



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Urban Neiningger,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Urban Neiningger on September 22, 1964. The interview was conducted by Harlan Phillips for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

URBAN NEININGER: I have a speech impediment. It will show up on the tape.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, it doesn't bother me so long as you are not uncomfortable about it.

URBAN NEININGER: No. Well, the first city wide project in San Francisco [inaudible] I've forgotten the name of it but the artists worked for it in the Coit Tower, you know, and it had been completed the year before on Telegraph Hill. Whether it was a WPAP [Works Progress Administration Project] or something else, I'm not certain but there were, I think, about ten artists who worked on the murals there with helpers and they each were given a wall space, and it was mostly in fresco painting. Among them was Clay Spohn who lives here now and Helen Forbes who is no longer living. I think Dong Kingman worked on it and quite a good Japanese artist who was out of the California School of Fine arts. He was young and afterwards he went up to Japan and stayed there. I've forgotten his name. Well, sometime later [inaudible]. It was in late 1935 [inaudible] the Federal Art Project started, and that's the one that my experience relates to. Well there were several students of Hans Hofman who were Californians like Glen Wessels and several others whose names escape me. A young art dealer who later became the area head of all the Federal Art Projects, Joseph Danysh- he was a Columbia graduate, and he knew other leading artists in the area and was full of ideas about how to proceed. He was appointed the area head, and he got a wire from Washington that said "Hire." I think it was four hundred artists in forty-eight hours and the allotment is so much. Well, the artists and even he ended up painting houses to make a few more dollars. They worked day and night, and I think they found around two hundred of new talent. But Danysh and his friends who knew all the artists of the West Coast managed to interest MacDonald-Wright, you know, in Los Angeles to organize a project, and I think the Northwest and several others to head the project and to find the artists. That's how it started. Then the leading artists were hired usually on a supervisory basis. They weren't required to take a paupers stand, you know. They were hired outright, and assigned as many assistants as they needed. The idea was that many of the public schools and the colleges and government buildings were interested in having murals or sculptures and in that way the younger artists who became assistants to the skilled ones were all employed. Well, that was one aspect, you know, of meeting the quota.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, I think the administrative rule initially was that ten percent of those hired could be on a professional basis for supervisory help. And that it grew from ten percent to roughly about twenty percent, twenty-two percent. So it allowed, you know, the feeling that there was some sense of direction, some ability in addition to the storm of the times and the people who also had talent, but had to go through the oath routine. This allowed at least a scaffolding of professional people to help staff the office to head the murals with assistants and so on, and a wise thing in its way. How did it work out there?

URBAN NEININGER: Well, the younger artists were able to work with so called "master" artists and they learned a lot about the medium and technique and also they were spending their full time doing what they were trained to do. Also on the easel project young artists like Dong Kingman who is now internationally recognized got his start, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: The art director for the area was William Gaskins, and he was a watercolorist. He'd also design and so on. He was older than most of us, you know, and saw the possibilities in some of the younger artists and encouraged them a little along the way.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: How did you get associated with this?

URBAN NEININGER: Well, I knew many of the artists from 1932 when I went to live in San Francisco [inaudible]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Marvelous city isn't it?

URBAN NEININGER: Yes. At that time it was about the best place in America to be in, especially for the

