Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Lou Block, 1965 May 31

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Lou Block on May 31, 1965. The interview took place in Louisville, Kentucky, and was conducted by Harlan B. Phillips for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The sound quality for this interview is poor throughout due to background noise caused by aircraft and rendered some words inaudible. In 2024 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript has been added in brackets and given an –Ed. attribution. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What I'd like you to do by way of beginning, because I don't really want to jump into WPA and the '30s without some background. I don't want you to appear like Botticelli's *Venus on the Half-Shell* is. Why don't you in a way indicate what it is you began with, where interest took you, why interest developed, how deep it was—

LOU BLOCK: Well, I can tell you my own. How other people got involved and all of that, of course, I can't say. But my own role with WPA, came about rather accidentally. I'd been commissioned to do a mural out on the West Coast in about 1933, I think.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And when I got through with that job, I came back to New York—very much I had—my whole background had been in the mural painting. And when I came back, I was just overwhelmed with the desire to do a big wall somewhere, because I'd seen some of the murals done on the West Coast by some of the Mexicans. I saw the Orozco murals; the Siqueiros' murals that he did in somebody's home. So when I got back here, Rivera was painting then in Detroit at the Valentiner Museum [*sic* Detroit Institute of Arts –Ed].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And I got hold of Ben [Shahn], and we sat down and started conspiring. He was also very much interested, but he had never done a mural. And so we talked about the possibility of how do you go about it. And I suggested to Ben that maybe we could work with Rivera when he would come to New York to do his Radio City fresco. Rivera—I knew him. And my brother was then living in New York—and he gave a big Christmas dinner party for Rivera and Covarrubias, and Ben and I came. And at that time, I suggested to Rivera that perhaps Ben and I could work with him at Radio City as assistants, because we were both very anxious to learn the fresco techniques. And Rivera knew Shahn also, at least he knew his work. And he was delighted. So we worked with him there through that whole episode at Radio City. And when that thing conked out and mural was destroyed, we were sort of left out on a limb. Well, just about that time, the ERB in New York City, the Emergency Relief Bureau

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: —was beginning to employ artists. And most of the guys were cleaning statutes in the different parks. That was their job.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Before you get into this, I'm dying to ask you about Rivera—his method, his technique. What did you pick up? What did you absorb from him?

LOU BLOCK: We learned the technique of fresco.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You did?

LOU BLOCK: He was a great craftsman, but neither one of us like his work particularly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: But we did learn what we were after; the whole technique of fresco painting, we got that. We also learned—after he was thrown out of Radio City, he volunteered to paint a series of murals for the New Workers School,—I think it was called. It was a Lovestoneite organization. he was very partial to and Bertrand Wolfe—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: Who has since become his official biographer—Rivera. Wolf, of course, went for that in a large way. The thing that interested Ben and me particularly on that project was that these were to be designed as portable murals—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh.

LOU BLOCK: —portable frescoes. Ben and I built these huge frames, which would contain these frescoes. And they were very solid and could take the weight of the plaster and all the rest of them. And we worked with him on those. We each got 30 bucks a week, which had also been our salary at the Radio City. And for each of us, that was it. That was our income [laughs]. Well, those murals were painted. We worked on those with him. And we hated that whole job. Have you ever seen them? They're out there at this ILGWV home.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

LOU BLOCK: I saw them there recently, and they are in a very good condition after being moved many times.

[00:05:00]

[Motorcycle sound.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What was the—you said you hated it—from the point of view of idea or —

LOU BLOCK: Well, this—his whole concept. It was so crowded. I mean, I didn't disagree what he was trying to say, but I certainly disagreed with how he said it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: It's like his murals in Mexico. They're so crowded. You have to see them piece by piece to sort of pull out some areas, or some incident, or something that you like particularly, and you notice in so many—frequently in reproductions of Rivera's work, and whoever did it, did the same thing. They'd fill out a fragment of detail out of a large mural, rather than doing the whole mural. Because I felt and still feel that many of his murals were unintelligible, because they're sort of jammed up with an overabundance of material, you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And my whole feeling about mural painting is to relate it to the architecture wherever it is going to be, and also to keep it as simple as possible—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: —for the sake of the spectator.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: Siqueiros, the other Mexican, had his own concept of the problems of spectators. And he did a series of murals in Chile, I think, where he tried to accommodate what he called the ambulatory spectator. In other words, the people moving by a mural.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: And he did the same thing in Mexico. [Aircraft sound starts.] I saw one of them that he did in the Electrical Syndicate Building in Mexico City, where it was a winding staircase going all the way up and all the way on the walls with his murals. And it was very

much the ambulatory spectator towards this [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: There was none of that in Rivera's work. The spectator just—would start looking at the—you know, with this thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What was the—you know, how did he like the destruction of the mural at Radio City?

LOU BLOCK: Rivera? I don't think he gave a damn.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In any given—

LOU BLOCK: I don't think so. We were all very much upset about it because—although we didn't like the whole concept— he had a very confused concept—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: —I have a picture of it somewhere around the—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Do you?

LOU BLOCK: Lucienne Bloch, the daughter of Ernest Bloch, the composer, smuggled these pictures out one night before it was destroyed and she gave me a print. Because he reproduced that same painting. He did it over again at [Palacio de] Bellas Artes office in Mexico City.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: I disliked Rivera. And I thought he was very dishonest. I think he was a great, great craftsman, but politically dishonest and just generally not a very—a man full of honesty or real integrity. And I felt that. And my brother who lived in Mexico for many, many years, I think, felt the same way. He was almost a neighbor of Rivera's in the—where he lived.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: And Lucienne Bloch took these pictures. She draped the whole thing with large sheets of onion skin paper that we used to use for tracings. And behind that shield [laughs], she snapped the—with her little Leica. She was also one of our group. She and this lad that she married later, Ivan Dimitroff. They are living in Flint, Michigan now, I think. The night that the murals were destroyed, Ben and I were in a cafeteria on 6th Avenue having a bite of supper. We'd been working around the clock.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

LOU BLOCK: And we knew something was imminent. That was just a few days prior that the permanent scaffold had been moved away, because all the other sections were completed. And we had a portable scaffold for the lowest section. Ben and I were up at this cafeteria when Hideo Noda, the young Japanese assistant, he knew where we were, and came racing down, “Rivera's off the scaffold, and the place is full of cops.” [laughs.] So we raced back, you know, Well, what the hell goes on? And Rivera was off the scaffold and pushed away from the wall, and workmen were already putting panels over the paintings. It was kind of a shocking business, you know, because it was an arbitrary rejection of Rivera. Well, the newspapers, of course, knew that something was brewing there, and a guy named Lind [ph], I think on the *Times* used to come by [every fifteen minutes and keep his nose –Ed] right there—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.]

[00:10:10]

LOU BLOCK: —But he happened to be away that evening. And Ben and I both promised faithfully that if anything did break, we'd let him know. We had a little workshop up in the mezzanine there [clears throat], where Rivera always kept the tools, brushes, and stuff. It was a kind of a little shack built up in there. We had a phone up in there—like I don’t have a

phone to call in— and started telling him what's going on, sort of a bird's eye view I could look down into the lobby and about midway in the conversation the phone went dead. One of these people who were there apparently cut the phone off.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's terrible!

LOU BLOCK: But Lind came by and he got the rest of the story from whoever he's supposed to—probably Nelson Rockefeller and the others. He got all sides of it. And Rivera wasn't upset. He got his check. At least he didn't show anything. He made no comment to us, except, *Merde alors!* [Laughs.] And that was it until he started his work at the New School, because the artists in the city—the different artists' organizations, and particularly the leftist groups like the John Reed Club and—I can't remember the names of all of them—they organized a big protest. And they had parades, picketing the building and all the stuff, you know. Well, anyhow, that's—that was that incident—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: —that had left me and Shahn, I think, still anxious to do murals. Well [clears throat], and we didn't know quite how to proceed because neither one of us was on relief. And you had to be on relief to get on these projects. This was still well before WPA.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And if PWAP had already come and gone, I didn't participate in that at all. I was in California when that happened. So I missed out on that. But then they had these Emergency Relief [Projects] things in New York City under Mrs. Audrey McMahon at the College Art Association, I talked to Audrey and suggested to her that Ben and I would be very much interested in doing a mural somewhere. And I don't recall how it came about, but we contacted Commissioner Austin McCormick in the Department of Correction for the city of New York.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: But he was interested in having something done at this new prison that they were building. It had originally been built under the administration of Mayor Walker and apparently the work that was done was so faulty that the whole thing was sinking into that morass—the whole morass of spongy earth Riker's Island had been a dumping ground.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

LOU BLOCK: They sort of jumped the gun a little bit by putting these heavy steel blocks inside these brick walls and the whole thing began to sink. the walls were cracking, and it was a hell of a mess. All the expensive cellblocks were rusting. Well, when La Guardia came in, among the things that he decided to rectify was this business, and I think they spent something like $11 million to rebuild that whole thing. Well, McCormick was interested. And we talked with the mayor, and he was interested. Phil Lewis said I will fund this project. And it was agreed that we'd spent at least a year on researching and the preparation of sketches, because it was quite a job. There were two opposing walls in a 100-foot corridor which had a width of about 20 feet. As I recall, there were no architectural breaks in this wall. It's such a continuous surface—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Wow.

LOU BLOCK: —of two opposing walls. Naturally, being so narrow, you couldn't see too much at one time. So our problem there was to contrive a kind of organization of the mural where no matter where you were in that corridor, on either wall you'd see a complete unit of interest, which would flow into the next one, into the next one. And we've managed to get around that problem. And we started to sketch it finally. And after a year of work—

[00:15:13]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I think you ought to go into the detail of the preparation. So this is how the current interest was born. The—[Lou Block laughs.] It is. It's complex, I understand.

LOU BLOCK: Well, as I told you earlier, we started out on this researching; we had access to prisons. Austin McCormick arranged for us to be—allowed entry to any prison we wanted to

visit. Why we wanted to is not too clear to me even yet, but I think back of our [clears throat] thinking was to see who lands in the jug, how they were treated, how did they live, where were they working. And we saw quite a lot of that. We visited [clears throat] the Bordentown, a medium security prison that's in New Jersey. It's mostly farm work. These men are transferred—if they show that they can behave themselves, they're transferred to this medium security place where they become in a sense trusties. We visited some of the bigger reformatories, the big one up in Warwick, New York, and we went to a women's prison in New York. We went to Sing Sing. Wurden Lawes was still there. And we felt he was a very dishonest man because he preached one thing. His books were written for a ghost writer who was an inmate. I don't know if you know this. And we felt that Wurden Lawes himself, with all his theories about modern penology, was as phony as a $12 bill.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's pretty phony! [Laughs.]

LOU BLOCK: Yes, but we did see everything there. And as I told you, we started out with sketchbooks but we found it was very cumbersome. And it was Walker Evans, who shared our studio, suggested we use Leicas. And neither one of us have ever used a camera like this—kind of a new experience for us. But Walker showed us just about what we'd need to do, when to push the button., and he helped us with the processing and the printing. As a matter of fact, the first prints he made, I have a collection of them, mostly prison pictures. Uh, we did collect a lot of material that way. And Ben had a little notebook which he filled with—later from the photographs with some of his collections. He made, I think, a little book containing over 100 little gouaches that he made and all this stuff preparatory to the murals. Because of the complexity of this thing, in addition to this corridor, there was a large room which had a dual purpose. On Sundays it would be used for religious services, and big walls came down, so folding walls came down and divided into three chapels called Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant. During the week, those walls were up and it was a general recreation, movies and whatever. Well, in considering the whole thing, we'd finally decided, Ben would do this whole corridor, and I would do these chapel things. So that involved additional research, because in thinking about thematic material for a place that had that kind of dual purpose, I felt that things which were purely religious would have no place there.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And I decided to do scenes from the Bible in modern concept, mostly from the Sermon on the Mount. And I finally read the Sermon on the Mount [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well [laughs]—

LOU BLOCK: And what I did was to try to involve—it would be 15 panels—I think there were 15. Each one would be concerned with a kind of religion, most likely to reach down to those areas of men who were convicted of petty crimes.

[00:20:05]

And I did some researching on that. I have found that there were a lot of these what Reinhold Niebuhr would call splinter religions, unaffiliated with any of the major faiths—missions of one sort or another. This guy out in Zion City, and I think his name was Oliver—whose basic vision was the world was gonna come to an end at a given time and he assembled all his flock in this tabernacle [clears throat], filled up singing and praying and waiting for the ceiling to fall down on them. That entered into one of the panels. Then I used some of the things that occurred in the South, the baptismal rituals, salvation army, those areas of the interest, [clears throat] and painted as they seem to look to us in the '30s. I prepared the sketches for those while Ben went on with his work. And then because the whole thing was knocked out completely by a group of artists who didn't like Ben or me. They said to the mayor that this thematic material was unsuited to the occasion. But I checked—for my own sake, I checked with the leaders of the three major faiths in New York, Rabbi Wise, and Reinhold Niebuhr, and—who else did I see? Was it Bishop Manning at that time in that big church on 110th Street?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: I talked to them about it. And there wasn't too much enthusiasm for the general idea because they felt that biblical themes should be painted as of the Bible, you know, with night gowns, and I didn't want to do that. But I went ahead with my sketches anyhow, because at that time with Reinhold Niebuhr, he said, Why are you picking on the

splinter faiths rather than going with the more substantial business of these major faiths? Well, it was a confusing thing for me, because I am no theologian. I know very little about it and truthfully I'm not too much interested. I was more interested in what could be drawn out picture-wise—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: —rather the pictures in the Bible, and how do they relate. And if I am in any sense a theologian, it's with one profound conviction that religion is static. And you have to dig back to 2,000 years ago to establish what is your faith. It seems to me that religion has to be part of its own time. And they didn't agree.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Amen.

