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Oral history interview with Robert Emory Johnson, 1975 Mar. 14

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Robert Emory Johnson on March 14, 1975. The interview was conducted at Robert Johnson's home in San Fransisco by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Robert Johnson, a painter, and for the purpose of this interview, former director of Intersection during the years of 1967-1969. I think both of us this afternoon would like to talk about the Rolling Renaissance in which you were involved. It was something of an art festival, really a celebration, as it says in the front of the catalogue here, San Francisco Underground Art, In Celebration Covering the Years 1945-1968. And I would like you to address yourself to this. Your recollections of the background, the origin of the Rolling Renaissance, the people who were involved, where the idea came from, and how it was carried out. But first of all, just to place you in point of time. You came to San Francisco in December of 1957, I believe, from Los Angeles. And you were an art student in Los Angeles, I gather, before you came here. Maybe you could fill in just a little of that.

ROBERT JOHNSON: I went to Los Angeles in 1949 and studied at the Art Center School with Lorser Feitelson, primarily, and other teacher of course. But he was important in my student years. Moved to San Francisco State College. I've lived here since 1957.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you ever use the teaching credential, by the way?

ROBERT JOHNSON: I never got it.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Never got it? But it did bring you to San Francisco.

ROBERT JOHNSON: It was my reason; it was what I told my friends, why I wanted to come here. Secretly I really wanted to move further north. I kept saying I wanted to go North. The fact is I've never lived north of San Francisco.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, since you've been involved in various aspects of the art scene in San Francisco, were you attracted to San Francisco for any reason relating to that? In other words, did you know that something interesting was going on? Were you aware of something interesting that was going on in the art world that was going on in San Francisco? That somehow you'd gotten wind of that in Los Angeles? Did this attract you? Or was it nothing that specific?

ROBERT JOHNSON: No. It wasn't that specific. I had gone to Los Angeles, as I say, as a very young fellow. In '49 I was completely taken by the situation down there. I met a lot of people and found it fascinating. I would say one of the main things that attracted me after moving to L.A. were the great numbers of people involved in various cult ideas, as well as the many painters. I did befriend a lot of different groups of painters, not just the Lorser Feitelson group, but also around the other schools; the Rico Lebrun group, and so on. I lived in L.A. 8 years. I really felt that I had gone through all that and still being very young wanted to move on to other things. I had friends in San Francisco who I would come up to see occasionally. They told me it would be a snap at S.F. State to get my teacher's credential with all of my background, which it really would have been, except I decided after getting into the program that I didn't want to teach high school. I was trying to give all my time to painting, while doing an endless string of part time jobs (like so many other painters). I worked in picture framing for a while, did all kinds of things here. Through a friend I had a chance to go to a job interview for the position of executive director of Intersection. I was unhappy in the situation I was in at the time in terms of employment. It always seems to be the same with painters and creative people – driving cabs, teaching and what not. So I went, on that kind of lark, to the interview. They asked a lot of questions, and I just spoke my mind. In a week or so they called and said they wanted to hire me. It was something that I was interested in. Intersection is still a rather undefined organization, although they have a line after their name that reads: "A Center for Religion and the Arts." They were originally part of an ecumenical group sponsored by Presbyterians, the Church of Christ, Methodists, etc. Intersection's background has always been in the arts and religion. The Bread and Wine Mission, which was a place on Grant Avenue in San Francisco in the late '50's was one of the early forerunners of Intersection. In fact Intersection came about as a merging of three of these kinds of organizations; all sponsored by church groups. The 14th Street Art Center, which was in the Mission district, the Bread and Wine Mission, which was on Grant Avenue in North Beach, and a place downtown in the tenderloin which was called The Precarious Vision – a meeting place for artists and young people who wanted to get together and talk. It was a coffee house type of place with live entertainment (which was ten years ago in 1965), the three organizations

joined forces and pooled their resources. The new board came up with the same: “Intersection.” The Intersection was supposed to be an intersection between artists, lay people and church members – to bring everybody together to discuss philosophical ideas, religious ideas and aesthetic ideas and see if there was some common ground. Intersection is still going today.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Located on Union Street?

ROBERT JOHNSON: On Union Street in a church building that was no longer being used by the Methodists Church. They in effect loan it to Intersection. In other words it’s rent free. John Williams is the director now. By the way, I was the only – let’s see there were four, maybe five directors – I was their only directory who wasn’t a protestant minister. The Board of Directors said it was an experiment on their part.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did you come from a religious background? Let’s see, I don’t mean a job requirement in that sense that somebody come from a close association with the church, but somebody who was sympathetic. Basically had a Christian orientation, or in a broader sense, certainly a religious, spiritual orientation?

ROBERT JOHNSON: I’m sure that in their talking to me at the interview all this came out. I did have, and still do have, a great interest in what we call spiritual beliefs and ideas. I was raised in the Roman Catholic faith and had studied seriously for a couple of years with the intention of becoming a Troppist Monk. The monastery idea, however, didn’t work out.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I’m sure your wife is very happy about that.

ROBERT JOHNSON: I’m very happy about it!

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Even more important.

ROBERT JOHNSON: I see now what the fellows were saying when they told me that it wasn’t going to pan out for me in the monastery. They said something like, “There are a lot of ways to do good stuff in the world, you don’t have to spend time in a monastery praying.” They really saw that it wasn’t the right thing for me.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Without trying to read into the situation, is it true that part of the attraction of the job – other than the fact that it was a position – the directorship of Intersection was a chance to work in a capacity that’s performing a service? Perhaps within association with a religious context?

ROBERT JOHNSON: No. Not so much as an opportunity to do things in the art field.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Okay.

ROBERT JOHNSON: I could talk at great length about the problems of Intersection relating to the church, but I don’t think this is the time to go into it.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No.

ROBERT JOHNSON: But, it provided me with a base of operations. The church building on Union Street was obtained at the same time I was hired as director. So it was pretty much up to me how we were going to use the building. And we, what’s it called – see how far away I am from the church – the sanctuary – we turned the sanctuary into a performing arts auditorium. We built a stage and took the altar downstairs, it sounds awful, into the lower level, into what is now a kind of coffee gallery setup. What had been the altar is now a serving counter.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: The altar is now a serving counter?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Right. It’s a beautifully carved piece of wood. A handsome piece of furniture. One of the first groups to join us in that little church building on Union Street was the Canyon Cinema Co-op. They were looking for a place to have their office and to show films. They had been operating out of a private home, which was very small (I used to go to meetings there). I had become a friend of Edith Kramer who, at that time was running Canyon Cinema Co-op, which was, and still is, an important group that distributes so-called underground film. They were the first ones to join us at Intersection. In fact we built a special room for them downstairs. It was a fairly large space converted into a storage room for the films and an office space for Edith. They were with Intersection for several years before they moved to Sausolito.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Now let me get this straight. This was at the Union Street location, right?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yes.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Okay. So Intersection was established on Union Street when you took the job.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Right. And they're still there. The space upstairs was used for film showings, plays, music, and poetry readings. I really dug into the job and had the place going night and day with drama, rehearsals, rock musicians, and so on. It was a beehive, and still is a beehive of activity. What else do we want to say about Intersection?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, I think that gives the flavor, or idea, of what intersection was about.

