have been bought for $1,000.

PC: Incredible, but everybody's market started at the same time.

WC: Yes.

PC: And nothing happened. Were the artists unknown to these people? Or were they against it?

WC: The artists were pretty well unknown. They were certainly against it. New York people were beginning to hear about Surrealism. And it was chic to show a certain amount of interest. Here it was quite the opposite.

PC: Well, there has been a show in the Museum of Modern Art in 1939.

WC: Yes, but it hadn't reached California yet.

PC: The museum people didn't know anything either?

WC: No, the museum people attacked us. And so did most of the public. I mean they felt the show was shocking and in poor taste.

PC: How about any painters? There weren't many painters there, were there?

WC: The painters there had just discovered abstract art. And so they were all very hostile too.

PC: You were really in a desert weren't you?

WC: Completely yes. Completely.

PC: Well, did you start collecting at that time? Or later?

WC: I started collecting at that time really because each artist that I showed, again, i suppose it was bad business judgement, but I guaranteed ten percent sales. And those I didn't sell I would buy ten percent of the

show myself. Which turned out to be the basis of my collection. I could make up what I lost on the gallery by selling one picture. But I didn't know I was doing anything different at the time.

PC: Yes, it was just one of those things.

WC: Yes.

PC: So then you went off to Paris, and you stayed there for all those years. And you just painted?

WC: Yes, almost full time. Almost all the time.

PC: Did you travel in between?

WC: Very little. Even when it was popular to go south I often stayed in Paris and worked. I liked the emptiness of Paris. And it was a very productive period for me. I worked all the time.

PC: I think in one photograph I saw of an earlier work, it's interesting how your imagery seems to remain, you know, very related.

WC: Yes.

PC: And the technique has changed.

WC: The technique has changed all the time because every time I have a show I try to find a new one.

PC: Well, did you know in Paris in those days, and what went on? That was in 1951?

WC: Yes, well it was a very informal life. At that time it was Montparnasse rather than St. Germaine that was the sort of meeting place. So if you had nothing to do you simply went to a cafe and you were bound to run into painters.

PC: Was there any special one that you went to?

WC: For a while it was the Select. And then it changed to the Pol. And a little bit the Dome. And gradually it moved away from there to St. Germaine on the floor and the Deux Magots. But it was very easy. It was a nice life because you painted all day long. And then you felt good. So you'd take a bath and get dressed up and go to one of the cafes and just sit till somebody came along with a friend. And then you usually ended up having a nice evening.

PC: Well, most of the Surrealists that were here had gone back by that time?

WC: Yes.

PC: So you knew all those people?

WC: I knew quite a few of them.

PC: Were there any that were particularly close friends during the Paris time?

WC: Well, Falberg, who was a surrealist writer was a very close friend of mine. And Jacques Herrault, who never really made much of a name for himself, was a close friend of mine. Max was living there, and Max came back to Paris with me in 1951. And we were very close. And I never really got involved with the actual official side of Surrealism. I new Breton. I had been to some of the cafe meetings. But for some reason or other I shied away from it. I t was already becoming too official. They were already feuding.

PC: Another organization?

WC: It was another organization. And I preferred doing my own work to being involved in it.

PC: Well, you know, I've talked to only a few people who knew Breton. What kind of a character was he?

WC: Well, he was certainly one of the most charming people I ever met. He has an old world politeness that was remarkable. I always sort of kiddingly said that one of my ambitions in life was to be attacked by him. But I was only attacked by him once in a newspaper article. I never got to see it so I don't know what he said. But he was certainly one of the most gracious, really old world gracious, people that I've ever known. And he was quite intelligent but already by that time much too official to horse around with very much. The cafe meeting had already become self-admiration societies and the schisms had already occurred. So that it wasn't anything I really became part of.

PC: Was Ernst very close to any of those people?

WC: No, Ernst had been thrown out I guess before I even arrived in Paris. And the story of my finally being attacked by Breton because a lovely old lady from Besancon wanted to do a surrealist show so she went to Breton. And Breton said, "I'll give you all the assistance you want on condition that you have nothing to do with Max." Well she didn't want to do it that way. So she went to Max Ernst and said, "Will you help me?" He said, "I will help you in any way I can as long as you don't have anything to do with Breton." So she'd heard about me and came to see me. And I said, "All I can do is make my entire collection available to you." I said I'd lived in Paris for ten years at that time and I would enjoy the opportunity of doing this for France. So she had her little show. Nobody ever went to see it. Breton wasn't very happy about that.

PC: Well, it seems, you know, that the idea of the feuds was very popular or at least quite prevalent.

WC: Quite prevalent, yes.

PC: They constantly went back and forth. Did you really have the power that you, you know, you get from reading about him, that he could say, you know, you do this, or you don't do that, or you're in or your out?

WC: Oh, yes. And don't forget that it was much more of a literary movement than a painting movement. So that the people who got thrown out more often were the writers. The thing that really broke it up was over the Matta business where he always preached a kind of moral liberty, suddenly became terribly moral himself.

PC: Who, Matta?

WC: No, no, Breton. And this I think really finished it. Because the whole idea of liberty that Surrealism really represented became a mockery after what might be called the Matta trial.

PC: What was that about?

WC: That was about, you know, Matta's running off with Gorky's wife.

PC: Oh.

WC: Which certainly shouldn't have been anybody's business except theirs.

PC: Right, yes. It was a big group.

WC: Yes.