profession, you know?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: Or at least you could walk wherever you wanted without riding street cars, and there was some work off and on. Knowing some of the artists, I would work with them if they had a restaurant to decorate, or a mural of some kind. At that time one of the well-liked muralists was Herman Strook. He'd been a World War I veteran and had stayed in France a while, married a French girl and got some art training, painting. Then before the Federal Art Project opened, I think a year before Herman Strook had a kind of art project under [inaudible] I think it was under the state where if you were qualified, you could work one day a week. Well, I worked for him almost a year, and then when the Federal Art Project started, Strook went into unemployment, rather than work on the new project. When the Federal Art Project started, I heard that Joseph Daynsh was head of it and he'd had an art gallery in the town. He was also my neighbor on Telegraph Hill. So, I called upon him, and the only job open was at the bottom. It was \$65 per month as a kind of technical assistant. Well, I knew I could do carpentry, and plastering and painting and some drawing, so I started out as assistant to a mural painter who had a mural in the Frederick Burke Training School, a school affiliated with the San Francisco State College which was at that time a square block, one near Hate Street and Buchanan. The buildings were on the outside of the grounds facing the street, and there was a large athletic field inside enclosed by the buildings. Out of that start I was assigned to two other mural painters, Ruben Kadish, who is now a sculptor who painted on the wall in the state college. Also to a young woman artist, Hava Dann, who is now Mrs. Peter Stackpole, a photographer, and the son Ralph Stackpole, who was one of the leading sculptors of the city. He did the big stone figures outside the stock exchange there. When those jobs were over, a large mosaic for the façade of the college on Haight and Buchanan Street corner was started, and by that time I'd advanced from handyman more or less to the status of craftsman, which was a \$28 increase in salary. The mosaicist who did most of the work at the Hearst Estate in Sidney, California who wasn't working, you know, was hired to set up the mosaic project which was quite a large one. The design for the façade was given to Maxine Albro. I think she now lives in Carmel, California [inaudible]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: On the mosaic project there was something like eight or ten of us from time to time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Had you worked in this before? With the mosaic?

URBAN NEININGER: No, but I knew about plastering, you see. Exterior and interior, and there is a lot of that in mosaics. Well, the original exterior medium of the Italians used in the Renaissance and even earlier, you know. It is set in exterior cement, ground on a stone wall or a brick wall. So, I worked along with the technical head, whose name was Premo Caudio. He was also a famous athlete, you know- a runner.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: I was sort of sorry to hear he died last spring. I have his obituary here.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Were these mosaics chosen on some competition? Or, were the people as supervisors simply chosen to do a mosaic where, as you pointed out, there was an available space or a desire to have one or? [inaudible]

URBAN NEININGER: Well the art director, Bill Geskins and Joe Danysh and several others checked it with the project, and also there were architects in town who had always been the artist's friends and had gotten them commissions and all that. The architects had an idea where there were spaces available. They would make a survey, you know, of the possible buildings in town, and they had to be public ones otherwise no artist was allowed to work under the Federal Art Project laws.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: And this group would call on the head of the college, or whatever it was, a city hall, or a government hospital, a naval station and there were several naval station murals in the open area of the Federal Art Project. These would interest them in having a mural. Then the offer to submit scale sketches. Quite often the artist was well known in the city like Lucian LaFaudt, or Bernard Zaheim who did the big hospital walls and Maxine Albro and Helen Forbes and Hilaire Hilev who did Aquatic Park, you know. Among the sculptors was Benny Bufano and Raymond Puchinelli and there were several others whose names—oh Clay Spony. When the sketches were ready, they were shown to the dean of the college or whoever it might be and an estimate was given of how much it would cost them. The cost was for materials only and a few tools. If it was approved, the artist would start work.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: So, it did go through a process?

URBAN NEININGER: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: An organized process of which the heads of the Federal Art Project would work out details with architects on the basis of a survey with interested sponsors who might be- like the college- might have a wall which they themselves would sponsor.

URBAN NEININGER: One of the most helpful cooperative architects at that time was Timothy Fluger. He's no longer living, but it was he who arranged a lot of the large scale art work. I mean, he didn't sell it just to get the job, but the salesmanship was done by the art director, and the regional head or [inaudible]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Then he would be a public spirited person who would know areas that might be fruitful and would then ask for it.

URBAN NEININGER: Also most of the people involved in planning those projects knew the deans, or the ones who had authority at the City Hall. It was also based on acquaintance-ship.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, sure. You described a conscious art community aware of itself and interested parties like the architects.

URBAN NEININGER: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: You know, faced with this kind of a prospect, would work in a sense together and I assume that there was a kind of San Francisco atmosphere.

URBAN NEININGER: Yes, it's-- well, it is a town that was special, you know, in those days. There has always been lots of artists there. And for the size of the town in those days [inaudible] I don't think it was over 500,000 population. I think less, you know. They had three major museums of the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, you know. It was a wonderful place.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

URBAN NEININGER: Ah, and the de Young Museum in Goldenstate Park and the San Francisco Museum of Art which was the first modern museum, and it was in the center of the city, a civic center, you see?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Right.

