



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Robert
McChesney, 1964 Apr. 4

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Robert McChesney on April 4, 1964. The interview took place in Petaluma, California, and was conducted by Lewis Ferbraché for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Mary Fuller McChesney was also present at the interview. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project.

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. 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.

Interview

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Lewis Ferbraché, interviewing Robert McChesney—capital *M*, small *c*, capital C-H-E-S-N-E-Y—at his home, 2955 Mountain Road, Petaluma, California, April 4, 1964. Bob, I'd like to ask you first your birthday, where you were born, and your early art training.

ROBERT MCCHESNEY: I was born in Marshall, Missouri on January 16, 1913. And after attending high school and spending a great deal of life in Marshall, Missouri, I went to Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, School of Fine Arts there. And I had a year of studying and the Depression hit my father about that time, and the family economics went all to hell. So, I missed a year. And then, after working around various jobs, I'd saved up enough money to at least give me back there to start. And then I won a scholarship for the year and finished out. I was two years in Washington University.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: That was majoring in art?

ROBERT MCCHESNEY: Yeah. That was just strictly art. I wasn't working for a degree or anything. I was just spending all my time—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Painting.

ROBERT MCCHESNEY: —full day of studying, drawing, and painting, a few other fill-ins. And then after that there was no more funds whatsoever. So after spending a couple of more years in Marshall, Missouri, I lined up a job in Montana at Glacier National Park, driving a bus out there, so I cut out for the far West. And I spent a year there both working in Glacier National Park and also in Fort Peck, Montana, with the army engineers building the Fort Peck dam, which was quite an experience for a small town boy, you know, getting out of into the big exciting world.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Bob, you were talking about working as a young man at Glacier National Park.

ROBERT MCCHESNEY: Take it up from there?

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Yes.

ROBERT MCCHESNEY: Yeah. Well, driving a bus in the park. And then, of course, as I said, I worked in Fort Peck during the winter of whatever year that was. That was about '34, I believe, '34 or '35. And then, I saved up, boy, I imagine around \$500 on that job in Fort Peck and the park combined. And cut out for Los Angeles, where I felt that I had to go back to art school for some reason or other. I shouldn't have. What I should have done was mixed with artists and really done some work. And then I went back to school. And I enrolled at the Otis Art Institute. Otis—Otis Art Institute. And I was there for a year.

And the second semester, I think I got some sort of working scholarship and played the role

of janitor. Then I got a job at Sheets [ph], which was a candy store and delicatessen, but soda fountain in Los Angeles, printing menus. And I was mowing yards and doing gardening. I think I had five jobs, carrying five jobs a week and making a total of \$30 a month in all the jobs.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: This was during the Depression when jobs were hard to get.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah. Yeah, And then, I fell in love with one of the models in the school, persuaded her to marry. And she said if I went to San Francisco, why, she should marry me.

[00:05:11]

So [laughs.] Then we came to San Francisco. At the time, I—we had a job working with the Max Reinhardt Faust set in Los Angeles. See, the whole production came up here and they put it on in the Civic Auditorium. And this friend of mine who had been working with me. He wrote me and said, "Man, this is the greatest place in the world. You can get a great meal up here for 25¢. And living is cheap. It's a great scene, so come on up." So, we did. And I immediately moved into the Montgomery Block.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: A famous building from San Francisco, it was built in the '50s, where the artists were living in the Depression period.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Built in the '50s, you mean 1850s.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: That's what I mean, 1850s. Yes. When I say the '50s [Mary Fuller McChesney laughs]—speaking as a historian—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, the Montgomery Block at that time was practically occupied totally by artists. There were very few other people.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Famous artists there had studios, like Maynard Dixon, for one, and any other—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Harry Dixon, his brother, and—well, names escape me right now. Well, the place was full of them. So being—not having established residents here I had a rather difficult time. The fair was in preparation in 19—what was it, 19—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: '39?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: '39 fair, yeah. It was—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: In preparation of the '38 and '[3]9 I believe. [Cross talk.] [Inaudible.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, this is the end of '37, I already started work on it.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Yeah.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I know the Project was in operation, in all of the art forms, for instance, the Volz mural was in—had a place down on First Street in San Francisco.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: This was the Golden Gate International Exposition.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, right. And this Volz mural is being done for the federal building. Well, I had talked to several of the supervisors on the Project. And they'd seen my work. And they said, Well, great. And all you had to do is get on relief. And I said, You know it's somewhat of a problem. If you can solve it, you're in. So, in the meantime, I had my portfolio of primarily studies, school studies, and drawings. And I was taking around the commercial analysis. And I was—same old rat race. Nobody was particularly interested in the students, and besides, by this time they'd hired mostly artists that they needed. But I was living with a friend and his mother. And she said that she would vouch for my having lived here a year in an established residence, which she did, along with a couple of other people. And I remember going before the caseworker, I guess you would call it at the time.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Social worker for relief?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Social worker, yeah. In the interview—[inaudible] well, you can get on

