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Oral history interview with Joseph Vogel, 1965 Jan. 5

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Transcript

Interview

BH: Betty Hoag
JV: Joseph Vogel

BH: This is Betty Lochrie Hoag on January the 5th, 1965, interviewing the artist Joseph Vogel. This is the first artist I've interviewed in the new year and I consider it an honor, Mr. Vogel. I was so happy that someone (I believe you said a Mr. Von Groschwitz of Carnegie) had told you about the Archives.

JV: Yes. He is the Director of the Museum of the Carnegie Foundation.

BH: It's very difficult for us to find people who were on the Project not in California and so we're always happy to learn about someone here who was someplace else, as you were - in New York?

JV: New York, yes.

BH: And you are a painter; you've just shown me your lovely studio and some of your things. You also are a teacher at Chouinard Art Institute here in Los Angeles at the present time. Before we talk about the Federal Arts Project or your work I'd like to ask you a little about your life. First of all, do you have a middle initial?

JV: No.

BH: Just "Joseph Vogel?"

JV: Just "Vogel."

BH: Will you please tell us where you were born and the date?

JV: 1911, in Poland.

BH: And what part of Poland?

JV: Austria-Hungary.

BH: At what time did you come to this country?

JV: 1927.

BH: Let's see, you were born in 1911, so you were 16 when you came?

JV: Right.

BH: Then you didn't have any art education in Poland probably?

JV: No.

BH: Were you interested in painting there?

JV: Indeed I was. As a matter of fact, when I arrived in the USA, I have a recollection of winning a dubious art prize at public schools to which I had to go to learn English, at the junior high school. At any rate my first formal education (which you want to know about) began at a National Academy of Design, the old school in New York with which you may be familiar. But that was after I started working daytime at the Variety, a very tedious proof-reading job to make a living.

BH: I presume that your whole family had come to America?

JV: Yes, my father had come first and we joined him here. He was a tinsmith, an old country craftsman, you know? My bent was toward other things obviously. You might say we came here practically at the beginning of the Depression, meaning simply this, that soon enough my father lost his job. I had to go to work; in fact I went to work right away on a variety of jobs ranging from one in a pocket-book factory to a fruit market to, god-knows-what-else.

BH: But this was typical of the times. Your predominant interest was going to the National Academy?

JV: Ah, yes, it crystallized itself after a while. I also played the violin at that time, curiously.

BH: Oh really?

JV: Yes, and I recall paying $5 for a lesson. Since I earned $12, soon enough I stopped it. I transferred to day school to get into high school, and graduated in 3 years. At that time my inclinations began to orient themselves fortunately and during the daytime I decided to go to the National Academy of Design where my teacher was Leon Kroll.

BH: Oh really?

JV: Yes.

BH: Wonderful man.

JV: Yes. He felt of himself as the "Bolshevik of the Academy" as he used to call himself. This was the routine kind of training - casts, you know - for a whole year which in retrospect, in these days, sounds strange---

BH: Oh, it's a wonderful foundation.

JV: Yes. This is a discipline to formal understanding of the passages of something classic - the reproductions, the philosophies. Subsequently I entered the life class under Kroll. I spent about 3 years there, subsequently left without any particular, any unique understanding of art problems at all, except the basic ones which are drawing and painting, the realistic style, of course. I began to make my own discoveries through museums, through associations, and so on. Now at this juncture, you must understand, there was social ferment at that time in New York.

BH: Yes, the early 30's?

JV: Yes. This would not be a surprise to you nor to the people back in Detroit, I'm sure. And through that I met a number of people, a number of artists, who turned out to be a considerable influence upon my next step. I cannot disassociate the growth of the artist at that time (I'm speaking for myself) and the social direction of the period. My baptism in that direction, curiously enough, took place in the first unemployment demonstration in New York City, into which I blundered quite idiotically, quite by mistake, only to get dumped by the firemen's hoses.

BH: Oh really?

JV: That's correct! This was quite a well known and famous demonstration, the first unemployment demonstration as I found out subsequently. Anyway I learned instantly what the issues were, relating more or less to working class, unemployment problems, etc. And this was my baptism, curiously enough.

BH: Baptism with a fireman's hose!

JV: That's correct. The interesting thing is that the Union Square incident precipitated a number of things, meeting a number of artists who were equally involved, interested and so on. They were the "new masses" of the time, if you remember?

BH: They were concerned in getting organized to protect themselves?

JV: Well, it was quite a phenomena, you know. By that I mean this: the artists were the truly disenfranchised because they had no organization whatsoever, see?

BH: Yes.

JV: So the artists got together, as you probably have heard from other artists...

BH: From some of the other artists, yes.

JV: ...and evolved a rather loose cultural organization. Subsequently this jelled into some specific action to get help from a variety of civic, municipal organizations such as welfare organizations. At that time I was unemployed having lost a number of jobs. I remember joining about five artists downtown in a loft, which were quite common at the time. They were Walter Quirt, whom you may know, who ended up I think teaching at Michigan. I haven't seem him all these years.

BH: I was looking at some of his pictures in Artforum this morning.

JV: Oh, really? Is that so?

BH: Yes. Pictures from 1936.

JV: Isn't that a coincidence? Then there was Jimmy Guy and Phil Bard. There was Maxie Spivak and bedbugs. There was also a fine printmaker by the name of Phil Reisman.

BH: I was going to ask you if you were in graphics by this time because I know that you were later.

JV: Not yet. Subsequently we went through the various stages of the PWA. Eventually I entered on the Federal Art Project in the Graphics Section where Mr. Von Groschwitz was at the time. I believe he was the head of this particular project.

BH: Oh, I see. This is the man from Carnegie?

JV: That's the man from Carnegie, yes. There were others besides - Eugene Morley, who died, and another fellow, I remember, Butch Linback. At any rate it was on this particular project where I had my first chance to develop and grow as a young artist.

BH: Yes?

JV: I would not possibly have been able to grow alone. Moreover I came in association with most of the developed and older and fine painters and graphic artists of the day, from Adolf Dehn to Stuart Davis to Ben Shahn, God knows who else.

BH: Well, this answers the question I usually ask at the end, "Do you think the Project was beneficial?" Obviously it was a wonderful thing for you.

