



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Michael  
Lenson, 1964 Oct. 30

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Michael Lenson on October 30, 1964. The interview took place in Nutley, New Jersey, and was conducted by Harlan Buddington Phillips for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

The original transcript was edited. In 2022 the Archives retranscribed the original audio and attempted to create a verbatim transcript. Additional information from the original transcript has been added in brackets and given an -Ed. attribution. 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

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Okay, as I—as I think I indicated the—let's find out personally, what the devil were you doing from '27 through, say, '29 by way of, you know, background? And you can go back a little bit further [if it seems important -Ed.].

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, during those years, I had been batting around New York and I was a student. I was painting around, doing whatever I could to pick up an extra dollar you know—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —along with the rest of us. And, oh, came summer I'd take on summer jobs designing sets at various [theater -Ed.] summer camps, and so on. I was rooming, then, with Louis Guglielmi, and Prestopino was living next door. We all hatched up in a little place on 116th Street—115th Street [and Third -Ed.] Avenue. So, one of these condemned wooden houses where the water froze in the winter and there was no water at all. And you know, you wake up in the morning with the—with the snow on your blanket. It came through the clapboards. And just that kind of a life.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, what happened then was this Chalonier national competition took place. That is what happened to me in the previous competition Guglielmi, my roommate, came in second. It was generally conceded that he had a very good chance for it this time. The total award was about, all things, considered four years abroad, travel, and everything else—about \$10,000. So, you know, we went through the motions of submitting our work. And, lo and behold, I got it. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] So—[They laugh.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In the midst of clapboards—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, this. It was fantastic, absolutely fantastic this thing. All of a sudden, all my worries fell away.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: And I was aboard ship and all my relatives who considered me a no good, you know, a watch out and a—and a deficit to the entire family were waving, waving farewell to me. I was a bigshot and off I went. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] And—[They laugh.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible] accidents.

MICHAEL LENSON: Isn't it amazing? Yes—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's the weirdest thing.

MICHAEL LENSON: —it was incredible. So, here I was. This was 1928. I went to London and I studied over there at the University of London at Slade School for a while on the—on the recommendation from the Chalonier fathers. And it a wonderful school for draftsmen, you know, in England. [Inaudible] probably the greatest school for draftsmen in Europe. And I had me seven months of it and I never regretted it. It was among the most wonderful experience.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Does this—does this have a deep tradition for them?

MICHAEL LENSON: For them?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: This is the English tradition. It may be academic drawing, but brother, can they draw. They're fabulous. So, then I went to Paris and made my headquarters there. And then, went to Italy a couple of times, and Spain, and the Netherlands, and so on, painted, had my studio in Paris. Well, you mentioned 1928-'29, you know, the ground suddenly began to go over here. And we didn't realize at the time just how serious the thing was. Well, by the time I was ready to resign in 1932 there was nothing. I was no more a conquering hero. I came back here to nothing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Good gosh.

MICHAEL LENSON: And picked up whatever few dollars I had and had my family see me through and very tight situations. And then, came the WPA. And when it first came along in New York, I didn't—I didn't think about it too much. I don't know exactly why. I think it was because there was the means test attendant, you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And you had to prove yourself a pauper. And I couldn't very well, although I was broke—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —my family was in business. I had—my oldest brother's a doctor, and they were doing, you know, decently. So, I couldn't—I couldn't qualify. Then, I moved over to New Jersey and stuck around here for a little while. I had some friends here. And then, finally applied for the Project and made it. Got on the Project, on the mural project.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What was that process? Did you have to—

MICHAEL LENSON: The means—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No—see someone, talk with someone, or did you—did you just qualify because you were an artist?

MICHAEL LENSON: Because I was an artist. I went—I went into the office there on Halsey Street and made out my papers, and so on. And you had to prove, of course, that there was nobody to bail you out. You didn't have an old beat up car either. You had absolutely nothing. So, you didn't—you didn't tell all, you know. So, there I was. And so, pretty soon they assigned me to a mural. And I competed with some other artists for the design, one at Verona, Essex Mountain Sanatorium.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: And while I did some little decoration—I assisted Pauline Gill [ph], an English painter, when I was over there. So, I had a feeling for it, yet I never really did a sizeable job. Well, this one was—let me see, 75 feet by 16, uninterrupted wall. One. And wouldn't you know, they liked my design the best. [They laugh.]

[00:05:15]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Suddenly.

MICHAEL LENSON: So, I had to learn everything about mural painting fast, right then and there.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: I had to find out about sounding out the wall. I had to find out about gouging it out and filling in pockets there. And about buying your large canvas and how to mount it on the wall. I had to find out everything. They gave me a group of four men as assistants—five subsequently, and off we went. And we spent almost two years on this

mural, *The History of New Jersey*.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: Colonial and contemporary history of New Jersey. And including the Battle of Trenton with 75 people [laughs], slogging all over the wall. And all of that was finally carried off. And, about this time also, there were the people in the office that discovered that I had a little bit of a—of a tendency to speak, and belonging to artists organizations. I held offices, and so on. So, they began to use me in the—in various situations to speak up for the WPA.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: And so, then they decided I was supervisory material. And they put me on the Project, now, as a supervisor—assistant state supervisor in charge of the mural and the easel division. And, from there, we went off. And the whole thing from beginning to end lasted seven years. During the—which period many, many fascinating things happened, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, tell me this.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: When you—what—as I understand it, you went to Halsey Street in New York.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And there, filled out whatever forms and—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —were accepted?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Now, did the New York Office then, as a regional thing, also have New Jersey?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, they did. I went to New York when I made my—after I had been appointed supervisor. Prior to that, I had no contact with them in New York. But then, when I had to assume certain responsibilities for other people—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —I wanted to make contact with New York with Geoffrey Norman in the offices there. Lu Bloch [ph]—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —and several other people. And sort of coordinate our activities, I wanted them to know what was going on. Periodically they'd come out and visit and see what we were doing. There was Audrey McMahon, I think, was also one of the—one of the heads in New York. And so, off we went. And we began to formulate the program. This place on Halsey Street would—was eventually taken over. It was a huge place. And we set up shop there.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: A corner for the offices, and the rest of it as a huge giant workshop. There were two buildings, really, adjacent. And in the one area, all kinds of men were put in to do all sorts of furniture. Ostensibly, it was furniture designed by the artists. But for the most part, they did a lot of repair work [laughs] for the d—for the people at city hall, and did beautiful desks for them, and so on. We didn't mind that, we overlooked that. But, on the other side, we set up a mural—a big mural division.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: And we set up tables where mosaics were being done. And in one corner we set up a lithograph press and began to run lithographs. At the front was a gallery where we showed paintings and prints by the artists on the Project. These, then, were formed— assembled into exhibitions that traveled all over the state to various places and institutions. And then, other possibilities began to emerge out of this, I think, that were quite interesting and I think never published or talked about, really. Now, these—I—do you still want to talk a little more about the murals and—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, I—

MICHAEL LENSON: —the easel work?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —process of submission of the sketch for this mural, this wall, this—

MICHAEL LENSON: You mean my own mural, or subsequent murals by other people?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Your own mural.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, well my own mural was submitted to the board of freeholders of Essex County, you see?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: They were interested in decorating the main dining room in the Essex Mountain Sanatorium. Tubercular sanatorium. And so, it was they actually who chose the design. And, from then on, well fine. Under the WPA materials are provided, canvas was provided, brushes are provided. Everybody was on a payroll too, and getting \$18 a week, but that didn't seem to matter so much [laughs], you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Had work.

MICHAEL LENSON: It was work.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: It was work. We were very happy. And—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —we had a wonderful time, really, we did.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In *The History of*—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —*New Jersey*, how conversant were you? Or did this require a period of research for you?

MICHAEL LENSON: For the mural?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, yes, of course. I spent time in the library. I found out many things. This was not the only mural I did. Subsequently, I did murals for the city hall in Newark, which is still there. Also, on the same basis I produced a design and had it accepted on the history of Newark. And then, they gave me a staff of assistants and we carried that one out. Only that one was done in the shop.

[00:10:12]

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

MICHAEL LENSON: And then mounted on the wall. Whereas, the other one, the canvas was mounted on the wall first, and the whole thing was done directly there on scaffolds.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: But the history—you know, the research done, of course, was essential. We found out many fascinating things. I mean, I can go on to discuss the content of such a mural as that which we did at the city hall, for instance, about the revolutionary history of New Jersey. Very few people know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Very, very few people know. That the first outbreak against the crown, for example, took place in Newark. That—for non-payment of taxes, a group of Newarkers were thrown into prison. And their friends stormed the jailhouse, liberated their friends, and then went to the courthouse, pulled the wigs off the judges. The wigs, I suppose, are more symbolic than actual. But they threw the British officials into the jail and locked them in there. So, incidents like this—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —presented wonderful opportunities and we used them. We discovered many things.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Or about industry in New Jersey. The manufacturer of such things as nails, for example, that made it possible to actually build homes here. That previously had been imported from England were being—now being manufactured right here in Newark, and so on. New Jersey has a fabulous history. Seth Boyden's discoveries, for example, steam and locomotion—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

MICHAEL LENSON: —and very many things. Well, you learn. By heavens, you really do.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Apart from just the painting of the mural, you'll get yourself an education in the process. You certainly do.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How much—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How much discretion did the sponsor exercise?

MICHAEL LENSON: The sponsors exercised discretion, and you become a politician in the process. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] Let me tell you something, about this incidence about—of the first revolutionary outbreak here in Newark. I knew very well that there would be objection to that going on the walls of the city hall. I just had a feeling that there would be voices raised against it.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: So, in designing this thing, this particular panel, the Britishers I made so accessibly hideous—[Harlan B. Phillips laughs]—you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: I made them real [laughs] movie ghouls—

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

MICHAEL LENSON: —with exaggerated noses with warts, and real monsters. In the—in effect, pointing an arrow to where the criticism should be made. And it worked. It worked because they said, "Do you have to make them this hideous? Do you think they were really this hideous?" I said, "Do you think they look hideous?" Said, "Oh, gosh, couldn't you do something about that?" I said, "Well, I suppose I could." Then I went home and off came the warts, and the noses became shorter, and the design passed, and I was in business.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You oversold

MICHAEL LENSON: I oversold. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] But I knew this: that men of that type, city officials and so forth, who are not interested in mural in the aesthetic sense but would be scrutinizing the content.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: That you would have to give them something to criticize so they may feel qualified to sit in and make decisions. So, I actually gave them the whole thing on a platter.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And they picked it out.

MICHAEL LENSON: And they picked it out just like that and it worked.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Isn't it—well, what a commentary this is on humans.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Who will look for the bizarre or the odd—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. That's right, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —and center their attention on that.

MICHAEL LENSON: I knew that if it worked that I—that a compromise would have to be made, but it was a minor compromise.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Because the panel remained. The incident remained. It's on the walls of the city hall now.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Whereas, if in advance I had asked them to permit me to do this I doubt very much whether they would have.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. So, that you, you know, this is—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —there's no—but there's no substitute for this kind of experience to lead to this kind of [laughs] [inaudible].

MICHAEL LENSON: No, there isn't, no. You're—absolutely not.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Subsequently, we did the murals for the New Jersey building at the 1939 World's Fair. And in meeting with the representatives of Trenton— representatives of the various state departments—I was asked to make some proposals. And I hadn't any proposals, but I sat through the meeting. And I saw representatives of the various departments, agriculture, roads, aviation, and so on, get up and make certain demands. Well, when I—when I was asked for proposals thing I immediately knew that all these various state departments would have to be represented in the—in the state building. And so, I quickly sketched—you know, verbally sketched an outline for what the mural should be, and they agreed. Sight unseen, they agreed. And we went off and did the murals.

[00:15:05]

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

MICHAEL LENSON: You see? So, really they gave us four and a half weeks to do the entire thing, which was fantastic. Just fantastic. We worked night and day in the building in Newark. I had to devise new methods of working so as to expedite things.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: I had my—I finished my designs, and then I had slides—transparencies—made, of sections.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: And the—these would be projected onto the wall. And the staff would—my assistants would be up there with pieces of charcoal tracing the whole thing in outline. From section to section, quickly transfer it automatically via projector onto the wall. And then, I had to prepare all the colors in jars that were actually numbered. And the squares on the—on the mural wall were numbered. And they just simply filled in the areas. And then, I went up there and began to actually introduce some style into the entire thing, and give some dramatic emphasis to the figures, and so on, and so on. But we had to do it that way. We had to actually move, you know, to meet the conditions.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Then four and a half weeks we had it ready.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What's—in short this was a whole new area for you—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —mural painting?

MICHAEL LENSON: Mural painting was a new area. And others also moved in because, under my supervision at that time, about 15 murals were done in New Jersey by other men. And I supervised them so, you know, discussed the designs, and so on. And they went into schools, they went into the libraries, and various places around the state.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: When you became a supervisor, did you have to handle the sponsors? Find the walls?

MICHAEL LENSON: We had to—yes, we had to handle sponsors, find the walls, talk to people, and explore the field, sell the idea of murals in certain places where they never thought of the possibility before.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: But it wasn't that hard because if you went to libraries, well, they're fairly receptive. I mean, they have a wall and something—some sort of subject was agreed upon that had to do with the function of the building, naturally to learning, or books, or the illustration of some particular story. Well, fine. There were some men that we—on the staff that were good muralists.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: And others were more or less illustrators.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: But we used them too.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: We had to use everybody.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's the thing, isn't it?

MICHAEL LENSON: We had to use everybody.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And in the sense that we used everybody, I think here is one of the unsung chapters of the whole thing. If I were to tell you, for example, how we used everybody. For example, we went out to Atlantic City, tried to explore it, see what could be done there. There were several artists we already had on a project like, Ezio Martinelli, for example, was one—who is teaching now at Sarah Lawrence.



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

MICHAEL LENSON: A very talented painter, subsequently sculptor too. Well, we explored in that area. We found Martinelli and one or two other artists, put them on a project. But we discovered during our visit that the city was very much interested in finding some employment or taking off the relief rolls a lot of women that were just simply not artists at all. They were just housewives in their past, and they were now on the rolls. So, we conceived the idea of having our artists design for hook rugs.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: And the women went about and collected rags from all over Atlantic City and brought them into a certain building set aside. And then, we proceeded to—we set them there and they began to develop these designs into some of the most beautiful hook rugs you had ever seen, very large. They made beautiful hangings for government buildings here and there. So, we got them jobs and our artists were designing, and there was a new operation going. But then in Vineland—which was once a great glassblowing center.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Really?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. Well, the old, what do you call it? The old shop—the works, were just shut down. They were just crumbling. They had been sitting there. And the last piece of glass blown when we got there was about 19 years previously. So, we thought of opening this shop up again. So, we rustled around, got some funds together, and mended some of the walls, repaired them, got a kiln going, and got some—you know, in New Jersey, sand is very good for glassblowing, and so on. Then, we found out, on the relief rolls, that there were some of the old glassblowers were still there and we put them on the Project. And the excitement and the thrill of having these men, who had not held a punty in their hands so long, to sit down and try to recapture a lost skill, you know?