ROBERT JOHNSON: I should say that even before joining Intersection I had been putting on programs in San Francisco. Concerts and dance programs and painting exhibitions and so on. I would use just about any place that was available. For many years I had enjoyed presenting and promoting artist friends and particularly people that I believed in. And of course they then become friends. Charles Campbell, who now has the Charles Campbell Gallery, was away in Mexico for a year. His place was one of many I used to present shows, and concerts.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What year?

ROBERT JOHNSON: I'm not sure, around '63. I managed his picture frame shop for him during the year that he was away. The gallery-frame shop was not in the same location that it is today. In '63 it was up the block on Chestnut Street, closer to the art school. During that year I presented several, I think 3 or 4, painting exhibitions, a dance concert and several other programs. It was a great space which we cleaned up, painted, etc. I sent out announcements and operated it like a gallery. All this without Charles knowing what I was really doing. Of course I wrote him letters and I'm sure he thought it was all right. I have enjoyed doing this kind of work for many years. I worked at Gump's Gallery, and other places as well.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well what about the Rolling Renaissance? How did you come to be involved with the project? How did Intersection get involved? At some point this connection must have been made.

ROBERT JOHNSON: The thing about the job at Intersection was complicated. There was a good part and a part that wasn't so good. It's inherent in that kind of position. There was a board of directors. They still are, and according to John (the present director), not very aware of what's going on. They were not very supportive. So in a sense it was a one-man operation and they pretty much left me alone to do what I wanted to do. So it depended upon the director's personality and interests as to what happened there. While I'd been busy doing things at the facility on Union Street, I was also involved with a lot of dance concerts. That was at the time that the Rock thing was happening here in San Francisco. So there were a lot of people looking for rehearsal space and concert halls. Artists of all kind were constantly in and out of my office so I knew what was going on in town, like the Jazz Action Movement, etc., etc. And eventually knew a lot of the groups that were busy, you know, doing the best things in town – the jazz impresarios, the light show people, and so on. So I had a lot of connections in the city. People used to call me and ask for ideas. In the case of the Rolling Renaissance – this name came about much much much later, in fact we were ready to go to press with the catalogue and still didn't have a name for the whole shebang – this really started, from my point of view, in January of 1968 when I got a call from James, I think, Farrell. At least his last name was Farrell. He was from New York, and in town as a kind of advance man. He was sent out to do some advance planning for a convention of the Associated Arts Council. It was to be a national convention that would happen in June of 1968 and be held at the Hilton Hotel, in downtown San Francisco. He came to my office and asked if Intersection could get together some kind of program for their convention. I assured him that we would be happy to do so. I was very accustomed to doing that very type of thing – of finding jobs, gigs, work and so on for artists, dancers and musicians. I had a directory in a sense, mostly in my head, of talented people that were looking for things to do. So this was right down my alley. I talked with Farrell for awhile and said, "What kind of things are you interested in?" And he said, "We're interested in doing something with the San Francisco artists. And anything that you would like to do." So it was decided roughly that we would do some kind of an exhibition, of visual things. A standard kind of thing of drawings and paintings, and so on, and a film program. I think that's pretty much what it started out as at the time. I told him there would be no problems. Oh yes, he also wanted a rock concert. He wanted a rock band and a light show, which was a big thing at that time. So those were the three things: an exhibition of paintings and drawings, a film showing, and a rock concert. So I knew I wouldn't have any difficulties getting that kind of thing together. I immediately went to Edith's office which was maybe 50 feet away from mine, and talked with her about a film program. This was 6 months in the future, so there was absolutely no problem. Besides, their convention was only going to be for 3 days. So we'd do a rock concert one night, a film showing in the afternoon, and the exhibition would be installed someplace in the hotel. So I worked on that for a while. Edith would do the film program, I'd get the paintings together and there was no problem finding a band in San Francisco. I looked through my notes earlier today before you arrived and reread a letter from Farrell in answer to one of my letters. He wanted either The Grateful Dead or Big Brother and the Holding Company. Well, as it turned out we didn't get either of those bands. We hired the Cleveland Wrecking Company. The concert was in the Glide Sanctuary, part of Glide Church downtown. Getting back to how the Rolling Renaissance came about – somewhere along, in early February, Tom Albright and Mark Green came to my office at Intersection and said that they were interested in doing some kind of a show about the Beat period. Mark is a photographer and Tom is a writer, he's also an art critic at the newspaper (the Chronicle). And I must say he's a pretty fine jazz piano player also.

Anyway, they had both lived in North Beach during the so called Beat period and had a great interest and a lot of information and energy to do a show about that time. They talked with me about it, and in my mind I'm not sure whether they were asking me about available space at Intersection or just why they came to my new office. You'd really have to ask them. But I liked them and I knew they were for real. And I said that I would certainly think about it and try to get back to them and that I was sure there was something that we could do together. But I didn't know just what. Well, I don't know at what point, but rather soon, that day or within the next couple of days, I realized that the Beat idea might fit into the program for the National Council of the Arts. So, Mark, Tom, and I got together again and talked about this. Well there were meetings after meetings after meetings! We excited each other with ideas. In my mind, while I was working mostly with young people and people in the rock scene at that time, I'm of the generation that's called the beat generation, and I thought, wouldn't it be nice if we could show these delegates from around the country something of the beat period and also the hip thing, the hippy business – several generations of the San Francisco art scene.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Was there some sort of idea already of a connection, some sort of continuum there?

