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Oral history interview with Victor Thall, 1965 June 8

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Victor Thall on June 8, 1965. The interview took place in Los Angeles, CA, and was conducted by Betty Hoag for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PART I

BETTY HOAG: This is Betty Lochrie Hoag on June 8, 1965 interviewing the artist, Victor Thall, in his home in Los Angeles. Mr. Thall was an artist on the New York project...

VICTOR THALL: The easel project.

BETTY HOAG: ...in the easel section. Thank you. Mr. Thall, do you use a middle initial with that?

VICTOR THALL: S. Edward, that's the way my passport reads.

BETTY HOAG: S. Edward. And what is the S, or is that a secret?

VICTOR THALL: I don't know.

BETTY HOAG: Doesn't "Victor" read on the passport?

VICTOR THALL: Victor S. Edward. I don't know -- nobody ever told me what the S is. I'm afraid to think.

BETTY HOAG: That's fun. We can make up names.

VICTOR THALL: Actually my legal name is Victoria. My mother was an Anglophile and she named me after Queen Victoria. You can imagine what that did to me when I was a child. I hated English...

BETTY HOAG: They told you as a child? They shouldn't have told you.

VICTOR THALL: Well, you know, that's all she did was yak about England and her Kensington garden and the fact that I was named after Queen Victoria, so you can imagine how I felt about the English when I got to England and met them. I hated them.

BETTY HOAG: Did she come from England?

VICTOR THALL: She was one of those transplanted Anglophiles that thought that the United States was full of Indians. She hated it and she spent her whole life in a garden in Milton, Massachusetts trying to recreate a Kensington garden. And she did it too very successfully because they gave her a silver watering can for the best garden and that thing haunted me all through my childhood because she never relinquished it after she won it. And I hated the English like you can't believe it until I got to England, you know, about 1923 and discovered how great they were.

BETTY HOAG: Oh! Where were you born, and when? Do you mind telling us?

VICTOR THALL: I was born in Brooklyn in 1902, and they whipped me off to Milton, Massachusetts before I had a chance to catch my breath.

BETTY HOAG: Was this a boys' school or something?

VICTOR THALL: No, that's a town - Milton, Massachusetts.

BETTY HOAG: I see, the family moved there.

VICTOR THALL: Yes, they took me there, and I spent my childhood in that town. And curiously enough, my wife is from not too far away, from Holyoke, Massachusetts, and years later we met again back in Brooklyn...

BETTY HOAG: Oh, that's interesting.

VICTOR THALL: ...on a blind date.

BETTY HOAG: Without ever having known each other?

VICTOR THALL: No. It's ridiculous. We're both the same age.

BETTY HOAG: Having been in the same schoolroom together there?

VICTOR THALL: Well, I never went to school, so that didn't matter.

BETTY HOAG: Not at all?

VICTOR THALL: No.

BETTY HOAG: Not even grade school?

VICTOR THALL: No. I played hookey for so many years they thought I left the country. I just wouldn't go to school, ever.

BETTY HOAG: Oh! Well, what about art school, Mr. Thall?

VICTOR THALL: Oh, art school I attended that.

BETTY HOAG: When did you start?

VICTOR THALL: I started at the Art Students League when I was eleven years old, when I got back to Manhattan. And I was painting nudes, you know, an adult class, I was about eleven, and the model, the naked model wouldn't pose in the same class with me because in those days, you know, little boys didn't have any costumes like they have today where the little boy looks like his dad. We wore those little Lord Fauntleroy suits and I had Buster Brown curls down to my shoulder and short little trousers with brass buttons...

BETTY HOAG: And the name of Victoria.

VICTOR THALL: So with the skinny little legs and the little boy look the model wouldn't pose for me. But the board of control said he's an art student and you have to.

BETTY HOAG: How long were you there?

VICTOR THALL: Well, not long enough to do me any damage, although I did go -- we didn't have much of an art education in the United States in those days, you know. It wasn't as cultivated as it is today so that the reigning masses were pretty bad. And I was victimized by some pretty incompetent teachers.

BETTY HOAG: Because you were a child prodigy?

VICTOR THALL: No, because there was nothing but ignorant men teaching art.

BETTY HOAG: At the Art Students League?

VICTOR THALL: Oh...

BETTY HOAG: I thought that's where the greatest taught.

VICTOR THALL: No, it took me years - of course I was - I might have a bit of extra-sensory perceptivity because I began to suspect by the time I was twelve that the teacher didn't know much. You know there was something phony about my first criticism, the very first.

BETTY HOAG: At the age of eleven you could sense it?

VICTOR THALL: I felt it, that it was a lie when he told me that the highest light was always next to the darkest dark, that's how you get form, sounded like a false ...

BETTY HOAG: Were you going to the museums yourself and studying the masters and analyzing things?

VICTOR THALL: Well, that's where I was going when I wasn't going to school. I never got a grammar school diploma.

BETTY HOAG: Well had your mother been a teacher? Or your father?

VICTOR THALL: No, they were business - my father was a business man. And I spent my childhood in the library, the zoo, and the museums. And actually I played hookey for so long, for so many months that when they caught

me - I'll never forget one time - I still remember this, I might have been about twelve years old when they hauled me up before this principal, and the idiot wore a beard, I still see him with his little van Dyke and his pince nez with a ribbon, and he had that benign look, you know, that they always give the little boy - that lofty position of an adult. And he said, "Don't you like your teachers, Victor?", you know. And I could see myself looking at him with my bald, black eyes and saying, "I don't even know them." I'd never seen them, how could I dislike them?

BETTY HOAG: Well didn't they have rules there that would put your parents in jail, or something?

VICTOR THALL: Oh, but you'd be surprised if a little boy is determined what he can get away with. I'd go off with my books and disappear into my world, and I just wouldn't go.

BETTY HOAG: You did do a lot of reading?

VICTOR THALL: Oh yes. I mean I wasn't interested in the teachers interpretation of Shakespeare or Socrates, I was interested in the original. I was just one of those nasty little boys that just wouldn't sit in a classroom, I was very anti-social, I wouldn't play with other boys, I wasn't interested in baseball, I was in a world of my own, and I was not going to be cheated out of it.

BETTY HOAG: How much of this was art? This world of your own that you were in?

VICTOR THALL: I was drawing since I was five. And I finally got rid of the Art Students League because I was listening to a lot of bilge and I went to the museums and discovered that it wasn't true because I looked at Rembrandt and everybody I loved, and I saw no indication whatsoever that the highest light was next to the darkest dark. I just didn't see it. And I've seen every museum in the world since then and I'm still looking for it, and I haven't found it from that day to this. So obviously I had an intuitive realization that he was telling me a great lie.

BETTY HOAG: Well, you must have been old enough to have seen the Armory Show and understood some of it then if you were...

VICTOR THALL: Well, I didn't understand it, but I knew it was important. I saw the Armory Show in 1913, actually that was my first shocking realization of what art should be...

BETTY HOAG: Did you like it or not like it?

VICTOR THALL: Oh, of course, I was overwhelmed by it. I didn't understand it because that's ridiculous but I certainly knew that it was better than John Singer Sargent and my teachers, Frank Vincent Dumont and George Bridgman and all those idiots, you know.

BETTY HOAG: Well, George Bridgman was a great anatomist, wasn't he?

VICTOR THALL: Well, what am I supposed to be, a taxidermist?

BETTY HOAG: Well, it's basic to other kinds of painting.

VICTOR THALL: No, it isn't true. That's a fraud.

BETTY HOAG: Do you think so?

VICTOR THALL: It just isn't true. It's one of those lies that gain momentum but never becomes more truthful no matter how great the snowball becomes. It's one of those monstrous lies that's perpetrated ad infinitum ad nauseam to every art school in the world, and it just is not true.