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Sure, if you have to approach it as a historian, it's no longer a faith. It's an obsession [laughs].

LOU BLOCK: That's right. And I couldn't see that. Well, anyhow, the mural—the work was stopped. We were just about to trace our cartoons on the wall when we had our feet knocked out from under us.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Mayor La Guardia decided and announced to the press that this is it. This is—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —discontinued.

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: And the theory being that it was unsuited to the inmates. Well, we agreed with McCormick who was two ways about it. He wasn't quite sure he agreed with either side. He agreed that we take a pole at the old Blackwell's Island prison where the inmates were still quartered, show them the sketches, and let them write their own opinions. And I have all that here [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Do you? What did they think?

LOU BLOCK: By and large, they liked it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Isn't that interesting?

LOU BLOCK: If you have the time, I can read some excerpts from some of their letters that they—and some of the opinions that they offered. They liked it and they gave their own reasons. There were a few who didn't like it, because—primarily because they couldn't understand anything, the concepts. And we offered the results of this poll to Mayor La Guardia, but he discarded it completely, and the thing was as dead as a dodo. And that was that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, who were these other artists groups?

LOU BLOCK: Well, they were men who were—I don't remember their names.

[00:25:05]

There was one guy particularly who disliked Shahn; they had quarreled somewhere. And he really had it in for Shahn. I don't think he knew me at all, but he knew Shahn and disliked him intensely. I have that bound record on file bound up. [Inaudible.] Here it is. [Inaudible] record of the murals. This is the whole exchange of correspondence that we had. Here it is. Want to cut the thing off?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, I remember reading this. I went back to the press for this whole period looking for items like this. I remember this one. They just didn't understand, did they? They didn't. No, but of course, it puts the creative person in the, I guess, wholly

unwholesome position of having to deal with people who are limited in their imagination.

LOU BLOCK: Well, mural controversy at that time was almost a daily item in the paper.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Beginning with Rivera in California and his whole crusade across the country, art suddenly became front page news.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

LOU BLOCK: And murals, particularly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And it seemed unless you painted cornucopias and whatever on the wall with daisies, you're likely to get your head knocked off.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah.

LOU BLOCK: And it's—the artist is really in an indefensible spot. How on earth can you defend your own work? You talk about it. You can explain it. You can argue till you're blue in the face. But what you're up against is not necessarily apathy, but I think mostly a lack of understanding of what is intended in what you might call a functional mural, a mural that relates to the function of the area where it's placed. And that was Rivera's idea, I think. It was certainly Ben's idea. It certainly has always been my idea.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: You must relate a mural to where it is. Unless some purely decorative things is asked for by an architect or so on, and if you're interested, and you want to make the money, you do it. But if a serious thing is projected, you have to relate it to where it is.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, they have—I mean, the people who are involved administratively have a fear of what it is they don't understand. That's for sure.

LOU BLOCK: Well, that's—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: —always so.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And their timidity is reflected in their—even in the descriptions here. You know, the timidity is reflected here that you cannot break new ground with the [cross talk]—with an artistic person—

LOU BLOCK: I have included that whole—it seems to me I did include it in this whole collection of stuff, the results of that poll; I have them somewhere. Oh, a lot of this stuff is correspondence I had with prison officials around the country to get their thinking, and the Museum of Modern Art bound this up for me. And they were very kind about that. But the whole history of the project is in here, and it was mostly my correspondence. Ben was not a letter writer. He left it to me to do all the negotiating.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How did you feel when this was foreclosed?

LOU BLOCK: Ben and I? We were sick over it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I bet you were.

LOU BLOCK: Because we really had a project going there. And it was a man-sized job for anybody. Not only the space involved, but the thought, the effort, the vast amount of research.

[00:30:05]

Well, anyhow, when that thing collapsed, Ben then went on into other pastures. He continued with mural painting. And I was left with a kind of a loose end. I didn't know quite what to do. And I thought that we might place these murals elsewhere. And with the help of

the Mrs. McMahon and Harry Knight, who was then her assistant, we began to investigate other areas that might be suited for this same series of murals, since so much work had been done.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

LOU BLOCK: And we had some correspondence with the State Department of Correction. And I noticed there was a letter there, and we couldn't find a site. Or we finally went to the customs building, not the [Alexander Hamilton U.S.] Custom House but where customs cases were held—I forget what you call that building. It's on Varick Street, I think, where nine judges presided. And the presiding judge, a very old man, we contacted him with the general idea of doing murals in the different courtrooms. So we appeared before these two judges, Ben and I. And they sat in a little semicircle in one of their rooms. And Ben and I were sitting in front of them and we preached our little sermon about the need for murals and what they could serve and how instructive they could be.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And these nine men listened very attentively and said that they would write to Mrs. McMahon and let her know their decision. Well, that letter finally came, and it was really a rare opus. It said, If there's any money to be spent for decoration of this building, they would much rather it be used to repair the judges' toilets [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: To each his own—[Laughs.]

LOU BLOCK: That's as far as we got on that. Well, we abandoned the whole thing later, and then there was just nothing more to do with it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Mrs. McMahon is—I guess she was caught between crossfire from all kinds of directions.

LOU BLOCK: Yes, she—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But she was one of those in—

LOU BLOCK: She had a—well, she, at that time, was still director of the College Art Association.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: All of this was kind of extraneous and extracurricular for her. As a matter of fact, when the WPA finally started in August of 1935, the College Art Association offices down on 57th Street were our headquarters. That was it. And how much College Art [Association] business she did at that time, we don't know. [Clears throat.] But there were many artists on the Project who, through the whole length of the Project, never called it WPA; they called it College Art [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Makes sense.

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Because of this first association. We later had our own headquarters building, first on 39th Street, and later on—where was it? I can't remember—42nd Street, I think. At that time, Mrs. McMahon, who had been made the director of the WPA for New York City, began looking around for personnel to head up the different divisions. And she tagged me to head up the mural division because of this earlier encounter I'd had with her. And so she built up the division heads mostly, and I think very wisely, out of artists who were practicing artists. She didn't look around for trained administrators.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: I mean, she thought that a project like this, —whether this was actually her thinking, I've never—I don't recall that she's ever said so in so many words, but quite evidently she felt that these different divisions of easel painting, mural painting, and so on, all the way down the line to printmaking, should be headed by people who were in those

fields, and more or less prominent in those fields. Well, my own reaction to this appointment was sort of mixed, because we had no idea how long the Project would last.

[00:35:17]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And there was no sense of tenure in anything pertaining to the Project. So I figured, What the hell, I'd give one year of my life to this. And on that basis, feeling it might terminate at any moment, I began to set up a mural division. Then Burgoyne Diller, the painter who died recently, Diller and I talked it over and we approached Mrs. McMahon. And since there were so many walls available, it would be an impossible job for one person to make all of those surveys and look for people who might possibly be able to do a mural. So Diller and I became co-directors of the mural division. And we divided the city not into areas, but into types of buildings and their functions. Diller took all the schools, armories, um, airports, libraries, and so on. And I confined myself almost entirely to prisons and hospitals. And at that point, [clears throat] Diller and I both set out to make surveys to contact the necessary authorities and explain what we were doing and how we were going to operate.

Meanwhile, the easel division was set up. The print division was set up under Von Groschwitz, who is now at the Carnegie Institute. And work started on the Project in August of ‘35. Well, Diller and I both had some fantastic experiences, because the first people we had to contact were the superintendents of these various institutions. I contacted some guy, I think it was in one of the Queens General Hospitals, and we talked it over. He seemed very receptive, but he finally came out with his opinion that the only murals he would have would be little boys in Dutch shoes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: God! [Laughs.]

LOU BLOCK: Another man in one of the New York City Hospitals, when I went into his office, he had a glass shelf, a glass top on his desk, and underneath that were pictures of dogs. The whole thing was covered with little pictures of dogs, and I knew what was coming [laughs]. He wouldn't have anything but animal murals, dogs particularly. Well, this was a little disconcerting for us, you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Disconcerting! [laughs].

LOU BLOCK: Yeah. But they were the local authorities. Well, I talked it over with Diller who was having more or less similar experiences, but not so extreme.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: Librarians and other school people have different concepts. And they were also rather arbitrary in some of their opinions, but not quite as bad as little boys in Dutch shoes.

[They laugh.]

So—and we talked it over, and we decided that the best thing to do is just over everybody's head. And I don't recall what Diller did, but I went directly to Commissioner Goldwater, the Commissioner of Hospitals. Austin McCormick was entirely receptive. He never held that whole experience against us at Riker’s Island. And then he said, By all means, if you can find the sites and people to paint them, let's see what you are doing. Commissioner Goldwater was wonderful. [Birds singing.] He really laid down the law to these people in the different institutions that they were not to set the thematic material. But that would be entirely a matter of developing of sketches, developing of themes. The first submissions would be to them, but that would only be an initial submission. It would then go to the Commissioner's office, and then to the Fine Arts Commission of the City of New York. And if it weathered all those Commissions then the murals would be painted. And of course, they had to agree, and it was on that basis that we functioned.

[00:40:05]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You had the right of appeal, which you didn't have at Riker’s Island, but you had, yeah?

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Okay.

LOU BLOCK: Well, you see, that was not on WPA. The whole thing was differently set up.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

LOU BLOCK: [Clears throat.] And I don't recall how the Riker's Island thing was financed, whether it was through the Department of Correction or whether—I don't know, but I do know I used to submit those to Commissioner McCormick, and they were paid mostly for materials. And the ERB paid our salaries. What they were I don't remember.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But weren't you fortunate to run into a person with sensitivity like Goldwater?

LOU BLOCK: Yeah. Well, his son, you know, has always been active in the arts. He edited the *Magazine of Art* [inaudible], I think, for a while. And he was fine. We had troubles later on as this work progressed. The biggest problem that I had—Diller undoubtedly had the same problem—was with all the applicants who came in looking for jobs. We would look at their work. We had what we'd call an admissions committee—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: —which was composed of all the division heads. And we, each of us, would look for people that we might possibly put to work. And our anxiety was always to put them to work, because they all came off the relief roles. And if there's any indication at all of some knowledge of art, they'd be hired, and then we'd try to put them to work where they could do useful jobs, even if it was non-creative.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And later on, I'll tell you how the Index of Design was organized. Boy, that was a garbage collections deal. That was not Mrs. McMahon's province. It was another lady who was in charge of the so-called non-creative division.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mrs. Pollak?

LOU BLOCK: Mrs. Pollak. She's a very nice lady, but not too well-informed. And she permitted things to happen that shouldn't have happened, mostly through ignorance of what was involved.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: The—our problem with mural painting was to find anyone at all who might possibly show in his or her work in the handling of thematic material, in the actual physical painting of a thing, could they handle a mural? I know it's a job. And who did they study with, and so on? I really—we really poked as close as we could because here are all these walls waiting. And we need the personnel to do them. Well, we finally came up with a group of people who are more or less qualified. And it meant for me and for Diller, each of us, constant drilling and instruction for these people and constant surveillance of what they were doing, how they approach their work, to teach them how to make a sketch, how to prepare their murals for submission, to make a detail out of the whole thing, painted as they would the whole thing, and so on. It is almost a school master's, art teacher's job, but we had to do it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And it was, of course, a fascinating experience for all of us, too. It was the first teaching that actually that I've ever done. I'd never taught painting. And some of them were misses; a few were not too bad. And then we hit a few good ones. And then we managed—when they opened the employment to what they called the quota for non-relief, we were able to pull in some people who were really solid guys like Kuniyoshi, Emilio Amero, and others who had had some mural experience. And they helped on this general problem. But for me, it was a matter of going round and round and round to all the hospitals and the studios constantly to help criticize what was going on. And work on the walls finally was started. And we found another gimmick. It was a gimmick, truthfully.

[00:45:00]

Many people wanted to get into the mural division, and the artists were clamoring for assistants, these so-called master artists that were designing the murals. So depending on the size of that job, we would allow two, or three or four assistants. Moses Soyer, who was painting in this hospital with the guy who wanted the little boys in Dutch shoes, had quite a number of panels to do and he had 20 assistants [laughs]. What they all did, we never knew. Well, we truthfully didn't care. These people were on the job. They were apparently working, and that was it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: We had to do that. Because if we had tightened up on what each person should do, we would have had half the employment that we had, and the whole sense of this program was to employ anyone who was in any way qualified and try to keep them busy. The same thing happened in the easel division. They would be given seven weeks to execute a mural. Twenty-three dollars a week, that was what they could expect for an easel painting. And many of these guys would get their assignment and would not show up until the seven weeks were finished. Well, there's some problem about that. Should they report in every week and so on? And I don't think it was ever really resolved. Because many of the artists, particularly in summer, lived up in Woodstock and other places. And to have them come in every week would've been a hardship for them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: So we had to take it on faith that they would put in the seven weeks painting their murals, and their checks would be mailed to them. There were some problems arose out of that method. We discovered, for example, that some guys were just unloading old canvases on us—snide tricks like that. And we were able to, through administrative supervision, we were able to get around that problem. And by and large, I think that the amount of work allocated—and you still see a lot of it around the country, prints and paintings in different government offices, civic offices, all over the place, people who are eligible for—to have work allocated. I ran across some recently down here at the University of Kentucky, the work allocated from the New York Project. I've seen some of it in Arizona and New Mexico hanging in city offices. So by and large, I think that the program served its purpose. And it certainly did a terrific job for the young people involved.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. When a wall was selected in a hospital, and you finally got a marriage with an artist and that wall, how much discretion did the artist have?

