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Oral history interview with George Segal, 1973 November 26

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with George Segal on November 26, 1973. The interview was conducted in New Brunswick, New Jersey by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PC: PAUL CUMMINGS
GS: GEORGE SEGAL

PC: It is the 26th of November 1973. This is Paul Cummings talking to George Segal in his new studio, renovated studio, in North Brunswick, New Jersey. I thought we would kind of start at the beginning. You were born in New York City. Tell me something about your family, where you grew up, some kind of general background like that.

GS: It's pretty simple; born in the Bronx, 1924.

PC: You just had a birthday.

GS: That's right. That's right. I had an older brother, a couple years older than I. My father had been a kosher butcher in the Bronx. I went to elementary school there.

PC: What part of the Bronx?

GS: 174th Eastern Concourse. Started night school and was supposed to become a scientist.

PC: Was that an early interest or inclination or . . . ?

GS: No, I was drawing all the way, you know, in elementary school. My teachers told me I was undisciplined. I tested out okay in all the tests and they said I was good for scientific research. Being an artist was disreputable -- couldn't make a living out of it. This was in the depth of Depression by that time and it was supposed to be a big honor to be accepted at Stuyvesant. So I went there.

PC: Did you start drawing early on?

GS: Yes. I took a lot of art in high school.

PC: I mean, as a child did you draw?

GS: I was drawing but was never particularly encouraged, you know. They felt it was impractical. You know how parents are. My father went from the butcher shop to the chicken farm and everything was counted in terms of simple survival and people always have to eat.

PC: True, true. What about school? Were there any teachers that you found interesting or remember as being particularly enlightening or important to you?

GS: Oh, yes. I did a lot of bouncing around in schools after I got out of high school. I did like art but always felt a bit guilty about being interested in it.

PC: For what reasons? Practical?

GS: You know better than I do. My family kept ramming down my throat to becoming a material success.

PC: Do something useful.

GS: Do something useful that would make money. And they always kidded me . . . I was always scribbling or drawing and there wasn't much use to that. So school became a private place. After high school I spent a year at Cooper Union and Delevante was my drawing teacher.

PC: Oh, really?

GS: A small gnome of a guy who was poetic and exalted and made pronouncements that art was magical. And I thoroughly believed it and thought it was amazing to find somebody else in the world who had that kind of opinion.

PC: How did you get to Cooper?

GS: Same damn way I got to Stuyvesant. My parents had no money to send me to college and you either get into free City University or you go to work.

PC: And they have a scholarship program there.

GS: Yeah. So I applied to both City and Cooper and Cooper accepted me and I just dove into the art school.

PC: Before we get into Cooper, what about high school? Was it just a regular standard curriculum that was going on or did you do any art projects or cultural activities?

GS: I was majoring in art -- school was on a double session. And then after your junior and senior years in high school you got finished with your classes at twelve and if I went home I'd wind up . . . what I'd be doing was delivering orders of meat and climbing up five flights of stairs. So I stayed at the Art Club for two, three, or four hours a day. Became art editor of the literary mag, looked at . . . .

PC: What kind of art classes did you have in high school?

GS: And old strict academician who was always talking about Renaissance and realistic rendering -- he was terrible, this man. I smeared around with water colors one day and I said it looks like a cloudy day. It was just a lot of clouds and he thought it was terrible and I felt again guilty.

PC: Do you remember who it was? Who that teacher was?

GS: He must be long since dead. I don't even remember his name.

PC: What about the other students? Were you with the art students amongst your group of students?

GS: There were quite a few art students. Most of them -- all of us -- I think I remember my high school yearbook, all of us . . . . This was Depression no nonsense days. You know, our math teachers were Ph.D.'s and happy to have the job and maybe that's why it was a good time to go to school -- one of those unexpected fringe benefits. All of us vowed on graduation that we'd become commercial artists.

PC: Did you ever pursue that activity or not?

GS: At Cooper I got a job at $2 an hour making illustrations for R and S Auto Stores -- drawing carburetors and bicycles and I swore I'd never go into commercial art.

PC: That was enough . . . ?

GS: Yeah, and I did everything freehand and the guy came by and says you've got to use a looming pen and I couldn't stand the constraint -- it turned me off commercial art forever, maybe. I don't know.

PC: Well, who else did you study with at Cooper?

GS: I only spent one year at Cooper and then my brother got drafted into the army. I was just too young for war but I had to go to the farm -- by that time my father had bought his farm.

PC: Which was where? Around here?

GS: Across the road from here -- it's been long since demolished. The house I'm building . . . .

PC: When did they move out here, your parents?

GS: 1939-40, something like that.

PC: And you went to Cooper what year, would you say?

GS: '38 I guess it was. I guess it was about '38 or '39. My brother got drafted then and there were labor shortages all of the country. I came and worked for my father on the farm through the war years and as always I loved building. We had to build trenches three feet deep to put pipes in for automatic water for the chickens, you know -- putting automatic feeders in for the birds -- automating the farm because there were no workers. It simply had to be done. Farming in those years was profitable. Everybody needed the food, you know, the U.S. Army and the Navy. But it was boring work and I was taking courses -- history, philosophy, literature -- in night school at Rutgers after work.

PC: How did you select Rutgers?

GS: It was fifteen minutes away. At that time they didn't have any art course, you know, so I simply took all the non-matriculating . . . just the things I was interested in which turned out perfect leavening for studio education.

PC: What things did you study?

GS: History and geography of Europe and Asia, philosophy, English literature and Russian literature, comparative religions, you know. It was marvelous not being enrolled in a course and just taking whatever struck your fancy.

PC: Well, was there any instructor there that you remember?

GS: Yes. A marvelous woman, Emily Hickman, an historian who had worked for Roosevelt's second, third, and fourth campaigns and was a consultant to the U.N. The wonderful thing about her was she made us do an incredible amount of reading in H.G. Wells and there were no written assignments. We had to draw maps.

PC: Oh, really?

GS: We had to draw maps covering three thousand years of absolutely obscure, unknown Asian history and I remember having about eight maps completed. Oh, I was very skillful and I drew them with India ink, everybody used colored crayons and so I drew my lines with India ink and used transparent water color. I superimposed the eight maps and put them up against the window pane and you could see the boundaries growing and shrinking. She was a magnificent teacher.

PC: What was your aim at that time? Obviously you had no interest in continuing to raise chickens. Were you interested in something particular or was the war, school, and the chicken business kind of taking all your time?

GS: I was always interested in art. Never had any quote official unquote encouragement except for Delevante -- not certainly from family. Most of my schooling up to that point -- it was a year of foundation courses at Cooper and the only thing that turned me on was fine arts. I had other courses, you know, design, architecture that I was rather distant from.

PC: How did you like that as a place to go?

GS: It was marvelous because I met somebody like Delevante who unlocked the magic of fine art but it seemed to be so far from my background, you know. I couldn't make a living at it; the world pressed in so closely and I never had the confidence. I goggled at art as something unobtainable. How could I even imagine that I could even do something like that, a lack of security in my own ability.

PC: Well, was there any interest at home in music, literature, books? Was music around or did you read?

GS: It was on my own. Not in the family, per se. It was all on my own.

PC: So there was no real encouragement anywhere along the line.

GS: No, only accidently what I met in school. You find an English teacher who is turned on by literature and you think, my God, somebody else likes this.

PC: Yes.

GS: But it's a virtue of having grown up in a city that you do meet occasional people. The museums are there and . . . .

PC: When did you start going to museums?

GS: High school. High school time. See, where I lived in the Bronx the subway fare, the elevated fares, were a nickel. I had to commute to Stuyvesant every day and I didn't even have to bother with the business of playing hookey because I was out of school at noon.

PC: Right. You had the whole day almost.

GS: That's right. You drink milkshakes and eat pizzas. And gallop around the city. You can see museums, Times Square . . . .