BETTY HOAG: Well it certainly is repeated though.

VICTOR THALL: It's repeated in every school that I went from the Art Students League and after going to - look it, this is the masters, ostensibly masters - George Bridgman - I was the prize little pupil, you know, I had the class when I was fifteen years old standing behind me watching me paint the model. You know I was the little genius and at the same time with an unconscious realization that it was all wrong, that whatever I was doing was wrong. My bravura and dexterity, my virtuosity had nothing to do with art, and they were destroying me literally. They could have too if I'd been anything else but what I am. I don't know how these things happen, frankly, except that it's formulated a theory that's never been changed in my mind that I'm suspicious largely of Freud, Jung, Adler et al, who insist that the child is formulated and victimized by these early traumas. Do you understand my point?

BETTY HOAG: Very much.

VICTOR THALL: And I'm just not too interested although I won't deny it completely because I've reached the age where I'm not sure of anything any more, but I'm very suspicious of some neurotic authority who leans heavily on the fact that his mother didn't love him.

BETTY HOAG: I agree with you.

VICTOR THALL: Well, I couldn't care less whether my mother loved me or not, you know; I couldn't care less. And I believe that at any given moment in anybody's life if they've got a brain they can wipe everything out starting yesterday and draw a debit and credit column now and start over.

BETTY HOAG: And go on with that.

VICTOR THALL: Go on with it.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. Well I think modern psychiatry is coming around to that. The latest...

VICTOR THALL: Do you understand what I mean?

BETTY HOAG: Yes, I do.

VICTOR THALL: And I'm thoroughly suspicious of this kind of pattern where people, you know, wander around in a fog because their mother didn't love them when they were five years old, for nothing could have made me happier if I could have escaped from mine.

BETTY HOAG: It's an easy thing to hide behind.

VICTOR THALL: Oh, it's a copout.

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

VICTOR THALL: You know it's the sweetest copout in the world, and I'm just not interested.

BETTY HOAG: Well you stayed at the Art Students League until you were at least fifteen. How much longer?

VICTOR THALL: No. I stayed at the Art Students League until I was about sixteen and then I went to the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia searching for something else that the Art Students League wasn't giving me.

BETTY HOAG: I gather however that your parents were behind this?

VICTOR THALL: They gave me the money. My father was a business man but he loved art. As a matter of fact, he hated business men. And there were a lot of things wrong with him but he had certain qualities that were great, and he had an extraordinary feeling about creative human beings. Because when I came back from Europe in 1927 and I was complaining bitterly that my genius wasn't being properly recognized, you know, without being cognizant of the fact that I didn't have much genius that was worth much at the time.

BETTY HOAG: You hadn't developed it anyway.

VICTOR THALL: He said, quote "You wanted to be an artist, did you not? Do you expect to get paid too?"

BETTY HOAG: Smart man.

VICTOR THALL: I mean to him an artist was such a sacrosanct kind of thing that he couldn't conceive of the fact that one would expect to rule a pay for such a privilege...

BETTY HOAG: He knew that it was a goal to earn.

VICTOR THALL: He knew that it was the alpha and omega within itself, and he desperately tried to set me up so I would never have to earn my living. I wish he had succeeded, you know.

BETTY HOAG: You were fortunate, wonderful.

VICTOR THALL: Fortunate in what sense? No, I was fortunate in one sense; but unfortunate in the sense that he let me live like a feudal baron for twenty-five years and then there wasn't any more money.

BETTY HOAG: You were on your own.

VICTOR THALL: So that then at twenty-five, or rather about at twenty-seven I was facing the world, that real

world, with the kind of an equipment that a convent-bred schoolgirl would have if she approached Wall Street with a complete set of Horatio Alger junior books. And I just wasn't prepared for it.

BETTY HOAG: Well before this happened, you had been to Europe. Had you studied with anyone in particular?

VICTOR THALL: I went to Europe but not at this point. Well, I got a scholarship at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine arts and the same thing obtained in Philadelphia, I had Denny Garpe and Arthur B. Carls and all sorts of men and there was always this feeling that there was something else, something terribly missing, I mean that kind of intuitive feeling without any cognizance really.

BETTY HOAG: Did you find it in Europe?

VICTOR THALL: No. And the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts was exactly the same as the Art Students League in New York except that it was more midget. And to win this scholarship you had to really do terrible, stupid, academic rubbish. I mean to express yourself you had gone duck. So that I made that kind of concession...

BETTY HOAG: To conform to get your scholarship.

VICTOR THALL: I wanted a scholarship, and I got it with a whole bunch of other men. And I got to Paris in 1922.

BETTY HOAG: Were you being sent to a school or just to study?

VICTOR THALL: No, you could do anything - you didn't have to go if you didn't want to, you just got the money.

BETTY HOAG: How wonderful.

VICTOR THALL: As a matter of fact some men went to Paris, stayed a week, spent all the money on books, and turned around and went back.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, for heaven's sake! Really!

VICTOR THALL: I remember several of them did that.

BETTY HOAG: How amazing!

VICTOR THALL: They just went around and bought a lot of art books and turned around and went home. Other men on the same scholarship which was supposed to last for a year, stayed for fifteen years and damn near died of hunger.

BETTY HOAG: They probably did a lot of painting and were willing...

VICTOR THALL: Those were artists, you know. But some of them were cowardly, they just bought all the books and went home. One of them didn't even go at all.

BETTY HOAG: Well when you came back...

VICTOR THALL: I was well - you know - apart from that as a matter of fact I stayed on for so many years, and some of the men said, "Jesus, you're really making this scholarship stretch out. What kind of a scholarship did you get?" And I said, "I got an Edward B. Thall scholarship." That was my father.

BETTY HOAG: Oh!

VICTOR THALL: Because he'd been backing my little stipend up with ten times as much, you see.

BETTY HOAG: Well when you came back you said that this financial support was missing. Were you able to make a living then?

VICTOR THALL: No, it didn't work like that. I got the death shock, you see, when I went immediately to the Ecole des Beaux Arts, which was supposed to be it. And besides that I had this romantic conception about Paris and the notion that if you stood on the corner of Boulevard Montparnasse and Raspai and took three deep breaths you were an artist, you know.

BETTY HOAG: All rub off. All the glow.

VICTOR THALL: Yes, by osmosis.

BETTY HOAG: Did you live on the Left Bank too?

VICTOR THALL: Yes, I had a great studio, I had several great studios, I had a great studio at 33 Edgar Quinet, it was just back of the Cafe du Dome. And don't forget those are the Roaring Twenties.

BETTY HOAG: How do you spell Edgar Quinet?

VICTOR THALL: Edgar... Q U I N E T T. And I was there before Hemingway wrote anything. We used to have breakfast at the Cafe du Dome when he was, you know, working on the newspapers as manning the cables, and he hadn't even written anything yet, I mean he had a couple of little pamphlets published at Sylvia Beach, and don't forget that The Sun also Rises which precipitated him into a world figure was published in 1927. So in 1923 I mean he was just somebody around the Quarter with a bee and a bandage and he was still on crutches from the Italian front.

BETTY HOAG: Did you meet him or Hemingway or Stein or any of that crowd?

VICTOR THALL: Oh, knew everybody! Knew them all.

BETTY HOAG: Wasn't it stimulating?

VICTOR THALL: Oh, it was tremendous. I mean one of the characters in The Sun Also Rises - all the characters in The Sun also Rises were friends of mine. Everyone of them. But the shocking thing is, my dear, is that there are schools in Paris that are exactly the same frauders as in the United States. That was the great denouncement that unhinged me, you know.

BETTY HOAG: Well, had all of the avant garde artists, experimentalists left the school? Were they all painting on their own?