[00:20:08]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: It was a great and thrilling thing, really.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: And they began to blow glass. They blew glass according to the design submitted by our artists, or they duplicated early American glass. Some very beautiful things were done. A set of it went to the White House; Mrs. Roosevelt wanted a set. And everything went swimmingly. What happened to the glass? We just simply gave it, you know—for the cost of the materials—to the hospitals. Vases on tables [laughs] all over the state, you know? All sorts of beautiful glass went to all sorts of places. Libraries would display a set of it, and so on. And that went on for a while until the Corning Glass people out there suddenly decided that we were competing with private industry. This, despite the fact that Corning was blowing laboratory glass, you know—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —for chemical work.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Chemical retorts.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Nevertheless, they won out. All that ever needed was a voice raised against us from private industry to kill us. And it killed the Vineland project. But before this project was killed, we did something very interesting. We got hold of a photographer and a scripts writer from the Writers' Project.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: And we sent them out to Vineland and he—to do a film on this thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The process?

MICHAEL LENSON: Of the whole thing. The man at the door leaving—going to the plant. This business of the blowing of the glass after a long lapse of inactivity, you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And all the—you know, the dramatic business of the fire from the kiln, and the faces of the men, the blowing of the glass, the cooling of the glass, and all the camaraderie, and the happiness that, you know, that returned to the lives of these men because they once more were functioning for what they always, you know, were trained to do. This film was one of the tragedies, too, because the film was made and it was shown. And, again, somebody—there was always somebody out of sight somewhere that would intrude upon the scene, that suddenly decided that this film could not be shown because this was interfering with private industry once again. We were compelled to turn over this film to Washington and where it was buried in the archives and I haven't the slightest idea whatever became of it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But did it show the—this old process or this old skill?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. Yeah. Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They don't—they don't do it anymore.

MICHAEL LENSON: They don't do it anymore. So, we had that film somewhere. So, we always had the politicians breathing down our necks. Particularly because we were regionally governed, from New York. And the local crop wanted state control for political reasons because this was a sizeable amount of money. And men could be put on for three months and fired, and another batch could be put on for three months. Four times a year they could put on different groups of men and gain the votes of all of them, you see?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: They use it politically. So, finally came the day when regional control was abandoned and it was handed over to the state, and that's when the Project vanished. And the day it vanished, I can tell you about that too. About what suddenly the politicians walked in just like in a b—in a beat bix [ph] movie. Exactly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Really?

MICHAEL LENSON: Exactly like that. They walked across the room, plumped on the chair, put their feet up on the table, looked at Loraine Trainer [ph] who was with the Project for seven years.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: A prime moving force. A fine artist, a fine woman. She was a sculptor. And said, "Who are you?" And she was fired that afternoon.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This was state controlled?

MICHAEL LENSON: They had become state controlled. But previous to that, glass, mosaics for the schools. Before the boom was lowered, mosaic—mosaics for the schools, the entrances, how was this done? We got men who were only stonemasons—

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

MICHAEL LENSON: —but quickly they understood the process of mosaics. The designs were made by our artists. And they made beautiful mosaics and inlaid them in the entrance of the schools. We went to schools and produced the color schemes that were little more contemporary, a little more alive, a little brighter, perhaps, you know—

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

MICHAEL LENSON: —for the children's rooms, and the kindergartens, and so on. We even tried going into a hospital, the city hospital in Newark, into the children's ward where the institutional original ochre, now beige, you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And we said, Well, look, just for the cost of the paint, you know, that's all, and we will do it. They got very concerned because somebody had the contracts for decorating all the hospitals—you know, painting all the hospitals. And he arrived on the scene, he heard about it. And he said, "Well, we don't want any of you damn New York communists out here, get out."

[00:25:08]

And so, we never were able to do anything about that at all. We ran afoul of a—of an entrenched kind of a thing there. They wanted none of us. So, fine, we had to abandon that. We tried something else. The children's wards. We found out how dismal they were, you know, and so on. We said, Well, maybe we could put some murals there. But we had this experience of being, you know, practically thrown out of the hospital. So, we said, Well, we'll do something else. We will make the murals on oil cloth.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: You see? We will print them because we have the silk-screen process down on Halsey Street. So, our artists got busy and began to design very gay children's themes, you know, in sections, you see?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

MICHAEL LENSON: In sections.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And then, we'd send the man out to a hospital, look at the wall, and estimate the size, and then suggest certain combinations of these—of these designs, silk-screen designs, oil cloth, to be simply mounted on the wall. If it needed a little additional ornamentation of some kind, a cloth [inaudible] so forth, the artist got up there and did it and—for the cost of oil cloth. We put up murals in children's wards in some of the most dismal places in the state.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Geez.

MICHAEL LENSON: We even discovered, for example—somebody came back and said, Look, you know about public drinking fountains? [Laughs.] You know a little kid can't get a drink unless an adult is there to hoist them up?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

MICHAEL LENSON: You know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: What about it? So, we said let's see whether we can design something where the child could actually get up and have a drink, even if there was no adult there. We designed it. We made one [they laugh] at the time the Project folded. We made one, a new design for a public drinking [they laugh] fountain and actually cast it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: [Laughs.] There were all sorts of interesting things that were happening. And then, of course, you know about the Index of American Design.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, tell me about that [inaudible]—

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, we had—we had about 10 or 12 artists who were not, as you know, themselves very creative, but they had tremendous technical skills.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: Tremendous, unbelievable. So, we had them in the state and they were working at home, periodically, you'd drop in and see what they were doing. And they

became very much interested in it, of course. And they themselves scrounged around and found all sorts of interesting objects. Early designs in glass, or metal, all sorts of oddities that they dug up that were early Americana; or muskets, or pistols, or all sorts of strange things, you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And they rendered them for—on beautiful plates. And a good many of these plates, of course, were Geoffrey Norman, the others picked them up and took them to Washington. And some of them actually are in the publication, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: So, that was another aspect of the Project. And it was a very, very, very remarkable thing. You say, well, boondoggling and this, that, and the other. Well, of course, they were. There was some boondoggling. But for the ultimate good, you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

MICHAEL LENSON: We knew—we knew what—that we were actually doing something for the state that was without precedent, really. And we were actually answering the needs in many areas that would never have been otherwise even considered.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Absolutely not. Well, our prints in hospitals, watercolors, and paintings, you know? In all sorts of places; to cheer up hospital rooms, glass vases on the table, even furniture, where necessary, was made in our shop. So, many things that were—that were done were really quite interesting I think. And it was a really remarkable period. And talents were developed, of course they were developed.

We took men who would not otherwise have actually grown and developed into artists at all. But given this opportunity for as long as they stayed on the Project, let us say, if you were an easel painter, well, I can name them in the state. You know some of the best known men that New Jersey has developed got their origin, their beginning [inaudible]—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The continuity through this opportunity.

MICHAEL LENSON: Absolutely. Yes, absolutely.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: This was the opportunity, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: A great opportunity. It's just a pity that it actually it finally had to come to an end. Of course, then came the war. But, even then, we tried to hang on. We started silk-screening posters, you know, for the—

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

MICHAEL LENSON: —government. And some are very, very fine posters. Not directly for the army so much as for civilian defense, for all sorts of civilian needs. They were very, very good posters. But that was at the tail end of it, and then the whole thing finally fell away.

[00:30:06]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Was—is—in terms of the way you've told us it would seem to preclude direction from Washington. Eddie Cahill, did you see him?

MICHAEL LENSON: Hill?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Cahill?

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, Cahill? Well, Cahill I think appeared once, or twice, or three times together with Geoffrey Norman. Cahill had a history of connection here in New Jersey. He

had known John Cotton Dana. And had written some interesting treatises for him, and for the Newark Museum subsequently.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: So, he would come out once or twice. But he was off there in Washington. We didn't see as much of him as we did of Norman, for example.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: But we would go to New York occasionally, and meet with the New York people and discuss the mutual problems. Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But from what—from what you said, the people here locally—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —developed their own—in the sense in those days, you rolled your own.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. Oh, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, we had—we collaborated in New—with New York. New York was—advised us on many issues, especially at the beginning when we were first setting up.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: They had been already in the picture for a few months before that. But we rolled on our own. All these things that I mentioned, glass, for example, could not have happened in New York. It only happened in New Jersey.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Mosaic projects, I'm sure they did some in New York, I'm quite sure. But we took it on our own. We have some beautiful panels in Trenton. I think it was for a church.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, but very beautiful. And the decorating of schools was an idea, and the hooked rugs. As far as I know, no one else has done it; hooked rugs. Taking unemployed women who are always handy. They can always stitch, they can always knit, you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

MICHAEL LENSON: And given a design and a process, a simple process to transfer them—the design, to the hook rug. Developed the rest, they took over very easily and well. So, they were—they were very interesting. And this business of the—of the—of the murals for children's wards in the hospitals, silk screen on linoleum, for example. Not on linoleum, on oil cloth.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And assembled swiftly and easily. And they were very handsome designs, you see?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: This was an idea that originated with us.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How was the response on the part of people, generally, to what was going on? Like the mosaic in the schools?

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, those schools were very grateful, because if you know Newark—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —and if you know the schools there, to suddenly have somebody arrive and offer this, you know, for a pittance, for nothing—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —and be happy doing it. Well, yes, they were—they were tremendously appreciative. Every time we did a floor, or we did—or painted some walls, or we did a mural for a school there were assemblies, and speeches, and all sorts of things, and the entire school was there. Of course, it was a very great event because—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

MICHAEL LENSON: —these things were permanent.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: They were a definite contribution to these schools.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And they were very, very appreciative. There were men, also, who were fairly high up in the social strata in the state that were very strongly with us. Like Arthur Egner, for example.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh—

MICHAEL LENSON: Did you ever hear of Arthur Egner?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Egner? President of—

MICHAEL LENSON: President of the Newark Museum.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —Newark Museum.

MICHAEL LENSON: And president of Egner, MacArthur & English [ph].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: A big law firm.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Of course.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Of course.

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, Arthur Egner was one of those really, really incredible men that come along, oh, very—too infrequently. He would drop everything and come with us on a speaking tour for the Project, for example. He was marvelous this man, really wonderful. You know an old good lawyer, for example, whose office was full of paintings and drawings [laughs] and sculpture. He was practically buried—snowed under them. He was a great friend, and a strong friend, a highly influential friend, who was with us all the time. We could always turn to him if you needed some support from officials from up on the top.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Look—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —these people come, you know—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —and it's a chancy thing.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know the juxtaposition of that kind of skill when you confront, oh, either inability or bleakness or blankness on the part of someone—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

[00:35:07]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, you know, "You're a painter? Yeah, I need my walls painted."

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: "I like this cream color or that," you know?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, I know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They've missed the whole point about the—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —aesthetic part.

MICHAEL LENSON: That's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Now, the—what sort of press did this receive? I can see that kids would go, you know, this is a—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —big occasion.

MICHAEL LENSON: The press—the New Jersey press was, on the whole, quite friendly. In the instance, for example, of when I submitted my designs for the decorations at the Newark City Hall, there were—some of the press were there, *Star Ledger*, *Newark News*, and so forth. They were very friendly.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: And they reproduced the designs in the paper. And when the mural was finished, they gave it a good magazine story. Bell Tower Phone Company, for example, took one of the panels and put it on their monthly bulletin and sent out, gosh, 500,000 of these across the state. You see, they were quite friendly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. So, that there was a—what is it—a friendly background or [inaudible] into which this thing can—could grow.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Except where you—you touched on alleged vested rights.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, the alleged vested rights. This we always were aware of. And they—in the—in the instance of glass it happened.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: And in the instance of our trying to actually produce decent color schemes for some of the hospitals, or charity awards, or what have you—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —at the cost of paint alone, well, we ran afoul of the contracts that certain painters had, and so on. And they were politically strong.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And they threatened, and we had to back off.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: So, we couldn't anything. Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This is a—this is also a period in which these artists banding together

in groups.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: A kind of collective voice. I suspect that part of this was social. Common problems, common employer—

MICHAEL LENSON: Among the artists, you mean?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And it lent itself to a kind of common voice as to what the relationship might be, might not be. For example, Somervell appears on the scene.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Colonel Somervell.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: A military man. Very interesting.

MICHAEL LENSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: With a job to do, as he defined it. Not a particularly lovely human being—

MICHAEL LENSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —you know? No social views at all, really. Untouched by this, an efficiency expert.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No sense beyond just an ant on the floor.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Less of a table companion, let's say, than an ant, though not—more dressy, put it that way.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And a wrinkle in the picture, because he announced cutbacks, a percentage of people would be separated from the force—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —arbitrarily, quite apart from—or at least he conveyed this sort of dehumanized approach, a machine-like approach—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —something which, as I understand it from the people who were part of it, was something else than a machine. It was—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —the Elysian Fields, in a way—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, it was.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —compared to '28, '29, '30, '31. And—

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —for the modern artists, opportunity to maintain skills or do the thing they love to do best and yet you have to confront a fellow like Colonel Somervell.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.



HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Do you remember anything about him?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, vaguely I remember Somervell. He was one of these dread words, you know? [Laughs.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah [laughs]. Well, you—

MICHAEL LENSON: That were whispered around in the offices. But it was a great—a great period, really, in New Jersey. It was a very notable thing because we produced artists; we gave them the opportunity. Many of them remained and are now among the most prominent artists in the state. We have left a series of murals about, perhaps, a dozen of them in public buildings. We have left some beautiful glass around the hospitals. I hope it is still there, you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Hook rugs in various government departments and buildings, Fort Dix and Fort Monmouth and places like that. And numberless prints run off the lithograph press on all kinds of subjects. And easel paintings, which probably are still, you know, on the walls at the government buildings now. Although I dare say when the Project folded their fate was the same as that in New York.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: When they were just dumped somewhere on Canal Street in the warehouse and banished from that point.

[00:40:00]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Nevertheless, they served for a time. And I think that the lesson, I think, was imprinted. It might not have been—have been—then been immediately apparent. But America has learned that such a thing can make a contribution. And, after a while, they came to understand it, I think, and to appreciate it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, because I know this from the—from friends we made across the state, and in libraries, and schools everywhere.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. And I think it was a notable thing, really. And people still refer to it, you know, as a—as a great period.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MICHAEL LENSON: It certainly was. Well, inevitably, I think in the history of the United States, it had to begin at some such level. And then—and then, leave the pattern, a blueprint, from which one might proceed—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —for the future.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, it was without precedent to begin with.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [It was a brand new departure. -Ed.]

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hopkins, as I understand it—and I may not—but as I understand it, was pressed into service by FDR when Ickes, who had the matter in charge of developing a program for public works, couldn't design a contract in his judgment which would keep the politicians' hands out of the—

MICHAEL LENSON: Till.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —money.