the Project [laughs]. There's nothing I can do. Well, she said, I know you're lying. I know you're lying about this whole thing. [They laugh.] And then, of course, I couldn't say anything. I just accepted her qualifications and got on. Immediately, I got on the mural project. And that was, at the time, the big job was at the federal building job at the fair. And that was a huge project, I mean—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: All WPA people on it?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: All WPA people. And there were numerable artists working on it. Just offhand, I could say that the people I was acquainted with—the number amounted to something like 25. And they were all working in the studio that was down on First Street. And there was—most of those people didn't go over to the island to do the actual work, because there was another 25 who went over there.

[00:10:10]

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: This was Treasure Island in the Bay Area where they were building the fairground?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah. And that was pretty much a terrific experience. It was a lot of fun because it was a cooperative job. Everybody's working together on that job.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Who was heading this particular project?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Herman Volz was in charge of it.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Herman V-O-L-Z?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I don't know how to spell his name. How is it?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Volz, V-O-L-Z.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: V-O-L-Z. T-Z, isn't it? Electric volts? [Laughs.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: No.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Don't let Herman hear this interview. [Laughs.] But he was the head of it, and took a hell lot of credit for it, but actually the artists themselves turned out the whole job.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Was this working on one big mural or a series of murals for this particular building?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, it was at two murals, one on each side of the entrance into the federal—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Into the federal building for the fair.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah. The building was like this. It was sort of—and you went in through here. And this was all open area.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Courtyard?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Courtyard, yeah. And there was sculpture in there done by the Project sculptures. And there was a big court with a pool in it where they—somebody on a federal Project was doing demonstrating fishing, fly fishing, and casting and all that sort of thing. And it had the—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: These were outside murals, in other words?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: These were on the front of the building. Completely open, there was a colonnade that went straight down through the building. And the columns all represented—there was 48 columns that all represented a state.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: What was the subject matter of each of the murals?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: By the way, there were two murals. And they were 120 by 90 feet, 90 feet high and 120 feet long. And one on each side. The subject matter is the history of

California. And—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Was this the beginning, from the Spanish colonist David Agren [ph]?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Right, right. And this was done primarily—there was no history pictured, to speak. It was just done huge portraits, beginning with the—what was the father's name, the priest?

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Father Serra.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah. And then, on up through—and most of these were portraits of the individuals that supposedly made the history of California.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Various governors and politicians?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Right. And the—I don't know what you could say about this being particularly outstanding, the mural. It was done in huge flat areas.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Were they depicted various atmospheres, like Gold Rush country, or among San Francisco buildings, or [cross talk] full-length figures?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: No, not particularly. They were huge figures. The costume would imply the period in which they participated. There was no room for background, actually. In fact, there was—the only some implements, say for instance a plough was introduced.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Were the figures in movement?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Or wagon, something like it. No, not really active. It was standing there in a pose.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Standing.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Just looking.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Just a series of figures running horizontally through the—

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Maybe some of them, maybe one or two, bent over planting something, which was pretty common during that period. There was always somebody down with their hand with very tiny little plants being very gentle with it, placing it in the ground, [laughs] that sort of thing.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Were there any people like Burbank, for example, [inaudible]—

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah, Burbank was in it. The—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Any writers, like Jack London?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: London, I believe London was in it, yeah, if I recall correctly.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: In other words, there are more than political people.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Oh, yeah. Oh, yes. In fact, it was primarily writers. I think there were some artists. I don't know who they were.

[00:15:01]

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Some artists represented, though, in the murals.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: I think so, yeah.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Of the older school.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: And particularly writers and historians and the pioneers. There was representatives from the Donner Party and that sort of thing, on up to the present-day personalities.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: On the technique these murals, I suppose first you drew sketches of people. You had to do some historical research or find photographs or paintings of these

people and make some sketches, and then build their cartoons.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, all that was done before I got on the project. See I got on it in the beginning of '38, I think it was February—February or March. And by this time, all the research had been done, all the planning and the composing of the figures and everything had been finished, practically. I did some blowing up of cartoons that were to be used, actually, and tracing off on the side of that building. But all the rest of the stuff had been accomplished and taken care of before I got there. My job was primarily to paint.