ROBERT JOHNSON: I don't know at what point this came into the discussion, but that's the way that I tend to think about everything – in a kind of overview, a long, historical perspective kind of view. In fact I usually bite off much more than I should. These broad range kinds of programs that try to involve as many people, and give as much information as possible. There's just so much art activity that's going unrecorded, not taking its proper place in history. I'm really concerned about that. Anyway, I know sometime in February we did decide that we wanted to do a kind of overview of everything starting with the early important writing that had been done, which was of course referred to as Francisco Renaissance. This period dealt mostly with poets and literature in the late 40's and the early 50's. The Berkeley people centering around the University and Tom Parkinson. And Duncan, of course, was there. Then we planned to move on through the North Beach period when the people from New York came out, Ginsberg, Corso and others. And on through to the period. So it was a beautiful idea. I mean these are strong things that happened in San Francisco art history. I used the office of Intersection and my loft for meetings. I must say that Intersection was paying my salary and I was doing a lot of other things for Intersection at the same time. But the Rolling Renaissance became an overwhelming task. It's very difficult to say exactly how this really did evolve. I know it was decided that we needed more space than what Intersection could provide. There was a very strong possibility that we could use some of the Glide facilities. I have looked at early notes where we were talking about Fugazzi Hall and we were talking about the Norwegian Seaman Auditorium and all kinds of strange places. But several things broke very nicely for us. I again, being in that position of sitting in an office and people coming in and out all the time, had a lot of contacts. There was a group of young people who had fashioned some kind of gallery association. A lot of people were opening new galleries at that time. There were half a dozen or so galleries that had banded together to share expenses of printing announcements. They wanted to promote themselves as a group. Some of them were on Union Street, others on California Street, etc. There was the Mandrake Gallery and the Standiford Gallery and the Sun Gallery and others. These were all new galleries. So it was very easy to talk to them and line up some shows to go into those spaces. Because what turned out to be a major month-long thing, didn't come about easily. In the beginning we were talking about having only a few shows. As I go through the hundreds of letters of communication back and forth between all the people, I see the thing moved in fits and starts. We did have some key breakthroughs with certain people. A lot of people wanted to be part of it but many of them didn't work out, or dropped out, for one reason or another. There was a nucleus of people, Mark Green, Tom Albright, John Fisher (who's a playwright), and myself, who formed what we called a steering committee. We took it upon ourselves to kind of spearhead the whole idea, call meetings and get people together. We divided the overall plan into separate categories, you know, painting, music, dance, and so on. And we would say, "Ok, tonight or tomorrow night, we're going to get as many of the rock people together as we can and meet some place. Very often in my loft, which was on Commercial Street I had 1800 square feet there. It was a nice place to meet; had big work tables and so on. Or we'd get together with jazz musicians, or poetry people. We would sit and rap and everybody would throw out their ideas; who we should see, what we should check out, and so on. Out of all these meetings, and there were many dozens of them, we began to believe that there were enough people who rally wanted to do it. And there was enough energy, and as it turned out, enough facilities, odd as some of them were – one was like a furniture store as I remember. There were some strange places that these events took place in. But it was worth doing. Anyway, out of all these meetings we began to see that there was a possibility of doing a retrospective type thing. Many people contributed names, leads, and ideas. I must single out John Paine, who was then director of the Moore Gallery on Sutter Street. John was a young man very close to the rock and the poster people. John and I got along well and he was very excited about the retrospective idea. I single out John because as you look through the correspondence, first we were going to have 2 shows, then we were going to have 3 shows, then it was up to 6 shows. And the ideas kept changing because some things just weren't possible. Some of the ideas that didn't work out, that I feel very strongly about in terms of arts in the Bay Area, things that should have been covered and weren't are, sad to say, not in the catalogue. But John Paine asked me one day if I would like him to, on his own and at his own expense, call a meeting of all the gallery owners in San Francisco, invite them to a cocktail party in the evening at the Moore Gallery, and give me an opportunity to talk with them about what I wanted to do. I said, "Sure. Fine." So he had the cocktail party, and I made a fool of myself at the gathering.

Crazy San Francisco chauvinist, how we had to do this thing and how beautiful the city was and what a great art center it was, etc., etc. There were so many art people who had gone unnoticed and this was an opportunity to kind of turn the whole city on. We were going to do a big thing! As a matter of fact I wrote the mayor and I wrote some supervisors and I wrote the art commission and so on. But we didn't get a cent from any of them. We did get some support from writers in local newspapers, Herb Caen and so on, but no support from any of the "official" people at all. So there was no money from anyone other than Intersection paying my salary which gave me the time to race around and go to all the meetings, write letters, etc.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But of course the galleries assumed their own expenses for the exhibitions at least.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Right. To get back to the meeting that John Paine had in the evening. As it turned out it was a most beautiful thing. Not only did a number of galleries offer to change their exhibition schedules, some of the galleries were already scheduling people that fit right into our idea. I mean Peter Voulkos was being shown, Jess was being shown at the San Francisco Museum, and so on. Voulkos was at the Quay Gallery at that time. Other gallery owners who thought it was a good idea adjusted their schedule and fit in something maybe that was scheduled for a few months later. Other galleries said, "our space is available to you, you can do what you want." We turned up, I don't know how many galleries, maybe 7 or 8, out of that meeting where we could install newly planned exhibitions. And the more established galleries, Bolles Gallery and the Quay Gallery made special plans that fit into the festival idea. We had made a successful contact with the more established people, and that was all to the advantage of the celebration or festival, or whatever you want to call it. So then we saw that it really was going to come off. And we got behind it with everything that we could. I've always been one who wanted to document things. It's very important. Even a single sheet, a kind of souvenir give away thing. Because these shows come and go so fast and if there's no record that's kind of sad, for some people. And we knew – when I say we I don't know who that means – but it was decided…

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: The steering committee.

ROBERT JOHNSON: The steering committee? I must say, to try and make things as accurate as possible, several members of the steering committee weren't able to help us as much as we had originally thought they would. John Fisher had to get on… I probably should be absolutely honest at this point.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Please do.

ROBERT JOHNSON: John was to present a play at Intersection and wanted to use the space for rehearsal and was spending a lot of time there. Because we weren't really an auditorium he wanted to study it and get his act together there, and he somehow got into a very strong disagreement, as a matter of fact a fist fight, with one of the conscientious objectors – how about that?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Beautiful.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Who was working with me at that time. I should say that while I was the only one on payroll, there were about 6 c.o.s. who were assigned to Intersection doing alternate service as conscientious objectors. All of them were artists of one kind or another. Three or four of them were musicians. And I turned to them loose to do things in town. One who's a writer, now a librarian (I think he's down in Santa Cruz though I'm not sure what library he's in), Malcomb Scott was my first right hand man. He was invaluable. He did typing, hundreds and hundreds of letters, took phone messages and so on. In a sense he really was the mainstay of the Intersection staff. I appreciated all of his work very much. But anyway, John Fisher had an altercation with one of the c.o.s. and it was a very bad scene. So John decided he didn't want to have anything to do with Intersection or our plans.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: With Rolling Renaissance?