PC: Were there students at Cooper that you became friendly with or remember? Important to you in one way or another?

GS: I had a friend named Zelvian who I thought drew much better than I did. He and I were friends and a couple of guys we palled around with. I was always sure that he would become an artist. He looked like the young

Modigliani and the girls loved him. He had a flair and dramatic presence -- something like an accomplished finished style. My drawings were always sort of flopping all over the place and they always told me I was undisciplined. Well, I don't know, let's see what happened. Got married -- Helen and I got married in '46 right after the war.

PC: Where'd you meet her?

GS: Here. You know, she was born and raised right down the road. When we were both 16 some guy moved in who became a chicken farmer. He had been an artist with WPA and he was doing silkscreen Christmas cards in his attic and Helen and I used to go up there. Helen used to help him make the silkscreens. You know, we were very Bohemian, sitting cross-legged on the floor. He had painted for ten years. Helen and I were very young, wet behind the ears, just dreaming, so rather than this poverty-stricken living of being a farm worker, Helen got a job for 44 bucks a week as a bookkeeper and financed me. I went back to school, first to Pratt . . . .

PC: Why to Pratt?

GS: In '47, the year after we got married, finally I really wanted to study art and it still was the old hang-up: art education, you know. I knew I didn't want to go into commercial art so, okay, become an art teacher, you know. It's an excuse to study art, but you get the degree and so I was to teach school.

PC: And so by that time there was some career sense of direction . . . ?

GS: Yeah. I didn't know anything. All I knew was I was very restless and Helen was very smart and at that time it was practically unheard of for a wife to work -- although, no, it wasn't -- women worked all through the war. But it wasn't the standard thing for a college student to be married and supported by his wife.

PC: That came a little later.

GS: All right, so Pratt . . . it was an art education and by that time I was a couple of years older and had done all that farm work, was married and was in a desperate rush and I couldn't stand the sophomoric quality of art education training.

PC: And you went back and forth from here?

GS: I commuted from New Jersey to Brooklyn and Pratt for a year. I was thoroughly disgusted because it was primarily a commercial art training school, the art education department at that time. I had been taking all the straight academic courses at Rutgers, no nonsense, you know, you read Kant and Hegel and what's he saying and you get exposed to that jargon. Then they took a whole bunch of us to the College Art Association and I told them it was slave market and you act nice to your future employers -- I got turned off at the end. I saw an exhibition of abstract expressionist student painting from the N.Y.U. department at one of these CAA meetings and I was knocked out. I had never seen paintings like that before and imagine! These were student paintings!

PC: And that was about '48?

GS: '48. And I led a student revolt at Pratt. I talked about twenty guys into sneaking over to a serious art department . . . .

PC: Oh, really?

GS: Yeah. We crossed over in the summertime to take summer courses -- everybody melted but me. I wasn't much of a leader. But what was going on at NYU at that time -- Baziotes and Tony Smith were teaching, the Abstract Expressionists were . . . .

PC: Around the corner.

GS: Around the corner at the Club and you could see the guys. We used to go to these Friday night meetings . . . is that really de Kooning? You know, hero worship de Kooning. It was at NYU I almost got into a fist fight with Baziotes and I remember him fondly because he treated me beautifully.

PC: Did you study with him?

GS: I studied with him. He was my first exposure to Abstract Expressionist painting which I loved.

PC: But he wasn't really that wild a painter.

GS: No, he wasn't, but he came on with that image of a New York tough cab driver who is able to talk about gourmet differences between Greek food and Italian food and here I am in kind of wild expressionism and

beating of breasts at the human condition out of my background and I'm reading Thomas Mann and Jacob Wassermann and he's drawing me diagrams of medieval French angels and pay attention to the space behind the head and telling me to start reading French for cool rationalism and then he says -- he must have been intrigued with me somehow -- he says join us on his . . . on his bad leg of the history of art, you know, like this abstract painting will go for a thousand years. I couldn't understand it. I couldn't understand how . . . .

PC: Incredible!

GS: I couldn't understand how I should buy five inch house painters' brushes and wipe everything out of my mind and everything visual that I saw and paint something internal and it baffled me and I used to bring in apples and bananas and paint trite Cezannesque still lifes. And he called me a schizophrenic one day and I got furious and I boycotted his class for weeks. I went down to the coffee shop and I was so upset because he was telling me about the rational French and he told me remarkable things that took me years to really understand . . . .

PC: In terms of what?

GS: Generally myself, in terms of understanding myself. And yet I was so obviously struck by that kind of painting. I admired the internalizing, the ambition of . . . you know, this was not a decorative object and this was not commercial art. You could be a rough, tough, realistic, pragmatic guy and yet try to project something extraordinary out of your innards. But something was bottled in me except for the means.

PC: Well, what did you do in his classes? You said you did that one Cezannesque kind of thing. Were you painting all that time in that style or was the style shifting?

GS: Oh, I was searching . . . .

PC: Searching, questing . . . .

GS: I don't know where I found the energy . . . I was commuting to New York every day, you know, and it was taking about three to three and a half hours. I was working the evenings and weekends on my father's farm. I was taking these courses which were pure studio but I found the mental problems much more severe in the painting courses than in any academic course ever.

PC: Why is that do you think?

GS: I don't know. Maybe it was because I was asking myself questions. I'd had such a . . . . I came to painting with such an exalted idea that I think I suffered paralysis when I was a student.

PC: What do you think led you to that? You know, the Cooper Union business and then Pratt . . . still with a tinge of commercial art of some kind of academic thing. It seems by the time you got to NYU it was beginning to shift away from wanting to be a teacher.

GS: Well, being a teacher was alien -- even when I enrolled in the course, it was a dodge. I knew I had to . . . I was already married. I knew I'd be out of school as quickly as I could manage it, you know, and I had to make a living. I decided at that time I wanted to be an artist. At that time the whole tradition was that you don't teach. You paint lofts, build cabinets, do plumbing, and I had done all that carpentry and plumbing on my father's farm. I also knew what a physical drain it was. At that point I had been battered by the world enough to separate the romance from the reality.

PC: What made you make the decision to become an artist, do you think? Because that was made even before NYU, wasn't it?

GS: Hard to know, hard for me to know. It seemed to be the only thing worth doing. Especially in relation to my family and my relatives.

PC: In what way?

GS: The emphasis on survival and business and making money and there seemed to be no room left for asking questions, for considering how you felt.

PC: The personal versus the impersonal way of thinking.

GS: I don't think I even remember when I looked at a painting or a sculpture and seemed to want to spring. I don't remember when that happened. It just seemed like there was no question about it. It was no better way to spend your time, and in the context of the way I was living, shoveling chip ore, building rough buildings, doing electrical wiring, plumbing, defrosting water when it was ten degrees outside. You know, hard, dirty physical life.

Which is rather enjoyable if you go through that kind of experience. There's a sense of floating when you're younger and working physically. You don't feel it, you know. There's like a fluid rhythm that goes on.

PC: Yeah, you do it and do it and do it.

GS: And it's hypnotic. And it's an unthinking thing, kind of thing. Which is not a bad state of mind.

PC: How did you find that, you know, with the commuting and the working and then the NYU -- the studio, because there's the thinking activity that goes on? Where did that come in?

GS: I suppose it's the terrible corruption of a New York Public School education in those years. It goes on now, it goes on now. I taught a half semester in the City recently, out of curiosity because I had done a year thing at Princeton two or three years ago, with super bright kids and I found it out of kilter that they're so high developed verbally and they had none of that physical stamina or way of using their hands. So the kids at city were like hungry rats, living in a grimy, gray environment, commuting by subway, afraid of getting attacked on the three blocks till they got past the safety of the iron gate campus. I did it out of that kind of curiosity. I don't know way that happens but the City, New York, now must be something like Florence was in the Renaissance, where you could get stabbed or poisoned in the streets and the buildings, the stones, in Florence are as threatening as Wall Street downtown. And yet you walk past the iron gate and you come into an extraordinary soaring experience. New York is like that now. I don't know any place else that has the jolting kind of extremes.

