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Oral history interview with William
Abbenseth, 1964 November 23

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Transcript

Preface

Interview with William Abbenseth
Conducted by Mary Fuller McChesney
At his photography studio in San Francisco, California
November 23, 1964

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with William Abbenseth on November 23, 1964. The interview took place at his photography studio in San Francisco, California, and was conducted by Mary Fuller McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

MARY FULLER McCHESNEY: This is Mary Fuller McChesney interviewing William Abbenseth, at his photography studio, 2 Cadell Place, San Francisco. The date is November 23, 1964.

I'd like to ask you first, where were you born?

WILLIAM ABBENSETH: New York City

MS. McCHESNEY: What year was that?

MR. ABBENSETH: 1898

MS. McCHESNEY: And where did you get your training as a photographer?

MR. ABBENSETH: Here in San Francisco, kind of informal, although I did go to an extension course at the University of California, but it was mostly picked up the way a lot of photographers learn the business from other photographers, working with other photographers, reading books, and so forth, very little formal education in photography.

MS. McCHESNEY: How did you first make any contact with the government-sponsored art projects?

MR. ABBENSETH: This is something I'm a little hazy about. As I recall it, I ran into Joe Danysh socially at a party and he was head of the local art project and we got talking about the art project and about my work, and he said that if I wanted a job he thought I could get one if I qualified, and I did, and that was the way it happened.

MS. McCHESNEY: Do you remember what year that was?

MR. ABBENSETH: No, I don't. It was probably-I was on the art project about three years, perhaps four, and I finished in 1939, so it would be either 1935 or 1936.

MS. McCHESNEY: What was the first assignment you received from the WPA?

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, the wonderful thing about it for me was that I was asked what I wanted to do, and now that you ask that question I recall that that was part of the first conversation with Joe Danysh. I was interested in San Francisco architecture and he heard about this in the conversation and so I was given clear sailing to do that. Later I got other assignments and was subsequently made a supervisor of the photographic department, and then I had much less time to do work on that particular project. I had to photograph paintings and sculpture and so forth.

MS. McCHESNEY: How long did you work photographing old San Francisco houses?

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, all the time I was on the project but part time because I had other duties. I didn't do nearly as much as I would have liked to have done.

MS. McCHESNEY: Who were the other photographers working on the project when you got on?

MR. ABBENSETH: I think I was the only one. They changed a lot. It was a very flexible setup and I can remember Ray Dannenbaum, who was a photographer-there were a great many people hired over the time I was with them. There were a great many people hired as photographers who selected photography because it sounded as if it were easy to do, and they weren't particularly qualified. I remember one fellow who worked under me who had been a brakeman on the railroad and so he became a darkroom worker and I taught him darkroom work. So there were quite a few people who were not particularly qualified as photographers. Hy Hirsh worked

under me for a short time before he went to the deYoung Museum and worked there as a staff photographer. He was a very competent photographer. I can't remember any others by name. There weren't really any outstanding photographers other than Hy Hirsh.

MS. McCHESENEY: So that on the time you went on the WPA project there really wasn't a very well-organized photography project?

MR. ABBENSETH: No.

MS. McCHESENEY: It was just you working with Joe Danysh as your supervisor, is that it?

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes. And I organized the photographic department, which meant that I did most of the work, and I had a few people working under me but I did most of the work. It wasn't a very large department.

MS. McCHESENEY: Did you set up a darkroom somewhere?

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes.

MS. McCHESENEY: Where was that?

MR. ABBENSETH: One of the characteristic things about the art project was that it was constantly moving about, and I worked for awhile on Washington Street, or maybe it was Jackson, in one of those wonderful old buildings with the steel windows, steel doors that is now part of Jackson Square. I worked there for a while. I worked in the pickle works on Columbus Avenue. I worked on Potrero Street in the old City and County Hospital, a part of it. They moved about wherever they could get space. I set up a darkroom also out in an old abandoned school near the ocean. We were constantly moving about, because the art project had no fixed place, no fixed home. It was set up, of course, on a temporary basis, on a sort of year-to-year, or six months to six months basis.