ROBERT JOHNSON: With any part of the whole thing. I must say that I think all of this has been patched up. John is a fine writer. We've always been friends and he's given me books of his poetry. But at that time, and this is in the early stages of the whole thing, we had lost John, so to speak (in terms of his energy and contribution). And Mark Green had to go into the hospital. So we lost his good ideas. So this left (on the steering committee) Tom Albright and myself. As it turned out Tom had a full time job at the newspaper and I was at Intersection. Tom was at all of the meetings in the evening and was always available, and always feeding ideas. I'm sure it couldn't have happened without him. He was around town as much as I was, but in a different capacity. He was going to all of the galleries and I'm sure he convinced some of the gallery owners that this was a legitimate thing – that it was really going to happen. Everyone was suspicious that this was another effort that would fail. I remember reading his first article in the Chronicle, which came out probably late May or so and the festival was to start in June. He said in the opening paragraph that he had been in on the planning of this for some time, but he had held off making an announcement until he was absolutely sure that it was going to happen. His office had received a lot of announcements of exhibits and events, and so on, and he knew that the catalogue had gone to press. So I guess he felt safe that he could make this kind of announcement in the newspaper. Albright not only,

I'm sure, talked a lot of people at the galleries into cooperating, but his writing in the press was also infinitely important. Anyone who was here in '68 and interested in the arts will remember all of the announcements – not just in the Chronicle, which was Albright's work basically, (Frankenstein also wrote, plus music critics, etc.), but all of the papers were full of articles. It really caught on. Many columns were written and so on. But I think it was because of Albright's really heavy coverage of it in the beginning; very, very crucial. We saw that the retrospective idea was going to happen after the meeting at the Moore Gallery that Paine organized.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: When was this, again?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Gee, I'd have to go back and look at the correspondence. It may have been in March, possibly not even until April. That was probably more the date – in April.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So the strong gallery support didn't come until really, considering the scope of the event, rather late?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Very late!

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: So you really didn't know in the early stages what the…

ROBERT JOHNSON: No, we didn't know from one day to the next. And that's why I am so grateful for everything that happened and the things that didn't happen, I still hope might some day. For example, I'll just mention things off the top of my head. Se did want to do a special show around the King Ubu Gallery and the Gallery Sit. We wanted to do a show around the instructors who had taught at the California School of Fine Arts. We wanted to do a show around what has come to be called the Gordon Onslow-Ford circle of people, young and older people. There of course had been the gallery in Sausalito headed by David Cole. And Onslow-Ford was behind that. And there were a lot of very good painters showing on that houseboat in Sausalito. When that folded many of these people didn't have any place to exhibit. Some of them were at Arleigh Gallery, which very unfortunately lost its space just before this Rolling Renaissance thing came about. Lee Carlsen, the director of Arleigh, really wanted to do something with us, but suddenly he didn't have any exhibition space. He had to move all of the paintings into his apartment. So that idea didn't come off. There were a lot of other ideas but I can't remember them all at this time. I do have good records of everything. Anyway, things happened from day to day. It would depend on who phoned and which letters I got an answer to and so on. What we did when this started was Albright, Mark Green, John Fisher and I decided at some point in the early stages that we would write up a one page statement and send it all over the country. I don't know how many hundreds of those we sent out. But we worked up rather quickly a list of key people, you know not just in New York but everywhere to everyone that we could think of that might have some material or leads. That was the first piece of mail we sent out. We got a great response to that, and of course kept running into a lot of people and new ideas. Well, it was just a kind of snowballing or mushrooming effect. Actually we had many more ideas than we had places for. That was one of the real problems that I had to deal with. I think it should be said that there was something like 23 spaces available eventually, which even included the public library where we had an exhibit of rare books related to the poetry movement here in San Francisco. This of course included the San Francisco Museum, also. It was one of those instances where Jess was scheduled to show collages at that time. It had already been scheduled for June. I was very sensitive about the Rolling Renaissance kind of phenomena moving in on some of those areas where shows had already been scheduled. But we did get cooperation from almost everyone after they saw that it was a legitimate thing, and that people did want to be part of it. Except that it was very hard won. Like I say, Jess and Duncan's work in the catalogue. It was all done, of course, with their cooperation. Some people have asked me about that and that's why I make a point of it. In other areas we decided to do a big poetry reading. I contacted a number of people and David Meltzer said yes, he would like to organize it. There were 5 consecutive nights of big readings involving I don't know how many poets, a great, great many poets because there were also open readings. The big one of course was at Norse Auditorium. It was on the 8th of June. I know it was Ferlingetti and McClure, Ginsberg and Meltzer, and Welch and I'm probably forgetting somebody and I apologize for it. And then there was the week long film festival. I talked to John Scolfield who was a filmmaker and he organized that. It was presented at the Light Sound Dimension Theatre on California Street. John did an excellent job of organizing it. Did beautiful program notes for each evening. And again it was a very, very heavy program. Long, in terms of time, and he packed in as much as he possibly could in 5 evenings. There were also a lot of musical events around town at the different clubs – Pier 23, the Both End Club, Bop City and so on. There were things happing all over town all month. Everyone who was a part of it seemed to enjoy it, and we got a lot of newspaper coverage. All the catalogues sold. There were a thousand catalogues printed.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How were they sold? At the gallery, at each gallery? Did each gallery have an allotment of catalogues?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Right. Again, everything was non-profit. The price of the catalogue paid for the cost of printing. I think we sold it for $1.25, retail. Some of the galleries didn't take any commission, some of them took a third. The film festival admission was very inexpensive. Whatever it was, I think $1.00, paid for the chairs and

film rental. The same with the poetry readings. We rented Norse Auditorium and collected, I think it was $1.00 at the door, paid for the auditorium and paid for the poets. This is what was so beautiful about it! That everyone contributed and no one made any money. It was a big wonderful thing that happened. It was a fluke in that it didn't start out to be a big thing and turn on the city. I could tell some interesting stories, and name names of people who later tried to do some big events with sizeable budgets that failed. For me "great budgets," meaning 10s of 100s of dollars to do multimedia events – you know, dye the bay a different color and drop a parachute over the city and turn on the whole city block by block, 24 hours around the clock and so on. These ideas just never came off, with all of the super planning and so on. I think, and I'm not being overly romantic, they just couldn't get enough people in town behind it. Because the way that the Rolling Renaissance thing happened was that there were so many volunteers and everybody contributing something and doing a little typing or running errands, that kind of thing, plus ideas. I mean hundreds of ideas poured in, I couldn't give you a complete list of who did what. I should say that Peter Bailey, who's a poet and fine artist-designer, working at East wind Printers and a friend of mine, said that he would help with the catalogue. He donated all of his time, all of his design talents. And Eastwind printed the catalogue for – they probably took a loss on it. But that was their contribution.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Did Intersection pick up the bill on the catalogue?