LOU BLOCK: You mean—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know, idea, content.

LOU BLOCK: And handling?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: We left it pretty much to the individual. He had to prove his own case.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And he had a long way to go to prove it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: All these approvals that he needed. But we never questioned their approach. We never questioned their researching. We assumed that there were these adults. And that's their job. If they ran into problems, our job was to help to the extent that we could. But we never interfered—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: —actually with their approach, particularly their manner of painting. The same thing with the case in sculpture, for example. The—what was his name? An Italian was head of the sculpture division for a long time. He never interfered with their approach, so you had all styles of work in all the divisions.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And that was all to the good. I mean, we were not censors in any things.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Didn't want to be. And Mrs. McMahon left it to each of us pretty much to establish such policies. And Edward, I think, the—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, what effect did the Washington—the center have in the—

LOU BLOCK: Not too much. We didn't say too much of the people from Washington. They would come up occasionally. Eddie Cahill would come up occasionally. Several of the people from his office would drift in and out.

[00:50:01]

But they never actually interfered, unless there were problems. And, of course, the most vexatious problems always were each year when it came time for a new budget in Washington. We'd get orders to cut off so many heads, you know. And that was quite a bit—with strikes, picketing, and all the works. Sometimes it got pretty serious, or rather grim, where the artists, you see, curious—this is another thing that grew out of the art project, which I think was the first in our country. But the artist having a single employer, the government, decided that they could ask for bargaining rights and organize a union. So the Artists' Union was organized with the grievance committees and the whole organizational process. And that grievance committee, whoever would be the head, would come up and meet with us or Mrs. McMahon, depending on what the exact grievance was. For example, I was called on the mat one day for something which I thought was very funny. A fellow named Phil Reisman was doing some murals somewhere in egg tempera, and Phil stammered a lot, a wonderful guy. He came into the office and his grievance was he wanted to know who the hell is going to pay for the eggs.

[They laugh.]

Some grievances, of course, were more serious. And there were questions of people being fired, and why don't we hire more. And it was that kind of a situation. And the pressures became most acute at the time of—when we were notified by Washington we would have to dismiss a certain number of people; that really raised the hackles on everybody's neck. We were opposed to this [inaudible] firing [inaudible] we had to confirm.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: The worst occasion was when we were ordered arbitrarily to dismiss 500 people and we had 2,500 of them on payroll. And that was half of the national quota., There were 2,500 elsewhere, between New York City, we had 2,500. And to lop off 500 was rough.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: But we all met, and Mrs. McMahon gave us our orders. The 14 supervisors met in somebody's house, and we decided we're not going to do it. But we didn't know of any method by which we could fire 500 people, unless we just picked the heads out of a—picked the names out of a hat. So we dropped the whole thing back in Mrs. McMahon's lap, and said, If you have to do it, you do it; we don't want to. And she threatened us with court martial and death by shooting and everything else, but we would not do it. We flatly refused to do it. And we didn't do it. She finally had to do it. And the following year, I think it was, we had the same problem. And this time, the artists were on 39th Street at that time. The artists staged their big sit-in. And the man who was the New York administrator of WPA made a tragic error. He called the cops, which he shouldn't have done. Actually, they had no business there; it was federal property. But the New York cops didn't like the artists because they'd become a bit of a nuisance with their parades, and their chanting, and picketing in front of the building, and the cops were not too merciful. We all had to leave the building, and we congregated in a bar to await developments. And finally, Mrs. McMahon deputized me to go back to the building and see what was going on, and it was carnage. But the artists were down; when the cops came in, the artists all got down in one corner. There are 200-odd people in that group. And all the young men locked arms and made a semicircle around the girls who are in the back.

[00:55:05]

And the cops, to get at them, wrecked the place. The artists didn't do any damage. I'll take my oath on it; it was the police who wrecked the joint, turning over desks and smashing typewriters to get at these people. And it was a real brawl. They beat these young people unmercifully.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And a lot of them were arrested. One cop had his thumb nearly bitten off by one of these young women. But they really gave them a beating. I was terribly sick by that whole thing. And I went back and visit McMahon. I said, I'm getting the hell out of this thing. This is not my kind of a job. If it turns to this, the hell with it. [Clears throat.] And we were all terribly upset. Mrs. McMahon, who, of course, was a already a trained administrator, could take these things in stride. She could see them objectively, and we couldn't.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: We got over that hurdle. We finally—they were all bailed out. I hustled around. And there was some kind of a fund that I'd heard about that was established for just such occasions. But I didn't know what it was and how to go about it. And finally—Ralph—Hugo Gellert, at the studio. [. . . –Ed.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, the Civil Liberties Union had a—not the Civil Liberties Union, but the—it was the Garland Fund. Some farmer in Massachusetts had left his son several million dollars. And he thought it would be corrupted. So without ever receiving it, he turned it into a foundation. Well, that supported things like the early Viking Press, the publication of a foreign psychoanalytic studies in America, all kinds of crazy things, but good things, you know, wild things—not wild, growing point things, stimulating things. And one of it was a bail bond.

[Phone rings.]

LOU BLOCK: Excuse me.

[Audio breaks.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's just possible that the Garland Fund was available as a—

LOU BLOCK: I never did know what it was.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: Hugo Gellert, he found somebody else that night. It was in the middle of the night; we had to rouse him out of bed. And he knew that there was some way of handling this, and—but we had no contacts or any direct leads other than these people that we knew might possibly know their way around. Well, it worked.

The following year, and I think this was the time that we refused to follow the orders, we were then in another building. I think it was on East 42nd Street. I'm not sure of the address. The artists marched in again and occupied the premises. And it was a hot night in July, blistering hot. These kids crowded up in there. And there were huge windows, bigger than this, further down the street. And it was so hot that a lot of them were sitting on the ledge of the window inside. I was terrified because if the cops had been called again, the pressure of the people in there—there were several hundred—would have knocked those kids right out the window. At this time, they ignored the local administration entirely , and they got in touch with Washington. And Washington took over. They sent—immediately sent [siren wails in distance] I think a fellow named Niles flew up to New York. And he negotiated the whole thing, promising that nobody would be fired if they'd leave the building. And the next day 500 were fired. [Inaudible.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, how does Colonel Somervell figure in this as an image? Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Well, he was—he came after the fellow who ordered the police into 39th Street, if I'm correct with my—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Was that Harold Stein? No?

[01:00:01]

LOU BLOCK: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Old Iron Pants—what's his name?

LOU BLOCK: Stein, I don't know at all. What the hell is his—Englehorn.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Englehorn.

LOU BLOCK: Englehorn. He was the guy who lost his head and called the cops.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Somervell —he was a very arbitrary man also. He also went pretty much by the book. His main concern, apparently, was locating all the Reds on the Project. He seemed more interested in that than anything else. And of course, at that time, if you may recall, it wasn't quite the stigmata that it is today. Back in the '30s, there were so many people who were either in or very sympathetic without really knowing what it was all about.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Popular front was in the air.

LOU BLOCK: That's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The Scottsboro boys.

LOU BLOCK: And not only that but the—those of us who were on the Project and saw these things going on knew perfectly well through close contact with all of them whether they were or weren't communist. We didn't care because we knew that, by and large, they couldn't overthrow a house of cards.

[They laugh.]

LOU BLOCK: So we weren't too much distressed about it. As a matter of fact, very often, we come in our offices in the morning and find all kinds of Red literature on our desks, being distributed by some mysterious agents. And it would go right into the wastebasket. We wouldn't think too much about it, because it was not our job. We were not particularly interested in who they were, what they were doing. Our job was simply to see that their jobs were done. And we were very much criticized for that, of course. All the division heads were ultimately accused of being Reds and so on. And I have somewhere in my files, letters which were sent to Harry Hopkins complaining that I or somebody else had acted arbitrarily, or we were Reds and so on. These things, of course, were all checked out very carefully by the WPA investigating people. They had their own agency. And I was called up on the mat several times as recently as 1943, when I was taking a job with the government again. And the day after I applied, the WPA guy got on my tail. But I had already been cleared by Naval Intelligence for a job I was to do in the Merchant Marines. And I showed him a letter of clearance. And he looked close at this and he closed up my dossier. I asked to take a look at it. I was very curious to know, how did it get so fat?

[They laugh.]

LOU BLOCK: Well, as I anticipated, there was a whole sheet of letters, mostly from people who, for their own good reasons, decided that I was a Red. Now, all of us had that same experience, right clear up to Mrs. McMahon. It was not unique. But I can understand why they checked it all out because that was their job, the WPA investigating people. And it was another thing that you had to take as being part of the times—Because these things that happened during that whole interval, the activities for the Artists' Union to me were an extraordinary manifestation, sort of a first in this country. The first demonstration that the artists had was before WPA; it was also called the—it was organized by a group who demanded of the city some building that could be used as a municipal art gallery.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mrs. Breckinridge.

LOU BLOCK: Mrs. Breckinridge. Well, she was the one who was appointed to it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But for the visual arts, she was blind.

LOU BLOCK: Well, let me tell you what happened.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.]

LOU BLOCK: The artists got together, and they decided the best way to make that petition to the mayor was to have a little parade [cat meows]. This was new. They had their headquarters on 18th Street. And they were mobilized and they were advised that each person bring with him or her a small work of art, either a small painting or a small sculpture or drawing. So that when they march from 18th Street to City Hall, people would know who they are [laughs].

[01:05:09]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

LOU BLOCK: And they made a big, big circle down there at the Plaza of City Hall, each one with this little piece of work. And the council went in. And La Guardia said, Yes, you can have a building on 53rd Street. But he didn't say whether they were building a subway at that time; Any approach to the building was impossible. And Mrs. Breckinridge was made head of [inaudible].

[Phone rings.]

[Audio break.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, gosh.

LOU BLOCK: I did mine last week.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, did you?

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, this was a—this was the Artists' Union, wasn't it?

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And Stuart Davis, Arshile Gorky—

LOU BLOCK: No, that came later. That story, that came before. In 19—I think I forget the exact year. I think it was 1937 that Stuart Davis and a few others organized what they call the American Artists' Congress.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. But he was—in this early parade where they announced the—what is it—where they announced the parade from 18th Street, they announced it publicly. First, they had a permit to parade, then it was disallowed. We—you know, the whole notion of artists, independent cussed creatures that—you know, individuals banding together for a purpose like a museum to be run by artists, a municipal museum to be run by artists. Yeah, just an incredible—you—never would have occurred but for these crazy factors that happened in New York at this time where they had an interest in what they were doing.

LOU BLOCK: Well, it was part of that whole pattern of kind of artists suddenly reaching a maturity that they'd never had when they were just working quietly in their own studios.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: For the first time, they tried to get together. First, the Artists' Congress, the Artists' Union, and there were other names, the Artists League of America, and many names. The great deal of dissension, a great deal of very stupid image of political shenanigans, I felt at the time. This ultimately split them up. The Congress went on the rocks when Russia invaded Poland and made that pact with Hitler. It was a terrific rift immediately in the Artists' Congress. Boy, did they fight and it practically wrecked the Artists' Congress—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: —and repercussions of that and similar pro-Russian, pro-Nazi, pro-anybody, for some reason, began to affect the business. The war in Spain had its effect. And quite a few of us, as a matter of fact, left the project and went to Spain to fight. Some didn't come back.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: It's a tragic business. I wouldn't call that political maturity. I think it was, again, evidence—a sign of the times. Because by and large, all of these people, as far as I know, have long since matured enough to know that it was kind of an infantile gesture to have made. But it couldn't possibly relate to their understanding of their work, their own personal philosophy in painting.

[Cross talk.]

LOU BLOCK: But we had a whole rash at that time of what they call socially conscious painting. A lot of it would appear on the Project. And always very immature. Cops beating strikers over the head, and all of this very delicate and sensitive portrayal of the social scene [laughs]. The Artists' Union had an exhibition in its own headquarters. And it was the most ridiculous performance I've ever seen in my life. It was—really, in a sense, it was a tragedy. They made the mistake of inviting Alden Jewell, who was an art critic at the *Times*.

And a young fellow named Cook Glassgold, who was a curator at the Whitney Museum, to come and comment on the work. We had about 300 paintings up on the wall, and all of these as closely huddled as they could and in one layer over another so that you couldn't really—it looked like a mosaic.

[01:10:16]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.]

LOU BLOCK: You couldn't see anything [laughs]. But that was the way the artists decided to hang their show. Jewell came and "Cookie" Glassgold showed up. And they just took that thing to pieces. They were merciless, particularly Glassgold who really should've known better. That was the first Union showing, as I recall and another and another; the artist equity since has had a number of exhibitions, but the Congress never attempted one that I know of, nor did the Artists' Union again attempted an exhibition. Alden Jewell, I think, in his column at that time was quite kind to the Projects. Except for the controversies and the disturbances that were created during the life of the Project, I think by and large the press was very favorable to this whole thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Except the *Mirror*?

LOU BLOCK: Yeah, I don't—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The Hearst's *Mirror* had a Sunday supplement about the—what's the favorite phrase—boondoggling of American Art, et cetera, et cetera.