URBAN NEININGER: So there were always lots of artists. The complaint about the community as far as the amount of artists and disposal of their work is that San Francisco isn't a city of collectors, you know?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No.

URBAN NEININGER: Collectors of regional art, you know, their own artists' work. Usually the artists who got their training and grow up there have moved to New York or Paris and have had their success elsewhere.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Strange, isn't it?

URBAN NEININGER: There are a number of those, but the town had a cultural history, and it was with continuity in the artist and poets. Everyone knows that Jack London came from there and the poet Sterling and oh, the architect Zymabek, who was quite often equated with Frank Lloyd Wright.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: He had retired on the hills of Berkeley, you know. So, it was in the air all the time- all the time.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sure.

URBAN NEININGER: Well, after the mosaics were finished, I think it was late 1938, you know, and a couple of things were being made for art exhibits and art work in connection with the Golden Gate Exhibition, which was opened in 1939. A number of young artists were assigned to work on the Indian exhibit in the federal building. Rene D'Harnoncourt was the head of it. I think he had either two or three anthropologists working with him and an architect. It was a tremendous show. I think the largest American Indian show ever assembled-- also with live exhibits. The Navaho sand painters came and some of the Alaskan Indians, and they made totem poles out in the court yard. They brought their own trees along. The Federal Art Project artists—one of them was Lewis Seigriest who designed and made up all the posters for the Indian show that later became collectors' items, obviously under supervision, and about that time I was offered a supervisor's job. The project needed someone to coordinate all the various large and small scale sponsored murals going on in the area and to set up what was

called an "art in action" exhibit on the World's Fair, which was in the central part of the fine arts building. It was a mosaic-- where the mosaic was made for the new state college out near twin peaks. There were two large facades and the artist was Herman Volz. The space was arranged just like a large mosaic studio, all the material and the craftsmen and the cartoon up on the wall. So that a visitor to the fair could walk around among the workers and see how it was being done and ask questions. There was a lithography booth where artists were making lithographs on original stones, you know, a sculptors project. There was an artist-- I've forgotten his name, although he's well known, who carved large figures out of Red Wood out of whole trees and all he used was axes. Large ones, an axe, and a hatchet, and he was the main attraction. He could make a chip fly into someone's hand, and the last week of the fair he was asked to autograph these chips. There was a weaving project. I think one was tapestry, and the sculptor, Fred Olmstead carved a tremendous head out of white limestone. I think it was a head of Michelangelo. He carved two heads, the same size, but one was carved in the Fine Arts Building during the fair, and they were later placed at the New State College where the Volz mosaics were installed. One of the interesting things about Olmstead is that he is a direct descendent of [Frederick Law] Olmstead who built Central Park and who wrote *The Cotton Kingdom* [1861]. Let's see, he's his great, great grandson.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: Well, the new State College was designed by Timothy Fluger. Much of the art work commissioned for it was through his interest, but the artists were paid by the Federal Art Project and the college paid the cost of materials. And, in that same area of the Fine Arts Building-- it took up the entire north wall. It was a tremendous portable fresco executed by Diego Rivera and it was commissioned for the college. River had, I think, one assistant, but all the others were Federal Art Project artists and craftsmen. It was a true fresco, so he had a plasterer who understood it and a helper.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: They were on the art project, you know, with the artist, you see?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: Later, I think almost six months after the fair closed in 1940-- it ran two years-- the Rivera fresco was completed, and I heard it was put into storage for a while and then later I heard it was installed in the college.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you see much of Rivera?

URBAN NEININGER: No. You know, he used to work all night. I don't know how he was able to concentrate such long hours. Or he would rarely start until about four in the afternoon, but his crew had been working since about eleven, putting up a tremendous expanse of wet plaster for the days work. Then he would start, and he'd work all night and he wasn't young. And tremendously over-weight, if you could call it that, and the scaffolding, although it was legal, wasn't at all comfortable.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No, I don't know how he did it. Is this one of the things you had in your net as supervisor, the coordinator?

