Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Max Spivak, circa 1965

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Max Spivak ca. 1963. The interview was conducted by Harlan Phillips as part of the Archives of American Art's New Deal and the Arts project for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

HARLAN PHILLIPS: Perhaps a good point of departure by way of contrast would be to sketch in some estimate of the mid-Twenties and the late Twenties so far as you're concerned....

MAX SPIVAK: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: ...your art is concerned, groups are concerned, thinking....

MR. SPIVAK: Well, actually I'm a late-I happen to be a late '29'er when I started. I graduated CCNY but I was painting on Sundays. This is my daughter Nora.

NORA: Hello.

MR. PHILLIPS: Hi!

MR. SPIVAK: And I went to Europe. See, I was an accountant, see, and I decided I was going to do art. That's what I was going to-I found it-that's what I had.

MR. PHILLIPS: What projected you into art from an accountant?

MR. SPIVAK: I was very good in high school in all kinds of subjects and I was bored, and I began to diddle, putter around with pencil and paper, to sort of doodle. Then they developed into certain kinds of-like the Kaiser-which was the cartoon of the day. And this developed until I began to really feel that this was an avenue where I could have what I wanted-a world of my own-without knowing it exactly in those terms. But I knew this was a possibility of creating this kind of thing and this could lead. I was not aware of fine art as such, because nobody in my home or relatives had any art experience. So it was...first I started in with the idea of having commercial art. And I went to Cooper Union when it was an academic course where the first thing you liked...in a sort of sketch class, you had to draw a cast.

MR. PHILLIPS: Three years.

MR. SPIVAK: No, one year.

MR. PHILLIPS: One year?

MR. SPIVAK: I took one year and when they took the cast down and put it on the drawing to see if it measured all right, then I blew up. I knew that was wrong without knowing anything. And then I went to the Art Students League. I quit. They tried to convince me; they had well-known artists graduate from there. I said I never heard of them. Well, I had never heard of any artists. The whole thing was a.... But it just started me in. And then I met students who were students of Gorky. And this went on. And then we went together and formed a sort of a group-all Sunday painters. There was a Puerto Rican, there was a hunchback and there were other...all people who had the capacity to be hurt. This is very important for an artist. In order to change the world, you have to have the capacity to be hurt. Otherwise, why change it? So these people would-just Saturday and Sunday-they all worked during the week. On Saturday and Sunday they would go out to Staten Island to paint and at that time Staten Island was a country kind of thing.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes, I know.

MR. SPIVAK: It was just like Europe, you see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And that started the thing. Once you heard of Cezanne and Matisse and all these things that came in because you had to make an effort to go to the museum, you had to make an effort to get an art book, your worry wasn't thrust on you. It wasn't consumed; you had to go after it and all this creative excitement. So I

decided I would graduate CCNY: I'd get my diploma graduate of accountancy for my mother, gave her the diploma, and I made some money through accountancy. I was making my…as an accountant and bookkeeper. Went to Paris; didn't even know-didn't know French!

MR. PHILLIPS: Did you study with Gorky?

MR. SPIVAK: Well-l, yes, for a while, yes. On and off. He didn't have a real class. He only had a studio class of weekend people. But actually he was much more of an inspiration than he was a teacher.

MR. PHILLIPS: Was he?

MR. SPIVAK: But that was important.

MR. PHILLIPS:

MR. SPIVAK: It's a very important factor. Do you feel hot? Want one of these windows?

MR. PHILLIPS: No, no. no. It's fine.

MR. SPIVAK: So when I came to Paris I felt I was the native, the one who was born and the French were talking a foreign language.

MR. PHILLIPS: Perfectly at home.

MR. SPIVAK: The protest quality of bourgeois life, the silk shirts that the people were wearing-it was the height of the time, right after I left there the boom, the whole thing collapsed. But I was unaware of that. And I eventually lived there three years selling paintings, more paintings that I ever sold here.

MR. PHILLIPS: In Paris!

MR. SPIVAK: Paris. Because why do you go to Paris for, see? You go where the market is. They go there-schoolteachers. Americans will come to the café and one painter will introduce new…and they will buy one of each one and they will come there…painting from Paris. Since they couldn't speak French, they bought Americans. This went on and on. So this was a fantastic experience. I lived there three years.

MR. PHILLIPS: Three years. I see.

MR. SPIVAK: And this experience of living in France absolutely colored and changed my life completely.

MR. PHILLIPS: Really!

MR. SPIVAK: Completely. My values were…come from France, the logic, the cynicism, the humor, the pleasure. All of this is a balanced life, see. The Frenchman is a bastard, see. But he knows the value of things in life-some things are important, some things are unimportant, see. It's like when a Frenchman…when a Frenchwoman knows that her husband has a mistress she doesn't worry; he's going to come back, that's where the money is. And this is an understanding that all this thing-the logic, the logic of everything, the clarity of their thinking in their selfishness, is amazing. For instance, I lived in a small town hear Arles and there were two men there who were on the town. They sat in the cafe, did odd jobs. I found out they were white slavers. They were convicted, sentenced to go back to their village where everybody knew them, and couldn't move; they had no card of identity. So they made extra money by doing odd jobs, getting a sou here, a franc there, and so forth. Then they came back to the café, couldn't go to the next town which was four miles, no walls, no keeper, no warden, no meals, no supervision. What could be better? I mean this is reasoning it out because they couldn't move. As soon as they moved one mile out of town somebody would know who they were. Everybody knew them. They were in prison but without walls, see. This is a marvelous.... and this goes on with everything, see. You talk to a French woman on the street, walk with her, flatter her, so-called try to court her. She'll go along with it and then leave you at the corner, knowing that she wouldn't invite you to her room unless she's willing. There's no hope, no, because a man goes into her room with a woman, there's only one thing to do. So you don't get guilty, see. You don't have the look of guilt without being guilty.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: And this goes on all their life; everything is.... And you can see that the question of achievement is measured. If you have one acre of land, you're somebody. You meet a guy who has two acres and you look at a guy who has a half acre. The question of not one class, it's a question of many classes. I mean each one has an achievement. When I lived in Paris near the Pantheon, the French worker would never copy Broadway. He wore his cap, on Sunday he'd wear a clean silk scarf, and he walked to the dance floor and got his girl to come over and dance; he was somebody. He never was the lack of being somebody no matter what he was. And a

Frenchman with a hat would come in-a Frenchman-I'm not talking about a foreigner; they would throw beer in his face. This was their castle. He wouldn't go to Broadway, go to a bistro in the neighborhood and a movie in the neighborhood and a dance hall in the neighborhood. Now all this is twenty-five years ago.

MR. PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

MR. SPIVAK: It has changed. But the kind of characteristic that they have, the kind of thinking that they have, the value of everything…. Everything has its place. The organization of their life. I was young enough. I looked like fourteen or twelve when I went down there; I was about eighteen. And I talked to kids fifteen or sixteen. They were already-the marriage arrangement is investigated-syphilis, insanity, everything is investigated thoroughly, the dowry is arranged, the boy is sleeping with the girl by this time, he goes to the army and he comes back. He always comes back because here he has a dowry, he has an importance. He is a son of the chef de gare, which a train comes once a day. Once one day once the other day. But the importance of everybody there…. The male kind of consciousness of male is fantastic. That's not in the Latin countries; that's not true.

MR. PHILLIPS: No.

MR. SPIVAK: It's the woman who is the domineering and yet the male-true, what you call the color is in the male in the posing and the bravado and all that, but the women are really the nicest. And this is the way a Frenchman who owns a small store picks up in the morning a heavy bottle, puts it on the shelf, goes down to the café. The cares in small towns are only for men. The conversation. Everybody talking. Everybody is listening in. It's a college.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes, I know.

MR. SPIVAK: It's a compete college. Nobody can…I mean they learn so much on these evenings of conversation. Sometimes they bait each other like they baited me about America. A baby was born every six minutes in New York City. "Fait huit, eh, fait huit," you know, the Provence accent. They you'd figure it out, so many hours, so many minutes, so many babies for 7,000,000 people. They have logic. They shut up. This is one of the greatest respects they have, if you think clearly. They were talking about "you Americans love money, that's all you're interested in," you know, the standard canards. I took off my shoe and asked them to take off…I told them what I paid for it in francs, I showed the quality of my shoe against his shoe. Mine was better. I took off my jacket and showed him the quality and workmanship was better than his, and who were they talking about money. They shut up. This went on all the time. Yet when I went down there I never paid for a drink at the bar for nine months in this small town. I was the guest…the entertainment. They made fun of my French accent. It was all…I was amusement. I was unprepossessing; I was young-very important. If I was five years older I couldn't have done it.

MR. PHILLIPS: No.

MR. SPIVAK: The youth was very important. They cherish it because the old saying is still true, the little boys of four play around and say "Mon Dieu," you know.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: Here we go out with the boys at sixteen. And this is still true. But this kind of value I didn't find anywhere else. I knew exactly what the score was about everything. But it wasn't dull, it wasn't social, there were so many varieties of status and in each one with his kind of little satellite that you were intrigued. So the knowledge of everything gave you a kind of poise about logic and understanding that the confusion here of status, not knowing whether you're in or out, is much, much worse.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And you can't talk to anybody. You can talk to…and this is the quality the French woman. She doesn't want to know mathematics or physics or anthropology. She wants to know men. If she knows men she knows everything. This is a kind of understanding that's so profound…

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: …that it's always charming.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: It's always knowledgeable and listens with graciousness to everything because she's not listening to you about astronomy, she's listening to you the man, see. This is the difference, black and night, no paths. This is the fantastic thing. So I got my real understanding at home-I felt at home completely without even knowing the language. So right away-I mean you have no idea what it felt like being in there feeling at home and all this foreign language all around you, see. And this was what it was. The more I lived there my French was never

good. It was always-there was no past tense, no future tense, it was always present. Do you know what I mean? But the accent was good.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And this went on and on so that I mean the poise I had with the Frenchmen, they took care of me; they took me to Bal des Quatres Arts in Paris for three years which is hard to get in. I went with them to Normandy and Brittany. There was a whole group from Lyons that had their little restaurant, a little sixteen places, a little restaurant in the basement and everybody from Lyons would come there if they wanted to meet their old friends. That's all it took. You don't entertain at home. You meet at the café. Then when you're bored you leave, you're not a victim, you see. Suppose you invite somebody and you get bored, you know. Have you been there?

