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Oral history interview with Serge Trubach, 1964 December 5

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Serge Trubach on December 5, 1964. The interview was conducted at Serge Trubach's home in Sausalito, California by Mary Fuller McChesney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

MARY MCCHESNEY: This is Mary Fuller McChesney interviewing Serge Trubach, who lives at 631 Bridgeway, Sausalito, California. The date is December 5, 1964. First, I would like to ask you, Serge, where were you born?

SERGE TRUBACH: I was born in the Ukraine.

MARY MCCHESNEY: What year?

SERGE TRUBACH: 1912.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Where did you get your art training?

SERGE TRUBACH: Mostly in New York and then in Europe.

MARY MCCHESNEY: What schools did you go to in New York?

SERGE TRUBACH: Well, I began studying in the neighborhood I lived in New York. In the neighborhood, you know, at a boy’s club, and form there I got a three year scholarship to the National Academy, and then from the National Academy I got a fellowship to Europe. I studied in Europe for a couple of years. But meanwhile, while I was studying at the Academy, I also studied at Cooper Union, and at the Beaux-Arts in New York, and different places where I went to, you know. I studied various things, such as sculpture, etching, and lithography, drawing, and painting and so forth, and watercolor, whatever the menu was at that time.

MARY MCCHESNEY: When did you make your first contact with any of the government sponsored art projects?

SERGE TRUBACH: Well, when I got back from Europe things were getting pretty dull, you know, quiet and economically they were very poor. It was the beginning of the depression when the project began. It began with the TRAP, Treasury Relief Art Project, and there were only three hundred artists on it from all over the country, including some well-known people like William Zorach and some of the 57th street artists. And it was originally organized by the Whitney Museum, by Mrs., what’s her name again? She used to run the Whitney Museum – Juliana Force. And there were only about three hundred in the whole country but the Whitney Museum was the innovator of the project. It was started as the tail end of the relief program for the unemployed. And some of the artists, having contacted the Whitney Museum and also exhibited at the museum, had felt that something should be done for the artists so they finally organized this project and it was national. And the way they worked it was that you painted one painting and when that painting was done, you were off, see. The wages were from about $25 to $100 a week. The result was that some of the artists went off to Florida to paint; some of the sculptors went hither and yon; some turned in their work right away; some stretched it out for almost a year. At that time, some of the artists felt that some of their colleagues were kind of destitute and somebody should start a program of a larger nature. So we went to see Mrs. Force and asked to have it enlarged, which she refused. And so the artists finally organized into a group and they picketed the Whitney Museum, whereupon Mrs. Force called out the motorcycle police and they corralled us around the entrance and wanted to know what was going on, and after she had called the police they decided to a have a spokesman for the group, and I was the spokesman. So I went upstairs and we talked to Mrs. Force about the whole project and after that, of course, she was so angry about the whole thing, I was never allowed to show in the Whitney Museum after that. However, it was very interesting to observe that with all the new movement in art going on at that time, that her office was full of Eugene Speicher’s very romantic girls sort of, all over the place. This was very surprising to some of the artists. Oh, there must have been about a hundred hired, and they were paid from about $25 to about $35 a week, depending on their dependents, and they finally took on a few more as the thing went on, until finally the program got larger due to the fact that the artists began to organize into a union, which was part of the CIO. And I happened to be the chairman of the grievance committee so I had a lot of contacts with different officials, such as General Johnson, who was head of the project at one time. And the Federal Art Project included all the unemployed, not only the artists, all the crafts and arts, and laborers and everyone was under the program, and at that time the rule was that the Army was supposed to administer the project. So we enlarged it to several hundred and finally there were about – all they employed in New York City there must have been about five thousand on the rolls, you see…

MARY MCCHESNEY: Was it still called TRAP?

SERGE TRUBACH: That was called PWP – the Federal Art Project was part of the relief program, and the program was the Public Works Project, PWP or PWAP, Public Works of Art Project. There were various categories of clerical workers and they all had initials. And it was quite a strenuous period, you know. A lot going on. Ironically, at the same time that this was all going on, Mrs. Whitney had her private art studio group, where she had several swishy young men that she supported and gave them fifty bucks a weeks, you know, and some went to Europe and at the same time she had her own little group, which she financed, you know. And then right after the project grew larger and larger, there was a Professor MacMahon at New York University…

MARY MCCHESNEY: What was his name again?