PC: Well, you've known Matta for a long time actually, haven't you?

WC: Yes, I was very close to Matta all during that time.

PC: I met him one day but he seems to be very driving.

WC: Oh, yes. He has fantastic vitality.

PC: You know, one of the things I found interesting is that all your activity with these people, and yet your work is so different from theirs, oh, you know, in technique.

WC: It had to be because I had no technique, except what I would discover myself. And mostly I worked in complete isolation, and I worked for long hours. And actually didn't get to show until after three or four years. So I was a sort of social hanger-onger. At that time I wasn't formally a painter in the sense that I was being shown. That came a little later.

PC: When did you start exhibiting?

WC: My first exhibition was in New York with Iolas. And then there was a lovely little lady at the time had the Galeri Dragon on Rue Dragon who gave me my first Paris show. And that later changed hands and became Max Claret's Gallery. I showed there two years later. Then I showed with Simon Colinet twice. And with Iris Clert twice. And then when Iolas opened, because he'd always been my New York dealer, I went back to Iolas who is my present Paris dealer.

PC: Well, you've been associated with Iolas then for quite a while?

WC: Yes, I had lunch with him today and we suddenly realized that in two years we'll have our silver wedding anniversary. It's been twenty-three years.

PC: Really?

WC: Yes.

PC: Well, he's been a dealer for a long time hasn't he?

WC: Yes, I think he was a dealer probably about five years before I met him. His first gallery was with the Hugo Gallery. He was backed by a Madame Hugo. He'd been a ballet dancer before that. I think he's a remarkable dealer in the sense that he had a very early eye. He was one of the first to show Max and Matta and Margritte, Tanguy, Cornell. He was a very, very sharp eye. I think he and Julian Levy were the most astute in the sense of being able to recognize talent at an early period.

PC: Do you know Julian Levy too?

WC: Very well, yes.

PC: What does he do now?

WC: He doesn't do much. I think he lives in Connecticut most of the time. And oh, he deals occasionally when he has to. But I think he's writing privately. He loves the country and doesn't need the public eye too much.`

PC: That's interesting. No, Iolas has always interested me because he's been the promoter of the Surrealist from very early on.

WC: Yes, and under conditions that were very difficult for him. I mean he had to help support Max and Magritte and Brauner all during the years when nobody was very interested in them. Which made it difficult for him. And it was more a personal loyalty I think to and his friendship for them and his understanding of what they were trying to do.

PC: Janis was also doing very well at that period. And I'll never forget how good I felt when I had the gallery in California to receive a letter from Janis, which was the only letter of its kind I've ever received. Telling me that he thought it was great what I was trying to do.

PC: That's terrific. Well there were not that many people in New York even who were really showing surrealist artists were there?

WC: Not really, no. It was the beginning, but just the beginning.

PC: Were you interested in, or are you still interested in the literary aspects of Surrealism?

WC: Well, I always call it poetic. Because I don't believe it's literary. I believe it's poetic.

PC: How do you differentiate it?

WC: Well, for me, you see, a painting is a, well, it's the difference between a simile and a metaphor. A painting for me is a metaphor. I mean it's a poetic metaphor rather than a poetic simile which it might be if it were literary.

PC: Oh, I see.

WC: Magritte is the best example of this, of course. The way I was taught in high school a woman is like a rose, is a simile, and a women is a rose is a metaphor. But Magritte for me is the master of the metaphor. To answer the question properly.

PC: Right. How do you find that your exhibitions, do you enjoy them? Do things look different to you when they're in a gallery lined up?

WC: I need them. I need them terribly. But I hate them. They frighten me. I don't enjoy them at all. But I need them because without my exhibitions I don't know where I've gone.

PC: So it's a kind of reappraisal, a re-seeing?

WC: Yes. I see what I've done. Usually I exhibit every two years. Well, when I have my exhibition I will know which will be the best of two years' work. I'll know what's happened to me in the last two years. Which I can't somehow do around my studio.

PC: That's interesting. Lots of people say that. I've had a couple of painters say that they go and see their shows and thy look around and can't see anything. I mean the gallery atmosphere and all the displays become a

problem they can't cope with.

WC: Well, the opening themselves are absolute murder. Because you are it's what they call in French le trac. It's stagefright. But even that's important. Because you do get a chance to judge how people are reacting. Which unfortunately is part of what a painter has to worry about. I'm always sorry that the gallery shows are so exclusive.

PC: In what way?

WC: I had one experience one time which gave me more pleasure than any thing that ever happened to me. There was a sort of mad psychologist in Paris who sort of wanted to psychoanalyze painters by their paintings. He talked me into letting him photograph some of my paintings. And since I had rather, well, I didn't have enough light in the studio for color photography, which he wanted to do, we took the paintings across the street and leaned them against a wall. And just then church let out. And I saw these people coming back from church. And they were standing in front of the pictures. It was a total surprise for them. And they'd walk away smiling. And that was the greatest thing that ever happened to me.

PC: Sure.

WC: Because usually at a gallery opening you know who you're waiting for.

PC: Right. It's contrived. It's like a ballet.

WC: Right. I mean why hasn't so and so shown up. And then you look out of the corner of your eye to see how they're reacting and that kind of thing. And that's why I was so delighted about these programs that they've had here in New York of putting up sculptures in sort of surprise positions.

PC: Right.

WC: Some tired businessman will suddenly turn a corner and have an experience.