PC: Well, also that vitality is there. Going back to NYU and Baziotes, how long did you study there?

GS: It was only about a year and a half or a year and two summers maybe; you know, just enough for me to get a bachelors degree and get out of school. And that was an ironic laugh. I got out of school and it was just before the teacher shortage, couldn't get any job. Yeah, I could have gotten one job for three days a week for eighteen hundred dollars a year teaching art at an elementary school and I decided to build my own farm. You know, there was no way out. I had to support myself; Helen was pregnant. We just never stopped living. And I built a farm mostly because I could do it physically, you know, I knew all about it. I admired my father's generation. I think I told you before, these refugees from the city who decided to be neither sheep nor wolf -- that kind of Zionist, socialist idealism, and it was return to the land, working with the hand, but the first thing they did was run down for the latest advice from the college of agriculture and order or make as many machines as they could. What I didn't like was that they hired these alcoholics, you know, to collect eggs. Guys who worked about six days out of the month and then you have to baby them through their hangovers and drunks. They eventually ran us.

PC: Because they were where you were living?

GS: There was not that much money in farming and there was . . . and the farms were at least this refuge, in the City they would die on the Bowery and . . . .

PC: Do they live on the farm there?

GS: Yeah, they used to live in little rooms, cubby holes in the basements or shacks outside. But, you know, it was supposed to be a family farm and cooperative and you do your own work and you are isolated from and independent from the world and that was the dream that was absolutely unreal.

PC: It didn't work?

GS: Of course it didn't work because they existed for a few years because the war needed the food and they were on artificial government subsidy; as soon as the war agriculture recovered, they were wiped out. You know, that the difference between that fantasy and reality, you know, where everybody up read it, and isn't it so with all the art anybody makes. So I have a fondness for that whole generation. I felt I could build my own farm mostly so that I could wake up when I wanted and manage my own time even though it meant working seven days a week and at certain times fourteen hours a day. But then if you felt like sleeping to ten o'clock you could, by setting the time clocks and the chickens would wake up early and go to work. I always ran a sloppy farm anyway. (laughter)

PC: Was the house here?

GS: House was here. It had gone through about seven transformations. It was a little box of a farmhouse and I just kept adding rooms as we needed them. Still doing it.

PC: And what about these buildings, did you build . . . ?

GS: Well, I built the buildings. I got a mason to do the cement; I did all the carpentry, the plumbing, the wiring, loved that part of it. Despised taking care of the chickens, you know, that mechanical repeat routine every day.

So I was always adding buildings but then it was really just to have enough chickens to make a living. So that I could paint and . . . .

PC: How many chickens did you have to raise in those days to do that?

GS: I started out with seven hundred and built up to five thousand.

PC: My, you have to have a lot of mortar, don't you?

GS: Sure did. Well, somebody offered to loan me a lot of money to go into a hundred thousand birds, and at that point I was too much into painting. Whereas if I had done it, I'd have gone bankrupt. Yeah, but that something was but another threat, you know, with the painting, you know, all that's soap opera. I really did have a crunch in my thinking with Baziotes. He was probably right that I was schizophrenic in my attitude. I had this, I think I probably still have, some private exalted idea of what I expect out of art. You know, that it should be an overwhelming vessel. There should be enough room in the way you work to catch every vague way you're feeling and your reactions within yourself towards the world. Because I've been dealing with these fantasies that people . . . my own fantasy about becoming an artist which I never really believed. Larry Rivers and Alfred Leslie were in my class at NYU and Larry invited me over to his Second Avenue loft and he was set up like a real pro artist. I was green with envy. My life was so grimy in comparison, you know; it seemed sparkling and sun-struck. You know, it seemed impossible. Then when I graduated from NYU I didn't know how to paint. You know, I simply wasn't convinced. I had no way of . . . no language to talk about the way my own life was, things I could see and touch and feel.

PC: What do you mean, that you couldn't paint in terms of . . . ?

GS: I couldn't in conscience pick up the names of the abstract expressions even though they bowled me over with . . . in those years I couldn't name the qualities that bowled me over.

PC: Did it hit you . . . ?

GS: It just hit me; it just hit me that was . . . that kind of painting compared to everything I had seen contemporary. You know, it wasn't too far away from Depression years and Ben Shahn was quite famous. You know, Clifford Odets was writing plays. You know, I remember in high school in Stuyvesant. You walk down town and you have that row of bookshops. You see, I didn't know when all this stuff happened. Somebody told me to read Swans Way. I go into a bookshop to ask for a second-hand copy of it and this big guy with a black beard and a huge belly says to me, "What do you want to bother with that French decadent nonsense for? Here, read this." And he shoves a big fat copy of *Das Kapital* into my hands. I had grown up in the Bronx surrounded by all those pinched, hurt, angry guys. Where I remember everything was grey and gloomy. You know the William Gropper cartoons in *The Masses*? Then the Vincent Van Gogh prints that the *New York Post* was distributing, and across the street from my father's store was my classmate Eli. His sister had married a commercial artist and he was the original schizophrenic. He was doing commercial layouts for magazines and his private paintings were, I found out later, dead regular copies of Kandinsky done in pastel colors. Then in the summertime he'd rent a cabin in the Catskills and he'd do little Renoirs, little impressionist Renoirs of his wife sitting in the shack out in nature. And we'd hear Paul Robeson records and read the *New Masses* and that's the atmosphere I grew up in and I said, "No thanks, I don't want this *Das Kapita*l." And I was a kid in high school and I suppose when Kestler's *Darkness at Noon* came out. I must have been just getting out of high school and Stalin had murdered a million kulaks and everybody was doing flip flops and, you know, I couldn't believe the heroic work posters -- they seemed such nonsense to me. The only thing that meant anything to me . . . I had done a watercolor and it looked like sky and it seemed to be a cloudy, gloomy, misty day and that's what meant something to me. So it was a long time to stress the deliberate abstractions and maybe that's what held me back from braving Baziotes. You know, I simply . . . I couldn't believe my elders.

PC: Because you saw the mess the world had created. Was there any one else that you studied with besides Baziotes?

GS: Tony Smith used to bring Rothko paintings into class, which I thought were glorious. Tony in those days was not doing any sculpture. He was in architecture; he was a practicing architect. And I remember one day he came and said, "I'm planing to build a house for Jackson Pollock and it's to be two cinder block cubes." And he's talking about this marvelous material and I had been laying cinder blocks that weekend. You know, I . . . and it could be clues like that. See, I was involved with my own grind and physicality, the atmosphere was either grey or dark brown. Another friend, Hymie, his father was an engineer for the city, but his father played chamber music and had records and books and I walked into his apartment and everything was dark brown. The cello, the violin, the bookshelf, the books, the walls, fireplace, chairs -- everything was brown. So, all right, that's the sort of murky background. Didn't know how to paint, you know, I was accepting, rejecting abstract expressionism. Really would have loved to go to Paris. Intimidated by Picasso, loved Matisse because he seemed to be approachable as a human being. You know, like I couldn't . . . Picasso seemed like the apex of something and like a dazzling

performer, and like me in my sludge couldn't even grasp anything like that. But Matisse paintings . . . I'd see the simple act of a simple guy but it was shot with light and shot with daring and again this battle between, well, the French from that distance to New York at that time seemed to be like a glowing sunburst but very far away. You know, how could anyone be in that state of mind.

PC: Well, you know, it's interesting that just thinking about having Baziotes as an instructor; what did you feel about the other abstract expressionists? You know, they were around in the village and you could see them in the streets or somewhere. When did you find out where they went? Did you ever go to those places at the end of the '40's, or say, 1950?