LOU BLOCK: Well, they were just reflecting some of the reactionary attitudes in Congress.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Oh, sure. And even their offices were invaded by Davis, among others. A group that went up to see the fellow who was writing these series of articles. So what I think is a sign of the times is the investment in a vested interest in their work and in the Project, you know, which made them defenders in advance, almost to the embarrassment of the administrators. Audrey McMahon must have been in between Colonel Somervell and his like on one hand, and these exasperating collectivities of artists who were making their own demands on the other hand.

LOU BLOCK: I'm trying to recall something, which was very pertinent to whole administration, that sometime along the line, it was changed from being called the Federal Art Project to Federal Project [Number] One. I believe, at that time, we were relieved with the local administration—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: —and directly administered by Washington. That was when we saw more of Eddie Cahill and his crowd. That made a considerable difference, I believe, in the whole nature of administration. How much would simmer down to us on Project level? It's hard to

say. We never—were too much concerned with the national administration and the Project. We had too much to do there on our own. And Mrs. McMahon, of course, and her immediate staff were those who were in direct contact with Washington and whenever necessary would join correspondence and so on. I became more involved when they moved me to the Index of Design. There I really got into—because that was a national project. I was more in contact with the national situation. That was 1937.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How did this come about?

LOU BLOCK: Well, I started to tell you a little bit about Mrs. Pollock and her doings. When the Index of Design was set up, Ruth Reeves had a great deal to do with originating the project. But she was denied actual participation at first.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How come?

LOU BLOCK: I have never known the whole story, though some business with Ruth and some others around, and Ruth was very forceful woman. She was a little bit of a dipsomaniac and I think they generally put her down as being a sort of a crackpot, which she wasn't at all. She was really a brilliant, brilliant, woman and a great artist. But personalities, for some reason, crept into this picture an awful lot, particularly among young the women, Audrey McMahon, Mrs. Pollock, Mrs. Breckinridge, all these ladies somehow didn't get along [laughs].

[01:15:04]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, I talked with Mrs. McMahon, and she's a powerhouse.

LOU BLOCK: Oh, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. So it was understandable.

LOU BLOCK: Well, Mrs. Pollock was heading up the Index. And somewhere along the line, that decision was made that all artists who couldn't be employed on the creative division should be thrown into the Index. No one knew, at that time, quiet what the Index was supposed to do except—I know I was in the same building with them and had absolutely no knowledge. I knew the Index was a project that all the commercial artists, and the poor hacks, and poor students were being employed on the Index. And we didn't know what the hell they were doing there.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: We were so busy with our own concerns. And since nobody seemed to be unhappy about it and a lot of artists were being employed, we figured, well, it must be something all right. But then something happened nationally, which immediately had repercussions in New York. The Boston Projects were making magnificent renderings.

You've probably seen them in Washington. And other areas of the country, we're doing these wonderful renderings of furniture and all the things, a whole list of things. Eddie came to New York, and he just raised hell, What's happened here? You have 125 artists employed and they're not producing anything. Whatever they have produced is so far below the national level that they could never be part of one collection. And he decided to chuck the whole works and kill the New York City Index, which would have meant a lot of jobs. Mrs. McMahon was very much upset about it. And why she called on me, I will never know. But she said, Lou, I want you to work with Eddie. Go through every plate that's ever been made on the Index. Survey every artist on the Index, who he is, what he is, how competent he is. And beyond that, set up some kind of administrative control where the artist can be trained to work up to the New England level. I have that whole story here. I re-read it this morning and it's quite a thing.

Eddie came to New York. We worked all night going through the accumulated files, and they were pretty bad. And he was all set to kill the Project. Well, I pleaded with him and said, Why don't you consider for a little while and let's see what Mrs. McMahon has in mind. And what she had in mind was to move me from the mural division to head up the Index. Well, that started a fight, because the people who were already there, the administrators, they had it set up differently than anything else on the Project. They had their specialists who were supervisors, one for glass, one for furniture, one for this, one for that, people who are

antiquarians and really knew their fields.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: But they were as competent as my left hind leg to administer a reduction Project with—had no idea of quality or standards to be established. They knew what was happening elsewhere. But it didn't seem to concern us very much. Nothing even approximating that quality was being done in New York. And I felt the fault laid primarily there with these people, that they should be confined to finding these objects, locating them, identifying them. And that was their job at all the different museums, private collections, wherever they were. And everything was open for them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: That was to be their job. Mrs. Scott, who was the head of the Project who was also a researcher, primarily. And she was totally indifferent to the quality of work. And Mrs. Pollock, apparently, just didn't know what was going on, as far as I can gather. She left the Project shortly after that and Mrs. McMahon took over the whole work.

[01:20:00]

She put me in charge of the Index for New York City, New York State, and New Jersey. There, I was left [inaudible] the blind. You know, where do you start? So I carried through these surveys. And Eddie said, he'd give me a year to bring that New York Project up to the level of the rest of the country. So there again, it was a matter of training to take these young people, most of whom were just barely able to hold a brush correctly, you know, and know which end of the brush to use. To have them begin to produce renderings, which would be in any way comparable to what the—New England really set the pattern, I think. And Dick Morrison did the job up there. I never knew how large his group was, how many artists they employed in New England. But they certainly—I think the New England plates are magnificent. Really beautiful thing.

Well, most of these plates were done in watercolor. It's a very difficult medium to begin with. And for the absolute finesse of detail of rendering, of textures, of color, and all the rest, it was a fantastic job. And particularly difficult for these very, very mediocre young people. So we set up training projects. And I began to bring in anyone I could think of who worked in comparable fields. And one young lady who was most helpful, and she spent a lot of time with me. She'd come every time I called her to lecture the students and demonstrate for them how to handle this medium—was a young woman employed in the Pathology Department at Bellevue Hospital—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh.

LOU BLOCK: —a medical artist. Now the techniques—I knew this, because I—years ago with—in World War I, I did some medical art. So I wasn't unfamiliar with what was involved.

But this girl, Ms. Lorenz [ph], Mary Lorenz is one of the best in the country. And Mary would come any time I'd call her. And she would show how you accomplish texture, color, and all the rest that was involved. And it's an identical problem. What she had to do is, in a sense, a—more of a technical thing. She had to understand what the surgeon was doing when she was making her drawings. All these people have to do is face an object and make a faithful rendering of it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: She taught them the techniques. We all helped on this. I even pulled in some of the artists from the creative divisions to demonstrate. Phil Guston did Index rendering for me. I can't recall who others, but they were very helpful on this whole thing. Because they knew as I knew that unless we could pull that thing up, there'll be several hundred jobs go by the board. So then I was very fortunate. The young man who wanted in one day and asked for a job and he showed me some drawings that he had done. And he was very much interested in Victorian material. And he showed me some renderings that he'd made of Victorian furniture, Victorian costume, and so on and done exactly as they should be done. I can't remember his name or anything about him. But on the basis of this applicant, I called Eddie and said, Can we extend the Project to include Victorian? Because it went beyond 1875. And I explained to him what I had and what this boy can do. He said, By all means. So

I got him on the Project and immediately made him a supervisor to work with me with the others and at the same time, seek out his own Victorian material and make renderings. And among the things that he did were the old, elevated railway station [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hmm.

LOU BLOCK: The architecture of them so—and he found other things. Another thing that he did was make very fascinating renderings; whether they're still in Washington, I have no idea. But he did the dressing rooms of people like Lillian Russell and others of that vintage and Victorian costumes. He made quite a contribution all by himself. He was the Victorian project [laughs]. Well, by the end of the year, we were producing plates. And life was serene from there on out. But that was quite an arduous job to bring all these young people up to a point of being really employable on a project of that nature. And I believe that ultimately, the New York contribution was nothing to be ashamed of.

[01:25:38]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm. I think this is the [clears throat]—what we've indicated so far is that in the—certainly, in the mural field and the easel field, discretion was local, since each project had to tailor-make whatever it was doing to the local personnel. But the Index of American Design is a departure from this because it becomes, in a way, the national project of the Federal Project Number One or the Federal Art Project. Now, I think ultimately, Glassgold went to Washington to sort of—

LOU BLOCK: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —be a clearinghouse of—

[Cross talk.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —because there was competition between the discovered objects. There might be duplications, needless duplication, this kind of thing.

LOU BLOCK: As Cookie went to Washington, that's true. He worked with me in New York for a while. As a matter of fact, when I left the Index to go to the National Youth Administration, Cookie took over the Index of Design as the New York administrator. When he went to Washington, I don't recall.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

LOU BLOCK: I do know he was there for a while.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: There's another name that—

LOU BLOCK: Lincoln Rothschild.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: He was with me on the Index. When he left there [clears throat], he became a —I think he went to teaching somewhere in some small college. And what's become of then since, I have no idea.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

LOU BLOCK: So I've been away from New York since 1951. I came here to get married and teach at the university. And then my contact with New York has become more and more tenuous as time goes on. I go there as frequently as I can, and occasionally saw other people I know that drift down here on teaching jobs in this area. And I usually see them. All old project people [laughs], without exception there.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

LOU BLOCK: And then up in Provincetown, I see a lot of the guys. Mark Rothko was there every summer, Milton Avery, Han Grews [ph], and bunch of the guys that are up there every summer. So I see them there. One thing that pleases me very much is that I never lost being one of the bosses on WPA. I never lost a goodwill. It pleases me a lot; we get along fine [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, there was a time, you know, the distinctions that could be drawn between a shop foreman, you know, and workers on the production line at the Ford plant was reflected in the New York between workers and supervisors.

LOU BLOCK: I've dug out some things that you may want to see of that vintage, some of my photographs done at the time. These are some of the project pictures done on demonstrations. Now, those are all Project workers. Their parades of that consequence where they would go to making these papier-mâché and things and banners, you know, usually their section of the annual May Day parade. They—all the lively arts had their own sections. Theater had a section, and painters had a section and so on—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah

LOU BLOCK: —and actors.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In the May Day parade?

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. It's very interesting, isn't it? Did you take these?

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You took them.

LOU BLOCK: And these are very poor prints. As a matter of fact, the—there about 30 of those are included in my collection of pictures which are now being considered at *the American Heritage Magazine*. They have them all up there plus many other pictures made around New York during the Depression.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: I have quite a file.

[01:30:07]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: These are incredible, aren't they? It's like a safety valve on the main stem, isn't it?

LOU BLOCK: Oh, yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Isn't it?

LOU BLOCK: I've never gotten over wondering if the—see none of that exists today. The Artist Equity is a very inept organization, which has never been able to carry out its formulated program. They stress that it's non-political, non-cultural, non-anything but all economic. In other words, the Artist Equity is supposedly to help solve the economic problems of the artists, but they don't do it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: There was a time in New York on the East Side where you could go into tea shops and spend half the night tearing society down, the rest of the night building it back up. And you'd hear arguments all the way from anarchism—you know, it either works.

LOU BLOCK: Oh, the old Cafe Royal on 2nd Avenue.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Wonderful.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This kind of thing.

LOU BLOCK: I heard recently, it's no longer there. That made me unhappy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But in the '30s, they were pushed down in the streets like this.

LOU BLOCK: That's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They had their arguments in a wholly different way because—well, the

corner that want—that was warm and familiar and one's understanding, the local tea house became the city of New York.

LOU BLOCK: Yes, that's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And there were many more things involved, like the identification with fellow artists who had comparable problems. It's also implicit in the NRA when they brought manufacturers from all over the country to Washington where they could suddenly say, Joe, you're having the same problem in East St. Louis that I'm having up in—you know.

LOU BLOCK: There's an NRA picture in there somewhere, I think.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, you remember the early parades, the Blue Eagle parade.

LOU BLOCK: Sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So in a very strong sense, the coffeehouse, the teahouse moved out into the street and became a much more fluid thing. It had political overtones. It had even ethnic overtones in the sense of identifiable groups that got involved. And this was the age of—this was the age—one of the big problems we were trying to decide and solve in the '30s was whether men could, in fact, organize. That wasn't settled till 1937 by the Supreme Court. So that was all up for grabs in this sense. What intrigues me about the artists organization is the fact that they are the first people on record warning against the ill winds in Germany and Italy. You know, the anticipation thing.

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I think it was an invitation to some Vienna—to American artists, to exhibit pictures in Vienna for some reason. It escapes me at the moment. So they had a meeting, I think, of the Artists' Union. And they took a position on that specific thing with reference to Hitler and Mussolini.

LOU BLOCK: They took positions on everything back in those days—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.]

LOU BLOCK: —they were very, very socially conscious, politically conscious. But unhappily, I think still in a very immature fashion. I'm as non-political as I could be, but I'd love—to the extent that I understand it, to know what's going on—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: —with some degree of appreciation, some degree of understanding. And what I saw back in those days always struck me as being slightly immature, slightly infantile. Because these people actually, as a group, were unable to act. There was nothing cohesive in this. Because the least little thing would shake these organizations and shatter them immediately, like the Artists' Congress went to pot over this invasion of Poland. Suddenly, things would happen. And even local issues, the divisions in the Union policies towards the projects. And they'd battle each other to no end. Rene d'Harnoncourt, when the Artist Equity was first organized, they had a meeting at the Museum of Modern Art.

[01:35:01]

And a lot of people, who wished this new organization well, came and talked. Rene d'Hanoncourt was one of them. There were others, distinguished people in the field, who welcomed what was substantially a new grouping and a more substantial grouping, presumably better organized grouping of the artists, started out with a flourish, started out with a bang. Everybody signed up. We all became members with great enthusiasm because we knew from the prior history of these artists organizations that they were not cohesive—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: —that they had no basic organizational premise. The basic reason for the Artists' Union was a single employer. They could argue for bargaining rights and so on. But here after all that was said and done with the new organization [clears throat], organized [clears throat] more or less along the lines of heavily active equity but not in any sense a union. Professional grouping, primarily. Well, here again, it fell apart. It was never able to

carry out its announced program.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: So my faith in it was rather, you know—these were two groups of people watching—

[Cross talk.]

