



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with George
Gaethke, 1964 Sept. 26

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with George Gaethke on September 26, 1964. The interview took place in San Francisco, California, and was conducted by Mary Fuller McChesney and Robert McChesney 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

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: This is Mary McChesney interviewing George Gaethke, spelled G-A-E-T-H-K-E, who lives at 1905 Pacific Avenue in San Francisco. The date is September 26, 1964. Present also this morning is Robert McChesney. I'd like to ask you George something about your background. Where were you born?

GEORGE GAETHKE: In Bathgate, North Dakota.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And what year was that?

GEORGE GAETHKE: 1898.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And where did you get your art school training?

GEORGE GAETHKE: I went to California School of Fine Arts for several years, that is, to the night classes three times a week. And after that I went to the Art Institute of Chicago for two years, to the day school. Once I drove a taxi for about three weeks, I didn't know the town, you know, needed money. I nearly blew my top. [They laugh.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Was that the—did you work on salary when you were driving a cab or was—

GEORGE GAETHKE: Oh yes. It was a mad house.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I bet it was.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Well, I did—yes, I thought I was dead—I would just be dead if I kept on with it, so I quit. [They laugh.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How did you first get on the government Art Project?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Oh, I didn't—well, the word went around that there was some work being arranged for artists and I took some samples of my work out the de Young Museum and there were others out there. One of them was—the one I remember particularly was Ralph Stackpole, the sculptor, who would look at these things. And the idea was the work was to be used for the embellishment of public buildings, which is the term they used. And then later on you—you'd be notified about going to work here or there. Well, in the meantime I'd been also sent to a man named Howard Mack [ph] who had something to do with arranging all this, and he said that he would put me on something.

So, nothing happened after a while, and I went to see him again and he said it was all filled up. I was a little desperate on the account that my wife was going to have a baby and such, and food was scarce. And I talked a little with him and he sent me up to Coit Tower to see Maxine Albro and she was doing a fresco. Well, you know there were many artists working up there. And so Claiborne Tatum was also assisting her and so, we didn't actually paint on her fresco, she wanted to do that herself. But she was a fine person to work with, we both enjoyed it very much. We did a lot of drawings for her, and did some research, and helped her in many different ways like running back and forth and getting paint and such like,

moving ladders around.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Did you grind color for her?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Did what?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Did you grind any color for her?

GEORGE GAETHKE: No, there were two fellows who were working on that Ed Hanson [ph], I think his name was, and Farwell Taylor.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: That's right, yeah.

GEORGE GAETHKE: They were down at the end of that floor grinding paint and they'd be—you know, sometimes you'd want certain colors and so on and they'd be a little chary about giving it to you because they wanted to throw a little weight too. They weren't getting a chance to paint, you see, but they wanted to be important. But they were really okay. Everybody really enjoyed working up there an awful lot.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That was 1934?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yep, mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's why I remember, on the account of my daughter being born that year. I called up Maxine one morning and said, I'm at the hospital I wouldn't be to work, and she was quite concerned. I said, well I'm in the process of becoming a father. [Laughs.] And then when I went, the next day or so, back to work, why, one of the nicest things was when I went to the door to let one of the artists in, it happened to be Ralph Stackpole and he said, Want a baby buggy? [They laugh.] I take it that he had one around. They had—I think Peter Stackpole had two or three children. And—

[00:05:26]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Maxine Albro's mural, that large one downstairs of the agricultural scene.

GEORGE GAETHKE: That's right, yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Were you working at Coit Tower during the strike?

GEORGE GAETHKE: No. Naturally I wouldn't.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Do you remember that?

GEORGE GAETHKE: I do remember it. You know, I think actually that that came up after my job ended there. Seeing that they had so much appropriation, you know, and then we were finally laid off, Claiborne and I. She still had some work to do and kept on with it. I know that the strike—it may have started before I went off. All I remember is an awful lot of talk. Not long after that, when these murals were all done, my father and brother happened to be visiting here from Montana and I wanted to show them this artwork and this mural in which I had helped and this guy, he was an ex-navy man, he wouldn't let us in the building. I forget his name, it was some Irish name. On account, it was still a hangover from this strike thing.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well the—let's see the tower was closed—

GEORGE GAETHKE: Kelly, Kelly was his name. I remembered it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: You mean the tower was closed to the public?

GEORGE GAETHKE: He what?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: The tower was closed down so the public couldn't get in.