And that was sort of interesting, too, because they had bought gallons and gallons of this fine paint, you know, to use. And, of course, having bought it by the tube previously. So, look at something like cadmium red light, and cadmium red deep, and cadmium red yellows and oranges, and so forth and so on in gallon buckets. You open up a gallon bucket, and old Neininger would dump it out in a great big pot. You take it up in five-gallon cans if the areas were large enough.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: You spoke of Neininger. What was this—the person's name and duties on the Project?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Urban Neininger, he was a technical advisor to Volz votes on the job. I mean, he took care of all the paints. I think he mixed—he was in charge of mixing all the colors from the color charts that we had for the mural itself. [Recorder stops, restarts.]—where we left off.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: You were talking about the federal building murals for the San Francisco fair. I want to ask you, Bob, were these done on plaster or were they done on canvas or—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No, they were directly done on plywood panels. The building was plywood, that is the sheathing—the outside of the building was all plywood. And these were prepared—water-proofed and prepared in a very simple way. I don't think they had any idea of ever saving this mural. They couldn't have, because it was done, as I say, without any—I guess, they did have a white ground on it. If I remember correctly, it must have had a white ground on it. Just strange, I can't remember whether it did or not. But that was sort of the way it went. Because they were trying to get by as cheaply as possible on the job and that was—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: The panels were prepared in San Francisco on First Street building.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Brought over or were they prepared over at the fairgrounds?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No, no, no. We painted directly on the walls. The building went up, and then—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Right on the vertical walls?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: —we made—we blew up the cartoons. Then tracing these, and perforated them, and then pounced them. That is, we used pounce bags and would go along and hit these perforated lines. And of course the carbon or whatever we're using goes right through it, you see, and leaves the markings on it. It was all done in big flat surfaces.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Right on the building itself.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: There was no filing or anything. And each section was set up. And you had a gallon bucket of green paint, which was assigned to you by Urban Neininger. And you went up with a 45. That is a regular painter's—what is it, four-inch brush, two-inch brush, three-inch brush, whatever it is, or 45. And you started painting.

[00:20:15]

And it was a little like as I imagine a sign painter would be painting, up on a building. He's got all this design. He knows exactly what he's painting, what colors to put in. And your scaffolding was, of course, at least 80 feet high. Maybe more, because you had this mural went right straight to the top of the building. It was 90 feet in height. So, you're working on a scaffold and each layer—each platform, the scaffold is only seven and a half, maybe, eight feet high. Probably seven feet. And you can't see what's going on above you. You don't know

anything. All you just see is this big section you're working in. So, you take your big brush and you just cut in and make a nice clean line and fill it in. And then you move over and take another color and put that in.

Later on, there was some modeling done with glazes. We'd take our colors and cut them way down, add a little varnish, perhaps, and run a glaze over it, and then stipple it. So it didn't show any brush marks or anything, you stippled in. That will give you a little bit of roundness to the thing, not very much, just simply flat shadows.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: You mentioned—you keep saying "we"—how many artists worked on this project?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I think it was around 25 painters working on the scaffold.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did they have assistants? Or did the painters have assistants?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Or were they were just all people—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Everybody was just painting. Volz was a head of it, Neininger was in charge of the technical aspects of the paint. And the rest of us just grabbed our bucket and brush, and went up and slapped paint.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Was part of the idea of the mural to have a demonstration for the public of how a mural was painted? You were painting the mural at the time the public was allowed into the fair or were they all completed before the fair opened?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, it wasn't originally planned that way, but the job just wasn't finished in time. So we were demonstrating. After the fair was—I think we were there for almost a month, at least, after they had fair opened, which was a lot of fun, too. You sit up there and [laughs]after you finished your section, you sit on there and watch all the tourists go by, and all the elephant trains and all that sort of thing, pretty girls.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: How much of a section were you given each day to do?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, there was no assigned area that you had to finish. You just simply worked all day. Because if you—when you finished a section, and you couldn't get a hold of Neininger or somebody down below, to send you up another bucket of paint you had a few moments to do a little loafing.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Does anyone know what became of these murals?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, I'm sure they were painted out. I don't know whether the building was torn down or not. It might have been torn down. But they weren't saved, I'm sure, there was no—there was never any intention of saving these murals. It was a decoration. Strictly decoration.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Temporary thing.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah. And with the destruction of the building, they were to be eliminated too. But it was really a great—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Heights didn't bother any of the artists working up that high?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Some of them it did. There was two or three of 'em that wouldn't go up to the top. I think Luke Gibney was one of them. Luke would never go at the top [laughs]. Work on about the third platform. But it was great. It had nothing but ferries running for a long time, over to the island. And you get up in the morning and walk down, grab yourself a ferry. It's always foggy.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: You mean a ferry boat?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Had a hell of a lot of fog. Yeah, ferry boat. [They laugh.]