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And it—well, '35 wasn't a particularly good year.

MICHAEL LENSON: Right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And the question was, how soon and how quick do we, you know, get checks out to these people who are [laughs] on relief? Like by Thanksgiving. Get it out—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —there. Well, '35—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —it was announced in June and July that Hopkins was going to have, I don't know, \$400 million from Ickes Treasury to set up this WPA. Well, Hopkins' notion was: get them to work doing something, feed them.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: We'll worry about the content and purposes later on.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But start the process, get it going.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, he picked Eddie Cahill.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know? Public relations man, a fellow who could—who rubbed shoulders with the artists, who knew many of the artists, who—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —in a sense quote "one of the boys"—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —or could be.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And yet he had a sense of Americana, a sense of history, a sense of development, and how this could lend itself, possibly, to our contribution in these terms. And, at the same time, provide opportunity.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And, you know, then [laughs] like in San Francisco they get a telegram, "We need x hundreds of men on the—on the payroll tomorrow. Find them." [Laughs.] So, you'd go to the relief rolls and you find those who have artistic bents in one form or another. Those who could work on the—on an index of design.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Those who could—who did have backgrounds as painters and could do murals.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Then, you know, then you cut and tear and make as you go. And—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —suddenly it's a flow.

MICHAEL LENSON: That's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's a flow.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And it's a—what has impressed me, I think, most is the number of—or the man hours that was used.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The spirit that was in the midst of this thing.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Way beyond anything I've seen since.

MICHAEL LENSON: That's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: A wholly different pasture.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah?

MICHAEL LENSON: We've had people come in who harbored, secretly perhaps, a desire to become artists. They had—they didn't have very much to show. For example, one day a little fellow with a hat, you know, sort of pulled down over one eye came in. As nattily dressed as he could have been at this time. But with a manner of a—of a neighborhood tough. His name was Merrigan [ph]. I remember very well.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And he looked around and we wanted to know what he wanted. And finally, he wouldn't talk to us in a group. And I think it was George Kuhner [ph], who was a Loraine Trainer's [ph] assistant, took him aside and wanted to know what he came for. So, he finally admitted that sort of, in his own quiet way, he did a little painting, you know? And, perhaps, he'd like—we'd like to see it. Well, he painted the streets. And he painted them with a—with a magnificent kind of forceful abandon. He knew the streets. It had an authenticity. And a power about it.

[00:45:00]

We put him on the Project, certainly we did. And he painted some wonderful pictures for us. The Newark Museum has about one or two in their collection now. But do you know he swore us to silence. He never wanted [laughs] anybody in the neighborhood to know that he was a painter. [They laugh.] And—because this was so unprecedented. I mean, he'd lose respect, lose face, lose caste in the—[they laugh]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What'll they say back home?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, what'll they say back home when they discover he's an artist? Ye Gods. [Laughs.] But all sorts of strange things.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, you can imagine in Atlantic City, talking to these women who suddenly found themselves on an art project, of all things. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] Making hooked rugs for the government and for the army, you know? It was wonderful, really quite wonderful.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] But it must, you know, this—the excitement—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —must have been, not only getting an idea like that, but then seeing it walk.

MICHAEL LENSON: Seeing it walk, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Actually work.

MICHAEL LENSON: Absolutely.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And, at the same time, providing opportunity for design.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Then, at the same time, opportunity for women who, without this process, would have been, what? Just sitting—

MICHAEL LENSON: Sitting on the relief rolls.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —[inaudible] vegetating.

MICHAEL LENSON: On the relief rolls.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MICHAEL LENSON: Absolutely uncreative.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Terrible. And the artists themselves had to—had to learn other than just their craft. They had to learn certain responsibilities. For example, in the instance of the project, this hooked rug project, when I came back to Newark and I wanted to talk to some of the artists about this, you see?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: I said, Well, look, here is a group of women. And they have manual skill certainly, you know? They could stitch, and they can sew, and they can—they can certainly be used. It needs, now, for you fellows to give us some good designs, and so on. They didn't agree with that at all. This was infringing on the inner sanctum of their lives. Now, even though under the Project, they knew that they were there temporarily and really were part of our national relief measure in a sense no different from these women, and so on, yet they resisted and rebelled. I remember, after I left them, hearing a jar of brushes come hurdling out of the [laughs], you know, at the door. Meaning at my head, but the door was closed. But they came through.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: They produced the designs. And when they saw the hooked rugs, they understood. Yes, they appreciated what had happened. They were very pleased.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Certainly. And for glass, for example, what did I know about glass, you know? I'm a painter, or this, I'm not a designer for the craft. Well, come down, and let's take a trip down to Vineland. When they saw the men working that got them. Yeah, that got them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Then, they could begin to think that [inaudible]—

MICHAEL LENSON: They begin to relate to them. They—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —can identify with this. They could pass out of their little isolated selves and isolated by society itself. Now, they never had an opportunity to actually feel a part of the community. This gave them a chance to become part of the community.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: To make a contribution. And they did. They did.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They got that sense of joy.

MICHAEL LENSON: They did, absolutely. A good—a good feeling of contributing. Of contributing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, it was very nice. And, of course, friends were made among the artists that would remain friends for the years, and so on; some of the best here in the state. We met on a project and remained friends ever since, yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, it's like opening up a whole area and projecting you into it. That's what opportunity—

MICHAEL LENSON: That's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —was.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, of course.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And what you—what you did with it when they—opportunity was opened—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —depended on you, really.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Instead of having someone put their thumbs on your eyeballs as a fellow who they—when they became the stateside, you know—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —when the state controlled came in and—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —what did he know? What do you really know?

MICHAEL LENSON: He didn't care.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Of course not.

MICHAEL LENSON: This was beyond his province. And he was not the slightest bit interested. He was interested in the power and the money.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And how it was to be used in the state, that's all.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: But the rest of it meant nothing to him whatever.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: But the artists themselves, and the community that grew out of it, I think is a very valuable thing for that particular time and the subsequent years.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And it's had continuity that—

MICHAEL LENSON: It's had continuity.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, certainly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Tell me this, what's the range in age of people as you remember them? Did they go the whole spectrum? Or was it basically a youthful movement?

MICHAEL LENSON: It was basically a youthful movement. Although we had some older painters. I can—I can recall a few, Caparelli [ph], for example, was then in his '60s, we put him on.

There were several others who had been lifelong sort of conventional painters.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes.

[00:50:09]

MICHAEL LENSON: Ah, what's his name? Foruccio [ph] [*sic* Gaetano Federici? -Ed.] over here in Paterson, a sculptor, a church sculptor, a few public monuments. We put him on the Project and assigned certain work to him, and so on.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, we lent them a helping hand at a time when they badly needed it. Perhaps even more so than the younger fellows. I don't know exactly why. A young fellow has to live too.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: But here in the—in the instances of these old academic craftsmen—

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

MICHAEL LENSON: —there was no youth or buoyancy left, you see? There was no opportunity, really; the door was really being slammed, not only on their work, but on their very lives when we stepped in. It was a great ray of hope—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —for them to return to the easel, or to the bench, or whatever at that time.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: It was very wonderful for them, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But by and large the process, as a whole, was more of a youthful thing.

MICHAEL LENSON: I would say so.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, I would say so. We had mostly young people on the Project, young painters, young craftsmen, young designers, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And this would be, in part, related to the relief rolls and who was on the relief rolls, plus a certain percentage for—what is it—the supervisory roles which could be not employed from the relief rolls.

MICHAEL LENSON: That's right. That's correct.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: That's correct. The supervisory was a—did not have to pass through the means test.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Although, as it happened, I came—I came up that way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But the—so that you could—you could, within a given area, reach out for quality in the sense of tested quality.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, you could.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And use that as—for guidance, for aid and assistance to this—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —younger group where you didn't really know—

MICHAEL LENSON: Quite so. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] For example, when we set up a lithograph press—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —well, we decided to set up a lithographic department. Then, where do we go? Who has a press? And this—and so forth. We discovered Senefelder in Brooklyn. You know the Senefelders?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: The—a branch of the firm was in Paris and taught Toulouse-Lautrec how to do lithographs [laughs], you know? Well, there was a branch over there in Brooklyn. And they were now going over into electrical processes of various kinds, and they were not using the hand presses anymore. And they had piles and piles of stones. And they wanted to give them away if somebody would come and take them. They needed the room.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: So, we picked up, I don't know, 100 stones or something, and two lithograph presses. We paid him \$25 for a press; brought out two presses. Fine, we had them in the shop. And the bit—the process of drawing upon the stone was not so complicated. But the process of printing, this was difficult. You asked about getting someone not off the relief rolls when you needed a specialized skill. We found Ted Ward [ph] out in South Jersey. He was a marvelous lithograph printer. We put him on the Project. And he'd come in and spend a few days in the shop and print all the stones for the fellows who were ready, and so on. Beautiful stones were made, yes. The—it could be done.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

MICHAEL LENSON: It could be done. And we did it, so I know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: We did it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Of course, we did it. And the great joy, you know, of seeing lithographs made in New Jersey [laughs]. Lithographs being made by ourselves. And the shop was out there, and the men would make the frames for us, and cut the glass, and put the whole thing up. And we'd have an exhibition ready to go, ready to roll, hit the road. Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How much did they actual work tour the state?

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, we designed a truck. [Laughs.] We designed a truck. We redesigned the inside. The men fix it all up so that the paintings went here, and sculpture went here. And this thing rolled. And if we—if we were not ready with an exhibition inside the buildings, and libraries, or schools, we'd set it up on the lawns of the towns, and screens, and set up the sculpture, and let the people see what we were doing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They were mindful of that.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, yes. We brought it to them if they had never seen it because in outlying towns, we never reached them. Well, we decided we have to reach them, so we did. We designed a truck and had this thing rolling all over the state. [They laugh.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What's on—what kind of a resourceful person was Miss Trainer [ph]?

MICHAEL LENSON: She was very, very good. If she didn't have the idea, she was suddenly ready and open mouthed for anything that came along.

[00:55:00]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: She was?

MICHAEL LENSON: She was friendly and very warm. And a charming woman, a charming person, with great vision, and we'd sit down and mull these things over. And somebody heard this, and somebody heard that, and when are we going to get out to the hinterlands? I mean, we're all in the Essex County here. What about down Vineland? What about here? What about near Atlantic City? Well, let's run down there and see. Let's see what we can find out, and so on.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: She was open?

MICHAEL LENSON: She was very open. She was a wonderful person. Yes, very open and very encouraging. She—at the drop of a hat, we'd hit the road because we heard that possibly near Atlantic City, somewhere over there, something might be done.

Although I think that the Vineland project was really her idea. And that was a beauty. That was a real thrill on that one. With that—when the kilns were there and the plant opened. And some of the old timers were sitting back at their old benches holding a punty and their calluses were gone, you know? They had to rebuild their calluses and everything. Oh, boy. And we see it. We saw that last—the glass begin to form on the end of the punty. And everybody stops, you know, all around while a man is blowing. He's the master blower. He poises himself at the bench, you see? And the assistant brings him this because he had this great breath control involved, you know?

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

MICHAEL LENSON: He can't just gallop up around, he must set himself and breathe properly so as to—so there's a steady flow of air [inaudible] until it was formed, and so on. And then, the shaping of it and so on. So, wonderful. And then, once in a while, boom, it would crack. And everybody would shout, "Halleluiah," in a great tradition.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Really? This is marvelous. This is something that really doesn't exist anymore, does it?

MICHAEL LENSON: No. Halleluiah!

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's marvelous. [Michael Lenson laughs.] And these men were simply found on the rolls. What do you do with them? You know if you tailor-make a project, can we use them?

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Can we get them started?

MICHAEL LENSON: We found that on the rolls who were originally glassblowers. And we went to their houses, and talked to them, and they thought it was, you know, too good a dream to come true that they would blow glass once again. They loved it. This was what they were. They were glassblowers. And there they were. It was wonderful. Just grand.



HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's imaginative as can be, isn't it? That is, to meet this kind of local need—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —situation, and so on.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Simply by pouring through, what have we got here?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What do we do with them?

MICHAEL LENSON: I am convinced that the—that in most of the states—I have never been out west; I don't know what you could say about, oh, North Dakota or someplace. But in populated areas like this with a history, like New Jersey—

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

MICHAEL LENSON: —you could start today, again—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —and build something so dramatic, you know, on the foundations of the past and take it from there, just as we did in our humble way, and for the limited period, and with a very, very [laughs] limited budget. But the business of creating—or being creative on a project was not just a matter of how well that you did your lithograph, or what kind of a nice watercolor you brought in at the end of the month or something. But to see the opportunities, to actually create the opportunities, everywhere, this was wonderful. It was really wonderful.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How many supervisors were there in New Jersey?

MICHAEL LENSON: We had a very small crew. There was Loraine Trainer [ph], and George Kuhner [ph], and myself. There was one other chap who was with us for a while who was a sort of more a public relations man who would send notices to the papers about what was going on and arrange for groups to come visit us.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh?

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, yes. Women's clubs, organizations, would come to the plant on Halsey Street. And we arranged for them to come, or we'd take them around and explain everything, then show them the processes, and so on. It was very nice. Oh, yes. We knew that we are—we had to let the people know what we were doing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It was like an education.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, it was. And always the response was very good. Of course, we were offering the thing for practically no cost to anybody who wanted it, through any non-profit institution. All they had to do was ask for it. If we didn't have it, we would make it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] In short, you—they were—take a look and see how we're doing over here. There were guided tours arranged.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, yes, certainly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Was there—was there a department of tours? Let me see, I talked to a fellow yesterday who set up something like this, Lincoln Rothschild.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, yes, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Who had the early set of—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —tours, or people who could go out—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —on tours. And had arranged for them. Then there was the teaching process—

MICHAEL LENSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:00:07]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —in settlement houses, here, there, and elsewhere where they've never had that.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, teaching it was an area we touched on slightly. We didn't develop it far enough, I think, because the Project didn't last far off; for example, in the army, we offered our services, our teachers, our artists to come and teaching in the army—

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

MICHAEL LENSON: —to give demonstrations, to organize classes, and so on. We gave some teachers to the school for incapacitated children in Newark.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Ah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, we designed color schemes for them and we—and we lent some of our artists as teachers there. We tried—let me see, where else did we try—yes, we were negotiating with the prisons. Yes, we had a few conferences with a Lieutenant Coulp [ph] at Rahway Infirmatory, who was a very enlightened guy, one of the most incredible men I ever met, who was very friendly, very receptive. And we were formulating a program at that time, also, and before we had a chance to put it in operation, he wanted us to come in and teach the men in the prison some of the skills, and we were—looked at some walls for mural decoration, not for us, necessarily to do it—

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

MICHAEL LENSON: —but to supervise and let them do it, you see—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right, yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —the prisoners themselves.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: So, you see, it's endless, I mean—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I know.