ROBERT JOHNSON: We had to pay the bill. But it was paid for out of the sales of the catalogue. It covered the cost of the paper and whatever. Eastwind didn't give us the whole thing free, but I'm sure they didn't make any money on it either.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: About the contributors, those who wrote? The catalogue is, I'm looking at it right now, broken into a series of little essays and articles on various aspects of the arts in San Francisco by different people. How were the authors/contributors chosen? Were they those who came forward?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Other than Tom Albright who did several short articles, the other people were contacted mostly by me. We would say okay we have this show and we now have this space and we need an article, and who could say something intelligent in a short form about that kind of thing, dance, film, whatever. I contacted a great many people. Some people just weren't able. I'm sure they could have done a good job, but they were traveling or tied up or had other commitments and so on. I'm very happy with the people who did contribute. None of them were paid. They all did it on very short notice, good writers that they are.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: How short?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Some of them on two to three days notice.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Really?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yes…

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What was your printing deadline for this catalogue?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Probably took them 10 days or so. Another man that I really should mention is Bruce Finson, who at that time was director of the Sun Gallery. No, I take that back. The Door into Summer Gallery, which was in the Haight Ashbury. Another very small store-front type gallery. It did exciting things. He came to the meeting at the Moore Gallery that John Paine called. Bruce Finson, late in the meetings, asked if I needed an editor to work on the catalogue. I said, "Yeah, I think that would be fine." I don't know where he is now, he may still be there, but I haven't seen him for awhile. He was editor of the Pacific Discovery Magazine, which is the magazine that the Academy of Sciences publishes (the Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park). So he's an experienced editor. And he was of great help. We worked in my loft on Commercial Street. The essays would come pouring in. Some, I must say for the record, were not acceptable. Some arrived too late. Some that we were hoping for never arrived, and so on. And so we had to go with what we had at hand when the deadline came about. The book was designed by Peter Bailey. We went with what we had in mid May, with the festival opening June 1st.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Then the catalogues were ready for the opening?

ROBERT JOHNSON: They were ready a day or two before the opening.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well let me ask you, what about Mr. Farrell, Mr. O'Farrell, the man who contacted you in the beginning? I won't say started all this off, that's not what you implied. But at any rate, was looking for some sort of special art show when his convention came to San Francisco. He must have been quite pleased with what he was greeted with.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Well, we did those things. We had the rock concert, and we did the film program and we had some paintings there.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: At the Hilton Hotel?

ROBERT JOHNSON: At the Hilton Hotel. The morning that the convention opened (I was of course invited to go to the convention) I was there and Intersection, the Rolling Renaissance, or whatever, had a booth with the catalogues. The booth was in a long corridor along with a lot of other booths and people who had their story to tell. On the morning of the opening of the convention, I think it was called “open letter to the ACA delegates,” appeared in the S.F. Chronicle. It was an article by Alfred Frankenstein welcoming the delegates to the city and taking a few swipes at the various kinds of art commissions and state art councils and so on (which we know he’s had a history of not always being in agreement with). Anyway, The Chronicle published this and it was a little critical, as I say, of what they’ve not been doing. He ended his article by saying, “While the establishment —“ (and I think he named the S.F. art commission by name) “While the art establishment of San Francisco has done nothing for your arrival, a group of underground artists have prepared a month-long festival and a 64 page catalogue.” Well, I was in attendance at the opening meeting and it was a little uneasy for me there for a while because people were pointing their finger at me. I was the bad guy. And we had done it in good grace. We weren’t trying to make fun of anyone.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It was right essentially.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yes, he was right. But, you know, the San Francisco “Art Establishment” was a part of it in the sense that they had a show.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: There was no special effort on the part of…

ROBERT JOHNSON: No. There was no assistance in any way. I should take that back. When we did the show at the Labaudt Gallery, which was called “Early Bohemians,” Madame Labaudt was very excited about this. And of course this was a generation or so before me. And I needed some help from some people who were around before I was. So I went to John Humphrey who was at the San Francisco Museum of Art. We looked through the museum basement storage, rows and racks and selected at least a couple dozen, maybe more, 30 or so paintings. I took them from the permanent collections in town and filled up her gallery. But John Humphrey was very helpful in putting on that show. Although I did have to pay for the insurance and the shipping and the trucking.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And that was with Intersection money? Or did you raise special funds?

ROBERT JOHNSON: It turned out, and I don’t want to make a big deal of it, but it cost me money out of my pocket.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Personal money.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yes. But this is often the case in these kinds of efforts, where there is really no money in the bank. There were other who spent their own money. I’m sure Sally Green, Mark Green’s sister, had things Xeroxed and typing done and so on. She paid out her pocket. A number of people were doing that kind of thing.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well so there was really no source of funding at all? No substantial operating funds. It was contributions in the form of work, space. Other than receipts from the catalogue sales and the admissions to the films, which was just to cover the expenses, it was really a show string operation.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Right. It was designed by me to be that way. This is probably a failing, a flaw, in my character, that I’m not out for profit, And yet in this case it would have been nice to have somehow a little more money. I think some other things we could have done some of the other exhibits. It would have been a matter of just a few dollars. I did plea at one point for space. I had it inspected and I had the owner go through the lease. It would have been like $250.00 to get the owner to cover fire insurance and the utilities and so on. I approached the board of Intersection and could not get the money. I’m no fund raiser. I’m a very poor fundraiser. I think I can sell ideas but I can’t sell the financial part of it. I can sell the romantic part of it but not the hard cash part.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well that’s usually the first step. It’s hard to follow up on sometimes. What about the title, “The Rolling Renaissance?” You said earlier that it came at almost the 11th hour.

ROBERT JOHNSON: It did.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: And how did it come about? What does it really mean?

ROBERT JOHNSON: We were all trying to think of something to call it. In the early stages sometime, I don’t know exactly when, we were referring to it in meetings as “Beat to Hip,” which indicated the kind of time frame that we were covering. None of us were happy with that as a title, but nobody worried about it much. I said it will come. You know, it’ll just happen, because we’re really into this. And out of all this will come the title. Well it

didn’t really come that easily. Peter Bailey and I sat together for many nights. Filling pages with catch phrases and playing with words. Peter put the two words together, rolling and renaissance. I had something else rolling, rolling encounter or rolling something or other.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Because it was all over the city? Was this the idea?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Well, I think it had to do partly with the sense that it was a continuation. That it was going on, that there really hadn’t been any break.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Oh, I see.

ROBERT JOHNSON: And the other thing was that probably somebody had said that it had come from the Rolling Stones. I hadn’t really thought about the Rolling Stones. But we were aware that all the rock things and so on were happening. We were trying to find two words that would talk about the older and the new. And whether this does it or not we’re stuck with it. I mean we did make that decision. And it’s a kind of funny name.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well it’s interesting to me. I had always assumed that the term Rolling Renaissance had somehow something to do with the fact that it was spread. Well, not all over the city, but there were these different galleries involved. And it was almost like you could get in a wagon and go from one place to another.