PC: Right. I think that's great. And the painting they've done on buildings, on the walls, painted walls is terrific.

WC: Yes.

PC: I want to ask you, what do you think is the difference between the New York and the Paris art scene since you've been in both?

WC: Of course there has been an almost total stop in Paris in the sense of activity. It's taking up again a little bit now. But still it's nowhere near as exciting as it is here. But what I do think, and it's a terrible thing to say, I do think that in New York the atmosphere of New York forces you to feel you have to make it. And Paris, I think traditionally was the place you went to when you didn't want to make it. People went to Paris to paint. To get away from their rich families. You know and live in cafes and paint and be beatniks.

WC: Yes, and I think the fact that Paris never really had that commercial drive and never quite attained that much ambition, where New York, is I think concerned with ambition.

PC: Oh, tremendous. Sometimes it gets over the fifty percent I think.

WC: Yes. It's interesting now that I think the revolt among the kids who are trying very hard to paint without any ambition. My son is a painter. And he's gone off to the desert with a friend of his, they're going to dig trenches int he desert and photograph them from the air. That's what they're accomplishing of course, is a work of art that cannot be sold. So a lot of kids are thinking in these terms and working in these terms, which I think is a reaction against the pressure.

PC: Of making a marketable product. That kind of thing?

WC: Yes.

PC: That's very interesting because you know, Paris still has always been a center for dealing for centuries it's been a place to buy and sell, trade pictures, and the auctions and all that kind of thing.

WC: Even there it's quieted down. I mean London has replaced it as the big auction center.

PC: How do you think that's happened to Paris?

WC: I think probably what happened was that at a certain point they were trying to skyrocket everything in

Paris. And I think they went past a level where people would pay. And everybody stopped buying at once, overnight. And it never seemed to revive.

PC: I know. It's never been able to get going after that.

WC: Yes, and that was at the height of what they call tachisme and there were all sorts of very chic young painters who were being entertained and getting very high prices and the level was being pushed and pushed and pushed.

PC: Too high too fast.

WC: I think everything went too high too fast. And everybody just stopped buying overnight.

PC: Do you think that will happen, or is happening here? Because some young people are getting fantastic prices.

WC: Well, I really don't know what's happening here because I've been sort of organizing my life in the last two years. And I haven't been painting. And I haven't been on the scene or haven't been going to galleries or museums even. So I'm out of it.

PC: Did you follow the shows in Paris when you were there other than the Surrealist?

WC: Yes, because you always went to each other's shows. It was unthinkable not to.

PC: It used to be that way here with the abstract expressionists.

WC: Yes.

PC: But it now seems to be changing.

WC: Oh, yes. I don't think it's that way at all anymore.

PC: The great names don't appear for the young guys' shows at all anymore. A dozen or ten years ago you'd meet half a dozen.

WC: Yes, it was a social duty almost.

PC: And they all lived here. Now, you know, they live in Woodstock or East Hampton or Southhampton, or they're away teaching for six months of the year at a university. And the whole social milieu has changed.

WC: Yes, and then of course a thing you can't forget is the population explosion being a large part of it. That there are awful lot more painters around than there used to be. An awful lot of kids that are a hell of a lot better than they ought to be. There are an awful lot of good work around.

PC: Why do you say they're better than they should be?

WC: Well, you just don't expect them to be that good. You know I had this magazine for the last year. And kids were coming to me every day and some were quite young.

PC: How did that whole thing grow up and get going. The Letter Edged in Black Press?

WC: There again, it came the way the gallery came, from drinking a lot of beer in the summertime. And kicking ideas around. And one day we said let's do it.

PC: I'm very interested in that. I've seen the first two. the other two I haven't seen. There are four aren't there?

WC: There were six.

PC: Then there are two I've seen and four I haven't.

WC: And they were meant to come out every two months. And then of course the same thing happened in my gallery. I just got scared after about the fourth issue because I was spending a lot and nothing was coming in.

PC: Well, they were very complex.

WC: They were complex.

PC: How did you like the portfolio idea?

WC: Well, it was the idea of keeping the work individual art, you see. We didn't want to editorialize at all. We didn't want any critical comment. I wanted something that would just open up and be full of what was going on.

PC: Like portable exhibition in a museum?

WC: Yes, with no comment. And that seemed to us the best way to do it.

PC: Who was involved in that with you?

WC: Well, there was Dmitri Petroff who was an awfully good painter in the forties and never really painted enough. But he had a very good background in Surrealism and a mentality that was rather close to mine. So that we were able to work together terribly well. And he had spent a lot of time on Madison Avenue so that he knew the techniques which I of course had no knowledge of whatsoever. And then I got a lot of help from the Sherwood Press. And then sometimes we'd just have to shop around till we could find somebody who would do the impossible. We were always looking for the impossible at that point.

PC: That makes it much more fun.

WC: Yes.

PC: Anyhow, how did you get the name for it - The Letter Edged in Black Press?

WC: I had come from a lawyer. We wanted a name that would be sufficiently surprising. And we tried a few, and we came up with that one.

PC: There was S.M.S. or something else?