MICHAEL LENSON: —and we only tapped it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's limited only by the imagination of those involved, yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Absolutely. It—limitless and endless what you could—what you could do. And we've done, I think, quite well in the period of we—that we existed.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: I really think, very well. We never had the forces that they had in New York. We didn't import artists, you know; we've got them right here. Some were pretty highly developed when we got them, and others grew with us and so on.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: This business, for example, of designing children's murals, well, we didn't import anybody. We set a couple of artists on the job, you know, and they produced some very wonderful children's designs for us, and we had them silk-screened onto the cloth. They were numbered, they were put away in the racks, and artists went out, saw the wall in the hospital and say, number six, number eight, and the so forth. And they were assembled there, oilcloth mounted swiftly and easily on the wall, cut out to fit, dovetailed. [They laugh.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's great.

MICHAEL LENSON: And every time we discovered one of these things and saw it actually worked, you know, oh—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The excitement.

MICHAEL LENSON: —seventh heaven, tremendous.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Excited.

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure, great.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Was there any experimentation done in paints with the murals?

MICHAEL LENSON: We talked, of course, a great deal. We didn't try a fresco because that would have been a little too involved, and nor did—nor did the opportunity for a true fresco present itself.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: But we worked with wax materials and paint. Let's see, who was it? Yes, well the New York Project put out the textbook on various median materials for us. What was his name? There was a wonderful guy they had in New York that gave us so many ideas on median materials.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This Potter [ph]?

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, there—this a man wrote a beauty of a handbook on materials, well, oil paints were simple, but then the gloss of oil paints was a—was a—was an obstacle, we—you had to get rid of that—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —by the addition of wax, for example; it diminished it and so on. Then you could use casein, for example with a—on a prepared wall, you could take a plaster wall, no canvas at all, and you could prime it with a good gesso and work with casein now on that, you see?

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

MICHAEL LENSON: And this sort of approximated fresco. Really, it wasn't bad at all; it was much simpler than fresco.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In short, there were lines, not only to idea but how to—

MICHAEL LENSON: Or techniques developed, yes, so—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes, interesting new techniques.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh yes. We had to develop technique for certain things, as it—that—we had to invent the techniques. We had to invent them, like this business of the oilcloth murals and the hook rug designs and so on. We invested it; it wasn't—it was—it was always a challenge, but we—[Harlan B. Phillips laughs]—it was fun.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What—

MICHAEL LENSON: We had a problem, and we solved them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Was the—was there any problem in collecting some old representational things of Americana from people who had collections of this stuff?

MICHAEL LENSON: It wasn't any problem because the men—our best things came from the men on the Project. Because if a man, let's say, was somewhere in a small town near Morristown—

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

[01:05:07]

MICHAEL LENSON: —he immediately set about, you know, researching the area. Finally, he —finding things—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah [laughs].

MICHAEL LENSON: —and producing them, and then he'd let us know or he'd bring them to Newark and show them, and off we went. I mean, all sorts of Civil War muskets and strange things, World War I gas masks. There was one man did a plate that was absolutely fantastic, with a gas mask—World War I gas mask, and a hand grenade, [laughs] and so forth. He hung them on a—on a board of some kind and rendered the whole thing in a most incredible fashion. He had a great plate. It was wonderful, so—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Staggering.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, tremendous.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: There was a school in New York City, a school of industrial design.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Was there any ramification of that here?

MICHAEL LENSON: No, we didn't touch on industrial design because, who would want our industrial designs?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Industry? We were afraid of industry.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: We were terrified of them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: No, we never ventured into that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I'm—

MICHAEL LENSON: Later on.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Later on, this was a—with the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Art. When I became director of it, subsequently after the Project ended, we had an industrial design department, brought in some men and did a lot of good work. Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I wondered about, you know, this was an offshoot of the WPA, this was an idea.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That somehow, someday artists could find a niche in industry, some of them.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Someway.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I don't know whether it's a fruitful idea or not, I really don't know, I don't know one way or another, although this was symptomatic of what was going on in Czechoslovakia and—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —Germany.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The role of the artist functioning in an industrial society. I don't know whether it's creative, especially in America.

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, it could be creative in a sense, for example when our glass project was going through it full blast, private industry men appeared who were willing to buy the whole thing lock, stock, and barrel—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

MICHAEL LENSON: —for themselves. Buy it. But the government wouldn't sell; they wouldn't sell anything. The government couldn't sell, I guess.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I guess it couldn't.

MICHAEL LENSON: You know, they were willing to undertake and underwrite the entire thing, take it off our hands, and keep the force, and keep the men, and do it as a private enterprise, as an industry.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I'll be damned.

MICHAEL LENSON: And there's a—with industrial—with the Index of American Design, you'll probably know that the textile industry wanted to buy the plates, the whole thing. [Laughs.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: So, inevitably there would be discoveries and findings that would be of value to industry too, certainly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure, yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Ultimately.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, as I understand, in part the origin of the Index, was to make a sample of Americana by way of design available for industry.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, but—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So that it could, you know—

MICHAEL LENSON: Was it ever turned over, or any part of it [inaudible]?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So far as I'm aware, it's available in the sense that they can send people down to wherever it is, in the Smithsonian or—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —the National Gallery, I guess.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And look at it.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's accessible in that sense.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But nobody, short of preserving, no one thought of publishing and sharing beyond, you know—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —multiple copies, or what—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —can you do, get a one of those [inaudible]. It's a damn shame, because of what did the—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know, it ought to be all over the place. I can't think of a library that shouldn't have [laughs]—shouldn't have it.

MICHAEL LENSON: That's right, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Because it is a key to so much in the way of design in our case.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, certainly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know, that is incredible.

MICHAEL LENSON: At that time of the glass, when these people evinced an interest in it, in the glass as a possible commercial venture, I think that the man who told them about us was Moholy-Nagy in Chicago.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure, well, he's one of the Bauhaus

[Cross talk.]

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, sure. He was in Chicago then.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: With his own school.

MICHAEL LENSON: With his own school, and he saw some of our glass, you see?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: It could have become something. That's a pity, but it didn't materialize for that reason. The Corning people raised the objection, and they had the power, and we were trespassing and had to close it up. And the men went back to the relief rolls.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: A pity.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Must have been a sad day for them.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, it's sad, I—it—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Worse than sad.

MICHAEL LENSON: It's eminently unfair and unjust because we were not competing with them.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: If they were to say to us, for example, that, You're competing with us; we don't want you in our path. We will employ your men—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's a—

MICHAEL LENSON: Ah-ha.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's a different proposition.

MICHAEL LENSON: That would have been something, but they'd made no such offer.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: You know, yeah. And so [inaudible]—

[01:10:00]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, our men—or, Your men are better than our men; we need them. Something like that.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, that's right. Well, they would say, These men don't know anything about chemical glass and so on, that they were, you know, free blowers of attractive pieces, which have no market value perhaps. They didn't say this. I'm just—I'd imagine that's probably how they reasoned.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: They could have, with little—a little bit of a—of latitude in their thinking.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, Corning's getting larger and larger and larger and larger.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: To what purpose, I'm not sure.

MICHAEL LENSON: I don't know either.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] This was a small order of things.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That brought great joy to those who participated, yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. But we were all over the state. We were everywhere. We were at the—at the army posts when war broke out. From giving painting demonstrations, to just simply entertaining the men, or setting up classes, offering our instructors. And hanging hook rugs, and pictures, and paintings, and in the officers' quarters, in their barracks, and whatnot. And there was no limit, I mean, we could have gone on and on and on.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's comparable, isn't it, to San Francisco where they discovered a small group of Armenians and Turkish people who had had skill in making tapestries?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah? And they set up a tapestry project?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. [They laugh.]

MICHAEL LENSON: Wonderful.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know, it was a small group—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —and their skill was hand tapestry.

MICHAEL LENSON: That's wonderful.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, you know, for a period of time, it was preserved and some of the tapestries still are extant out there; at least I'm told they are, I've never seen them. But this is a—this is a thing. They're on the rolls, and they're artists—or craftsman, put it that way.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: With a craft that's all but gone, you know.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, of course.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And a machine, however delicate, however well designed, couldn't duplicate this kind of stuff in a million years, you know.

MICHAEL LENSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It had that—what, that tenderness, that affection, that skill that's in the—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —that goes way back. It's, you know, it's a skill, that's all, and it's—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But the glassblowers, that's a fantastic story. But, you know, it's duplicated everywhere, even where you said the—the tough kid.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, the tough kid that came in, yes. Oh certainly, yes.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: Our guys, you know, if such a—if such a project were in operation today — certainly not on a means basis anymore. I mean, you can't anymore. That's over the hill; that's gone. You couldn't do it, unless there were, heaven forbid, another gigantic depression.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: But what about the slums? Look at Newark, you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: How would you move in there today, oh boy, if we had a force to move it —to move.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, what couldn't we do?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This was that kind of—

MICHAEL LENSON: Of course, certainly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —thing, yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Tremendous, well that's only our Project. There was—there was, you know, an opera project here too.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, was there?

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, there—wasn't there? It was Errolle [ph], Ralph Errolle [ph], and he was in charge of that, and they performed all over the state. They had a beautiful opera company. They performed in auditoriums and schools all over the state. They had a marvelous company, yes. They had a small theater project, nothing like New York. I remember in one of those plays, William Bendix was on the Project. I saw him in a Newark WPA play [laughs], the first time I ever saw him. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] Then after the Project, well, all of a sudden, there he was, big as life on the screen.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. [They laugh.] How was the—was the—was there much relationship to the Writers' Project?

MICHAEL LENSON: No, just a friendly relationship. We didn't have much to do with them, except when we wanted some writing done for us, a pamphlet or something or other. Harold Smith, for example, came over and did this scenario for this Vineland film. Now, who is Harold Smith? Well, he had an Oscar in Hollywood for the—what was the name?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.]

MICHAEL LENSON: No, no, with Sidney Poitier, and the other guy. Curtis—Douglas [ph]—you know, they were chained to each other.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. What the heck was it called? Yeah—

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, he wrote the script for that [*The Defiant Ones*], and he got an Oscar. [They laugh.] I saw Harold Smith on the TV set. He was walking up there, getting an Oscar. [Laughs.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He got an early Oscar for the glassblowers.



MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, for the glassblowers. Oh, he was so heartbroken when that film was taken from him. It was terrible. I mean, he really worked at it. And Bill Cotton [ph] ran the camera—we borrowed the camera, a movie camera somewhere, and we sent him down there and they did a fine piece of work.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hm. That's marvelous. Yeah, well, that's part of the creative process. Was there any photographic—

MICHAEL LENSON: We didn't have—we had—somewhere we had a photographer who photographed some things for us for publicity, more or less. We didn't have a photographic project as such. No, no.

[01:15:02]

It would have gotten there, I'm sure, ultimately, if we had lasted. Because again, later on when I was director of the school—when I became director of Newark school—sure enough—what was his name again? A fine photographer from New York came out and we set up a photographic department to teach photography, after the Project was gone.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: We thought about it on the Project but it didn't seem feasible. So some of it, materialized later.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Was Audrey McMahon much in evidence or did she—

MICHAEL LENSON: No. No, she was—she probably came out once or twice, but we didn't see very much of her here at all. But we ran our Project quite well. There was—it was a harmonious group. Very harmonious. We got along very well. We understood and we had a, you know, common purpose. We worked very well together. It was a very wonderful period. And so few people talk about it today, you know. Well, you don't expect them to necessarily. I mean—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, except that all life is experience. [Inaudible.]

[Cross talk.]

MICHAEL LENSON: [Inaudible.] Who was the French critic that came over at that time, who said that the WPA was the greatest single period in American art that he had ever seen? And this was valuable to us. We were very—we were so delighted to quote him because he was—if an American had said it, they'd say he was partial, or this, that and the other. But he was a foreigner, a French critic came over and saw what had been going on with the WPA, and praised it very highly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How much affect in New Jersey was the difficulties that were going on in New York City, which was a much larger thing.

MICHAEL LENSON: What sort of difficulties do you mean?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The—in the first place, Somervell.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And the reaction to Somervell.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Earlier than that, the reaction to Mrs. Force at the Whitney Museum, but that kind of background where—well, it's like the fruit, the banana, stick to the bunch or you get skinned, this kind of thing began to generate. And, well take the art teacher that had this—so far as I can see, the first sit-in demonstration in Somervell 's office. This kinda thing.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The miserable press from *the Daily Mirror*. Castigating—this was the boondoggling gambit—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —endlessly. The succession of organizations from, like, the John Reed [ph] club to the Artists' Union and then the Artists' Congress. And so on. After all this is the period of the Popular Front.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This was a period when America was stretched on the ground, when we were reexamining the machine. And you see what made it tick. And, you know, leather against leather where pocketbooks is concerned somehow or other generates more imagination and more idea and certainly more productive idea than it does when it's swollen and heavy.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Or seems to.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: More venturesome.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: More open. A willingness to chase an idea. And of course, in New York it was, you know—it had a succession of voices dealing with this city hall for a public gallery, run by the artist, as distinct from dealers. I don't know the role that the museums had or whether they had any, you know. It's hard, but it seemed artists were good news in the sense that when they marched on city hall, this is something that you had to cover. Gorky carrying a huge sign, something like this was news. Or the congresses that were held, the views that were expressed.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The attitudes, for example, very first broached by artists, a disinclination to entertain anything with respect to Mussolini and Hitler.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Spain. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade. You know, this was a hell of an exciting period, a depressing period, of course, because people had to make choices. [Laughs.] You know, and in making them, it helped—what is it—reexamine, or tinker with the machine.

[01:20:06]

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In a way which it had never been done before. And you get expressions from artists, from lawyers, from—heaven only knows what, the Civil Liberties Union.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: All this kind of thing. It was an exciting period from the point of view of ideas.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Now, I don't know—you've indicated certainly that the nature of sponsorship and the design of thinking in New Jersey was to cut the pattern, in a sense, to fit and to please people. [Quite apart from idea. -Ed.] Whether this led itself to the more modern things—mosaics, you indicated, splashes of color and so on—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —more brightness, so that there was a heck of a period of

experimentation from a to z. Well, you know, most people are overwhelmingly impressed with the warm and the familiar.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. We always had that problem, of course. But nevertheless, we were able to project some new ideas. I mean, even in so simple an instance, for example, as one of our artists, Schneider [ph], who had a good deal of imagery and some ideas on education, went into a school and among other things, he thought the color schemes ought to be—why do they have to be all one, you know? That certain rooms can be done in different colors. And we did a school like that in Newark. But then he said, What is this with the blackboards, do they have to be black? And why do they have to be so tall that the youngsters can't reach it? So, we designed a blackboard, which was a sort of a green blackboard and it was way down. So there was no barrier between the children and this board. They could walk up to it and draw on it and use it.