MS. McCHESENEY: What was done with the photographs you made of these San Francisco houses? Were they put in a portfolio, or...?

MR. ABBENSETH: I have no idea.

MS. McCHESENEY: Did you ever have any exhibitions of them at that time?

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes, there were some shown at the San Francisco Museum of Art, and some were published in books, some were published in newspapers. I believe the Writers Project got out a guide to San Francisco and I think some of them were in there. Some of them were also used for a photo-mural that Ben Cunningham and I worked on together, that is in the assessor's office in the City Hall. And we used those. It was entirely San Francisco architecture, using architectural detail in combination with views of the city at that time, and it's still there.

MS. McCHESENEY: How large is it?

MR. ABBENSETH: It's about five or six feet high. It covers one wall about twelve feet long, twelve feet wide, rather, and goes around a corner and covers part of another wall and that is probably about six feet in width.

MS. McCHESENEY: And you and Ben Cunningham worked on it together? Was he a photographer too?-no.

MR. ABBENSETH: No. The assignment was sort of dumped in my lap to do a photo-mural for the assessor's office in City Hall, and it just scared the hell out of me because I had no training nor the ability to design a photo-mural. I could do photographs and blow them up but the idea of doing something that would be part of an interior and be an integral part of an interior was rather frightening, so after discussing it with Bill Gaskin, who was then an assistant to Joe Danysh, he assigned Ben Cunningham to work with me, so Ben Cunningham and I worked out the design. It was mostly his design, and using architectural details to frame views of the city. So he was not a photographer; Ben was an artist. He's now living in New York.

MS. McCHESENEY: Was this photo-mural done before you became a supervisor yourself?

MR. ABBENSETH: I can't remember that. I think not. I think I was a supervisor at the time, but I can't recall. We weren't equipped to do it technically from the standpoint of darkroom equipment and so forth. We weren't equipped to do anything of that size, because it was done on a very large roll of paper, photographic paper, so we rented and used Ansel Adams' equipment. He was set up to make photo-murals, and photo screens, and we did the darkroom work there, made the prints there, and then put the prints on the panels and the panels were later laid on the wall.

MS. McCHESENEY: Was Ansel Adams ever on the project?

MR. ABBENSETH: No.

MS. McCHESNEY: What were some of the other projects you were involved in? Did you work on the Index of American Design?

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes. I did quite a lot of work for the Index and I would go out on trips to missions and places like that and I worked with a-almost entirely with a gal whose name I can't possibly recall, who was kind of a meek, mild person, her personality was-she drove a Model A Ford and drove about ninety miles an hour. The motor used to get red hot and sparks would fly out and it was a terrifying trip but we always made it. But I worked with her and she was a very good artist on this kind of thing. I don't remember her name.

MS. McCHESNEY: She did drawings and you did the photographs?

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, I did photographs of old needlework, sculpture, wood carvings, things like that, mostly in missions, and sometimes things that were in books where we were not permitted to move the books because they were so precious, and then she would work from my photographs and do a drawing, so my photographs were just used for her study as something to work from, that's all.

MS. McCHESNEY: Who was the supervisor at that time on the Index of American Design? Or was that separate?

MR. ABBENSETH: It was completely separate and I don't remember who the supervisor was.

MS. McCHESNEY: Did you ever hear of a woman named Laura Armer in connection with that?

MR. ABBENSETH: Ruth Armer?

MS. McCHESNEY: No, Laura.

MR. ABBENSETH: No.

MS. McCHESNEY: Somehow that name came up in a file somewhere-I don't know-but she wasn't connected with the Index-and I don't know quite how.

MR. ABBENSETH: No, I don't think I remember that name. Ruth Armer I remember. She was an artist, not on the Index, though. No, I never heard of her.

MS. McCHESNEY: Were there any other people working on the Index at the time you were?