WC: Yes, S.M.S. That was what we called the magazine. It was The Letter Edged in Black Press Incorporated. And the S.M.S. really had no particular meaning except between the two of us, which was supposed to mean Shit Must Stop. It was a terribly foolhardy venture. I was between marriages and unable to paint, and looking for something to do. And I enjoyed it. The worst thing I feel about it is that I lost a good job. Because I liked it and I liked doing it. But getting back to the kids, I was quite amazed. If you see the issues there's a lot of, they're very young and they just walk in and show me their material. And it was invariably of interest to me. I'll never forget one time there was a beautiful tall brunette who walked in with a big portfolio under her arm. And she just stands in the doorway. I say, "And what do you do?" She says "I do pornography." It was great pornography, but I did see a lot of very good young work by young people just through having the magazine. I was quite surprised.

PC: There's a great interest in eroticism and pornography now. Lots of people doing it.

WC: Yes, my feeling is that Americans, being Anglo-Saxons as they are unfortunately they don't know the difference between eroticism and pornography. Because eroticism has always existed in art. And pornography has never necessarily been in art. And I haven't been terribly impressed by these pornography shows.

PC: Oh yes the Kronhausen wants to bring their show to New York.

WC: Yes, I and Know them very well, but I don't really go along with that whole thing, no.

PC: I haven't had a chance to look at their Grove Press books which is, you know the catalog of their collection.

WC: Yes, there are some astounding things in the collection there's no question. And they do have a certain eye. But they exaggerate it a little I think. I mean in that real distinction between pornography and eroticism. Although they're better than some people I must say. Their approach is perhaps more scientific.

PC: Yes. Or a gauge over a few things.

WC: I don't know, I know one time somebody from Kinsey came down to my studio. And I was quite flattered. They left very disappointed because they didn't find my work dirty. I mean I don't think my work is dirty. But I think it's erotic. I like it to be. I mean eroticism to me is, or eroticism and humor have to do with the sweetness of life. So that when they left disappointed I was disappointed too.

PC: How as your interest in humor, because you just had mentioned that a while ago about using humor and having it in painting?

WC: Well, one of my first contacts with the Surrealists were Man Ray, Max Ernst, and Marcel, who I think are the three greatest humorists around, you know. Marcel's humor is one kind of humor. Max's is another. And mine is another. And my humor applies to the, what I like to say is the battle of the sexes. Sort of the impossibility of men and women to get together no matter how much they would like to. Yes, yes. there's difficulty there you

know. I don't know, it just happens to be the way I feel. I don't think about it very much. But I never seem to be able to come up with anything else.

PC: I was looking through the Stedelijk Museum catalog yesterday, and I noticed some very interesting things. They'd have like a comic page where they'd have little boxes and a story. And one of the things that amused me was that they would go from French to English. You know, there's be French here, or a French sign and English words. Do you notice any difference or does that just happen as you go along that ....

WC: Well, you see, it's definitely true that some things are funnier in English than they are in French and vice versa. I mean Duchamp was very well aware of this. Certain of his puns are totally untranslatable. Or they may be translatable but they still don't have the impact in translation because there'll be a nuance, a nuance or maybe just through French usage that will not translate or will be not come across.

PC: Yes, because of the culture and background and all that.

WC: Yes.

PC: When did you discover that you were involved with humor as a factor in your work? Or has it always been there do you think?

WC: I think it's always been that. I don't think it's anything I ever discovered. I never really tried to paint a pretty picture in my life. And I was a writer. And I was interested in, this is where your word literacy perhaps comes in. Although I think I caught that mistake fairly early. I tried for instance at one time to illustrate an image from a poem and I was very serious about it. And it didn't come off at all. In my last show I illustrated some Robert W. Service.

PC: Right.

WC: I feel it came off because I was no longer making a literacy translation; I was making a poetic translation, or trying to.

PC: Oh, I see. I see what you mean. You did that whole series of drawings. There were paintings too, weren't there?

WC: Yes, I worked three months on the drawings. And then I did this painting show. And for a while I had an idea in my head to do a book with drawings, but I never did. I had trouble with the publisher and it got complicated and I dropped it.

PC: But do you always make drawings for the paintings?

WC: I do now. I never used to. Well, I haven't painted in two years now. But as of the last three years before that I would draw for three months, two months before I started to paint. I may not paint directly from my drawings but I find it necessary to have gone through the period of drawings.

PC: Doing the images and ideas and things like that?

WC: Yes, set myself in the mood for the ... And usually the paintings have a common theme. Before I did the Service, I did the American Ballad and I find that drawing helps me more than anything else. The only reason I didn't draw more before was that there were two things that really frightened me, one is writing and one is drawing. Although I consider myself a fairly good writer I hated it, it frightens me. And I never did learn to draw until I finally made myself learn to draw. And now I feel that I've taught myself to draw, but that was an effort I put off for a long time just out of laziness.

PC: What's the quality about it that bothers you, would you say?

WC: It's hard work. It's just like when I went to school. I didn't want to work.

PC: You just wanted to enjoy it. How did you hit upon Robert Service and the Yukon business?

WC: Well, I remember it as a kid, you know. A friend of mine used to read it to me as a kid. And those images stuck in my mind. It was Cliff Westermann who said to me once, "You should illustrate Robert W. Service." And this sort of cooked in my mind for about a year. And kept coming back.

PC: How in the world did he bring that up?

WC: I don't know. I can understand it coming from Cliff because I'm sure that Cliff Westermann probably sees Service just about the way I do, a man with a remarkable sense of imagery and very limited intellect. Which is a

perfect combination particularly for me, who, I'm not really interested in intellectualism in either writing or painting.

PC: How would you define your interest in, say, writing for one ....

WC: Why do I like to write?

PC: No, How would you define your .... Since you're not interested in intellectualism, what does interest you then?