URBAN NEININGER: I knew who the [inaudible]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Project artists were?

URBAN NEININGER: Yes, the mural painters and then some of the younger ones were eager to learn how they [mural painters] did it, the medium and the whole routine on that scale. They would ask us to let them work there. I think there were a few of them who did that, but the rest of them knew the medium.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, that's quite an experience for a youngster.

URBAN NEININGER: And the best fresco technician in town was the artist Mat Barnes. Mat was around some odd 60 years old. He was from Scotland, and he was trained as a plasterer as a youth in Scotland. He came to the United States and worked in the East and then worked in Florida building boom with Wilson Misner and his brother, Addison Misner, also a couple of San Francisco architects.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: So Mat Barnes worked as a plasterer for several years, or more until it all folded and then he went to San Francisco. He'd always painted, you know?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: It was his real interest- painting. He was interested in the stage. He'd done some acting, and he'd written a few plays, but his painting was what he was best known for. He was a great admirer of Albert Ryder and Turner. His work has a similar quality, its thickness, but it is excellent. Well, anyways when Rivera first came to California, rather to San Francisco to do other large commissions-- I think it was around the 1930's, maybe earlier-- Barnes took care of all of his special costumes. When the big murals were done on the fair, but he trained a couple of the younger people how to do it after he got the mural started. So after the fair was ended in the autumn of 1940, there were a number of large murals still underway, and I think Aquatic Park wasn't finished yet. You know, it's down on the shore of North Beach. Do you know the? [inaudible]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

URBAN NEININGER: We'd rented an old factory in North Beach. It has been unrented for years and had once been a pickle factory. It was on Columbia Avenue and San Francisco Street where all the murals were completed. It has high ceilings, and high windows. It was handy. It was near the project offices. The large sculpture jobs in outstone, except the Olmstead one, were usually done in a leased space in the stone yards around town. The largest one at the time was MacGilbre Raymond. It had been a tremendous company. They built prisons the size of San Quentin and banks and things, and there was very little business for them during those years. They were happy to rent out a section of the yard. It was enclosed and had all the tools and so on. Also many of the expert stone cutters-- they weren't young men-- they'd worked for those companies in former years and their big jobs and were unemployed, and we were to go around and find out who they were to hire them, and I think all of them with the exception of two were on relief. They were happy to work on the big sculptures. The most sculpture that was done in those years was Bufano's, and at one time he must have had eight expert stone cutters.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Working with him?

URBAN NEININGER: Yes, under one supervisor. Although Bufano himself is a whiz of a craftsman, you know?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes!

URBAN NEININGER: As a boy, he was doing lots of major things. He was Paul Manships' right hand when he was fifteen. He worked there, and modeling was the big thing with him.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: He also had exhibited not a little aggressive self assertion too.

URBAN NEININGER: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: He came with his own built-in brass band and a whole lot of ideas and would press and press and press and would never turn them loose. Well you know, it's a human story all over again.

URBAN NEININGER: I couldn't believe he was fired, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Was that the occasion of the call for help from Washington?

URBAN NEININGER: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, Tom Parker-- was it Tom Parker who came out?

URBAN NEININGER: I think so. Someone came out. Well, as far as I know, the reason he was fired-- it was after years, and he'd already completed all the large scale animals in the parks. He had a much bigger assignment. It was a relief of athlete's for the George Washington High School, a new school with a very large athletic field. One end was a wall. I think it was about 300 feet long and probably ten feet high, and there wasn't an awful lot of money appropriated for it. Who estimated the job, I don't know, but the money given by the high school was to pay for the materials, you know, and some of it for studio usage. Well, I think it was Timothy Fluger's building. It was completed in 1938, I think. What was needed was a first class studio space preferably an ornamental plaster studio to cut up the wall in sections, to make the actual full scale model. Well, we found a very good one. It was owned by an old timer in the business. His name was Dackart. So, Bufano and his assistants started on the layouts, and he wanted an expert as a modeler who was also an old pro to look after the art crew and to lay it out properly. Well, the modeler was academically trained and very competent. There was no doubt that they started. Then there was some conflict between the way the modeler did it and the way Bufano wanted it, and Benny was right. He was an artist, and the modeler wouldn't try to do what he wanted and not being an artist he couldn't appreciate it. I mean he couldn't. He'd worked, but it was never what Bufano wanted. As far as I know, they worked along there for some months, and had a piece of the section of the wall done. Of course, it was Fluger's building. There was a small section done and as the work went along, it had to be approved by Fluger and someone else to see what was going on. I remember Fluger came there one day when I was there with Edward Rostello who was out there one a visit to show him what was being executed. What happened- I think