MR. ABBENSETH: There probably were but I had very little contact. It was completely separate and I had practically no relationship with them at all except only that once in a while I would be asked to go with this one gal some place to take some photographs, so I knew very few people on that project. It was the same as the Writers Project, I had very little relationship with them. I remember Kenneth Rexroth coming to the photographic department and getting photographs one time for a book that they got out, one of the guide books, but it was like dealing with somebody from a different company, a different organization. They didn't work together closely. They probably did in the executive department but not where I worked.

MS. McCHESNEY: You also worked on a project in Monterey, didn't you?

MR. ABBENSETH: No.

MS. McCHESNEY: Doing photographs? I thought Dorothy Collins said that you did some photographs for some project in Monterey, California? No?

MR. ABBENSETH: No.

MS. McCHESNEY: I thought you were the photographer. She was describing a project where they restored old buildings in Coulton Hall, or something, and they took old photographs and enlarged them of early California people and put them around. You didn't do any of that work?

MR. ABBENSETH: No. No. The only other outside project that I can recall working on was setting up a photographic department in the art department at the University of California for making slides. They set up an art file, and art catalogue, and I set up the project for them, the Art Project did, and as a supervisor of the Photographic Department I set up this project for them and we used people over there who were on the art project in Oakland. And that was the only outside project that I worked on that I can recall. I made a movie as part of my activities. I got interested in film work and had a motion picture camera some place I can't recall. I think it was borrowed from the Recreation Department, and I made some movies documenting some of the work that was done at Aquatic Park by Sargent Johnson and Hiler and some of the other artists, and I got very much

interested in motion picture work as a result of this, and I made a movie in Oakland on the making of a stained glass window. This movie was subsidized by, or sponsored by, the University of California and subsequently when it was finished it became part of their library. And this movie was an educational movie showing how a stained glass window is made and it used an artist named Edgar Dorsey Taylor, who was on the art project in Oakland, and later I made a documentary movie for the Housing Authority of San Francisco. It was a rather ambitious effort with a specially-composed musical score by a man-I think his name was Coke, who was on the music project-is that what it was called?-music project? Yes. And he composed a score especially for it, for the movie, and it was played by a symphony orchestra, so it had a marvelous musical background. This movie ran about, oh, twenty-eight to thirty minutes, black and white, of course, and it was used by the Housing Authority for quite a long time, and of course it became out-dated and I'm sure it isn't used anymore. The movie, incidentally, made use of, in dramatizing some of the evils of bad housing, people on the art project like Charles Howard, who became the father who was moving into one of the new housing homes with his family, and things like that.

MS. McCHESNEY: Oh! What happened to the movie you made on Aquatic Park, of the people working on the project there?

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, that was not an organized film. That was just footage that was shot for the record, for no particular purpose, but just as a record of what was going on there. I have no idea what happened to the material.

MS. McCHESNEY: It mentions here that you did some still photographs of work that was done on the WPA art project, you photographed the paintings that were made and that sort of thing...

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, that was primarily for publicity, and the record, but mostly for publicity because the newspapers were giving the project publicity in those days, also for the sponsors, for the people, City Hall people and so forth.

MS. McCHESNEY: Was there much of an effort made to keep any kind of photographic record, or was it more, say, for publicity?

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, a photographic record of the activities of the art project?

MS. McCHESNEY: Yes.

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, yes, there was an attempt at it, but it was not very well organized because necessarily the art project was not very well organized. It was set up on a temporary basis with funds being voted, as I understood it, funds being voted from year to year by Congress so that it was not run as a permanent organization, and necessarily, it was rather-some of the activities were rather disorganized. But there was an effort made to record what was going on, to some degree.

MS. McCHESNEY: When you were talking about the slide library, I guess, that you set up at the University of California, were these slides from their collection, or...?

MR. ABBENSETH: No, this was something that is done in museums and art departments and universities. It is routine. It's compiling a library of slides that with mostly visual material from books, illustrations in books, drawings, and so forth, and it's used primarily by lecturers in art education, in art history, and so forth. And rather than bring out a book and show the illustration to a class and, of course, it would have to be shown at a disadvantage because it's so small, but with a slide they can project it on a screen, and it's very clear. And this is pretty much routine in art, I think. And at the University they didn't have one at the time, didn't have the setup, so this was the beginning of the art library, an art film library, or filmed art library.