GS: I went as often as I could to The Club meetings. I was intimidated. I went a couple of times to the Cedar Bar but I felt disarmed; I had no equipment. You know, like I couldn't enter the Cedar Bar.

PC: How'd you get to The Club?

GS: Mostly because Baziotes told us about it and I knew all the storefront exhibitions. Alfred was precocious, Alfred Leslie, you know. He was exhibiting with de Kooning and all those Eighth Street stores and, you know, Alfred was a virtuoso performer. I could see all that paint going on and appearing like magic and, I don't know why it struck me then, but it seemed not so much technical as a state of mind -- that happened because you were in a particular state of mind, that you could make marks like that. And I could never get into that state of mind.

PC: I see. Well, what kind of things were you doing? What was coming out for you then?

GS: Landscapes and still lifes, which is what I was doing. I was drawing and painting from the model; I was reluctant to give up the model. I was reluctant to give up starting from the clue of what was the front of me.

PC: Did you paint around here, I mean the landscape?

GS: Yeah, I used to paint around New Jersey and they were timid, they were Cezannesque, they were tight. I had read about Cezanne and rhythm and stuff like that. I don't know in retrospect what I was . . . that this was a state of mind. You really have to be confident about who you are, you know, to make a mark. It has to go down without any question. You know, like certain things have to be resolved in yourself. You know, this is part of that famous adolescent "Who am I?" I suppose, which turns into cliche.

PC: It goes on for longer than adolescence sometimes.

GS: Yeah, I had a hiatus. It was not a real hiatus because I never stopped thinking about it. I stopped painting for about a year and a half when I was building, physically building the place.

PC: When was that?

GS: I got out of school in 1950 and I took the time to build up the place so that I could make a living. Enjoyed it, you know. It seemed to be something therapeutic. It was before the days of plywood, you know, and you're doing two thousand square feet in nailing six-inch boards. And all you're doing is hammering nails, you know.

PC: There's something therapeutic about carpentry, I think. It's all rhythms and repeat, repeat, repeat.

GS: I resumed painting and it was then figures, then expressionist -- somewhere between expressionism and fauve. I was teaching a class in drawing and painting in a local community center. The ladies, you know, the nice ladies who painted tame impressionist paintings used to go with me to exhibit and my pictures always stuck out like sore thumbs. They were gawky and awkward. Too brightly colored.

PC: Was it thick painting to thin?

GS: Thick and thin. Then in '53 I accidently met Kaprow who had just gotten a job here at Rutgers, teaching art. Somebody told me that this young artist had moved in; he lived a mile down the road right on the lake. And he had rented a cottage and, you know, here I was ankle deep in chicken manure, you know, with all these ponderous problems. I felt like a . . . I felt overweight and clumsy. You know, Kaprow moves in and he rents -- a mile away from here he finds like an aesthetic spot. And he's doing bright School of Paris painting. He had been to the Hofmann school. He had been to NYU the same time I was and we had never met. And he had gone to Columbia to study with Shapiro, and he studied painting with Hofmann. We found we came from identical backgrounds and started running to New York together. And then it was really my first encounter with the avant-garde -- Cunningham concerts, Cage concerts -- art and music. Rauschenberg, Johns and Kaprow then belonged to the Hansa Gallery. I . . . it took me three years to drum up the nerve to apply and I got accepted which I thought was remarkable. Accepted in '56, so I was a painter, you know, and I'm convincing you. But the thing about the Cage - Cunningham business, it seemed to present an alternate road to abstract expressionism, and

there was Duchamp lurking in the back ground. Kaprow was quite a scholar, you know, and then I was devouring books, so I found out very early.

PC: What kind of books were you into then?

GS: Well, I was thinking at the moment of art books, and what I've been reading. I've been reading everything -- Sartre, Camus, Kierkegaard and stuff like that. But then with this other avenue of avant-garde plus the Hansa group. See, there was a sparkling of color and a bohemianism in the Hansa which had to do with Hans Hofmann, that had to go with color burst, going up to Provincetown -- the blue-green of the water, the sunshine. I found out that Hofmann picked Provincetown because it resembled summer resorts of the French impressionist painters, you know, then the Portuguese barns with the grey shingles. The girls all young, you know -- flowers in their hair, bare feet and they look like they stepped out of Gauguin paintings. You see, that was the thing that delighted me and bothered me, you know, that boredom. It was like a sunburst of ease and sexuality and pleasure. That whole atmosphere of the early Hansa -- it has to do with youth, it has to do with Hofmann, you know, the color burst School of Paris and then the ideas, you know, then the ideas. Painting ideas are as difficult and dense as anything you find in a philosophy book if you have to translate it through your own body.

PC: What was the appeal to you? Do you think it was just the enormous contrast from the gray and browns? Here was luminosity and light, color and a different kind of vitality. Kaprow and the other Hansa people, most of them were figurative, weren't they?

GS: Well, Hansa was a peculiar place -- Hansa was something not generally written on now. Hansa was like a seed bed of all the avenues of the '60's and '70's. There were some figurative people there -- there were Stankiewicz was doing assemblage out of rusty steel, as city debris; G. Valente was doing black and white before Klein but they were muralesque-like things.

PC: Big, flat things on panels, tight, and ropes . . . .

GS: Ropes, radio tubes and found objects. She was dealing with found objects way early and it was gloomy and menacing and threatening, quite unlike Miro. Which to me was another kind of revelation -- that you could use the same means and make it a completely different universe. So then also Myron Sparent was doing well black and white abstractions of forms that he called the seed pods of the gods, ascribing exalted meaning to a simple-looking abstraction. Jean Mueller was dealing with gigantic paintings coming out of Gauguin and symbolism.

PC: Thick color and . . . .

GS: Yeah, and fauve painting, but dealing with illustrations of Goethe. You know, the Hansa was its own pot of stew, cooking and bubbling and . . . .

PC: And where did Bellamy come into that?

GS: I came into Hansa in 1956; Bellamy came in the same year. Bellamy and Ivan Karp got the jobs as co-directors at Hansa. They split five dollars a week salary plus commission. And Belamy would often as not slip in his brother in the office. So we knew each other then and we came into Hansa the same year.

PC: Was it up town by that time or still downtown?

GS: Hansa still downtown to Central Park South, which is when I came in. It had been on 10th Street.

PC: How had you gone to it then? Through Kaprow?

GS: Through Kaprow, right.

PC: You know, I'm curious about what you said -- the Cage - Cunningham relationship and what they were doing and how you found that of a viable alternative or an instance toward a viable alternative to you.

GS: I really came out of the School of Paris, that is, modern art attracted me to art and if I knew about Picasso and collage, you know, like I certainly knew about dada and surrealism and futurism, except that in the beginning everything seemed very distant and exalted and enshrined.

PC: Why was that? You mean through museum catalogues and exhibitions and the remoteness with people?

GS: I'm talking about Hofmann's look to me as an art student. I had only seen books and magazines with the pictures. And it's familiar, everybody has that story.

PC: Right, but had you gone to the Museum of Modern Art much?

GS: Yeah, I was familiar with the Museum of Modern Art. And everything seemed to be labeled in schools. I think the shock of meeting somebody like Baziotes and Smith, then the . . . . They loom up close to you and what you do in your art depends on who you are and how you feel. And it never dawned on me until that moment that if you want to work like a dadaist or a surrealist, you really have to feel that way. It's got to be crucial and critical in your life. You know, I don't know how but that's the way I came to it -- as a measure and act. That has to be total commitment and you've got to believe that the world is like that. Any reservations and it's no use. Which has been . . . that's the way I happen to make, you know, no rule. The Cage business had its in it, because you know, I knew intellectually, not emotionally or . . . I knew intellectually about Marinetti and futurism and I had seen all those things. They seemed to come from another planet; imagine taking over remarks like that or an attitude like that, and it also seemed to come straight out of cubism to me, and then what was the difference, and there was a great difference. You know, by then it was beginning to dawn on me that everybody including myself desperately was looking for language.