JV: Oh yes. I would go way beyond that. It was personally probably the critical period of my inception as a creative painter and graphic artist. Without it, I don't think I would have survived. I would have moved off possibly into another area, perhaps commercial art. I should have mentioned the Art Students' League where I spent a short period before the Project days. (I am allowing myself the luxury of a sort of chronological presentation which you may not be interested in.)

BH: That is fine. I'd like to come back to the Project again later.

JV: I think this may be of interest historically. The Project, because of the various problems that it raised in terms of secession, raised opposition from the artists; which meant that in turn they began to grow other than artistically; which meant that as their eyes began to open on issues, and problems which were actually beyond the immediate issue. But nevertheless, it gave an understanding, a grasp of political problems of the day as you know.

BH: Well, the need to relate themselves to society...

JV: Which in turn meant sort of flirting with the "left," as everybody participated in a variety of activities which had absolutely no relation to the artist's problem, but nevertheless was a sum total of the day. You see? And denying them, or ignoring them, or forgetting them, or belittling them would be false. Because it was a very rich ferment which brought about the Federal Art Theater Project, etc. And in that sense it became very valuable as a national experience too, you see? The orientation by the artist, by the writer, by the actor toward seeking of a meaning in terms of a broader national significance is something which we don't have today. Today the young artist moves off in a truly formal direction. I'm not charging its merits one way or another. I'm speaking in terms of art now. But that was my days, my beginning; those were my beginnings in a kind of cataclysm or baptism, as I said before.

BH: It must have been very stimulating, knowing that work was going to be received by people too.

JV: Now the art was very interesting, I'll show you some of the things I have done.

BH: Wonderful.

JV: And I must say, considering that this was a Federal Arts Project there was enormous latitude and intelligence and tolerance of style and of approach which in retrospect seems literally incredible. Because formal government art, or academic art (how should we say?), formally-supported art tends to be rigidly controlled. This was not, you see. And in that sense it represents a certain kind of renaissance of the period, even today, I think. The things which I did (like that print out there) [he indicates] could hardly be considered academic and yet we did them. Among the painters of the day there was enormous experimentation because we had a chance.

BH: With subject and medium?

JV: The subject and medium. Today what the Tamarind Workshop is doing, we did on the Project; the prints went out to libraries, to hospitals. Unfortunately most of them were later destroyed due to ignorance, due to carelessness and neglect. Because all that should have been kept. Canvas by the yard (as you may know) was sold off to pushcarts. Were you fully aware of that? This happens to be a historical fact. Some peddler should be a very wealthy man because he must have Soyers and god knows what else.

BH: They were only supposed to be sold to tax-supported institutions!

JV: Subsequently they dumped them and sold them by the yard. That's correct. Like any government surplus. In retrospect, again, we see that that's precisely where the mechanical aspects of it becomes intolerable. The same way they sell government surplus, Army surplus, they sold art surplus.

BH: I didn't know that.

JV: So I'm only wishing that it had been preserved instead of being used as rags. These are facts. I believe the graphics, on the whole, fared better because the storage problem was simplified. I know there are prints in Washington and fortunately the Metropolitan picked up a lot of them. I have some there and so on. In that sense I would say the Federal Arts Project as a piece of national history is a remarkable achievement and a tragic one at the same time.

BH: I have been trying to locate things like this. We haven't money on our grant to do such a thing but just on the side I'm taking notes of wherever I can find such work, and I do find them in the attics and basements of public buildings.

JV: You still find them...you mean here locally?

BH: Here in my territory, yes.

JV: Really?

BH: In fact one of the all...he was actually the finest artist in San Diego. A very old man at the time but fascinating to feel with his fingernails. The Scrissito was done in an experimental way, it was SCRISSITO, you know, where you put a wax surface on and cut through.

JV: Oh yes, yes, yes.

BH: Well the old man did it with his long fingernails and he did beautiful things.

JV: Is that so?

BH: And one of those I found, one my artists had found in one of the schools being used as a _____ just recently and he knew what it was and saved it of course. All of these I'm trying to keep track of for the Archives for sometime because ...

JV: That's an enormous service...

BH: ...someday we're going to have the funds to clear up those that have been preserved.

JV: Let's hope the Kennedy Library or some government Washington Gallery will eventually gather these things under one roof and just claim or at least have some basic collection. Now my concentration was on lithographs as it was with others like Boris Gorelick. I don't know if you've seen any of his work?

BH: No, I haven't unfortunately; I'd like to.

JV: May I say on his behalf that they were remarkable for that day, and without undue modesty so were mine, merely as both graphics and as forms of expression. They were unique for the day. We were sort of like the black sheep of the Project and not in the main stream of production. But nevertheless everybody had the chance. Plus first experimentation in silkscreen, you know.

BH: Is that right?

JV: Oh very beautiful, very beautiful, excellent work in wood-block etchings and engravings and carvings. A whole gamut of graphic arts was explored to its fullest, literally. I imagine the Tamarind Workshop is doing that now on a sort of limited scale.

BH: Probably a limited budget too. You had something behind you to pay for materials, didn't you?

JV: They paid for everything.

BH: And you had the equipment there?

JV: Oh, the best darned printers in the country were there. Yes, there were some excellent printers. There was paper, there were huge stones. Everything was prepared. I would have a stone delivered to my studio to work on.

BH: You could do it at home then?

JV: I worked at home, yes. I worked at my studio. I had a remarkable studio on 28th Street in New York. Close by Guss Bundy had a studio and Michael Lowe had a studio on my floor. What happened is as follows: I found a whole top floor with four skylight studios. In those days we were very, very subject to a kind of special ethics. I divided the rent 3 ways. I rented one to Michael Lowe (which had, I think, been occupied by Willem de Kooning at one time, and ah, Byron Bakink). We did a lot of work there you see.

BH: Who were these men?

JV: Michael Lowe is a a well-known Eastern painter. Then one was Bundy.

BH: What Bundy is that?

JV: It is Guss Bundy who is raising chicks in Nevada and still painting and teaching, I think, near Carson City [Nevada]. He came out West too. And so there were three of us and the fourth one we luxuriously used as a storage room. All that cost us $40.00 -- the whole loft floor!