GEORGE GAETHKE: That's right, and I worked there, and he knew me, [inaudible] absolutely. And he lived in there, he and his wife. He had charge of it, for some reason. I never did understand the whole thing. Nobody was allowed in there at all for a long time and I don't know how it was finally resolved. Well, it had something to do—I think somebody

painted a hammer and sickle on his mural with the—was it a guy named Wright [ph]? Yeah, he did some of those corner things.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, the tall standing figure.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah, that's right, and very nice too.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: What's his name, Wright? [Cross talk.]

GEORGE GAETHKE: I think—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Wight.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Wight, Clifford Wight, yes.

GEORGE GAETHKE: I didn't work with him, I didn't know him, I didn't see much of him.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Who were some of the other people doing murals at the same time you were there?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Well, Ralph Stackpole was doing a big one on the—about, I guess, the same size as Maxine's, on that floor. And at the end John Howard was doing one on that floor, and Victor Arnautoff. There was another younger fellow, I can't think of his name. He did one along on the same wall as John Howard, but I can't recall his name. It may have—let's see, that's all at the moment I can recall there. Then upstairs there were some smaller ones. Oh, Ben Cunningham did some along the stairs above, and I particularly liked those of his because animals were always interest to me and he did some awfully nice things with deer in them up there. There were some more women too. I can't think of her name. Wife, the French wife of one of the Howard boys—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh, Jane Berlandina?

GEORGE GAETHKE: What?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Jane Berlandina?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah, that's it. Is she around yet?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: She's in New York.

GEORGE GAETHKE: She's quite a gal. She'd come sailing in, you know, in the morning and say [Imitating Jane Berlandina], "Good morning Mr. Kelly [ph]." You know like that. [They laugh.] Maxine says—she said, Oh the French can get away with anything [laughs].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Zakheim was working there too, wasn't he?

GEORGE GAETHKE: What?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Bernard Zakheim?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah, now wait a minute, wasn't he up there too?

[00:10:02]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No, he was on the main floor.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah, yeah. Sure, he had one. Good heavens. I haven't seen him for a long time. Sure Zakheim, how could anybody forget him. [They laugh.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How long did you work on Coit Tower?

GEORGE GAETHKE: I don't know exactly, it was a few months, I can't place it exactly. I don't know just when—we worked through the winter, it was cold as hell up there. Maxine felt sorry for me [inaudible] bought some more mufflers and things for me, I actually had some more things at home but I wanted to be tough and not come bundled up too much. [Laughs.]

After, let's see—the next thing after that, I guess, was—there was I believe an interval, I don't know how long, the next thing then was what they called the Federal Art Project. That

first one with the W—or the PWA, Public Works Administration. That's what it was. There was also something, a SRA. There were so many initials, I can't remember them all. Anyway, then the Federal Art Project of the WPA started going. And I got a job on it being assistant to Maxine Albro again on a mosaic which she was doing at State College which was located downtown at that time. Now it's out by the ocean. And I worked for some months on that, and it was quite a large project. And Ted Gregory [ph] was an assistant on it. He was very good at it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Had you had any experience doing mosaic work before you got —

GEORGE GAETHKE: No, no, but actually to work on it—and you work under supervision you can be most useful, and especially if you are an artist at all, because you've got somebody to tell you what to do. I'll show you how—[Gaethke walks away from recorder while speaking] [returns with photographs] are you familiar with how mosaics are made [inaudible].

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yes, a bit. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE GAETHKE: You are—well, I'll just show you—I have photographs. I got these photographs [inaudible].

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: This is a large outside mural.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That was over a doorway and the subject matter was animals and flowers of California, isn't that right?

GEORGE GAETHKE: That's right. I can't remember what her title was.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And it was done in different stones, not glass.

GEORGE GAETHKE: No, no these were actual stones. I don't know if they were all quartz. The only name, for some reason, that I can think of is travertine and I know travertine was used, maybe we used more of it than other—than stones by other names. Where in the heck did that—oh, here's a section, just a piece of it [looking at photographs]. That's the way we did them. You do them in pieces and then they're stuck up on the wall afterwards. That's all technical stuff, she didn't have to do that, that was work for men.

Here she is. Now this man, Carradeo [ph] his name was, he was an experienced man in mosaics. So, I don't know whether Maxine had had any experience in it or not, but anyway, he was there to give off professional help if it was needed.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you do the actual stone cutting yourself or did this man do it all?

GEORGE GAETHKE: No, no, we all worked—see me working back here, and here this is a close up. This is in an old, abandoned school.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: This was [inaudible]—

GEORGE GAETHKE: You see, here, this thing is wood here and this is a little metal block which sits on a table, and then we have this—see this hammer, this special type hammer? You just hold these pieces. That's the way we got them in these pieces about this size. And then we would shape them on this metal with this tool that cut. We got quite skilled at it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]

GEORGE GAETHKE: To fit in the place where you wanted them.