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: You know what I'm talking about?

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes, yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So that this kind of understanding of your time, of how much for politeness you have to play, how much you can avoid; all this is so understanding. You have no idea. So finally a painter saw me painting, waited around till I finished, brought me to this little restaurant and then they took care of me, see. That's how I started. Then I came back in the height of the Depression.

MR. PHILLIPS: What did you do to your work over there?

MR. SPIVAK: I painted. What?

MR. PHILLIPS: Content-wise what…you know, how about idea?

MR. SPIVAK: Idea…the point is that at that time it was painting city streets and then I painted from life the landscapes down in the south of France. Not the Riviera, I went down the Riviera, it was too hothouse; it was too abundant and had no space.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: Everything is too close up to you, the palm trees annoyed me as a symbol of bourgeois leisure. I couldn't stand it, see. I never saw a painting of a good palm tree either, see. So this went on so that.…Then the paintings-I have one painting in the bedroom-I'll show you the painting, you can.…

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, we can do it later. While it's in the mind, let's go ahead.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. Well then, you see, the thing is that the nature, the kind of effect it had on me, I painted from nature using still lifes or something. There wasn't anything abstract. You don't have to paint abstract in Paris. Everything is paintable. Been lived in hundreds of years.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes, has that…?

MR. SPIVAK: You sit at the café; you paint across the street.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: And you come back, you cry when you see the New York skyline, the most beautiful landscape in the world. But one you get to paint it, you're lost because you can't catch it from viewing it.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: To be in it, you have to recreate it, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And that's a different story that means you have to paint in a studio. This is where-that's why abstraction has taken such a big hold here earlier than it did there. There were abstract artists started there, the ideas came from there but the practice-that's why there is no nature school, the last one was the Hudson River Valley School of Art. See, the leisure there the Hudson Valley was very good and even in the Southwest in Taos they can't paint those mountains, like you can't paint the New York City skyline, it's too big.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: You put it down but it looks like a picture postcard.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: You have to recreate it. That' s what Marin knew. He got the turmoil and the confusion and the hectic business but he didn't get the appearance.

MR. PHILILIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: And this is important, you see; this is what you learn here is the fact that you have to recreate the thing; you cannot work from the scene.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And every painter who works from the scene produces picture paintings that have nothings to do with art.

MR. PHILLIPS: I see.

MR. SPIVAK: But everything in Europe is paintable, it's been, you know, molded; it's been touched and waxed and caressed and loved so that it's paintable. Anything you look at forms its own kind of coherence, a new kind of creativity, of pleasure, of warmth, of sensuousness, which we haven't got, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So that's the difference I find between the two. There I could paint the nature continually. I don't know about now, see. Again this is a question of time. I still think that a good deal of France in the small towns and Italy are not changed.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Untouched.

MR. SPIVAK: You see, they're not touched yet. It's still the big cities that they're trying to maintain as a museum, but the outside is we won the cold war. Everybody wants to be like us. So that's the tragic, to be able to go from place to place you wouldn't see anything. The uniqueness of each place is....

MR. PHILLIPS: Gone. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And this is the inheritance that we're going to give your youth, our sons. It's a big problem.

MR. PHILLIPS: Did you put this into words this way then. I mean, did it make this kind of impact on you then?

MR. SPIVAK: I felt it. I didn't know how to put it in words. But I was able to understand it in the sense that I was at home with it.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes, I see.

MR. SPIVAK: That I understood it. And that's why when I came back here I had a cold-water flat on Sutton Place out on 55th Street. At that time it was black and white buildings and it was cold water, eighteen dollars a month. I used to look out on the East River and I'd paint the East River scene, come back to it-couldn't do it, couldn't get what I felt in the other place so I had to come to an understanding in order to paint I would have to do in the studio.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: I used to go up on bridges-friends had a 40-story building because the sight of the New York skyline coming in on a drizzly morning is a phenomenon; it's the most unique thing in the world. You cry because this is the seventh wonder; I mean you go all over the world, here it is. But try to do it as is. Nothing. You do not capture this. You have to be in it. And you have to have all the sensation and create the drama and the kind of impact that has you from the inside, not from viewing it. And this is very tough, you see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: But this goes on-even the Rocky Mountains-can you paint. Is there a decent painting of the Rocky Mountains? There isn't. It's too big. To catch that bigness you have to do something so you paint the scene of the Rocky Mountains-it's at best a picture postcard. It's sad, isn't it? And the photograph does a terrible...I don't see any reason to do it. And the photograph has handicapped the painter because he could have maintained the illusion of being a creative person, a magic by creating an image as it looks. And, incidentally, beyond that the

structure would come and the other things would add to it. Now he's face-to-face with a blank canvas and right away he touches one thing-is this art? It 's really murder! Because right away you're faced with the end. The idea of being a Renaissance painter going into a studio for ten years grinding color, enlarging in scale, the process is there; the end comes from the process. But here we're always faced with the end first. As soon as we put…is this art? And if you'd weigh it that way you'd never risk, see. It comes out of experience, it comes out of growth, it comes out of a process, and this is what we don't learn here. We haven't got that patience nor do we care to have it, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: And that's the murderous…. So the experience in art culture has to change your life, otherwise it isn't anything; it's one more thing. And culture is being consumed to a degree that no other country has ever had but it doesn't change a thing. It doesn't change their thinking or their desire or their way of life. It's completely one more thing. And this is what's happening. So that's how I started. This is the way I thought. I couldn't clarify thinking or in words in that fashion because I lived it. I was too close to it. And I believe….

MR. PHILLIPS: I was going to ask you what projected your return home? I mean if you found…?

MR. SPIVAK: I began to feel if I stayed there long enough I'd be a "Mon Dieu." There's something about it, see, already the fact is that I was getting older, was not that young, I knew was a factor. I knew already I would begin to see and hear more of the ordinary and the banal, not knowing the language is a big advantage, you see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Oh, yes.

MR. SPIVAK: It gives you a complete primitive wonderful feeling knowing everything is not that good in some respects.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: Where you know everything, a lot of things you shouldn't know.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: And that's one of the big things today. We know everything that's going wrong with the world, see. We can't do a thing about it anyway. And knowing it depresses us. So there's certain things knowing the language more, getting into the habit, allowing habit to take over. Then I decided I had to go back.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you were running out of cream?

MR. SPIVAK: Well, I could have stayed there another year; I sold paintings, I had a sponsor. I had…Mrs. May bought some paintings, a whole series of them, for a year or two, so I could have risked that because I came back to nothing. So that wasn't the point. But I had to have fresh experience, everything about my experience referring to my travels in Italy, every time I saw a painting as I traveled in England and so forth, as soon as it became habit, I knew you cannot renew an experience. Something gets lost instinctively. This is all-this is all after the fact.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: But you feel it. And this is what I value-the intuitive feeling is so right. But you've got to keep your instincts clean. This is so hard. So that the actual judgment value first kills the intuitive kind of experience. Even doesn't ever allow it to develop.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And this is murder. People without intuitive feeling, like in art. I teach art-the first thing I tell them-I'll talk to you from day and night but, unless you felt that when I say form, it doesn't mean anything either to you or to me as far as communication. But if I say it hasn't got form, you already felt something was wrong. It's communicating, but we share the same experience. Intuitively you felt it. I also felt it…little more experience. And this is a fact that we're losing. The intuitive has to have a chance to blossom. You can't cripple it by pre-digested judgments of value, you see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And this is a very, very-this is the sad state; I mean this is all I do is to teach them to value an experience and then judge it afterward. And this is a very tough thing to do because they're all conditioned; you'd doing this experience because you want to get this and this. Therefore there's no experience.

MR. PHILLIPS: No.

MR. SPIVAK: And this is a very tough question. It's going to be-unless we reach that in the educational factor process, we stress that more, we're lost. We'll have all the engineers and all the computer people and all the works but if you don't have that instinct....

MR. PHILLIPS: Nothing.

MR. SPIVAK: That's right. Isn't that what you think?

MR. PHILLIPS: Right!

MR. SPIVAK: It's very important that it's not...and you can't outline this sort of thing because it's used by the charlatan as well as the sincere person. They both use the same words.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right. It's like having all the techniques in the world and no statement to make. Nothing to say.

MR. SPIVAK: That's right.

MR. PHILLIPS: What did you pick up in travels in Italy?

MR. SPIVAK: I went there to see. I traveled. You know what I did usually? I went with one friend. He was a sort of boy from Detroit, very quiet and modest, and we used to drop off there at the station and walk until we found a place we liked. We would smell, we would feel the air, we never went to a real hotel. And then when we found a place then we'd have a taxi go back and get our bags. And as soon as we got too tired, we didn't have to go through all the routine, we left the place. And this was the way of traveling, see. You always lived on the basis of...in the people and we met very few of the American spots in this but there weren't too many anyway. It wasn't as frequent as it is now. It would be much harder now. But it was a wonderful period; it was 1930, the franc was twenty to a dollar, life was much cheaper there, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Sure.

MR. SPIVAK: And, you see, one of the values that I appreciate too that the experience of going to concerts and theatre and ballet and opera are cheap; they're state-supported, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Accessible, yes.