PC: But your own language rather than a group language.

GS: Your own language. Artists are always bundled and bunched into schools. But it boils down to each individual artist looking for his own language, everybody wants to be his own miniature artist.

[SIDE TWO]

PC: You know, speaking about the artist's individual universe and schools and everything, you had mentioned Duchamp before. Where did he come in? Was this through Kaprow or though Baziotes or that group of people or on your own, or did you meet him ever in any form?

GS: I met him very late once -- twice maybe. I knew him as a presence, I knew about him early. Kaprow and I had gone to visit Rauschenberg and Johns; I'd been to a lot of Cage concerts, Kaprow got into electronic music and etc. And we were forever batting ideas back and forth and we consciously were looking for language that could be more encompassing because we had a . . . each of us in our own way was dreaming up a large ambition for the work. Duchamp is a strange figure because I found through a lot of internal revolutions in my attitude toward him as an artist. I don't know, maybe I should start backwards. Duchamp once spoke about art coefficient and I think he was talking about the disparity between the artist's intention and the way the work comes out. Then he spoke about the work being fulfilled in the mind of the spectator. And he was always kind of passive, withdrawn and refusing to seek center stage. And here was this big cult growing up around him and about him and then I noticed my own disparity looking at his work for myself.

PC: In what way?

GS: Precisely this. A cult had grown up around him and these people had a particular slant -- the people were Duchamp -- they were thin, cerebral, aesthetic, sometimes dandy, gourmet, delicate, sensitive and they were attracted to . . . .

PC: That's very interesting because I only know one fat man who liked Duchamp.

GS: That becomes precisely the point. It was this thin, aesthetic, very delicate sensitive dream that was attracted to mysticism, obscurity, medieval alchemy. And John Cage always truck me as taking a point of view from a helicopter, you know, hovering above the earth and looking down at turmoil and screaming and crying, all this philosophically detached floating point of view and . . . .

PC: Sort of ritualistic eventually.

GS: Which is an extension of cubic collage into a field seen from a helicopter. You know, with all the implications of Zen and oriental and de-emphasism, which seemed to be a point of view, you know. You asked how is it different from futurism or cubism, you know, like much the same splintering and fragmenting, and chance, etc. that floats into the hum of the universe. And Rauschenberg comes right out of that, like the expansion of the cubist idea. Then where does Duchamp fit in? You know, there was a cult around Duchamp. These kind of mystical people. Duchamp's work didn't strike me that way. I always expected that his intentions were different and that he was politically or philosophically silent. The . . . I had a succession of jars regarding Duchamp, you see; I'm leaping ahead but maybe it will make it clear. When he first showed his first piece in Philadelphia, are you familiar with it? I was jarred to see the sudden switch to real materials. It looked like it could have been my work, and damn it, and you know, there were a couple of pages of my work reproduced in the catalogue and it seemed to be a complete reversal of the disguised, symbolic mechanics that were dealing with sex, but with what kind of sex. So the *Large Glass* and the new piece both deal with sex. And if you read the references to *Large Glass*, it's . . . there's ironic, mocking laughter. There's no feeling. The men are a ridiculous sequence of guys who are either impotent, who are impotent, everything is translated into mechanics and then also in the new piece you can't approach the girl. There are two blocks of barriers for the fulfillment. All right, then the other revelation was the retrospective currently in Philadelphia where there's one wall hung with a bank of drawings or

etchings, etchings, I think, of the mechanical elements in the *Large Glass* on the opposite wall are a series of realistic, quivering, sensitive drawings on the lover's theme, so obviously Marcel was dealing with sexuality, principles of the universe, transformations, transmutations and the shuffling of one identity into another. You know, its . . . . Now, there seems to me . . . the thing I was talking about with Duchamp is he is one or two generations removed. He had a whole different hidden point of view; he was concerned, you even take that sexuality related to pop art, dealing with the assumption of the virgin.

PC: But he always made those funny little contrasts, you know, the kind of French philosophical trick, really.

GS: But it could also be for me a large clue. You see, I'd been aware of that difference for many years and because I myself had come out of my own background. You see, Duchamp was very helpful and everybody who has been interested in Duchamp has taken off on a different road and it's all been subjected to interpretation. You know, what's involved. I could follow that track.

PC: But you can't pick his iconography out?

GS: All right, it's immaterial, the history of art is a series of leaps and jumps made by individuals. You know, and the transformation and shift of emphasis. Years ago I thought I put my finger on what was bothering me. My one reservation about abstract expressionism approach and it comes to a theological, philosophical disagreement. All right, let me build this, do this as clear and simple as I can. Pour yourself some more coffee.

PC: No, I'm fine.

GS: O.K. It would go like this. The abstract expressionists had in those years an amount of exalted gold. They wanted to touch metaphysics. They wanted to touch the center of internal essence, they wanted to find a universal event. Which always seemed to me a continuation of Leonardo and Freud, of discovering and unfolding the universal. All right, so I connected that with a long tradition and then it seemed that they acted very much the way the Catholic Church acts in demanding celibacy from its priests, that the higher the spiritual state the less material is involved. Refrain from sex, that spirit is weightless, invisible, god-like and the world is irking nonsense, suppression of figuration. And I was always intrigued with that battle in Pollock and de Kooning. Figurative imagery would come up and get stomped down. But it always kept cropping up and I was always interested in the drama of that conflict. And then Barnet Newman and Rothko were sailing with pure religious states and suppressing the world and I couldn't accept that attitude toward the world. I told you about my paralysis, you know, in order for me to make it as an artist I had to leave what I was doing. Maybe self-deceit. So I found myself temporarily rejecting the end on material stance but I loved the exalted ambitions. Ironically in later years Greenberg was all for the flatness of the image and the kind we don't have on the wall, a straight line development of problem-solving in painting and I couldn't care less. I think I had been weaned or temperamentally attracted to art as a vessel to huge ambition. At least I felt, and feel that there has to be a connection with your total life. The total life business attracted me to Cage. The Duchamp outrageous hidden irony also dealt with real objects, but Duchamp was far too complex a man. And I always sensed that he was more renaissance and Leonardo-esque than medieval or mystical.

PC: I would think so.

GS: Well, you know, I joked when I first saw the new piece. I peeked through the door, the vagina on the girl was askew and I turned to somebody that was with me and I said he worked twenty years on that. Why should he make that simple anatomical mistake? Every time it looks like it's smirking at me, and I said, my god, he redid the Mona Lisa. (laughter)

PC: One of the things that always intrigued me was that Duchamp has been able to provide so many people with material to go in their own direction.

GS: Yeah, which is fine. It's probably the way things will always go. All right, so here . . . I always felt that about matter of experience -- heard all the talking about atoms and indivisible building blocks and energy and Einstein and electricity, etc. But things always appeared to me solid and airy. Energy is invisible, but there are marks left by it and I was in a mood to reject an aspect of abstract expressionism and Cage and the splintering and fragmentation of collage form. Things have to clump together as whole unit for me.

PC: Did you recognize the whole units or was it only after the fact that you recognize a whole unit?

GS: I was making paintings where I was disintegrating everything, all the modes. I had painting guys upside down with abstract space but realistic modeling and I would paint a table that would in a wash version of a Goya painting on the wall. I couldn't believe the mode . . . all the different modes of painting. I mean like each mode seemed to be totally arbitrary and to be reinvented, and I had to move into real space and it had to be a complete object that was philosophically intact and, if that was my field into which I could enter, I could move around within my field. I had to give clues. Pollock's paintings, you know, implying limitless infinity. Rothko

putting up a show where he built white partitions and the paintings close together at the Modern where he made a total environment of paintings. You know, so that the whole idea of being surrounded by art and being in a magic space -- well, that rang back . . . the magic rang back to Delevante. There's some snap of magic that has to occur, you know. The art space is very different, special mental space, and if all this battling is going on -- on painters and people talking about the picture plane and the flat surface and its three-dimensional thrust and the whole theme was going, I felt, in avenues that couldn't bring that much fruition for me. I couldn't imagine the excitement in making an abstract painting that simply fulfilled a recipe and dropping even the extraordinary ambition of a Pollock or a Rothko.