LOU BLOCK: —the May Day parade.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But these are marvelous pictures.

LOU BLOCK: [Laughs.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I just saw a film for the second time, a motion picture, Jules Dassin's *He Who Must Die* which is on the Island of Crete with local people and studies of the faces are just fantastic, you know. Look at that thing. Jesus, that's a priceless thing, isn't it? [Laughs.] But don't you think the—

LOU BLOCK: It's Ben Shahn.—no, it's another one. Another parade that's Ben Shahn with his camera.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But don't you think that the—this cauldron that boiled up in New York City, you know, was symptomatic of the period generally?

LOU BLOCK: Oh, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: After all, the country was high center. No question about that. And all kinds of idea came up. It's almost as though the fruitfulness of American people is related to the emptiness of their wallets in a way because you get a multiplicity of ideas as to what to do. They put rude hands on the body politic to find out what makes it tick, you know, the course of which they stumped for this; they stumped for that. It's almost—what's in the air? This kind of almost mutually exclusive views, sometimes. So you know, you can have a Stuart Davis as he said, [imitating Stuart Davis] walking around with a big folder under his arms attending meeting after meeting after meeting.

LOU BLOCK: We had a guy here recently, Carl Holty.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: He taught here for two years. He is now at the Brooklyn College. He and Stuart Davis are very close to each other. And he could imitate Stuart. He could imitate anybody. The guy's fantastic. You should meet Carl Holty when you go back to New York.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Fabulous character.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, you know, and interestingly enough, his work was untouched by this.

LOU BLOCK: Stuart's a pro. He was too mature in his own field. I mean, he—well, he, of course, never resorted to the business of introducing his political thinking into his work. There's no need for it because his work has—could speak for itself.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Very few of the artists, unfortunately, have that level of competence. They weren't mature enough.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Hugo Gellert, for example. He is a very competent guy, but everything that he did was so class conscious. Bill Gropper is another, sort of smacks you in the eye. So what, you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: You can't deny that competence, but you certainly can deny the over emphasis on trying to pound an idea across over and over and over again and not go anywhere.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. He has—there's no question about it. For example, the Artists' Union published a paper.

[01:40:00]

LOU BLOCK: Yeah, upfront.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. And Hugo Gellert is there represented with cartoons as is Gropper. And—well, this is—this is a flame. It's an overcharged idea. No question about that. But it's—you know, it's a whirling flame. I don't think he's ever been able to get out of it either in his thinking. These are marvelous.

LOU BLOCK: Here's another group that I dug out this morning. And I'm very sad about one thing. The negatives, which were close to 30 years old, all deteriorated. So that what exists today is it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: These are marvelous. What are you going to do with these, ultimately?

LOU BLOCK: Well, I don't know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But this is a part of a huge—oh yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Arshile Gorky at one of the demonstrations.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Gosh. He's a strange fellow, isn't he? Do you know him well?

LOU BLOCK: Yes, I knew him very well.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Great. A strange fellow—pulled and tugged in 101 directions.

LOU BLOCK: Well, he made a strange marriage because he married the daughter of an admiral of all things, and he finally committed suicide, as you remember.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Do you know that they—and they worked the airport mural?

LOU BLOCK: Yeah. I had a critique from a Newark Ledger somewhere. That's one of our artists at work. There's something else about the mural project. You know, if you'll put those aside for a minute—that I just thought about it. This business of approvals—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: —and getting approvals. It sounded like a complicated thing. By and large the superintendent would bypass them since they've been overruled once [laughs]. They decided to leave it somewhere else and introduce itself basically to a—any department hospitals, particularly, to Dr. Goldwater and then later the Fine Arts Commission. We had on the Fine Arts Commission, as far as murals were concerned, an architect and a very distinguished mural painter of the old vintage. What the hell is his name? I should know it because I knew him very well. Ernest Peixotto.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Peixotto?

LOU BLOCK: Yeah. He was on—and a lot of these young artists who were reaching into some of the new areas of influence in painting. Fellows like Walter Quirt and others who were fairly mature painters when they came on the Project. And they weren't fumbling at all. The classic business of getting an approval was Walter Quirt's mural for the doctors and nurses lecture in the psychiatric division at Bellevue Hospital. As Simon showed it to us, he wanted to do it. And he chose as his theme the history of psychiatry—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: —just a mere trifle [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Staggering theme.

LOU BLOCK: Well, how he conducted his research, what he premised it on, what his starting point was, I don't know. But knowing Quirt and having a great respect for him as a person, I decided to let him work it out himself. He obviously wasn't looking for help, didn't want any, and might even have resented it. So I left him strictly alone. He brought in a series of sketches to the office one day, and I was almost thrown out of my chair. I'd never seen anything quite like it. The mural—he devised his own symbol and organized his project to show whatever it was he wanted to demonstrate. I think he did it quite convincingly. But it was not abstract in its handling. Everything is quite real. But the way he organized these things is almost surrealistic.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[01:45:22]

LOU BLOCK: I liked it very much. I was tremendously impressed by this thing. It was one of the really good solid jobs ever brought in. There was misgivings. I took it to Dr. Karl Bouman [ph] who was, at that time, head of the psychiatric division at Bellevue. I was completely amazed. He read those symbols as though they'd been written out for him. He was very excited just as I was by this thing. And he gave every kind of approval. But I still had misgivings about what comes next. I took it to Dr. Goldwater and he sidestepped it completely. So Dr. Bouman knows what this is all about. I'll go along with him [laughs]. Then I took it to the Art Commission. And Peixotto looked at these things and he obviously didn't know what it was all about. And I told him, these are not ever to be seen by the public. These are to be in a doctors' or nurses' lecture room and will be seen only by people who are professionally involved in the subject material of these murals. And apparently that was the argument he wanted to hear, and the Commission approved them.

And Shorty [ph] painted them. Shortly after he began to work on these things, he had a mental crackup. He was a very little man, Shorty Quirt, and his wife, Martha, was very tall. And finally Will Friedman [ph], who is a very close friend of the Quirts called me at home one night and said, Shorty is very sick. Can you come down to his house with me? And they lived on Union Square. I went down and it was really a pathetic thing. He had reverted to some kind of infantilism. When we came, he was dressed in this long underwear with a little patch behind, you know. And he had to go to the can, and Martha had to take him by the hand, just like a baby, and lead him to the potty and bring him back. And that was his behavior. That was very upsetting as you can imagine.

And I called Dr. Bouman. I also called Dr. George Bayer [ph], a psychiatrist in New York, and explained to him what was happening. And they immediately put him in this hospital where he was going to have his mural. They kept him there. And apparently the diagnosis, which was never too clear for me, was that he had been suffering from ulcers for a long time. And this constant pain, among other things, is what had set him off. Dr. Bayer moved him to Mount Sinai Hospital and made a more thorough examination and found out there were no ulcers at all, but Shorty insisted he had ulcers.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: Now, this may or may not be true. But the story, as I got, was they went through a whole business of a mock operation on Shorty. And he's been well ever since. But for a while there, it was a pathetic thing to see this poor guy just become a baby.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Well, he finished the murals and they were installed. And that was the end of that. Several years ago, I was in New York, about five or six years ago, and I thought I'd take a look and see what is still around of the WPA murals. And I went to some of the institutions. The Amara mural is still in the lobby of Bellevue. At least they were then, pretty badly scored; they were frescoes, and people had been scratching things on them. And the upper floors in the occupational therapy room, the murals are still up as far as I know. On the way out through the out clinic—outpatient clinic, I went through the basement. And Shorty's mural was standing in the corner upside down against the wall.

[01:50:00]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, no.

LOU BLOCK: Yeah. And for all I know, it's still there. But that was one instance of getting approvals. On other occasions where I had doubts about making a submission or try to jump the gun a little bit, to help the artist, I'd get some authority of the Hospital Department or the Prison Department to come by to his studio. And they were very cooperative. And one fellow by the name Léon Hartl [ph] was doing a mural for a hospital. And he had really lost contact with his work somewhere along the line; it was getting very confused, overpainted, and in a pretty bad shape. And I had someone come and looked at—don't know who it was—to talk to this young man. And it was decided that—immediately but I had a letter later that said that the mural would not be accepted. I had to let him know. And he had a complete breakdown. We had other problems, more or less similar problems. See, these young people came to the Project from God knows where—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm.

LOU BLOCK: —and what kind of background. And they were hungry; they were ill clothed; they were bitterly frustrated in their own—not only in their work, but generally speaking, they were young people who just had lost their direction. So the incidence of mental crackup wasn't rare on the project. I assigned a young man, whose name I can't recall, to be an assistant on one of the projects in the psychiatric division at Bellevue. I had many projects going there. And he was a strange young man but quite talented. He drew beautifully. And in all innocence, I had an opening for him on one of these projects, so I put him in there. And one day on my usual round to the hospitals to watch the progress of work, this lad came over to me standing behind me and said, They're all after me. You know, and I didn't know who it was. I turned around and said, Who's after you? You know, Well, anyhow, he flipped his lid. Well, I got in touch with his parents and they took over from there.

And another boy, and I can't recall his name, who lived down in a village somewhere, he went nuts. It was that kind of a situation where you had to be not only the administrator, but to the extent that you could be admitted into their confidence, to be an advisor or friend, to the extent that you could stabilize them. A young woman named Collarbone [ph] came into my office one day. She was—this little project I set up at Harlem Hospital.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, there’s a mural up there.

LOU BLOCK: Yeah. And if I can digress for a moment, we had some problems there too. Harlem—in Harlem Hospital, it's almost totally a Negro community. And again, in my innocence, I thought that it might be nice to have a young Negro artist paint in his own area.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

LOU BLOCK: And the young man named Charles Alston, I named him to be the supervisor of this Harlem Project. He's now teaching at the Art Students League. Well, we assembled a group, and we found many of the young Negro painters working on a labor projects. They didn't know about the Art Project. But with Pinkie’s help and whoever I could find to help—Alston, we called Pinkie Alston—we located eight or ten young artists, Negro artists, who were working on these labor projects, moved—and had them moved over to the Art Project. And shortly after we [clears throat] got started working and planning what to be done there in the children's wards and in the lobby and so on, the delegation from the Artists’ Union came to see Mrs. McMahon accusing me of segregation [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's a thing.

LOU BLOCK: Well, I don't segregate anybody. I thought I had a good idea to have them paint in their own communities. They all seemed to like it, but the other students didn't like it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

LOU BLOCK: So what I did, I move some of the Negro assistants downtown, some of the white assistants uptown, level them all off that way and everybody was happy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's strange.

[Dog barking.]

LOU BLOCK: Well, I started telling you something else about the—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: A Negro woman, you said.

LOU BLOCK: Oh, yes. So this young Negro woman, who was doing a mural, came in. Now, she had never looked me in the eye. She would always lower her head when she was talking to a white man. And she was very quiet and uncommunicative and quite unfriendly. And I was a little surprised when she came into the office. And she sat down by my desk and said, Mr. Block, I need your help. I said, That's what I'm here for. What's the trouble? She said, I'm five-month pregnant. [Laughs.] Oh, gosh. So I said, What are you going to do about it? Do you know the man? Is he going to marry you? She said, No, he doesn't want to have anything to do with it. He was a young Negro sculptor on the Project. Well, I didn't know what to do but—[laughs] I'm no midwife. So I finally, in desperation, I could see the kid was really half out of her mind with worrying and so on, and much too late to do anything about it. So I knew an obstetrician in New York, a lady, who I knew well enough to attempt to get her interested in this Negro girl. And I called this woman up, this doctor. And she asked to see the girl, and I sent her up there. And I wish I could remember that doctor's name. She was really God's gift to all women. She looked like Mother Goose. The oldest woman in the world but really one of the most gentle, kindly, sympathetic, and broad-minded women I've ever known.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Connie Guion [ph]?

LOU BLOCK: No. What's her name? Doctor, doctor, doctor—so anyhow, she took this kid over and carried her through her whole business and delivered the baby and so on. [Laughs.] They made me the godfather of this child [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: God!

LOU BLOCK: Well, that's more or less typical of what would happen day by day with these young, upset people—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Constant turmoil, wasn't it?

LOU BLOCK: Constant, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The whole continuity probably—you know, this was opportunity with continuity and here they had anticipated turmoil, difficulty.

LOU BLOCK: Well, a lot of marriages on the Project. Some of them worked out; many of them didn't. I keep running into them here and there. And it's surprising to know that things which had their initial impetus during the Project days are carried through. It certainly is carried through in terms of what they're doing. One thing which I believe stems directly to the Project that when you tour the colleges and universities today that have fine arts departments and see who's—

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LOU BLOCK: —during the project are carried through. It certainly has carried through in terms of what they're doing. One thing which I believe stems directly to the project; now, when you tour the colleges and universities today that have fine art departments—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: —and see who's instructing there, who are the teachers, what's behind the spread of love and understanding of the arts? How did it come about that presumably provincial areas know all about Picasso, and know all about this, and this, and this?

All these young people who were on the Project at that time are now teaching. At Indiana University, there are two Project people; we've had two of them here, and so on through the country. The arts centers that were established by the Art Project had a profound influence, because some of them were taken over. When the projects were abandoned, the communities decided to keep these art centers and continue to run them. Well, Roswell, New Mexico, is one. Another one south—in North Carolina is still functioning as far as I know.