ROBERT JOHNSON: People did that. In fact people wrote me letters how they would make an excursion, come up from Palo Alto, spend the day here. And what was really nice, and I want to mention another guy who contributed this idea. Again an old friend of mine. A guy I worked with for a number of years, Fidel Caliesch. His contribution and his idea, as far as I know (and he did it, it was printed at Eastwind and Peter Bailey helped him a little bit). Fidel said, “Why don’t you have a map?” Again this would be in the catalogue. It would give the location of all these places, because as I say there were 20 some places. And many of them were rather obscure.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Where did we break off exactly?

ROBERT JOHNSON: We were talking about the map that was designed, and which was inserted in the booklet. It gave the locations of all the places. And Fidel Caliesch did it. It was an excellent idea. You’d see a lot of people walking around town with this map, trying to find all of the obscure little places where we housed the shows. Like at Peter Le Blanc’s studio, which was on the floor above where I was living on Commercial Street. It was definitely a side street, and up three flights of stairs, and so on. And yet you’d find older people climbing those stairs, and so on. And yet you’d find older people climbing those stairs and going up and having a great time. In fact I received letters about just that kind of thing. People kept saying, “Why don’t you do it again?” In fact, for years people kept asking me, “why don’t you do it again? Why don’t you do it again?” You just don’t do those kinds of things again.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: No. You do it once.

ROBERT JOHNSON: We are going to republish the catalogue, because there have been so many requests directed to both me and to Intersection. I think the nook has started to be looked at finally by, you know, some of the museum people. And other people who…

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Art historians?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yeah, other people who are interested in San Francisco at that time, earlier times. You know the catalogue covers quite a lengthy period of time; and in just a few pages! So it’s hardly definitive. It wasn’t supposed to be definitive. I mean we’d love to have had it so, had it been possible. But it was interesting to me that Chassman listed this booklet in the bibliography of the catalogue of the “Poets of the City” show. The only thing from San Francisco, as a matter of fact. He does list Mary McChesney’s book from the Oakland Museum, for the exhibit “A Period of Exploration.” Mary wrote several very nice things for Rolling Renaissance. She is important and was a key person, in the Rolling Renaissance. There were a lot of people who were there in the 40’s, 50’s and 60’s and they’re still here in the 70’s. And they’re still working away at getting the message out about a lot of the artists. I felt, yes, I really wanted to do the catalogue again, a repeat. There’s no money. Intersection has no money to do this. They contacted me and I said that I would do it. My contribution is to re-work this, add a few things. We’re adding a couple of little essays and probably some more pictures. Add a few pages, I don’t know how many.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What about the (this isn’t really relevant to the subject of the tape) San Francisco Museum

of Art taking this over as a historical event? Republishing the catalogue and mounting an exhibition?

ROBERT JOHNSON: I don't know who at the museum would do it. I mean, I know the curators there. But an individual has to take a great interest in whatever show is to be undertaken.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It would seem appropriate in line with what they want to be, I think.

ROBERT JOHNSON: John Humphrey (who I like very much) would have been the man that I would have liked to work with. Or just turn it over to him. I don't have to be part of it, although my heart is there and my interest is there, and I probably would end up contributing. To be independently wealthy! (Laughter)

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: It's most fortunate that you were. That you had unlimited time and resources for this (laughter).

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yes, I almost lost a wife because of the Rolling Renaissance. But again it may not be appropriate on this tape, but here comes a Merril Greene young student from Mt. Holyoke College in the East. She seems to be very perceptive, and bright, and interested and so on. She is a graduate student, again with no money or backing. But she's got a little college behind her. I think she's doing a marvelous job (having discovered the Rolling Renaissance Catalogue "People").

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: A lot of energy, that's for sure.

ROBERT JOHNSON: You know, Frankenstein in '68 came out with that article about the establishment not doing anything. I don't like to rap on this, because I've always felt that I could work with everyone from street people to city hall. And I have. And I've done it fairly successfully. Again, contributing my time, nobody's paid me. But I see it as in sports. You have major leagues and minor leagues, triple A ball, and so on. We're all in it together. You move through the ranks so to speak. It's only traditional, or unfortunately so, that the institutions deal with people who are better known and more accessible and that there has been something published on them. So they're the museums reworking material and hopefully adding some new material, and so on. But the ground breaking effort always seems to be done by a few individuals (usually even away from the institutions, not always). But only if you get some really hot shot people in a school, or a museum, or an art center, or somewhere.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well it's not a bad idea. And ideas are not monopolized by the "establishment" or by the curators or directors in the highest positions in the museum.