VICTOR THALL: I mean no artist - there's never been an artist that ever came out of an art school. The whole conception is preposterous. Can you imagine Picasso going to an art school? Or Paul Cezanne?

BETTY HOAG: I always thought he did.

VICTOR THALL: Nonsense! Impossible!

BETTY HOAG: I thought that's why he came from Spain to Pais in the first place was to go to art school.

VICTOR THALL: He came from Spain to Paris to breathe the juices of the air of all the creative energies that were around. But never in an art school. It's not possible. It just doesn't work. It just doesn't work. This is the monstrous fraud that's being perpetrated. I remember when I was just a kid finally, you know, when you constantly go from one to the other thinking this is it, you know, and you always have that romantic notion, you just never give up the idea. Finally, it was the famous Academie Julien and then...

BETTY HOAG: That wasn't it either?

VICTOR THALL: No. And this is the Rue du Drabout, and all my life I've seen etchings by Whistler with this beautiful building with the ivy on it and you stand there in front of this building and there's the footsteps of the masters and you think this is it. I mean it's like the guy looking for that woman, you know, that he never finds, some people I mean never find, you know, you wander. And finally I go past those sacrosanct portals and there are the same miserable, academic drawings in the hall that you see everywhere, the same naked man or woman holding a staff in his hand, the same idiocy, you know.

BETTY HOAG: Well, what were you doing, mostly landscapes and wandering around?

VICTOR THALL: I was studying art! And wandered from one country to another trying to trace the history of art in the museums, I mean I covered half the world by then, you know, I'd been practically everywhere, I'd been to thirty countries possibly in those years and all the great museums. And there was nothing in the museums that had anything to do with what you saw in an art school, no connection.

BETTY HOAG: Well, what about the school of Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, the Fauves, the Blue Rider, all of these people? The work was around then.

VICTOR THALL: Of course! But what has that got to do with what you see in an art school?

BETTY HOAG: You saw that in a museum.

VICTOR THALL: Saw that anywhere, but there was no possible connection, you know, between the creative energies of the men that you love with what you were going to learn in an art school. And I was, you know, it was running itself out. And of course the Academie Julien was the final fraud when they had - there were rings

hanging from the ceiling, you know, like in a gymnasium...

BETTY HOAG: What for?

VICTOR THALL: I don't know. I thought that's pretty eccentric, and I thought well perhaps they turned the place into a boxing club at night, I don't know, it looked a little peculiar to see this. And of course the windows hadn't been opened for fifty years. The stench would kill you; the leaky stove, you know gas from this stove, and the unwashed French bodies and the socks and the turpentine, I mean the stench had dimension. And I discovered quickly enough what those rings were. They were some enterprising art student got up on them and started to cavort over everybody's head, wrapped his leges around the nude model and hauled her aloft too and then they did a flying gymnast performance, you know, the whole thing was bohemianism and lunacy.

BETTY HOAG: I thought you were going to say to ventilate the room, all this breeze.

VICTOR THALL: I mean it was nonsense, you know. And then I was talking with Frank Harris at the time. Of course I can't tell you this story because it's too vulgar. But I'll never forget Frank Harris sitting at the Cafe Dome with me one day and he said, "What's the matter, kid, you look unhappy?" And I was telling him about these desperate experiences I was having at the Academie Julien, and he said, "Kid, you don't know what you're talking about. You should have known it in my day." And he told me a story about his days, ho, ho, ho, ho!

BETTY HOAG: Real French days.

VICTOR THALL: You know Frank Harris was something in those days. He was cute.

BETTY HOAG: You came back in about '25?

VICTOR THALL: 1927, I came back to the United States.

BETTY HOAG: Almost in time for the depression.

VICTOR THALL: Well, no...

BETTY HOAG: Two years before then.

VICTOR THALL: I knew nothing of the depression. I came back, you know, just to look around and about, to see my family, my sister was ill at the time, and I came home, and I met this woman who I married immediately, and we shipped right back to Paris. And we did a few countries and had some fun, could have plenty of money still. And in the meantime I had given up art schools and had a studio and I was, you know, painting, studying.

BETTY HOAG: Was she an artist too?

VICTOR THALL: No. And we just went back to Paris, and we stayed on, did a few other countries, had a ball, and I was painting and I was in the museums, and forgetting art schools because I had long since given them up.

BETTY HOAG: Were you selling yet, or were you ready for that?

VICTOR THALL: Well, I wasn't interested in that. It never occurred to me, I never thought of that.

BETTY HOAG: Really?

VICTOR THALL: Uh! Last thing in my mind. If that father of mine had fulfilled his promise to me and set me up, you know, so I would have had all the money I anticipated I would have, I would still own the first drawing I ever made from that day to this. I would never have sold anything ever. I had no interest in that. That's the unfortunate situation that a professional artist (obnoxious term) is compelled to do. This thing is going to go to New York in another month and it just kills me to let it go out of this studio, even though I'm going to get $15,000 for it I can't stand it; but I have to, you know. What are you going to do? I hate that part of it.

BETTY HOAG: I would think that would give you pleasure. If I were an artist that's the part I would like.

VICTOR THALL: That's the least interesting. It's just an obnoxious necessity. Now that isn't true of other people; I'm only talking about myself. Because I know people that sell them while they're still wet and before they even realize when they're worthless. That's another point of view. I'm talking completely subjectively now and I know from empirical experience that if my father had done what he planned to do that my whole life would have have dilettanteism, that means that most intense work because nobody can work as hard as I do, you know. I would have put in my whole life at art, I would have never had an exhibition or sold a picture until after I'm dead. Because I just don't approve of it.

BETTY HOAG: Do you think that that would have been better for you?

VICTOR THALL: I don't know whether it's better or worse, but it's the way I would have lived my life. I would have done what Picasso is doing now, he's got thousands of pictures stashed away in his castle that nobody can see. Because they represent milestones of my development and I want them around me, I want them in a different kind of a thing than this idiot studio. It would have been, you know, an armory, and they would have been racked up and I would have everything, because I'm just not interested...

BETTY HOAG: Incidentally, I think this is a beautiful studio, you should see some of them that I see, you're lucky.

VICTOR THALL: This is not a studio, it's boudoir. You should have seen the studio...

BETTY HOAG: It has the light and the display room...

VICTOR THALL: It's not bad, but it's not - I'm living with my wife, my daughter, my grandchild, it's a kind of pleasant situation but it has nothing to do with the studio. You should have seen the studio I've got in Palma de Mallorca, it's fifteen times the size of this, three times as high, you know, it's workshop. The one I just left in New York a month ago had a thirty-foot ceiling, it was great.

BETTY HOAG: Gosh, how wonderful.

VICTOR THALL: It was the old house that old John D. Rockefeller built about ninety years ago, and it was enormous, you know, old, high ceilings, lovely woodwork. This is not a studio but it's adequate for the moment, you know, it's that kind of situation, and I'm rather enjoying it because I've been away from my family for so long it's kind of fun to have them around me. I was here for five years by myself, you know, this past trip.

BETTY HOAG: No, I didn't know that.

VICTOR THALL: Five years. In any case what happened at Paris was that in 1929, or little later than that, in 1930, we were in Paris when I got the bad news, you see, that there wasn't any more money; it was all finished. And I mean I was - I just couldn't cope with it, just didn't know how to deal with it, because I'd been in Europe enough years and had spent enough money to know that without money a foreigner in Europe is de trop, you know, persona non grata, nobody wants to even talk to them. I mean, for instance, even jazz bands in Montmartre - and if there was a Negro American who played a hot trumpet or something when the inspectors came in they hid him, that kind of thing, it was impossible for a foreigner to get a job.

BETTY HOAG: What did you do, for heaven's sakes?