[00:14:58]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: You were doing this work at the school, the WPA headquarters on Turk Street?

GEORGE GAETHKE: It was on Turk Street, I can't remember the school. It was an old, abandoned school that I know. It was Turk, a couple blocks or so off Fillmore, this side of

Fillmore.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Then did you work with Maxine placing the stones on the wall?

GEORGE GAETHKE: No, I didn't, because I asked her before—before they got to that part if she minded if I left it because I got a little tired of working in the mosaic. It was a large mosaic, and I was—again, it was so monotonous. I wanted to do something of my own. And, but I understand that all that part of putting it—they had to build scaffold and it was up high, all that part was done by men skilled in doing that sort of thing.

Well, that's another good thing of the Art Project, is that it functioned as an organization and some people would do this and do that. The business of—well, for instance, they took care of the buying of all the materials and they did whatever you have to do to contact the public places like the schools. Public building people who would want murals, or lithographs, or paintings done by the artists. And all that was done by the people of the organization who did that sort of thing, and the artist didn't have to think about that part of it. I'll tell you, they worked together and that was one of the nice things about it. Well, that sort of thing just doesn't exist now as far as I know.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No.

GEORGE GAETHKE: I was thinking about—I was wondering, supposing they start another art project—which evidently they're not going to, certainly not if that Arizonian gets in. . Good god. [Laughs.] And I don't think LBJ goes in much for it either—if I would go back on it, and I think I would. Say it would be the same deal, I guess, you know you would never make any money on it but at least you could work at it and you know—you'd be sure a certain amount of money. Of course, I don't need it as badly—not that I'm well off or anything, but I don't need it as badly now as I did then. But I can still always use more.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: After you stopped working for Maxine Albro on the mosaic, then you went on to the lithography project?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Lithography project, yes. And I hadn't done any before and I started going to the night classes under Ray Bertrand at the school. And started making them on the Project right away and it was a natural for me. I liked it from the beginning and learned it very quickly. And the—Ray always told me, on the project, that mine were one of the most popular with the schools. Which made me happy because I liked the idea of—aside from any money that you get—of something that you do, of it being used, having a useful purpose in life. And I heard, I mean, so many accomplished people express delight in the things that I had done that—I get a good feeling about that.

As I say, I think I did something like 70 or 72 lithographs while I was on the Project. And I'd say the one thing I liked about working on the Project, I had no hindrance, I was allowed to work out things the way I wanted to do. Do what I wanted and that way I think—also with the anxiety of money off your mind at the moment—that way I think you do your best work. And I think some of the best work I ever did or will do was done on the Project.

[00:20:02]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: George did you take—did you take your stone home?

GEORGE GAETHKE: No. Some of the stones—no, I did all my work up on the project. They did let me—I thought it was better to work up what I wanted to do next at home. You're—at that point where it's a matter of creation, you just want to be left alone, you don't want people annoying you or talking to you or watching to see what you're doing or anything. You just want to be alone, at that point. And then—but and then I had a drawing, not a finished but pretty—fairly finished drawing to show what I would do next. I would bring it there and show it to them and it would have to be passed. I mean they would—if they didn't want it then they'd say no. I don't recall them having turned down any that I did.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Who was this who passed on the drawings? Was that Ray Bertrand?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Well, I don't know whether he had to do with passing on it. He had charge of the project of doing it. As I remember, I believe, it was more Bill Gaskin. And I don't know if Joe Allen passed on that too, he may have.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I don't think Joe had anything to do with it, he was more or less—

GEORGE GAETHKE: More other things.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Well, I think probably Gaskin was the main one.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: But I don't think they juried any work anyway, did they? I think it was all accepted. And then if it—

GEORGE GAETHKE: I thought some things were turned down.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh, really?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah. What they didn't think was adequate. Anybody can—nobody does perfect things every time, of course, as I say I don't think—maybe a few of mine might have been turned down but I don't recall them now. I'd say anybody's work can vary at different times, and I think there were also some of the artists there whose work wasn't as good as some of the others, as you know. Like any group, any true independent group.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: *The San Francisco Chronicle*, I think, did a big spread on these lithographs didn't it?

GEORGE GAETHKE: The what?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: *The San Francisco Chronicle*, didn't they take over a bunch of these lithographs and advertise them in the paper?

GEORGE GAETHKE: That was a separate thing entirely. It had nothing to do with the Project.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No?