that what they planned on originally for it was for the stone to be all white. I've got all the samples. I went out to the quarry where they quarried all the stuff and ground it up and brought in a lot of samples. It was over in Rin County. They made a sample, and a full scale section of the relief was up in the studio. As far as I know, Bufano didn't like it. He didn't like the idea of being cast stone, although it was granite sort of high class, but off white. Then he was going to do it in hammered copper, or some hammered metal, the whole thing. Another medium besides the one in stone. You see, it was first modeled in clay full scale and the plaster cast from the clay, and the stone mix put in the plaster cast and it became the finished relief or cast stone. He had many really qualified workmen doing it along with the supervisors, the old professional. I think his name was Mr. Glo, and he'd worked on both World's Fairs there and the Civic Center Buildings and all. Well, so the work stopped-- I mean a couple of days, and Bufano announced that he wasn't satisfied and he wanted nothing else.
[AUDIO BREAK]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Work had stopped for a couple of days-- an upset.

URBAN NEININGER: What happened was-- it was really a matter of the extent; where the sponsor had only donated a certain amount of time, and it was Fluger's responsibility in a way because he'd helped sell the idea to the school board. There just wasn't enough money to make a complete switch in the medium at all. Also the sponsors were pushing to have it completed. The head of the project and the others in the state and city offices saw no completion date. It might go on for years, you know, and even if it had and if the money was there, it no doubt would have been a terrific public work of art, but there was no organization. Fluger was firm about progress, and there wasn't any time commitment from Bufano after he was told that there wasn't enough money to do it. It was something that never really interested him. I mean, that was something that the sponsors were to find somewhere, or to sell. So, he was fired, or separated from his latter work, and in his place, the sculptor, Sargent Johnson, was assigned. Sargent Johnson had been on the project several years. Have you seen the work at all?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: I haven't seen it at all. I surveyed the wall with a civil engineer and made up the plan of the actual area and saw one of the sections at the studio, but I left the project in the summer of '41, and it was finished after that. So, I never did get out there. How's it look?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Staggering. As you would expect- it's a staggering thing.

URBAN NEININGER: Well, anyways, Sargent Johnson was assigned the job, and gradually he got the modeling supervisor to understand how he wanted it. The rough in the clay, or Johnson wouldn't finish it. Even though they had some rough times-- I mean, conflicts between the artists and the head draftsmen. That's the story on the wall, and the sponsors were quite happy with it and the architects, and after I think Bufano worked on some of his own things in his studio, and he did a lot of traveling.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Sort of a change of pace.

URBAN NEININGER: In the summer of 1950, I was sitting on the Terrace of the Select in Paris, you know, with a young sculptor who lives there and is from the West Coast. She is one of the Stackpoles' regulars-- well, when she was 18, and it was in the earlier period. We were sitting at a table and out of the corner of my eye I was certain I saw Bufano, his walk and his hair, and I was going to rush out, and call him, and then I waited a bit and when I went out in the street, he was gone. Well, two days later in the Paris *Harold Tribune* there was an article that Bufano had been to Moscow to see Khrushchev and to offer his gigantic statue to peace to the Russian government. It was Bufano. He'd just come out of Moscow to Paris. I don't think anything ever came of it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. He was a live wire, alive. Yes, he still is. You know, as the project headed into the 1940's, in effect the scene in America had shifted from one of concern with putting people to work to a concern with preparedness. Was there any-- I guess the WPA [Work Progress Administration] by and large became and eddy in the thinking as distinct from the main line of thinking as it has been since '35, '36, and '37. I think they were already beginning to build airplanes in '38, and certainly dealing with the problem of preparedness, you know, two things at the same time. I would say build a fireproof house and take out fire insurance at the same time, prepare for war and think in terms of peace and speak in terms of peace.