MS. McCHESNEY: How were these things arranged? Did the University request the WPA to do this, or what?

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, this is something that, of course, was not within my jurisdiction. I was just told that the arrangement had been made, but of course I didn't operate in a vacuum, and also I had normal curiosity so I think that in some cases the art project, in many cases, went to places like the University of California and looked for sponsors to keep the artists busy, to keep the photographic department busy, and likewise, people like the University of California heard that these things were available, these were people available, and so it was a two-way thing, I'm sure. It worked both ways.

MS. McCHESNEY: Were those the majority of the projects that you worked on?

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes. I can't recall how the housing film was started. I wouldn't be surprised if it didn't start with me because I got enormously interested in motion pictures and I got to know some of the people on the housing project because I had been doing still photography for them and so it probably came out of partly my own

ambition. I was doing quite a lot of work for the Housing Authority, the local office. The local branch of the federal office, for example, sent me down to Los Angeles to photograph a Mexican housing area that was to be demolished, and I did documentary photographs down there. I spent about a week doing documentary photography of a very picturesque but, of course, very unsatisfactory housing area mostly inhabited by Mexicans, and that area was subsequently demolished and they put up a new housing project there. So I was familiar-I knew quite a number of people who were working in the housing field, federal as well as local.

MS. McCHESNEY: What sort of activity were you engaged in in San Francisco then? They weren't doing slum clearance already, were they?

MR. ABBENSETH: Oh, yes.

MS. McCHESNEY: They were?

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes.

MS. McCHESNEY: In what areas?

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, the first one that I remember-I'm pretty sure that was the first one-and I took photographs there, was Holly Park, that was a small one out in Outer Mission, and they later, they went out further, out toward Butcher Town, and yes, they were quite active in it. They were just getting under way.

MS. McCHESNEY: There were building housing projects out there from that period then?

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes, yes. Holly Park, I believe, was the first.

MS. McCHESNEY: Were there any other WPA people used by the Housing Authority? I remember seeing some sculptures of Bufano's sitting around in a housing project.

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes, they used Bufano sculptures. I don't think they used any other artist because there was no provision made in the housing project for wall decoration or murals or anything like that. I don't know why, but-and as I recall rather vaguely, Benny Bufano's sculpture was-that was even controversial. I don't think it was clear cut. I don't remember why. But as I recall there were no artists used by the Housing Authority. It was more places like State College. Reuben Kadish did murals there. Reuben Kadish, who is a friend of mine, was out here a couple of years ago and I went with him to look at the murals and he was horrified because they have been defaced and the building is in bad repair. Now it's-State College is no longer there, of course-the building is used by the extension division of UC, and the murals are in bad condition. He was quite outraged. But this was the type of organization or institution that made use of artists, as I remember it, like the University of California. I remember now, now I remember photographing a mosaic in the building that is now, I think, the library. It's an old red brick building and one of the art project artists made one of the mosaics for that building. I believe it was a woman but I can't recall her name.

MS. McCHESNEY: Florence Swift, wasn't it? Didn't she work on that?

MR. ABBENSETH: It could be.

MS. McCHESNEY: Maybe one of the Bruton sisters?

MR. ABBENSETH: Or maybe one of the Bruton sisters, yes.

MS. McCHESNEY: It's on the outside of the old power house art gallery, isn't it?

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes, the old power house art gallery at University of California, Berkeley.

MS. McCHESNEY: I don't know what it is now-maybe it still is that.