VICTOR THALL: Well, it was a shocking thing. And of course the only thing I could think of was that I was going to go home immediately because I just couldn't face it. And Mona here who has another kind of point of view about these things said, "Well, let's stay." Which absolutely made my eyes open wide, you know. I said, "What do you mean, stay?" She said, "Well, if we haven't got any money, we haven't got any money anywhere. So why don't we stay where we want to be?"

BETTY HOAG: Good for her.

VICTOR THALL: Which is unbelievable, isn't it?

BETTY HOAG: Yes. Like a good wife.

VICTOR THALL: So we stayed on until about 1932 or so, almost '33, went down to the South of France where at least the sun shone and you could reach out and get a lemon or an orange.

BETTY HOAG: Provence, or ...

VICTOR THALL: And we had a pretty salty time, believe me, you know; I'm not even going to attempt to describe the way we lived; you can't believe it. I mean those cats would have died. Because I had a dog in my studio and he died and I took him to a veterinarian and he said, "Where did you have this creature?" I said, "In my studio where I live with my wife." And he said, "He died of exposure." That's the truth. That is the truth. But animals die unless they're warm and well-fed, but men don't. It's true. We had a pretty salty time. And finally in the South of France things started to change and I began to have some success and things. And still not knowing anything about what was happening in the United States actually, and I left my wife and child - I had a child at that time - and I came back to New York to have an exhibition, if you will, because everybody was advising me to do it.

BETTY HOAG: You didn't have anyone sponsoring you ahead of time?

VICTOR THALL: No. I just had some success and people were talking about me and this and that an in a moment

of mental aberration I went home, and discovered there wasn't any world of art, the galleries were closed up...

BETTY HOAG: Surely. It was gone at that time.

VICTOR THALL: And it was finished, you know; there was nothing. And there was nothing at all, I mean I went to Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, you know. The gallery dealers were sitting - those who were still in existence - looking at their pictures racked up and planning to go into the fur business or something. It all was just insanity, nothing. So my wife had nothing to do but take my child and my dog and follow me home. And then the whole thing started after that, you remember it was just about that time.

BETTY HOAG: The Federal Art Project?

VICTOR THALL: Well, not quite. I mean I went out to the West Coast riding freight trains and carrying on for another while, for a year or so, and got myself involved in all sorts of insanity. And then it started when I got back, with, you know, all that business of picketing the museums and carrying on and wild scenes.

BETTY HOAG: Were you part of that? Or just an observer?

VICTOR THALL: Oh, part of all of it, part of all of it. I was one of the - how shall I say, how will I describe my relationship to all of that? I was one of the men that was busy at the front while the smart politicians were sitting in the background directing it. And we were all busy, busy, busy, in and out of prison and getting knocked about and being carried on, I was a real crusader.

BETTY HOAG: Well, this was for the Artists Union? This had nothing to do with the project yet?

VICTOR THALL: This was all part of it, and part of the whole business, you know how busy you had to be to keep it alive while the smart politicians were directing it from behind and never put their own signatures on our pamphlet or anything, you see. And I was the front of the Dies Committee and all that kind of thing, and Red activity and all that jazz, you know, and just was a big crusader. It was just ridiculous, you know, when you come to think of it how completely victimized you can be, and naive. And now that I remember some of these men they never did anything themselves, they were just the big directors behind the scene, you know, the smart boys. It was very cute. And I'll never forget the time - which I suppose had something to do with it - where they hauled me up before the Dies Committee and I was sitting facing a dozen I don't know what you call them, politicians? Could they be called politicians? They looked at me as if I was something odd. And I remember Congressman Mark Antonio defended me at the time.

BETTY HOAG: Where was he? In New York Congressman?

VICTOR THALL: Yes, he was in New York and he was supposed to be the big Red something or other, you know. And I'll never forget the questions these idiots asked me. They hauled down a huge montage, photo-montage of a Mayday parade, and there was a beard, you know...

BETTY HOAG: They thought it was your beard? In the photograph?

VICTOR THALL: Well, you know - there it was, but you know what kind of a thing that looks like. All you see is black dots, you know. So they said, "Is that you?" Well, it could have been, I mean you couldn't tell; it was impossible to recognize it. So I said, "Give me a magnifying glass." So they gave me a magnifying glass and I looked at it and now the spots were like soup plates, it didn't change any, the spots just got bigger, and I still didn't know if it was me or not. But I was furious with these louts, you know, so I said, "No, I'm much better-looking than that." And then they asked me these odd questions to prove that I was some kind of a editious character, you know.

BETTY HOAG: Well, was this just to prove whether or not you had been in one of the rebellions?

VICTOR THALL: Well, I'd been in all the actions, you know we were always in and out of jail, being knocked about, I was on the picket lines and things, these were part of the project activity.

BETTY HOAG: Yes. But it had nothing to do with any of the painting you had done?

VICTOR THALL: No. I was painting my own pictures, but there was always these actions that you were involved in to keep this lunacy alive because it was crumbling, you know; and to keep it alive you had to be awfully busy with it. I mean we went to Washington, you know that hunger march, it was all lunacy part of the whole crazy goings-on, you know. It was complete...

BETTY HOAG: That whole situation was.

VICTOR THALL: I mean sitting there looking at these men, these brutes asking me those questions, and then

each one of them coming up with a different question to prove their point, you know, that I was some sort of a Red. And one of these bright boys said, asked me if I read The Daily Worker, you know this was supposed to be the big, pointed question. I said, "Yes, I read The Daily Worker and I read the New York Times. I read the Holy Bible, I read the Farmer's Almanac, I read Balzac, and I read Dostoievsky, and Bobsy Twins at the Seashore, I'm a reader, Mister, I read everything." I said, "What do you read?" And the final question that was supposed to really prove the point - another bright boy asked me if I believed in free-love. That's a hot one, that's right out of Moscow.

BETTY HOAG: Had a lot to do with the problem.

VICTOR THALL: And I looked at these, you know, from one face to the other and I said, "Well, I don't know about you gentlemen, but it's always been free for me." I mean they were just too ridiculous. And finally when they couldn't hook me with anything, and the whole thing was over, and we were about to go, I said, "I've been asked a lot of questions. I think I'd like to make a statement." In the meantime Mark Antonio was dragging me out of there. He said, "Let's go." I said, "No, I've had enough of this." There was a secretary taking this down on a stenotype, and I said, "I want you to take this down, Miss, and if I talk too fast slow me up and be sure you spell it right." And I said, "Let me tell you something" - because this was all going to Washington, you know - "I was born in the United States, I'm an American and I've spent my entire life studying art for whatever glory it could be for myself and my country and I've never spent five minutes in a poolroom or a bar and I resent being questiond by twelve louts, poolroom loafers who have the presumptuous effrontery to question my patriotism." I said, "Have you got this down?" And Mark Antonio was trying to drag me - I mean I'm boiling with fury by now, you know, and this all went to Washington, this whole mess, because I was black with rage by now at this whole maneuver. Anyway that was the time that the whole thing was beginning to crumble, and all sorts of reactionary politicians were involved, that's when the whole thing blew up, you know, at the end.

BETTY HOAG: Now did this have anything to do with the art project? Were you on it already at this time?

VICTOR THALL: Of course!!! Of course! Because don't you understand in the ...

BETTY HOAG: You had a different situation than we did in California, I don't know too much about it actually, I mean I'm still trying to get it through my head how it was in the New York project.

VICTOR THALL: The New York project at no time from its beginning to its end was it not under attack, do you see, by reactionary elements in Washington. There were forces in operation, there were those men part of the Roosevelt regime who wanted it, and there were other men who did not, so it was constantly under fire.

BETTY HOAG: Was this political for the content of pictures, or the technique of painting, or what was the ....

