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Oral history interview with Ben Shahn, 1964  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ben Shahn on April 14, 1964. The interview was conducted at Ben Shahn's home in Roosevelt, New Jersey by Richard Doud for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

RICHARD DOUD: I'd like to start with a general background of what you were doing prior to the time and how you managed to get with the Resettlement Program.

BEN SHAHN: Well, I told you I shared a studio with Walker Evans before any of this came along. I became interested in photography when I found my own sketching was inadequate. I was at that time very interested in anything that had details, you know, I remember one thing, I was working around 14th Street and that group of blind musicians were constantly playing there, I would walk in front of them and sketch, and walk backwards and sketch and I found it was inadequate. So I asked my brother to buy me a camera because I didn't have the money for it. He bought me a Leica and I promised him - this was kind of a bold promise - I said, "If I don't get in a magazine off the first roll you can have your camera back." I did get into a magazine, a theater magazine at the time. Now, my knowledge of photography was terribly limited. I must tell you this because I thought I could always ask Walker to show me what to do and so on, and it was a kind of an indefinite promise that he made. One day when he was going off to the South Seas and I was helping him into his taxi, I said, "Walker, remember your promise to show me how to photograph?" He says, "Well, it's very easy, Ben. F9 on the sunny side of the street, F4.5 on the shady side of the street. For a twentieth of a second hold your camera steady," and that was all. This was the only lesson I ever had. Of course I realize that photography is not the technical facility as much as it is the eye, and this decision that one makes for the moment at which you are going to snap, you know. I was primarily interested in people, and people in action, so that I did nothing photographically in the sense of doing buildings for their own sake or a still life or anything like that. To me it was just to document myself on my own work. Then someone came down from the Farm Security. It was called then the Resettlement Administration. I had been recommended by the same woman, Ernestine Evans, who was on the planning board and had recommended Walker Evans. I was brought in, not in the photographic department at all, I was brought in on a thing called Special Skills. I was to do posters, pamphlets, murals, propaganda in general, you know.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

BEN SHAHN: I mean I believe in this thing, and to me the word "propaganda" is a holy word when it's something I believe in, you see. So, I was offered this job to come down there but first it was suggested that I take a trip around the country in the areas in which we worked to see what it's all about, and I tell you that was a revelation to me. My experience had been all European. I had been in Europe for four years. I studied there and my knowledge of the United States rather came via New York and mostly through Union Square.

RICHARD DOUD: Pretty stilted picture.

BEN SHAHN: Well, this was the only picture I had, you see. When I began to go out into the field it was a revelation. I did take my camera along, as I felt there wouldn't be enough time to draw the things I wanted to do. I did some drawing and did a lot of photography but I was not part of Stryker's outfit at all. I presented them as a gift with my negatives and I also, for that reason, had the facilities to print them. I still want to speak of the revelation that the rest of the country became for me as against what I knew of it. Frankly, I'd never traveled in the United States at all. I'd traveled all over Europe you know, and Africa, but not the United States.

RICHARD DOUD: No desire or no opportunity?

BEN SHAHN: No, at the time when I did go to Europe, of course, I went there to study and it was a good idea I think still. The time when I had desire to go to the United States I didn't have a penny. It was in the middle of the depression, you know. I couldn't get as far as Hoboken at that time. It was really a very serious time. I thought I'd never get out of New York again. I mean the present seemed to be hopeless and I just felt that I'd never get out of New York again. It was a really tough time and when this thing came along and this idea that I must wander around the country a bit for three months...I just nearly jumped out of my skin with joy. And not only that, they were going to give me a salary too! I just couldn't believe it. Anyway, I went and I found things that were very startling to me. For instance, I remember the first place I went to on this trip, where we were active -- these resettlements that we built -- I found that, as far as I was concerned, it was impossible to photograph. Neat little rows of houses, and this wasn't my idea of something to photograph, and I had the good luck to ask someone, "Where are you all from? Where did they bring you from?" When they told me, I went down to a place

called Scot's Run and there it began. I realized then that I must be on my own, find out, you know. I thought it would all be sort of given to me and from there I went all through Kentucky, West Virginia, down to Arkansas, and Mississippi, Louisiana...in other words I covered the mine country and the cotton country. I was terribly excited about it. I did no painting at all in that time. This was it, I'm sort of single track anyway. When I'm off on photography, it was photography and I thought this would be the career for the rest of my life. In '38, this time I did a job for Mr. Stryker. I went on his payroll at about half the salary I was getting before, to cover what he called Harvest in Ohio. At first it was so completely different from the South and from the mine country. It was neat and clean and orderly and I didn't think it had any photographic qualities for me. At first I said, "Well, I can't do anything about it," and one day it sort of came to me. I felt it after about two weeks so I called Roy and I said, "I'll take the job." I stayed about six weeks with it and worked just day and night on the thing. This was an entirely different thing. In the South or in the mine country, wherever you point the camera there is a picture. But here you have to make some choices you see.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

BEN SHAHN: You know, nice orderly farm house, nice orderly road and so on, and without sharecroppers and without the mine shacks. It was a little more difficult, but I think I did what I call a nice job. Not only was it the actual harvest, but I wanted to know what they did on Sundays and I covered a lot of the church activities. I wanted to know what they did on Sundays to amuse themselves and I went out to a place called Buckeye Lake, you know.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

BEN SHAHN: Then there was the auction of a home, which had its tragic overtones, a baby carriage...the children for whom that baby carriage was bought were now grandparents themselves, you see, and all those overtones. I looked at it almost like a movie script except they were stills. I'd first go out and photograph all the signs on telegraph poles and trees announcing this auction; and then get the people gathering, and all kinds of details of them, and then examining the things, and the auctioneer, and so on and so forth. That was my last job on the thing. Now, when I came on to Washington to begin my job, I was so interested in photography at that time that I really would have preferred to work with Stryker than with my department, which was more artistic if you wish. And the amusing thing was that Walker Evans would have preferred to work with my department, rather than with Stryker. He didn't get along too well with Stryker for one reason or another. I didn't trust the government facilities for even developing. I sent it in to New York.

RICHARD DOUD: The old home place!

BEN SHAHN: Yeh, yeh, that's it. It was home you know. I'll tell you one very amusing thing. I think we were in Biloxi at the time, and sat down with a little "coffee pot" to have a cup of coffee, and a couple of young boys came in and ordered oysters. And I nudged my wife and says, "1500 miles from New York and they are ordering oysters." Ha ha ha... I think this is the provincialism of the New Yorker you know.

RICHARD DOUD: It's really quite marked sometimes.

