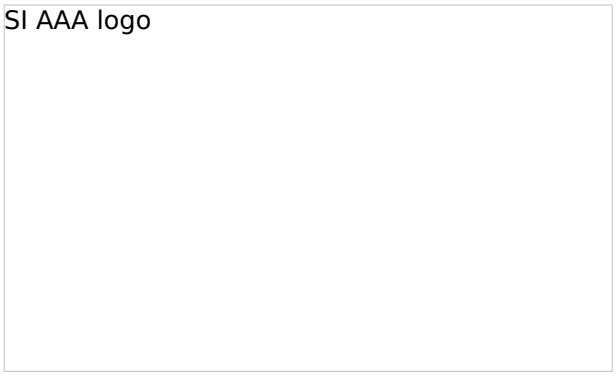

Oral history interview with Adrian Dornbush, 1965 June 13

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

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Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Adrian J. Dornbush on June 13, 1965. The interview took place in El Yunque, Puerto Rico, and was conducted by Richard Keith Doud 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 original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives created a more verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript that seemed relevant was added in brackets and given an –Ed. attribution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

RICHARD DOUD: The following is an interview with Mr. Adrian Dornbush at his summer home on El Yunque Mountain in the rainforest of Puerto Rico, June 13, 1965. The interviewer is Richard K. Doud.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Well, what do you want me to say?

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

RICHARD DOUD: I'd like to have you start out by just telling us something about this Key West thing, how it got started, what part you played in it, and who else was active in it, to begin with. And then we'll sort of take it from there and see what develops.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Well, the idea of the Key West project—was conceived, I think, by a man by the name of Julius Stone, who was, at the time, state administrator for the relief program.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Key West, as you may know, was one of the really stranded communities during the Depression. And under the state relief program—that was the precursor of the WPA and at the moment, I can't remember what the initials of that were.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, it might have been the FERA [Federal Emergency Relief Administration] or the CWA, the Civil Works Administration. I'm not sure which it was then, or the Public Works Administration.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Public Works Administration is what it was. And Mr. Edward Bruce was the head of the first Art Project also under the old Public Works Administration.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Stone felt that the one possibility of reviving some kind of economic pattern there in Key West was to publicize it as a tourist center.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And Stone, being a man of imagination, felt that perhaps the best way to get national publicity for Key West was to bring a number of artists down to Key West to make paintings of the quaint community, which were paintings that could be circulated or exhibited throughout the United States.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And perhaps be publicized in magazines and so on, as a means of drawing people down there. A group of 12 watercolor painters were selected. This was—the men

themselves, selected, were at the—were not on relief. They were people who had established a reputation as watercolorists. And Mr. Bruce, I think, also selected them because he felt their particular talents were of a type that would make very good exhibitions and be descriptive paintings that would really be descriptive in an attractive way of Key West. In other words, the men were not abstract artists—

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: —for the greater part.

[00:05:24]

Well, I wasn't one of the original ones. I think I must have come on when the Project had been running for about two or three months. At the time, I was—I myself was in Des Moines, Iowa, where I was teaching and where at the time also, I was painting and had a number of portrait commissions. My own work was in good part in watercolor, although not exclusively. And I had in—at the time, I'd exhibited at the Chicago World's Fair. And although a young painter, I've been associated in the Midwest also with the Stone City Artist Colony. Grant Wood and I had started that.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. I think I remember that. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: [Laughs.] Well, how I got drawn into the Key West thing was Edward Rowan, who had been also associated with Grant and myself in the Stone City Artist Colony, had gone to Washington. Ed, by the way, had been a director of a small gallery in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which was the Carnegie Grant, I think.

RICHARD DOUD: I didn't know that.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yes. And so—but in the meantime, Ed had gone to Washington as assistant to Mr. Edward Bruce—Ned Bruce. [Coughs.] And it was through Ed Rowan that I got involved in the Key West thing.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And how it happened was this: they—there were—about a half a dozen painters already established there in Key West, but they found that they really needed somebody with—who understood artists and who himself was a painter, but also somebody who had some experience in organization.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Even just the simple matter of housekeeping, of ordering paints, and things of that kind, you know. But also laying out a program, working up exhibitions, and all the things that go—that would be involved in that. So, they asked me if I would care to come down and be one of the painters but also direct the Project.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Now—

RICHARD DOUD: Do you remember—this isn't quite fair. Do you remember what year it was, the—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yes, I think so. Let's see, it was—that must have been the spring of 1934, I should guess.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Right? I think—

RICHARD DOUD: It sounds right.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yeah.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Because I went to Washington, then later I was—about—I was in Key West about eight months, and then went to Washington in '35, to start the Special Skills program there.