BH: Oh no!

JV: Yes!

BH: How great!

JV: And let me tell you, we had a wonderful time. We worked very hard, very diligently and it was a sort of meeting place. Let me recall the era. On occasion Arshile Gorky would come up, Bill de Kooning would come up, Michel Vaderkoff, Byron Browne. These were the "white-haired boys" of the day, you know.

BH: You were doing only graphics, you weren't on the Easel Section at all?

JV: Let's see, chronologically --- I became the assistant to Ben Shahn. Before getting on the Graphics Project, I was assisting Ben Shahn.

BH: On a mural?

JV: On a mural at Rikers Island Penitentiary. I don't know if you have any photograph of it, if you have seen any pictures of it? It was a very interesting project. It was actually controlled by Ben Shahn and Lou Block, a friend of Ben Shahn's.

BH: Now is he a man who is here in Los Angeles?

JV: No, Irving Block is a different man entirely. He also did some work. I talked to him the other day and I said you might get in touch with him. I would urge you to get in touch with him because Irving is a fine painter and certainly stems right from that era, you know. He shows at the Ankrum Gallery here and he teaches at San Fernando Valley State College. To get back to the period. As I told you, there was enormous participation by the artists in a variety of cults and struggles, to maintain the Project. They took on most fantastic forms. There was a great sense of solidarity because it was primarily an economic issue, though occasionally it would sort of pulverize into aesthetics, and so on. But that wasn't too bad you see.

BH: When you spoke of camaraderie feeling about getting the work, I wanted to interrupt to ask you a question. As I told you, I was reading some of these old Art Fronts of 1936 ---

JV: Oh, you have them? Oh good!

BH: One of the artists gave us some to microfilm and I read them. One in June of 1936 wrote of a kind of sit-down strike by the artists because they didn't have any work. They went to Project headquarters and complained. Was it the responsibility of the artists themselves to try to get jobs?

JV: No, I'll tell you what happened if you want a kind of retrospective summary.

BH: I'm curious about it.

JV: There were a number of sit-downs, I survived one of the first, you know. I went through the alphabet, you see, I was probably one of the first to be beaten up in front of the Whitney Museum. In fact I was the first.

BH: You mean physically beaten up?

JV: Physically, by the cops. It was one of those idiotic, crazy situations. People are firebrands, you must remember. People go out in the hundreds to picket. At that time there was a threat of closing it down; there was some demand, you know, correct or not correct, I don't know.

BH: You were showing pictures at the Whitney Museum?

JV: No, the Whitney was the center of one of the earlier projects preceding the Federal Arts Project. There were a number of them, you are aware of that, aren't you?

BH: Well, the Treasury was different ---

JV: The Treasury Department Project was an entirely separate thing. The Treasury originated in Washington subsequently, and was primarily related to decorating of all post office and public buildings. Separate. It was something else. Prior to that there was a CWA, there was a PWA, a variety of alphabets historically which are probably catalogued in Detroit. These various projects started out as a sort of welfare doling-out; artists painting angels' behinds. My first job on this project was with George Constant who was a most wonderful graphic artist, a great painter by the way...

BH: Was this a mural?

JV: Yes, we were touching up angels' behinds in Grace Episcopal Church in Brooklyn. We also repainted the organ pipes.

BH: Oh, it was probably a state thing, wasn't it?

JV: This was state.

BH: Probably New York State.

JV: New York State, I'm not quite sure. But I just want to give you an indication of how the thing grew and developed and finally jelled into the Federal Arts Project, which was under the WPA, the Federal Works Project Administration. And the Art Project included the theater, writers and so on; right?

BH: Yes, "the four arts."

JV: "The four arts," correct. So what happened was that every so often there would be a threat either to discontinue the project or to close it down, or to let us go, or to forget about it. Each time there was, an organized concentration of artists mobilized to make our protest known. The nature of this would be street demonstrations with placards and with beatings, et cetera. Oh yes, this was fantastic. We made headlines nationally during one of the memorable sit-down strikes at 38th or 39th Street, I believe it was, when they were actually closed down. A number of artists were very severely beaten by cops called in from Queens because they were the impartial ones.

BH: But the artists weren't doing anything to hurt anyone?

JV: The artists sat down...

BH: They were just protesting?

JV: It was a sit-down strike, you might say, yes, it was a sit-down. It caused an enormous...

BH: They weren't hurting anyone else so why did the police come in and...

JV: To pull us out of the street.

BH: For being a public nuisance?

JV: Yes, a public nuisance, the name that you have today. Today the students of Berkeley have done it, and we find the counterpart in the racial situation, and so on. On the other hand we - the artists, the painters, the graphic artists, the sculptors - and I say it with some pride - we were in a sense, in the vanguard of all white-collar solidification - or I would say ideological crystallization of that period. A very fascinating period because at

the same time Roosevelt was supporting the CIO, and so on. Somehow we, by curious historical coincidence, became involved in it. And it's not to be ignored, because in a depression the root of it resides precisely in a search for an answer to many problems of which the artist is a minutia really. Nevertheless he is part of it and cannot be ignored. So with that came also for the artist a larger view on an international scale. Spain came into the war you know. Quite a few artists went off to Spain, including "yours truly."

BH: Yes, I know ---

JV: I ended up in Spain.

BH: --- that you had.

JV: How did you know?

BH: I've been doing some research on you, as much as I could, so I would be prepared to talk to you.

JV: Where did you find that?

BH: Well, let's see, an article in Arts and Architecture.

JV: Oh my God! What's his name, ah, what's what's...

BH: Dalton Trumbo wrote about you in Arts and Architecture, November, 1942. It was after a show you had here in Los Angeles, your "Surrealists Show" which we are coming to later.

JV: That's right. You're well-informed. Yes, I ended up in Spain.

BH: Actually fighting?

JV: Well, yes, in a sense.

BH: For heavens sake!

JV: Out of a sense of sheer belief in social justice, don't you see. I was actually doing illustrations. I ended up there literally by sheer accident practically. I found there were others with me and some of them lost their lives. Paul Block lost his life. A few other artists lost their lives there, you know.