And they were staffed by people that we sent out from New York, some who stayed on there. I mean, the distribution of that kind of understanding. We picked very carefully who would go to these outlying areas to work, teach children, children's art classes and so on.

That's another division of the Project, which I never knew too much about, the teaching project in settlement houses and wherever we could get in.

A man named Alexander Stavenitz headed that up, and he did a superb job.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: Did a great [inaudible] a good job. He was a difficult person to know. He was a little on the brittle side and had a fantastic conceit. He was a little guy and with all a little man's conceit. He's quite young now, I understand, if he's still alive. Last I heard, he was totally paralyzed. We had a meeting in the office one day, all the supervisors, and Stavenitz was holding out for something which was rather immaterial. His initials were Alexander R. Stavenitz, A.R.S.; he finally stormed out of the room and Mrs. McMahon looked after him and said, He couldn’t have more appropriate initials [laughs]. She was quite a gal.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: There's a—there's a man in the office by whom it might be well to have some comment. This is Harry Knight.

LOU BLOCK: Yes, I saw him recently. Harry Knight was a very kindly guy and stubbed his toe through being too kind. He was the buffer between McMahon and the Project. Everyone loved the guy; everyone liked him; everyone admired him. I have yet to hear anyone have any unkind thing to say about Harry Knight. He's always been one of my dearest friends ever since these days, all through these years; we correspond; I see him whenever I can. Harry was himself a commercial artist before the Project started, and he gave up his work, as we all did, to do this job.

He was Mrs. McMahon's administrative assistant. I don't know what else—what other title he may have had, I don't recall. But he replaced two young men who, in the early days of the college administration [College Art Association], we had two young men, one called Trainum Carl Trainum, and a young fellow named Killem [ph]. Of course, the word spread immediately through the Project, “Trainum and Killem” [laughs].

[They laugh.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.] They both went to Puerto Rico, didn't they?

LOU BLOCK: No, Trainum, went to Puerto Rico; I don't know what happened to Killem. Well, Harry took over that sort of administrative assistance, so they disappeared and went off wherever they went.

[00:05:00]

LOU BLOCK: Harry would work with all of us. He kept his finger on the progress of all the divisions. He would make actual inspections; he'd go around, not to be an inspector, but just to know what's happening.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: He very rarely met, as I recall, [clears throat] Mrs. McMahon would take over on our grievance committees in the office, and she wanted to do that. As I really think about it, now that you've raised it, I don't know how to describe Harry's duties. He was, as I think, more than anything else a buffer. A sort of a soft pad—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Inside public relations man—

LOU BLOCK: That's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —to keep all parts harmonious.

LOU BLOCK: Yeah. And, um, the story, as I know it, was that he was shaving one day, when there was a knock on his door, and it was another one of these hundreds of petitions that were being circulated looking for signatures, and Harry, being impatient and half lathered, and so on, signed it without even looking at it. That's what tripped him up. It was something to do with the Communist Party. And Stavenitz , who was very arbitrary [clears throat], bounced him off the project.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: It gave Harry that sort of a statement to live down. It was unfortunate, completely unwarranted, but our opinion was never asked, and we were all very unhappy about that, because Harry was missed. I was no longer there when this happened. I was already off at with the NYA [National Youth Administration]. See, I left New York [clears throat] in 1937. [Coughs]. Mrs. Tugwell, Rex Tugwell's wife, began to work with Aubrey Williams in Washington on the NYA, and she wanted someone to act as an adviser for Arts and Crafts. And because of my association with the Index, which somehow labeled me as an Arts and Crafts man by some mysterious alchemy. [Aircraft sound] I knew nothing about arts and crafts, wasn't interested in arts and crafts, because I dislike the name to begin with; it's a misnomer. But anyhow, my name was suggested, and Aubrey asked if I was interested, and when I learned that it would mean constant travel around the country, contacting young people, and introducing them to participation in the arts, which made more sense, I jumped for it. Seemed, to me, a most exciting kind of challenge. And for the next two years, that's what I did.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did you, by chance at all, talk to Aubrey Williams? He recently died; I tried to see him.

LOU BLOCK: Yes, I had many talks with Aubrey Williams, and I had a rather unfortunate experience with him. My instructions from Audrey were to have the boys and girls throughout the country drawing, painting, sculpting, and so on, doing crafts. And my job was to travel constantly and introduce these projects wherever I could. And he left the ways and means for this procedure entirely up to me.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: Well, we started out—Grace and I, Grace Tugwell and I started out from Washington, on a sort of quick inspection, to see what it looked like out there. And we traveled from New York to California, via a meeting in Chicago. We visited many projects, NYA projects, in California and New Mexico, and traveled back to Washington. And on the basis of this survey, I was asked to set up routines and procedures and so on, which I did. I have all that material somewhere. And then they turned me loose, and for the next year and a half, I traveled the country working with local and state people, introducing participation in the arts and all the NYA projects. Very exciting experience. Well, in itself and as far as the Negro and whites were concerned, pictures grew on bushes. They knew nothing about it, you know. So wherever I went, I had them draw or paint a picture for me, and in almost every instance, an initial experience with boys and girls between ages of 17 and 24, they make their first paintings. And I carried in my car the materials for up to 10 people to work. And I'd ask for 10 volunteers. I'd say, give me an hour or two of your time, and let's see what you can do with making a picture, and the responses were wonderful, fantastic.

[00:10:33]

LOU BLOCK: But I would usually get 10, I'd select a few. Just ten boys and girls to sit down, and for an hour or so they'd paint pictures. They came out exactly like children's art, which none of us anticipated because they had no prejudices; they had no taste; they had no knowledge of pictures, so that what they did were just as spontaneous as children's paintings with one difference: [clears throat] that being older than the preschool age kids who draw and paint the same way, these people already had developed some sense of observation, retention of detail, retention of good memory, so that while they looked like children's art, they were, nevertheless, much more legible as pictures. [Cat meowing.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And many of the symbols that you see in children's art didn't occur in their work. Well, Aubrey Williams wanted to see some of this art, and I brought it into Washington with a varied collection from the states where we'd been working. And he was terribly disappointed. What he had anticipated was that it'd be a parallel experience what was happening in WPA.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hmm.

LOU BLOCK: And all these boys and girls would be producing sculptures and paintings and so on, which is utterly impossible except in big cities, where I didn't go at all because after seeing what was happening in Cincinnati and Cleveland and so on, and the NYA project, it was a totally different thing. I knew they needed me as much as they need a case of

measles; they had all the local people and doing an excellent job.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: But as far as rural areas were concerned, and that's where I spent most of my time with the rural boys and girls and a whole bag of states across the south part of the country, all the southern states. That's where it was mostly needed. He didn't like any part of it. And when he—I at that time began what was the beginning of a 17-year battle with the Arts and Crafts people, these very well-established authorities who fostered the popular Arts and Crafts. I hated that. There—have no cultural value; they have no craft value; they're just doodles, and I have been fighting them ever since.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I wonder why the emphasis on the South? Is this because there was relatively little in the way of art under the WPA?

LOU BLOCK: There was very little. This state as an example—I see my wife is home. She can tell you more about that than I can. And what actually happened here, because she was one of the WPA people here at that time.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

LOU BLOCK: Worked with Adele Brandeis and she can tell you about it [laughs], quite dispassionately. I can't.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

LOU BLOCK: You know, the—New Mexico had a good project under WPA. They had a young man there, a good painter, who set up some very meritorious work. In California under, Joe Danysh, I think his name was—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Joe Danysh.

LOU BLOCK: Joe Danysh; he did a good job in California, but they had a lot to work with, you see. But there was very little—area in Texas had some things going. There again, they had some good people to work with. But in most of the states, Georgia, South Carolina, Alabama, Louisiana had something going. What's her name, Durieux, she headed a project—the Art project in Louisiana. Caroline Durieux, she's down at the UCLA.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Right there with the University of Louisiana in Baton Rouge. She set up her headquarters in the Latin Quarter—in the French Quarter down there in New Orleans, and was doing quite a job. Alabama was a wilderness; Georgia was a wilderness. But she's probably still teaching at the University of Georgia. He, I think, headed up the Project there; he did quite a job. How much coverage do you plan of all the states?

[00:15:38]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I don't know what they plan, but there's a lot lacking and a lot of gaps in what we know. We've had to concentrate, in some respects, where big populous areas were, like East Coast, New York. Or like California, San Francisco. Well, not so much in Los Angeles, but San Francisco, or Seattle—Inverarity. Other areas, too. Well, the whole art center movement needs exploration, particularly in the South. They set up the arts center movement to bring, apparently, WPA art to these people. And from what you said about the “arts and crafts,” in quotes, but you don't like the phrase, the NYA was an effort to induce creative work on the part of young people in the southern areas, which would seem to be like two horns of the same ship.

LOU BLOCK: My most successful thing and WPA was—in NYA was in San Antonio, Texas.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It was?

LOU BLOCK: My program for NYA was to set up regional centers.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: Again, following the art center idea, but this time to involve the youth in a

program of training we should approximate what they were doing at that time at the Institute of Design in Chicago.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Huh.

LOU BLOCK: In other words, to put these kids through a whole routine of learning to draw and learning to read blueprints, how to make blueprints, learning all about materials, learning about design primarily; to wean them away from popular arts and crafts to the more basic functional things; to understand selectivity of materials, how to use them, why to use them, when to use certain materials, and when not to use certain materials. In other words, to give them that kind of training. I got a great deal of help from the Society of Industrial Designers. My thought was very mature as far as I understood it myself. I couldn't get involved in arts and crafts because I felt it was just the time killing—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

LOU BLOCK: —writing institutions for the blind—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: —and the physically handicapped. I couldn't see it as work for not all the young people. So in San Antonio, the NYA boys were reconstructing this old village; it was originally the heart of San Antonio, called La Villita. They were rebuilding it out of local stone, with local stone called caliche, which works almost like wood; you can saw it and do things with it. And I set it up, so that we had workrooms for metal, a little foundry, weaving and so on, and the only youth employed there were the Mexican youth of San Antonio. I had a long meeting with Mayor Maverick, who was the mayor, and he gave full approval to my whole program of work. And I asked O'Neil Ford, a very progressive young architect in Texas, to help on this general problem.

What I wanted him primarily for was to involve the youth of NYA in that area in the completion of the building. If there were window drapes to be done, they should design them and fabricate them. If there were light fixtures, the ironworkers should do them, and so on, carpentry work. And the first job that was done was a little place called the Chapel in the Woods in Denton, Texas, up on the campus of the college for women.

[00:20:01]

And the NYA girls designed all the altar equipment, the pews, lighting fixtures, and they were all fabricated in our little shop in La Villita. The hospital was furnished out of that—those workshops. Now that, to me, made a great deal more sense than arts and crafts.

And I tried that same thing by setting up regional centers everywhere. I had one in New Orleans, kept me there for six months. [Cat meows.] The navy had abandoned its Navy Yard in Algiers across the river from New Orleans, and the NYA took it over. [Aircraft sound.] That was really a fantastic experience, because here are these enormous workshops where they can build a battleship, build canons, so on. I couldn't find enough help; the State Director who was more or less indifferent to what we did there.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: To get proper supervision of the shop, I couldn't do it any of it myself. I couldn't —I can't do any of the crafts. I understand what's involved, but I cannot do. And I could find proper personnel. I got the personnel for La Villita without any difficulty, found wonderful people there, but I stubbed my toe rather badly in New Orleans, the lack of adequate personnel. The woman who was in charge of the art in public schools down there was shocked when she saw the kind of work that these young people were doing. Said, how can you let young people use color that way?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Huh.

LOU BLOCK: It was that kind of an attitude. And these enormous foundry shops there at this navy yard, had a young man that they finally put in there as supervisor, who was having them work in one little tiny corner of this huge shop, casting clothes hangers and things like that, which he thought was a meritorious project. Well, maybe it was; it was better than making doo-dads. But it seemed to me sort of a pitiful use of the wonderful facilities that

they—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: —had there. I wanted to set up a regional project in the southeastern states, and spent, oh, over a month going through all the Appalachian Mountains trying to find a suitable site for a regional center. And I had a meeting of all the directors of these six states: Alabama, Georgia, Florida, both Carolinas, Kentucky, Tennessee.

I called a meeting of all the supervisors in Asheville in North Carolina to discuss this thing and ask their help in locating a center. Probably would have been more than one if they all agreed—they agreed to the program, but actually locating something, they dropped into my lap. I didn't know the area that well, but since it was particularly my problem, I went traveling through the area, and I found that there's many abandoned Methodist colleges, fine old brick buildings just standing idle. Some [inaudible] who negotiated [inaudible] I had to reach the local people, and they would agree to dissipate and disappear.

I did track down the owner of one Methodist college in the—one county of North Carolina, a man named Yokum [ph]. But he asked some outrageous price for this thing, and the state director, a Mr. Lang, if I remember, I agreed with him, but he was adamant. And then on a closer inspection of the building, it would cost so much to make it useful; it was just impractical. And that was my experience from—that area was not ever served at all. I had to serve around it on an operational basis, on statewide basis, to work with them statewide rather than regionally. New Orleans thing was partially successful. The best thing that I think I was able to do there in La Villita.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Did Williams understand what you were up to?

[00:24:53]

LOU BLOCK: Yes, but when I left NYA, he seemed a little annoyed with me, and said, you know, Lou, he said, many of these state administrators didn't know what you were talking about. Well, that was not the job. I mean, I couldn't set out to educate all these people on every level.

[Cross talk.]