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

MICHAEL LENSON: Ideas like this that were never originally in our thinking. But there were always such things that occurred and we always found the men, or some solution, and always some rather novel approaches were developed this way, that were valuable socially, educationally, esthetically, what have you, certainly.

Yes, it was a turbulent time. There was—The Artists' Congress was in New York. I was a member of the Artists' Congress—as a few of the artists who belong to the Artists' Congress in New York. And we'd go there occasionally, have these meetings. We knew about New York and the picket lines. Our picket lines were not that frequent. There was a group, I think, what was it called, Artists Alliance or something.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yeah, something—

MICHAEL LENSON: That wanted the artists to get organized, you see, and so on. So some joined it and there were a few picket lines that were thrown up at the official headquarters of the Project as a whole at 1060 Broad Street.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And yes, there are picket lines and a few of the artists would go out on picket lines. I myself would go out on a picket line once in awhile, and so on. This is part of the whole thing. You have to stand by. You have to more or less defend your position.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This is participation.

MICHAEL LENSON: Participation. That's right, yes. But it was good, it was spirited, it was—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It was learning in the best of schools—

MICHAEL LENSON: That's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —which is the real one.

MICHAEL LENSON: See, I remember going to New York and seeing a huge picket line and who was marching up and down? Maxwell [ph], um, not Max Anderson [ph]—what's his name again?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Parrish [ph]?

MICHAEL LENSON: Not Parrish [ph], no, the writer, the poet, the one that finally was killed in the—wrote *Replenishing Jessica* [Maxwell Bodenheim]. Maxwell—oh gosh, now I—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Lived in Greenwich Village?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, sure, sure, sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, I know [inaudible]. Just recently, yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: A sad drunk, a few years ago. He finally got killed in a strange situation. But people like that, poets appeared from nowhere [they laugh], and there they were. Everybody had the same: nothing. Economically.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In the same boat.

MICHAEL LENSON: In the same boat. It was wonderful what camaraderie grew out of that. Because, you know, a great evening was—and I've had them, I've sat through some uproarious evenings since the dawn with some of the guys just generating our own entertainment, you know, exchanging ideas, singing songs, and what? Tea. Tea, and if they—if we were really lucky, lox and bagels, or cream cheese [Harlan B. Phillips laughs] on the table. Things like that. There was no money to be spent, so we didn't worry about it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. But we had wonderful times.

[01:25:01]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I know what you mean because, as a kid in those days we had a—we had one baseball. It was no longer recognizable as a baseball, it been taped so much. But the rule was, if you hit the damn thing over the fence, you were out because you might lose it. [They laugh.] New rule. Marvelous. I've laughed at that so much since.

MICHAEL LENSON: That is funny.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Because if you really were powerful enough to lose the ball, you shouldn't be playing. [Laughs.]

MICHAEL LENSON: Your career was ended. [They laugh.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right. Of course, you'd throw your arm out trying to throw the thing because it was loaded down with the tape. But camaraderie. [Cross talk.] [Preserve what we had, which was how to lack for a little (ph).]

MICHAEL LENSON: That's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Which is a marvelous thing. Which certainly is not symptomatic of our current spirit. But in those days it was.

MICHAEL LENSON: But you know, the camaraderie, not only, you know, in the grouping of the artists, but in those sympathetic, for example. The professional groups, you know, the doctors or the lawyers and people like that, who are our friends. And those houses were open to us and so on, who were really totally with us. They were a great source of moral support through it all. Those were just wonderful evenings we had with some of these people. You know, I'll tell you something, some of the artists tried to get on the Project even though they could never qualify under the means test. They wanted to get on the Project before—because of the opportunities of growth that was offered there, you know? They try to get their sons and daughters on the Project. Fairly well-to-do people.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Let me turn this over.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, all right. Listen, would you like a glass of wine?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

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HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You were indicating the, you know, the [inaudible] that gets around. You build a better mousetrap, whether that's in conversation or whatnot—excitement, a period of growth. And people who somehow rather had—couldn't qualify—were, what—excluded, desperate to be part of it.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: To sample and to drink deeply of whatever it was, that was the spirit within that. Which is something which I hadn't run into before. I mean, you know, this notion that—

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, one—in one instance they tried to bribe me. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] To put their daughter on the Project. Wealthy people, they had a daughter, and this

was something that they felt that the daughter ought to have. She ought to be in on this, she ought to live this and grow with it, you know. I couldn't put her on the Project [laughs], it just was impossible for me to put her on the Project.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. But the notion that they'd have that idea.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And even go to such lengths to expose the daughter to this kind of thing.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: As a—you know, as a—as a new wrinkle, as a hurdle to which you ought to go.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Something like that. Well, heck, was there anything of, you know, the non-positive thing? Was there any sourness at all? You don't describe any.

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, there were—for example, when I say I tried to sell the artists on the idea of designing for hook rugs.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, that—

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, there was resentment, absolute resentment; they didn't want to be part of it. They just wanted to be left alone in their studio to work.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, it took a little bit. And there was animosity. There was a great deal of hard feelings there for a little while. But then I had to—because I was convinced—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: I myself was convinced that this was right. That the artist ought to be made to step out of the studio and participate a little more in the society, make some other contribution. That it was good for him, actually, too. You know? So I had to use a little—my official strong-arm pressure here to compel them to do it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: They did. They did. There were little tight passages like that—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —occasionally, yes. There was a certain amount of jealousy, you know, for the fact that I say that I was a supervisor in some period, some people felt that I wasn't—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: "What's he doing there?"

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, what's he doing here? Yeah, that's right. "I should be there." [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] And so on. Which is sort of par for the course, you know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I once heard a man—oh, the heck is his name? Isaiah Berlin.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The Justice Frankfurter, indicated to his wife that he had received some mail from some old Harvard colleagues of his.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And somehow or other, he detected a new note introduced into the correspondence: critical, fussy, picky with some things he'd written [laughs].

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And he couldn't understand it. These were all old friends, and they'd had a long period of academic life behind them. So, he took these letters into his wife, Mrs. Frankfurter, who was an exceptionally shrewd person, perceptive. And she turned to the Justice, and she said, Why, don't you think they're jealous? You know it never entered his head that this was it.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So, he rushed back into the other room where—his wife was an invalid—he rushed back into the other room, where Isaiah Berlin was, and turned to him, and he said, Look at this. He said, Look at this letter. You know, my wife says this is jealousy. Can you imagine it? Isaiah Berlin said, Why, it explains everything. [They laugh.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Marvelous.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But, you know, that's as, you say, par for the human course.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. Oh, yes, there are lots of situations where you're irritated and upset. For example, sometimes, you would have to turn down the possibility of doing a mural.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Hm?

MICHAEL LENSON: And it happened right here in Nutley; that's before I live in Nutley. I was then living in a furnished room in Newark. Because the thing that they wanted was so infantile, so ridiculous, you know. The librarians had no vision; the head librarian did not. And so, I set an artist on the job, and they began to pick on little, tiny, you know, infinitesimal minutiae, all kinds of things. And I saw that this mural could never be anything at all. We couldn't really take any pride in it if we went through with it. It was just some sort of a tawdry illustration they wanted. And we turned them down.

[00:05:12]

We just turned them down. Made some sort of an excuse about it, said I hadn't the men to do it. Because I knew it was going to be one irritation after another, because in consultation over the designs with some local commissioners who knew absolutely nothing and had no sympathy for what we were trying to give them. So, we had to pull out on occasion.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Who had the vision? The official vision? A good painting is a good portrait of me.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah. [They laugh.] Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Anything else is a waste.

MICHAEL LENSON: That's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And occasionally, you know, there were some men on a project, who just simply made pictures. They were academic painters, and so on. So, all right, if you wanted some historical paintings of former judges for the courthouse, okay. And you don't—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, that's the place for it. I mean, it was another string to the bow.

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure, sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: An opportunity for someone. And if he had this skill, so much the better.

MICHAEL LENSON: Let him, yeah. That was his skill; fine, let him do it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. Yes. Well, you know, dealing with politicians, for example, you talk about your picket lines periodically; there'd been layoffs.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And I was in a supervisory position. There were times when I was called upon to indicate who needs to be laid off.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh boy.

MICHAEL LENSON: You know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's a hard job.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, brother, this was really tough, really tough because I didn't want to lay off anybody. We were using them. It's—you know, some of them were not great contributors. But I felt that they had a little contribution, whatever they did, and they were entitled to be on the Project; they were not to be cast off back in the relief rolls. And this was very, very difficult, the business of choosing, and this hung over our heads all the time, this ax. Every three months or something or other, they'd say, "We gotta reduce the forces. You, 10 percent will have to be left off. Another project, you have to go up 8 percent, 20 percent." So, we'd be sitting in front of the rolls, studying them and see who could be killed. Oh, boy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, that's not easy, is it? Because, you know, since it opened up the world for these people—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —to turn it off, might have a reverse effect, and in turn, create an element of bitterness.

MICHAEL LENSON: It could.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It becomes subjective.

MICHAEL LENSON: In a way, it became subjective, and those fellows who were lopped off felt that I was there in the office, and I was a sort of friend, you know. They always counted me as a friend because they knew I was sympathetic with what was going on. And this made it, you know—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Look, my friend's become a louse.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: All of a sudden, you're a louse. [Laughs.]

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I know. But it isn't easy to swallow. Or to have that kind of position.

MICHAEL LENSON: Or have the FBI arrive and say, Who, in your opinion, are the Communists out there on the floor?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, for God's sake, yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: You know? I'm supposed to go out and point out the Communists. How the hell am I to know? You know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: The liberalism, at that time, was everybody's.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This Popular Front [inaudible]—

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure, sure. Everybody.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What the hell, the background of Sacco-Vanzetti? The Scottsboro boys —

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, did you—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —right on down the line. I mean, this was news, and this was injustice running wild, you know.

MICHAEL LENSON: Wild. Who, in your opinion—this question by one of the FBI people, in your opinion—when you go out to visit these artists' studios, did you ever see, for example, some books or maybe a portrait of Stalin on the wall [laughs]? I said, Look, if you were a Communist, would you hang a portrait of Stalin on your wall [laughs], for everybody to see? How am I to know? [They laugh.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, it got silly.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But you know, it—this simply reflects, I think, the—in a sense the difficulties which the central office was confronting from Congress where they had the problem of going back for a supplementary this and supplementary this all the time. And Congress kept 'em on a quite tight snaffle-bit, fund-wise, you know?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And well, congressmen may be good lawmakers. I don't know. That's questionable, even in those days.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Let alone today, when I don't know whether they're representative or not [laughs]. I mean, that's another problem. But the Dies Committee was running hot. Of course—well, look, we were solving, in a way, nationally in those times, the whole problem with—as to whether any group of men who organize for purposes of protecting their interests in their job.

[00:10:03]

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know, and in their livelihood. That wasn't settled until, hell, '37 with the Steel case.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Jones & Laughlin [National Labor Relations Board v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation]. So, that it wasn't until '37 that we decided as a nation that men who were, you know, working, did not have to deal with the employer, as a single person, but they could organize, unionize.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So, you know, the whole thing was up for grabs. Heck, they could point a finger to what? They could take the Writers' Project and pillory it, as they did Henry Alsberg, for writing some—you know, some letter to *the New Republic*.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He had an idea one night, about one o'clock in the morning, that they ought to introduce democracy into American prisons.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Let the prisoners run the—a marvelous idea [laughs] that you could get at one o'clock in the morning—[they laugh]

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.



HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —and scribble it down and write this letter in answer to an article that you read [laughs] in *the New Republic*. Never dreaming that, given 1935 and 1936—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —some astute researcher for congressional Appropriations Committee would suddenly present you with this idea as to your qualifications, you know? Whether you're really behind the Democrat, you know—prisoners are supposed to be incarcerated, period [laughs].

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But you want to introduce democracy, and you have to defend this.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Or take the imaginative Hallie Flanagan—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —who—you know, the Living Newspaper?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: *One-Third of a Nation*, marvelous stuff, wasn't it? All right, so suddenly, she's called on the carpet. Why? Because in the course of *One-Third of a Nation*, they quoted some senators.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But they quoted them correctly.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] And they—

MICHAEL LENSON: A fatal error.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Public relations-wise, maybe they could have changed the name, maybe a comma here, or a word there. But no, they—this was the—and Hallie Flanagan apparently had enough guts to do this.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah. Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Now, it meant—in the last analysis, it meant, you know, the whole mural came down.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That she had to—they simply cut off the funds. Well, the handwriting was on the wall, from the point of view of the idea, and it enriched the turbulence. I mean, it made for better organization; it made for louder demands, because I would concede that independent artists who had that peculiar, unique vision, which they individually have, would say something like, who the hell is the federal government that I should fall on my knees to that? You know, this kind of thing, like a challenge.

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And it didn't lend itself to smoothness.

MICHAEL LENSON: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know? And—but this kettle is really boiling, so you could introduce the Dies Committee; you could introduce the FBI.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah. Oh, sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So—

MICHAEL LENSON: I remember at an Artists' Congress meeting in New York, I went there, and there was some hot discussion about Federal Art patronage. And heated voices were raised, and I spoke and so on. Wouldn't you know that either the thing was reported in *the Times*, or the speaker of the evening was Meyer Schapiro?

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

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah. And it was reported in *the Times*, and *the Newark News* picked it up, and I found it in my desk, and there it was in black and white, you know. I couldn't remember what it was that I said. But, you know, I was required to explain this, you know. It was a very leftist position of some kind.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And it was tough for me because, you know, I felt strongly about federal patronage of the arts and still do.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: You'd be surprised at some of the ideas that I had at the time, when I saw the handwriting on the wall and the Project was doomed, as to where to take it. Where to take it, you know, to save it, to preserve it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: I thought at the time, together with Bill Cotton, the photographer, and Harold Smith, who did that script in Vineland, that we got to prepare for this. We ought to discuss it, you know. What should we do? Let's say in the arts, where can we go? We considered all possible sources of patronage. And we decided that possibly the only one still on untapped was organized labor. You know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: That they would be receptive to this. So I said, Well, we have the United Mine Workers' office at Newark. I didn't know what they were doing, [inaudible], but they had one. So, we went over there and we said, Look, we want to paint a mural for your office. We want this as a trial run, you know.

[00:15:05]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, we're going to make a film of the whole business, even some of your men who might have a little bit of skill can be involved in assisting on this project. We'll give you the men to do it. We'll take mining for a theme, which is close to you. And we will give you a set of murals for your headquarters. He said, What if we don't have a headquarters here a year from now? I said, We'll design them so they're portable; you can take them wherever you go. And so on. I wrote up this project, and I wanted the Guggenheim Foundation to pick up the tab for this just initial project to make the film and have the whole thing, and then start showing this film across the country. You know, to union people everywhere.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: So, that I figured that at that time that if there were 10 million organized men in the United States, and if each one once a year would drop a dime into a hat, a million dollars. Just once a year, a dime—that we would have a federal program sponsored by labor. And not only would it pick up where the WPA left off, but give it a new impetus, aesthetically and socially, too.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

MICHAEL LENSON: Because I thought also that it would probably cure a good many of the ills— the aesthetic and technical ills of the art world if they had a focus and a direction of which way to go. Who—well, this proposal—Geoffrey Norman was one of the signers, and Arthur Egner, the president of the museum thought so highly of it—mind you, a man that's as high up as that, you know and so on. Nothing ever came of it. But about two years ago,

somebody—Jim Kearns, one of the artists here talked to some woman in New York who writes a trade journal of some kind. And I had talked to Jim Kearns about this. And he told her—she wanted me to write this thing once again. So, I've never got around to it because I was so damn busy.