MR. SPIVAK: The luxury things were food which was almost as expensive as ours, and if you wanted to live the way we would live, with a bathroom, the rent would have been the same. But the pleasurable things were cheap. Like going to...or sitting in a café is cheap. Going to the opera was three francs-twelve cents. The Ballet Russe was six francs-eighteen cents. It allowed you...how can you pay nine fifty today? And then get gypped.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right! In the bargain.

MR. SPIVAK: See, that's what I'm...no matter how France changes what it gave, the whole picture of how to value things, see-they made the entertainment and the cultural things cheap and they gave it the importance because this is the important thing--the pleasure. And we have pleasure from automobiles but they're getting to be three thousand dollars, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: It's the difference. There's a big difference of values.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So I had a wonderful experience. When I came back it was...I had to turn myself all over to get this kind of picture we have here. But I came back at the right time, see, when-as I said before-for the first time the artists who had felt themselves an outcast, who had deliberately and maybe without knowing that this was the role he had to take and this was the road he had to take, cut himself off from the mass of society in order to begin to be a little different all of a sudden feels that he's part and parcel of it, that he belongs to he human race and they are suffering the same way that he did...

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: ...without the same reason. For all of a sudden he embraces them back again, then he goes into their politics, he goes into their sit-ins, their protests, things that he wouldn't have done alone.

MR. PHILLIPS: No.

MR. SPIVAK: Your artist never got involved with that. Politics was something they …but as a group they joined, as a group, not as individuals, so much because there was an artists' organization, because there was also an identification the mass of the artists with the mass of the people, then the kind of experience of this mass kind of experience which they shared with them on a higher form because then they brought into it all the values that they wanted in their painting. The better things were changing, see. That was all right until that became no longer fresh. And then they…they still belonged to organizations but they no longer became active. Of course, in order to give that its proper due, they would have to give up painting, see. And there the choice came. And most of them chose not to give it up. Besides, it had lost its kind of spontaneity.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: It lost its excitement. And it became tight as an experience, again the same….

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Well, when you…what was the year that you returned-'33?

MR. SPIVAK: '33, '33, yes. That's right.

MR. PHILLIPS: And you took this place on…?

MR. SPIVAK: On Sutton Place South, and I tried to paint there for a while and I just couldn't get anything that I was satisfied there.

MR. PHILLIPS: The key this morning was this whole flavor of spontaneity.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: How did this begin to operate on you? As far as I know you weren't necessarily known among artists. How do you…?

MR. SPIVAK: Well, the thing is that it's true but I knew a number of art student Leaguers, a small group.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And then the whole business began since it was that kind of area there-it was a very fancy area, Sutton Place South-and they had guards around and pretty soon they recognized your friends as not bums but it got…even though mine was not part of their domain-but they patrolled that block. Anne Morgan lived on the next block.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So that sort of thing. But then you felt isolated there. Something was happening in the world. There were all kinds of little explosions, you couldn't sit in the East River window and paint any more. You lost that sense of reason. This is what happened. So you went down to Eighth Street with somebody who knew somebody, you went up to somebody else's studio. They were looking for work; you were looking for work, money was running out. What to do? Then the Gibson Committee-somehow or other, I don't know how it happened, I got on. Then I met some people there. Eventually the identification of artist and artists got closer. Before that it was only small groups-nobody really….

MR. PHILLIPS: No one…?

MR. SPIVAK:

MR. PHILLIPS:

MR. SPIVAK: And there were no groups; they were friends.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: But they were friends on the basis they were craftsmen basis; it wasn't as a mass. Gradually the Gibson Committee had-I don't know how many people-a hundred, very few. It wasn't too many.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. But the nature of their job was important too at the time.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes, the nature of the job, and we laughed at the job when we painted-some of the kids put hammers and sickles on the saints when they had them upside down so when they were all over thrown there would be a sickle on top. It was that kind of…they couldn't take that job seriously. Yet they did their job.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: But they didn't do it-it was a sort of job you did but you weren't really concerned with it...

MR. PHILLIPS: No.

MR. SPIVAK: ...you weren't trying to please a boss by the quality of your work and trying to be advanced and getting a raise. You were doing it to get some of the Gibson Committee money and you were doing it to get some sort of flattery out of it, but at the same time you didn't take the content seriously.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So that also created...but it wasn't until the project began-the Whitney Museum project--and the prospect of a number of us met who had met on the Gibson Committee and we had...in a beer parlor we talked about getting a committee sponsoring government work and that's when we thought of the WPA. When did that issue-193_?

MR. PHILLIPS: 1935.

MR. SPIVAK: '35?

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. The PWAP came first. That's the Whitney.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. And this began to be in the air with solutions really, though we didn't read the papers as well as we should have, but it began to be as a little model group met-there may have been other people who were more left, had joined the John Reid Club. They were such more socially aware, they had meetings there, there were fights and arguments and so forth in the club. This attracted you too, the fact that some thing was happening.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And then of course it wasn't happening only to you, which means a private club or a private closed shop. It was happening to the whole world including you.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. There's a difference.

MR. SPIVAK: That's a big difference, you see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: But at the same time you didn't have to pay for it, you didn't have to change in order to be in it. Because it was so big and affected everybody; it didn't have time to classify you...or worthy of it or not worthy of it. You were in it.

MR. PHILLIPS: Period. Just by virtue of being. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So that you didn't change any. You didn't change anything to be in it.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: Because it had to be done fast. They had to spend the money, get it into circulation. And they didn't ask are you proper, are you good morals, are you wasp, white, Anglo-Saxon, see. They didn't ask anything because money had to be spent, see. And this is the work...so that this created the kind of a mass action without you sacrificing or lowering in any sense any value that they were asked.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: And you didn't do it. So this was ____ see. Now then the only thing is the poverty basis wasn't demeaning. Everybody was poverty-stricken so it was no longer demeaning.

MR. PHILLIPS: No.

MR. SPIVAK: It was no longer a feeling of shame, you see. And this is where I mean that we joined the human race but we joined it on our level. We didn't get grovel'y, or we didn't beg, we still had the same kind of clarity that we went away from the mass before. So when the money came in, or the relief, or the possibility of changing things, we were at our level of achievement as a person.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: That was very important that they didn't ruck us down, there was no groveling and we weren't stamped under in order to get this kind of stipend to exist on. We didn't have to accomplish a new kind of metamorphosis to live. Well, now look, that's very important, the fact that we didn't undergo any period of indoctrination to justify or to be what you call eligible for this kind of charity work.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And this kept it on a high level immediately. There was no shame, there was no panic, one's position was like a soldier. A soldier you don't come into....

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: The Army takes you over and puts you through the grind and then you get, you know, and even then....

MR. PHILLIPS: You come out a bundle of tens, yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And this wasn't true on the projects. That's a very important fact of why it maintained its quality; it started off right, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And that's a strange thing. I mean, you know, you talk; you think as you talk, and I hope I talk as I think, you know what I mean.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: But it's true. It's true. That is very important. That's why everyone that came there, we weren't peasants, see, we were there you see. We took this...it's like when Roosevelt was told about a strike on the WPA, see, he said, "Well, That's mutiny on the Bounty." Which is very clever, that kind of humor; that wasn't an insult to him, it was....

MR. PHILLIPS: No.

MR. SPIVAK: It wasn't ingratitude, it was no ungrateful feeling in it or that we were ungrateful. Look at us. Here we were beggars. We're telling him...there was a feeling...this is part of the ...to accept it on that basis...that's when we had this fright but it was sort of a laugh at the same time.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And this went through the Administration; it was fortunate too for us.

MR. PHILLIPS: Was it?

MR. SPIVAK: The Hopkins and-who's this guy-Cahill-and other people of that kind were in Washington pushing it. They knew where to spend the money, they had to spend the money, and the intellectuals were there to siphon off some for us. Otherwise we would-if the politicals were in there in addition, see, then it wouldn't be...the thing would be no place.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: But the fact that Hopkins and a few other boys went down there with the New Deal with FDR in the beginning because this was an emergency, there was a crisis all over the intellectual...and I think that helped us too. So there was a meeting of both minds on both sides; it was at the highest level of achievement as a human being.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So that made a difference too. Sometimes you have the-the one who gets the money at that level but who gives it isn't.

MR. PHILLIPS: No.

MR. SPIVAK: But in this case they both....

MR. PHILLIPS: Hmm. Well, what sort of experiences did you have with the PWAP at the Whitney Museum?

MR. SPIVAK: Well, the PWAP was very, very simple. The only experience I had in the beginning was I was the

organizer and Brushan was the secretary of the artists' organization, and when the money was being given out only to favorites or to people she knew-she claimed she knew all the artists-and we stuffed the mail boxes of the Village because we never knew all the artists. "Are you known to Mrs. Force? Are you an artist? Money is being given out only to the…. Let us know it." I'm very good at that. I mean at that kind of…. Hundreds came out in the street in front of the Whitney. She called the mounted police. And one of the boys was hurt. This created-the back door…. In the first place, when she met us, see-I didn't go in. I sent Bryson in and the others-but she met the committee with nails sticking-she never had seen anything like it-we were like a horde from the uncivilized….

MR. PHILLIPS: Neanderthal.