SERGE TRUBACH: Professor MacMahon and he was consulted about the arts and so finally his wife was given the job as the director of the Art Project, which included mural painting and posters, and different categories of sculpture, and all kinds of crafts. Then they had the *Index of American Design*. They had artists copying little emblems and little relics of colonial days in different parts of the country, you know, sculptures and utensils that were used, and they catalogued and a fabulous collection was made at that time. However, to get back to the Art Project, they also had a group of unusual artists because they had to qualify for the project; those that were very creative, and there were the easel painters, and there were people that painted romantically, and there were very modern painters. However, there was always the chance of being disqualified on some pretext, justified or not, and several artists were always in danger of losing their jobs. Some did lose their jobs. Then there were wage cuts and there were many cases of demonstrations, of strikes, or pickets, or kind of organized action to prevent cuts in pay, to prevent people from being fired, to help make people get back on, and cases of signing the pauper's oath, there were cases of dependency, and there were cases of residential qualifications – whether you were a qualified resident, whether you were in the city for a certain amount of time. However, to overcome that, action was taken by the Artists' Union at one time. One of the big actions was a mass entrance of the artists in mid-town Manhattan where a couple hundred artists entered the quarters and refused to leave the quarters in the evening when the offices were closing. Whereupon Mrs. MacMahon called the police department and they came down to the entrance and the people wouldn't leave so they immediately called up ambulances and they beat the devil out of all the artists and some of them had to be taken to hospitals on stretchers. Meanwhile, the photographers from the newspaper came around and took pictures of all this going on. And they got hold of people on the 24th floor and sent the elevator up there and they'd catch you by the back of the neck and throw you into the elevator, so you hit the elevator face first, or head first, and then as you came out on to the street, the police didn't know that the newspapers were notified, so they just went ahead with their clubs and beat everybody up. The women were hit with rubber trenchers in the midriff because they didn't want to show any bruises, so there wouldn't be any public sentiment that they were also beaten. So they were hit in the midriff of their body so it wouldn't show in public, you know, when they went out of the building. And at the same time, the photographers took pictures and immediately took them back to the newspapers and the *New York News*, you know, sent out an evening edition with the front page showing full photographs of clubs being wielded and a lot of people being beaten up. And somehow the editorial office didn't realize that this was sort of bad publicity. So by about eleven o'clock all the papers were around Times Square, all the newsstands were packed with these copies of the *New York News*, and people were buying them all over Times Square. And suddenly somebody advised them that they'd better get those things off the stands, so they sent out trucks all over the city with drivers and tried to get the papers off the stands immediately to get rid of the bad publicity. Well, that went on that night, and several people landed in the hospital, and then there was a big trial and at that time I think it was the LaGuardia administration, I'm not sure, but Vito Marcantonio was a Progressive Republican protégé of LaGuardia. And he handled the case. And he had a tremendous case. It was called "219 Artists." No it was "John Doe and 218" were arrested, you know. It turned out that all the artists arrested all gave fictitious names and were sent up to night court. Let's see what we have so far.

MARY MCCHESNEY: OK.

SERGE TRUBACH: Is it on?

MARY MCCHESNEY: Yes.

SERGE TRUBACH: They sent us up to night court and we got there about eight o'clock and they had two big pens. They put all the women in one pen and all the men in the other. And several women became hysterical. There was only a urinal on the floor where the men were.

MARY MCCHESNEY: How many women were there compared to the number of men?

SERGE TRUBACH: About one third of them were women. And there was a big iron gate, you know, in front of these temporary cells, and among the men they had derelicts that they had pulled in from the park, the vagrants, the alcoholics, the perverts, and these dope fiends. They had them all in the same cell with the men.

And they were waiting around like that. Nobody had eaten any dinner. It was just before dinner time when the arrests were made. So they kept a vigil until about ten o'clock at night and they put all the men in – they took them down to the jail, which was somewhere around 62nd Street, the old jail, and they put them in some of the cells. The cells were full of old army cots that were black with age, you know. Ands across the cells were all these derelicts. I don't know what happened to the women. I didn't know where they went – but the men were all lying all over these cots, these people they had taken in during the day including that night from the different parts of the city, they were also sleeping – there were people sleeping like sardines one over the other. And most of the artists just sat around and talked. However, they all had different names; everybody from Cezanne to Michelangelo was arrested. Rubens was there, and Bruegel, and, oh, Ryder, and let me see, Turner, everybody, you name them and they had them. After everybody was registered and their names taken and taken in to the cell, they sat around and some of them fell asleep, wither sitting up or leaning against the wall, or lying on the floor. It was just the filthiest place you can imagine. If you had to go to the bathroom, you had to get the turnkey, you know. The turnkey was the policeman who was retired or something. He was so fat that I guess they wouldn't dare put him out in public. He was about four hundred pounds, and it took him – from the desk downstairs, it took him quite a long time. Well, after a while they thought they'd release these people, after they booked them. Then they had to appear in court at a later date. So it took from about, oh, eight or ten at night, till six in the morning before everybody got out. We were let out two at a time. When it came to Van Gogh, they couldn't find him. He had disappeared, you know. And it turned out that this Dutchman, who gave his name as Van Gogh, had fallen asleep and he couldn't remember his name when he awoke, didn't know what artist he was supposed to be. So he sat there in the cell and the policeman was waiting and we knew that he was the one they were waiting for but we didn't know what name he gave, so the policeman called out "Vincent Van Gogh," you know, this big fat policeman, and he called and he was very sound asleep, and we motioned to each other who it was. There was only one fellow there that was asleep. So they woke him up and after he woke up, he didn't know what his name was. Finally they decided he was Van Gogh. So they let him out and he was booked and then had to appear later at a mass trial where Vito Marcantonio was the defense lawyer.