[00:24:57]

And it always amazed me how every day, these guys would have to go clear up to Oakland, slips. And then we would—because of the fog, they weren't familiar with the slips on Treasure Island. They were in there, but they weren't familiar with it. So, they'd go to Oakland and then you took a launch back to the island. But by God, it was amazing. Well, you remember taking these ferries over, just a peasouper. You couldn't see a damn thing. And zoom, they go right in. Just by listening to the bells and the horns all the way across. And we get over there and we pile up on scaffold and start painting. Sometimes it was cold as hell.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Even in a foggy weather?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah. It was never so foggy underneath the overhang there, on the mural that we couldn't find the painting surface.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: But in rain, though, of course—

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: It was cold, though. Man, it was cold.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: In rain, you weren't up there painting?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah.

[Cross talk.]

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Were you still painting in the rain?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Well there was an overhang there of about six feet. If it was storming we couldn't paint. Blowing in there, but as a rule, if it was just slight rain it didn't bother us. Misting or something like that.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: How long did it take you to complete the murals?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: How long?

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: How long did it take you to complete the murals?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Well, I didn't work at First Street very long. And that was—I think I started there in March, as I said before, of '38. And we were—when did the fair open? We were there a couple of months on the mural after the fair opened, how much time it was, I don't know exactly.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Do you remember some of the other artists besides Luke Gibney and Herman Volz?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: The ones I can recall are Percy Freer. Percy was not only a painter. Whether he had done much painting before or not, I don't know but he was an actor, primarily. And he had been on the actors' project [Federal Theatre Project]. I don't know how he got on the Federal Art Project, but these things sort of shifted back and forth. You found some of the guys who did on one thing and then they got on another.

Carleton Williams. Carleton is now working with one of the big radio stations in town. And Julian Williams, he was the caretaker of the ranch next—across the canyon here. And Jose Remiz [ph]. And a fellow by the name of Tatum [ph]. Mary's got all this people on the list. Why don't you get the ones that I haven't mentioned? John Saccaro, for instance. John is one of the few artists that are still operating in the area.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Still as an artist?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Still as an artist, yeah. He has a good name. And he is well-known. Percy Freer and Luke Gibney, of course, are dead. And Angelo Sottosanti, he wasn't on that project. He was over on the—he was at the Pickle Factory and went over there.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Pickle Factory, what was that?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Well, when the—you see, after the mural was finished, we went over to the fine arts building. And there was another project there, a huge mosaic.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Fine arts building on the fairground?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: On the island, yeah. A very large mosaic, which was another one of the projects that Volz was heading up. He had—doing the mosaic—actual mosaic work he had about six old-country Italians, real expert mosaic people.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: This was on the vertical walls of the building, too?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: These were on panels that were later moved to, I believe, San Francisco State or City College, one or the other. It's still—you could see it. It's an interesting job. And again, it has these big sort of profile faces and things.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: What size were these panels?

[00:30:00]

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: I imagine they ran around 25 feet high. 25 by—and again, it seems there were two of these panels.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: And the subject matter?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Oh, I can't remember that. I wasn't on this very long, because there wasn't anything to do.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: The fair must have been operating at this time, though, when these mosaics were being made.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah, these were demonstration projects, you see. The other side—

[Cross talk.]

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Art [inaudible].

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Across the court from us—and this was a huge room. You didn't see this?

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: No.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: This was an immense room. On one side, Rivera was doing this huge panel. Where did that go?

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: There are some Rivera panels in San Francisco—the San Francisco Art Institute.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Well that was his first trip up here. [Note: Rivera had been here before. See Emmy Lou Packard's tape. -Ed.] But during the fair, he painted this huge panel. And I don't know where that went.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: Oh, the one with Paulette Goddard—

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: —in a bathing suit, that's at San Francisco City College.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: City College. Well evidently the Volz mural went out there, too then.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: —this tape that he does say that. Maybe he'd better—you'd better [inaudible].

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: You weren't on the Coit Tower project, which was much earlier before you came here—