GEORGE GAETHKE: In fact I think the Project was over. Well maybe—no it wasn't over yet. The Project was still going on and this was an idea of Bud Painter's, remember him?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

GEORGE GAETHKE: One doesn't forget him. Art Painter, I believe, his name is.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

GEORGE GAETHKE: What was he? He was a publicity man for the Project.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Right.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Well, his idea was to get his artists to make these lithographs, which were printed in large enough editions so that, with good publicity and so on, they could be sold for as little as two dollars each. Well, of course, as far as I'm concerned, I just like to give things away, but people still have to eat. And we all seemed to think it was an excellent idea and it did have fine publicity. I should have looked at my—I have cut out and saved, and they're yellowing in some drawers somewhere. [Laughs.] They had fine publicity and big reproductions of the print which they were now putting out in this two-dollar-idea, and quite a little write up about the artist and how he came to work in art and all that. And a lot of encouraging comments. It seems to me, I, for some reason I may—for some reason I remember the name Professor Pepper, I believe, at UC, was one of the men who was quoted in thinking what an excellent idea it was. Well, it was a fine idea. As I remember thought, it didn't pan out because the outlets fell down on the job. You would go into—this was an actual department store [inaudible].

[00:25:02]

Now I understand you can go buy European originals in a Sears Roebuck. But I haven't been out to see. But you'd go into a department store, and I didn't ask, but others who did had that experience. Asked, and nobody seemed to know anything about it, you'd get up to a department where there would be a bunch of them stacked like this up on counter somewhere, oh, like it was a stack of sheets or something, you know, towels or anything

else. And they just— nothing special was made of it by the stores. It had excellent publicity, they could have. Now that the stores have become more aware of that sort of thing. Of course, mostly stores or department stores—among artists you mention department store art and they all go thumbs down, because you get just any old crap there. And—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: So, they didn't sell very many of these? As a result of the stores [inaudible]—

GEORGE GAETHKE: I don't know. I never did know about that part of it. Anyway, it didn't work out. They did sell, I think, quite a number but I say the—it fell down on the outlet part of it. The rest of it had just come along fine. Ray Bertrand printed them, and Bud Painter managed to get this excellent publicity we had. You know, I was all thrilled about it. But—and there were—I forget who all was in it, but there were a number of people, I think. Oh, I believe Victor Arnautoff was there.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I think practically everybody who was working on the lithograph project turned out something. George Harris—

GEORGE GAETHKE: Who?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: George Harris, he had one.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Oh, George Harris, sure. Where's he?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: He's gone to school at Stanford, didn't he?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: He lives down in Palo Alto. How many prints did you get, George, from a stone?

GEORGE GAETHKE: You mean in this last thing we were—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: No, when you were on the Project.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Oh. They printed—at first the artist could have only one of the prints, and there were then an addition of 28 printed. Afterwards they changed that, and the artist was allowed to have three of the prints to do with whatever he wanted. And then the other 25 were allocated to different schools or different tax paid institutions which had a preference for this or that lithograph. I mean they would choose their own.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: They came into headquarters and picked out what they wanted?

GEORGE GAETHKE: That's right, and then they had to pay for the framing of the prints. I don't know how much it was, and I'm not sure whether the Project did that part of it or not. I think maybe they did. I had no contact with that part of it. I think it was done quite inexpensively. So, that was that part of it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Most of your lithographs were of animal subjects?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yes. Well, it just happened to be. Animals have always interested me ever since I can remember, and so it was a natural thing for me to do.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did they assign you a quota? Were you expected to do so many per month or something like that?

GEORGE GAETHKE: No, they—I don't—they may have had ideas about it, but I never even thought about it. I would finish a lithograph, then I was allowed to work up my next one in drawing at home, which would maybe sometimes take a few days. Maybe a day, or a couple of days, maybe even longer. Bring it down to the Project and they would look at it and say, Okay. I would go ahead and work on the stone making the lithograph at the Project, and then it would be printed right there too. Let's see, did I get off on a tangent or something? I forget now just what you asked me, I get talking so much.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: No, that was it. I was going to ask you too, did you have any exhibitions of lithographs that were done on the Project?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yes, I did. As I say, the artist could have three for themselves.

[00:30:00]

So, I had those three, I kept one of each for myself because I always wanted to keep one of each, and still have them. So, I had two to sell and then I started making some on my own in the evening, at California School of Fine Arts. Ray Bertrand taught there and he—well, I did my own, he didn't tell me what to do, but he did the printing of them.