BH: Well did you - I'm just curious about how it worked because I'm... - I was in school at the time and I remember boys going out on this thing and being killed.

JV: Oh yeah.

BH: Did you go in as volunteers in the Army?

JV: No, no I was doing illustrating. I drew and I was kind of sent as a journalist, and so on, this, that.

BH: Were you sending things back here?

JV: I tried, you see, it was one of those "Sammy's Adventures" things.

BH: The right time in your life to make it a great adventure, as well as an ideal?

JV: Yes. Anyway there were quite a few who never came back, among whom Paul Block. There were two others, a man by the name of Taylor - and used to play billiards together on 6th Avenue; and there was another young man whose name I've forgotten. There were others who never came back. And all of them had the same motive, that is, trying to find an answer to their personal dilemmas in relation to what goes on in the world. These days of course I look back upon this and the answer is yet to be found in many areas. You grow older, you're mellow, and yet you look back on that period and you try to analyze it. You try to pinpoint the answer and the answer isn't anywhere as yet. A lot of people feel that way. Walter Quirt, whom I idolized at the time as one of the few people who understood what the score was, from what I gather is disenchanted, teaching summers in Michigan University, and so on.

BH: He is now?

JV: Yes, I think so, yes. Whereas in all honesty one must examine the totality of this thing ---

BH: To evaluate?

JV: --- to evaluate what the Federal Arts Project in turn actually precipitated: and it did that to me, you see.

BH: Mr. Vogel, I'm wondering whether "Guernica" had any influence on you as an artist.

JV: Definitely!

BH: That was painted right in the middle of this time, wasn't it?

JV: I saw "Guermica" out of Spain in the late '30s. Guernica had a profound influence on me. It may be reflected in some of the paintings you see here, one or two at least. It had a profound influence because it was the first real submission of a channeled Cubist formalism into a meaning for the day.

BH: A real protest, a social protest?

JV: A social protest. Actually when you had the early Ash Can School, Sloan and so on, this was a further maturing of the same thing. Except this was a more vital sort of participation in the issues of the day because we were kids, we were young, you see. We were fighters and we didn't hesitate to make our protests known one way or another.

BH: After all, you were living for it!

JV: Then, subsequently, the Project ended, as you know.

BH: Wait. We have you over in Spain. How long were you there?

JV: I cannot give you that in months. I would just as well cover that period with a blank for a variety of reasons. There are dubious areas there which have nothing to do with me. They have to do with somebody else. And it truly does not relate to the Archives study.

BH: We'll skip it then.

JV: But I'm citing it rather as an example of what happened to quite a few people. Then of course you had schisms among the artists before that and after that, various ones - you made enemies, friends. In retrospect it's all very stupid and very silly and very ridiculous. Not a few painters with whom we disagreed on social issues turned out to be perfectly wonderful people, and so on and so forth.

BH: You did have the social problem to argue about as well as the way to paint?

JV: Yes. There was a danger in the preoccupation with issues which did not bear on the immediate problem of the artist. On the other hand when you go back to the Renaissance, when the artist painted religious pictures he was deeply preoccupied with his day. Or when Goya did his drawings, his "Ecco Homme," they were related to his particular day. So this is the ebb and flow of art, of artists, of preoccupation throughout history one way or another.

BH: Was the Project still going when you came back from there?

JV: Yes, I got on the Project again and then that ended.

BH: It didn't end until the war,did it?

JV: Right. But I left before that, you know.

BH: That's funny, everyone did. I can never seem to find anyone who was there at the end of it. It petered out so much that people are just not sure what happened. Very strange with all the artists.

JV: Oh, I know why it ended for me; I was kicked off actually! Yes, yes, I recall now. I remember one day someone asked me to sign a petition. The petition was, I believe, for a Communist candidate in the local election. And I signed it because at that time I did not see any reason why this man should not get X signatures to run. And this day I would do the same thing if I felt it was right. So next thing I knew, General Sommerfield of the Post Office, apparently had decided, for better or for worse, to ferret out the, quote, "troublemakers" on the Project. And he did it in this fashion - these were plants.

BH: You mean that they'd been planted?

JV: They'd been planted.

BH: Oh, for heavens sake!

JV: That's correct. Naturally when confronted with my signature I was not going to deny it. I wasn't confronted with it - I just got a pink slip, as I recall. Which was just as well, because this was not the solution of anything. Subsequently the troublemakers, so-called, were kicked out. In other words the people who had fought for the maintenance of this thing as a social means, and I don't mean just for the artists, but as a national cultural means. The thing gradually was discarded, disabused, abused, subsequently destroyed completely, and that was it. Of course what took its place in postwar was a kind of semi-prosperity, so the artist back east presumably was able to make his living, I don't know of many who did.

BH: I don't know what happened there. Here many of them went into war industry.

JV: You know, there is something I forgot to mention prior to this. I became interested in motion-pictures.

BH: Oh, really?

JV: I've done some documentary work. When I got back to this country I took a trip to Mexico, came back and located here.

BH: Excuse me, Mr. Vogel, I'm getting mixed up on the time. Your Mexican trip was after the war?

JV: No, that was before Pearl Harbor, roughly I'd say '40 or '41. After Pearl Harbor I came back here.

BH: Had you already been in California?

JV: No, no, no, no.

BH: From Mexico you came to California?

JV: From Mexico I located here, and I enlisted from here, as a matter of fact, in the Signal Corps as a Combat Cameraman of all things!

BH: Oh, how interesting.

JV: Yes. And I went into the war as a candid Combat Motion Picture Cameraman.

BH: Did you know Al King at the time?

JV: Al King?

BH: He's a color authority here, teaches in Los Angeles.

JV: He may have been teaching at Eastman Kodak; there was a fast course for the candid cameraman then and I took that.

BH: He still does work for Eastman.

JV: Is that so?

BH: He's a marvelous person. On the California Project he was in charge of all of the Long Beach mosaics, a tremendous -- well, it was the big thing in Southern California. He and his wife were both on it.

JV: I see.

BH: But anyway he was with the Combat Photography Division during the war too, and I thought perhaps you'd known him then.

JV: No, no I didn't. But if he was a color specialist I may have met him. I ended up in the Signal Corps. Ended up in Japan where I transferred back to Combat Artists Service in 1946.