BEN SHAHN: It's terribly marked. The other thing that startled me; when I was down in the mine country, I think it was Kentucky, there was some local strike taking place and I thought I want to cover that. It was being picketed and I thought, "Now how do you get into a conversation with a union picket? You offer him a union made cigarette." So I bought a pack of Raleighs and I offered him a cigarette and he says, "No, I don't smoke that awful stuff." In stronger language than that. He says, "Here, I've been in the union for thirty years and I won't smoke that," and he offered me a non-union cigarette. This to me is startling you know. As was the fact that John L. Lewis, who was a kind of a God of theirs at that time, and you didn't dare say a word against him...if you had a copy The Nation with you, I think they'd run you out of town. There was this incomprehensible conflict there you know. I got into homes. I stayed with some families. I knew how to do that pretty well, and got to know them, and we still remember their names. My wife can tell endless stories. She acted as a stooge for me...

RICHARD DOUD: She went with you on these trips?

BEN SHAHN: Oh yes, yes. I used what is called an angle finder. You know what that is? You know in an ordinary Leica, the lens is here. Now, I would look this way and by refraction of what they call an angle finder I would take away any self-consciousness they had. So, most of my pictures don't have any posed quality and this was a very helpful thing in the whole quality of my work, this angle finder.

RICHARD DOUD: Did these people know though?

BEN SHAHN: They did not know.

RICHARD DOUD: They didn't know what you were ...

BEN SHAHN: I'll tell you when I was first in Louisiana and some kids got around talking to me and they didn't know if that was a camera or a machine gun. When I came back there I did an extra little trip once, sort of a review two years later in '37, they said, "Ha, you work for Life Magazine." It had already come out. They had become very sophisticated, but in the early days they were not. I remember traveling around in Arkansas with Senator Robinson, and I told him what this little trick was. He felt very much part of it and had me take pictures of people unbeknownst to them. On another occasion when I was in Kentucky the sheriff came along and just took me by the arm: No photographing in Post Offices. A post office had been held up in Paduka and someone had come in with a camera and sort of cased the joint...Well I was very amused by this. I had credentials which I hadn't shown. I wanted to see how far this would go. So, he took me to some justice there and I showed him my credentials and while he was reading me the riot act I kept photographing him with this angle.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh, for goodness sake!

BEN SHAHN: Yeh, yes, he was just unaware of it completely.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, how do you justify you being in these places? You mentioned the strike in this one small town. How did you explain your presence?

BEN SHAHN: Oh, I don't know...nobody seemed to care. Only once did I run into a little trouble. When we got to Little Rock I had a letter of introduction to our director there, the regional director, a guy by the name of O.O. Jones and when I showed him my letter, he said, "What are you coming down here for? Make trouble?" Weird!! This was our man you know. Same way as one of our men said when we were going up in the Ozarks, "You ain't seen any niggers around here have ya?" These were our men you know. It was fantastic. I went down to a place we hear about a great deal now, Plaquemines Parish, below New Orleans, where they've had all this trouble. This man Perez runs this place, and I got into country I never dreamed existed in this country. This was an area of ten miles settled only by Italians and they made an environment that was just Italian...the architecture, the lemon groves, the orange groves and so on.

RICHARD DOUD: Is that right?

BEN SHAHN: Yes. Then we went through an area of the trappers who wouldn't touch the soil. It was beneath their dignity. They'd stamp out anything green because their whole dignity rested on trapping, not on soil, you see.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, what did..you started out for example on the harvest in Ohio...

BEN SHAHN: That was later, that was in '38, yes.

RICHARD DOUD: What sort of preparations would you make before you left Washington?

BEN SHAHN: Nothing, nothing. I must confess that in the early days...well I had this happy arrangement that I wasn't in the employ of Roy so he couldn't very well give me instructions, you see?

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

BEN SHAHN: In the beginning there were no instructions, but later on it became a little bureaucratic, Roy would assign books to be read. I confess, on my own, on that first trip I took a lot of books along, particularly books that were published in Chapel Hill, a series of sociological studies of the problems of cotton and so on. That was completely on my own. I think I could have resented having someone tell me what book to read. And when I went on this trip to Ohio, it was just as vague as that: to do the harvests; and I must tell you something very amusing about that...who is the man who wrote "Middletown?"

RICHARD DOUD: "Hometown?"

BEN SHAHN: "Hometown"...no not "Hometown"...the sociologic study that was made and the guy that... Anyway, he heard I was going down there and he asked Roy if I would also be aware of the impact that women's clubs have had on the whole social structure. I was so amused by that, I wrote and said, "If you will send me psychologic lens and philosophic film, I'll do this job for you, then." This was the only time I was directly under Roy's employ...those six weeks when I was out in Ohio. To everybody's amazement, I resigned because so many people were trying to get into it. I had a big mural to do, and photography ceased to interest me, suddenly. Suddenly, just like that, I felt I would only be repeating myself and stopped it dead.

RICHARD DOUD: When you were working on this thing, how did you feel about this idea of photographing America? I mean what was...?

BEN SHAHN: Well, there was a strange harmony with the time. I felt very strongly the whole social impact of that depression, you know, and I felt very strongly about the efforts that this Resettlement Administration was trying to accomplish; resettling people, helping them, and so on. I felt completely in harmony with the times. I don't

think I've ever felt that way before or since. Totally involved...I thought nothing of working through a night or something like that...to print stuff or make posters or what have you.

RICHARD DOUD: A real, total commitment.

BEN SHAHN: It was a total commitment. I never had it, as I say, since. For a while I had it when I went to work with the CIO. I worked with them for about six months, and in short order that too, became bureaucratic, as Roy's department became bureaucratic.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, I think it was bound to be, as things grew.

BEN SHAHN: Well, its tragic, but it's so, you know. I just hated to see it and I stepped out of the CIO when it became bureaucratic as I did in this thing. The things I photographed, I did not think so much as photographs, as documents for myself. A lot of paintings came out of it over the years. I thought of it purely as a documentary thing and I could argue rather violently with photographers who were interested in print quality and all this bored me. I felt the function of a photograph was to have it seen by as many people as possible and the newspaper is one of the best ways or the magazine. Naturally things printed in the magazine won't have the photographic quality of the photograph itself...through the screen and the half-tone it loses a great deal of it. I felt that the image was more important than the quality of the image, you understand?

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, I think, from what I've seen of the Farm Security Photographs this was pretty much the general idea they had.

BEN SHAHN: I would say so.

RICHARD DOUD: They were concerned with...

BEN SHAHN: I was quite a purist about it and when some of the people came in and began to use flash I thought it was immoral. I'll give you a reason why. You know, you come into a sharecropper's cabin and it's dark. But a flash destroyed that darkness. It is true that a flash would actually illuminate the comic papers that they used to paste on their walls, but this wasn't the impact it had on me. It was the darkness, the glistening of the eyes, the glistening of a brass ornament on top of a big bed, you know, a glass, a mirror that would catch light. I wanted very much to hold on to this, you see. Now, that's a matter of personal judgement about this thing whether you divulge everything or whether things are kept mysterious as they are viewed.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, it's a good comment because after all it's...