RICHARD DOUD: So, what all went on at Key West? I—I've heard that you even got involved down there with such things as making furniture and that sort of thing. Is that true?

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Well, that was very minor. It is the—the program or the Art Project is basically very simple. The agreement or contract—it really wasn't a formal contract. But the agreement was that each artist would contribute or give to the government, to the Project, three watercolors a week.

[00:10:25]

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And the remaining work he could keep for himself. Anything over and above that [inaudible] to do was his own. I don't think we ever set up a definite method of selecting what paintings the artist should contribute to the government. I think that was left pretty well up to him.

But in as much as we knew that the paintings were going to be exhibited and would be illustrative of Key West, the quaint houses and the streets and the fisherman, and so on, I think we all tended to be influenced somewhat to make attractive pieces to serve that purpose. Then if we wanted to do something more on our own, something more abstract, or what have you, that was all right.

So there was never any problem about the selection. And it wasn't very long before we developed some very nice exhibitions. Now, the people who were on that Project—there was Stan Wood and Avery Johnson—dear. You know, after all these years, names tend to be a little bit of a difficulty.

RICHARD DOUD: It's been a long time.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yes. I'm afraid I'm going to have to skip that for the time being.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: [Inaudible] a little blocked on that. Would there be information easily available to you about who these people were of that Project, or was that a very important—

RICHARD DOUD: This we haven't been able to find so far. We don't know—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: I'd have to do a lot of thinking about it.

RICHARD DOUD: This was pretty much a state concern now. The federal government wasn't involved in this—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Well, you see, the way that the—that was set up, it came under the state PWA administration.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: But the money was federal. I don't know how that first program was organized, I mean, on a nationwide basis, or how much autonomy each state administrator had. But it was a prototype of the later on—of later on, the WPA, because they also had the variety of other—they had direct welfare. And I think they had some—I know that practically all of the Key West community was on the WPA, because there was no other employment anymore. It used to—before the Depression, the main industry in Key West, aside from some fishing, was the cigar making with tobacco. But I think even before the Depression, those factories had moved away because they found that they could produce more efficiently in air-conditioned factories up north. I think also a good part of the Key West tobacco or cigar industry was the—probably the hand rolling type that later on became more mechanized [inaudible]—I think probably originally the cigar business in Key West, since they raised no tobacco there at all, there was a way of making Cuban or Havana cigars without paying the taxes. [Richard Doud laughs.] That's probably how it got started. At any rate, it accounted for—at least a third of the population in Key West were Cuban.

[00:15:04]

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: After all, it's just a large jump from Key West over to Cuba.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah. But this—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: There was also—oh, another thing with—Key West had also been a naval base, you see. And that had been moved out. That was another important thing.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Inaudible.] [Cross talk.]

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Now you asked about the PWA. Julius Stone was state administrator and he seemed to have pretty much of the free hand in deciding what kind of projects he wanted. And he seemed also to have pretty much a free hand in trying to develop Key West as a tourist center. There were—actually the effort to develop tourism there, I'd say, never developed very far. For one thing, there were just two hotels there and probably with the total accommodation of maybe 120 to 150 rooms. So, there wouldn't have been any place to put them up if they did come, you see.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And then that was also before this new highway was built. And the only way to get into Key West now—well, I had my car down there—there must have—yes, there must have been—well, the new overseas highway wasn't built, and there was this little—

RICHARD DOUD: A ferry?

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: —railway, the Flagler railway.

RICHARD DOUD: Flagler, right. Uh-huh [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And then—[coughs]—

RICHARD DOUD: As administrator, did you paint yourself? Did you contribute to the exhibits and —

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. And there wasn't—after all, there wasn't that much to do because my first job, I remember, was to run into Miami and buy art materials. Because when I got there, the boys were all ready to paint but they had brought their own materials but they had already run out. And they were sketching on the writing tablets, that's about all that was left. A few of them who had been a little bit more provident in coming down still had some watercolors left. But I flew into Miami. They used to have one of these old flying boats, the Pan-American flying boats that would get us onto the mainland.