BH: Those were documentary artists weren't they?

JV: Yes, the Combat Artists. First Signal Corps is a combat battalion. I went into the European theater of war first, and I ended up in Tokyo, of all things! Yes, we ended up in Tokyo where we were reshuffled. They did not release us but sent us on through the Philippines. And in the Philippines we were literally "hooked" by some, by Barse Miller, and Simon, combat painters who wanted to get out. They were officers, and they hooked Ted Gillien and me.

BH: What Simon is that?

JV: I've forgotten his first name, he's a well-known painter back East. Barse Miller was the head of it or something. Anyway the Far Eastern artists Combat Section was located in the Philippines, and the boys wanted to get back to the states, so they could put us in.

BH: To replace themselves?

JV: Yes, to replace themselves. They used a rather curious device of promising us a trip back by plane rather than by boat; that in itself sold us out! Next thing we knew we ended up in Tokyo, still in the service. I was demobilized at Fort Dix, but not before I did my tour of duty back in New York making some canvasses for the National Museum of Washington, canvasses related mainly to Tokyo. So that was that.

BH: I should ask you here, before you go on: Did you meet Lucien Lahaudt when you were in the Philippines area? He was a San Francisco artist and he was killed down there.

JV: No. Is that so?

BH: He was doing what you were doing. He was an older man at the time, I understand.

JV: No, but as a Combat Cameraman I feel I covered a lot of territory. This has no relationship to it, but my interest in films was a logical and natural outgrowth into subject matter which is not coverable easily by painting, and which exceeds painting in a sense, and so on. In that sense it might be an interest to you.

BH: Very interesting, yes.

JV: This part may be of interest to you: I did a number of documentaries.

BH: Now for whom did you do them?

JV: I did them for the World's Fair back in 1939. The New York World's Fair.

BH: What were they about?

JV: Oh, these were just educational data, all kinds of rather standard and documentary subjects you know. And I became vitally interested in films. When I got back here I wrote quite a bit. I still do.

BH: For the film industry?

JV: Yes.

BH: I didn't know that! You offer many surprises!

JV: Yes. I must confess that I'm also an author of some dubious TV shows...

BH: You are?

JV: ... which I hesitate to mention, as it has no bearing on the Archives. But it might, in a sense, indicate the road a painter has to travel to earn a living.

BH: Well, of course it does.

JV: This is all a natural outgrowth of my interest in documentary. I've directed and I've made use of some of my material in relation to certain films which I'll show you later on like, "House of Cards" avante guard films, within which I made use of some of my early lithographs as a matter of fact -- a combination of live and animation-world.

BH: As background for the action?

JV: Yes. You will see them, yes. Actually one particular lithograph had been done on the Federal Arts Project, and they can sue me for it if they want to!

BH: I think at this point they wouldn't.

JV: If you recall, we used to get work copies or prints.

BH: "One out of ten" or something?

JV: Something like that. I have only one copy each and I had more than that you know.

BH: Well could you tell me the name of that particular one?

JV: Yes, "House of Cards."

BH: Oh, that was the name of the tape, but the lithograph...?

JV: "House of Cards"...the lithograph? No, no. That was ...

BH: Probably "Number 10" or something?

JV: Yes, something like that. The picture is "House of Cards." It's mentioned in "History of American Films," written by an expert. Lou Jacobs was the author of it.

BH: Yes, I've seen his book.

JV: This is the area I had to work in. Now I'm painting a great deal, I'm teaching.

BH: What do you teach at Chouinard?

JV: Painting, yes, I have an adult class.

BH: Is it mainly life or landscape?

JV: Mainly life, as a matter of fact, still-life.

BH: Does it include anatomy?

JV: No, no just from the figure.

BH: They have a separate course for that?

JV: Oh yes, yes.

BH: I don't know the curriculum at all.

JV: I'm primarily curious enough, from black and white. I matured into what I would say is essentially a color-painter, a colorist, I would say, as distinct from black and white. Now you must remember, too, that my artistic influences date back to Surrealism quite a bit.

BH: This is a good time to ask you about the first exhibit that you had on the West Coast. It was at a gallery on La Cienega.

JV: How did you know that?

BH: It was in that same article Mr. Trumbo wrote. He said something about you that was very interesting.

JV: He didn't write it! Did he write it?

BH: He wrote the Article for Arts and Architecture.

JV: I didn't know that! This is something new to me.

BH: It was in November of 1942 and is called "American Contemporary."

JV: That's correct.

BH: And he tells about the West Coast show that you were having. Let's see ... if I can remember the name of the gallery.

JV: Contemporary Art Gallery, Harry Grossman's, yes.

BH: On North Cienega?

JV: On LaCienega. I have a catalogue from it.

BH: Oh, do you!

JV: Yes.

BH: I hope we can borrow it and have it microfilmed.

JV: Well, I'll give you the photo from the cover when we come back to it, yes.

BH: Good. He said that you had paintings, lithographs and gouaches in the show?

JV: Correct, correct. I had 80 pieces shown, I didn't sell anything. Isn't that idiotic?

BH: Well, you were probably way ahead of your time.

JV: Either that or I wasn't in the main-flow of decorative pieces, what people who were the nonveau riche in the area wanted.

BH: Something like "color to fit the couch?"

JV: "Color to fit the couch!" You know, my work, was in that sense, remote.

BH: Well, I thought he wrote a very nice tribute to you. He said that you were "painting in Surrealism but healthfully, lustfully removed from the neurotic vaporings unfortunately associated with most of the Surrealist group. He" -meaning you- "deals with the world rather than with himself." And I thought that was a very interesting remark and I wonder if you will please comment on it? Because I always thought Surrealism implied dealing with your own inner self and not with the world.

JV: Yes. Well, you see my interest in Surrealism was rather a free-imagery, not a stream-of-consciousness, associative approach 'a la Dali (let's say) but rather a pragmatic relating of imagery to the social scene.

BH: I see.

JV: This is dubious in retrospect. I'm citing that only to interpret Mr. Trumbo's position on it because actually there's a paradox there. There's no such thing as a healthy ...

BH: Surrealist?