MR. SPIVAK: Absolutely. She said, "I know all the artists. I don't have to be-you don't have to submit any names because I know all the artists." Well, when she saw this and we came out and the police charged, and one cop was hurt in the commotion, and then she looked out the window and she saw some of her favorites were in that crowd. That killed her. Because she was a queen.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: She was giving out all the gifts and all the courtesies and they were currying favor with her and all of a sudden this whole world collapsed on her. After that year, she did not…she went away for an enforced vacation. It was a fantastic…. So that I got a job. Most likely maybe it was political bribery to keep me quiet but we did keep quiet because there wasn't anything left after a while.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: Then Mrs. McMahon got into government to put in some project on the WPA side to supplant the other.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And she qualified herself because of the Gibson Committee and Mrs. Force became hysterical and quit in despair. And a little later I met her, she was a little sorry about her attitude. "She had to learn," she said. She was very nice about it but you can imagine what it did in a moment. She was the aristocrat, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: ….completely.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. So McMahon was very ready for this. And then the committees would meet to set up store, the organization of people, and it was quite…you had to qualify for relief. They investigated you. The investigation wasn't too bad. They had no time to really go into every investigation, so that you weren't humiliated in any sense of the word. But you see this started so the relief business was a fact. If your wife was working, you couldn't get on. There were other things-if you owned property, you couldn't get on. They were very simple things but many people began to fake, began to move away from their wives, get a separate address and so forth. There weren't too many. There were enough people who needed….

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Oh sure.

MR. SPIVAK: So that the few people who skipped on it were very unimportant, you see. But then it began and the question of classification was important, the question of who could teach and who could paint easels, who could do murals and who could help. So they had a classification of easel painters, ones whose paintings would be acceptable, acceptable to show easel paintings, or ones that would be selling, the ones that would be given to schools and institutions of tax exempt source; it had to be that. And then they had a horde of people who were assistants. I had five assistants on my mural project. Five. There was Lee Krasner who married Jackson Pollock.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: She was my research girl. Harold Rosenberg who was my reader, a very good reader. And then we had a guy to wash the brushes and so forth. And another did odd jobs. But everybody was accounted for. Then they had the design project and teaching and sculpture, so that they tried to do-they tried woodcuts-so they tried to get people who could handle and control and supervise these things. And then the people who couldn't, who just had some skill but didn't have the capacity to organize or didn't have a reputation or the possibility of a reputation, see-so it was judged by artists, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And artists of their own age-they weren't great artists-Harry Knight wasn't known as a painter. Lou Block certainly was only known as an assistant of Ben Shahn's. But in a sense that they judged their peers it was a good thing.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: It wasn't too much demand as long as they functioned in the capacity. And, as I said before, it was very important to include many artists, you see, because only when you have many can you have a few live and even if the few didn't paint in there or did something else or taught, they managed to live through a time to paint again.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And that's very important.

MR. PHILLIPS: Let me flip this over because we're just about at the end….

[END OF SIDE 1]

[SIDE 2]

MR. SPIVAK: …now once the artists began to get a wedge, see, enough to keep on a minimum basis, not a maximum basis, then the idea being in this mass they were with the mass unemployed, the people who worked on parks, the people who worked on roads, and the fact that they all shared the same experience of starvation, they weren't alone, made them go into the social basis. This gave them also an excitement, for the first time they were participating, not as individuals but as a group. This is important when you talk about artists because there have been artists who worked in what we call changing times in a political sense but it's rare because eventually the others overwhelm it; there's no kind of communion between your own people, you don't subject it to values of your own kind of profession, you have to do it on a power basis. And this wasn't the thought at all. So that this became an avenue of heroics. Now some of these people never got over this. This is what I say when Louie Le Ne fitted the phrase. Even after it was proven that there was a hoax, that the politics was a question of power and not of an act of a power personal life, they treasured that personal act so much that even with every kind of expose that nobody helps the Jews. Hitler is killing the Jews; Stalin is for it. They would always find an excuse; there would always be something valid to keep their faith. Their faith wasn't so much in…but they didn't examine the system. They didn't examine the other system. They were only examining their heroics. So the act of heroism is so rare now that once it occurs you keep it in mothballs, you don't let anything crush it, you don't let anything topple it over because, "Once," said the mock turtle with a deep sigh, "I was a real turtle." And this goes on for years and years and years, they die with that point, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And the disappointment and especially the blow of Hitler-Stalin on Goering and thing. But the biggest blow of all was Khruschev's speech about the monster-Stalin. When the Pope exposed what…who people wanted to know what was going on and felt without being there-they knew something was very wrong with these trials and purges, and these killings and all these statements lauding this man as the greatest poet, the greatest sculptor. the greatest philosopher, and all the speeches when you heard the speeches of this man, see; then their so-called aggressiveness…

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: …their righteousness disappeared. But their hope for miracles didn't disappear, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: This is a different thing. Now some of them are recovering with Vietnam, see. It's not identified with this God that failed them, but it's still identified with some sort of heroics. Some of them are sincere, I mean.

MR. PHILLIPS: Sure.

MR. SPIVAK: But I'm only saying this is a fact that of that time….

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: Because these artists went into May's department stores on strikes that did not affect them, on sit-downs that did not affect them, some went down to Kentucky…the heroic basis of the whole experience. And we, by standing still, became the leaders of the inarticulate mass because we shared the same experiences of starvation, therefore we had to lead them, you see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: The most exciting thing!

MR. PHILLIPS: Tell that story outside the *Mirror*-the paper bags full of water….

MR. SPIVAK: Oh yes.

MR. PHILLIPS:

MR. SPIVAK: The thing is we called a meeting, we had this news in the *Mirror* articles and they were the usual boondoggling, queers. Fakers-what they call it again-all kinds of-I forget the exact name, maybe I'll get it later. So finally we called a meeting after the project from the project itself after we met for our pay, we used to go in on a certain day for our payroll and we announced at that meeting that we were going over to the *Mirror* to picket because of these statements. So we included many people who were not members of the union. This was the crowd I was talking about.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So members who were already on our picket line, men, people who had contributed in action to other strikes were understandable, they were pros, they were veterans at it, but there were many people who came immediately from their pay line at the project to walk down to 44th Street and then we marched. And then the paper bags came down and people I had never seen before-I knew on the project-but I knew never attended a meeting in the whole thing would have been completely obnoxious to them to go through that kind of thing went through this kind of ceremony. The baptism and the bravery when they squared their shoulders and they marched further and every once in a while these big cops would come in and stop us, you see, because we were supposed to keep moving. The picket rule was "Keep moving." So they would stop us to keep moving; we would go there. Then they would move over there, by that time we would keep moving. As long as we kept moving, it didn't matter whether we went this way or that way, so that they couldn't trick us by that. But if we had stood still, they would have said, "You're violating the picketing ordinance by not moving," you see. This kind of instinctive basis they all…they knew just what to do without instructions. And the payoff was when they…the payoff came when we went to the police station for the blotter, we didn't have to give our own, our real names. The idea was proposed to give famous artist's names without knowing what it would do. This was not a plan but just one more thing, a spontaneous kind of idea without considering how it's going to step forward or what it would lead to. And this was grabbed on as one more lark, one more experience. Let's do it, it was really a rogue and each one picked a different name and we never knew who picked who until the courtroom when the roll was called. And when they called--by that time the press had gotten…Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Da Vinci, all that sort of business-it was all over the headlines and everybody was there and that judge-the police had trouble pronouncing these foreign names so the judge by that time was wise, everybody was wise, and the whole place was roaring, it was a travesty of justice. We got ten days suspended sentence anyway because it was a newspaper in spite of the fact that the judge was laughing and enjoying it, Hearst was too powerful to ignore. But it was-we won sentence-it was s.s.-suspended sentence. But to see the effect of this thing without any kind of control or organization or pre-arrangement…they had everyone-Paul Klee, Picasso was obvious more or less and Caravaggio-names that came up, everyone was different and we'd always see who was that, see, we couldn't tell who it was. So this led for a communion of excitement, a community of excitement and enjoyment of…creating that much pleasure.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: And this went on all the time in everything that we did. And everything , even the way we shared a kind of loft that I had when they all moved in, we paid two month's rent, and friends who didn't have a place, were evicted, moved in. Finally we all had to go. So spontaneously we had to get a mover but we didn't have the money to pay a mover. So we made a contract with a van who we would help. There were six guys-two guys we couldn't get-we'll help, all you have to do is have the van, but he'll help us, see. Then these three floors…empty floors, there was nobody there and as he went up somebody went down, and when he went down somebody followed him and very soon…with furniture…one single van…said, "How could we have made such a mistake?" You know, he just kept…made such a mistake and he never caught wise, he was such a phenomenon that he never trapped anyone coming out of the second floor with furniture, then he would have…we would have been all exposed. But after it was all down, he said…. We were all absolutely trying to have a straight face but completely enjoying the fact that he didn't know what happened.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And so this kind of activity that was spontaneous resulted in some kind of communication of pleasure, excitement, that was possible….

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. You mentioned that the groups would take a loft and argue all night long, where you see and meet, you know, artists you had never seen before.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. The thing is we used to have meetings. The meetings served as our social place. We didn't

have much money to go out, I mean we all went out after the meeting but we began to see each other and all kinds of painters, whether they were realistic painters or the beginning of the abstract movement was at that time, they first began to paint like Mondrian or Hans Arp was just beginning at that time. And so they would all come there on the basis of a common interest outside of their styles. Talking on an issue didn't affect our own interest in art, which is a stupid thing to talk about, you know-talk about my style against your style; he's famous or infamous or not known; it's unfair. He's favored; I'm not favored, which is stupid, you see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: But they talked about the problems, the trade union problems, what's going on the project and who's the enemy and who's the-what kind of risks are they taking there, and so forth, the question of cut-down on the next project, the next appropriation, how would it affect us. And also we would have in a magazine…we were included in *Mass Action* on strikes and all kinds of things. And all this was outside of the realm of style and they all joined in. They used to bring their wives and children, couldn't leave them home. There was no babysitter, bring them and stay all night, having the arguments and even members of the same political party would argue absolutely contrary, which is unheard of. So that this kind of argument, and each one having…and the characters came out and had their flavor and humor and their kind of style of talking and their kind of…which was very funny, you see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So that they were really-it was art show, every week four hundred people came to meetings, you see, because it was a wonderful show, wonderful sense of excitement, the fact that they were sharing something in common on the real fact, not forced into it. They all shared the same job and we all were under the same conditions. This was also true of the magazine. The magazine was an idea not to promote just proletarian art, which was the nature of the political composition, but was to include all kinds of artists. The fact that Stuart Davis was one of the spokesmen shows that they didn't depend on one kind of art to be…even though there were many attempts…and so many people like Gallatin to impose proletarian-this was an avenue, a vehicle, to impose proletarian art or to push it. And this was fought down, this was never allowed to come up. As soon as it reared its head there was a lot of people who would object on self-interest. So this was a very…and we had to avoid these things that would tear us apart, and join in the excitement and the organization and the activity which we could all share together on the same kind of….