WC: I think the personal side. The sentimentality. I like to say warm things. I don't like to analyze. I don't think I have an analytical mind. I like to leave that to other people. I like to remark on the intensity of life, but I don't want to take it apart into little pieces. I just don't have that kind of mentality.

PC: Is it similar in painting too?

WC: I think so, yes. Otherwise I would be painting pretty pictures which I've never really wanted to do.

PC: Have you ever been interested in abstract painting? Non-figurative painting?

WC: Never, never.

PC: Because I don't remember anything. It's always ....

WC: Never in the least. Never for a moment.

PC: But your paintings have always been very flat and the space has never been, you know, like deep space.

WC: No perspective. Because I don't know perspective. Matta was out at my house one weekend and I said to him, "Would you teach me perspective because nobody knows perspective better than Matta and nobody is more articulate than he is." He said, "Yes. We'll go out to your studio in the morning." So we went out in the morning and he picked up a piece of charcoal down and said, "No, I'm not going to do it." And walked out. Because he didn't think I should do it. He thought he would be doing me more of a disservice than anything else.

PC: That's very interesting. Let's see. You had an exhibition with Arthur Craven in 1953 in a group show?

Yes, that was when, that's a very funny story there. I probably shouldn't tell it.

PC: I'm curious about him because he's such an extraordinary kind of ....

WC: Yes, well, if you delete it I'll tell you. He came to see my first work in Paris. I'd shown him one or two things at the very beginning. And the first thing I showed him was portrait of Marcel that I had done. And he was very enthusiastic and offered me a show. So I worked my tail off for the next six months and when I finally felt that I had it all put together I went and got him, brought him to the studio. And he took one look at it and called the show off. It appears he's very Catholic and I guess a lot of the work in the pictures he found quite offensive.

PC: Oh, really? I don't know very much about him but he seems to be a kind of unusual underground image. Did he have a gallery there for a long time?

WC: For quite a while. I think he still does.

PC: Oh, really?

WC: But I did have the portrait of Duchampt in his American show. That must have been about 1951.

PC: 1953.

WC: Somewhere in there.

PC: You did sets and costumes for ballet.

WC: Yes, that was for the Harkness Ballet.

PC: Cross Walk.

WC: Yes, it was to be done to the music of a percussion piece of Darius Milhauds. And I don't think that Skibine is head of Harnkness anymore. Because that was Skibines's idea. And the sets apparently were already made. I've never seen them. And actually I think one of them was illustrated in a full page in the catalog. But for some

reason Skibine was very slow in finishing the choreography. And then I never heard another word from him. And I suppose somewhere along the line he lost his job with Harnkness.

PC: Has it been performed or not?

WC: It was never performed, no?

PC: But it was all built and ....

WC: The sets apparently were made. And the only thing that wasn't done was the choreography. As far as I know he never finished the choreography for it.

PC: That's the only theatrical project you've been involved with, isn't it?

WC: That's the only one, yes.

PC: Did you find that interesting? Or was it kind of a ....

WC: I find everything interesting the first time I do it. Somebody asked me to do a lithograph in Paris. And I loved doing it and I must say it came out rather well. And ever since then I haven't been able to do anything interesting on stone. And somebody asked me to do a copper plate. And I'd never touched copper before. And I was rather happy with the result, but ever since then I haven't been able, you know. I accept commissions and then I put the execution off as long as possible. And then I do them and I'm rather pleased. But that never seems interesting again.

PC: How did you decide on the dedication of the Stedelijk show to Hugh Hefner.

WC: The dedication?

PC: Of the catalog. It's dedicated to Hugh Hefner. Entertainment for men.

WC: Oh, that was not my idea at all. I wish I could give you the guy's name. You'll find it I think in the catalog somewhere. He took the liberty of doing it himself, and showed it to me. And I was in total approval. I found it great, you know. But I wasn't even asked about it. He just went ahead and did it.

PC: I'm just curious. I thought it was a very, very amusing little.

WC: I thought it was very successful, yes.

PC: I loved the gatefold.

WC: Yes.

PC: Well, you know, one thing about that. Have they in any way along tied you in with the Pop people? Because of your interest in, you know, like using the newspaper cartoon and telling stories in series.

WC: No, actually I never have been accused of it. I feel personally every artist has the kind of feeling in the sense that he should keep his mouth shut. Because I don't think it ever matters who did does what first. But I have been involved in this in Paris for quite a while privately. But I've never been officially associated with it, I don't think.

PC: I don't remember any of the critics even. Are you interested in Pop art? Or doesn't it ....

WC: Well, I think I always have been. Not to the extent that it was finally carried to. I know the big difference I think between British Pop and American Pop, I feel that British Pop came out of the deprivation, the war years, where suddenly there was affluence again.

PC: They could buy butter and washing machines.

WC: Yes, and big adds. So this had that kind of effect. And I think American Pop was quite the opposite. I think American Pop was almost a kind of self-disgust. At least it was satire.

PC: Do you know Lawrence Alloway?

WC: Yes.

PC: Are you interested in his theories about Pop? Or don't you think they fit?

WC: I'm not interested in Lawrence Alloway.

PC: Oh, okay.

WC: I'm a great friend of Richard Hamilton's and to be absolutely fair I think British Pop was more or less the result of collaboration between Alloway, Hamilton and who's the sculptor, you know.

PC: Paolozzi?

WC: Yes, yes. To be perfectly fair I think that it should be attributed to those people in the way they worked together.