That's one of the things that bothers me a little. At that time certainly many of the artists, maybe most of them—and I'm speaking of the whole country, I mean, people like Rockwell Kent, who had done so many—their work was printed by a printer of lithographs, and of course, I always stayed right there when it was being printed and you know, if anything wasn't right they can do something to the stone and you can work on it a little more until it comes out the way it's intended to be. And I stayed there until the whole thing was printed. And once in a while I would even lend a hand and help a little. Oh, what I was going to say, at that time it would be the custom for most—I think most artists, to have the work printed by a good printer. I forget the name of that man in New York who is so well known. I would know it if I heard it. And he did Rockwell's prints I know that, and many other nationally known artists. But these days, with so much—so many individual approaches and work in experimentation that if you want to work in that way, you're practically forced to do your own printing in order to produce that sort of thing. So I—you really need quite a lot of equipment in order to do lithographs, you've seen the presses—about this long, big heavy things. I guess quite expensive.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE GAETHKE: I don't know if it's true, but sometimes I would say to Ray, Well, I think I really ought to learn how to print my own. But that's not a natural for me. I'm not mechanical. I wish I were a mechanical aide, but I'm not. [Laughs.] And he'd say, Well, George, that takes about three years. So I don't know if he's right, but that's what he said. So I would be just content to go ahead and make my own drawings and let someone else print it. But as I say though, now, with the trend in the arts, so much of it is experimental and you're just—really to do the things they're doing, much of it at least, you just about have to do your own printing because you don't know what you're going to do yourself. And you—as I understand it, things happen as you go along in developing the work and you take advantage of that, well, you do that in watercolor or oil or other things too. And this isn't something you could tell a printer. I mean, what I mean is you would have to be doing it yourself in order to get what you were [inaudible]—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You're average professional printer wouldn't touch it anyway.

GEORGE GAETHKE: I think so. He'd think you're utterly mad. [Laughs.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: He'd flip.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Of course, the thing about Ray Bertrand is he was an artist himself, so was the good part of that. But this grumpy old guy—I don't remember his name—who was a printer on the Project, who did a lot of the printing—he wasn't an artist, I'm sure. He probably thought we were all a bunch of nuts. Well, as many people think that artists are all a little crazy, but I always feel it's kind of a nice crazy. [They laugh.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Who were some of the other artists who were on the lithographic project when you were on? Besides Ray Bertrand.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Well, of course, Ray Bertrand was in charge of the project. Oh, one of them was Lloyd Wulf, remember Lloyd Wulf?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yes.

GEORGE GAETHKE: He had a lot of talent. I don't know what happened to him. He went to Ecuador, the last I heard of him. Whether he ever came back, I don't know. And why do I think of him; there was quite a number of them.

[00:35:01]

[Inaudible.] Now I can't remember whether Dong Kingman did some lithographs on the Project or whether that was a separate thing. I know he had done lithographs, but he may

have just done it at the time that—a separate thing, you know, where they had at *the Chronicle*.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Well, I think—

GEORGE GAETHKE: He may have done some, I don't know, on the Project. I don't know—now, why can't I think of other people, I guess I was so concerned with my own [laughs]—but there were a lot of people working on it.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: At one time I think practically all the artists were worked on it.

GEORGE GAETHKE: At some time.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Did some plates—

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Clay Spohn—

GEORGE GAETHKE: Oh, Clay Spohn. Yeah.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Reuben Kadish did some.

GEORGE GAETHKE: I remember Shirely Staschen even did some. She's up your way, I think, isn't she?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah.

GEORGE GAETHKE: [Inaudible], or something?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE GAETHKE: Sebastopol.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: Ray Bertrand practically revived the art of lithography in San Francisco, didn't he? As I understand, there was hardly anybody—nobody was doing it before he came along on the Project.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah. Yeah, I think he did. I think he made—really responsible for quite a lot of the movement. There are quite a few people doing lithographs now.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: You were saying that you had a show in New York during this time.

GEORGE GAETHKE: No, I didn't have a show in New York. I actually had some of my prints in a New York gallery, the Wihe Gallery, W-I-H-E, for a while. I didn't hear much from them, and I didn't know much about putting things out in galleries at that time. So after about six months, I wrote and asked them to please send them back, which they did.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: How long were you on the lithographic project?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Well, I guess—I don't know. I spent most of my time on that, and on mural projects. Oh, gosh, I don't know. I stayed on the Project—I was there during the whole darn thing. Let's see, '34 was when that PWA thing was going. There must be a way of finding out when the regular WPA Federal Arts Project thing started. Maybe the next year, or maybe that same year, I don't know. So, I was on it from then until the war, and then everybody was off. I don't know how much time I was on the lithograph project, but quite some time. A couple years, maybe more than that. I don't know.