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. What was Gorky's definition of proletarian art?

MR. SPIVAK: Gorky's definition-we asked him, "What do you think of proletarian art?" He went, "Proletarian art is poor painting for poor people."

MR. PHILLIPS: The *Art Front* was a great magazine, though.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes, wasn't it? It was only four pages.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes, but it was, you know, it was excitement in itself.

MR. SPIVAK: You know, I had the experience…but we tried to get also lithographs that appeared in The *Message* which Groppo was doing and a few others-the artists were doing and some of the tings we had in *Art Front* and put them on poster paper, the cost was a penny apiece, and sell them for five cents. And this would be exhibition posters, you know, so that they could buy it. And the other thing was we had…we had paintings. One time we gave a series of paintings by Soyer and a few of the other boys and then these prints, these black and white reproductions of line cuts, which prints easily, you don't have to have a photograph; it prints by stamping in dots.

MR. PHILLIPS: Mmhmm.

MR. SPIVAK: So…took the show and they called me up the next day, They sold everything. I said, "What do you mean, sold everything?"-paintings by Edward, Gordon, Soyer-"How could you sell everything?" He said, "We sold everything, black and white five cents, mit color ten cents," because we had prints five and ten, some were large, some were small. So he figured one must be five cents, one must be then cents. It was one of those strange…and then he realized that it was only the patriotic people would want copies of these *Masses* cartoons, the kind of drawings they did for the *New Masses.* But when we wanted to send pictures of miners-the miners' lives that artists conceived of-- down to the minefields, they sent it back and said, "Send us something pretty." It's a kind of experience we had to learn.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. The same old story.

MR. SPIVAK: They don't want to see their own life the way we see it because they're realists you see. They see it

and if it doesn't resemble it, it becomes almost a farce in that-to see their misery is no pleasure, you see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So that this became an experience, it became too much of a propaganda basis. The importance of propaganda would be more important than the quality -what it did as art.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. But again there was always a faction in it who wanted to emphasize the political. But it was fought down, it was really fought down all the time. And even the people of the political persuasion who had any sense knew enough to fight it.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So this was the kind of thing…so that once…then afterwards when it became politically controlled in every fashion where they had to have meetings before meetings then they lost interest, the whole basis of excitement got lost...

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: …because it was almost predigested before they came to the meeting. So it became boring even to the people who had control.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So that killed the idea of the form, the excitement of the form.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: But eventually that gave all these things a short life.

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, that was your notion about spontaneity his morning, it can last how long.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes, it can last-I mean actually the project lasted eight years, didn't it?

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: About '42 it died?

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: Well, in the last few years it died, you can say it lasted four to five years. That's a lot, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: A lot, sure.

MR. SPIVAK: But in that four or five years it was the best. The best experience for everybody who was in there regardless. I don't remember of anybody who felt…unless there's a certain people…that he was neglected and he didn't become a muralist when he wanted to be a muralist. But that was never really too much of an issue. Everybody that was assigned to a certain thing, if they could show that they could qualify for the other, they were given a chance. So that never came up as an issue. Somebody is a mural supervisor and the other man is a mural assistant because the difference in pay was two bucks a week, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So why worry?

MR. PHILLIPS: What's the problem, yes.

MR. SPIVAK: What's the problem? It's like I did this tile mural, I asked a young Italian who was a helper, see, a craftsman just hands out his hand like this and he gets whatever he needs, doesn't even have to turn around. I said, "Isn't that your ambition to become a craftsman?" He said, "What for? You get only four dollars more than I do." See. That was the difference, see. That's why, I mean to get the excitement of the achievement, the control, to organize it…. But in this sense there wasn't enough difference in pay. A mural supervisor was the highest, he got two bucks more a week but it didn't mean much but he had to organize, keep a timetable. But that was done on the idea-the honor system. You said there was nobody absent, nobody cheated. Because it wasn't really important. You also had one more faculty that artists have an affinity for their work, they related to their work on the basis that if they had in a piece of junk it's them. So that even though they may-they were saving it for an

exhibition they might cheat a little bit but they couldn't yield in total…because that's them, it's their portrait. So that quality was maintained even when there was a lot of achievement. And also you're judged by the painting by the other painters. So this also gave…it reduced the amount of cheating where it became a fraud, you know, a farce-the kind of work you handed in didn't mean anything-this would have demoralized the project tremendously, because eventually demoralizing the good guys-see, for them the comparison of achievement is no longer there.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: But there's nobody there.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: So this is the basis.… One guy got up once-an anarchist-he was one of those fringe guys in politics, there's what you call a splinter-there's what you call a splinter group and a slither group. A slither group is a single person having no political party, see. So he would come in and say, "Let's have a revolution by giving them the worst possible thing." Well, this offended all of them-no matter-even though they might be fighting the administration, on picket lines or asking for more money to fight firings or something except that they would be willing to give their worst because it might turn out to be their only thing, see. This kind of thing is also a factor. This also lifted the morale above the ordinary project. But again, the sooner… mean we were fortunate in the supervisors. The supervisors were people who advised, who couldn't get on relief;--they had the ability to administer the project, select people, to get things through, to get the Art Commission to approve it, to get the people to accept it, or to promote an agency to sponsor a certain project, see. These people always lived on the basis that they were artists but not bureaucrats. This is so unique that you have…I mean this could only happen on…only if the supervisor thinks himself as a supervisor on a temporary basis. Once he thought it made a career, the permanent quality of his life, then it would change.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: That was also part that kept the spontaneity fresh. Because nobody there felt that they were going to make a career of this. It was a temporary job for eight years. But it was never a career, you see, because they knew it was temporary so that their actions were freer because they didn't have to plan for a hedge or security or to get in because it might last and so forth-all--of this. That's why a kind of…too much of the fringe benefits of security kills something. There should be enough so they don't starve, or the house and shelter and so forth, but to give them where they can live on this basis of, say, Freud, if they want to be a Freud, and live well would be a mistake.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: Because that might become the achievement, you see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: So that you always have to leave it on the level where some achievement is made beyond this, then this remains in the aftermath.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: It isn't lost. It's not skipped over.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: And this is a very important factor. This was the quality of the project, you see, and that's why everybody remembers it no matter whether he was an assistant or he was just a copyist in the design department or he was a swashbuckling muralist like I was. Everybody remembers it with pleasure because they all shared the same freedom. This is no small…all of them-no matter what they were, whether they were good or bad, they all shared that.… And this is a rare experience.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: This is why it's important as an exercise in understanding how to get the best of a group of human beings, of getting the pride to be based not on what you call possessions but quality of performance, and consistently for at least four to five years.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: I mean that's one thing the project did do. The art work again was as good as any other period.

There was a lot of bad things but most of the bad ones were relegated to assistants. They were lost. Their production was supervised or welded into something else so that it didn't show up as badly as it could have if they all were free painters.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: But they were all controlled and many of them liked the fact, they couldn't stand that kind of isolation because it would be too revealing. It was much better to go under a process of apprenticeship…

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: …in order to…and still have the satisfaction of being an artist.

MR. PHILLIPS: And learn. By going to school too.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: Because weren't there a number of young people fresh out of school?

MR. SPIVAK: Certainly. But you see all of this led to wonderful spontaneity that was kept warm and on a hot basis by many factors-the administration, the people who started the thing, the people in Washington who kept seventy kilometers away from us by allowing McMahon to have full control where she was queen in her own domain and could ignore, and if they hesitated she would call up Washington, she could go over their heads very quickly. So all of this combined and the very fact that Congress couldn't do anything…the whole country was in a very…. But that's…would you like some drinks?

MR. PHILLIPS: No, thank you.

MR. SPIVAK: But you see all of this combined together is so rare and the consistency at the same time of all these qualities was shared by so many diverse factors, the times, the administration, the supervision, the artists and their own demands on their work, see. And the fact that it was kept free of what you call gang methods in style. Suppose they only wanted the academic school.

MR. PHILLIPS:

MR. SPIVAK: And they couldn't live together.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: They could live together, the academic and the proletarian and the abstract could live together-if all they asked them to be artists in each.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right. And that gave them opportunity to….

MR. SPIVAK: And this is what goes back to the…everything I mean you don't have to have them all equal in quality, or you don't have-you can have them side by side, as long as they share one thing. And this communication came through whether it was an academic artist who hated proletarian art or an abstractionist who hated any kind of tradition at all. That didn't stop them for sharing the same kind of experience.

MR. PHILLIPS: No.

MR. SPIVAK: That was an experience I think none of the boys forget. You meet them the least possible chance everybody…"Do you remember? Do you remember this incident?" And this goes on, and now it's actually about thirty years.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: And they never forget it. [Sotto voce]

MR. PHILLIPS: Did Mrs. McMahon ever reach the point where she recognized the Union as the agent for…?

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. She recognized it. She fought against it for a while because it might have inflicted something of a power, but she was smart enough since the trade union was strong in Washington to play along with it and recognize its availability. She did something once-once there was project in the Post Office murals; this was a Treasury Department project only on commission. It was not hired. And we were fighting for more jobs for newcomers who came in. The quota was frozen. And she dropped a hint that there was something available there, you know, without being direct, sort of slipped in a note and then, when we came to meeting the other

people, it was very fortunate because we gained about 200 jobs. So that she used us also on the basis of getting rid of the pressure on her 200 people who needed jobs and diverted it into channels that were opposed to us. Oh, but this is good politics too.