But I said, The ante will have to go up to the cost of a pack of cigarettes now. You know? Each union member in the United States, a quarter, let's say. Two and a half million or more. There's more than 10 million now; we can get three million dollars a year. Is this too much to ask? I went to New York to the Garment Workers Union on 15th Street—16th Street, off Fifth Avenue. And I wanted to talk to them about it to try to get their patronage and their support for it. For the idea. Just to support the idea, just to explain it to them. They almost threw me out of their office. One said, "What are you talking about? We got strikes. We got strikes." "But you'll always have strikes," I said.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: You know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Right.

MICHAEL LENSON: But I still think it's an idea.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: I still think it's an idea. When I got bitter about it in recent years, I said, it looks to me like the only guy that listens to [inaudible] is Jimmy Hoffa. [Laughs.] Because this would be right straight up his alley; he could shame the government. He could become the American Medici.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. [Michael Lenson laughs.] Yeah. There have been all kinds of, you know, ideas of rehabilitation. Because I entertain one in Chicago, where you would work possibly in conjunction with the Catholic Church.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: For housing development, which in this area we're so desperately needing.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And what the heck, he was—and do this as a—you know, a gift.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Make a grant. He could do it.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: At least there'd be one area in the country where nobody could point a finger of scorn at the Teamsters union—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —for housing someone like this.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And I don't know whatever came of the idea. You know, he was in and out of the courtroom, and it didn't seem feasible that someone—maybe it was too late, timely, untimely, I don't know. Whatever it was. [Laughs.] But you know, it's a natural.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This would be a natural, too.

MICHAEL LENSON: It would seem to me. It would really seem to be.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Because somebody is got to begin to move in a big way—

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: —to sustain the arts. We can't go any longer historically. You know, we just can't. The UNESCO conference, two years ago, was it? Three years ago, in New York, 54 nations were represented. A word of greeting from President Kennedy. You know, 54 nations. Of the 54 nations only one does not sponsor its art: the United States. And we were the hosts.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And a word from our president, [inaudible] President Kennedy was sympathetic.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: But when? I mean, when? Let's go.

[00:20:01]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: It's later than we think.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: For heaven's sakes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: So, no, this business of the appointment of a body of 25 men, it's a research body, in effect, all right. It's an advance over just [August] Heckscher all alone. But when I sat down, I figured it out, of the 25 people that have been now designated by President Johnson or whoever does the choosing, one is there at \$25,000 a year, and the others are per diem people, that is no more than \$100,000 that was given originally for Heckscher by President Kennedy.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: That's all it is.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, but more names.

MICHAEL LENSON: More names have been added. [Laughs.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Besides, you know, that kind of thing is—comes under the heading of: Don't commit yourself, committee yourself.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah [laughs], that's good.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: That's very good. Yeah. Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's an endless wrangle to nowhere, really.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Somebody with fire in their belly, will regroup with fire in their belly and this in a way is symptomatic of the WPA, you know? Fire, and a sense of joy, too.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: At long last, really literally being paid to do the thing you want to do most.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, it's fabulous.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. And—

MICHAEL LENSON: Do you realize what the country would actually gain if a few million dollars a year was set aside? And you picked out 200 of the leading American artists and put them on a payroll at a decent substantial wage, and then either have them paint murals or pick up their best easel work and put it into government collections or give it to libraries or institutions, so on? Well, the flow of this stuff, you know, into the cultural community across the country would be fabulous.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And it's such a little sum—expenditure of money, so little, and so much would be gained. And where are we going to find this? How much longer are we going to wait?

Amazing, I was—you know, I was traveling around Italy. This business of my winning the [inaudible] prize and so forth, I wound up in Cassis on the Mediterranean at a couple of points in my travels. And I met the Grigorescus, Romanian. I got to know them, they're very nice. Lucian and [inaudible] Grigorescu, Romanian painters. What were they doing? Who was paying for them? The Romanian government was. They said there are about two dozen of them. Wherever they wanted to go, anywhere in Europe, the Romanian government picked up the tab. At the end of the year, they gave them a big exhibition, buying about 50 percent of the work for the government and the rest was bought by trade unions, in Romania, mind you. You know, we could buy then sell them twice a week. This is Romania. Fantastic.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Crazy. It's upside down.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, it's upside down.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: The—you know, in the northern—you know, in more cultural urban centers, of course, you don't have to sell this thing too hard. People understand and so forth. They may disagree with you but not in principle.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: You know? You know, the country at large, in the North or South and so forth—I guess that's where the bottleneck is because you can't—you just can't move into there with any progressive ideas in art or education.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You're looking at—the South has contributed strangely. Or maybe not strangely. Not a few of our leading writers.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. Oh, sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Whether you like to read them or not is beside the point; nonetheless—

MICHAEL LENSON: Capote and some of the others.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Oh, yeah. So, it isn't a wasteland, although maybe it is, I don't know, you know. [Laughs.]

MICHAEL LENSON: It's only—it's only that we cannot wait for them. We have to—we have to begin. Oh, ye Gods, you don't wait for a national referendum to build a big dam someplace. You mean you move. You get congressional approval on it, and you move.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And you have a Boulder Dam done, you see, you have something, and so with the arts.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Why is it then that, among leadership—Congress—they look upon the arts as unsafe, unstable? An idea they don't understand. You know, it's possible in parts of their limitation that they have, that they prefer to play with something like a dam which itself is artistic design, somewhat.

[00:25:02]

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Although it has a different and a continuing need. They don't seem to understand the nature of aesthetic experience and the human need for this too.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's a more elusive quality, not so easily defined as electricity that comes in as a construct of a series of dams or the flooding of certain areas for irrigation purposes. You know, this, you can go out on the hustings and talk about forever and a day, and it lends itself to the political arena. Well, what about the aesthetic experience? What do they know?

MICHAEL LENSON: They don't.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] And yet they are the ones who—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah. Yes, but I think that all the—you know, through Congress, we have a few here. What's his name? Congressman Thompson here in New Jersey, for example.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: You know—and there was, what's his name? Fitzmorris [ph] or Fitzhugh [ph] in New York? [William Fitts Ryan] Whose maiden speech on the floor of the Congress, called for a federal arts bill.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: A man just went through this arduous campaign of getting himself elected and goes out and practically commits suicide the moment he rises on his feet in Congress.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: It was felt this way, you know, the ardor of youth. Where is [laughs] he going with such an idea in Congress?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: But they have been fighting, you know, pushing and pushing and pushing and fighting. Williams, here—Senator Williams who's running now—he hasn't been that active actually in promoting federal support for the arts. But he came to us—that is to Artists Equity here in New Jersey, and he said, Look, this isn't much, but can you give me pictures to hang in my office? And an awful lot of other senators keep coming in all the time, you know, and everybody in Washington drops in. Fine, all right. He says, I'll pay you with some little thing, you know, so much a month for each painting. And it's been going on now for a couple of years.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Now, in the event where his voice—his vote was needed in a thing like this, we'd have it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: You know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And those that came in, and maybe were exposed to this, also probably won't be more partial. But these little things, that it's not—it's not fast enough.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, you know, they can—they'll vote endlessly for a heart institute.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I'm in favor.

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure, sure. I know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But why is it so loosely defined? Or, why is it so carefully defined?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Does it not also include the, you know, a sense of satisfaction, also? A sense of drinking deeply at the sight of something, without words, you know, getting that kind of effect.

MICHAEL LENSON: You know, even those of us, you know, who understand this full well, wasn't it strange to see Robert Frost at the inaugural? Kennedy's inaugural?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: We looked at each other a little bit in amazement, you know. Says, Ye gods, look at this. This is the United States, you know [laughs]. A poet?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: A poet.

MICHAEL LENSON: A poet up there at the inaugural—at the inauguration. Isn't that something? It gave us hope. [Laughs.] And people accepted it, and the country heard him. Were there any voices raised against him?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. I don't know the extent to which it still resides, you know.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Although he's a fabulous guy, Frost. Oh, he testified on behalf of the artistic people.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, he did.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: In the sense that, the so-called—unlike Bethlehem Steel Company, you know, an artist or creative person conceivably might strike well, in a given year, and the spread forward or the spread backward would be useful for it because there had been lean years perhaps on either side. This notion that somehow, somehow a creative person in our society has a contribution to make and ought not to be penalized for having made one, you know.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: On the sense that it's—maybe it's a shot, wham, then it goes. And, you know, he shot his bolt, he's had a psychic death for one reason or another. He's got nothing more to say [laughs], he said it—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —this sort of thing. Maybe not, I don't know. But he did raise his voice in testimony.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, he did.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Which was strange, and it was publicized, partly because he's the kind of creature he is.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I heard a very funny story about him. Somebody asked him to compare himself to—who's the Chicago man?

MICHAEL LENSON: Sandburg.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sandburg.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And he said, Sandburg says "The People, Yes"—you know that great poem?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

[00:30:01]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He says, I say, the people maybe yes, [Michael Lenson laughs] and maybe no.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] That's the difference.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: How perceptive. Because there is this skepticism inherent in—well, "Mending Wall, "it's a series of skeptical phrases.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. Yes. [Harlan B. Phillips laughs.] But Kennedy did inaugurate us, at least, a feeling and a sentiment for it, I think. Have you ever read, you know, his statement? In some Washington publication. What was it? I had it somewhere. I quoted from it. You know, I write this art column for the paper.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: I quoted from it at the time very heavily, about the need for the arts in the United States, the need for culture in the United States.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: It was very, very good, excellent. It was very far-seeing. And I wondered whether with him up there still, if that were possible, of course, whether we had not been able to move a little faster.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, I think it was in the works, in this sense that he did want to embrace, within his tent, creative things.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: After all, he was an astute man. And he had the—he was the realist in the sense that ultimately when you come to a conclusion, you tug your ear anyway.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know, and you only learn later on whether you were wise or unwise.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You—to know that, you know, not in the sense of—well, it's partly destiny, but at the same time, it's skeptical of one's own destiny too.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And ultimately, it is a sort of intuitive thing.

MICHAEL LENSON: That's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, this is creative.

MICHAEL LENSON: That's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And so, it was in the cards. I think his wife also lent—well, in a kind of



preservative way.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Like the mothball fleet, in a way. Not quite, but, you know, a kind of monumental thing.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Not an active thing or an action thing, or a thinking thing, I'm not—I didn't do her a disservice, but he was—I mean, he exuded this kind of thing.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, he did, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And it's planted.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's a seed.

MICHAEL LENSON: It's a seed, yes. He planted; he knew that when he appointed Heckscher. And it was publicized, and the people knew that a step had been taken.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Right.

MICHAEL LENSON: And this was probably the first of more steps to be taken. And we expected that that would be so.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And there will be these steps taken, only they shouldn't be delayed interminably. I mean, this is a great period of American art.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, the government has been playing a long while with the export idea. I don't mean as a commodity—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —but how can you come closer to whatever America is except through its creative people, as an addition to sending experts, and this, that, the other thing?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Why not send, or share with, or send to given localities for a year or so on, someone who is in the creative field, an artist, a sculptor?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And let them work and share in that sense.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Or maybe the problem from their point of view, since they deal with what they believe to be hard and serious questions, is how to use this—you know, the gift that we have.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That something extra special, that unique thing that we have.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Instead of this monolithic—you know, these vague, ill-defined phrases like: Democracy should exist in the Congo. It's very interesting.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: We showed how—our ignorance of anthropology—cultural anthropology [laughs], you know, for policy and the rest—

MICHAEL LENSON: That's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —that—

MICHAEL LENSON: I remember that it was brought to me very forcibly when a carefully arranged film of Tshombe—not this last time, but previously just before he got heeded out.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: When they dressed him up to look like a British diplomat. [They laugh.] He was so ill at ease. He looked so completely out of kilter. And it was so completely synthetic. Somebody's idea of democratizing them by making them physically resemble us, you know.

[00:35:05]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. It's just a weird idea.

MICHAEL LENSON: Isn't it?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But the—it may well be that the State Department—I know—of course, I don't know anything about the process involved, but the State Department is trying to use or work out ways in which shows travel abroad and artists travel abroad.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But Jesus, all you have to do in terms of the past was to have somebody rise on the House floor or the Senate floor and raise some question about some contribution, some painting. Look at Eisenhower, what he did to the Moscow show.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Although he later had to eat his own words.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: As though his [laughs]—his view is controlling or should be.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Or that you can't make a representative selection of the various schools. I don't know that you can, but you know, you can get a—I don't know, maybe it's because human experience is becoming so fragmented—

MICHAEL LENSON: It is fragmented.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —that nobody can see it total [inaudible]—

[Cross talk.]

MICHAEL LENSON: [Inaudible] very difficult [inaudible].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Whatever it is you do see is only a fragment of a total picture. No one quite climbs on top of it. So it's difficult to get across to a congressman or a senator. What there is of meaning in a representational way of modern art, I don't know.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Since it is a fragment thing, or a new way of looking at things.

MICHAEL LENSON: Is there any other way of approaching Congress? For example, has anybody thought of an actual educational program in Washington? Films and lectures, and so on? Can we involve a group of senators and congressmen to attend this?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I don't know.

MICHAEL LENSON: Huh?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I don't know. It's hard as nails, you see.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The whole concept that they're having the kind of power collectively that they have to exercise is wholly at variance with the nature of their function and work, which is as glorified messenger boys in a way back to their constituencies.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, and very few of them, so far as I can see, except on some matters, have brought enough vision to transcend the state lines, which they represent.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What your asking—and it's implicit in the WPA, where something national in nature occurred.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The nature of which no one understood at the time, but it enriched the air, it germinated an idea, it brought ideas together.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I mean, people were sent out from New York to open something in Arizona.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: A community art center, this kind of thing. Shows were sent around. Nobody knows how to test and measure the net effect of this.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But something national occurred, all under the guise of freedom.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know? I hate to say it, but it would appear that it would take some kind of tragic happening, instead of a positive view that somehow somehow art has something to say, beyond our shores and perhaps more representative of what it is we are as idea to people.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And our experts, our military genius, you know, who needs it?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Although it's a marketable commodity for those who are involved in the production of these gadgets.