URBAN NEININGER: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: A difficult thing for leadership to do. But in the thinking, in the shifting scene, the effort, as I understand it, from Washington's point of view-- there was some thinking about changing the complex of WPA into a kind of training school for war work.

URBAN NEININGER: That's what happened.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: This is what I wondered. Was there a steady or a discernible shift?

URBAN NEININGER: Yes. What happened was-- I think that started probably as late as 1940. I'm not certain about that, but there was a training program set up for people to become coppersmiths, I think, or sheet-metal workers and other programs. Anyone who was on the WPA-- well, all I know about is the art project aspect of it-- those who were called to be interviewed for training. As far as completing some of the major murals or the major sculptures that were still unfinished, got to be very rough going for the artists who were doing it because his assistants were usually the ones who were tapped for the defense training program. They carried on alone, or if he had older people who were helping him in the case of the mosaic project, some of the specialists were men in their sixties, you know. They weren't impeded as much as say, the mural painters. Well, the sponsorship of those works of art had been paid and a contract given, some of them a year or more earlier and to have them completed, the master artist was often given a delay on learning a defense trade. But, the artist on the easel project, for example, or the lithograph project, some of those were taken into the training schools almost immediately.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: They were separated from the project.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. Was there a-- as we get deeper into the '40's-- was there a gradual liquidation of the number of people? I guess there was, wasn't there?

URBAN NEININGER: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: So that there was a tapering off.

URBAN NEININGER: I left mid 1941, and there were some orders coming in, also sponsors, for work for the Army, or the Navy-- signs or diorama or something like that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: And I know that some of the artists worked in the shipyards in the drafting department and one of the very best ones who is in fact one of the outstanding artist now, but you don't see his work in this country much, although he's having a show next year, I think at the Howard Wise Gallery, is the artist Charles Howard. He lives in London-- he and his wife. During the war years, he was from a San Francisco family, all the family, you know, all artists. Robert Howard is his brother, a sculptor. Henry was an architect. He's in New York now. Then John Langley Howard, who lives here and does a lot the work for the *Scientific American*. Well, Charles Howard was living there during the way, and the last thing he did on the project was a terrible painting on glass, a very large one which is in the recreation room of the bar. I think it's the back bar installation at the officers' recreation building in Alameda Station for the Navy.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: Well, at the end of the project Clay Spohn whom I mentioned earlier and who lives here, a muralist, helped him complete it, and as soon as it was finished Charles Howard went to work in a shipyard as a ship keeper, and Clay Spohn went into the drafting department.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Of the Navy?

URBAN NEININGER: Yes. No, the shipyards, but they were Liberty ships. They were given extensions from the sailing program because of the commission of the Navy recreation center officers' club. But, by that time-- oh that must have been into 1942-- there weren't many working.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Does the Artists' Congress figure very heavily in San Francisco?

URBAN NEININGER: I think about 1937 was the high point. They had meetings every couple of months or something, but it was never as intense as it was in New York from what I've heard about New York.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Well, there was a different atmosphere, you know. San Francisco is an exhilarating place to be. I'm not so sure about New York in the '30's. Let's put it another way. New York, whatever it was doing, was experimenting in 101 different ways, ideologically, from an organizational point of view, as I think the nation was. We put rude hands on the ship of state to find out why it suddenly stopped, and there were all kinds of things going on. There was the relationship between art and industry from the point of view of design, you know the school of design here, started for exactly that purpose to try to work out some relationship, only to discover that if you were a real artist, it was the salesman and Mrs. Murphy who was really telling you what your design should be.