BEN SHAHN: We were hypercritical of each other in a very decent way. When a man returned from the field and we'd look at the work, we'd criticize each other very genuinely and never offensively. And we would avoid all tricks, angle shots were just horrible to us. And the criticism that I had at a later time about it was that we were photographing just one side of America, the real poverty stricken. In 1938, I think, when I was no longer working for it, Roy invited a number of picture editors from Life, Time, Look and all those magazines - then they were the first ones of this kind. To frankly discuss the program as it was being done. I was invited, my relation was avuncular to it and I said, "Well, we photographed many, many times a pregnant woman standing in a doorway, someone looking out of a window. But how about the family who just bought a new set of furniture from Sears, Roebuck? How about this nice little middle class street? This is hard to do." I said. Well, you know, I think Roy was offended by this criticism. I think he expected me to say nice things though. I have no question about it. I think he has come around to my way of thinking since, though.

RICHARD DOUD: I think so too.

BEN SHAHN: Yes. And Roy had this remarkable facility of listening to people's judgement who he respected and it became part of him, became part of his critical judgement as well, I had the strict advantage over everybody else there: A. They had not worked for him. B. My work was included in the first Annual U.S. Camera you see. That made a terrific impression. It's a little bit like my inability to read a guide book before I go anywhere. I can read it after I've been there and by the same logic I refuse to accept any technical stunts from anybody. I refused to learn more than I knew and I confess I missed a great deal. I missed a great deal when I traveled by not reading the guide book. But, that which I did with the absolutely simple facilities...I could literally put this camera in my back pocket. I used a camera that didn't have an interchangeable lens so it was much flatter. I could put it in my back pocket. I got to be fast enough to work from a moving car. My wife would do the driving. She was very understanding of the whole thing and just as much enthusiastic about it as I was, so that we'd retrace steps, sometimes five hundred miles. I needed something to fill in. I'd missed it and back we'd go. We had a little A Model Ford that we knocked around in. It gave us no trouble but it didn't have much speed, so going back six hundred miles meant almost three days.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, you were using a 35 millimeter...

BEN SHAHN: Only, only.

RICHARD DOUD: Why? I mean, they weren't that common were they, when you started out?

BEN SHAHN: Well, I knew Walker Evans had one and the one I got cost all of twenty-five dollars. It was a second hand one. Now again, there are so many gadgets on cameras now that people abandon these simpler instruments for the more sure instruments. I didn't even use a light meter. I used my own judgement on it. So, that I missed a lot of things and then I also was very fond of the German film called Perritzbromena which is very, very fine grain and it was very slow. I remember spending the whole evening at some dance hall and not getting a single thing. If I'd used a faster film I probably would have gotten it, but I had a great deal of faith in that film. Sometimes, I got things that I never dreamed I'd get. There was one photograph that I'm very proud of. It's been reproduced a lot. There is a little girl, sort of very meager looking, tragic eyes, and she was walking through the hallway of her home and there was a huge reproduction of Raphaels Holy Mother.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, I've see it.

BEN SHAHN: I held the camera in hand for about ten seconds and I got it! My hands are pretty steady, so I was able to get it. Well, this was a lucky thing you know. In Arkansas I saw a family and they were so miserable that it was unbelievable. The child was holding some ragged doll and the child looked as horribly ragged as the doll. It was an unbelievable situation. There, of course, it was out doors and it worked all right; but the other was indoors, you know, in a dark hallway, and just by having this hope and confidence that it would work, it did work you see. And my negatives I know were very uneven and real trouble for the printer. Then I would insist, in the beginning, on printing my own stuff and then, when I did so much stuff, they had to bring in some printers. I would give them the quality of the thing I wanted and they would put it in the file so when they had a call for it, they would reproduce it. They were much better printers than I was. They could reproduce it exactly.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, you were in the game fairly early. Did you have any idea how this thing might grow and expand?

BEN SHAHN: No. I'll tell you the truth, I was happy to do it and mine was a selfish one. As I told you, I was documenting material for myself. The fact that one of the newspapers, AP or UP, began to borrow stuff and make boiler plate of it and send it around the country was one of those weird accidents, because normally the average photo editor is not going to go to a government agency for good photographs. I saw what photography was in the other agencies. You know, we'd work to mid-night, nobody cared, and I remember going into one of the older agencies, one of the farm bureau things, and I wanted some photographs. It was 3:00 and the women are all washed up, you know, they were leaving at 4:30 and they won't bother. It just horrified me, you know, that people looked upon their work that way. Whatever I get involved in, I'm totally involved, you see. So, that I couldn't understand people stopping work at 3:00 and so on. The quality of their photographs was always static. They were dull in every sense of the word, and I couldn't see where anybody would want to use them outside of the government agency in making its own report and so on.

RICHARD DOUD: Do you think that pictures that you people took were used as much as they could have been or should have been; or were they exploited?

BEN SHAHN: Well, they were used a good deal. I don't know whether you heard of the story that Archibald MacLeish who was then an editor on Fortune was doing one of those enormous studies on the use of the land.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

BEN SHAHN: And someone suggested that he might look at our photographs. I don't think he was very excited about the idea. When we sent him our photographs - we sent down a big portfolio - he said, "I'm abandoning my text, I'm just using your photographs and I'll write a sound tract for it, single line." The book is called Land of the Free and this I think was the first book that came out of our photographs. On the other hand, in Switzerland, somebody got a hold of a lot of our photographs. They published practically a whole issue of a magazine with our photographs. They did a beautiful job showing how democracy helped itself when it's in time of trouble. The same pictures were gotten a hold of by some Italian magazine during the Mussolini days, you see, the very height of Mussolina's time and they show how democracy can deteriorate using the same photographs. Photographs can be used both ways. There is no doubt about it.

RICHARD DOUD: It's not the picture that's propaganda.

BEN SHAHN: It's the caption and juxtaposition of pictures etc.

RICHARD DOUD: Do you think that the file has any real value today?

BEN SHAHN: Well, historically it's incredible. Years later I was working for the CIO, as I told you, and I was doing

some pamphlet, and I sent the girl working for me to find some pictures at the New York Public Library who had a complete file of most of our stuff, and she brought back some of my pictures. They'd been borrowed a lot and they were all frayed and so on and they looked as if they had been taken about fifty years ago. The changes that have occurred in the country were so sharp. I did a series of photographs on a Saturday afternoon in a small town in Tennessee, I believe, of a medicine man. He had a little dummy, ventriloquist dummy, and he had a Negro to help him and so on. It was Saturday. I don't think there were ten cars in the square, they were all mule drawn carts that had come there. This was 1935; it was incredible you see. The same was true of a lot of areas we covered. You'd have that feeling then of being way far back; but tragically enough, just about a month ago we took a train from Washington to Cincinnati. I had to go there - I wanted to go on a slow train; I love trains. As I went throughout West Virginia, it hadn't changed. It just made me sick to see the same darn thing. That whole problem of Appalachia you know?