MARY MCCHESNEY: What were you charged with?

SERGE TRUBACH: Charged with trespassing and resisting arrest, and all kinds of charges. However, there was one sculptor whose name was Bloch. It's a very important name because when the case appeared in court, he was the main witness. When he came to court he was bandaged from his shoulders up to his head. You could only see his eyes out. You couldn't see anything but his eyes. And I think his name was Lou Bloch. I'm not sure. Later he went to Spain and died over there. He was shot by a dumdum bullet. He died from poisoning. Well, he was on trial and one of the artists was on trial and, of course, it was obvious it was police brutality, and so they got the policeman that he identified as the one that attacked him, and the judge said to him, "Why did you beat him up like that?" He said, "Well, it was in self-defense." He said, "Were you hurt?" He put his finger up. He had this little finger with a little tape, a little Band-aid on it and he showed the judge. But there was this guy practically covered from the neck up to his eyes. All over his face looked like a sculpture cast Only his eyes showed out and this was quite a contrast. Well, anyway, the way they compromised, Vito Marcantonio made a deal with the judge that he would give everyone a suspended sentence if they wouldn't prosecute the individual policemen that were brought up on charges of assault and brutality. So the case was dismissed and everybody got a suspended sentence. That's the way that case ended.

MARY MCCHESNEY: What about your original disagreement with the WPA?

SERGE TRUBACH: Well, they put some more people on then. As time went on they kept firing and hiring. Those artists that probably had the best background were kept on. Those had background and reputation were favored. The biggest trouble was that they hired their own friends. After a while, the administration went off into private industry and they began to hire artists as officers and officials and the were worse than the original people because they got high-hatted and they got conceited and instituted their own friends so it got very chaotic and after a while the rolls kept being cut down and then when the war was declared a lot of people went into the war industries, you know. That's how they were siphoned off. However, at the time of the art project, a lot of work was very good and a lot of artists made their reputation, you know, and developed through the assistance of this project. Nowadays I guess there are quite a few people around the country are well represented, such as, Pollock who was one of the artists on the project and there were others that were well-known. I think it was a most interesting period. However, it shows how chaotic out culture can be when the people today that are so famous all over the world, internationally famous, now are probably too old to enjoy their luxuries and then had a hell of a time surviving. Let's see what we got so far.

MARY MCCHESNEY: OK.

SERGE TRUBACH: The people on the relief rolls were organized. There were about five thousand or more of them. Maybe there were more than that even, but there was a big organization which was called the Workers' Alliance and that included all the artists, the theater people, the dancers, writers, the poets, all the clerical workers, but not the laborers and they had an organization called the Workers' Alliance and a young man by the

name of Lasser or Lesser, I'm not sure, (L-e-s-s-e-r or L-a-s-s-e-r) he was a clubfoot individual, he was a cripple, he was leader of the whole thing, and he had quite a militant group there. I remember one building in town, which was the main administration building, and at that time General Summerville was in charge of the relief projects, and they picketed the building. They had about ten abreast around a clock in the middle of town on the west side and they had enough pickets to picket the whole buildings in a square block. They were about ten abreast, solid, completely around the block. They marched for about all day. To keep people back, to keep people on the road, they had the mounted police out and there was a tremendous demonstration. And then we met, the committee met, and each craft had a representative and we met with General Summerville and began to examine the situation and so then again they put some on. However, the thing fell apart after Mrs. Roosevelt called Lasser to Washington and gave him a job in Washington and nobody ever saw him since. So that was the end of that. That's how the organization fell apart. That's another side issue of the time. And the artists – although some well-known artists were on the project, a lot of them were siphoned off because they couldn't fit into the changes. In other words, they gave up the fine arts, and the easel paintings, and they all began to do posters for the war, for civilian defense, enlistment aid, and those that could qualify were kept on, so I ended up being in the poster division and did posters for different services around the City, for bonds, raising money. You know, selling war bonds, and nurse's aides, and various activities – civilian defense, and so forth. And that's the way the project ended up. And then afterwards the paintings – the interesting part is all the paintings were left over – a lot of them were allocated. At first, they tried to keep the paintings from being too wild because they had to allocate them to hospitals and they had to be serene and quiet, and some people went along with that but a lot of us didn't want to. They wanted to assert themselves and experiment. However, when the paintings were all done and the project was discontinued – they had several thousand paintings – they took them off the stretchers and sold them by the pound to junk men down in the city somewhere in one of the outlying districts. And some of the collectors in town got wind of that and they went down and bought big paintings by famous people for a dollar a piece, you know, and put them back on stretchers. A lot of galleries went down and some of the museums don't realize that they have these pictures that were sold for a dollar to a junkman by that pound, you know. He sold them to a _________ so they resold them back. Galleries got them, and individual artists went down and got them. Of course, the way the thing was worked, no one knew what was going on. It was all so quiet, so those who got wind of the idea, several artists, went down and bought their own work, and some just bought other people's work besides, and several professional people, doctors, lawyers, that were collecting pictures at that time were very busy collecting. At that time, Joseph Hirshhorn was just starting his collection. I think he bought a lot of work of artists on the art project. Now he's a big collector. But I don't know what else I could say unless you ask me some questions in particular.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Well, I'd like to ask you first when you first went on TRAP, what was your first assignment? Were you on the easel project?