RICHARD DOUD: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: It was always quite a trip too, because we'd persuade the pilot to fly low. And it was quite exciting to fly, say, 300 feet over these Keys and see the large fish in the water, you know, the sharks and so on.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh. The—these first artists were not on relief. Well—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: No, none of them—no, they've been selected. I'm just dreadfully sorry I can't think of the names at the moment. There was [Erich –Ed.]. Oh, there was a boy by the name of [Jinfrey –Ed.] from Milwaukee. Then there was a big Swede [inaudible] and his name was—I'm sorry about that. I should have—

RICHARD DOUD: Well, that's understandable. Well, the government then paid for the supplies?

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yes.

RICHARD DOUD: And the cost of [inaudible]—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yeah. The government paid for the supplies and the material.

RICHARD DOUD: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And we produced each three paintings a week. And we—oh, yes, we received—we had our room and board. And were paid $35. Since I was head of the Art Project, I think I got [$]40. [Richard Doud laughs.] But that was pretty good, basically.

[00:20:17]

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah, I guess it would have been.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: In those days, it was pretty good. It wasn't as much as I had earned in the states, but I think net probably it was because we had no other costs particularly.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And we had very good quarters, because the old navy yard—since the navy was no longer there, it was empty. And we were billeted in these houses. I remember there were—I shared one house with three or four other fellows. And we had a Colored maid who was a wonderful cook. It was a very, very congenial and very delightful atmosphere. And somehow, you felt, actually, as if you, for the time being, escaped the Depression somewhat, you know.

RICHARD DOUD: I bet you did.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Because in—for all of us, all the painters in those days, even if you were not on relief, you still had a hard time getting along really.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: I probably was a little luckier than a lot of the other men, because I had had some portrait commissions that kept me going. And in the meantime, I had some art classes in Des Moines also. Nevertheless, it was a delightful six months—six or eight months.

Well, other things developed. We did develop a number of exhibitions. And then the job came along of mounting them. And at that stage of the game, a young fellow knocked on our doors, and his name was Henry LaCagnina. And while he was a painter of sorts, he—his main talent was just general all-around craftsman. And he—and I think probably Rex would have mentioned Henry, because Tugwell later on became very fond of Henry, because I brought him to Washington. But Henry was in demand. He became very, very valuable to us. He also had a very nice talent for painting. And particularly, he, with his decorative talents, made himself useful in making very attractive maps to illustrate the location of Key West. Illuminated maps, you might say, or animated maps.

So, he also took charge of the mounting and the framing of the watercolors. I think the routing of those exhibitions was all done through Mr. Stone's office in—where—in Tallahassee, Florida, wherever the state administrative office was. Well, we accumulated an awful lot of paintings. And I suppose we—there must have been six or eight of these exhibitions circulating. In the meantime, too, the paintings that were not yet set up in exhibition were stacking around, and we decided to set up an art gallery, which we did.

RICHARD DOUD: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And then one of the men had an idea, in order to make the town itself more attractive to tourists, why didn't we do murals for the various little bars and bistros of the town?

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Well, all of the men set to [laughs] with a great deal of enthusiasm to do that. So, pretty soon there wasn't a little dirty spoon restaurant in Key West that didn't have huge murals on the wall, you know [laughs]. Sometimes the murals would be larger than the restaurant itself, frankly, And we'd have been cut them down. We got the—we got sheets of Masonite or four by eight sheets and we'd go to work—I got some—in order to facilitate the work, cover the ground, we used to use the casein or tempera, and very often just the tempera, the type that you use to paint the—paint walls.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:25:30]

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Except you could buy that in powder form and in the pure color. It was a little bit crude but still made [coughs] very [coughs]—I'm sorry about this—lively decorations. Well, the next thing that developed that we got involved in in Key West during those eight months—those were a very lively active eight months, I assure you—in—during the height of the winter season in Miami, Mr. Stone decided that he wanted to make a special attraction to bring people down to Key West from the mainland. So, he decided that the whole town would turn to—we better get out of the way. We got rained on here. The—[inaudible] protect that [inaudible] how about an umbrella? Can we move this indoors? Do you want to stop the—

RICHARD DOUD: Well, now that we're in and out of the rain, we'll pick up—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yeah.

RICHARD DOUD: You're talking about another development at the height of the—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Uh-huh [affirmative].