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Is it any more formative or useful than the artistic, creative thing? I think the State Department is playing and toying with this idea. I don't know who it is that is doing it. But government people tend to be timid.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And boldness, where can you find boldness except in the creative area?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So, it's like mixing antithetical things.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. Occasionally, you hear of some little thing happening. One of our printmakers here, John Ross, who was the president of the American Society of Graphic Artists—he lives in Englewood here. And he was one of the jury that chose Stuart Davis' design for the stamp. You know, that fine arts stamp? And I discovered in reading his biography that he had been sent by the State Department with a graphic show to tour Europe and to demonstrate, and to speak, to travel with it. That's good. That's very good.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. It's all good. I think, somehow—well, you know, it's worth 1,000 words, they say.

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure. Sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And the words may differ to every set of eyes.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. I don't know. We have a tendency, I think nationally, to disregard the intuition of people as a whole.

[00:40:00]

Because, for example, I had some people come here two weeks ago. And they wanted to look at some paintings [inaudible], just to look, you know. So, one of them was a man who has been asking to come here a long time; he's an Italian who runs a fruit stand over here. And I brought him in. And he was—he had very little cultivation; he had very little exposure to art, but he has a deep, deep instinct, you see. Well, his choice of the things that he liked were really so far superior to the others who ostensibly knew painting, and so on. And then one of them lit off, he had just come back from the trip in Europe. He's a very wealthy businessman. And the things he had to say about Florence and Rome. And all he talked about, you know, was the exploitation of the American tourists and so forth. He didn't see a damn thing. And then he finally said, The Colosseum, boy, there's a lot of rubble. This guy, this Italian, you know, I was a little worried [laughs] because I thought he was going to really suddenly get a hold of this guy and bash his head in. But no, patiently, he leaned over and tried to explain about what the importance historical of the Colosseum, and what he had missed, you know, and he wasn't prepared to actually understand about the cobblestones of Florence and the Piazza Vecchio. Then why did he go, you know? This Italian.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: A good fan?

MICHAEL LENSON: Wonderful. Really, I was just moved.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: I just want to—and he's an ordinary guy, just a very ordinary guy. And how much of this kind of sense of reaction, to appreciation of thought, the creativity, and so on. Guys that come into fix the skylight—I always have this experience, with craftsmen particularly. They seem to—if they see it as a craft, they immediately respond, you know. It's nice, and I think that we just disregard this. And in the WPA, we found a great deal of it, you know, a great deal of it. Look at the men who laid the mosaic floors. They were only stonemasons, but with what care, they assembled the little chips, you know, following the design and so on. It was wonderful to see. Sure. I'm an optimist. I mean, I get impatient for the passage of time.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: But I know that if the thing came to be, that the people would respond; they would. Because they can't possibly see in art anything of an anathema or as a threat to them. They can't possibly. Why would they?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I don't know, but the sensibility they have is like setting off in the harbor, a sailboat.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And, you know, you just go with the tide. And so far as you're

concerned, when you're through, the harbor remains uncharted, you really didn't see it.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And it's like screaming at the dark, without hearing.

MICHAEL LENSON: Look at how many people, you know—let's say, Nutley has an adult school, there are about 60 more adult schools in a state. Each one has an art class, two art classes. And they never have any trouble filling them up. They have trouble with other classes; somebody wants to introduce, let's say—oh, I don't know—literature or to get some lecturers out to talk about philosophy. But you—an art class, for example, where they can come in and participate, learn a little bit about it, booming, all over booming. Booming everywhere.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Well, it's a need.

MICHAEL LENSON: It's a need.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Otherwise, they wouldn't be there.

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, what about this—you know, this great reservoir of leisure and greater reservoirs of people, what about it? Isn't this, in a sense, dynamite? I mean, shouldn't this be charted constructively? Aren't we sitting on the crater of a volcano here?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, I think probably we'll go deep into the crater before anyone will discover that we ought to do something about it.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And this may be—only be attractive things that the warm and familiar are. It's something new, and therefore it's, you know, it's not yet ripe in a sense.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And I don't know, it may sound un-Christian in a way, but you can divide people, I suspect, into a group that grazes a pasture like cows. You know?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And a group within that that somehow are going to get the hell out of the pasture and do something else.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They—you know, it's a restless, itchy-footed quality; they got to do something, in a creative way. Others are content just to eat the same old grass.

[00:45:02]

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Although they—I don't want to sell them short, they also get—derive something from either the green, the grass, or the shade, or its taste, smell, something, you know. So, they're not totally devoid. It just isn't developed in the sense that their feeling, you know, is—and their action and their thinking are not correlated to the point where thinking is also feeling, an intuitive thing, all at the same time.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, you know, I took a group through four visits to New York museums on four successive Wednesdays, two to the Metropolitan, two to the Museum of Modern Art. We only had arranged for four, so that we didn't cover very much, really. But here were people—just one or two of them had a little bit of familiarity with painting and sculpture, so on. The others just wanted to know. And it's amazing, you know, I thought—when I met them for the first time and took them upstairs into the Dutch gallery, I sort of planned a route. And I said, well, where should I begin? You know, just how do I begin here? And we walked through—a great part of the gallery is closed off now because they're reconditioning; they're putting in air conditioning, you see. So, I said, You know that the High Renaissance, for example, I'm sorry, we cannot see. It's just simply closed off now for the duration of these

renovations here. They need air conditioning. And I said, What do you think this air conditioning is for? For you? You know? I said, The place is comfortably warm, or if you're cold, you can put on another sweater or do something. This isn't for you; it's for the paintings. You know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: They listened. I said, Do you realize what care these things need, if you want to, you know, really keep them?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And how so many treasures everywhere—in Italy, for example, the government had to step in, in order to preserve their greatest commodity, art, and so on.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: They organized the restoration workshop in Florence, at the Uffizi Gallery, and here, and so on. These pictures and what goes into them, how they're made, and what care, needs, the restoration departments here that nourish them and watches them night and day and so on, you see. And this Vermeer, for example, we discussed this, and what it was made of, you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And how violent changes in temperature conceivably could damage it, and so on. And you let them into that. And then we begin talking about Vermeer and the Dutch school and the times and the quality of the work and the content and why, because it was a rising Dutch class. I said, You don't see much mythology introduced here, not much allegory; there are no great victories or battles. Just quiet things, you see? A time of security, a time of peace. And so, we went on and on, we took it from there. These people, you know, this is something they were—Oh, it's grand.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: It's grand. Opening up, you know, a world of information, of knowledge they wanted very much.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And I don't think this group was exceptional.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, I don't either.

MICHAEL LENSON: No. It wasn't exceptional. It was just like almost anybody, any group of 10 people, would have responded the same way.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But the difference, in a way, is having someone to guide.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know, someone to point out that—what a teacher ought to do. Just a footpath.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Look out for that boulder. Watch out for this one. That's the function of it, to light the way, or to demonstrate what the past has been.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I think there is an eagerness for—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's in competition with a lot of things, like that square box that rules our roost.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah [laughs].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: With [channels ad infinitum (ph)].

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Stuart Davis, he had one when I talked with him.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He had a television set that was turned on.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It moved so that the picture—

MICHAEL LENSON: Spun.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: That's right. He wasn't watching anything in particular, and the sound wasn't on because he likes jazz.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And a jazz program was on when I got there with a radio that was wired, I think, with 1890 wire, but the jazz was coming out here.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The picture was rolling over here.

MICHAEL LENSON: Is that so?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: He loved to see the signs it made, huh?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Of course.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: For sure. And—

MICHAEL LENSON: That's fantastic.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, and to [laughs]—but this is the—it's very interesting to me to tell his story because the function of the TV set for him had nothing to do with the sound. [Michael Lenson laughs.] It was the wrinkle that he introduced by playing with the back so that it would flop sideways and roll this way. [They laugh.]

[00:50:15]

[Cross talk.]

MICHAEL LENSON: [Inaudible.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, you had to have it, you know. It was—whether—and it was on without—no sound at all, just continually going all the time. [They laugh.] Well, that's what it should be used for, you know? [They laugh.] I mean, that's—it has a purpose that way.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. [They laugh.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, I gather that the WPA left deep scars on you that's still rumbling, direct [inaudible]—

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. Oh, yes. Yes, a great deal of that—well, it was a time of great social awareness. We knew that the country was in a dump. We were very insecure, we didn't know where the hell this thing was going to wind up, you know. We had a breather there on the WPA. It gave us a chance to develop creatively. But we didn't know whether we'd

actually come out of this Depression. What would happen to us when the Project ended? We knew it wasn't forever.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: You know, and so on. And we were very uncertain, insecure, but we got a great deal of understanding about ourselves in relation to our times, to each other, to our creativity. How little was actually guaranteed for us, you know, very little. Very, very little. A certain amount of bitterness crept in, the firing periods, you know, and I had to lop off guys, and so on. It was very, very bitter, but along with the camaraderie and all this, but camaraderie as what? I mean, the mutuality, even of woes and sorrows, makes for camaraderie.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure.

MICHAEL LENSON: We had that. So, the business of art as a social measure, you know. I have to do, within the work, to say something about what I feel, you know, about myself, my fellow man, the times, protest, lash out at something. I mean, given the tools, I just don't want to play tiddlywinks with them, I want to use them for something.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: You see?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: And of course, you know, now they're referring us back to the '30s. And changes have taken place, and so on. Oh, I don't know, maybe photography has come a long way and has taken over some of that area. So we don't have to do that in that identical way any longer.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: You see, we can lead courses maybe on a slightly more exalted level. Okay. But I've never—nor have the fellows that have been with me on a Project—ever quite lost this feeling of being—of art being an essential part of their living and the country as a whole. And the sooner we get to understand this, the better. We've been delaying for too long. We've got to get into this. I mean, we can't just simply be purely materialistic, consuming, physically consuming beings. What are we worms? It comes out here, goes out there?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: You know, is this all?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: The country itself is waiting for some sort of spiritual motivation. This is one of the maladies of our time. More Frigidaires or more cars instead, three cars and a third—you know, in a two-car garage, and what the hell. [Laughs.] You can't stuff it in anymore.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. No.

MICHAEL LENSON: Really, there's a great deal of unrest resulting from all this. And the gravitation towards the art is, I think, a seeking after spiritual values; I feel it strongly. And we know, we got a little bit of a messianic kind of a feeling out of the Project. Those of us who helped formulate it somewhat, and saw its results. We never stopped being missionaries. Well, you think that this—at a greater, more expanding arc must return, must return. We've got to work for it. We've got to—really must. Because the people actually knew, this isn't for me alone. Another few years, I'm gone. But our country needs it. They must. They must. They really must. And this is something that we learned on the Project. Yes, I remember that.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This is the great continuity of the thing.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.



HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: It's got to be. That's why I say, all right, fine, Kennedy did this, now Johnson appointed a body of 25. Well, let's go, let's go. Let's go. You know this is only a very faint beginning. I mean, the people themselves are moving faster than this.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, you know, we're still in the period of adjusting, or writing footnotes to all the giants, like Einstein.

[00:55:04]

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Or Freud. Or Marx, and social conditions [ph]. And hell, to break through now with a new statement that somehow is going to reach beyond the current thing and make for something wholly new.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I mean, Einstein, we're going to play with him until somebody discovers a new galaxy or a new galaxy within a galaxy or something like that. We'll still be writing footnotes with Freud, individualism, and concentration on the individual is going to—well, there've been some changes in humans and so on in terms of a collective kind of thing. But it's fluid still, I mean, there's no—it's the same in art, from, let's say, Picasso, we anticipate the thing.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Maybe not Picasso, maybe others, but you know, symbolic of what Einstein is to the science field or what Freud is to the psychic field and Marx to the social field, Picasso to the artistic field.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But then gee, you know, you take a look at—you take a look at the intense, smaller fragmentation of things. You know, fragmentation of experience. Something happens in Vietnam, it affects me, I've never even seen them [laughs], let alone heard of it. But there it is. That backyard is what? Cambodia?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's gotten there. Yes, I know.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But to—

MICHAEL LENSON: But you see, that's it, you see [inaudible]—

[Cross talk.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [We've not only done that but now we're in -Ed.] Cambodia. Our front yard now is, what, at least 400 miles up in the air, maybe more. [Laughs.]

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh sure, oh sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know, and God only knows what lies beyond. Well, someone is gonna to have to either anticipate it, imaginatively, project ahead, come up with some kind of statement, which, as you point out, is a new spiritual value—or a value somehow which is relevant to this—to the turbulence of our own times. And there is a great deal of it.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You just see it reflected in kids.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. Of course.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: You know, it's one thing to snap on a box and go to a football game in Los Angeles.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, isn't it something? It's incredible.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: We didn't have that in the '30s. Finding Query [ph] Avenue, Prospect Avenue, and so on.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The synagogue across the way, you know, the other church on the other side. That's a small, parochial view.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: My son can go to the box and turn it on. And with his parochial context—because he knows the block, the house, the Junior High School—he takes a trip to the West Coast. I don't know what he absorbs. He sits there silently.

MICHAEL LENSON: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I don't know what he absorbs, or what it adds to him, or whether it deepens this or expands on—there's no way of testing it.

MICHAEL LENSON: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Or how much—or what—or how the—what will come out of the intake which he absorbed.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Or what kind of creature this really is?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes. [They laugh.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: "I've seen the Pacific, so I know," he's never been there, but he sees it. You know, what does it mean? That sense of time and sense of space is just shot, you know, in terms of what we knew it to be in the '30s. Which interestingly enough, Audrey McMahon was in New York, you seldom saw her. [They laugh.]

MICHAEL LENSON: She was right there.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Radio was the new thing in those days [inaudible].

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But you know, you had a chance to work out destiny here.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I don't know whether it's, you know, going to—some people would say the only thing I'd leave to the states would be their lines. I don't know, the endless duplication from Maine to California in terms of snow removal. Maybe that's what the local community can continue to do. But no more. [Michael Lenson laughs.] Let's get out of the business of doing other things.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I don't know, you know. Everybody protecting their own little corner.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, that's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And the cost, astronomical. Endless duplication, which perhaps could be handled better.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But this leads to leisure. What do you do with it?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, that's it. That's it, leisure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: What do you do with it?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I mean, the WPA in terms of its creative thing and the ramifications for children and for their fathers, you know, as they—it cut the pattern differently throughout the country, is a way.

[01:00:07]

MICHAEL LENSON: It's a way, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's maybe not an answer in terms of the WPA itself, but a precedent upon which something new can be projected. Whether it's sailing kites, building kites, or whatever it is. I don't really know, but catalysts come in strange ways, and sometimes the length of time between one given area of thinking and a new one, there's a technological development that suddenly, you know, telescopes through time, and suddenly you're in the midst of something new you never—for example, I never would have zeroed in for the atomic age. Who can understand a physicist, you know? I mean, what is a physicist to me?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And whammo, they're blowing off half the map, and suddenly they've got fantastic power. Well, I never quite got adjusted to this. And suddenly, I was in the Space Age. [They laugh.]