SERGE TRUBACH: I started on the easel project. They were all easels, you know. You did your own work. You did a painting or it might be a piece of sculpture and when it was finished, you were taken off, you see. So you tried to stretch it out as long as possible. You had to report every month and you got your pay. You got either $25 or $50, whatever arrangement you made with them. They got you for whatever price they could get you for. However, the big boys got a hundred dollars a week, you see.

MARY MCCHESNEY: And they got you for one painting, and when you finished that one painting, you were off the project?

SERGE TRUBACH: You were through. Some of them stretched it out for a year, so if they didn't have money they would take it longer. There were three hundred artists all over the United states at that time. That started in New York. And then after that, when the government, the Federal, the first one was City relief rolls that got the artists on, that was the TRAP. Then the Federal government made this art project for a whole city. Then, I think, what's his name again? Cahill that was in charge of it, I don't know. Cahill in Washington…

MARY MCCHESNEY: Holger Cahill.

SERGE TRUBACH: Yes, Holger Cahill, and Biddle I think was in this, and I don't know, some other people. It's sort of vague, you know, after so many years.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Well, after being on the Treasury Art Project, then what happened to you?

SERGE TRUBACH: Then you had to go back and apply for relief. You had to qualify for relief before you could get on. But first they gave you about – I don't know, they used to give you tickets to go and get potatoes, or a raw slice of beef. You had no place to cook it, and they you took that home, mostly potatoes and some kind of meat and maybe some storage butter, you know, pound blocks of butter. They'd give you a block that came out of the government storage, you know, surplus, and so forth. At that time they were organizing the Blue Eagle, you know. Do you know what the Blue Eagle was? All the employers used to hire workers to retrain them, you know, and the government would pay part of the training program, part of the wages, so the idea was they could hire

them, say, hire them at a minimum wage and after they were there three months, they had to pay them a regular wage, you know, whatever the wage was at that time. So the government paid part of the thing. While they were working as trainees, the government paid, so as soon as the workers had used up their time period, then they would fire them, and they would hire others. They got a percentage for training them, you know, from the government. So that's what it was, that sort of a thing. A lot of the artists went into industry, like drafting or working for some government – not government but government contracts. They were hired on cost plus basis where they had a thousand draftsmen and some of the artists went into those places and they bought them beautiful desks, they had beautiful lighting, and they did nothing but make fictitious corrections on plans, you know. Meanwhile the employers were getting ten percent plus from the government just out of wages, you know. So if they paid you a hundred dollars a week, they'd get a hundred and ten dollars. They'd get whatever it was. And they used to hire people and also fire them. After three months, they had to give them a certain income, but they wouldn't get the same amount of refund from the government so they used to fire people after they had their certain training period.

MARY MCCHESNEY: This was later, though, during the war?

SERGE TRUBACH: Yes. But I mean a lot of the artists were in these industries, you know, cost: plus, you know, where they'd pay you a hundred dollars and get a hundred dollars. They got a hundred and ten dollars guarantee, in other words. They were supposed to get the money from the government to train the workers, see, a hundred dollars, say, a week, plus ten percent, ten dollars, you see, for the profit, you see. Meanwhile, really they had to pay nothing at all, you see. They got their hundred dollars, gave it to the worker, and they get the income from the plus, you know. They used to hire people by the dozens and they just made money on the plus, you know.

MARY MCCHESNEY: It was the same way in the shipyards here. In the shipyards here at the end of the war, they started to fire people, and as they fired people, production was suddenly up; because there were so many people they were getting in each other's way.

SERGE TRUBACH: Yes. This is a great country, what goes on and how they survive. It's just: fantastic, you know. It's amusing in a way.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Well, were you on any other kinds of projects besides the easel project? Did you ever do a mural?

SERGE TRUBACH: I did a little mural work at the beginning; I did some murals in Central Park. It's still there. I worked on the murals in the police station in Central Park. I worked in the cafeteria…

MARY MCCHESNEY: Tell me about the Central Park police station murals.

SERGE TRUBACH: Yes. They had these old New York murals in the police station. There's a spiral staircase and somebody up there hired people from outside, from private industry, hired commercial artists mostly that were given the commission. They were favored by the politicians and there were some really very talented people who were their assistants, you know. We were assistants. We worked on the murals. We worked on the murals in the cafeteria in Central Park, you know, at 59th Street.

MARY MCCHESNEY: What was the subject of the murals in the police station?

SERGE TRUBACH: They were just old New York – carriages, bustles and, you know, old-time New York.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Was it fresco painting?