RICHARD DOUD: Yes. What do you think would have happened had someone other than Stryker had been in charge of this thing? Do you think he contributed?

BEN SHAHN: He contributed an incredible amount to it. I must tell you very honestly that I was so brought up -- my own father was responsible for it; he had very little use for anybody except those who produced, whether he wrote or painted or drew or made furniture or carved (my father was a wood carver) and I came down there with this kind of a chip on my shoulder. Roy was just another bureaucrat to me, but I realized very soon that without Roy this thing would have died. He was the one who was constantly up on the Hill and constantly manipulating so on and so forth. Making it possible for us to go out in the field, to be protected completely by him and for this I was very grateful. The work that came on later became a little more specific. I personally didn't like the idea of the dictation that went with it. I know they would have a young man read something and have him quiz him on it. Roy was essentially a teacher, you see.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, certainly.

BEN SHAHN: So, that I was resentful, but it wasn't by barn burning so I didn't care, you know, I wasn't working with him. I saw this kind of thing going on. Then something else happened, he had to fight for a budget all the time in a situation like this. I remember they had to drop a man because they didn't have enough money and they went through the file and counted the photographs. Walker Evans, who had the least number because he is such a perfectionist, was the one who was dropped, you see, and I thought that was insane. This is the way the government runs things, I don't know. Its what they call quantity control instead of quality control.

RICHARD DOUD: I'd like to ask you a sort of subjective question, perhaps and a double barrel one. I was wondering whether or not that you felt that you contributed anything of value to the Farm Security file and whether or not this experience contributed to you!

BEN SHAHN: They are both...yes, I'd say "Yes" to both of them. I think I contributed something. Indeed I did, I think it contributed a great deal to me, perhaps more. This whole revelation of what America was did not exist in my mind because I had a very phony idea of what the United States was like, you see, I had some rough notions about it. For instance, this is a much broader thing in a sense, when we were in the Ozarks and the families there were on total relief - you couldn't get a work project for them because they had no vehicles and they lived twenty miles apart so you couldn't pick them up for a day's work - I'd come to one family and the house was immaculate. They got the same amount of relief. Another one was completely impossible. I thought, "There is the difference in people." It isn't only the situation. Differences in people and their attitude and the respect they had for themselves and so on. This is something I would not have believed because I felt that two families earning the same amount of relief would be equal, you see, but it just didn't work that way. What it did for me for a period of almost seven or eight years after, it was the basis of most of my work. The experience that I went through then you know. So, I can't say enough about what it did for me.

RICHARD DOUD: You knew Walker Evans before you started the project?

BEN SHAHN: Yes, we shared a studio.

RICHARD DOUD: What was he doing, what was his attitude towards this whole thing?

BEN SHAHN: His attitude towards this thing was...well, he loved the South. Particularly the architecture, the antebellum architecture, and I think Roy was rather disaffected by that rather rigid direction. He thought perhaps Walker ought to do more of the kinds of things I was doing-people and movement and so on and so forth. And then Walker also apparently made some prints for himself, which Roy resented, of the same things. I did too. I didn't take the best ones, but I wanted to be sure I got some for myself. I didn't get one tenth of what I did, but I did get a good deal of it. Then there was a very amusing thing - I didn't think this would go on forever and I thought they ought to be in a more secure place than a government agency because those are inaccessible, you know; if you want a photograph it's pretty hard to get. I thought they ought to go to what is called the picture collection of the New York Public Library and I kept hinting to Roy. Roy sort of suspects women

in any kind of work, so that he didn't go along with that and I confess I used to pick up things from discards in the barrels and send them to the library. But finally I convinced Roy and when the thing was ending and the war came on, he sent her enormous collections of photographs which to this day they haven't had enough money to have filed. I thought it is infinitely more accessible there. You know, going down to the Library of Congress and trying to get a photograph...

RICHARD DOUD: I saw some of the things that were published in this book Let Us Now Praise Famous Men and the pictures that Walker had taken for Farm Security.

BEN SHAHN: Yeh, Yeh.

RICHARD DOUD: It seemed to me that maybe because of the nature of the book itself, that they were all sort of exploiting the deterioration of the South. Is this...was he interested in this business of deterioration?

BEN SHAHN: I think I was too, in a sense, because the South was deteriorating. That's all there was to it. You see, I recognized what our function was. Our function was, if our work was used at all, to convince our congressmen and senators that this is a necessary thing, this Resettlement Administration; and without convincing the public you can't convince a congressman either. So I felt it was very necessary to get our stuff out to publications and exhibits. I designed a number of those for state fairs and so on. Big things, we had them blown up enormously and so on; but the whole idea was to impress the public and our government of the need for this. So, if you want to call that exploiting I guess it was exploiting the deterioration of the South. Oh, listen, I saw things when I made arrangements to meet with a group of cotton pickers and they'd leave at, say, 5:30 in the morning and I had a lot of photographs of them actually gathering...steam rising out of their breath. That's because it was early and cold. They'd take along those huge cans of water, the kind that milk used to come in, you know those big milk cans that farmers use.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

BEN SHAHN: And by the time it was nine o'clock, that thing was just as warm as anything you want to call it, and those poor people were there, say twelve hours, at 5 cents per hour, and then come back -- we drove them back to the company store and drink three cokes, one after another. Drink up in one swoop one quarter of their earnings. If that isn't deterioration, the general exploitation that the poor farmers there were going through, you know. For instance I was stopped one day by a colored man and he saw DC plates on the car and he told me a heart rendering story. He was a sharecropper. And I said, "Why don't you go and complain...We have this board and so on." He says, "The man I work for is on the board." Yes, it was a pretty hopeless situation so it seemed.

RICHARD DOUD: How many of the other photographers did you work with? I think you were there before some of them came along.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, I was there before Russell Lee came on. You probably know his work. I was there before...what's his name? He's down in Puerto Rico now...ah...Jack Delano.

RICHARD DOUD: Jack Delano, yes.

BEN SHAHN: I was there before one or two other people. It's hard to remember. I came over there in the fall of '35 and Walker, I think, came on in the early summer of '35. But, Roy had brought along Arthur from Columbia, a student there. I must confess, that Roy's idea in the early days, before I came there, was a historian. He was the historian of the project, and was to photograph even the very typewritten memoranda that came through.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh, no.

BEN SHAHN: Yeh. And also a closeup of a piece of eroded soil, you know. I would talk to him. I'd say "Look Roy, you're not going to move anybody with this eroded soil. But the effect that eroded soil has on a kid, who looked starved, this is going to move people. You just can't move anybody with this kind of photographs." At that time Dorothea Lange's work was sent in or brought in by somebody and this was a revelation, what this woman was doing. So, Roy's whole direction changed, you see. He abandoned all this documentary stuff he was doing; documents of documents and stuff.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes.