VICTOR THALL: No. It was just that they didn't want any part of it. It was all this talk that it was a lot of boondoggling waste, you know the old jokes - listen, I want to tell you something, that the whole face of this country was changed by the projects. I'm not talking about the art projects now, I'm talking about Riverside Drive when it was an eyesore, when you drove up Riverside Drive and looked down there were tin houses where there were thousands of people living in tin cans where the railroad trains went, where it was a detriment and an eyesore, and the projects cleaned it up and made it into a garden, where there were parks, swimming pools, playgrounds, roads built all over the country by workers. I'm not talking about the art project. In my opinion that was the least important part of it because most of the pictures went down the drain anyway, they were just thrown away, there were only a few things left.

BETTY HOAG: Was that at the end of the project?

VICTOR THALL: From the beginning to the end.

BETTY HOAG: Well, you were an easel artist, you were doing - what? Pictures at home and turning them in every week?

VICTOR THALL: I was painting pictures. That's right. I had a week or a month or so to paint a picture.

BETTY HOAG: Well, then, didn't these pictures go into public institutions like schools...

VICTOR THALL: Aw, they were thrown away. You can't believe it. I know collectors that went down to the final warehouses and hauled out pictures. I know people that own pictures of mine, they bought them at auction for fifty cents, or seventy-five cents. The things are just stored away in warehouses, there are only a few things that exist in buildings where they couldn't be ripped off, you know, I mean like in airports and things where certain men got up on the mural project, they did a job so there was some element of permanence. But most of the pictures, I mean most of everything was just nothingness. It was blown away.

BETTY HOAG: Did you work on any of the mural projects?

VICTOR THALL: No, I was never on the mural project. I was on the lithograph project and the easel project.

BETTY HOAG: Oh, you were lithograph, too?

VICTOR THALL: Yes, I did lithographs, and I've got some of them in the Brooklyn Museum.

BETTY HOAG: Did they give you your own materials, your own stone for liths? How did that work?

VICTOR THALL: I used to - you know, there was a place where you could go and do it, and I liked lithography, I didn't care about murals, it wasn't my cup of tea, I wanted to be on the easel project and I wanted to be on the lithograph project. Now there were men on the Writing projects, you know the Orson Welles bunch came out of that Theatre group, I haven't the slightest doubt that the hinterlands of this country and peasants and farmers saw the theatre for the first time in their lives.

BETTY HOAG: That's true.

VICTOR THALL: It was a tremendous thing.

BETTY HOAG: It's also true of painting, however, because...

VICTOR THALL: Well, I'm not so sure about that. I think that was the least important.

BETTY HOAG: Well, I've talked to artists who were in the sticks, like Kansas where they hadn't had a chance to see paintings before until the project came along, and they had these shows. Montana and different...

VICTOR THALL: That could be true but I'm speaking now in terms of retrospect, I would dare to suggest that the least important aspects of the whole conception of the Federal project, the least important was the painting aspect of it, in terms of reaching the people. The Theater to me was terribly important because it gave people an opportunity to see theatre - Shakespeare, Orson Welles, whatever. They saw plays. And the physical change of the country. I saw parks, playgrounds, swimming pools, road, decatus in poverty torn up some areas and changed into gardens by workers, in spite of the fact that all the bad jokes were made about, you know, the guy leaning on the rake and the foreman comes along and says, "What are you doing?", you know.

BETTY HOAG: Yes, there was a lot of that talk.

VICTOR THALL: "What are you doing?" An old guy standing there, he says, "What are you doing? Why aren't you working?" He says, "I haven't got a rake to lean on like this other guy." So they'd give him a rake to lean on so he'd pile up some leaves. He'd say, "What am I supposed to do now?" He says, "Well, knock it down and pile it up someplace else." To a large extent that was true.

BETTY HOAG: Well, they did a lot of good. We had the CCC boys out in the West...

VICTOR THALL: Wait a minute, don't mix that up, that's not the same thing.

BETTY HOAG: Well, it was part of the Federal Project, a branch of it.

VICTOR THALL: Yes, but it's another kind of an aspect of it. And there's also another aspect of it which nobody knows anything about...

BETTY HOAG: What's that?

VICTOR THALL: ...which I was part of, and nobody knows anything about that. It was transient camps sprung up all across the United States, they had bindlestiff, so-called, if you know what the term means...

BETTY HOAG: No. Never heard of it.

VICTOR THALL: Oh, my dear!

BETTY HOAG: I'm sorry, I didn't. Bindlestiff. Is that a hobo?

VICTOR THALL: A bindestiff - let's get back to the beginning of its conception. A hobo, but a particular form. At that time, because I rode the freight trains all over the country for about eighteen months, as a matter of fact one of my children was eight months old before I saw her, you see, and I left New York, and my wife was just pregnant -- because I couldn't cope with it - this is before the project. I mean my wife was pregnant in New York and I had a little apartment and I just couldn't stand the whole gaff, this was before the actual projects were established, and she had a family up in Massachusetts and I said, "Why don't you go up and stay with your

mother?" Because there's a whole bunch of kids and there was always enough to eat, they owned a little home up there, and she had thirteen brothers and sisters. So I said, "Why don't you go up there and stay there?" And I went to the West Coast because I had a weird idea that if there's anything left in the United States it's the movie business. Because there are still movies, somebody is making movies. But I thought there would be something to do out there because I had played in some movies in Europe. And I'd worked with Rex Ingram in a couple of films. He said I had talent, he said, "If you ever get to the United States why don't you go to Hollywood?" Well, actually I wasn't interested in the theatre, and I'm not an actor, and I have no interest in it...

BETTY HOAG: But you were good at it.

VICTOR THALL: Well, not really because I'm not interested. But I did know that there was something happening on the West Coast. People were working at least. Because there was nothing in New York except shovel snow. And I have no talent for that, do you see? So I simply sent my wife to Massachusetts, I gave my apartment and all its furniture to a young fighter friend of mine who had a pregnant wife and he had no place to live, he was living with his mother in some rat-hole on Third Avenue. His name was Al King and he should have been lightweight champion of the world, except that he was too lazy. He'd lie in bed and read Socrates instead of training. I used to run around Central Park with him in the night and make him train. We used to box together. But he was a natural fighter only he didn't want to work at it. So he never became champion. He got knocked out finally. But he had great natural talent. So King and I used to run along the Reservoir in Central Park. This is ridiculous, isn't it? But he wouldn't work, I mean he was a kind of 135 pound Gene Tunney who wanted to be an intellectual. This is ridiculous, isn't it?

BETTY HOAG: But you gave him your apartment?

VICTOR THALL: So I have him my apartment and all the furniture, he moved in. And my wife went to Massachusetts, and I grabbed the freight train and went to the West Coast.

BETTY HOAG: Did you come to Los Angeles?

VICTOR THALL: I got to Los Angeles. I went to work for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

BETTY HOAG: How long were you here?

VICTOR THALL: Well I came out here, but they wanted me to do junk, you know, and I just couldn't do anything creative. So I was in a position where I was taking little postcards of Rembrandt and blowing them up big full size to use in the movie sets, you know, if they have an elaborate home where they wanted some impressive, you know, pictures by Velasquez or Rembrandt, they have these idiots copying them. Well that's hardly my cup of tea, you see, so I couldn't face it; although it was a fat salary, I couldn't make it. But something curious happened though. I got to Chicago - this is going to go on for days, I mean we're digressing in too many different directions...

BETTY HOAG: We're supposed to concentrate on the project, so we'd better get you back in a few minutes.

VICTOR THALL: Yes, we're going off in too many directions. So, in any case, the point of the whole story is that in this moving around the country at the time, riding the rods, I discovered the interesting fact that there were possibly ten million people on the move. Well, you know you read it in Steinbeck's "Grapes of Wrath" but he never touched this particular aspect of it. The "Grapes of Wrath" describes the okies...