SERGE TRUBACH: No, they were done in oil on canvas, and pasted on the wall. Then they did murals of animals, you know, animals dressed in clothes eating, you know, in the cafeteria around the ceiling there. The murals were done over the City as a matter of fact. A lot of people got murals either through the WPA or they got them through the Federal Government, you know. They had mural competitions, you know. The Federal Art Project had mural competitions. Like Refregier's mural was done. He won it in New York and did it out here, you know – Refregier, the one that's in Rincon Annex, you know, Rincon, the post office.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Yes.

SERGE TRUBACH: Were there any other questions?

MARY MCCHESNEY: Is that the only mural that you worked on?

SERGE TRUBACH: I worked on those two murals. Well, I had so much experience being a painter and studying in Europe that I was allowed to do easel painting. And I have, oh, maybe a couple pf hundred paintings all over the country just in public buildings. A lot of them are in Washington and a lot of them were sold to the junkman too.

But I did do a lot of paintings that were placed in collections, and some of them are in universities, colleges, like Hunter College, and Columbia, and Harvard, and Princeton. They sent them all over the place. I don't know – lots of paintings – I don't even remember how many.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Did they set you a quota when you were on the WPA?

SERGE TRUBACH: Well, there you had to do a painting and when it was supposed to be finished, you were supposed to bring it in, you know. And it was very interesting, because some people would paint certain things and they wouldn't accept them, and I used to come, and I'd be the sort of lawyer for these artists and I'd have to defend them. They would put them off. They didn't like the paintings or they thought it wasn't good enough. There were always some excuses, and actually they were only harassing, you know. And ...

MARY MCCHESNEY: Excuse me, if they didn't accept the painting, did that mean that the artist would be dropped from the project?

SERGE TRUBACH: No. But sometimes if he didn't hand in his work on time, or was behind, they'd fire him. Or if they thought the work wasn't supposed to be up to his standard, or something. They'd give you materials to work with – and there were all kinds of things going on all the time. And then others worked right n the building, you know. In the administration building they had studios where they did casting and sculpture for monuments, you know, for buildings that were built by the city. They had different projects, like hospitals, sculpture for the entrance to a park, or wherever the city required some work. And getting repair jobs on monuments and cleaning monuments. But I was mostly on the easel division because I was always an easel painter and I already had sort of [a] reputation, so I didn't have much trouble staying on. But the pay was cut from time to time. We were getting $35 a week, and then we were getting $25 a week, then $27 a week. They'd give us a raise, or they'd cut us off. And of course it was always a problem for those people that remained on were generally looked upon as the people that always pulled the others back in, you know. So it was like a tug-of-war, you know. In other words, it was embarrassing. You might have had the best intentions in the world but if they let you stay on, what could you do about it? Another guy, maybe one of the geniuses, wouldn't stay on because he didn't have the reputation, or something, and there was a lot of favoritism. Mrs. MacMahon had a bunch of fair-haired boys, a lot of homosexuals that ran the office and some of the painters too. And they were favorites of hers. She was a kind of wrinkled, elderly lady, you know, and she liked to have a lot of young men around her, and they used to set the tone, you know. Either they themselves painted or they were administrators, but there was a lot of favoritism in many ways. But all in all, I think it was a tremendous period and I think it certainly was remarkable, I think the whole American movement in painting today and especially all over the world is really in a great way responsible to the projects of that time. A lot of work was done. Many, many hundreds of easel paintings were done, and lots of murals. Some of them were pretty lame murals, but some of them were pretty good. Of course, the period in painting of that time was so different that it was sort of a developing time and so that a lot of work is interesting in the fact that it was so American, you might say, and now it's a little bit more international, you know.

MARY MCCHESNEY: What kind of painting were you doing yourself? What style of painting at that time?

SERGE TRUBACH: Well, I began to do, you know, sort of Romantic painting. Then I went into a sort of phase of Surrealism, and then I went into more of the semi-Abstract, and I ended up being a sort of an Abstract painter. And at the same time, I was connected with several galleries and so I developed a lot during that period. However, it was really a starvation diet and it was quite a struggle to survive because even thought they had these things going, there was never enough artists on, you know. They didn't allow enough artists to stay on it.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Were you allowed to have your own private exhibitions while you were on the WPA?

SERGE TRUBACH: Well, they had their own gallery. They had the Municipal Gallery for a while. They had their own exhibits. They had traveling exhibits. They had the College Art Association, which used to organize exhibitions from the Federal Art Project. New York City had exhibits. And then after a while, the galleries began to approach some of the artists as they developed. It was quite something, I must say, tremendous.

MARY MCCHESNEY: What were some of the most outstanding murals that you remember being done on that period? Do you remember any?

SERGE TRUBACH: In that period?

MARY MCCHESNEY: Yes, in New York.

SERGE TRUBACH: In New York. Well, it's hard to say because I don't remember. It's so long ago. But I know they did murals in several hospitals, in some of the libraries. Usually the branch libraries had murals done in the libraries. Then there were many murals done in courthouses. Also sculpture was done in courthouses, and different departments, police departments, and there were several murals done in public institutions, you know,

like health departments, you know. But it was quite a tremendous thing.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Was there any difficulty over the subject matter of the murals?