ROBERT JOHNSON: I started to mention Jim Monte who, during that 1968 period, was a curator of some sort at the museum in Los Angeles.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Assistant curator of modern art, I believe.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yes. In Los Angeles. Of course Jim was from the Bay Area, or at least had lived here. I don't know where he was born but he had lived here during that time period (the late 50's) and painted here and knew a lot of people. So we contacted him originally with one of those form letters. And he responded. I kept up with one of those form letters. And he responded. I kept up the correspondence with Jim and finally asked him if he would write a article for the catalogue. He did and it's a very fine little piece. He in fact is the one who encouraged me to document the show. He said, "If it's worth all that time you really ought to document it." He really pushed me on that one. I knew I had to do it somehow, even though we didn't have any money. Later he wrote a review in Artforum magazine. A full page in Artforum about the show. He said some nice things about a lot of people. He ends the review by giving congratulations to Intersection, people who'd worked on it, and so on. But he raises this point which I'd really like to make clear in the context of our talking about the institutions and the so-called underground people. He says something like, "It was a real tour de force. The project had nothing but grass roots help and encouragement from start to finish." He says, and I'm quoting from Artforum, "Even a simple description of the 100s of objects in the exhibition is impossible, as well as unnecessary and even unfair. Many of the artists in the various shows were represented by extant examples of their work which were most easily available. In many cases these examples naturally enough were not of the highest quality. The organizers of the exhibition cannot be blamed because they had no money for shipping or insurance. Research for the exhibition was of necessity sketchy, since there is little written material available from which to draw. Nor was there a researcher to bring together an exhibition of the highest quality. A logical question would be, 'Why do it if these ingredients are missing?' The answer is because it needed doing and if so-called professionals couldn't seize the opportunity to do an organized and integrated survey, then it was left to enlightened amateurs who put together a splendid survey, handicaps be damned. What's that you say Mrs. Robinson? Where were the museums? Oh, working very hard Mrs. Robinson, very hard." Jim wrote this review while he was at the L.A. museum. He went on to the Whitney. You know, it's an interesting comment. I'd love to be a curator at a museum. I have tons of ideas but I need support. I mean I need a base of operations as we talked about earlier.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: I'd like to ask some questions directed to your view of the event itself, the whole package. At some point it is necessary to take stock. What Jim Monte was writing about was in a way a criticism. But by the same token was in no way taking away from the contribution and importance of the event. But specifically I think one has to deal with this. What did you feel really was the impact? What was the contribution? Were there any lasting effects in San Francisco of the exhibition or the series of events? And what were the high points? What were the things that really did stand out? What historically was important about it, other than the fact that it did happen?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Well a lot of people, as I said earlier, kept saying let's do it again. If it really had been possible, and this is just really off the top of my head, say for the city or the art commission to say "We're going to try to do something like this again." Like an annual, that kind of idea. I think back in 1968-69 with some backing and with some staff we could have done a much more thorough job and it would have been lasting in terms of its use by other people who could pick it up and develop it further. I mean, you have to be kind of naïve and a little whacky to try to take on 1945 to 1960. That's rather insane. I don't think any curator in his right mind would have even been given permission by the museum to do that kind of show. Unless you have a tremendous budget and a lot of cooperation from other museums and so on to get things from Europe for whatever kind of show you're doing, etc. But for a couple of guys to sit around, drinking coffee and say they're going to do a retrospective. (laughter) It really does sound insane to me now. But at that time we didn't start out to do a retrospective. We started out to do a limited show. And as have said, a lot of energy got behind a lot of people and that's how it happened. Yes, I like doing shows that have scope to them, that come at a subject from a lot of different angles. That's my orientation. I try to get as many view points as possible, an in-depth kind of thing. But I don't have an institution to back me or a bankroll, or whatever you need. But to answer your question (and I really haven't answered your question) "What was lasting?" Some people are now beginning to take a look at that. I think possibly the little thing that we did in '68, a month long thing, was enough for some people that were involved in it to hang on. I mean to keep going, to keep working, and so on. Obviously it's a little drop in the bucket, in terms of documentation, but it is on record. And other people are looking at it, as is this Merril Greene I mentioned. The value in doing it, in getting it on record is that other people can pick it up and work with it, in getting it on record is that other people can pick it up and work with it. And there seems to be a growing interest in these very people that we were talking about at that time, who hadn't really been showing that much. They'd been showing, but they hadn't gotten the kind of reviews or the notice that they deserved. And that they still deserve. Some of them are no longer here. We don't want to kick them around. But, many of the people that were shown, De Feo, Berman, and all these people, were in that show. Some of them, like Peter Bailey, who had a show in 1968 in his studio, just had a show at the de Young. I mean it takes a long time.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You mean Peter Le Blanc?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Peter Le Blanc, right. Peter Le Blanc had a show in his studio. Now he's showing at the de Young and he tells me that he may put together a show for the big museum in Mexico City. Now this is a nice story, and it didn't all come about because he showed in his studio in 1968. But his beautiful, charming new wife told me last week that Peter carries the Rolling Renaissance booklet around with him, which has a self-portrait in it. He shows it every time he goes out on business someplace. That's the only thing he had until the de Young Museum exhibit. For years that was his portfolio so to speak, he credentials other than his work. That was the only thing that had been published.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: What you're saying then, I gather, is that one of the contributions of the Rolling Renaissance was that it gave drowning people new hope or something to hang on to?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yes, well, I , of course, never think of it in that way.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's, perhaps, a little severe way to put it.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Another facet of my personality is that I do really love encouraging and assisting. Sometimes this gets into too much of a kind of psychological counseling which I've dropped away from because I'm not qualified to do that kind of thing. But when I was younger I got into it a lot more than I should have of encouraging people, just plain encouraging people. Whether it meant giving them $5.00 talking to them or whatever you do. In many cases it was helping them get exhibits. I think the Rolling Renaissance was important in that sense and it did tie a lot of things together. There were a number of, as we've said, people writing in there who are, as far as I'm concerned, very key people related to that period. I mean Meltzer, Duncan, Broughton, Knute Stiles, Mary McChesney, Jim Monte, the music critics, the art critics, photography critics and so on. They kind of held it together in '68. And here we are in '75 and there still is not another published piece that deals with this kind of material. We're still waiting for somebody or some group to get together to do a much more careful job and include more people that deserve to be included, and kind of sort it all out. At least we saved that much at that time. And I've found out a great deal since then. I mean I, of course, would do it differently no, but we all move on, right?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: That's always the case. So you really view this as a historical statement, an evaluation and presentation of the last 15 years?

ROBERT JOHNSON: In a very short sketch form, yeah. Many, many names are mentioned in this catalogue, with no illustration of them or their work. It's a storehouse, a mine, to be tapped by serious people who want to find out more providing they want to start with just a few names. I don't mean the stars, the ones that we all know. But there are many, many people mentioned in this little catalogue who have spent their life doing one thing or another, and are not stars. But they might be stars later if somebody discovers them. It's that kind of catalogue.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, what if in fact, and I agree with you, it has its important historical position, it's preserving, it's documentation essentially of that which had gone on before. If it is in fact a historical document then one would look for a certain comprehensiveness. And also one of the first questions that would occur to me (I think somebody else who was trying to get at the period through this publication and through the exhibitions and so forth), how were the artists who were exhibited included? How were they chosen? You gave part of that answer. Some of it was just by chance. If a certain institution or gallery were having a show and it fit then this…

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yes. I think probably in terms of looking at this, as we've been talking about it, the two most interesting shows (and they're all relative and good) were at the Labaudt Gallery (which dealt with the early Bohemian painters. That's before the beats, the late 40s and so on. Or the 30s and 40s actually, and maybe some further back) and the other show at the Cellini Gallery, it dealt with the so-called beat period. The reason I single out those two shows is because they were monster shows. They had I don't know how many painters. At the Cellini we must have shown, I'm guessing, 50-60 artists in that one show. I mean that little place was packed. It was not very beautiful. I mean I did the hanging, and so on, and did the best job I could, but we had no other place to show it. This was in the loft of a shop that sold marble tables.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: The show at the Labaudt Gallery would obviously have lent itself to being a strong show, because I gather that it was created essentially for the Rolling Renaissance. Is this right?

ROBERT JOHNSON: Yes. The show you mean?

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yes. The show itself.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Oh yes. It was put together for that very reason. So was the Cellini show.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: You see, this is what one would have hoped for in the entire project. This then would have covered, again there's a selection involved of course, but you're able to look back and try to determine what are the most significant developments and which artists really should be included. In fact I gather that galleries participated because they had somebody on their schedule or they had somebody in their stable they were willing to show.

ROBERT JOHNSON: This is not so in many cases, but it was in a few cases. We decided what fit the historical review idea.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well this is what I'm trying to get a feeling for.