MR. PHILLIPS:

MR. SPIVAK: I have no moral basis for it but she knew the administration well and she used the Artists Union eventually. She did not consider them an enemy and the fact that they made demands helped her demands, made her a bigger project. We were used as Parkinson's Law. But it wasn't written but it has always been true.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: Once she recognized what we could do for her, she was very wonderful.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. What about the wage scale?

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. The wage scale was at one time fixed at twenty-four dollars for twenty-four hours. The law was established-the trade unions put through a law that all wage are paid on projects should be paid according to prevailing wages for union labor. When this law came through we took steps-we sent our claims even though we had no precedent. And we used the scenic artists union as a trade union, bona fide trade union, AFL, and the fact is we tried to…our contention was that we would use the public basis, see, of the Artists Union. We do murals for public, we teach in public schools, our designs are given to many organizations-libraries-for public use. On that basis we used the…we tried to establish the scenic artists union being the equivalent and the point is this raised the question then we were getting a dollar an hour, we wanted two dollars an hour which was the legal rate in their books. Well, this would have meant that the mural project was working 24 hours would only work 12. This was what we…but there was no belief in the artists that this was a feasible thing, there was no kind of excitement. They took it but they didn't believe it. This would be, you know, a phenomenon beyond their wildest hopes. So nobody took it seriously until Mrs. McMahon brought in the…all the letters she wrote to commercial artists studios. Apprentices were paid 75 cents and artists were paid a dollar at the most. This was the going rate among the…. Well, then, when this whole pile-she showed me this pile of letters, not one of them had any higher than…I said, "The law says trade union labor," she…. She was very dramatic. She knew, you see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Mmhmm.

MR. SPIVAK: Then Colonel Somervell was the administrator. This is the general who in the World War was the toughest guy.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: But he didn't know this amalgam that was going on, this kind of commotion. So she pointed out that this was our claim-scenic artists-and he began to talk about anecdotes of artists he had met, you can imagine, see. Finally we told him we had no time for anecdotes, this General…. So this was something that he never gets in the Army. Finally he came down to the basis, could we…she asked could we continue the mural projects and all our responsibility and assignments in schools on the basis of twelve hours. So then I said, "That's for you to figure out but our claim is two dollars." They came back-they went out of the office-we stayed in the office, they went out. This is the kind of thing we did that nobody…you know, you can't plan this kind of thing.

MR. PHILLIPS: No.

MR. SPIVAK: See, we made it clear what we want, we have our plans-what's your answer? And since we were many and they were two, they went along and when they finally came back and they offered us sixteen hours-no, fifteen hours-sixteen hours, yes, because there was one dollar, sixteen hours was the compromise. Then we asked them to go out again, you see, because…then when I realized there was no kind of, no belief, in this kind of thing, nobody would right for it, this was something beyond their wildest dreams…

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: …and the fact that we got even this victory was something important. So then we tried to get other things to compensate for the fact that we were willing to settle for one-sixty, but by that time they knew we'd take it, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So it was all settled. When I announced it in the Artists Union hall that we were getting-I think it was a fifteen hour week, I forget how it worked -fifteen or sixteen hour week, see, and that we won this victory, nobody believed it. One guy gets up and says, "If we win more victories like that, we'll be out on the street." That's the marvelous thing about it that their mind could run in that kind of because their desire to give was

there.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: They were something.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And the fact that you were giving it so short a time meant that it was going to be less…very soon nothing. It's like the Mies van der Rohe statement, see, "More is less; less is more." What he meant by not getting too involved with details and all kinds of involvement, if you reduce it to the synthesis of the purest, you get more-less is more.

MR. PHILLIPS: Mmhmm.

MR. SPIVAK: But if you want more, you get nothing. See, that's the kind of thing that they were thinking even before Mies van der Rohe said it. It's a very good statement-it set the….

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: But there was really no basis to go to any action for more.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: But they didn't believe it.

MR. PHILLIPS: No.

MR. SPIVAK: It's a fantasy; I know it was.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes, it was. In its own context it was. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: It was. It was. So we used to go out on our off days-we used to work three days a week, see, it as a five hour day; we had fifteen hours-we'd go off on Thursday at ten o'clock to Jones Beach and the millionaires would be coming in to work. That's the kind of democracy we had. It was marvelous! See, this went on and on. The quality of it always was on the luftmensch type but with enjoyment, not suffering luftmensch or velsch mensch, it was altemensch. It was the excitement of the creative phrase, the creative act, the creative motion, everything on that basis.

MR. PHILLIPS: Uh-huh.

MR. SPIVAK: And everybody shared it. They all smelled it; they felt it and smelled it and enjoyed it.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: Even though they weren't the most active, they all had that feeling.

MR. PHILLIPS: And whatever artistic persuasion, from conservative on, they all had this?

MR. SPIVAK: They all had that. No matter what kind of school of painting they had, they all shared in this fact that every act was spontaneous and of the best order and the excitement was shared by all. It was explained and when we went into action the excitement of it melded them all together with terrific enjoyment. This reminds me of the other night, the blackout. I'm now walking about the people in the subways, the elevated. I was stuck on 40th Street walking down to 14th Street. Everybody was having a wonderful time. There was much good feeling. People talked to each other and all these kind of…all the darkness was there, only the headlights and the most amazing thing is that where cars would come up to an intersection, no red lights, no traffic lights, another car would come-one car would bow and the other one go forward, then he would go forward. You never see that again, the graciousness of cars bowing. Where could you get that! Where they shared the same experience. They debarked on something that was aggressive and whether they really believed in it or not, but something big fell down.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: And they remained. That was marvelous. That's one of the things they missed in England. The bomb shelters had that kind of feeling, see, the community quality of everybody sharing experiences was the most magnificent…it brings out the best, and this is what this did. But it had many factors that you have to have to get it.

MR. PHILLIPS: Oh, sure.

MR. SPIVAK: To duplicate it. That's why I doubt...

MR. PHILLIPS: What?

MR. SPIVAK: ...whether the coincidence of so many wonderful things happening at the same time will ever happen again.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: But I really think that something of this showed, this project showed that the possibility of having even art en masse, I mean where it's promoted by the government paying the artist to paint, a minimum still can't produce good work providing some of the quality because, even with the bad ones, see, the question has always been bad painting. Society has always supported thousands of bad painters to get a few good ones. If you're only going to command only the few good ones, you're not going to get any. So that this kind of thing proves that, even with this kind of association of many people, some talented and some not; still, good work, enough good work, was produced to make it worthwhile.

MR. PHILLIPS: Hmm.

MR. SPIVAK: In that sense, but the administration of it, the supervision, and the quality of the artists had to be recreated to capture that same sort of feeling, or else it's just welfare, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right. Right.

MR. SPIVAK: And that's the big problem, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Did you have continuing dealings as a union with Somervell?

MR. SPIVAK: No, he wasn't there for a long time; he came in the year before the War, you see. He came in the year before the War was declared in '41. After December 7 the project changed, but he was no longer attached to it.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: He was there a very short while. The fact is we actually avoided meeting with him. See, the only reason we met with him at that time was to have him approve the wage rate.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: He had to do it.

MR. PHILLIPS: But he was in the press not infrequently with these quota reductions announcing, you know, so many artists are going to be lopped off and....

MR. SPIVAK: That's right. Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: But Congress in a sense was behind this because it kept, you know....

MR. SPIVAK: It kept squeezing...they began...the emergency began less...

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: ...less viable, the kind of people that were in there were obnoxious to him, they would eventually-they had no finger in the pie-they wanted part of that pork barrel basis, and so our kind of people had to go.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So eventually we would have been cut down regardless of the War.

MR. PHILLIPS: But what got the teachers to sit in Somervell's office? Marvelous.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. Well, that's what it was. At that time there was no kind of, I mean at that time there was no kind of fear, that kind of activity was still new, the sit-in experience was very new at the time. I don't know where it started, but it was very new. But that sit-in was participated-everybody volunteered with excitement...at the other end you almost had to stop them, they went on so many causes outside of their own causes that we had to call a halt because we had to supply the bail, see. And so this became too heavily on that side because the

excitement of that kind of act where being one of the mass was…they couldn't get over it.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So in this sense…and that's why everyone, whether they can understand it in the same sense, they all shared it. So it isn't necessary then to even understand what was really happening. All they had to do was to share it, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And this I think everybody would say….I think there'd be very few exceptions. Have you met any who found it a very humiliating experience, a very patronizing experience, or that kind? You haven't?

MR. PHILLIPS: No.

MR. SPIVAK: And I don't think you'll find many. You certainly had causes. Some people felt some things weren't just and so forth but not in the quality of the experience.

MR. PHILLIPS: Oh no! But, you know…hell, there were a lot of things going on in the world-the Spanish Civil War….

MR. SPIVAK:

MR. PHILLIPS: You had to choose. Our nation couldn't because we were behind the Johnson Act.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: But instinctively, emotionally, you could choose.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: And the artists chose the right side.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. I mean what they did was to choose the most heroic side.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: I would say the right side, too. I'm not arguing about that but I want to classify it as a kind of experience, not on a basis of right and wrong, because it's true they were on the right side, but at the same time the excitement of the experience was better on that side, see. I can only say that. That was true. I mean, if it is that way then it's a true experience; it's like when I teach in art, I say, "If it looks good on paper, if it works on paper, it's true. The very fact that you copy a thing and it's bad doesn't make it true. If it's bad on here it's bad; you've got to do something about it because nobody is going to check it each time because that's not important. It's what it does here and here's the little world. Does it look good this paper and, even if it isn't exactly the same thing, then it's true. And that's a quality of truth; see; even if they felt it to be true it was enough…felt it to be true, it was enough, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Mmhmm. It was enough. Gee, but it's …with homes it's all kinds of things.