SERGE TRUBACH: Oh, yes. There was a lot of battling. That's part of the grievance committee. You know, you had to battle for subject matter. The juries were taken over by the academicians, like Leon Kroll or some academic painter that was in charge that was on the Committee, or Commission. They used to pass on things. It was amazing, though. Sometimes the very corny things passed, and very way-out things passed, and then it was a problem of content. Sometimes there was left-wing content that they didn't want. Sometimes there were complaints by some of the officials of the institution where the mural was painted because of the crudity of the characterization. Maybe the feet were big, or, you know. Things like that, or somebody made Washington look a little different than they thought he ought to look, or, you know, if it was an historical mural. A lot of it was just regional stuff, you know, showing the history of Manhattan, the Indians, and some were just civic virtue stuff, you know, and some were done like the Thanksgiving feast; and some were Columbus landing, and you know, historical murals…

MARY MCCHESNEY: Was the majority of it done in oil on canvas, or was there any frescos?

SERGE TRUBACH: Well, there were many artists doing frescoes too…

MARY MCCHESNEY: Oh, there were many doing frescoes?

SERGE TRUBACH: Yes, and when Rivera came to New York, and worked at Radio City, he had a big influence on fresco painters. Some of the artists worked with Rivera. He did some project work and they helped him, and they learned. Then they had their own murals and they did them in the same technique, you know. Then Ben Shahn was active in that project, you know and a lot of artist that are well-known were – I can't remember the names offhand, but there were quite a few. And they used to march, even on May Day all the artists would march. Ben Shahn would be marching out there, and Gorky. Gorky was marching, and all these people marching up and down Fifth Avenue, all the unions, the workers, and the communists, the workers, the artists, the CIO, everybody all marched together. And the Art Projects, you know, had their own thing, and they had a CIO convention, and they had the artists come to Chicago to the convention at that time, you know …

MARY MCCHESNEY: The Artists Union was actually affiliated with the CIO.

SERGE TRUBACH: Yes, that's right, yes. Let's see what we've got so far.

MARY MCCHESNEY: When Diego Rivera was out here on the West Coast, he had very strong stylistic influence on the painters here. Did this happen in New York too?

SERGE TRUBACH: Yes, it did, yes. There are a lot of people that were influenced by Rivera, but mostly the influence was among the mural painters, those that were doing murals. But the biggest influence in the arts was the social content school, you know. Because the project was just like any other institution, even though it was a relief project, an art project. Mrs. MacMahon always used to work close to the status or quality galleries, like the Downtown Gallery. Edith Halpert had the Downtown Gallery and she corralled a lot of artists from the project that were supposed to be very interested, like Kuniyoshi, who is dead, who has passed away now. Kuniyoshi, Prestopino, Beniamo Bufano and there was Paul Cadmus. On there were many of them that were siphoned off from the project and taken by the galleries because they had this, you know Ben Shahn quality stuff with streaks, you know. They were done rather meticulously but they were supposed to be pictures of broken down buildings, and relief lines, and bread lines and, but there were done in a most meticulous, sanitary manner, you know. The technique was, you know, very meticulous. And the Whitney Museum had a period when they showed mostly work done in that manner. Like there was Louis Ribak who was a big number in the Whitney Museum. Of course, Gorky was very much around them but he wasn't doing too well. He was having a hard time economically. He did some teaching. But I know a lot of artists that got very popular at that time. Of course, they faded out soon, but certain galleries helped them – the Downtown Gallery, the Etienne Gallery, and some of the other galleries. And then, of course, the College Art program siphoned off a lot of work from the project as loans, or were given works for permanent files of that period, but most of it I think had a moralistic quality. A lot of it had a moralistic quality. For two reasons: because Rivera had made such a big splurge, and also because of the fact that it became such a fastidious style. People wanted to collect them, and also the galleries were selling a lot of that work, like Gropper, who was never on the project, but he was very popular for a long time because he had these Spanish Civil War pictures. They were very, very much in demand at that time. And I would say, though, that at the same time there was a group of artists that called themselves the Secession Group and I belonged to that, and that group included Gottleib, and Milton Avery, and Hans Hofmann, and Gorky, and oh, there were many others. I can't remember all of them offhand, de Kooning, and Motherwell, a whole group there. A lot of them from Provincetown that called themselves the Secession Group. We used to meet, oh, about once a month in somebody's studio, and I think the fellow's studio – Joe Kane was his name, and we had discussions and things. They were a very anti-Stalinist group. They were against the project, but they were very interesting

painters, and so – a self-made Bauhaus group, you know…

MARY MCCHESNEY: Joe Kane?

SERGE TRUBACH: Joe Kane was the name of the fellow that had the studio.

MARY MCCHESNEY: But they weren't on the project?