BETTY HOAG: The dust bowl people.

VICTOR THALL: ...and their migration from Oklahoma to California, because they were migrators. But he didn't know anything about, or he didn't write about the thousands of other people who had nothing to do with that fact, who were just wandering the world. Whole families in freight trains with babies and mattresses and lunacy, you know. And they were a disgraceful sight so that they were very unwanted, not only from Oklahoma to California but all over the country. So that we find this fantastic fact that these workhouses sprang up that were built by the men who were arrested as vagrants.

BETTY HOAG: You mean the communities sponsored these to help them?

VICTOR THALL: No, darling, it was a piece of Fascism, it was open Fascism in this country at that time...

BETTY HOAG: I didn't know that.

VICTOR THALL: ...that nobody knows anything about, actually...

BETTY HOAG: I never heard of it.

VICTOR THALL: Nobody else did either. So that, for instance, suppose you were in a boxcar, you know, there I am in a boxcar with men, just in a boxcar, - of course I discovered something very interesting about being an artist in a situation like that - again if you have a mind and a spirit you just don't suffer as much as other people, it's an interesting fact that men, no matter how strong they are, if they're cold and hungry they're completely comatose, they huddle in a corner like animals and they suffer. But if you have a spirit you just don't. And I still had a sketchbook in my pocket and I could still look out at a moving landscape and be alive and aware of what was going on, you know, even though I was undernourished, had colitis, malnutrition, intestinal poisoning, I weighed 117 pounds at the time, but my brain was still functioning, I had not lost my identity. I'm still Victor Thall and I can still walk into the Beverly Wilshire Hotel in a pair of dungarees and say mack of the hotel...

BETTY HOAG: Yes, with your head up.

VICTOR THALL: Even if I was starving. It's a kind of thing that you have - if you have that kind of beginning - it's a curious fact, you know, and maybe that's what my father gave me with the money, because you somehow develop an identity. I wonder if there's any possible validity to this, that the people who are impoverished when they're children are marked by it, and they just re-try to escape from it and they never want to go back because they have a horror recollection of it, I'm talking about people in the slums of New York who finally get up to Park Avenue, they never; want to get below 42nd Street again ever...

BETTY HOAG: For any reason.

VICTOR THALL: Now they're the same people - the path of behavior hasn't changed except for the outward appurtenances, you know, the car, or whatever. As a matter of fact i had a man sitting in; this studio just last week who now has an income of one million a year, and he told me this. Now I remember him when he was a fifteen dollar a week bundle-wrapper. Now he has an income of a million a year, and the biggest Rolls-Royce in the country, he informed me, but I realize - talking to him - that he hasn't gone one inch away from his beginnings, not an inch. He's still the same bundle of insecurities, the same nothing that he was...

BETTY HOAG: Well, maybe you'll change your mind about Freud, then? This put a different complexion on it.

VICTOR THALL: Well, I told you that I wasn't sure, remember?

BETTY HOAG: Yes. I mean I'm just wondering, I'm not contradicting you.

VICTOR THALL: You understand that I said that I'm not sure.

BETTY HOAG: Yes.

VICTOR THALL: I'm stating this particular fact that I met this man at a time when I wa broke but I had a lifetime behind me of luxury and a certain kind of status of the childhood that I had, and this man, much younger than me, was a clerk - not a clerk, he was a bundle-wrapper, he got fifteen dollars a week, but he had to have money. And I remember at the time saying to some of his companions on the beach when I had my boat out saying to be a little more respectful of him because I said you're all going to be working for him. They said, "What are you talking about?" And I said, "Brother, I can smell gold around this boy." There was a Midas all around him that you can't believe.

BETTY HOAG: A drive...

VICTOR THALL: A drive to break down those walls. Now in subsequent years he had his nose done with plastic surgery, he developed a phony accent, he had all the outward appurtenances of money. And now, right now, he's got an income of one million a year. But he has to make the statement and tell you about his Rolls-Royce. But he's the same ignorant lout that he always was; and he's a bundle of insecurity. It's interesting.

BETTY HOAG: Amazing. Very interesting.

VICTOR THALL: Now if he had rode those freight trains with me, he would have died. You know, in the first place he would have died of nothing but cowardice because he couldn't have faced the situation, he would have been scared to death, you know. But the whole point of the whole thing is this...

BETTY HOAG: Well after you had been for eighteen months you came back to New York...

VICTOR THALL: Yes, but I wasn't to tell you about those things.

BETTY HOAG: Oh yes.

VICTOR THALL: Because nobody knows about it. It's very interesting. So that you find yourself in a situation where you're in a boxcar with x number of men, and now the police come in and you're hauled off to the pokey.

It doesn't make any difference where it is. Because it's illegal, so you're arrested. Now you spend a night in jail, because you're not allowed to do that and it doesn't make any difference whether it's done all over the country. You're taken away to the pokey. As a matter of fact, in Los Angeles at that time if two men were standing on a corner the police would come over and you'd be taken away. They'd take you up to a transient camp and I remember one at the time was in Banning, California up in the high mountains. Now this was a building, a succession of buildings that were built by the 800 men that occupied them. Everyone of them had been arrested as vagrants. Now among these vagrants were steamfitters, plumbers, electricians, first-class workers, because otherwise they couldn't have put this building up with shower baths and everything...

BETTY HOAG: Well, were they paid for this work?

VICTOR THALL: Sure, they were paid.

BETTY HOAG: Or made to do it?

VICTOR THALL: They were paid a package of tobacco a week, ten cents worth of tobacco.

BETTY HOAG: Well, were they under arrest and made to do it?

VICTOR THALL: They were put in this transient camp, they were all over the country, they were building...

BETTY HOAG: I mean did they have a choice of staying there?

VICTOR THALL: Sure they had a choice...

BETTY HOAG: They could leave if they wanted to?

VICTOR THALL: That's right.

BETTY HOAG: Well, they were being fed probably, weren't they?

VICTOR THALL: Yes. The food was four cents a meal per man.

BETTY HOAG: Were they an unhappy group of men.

VICTOR THALL: Well, there was nothing they could do about it.

BETTY HOAG: I mean conditions were so bad. Was this better than what they had before?

VICTOR THALL: I don't know what the conditions were but the situation was that they were in a transient camp, there were tiers of beds with chicken wire mattresses, they got up at the crack of dawn and piled into trucks and went up into the mountains to make fire bricks or do piping or road work, they'd work, they'd put in the kind of day's work that today would pay the minimum would be a dollar and a half an hour, and these were, some of them, skilled workers, plumbers, and electricians and steam fitters and one thing and another. And they were paid a pack of tobacco, they ate meals that were swill and they could leave any time, and if they'd walk fifty yards away from the place the chief of the camp, which was a big, six-foot lout with a couple of guns, would telephone the local constabulary, they would pick them up again and be whipped into another one in a like situation. And some of them...

BETTY HOAG: Well, let's hope it never happens again.

VICTOR THALL: Now, nobody knows about this. This is an absolute fact. I saw some of them, like Houston, Texas; El Paso where there were notices on the wall that stated that if anybody offered any of these men a job there would be a bus to take them to the job location. Now with some twenty million people unemployed what was the likelihood of any recognized firm reaching into El Paso, Texas into a transient camp to offer somebody a job? And I know this is true because I escaped from this one using a little device of my own.

BETTY HOAG: Good heavens!

VICTOR THALL: I was stuck in El Paso, Texas and I couldn't get out, and the next step was a chain gang, and I'm telling it was weird, weird, and I'd had it, you know, I had a child I hadn't seen, and I wanted to get out of this mess, and I had no talent for swinging a pick, you understand.