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah. In fact, I think they had finished it when I came here. I remember some of the repercussions of it, I remember the discussions of it and so forth and so on, but I hadn't been on that all.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: What were some of the discussions about the Coit Tower murals? Or some of the repercussions?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, it's so vague. Now, the original discussions that I had with the other artists during that time were so vague now I couldn't repeat them. Of course, if I did repeat anything and told any stories about everything it would be those that I heard just recently, as you know. And as we go along—we question—Mary having done some research on it, you know. These stories repeat themselves. And I think you've picked up enough of that to—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: And you were—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: —eliminate any discussion I'd have on it.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: After the mosaic murals what did you do, Bob? Any more of the WPA work?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yes, I went from that mosaic job over to the Pickle Factory.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: You'll have to explain the Pickle Factory.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, the Pickle Factory was sort of a dead end. The Project by this time was sort of what the artists thought was in bad shape. And it was. People were being eliminated person by person. And we were just over there to kill time, evidently, because there were no murals being assigned, there was not really any important work. And in fact, I wound up by doing—I did a design for two panels for a school down south. Palo Alto or some place, it was a high school. And I'm sure that the supervisors' intentions was just to keep me busy. He had no intention of using 'em. And I would up on doing models.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Let's clarify some of these other things first, if we could. Now the Pickle Factory, it's kind of humorous name. What was the meaning of Pickle Factory?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, it actually had been a pickle factory. The Pickle Factory was on the corner of Columbus and—what is that other street, Lombard?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: No, it's [inaudible] or Chestnut.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yes, Lombard. Or what school, Chestnut?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Chestnut.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: In San Francisco?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: This is on Columbus and Chestnut. And it was a warehouse. It had been a warehouse. And then the government took it over. But originally, it had been a pickle factory. [They laugh.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Still standing, isn't it?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: And everybody called it—yes, still there. And it was three floors. The top floor was used for the designers. Second floor, there were murals going on when we first got there, a fellow by the name of Tom Hayes and Gaethke. George Gaethke and I were doing a mural for a kids school—for kids. It was evidently either a kindergarten or—what is it, kindergarten? What else? What comes next?

[00:35:31]

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Elementary.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Elementary school. Big pals, very interesting. Very good pals. And I think there was one other job going on the same—I can't remember who was doing it.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: This is about 1939, or '40?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: I think this is around—yes, late '39 or '40. And then, down below, they were still working on the—doing mosaic work down there for the fair job. They were cutting out a lot of stones. They were chipping stones. And then they had some—Peter Lowe,

I remember, was working down there. He was doing mosaics, small sort of easel-like projects, mosaic panels, about one foot by two feet, something like that, very small. There was couple of other fellows doing that. I think Carleton Williams finally got over there and did one. David Kittredge did one.

But it was very demoralizing at this time, because there wasn't anything to do, you know? As I say, I wound up by doing modeling, making small architectural models as an assistant to one of the San Francisco's most outstanding model makers who is on the Project at that time.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: And these are models of what subject?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Just buildings. For instance, if there was a school that there was a supposedly commissioned to do a mural on, they would do a model of that school. So that you could mock up the panels on the building and it'd show you sort of what it'd look like it. But going back to the big job on Treasure Island, I remember there was—not only there was actors like Percy Freer working with us, but there was also house painters. There were five or six house painters working on the same job. And after the Pickle Factory, well that was that was the end of it.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: You were down—doing some murals for this Palo Alto, California high school, though, south of San Francisco?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: I designed a couple of panels. And the designs were never accepted. The job was never done. Nobody ever did the job. There were—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: What was the subject, anyway, of the cartoon?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Sort of the subject of the environs of that area. I remember I—whether this was Palo Alto or what it was, I don't remember—but it was evidently fruit area, because I—both panels concerned farming, agricultural, particularly fruit.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: What would you say was the influence of Rivera on the murals around here at that period?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: The early jobs done to—out there, you know, on the PWA were extremely influenced by Rivera. He was the influence. —It was rather a sad thing because everybody was doing it. I mean, you would think there was no other influence and no other way to paint than Rivera's way of painting.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: Did he actually teach artists up here how to use fresco?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yes, he did. Uh-huh [affirmative]. He had quite a few people working with him. He taught at the School of Fine Arts for a while. And he set up that—he painted that mural there. He painted it directly on the wall. But there was no one that was painting and had any influence around the area. There was no one that was a painter that wasn't influenced by Rivera. It's too bad Orozco didn't come up here, and influence a few people. There'd been a little variation in the direction of painting at the time, but there wasn't.

[00:39:59]

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: You mentioned, incidentally, the concern of many of these muralists for farming scenes, with the concern for plant life and very tenderly planting themes. This is a typical Rivera theme. I've seen it in murals in Mexico, too. At an agricultural school in Chapingo [Mexico], people very tenderly planting.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah. Well I've seen reproductions of murals done all over the country, that have always had this big human hand with a tiny, tender, little plant in it, you know, ready to set in the ground. And this was all during that Project era. Of course the Coit Tower murals and other [inaudible] this Bay Area. Other buildings, they—there's pretty good coverage. But I think it's rather amusing that, although they were depicting the conditions that was supposedly existing during that period, they didn't—I mean, this was an ideal. This was a condition that should exist, which wasn't existing. Nobody showed the bad conditions in plants, in canneries, or anything like that. It was very little—there was practically no paintings of the strikes and struggles and the labor movement. And when they depicted the worker working, he was [laughs] dressed in good clothes, and he was clean and neat and—

and fat!