LOU BLOCK: Somewhere along the line, if they'd accepted the national office's authority by sending me in there, they might have—at least have figured that they wouldn't have sent me if I didn't know what I was doing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative]. Besides, there's only 24 hours in a day.

LOU BLOCK: That's right. So that was it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, the reason I asked is, in these two instances, you've worked for Mrs. McMahon, who had an art orientation. And you worked for Aubrey Williams, who had a social worker's point of view, really, a long time in social work in Wisconsin, I believe.

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And comes out of that school, whatever it may mean, and it may mean a great many things to many people. When it comes to creative art, it's a blank, it seems to me. I don't know how you feel about it. [Cross talk.]

LOU BLOCK: He didn't know. As a matter of fact, it wasn't until I was about to leave NYA he financially wanted to have a report. Now I'd sent voluminous letters to Washington from everywhere. My immediate superior was—I'm sorry to be stupid about names this morning. Well, anyhow, I would send reports weekly and describe in detail everything that I was doing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: So that Washington knew. I imagine those went off into a file somewhere. I have copies of all my correspondence. And on the basis of what I did in NYA in 1939 and '40, in 1941, I was asked by the High School Journal, which was published by the University of North Carolina—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: —to write a summary of this whole thing and what procedures I used in working with these young people for, what I think was, training in the manual arts. But I wrote this thing for the High School Journal; it was published and, oh, for a long time, the repercussions of that thing—as I understand, it was known throughout the country as a Block plan, Block plan. [Aircraft sound]. And I think I had something to do with coining the term "manual arts" as it's being used today. The—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, you know, to meet a need, sometimes it's difficult to define it in Washington. At the very best, you can get some vague contour which will allow an imaginative man to fill it with content when he gets out in the field one way, and do it differently in another state, which I think is the virtue of the WPA, for example, because New York is not a window on America. It has its own peculiar problems. But I'd be very surprised if the real virtue of WPA didn't allow for differences in terms of time, place, and circumstance. The people who work on the relief roles, if that isn't, you know, a chancy thing. But here—

LOU BLOCK: Well, in NYA, there was no chance for follow through as there was in WPA—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: There wasn't.

LOU BLOCK: The WPA, followed through on its own impetus, and—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

LOU BLOCK: —it still follows through. NYA died there with the post, when it was terminated. Sometime in June of 1940, I think it was just about the time that the Nazis ran over France.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: Aubrey Williams came to New Orleans, and I called the meeting of all the NYA youth in that area; he wanted to make a speech. Got them into this old navy yard, and Aubrey Williams made a rather fantastic speech at that time. He said, Boys and girls, you've gained weight. You came on this Project without any clothes, you were hungry, you gained weight. You look fine, you're all occupied. And among other things, he pledged to them they would never have to go to war. This was in June of 1940, just shortly before the project's terminated.

[00:30:09]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How do you account for this?

LOU BLOCK: Well, that was Aubrey Williams. The one thing Aubrey Williams excelled in more than anything else was playing roulette—a poker game that he called "Russian son of a bitch"; as far as I know, he invented it. And traveling around the country with him, whoever traveled with him had to play this poker game. And it was—do you play poker? [clears throat] How many cards were wild? Well, half the deck was wild [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That kind of game. No, thanks. No, thanks.

LOU BLOCK: Russian son of a bitch.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, I've had criticisms made and leveled at Mrs. McMahon, which I can understand, since she was in a kind of crossfire all the time. There were occasions she had to be quite arbitrary.

LOU BLOCK: Oh, yes, and she could be.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And, yes, she had an instinct for the juggler—

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —I think. But she was also quite positive, uh, could be quite positive, even to the point of blindness. Although handling Somervell is not an easy task, even on a clear day. Or handling, on the other side, the ramifications of our disorganization wasn't easy, you know? And to keep at least the project going, or keep it alive somehow, wasn't an easy task. But Aubrey Williams, I don't get anything from, from the point of view of an

administrator, a man with idea, a driving person. Does any of this mean anything to you?

LOU BLOCK: Well, the social worker had a field day at that time, as you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Beginning with Harry Hopkins.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. [Cross talk.] And he's an administrator.

LOU BLOCK: Yes, undoubtedly many of the people that he did appoint, he would look for his own kind of person.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: A social worker and the do-gooder. Aubrey Williams is a curious guy. I don't believe that he was ever truly involved in the NYA program. He was—he would travel through the states like a meteor, you know, like this business—his visit to New Orleans, where he would make a speech and then take off to play 18 holes of golf. I was very much annoyed with Aubrey Williams for that lack of interest and lack of support—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hmm.

LOU BLOCK: —because I do know that all the correspondence—and there's a whole thick file of correspondence of NYA, I went to great pains to keep Washington informed, to keep Grace informed, Grace Tugwell. She was a wonderful person to work with. On this initial survey that we made when I first joined NYA, she was very pregnant, but she insisted on making this trip. And we took off [laughs], and I thought about grabbing after her with a basket [laughs]; we traveled across the country and back. But she was rather a remarkable girl, and she was whole heartedly interested in this thing. And I don't recall when she left NYA. I think probably after the birth of her child. And then who must have succeeded here? Who is it that I wrote all these letters to? He was the brother of a very well-known writer, and for some reason, I can't think of his name. Boy, is this piled up. Tom Hibben.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Tom Hibben?

LOU BLOCK: Tom Hibben. Paxton Hibben [ph] is his brother.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, the writer.

LOU BLOCK: Tom would receive all of this correspondence from me, and I don't recall that I ever had any response or reaction of any kind. Well, truthfully, I was too busy and too happy doing this job to give a damn.

[00:35:00]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative.]

LOU BLOCK: So long as I wasn't stopped. Because I had a wonderful reception everywhere I went; the state administrators, the local people on every level, always glad to see me. I had a wonderful time in Texas working with Jess Cullen [ph], who was the state administrator, and the local people there in San Antonio.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: Maury Maverick was very excited about this project. And when I left there, they had these—I dug these out of the dust bin the other day; it's a description of the project that the city of San Antonio got together.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yeah.

LOU BLOCK: This is the one. I think this is the one. Yes, it has 10,000 signatures. Everybody in Texas, apparently, signed this thing. Page after page of signatures; who they all are, I have no idea [laughs].

[They laugh.]

LOU BLOCK: I was looking to see if Aubrey Williams ever signed it, but apparently not. Maury Maverick, commissioner of taxation, commissioner of sanitation, commissioner of fire and police, commissioner of—[laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: These are memorable thing.

LOU BLOCK: And this one is in Spanish; it's a parallel document, made in Spanish, with the same signatures.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What was the problem in Georgia? Did you run into Ernest Allen [ph]?

LOU BLOCK: Earnest Allen, no, he—I worked in Georgia. A man named Lassiter was the state administrator.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Lassiter?

[Aircraft sound]

LOU BLOCK: He was a nice enough guy, and he never troubled me. He wasn't too much interested in what I was doing, and I spent a great deal of my time in north Georgia, place called Habersham County, where I did set up a project.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: That was a rural mountain county, very poor, and we recruited kids from that whole area to the Habersham Project. It was a residence project, mostly for bureaus. And there were other areas in Georgia where I worked. I helped set up a ceramic project, where there was nothing available except the little wood burning kiln, which they did, and that worked very well, and they made some very rough pottery. I have photographs of all the business.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hmm.

LOU BLOCK: I— my Leica went with me everywhere; it still does [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hmm. You know, I've talked with Ernest now, and he's now on the Health, Education, and Welfare Department as a—oh, an assistant to the Surgeon General, because—so I understood from him, the NYA administration in Georgia became involved in, technical training, manual training, technical training, which fed people into the burgeoning shipyards probably.

LOU BLOCK: Yeah, him, I didn't know about. You see, I worked mostly on the residence projects. What happened—what you're talking about very probably happened in the larger community.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's possible.

LOU BLOCK: Yeah. You know, I [inaudible]—

[Phone rings.]

[Audio break.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It must have been a very satisfying experience, then, working with the youngsters.

LOU BLOCK: Oh, yes, it was terrific. You know, it was big stuff, but the war was imminent.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: And, the whole thing changed over to—this is perhaps what you heard, that the whole thing, as long as it existed as a project, as an administrative set up, training for defense.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's it.

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's it. A whole shift in emphasis in training.

LOU BLOCK: And, of course, there's no place for me in that; that's why I got out.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, there was an effort, I think, in the WPA, to try to make existing things relevant to the new preparedness pitch.

LOU BLOCK: Well, they did model making, map making, those things crept into the Project; of course, I was long since out of it, and—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: —didn't know too much about it, and its details.

[00:40:02]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But I think the handwriting was on the wall for the WPA, almost from its inception, as reflected in Congress's attitude, which was to keep it on a short snaffle bit financially.

LOU BLOCK: [Inaudible].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: There was always a deficit financing. Even month by month or three months, something like that, so that you never really knew what kind of continuity you could have—

LOU BLOCK: That's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —or the number of horses that you could keep in a stable, was always that question of juggling. So the Congress wasn't too happy, I suspect, with the whole idea of the WPA. I don't know why they preferred or seemed to prefer a straight dole as distinct from creating an area in which people could, you know.

LOU BLOCK: [Clears throat.] There was a fair number of newspaper people who contributed to that dislike. I can't recall which, by and large, the press was kind to the Project, but there were others, in particular, columnists, certain columnists, who hated the Project, and attacked it from every angle. Theater had its problems, and the writers had their problems. Here is something I found the other day which I hadn’t seen for years [clears throat].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yeah. Holy smokes, who put this out?

LOU BLOCK: Several theater people. And I have more things of that kind. I am a saver of things, as you see.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I'm glad you're a squirrel. [Phone rings]. You're a treasure trove of—

LOU BLOCK: Yeah, I got a lot of—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —of ephemeral things. Well, this is—you know, this is probably nonexistent anywhere. But that sort of thing. But it's true that the—Hallie Flanagan, with her living newspaper, quoting senators correctly on the subject of housing was hardly a public relations man's dream, as to keep an idea afloat. Yet the integrity that she had, with reference to her own idea—of course, you know, from Washington's point of view, I don't suppose they had ever had to deal with the likes of Henry Alsberg and the Writer’s Project, Hallie Flanagan and the Theater, Holger Cahill. It's just a kettle of fish that's unknown.

LOU BLOCK: Well, that was another thing that impressed me, that on all the Arts Projects, for all of them, instead of getting trained bureaucrats in stuffy shirts to administer these things, they got people who were involved, had always been involved. And I thought that was—we were all amateur administrators; we knew nothing about public administration. The best of us, clear on up to the top—Holger Cahill was by no means a skillful administrator, neither was Aubrey Williams, you know, any of us.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: And I don't think that—Mrs. McMahon was more skillful because she at least was used to being involved in her work at the College Art Association, for example. She was

a woman of means apart; she understood great problems, but for most of us, to sit behind a desk for the first time in our lives was something else, you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. It starts to squeak for some, to me, unknown reason, a desperate machine, a victim of industrialization.

LOU BLOCK: Being hauled around too much.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, I don't know what it is. It's a brand new tape, and it goes so far, and then it sets up the squeaking thing, which when the girls transcribe it, sometimes overrides the voice. It's not especially helpful at all. Why—you know, this is—for me [tape squeaking], the exciting part of this is that they were able to float these ideas at all, you know.

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: When you look back on it, you wonder how the devil.

LOU BLOCK: Well, this is relative. [Aircraft sound]. The underlying character, Mr. Roosevelt himself, the influence that Harry Hopkins had, I mean that's an accumulation of rather powerful voices in Washington.

[00:45:02]

And undoubtedly, Mrs. Roosevelt had a great deal of—just one person to do with bringing all this about. The—very recently, I had to write something around these photographs for the *American Heritage* press. And I did some research and read a book about Harry Hopkins—how he worked, what his problems were, and it was quite illuminating. [Clears throat]. It was not an easy job [inaudible] there in Washington, because it was undoubtedly always a very hostile climate, Congress.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I think Hopkins had a view of—which can only be described as contempt for Congress [laughs]. That is the whole—the whole notion of doing a job—or this whole concept of feeding them, it has a background, too. I think they were trying to wait for Ickes [ph] to come up with some program of public building. And Ickes was spending all his time trying to devise a contract which would keep the local politicians' hands out of the funds which were allocated. Well, you know, he couldn't come up with a contract and he was wasting time.

And so Roosevelt decided to shift the whole emphasis, and Hopkins, who was initially supposed to be a coordinator of all this, became the man who was touched for the job of, “feed them, get checks into their hands by Thanksgiving, get them to work doing something, we'll worry about what they're doing later”. You know, this kind of approach, so that there was a—oh, it's partly a Salvation Army, but certainly a kind of crusading thing in which Hopkins was a part. And yet he's a man who could cut through a lot of red tape, too, if it became necessary, you know?

LOU BLOCK: Well, we certainly felt the pressure of greater displeasure from Congress each year when it was time to make our budgets.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, boy.

LOU BLOCK: Really [inaudible]. And the whole term boondoggling—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: —got into public press and everybody's minds. There were all manner—you see that whole period, beginning with the—I imagine, shortly after the beginning of the Depression, created a whole new situation of people who had never known of organization, knew nothing about protest, knew nothing about making demands suddenly found themselves declassed, outcast in a sense.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

LOU BLOCK: It was very natural that they would gradually come together, and all sorts of new organizations were formed out of these people who were not primarily organizationally minded. And out of that grew this whole pattern of protest and demand. And even the artists

were involved; for the first time in history, they became a demanding, protesting group. The actors, the writers, thinking only of our own immediate fields of the living arts, to undoubtedly happened elsewhere. I remember, Ben and I had a studio on Bethune [ph] Street right down the street from Southern Bell Telephone Company offices in New York. And we see these young women, hundreds of them, streaming by every evening and going home from work and looking at the inevitable dresses and their shoes, looking very trim, neat. We both would have the same thought: what would it take to organize those people?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That was the thinking?