BETTY HOAG: So you did get out?

VICTOR THALL: I wrote a postcard to Marie Sterner Galleries in New York, that's all I could find was a little lousy postcard and I wrote small and instructed her to send me a letter offering me a job. And I prayed that I'd get an

answer, it was just like sending a carrier pigeon out into the unknown. And finally I was called to the office of these two big, six-foot louts carrying guns, wearing boots, had opened my letter, it was on linen from the Marie Sterner Galleries in New York offering me a job as a salesman for a hundred and fifty dollars a week. You know, this is insanity because it doesn't happen but she followed my instruction, and they came in, they were turning this letter over suspiciously, they knew it was a fake, but they couldn't put their finger on it, and a bus was waiting for me and it took me from Texas to New York to this job location, and I got my job back to New York. And I came back with a black eye, with my teeth through my lower lip, I weighed 117 pounds, I had malnutrition, intestinal poisoning, colitis, both eyes black, my nose half broken from being beaten up, and I was taken into a delousing machine and I got out of this delousing machine, my wet body fell against the metal and all the skin of my buttocks was ripped off and pasted against the steel, and that's how I rode from Texas to New York. And I came to Al Hirschl's apartment who was the theatrical caricaturist for the New York Times and I walked in with this costume of the rover with my bundle over my back, and his jaw literally dropped. You know, you hear this expression in acting "his eyes opened up and his mouth fell open" and I just turned around and unbuttoned by trousers and turned around in my bare buttocks, and he fainted. That's the sight I was. And I couldn't go up to see my wife and show my face to my mother-in-law, so I called up a doctor friend of mine who was chief-of-staff at Sloan's and he reported to me that I had intestinal poisoning, malnutrition, colitis, weighed 117 pounds. And I stayed in Al Hirschl's apartment for weeks until my face cleared up and then my wife came down from Massachusetts to see me and it took me two months before I was in any kind of shape to go up to see my child in Massachusetts. And that was the end of this experience on the road. This is before the project, the legitimate project had stared.

BETTY HOAG: How did you hear about the project in the first place?

VICTOR THALL: Well, I was back in New York, you see, then and the whole thing began. You know then they started with picketing of the Museum and all that lunacy that went on. Then they started to get this thing going, you see, and I was on the easel project. And the Theatre project and the rest of it was beginning. But nobody knows about these transient camps, and it was a piece of absolute Fascism because they were working, these men were working building roads, and working hard all day long eating the kind of meals that they get at Folsom Prison, absolute rubbish, and they were paid a ten cent package of mild tobacco a week, and they used to shoot crop to win their week's wages and that's what was going on.

BETTY HOAG: Some day somebody will write...

VICTOR THALL: I mean it was a piece of madness that would stagger the imagination. I saw it, I saw it all over the country, I saw this lunacy, and I've never met anybody back in civilization that ever heard anything about it.

BETTY HOAG: Did you feel that the project helped a lot of artists who might have been that hard up without it? I mean you've implied that...

VICTOR THALL: I have ambivalent feelings about it.

BETTY HOAG: ...the Theatre project did so much good...

VICTOR THALL: I think the Theatre project made sense; I think the physical projects, you know, the men who were actually out doing a job of work, for instance, cleaning up Riverside Drive and building parks and playgrounds; but in terms of the Writing projects and the actual painting I never saw much come out of it that made much sense. Everybody knows how de Kooning and all these masters now that are getting, you know, millionaires today - but I tell you frankly that if it ever came about again - I heard somebody the other day say they're going to start some lunacy now where they're going to have some kind of a base of $150 a month...

BETTY HOAG: Oh really?

VICTOR THALL: Somebody told me this. Of young talents. I would be for it, but I wouldn't take it again if I were dying.

BETTY HOAG: You mean a government project?

VICTOR THALL: Some kind of a thing where they're gong to have a base of $150 a week for young talent, writers and painters so they can paint, so they won't starve to death.

BETTY HOAG: I haven't heard of that.

VICTOR THALL: I heard of this. I wouldn't - I'd die first. I would have nothing to do with it. Nothing! Nothing!

BETTY HOAG: Well, why do you say that, Mr. Thall? Do you think it breaks their spirit if they feel they don't have to work for it?

VICTOR THALL: I don't want any part of it, that's all. I don't like any interference with me. Nothing to do with it. I don't want any part of any nonsense like that. I'll take my chances. We live under the...

BETTY HOAG: Well, that's for you personally, but what do you think about the other artists?

VICTOR THALL: I told you. Everybody should have it, all the young talents should be supported.

BETTY HOAG: They should?

VICTOR THALL: I don't want any part of it.

BETTY HOAG: Before we went on the tape you were telling me something about seeing project material dumped in the river, and about actually rescuing easels...

VICTOR THALL: Oh, they were breaking up everything...

BETTY HOAG: Well, was that at the end of it when from the central..

VICTOR THALL: At the end of the whole thing they were breaking up beautiful material and throwing it away.

BETTY HOAG: Well, why did they do that? I can't understand it. Why?

VICTOR THALL: I don't understand it either. I just don't understand it. It was just one of those things. They didn't know what to do with the junk. And they just wanted to wipe if off the boards, you know.

BETTY HOAG: Why didn't the artists just go in and get it?

VICTOR THALL: I don't know. They were breaking up priceless stuff, they were throwing away easels and beautiful architect's drawing boards and brushes and everything was being dumped, you know, dumped, thrown away. They wanted to wipe it out of existence, all of it, you know. What were they going to do with the stuff? Put it back in the art school stores? The art stores were loaded with junk anyway.

BETTY HOAG: Well, they could have given it to art schools, I should think they would have been glad to have it.

VICTOR THALL: Why don't they give milk away when people go hungry? Why do they pour that stuff away? Why do they burn up pigs for? Because I saw...

BETTY HOAG: That's a different thing.

VICTOR THALL: What do you mean? What's different about it. Do you know what I saw when I was on this business, when I was riding the rods. I saw men spray mountains of oranges with gasoline and children standing looking at it with their bellies swollen with pellagra, that had never tasted an orange in their lives, and men were spraying millions of dollars worth of fruit with gasoline and burning it up. And animals slaughtered, and milk poured into rivers; and children standing there that had never tasted milk and had never tasted an orange. So what's the difference between that and pouring more paint and easels into art supply stores that were already loaded? It's the same idiocy, isn't it?

BETTY HOAG: Well, it is certainly an idiocy.

VICTOR THALL: Yes, it's the same kind of lunacy. And I like to be left alone, you know, I love this great democracy of ours where you have the inalienable right to starve to death in your own fashion.

BETTY HOAG: Well, what about this business of the rapport between the different artists working on the project? Did you make a lot of friends? Do you feel you influenced some of the other artists?

VICTOR THALL: It was a great movement. It doesn't exist anymore. It doesn't exist.

BETTY HOAG: You feel it was at that time?

VICTOR THALL: Great! There was nothing like it, there's never been anything like it and there's never been anything like it since. The rapport, the affinity, the warm closeness between all those men who are now rugged individualists and totally separated from each other and now it comes to animosity and a nastiness and evil ambitions. I don't want to know them, do you understand? I wouldn't let Bill de Kooning come into this house right now and sit at my table because he's such a noxious coward, when he was my close friend who I loved. Because I don't like what h's become, he's a drunken lout, an egocentric, who screams with bodyguards to protect him, "Don't talk to me, I'm an institution."

BETTY HOAG: Good heaves!

VICTOR THALL: Well, I don't want to know anything like that. I like to remember what he was in those days, you know, a warm, human being...

BETTY HOAG: He was on the project when you were in New York?

VICTOR THALL: He was on the project, and as he'd walk in everybody and there was a great, close warmth and friendship between us all and it was great, and now it doesn't exist. And now I just look at their pictures and I don't want to know them.