PC: Do you find among the group of painters that were your own age at that point the same sense of ambition, or heightened sense of direction?

GS: Yes. Yes. I think that's the thing that attracted me to him and his whole avant-garde group, you know. I had a little battle with Kaprow. It seemed almost everybody I met had the same exalted sense of ambition and it was not in the magazine definitions -- a translation of art. Which everybody forgets today. That the portentous rhetoric that accompanied abstract expressionist painting -- that same kind of portentous rhetoric -- you know, if we came out of ourselves, we're place with different language on all the young painters, some of whom realized themselves, some of whom did not.

PC: One thing that interests me is the Kaprow-Rutgers relationship and the distance or proximity to New York. You've lived here for decades, right?

GS: Right, right.

PC: How did you relate to New York City and the artists who lived on 10th Street or the Bowery or down in SoHo or the people who were constantly there? Was it a place for you to go? Was it meaningful in any way, that abstract expressionist generation? You know, what was it like or what is it like?

GS: To live out here?

PC: Yeah, and how do you relate to that world . . . ?

GS: I feel like I've been living in a suburb of New York all my life. If you live out here, it's like the U.S. Army or the Middle West. Most people go about their business, art if not a primary activity . . . it has all its decorative, pseudo-cultural aspects. But I grew up in New York and I first learned about the intensity of art there and I've been pulled back to it like a magnet all my life. Helen and I had many conversations about moving into a loft downtown New York. But I have no way to support myself. Simply an accident of my life, you know, that my physical base is this heavy and massive here with the buildings. Simply these massive buildings house my sculptures which are also massive. It turned out to be a lucky accident because this kind of space is cheap and obsolete. I could never have afforded it.

PC: Oh, in Manhattan it would cost a fortune.

GS: You know, I kidded Oldenburg . . . he just moved into a loft on 14th Street that went to 13th and he says 250 feet long -- a city block is 250 feet. This place is about a block and a half long -- go pay the rent on that. And it's useless. It is a useless building.

PC: Have you felt part of the New York art community? How has your relationship with it been defined or hasn't it been?

GS: Oh well . . . I can't be without it. The early quote Bohemian unquote years, you know, when all the young artists were doing their romantic loft bit -- now that was a generation immediately following abstract expressionism. They set up that lifestyle with the undercurrent of elegance -- the women with glass bead curtains -- the paisley print skirts, you know. Then later because they were poor and chilly, the black stockings -- the aristocratic elegance and poverty of the loft style was being practiced by my friends and I was in the murk of building a poor farm. I started going through the financial troubles very quickly -- we had picnics out here and they'd say, "George, you're a real landlord." And I had a washing machine, except I was so into the sheer physicality I welcomed every machine. The washing machine is the . . . I needed an automobile to get to the grocery and I used to laugh like hell at the romantic loft attitude. I found there was a difference. It's like one person working intensively on his paintings and someone else switching attention to how the whole thing was to move around in and look. That was the beginning of living a lifestyle. The generation before the hippy flower-power dungaree . . . .

PC: There was just this five years in the Fifties or so. Half a dozen years.

GS: Yeah. So I was flipped. I loved the sensuality and vacation aspect of going on vacation to Provincetown but

never understanding where these people got the money to rent a cottage for a whole summer. You know, I was always baffled by the hidden means in the art world because I never had any means, hidden or otherwise.

PC: When did you go to Provincetown?

GS: When I first became a member of the Hanna -- you know. Everybody was up there. It was like magnificent -- the sun was shining; I went out drawing and went into the shop and I saw the pad -- he traded me two color shirts -- very inexpensive - -for two drawings. I thought it was magnificent.

PC: Terrific. Do you go up there often?

GS: Well, I did for a few years and I stopped going because it changed very drastically, or maybe I changed mentally. The brilliant sunshine aspect was beautiful and then it began to dawn on me that there was a posture involved, that these people were painting and living a lifestyle of what they had learned -- how they thought the French Impressionist painters were painting and didn't have much to do with what the paintings were about and it also didn't have much to do with the environment that we were in. See, as Baziotes told me a story about Gorky going out to Easthampton to paint fresh landscapes, got disgusted with himself and came back and copied the cracks on the sidewalk in front of his building and he said that's American painting. So I had been exposed to all the propaganda about how to find yourself by accepting your own environment and your own river and then I proceeded to cut down my teachers by literally doing it.

PC: You know, I read somewhere in an essay or interview about you that you had started making collages or objects with fabric with dimension but flat, not three-dimensional piece and was that . . . ?

GS: My first entrance into sculpture. I painted a whole series of six by eight foot canvases and those were lifesized figures loosely scrawled in charcoal and great big washes of paint and they were ghostly hidden gesture paintings of an Old Testament theme of the relationship of Lot which had to do with forbidden sexuality and delight and really the crunch of prohibition and what survival in life was about. It was extraordinarily unpopular in those years, you know, to deal with a literary theme, and yet years later you find all that hidden stuff in Duchamp . . . .

PC: And a lot of other people . . . .

GS: A lot of other people and how come? That pervisty like all these prohibitions are it seems to me so arbitrary . . . .

PC: Well, they're kept sometimes, you know, if you don't do that we have to do something else -- what else are we going to do?

GS: But who is making those self-confident pronouncements and who can I believe and trust since I have been so early thrust on myself? So I made this whole sequence of paintings that were all connected by this Biblical theme -- shuffling back and forth and in and out . . . .

PC: How did you ever select that theme?

GS: Mostly because it was in my background and it seemed to me, you know, this comparative religion stuff and I'd been hearing all about Zen Buddhism and Kerouac and Ginsberg were then bobbing about with a girl that was close to the Hansa gallery.

PC: Who was that?

GS: Doti Moriano. So Doti for a while was Kerouac's girlfriend. Robert Frank has made a film out here using my farm as a set. You know that . . . everybody forgets how closely connected this flow of ideas was so that when I met Cage's brand of Zen, I already knew it through Kerouac and there always seemed since I had been so interested in Indian religion myself, you know, sort of hopping around the world mentally, you know, Malraux had done that metamorphosis of . . .

PC: The gods . . . ?

GS: You know, the transition from Apollo to Buddha -- something struck me as too easily superficial about taking on aspects of a religion that you didn't grow up with, that wasn't related with the food that you ate on holidays . . . .

PC: Putting on a costume . . . .

GS: Yes, yes. Because all these things always struck me as . . . which is maybe why I'm so delighted with Duchamp making his Virgin like a burlesque queen, you know, like all these exalted holy terrors somehow are a

part of the food you eat on holidays and your aunt exuding body odor. Like your aunt is a great big fat jolly woman with all this love of life but she's been widowed for fourteen years. You know, what's she doing for sex? You know, and things like that so that kind of convolution between exalted terror and everyday activity -- that's got something to do with choosing Lot -- that's got something to do with choosing my friends and relatives to pose for me and some suspicion or intuition that when you whittle your own toe that this has got something to do with all this art and it's putting yourself at a different point.

PC: Ah . . . .

GS: I didn't finish the question because I did those same things and then I thought I was so questioning of space and the language, the syntax . . . I knew what I wanted to deal with but I didn't know how -- didn't have the language. I built up some lifesize figures out of plaster, you know -- armature 2X4's . . . very . . . the . . . my first plasters were the expressionist equivalent of the figures I was painting. So I put together some old 2X4's, crunched some chicken wire around it, did plaster -- dipped burlap scraps into plaster. It was all stuff I had around the farm. That's the tradition of my things -- you just do it fast and slanted and it costs nothing.