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, all right, if that affects—I get dizzy standing on a curb stone. What the heck am I doing way up there? You know? What does this do, creative thing? Look at San Francisco, hounding their poets out of the city. I mean, yeah, it doesn't make sense. You shoot a rocket up in the air from Cape Canaveral and hound the poets out of San Francisco. I think the two things are joined, somehow.

MICHAEL LENSON: I guess. I guess.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Must be. It throws up to the surface in a given period this kind of impulse, to break through with an artistic design, a fantastically delicate mechanism, carefully geared, carefully weighted, and so on. It takes fantastic things to do it, you know?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And the people who, in previous years, have been able to somehow absorb whatever it is we are and in a creative way project it, in rhyme.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I don't know.

MICHAEL LENSON: I don't know, either. It's very difficult to say. Sometimes you wonder about whether you can, you know, spark something. You know, an opportunity may come sometimes. For example, you said the poets are being hounded out of San Francisco. Well, the artists are being hounded out of New York, you know? So, we know this has been going on. Well, I once visited a friend in Philadelphia, and in what they called the—what they call the Society Hills section in Philadelphia. So, I went around, and I said, "Look at the alley! There are dozens of them here, and they're empty! [Inaudible.] Why don't we bring the New York mob out here?" You know?

So, just at that time, somebody—a girl who works for the Ford Foundation and lives here in town called me up. She said, "Ford Foundation is trying to find some other way of spending money, you know? Maybe more money, you know? We're looking for ideas. Have you got any?" So, I thought about this. I said, Look, the Society Hill section in Philadelphia, there are the most beautiful, little, old brick buildings standing there, and there's nobody in them. Turn it over to the artists. Look what's happening in New York. Let Philadelphia, the government itself, plus the Philadelphia Museum, plus the Pennsylvania Academy, and plus

Artists Equity, get on the ball over there. Let's all get together over there and open—you know, open their arms in welcome to the guys from New York. You know, you can set up schools for them, open new galleries, get the whole thing moving, you see?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Let somebody provide some funds, you the Ford Foundation, to let the artists take these building offered at reduced rentals, you see? It'll shame New York for a while. It'll create the most dramatic exodus out of New York, you know? And it'll be a really dilly for the press, you know, [they laugh] when the New York refugees start marching up and down the roads, you know? [They laugh.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: So, she said, Well, that was interesting enough, and then she said, well, she was going to speak to them up there, and then I talked to Meyer Chicovsky [ph], who's the president of Equity out in New Jersey, and he liked the idea, and he talked to the fellow up there that was president of Equity in New York. So, they decided to send him over there to this Ford Foundation meeting. So, the question was raised, this proposal was discussed. So, all of a sudden, up gets Philip Guston. You know Philip Guston? I wasn't there. This is as reported back to me. And Philip Guston said, "We's against all kinds of, you know, community concentration of the artists. That's not the way for creativity."

[01:05:02]

And, well, he's entirely opposed to any such idea, and so on. And he sits down, and nobody got up to refute him. This guy from Equity just sat there, and nobody defended this whole thing, and apparently it just sort of—it just went. Just went. Who the hell said that anybody in this community has to become a member of the community and live and sleep with the other guy? It was just to create the physical conditions for them to continue to create, and make it a little easier for him to exist. That's all that I was proposing. And I thought the Ford Foundation might conceivably, with the help of other bodies in and around Philadelphia, create a renaissance in Philadelphia, and shame New York.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [They laugh.] Well, it's a different kind of renewal.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Not urban renewal, but an aesthetic renewal.

MICHAEL LENSON: It's an aesthetic renewal, sure. The buildings are there. The alleys are there. They could be used. It would be a marvelous thing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure. A great artist's quarter in Philadelphia.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. It would be marvelous from the point of view of the press. How they could engineer it beautifully, in the sense of—you said shame New York.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: All you would need would be a bank of violins. Go over like gangbusters.

MICHAEL LENSON: [Laughs.] Yeah. Well, I was disappointed, of course, that not more discussion, at least, had taken place on it, you know?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, that the idea didn't get a chance.

MICHAEL LENSON: A better hearing than this, but to be brushed off so easily without anyone to really defend it a little bit more, explore it a little more.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, was it—you know, in the '30, was there attempts at housing like this?

MICHAEL LENSON: No.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. I mean, the housing was, the only thing was the opportunity to earn—

MICHAEL LENSON: To work.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: —bread, butter, and so on.

MICHAEL LENSON: There was no housing provided. Wherever you are, that's where you are.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: This is it, yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: This is it. And all kinds of little alleyways, they hung on. That's it. No, this was a very limited measure, very limited. Economically, it was a mere subsistence pittance to eat by. Before I became a supervisor, it was \$18 a week. Well, you know, \$18 then was all right. I got along fine. But nobody got rich. Just barely subsisted from week to week. And if they were fired, boom. You know, they shut off their breath. [Laughs.] They turned off the air. [Laughs.] Oh, mama. Well, what will happen? The opponents of any kind of federal patronage will say that with security comes death, you know? I don't know, let's try it and see.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I think that's what I implied in the leather against leather, you know? That when it's empty, somehow or other, we re-examine where we are, put rude hands on the machine, pull out a few cogs, and throw in something new, and we feel—otherwise, it becomes precious to us. We want the momentum to continue.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Even, like in '29, if anybody had bothered to look in '27, we would have known that the modern artists, but for a few, were—what—hanging on by their fingertips.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And they were doing a lot of other things, you know? A lot of odd jobs in order to paint. So it wasn't, you know—it wasn't the land of milk and honey for them. If they looked even deeper, they would've known that the farm community was on its pants in 1921, not '29, 1921, struggling along. So, it's an illusion that they had that this was the great era, the age of the red-hot mamas and the bubble. You know, it broke in '29 for those who had affluence.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, that's right.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But that's all. But it brought everyone back to the point where some modern artists had been all during the '20s, and where a good many of the small farms had been during the '20s.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So, you know, it's hard to say. No ideas generated then, except for the law schools, incidentally.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah, law schools began to re-examine what the devil they were doing, and why isn't there a greater relevance between what's going on out in the community and what's being said in the classroom? So they—to varying degrees, they overhauled the curriculum, to bring the, you know—to bring the marketplace up to the law school, instead of making it some separate thing, you know.

[01:10:06]

MICHAEL LENSON: Something detached, exclusive. Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Laughs.] Yeah. But to enrich it with case studies of actual things, as distinct from, you know, some dream that was set up for them. Textbookitis [ph]. Well, that's the only, you know—that's in part one of the things they were doing. Well, Civil Liberties Union was operating in the '20s, too, but for their purposes, you know. Just to stand on a

street corner and give a speech.

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: So, you know, we've come a long way. This—somehow or other, I don't know. I'm torn between the notion that in order to achieve the flowers of civilization, we need a little stinking human manure. I hate to say it. It's tough to say.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Whether an affluent, fat, comfortable, steam-heated society can generate excitement in terms of something new, or in terms of drive or appreciation or creativity, I don't know.

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, you may have something quite different, as you had at the peak of other civilizations, in Greece and Rome, and so on, where there was state patronage, and they built their temples, and they built their statues, a certain quiescence about the art, a certain elegance, perhaps, ensued, and they then began to topple until the Laocoön [ph] group, you know, and all this kind of thing began to indicate instability and torment and so on. But that period, a certain serenity, a classical serenity ensued. So all right, if we were guaranteed a livelihood, and we knew that tomorrow was provided for, and our children would be educated and so on, conceivably a certain classic period would ensue, possibly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, you know? But nothing is forever, and even that wouldn't last. So let the future determine what follows next.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: It's like the great line—

MICHAEL LENSON: Say, do you know Frank Jennings, by any chance?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Frank Jennings. The name.

MICHAEL LENSON: I don't know why I thought you might know him. He's a friend of ours. I hadn't seen him in almost a year. He's one of the editors of *the Saturday Review*, and he's in the educational field. I don't know which organization he works for. Wonderful guy. Tremendous thinker on education and aesthetics and so on. I don't know, something about you sounded a little like him, and I thought possibly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No, I don't. But *Saturday Review*, I get *the Saturday Review*. That's where I might've bumped into him.

MICHAEL LENSON: I see, yes. So, I don't know what I remembered of the WPA has been of any value to you.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: I think it has a great deal, because this is an area here, which is unlike New York, unlike San Francisco, unlike Los Angeles, this is—you know, and therefore would have remained unrepresented. And in this sense, it's been good. And I much prefer—let's see, if I had a theme that I wanted to show, it's the excitement in allowing local discretion. You know?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Where you don't administer creativity into nothingness, but you give an opportunity, and then give it discretion, also, where it can choose to work within. It has to make its own way.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: As you did with sponsorship.

MICHAEL LENSON: In that regard, it's quite true. We made our way, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. And we said before, the possibilities were limited solely by the imaginations of those people who were in positions of leadership within the whole thing. And this varied from place to place to place to place, depending upon the local scene, depending

upon the local people that they had to work with, how they put them to work, what they got them to do.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The tapestry boys and the glassblowers.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah. What construction do you put on what followed, for example, the dumping of the paintings in the Canal Street warehouse, just simply dumping it and finally being sold for, what, a dollar apiece by the—now, incidentally, why would they give it to a commercial junkman? They never permitted us to sell anything commercially.

[01:15:01]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible.] By this time, they had passed—precedence had been created.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Sure, in the naval shipyards, for example.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, I see, surplus.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Oh, yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Or, deeper than that, overage, unused, unseaworthy destroyers were shipped to Great Britain, in return for bases.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, I see.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: We have storage space, what do we do with it? Declare a surplus, sell it for scrap.

MICHAEL LENSON: Scrap, yes. Because some of the fellows, as you know, ran over there and started buying back their own pictures for a dollar, two dollars, five dollars, tops. Evergood bought back some of his own pictures for five dollars. [Laughs.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: He did?

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Good for him.

MICHAEL LENSON: The things he painted on the Project. That's the one I heard about going down there. But a lot of the other fellows went down there, too. But there was another aspect of it too, and this is not something I can decry particularly, because it seems inevitable in the nature of things. For example, you probably heard of Gorky's mural at the Newark Airport vanishing.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: Well, they vanished. They called me up; did I know what happened to it? I haven't the slightest idea, because nobody called me up and told me they were going to tear them down. They had to remodel the airport, and go to the murals, and somebody took them down and dumped them somewhere, and they vanished. But I know closer to home how this works. This mural on the history of New Jersey, 75 feet by 16 and a half, that vanished. Doesn't exist anymore.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Like that?

MICHAEL LENSON: I know. What happened? But nobody called me up or asked me or warned me about it. This huge dining room, they decided to convert it into wards. So here's this mural, the whole length of it. It's got to come down. They started tearing it down, but we did it very well. We mounted it with [leading and spar varnish -Ed.], and it was there a long time. So they began to tear it, and they began to probably rip it, and they finally said, Hey,

listen, \$20-a-day man—or whatever it is, \$40, I mean—we can't waste time, let's get this down. So they ripped it all up and dumped it, and it vanished. And only about a year and a half later, I had occasion to call the sanatorium. I asked them whether they had certain photographs of it or something, and they told me it wasn't there any longer. Well, it was gone. Vanished. So would you say, don't take it down? You know? Do not remodel this dining room into wards? Do not remodel the airport?

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: No. We can't, not really. But at the same time—look, in New York City, we tear buildings down before we even get a chance to love them, don't we?

MICHAEL LENSON: [Laughs.] Yeah, sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And that's—I guess it is the order of things. Like the Ritz, that gorgeous dining room.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah, sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: They've got a big mountain of glass. All right, so that's something new. I could conceivably think of whole areas of New York which they ought to spend their money on to remodel, and the Ritz wasn't one of them. It was a good building.

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But we do tear things down that way. The Gorky thing, your own mural? It illustrates a—the time changed, you know?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: The scene shifted. The impulses are different.

MICHAEL LENSON: That's right. Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Wards, we needed. A dining room, we didn't need.

MICHAEL LENSON: Of course, certainly.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: An airport, I don't know. I guess larger planes, more room, whatever it is, service, you know.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes, sure. So it came down, yes. There isn't anything—people, you know, wanted to go up—well whom was there to protest to? I can't say you shouldn't have remodeled the airport, or you shouldn't have reconverted a dining room, that's ridiculous. I wouldn't say anything like that. All I could've said was, Why the hell didn't you call me up? Why didn't you ask me about how you can get this thing down? Even if it were rolled up and put away somewhere, it would still exist, and conceivably, in time, we might find a new wall for it. But nobody asked me anything, you know? [Cross talk.] This was the crime, not having even asked me as to what might be done, consulted me on it, that—you know, the man who created it.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yeah. Yeah.

MICHAEL LENSON: This is wanton. This kind of thing really disturbs one.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, it has—you know, it has all the agony of birth pains about it all over again. I mean, it's the new. Wards, we need.

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure, yes.

[00:20:04]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: We need them yesterday. [Michael Lenson laughs.] You know, in terms of their thinking. That is that civilized decency would require what—what's in a phone call?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah. I would've come down. I would've thought of some solution. I would've asked somebody else about how you can maybe soften the, you know, the varnish or something and let it come down easily. See, I don't know. Well, this is all right. I don't feel too badly about that, because I understand. It was inevitable. I wouldn't have opposed. It



was their province. This was a hospital. All right, fine. But how many other things, with this business of dumping all these paintings in a warehouse? Ye gods.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, that was a crash—

MICHAEL LENSON: This was an attitude. See, this—art is not quite war surplus. When a gun no longer is up to specifications, you dump it. You design another one. But this is not a gun, you know? It's something else.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Yes. It is not a gun, so long as the people who are handling it think in those terms.

MICHAEL LENSON: If they think in those terms.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: But when someone comes in and says, Look, I have a warehouse, says, We've got a lot of room. We've got bundles for Britain to store.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Just to illustrate the change in time, you know. We were then aiding them. That was the big spirit, the big push, the big drive, the big interest. Our idea—we were going to have 20 million people in the Armed Forces.

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: And in those terms, what is a piece of canvas, you know?

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah. Sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Besides, we were blistering hell out of—we didn't suffer any ourselves, except, I guess, in a way, this is our own destruction. We didn't suffer like Cologne, London, you know, we didn't suffer this. But our own losses were in our intemperance with reference to our past; we'd sweep it up [inaudible].

MICHAEL LENSON: Sure.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, I once had the idea, as a subtitle for an American history book from 1896 to the present day, sort of a modern history, I was going to call it, you know, *American History*, very formal, *1896 to 1960: The Full Garbage Pail*.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yeah.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, how about—you said three cars in a two-car garage.

MICHAEL LENSON: Yes.

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Where you not only have a full dinner pail, but we've got a full garbage pail at the same time.

MICHAEL LENSON: That's right. [Laughs.]

HARLAN B. PHILLIPS: Well, you know [inaudible].

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]