SERGE TRUBACH: No, they weren't on the project. Some of them couldn't get on, so a lot of them were supported by their wives or relatives, and …

MARY MCCHESNEY: But de Kooning was on the project. He said he was.

SERGE TRUBACH: Well, he was. After a while he was, but I don't think he was on it right away. You had to prove that you were destitute to get on, you know. It was quite a problem. Because to prove all the points, you know, you had to be on the verge of eviction, but it was kind of a struggle to get on …

MARY MCCHESNEY: What was the aesthetic theory of Secessionists? They were more European-oriented?

SERGE TRUBACH: No, more of the avant-garde, the way out painters, the non-objective painters, and the expressionists, you know, and all that sort of thing. And later on the project began to encourage more of that work, you know.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Why were they against: the project? Because they couldn't get on? Or because they didn't approve of the stylistic direction of the people on it?

SERGE TRUBACH: Well, there were two reasons – those that didn't approve of the censorship. They had quite a bit of censorship in the beginning about the art, what you could do, what you could paint. Then they also were against it because they had the qualifications for the pauper's oath. They had the means test, if you could qualify. They felt they were being prejudiced against. They felt that no one had to know. As long as there were artists and had no income, they should be qualified. There were many dialectical battles about who should get on, who should stay on, who shouldn't be on, and so forth and so on. But most of the work that was done, I think, was more or less of a stylistic – Ben Shahn had a great influence on the artists of that time, you know. The Sacco-Vanzetti murals and all that sort of thing.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Did the Artists' Union ever make any attempt to have the pauper's oath taken away from the project?

SERGE TRUBACH: Oh yes. They had a lot of problems. Oh yes, sure.

MARY MCCHESNEY: But you never were successful in that?

SERGE TRUBACH: I don't remember now. I think it was never really done away with. You had to be a relief case to get on. I must say this is tough; there are a lot of people that never should have been on. They belonged in the category of being unemployed and automatically qualified for the project, where others who had been painting for years and needed it as much as the others couldn't qualify exactly because they might have had some little bit, either had relatives or – most of the people had to move away from their friends or from their homes to qualify, you know. Their parents might have been unemployed but they couldn't apply because they expected the parents, the father or somebody to be on welfare, on relief and he would sort of take care of the situation. But a lot of them left home and were on their own and qualified in one way or another. Some didn't qualify in one way or other. But there was a lot of misqualification [sic], you know. A lot of people that should have qualified didn't; and some that did, shouldn't have. It was kind of strange in a way. It was quite something. Artists were really starving to death, you know. And, of course, one of the problems was in the wintertime, you know. Most of the places they lived in were old buildings with no heat, you know. Well, if they were on welfare, they might have gotten some food and some coal. They wouldn't have qualified for certain things. But the artists sometimes, they had to have fictitious addresses. They couldn't live together. Two people couldn't share a place because the income would be double so even though they could paint in one place they couldn't live there because it was too cold. There were always these problems though. It's like being on the run all the time, you know. You have to use your wits, and a lot of good people had to become liars in a way, you know. It was really like a rat race. You had to survive. It was quite pathetic sometimes. Yet I think a lot of them were pretty wonderful people on this project. I must say though that the people who were administering the thing were pretty well paid and they weren't having much trouble. They were worried at the time. Like Mrs. MacMahon would get an order from the top office to dismiss a certain amount of people. They figured that if they fired them, they would go out and get jobs, and that was a sort of a delusion. But at the same time, they kept cutting down until they were glad when the artists would go out and picket; demonstrate in front of the offices, the main offices to back on again. They wanted their jobs too, you know, because if they fired too many people, they

would lose their control to, you know. And a lot of them were not bothered at all. I mean some artists were sort of pets. They weren't bothered. They kept going right along and were given a lot of privileges. Where one person would have to be on time and so forth and so on, another person wouldn't even show up for months, and they'd pass them through, you see, depending on the person.

MARY MCCHESNEY: How long a period of time were you on the project?

SERGE TRUBACH: Oh, I must have been on – I was on almost when it started and I was on till the end of it about, about eight years. I was one of the last few to be on. Some of the people that were on, I remember only one person who just passed away about a year ago – Byron Browne, who was teaching at the League lately. He was on it for a long time. You had to qualify technically to stay on longer than that. They transferred the easel painters into doing posters, you know. I mean if you had the adaptability to do something, if you could draw well, if you could letter, if you could design a poster well, the artists that were making headway like this, those that were developing in design, like they were abstract, they knew about two-dimensional form, you know, and controlled color schemes, and design letters, they fitted in more, and there were kept on longer, see. And they were given work from different departments of public health, or the library drive for something, maybe for books to send overseas, you know; all kinds of ideas, you know, about keeping quiet, not letting any information out to the enemy; and, you know, regular propaganda, war posters, a lot of it; enlisting in the army, or trying to save, you know, don't waste; and so forth and so on; and many, many of these measures that were created for the victory of the war, you know; and then about conservation, and so many different things that came up, wardens, you know, that stay on the roofs at night, you know, in case of so-called attack, you know. They had posters of that; and then about factory workers, how they should have safety in the factories, you know, posters of that, and so forth; and about children in school, you know, where they could get their lunch or something, or clothing drives, you know; demonstrations for getting clothing for the unemployed; medical health; and all kinds of things.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Do you think it would be a good idea for the government of the United States to sponsor arts again?