RICHARD DOUD: —winter season in Miami.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yes. [Coughs.] This was a cultural project that in one way or another involved pretty well all of the WPA people in—or rather the PWA people, in Key West. Mr. Stone decided that we would put on a performance of *The Pirates of Penzance*.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And he brought down a musical director. The—this project was in—was taken charge of by the man in Key West who had charge of some architectural works. He was a known architect. But about six weeks before the evening of the festival, this man had an accident. He drove in a taxi. He was riding in a taxi, and he got in a crash and was put out of the running. He was not too seriously injured, but at least he had to retire. And for lack of somebody better, they asked me to [laughs] take charge of his program. Well, we had already been very much involved, of course, because in developing the stage setting, we used one of the—we were planning to use one of the old outdoor courts, one of the ruins—small courts that were located in the southern of the little island. And we were decorating that as the rocky headlands of Penzance.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And we all turned to in one way or another. And one of the young men, the landscape architect turned off had the talent for making costumes. And one of the boys, we found, was pretty good about the electrical lighting. And it's amazing how many talents we dug up in one way or another.

[00:30:11]

In the meantime, the musical director was rehearsing the choruses, and we even found one or two local singers that have very nice voices who were the principals. One of the boys on the Art Project, Avery Johnson, a boy from Chicago, have a very fine baritone voice. So, he became the Pirate King, and he did very well in that. We didn't happen to have a tenor who could run the high notes very well, so we borrowed somebody from Miami, one of the tenors from the local radio station there. It all worked out fine. Incidentally, later, that tenor—in the process of the rehearsals, in the process of the performances, the tenor became—fell in love with the prima donna—

RICHARD DOUD: Oh boy.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: —who he later on married. [They laugh.] And they settled down in Key West. And many years afterwards when I made—I think in '49, I found that they were living there still happily in Key West.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh, good.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And that was the big project. Of course, all of us also except myself—I was in charge of the—directing the show with a number of misgivings since I've had really no—I had belonged to the dramatic club at the University of Wisconsin, but beyond that—well, I'd had a couple of years—I had a year in the University of Kansas in '29, no in, '28, the year before, as the technical director of the drama department, but that was mainly concerned just with

stagecraft. At any rate, we got the thing over, and it did very well. Still, the tourists didn't come, except that they did—enough came over to support the performances, and fill the houses [inaudible]. [Coughs.] Got a lot of good publicity, I'll say that.

RICHARD DOUD: Were there any lasting influences in Key West from what you were doing there?

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: No, I think not really. Later on, when I came back, I—we—I still saw some of the murals there, and they have managed, in a way, to keep the gallery going. I did think—I do think, yes, that later on some artists—the things that we did there, did bring some other painters there, probably on a temporary basis. I have no idea what ever happened to all the paintings. I think a lot of them finally ended up in the—in executive offices throughout the states in various places.

RICHARD DOUD: Probably did. Well, how—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: I think the—perhaps the value of the Key West Project was this, that if the—it gave Ned Bruce the idea of employing artists on relief. See, it was a prototype for the art program that followed later. Well, Mr. Bruce had a basic policy difference with Harry Hopkins—

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: —that you're probably familiar with. It's probably already pretty well recorded. So that he then sold the idea to the [Morgenthaus –Ed.] to start the Federal Art Program for murals in post offices and public buildings. And then Holger Cahill became the head of the WPA Art Projects. But I'm sure that the Key West art program was a prototype, you might say, was a germ for developing the later on vast—

RICHARD DOUD: Did Cahill—was he very aware of what was going on in Key West?

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Not to my knowledge. And certainly, I don't recall that he ever was there. No, I think he came onto the scene perhaps a little bit later.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:35:00]

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Because when I came toward the end of my stay there in Key West, I met Rex. And he came down as a guest of Julius Stone. Julius Stone by then had moved to Key West. He had a very nice house there. And he was a great host. And one evening, he asked me to come to dinner saying that he was entertaining a Mr. Rex Tugwell, of course, I knew very well who Mr. Tugwell was because he had plenty of publicity.