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: With the exception perhaps of Anton Refregier's murals at the post office.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Well, that was much later, of course. That was much later. And of course that was another thing too. That was neither on the PWA or WPA. That was, uh, Federal Arts—

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: Is it part of the Treasury Department?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Treasury Department, yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: You worked as an assistant with the—

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: And this was a nationwide competition. I know Reuben Kadish, Victor Arnautoff are just two of the local people that entered the competition. Refregier won and had a pretty tough time because the—he said—he did all the cartoons, did all the designing, and everything and then he was stopped—the project stopped, I think, because of the war. There was a big beef about you can't have people going around painting murals while there was a war going on. No culture during the war. So, by the time he got back on the job he had spent up all his money, you know. He used up every penny. Of course he had some coming, but he only got that after he had finished a certain amount of the job again.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: This was Anton—

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah. And his, of course, showed some of the strike scenes. And that's where he ran into his big beefs our here, from the Daughters of the

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: American Legion and many other groups.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah, Daughters of the American Revolution, the Daughters of California, Sons of California.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Because they were showing longshoremen striking and that sort of thing, which was un-American, right?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Well, they objected to the fact he also put the Indians in a sort of a decent light. He showed some of the Californians chasing Chinese around with an axe. He put President Roosevelt in there, and they screamed their heads off about that. They removed that from the—I think, the Republicans were responsible of that primarily. Actually, most of it—I don't think he had any really brutal so-called strike scenes. He had one in there showing the longshoremen, the waterfront, unions placing wreathes at the location where the strikers were killed, down on the Mission [Street -Ed.] there, a couple of blocks from the Embarcadero. Which they still do every year, and it's a national—I mean, it's an institution in San Francisco.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: On Steuart Street—

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah.

[00:45:18]

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: —the 1934 strike of the longshoremen.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: Incidentally was his style of painting any different from the people who showed the worker as a—sort of a fat, sleek, classical, idealized model?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Oh, yes. Well, Refregier had a very distinctive style. He wasn't influenced by Rivera by any means. And he had been doing work of his own for a long time. I was his assistant for the big part of his job.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: At the post office mural.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And this was what years?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, this is right after the war. That'd be '43 I assume. I don't know exactly—

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: No, it's later. War was over in about '45, '46.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Oh, yes, of course, it started in '42.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: It was over in September of '45.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: '45, yeah. Well, and I was—Refregier came out here right after that. I suppose it would be late '45 and into '46. I prepared all his panels, all the wall panels for him and—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: He didn't start the project then back before the war?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yes.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: That's what I'm trying to clarify.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: The project was started, he did all the cartoons, I said before—all the cartoons, all the drawings, original drawings, planning, everything. He had it all set up. It was ready to go. He had all of his perforated panels and everything [in 1941 and 1942 -Ed.].

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: That's what I'm trying to clarify.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: For the tape.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: And he was working along and he was forced to stop the job.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: What comments would you make about the general work of the WPA Projects, whether such thing should be again sponsored by the government or not?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: What you mean, my feelings towards it?

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, of course, today is my feelings are entirely different, and it's rather hard to say what I would think about having a new project. I think it would be very important. But how it would be managed, I don't know. It's problems to me, now that I'm much older and much more experienced, innumerable.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: How about the old projects?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, there's one thing about the old project—you see, everybody was forced to go—all the artists, practically all the artists, were forced to get on the Project. And at a certain time—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: What do you mean by forced to go—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Economically, they had no other way to live. They couldn't exist. I mean, being an artist, a practicing artist, making any money at that time was an unknown thing, outside of teaching. And schools were rather few and far between then. The art school and the School of Fine Arts didn't employ very many people. Arts and Crafts is operating, but it didn't have very many instructors. And what instructors they had I don't think they were paying very much. But the rest of the artists were on their own. And one thing it did, it drew all the artists together. There was a cohesive group of artists at that time. Everybody's working, everybody's working together.

Unfortunately, at that time, I don't think that these artists in San Francisco had much of an idea which direction they want to go. They were sort of a very loose, sort of wandering around, floundering around, trying to find a direction. There were some people like Reuben Kadish and the Olmsteads and a few were very much influenced by surrealism. The stuff they turned out was interesting, sort of a romantic realism. Now all these people were on the Project.

[00:50:00]

And then—oh, yes, Hiler, Hilaire Hiler, he did some interesting things. I think he was—the stuff he did was certainly not influenced by Rivera. You can see it today and I'm sure you've seen it down at the—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Aquatic Park.