JV: ... surrealist. Surrealism, per se is in itself a phenomenon. I had the pleasure of meeting Tristan Tzara and Man Ray in Paris. Both were friends of mine.

BH: Oh, had you?

JV: Yes. The word "healthy" is a ridiculous word to use. I'm not challenging his right to say that. I was rather delighted that he did. But Surrealism, as I understand it, is a sort of highly distilled stream-of-consciousness technique. And its best exponents are truly great creators. What I took from it was, in a sense, vulgarizing it. Now I'm using that word advisedly because in the best sense of the word, surrealism is a very pure protest. People like Gross - George Gross, Dali, Margarette (the Dutch artist), Max Ernst, Man Ray - these are the great Surrealists. What I took was rather naive. I took it because we didn't have at the time any intelligence about any of the art movements. We still, to this day, don't have it. We take what is an echo literally. We try to, and we only adopt it, you see. By that, I mean we either adopt it to advertising or we make "pop." We make it an adaptive art.

BH: Then this is why you use the word vulgar, in the sense of it's being "of the people," vulgar?

JV: No, I'm saying it becomes a vulgarization, do you understand? Because in the final sense we were not present at the inception of these movements. So by the time it reaches us it is either completely distorted or we distort it by the demands of our scene here, which is totally different from the French scene, see?

BH: And the philosophies become lukewarm usually by the time they get that far.

JV: The condition in each country--

BH: Is different?

JV: -- is different. When I partook or dipped into Surrealism, I was in a "sense" (quote again and I do make that strong) painting with a strongly politically-slanted view. It does not mean I was a Communist. But I was thinking in terms of class relationship. Things were not just abstract to me. But in that sense my taking from Surrealism was tainted; it was not pure. Surrealism, as such, is a very pure, exciting thing to see. Its manifestations are fabulous. In literature, the Joyce-ian stream-of-consciousness finds its counterpart. I did not see it that way. However I took a certain freedom that it gave me, an illustrative freedom I would say.

BH: It was your springboard really?

JV: Correct. So I'm not sure Mr. Trumbo understands the true nature of Surrealism in that sense. Herbert Reed has a pretty damn good understanding. In fact he's one of the few who has it, I think.

BH: I'll read his chapter on Surrealism again.

JV: So in that sense, I was also involved in abstract art, as you all see here. [He indicates paintings about the room.]

BH: By Feininger perhaps?

JV: No, never Feininger. Leger was my greatest formal influence, I would say, I think he's one of the true intelligences of the era who understands our age better than anyone else, with a kind of critical, rational approach to the forms around him. A man like Stuart Davis understood things. There are a few others. I think Bill de Kooning in his early period of stylizing and form did. I partook of that too. I had to. No one was there to teach you so he had no basis for contemporary art in our country. Instead everybody is his own little lab, for better or for worse. I think it is "for better" essentially because there is a greater range, a greater variety, it is less stilted and less academic in the final analysis.

BH: Were you ever associated with the Post Surrealists here in L.A., Feitelson and ...

JV: Here? No, not at all. I have studiously detached myself here for a variety of reasons. I was away for seven years. Then I came back, you see, and was active in the film industry, writing. I've never met Feitelson.

BH: Oh really?

JV: No, no I know his work. I know his wife's work.

BH: They are fine people.

JV: Oh yes. And they've never met me, on the other hand! Can you see that one from over there? [He indicates a painting.] That was 1938, late 1938, I think. There is a distinct Leger influence.

BH: I should say! In the color and form...

JV: Well, certainly in form and stylization. But it still has human beings in it. These are two workmen presumably, yes? There, some stylized machines, objects, as you see. This was my orientation. It isn't as highly distilled and as pure as Feitelson (whom I respect as a painter, as well as his wife -- I've forgotten her name.)

BH: Helen Lundenberg.

JV: Helen Lundenberg, yes. The Hard-Edge School now, this renaissance of hard-edge schools is probably, for very young painters, a discovery.

BH: In 1942 I believe they had a Post Surrealist group here which I think was not hard-edge at that time.

JV: Well, many painters handled hard-edge beautifully. Jean Helion, a great painter, Feininger is also of the hard-edge school in a certain sense. But my art grew much more primary sources; Picasso, Leger, Ozenfant I would say; Andre Lhote, Grig...

BH: Orozco?

JV: Oh, I have an Orozco influence too in some of my early lithographs. Well, these are the agonies of growth you see now, for better or for worse I would say. [He indicates more paintings.] "Applied art" was the term I was seeking before. We have a distressing, horrible tendency for taking the spirit and turning it into something malleable. That happens in theater: we take a good show like "Waiting for Gondot" and we turn it into "American Dream" by Albee, which has no bearing and is what I call "vulgarization" of the mainstream of a great freeing of art, whether it's theater or whether it's in the plastic arts. This comes from something entirely different. We have that tendency because it's an American trait to put things to use. When you put things to use sometimes you also destroy them. Not everything can be put to use. The work "use" is a very suspect word anyway. I've been reading Jean Renoir's biography of his father. I don't know whether you've read that?

BH: Not yet, no.

JV: I highly recommend it to you. There are some very pertinent observations by Renoir on the artisantraining of painters. In an introduction to a Cellini autobiography there are some very pertinent points of how each age

trains its artists in this unique fashion as predicated primarily under use and the adoption, or adaptability, to the nature of society. Now if there is a need for mosaics in this particular area of California, naturally you have a crop of very fine mosaic artists grow, you know? Or fresco? Take Mexico as an example. If not, you won't have. It is all based on the uniqueness of a period or certain new materials. When I go flying I drop off from the airport and I see some remarkable new things which never occurred to me because I'm not part of the new materials. There are certain artists who specialize in researches in this area. They're the lucky ones, I would say. They contribute. Materials, it goes the other way around: a certain material will engender a completely new art form perhaps.

BH: That's a fascinating thing to think of.

JV: I have digressed with other observations. I'm concerned really to communicate to the Archives the relationship between society and the artists. Some of the artists (among them de Kooning and Lowe, and so on) will disown what I say. Yet they're part and parcel of it: (not so much de Kooning, but certainly Michael Lowe) at one time we did Daumiers, you know. And these are artists very well known back East although you may not know of them. The whole group of so-called social painters who now are painting abstractions.