BEN SHAHN: I confess that Roy was a little bit dictatorial in his editing and he ruined quite a number of my pictures, which he stopped doing later. He used to punch a hole through a negative. Some of them were incredibly valuable. He didn't understand at the time. For instance, I was in Marked Tree, I guess you call it, in Arkansas, and there was a tension there. It was breaking out there and it was really ugly. Anyway, I photographed a front of a store where they, with Bon Ami, had marked the price of things, you see. Later on, during the war, when I was doing some work for the OPA, I wanted to show what happened to prices (the prices



were fantastically low at that time) and I went to look for that negative and he punched a hole through it. Well, I shot my mouth off about that. But, I didn't know what was done with a lot of my negatives, naturally. He learned, then, not to do that, you see, because this was an invaluable document of what life was like in 1935 and when I was looking for it in 1943 or '44 it didn't exist anymore.

RICHARD DOUD: It's hard to tell what might be worth something in the future.

BEN SHAHN: You see, this woman who runs the picture collection has an incredibly wonderful imagination and exercises no editorial comment on the two or three million pictures they have there. They have value for someone, for something at sometime. Roy learned all these things. This was a minor thing because the things would not have gone on under anyone else. His activity in protecting us, in taking the guff as it were, was the most wonderful contribution he could have made and the contact he began to make for publishing and so forth.

RICHARD DOUD: Do you think that it would be worthwhile or would it be impossible to have a similar photographic documentary of the country today?

BEN SHAHN: Oh absolutely. It should do it all the time. It should do it during its miserable depression, it should do it during its period of affluence, and the contrast is even greater during the period of affluence. You have this counter-point of poverty going right along with it you know. I think this should be kept going all the time. It's such a tiny amount of money involved. You know, I'm doing pretty well now and it just...I resent...don't resent paying taxes, but I feel that my taxes are used for these failures and these moonshots you know. There goes all that money I put in last year.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, when people are starving and...

BEN SHAHN: Yes, it's such a tiny darn thing. One ought to look at the budget of that thing. It was ridiculous.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, it was.

BEN SHAHN: It becomes more and more valuable as times goes on. You know, when they did the picture of the Okies, the movie, Steinbeck's picture, "Grapes of wrath," our photographs were used, you know, for setting up all sorts of scenes. When I saw it, I recognized it immediately. They've been used all over and they've been stolen, you know. Agencies, photo agencies, copied them and sold them, you see. They made negatives of them. I've seen photographs of mine double spread in magazines with the caption under it; Ewing Photo or something. I think it was one of the agencies..Galloway...something like that. Big double spread picture.

RICHARD DOUD: Nothing you can do about it?

BEN SHAHN: No, you couldn't do anything about it because it was public domain, you know. Government made it available. Life used them and Look used them.

RICHARD DOUD: You mentioned Dorothea Lange's photographs of migrant workers. I'm assuming they are the ones you have in mind.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes.

RICHARD DOUD: Do you think that she was of perhaps a personality that could do more with this type of thing than someone like Arthur Rathstein or...

BEN SHAHN: Well, Arthur is a nice guy but I don't think he is very bright. I remember, he brought in a photograph, I mentioned before, of a pregnant woman in a doorway looking off in some direction, and I was excited about it. He says, "You excited about that too? What the hell is in that photograph?"

RICHARD DOUD: He didn't know what he was doing.

BEN SHAHN: He didn't know. One time Roy kept a private little collection in his own desk. Sometimes our photographers paths crossed and we photographed the same thing. I remember, he had one of a little fallen-down sharecroppers house. When I photographed it, I went right up against it and showed no sky, practically. When Arthur photographed it with a filter (which is another thing I didn't care for) the clouds came out beautifully and Roy said, "Arthur's looks as if you put two hundred dollars in it you could make a nice little summer home." I mean there is difference in attitude but I think that the greatest picture of the whole period was made by Arthur, the dust storm picture, the man and boy. Then the pregnant woman and several others that were classics, you know.

RICHARD DOUD: He was probably responsible for one of the classic problems too, this business of the skull.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes, dragging the skull around, yes.

RICHARD DOUD: It probably started more...

BEN SHAHN: It did, it did, yes, particularly in the Herald Tribune or I think it was just the Herald at the time.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, I think so.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, I remember that incident. That was the first time I got my name on a bad list, because I had once taken over a class of the John Reed Club. A friend of mine got sick and he was teaching fresco and God, I would have taught fresco anywhere, Catholic, Jewish, Communist, Republican, anything, I loved fresco very much and they mentioned me then. It was the first time I had my name in the paper in that sense, you know. I've been in trouble ever since.

RICHARD DOUD: Would you think that in general the public appreciated what you were doing or realized what you were trying to do?

BEN SHAHN: The whole public...no, no but certainly editors, people who used to put out those boiler plates, they appreciated it and they got it to the public. And I would say so, because a lot of our photographs were used before the thirty-six election, and that's when Roosevelt was elected by everything except Maine and Vermont.

RICHARD DOUD: Yeh.

BEN SHAHN: So, I think it did have it's influence. It's pretty hard to measure influence of written or visual material. I'm sure Uncle Tom's Cabin brought on the Civil War, perhaps. I don't know. I could flatter myself in thinking our photographs brought Roosevelt in in '36 overwhelmingly. But beyond that you can't measure it. I've been asked a great deal about the influence I've had with my work and it's impossible to say, you know.

RICHARD DOUD: This is interesting because I asked Roy almost the same thing and his answer was almost the same as yours. It's interesting to note that you people feel pretty much the same.

BEN SHAHN: What I think was very beautiful about this thing is the sense of a unity of a group that we had. Leica people used to put on an annual every year, you know, and they wanted to give each one of us awards and we said, "No, give it to the outfit, the photographic division."

RICHARD DOUD: Sort of an esprit de corps.

BEN SHAHN: It was an esprit de corps, it was very beautiful. It was pure. There was no competition financially. We all were around the same salary, or they were. I was on a different thing and when I took the six week job with Roy, actually I was in his employ, I had to work for much less money but it didn't bother me at all. There was enough to get by on and that was the important thing. There was no competition even critically, you know. I did arrange...I was so impressed with the work we were doing and I was very involved ideologically in photography - that I arranged an exhibition at the College Art Association. The first exhibition I picked the photographs and so on and we had an exhibition in New York. That's the first time people in New York became aware of it. Now, people talk about it. When they had the show of them at the Modern Museum here last fall wasn't it? Or a year ago last fall?

RICHARD DOUD: '62 I believe.

BEN SHAHN: Yeh, in the fall of '62. Wow, the crowds that were there and people began to talk about it again and so on and so forth.

RICHARD DOUD: Are you surprised that people are still this excited about the pictures you took?