PC: I was in London in 1953 I guess or 1954 and Alloway was in the I.C.A. and talking of Pop, Pop images and that kind of thing. I don't remember Hamilton there. Paolozzi was there I know.

WC: Yes, well, Hamilton was very much involved. Although he was working at it through a much more intellectual way and actually through Duchamp. He was trying to update, I would say, the concept of the Duchamp readymade.

PC: Oh, really?

WC: Yes, if you ever get to his studio I think it would be immediately evident. Because, you see, before that he had been one of the intellectual disciplines of Marcel. He's one of my best friends. I feel, for instance that he sees Duchamp one way, I see Duchampt another way. I respond to Duchamp's humor. He responds to Duchamp's fantastic mind, the gyrations that Marcel goes through to ...

PC: The intellectualization thing.

WC: Yes, and he was studying Duchamp's techniques before these Pop images emerged. But they were simply part of the same process, as I say, to update the readymades. And I don't think that Richard has less of a sense of humor than I have. Three's a very cute story that I can tell. By the way, I have a replica of his glass. It's part of my collection. He was with me in Greece a couple of summers ago and he'd been terribly worried about how to find the lead for the Bachelors and the leading that went into the glass. He said that he'd worked terribly hard on it. He'd found some company in Manchester that would do it for him at some fabulous price, you know, like a pound and a half a foot or something you see. And I said, "Richard, fuse wire, French fuse wire." Which is nothing but lead, you know, just lead in spools.

PC: That's right. So he found some French fuse wire for the ....

WC: Yes, I just tell the story to show the difference in our mentalities you see, because I thought of it immediately, and he wouldn't have.

PC: Well, but that's because you were there, and he wasn't.

WC: Yes, because I knew France a little better. But at the same time, you see, he would look for a technical solution, whereas according to my knowledge of Marcel, Marcel wouldn't. Marcel would take whatever was at hand, you know, and make use of it.

PC: Yes, well, you got to know him very well then, didn't you? Duchamp?

WC: Yes, we were very close friends.

PC: Did you play chess with him?

WC: I never dared play with him. It was always too much of a disgraceful experience to be beaten so badly. I would lose all self-esteem. And I never had patience for chess actually. And when I finally decided to give it up, there are two things I gave up in my life and both of them made me happy. I gave up chess and I gave up photography.

PC: Oh, I didn't know you were interested in photography.

WC: I really wasn't, you see. I was trying to make myself interested in it. One time I was standing in front of a Greek temple, and I had forgotten my camera. And I was so relieved. I said, "My God, I can look at this thing." So I got rid of all my cameras and have never taken another picture.

PC: You didn't have to go through it?

WC: Yes.

PC: Oh, that's terrific. Well, what, how would you describe Duchamp? Since you knew him for long time. What kind of person was he for you?

WC: Well, I would have to say a saint, you know. He was certainly the most important person I've ever known. He was a person who knew how to live more than anybody else. He knew how not to worry, how not to be upset. He knew how to get through life pleasantly. Nothing was problem for him. And I don't want to quote myself on things I've written. I always needed to see Duchamp, say, every three months if possible. Because I'd always come away with a stronger feeling about myself. He could somehow inject you with confidence and make things that seemed to be disturbing be ridiculous.

PC: In what way? You know, that's a magical quality to have.

WC: Well, it was magical. It had to do with his philosophy that he himself was able to live by so well. I don't know if you saw the little piece I did for the New York Times when he died, which is very much a capsule of how I felt about him.

PC: No, I didn't see that.

WC: That might be better than asking me, you know, because I worked on it for a few days, and tried to say exactly how I felt about him.

PC: It's interesting the variety of influences he seems to have on an extraordinary collection of people.

EC: Yes, that's why I would like to see, for instance, a book written on Duchamp, written by a collection of people. Because the way he influenced me is not the way he influenced Richard, and not the way, say, he influenced John Cage. And yet the influence is probably just as strong in each case.

PC: Well, how many people do you think could really say how they were influenced by him? Or they certainly would have opinions on him.

WC: Well, it's funny, you know, there weren't too many people who knew him. I mean who knew him that well. John called me up one time. He had an editorial job of some kind. He asked me how many people I knew who could write on Duchamp. And I said i'd have to call him back, and I thought about it. I called him back the next day and gave him three or four names. Certainly Jasper Johns would admit a strong influence. John Cage of course. And then there others are people who intellectualized on him. Not too many who, at least consciously, I mean the things that Duchamp accomplished, reached many people in many ways. But the ones who were conscious of his effect on them were probably not too many.

PC: Cage knew him didn't he?

WC: Yes, Cage knew him well.

PC: Did Jasper Johns?

WC: Yes, Richard Hamilton knew him well. I could probably think of a couple, but not offhand you know. But there weren't that many.

PC: It's amazing how the whole, you know, life and influence and mythology.

WC: Yes, of course the greatest discipline I think is Man Ray. And they actually collaborated quite a bit in the early days. I did an article once for the Art News Annual in which I tried to explore that areas of the relationship between Man Ray and Duchamp.

PC: Yes, they've known each other for a long, long time.

WC: They were close friends, yes. Perhaps the closest.

PC: One thing I've always been curious about, which is just an observation, is that in so many of the paintings the people have no faces or they're circular images or something.

WC: Yes, well, that's very simple. I never had any luck drawing faces anyway. And so one day I was looking at something I was working on before I put the face on, what will I need a face for anyway. Since I am only interested in men and women and the relationship between each others why do they need faces?