MR. SPIVAK: Well, you mean to say even especially parents of these kids? Would you say that, or…?

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. On the whole notion of political affiliation…

MR. SPIVAK: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: …they cut across all kinds of lines….

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. The thing is that it only started…only started as a group….

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: It doesn't offer too much on an individual basis. After that they became the fellow travelers, which wasn't the same thing. They weren't…they supported by money.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: Some of them got rich like in Hollywood, they paid conscience money but they were no longer making the act, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right. Right.

MR. SPIVAK: Because if they had to go into that they had to get a new kind of psychology of power, of organization for the sake of power. And this they were not willing to do. It was a spontaneous thing, it was fresh, it was a personal act but it was not a question of power. And any guy who was in this long enough eventually knows that you don't fool around with that if you really know you go into it enough it is power play, see. And even if the fight is C.p. faction, Stalin faction, you have to organize your own power. You can't do it by being alone. So quit. Get out.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right. Right.

MR. SPIVAK: See, this is important. When it came to that, they quit. Whether they knew why or not is unimportant. They felt it. The instinctive business was not to go into it. Because then they would have to have a new kind of ethics, new kind of decorum, a new kind of attitude. And they would lose something that they felt was important.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: The personal act of spontaneity in their art.

MR. PHILLIPS: And this they wouldn't risk.

MR. SPIVAK: This they didn't want to risk.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: It's all right. It's all right up to a point but when they threatened that art, that kind of world where they had that kind of freedom to create their own little world on paper, this is a freedom you have to pay for, see. Then, when they threatened that by their own will and by going into it so much even on the basis of conscience, the ones who did weren't much of an artist anyway.

MR. PHILLIPS: No.

MR. SPIVAK: They chose the most important thing for them.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: It wasn't art.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So everybody lives the way he wants to live. Eventually there is a question of choice. Would you like a beer?

MR. PHILLIPS: No, no. no. [Interruption]

MR. SPIVAK: …flower.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: Once it reaches its fullest ___ it has to die. It can't get better; it has to die. It reaches its end. This is the law of nature. The struggle is beautiful, the kind of quality even in struggling has to have its beauty for you, you can't just spend it on the achievement. The guy who climbs the mountain, the Alps, doesn't climb to be just on top of the mountain and have a cold seat and snow and wind there. It's the struggle that also has its beauty. That's the nature of art too. You don't always achieve a miracle in art but the struggle is beautiful.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: This is the thing the young kids don't know today. They don't know the word struggle and they don't know that it can be beautiful just struggling. And as I say once the achievement of that perfect vision, that spontaneous kind of grouping of all these factors to make a wonderful experience shared by thousands of people, it has to die; it cannot be renewed by itself. Something else has to come up to make it…a new struggle has to come up to grow better and that makes a struggle. Something has to…lose something to get something.

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, is this the seed behind the development of the Artists Congress, a much larger thing?

MR. SPIVAK: Well, no. The Artists Congress was a political move. It was to enlist the names of well-known artists who weren't involved with the struggle primarily, who had name value and news value to support political basis

and also to support economic basis. But it wasn't supposed to be…we took the people in the Artists Congress on their own terms. They didn't ask participation day by day. They didn't ask them to get involved in the Jimmy Higgins basis of the struggle to exist. All they wanted was their names, to take an issue politically because they only wanted to use those names representing the artists and not the ones who were doing the struggling who also were as good but didn't have the fortune to be in the books. This already became part of the political thing. It's true many of these people had sympathies but the primary aim of the Congress was not to increase the quality of it but it was to support the political end of it.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. By creating a central….

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. That's right. That's when it came into the nature of politics, real politics, the power politics. That's the way….

MR. PHILLIPS: It's gone past…. It's almost like the preservation of a vested right.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. That's right. You see, that really didn't mean anything to the artists, the younger artists, and it didn't mean very much to people who consciously knew what it was about and they thought they would help that way but they weren't even involved.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: It was purely a support basis without heroes, without heroic deeds.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right. The time for heroic deeds is past.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. See, now the thing is that's how it happens, you see. It needs experience. You can't freeze it.

MR. PHILLIPS: No, you can't.

MR. SPIVAK: It doesn't get better. It dies. You see, this is true of art, the very fact that a movement like the Renaissance can reach that high where the poetry and the kind of …even among gangsters and the dukes, the kind of change that breaks under the feudal system into a new kind of the image of man will result and reach its height. As soon as it reached its order and its equilibrium and harmony in Raphael and others, they were good… have to die, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Polarities.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. It has to have…I mean you also have discovered, see, that what you call personal habit-the breakout, then you have the order, then you have the breakdown, and the order. Once this becomes established as an order, then deterioration set in, the status would come in, the power would come in, the economic power and prestige would come in. You can't have that. The struggle has to be the basis.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right. Right.

MR. SPIVAK: And this is why these things cannot last. And they shouldn't, see. I mean by having it last too long, you kill the memory of the good things. It's fortunate, see. It's hard to say this, I mean you can't…I've got a certain kind of thinking, you know, what would happen, see, but you have to say that it's fortunate it remains.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. As long as you can.

MR. SPIVAK: As long as you can, see. Once it becomes a machine thing used by the reform Democrats or the Democrats or the Republicans, all of them, or the Progressive Labor Party, in the experience itself will die, the memory of it will die.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And this is one of the things that we have to recreate, the whole kind-a kind of…the things that made the thing jell, plus the struggle. We can't have it without it.

MR. PHILLIPS: No.

MR. SPIVAK: This is the nature of nature-the nature of art too. As soon as a movement reaches its height, it has no possibility that the artist can see to improve it; he has to break it down to…. It may not be as good but it cannot just…. Michelangelo killed sculpture for three hundred years-nobody-after it came to Rodin, then it began to break out again. That's the problem. I mean the nature of the experience resembles very much the nature of art. The miracle basis that sometimes the unconscious comes in ____the spontaneous business-you can't plan it, you only have to accept it when you have it, embrace it, but you cannot plan it, organize it, and direct the

miracle. These accidents have to come in the action because all these things happen together, see. And to try to plan it that way would be almost impossible.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: And this accident is part of art. The only thing is what... the accident should be used by the artist as part of his concept of events. But if he ___ then he depicts the accident. That means...that's what happened with Abstract Expressionism. The glorification of the notion of the nuances, the accident. The only ones that were doing really well were the ones who painted twenty years like Bill de Kooning. So they knew it from experience that this was good. It was no longer.... They recognized something even in the accident that they didn't want to stop. But the young kids tried it and it was a mess. That's why ___ die. These new kinds of movements in art... nothing takes its place because there was no structure-there's too much accident. You can have structure and motion-how to do that, that's always a question.

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, within this period of period-this spontaneous period--what was the nature of experimentation in your own work on murals?

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. The thing is, for instance, I was asked if there weren't mosaic murals-they had mosaic craftsmen who were unemployed. When I brought in my first sketch of mosaic, the mosaic craftsmen recognized it as something they could do different from what they had been doing. Watching them see it come to life made me...then I got it by myself. This started the whole cult of mosaics.... So I started the first mosaics in schools because of the problem of vandalism, see, you cannot put paintings in schools. Vandalism.... We have a new kind of sculpture in schools. Group sculpture. Stick a figure, chop off the head, a hand is chopped off, so it's very tough now. But the point is that it did for me reveal the need, even though it's a Byzantine medium, but it had been corrupted by the fact that they imitated painting and made it dark and light instead of getting the nuances, the play, you know, the scintillations of limited space, not three-dimensional space. And they have mosaics in the Vatican that never even know painting except Michelangelo, which is too hard to do painting. Boticelli, Raphael, did mosaics that were twenty feet apart and you can't tell the difference. That's how corrupted it became. When it becomes something else, it no longer has value by itself. So what I did was to encourage the medium itself using the modern medium of scintillation, of vibration, instead of light to dark, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So, to keep the activity going in a canvas-this was from my modern experience--that's why I worked it out. And this influence, I mean this kind of experience is experimentation with silk screen. I was there when they first used the photographic silk screen. This was when we were doing war work. They put up a fifty-foot long table and they used a photographic print of good design and it came out the first time it was used by a guy who had never done silk screen and this since has been ____ make a screen out of it and this came through. So that the silk screen industry came from the project. But many other...I mean, offhand, I wouldn't know. Now the Index of American Design is still kept up in some form or other by private people who also became important. So that many things that occurred were very good. For me it was a wonderful thing, the medium of mosaics so that I could...and when it was put to use, it was very well received.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: So that this sort of thing by this kind of association had its rewards in invigorating kind of thinking _____ and, if it was accepted along with progress, the excitement would have been enough. This would have been a new struggle, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. SPIVAK: Then it's all right, see. But it became a political struggle was the killer, that would be so contrary to the basis of the instinctive and the spontaneous that it would kill. Now the struggle for development of mediums and new kinds of approaches, this was encouraged to continue in the project is the main fact and the economic would have been subdued. Even though it were cut off, this would also be renewed but with a new area. Otherwise, if we continued where we only enlarged our political activities as an organization, people in organizations identify themselves going out and copying everybody else, we would have been bad bargainers but not artists, I think. See what I mean.

MR. PHILLIPS: But even in the mural division, you could distinguish a greater freedom in schools, murals in schools...

MR. SPIVAK: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: ...than you could for murals for a public building?

MR. SPIVAK: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: This is important I think because…

MR. SPIVAK: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: …nobody did think in terms, you know-you do a mural and everyone is, I think, not conversant with the nature of negotiation for acceptance of the mural because….