RICHARD DOUD: He certainly did.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Even back then. And I found him a very charming fellow. And he was intensely interested in everything that we were doing. And he told me then that evening, he said that—or perhaps it was the next evening—he asked me to come over and see him and he told me then that he was planning to begin the resettlement administration. And although it is primarily concerned with the resettlement of rural—stranded rural people, and also with the suburban greenbelt community, he felt that an all-around type of art program—he didn't try to define it, he left that up to me—but he felt that the skills and the talents of artists were very vital to developing a community life.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: But that—we talked about that, I recall, in a very roundabout way. I mean, nothing specific, but—so, it was with considerable surprise that several weeks later, Mr. Stone showed me a telegram asking permission to try to get me to go to Washington. And also stating it in a way that is if I were interested. Well, Julius had me over. I think he was a little reluctant on the other hand, because he—I think he—the Art Project in Key West was his favorite baby too, you know.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And then by that time, things were running smoothly, and we were—what with *The Pirates of Penzance* and the murals and the watercolors, we were a focal point of

attention [inaudible]. Everything is running very well, you really don't need me anymore. My job of directing this thing is very simple, and by now, some of the other boys can take over. Although I myself at the time, I had—I took about a week or two to think it over, because I felt that up to then my work had always shaped up with a basic emphasis on painting. Although I had done teaching and I had developed some community galleries throughout the Midwest and —but still, I always thought of myself as a painter and going to Washington with a program of that kind looked to me as though [inaudible] time for it. For any more painting. So, there was a decision that had to be made there. But—and I went to Washington to interview and to talk to him, see what ideas he had. And I went back to Key West then and thought it over and, well, I went to Washington.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, when—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Now, there's one thing you mentioned that perhaps I left out, in this Key West Art Project, and that is, although Henry LaCagnina came in fairly late in the program, he made himself enormously useful. He was an Italian boy from New York. And his people were the old Italian type craftsmen. They were there in the house decorating business, but they had all sorts of skills and techniques, they could turn their hand into anything, anything in this decorative line, you might say.

[00:40:16]

And Henry was—besides I think Henry was real artist at heart too. So, one of the things that he did was to renovate some of the—one or two of the navy houses as guest houses for VIPs and other people that came down. I think partly Stone had in mind, if the project kept up—if that whole program had kept up—of course, that was changed into the WPA not too much long after I went to Washington. And I think they probably tightened down on some of the—

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah, they were—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: —side frills that we were able to do when we were a freer program, you see. But Henry then set up a woodworking shop there, and made furniture for some of the navy houses and decorated them. And did a beautiful job. And I think that probably was what Rex had in mind when he indicated that we were making furniture there.

RICHARD DOUD: It must have been, yeah.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: But that was a—that actually was just begun at the time that I left. And I don't think it ever got any further than just the furnishing and decorating of several of these navy houses.

RICHARD DOUD: It never became a project as such?

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: No, no.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, could you—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: It did later on under my Special Skills program. And I got Henry come to Washington. And there, the furniture became a major activity, because we also found the people who were being resettled in these—into these communities. Would come there very often without any furniture whatever. And since they were considered to be wards of the government, the local merchants, very often, were anxious to give them credit even when they shouldn't have done so.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: So that in a number of cases, they found people who were buying furniture that was costly, probably not very good, very—not very durable, but was getting them into a very serious credit situation. The idea occurred to me at the time now, if the government builds houses for them to move in, furniture is part of an essential part of a house. Why don't we design furniture on the basis of the actual blueprints of these houses?

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: So that the furniture would be functional. And that it would fit. And that it will be durable. And the thought occurred to us, also, if the furniture that we designed and proved out were manufactured by established furniture manufacturers—who were in those days

having a pretty hard time too—we could help—give a little shot to the economy in that way and in no way interfere with private enterprise. We set up a committee which included the head of the National Furniture Manufacturers Association and some people skilled in the industry, actual manufacturers. I employed designers.

[00:45:00]

And in the Special Skills program, I got hold of a small building. And on the second floor of the building, set up a woodworking shop, so that we could test out our designs and work them out. And Henry La Cagnina there was in charge of that. That was all—of course, it was all very controversial, and we got a lot of bad publicity on that before the things straightened out. But later on, I think that the manufacturers were very happy with our solution, because we did give out contracts that amounted to about $3 million or more.

RICHARD DOUD: Really?

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: In—of course, the resettlement program was sort of a mixed bag. And I don't suppose you want it, since that's not part of the art subject, I don't want to get too far into that. But Dr. Tugwell's idea originally was he wanted the greenbelt communities. He was interested in planning. Those were the suburban communities. And he wanted to use [coughs] the federal relief money, and so on, to make some model communities that would be suburban to some of the larger cities. And the president agreed with him except that—on the provision that he would take over, also, a number of the rural communities, some of which had been started under the Department of Interior and some under the old PWA—

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: —and so on. And of course, it got to be very complicated, and all. Our furniture program was largely concentrated on the majority of the greenbelt communities. And there, the furniture was made available to the people on a long-term payment basis, it wasn't [inaudible].