ROBERT MCCHESNEY: Aquatic Park. Very interesting, technically.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: You mentioned the strike on the WPA Projects, would you comment on that?

ROBERT MCCHESNEY: Well I can't very well because I don't recall much about it. I remember everybody's very excited. Whether it was an economic thing or whether it was—anyway, the Project was being cut down in some way or another, either on the pay that the artists were getting or whether it was the hours that they were working. I don't recall. But I remember we went out and there was a demonstration, and we were walking around—what is it, that square downtown there on the—where the parking lot—underground parking lot is.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Civic center?

ROBERT MCCHESNEY: No, no, this [inaudible].

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: The Union Square?

ROBERT MCCHESNEY: Union Square, I guess it is. We walked around there and—Jesus, I don't know why this is so vague, but I just can't recall much of it. I remember the committee was going over to see Bufano and asking Bufano what he was going to do about it, because he had all these men there working. We said, "Bufano, are you going out with this?" And he says, "No, I got a better idea. I got a much better idea." [Laughs.] Bufano always had a better idea. [They laugh.] And I don't remember what that was either. But I remember we leaving and Bufano had nothing to do with—he wouldn't—If you don't follow my way of doing it, why, the hell would you? [Laughs.]

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Probably his idea was to everyone cut off a finger and send it to Washington. [They laugh.]

ROBERT MCCHESNEY: Probably. But that's—I haven't had—I never checked with anybody about that thing. Often wondered—remember we were carrying placards, and everybody was really all upset. And it wasn't just the Art Project either, there was the musicians, and the theater and—

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Did it have anything to do with the loyalty oath? Wasn't there some brouhaha during the Project days about people having to sign a loyalty oath?

ROBERT MCCHESNEY: Yeah, there was.

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: When did that occur?

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Did they have any other—

ROBERT MCCHESNEY: I think it—it was later.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: —other comments to make, Bob, about the Projects or your work or other people's work or personalities and administration?

ROBERT MCCHESNEY: You'd have to ask me more direct questions than that. No personal stories. I don't like to go into personal—I could tell you some, but—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Any other comments you'd like to make, or statements?

ROBERT MCCHESNEY: Not unless you have something to ask me, I can't think of a thing.

[Recorder stops, restarts.]

MARY FULLER MCCHESNEY: Well Thelma Johnson Streat, wasn't she interesting? Or she was

not [inaudible]—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: No, let's talk about the Clay Spohn—S-P-O-H-N?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yes. Yeah.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Murals?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, he had a mural assignment to do for the Los Gatos High School.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Los Gatos down the—

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Down the peninsula, yeah.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: —peninsula, south of San Francisco.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah. And after I left the job at Treasure Island, I went over there and I got this—I forgot all about that, [laughs] strangely enough, it was very interesting too. Zakheim's wife worked on this. Phyllis—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Wrightson?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Wrightson, yeah.

[00:55:00]

And it was a history of the local Indians. It was one particular history. It was where the Indians had used mercury or—what it's called?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: [Inaudible.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No, no, no.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: The mercury mines here in California?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well the raw product of the earth—the red earth. It's called cinnabar. Cinnabar.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Cinnabar, yeah.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: The Indians use cinnabar as a decorative medium. They painted themselves with it. And it was extremely poisonous, and they were dying off very rapidly and then some cat had sense enough to go down and wash himself in a stream, you know. Wash this off and he saved himself. Of course, they had to put something—some myth behind it so some good spirit had saved them. Well, this is the history, the story, this legend.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: That was done for the mural at the high school.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah. Very meticulous. What is that medium?

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Egg tempera?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Egg tempera job, very meticulous, this drawing. Big, large figures on a gesso ground. And we worked—I must have worked three months on that and I don't know how long it'd been going at the time. But Clay was—Clay is a fabulous person and still is. He's in New York now. But he would—he had this huge table and it was literally covered with recipes, formulas, that he had mixed. And each morning he'd mix a different formula for this egg tempera. And each day he would keep a little sample of this formula, make notes of it. And as I say, he had his table littered with this, and he was demanding more tables all the time from the [laughs] people who had in charge the materials—who were in charge in of the materials.