PC: So it's general rather than specific?

WC: Yes. I'm very happy to give up painting faces, which I never learned to do.

PC: Well, you really are completely self-taught then?

WC: Yes, I've never studied with anyone.

PC: Do you think that the painting as opposed to writing or parallel to the writing is involved with a drive to communicate? Or don't you feel painting is involved with that?

WC: I feel painting is for myself. This is just myself speaking, painting for me is directly concerned with communication. Actual communication of poetry. I always consider painting and poetry synonymous.

PC: Do you write poetry?

WC: No.

PC: You just read it?

WC: I used to be an avid reader. And now I never look at it.

PC: Really, for a long time?

WC: For a long time, yes.

PC: Were you interested in the Surrealist poets? You know, L'Autremont and people like that?

WC: Only L'Autremont and what's that other one.

PC: Rimbaud?

WC: Rimbaud, yes. Most of the formal surrealist poets bored me. And of course they never came off well in translation. And I never did learn to read French really properly in order to savor poetry.

PC: How about your travels? Because you've traveled a great deal, haven't you? Since you've lived in different places.

WC: I've lived in different places, but I'm a reluctant traveler. I really don't enjoy traveling. Displacement terrifies me. I'm alright once I get somewhere. But I haven't really traveled that much. I mean I honeymooned in Egypt on my second marriage. My second wife liked Greece. I didn't, but I went along. Every once in a while I do feel like getting out of town, particularly when the weather is bad. Or if I've been in a town too long I like to get away. But I'm a very reluctant traveler. And I think most painters are. Because I'm usually in the middle of a series of work and if somebody says let's go here I say no, I want to finish. Then if I've had a show, then I might travel, because I can't work right away after a show.

PC: A break. A change.

WC: Yes.

PC: Yes. Writers always just grab a typewriter and pencil and paper and they're off.

WC: Yes, but I'm a very reluctant traveler.

PC: Do you think that the fact that you've lived in Europe all that time had a great influence on your painting, the imagery, or the content of it?

WC: Certainly. Because I think any environment gets to your work right away. I was in Mexico one time. It almost destroyed me. Because I was surrounded by Mexican colors and Mexican light. And it was just too much for me. Too much for my palette. Or I spent a summer in Venice because I had the children with me and you know all the houses around there are pink or blue or soft pastel colors. And I just didn't know where I was.

PC: Most of your things have been monochrome, haven't they?

WC: Particularly since I've been in New York I've done a lot of monochrome.

PC: I wonder i that's because New York is a gray city?

WC: Well, Paris is a gray city. But I got used to it. And I like gray cities because you can invent your own color. And in colorful cities the colors are on top of you. But also I'm very interested in color, not painting Venice or

Mexico. But I spend an awful lot of time on color. And then it occurred to me that if you have a drawing and the drawing isn't perfect you have a perfect drawing. If you start a painting, the painting will not be perfect until it is perfect. Which means you have to, the colors have to be just right as the drawing has to be right in a drawing. I almost say this eliminates the difference between painting and drawing. Because if your colors are perfect nobody is going to notice them particularly.

PC: Oh, the image is there and it works.

WC: Yes.

PC: Well, were you ever interested in color as a thing?

WC: Yes, I am. If I'm painting I won't give up until I feel I've achieved perfection. And I began working on my palette. But for about the last ten years I've worked exclusively in glazes. And the greatest thing that has happened to me has by acrylics. Because before I used to have to work on ten pictures at a time and let the glazes dry. And now I can just work a picture through.

PC: You like acrylics then?

WC: Yes, I love them. But I don't use them the way the New York painters use them. I mean I use them the way I always use oil paint. I use them on canvas and not on cotton. I'm not interested in pure colors areas. I find it's the greatest stuff in the world to glaze with. And on paper it's fantastic.

PC: Great. Well, you've used all kinds of materials like lace and things in pictures.

WC: Yes, I've had lace periods and things like that.

PC: Do you still use different materials?

WC: Well, I haven't recently. I haven't painted for two years. And I have no idea what I'm going to do next.

PC: How did you get involved with the lace? Because there are quite a number of things ...

WC: Well, it suddenly occurred to me, you see, that almost every material has connotation, poetic connotation. Look at that fur there, you see. And then getting this masculine-feminine business again I said now what is the material that has the strongest female connotation. Obviously black lace. So then I had to find the material that would have the strongest male connotation. And so I decided on either corduroy or blue jeans. So my interest in materials, you see, is purely connotative. Because I think it can give a dimension. But it's a poetic dimension.

PC: But it really means what it is?

WC: Yes.

PC: That's fine. Have you done many things with other materials besides the lace?

WC: Very little. I've done a few collages. In the early stages I did quite a bit of collage when I was just beginning to paint, probably because of Max's influence. But really I'm not that much of a collagist.

PC: Your really have to paint?

WC: Yes, unless sometimes you find an element, particularly a single element that you can use in a collage sense to finish a painting with. My biggest beef against collagists is that they always overcharge for their work. Max, who to me is the greatest collagist int he world also is a collagist with the greatest economy. He never overcharges.

PC: Yes, some of them just fill it up and ....

WC: Yes.

PC: How about Schwitters's?

WC: Well, Schwitters means a great deal to me because I think he's also one of the great collagists. He also, in this sense more than Max, realized the connotative aspect of his collage material. I mean a stub from a train ticket represents a trip, and that kind of thing.