(Interruption)

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, typical of that kind of thing that I did as a photographer was working with a public relations man. He was called a publicity man then-Bud Painter was one of them, there were several, and it was to photograph an artist at work, and one of the rather unusual ones that I worked on, or rather one of the unusual projects of this kind, was photographing Francie Terebova at work. Francie Terebova was a sculptress who had a little house in Bolinas and she lived there with her small daughter and she was a very interesting woman, very large physically, and she hauled most of the timber up from the beach to build the house herself. She built practically everything herself, and it was a rather makeshift structure but very sound and she took great pride in the fact that she had built this house herself. She also-her sculpture was of driftwood. She carved in wood. She didn't work in any other material that I can recall. And her work was rather primitive. She was a

very colorful woman from Europe. She told varying stories, all straight face, about her background. She came from a royal family, and one time it would be from Yugoslavia or something, next time it would be someplace else. She would evidently forget herself what story she had told you. But a very interesting woman and her sculpture was rather not primitive but rather crude and mostly concerned with Madonna and Child, and mother and child, and that sort of thing. And I photographed her at work, and made shots of her work, and showed her using her various tools, and as I recall, this was used in a Saturday News or Saturday Call Bulletin on their art page. They used to run things like that for the art project in those days. Terebova, incidentally, died of a heart attack while driving over from Bolinas to Mill Valley one day, quite a long time ago.

MS. McCHESENEY: Who were some of the other artists you photographed? These were all WPA artists that you did? The artists at work series. Do you remember some of the others?

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, I did quite a lot of Benny Bufano, Sun Yatsen in the course of construction, and an awful lot of Benny Bufano because a good part of the time that I worked on the project Benny was the white-haired boy and they were trying-Joe Danysh and Allen were trying-mostly Joe Danysh was trying to get the city to put a statue of St. Francis-this became a kind of obsession-to put a statue of St. Francis on top of Twin Peaks, and there were many models made and I photographed, I did a lot of photography of the models, so there was a lot of Benny Bufano-Sun Yatsen, I photographed that in construction and also after it was installed.

MS. McCHESENEY: Did you photograph any painters working?

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes. Not so much painters working as their finished work. I did: Clay Spohn, Cunningham, Hiler, oh, James Budd Dixon, Reuben Kadish, Volz. Oh, and I also did some motion pictures of-you know, the Fair in '39 was the sort of windup to the art project. It was the grand finale and so rather appropriately I did quite a lot of photographic work over there, and I photographed Volz's project, which was a huge mural of the Federal Building at Treasure Island, and I photographed some of the painters at work on that, like Luke Gibney and others. I didn't do very much on it because it became a kind of controversial thing, so I did very little on that.

MS. McCHESENEY: Why did it become controversial?

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, because Volz was very difficult to work with, and he was very temperamental and a very great many people had trouble with him, and I can't remember the incident. It was very trivial, but it became so unpleasant that I just decided to hell with it and I didn't do any more.

MS. McCHESENEY: Oh, I see. I understand the Recreation Department here in San Francisco had a photography project set up too. Was that completely separate? This was also on WPA?

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes, it was completely separate. I knew that there was one because, as I mentioned, I borrowed, I used their motion picture camera to do the motion picture work that I did. But there was no connection and no relationship between the two. I did some work for Beatrice Judd Ryan and now I find it difficult to recall just what Beatrice, what her function was, it was something to do with public relations, wasn't it?

MS. McCHESENEY: I think she was in charge of exhibitions.

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes.

MS. McCHESENEY: Probably she was in charge of public relations too, but she did have charge of arranging exhibitions of WPA paintings to be shown, I guess, in San Francisco and also traveling exhibitions.

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes. And I did some work for her, some photographing.

MS. McCHESENEY: Probably photographing shows that she had arranged?

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes, installations, yes.

MS. McCHESENEY: Well, you were on the project for about three years, then, up to 1939, when you worked at the Fair?

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes, and that was the windup of the Art Project. I was almost to the end.

MS. McCHESENEY: What kind of influence do you think the WPA Art Project, the photography project, had on your own career as a photographer, or did it have any?