PC: And the plaster dries and there it is.

GS: That's right. And they were pure gesture, undefined . . . everything was just rough and when you ran your fingers through it . . . and I just placed them. I made three figures, one standing, one sitting, one lying. And I placed them in front of the paintings as if they had just stepped out of the paintings and their presence was extraordinary. You know, like I'd been dealing with veils, palimpsests, running tones of color and I wasn't convincing myself. So . . . .

PC: What became of three-dimensional objects?

GS: It was so much there as a presence, and it was a blur presence and it was pure gesture and it was made out of scrap and it costs nothing and I could do it in three hours. But I didn't do sculpture then for a year. I continued painting.

PC: What happened to those figures?

GS: I still have them. I have them in my other building. I'll show them to you later if you want.

PC: Do you keep the paintings behind them or do the . . . did the paintings disappear?

GS: No, I have the paintings in another room.

PC: So one could reconstruct that situation almost.

GS: Yeah.

PC: Oh, fantastic!

GS: That was '58.

PC: But you already had a show at Hansa, right?

GS: I had a show in '56, '57, '58.

PC: Right. But '56 was a one-man show. When did the figures first appear in the exhibition?

GS: Right from the beginning. '56. I was painting figures.

PC: It was your plaster figures, though?

GS: I was painting figures on canvas. I was figurative from the start.

PC: No, but I mean, the plaster figures -- when did they appear?

GS: '58.

PC: '58. Why'd you take the gestation time in between there? Did it take that long for you to think about what you had done or to realize it, or figure out what it was or . . . ?

GS: I was thoroughly involved in painting, you know, I considered myself a painter. The crazy thing is that I showed a painting at the Whitney Annual, '56, '57, I think, something like that. And accidently it got hung in the same room as a de Kooning and a Motherwell and a Hopper and, you know, I couldn't believe that.

PC: How did that look to you, given those circumstances at that point?

GS: Extraordinary, you know. I was maybe drumming up courage; I was feeling I think for the first time that I could become an artist. But I really always thought that it would be as a painter. The painting that I had in the Whitney was called *Room Six* and it was really an abstraction. It was an abstraction -- it was an abstract out of Matisse, maybe; it was my chicken coop room with the indication of a chair but it was mostly big planes of gorgeous color. I retreated. I said, all right, I've been talking about this gorgeous paint, you know, the concreteness and solidity of paint. I'm going to try a painting like that and I did and it was a retreat for me. And so I said, all right, that's a technical thing, isn't it and did the painting that did go to the Whitney. And I think maybe that's what provoked me into the sculpture, that there was a feeling that if I was going to do work it would absolutely win with my own experience, and if I was going to be the good student, you know, and master all my lessons and do them well and get patted on the head and rewarded . . .I don't know, maybe that's being perverse.

PC: Well, you know, one thing that still intrigues me is the whole Kaprow circle and your relationship with him and those people before the real adventure into the sculpture. He was teaching at Rutgers and Liechtenstein was teaching there too.

GS: Later, later, that was quite a few years later. You see, Kaprow and I became friends. I don't know, temperamentally we hit it off. We were the same age, the same background, both of us intensely interested in art, in the same area and living out here we had only each other to depend on. We were the only people living out here who cared that intensely about art and becoming and artist.

PC: So you became your own social world in a way, too, the two of you.

GS: Yeah, we needed each other and supported each other. He'd call me up at 11:30 at night and say I've just finished a canvas, you know, come on over and I wouldn't get home until 3 a.m. or 3:30. Or he'd come over and see what I was working on and we'd jabber away for hours. The kids were small and Helen would stay home and we go on to New York and go to the galleries and we were looking at our own age and I found it the height of self-indulgence. I'd say it isn't right to enjoy yourself this much, because all the art scene was sparkling and exciting.

PC: But there's something important in doing that and also realizing it, isn't there?

GS: We use the joke about New Brunswick Fool of Painting. See, by this time we were both in the Hansa. I didn't a . . . I had a bachelor degree, I didn't have any fancy paper. Alan wanted to get me hired by Rutgers. So he got me a job teaching a drawing, composition class at Rutgers. They called me George but they called him Kaprow, Mr. Kaprow, because he was their professor. So the four of us became, somehow, something of a nucleus. You know, they were living out here and the four of us commuted to New York. And Whitman showed in the Hansa Gallery, Samaras was showing down at the Reuben gallery. Then, you know, the Hansa dissolved. I got elected captain of the sinking ship. We needed five hundred dollars to finish the season. I went to Meyer Shapiro to see if he knew somebody who could put up the money and he gave me a long drawn-up talk about the end of flowers blooming and accepting nature, and then he turned around and asked me . . . he knew a promising young artist. Did I know a gallery where this guy could show? And I was so . . . that's one of a series of reinforcements has done for me that are incredible.

PC: Where did he come into all of this?

GS: Meyer was something like a strange kind of guiding light. He used to come into Hansa and he loved the place and he would launch into beautiful expositions on the paintings that were criticism. I had a painting that was my private take-off on Matisse's *Red Studio* which is still hanging in my attic with a bunch of cubist planes. So he gave me this lulling, sensitive, passionate talk on what Matisse was really about in the *Red Studio* and I had the gall to tell Meyer I was only interested in three aspects. He just grinned at me. Then he used to come and criticize my paintings. He used to come out here and drink tea and he was this great scholar. You know, he was so "in". I was so bowled over that he would take the time and trouble to criticize the painting. When I first started doing sculpture, one time he came out . . . he did me the greatest service that anyone ever did me as far as being an artist is concerned. He looked at the sculpture, which was one of the first rough crude things I slammed together and he said, "You know, I was making sculpture in Vermont and I ran into this problem. Tell me, George, how do I solve this?" It was the first time he never went into that brilliant, beautiful criticism. Instead, he asked how to do something. Which was the most extraordinary reinforcement I could have gotten from anybody at that time, especially from someone I respected very highly.

PC: Lucas was studying art history first, wasn't he?

GS: It was because of Meyer's special relationship to the Hansa people. Lucas got a scholarship and went to study specifically with Meyer. Then in the middle of the thing he changes and decides to become an artist.

PC: What do you think of the Hansa now in retrospect, as to what it accomplished for you as a member and associate artist?

GS: I think it was extremely valuable for my growth. In microcosm, it dealt with all the most difficult ideas which were just seeds, and that really grew, exposure to abstraction, the exposure to found objects, the exposure to exalted literary themes. Kaprow was dealing with happenings and environments. You know, we were inventing the ground rules for a new art here in New Jersey. Some of it flowered, some of it ended, some of it got brutally treated.

PC: I often wondered about the social relationship between all of the artists in that gallery, which I think you said was a co-op. And most of the co-op's are founded by two or three people who had a couple friends and the gallery grew that way as opposed to a dealer gallery. Do you think the fact that there was that personal relationship between the people made it such an interesting place?

GS: It sure was. It was one of the . . . I don't know if it was a great lucky accident or what, but the catholic view, you know, small "c," the catholic view of the Hansa, I don't know if the word is predicted but was certainly continued by Bellamy and Green Gallery. You know, much more finally honed in the Green. The Hansa was primitive, natural. I don't know, I don't think anybody was conscious of putting together that kind of combination.

PC: No, I think it just happened. I don't think you can put it together.

GS: It just happened. I think Bellamy's greatness, I'm saying that advisedly, was in perceiving that quality and he proceeded to use a rare visual intelligence in making the Green Gallery after that. I'm much more comfortable with the broad aspects of containing several areas that seem to be contradictory, you know, as part of a core, a coherent core. I could never stand this in the school business.