LOU BLOCK: Yeah, and of course, those were thrown out of work by the Depression, and telephone company, and all companies. They found their ways of drifting together and making protests.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. You know, it may be only a social initially, but at the time, somebody would say, well, we've hired a loft; somebody is going to give a talk on something; why don't you come down? You know, it's social in a way.

LOU BLOCK: Of course.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And not—as later thought to be ideological sinister. There's nothing sinister to it at all; it was just a way of getting together and—

[00:50:01]

LOU BLOCK: It was the opportunists who gave it the unhappy twist and the unhealthy twist. The leftist organizations, like the John Reed Club, crawled into the Art Projects, and there were others who saw an opening, and of course, being trained for that, they knew how to move. So that many of these new organizations became, in a sense, captive organizations after a while.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, well, they knew how to run a meeting into the ground; there's no question about that [laughs]. They keep it alive until everybody goes home.

LOU BLOCK: I remember some of the furious debates in the Artists' Union, not on ideological grounds or on artistic grounds, but purely political grounds. It was just so much froth because none of them really knew what they were talking about. I ran into some of these guys occasionally, and I'm always surprised to see how they grew up after a gap of 25 or 30 years.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: The whole thing to them must seem like, *Alice in Wonderland*. The more mature among them continued in their work. I'm sure, a guy like Mark Rothko, who gets $20,000 for something that takes him 15 minutes to paint, he must really believe in Alice in Wonderland or Santa Clause. But he stayed with it, and others—so many guys who, when they came on the Project, barely knew each which end of a brush to use. But as I mentioned earlier, the fact of continued work with enough income to keep themselves alive—$23 a week, I think it was—made all the difference.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure. Sure. It kept skill alive, gave it an opportunity to develop.

LOU BLOCK: And the NYA project, you'd see some of these incoming kids coming into a residence to stay there for a year.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: And these young girls, usually in a battered old pair of shoes, too big for them, very frequently men's shoes, and one gown, and that's all they owned when they came into a residence. They were taught, gradually, how to sew, how to cook, and they would take part of their monthly check, which was $21; they had to send home $11 of that, I think, keep $10 for themselves. Their first purchase from there would be a little frock, pair of stockings, and so on. And the change in their appearance, demeanor. And course, they were fed on a diet which was calculated to beef them up a little bit. If they accomplished nothing else, that was something.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure. It made sense [laughs]. It makes sense, even in retrospect.

LOU BLOCK: Here in Kentucky, in two counties, Clay and Montgomery Counties, at that time, in 1939, there was not a single line of electricity, or power, and no paved roads. In the adjoining counties, where they had the NYA residences, they were teaching these girls to cook by electricity, use electrical sewing machines [laughs]; What the hell good would it do them when they went home? [Laughs.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm.

LOU BLOCK: But those things, of course, you can overlook; I mean those inadvertencies happen to the best of families.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, sure. Sure.

LOU BLOCK: I try to take advantage of one thing at NYA—

[Phone rings.]

[Audio break.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The means of mass communication—

LOU BLOCK: The little girlfriends now keep calling up.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I wish we could stop this thing.

LOU BLOCK: I don’t know if Mary wants to come down or not. Excuse me just one minute.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: All right.

[Audio break.]

[00:54:49]

LOU BLOCK: —read in the papers that I was down there on business relating to the arts, so they apparently tagged me to meet with them. And Maverick had given them a building to use as the center for having teas and exhibitions and meetings or whatever. It was not an actual organization; it was just 60 people who had identical interests, and they'd asked the mayor apparently for some place where they could have—get together. So he gave them this building right across the street from this La Villita project; it was probably that same little complex of little buildings. And they asked me [clears throat] to come on a Sunday afternoon and talk to them. And what they wanted to know from me was how can 60 artists make a living in San Antonio [laughs]?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Ah.

LOU BLOCK: How do I know?

[They Laugh.]

LOU BLOCK: So the most I could think of was to tell them a little bit about how artists make a living elsewhere. And it was a precarious undertaking at best. But with the help of certain galleries and certain museums, things can be done.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Mmm [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And I told them about the Artists’ Union in New York, what they were trying to do. And generally speaking, to the extent that I could get across to them that the artists primarily have to help themselves in their own community and not just sit out on the fringes, which is what the artists customarily would do, they would never mingle.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: They'd be off in their own little private world. So I said, make yourselves part of the community. Well, anyhow, the next day, Maury Maverick called me up, and asks can I come into his office, so I did, and he says, I hear you're a communist. [Laughs.] And I said, Well, that's interesting. Since when? [Laughs.] He said, Well, you preached unionism to these people yesterday. So I told Maury Maverick exactly what I told those people, and

apparently, the woman who was a little frightened by what I'd said—I don't remember her name, but she was the director of their local museum in San Antonio.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And I visited the museum and was interested to see what they had there, and it was a very heterogeneous collection. Anything that nobody else wanted was put in the museum: pictures and a little street car, things of that kind. [Clears throat.] And she was the one who was quite sure that I was persuading all these good people to blow up the city. And Maverick was—and he goes—I suppose, he had to make his own inquiry.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, sure, [aircraft sound] he had to confront that other creature from Texas who was riding high at the time and getting the ride higher, Martin Dies.

LOU BLOCK: I didn't run into that too much around the country, but one experience in Texas. And I remember traveling from Washington to—I think we were headed to Atlanta with a young woman who was in charge of the music end of the NYA activities—I can't recall her name. Well, she was weeping in the car all the way down because of this Russian invasion of Poland. Well, a lot of us were a little bit surprised by this whole turnabout. And I tried to explain it on the basis, as I understood it, that they didn't want to be encircled; they didn't want Germany to come in right to her borders, so to counteract that, they moved west, which was my explanation. It probably made no more sense than anybody else's explanation. Well, she repeated that conversation somewhere else, and then I was immediately accused of having tried to justify this.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You can't even tell when you're helping your friends! [Laughs.] No. No, but that whole—that whole issue about the Soviet Invasion after—or even the, you know, the peace with Germany, you know, when they signed the—whatever it was, the Friendship Non-Aggression Pact.

LOU BLOCK: That’s what I’m talking about.

[01:00:00]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, you know that's who everyone who had—

LOU BLOCK: It was a bombshell.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, and how it was, because it came without any background. Yes, we didn't—

LOU BLOCK: Well, that's what stuck the [Artists’ –Ed] Congress—[clears throat] and among other things, they've created so many schisms in New York.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, terrible.

LOU BLOCK: I remember when we were down doing this painting in Radio City, we used to have what we'd call professional fresco watchers. Every evening, there'd be a whole crowd of people crammed into the lobby, and we'd all be up on a scaffold, and they'd be down there. Among those who came, would be delegations of the different splinter groups: the Trotskyites, the Lovestoneites, the Musteites, and the official boys, and they’d have their own little huddles, and Rivera would sit up on the scaffold like an orchestra leader debating with all of them, you know [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: It was—it was a circus, these guys.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: This would happen every evening. And because he was—not one of these guys knew who he was championing, you know. What an experience that was there at Radio City; I’ll never forget it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But he worked nights?

LOU BLOCK: Oh, he would—he practically lived there. See, he would take an enormous

section of painting. Technique of fresco, you plaster only that area that you think you can work on, because once it's dry, you have to stop.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: The theory of true fresco is that your paint is absorbed by the wet plaster, but as it dries, it becomes permanent. He would take an enormous section, sometimes as much as 10 square yards, which was fantastic, and he'd just sit there and paint and paint and paint until he practically dropped in his tracks. When he was painting in Topanga in Mexico, he did fall off the scaffold, and he weighed about 400 pounds; It was a lot of weight to drop [laughs]. Didn't hurt himself too badly, but that was his style, because as long as he was up on scaffold, we felt obliged to stay, so—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, man, the day had no end, then.

LOU BLOCK: No, we worked in shifts. But we adjusted to kind of a pattern because we could tell—we learned before long how long that plaster would stay wet, and so when it would begin to dry, we'd clear out and go home, take baths, freshen up, and come back.

[They laugh.]

LOU BLOCK: Shahn did a big fresco not too long after that in north of New Jersey in its Farm Security Project that they had out there. [Aircraft sound.] There was a building for a factory for hat makers, who had settled there in Roosevelt; they were all moved out of the areas where they had been—well, hat makers, I think they were hats. And it's—Ben bought a house out there at the time he was doing the mural, or at least he rented a house from the resettlement people. And when the Farm Security abandoned the project as a fallout project, they sold the houses to the people who occupied them, so Ben was able to get his, and he's still there—made a nice, delightful home of it. He did a fresco in the Bronx post office and did a tempera painting in the Social Security building in Washington.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Washington.

LOU BLOCK: He's—right now, he's entirely occupied with architects, primarily, doing stained glass windows and mosaic murals. He just completed a series of decorations for a new steamship owned by Israel; the *Shalom*, I think it's called—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: And he's working now on some stained-glass windows which will be executed in Europe. He's done very well for himself.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: Aside from the factor of stabilized income, he's established himself as a man with a great deal of artistic integrity. I mean, the guy's got it all.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Unlike the Sacco and Vanzetti things.

[01:05:00]

[Aircraft sound.]

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, man. So that comes from center field. That is only the hand ball players that I like.

LOU BLOCK: Yeah. That's a beautiful thing. You know, I have a photography student who drifted into the office one day about two years ago, and I assigned them their projects to make them more observant, to make them more conscious of things they're looking at, so—some projects were—I think that they're neat things to challenge—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: —set up a challenge for them. This guy came in with a photograph of some boys playing handball, and it's almost a facsimile of Ben’s painting.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Really?

LOU BLOCK: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's an exciting thing.

LOU BLOCK: Oh, yes. But this boy, Barney Cowherd is now on the campus of Indiana University; he's a magnificent photographer. I think he's one of the best in this whole area, does magnificent work. He was employed by the *Courier Journal* here for a while. Being a rebellious character by nature, he didn't last very long as a news photographer. Because he would do things which are most unorthodox. They were having a country show here called *The Tall Man*, supposed to be the story of Abraham Lincoln, and he was asked to make a photograph of the tall man. Well, Barney's idea of a tall man would be to submit a photograph, which the printers wouldn't have time to alter, because he'd always turn it in just before the deadline; it was a picture of a man the full depth of the newspaper and one column wide. [Laughs.] You know, that makes a picture editor go crazy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Of course.

LOU BLOCK: Another time, he was asked to photograph the biggest airplane that had ever landed in Louisville, at Bowmen Field, which was the old airport here. Barney went out there, and he got his picture, and again, it was the full width of the paper this time, and just about so wide, looked like a big airplane [laughs], no doubt about it [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I can see why he didn't go over so well—

LOU BLOCK: And he was also a heavy drinker, poor guy, and he's now campus photographer at Indiana University. No job for a guy like that. I've had some good students, and there's great photography. I also teach painting. But quite truthfully, painting is important, of course; I still draw—paint occasionally, but it's just—photography has just crowded everything out there.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative]

LOU BLOCK: It's a remarkable medium. I'm very pleased now, looking back, beginning to use a camera in 1934, what an enormous file of stuff I've accumulated. Just nine out of ten of it has never been printed and probably never will be, but what I have is there.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And you've been steadily at it since 1934?

LOU BLOCK: Pretty much, yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: [Clears throat.] There have been interruptions, of course [clears throat]. I still occasionally, back in those days, would still paint a mural, and I began to teach at the Brooklyn Museum Art school in 1947. When I left NYA, especially, the outbreak of war. During the war years, I was a consultant to the Red Cross, some of their activities for the GIs, and I worked with a committee that was set up by the Museum of Modern Art to develop the good techniques for art as a therapy. And that was quite interesting because I worked along with psychiatrists and others on this general problem. And then in 1943 [clears throat], I was anxious to be more immediately involved, and I had myself accredited to the Maritime Commission as an artist correspondent and went out on tank ships to draw and paint what was happening at sea. And I worked a great deal with seamen and the unions and the, you know, the United Seamen’s Service War Centers introducing activities in the arts as a recreation.

[01:10:29]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: It was quite interesting, and I'm happy none of that work was paid for. It was all voluntary, but I managed to survive the war that way. Finally, I was employed, and I think it was late 1943. I was given a very odd job, I was made head of recruitment for the Equipment and Manning Organization of War Shipping. I became a Shanghai expert [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I'll be darned.

LOU BLOCK: Well, I sailed quite a bit when I was a boy, so I knew something about it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: And my headquarters were in Charleston, and my job was to find men who were working ashore, who'd been at sea at any time in their lives and decided to go back because the need for men was desperate.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Astronomic. Yeah.

LOU BLOCK: So I shipped quite a few guys out of southern ports, and in fact, I was in charge of the eastern Gulf Coast recruitment. And that, again, involved a lot of travel through the South, which I always enjoy. And somebody remembered me in New York, I think it was Rene d'Harnoncourt. They were establishing a school in Dartmouth—the campus of Dartmouth College, to be called the School for American Craftsmen, and it was one of the first of—under Public Law 16, I think, which was to give rehabilitation training, to wounded GIs.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

LOU BLOCK: I think Mary’s ready for us.

[END OF TRACK AAA_blockl65_8404_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]