RICHARD DOUD: Well, that's pretty good.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Now, as far as this Special Skills division is concerned, I think what we did do, and did very effectively, I think, was our community programs. One of the things that was clear, particularly in these hybrid rural communities where people have been taken out of the cities and very often stuck in a rural—or the rural communities—people with no social or cultural unity, there's nothing to bind them together. We felt that we had to do [coughs], and that we could do, something effectively to, well, give them entertainment really, but also, help them do things for themselves. In other words, it was just not putting on vaudeville shows—

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: —and [inaudible] at time, but rather to develop a creative interest and social interest and entertainment interest, music, dancing, and so on. Their own participation and activity, and that's how we got started on folk music activity. We had—I got Mr. Charles Seeger, whose son Pete Seeger now—

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Well, the—up to that time, Alan Lomax and his father, and probably a handful of other folklorists, had already begun to dig out some of the music out of the hills and the mountains and Lead Belly and people of that kind. But their interests had been that primarily of collectors. Although the Lomax's were associated—they were connected with the Library of Congress. It was purely a collecting and publishing activity.

[00:50:15]

Well, Charles Seeger was [inaudible]—although he'd started out life as a professional pianist, he was a musicologist, and was also intensely interested in the folk music. And a great friend of the Seegers. So, our project was to find people who were trained in music, employ them on my program, send them into the community, fit them up with recording machine, dig out the folk music, and then turn it back into active singing and dancing programs.

RICHARD DOUD: Excuse me.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yeah.

RICHARD DOUD: Let me turn this—

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ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Exactly to—I had mentioned this folk music activity, because I think that is the one—definitely one tangible thing that we did during the Special Skills thing that has really lasted and boomed.

RICHARD DOUD: It certainly has. Uh-huh [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Because, for one thing, we had some money available and were—through Mr. Seeger's efforts, we set up, actually, the first archive of folk music in the Library of Congress.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And with our recording equipment and all. We were able to get to—to wax I don't know how many hundreds of folk songs, that later on became the source material for a great deal of the current stuff, although not all, but still it—I think it was the starting point of the current interest in folk music. Although at the time there were other independent movements too, such as the Appalachian Folk Festival that was started more or less at the same time, independently.

RICHARD DOUD: Was there any cooperation in this line between Special Skills and the Federal Music Project? Did you work [inaudible]—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: [Coughs.] No. Not that I recall. We—as a matter of fact, there wasn't any—I don't think—you see, the WPA being organized as it was, such projects, as music projects would be, for the greater part [in cities –Ed]. And it is only such art projects as the Index of American Design that would tend to go out into the rural area [inaudible].

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Ours was entirely oriented to the rural situation, particularly in these troubled areas, these rural resettlement project.

RICHARD DOUD: What—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: We had music, and there was also we started establishing some artists-in-residence in some of these communities. Their job would be—for example—they would have a specific job to, say, do a mural for the community hall or school, or to do their sculpture, something of that kind.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Is this where Ben Shahn got associated with Special Skills?

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yeah, that's how Ben Shahn got into it. Although Ben's work was directed to the Hightstown [ph] project, which is now—

RICHARD DOUD: I think that community is now called Roosevelt, isn't it? It still—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: That was a community for the resettlement of needle tradespeople, I think, largely.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And we wanted—that was one of the major suburban projects. Although that too—that I think was originally started under the Department of Interior, and it came into the resettlement program. But nevertheless, it was a—not a rural project. And Ben's assignment was to make a mural for the school, which depicted the history of the needle trade union. But before he got to that, Ben also made a contribution to Roy Stryker's photographic project. You've probably discussed that last night.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: What?

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: About Ben's contribution to Roy Stryker's photographic project.

[00:05:09]

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. [Cross talk.] I've talked with Ben about that. Yes.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: So, we don't have to cover that angle.