MR. ABBENSETH: Oh, an enormous influence! It was very educational. I learned a lot at the taxpayer's expense which is putting it rather cold-bloodedly, but I am sure the taxpayers have been repaid, but it was very educational, because I had not been a photographer so very long at that time, and so I was learning as I was doing. I had worked, I had gotten quite a bit of my education in photography from, oh, being with other

photographers, as artists get their education-with Consuela Kanaga, for one, who was not on the Art Project, but she was a local photographer and an outstanding one, and I was in with the F-64 group, which was the early group of documentary photographers: Ansel Adams, Willard Van Dyke, who later went into motion picture work, and Ralph Steiner, and I can't recall-Hy Hirsh-I can't recall any of the others. But the wonderful thing, of course, from an educational standpoint, that the Art Project did for me as an individual and as a photographer, and especially a creative photographer, was that it enabled me to go out and use my camera on subject matter that I was enormously interested in, and which I couldn't have done in any other way. Of course, this is what the Art Project did, I guess, for artists themselves whether they were painters or sculptors or whatever. And in the last part of the period I was with them, I wasn't able to do nearly as much of that as I would have liked, because as supervisor of the photographic department, which gave me perhaps ten dollars more a month, it also gave me a lot more work to do that was sort of routine work, and not very exciting, interesting but not very exciting, not creative.

MS. McCHESNEY: You mean office work instead of creative work?

MR. ABBENSETH: No, I mean photographing paintings...

MS. McCHESNEY: Oh, I see.

MR. ABBENSETH: Photographing paintings and that sort of thing, which is interesting but is not very exciting, is not creative.

MS. McCHESNEY: Yes, I see. How did the project manage the problem of your materials? Were they paid for by the project and given to you? Darkroom equipment and things like that, and film?

MR. ABBENSETH: I furnished my own photographic equipment and the project furnished the materials, the film, the paper, the chemicals, and so forth. But the equipment, we used our own equipment.

MS. McCHESNEY: So you had to have your own camera? They didn't furnish cameras?

MR. ABBENSETH: No.

MS. McCHESNEY: You mentioned an F-64 group. Was that actually an organization, or was it just sort of a school of photography?

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, it was kind of-it wasn't formally organized. It was a group of photographers who got together mostly informally in a bar, or in a café, a restaurant, or a home, and who were banded together by a common attitude toward photography, which at that time was a revolt against the fuzzy school of romantic, the romantic approach to photography where things were blurred, and so forth, and the F-64, of course, is simply, it's a technical term and what it means, purely and simply, is showing things sharp. In other words, an honest approach to photography, rather than a romantic; a realistic approach rather than the romantic approach. No, it was very casual. It was never organized formally but they were just kindred souls who met together.

MS. McCHESNEY: That was a great new development in photography at that time, wasn't it?

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes. They were the avant-garde of the period and, of course, now it's taken for granted. In fact, now there is a kind of going back to the romantic. You see it in a great amount of photography, creative photography, as well as advertising photography. They're going back to the fuzziness.

MS. McCHESNEY: What do you think of the WPA Art Project as a whole? How would you evaluate it, not with respect to you particularly, but what do you think its contribution was to the cultural life of the area?

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, I think it was a very great contribution because it happened at a time when art and the artists were held in much less respect than they are today, when the average person's attitude toward art and artists was one of great disrespect. Artists were renegades, and unless they happened to be enormously successful, which was, of course, an old cliché after they died, but it was a time when there was so much soul-searching and so much attempt at evaluation, both socially and culturally and every other way, that I think that the art project, as did the music project, and all the other cultural projects contributed a great deal because not only was the economy at a low ebb, but cultural values were in great question, so that this kind of positive statement on the part of the government, I think, was very important, because people were asking questions. People were wondering about the worthwhileness of, if we can use that word, what are the values that they can believe in, so that the mere fact that government was willing to support culture I think was of great value.

MS. McCHESNEY: Do you think it might be important for the government of the United States to support the arts again?