MR. SPIVAK: Well, the thing is that what we tried to do was to avoid the historic, to avoid the kind of the history business of a city, or the history of weaving, the history of medicine, the history…cliché… but we wanted to show…. That's why what I picked on the grade school kids because there I could make a goat and the goat was standing on his ear, this would be a natural, logical thing for a goat to do. But among adults it wouldn't be. What is the goat doing standing on his ear? With them it's a different problem, you know. Goat standing on his ear, he's standing on his tail and this goes on, they are laughing by this grade school as a phenomenon of wonder but among the older kids it would not and especially the adults and the teachers and the principal would accept it on the basis, well, it's all right for kids. But it was all right for me, see.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: So that's the way I went into the thing and trying to get the kids to participate by having them… some blank faces, some of their drawings were beautiful but we couldn't preserve them as such because the process was important but, as each kid drew each week, it was good; it was as good or better than the last one. So, because we wanted them, then it became partly them, you know. It was marvelous.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's what I meant by experimentation.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. So that this sort of thing, this kind of thing, now this is where the new kind of achievement would have to be directed for that kind of struggle, for that kind of achievement would have been the next step, see. But unfortunately we never got to that point, you see. I think it was too involved politically. That would have to be removed. Once it reached that kind of struggle, the excitement, the identity with the human race, again sharing their problems voluntarily because we welcomed them to our human race. They joined us, we didn't join them. You know, that kind of thing. That was marvelous for a while. But after a while that ____ and then by sacrificing and doing, because we found our identification, we finally found we were the lost tribe or they were the lost tribe doing everything they did or what we thought they should do, we would have to That's why many of the artists who, when they had to face the political basis as the important thing, ____ chose the other and the few artists who didn't were never primarily interested, you know.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: It was only a means.

MR. PHILLIPS: The handwriting was pretty much on the wall, wasn't it, by '38 or 39?

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. I mean actually we were being attacked. We were being attacked by the middle class, small towns. The other states-after all this was primarily a big city project-San Francisco, Chicago, and so forth, and it had to have that kind of atmosphere to have this kind of commotion.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: Couldn't occur in a small town. It would upset. And the character of the small town is the conformity. You can think anything but don't express it, see. You can do anything but don't do anything unusual, see. Then everything is fine. But this kind of thing could only occur in this small town and with _____. This was the danger with Mr. Goldwater. He was the typical small town mind. He knew the value, the year one; he was sincere about it, he was very simple, no monkey business, no nonsense, what's right is right and what's wrong is wrong and he represented ___ still is _____ And this is the thing that would have killed it eventually. So the artists had to get out. They had to get out because they couldn't survive without an emergency. Now what's going to happen with Johnson's cultural format I don't know, you see. That's…. I mean, see, I don't know whether the artists _____ or not. But the Kennedy program is a question of taste; it's a question of a little higher perhaps but good taste, it wasn't any finer. _____ fashion. The fashion would have taken over, see. And you have to ____ you don't leave it up there. There were patrons in the past who supported art and they were bastards and they were crooks and they were bandits and they were dukes and everything else. But they knew this: that their claim to posterity was in art. So they allowed…look what happened to the queen of Spain with Goya. Did you ever see anything more horrible than ____ she never recognized it. He was a traitor, he was with Napoleon for a while ____ came back ___ he was _____ to posterity. See, that's a funny thing. And we don't have that kind of thing. It becomes an expression of taste. It's not the same thing. They'll fight for ____ on the basis. So I mean it's still the

artists ____the combination of all these things _____ fortunate certainly the administrators in Washington and the fortunate thing that the administrators here were artists and still are, you see. That is how to do it. Where there's money involved, there's pressure involved, etc.

MR. PHILLIPS: _____ it traveled…its momentum longer in terms of spontaneity because there wasn't any precedent.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: ____ that's what

MR. SPIVAK: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: Worry about what they' re going to do later on.

MR. SPIVAK: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: And then the administration _____ at arm's length, didn't it?

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. Yes, because the vehicle was in their ground. Block was an administrator. Cahill was right there, he was one of the boys ____ brain trust ___this kind of thing and this was their kind of contribution ____. When they tried to increase the music project, you know, one time Roosevelt had project problems, he said, "Must I give everybody who wants a fiddle, a fiddle?" This was his answer to our people. And this was going on. This was understood, you see. It was part of-the actual identification Hopkins wasn't there. Well, I think it's understood now that art is useful. It's like I've done a lot of murals for big companies - Pfizer, Warner-Lambert, Colgate-Palmolive, Johnson & Johnson…. The business man is very free now. He says, "I don't care whether it's art or not. What will it do for me?" He doesn't care about the art, he's not involved with the cultural problem. This is another thing, you know, he can use ____ to give his prestige ___ he gets in the paper ___ look more important .That's a freedom for the artist I mean. I've had this, see. So that I welcome it. It's not that I object to it, but it's not on the real basis of love, it's not on the basis of culture, it's the basis of use. That's valuable to the artist.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes.

MR. SPIVAK: For instance, I did a small group for Johnson & Johnson, and the architect called me when I had a sketch ready. We went down there to New Brunswick and he looks at it and he dies. He said, "It's crazy. Birds!! For Johnson & Johnson? ___ Couldn't say anything. ___ looks at birds. He said, "Why? What birds?" The only thing I can think of in terms of the Johnson Company is ____ that was the smallest mural, see. So they laughed. Then they began to look at it ____ you know. This is the way it happens he looked at it and, after a while, ____ executive ____ birds, see. And that's what happened. The employees came around asking Mr. Harper ___ So this fitted the place again and I had one more problem. When I came in there they all had their notes. You can't do a mural when everybody under your nose can tell you what to do because they never know what they want. But they know that they don't like it, see. ____ Stopped. So I'm not going to give you a history of medicine, I'm going to give you the structure of the sun, the sea, the vegetation , the solar system ____ with scientists ___They know, but they know that they…. But this kind of ____ changing the press is one more ____ thing _____ energy. It's a question now _____ posterity, that was important. That was more important than art, see. _____ In order to do what you want, you can't be just somebody finds you ____ and it's good. _____ It's very much like what happened to Rembrandt. They paid $2,300,000 for a Rembrandt that many artists consider inferior. What difference does it make? It makes ____ if buying it for two million they increased the price ____ or twenty, what's the difference? They make money! What value is money, see? In that connotation, that's what's happened. I mean you can't worry about things ___ pay every price ____ what have they got to lose? That's what happened to the boom in art. Paintings evaluated at an increased price ____ They made money on…they not only got their money back but they increased the value the so-called appraisers made any price. Everything went up. That kind of value is coming in, you see… There's money in it. Where there's money ____ income tax. They cut that out, by the way. Too much of ____ but that made for the boom in art ____ it may be good for the artist anyway ____ interest in art. It made people ____ you have to get something that will appeal to the mass so that the ordinary guy, the goons, wouldn't take it over ____ so-called ____ What will it do for them? That's why the business man is so ____ because ____. He doesn't care about it; it doesn't do anything to him, he'll laugh about it. ____ Good image.

MR. PHILLIPS: [Inaudible] Handle the….

MR. SPIVAK: Yes. They maybe on the right side, but the primary basis, they don't want to expose you, of course, they don't make any money but they don't want to pay too much. IBM for five years, twenty thousand dollars. The longer you work there the more you convince yourself, see…that it's good to be loyal. And, if your dog dies IBM pays the funeral expenses. A guy had a nervous breakdown, they kept him on the payroll. What's money, you see. The money isn't ____ a machine, a new kind of development, a new kind of promotion, see. If you want

loyalty, you have to have some people. They don't even need as many as they have. But if they get the image, then the people will be glad when they break down, the power trust, ____ of image, see. The human dream ____ if it does, it's pretty bad.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes. Fill me in on the waning moments of the Project, how they gathered together, what happened to Mrs. McMahon…?

MR. SPIVAK: Mrs. McMahon-she was like a Joan of Arc. She had her own interest; she wanted to be the most important woman in New York in the art field. But at the same time she did a wonderful job in fighting off the bureaucrats, taking on the unions ___ so that they added up a score to be even when the Project went into the war period, December 7, about a month after everybody ___ all into one big loft on King Street state supervisor ___ I was the head of the ___ Project ___ then I became assistant. Then I left for the Navy and I became ___ Horatio Alger story ___ and when they were called in a little later ___ and they were called in.… It was a real blow. They knew war was on. There wasn't too much they could say or do about it. They couldn't protest.… It was an attack and also political, see. So there wasn't ___ don't embarrass the administration. Posters. People were doing cartoons. They had to be reorganized into silk screens people ___. Most of the people were just people putting posters ___ manual-mostly unskilled workers. Jackson Pollock was a designer for posters ____ People would faint when they were told to do things they ordinarily would feel were beneath them. ____ I had an open door to come in. _____ Well, she didn't want to quit. Something would happen that she would get back ____ She had no authority _____ They kicked her upstairs. She used every opportunity to increase the benefits of the project. She was all right.

MR. PHILLIPS: How did she handle Eddie Cahill in Washington?

MR. SPIVAK: ____ but she was too powerful. And Eddie Cahill wasn't particularly intrigued with it; he was one of these…Stuart Davis's friends. If it went along all right; he didn't make an issue, he knew the limitations In Washington. Harry Knight was ____ he was doing it for something good.

Typist's note: The interview goes on but I think you will agree it is impossible to make a coherent transcription.

MR. PHILLIPS: Let me turn you off.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

MR. PHILLIPS Note: …has its service station right across the street from where I recorded this. Somewhere along this second tape their hum starts which distorts the voice and made it, I suspect, very difficult to transcribe. They were having trouble with one of their damned generators, which accounts for the hum, because I recorded this later that same evening and there's no hum. HP

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