But then you see, I did some other things too. I was assistant to Hilaire Hiler for a while, on his mural at Aquatic Park. [Rattling sound.] Which—that's nothing, that door rattles—which I hate to see partly obscured now by the thing that they have in—have you been down there? You know, that building where—well, they show all these ships and models and things, and a lot of it right in front of the mural.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah, I haven't been down there recently, but we were down there, years ago.

GEORGE GAETHKE: I haven't recently. But I was shocked when I first saw what had happened. My wife even wrote a letter to the paper about it, which they printed. I saw Hilaire Hiler once, oh, a couple years after that. He was here on one of his visits. I'd just mentioned it to him, he just shrugged his shoulders and went on playing the piano. I guess he figured, well, it's all down the drain.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: You were on Hiler's job after the—right after the lithographs?

GEORGE GAETHKE: After the lithograph, yeah. I didn't work so long with him. But I enjoyed it very much. Well, it was down at what they call the pickle factory. And he was a fine person to work with.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Were some of his mural done at the pickle factory?

[00:40:00]

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah, it was painted—actually painted there. It was painted on canvas and then put up on the walls down at Aquatic Park. And then, let's see, I think there was some painting of it done there too, afterwards.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you do the actual painting for him?

GEORGE GAETHKE: I did do, yeah. Now, he let his assistants paint on it. Of course, he had his completely worked out small painting of it done to scale. I don't know whether it was an inch to the foot or two inches to the foot. So you'd just follow that. It was his work, and he would come along, and tell us, Oh, well, let's change this a little, or do this or that that way. It was under his supervision.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Who were the other assistants?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Pardon?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Who were the assistants who worked with you on that? Do you remember?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Tom Dowley. And after a while they even had that Ann Medalie. I can hardly remember her. Bob somebody, Bob—I think he did pottery afterward.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Bob Clark?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Clark, yeah. He was working on it. Larry Holmberg, he did quite a lot of painting on it. Larry Holmberg.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What's the subject matter of the murals?

GEORGE GAETHKE: It's fish, sea forms. Have you been in Aquatic Park?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Yes, I've seen it.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah. Very nice job, I thought. I loved it. I remember when we were down there, it was pretty well towards completion, and the only time I saw that was when Covarrubias and his wife came in. And Hiler is a nice guy, he introduced us all to them, and said, you know, doing a lot of my best work, or something like that. And Covarrubias and his wife was highly enthusiastic about it. They loved it. She was just like a little bombshell, bouncing all over the place. It was cute. He's died since, I heard too. Covarrubias.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh, has he?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah. I remember talking to him there, and he had—he used to do these full-page caricatures in color in *Vanity Fair*, if you recall them.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative.]

GEORGE GAETHKE: And I mentioned to him, I said, They're not printing *Vanity Fair* anymore, I miss not seeing those pieces. And he says, I certainly miss that outlet. And there never has been anything really like *Vanity Fair* was since—well, there's an awful lot of magazines. You've got *Esquire* and that sort of thing, but it's different. I guess *Vanity Fair* was a snob

publication, but it had some interesting things in it.

I should tell you also, I shouldn't forget—my chief accomplishment on the Project was a mural I did of my own. Which was down at the Baywood School in San Mateo.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Was that after Hilaire Hiler's project?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: After Aquatic Park, then you did your own mural?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah. That was after that. This was—we were still working in what we called the pickle factory, I think it had at the pickle factory at one time. Down there on Columbus and—what street was the art school is on? Chestnut, maybe? I don't know.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I think it was.

GEORGE GAETHKE: I think Chestnut.

ROBERTH MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE GAETHKE: Well—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Famous building.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Hm?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Very famous building. I think practically all the artists in San Francisco worked there—[Cross talk.] were on the Project, so.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah. Well, at any rate, I thought, well, I could do a mural. So we got the measurements of the walls where it was to be, and this is for a kindergarten room, in this San Mateo school, and of course again, animals and that.

[00:45:02]

So, I worked up my idea, I got the colors [inaudible] it was passed, and so I did it. And the two men who helped me on it mostly were Peter Friedrichsen, who I think has died since too. He was a very useful man on the Project. He worked on many things on the Project, he was one of the most useful—and so was—[inaudible] I can't think of his name. Ernie Lenshaw.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did he help you on your mural too?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Pardon?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Was he your assistant on this mural too?