RICHARD DOUD: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: But that was partly because I had—there was Ben and Boris Deutsch and three or four other painters that were on—employed in Special Skills. But not just for murals alone, but to get the contribution of the artists in terms of posters and other things to illustrate such rural agricultural projects—problems as existed in those days, as the Dust Bowl. And these men worked in the building there in Washington. But they had opportunities to go out into the field and spend time in the field and get acquainted with the situation at hand.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure. Yeah. They'd have to—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And that's how Ben, for instance—he had a trip throughout the country that I think he pretty well—I think he must have been gone a month or maybe longer—to go where he felt that he could get material of interest and the photographs, of course, were part of the raw material that he would be working with later on, you see.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah. Well, on this Special Skills thing, did you select the artists who would do the work? And there wasn't a competition type, so actually—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: No, there wasn't. I felt—I selected painters because I felt— like Ben, a man who was sincerely and genuinely interested in the things that we were dealing with and who could—would reflect that in their painting. It didn't always work out with equal success. Of course, Ben was the outstanding man. But I will say this, they all made a very, very sincere effort in—for example, there was [Earnest Pinne –Ed.] who worked with me for—he was on my staff for about—I want to say about three or four months. And he did some magnificent drawings of the West Virginia coal mine era. But he wasn't too happy with it, [inaudible] he and his wife went into that country rather late in the fall [inaudible] second-hand car of theirs, they ran into a lot of hardships and difficulties, and he's not—[it was a little too rugged for him –Ed.]. [Richard Doud laughs.] But on the other hand, most of the artists took those things in their stride.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

ADRIAN J. DORNBUSH: The unfortunate thing was that, very often, the more successful the artist was in depicting the really grim conditions—in terms of posters which were printed and distributed over the state—the result was just too grim for people to take. So, at the time, we had a rather violent reaction against what we were doing rather than—we missed the point.

RICHARD DOUD: Overselling in a way.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yes, in a way. Because the people in the Dust Bow, they knew very well that they were in the Dust Bowl, but they didn't want to have that grim story depicted in posters all over the states, you see.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure. Well, aside then from the making of furniture and the folk music you've discussed, and the painting, what did Special Skills do? Were there any other kind of handicrafts or anything of that nature?

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: No. The handicraft thing, that was decidedly a secondary thing. There was always, in the Depression days, a good deal of pressure to develop handicraft projects with the idea of making people self-supporting.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:10:16]

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: But after all, except for certain subsidized handicraft movements, such as the New Hampshire League of Arts and Crafts and so on—first of all, Dr. Tugwell didn't feel that there were—that handicrafts should be emphasized as a—as an economic thing more than anything else as a hobby or as a means of self-expression. And he was very much interested in developing any handicrafts in schools or in the community centers as a social thing. So, in Special Skills, we never did delve into the handicrafts as such. Later on, after Tugwell left the

administration, when he went—I think he went with the American Molasses Company, and the administration was given into Dr. Will Alexander's hands, Special Skills was scaled down a great deal.

At that time, we did get involved—or those of us that remained on the staff, did for a time get involved in a big handicrafts exhibition in the—that I think is more or less sponsored by the extension service—exhibitions held in the Department of Agriculture. But that was mainly to help select the things and mount the exhibition, even though we had no handicraft projects as such. Then later on, when I went with the WPA, became the associate director of the WPA Art Program, I was given the handicrafts thing for the simple reason that apparently there was nobody else around to handle it. [Richard Doud laughs.] There—the handicraft projects had not grown up actually with the blessing of the administration. There were, in many instances, offshoots of the women's programs, sewing and so on. And the problem there was when I came on, they found that they had handicraft projects in about 42 states and were spending a considerable amount of money, I don't know how many millions [inaudible]And most of—many of these things were without really much purpose. The—and the things that were done very often were just stored in store houses and never any particular meaning or use. And in other instances where they did have some real value, sometimes they work out to be somewhat too costly. My job was [inaudible]—

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: You have about 15 minutes before we have to go

RICHARD DOUD: Okay.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: —more or less to try to make some sense of it. Originally handicrafts were not supposed to be in—under that program, they just grew up from the local pressure. [Inaudible] also there seemed to be a general feeling throughout that if people could only be taught some handicrafts, they could earn some money by themselves—

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: —which is, in the Depression, certainly there was very little chance of this. And so, I tried to give some direction and shape to that program, to weed out those projects that I thought were just plain boondoggling [inaudible]. And also to give the work some real craftsmen meaning, if they did wood carving it would be done for a purpose.

[00:15:05]

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And then also to give it some aesthetic content.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You had—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: I stayed with that I think from about '30—for the WPA Projects over '39 to '40 [inaudible]—then the war came along.

RICHARD DOUD: You were actually working then on the—after Special Skills, you went to the WPA—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yeah.

RICHARD DOUD: —Federal Art Project?