BH: They wouldn't want it known? I have names of places where you have exhibited only up to 1942.

JV: I'll give you some more.

BH: I have Whitney Museum...

JV: Where did you get that?

BH: Well, this is also from the Arts and Architecture magazine which tells about your first West Coast show!

JV: Really? Oh huh.

BH: It said you'd shown there and Corcoran and the New School for Social Research and the Valentine Galleries.

JV: Was this all in the article?

BH: All in the article.

JV: What issue is that? I'll have to get one.

BH: It's November, 1942. I'll give you a copy of this if you'd like...

JV: Oh, really? May I have a look at that?

BH: Oh, surely.

JV: Now I'm intrigued. Is it this article here? Oh, here; Whitney, Corcoran, New School, that's correct; Valentine, that's correct, yes. My first one-man show was at the New School for Social Research. Shall I give you a bit of chronological background? I studied at National Academy of Design; Arts Students League; Grande Chaumier in Paris while I was there, the Academie Julian...

BH: Pardon me, when was that?

JV: Way later; 1948 we were abroad you know. I had a studio there for just for a short period too. Exhibitions among other things. Now let's go right down this, shall I?

BH: Fine.

JV: The ACA Gallery; Whitney Museum...

BH: In New York?

JV: That's New York. Most of these will be New York except those which I shall indicate specifically, OK? The ACA; the Whitney Museum, a number of times, special hangings and so on. I was mainly black and white at that time, I'm not on their list now, I never hear from them you see. J.B. Norman Gallery; he passed away years ago. Paul Rosenberg Gallery. The Valentine; it was a group show, I think, with Bill de Kooning and a number of others, specifically for some kind of thing I've forgotten. Brooklyn Museum. Metropolitan Museum, I'm in the graphic collection at the Metropolitan. The Boston Worcester Museum, the National Museum in Washington, Contemporary Art Gallery here, that's the one you have the reference to there I believe, yes? The Hudson Art Gallery. Galerie Minotaur in Paris, Galerie Baux Art in Paris. The Heritage Gallery here recently...

BH: Oh, Mr. Horowitz?

JV: Yes, but before he went into it. He was with Paul Gerchik of the Ryder Gallery.

BH: I didn't know that!

JV: And now I'm with the Ryder Gallery. My first one-man show was at the New School of Social Research in 1938.

BH: Pardon me, was that a school?

JV: It's an institution, big institution for social sciences primarily. They have some magnificent Orozco frescos. It's on 12th Street in New York City. My second one-man show was at Contemporary Art Gallery on LaCienega, 1942. Subsequent shows in Paris, and Rome, and L.A. at the Coronet Gallery - it was a little gallery here, presently at the Ryder Gallery. I had an invitational show at Newport Beach last year. I have a number of local shows, a small group show presently at the Canoga Mission Art Gallery, a sort of invitational thing.

BH: The one that's in the old stable?

JV: Yes. I hope you can see that. Collections: a number of private collections of course. Metropolitan Museum print section. Brooklyn Museum, Woochester Museum print section, I think. National Museum Common Artist section as well as the print section; I think it's in relation to the Smithsonian Institution. Teaching: I taught at the University of Southern California last during 1947-48.

BH: Oh, did you?

JV: Yes, documentary. I have had private art classes and at present am at Chounard and do some private teaching, not too much.

BH: I'll want to ask you a question about this documentary teaching at USC.

JV: About films?

BH: Yes. I have become very disturbed because there were at least 2 wonderful films made on the Art Projects here which Al King told me about. One was on the mosaics - they were taken to USC and the students there allowed to cut them up for experiments.

JV: Isn't that fantastic?

BH: Isn't that dreadful?

JV: It is, it is.

BH: I'm glad to know it wasn't under you that it happened!

JV: No, but I had another experience with students. One of the students in my documentary lab class decided to take one of the films to Paris with him and the class never saw it after. So I can understand something like that happening there. We have now, in substance, completed my range as a painter, graphic artist and ...

BH: And writer? And you've directed things.

JV: I've directed yes, yes. No, I've not directed the TV things. I will not mention the particular shows I've done because I don't think they have any particular bearing (especially a certain unnamed Western) on art and the Archives, you know. In relation to that, I regard it as a popular mass art form. I think the educational stations can do an enormous job, I think Mr. Feitelson's lectures have helped a hell of a lot towards clarifying art and its meaning to the public.

BH: Yes. Did you see the one of Leon Salter? It was excellent.

JV: No, did he do one on Leon Salter?

BH: No, Mr. Fuertes directed it. I don't know if you know him?

JV: Was that show on TV?

BH: It was shown on TV, and it was just great.

JV: Is that so?

BH: They had a marvelous response. My daughter works for the new Los Angeles County Museum, she's in charge of all the publicity for the museum.

JV: Is that so, isn't that interesting?

BH: She's trying to get it shown there again.

JV: Marvelous. Oh, you mean someone made a little film on Leon Salter?

BH: Yes. Showing him going through a whole process of making one of his sculptured pieces, and talking about his philosophy. He's a very articulate man.

JV: And he also paints well.

BH: Just beautifully.

JV: Leon also used to be a dental mechanic, did you know that?

BH: Oh, I know, I taped him. He's a delightful person. I enjoyed him.

JV: I haven't seen him in years. I dropped by to see his show.

BH: In the gallery this fall?

JV: At that time I didn't have a beard and he didn't recognize me so I just let it go at that.

BH: Oh, you should have gone up to him!

JV: Well one of these days I'll get together with him again. I rather liked his show.

BH: Oh, yes. I was particularly impressed with the fact that he is able to say something in both mediums, painting and sculpture, and make it come out so that one knows what was behind it. I should think that it would be very difficult to do in both 3-dimensions and 2-dimensions. You saw his things in the show?

JV: I saw paintings.

BH: You didn't see the sculpture?

JV: Really, I paid attention only to the paintings.

BH: Because you were interested in that.

JV: Ah, wait a minute, ah it's a blank spot in my mind.

BH: Well, he worked in all different mediums.

JV: Oh, I know.