GEORGE GAETHKE: No. But Peter Friedrichsen, F-R-I-E-D-R-I-C-H-S-E-N. And Ed Herron, H-E-R-R-O-N. They both—they were the main ones who worked on it with me. And they did paint it. In fact, I learned some things from Peter. And he had worked on so many things on the Project that he knew technical things that I didn't know about. So, you know, it's all a business of us working together.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How large was this mural?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Well, it was approximately about 400 square feet. And worked on it about a year.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: When did you begin, do you remember the year you began it?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Oh, 1940 I had it completed.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

UNIDENTIFIABLE SPEAKER: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE GAETHKE: So it must have been '39. I mean, I know it was about a year. [Inaudible.] [Looking at photographs. -Ed.]—put it on the floor so we can see it, and this is a

photograph of one end of it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Oh yeah, and how many walls was it?

GEORGE GAETHKE: All the way around the room.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: All the way around the room?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah. It was [inaudible] four and a half feet high, and this gives the length, I believe, of this wall.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: 26 feet by four and a half feet?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah. But I don't have a picture of the longest wall, I have a picture of some of the spots in it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: And this was done oil on canvas?

GEORGE GAETHKE: That's right, at the pickle factory. And then the idea that it had to dry to a certain stage. It had to dry long enough before it could be rolled on a core and taken down, so there would be no damage to the painting. And when we were putting it up—well, let me see, what's his name. Reuben Kadish was in charge of that project. And Reuben was down there with us when we installed it. And when we were putting it up, oh, we had all kinds of ladders and things. Several of us holding it by the top and all. It's quite a tricky thing, installing those things. But we did it, made a perfect job of it. And you have all this thick gooey stuff on the back of it, your fingers got all slippery and the thing started to slip [Mary Fuller McChesney laughs], like that, and smeared a lot of this white stuff all over the front of it. And the superintendent came in, you know, clapped his brow. [Laughs.] Oh, he even leaped in and tried to help. And he said to me, Is it ruined? and I said, No. I said, It's perfectly fine because it's just at the stage where we can put it up, and it just can be cleaned off. And it won't harm the mural at all. I was so pleased. I felt so professional, I could tell him this. [Laughs.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What kind of colors are they?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Gorgeous colors [laughs].

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Very bright?

GEORGE GAETHKE: No, not brilliant colors. But now the ground color in here was all—mainly [inaudible] I'd say it's sort of a [inaudible] purplish plum color. And worked in to it the other—I'd like to have a color photograph of it. It was something off-maroon. Only maroon wouldn't describe it. It's a more subtle color than that. And because of the animals, I guess, they approach the natural colors. The bears are all black and gray and white. The tigers are a pretty good orange. I probably didn't use just straight black for the stripes. And then of course all the different colors for the plant forms.

[00:50:32]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Is it still in place there, at the school?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Is it what?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Is it still there in the school?

GEORGE GAETHKE: I hope so. I have heard of murals from the Art Project which have disappeared and so on. But I'll tell you, I went down there 10 years after it was up. My mother happened to be visiting here from Montana, and I wanted her to see it. So, my wife and my mother and I went down there to the school, just taking a chance, you know. We went in there, very nice. And of course, there was a kindergarten class on. But the kindergarten teacher, I don't recall her name, she was most accommodating. She took it all in stride, and the kids just kept on doing what they were doing. And so we were able to come in and look at the mural. And she told me—she said, This mural had just made this room. She said, I've been here for eight years. So that's a lot to me.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: That's wonderful. Did you stretch the canvas? When you were painting at the pickle factory, did you have the canvas stretched?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE GAETHKE: And that, you see, was all done by people who were expert in that sort of thing. I didn't have to prepare the canvas. I forget the names of some of these people who were doing that. But this was not done on linen. This was done on a heavy cotton. I've got it written down somewhere what weight it is. In fact, I have a few trimming strips of it around somewhere. And then it prepared—it was prepared by the men who were working on the project who do sort of thing, who knew how to do it professionally. And then when it was ready to paint on, then I came to it and started working. And the building, the scaff— [coughs] excuse me—I don't know what you call it. Anyways, the structure on which the canvas was stretched, that was all done by other people. So, in that way, it was quite deluxe. [Laughs.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you do any murals after this one?

GEORGE GAETHKE: No, I didn't. I know when they had the—well, what do you call it, presentation or opening of the mural or whatever you would call it. There were a number of people and the officials and so on down there to view it. I was just—[inaudible] I don't know why, Reuben fell down on me that time. He called me up, it was kind of late, the very day it was going to happen. So I managed to get down there, and had a few beers or something first, you know, so I could stand it. [Laughs.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Was Reuben Kadish your supervisor at the time?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And he's in New York, I believe, now. He's been back East a long time. So, I wandered around. Well, naturally, I would like to have my wife see it, and some of my own personal friends. So, I told Joe Allen about this. [Inaudible] I don't hear anything until the last second about it, and he says, Well, who am I? [Inaudible] I want to show it to somebody. So we got permission from the school, show it on a Saturday, and had quite a little party of friends who drove down there and viewed it. Saw it. The janitor was there to open it. Only he said we couldn't smoke in the room, the school. And we all came to my house and had a nice party. So that to me was the official opening. These other people were nothing to me. [They laugh.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How did you happen to be selected to do this mural? Who asked you to do it?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Gosh. Who suggested it? I honestly can't remember how it came about.