URBAN NEININGER: Well, there were several artists, or rather they started out to be artists, but they went into industrial design and packaging in San Francisco during those years. Some of the artists I knew worked with them. It was called so and so and Associates. One of them is now extremely successful, although he was never on the art project. After exhausting the West Coast, he had to come East to get more business. He would package everything in a supermarket in a cold-storage bin, strawberries, peas, or a bottle of water, or beer, and one of his odds was a cigarette that was red, white, and blue. Luckies?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: The big [inaudible]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Was it green?

URBAN NEININGER: No, it's a new package. He redid the old line, and it was a pure winner, but there were a couple firms like his, and they were usually staffed by artists who wanted to be successful financially and they knew they would be of service.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: This was a period when an artist had to answer that question.

URBAN NEININGER: Yes, it still is.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes. What is my relationship to the shifting scene? This idea came in part out of Germany and Czechoslovakia. You know, the relationship of art to an expanding industrial society, the Bauhaus.

URBAN NEININGER: I knew lots of the original ones, when they were over here.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: Like Marcel Breuer, Herbert Bayer, Zanti Orinski-- he sells, paints, and does very well.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Was Ed Reemer on a project?

URBAN NEININGER: I don't think so. Ben Remo was on the project. I think he was always a highly successful commercial artist. Ben Remo, do you know his work?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: His widow is living, I think, on Howell Street.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did San Francisco become a stopping point for travelling exhibitions? Under the WPA? What's his name, Danny Defenbacher.

URBAN NEININGER: Yes, he's at Oakland, or was.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: But while in Washington I think he, with Tom Parker and maybe of or two others was using the Community Art Centers as stages for the art tours for WPA products. I wonder if San Francisco-- of course it has, as you put it, continuity of interest in culture. It had the Civic Center itself. Was there much in the way of art from other regions that came out there?

URBAN NEININGER: Well, there was an exhibition department and the women in charge of it, the lady was Beatrice Judd Ryan. I think she has the art gallery either at the city of Paris, or the White House, the stores there.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: It seems to me that she was sending things out of California artists in the various communities around the state, but as far as I know there was only one exhibition. The one that Mildred Holzhauer at the de Young Museum, you know?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: I don't recall any tours, small ones. A proposal disposing of some of the works of art, I know that the San Francisco project gave out lots of pictures on indefinite loans-- you know, to government offices and hospitals and things.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: What kind of a press did the project have in San Francisco? Favorable?

URBAN NEININGER: Yes, oh yes. There was a full time PR [Public Relations] man on the project-- I think over a period of three years at least during that time, and he was an excellent journalist, you know. He had access to

the press club and so on.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: If you limit yourself to the re-reading of the New York papers of that day, more particularly the Hearst papers, the art project, and Mrs. Roosevelt and reviews and heading other things were dismissed as wasteful. That's mild in terms of the words that they used, but New York is not the window on America. It's possible for other areas to have a different experience. This is why I wondered what sort of press it had. I gather that this is attributable to what is quite genuine about San Francisco and this is the identity that people have to it. You know, you can live like a city dweller in New York forever and a day and happily never really be part of the barnyard in some respects. I don't know that that's so true of San Francisco. I suspect it isn't. There is a community spirit, and it feeds into the press. It's almost like a steady sales job, you know. From the people enriching the press and the press in turn enriching the people about their own area which is not true, if you pick up the New York City papers. Emphasis is all in another line. If there is a clash like Stuart Davis et al invading the *Mirror* office to protest a series of articles that were published in the *Mirror* quite critical of WPA art work- you know, this appeared with description of works, styles, and impressions.

URBAN NEININGER: Yes.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Not always to the advantage of the WPA.

URBAN NEININGER: Well, I don't know that-- all during the history of the art project in San Francisco it subscribed to a clipping bureau, and they kept a library on it.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: A running file?

URBAN NEININGER: Yes. Whatever happened to it, I don't know, but it was one of the things that Bill Gaskin was interested in.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you see very much of Holger Cahill?

URBAN NEININGER: Only once. He came out one summer. It was the summer that I met Gorky who'd come out there for three months, you know.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: Holger Cahill and his wife came out during that time, and I saw them with Gorky.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I wondered how much direction Washington gave.

URBAN NEININGER: Out there?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes, San Francisco is quite a distance away.