BEN SHAHN: Well, I think it revolutionized photography, one aspect of photography. To me there are two areas of photography. There is the kind of thing Paul Strand does or Walker Evans and that is with an eight-ten camera, getting on the thing and divulging textures and details the human eye almost can't see. Then there is the thing they say Cartier-Bresson does of people in movement, see, and those are the two great directions for me. A third one has come up now which is kind of abstract today, but it doesn't move me very much. I'm not surprised that we've had this effect upon photography. As a matter of fact Margaret Bourke White and her husband then...I think it was Caldwell...did a book See Their Faces or something and they were inadequate copies of our work, really. It didn't have that particular dedication that ours had. It was a commercial job you know. Then there were two more books put out. You remember Hometown, and Twelve Million Black Voices which Ed Rosskam - and by the way you ought to see him he lives right here.

RICHARD DOUD: Does he?

BEN SHAHN: Yes.

RICHARD DOUD: Oh, I didn't know that.

BEN SHAHN: Yeh. He worked with Roy after I left there, after I left Farm Security. He managed to arrange all this to get ...what's his name with the Twelve Million Black Voices, Richard..Negro writer.. and the other one, the Hometown, he worked with the author and those were totally our photographs, if you remember.

RICHARD DOUD: What do you think of this book that Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor put out? This American Exodus?

BEN SHAHN: I haven't seen it.

RICHARD DOUD: I was quite impressed with it. It was...it dealt with the migration of the Okies and Missouri and...

BEN SHAHN: She was a great person and she came with a good background. Her husband was a sociological person and so on.

RICHARD DOUD: It's a pretty terrific thing, I thought. Primarily the photographs. I thought they were much better handled than the text.

BEN SHAHN: Well yes, of course you know there had been this cliché around "one picture is worth a thousand words," they said. Well, the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and one other thing plus a few words left over for girl scouts used a thousand words you know. I'm not impressed with those clichés.

RICHARD DOUD: Roy said once that he felt that an intelligent caption was worth as much or more than the photograph itself. He still feels that the photograph is an adjunct to the written word.

BEN SHAHN: Well, I don't, I don't think so at all. I don't think one is an adjunct to the other, you know. It's like saying that the cello is an adjunct to the orchestra or that other way around, the orchestra is an adjunct to the cello. It depends how you use them and how you put them together. I don't feel this. There is, among photographers, a kind of self-consciousness of wanting to be an "art," you know, the "art of photography" and so on, and I get kind of tired of that. Those are different media, you know; you can't compare them. An apple isn't an adjunct to a pear. Maybe in a fruit salad.

RICHARD DOUD: Do you think that there is a photographic art?

BEN SHAHN: No. I tell you why I don't think so. I've seen some accidental photographs that a nine year old took, you see. It is not an art at all. No, it is a mind, an eye, but not an art. The word "art" of course had never really been defined so you can't argue about it. But this sense of inadequacy that so many photographers have...I have friends come in and talk about photography and they can get mystical in ascribing to it certain qualities which it hasn't got. It's a reflective image which we have the good fortune to have the mechanics with which to hold this.

RICHARD DOUD: Do you think that a photograph, such as you were doing in the thirties, has more impact on the average individual than a painting of the same subject? Do you think it is easier for the common man to identify with a photograph?

BEN SHAHN: Yeh, I would think so. In 19...whatever year it was that Steichen put on the show in the Modern Museum called Family of Man, a photographic exhibit...

RICHARD DOUD: '58?

BEN SHAHN: Whatever it was, yes. The art critic wrote a very snide thing about it, consoling the artists about the crowds that were waiting to get in, that they shouldn't be disturbed by that because, "This concerns itself with the outer world, but you artists concern yourself with the inner world." I was pretty burnt up about this silly review so I called the art editor and said, "Would you give me a column or two so I can answer this?" And he said he would, and it was published. I generally never engage in any kind of polemics with an art critic on my own work but I thought this was as good an opening as any. You can look it up in the Times because I went into this pretty thoroughly. Beyond that...you can't form any generalization about it. That's the thing. You know when I worked in both the Farm Security and then later in the OWI where I was completely involved in graphics, posters; I felt we must use the work of Picasso and the work of Norman Rockwell because there is no one common denominator of a symbol that is going to get everybody. If there are only the classic twelve who appreciate Picasso's Guernica we must appeal to them too, but, through the Guernica, and they are never going to be touched by Norman Rockwell, and conversely you see. So the effort generally in all such situations is to arrive at the common denominator symbol and there is no such animal. We are not a mass, we are groups of individual, and we must talk to them as individuals. My own experience was very interesting. When I worked for the CIO, Fortune asked me to go down and they were doing a whole labor issue, the organizational drive of the CIO, '46 or '47. I got permission from Murry to go down, to leave CIO. And, I was there as kind of a double agent.

It was very amusing. I remember seeing a bunch of the posters I had done at the CIO at one of the Union Quarters in Gadston, Alabama, and I asked the president of the council of the CIO, "What effect do our posters have?" He didn't know who I was. I was there from Fortune magazine you see. He said, "I'll tell you the truth Mr. Shahn, if a boy in our neighborhood falls off a bike and is hurt, everybody is concerned about it; but if a bus load of kids in Oklahoma go off the side of a mountain and get killed - well, we're upset but not as much as we are about the boy on the bike. So, you have to get as close to the people you are talking to as you can.

RICHARD DOUD: That's right, and this is probably what the Farm Security did.

BEN SHAHN: Yeh. You have to get closer to people. Statistics meant nothing. Six million were unemployed...oh, it meant something, but not if you told the story of just one. I started to do a movie there and the money ran out on it...on this very subject you see. I wanted to tell the story of one individual. I started to do that with Walker Evans and the money ran out on it.

RICHARD DOUD: Too bad. That should have been quite a picture!

BEN SHAHN: Well, I don't know but I got very excited about movies then after all.

RICHARD DOUD: This didn't last, I take it.

BEN SHAHN: Well, no, I just have a way of being fairly honest with myself and particularly in admitting my own inadequacies. I was what? 35 by that time and I thought, "Look you can't start in the movies at 35. Your aesthetic arteries are hardened." You've got to be in there at eighteen. This is a cooperative business, a collaboration business, and you've been a lone wolf all your life. I just faced it and stepped away from it. It was that kind of a serious decision to make, but to me it's the greatest medium there is today, you know, it's total. We use all our senses and when it's good it's terrific. When it's bad of course, it's also very bad.

RICHARD DOUD: Do you think that we are as responsive to visual media today as we were, particularly photography?

BEN SHAHN: I think so, I think so.

RICHARD DOUD: You don't think we've become jaded by over exposure or...?

BEN SHAHN: Ah...yes, but I think we are still responsive. Something comes along and we still are responsive. I feel, having the choices I had, I felt I had more control over my own medium than I did over photography. Extraneous material entered into it that I couldn't control in photography except in very few instances where I felt there was a total picture, but in my own work I feel I have complete control.