PC: 1, 2, 3, ...

GS: I could never stand straight-line thinking or, you know, that . . . .

PC: Well, I don't think it works in the arts.

GS: Well, I simply think it's not true. You know, it's a painful fight because I owe as big a debt to Pollock as I do to Duchamp. So the post-painterly abstraction in the Green Gallery I was with Flavin, Judd, Morris, Poons very comfortably . . . I think all of us were comfortable in the Green Gallery together. You know, before the publicity burst and, you know, where the school avenues split. A real community.

PC: Did you find that that sense of community changed once the Green Gallery became what it did for the last couple years that it was there?

GS: The sense of community changed. Everybody's gone through revolutions in their lives. Not because the Green gallery changed, but the world was the world. Everything seems to be painful when you're going through it, you know. You look back and oh, those were the best painters. When the Hansa broke up Kaprow said we're going to look back in these as the best years of our lives. And I said, oh, you're full of shit. I was involved in such a painful struggle. The Green Gallery years were marvelous years, also, you know, of a totally different sort.

PC: Why did it have to break up, because of money and business or just general shift of the culture?

GS: Well, it was money and business and also growing up. The group got together because everybody was on an equal par. Every body had a different battery of equipment. There were all these different avenues and directions but everybody was not selling and totally unknown and the cement was intensity about art. Inevitably in that intense a group, you know, like somebody is going to start getting recognized, you know, like many of us did. So Stankiewicz was the first and it provoked . . . And he got into Eleanor Ward's Gallery. You know, then if one person signed . . . and the whole thing was like a natural commune. If you sold a drawing for $25 dollars, you bought wine for everybody and you had a party. You know, if one person needed . . . . Montgomery continued that commune, socialist attitude in the Green Gallery. So that, at the first glimmer of one or two successes, the individual quality of each artist came out. You know, the fact that each artist was making his own world. You see, that's more than money. So that kind of communal experiment disintegrated because of that, very poor people reluctant to do all that sharing.

PC: You know, what triggered Bellamy to -- Bellamy and Ivan -- to come to their own thoughts about the same time, and Ivan stayed or Dick stayed? Ivan went to work for Martha Jackson at one point.

GS: You mean when the Green Gallery folded?

PC: No, when the Hansa was folded.

GS: I mean when the Hansa folded. When the Hansa folded, yeah, Ivan went to work for Martha. Then he ended up at Leo's -- working for Castelli. Dick floated for about a year. I was showing at the Rueben gallery in group shows. I promised Anita that I would have a one-man show there and Dick sidled up to me one day out of the blue and said, "Hold up showing; I'm going to open a gallery and I want you to show." And I said O.K., you know. Obviously, Dick and I have remained very close all these years, mostly because, well, that great eye of his -- it's that sensitivity to the whole thing and what the whole thing is about.

PC: What do you think it is about him that makes him do what he does without really becoming a -- what? A sculptor. He probably could be a rich man today or some silly thing like that. But he always seems to go back looking at the art and . . . . Do you think he identifies or, from your point of view, what do you see about Bellamy that makes him more important to you? It's hard to define.

GS: It's hard to define, You have to put your finger on some intangible drive. I think that was the mark of a lot of people I knew besides myself. When I went into art there was no money in it. You know, you really couldn't imagine that it was possible to make a living and, if you were foolish enough to do it, you know, you hid it under some kind of everyday toughness. You know, you just simply made it your business to go about doing it. Bellamy absolutely seemed to understand that. You know, he is still knocked out by the word -- excitement isn't right; it's the intensity of coming up with something that is an illumination to yourself for reasons that I don't know. He has that uncanny ability to spot that quality of burst in a work which is what everybody is working for, everybody is struggling for. I don't know, maybe it's grace or state of mind. When it's happening it's like working or nailing boards, you don't know it's happening, you know, it just happens and that's the only . . . and he's identical to those driven artists in spotting it and responding to it. He's got an extraordinary respect for what art is about which is utterly different than the art market.

PC: Oh, well, that's true.

GS: And maybe that's one reason I agreed to talk to you, you know, because it's precisely around that point that the whole thing centers rather than the art market.

PC: Well, that's . . . the art market doesn't have anything to do with art.

GS: You know, like all of us are human and alive and sometimes rational, you know; that's another aspect of our lives.

PC: But you know, it's fascinating to see what happens. I remember going to the Stable Gallery and everybody went with somebody who constantly saw shows -- hey, you've got to go around the corner to the Hansa. The day you were there you might not know anything was there but you always went. And it was kind of like the one underground gallery. Tenth Street was something else but it was like the one place in the strangest location for it, you know. You would expect it to have been anywhere but Central Park South.

GS: Well, Bellamy always had this Chaplinesque quality. He'd dress in the most outrageous rags, you know, but then he'd pour you tea as if you were in the garden of the Frick.

PC: What happened at the point that you decided that you were going to continue making objects and figures and stop the painting? After you made these three figures and there was the year and a half, what took place? What was going on to provoke you into stopping the painting and proceeding with the figures?

GS: After I made those figures in '58 I was still painting, you know. I did go into the Green gallery; I had a show of paintings. My first show at the Green Gallery were paintings and that was my crisis year where I was questioning even more strongly the ground of the painting, the space of the painting and I was simultaneously putting every kind of space into the pictures. Some of the pictures were outrageously erotic and sexual, some had deep space, you know -- some had everything mixed up in it. Scull wanted to fire me out of the Green Gallery because of my first show. And it was Dick who spoke up and said give him another year. You see that understanding about the ruthlessness of . . . . You know, the search for the process of coming to it I think is incredibly important. That's where Dick's stature comes out.

PC: What happened? I mean you term your crisis year, I mean, in what way? There's always changes going on in painting but it was still painting.

GS: It was still painting. I told you about that painting I had shown at the Whitney Annual which was on one hand I believe personally an unbelievable achievement, you know, that I could hang in the same room with my gods. On the other hand, I was so seriously doubting and rejecting syntax. I had proved to myself that I could learn the language, that I could paint that way and it wasn't enough. So the clue of the sculpture. All right, then I came into action; I was so seriously questioning the nature of space in my own paintings -- you know, the nature of my own attack. Then the accident of somebody giving me some Johnson and Johnson bandages. I was teaching an art class here in New Brunswick and the wife of a chemist, had just developed this new material. Somebody

offered me fifty bucks to write an arts and crafts booklet on how to market the stuff; they wanted to use it as an art material. And they gave me like boxes of this brand new expensive stuff doctors wrapped you up in. I took it home and Helen tried to wrap me head to foot with this stuff. I didn't know anything about plaster sicking to hair -- stuck with a giant bandage. And I was sitting on a chair outside in July and it stuck all over me; it was incredibly painful. And the pieces all fell apart and I put them together and of necessity I had to put the plaster onto that chair to hold it up and the place was full of old furniture and I just stuck an old table in front of it and so I said it's a sculpture of a man sitting at a table and then I looked at the chair legs, and the table legs and the plaster legs and I said my god, it's Cezanne. You know, like here's all these vertical shafts and you know, there's a diagonal and there's a horizontal and then also there are . . . . The thing was crudely pasted together, but there are flashes and glimmers of fingers and a mouth coming out, a real mouth and the presence was so uncanny. I could put it up like a three-dimensional abstract painting. I could begin to see details and I could choose those details, and I said if I could do it, you know, like I made mistakes when things popped open and it looked like my expressionist sculpture but. if I was a little more careful. I could save those fingers or mouth and things could be peeping out of this mirage. And then the problem I had in my paintings was I was so emotionally involved I could never use a ruler, couldn't have a clean straight edge. And here it was taken care of because there was that chair leg which had it. So, damn it, there's a language -- straight lines, curves, color and the presence was so uncanny, it couldn't be avoided.

END OF INTERVIEW

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