And Clay would come to work in the morning with a slight hangover, something like that, and he was a vegetarian three quarters of the time. The other time he was alcoholic. [Laughs.] He would—when he had a hangover, he would bring this—I remember he'd bring a whole bunch of your radishes, and a banana, and maybe some orange juice. This was his

meal for the day. This was his food supply. Monday he's coming to work and next to the Pickle Factory was this open yard. That building had been torn down, it was a vacant lot. And I noticed there was an egg over there. I noticed this egg, so I went through this fence and got this egg, and there was no one. It must have been 50 years old anyway. And you could rattle the yoke around in the thing, and it was loose as hell. So, I took it up. I put in with Clay's egg supply [laughs]. So, he takes this egg. You know, he picks it up and he is funny as hell anyway, you know. And he shakes this damn thing, he just goes all the pieces. This is—there's something wrong. This is terrible. Here is a solid matter inside this egg [laughs]. [They laugh.] He finally breaks it and out pops this marble of yoke, you know. It was just hard as a marble. All dried up. And he and this Thelma Johnson Streat—I don't know just what her position was on the Project, the Negro girl. A real terrific character. Beautiful character.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: She was an artist?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: She was a dancer.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: She did very primitive paintings. She was on the easel project and wound up over in the Pickle Factory doing easel paintings. I suppose it was meant to be reproduced in silk screen but the silk-screen project was folding up then too. We were doing some work over. Not much. But between Thelma Streat and Clay Spohn, it was a scene constantly. She was funny and he was funny, and they would put on these big acts. She was also dancing. She ended up with dancing, professionally, she did it. She danced there the Museum of Art, in Honolulu, and all over the place.

[01:00:03]

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: How about some of these other people on Mary's list here?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Well, John Saccaro, he's still painting like mad in San Francisco. In fact, he is quite well-known as a painter.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: But what was he doing on the Project?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: He was on the—at first he was on the easel project, and then he transferred to the Volz mural, Treasure Island. And after that, I think he went back to the easel projects for a while. I don't know whether that's correct or not, but it seems that I recall that he was back in his own studio painting after I went to the Pickle Factory. And David Kittredge, he was quite active on the Volz mural. He was sort of a secondary supervisor, along with Neininger, although he didn't have that status. Dave Slivka, he was on the sculpture project. He's certainly well-known out of New York now. Charles Safford, he was on a project in San Diego for a while. He later on came up here and didn't get back on the Project but worked on his own. He just died recently. Great painter. Who else? Claiborne Tatum [ph], I don't know what happened to him. Bud Painter, he was in charge of publicity. You know him?

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: No. Bud Painter?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah, Bud Painter.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: That'd be an interesting name for an artist.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah. Yeah.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: But he was in charge of publicity, right? [Laughs.]

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: He worked Gaskin. I remember the first time I met Gaskin, I went up to Gaskin's office and he and Bud Painter were together up there.

MARY FULLER MCCHESENEY: Did you know Lucien Labaudt during the Project days?

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: No. I don't think Lucien was on the WPA. He was on the PWA.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: He did the Beach Chalet murals.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Yeah. The Beach Chalet and—there's two jobs of his out there, aren't

they? In the park?

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: He was killed—

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: The women's house, the women's is at the—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Mother House at the—

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Mother House [Fleishhacker Motherhouse at the San Francisco Zoo] or something like that.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: Helen Forbes did that.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: I think there was some women who worked on that.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: Helen Forbes [and other women did that -Ed.].

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: All of it?

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Not Lucien.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: From what I can tell. At Fleishhacker—the Motherhouse.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: But Labaudt was killed during the war in India in 1942.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Right. Right. Oh, there's Julian Williams. I used to get a big kick out of him. He was quite energetic in those days, feeling [ph] himself a—

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Athlete?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Extremely athletic. Instead of coming down the ladder, or the scaffold, he would always come down—straight down off the bars, you know. [Laughs.] Hand over hand. And on each day, you know, early in the morning, he'd go up the same way.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: What was on the murals of the Treasure Island, up 90 feet?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah. That was—they had these big—what do you call 'em—these pipe scaffolding.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: You know, the—what I—I don't know what they called them, but they were a great place to work out on if you really worked out, because it was—particularly on the end of 'em. Pipes going cross all the way down, you know. You could go all the way down and all the way up very easily, if you were energetic enough.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: No one got ever got hurt or injured on some of these?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: No. No.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: Good.

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: No one ever got damaged that I know of.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: Do you know Matthew Barnes, if he was on the Project?

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: No. I knew Matthew Barnes, yeah. But he didn't work on the Volz mural.

MARY FULLER MCCCHESNEY: You mentioned Luke Gibney earlier. He was on the Treasure Island mural project?

[01:05:00]

ROBERT MCCCHESNEY: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you have the name Peter Lowe? I think I have mentioned most of these people that I know.

LEWIS FERBRACHÉ: I think this about winds us up off. Thank you, Bob and Mary McChesney.

ROBERT MCCHESENEY: Very welcome.

[END OF TRACK AAA_mcches64_266_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]