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, I used to think so, but I think that it isn't so important any more because I think that this

is being taken over. Rather than the government doing it, I think that business, industry is doing it. I certainly think that the artist should be supported. I don't think it matters very much who does it, whether it's royalty, when we have a monarchy, or whether it's government when there is no monarchy, or whether it's industry. The only important thing, of course, is that the artist not be made to be a mouthpiece for whomever is supporting him. I think right now that isn't necessary because the big foundations and the big industry, in one way or another, is supporting artists. I think it would be better if the government did it, because I think there is always a suspicion when it is private industry. An example: the government in this country has never supported a documentary motion picture movement because there was been too much pressure on the part of private business in the motion picture field. Other governments do support a motion picture documentary activity. Canada, in particular; England; as well as other countries. And I think it's very unfortunate. It's done in this country by industry but it isn't done nearly as well because industry for the most part can't resist saying something in behalf of industry, or if they can't do it in behalf of a particular product, they do it in behalf of free enterprise or something like that. So I think it would be much better if it were done by the government rather than by private industry.

MS. McCHESENEY: Do you remember any problems while you were on the WPA project? Were there any things that troubled you as an artist working for the government?

MR. ABBENSETH: No. I thought it was simply wonderful. I was given-apart from the things I had to do as a supervisor of the photographic department, certain responsibilities, certain duties, otherwise I was given a free hand. I could do whatever I pleased and I'm sure that almost all the artists on the Art Project had the same opportunity. So from that standpoint, it was quite wonderful. There were no restrictions. You could do whatever you wanted to do. It was wonderful. I could go out with my camera, as I did, and photograph what I wanted to photograph, and what more could one ask? And I was given the materials.

MS. McCHESENEY: Was the money adequate to live on?

MR. ABBENSETH: Yes. Oh, yes. I think I was getting \$94 a month, something like that, \$80 or \$90, \$95, somewhere around there, and at that time it was quite satisfactory, because artists, if I can include myself, live very simply, and, of course, it was not only that things cost a lot less then, but also standards were very low and one could live very simply and get along beautifully.

MS. McCHESENEY: You have no criticism then of the way the project was managed as far as you were concerned?

MR. ABBENSETH: Oh, there were clashes of temperament. There were, of course, things that one didn't like, that one resented and one got angry about, but this can only because expected in a kind of bureaucratic system and especially one that was set up on such a basis, a non-permanent basis. There was-if one wanted to go to Oakland, as I had to do, or Berkeley, it became necessary almost to make it an enormous project just getting the transportation money, or the tickets, or whatever. Well, this was very annoying, but you can understand the reasons for it. No, there was no-it was wonderful. But one looks back with a certain amount of nostalgia and one forgets about the irritations, I'm sure. I haven't forgotten some of them, but on the whole I didn't have any great irritations or dissatisfactions. I found it quite wonderful. I worked with people I liked for the most part, and I worked in an atmosphere I liked among artists, so it was fine.

MS. McCHESENEY: Do you have any more comments about the period?

MR. ABBENSETH: About the period?

MS. McCHESENEY: Yes.

MR. ABBENSETH: Well, looking back on it, I think of it, as I do, thinking of the Fair on Treasure Island, as being a very interesting and perhaps significant end of a period, because right after the art project folded, right after the Fair, which in a way was an expression of the period that ended, came the holocaust of the war. I remember I was in the San Francisco Museum shortly after and heard a lecture by Lewis Mumford in which he-this was at the time when Hitler was running rampant in Europe-and Mussolini-and Lewis Mumford in his talk told us to go out and look at the paintings and we would see on the canvasses what was happening, and of course, this was not a great discovery, but this was sort of the beginning of the art of chaos that really portrayed the world we're living in. Up to that time, up to that period, I think that art as well as society had been playing make-believe, and was living in a world that didn't really exist. So I think of the Art Project and the Fair as ending this and bringing us very abruptly and with a terrific jolt face to face with reality, with the world we were living in. So I think, from that standpoint, the Art Project was very significant. It can never happen again. That kind of life can never happen again. There will never be a need for subsidizing artists. There will never be a need for subsidizing people again, I don't think.

MS. McCHESENEY: Thank you very much for giving the time for this interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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