URBAN NEININGER: Well, whenever some of the supervisors-- I've forgotten their titles now, but one was Mr. Watkins, came out, they were always impressed with the Project, and I have a hunch that they were equally, if not more, impressed with the Los Angeles one because McDonald-Wright never let any of those artists relax, on the project, if it was a large one, you know, like a façade or a mural. I knew some of the artists down there, and once in a while I would go there to see what they were doing. At one time I lived down there in the twenties. So I knew what Fletcher-Martin was doing. He and others were doing those big things with a minimum of help.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Yes.

URBAN NEININGER: Have they spoken to Wright at all?

HARLAN PHILLIPS: No. He's on the list, and there is someone out on the West Coast who is operating I believe out of the Oakland Museum who is, I think, doing pretty much the same thing I'm doing. He's covering California. Now, whether it is the entire West Coast-- well, this would be California anyway.

URBAN NEININGER: I thought that Defenbacher was at the Oakland Museum for a while.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: I think he was. He was located out there a bit, but [inaudible]

URBAN NEININGER: Joe Danysh was working with him, you know, and I heard that Danysh resigned and helps at Carmel now, I think.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: The last thing I heard was that Defenbacher, once located in Oakland, has now disappeared. Where? No one seems to know.

URBAN NEININGER: Well, several years ago I was working in Dallas. We'd opened a contemporary museum which was private sponsored along the lines of the Modern Museum, but small scale. The never had one down there. Well, the only Modern Museum in the area was Fort Worth. It was designed by Herbert Bayer of the Bauhaus. When it opened, Defenbacher was hired, you know, as director. He left about a year or so before I went there to Dallas, and I met a number of artists from there, the young people, and they said that when he had it, it was really jumping, you know. He had art classes all that time and some first rate travelling shows and so on, but he resigned and went to Oakland. He went to the West Coast.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Did you do much, if anything, for children in San Francisco?

URBAN NEININGER: There were a number of murals in children's schools, like the Fredric Bourke School. They had a section devoted to pre-school teachers with children. There were murals on the walls of that school, and there was a Community Center out near county hospital, near Petraro Hill. I think Olmstead designed something for that.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Were there art teachers employed to instruct youngsters in special classes?

URBAN NEININGER: That was a separate project. We called it a teacher project. They had life classes in drawing and so on, but it wasn't under the art [inaudible]

HARLAN PHILLIPS: WPA?

URBAN NEININGER: Oh yes, but it was a separate division. It was called the educational project.

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Was there much effort put into the exhibition of local easel work?

URBAN NEININGER: He would have shows at the project headquarters, but it wasn't open to the public really. They were up in a kind of a gallery mainly because the schools, or the government departments, or the state would want to see what they could borrow on loan for their offices. We had an exhibition in the project, but not in the museum. Oh, once, yes, towards the end of the time that I was there. It was in the spring of 1941. The Palace Hotel would rent us a corner store which was vacant at the time. I think it had been a small stock exchange of some kind. It was empty, but a marvelous location on the way to Market on 12th Street. Oh, there were two of those shows. I'd forgotten the other one, but on this occasion it was not only the art project. It was all the projects that wanted to exhibit their programs. I know there was an engineering project that had designed new ways of using wood for large spans, laminating it, arranging it. There was a weaving project, a craft project which wasn't under the craft project; in short, all the projects. I think in this exhibition there must have been eight or more exhibits. Well, the art project was called on to lay it out and gather the year before, it must have been 1940, there was a very large art show. I think most of the work was from the Northern California Projects, and it was also in the Palace Hotel, but the street level, a large store, which was for rent and they rented it to us. It was a big space with windows on two sides and well lighted. It was Mrs. Ryan who was still there and was in charge of it. If you ever go out there, you might look her up because she started at the very beginning, and it was her field. Well, we installed temporary walls and laid the space out. It was a success. I remember a lot of movie stars who were staying at the Palace, and they liked to walk around. They were interested, Audrey Smith and Heather Angel, a whole group spent a lot of time there. But, those were the only two exhilarations that I recall.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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