RICHARD DOUD: Let's hope we never do become insensitive to this sort of thing.

BEN SHAHN: No, I don't think we ever will. You know for a time sophisticated people had no use for say...National Geographic and I was part of those sophisticated people. I had been a subscriber for years and now I can't wait for my copy!

[END OF SIDE I]

BEN SHAHN: Some time ago, we went to Asia and took a camera along, and I began to do what I'd done even years ago doing people. I couldn't get interested in it. And I did hundreds of photographs of details of the monuments as sculpture. We were in Indonesia. We were in Cambodia, you know and I did endless photographs of details of the sculpture, the temples and so on. But no more people. I found it was gone, you know, it happens to people. A certain interest leaves them. I still love to look at photographs but I couldn't do it myself anymore.

RICHARD DOUD: Do you think the same type of person could photograph people and photograph architecture and this sort of thing equally well?

BEN SHAHN: I suppose so. But I haven't seen it. Taking the two, since they are both friends of mine, Cartier-Bresson and Walker Evans, Walker still is interested in the thing that is still you know. He did one of the best photographs on depression, photos like a classic piece of architecture. He walked around with an eight-ten camera and he found some bum asleep in a beautiful doorway and this was it, you see. Cartier-Bresson always gets a thing as if he catches it in flight you know. Whether in actual motion or not...their minds are in flight or something. Neither does the other very well you see.

RICHARD DOUD: What is Walker Evans doing now?

BEN SHAHN: He's doing America.

RICHARD DOUD: That's a big job.

BEN SHAHN: Yes, yes. I just saw him a few months ago; he was out here. Apropos, that awful period before the we both got some work from the Farm Security...as I say we shared this studio and here some twelve or fifteen years ago someone did a biography of me, - Shelden Rodman.

RICHARD DOUD: Yes, I've seen that.

BEN SHAHN: And he went to look for correspondence among friends and all he found, all that Walker found was, "I'm going out to my sisters to see if I can borrow \$5." But we both looked disdainfully at each other as to how we earned the few dollars that we did earn. I worked for a department store drawing pots and pans and bicycles and so on; and he would hang around the Modern Museum and get a twenty dollar grant to do some photographs of a collection of Negro sculpture or what have you. I looked upon this disdainfully and he looked upon me disdainfully. It was horrible to do this kind of work and I had the feeling that if you are clean inside you can go through anything and it's not going to hurt you. I knew Walker was clean inside, you know, if you get the symbol of this...anyway, around 1940 or 41 when the War began, we lived in Washington and Walker came down to visit us and he said, "You know maybe you are right." I can go through shit and come out clean. I can photograph babies now and it doesn't hurt me."

RICHARD DOUD: Ha ha ha ...

BEN SHAHN: He didn't feel that this was the only way as he was doing previously, you see. It's a problem, you know, the livelihood which...if you don't take a course in economics you don't know what to do.

RICHARD DOUD: You sort of changed you ideas then about each others livelihoods...?

BEN SHAHN: Well, I don't know. for instance, we had opportunities to be published in magazines then you know. I didn't care where my works were published. I felt if it is good it will stand up on it's own, and if it isn't it doesn't help me if on either side of me I'm surrounded by genius. Walker felt that the magazine had to please him in which his work would appear. After all we are quite different people.

RICHARD DOUD: Is he living in New York.

BEN SHAHN: Yeh, he lives in New York.

RICHARD DOUD: I hope to see him sometime before I get through.

BEN SHAHN: I don't know whether he'll talk to you or not.

RICHARD DOUD: He might not.

BEN SHAHN: He has a kind of a real scar from the FSA because of this...he was the best photographer we had there, no doubt, and he was dropped, you know, for that reason I gave you. Then there was kind of a personal antagonism between Roy and him.

RICHARD DOUD: From what I know of Roy, if he doesn't rub you the right way he can certainly rub you the wrong way.

BEN SHAHN: Oh yeh. I heard later he used to rather walk over people. He either looked up at you or down on you. He couldn't see you eye to eye. I found that out from people who have worked for him subsequently in other agencies, when he was with the Standard Oil and so on. So that, as I say, I had the good fortune never to work for him except that six week period and then not to be there...not care you know. It was not my livelihood nor my career. It gives you a certain confidence. I remember he needed kind of a right hand man and I sent a friend of mine and he was crazy about him. But this boy formed during the depression; and if we needed some little piece of something for the darkroom (he handled all that) he would spend three days looking for it, because he could find it in a second hand shop you see. And that killed Roy. Roy came down here one day; he was heart broken but he had to let him go. He felt terrible about it.

RICHARD DOUD: I think he is a very sensitive man.

BEN SHAHN: Oh, he is, he is - very, very. That experience when I criticized the work - I thought it was going to one direction. He didn't talk to me for a while and his secretary wouldn't even talk to me. I came the next morning and Roy has a way when he'd disturbed he has a twitch, you know, and I saw that twitch. It's like a family now. We met a few of them at the opening of that show at the museum. Let's see, who else was there besides Arthur? Oh some of the people came in, I've forgotten now, it was kind of a reunion you know.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, if it were possible to start this thing again, who do you think is the logical person to...

BEN SHAHN: Well, of course Roy has the energy of a boy you know. He's incredible.

RICHARD DOUD: He certainly is.

BEN SHAHN: Incredible. Roy would be the first person I would suggest. However, I know he's not going to be around forever you know. He has retired several times, and can't stand it. There is a man I've met here in New Jersey. He is an assistant to our governor, David Davies. And I don't know how I met him. I guess through the Tri-centenary we are having here and I got involved in this a little bit and I began to talk about our photographs. I tried to get him interested in starting a photographic project here in New Jersey and I said, "I suppose you know I did some photographs." And he said, "Do I know you did photographs!" My father was professor at Western Reserve and he brought me up on you photographs." He'd be the man I can think of. He's remarkable. He's had the curse to see things in this particular job. I've never seen a man in a civil service job of the kind, see. We actually almost started a project here in New Jersey. The contract was signed. I wasn't involved in it. Roskam wrote up the project and Roskam writes like an angel. I said, "Ed, there won't be a single photograph that will come up through this project as you've written it up. Ha,ha,ha,ha..." And it died. We had a disaster happen to our pavilion in the Worlds Fair, it collapsed, you know, in the early days of the building. So that all the projects that we were going to undertake, like the photographic project, which had not been started, the state legislative told us, "We've got to use whatever money we have because it's been costing so much extra in the rebuilding. We'll collect insurance I understand but not for a while yet." So, the project died. It was very bad. It looked as if we were getting off the ground.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, yeh. If one state could do it and do it successfully it would...spread to other states.

BEN SHAHN: That's right. I don't believe it should necessarily be a federal thing as it was in our case because there is so much damn traveling, you know. Sometimes in unfamiliar territory which has it's good points - you come to it with a fresh eye you see - but it should be on a state level. It's so ridiculously little money that's involved and become so significant in a very short time.