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yes.

RICHARD DOUD: With Cahill?

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: I was associated with Cahill. I had the applied arts and then he had the fine arts.

RICHARD DOUD: I see.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And then the last two years, when the war was coming on—of course President Roosevelt foresaw that with the—everything being turned toward the war effort, he wanted to—he saw—he foresaw that the art programs couldn't continue [inaudible]. And so, he asked me what I thought could be done to—if anything could be done to get—to keep these Art

Projects of ours sustained by individual community. And talking it over with Cahill, we came up with the idea of having National Art Week, which probably—you wouldn't remember but—probably is part of the Archives, because we certainly created quite a lot of hoopla.

RICHARD DOUD: I've seen a material relating to that.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yeah. So, my last two years in the WPA were largely spent organizing and developing that. We had two years of the art week. First year, the director of the Metropolitan Museum in the [inaudible]. And in the—he was the chairman, and the second year Mr. [inaudible] was the—

RICHARD DOUD: Well, I'm afraid—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Well, that was the last part. That was the—those were the last two years of my stay in Washington.

RICHARD DOUD: I'm running out of time here.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yeah, I know.

RICHARD DOUD: But I would like to ask you just sort of a summary evaluation of the government's role in the arts of the '30s. Do you think it was a good thing? Or was it a bad thing? Or do you think the government should have anything to do with supporting arts in the country?

ADRIAN J. DORNBUSH: Well, I've always felt it was a good thing, and I think here—I think the federal art programs that gave a tremendous impetus to the general interest in art that we have today.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, wonder what it would be if it hadn't been for the government keeping artists going.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: [Inaudible] even this, certainly there's a great deal of confusion. Henry Hopkins—Harry Hopkins' point of view as distinct from Ned Bruce's. Ned Bruce was simply interested in employing artists, competent professional artists. Well, Hopkins didn't weed out the talent factor (ph), he said the Art Program is simply to keep people alive and to employ with what they can do best.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: So that in the WPA Art Program, that would certainly—you wouldn't say that it was—by any means that it was all on a professional level. I think even now, we see some of these post offices and wonder whether they were really on a professional level.

RICHARD DOUD: Sure.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Nevertheless, supposing that hadn't been—

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah. What was the alternative? That's the question.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yeah. I mean, on the—what was the alternative? You know, what would have happened to the artists? How many would have stayed with painting?

RICHARD DOUD: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: How many young artists would have had an opportunity to develop? And in the successful Art Project, certainly, the young artists, they had an opportunity to learn from the older ones. There was a tremendous amount of exchange in stimulation about. So, first of all, I think in the—it developed an interest—preserved the artists, I'd say.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

[00:20:15]

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: And the second place, it is clear that the orientation of art activities within various communities certainly later on developed a community interest in the arts that would never [inaudible], I think, from where I sit here—and I've been out of it now for so many years,

for 20 years or more—but I don't—I think it's an extraordinary phenomenon, the widespread and general interest in the arts that have developed since.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, that's a virtue of the WPA in spite of all the vices people charge it with. At least this has been one good thing that came out of it.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yes. After all, the WPA was a way of getting money into circulation. And let's not forget that it was in—it was used, at that time, as a means of keeping people alive and keeping the economy going and hoping that it would prime the pump, as we used to say.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: So, it isn't important, it seems to me, to try to evaluate how many great works of art came up.

RICHARD DOUD: That's right. And this is what people tend to try—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: That, I think, is wrong. I think you have to see it in terms of a living chain of growth.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Exactly. Very good.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: You might say the—it's part of a process of becoming. I mean, that it not only sustained the art—the artists during those days, but had a profound influence of rooting art in the soil in the communities in the United States.

RICHARD DOUD: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yeah.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, Mr. Dornbush, I could listen to you for hours, but I'm afraid—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: Yeah.

RICHARD DOUD: —that I have to leave and I do want to thank—

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: I hope I've given you something of what you want.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeah. You certainly have. I appreciate it.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: I'm sorry about the names that I don't recall, the names of some of these people. I think—I'm sure that five minutes after you leave—

RICHARD DOUD: This happens all the time.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: I'm a little self-conscious about this thing too, don't you see? That probably —

RICHARD DOUD: Well, don't worry.

ADRIAN DORNBUSH: [Inaudible] a little bad on names. I always dig 'em up. But never when I want them.

RICHARD DOUD: But thank you very much.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]