SERGE TRUBACH: Well, I don't know. It all adds up in the same way, I suppose, in the long run because what the people don't give, I mean what wealthy people don't give the government in income tax, they give it in endowments and it's about the same thing. So I don't know. It's about the same thing. They take it off their taxes and they give it to the museums or they endow some institution so the main thing is to get the best art in the best way, but the money always comes in a sort of similar way. They either give it to the government directly or give it privately and who knows which is the best way to save? Or which is more waste or not, but I don't think the government should make a relief program but I think they could commission more work. I think it would be very good to have competitions for murals and stuff, and sculpture, and landscaping where artists could be employed. There are a lot of artists today painting bad pictures, to sell to the public cheaply, you know. They knock them out. The bars are full of pictures, and restaurants, and galleries. Some galleries sell bad work, and art auctions, and I think probably it would be better if the government did something. At least whenever the government puts money into housing or some public buildings or whatever, they could put artists to work, not for life, but for a period, say for five years and then they'd have to compete again to get in, but it would be a good idea to have the government instead of people who give to institutions privately. They always take certain artists because they seem to be closely connected with institutions but the other way around with competitions, you'd get different artists. A lot of artists when they get out of art school, they can't seem to do much except to go into the same old rat race doing a lot of commission work, or peddling their work, or opening up their own shop. I mean, the art movement is too good a thing to dissipate I think in peddling your wares. I think it should be more of a national thing, part of the culture, see. Don't you think an awful lot that way? I don't mean the way it is in Russia. There when you graduate from the academy, you know, you work for the government and it's a certain school but I think by competition, say an artist is qualified for a period of five years and then maybe if he qualifies for a period of ten or fifteen years, maybe he'd get a pension. A small pension so that he could work privately, or help to train others. There could be many things done in helping to beautify the cities and parks and public buildings. I think there are a lot of things that can be done. I think this poverty program would be a good thing to enlarge the museums as assistants to some people that have qualified for commissions and they all do this work together. Of course, they have the problem there of building trades, the unions, you know, that do building and all that sort of thing. Well, the only thing is to make a union for the artists themselves. They can also be workers in a way. After all, if you keep them occupied in the thing they do best and have the most interest in, it would be better than having them being sanctified by some union that wants to employ people, they have, that wants to employ members of some grant, you know. I think the artists can be a group of craftsmen which could be specialized in a way that they would work in groups after a design has been accepted, and as I said, for say a period of five years and then another qualifying again, and say up to fifteen years, and after a period of fifteen years – like in the army, when you're in the army twenty years, you get a pension, so I mean, in other words, to keep the art product in this country from becoming a corny, you know, escape mechanism for making a quick buck, because so many people do that, you know. Make arts and crafts that are useless, pottery that is bad, and some of them make a good living but they are retarding our culture, people like

that – the layman comes and buys this stuff and it’s raw meat, you know. It isn’t digested. I think it would be a very good program. And I know that private industry tries but I don’t think they could handle it because the trouble is they’re bound to be siphoned off by some group or some individuals that think this is something they want, see. But the government thing could be tied in with education, see. I think more art might be taught in art schools or in the public schools, or high schools, colleges. Some people might just as well go into it. There are a lot of people that are not going to be scientists. They want to be artists. They could be trained to belong to a guild where they would use their work that they learned to develop in their scholastic way as part of the culture itself, you know, the housing, and the landscaping, and the character of our environment would be improved and would be fortified, I think.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Quite a few of the murals that were done here on the West Coast in post offices were done under the Treasury Projects and they were contests. Did you ever enter any of those contests?

SERGE TRUBACH: Yes. Yes, I did. I never got one. But I did a lot of easel paintings that were accepted. But the contests were not always – they were slanted by a certain taster, you know. A lot of people couldn’t get a mural to do that were really qualified. It just happened that way. Sometimes a gallery – a person that was on the project and was connected with a gallery had more prestige and was given more respect, you know. Others that didn’t have any connections lost out, in other words. In this thing I have in mind there wouldn’t be any thing like reputation. It would be a matter of competition, and it would be continuous, like every year, you know. An artist would have a certain amount of time to prepare, and then others that didn’t compete, say, twenty runners-up would be asked if they wanted to assist on this project, if it was big enough, and if some didn’t want to, they’d get the next runners-up, you know. In other words, it would be a program which would keep the artists more idealistic, I think. Do you think so?

MARY MCCHESNEY: It would probably be a very good plan.

SERGE TRUBACH: Let’s see what it ways.

MARY MCCHESNEY: Thank you very much for giving the time for this interview.

SERGE TRUBACH: Oh, that’s OK. It’s been a nice afternoon and we haven’t seen each other for a long time.

END OF INTERVIEW

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