BETTY HOAG: Well, maybe if this thing you spoke of, of helping young artists, comes along it will help reinstitute this for men again.

VICTOR THALL: I don't know, but there was certainly a warmth and a camaraderie and a - it was great, it was a great movement; it doesn't exist anymore; it's finished. Now there are nasty little groups, cliques, you know, if you sit with this man at the cafe table those other twelve will never talk to you again.

BETTY HOAG: Excuse me, I have to change my tape.

END OF TAPE
PART 2 (TAPE 61)

BETTY HOAG: This is Betty Hoag on June 8, 1965 interviewing Victor Thall, Tape Number 2. Now you were going to tell me about Orson Welles.

VICTOR THALL: No, I'm simply going to reiterate the fact that there was absolutely and indubitable a rapport, a quality of camaraderie, a warmth and a friendship, and an interlocking relationship between all these men that never existed before in this country, and I have never seen anything that obtains comparable to it since the projects ended; and I haven't the slightest doubt that if Orson Welles were sitting here he would say the same thing of the theatre. And I know now that in the theatre there's the same thing; each is a rugged individualist, each with their own personal ambitions, each with their own little, petty, boggy patterns of behavior, and it's all gone and separated; something great blew away; with us.

BETTY HOAG: Do you feel that accounts in painting for the diversified school system?

VICTOR THALL: No, it has nothing whatever to do with that, it has to do with the fact that when the projects, which meant a group therapy -if you will - it was the kind of thing, it was exactly the same kind of thing that obtained if you were running alongside of a moving freight train, and you lifted up your hand and ten hands reached out and you were jerked from the ground up into the warmth of a boxcar, and if there was one cigarette it went around to thirty men and everybody taking a puff; if there was one blanket it covered all those men; if there was one lousy apple everybody got a bite, you know, that kind of thing. It was the same kind of peace that two cats get from each other when you find them curled up and interlocked on a door mat. It was the necessity of convivial warmth and mutual fear, that's what it was, and it's a deep psychological and sociological fact. You know like somebody said once - I remember reading a novel thirty years ago in which a man was describing his - there was an impoverished family and there was a great line - I don't remember a thing about the book - but there was one line that stuck in my craw in which he extolled the virtues of poverty in a family because the toilet seat was always warm. Isn't that cute?

BETTY HOAG: Quite a line.

VICTOR THALL: And I'll never forget it, I don't know who wrote it or anything about it, but that one line stuck in my mind.

BETTY HOAG: It's unfortunate that this wonderful thing had to come out of oppression.

VICTOR THALL: And that kind of thing, and the kind of childhood my wife had when, you know the last one up didn't have anything to wear, because if you got up you had your choice, you know, with thirteen brothers and sisters and everybody grabbed the best and the last one up was naked, there wasn't enough to go around. And it was that kind of thing that actually obtained on the projects. There was a warmth, we sat in each other's studios, there was a feeling of artists and their problems and the same thing obtained when I was a kid in Montparnasse. And the same thing obtained, I'm sure, fifty years ago when Picasso was a close friend of Matisse and Derain and George Braque. But it doesn't happen now! When Picasso goes to visit Matisse now he comes in suspiciously you know and hopes he's going to catch him, you know, behind a curtain with a secretary. If you read Picasso's life by his mistress you'll know what I mean, you know. But it wasn't true when they were starving in Arouge together when they shared each other's pants, when Modigliani and Soutine lived next door to me I mean when I was in Cannes-sur-mer they had one pair of pants between them, and when one went out the other had to say in, you know. But now that they're all giants and masters and all solving their individual problems it

doesn't happen any more. And I know that to be true today because I want to tell you that I've been away now from New York for thirteen years and I went away and I shut doors on myself because I'm a romantic, see, the only religion I've got is art and I couldn't stand the evil smell that was coming on the scene, because it was offensive to me. And at the last conversation I had, the last civilized conversation I had with Bill de Kooning was at the corner of 57th Street in front of Carnegie Hall, and I was teaching at the Art Students League and he was teaching up at Yale, and we met, and I hated my life. In the first place I was getting myself sucked into a sinecure of an art teacher and that's, to me, is the trap closing in, where it's getting cushy now and safe, and you become a political prostitute, because you can't criticize these dear little geniuses, you just got to put your arms around them and tell them how talented that are because if you criticize them they run off to some other teacher and then you're out of a job because your success is not determined by the quality of your teaching but by the number of students you've got. And to prove that conclusively, the highest priced teacher who drew a tab of $32,000 a year was an idiot named Frank J. Riley who doesn't know from the day he was born to the end of his life what drawing, painting, aesthetics or the history of art could possibly be, you know, for he's an idiot, an absolute moron, but he drew $32,000 a year at the Art Students League because he was all things to all people. And he just knew how to titillate these, you know, little egos...

BETTY HOAG: Is that the kind of teacher de Kooning has become?

VICTOR THALL: No, I don't know anything about de Kooning as a teacher but he was up at the Yale Art School. I'm only stating that we had a conversation in which I said to Bill, quote I've had it! I've just swapped a painting for a Packard station wagon and I'm going! Because there must be a better life than this." And he said, you know, in his quiet little, charming little fashion, because in those days he hadn't been picked up by the tide that swung him into world figure, "Well, at least I'm going to stick it out and see what happens." And I just went away, because I insisted - now I'm not going to dare to suggest, Mrs. Hoag, that it was a mistake on my part because in terms of an economic mistake it might well have been, but I do know this: that I wouldn't take ten million dollars in cash for the life I've lived from that day to this because I insist on my personal identity and my personal integrity. Now I went away, I went to the West Indies, I went to Mexico, I went to Europe, and I've lived my life; win, lose or draw I want every minute to belong to me. Now the next step was that a monstrous tidal wave swung Bill de Kooning et al. up into a preeminent position. Now whether I would have been swept up by the same tide I don't know.

BETTY HOAG: Sure. Nobody can tell.

VICTOR THALL: Who can tell? And I don't give a damn, you see. I don't care. But I know this: that de Kooning today is impossible to communicate with; impossible; impossible! Because he's a drunken lout and an egomaniac and he's just ridiculous; he's ridiculous. and I'm not talking for myself, I'm talking about dear friends of his, collectors who love his work and have purchased some. In the last conversation I had with one of them in New York just a short six weeks ago we were discussing Willem, he said, "I can't even talk to him, he's ridiculous and impossible." And in those days there was no such a thing, during the project days he was another human being, you know. And Arshile Gorky is now dead, you know he hung himself; when I was in the West Indies he put a rope around his neck; when I came back from Jamaica he was dead.

BETTY HOAG: I didn't know that.

VICTOR THALL: And a painting that he couldn't sell for eight dollars that I remember in his studio that he used to have, you know, rolled up, stuck up in a closet with a couple of old bicycle parts was now ironed out, patched up, polished and framed and sold for eight thousand dollars by the Sidney Janis Gallery because he was dead, you know. So that if you're interested in the possibility that that kind of thing created a warmth and a mood and a camaraderie, I could never deny it because there's no margin of a doubt that it obtained, and it doesn't happen any more.

BETTY HOAG: But it only obtained at that time. I did not hold...

VICTOR THALL: I never saw it again; the only thing I ever saw comparable to it was those great days in the Roaring Twenties when we were all art students in Paris and we were all hungry, and having fun, and studying art, and it was a great life.

BETTY HOAG: Well, Mr. Thall, I certainly appreciate you sharing this with us...

VICTOR THALL: I just can't imagine what good it's all going to be.

BETTY HOAG: Well, I think it will be. We get all these pictures put together. Thank you so much. I appreciate having the tape.

END OF INTERVIEW

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