[00:55:04]

Really a number of people had said to me, Why don't you do a mural? And I said, Oh, I've never done one before. And then, of course, afterwards I helped some other people, so why not? I can't recall—I suppose that Joe Allen and Gaskin suggested it to me. And I went ahead and was accepted. And it was very well taken down there, too.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: After that was completed, what did you do then on the Project? That was 19—

GEORGE GAETHKE: Oh, let's see. I was doing—it was pretty—let's see, when was Pearl Harbor, December 7, '41?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE GAETHKE: '41, I think, wasn't it? And I had '40 on this mural somewhere, but that didn't mean that it would have been completed in '40, but I think it was in—sometime in '41 when it was really completed and installed and everything. After that, what I remember—it when in, I think—can you read it? I have it on one of these things.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No, there's no date on this.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Well. I did some silk screen, some design for silk screen. But I didn't print them myself. There was a man named Ed Casey [ph]. He was doing the printing of the silk screening jobs. So I did several of those. I rather liked it. But I didn't get far enough in it before the Project folded to, you know, really do a lot with it. [Inaudible] I don't know if I have

—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you work directly on the screen? How did you go about doing the silk screens? Did you work directly on the screen with touche?

GEORGE GAETHKE: No. No, there's so many different techniques that have developed since then. [Telephone rings.]

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: We were just talking about your being on the silk-screen project, George, when the telephone rang. And you were saying that you did several silk screens.

GEORGE GAETHKE: Yeah. Oh, you were asking, I believe, how I did it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: About the technique. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

GEORGE GAETHKE: That was another one of those technical things where somebody else did the technical part of it. I would make a finished color work, take it down there, and there was a girl—what the deuce was her name? Dorothy [ph] something, who did the cutting of the—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Stencils?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Dorothy what?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Stencils? Did they—

GEORGE GAETHKE: The stencil, yeah. I was thinking of her name, I can't remember it. She was very skilled at it. She had done it before. And she was actually the person who would cut the stencils for these different things. And I didn't do any handwork on the things that were being done. Although, I understand now, much handwork is done on the screen. I'd like to take a crack at it, but I don't know where I could find out anything about it. I called up some schools around here, but nobody seemed to be giving any classes. Maybe it's gone out of date or something. So that was all. Did the color job, take it down, and somebody else cuts the stencil, and somebody else—in this case Ed Casey—did the printing of them.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: How many would they print up?

GEORGE GAETHKE: I think they kept those editions about the same as the other print, 28. I'm not sure I got more than one. I don't know if we were allowed more than one. I don't know if I have one, hold on. I didn't get far enough into [inaudible]. I'd have liked to have done with somebody who had done it.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: I'd like to ask you, George, just to sum up the tape. What do you think the effects of the government Art Projects were on you as an artist? Did they have any effect on your career?

GEORGE GAETHKE: Let's see. I would say definitely, at that time, because—you see, I had been—in '29, I came back from Chicago. And that was when I had been studying there for two years at the Art Institute.

[01:00:12]

Well, that was the year my wife and I got married, that summer, in July. And then that fall, the people started jumping out of buildings on Wall Street. We got married just before the Depression broke. And things got awfully tough. And I thought, Now, oh, I'll be real sensible and try to do some commercial artwork and stuff. I worked up things and got a little work. But it was awfully hard. They were laying off people right and left, you know. And then the time went on.

Oh, I did a few things to make some money but didn't really do much with art until the Project came along. And I would say that I was able to—I blossomed, developed as an artist on the Project more than—as a result of the Project, perhaps more than I would have if the Project hadn't existed. Because I'd probably have been forced to do things that had nothing to do with art in order to earn some money. That is, if I could get it, because even at that

time there were highly educated and many professional people in different professions who were wandering around down in Third and Howard, and they couldn't get work. It was a terrible time. But anyway, I would say, yes, this Project—working as an artist on the Project, it was a great thing for me because I had the opportunity to work and develop. As far as what followed afterwards, well, of course, there wasn't anything like the Art Project anymore. There wasn't anything to go along with it, so you were just out on your own again.

[Audio break.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Thank you very much, Mr. Gaethke, for giving us the time for the interview this morning.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]