RICHARD DOUD: Well, this is what...

BEN SHAHN: A record of our life you know.

RICHARD DOUD: It seems to me this would be a natural for the states in the Appalachia area.

BEN SHAHN: There is the business whether they have the money, but it should be actually within the state you know. For instance, there may be...I'm sure the time I was working in Arkansas that there wasn't a person in Arkansas who would have cared or was aware of it. I did have a young man they sent around who took me places, who was aware. He was a newspaper man who was out of a job and got a job with Farm Security. A similar thing - he wasn't a photographer - a similar young man I'd met in Louisiana who was my guide as it were. But, by now...this was thirty years ago...by now everybody uses a camera so that I don't think there would be any trouble finding them locally at all. It would be an incredibly important thing. Dorothea wrote me, called me one day - this was some time ago, maybe a little less than a year ago - in which she said that she's leaving for Egypt but she wants to talk to me when she gets back about a photographic project. I haven't heard from her. I just got a photograph she sent me and that's all. Then there is a man living here also name of Lipson who worked with Stryker in the Standard Oil outfit and he's a pure, dedicated person and a damned good photographer and he was going to be on this Jersey project and looked forward to it with such eagerness and the thing died. It was very...I was heartbroken about it.

RICHARD DOUD: That's a shame.

BEN SHAHN: Yeh. I'm on a state art commission and the last time I got the commission, which has no power, no money, no nothing, to pass a resolution asking the state to pick up the project again which was dropped you see.

RICHARD DOUD: I've heard about this commission. I wondered what progress they'd been making.

BEN SHAHN: Well, there isn't a penny literally for it. I mean there isn't any money for fare to come down to the meetings. But, that doesn't bother me and it doesn't bother the other people very much I think. This art commission is interested in bringing a conscience of the arts to the public in the state of New Jersey, and I felt there that we ought to begin with our youngsters. I want to know what kind of education they are getting in the arts because I see kids coming into college and they haven't done anything with a brush or clay or anything since they were in Kindergarten practically; and suddenly they begin to hear about the "humanities." And arts, which they have looked upon as sissy activity, is pretty highly regarded and they are terrified of it, you know. So that, if in our whole educational system we kept them aware of it, through doing. There are some fine examples of where they do it beautifully. For instance, a school here in New Jersey I heard about, Hillside, does a wonderful job, a highschool. One or two of the prep schools do remarkable jobs with this, you know. So, that

when they get into the college they ease into this subject and the others are just paralyzed by it. And, then I also feel, and this is very personal, that the researchers of...let's say Agier the French photographer...or Walker Evans or Cartier-Bresson are just as important as the researcher of Einstein in human terms. I think a good deal more emphasis should be placed upon it during our formative years than it is now.

RICHARD DOUD: I feel the same way but you realize we are fighting pretty general opposition to accenting humanities when they accent is primarily on the sciences and...

BEN SHAHN: The sciences and the war, cold war and so on. But, I'm kind of a perennial optimist about this and I think right now there is an awareness that we've over-emphasized the so-called sciences and, with our cutting down on our arms spending, there are engineers looking for jobs now, you know. This is the most encouraging thing I've heard, you see.

RICHARD DOUD: Ha, ha, ha. Not for the engineers!

BEN SHAHN: Now...no...no never. What was it someone said? Somebody says it's a recession when your neighbor is unemployed and it's a depression when you are unemployed. It isn't to the engineers, but they were sort of hornsoggled into these things with the incredible ads and so on and so forth.

RICHARD DOUD: That's right.

BEN SHAHN: I know one kid who spent almost a year doing nothing, just being interviewed and they paid him to go out there and out here and so on. But, this over-emphasis on the sciences is, to me, a very tragic thing; the Sputnik psychology we got into and now this...insane moon project. My God, we don't know what's going on in our backyard!

RICHARD DOUD: That's true.

BEN SHAHN: But maybe it will quiet down. I've been...yesterday the Times had a long story on this lessening of arms spending and how are we going to shift into an economy which will not have for it's major activity armament, you see. It seems to me so natural you know. Here we are crying for the lack of schools, and school rooms, and hospitals, and roads, and houses, and so on. I guess I'm naive but I don't see that there would be any difference in our economy if we built houses and hospitals and so on instead of another moon shot. I think they are a bunch of Buck Rogers down there in Washington.

RICHARD DOUD: Ah...well we need another FSA program.

BEN SHAHN: We certainly do, and with this whole War on Poverty thing that they are carrying on -- it is so natural now that such a thing be established so an awareness to the public be given on this thing you see. When you talk about war on poverty it doesn't mean very much; but if you can show to some degree this sort of thing then you can show a great deal more of how people are living and a very great percentage of our people today.

RICHARD DOUD: It's pretty hard for most of us to really realize it, and feel for these people; because it's not presented to us they way it should be.

BEN SHAHN: But, see you are young but during the depression everyone was in trouble, everyone was in trouble; and now we have a kind of a split level economy. Most of us..people that we know and that you know, probably, are fairly comfortable but there is a level that we hide behind facades of housing and so on who live in poverty.

RICHARD DOUD: The difference now is that if we feel anything it's a sympathy where in the thirties it was an empathy.

BEN SHAHN: Yes.

RICHARD DOUD: You feel with...

BEN SHAHN: We were with it, right with it.

RICHARD DOUD: Let's hope it doesn't get so bad that we are with it again.

BEN SHAHN: Well, it isn't necessary for it to get bad at all; but the very fact that people are complaining of...I saw some television show of two million dollar planes being cut by a guillotine like that and they had about five thousand dollars worth of material out of it you know. Two million dollars!

RICHARD DOUD: Makes you wonder where our values are.

BEN SHAHN: Yeh, yeh. This has nothing to do with it, but I had one very amusing experience in the thirties when I lived in the city. I had fixed up a yard. I lived in the basement and it was quite a pretty garden, a flower garden, and above me lived a Naval Captain. He used to come down at twilight and ask me to walk around the yard with his wife, lovely people. He was a surgeon in the Navy. It was a day when we had one of those shows of our planes. You know, they just boomed over the city and somebody calculated in the paper how many millions of dollars worth of gas we used up. And, we were all talking about it and I said "Shhhh,,,,,This is a Naval Captain." He came out - he was about six four or five and he sort of towered over me and he said, "I couldn't help overhearing your conversation Mr. Shahn of what we wasted today in the Air Corp. Well, I don't begrudge the Air Corp a penny when I think of what we wasted in the Navy." Well, I think...unless you have something specific to ask me?

RICHARD DOUD: I think I shouldn't take any more of your time. I certainly appreciate your giving this to me.

BEN SHAHN: You're very welcome.

RICHARD DOUD: Thank you much.

END OF INTERVIEW

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