PC: So it's a whole story.

WC: Yes.

PC: I think it's interesting that you've had such a long association involved with Surrealism. But I don't really see it apparent in your own work.

WC: I'm glad you say that because I never wanted to present myself as a formal surrealist. I mean if someone says I'm not a surrealist I will insist that I am because I owe it to the people who helped develop me. But I've never wanted to be anything more than just a painter. Although I will insist on calling myself a surrealist because of the way I developed.

PC: Oh, that's it. But it's an entirely different kind of imagery and painting style and attitude, everything.

WC: Yes.

PC: I find it interesting to, some of the painters I've talked to do, do call .... When you see little obvious bits of influence, you know, the collection or people they have been associated with, and they all .... But I haven't seen it anywhere in your work.

WC: Well, it all happened subconsciously and it's better if it does.

PC: Did you ever get interested in the theories of Surrealism?

WC: Only in the most simple terms. I could talk more about it but I'd rather not. I think that when I say that Surrealism is a statement, it is metaphor, it is poetry, that's really as far as I'd like to go. I don't like to intellectualize it. It's a very simple thing for me.

PC: You don't have any theory about your own painting, do you? Do you develop ....

WC: No, just that I think that I'm by necessity doomed to explore the tragedy of man and woman. It's Chaplinesque I suppose.

PC: But don't you find it kind of curious, because here you are, you're painting figures which is not the in thing to do today, you're involved with humor, which certainly in around.

WC: Man never been in.

PC: Yes, but it's never been a very big thing. People ....

WC: It's an outlet.

PC: Yes, you've got a whole ....

WC: It's very offensive to people.

PC: Why do you think humor bothers people in painting? In literature they love it.

WC: Yes.

PC: But it there's humor in painting they get uptight and nervous. Why do you think that is?

WC: I think it's just sort of a social stance. I mean why do people say "Shhh" in a museum? I mean why can't you stand in front of a painting and laugh your head off? But it's just sort of a social stance. You can't.

PC: It's a cathedral-like atmosphere.

WC: Yes. And it has to do with snobbery. And that there's something very special about a painting. Look at the spectacle of the Mona Lisa's visit here.

PC: Yes. The hordes of people who if they blinked missed it.

WC: Yes.

PC: That's interesting. Oh, a thing that I find amusing in a lot of your pictures is that you generally have a man who's dressed and a nude girl. Which is an interesting combination.

WC: Well, I see no particular beauty in a naked man. And in the last few years I've developed, what I think is quite amusing, all my men in tweed suits.

PC: Yes, I noticed that.

WC: Because this is to make the girls itch.

PC: I see. There's an erotic subtlety there.

WC: Yes, and it also represents, you know, another impossibility.

PC: Oh, there's another thing. You have for years had a foundation, or you still do I guess?

WC: Yes.

PC: That you have I guess Penrose and Sir Herbert Read and all kinds of people are associated with. How did that get started? Or was that an idea you had in ....

WC: It's an idea I developed back in 1954 with my lawyer, a change to do something useful with my money. That's about all that is. Using my own taste. Not my own taste, I mean, working with advisors of my choice to arrive at a taste to encourage either new people or people who've been forgotten.

PC: Because I notice every year when you publish the list of recipients it's always amazing to see who is there because somebody ....

WC: Well, it's worked out very well I think. I mean I have a theory that the most perfect number in the world is fifty-fifty percent. I mean it would be very wrong to be right a hundred percent of the time. It's like I think in the last act of Agamemnon if he can split the jury fifty-fifty he's exonerated. And I've always been very happy to see that with the recipients of my awards that about fifty-percent of them were able to use the money properly and do something with it. And the other fifty percent, you know, either bought a car and killed themselves or got drunk and stopped painting or something else. This is very satisfactory to me, I think fifty percent is quite successful.

PC: Fifty percent on the stock market is fantastic.

WC: Yes, sure.

PC: That certainly is so. Do you intend to be in New York for another ....

WC: I think so. As I say, I hate traveling. And I'm really happy anywhere I am.

PC: You can do what you want to do and carry on.

WC: Yes.

PC: Do you think there are any things we could talk about that I haven't touched on, or might not know about to bring up and discuss?

WC: God, I can't. My head is empty right now.

PC: Politics has never been a great interest?

WC: I've always been to the left. But I'm against an artist over-participating in politics. Simply because I think he has more to say. If he remains an artists I think he can certainly express himself or a cocktail party. But I don't feel that an artist does himself an awful lot of good wasting his painting time handing out handbills.

PC: Or picketing or doing ....

WC: Or picketing or anything like that. I think there are certain gestures he can make. He has to be very careful because his time is more important than anything else. To an artist time is worth much more than money or anything.

PC: That's true. And once it's gone it never comes back.

WC: Yes. The other thing I feel, I don't know, it has to do with time. There are probably two periods in a painter's life, one when he's young and one when he's old. And maybe it's just because I've turned fifty and it's worrying me so much. But I think an artist is obliged to experiment when he's young. And then at a certain time he must stop and use what he's learned. Because he doesn't have that much time.

PC: He can't experiment, experiment, experiment. Okay, well.

WC: I can tell you, if you want to, call me in a week and if there's anything I feel I've left out maybe I can write it down and send it to you. I think we've covered a lot of ground. I don't know if it's going to mean ...

[END OF INTERVIEW]