ROBERT JOHNSON: That Cellini show, as I think about it now, and I'm not tooting my horn at all, as I look at the line up of people, well there are maybe 70 painters, a quick estimate, I think that show, if it had been done by a museum, not with exactly the same number of people, but take that as a start and really develop that idea. Now that is much more of a show than the "Poets of the City" exhibit.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Yes, it's an impressive roster and it seems to be very complete. In looking through this catalogue, it's fascinating, and in some ways a social document or a really broadly defined cultural document for San Francisco during this period. Because it was dealing with poetry, performance, theatre, photography, paintings, sculpture, collage, assemblage, Ann Halprin gets in here. It is in this sense very complete. And there is also, to my mind, a nod to fashion, to a sort of media idea of San Francisco. Which may or may not in the final analysis by considered really significant. What I'm particularly thinking of there is some of the poster artists. And there are those of course who feel that poster art is one of the most direct manifestations of the period. Art historically one could call that into strong question as being incredibly eclectic. Here I'm talking personally. I'm talking about drawing essentially from, and reviving something that had been done before better. Now it's not usually my job to say this kind of thing on a tape. You see what I'm getting at?

ROBERT JOHNSON: I want to talk to you about that. You know as a historian that the closer you move towards where you are the less sure you are of what is really important. Of course we did this in 1968. And we used 1968 people in the last pages of the book. Some of them turned out the be kind of interesting legends, like Janis Joplin for example. But I must say at that time we were making very, you know, kind of foolhardy choices of who we thought was good. And what was happening was exciting, and so on. Absolutely no perspective. So in terms of

behaving like a historian we had nothing to stand on. A story that I wanted to bring up was one in which I was called by some people out at San Francisco State College who asked, “Can you come out and do a tape? It will be played on the radio station.” On which I’ve still never heard. But I called together a bunch of people and we went out of one night to San Francisco State. It was a most difficult evening because I was trying to act as a moderator. I had picked some of the older artists and some of the younger artists from the Haight-Ashbury. Well the older artists, particularly the older, older artists, wanted to reminisce, “Oh I remember so and so and I remember that.” The younger people didn’t buy that at all. And we all know why not. Because they were looking to the future, very involved, very plugged in, very involved with what they were doing. And they didn’t buy any of that reminiscing crap at all. I mean they weren’t part of history. They hadn’t entered history yet. So the taped discussion was a very difficult thing. The people at State were aware of it. I talked with them later. They said they would edit the tape and make something out of it. They recorded about 2 ½ to 3 hours and they were going to make an hour long program out of it. Well I’ve not heard the tape. It might be interesting. You might be interested in picking it up. But you can see the problems when you try to discuss contemporary events in a historical context.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: The Rolling Renaissance was an interesting mix. You had a strong sense of history, or the need for documentation. This is your own orientation. And also you were trying as well to give something of the flavor of an overall Bay Area culture, right up to 1968. Obviously a very important part of that would be the popular culture, maybe the most visible.

ROBERT JOHNSON: When you read somebody else, like Albright’s opening essay, you really see. He looks at, compares and contrasts, as they say in school, the beat and the hippie in terms of lifestyle and dress and behavior and so on. And also how the country, including the media, responded to the beats. How the press in particular treated the beats and how they treated the hip people. I just read Jerry Kamstra’s manuscript which he calls the “Frisco Kid.” It deals with north beach in the late 50s and early 60s. He claims in there, and this is a romantic novel (I don’t know how he arrived at this, but I checked it out with other people who were there. They say, “It’s not really an outrageous guess.”), that there were about 700 people that could have been called (in San Francisco) the Beat Generation. About 700 people. When you think of the hip thing which was nation wide. I mean every little city had, you know, houses full of rock musicians, houses full and parks full and so on. But in San Francisco there must have been, I don’t know how many – thousands and thousands and thousands. And that’s not that many years later. Ten years later? The thing really was gaining ground here in ‘65/’66 and so on. Well I was living in Mexico in ’66 and getting letters from friends telling me outrageous things. I just couldn’t believe it until I got back in late ’66. And I loved it. It was just really a beautiful time here. But there is a lot of this sociological thing. It’s not just straight art history. In fact here is a page from one of our early meetings – just notes of things to talk about. It says, “political, philosophical, religious lifestyles, costumes, living habits, sex, drugs, anarchy, communal living and so on.” We were talking about all these kinds of things, not just paintings and sculpture.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Right. This is one of the things I wanted to get at for the purpose of the record. That it was a much more all-embracing view of, shall we say, San Francisco culture during those years. Not based on aesthetic decisions…

ROBERT JOHNSON: I would hope that younger people who go into curatorial work will have similar kinds of ideas. I mean yes, a painting has to stand on its own when nobody else is there, but I think there are a lot of other things to look at, to put it into context, and so on. I think it would help the general public. And I don’t mean psychoanalysis and all that kind of stuff. But “house it in something else” besides just hanging it on the wall and letting it you know about the exhibit.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well it’s related to contacts. And I think it’s related to the job of responsible history, and even responsible art history.

ROBERT JOHNSON: You see very little of those kinds of plaques in, for example, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. There are a lot of inquiring people who go there. I’ve been through this with Jerry Nordland, and he disagrees with me. When he came here I liked him and did a lot of volunteer work there – like straightening up the storage area. I’ve been asked (and I’ve done it for years) to get groups of people together who are interested in art and talk with them in my apartment, in the apartments, wherever. There are a lot of people who like to do this and some of them could be of great assistance to the arts. I mean they have the money to do it. They have the interest but they don’t know where to start. I talked to Jerry about this. He was dead set against putting little blurbs on the wall – like a brief history of surrealism for example. He said that the people who come to the museum already know that. And I said, “I don’t agree with you. There are a lot of people who wander in, can’t make head nor tail out of it, and will never come back. But if they had something, a little crutch, to hold on to, let’s face it, most people are oriented to the word, not to visual forms, painting or sculpture.”

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: Well, this is the value of intelligent labels in an art museum. To provide access.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Sometimes it's overdone. But I do think – I mean I go and while I don't follow the docents around – that's another whole subject. (We won't get off on docent programs, which I've worked on also, I mean training docents.) I don't read labels. I've read them all for years in books. Although if something new goes up I'll take a look at it, because somebody might have another idea. But so many people, as you know, are talking about democratization in the arts, and arts being available to more people, and so on. I think we have to help them. I mean they've turned against the museums because they didn't get any help when they went there. Fortunately a lot of this is being taken care of now.

PAUL J. KARLSTROM: But it still is a problem and it's difficult to know exactly what to do. It really is.

ROBERT JOHNSON: Sure.

END OF INTERVIEW

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