BH: Welded things and marbles and...

JV: Of course, of course.

BH: A lot of biblical heads.

JV: Yes, yes, I like his paintings.

BH: I'm glad you did.

JV: Oh, yes.

BH: We took some friends with us and we bought the first painting of the show, so we were happy about that. It's always fun when you go to a show even if you don't do it yourself.

JV: You paint yourself not at all?

BH: No.

JV: And your daughter is on the staff of the County Museum, did they move yet? They're moving now.

BH: Ah, well, the public won't be in until April but they have all moved.

JV: I see.

BH: A tremendous job.

JV: I see, when does it open, do you know?

BH: I think it the first of April for the public and March for the people who are Museum members and directors.

JV: Oh, I see.

BH: She is in New York this week, in fact.

JV: Oh really?

BH: Getting publicity on for magazines and television, radio...

JV: It's a great museum.

BH: Oh,...

JV: I think it's too small though, it's already outdated, it looks like...

BH: Oh, I hope not.

JV: Well, it has, it could have been a nobler design, I don't like the design.

BH: Looking back over this list about some of the exhibits that were given, I notice your lithography division in New York at the time. I am interested in some of the people who are mentioned along with you at the show that the Federal Arts Project exhibit in 1936 again and they were very interesting. I wonder if you could tell me anything about any of them...Don Freeman?

JV: Don Freeman in New York. [Note: Now in Santa Barbara - I taped him. B.L.H.]

BH: Harry Sternberg.

JV: Harry Sternberg was out here about six months ago, with a one-man show at the Heritage Gallery.

BH: Oh, yes, a very tall, gray-haired man? I met him one time.

JV: That's right. He had a one-man show here and he was over at Idlewild lecturing too. I know Harry, yes.

BH: Arnold Blanch?

JV: Of course, great painter, married to, what is the woman painter's name? I've forgotten. Woodstock artist.

BH: Elizabeth Olds?

JV: Elizabeth Olds is a great, great graphic artist and painter and silkscreen artist.

BH: These people are all in New York unless you tell me. If there are any here I'd love to know so I can call them.

JV: No, not one of these would be here. Bill Gropper of course, do you have Bill Gropper there?

BH: Not in this particular group.

JV: He was on the Project. Any others you wish to mention?

BH: Hugh Miller?

JV: Hugh Miller, oh yes, of course. He teaches at League. So does Sternberg.

BH: Of course Adolph Dehn.

JV: Adolph Dehn, yes, who else?

BH: Eli Jacoby?

JV: Eli Jacoby I vaguely recall.

BH: Harold Faye?

JV: Yes.

BH: And Yasuo Kuniyoshi?

JV: Of course, Kuniyoshi is a great painter as well, you know.

BH: As well as a printmaker?

JV: Kuniyoshi is primarily a great painter, great painter. Passed away unfortunately. Also a Woodstock man. Woodstock, New York, you may know, is a great art settlement back East.

BH: You must have had many of these shows, from the implication of this article. I mean exhibitions for the public of Project work. Do you think that it made much difference in getting the artists established with the public at that time?

JV: I doubt it. I'm not convinced about that. Whereas, in WPA theatre it was popular. The painter and the graphic artist actually functioned in a relative limbo. I would say it could happen, yes I would say. Primarily as a sort of crucible of his own work and growth, but not entirely publicity you see.

BH: I just wondered if it had that effect on them. Another question: The same Art Front magazine tells about the Artists' Union being pretty upset at a time in 1936 because they were threatening to remove that WPA project from a Federal support down to a state level, was that threatened very often? They were quite upset about it, were going to have a meeting, and they said that it would mean an end of the Federal Arts Projects. The states weren't prepared financially and would be unwilling to assume the burden, that there would be political skulldudgery, and all of this.

JV: It wasn't that they were going to put it on a state basis. I think usually it was total discontinuance. Actually I don't recall such a dire threat at that time.

BH: I just wondered if this happened all the time, if artists were constantly feeling that the rug was going to be drawn out from under them?

JV: Well, more or less, yes, more or less. Hence there was this constant mobilization to make our woes known to the public and press. It helped, you know, it helped. Now to come back to the anecdote if I may ...

BH: I'd love to hear it.

JV: Because it might bear this out. One of those so-called threatening days we all forgathered, as I told you, picketed -or I think it was oneof the sit-down things. We were all hauled off to jail by the hundreds and the interesting thing was that when we got where they were booking us, nobody gave his real name. I was "Cezanne," I put it down. Some others spelled out "Modigliani." There was a host of "Matisses" - a host of contemporary artists found themselves in jail, and that made the headlines nationally.

BH: Of course it would!

JV: And the next day they called us out in court, and naturally the cops had a hell of a time pronouncing our names. So I sit there and hear "Casami, Casami Casami," and what he meant was "Cezanne." To that I responded. You'll find that Irving Block will bear me out on some of this. There were a lot of other things which attest to the health of the artist at that time in a sense; the humor, the struggles, the reaching out for some meaning, economic meaning. Where does the artist stand, rather than being dependent on the whims of patronage. For instance, at that time we tried to initiate something very interesting, gallery exhibitions with earnings paid to the artists with a rotation of artists' work. This was aside from the Project itself, with the artist getting some money from his show. Now as a matter of fact I think this would be a good idea today: the society ladies who are so desperate to be helpful, to show off their chapeaux with openings of charity shows, should institute some manner of compensation to the poor damn artist who goes to the trouble of painting his picture and in the end gets nothing. I think that would be nice. I'm speaking now of the "social functions," so-called, rather than the artist-charity show naturally. So this is another aspect of that period where the artist tried to find his little niche in what went by at that time as boondoggling first-aid. But nevertheless it was a nest for the artist to help him grow and develop.

BH: A time they should have gotten paid and didn't was if they didn't win in the Treasury competitions, they were never paid anything for those, were they?

JV: No, but that was volunteer: if you entered them you took your chances. I know a lot of artists who entered beautiful mural designs. I never participated in any, although I was one of the youngest artist members of the Mural Painters Society in New York, which I forgot to mention.

BH: Oh, were you? Under George Biddle?

JV: Under George and Mrs. Biddle, correct? And I remember the Mural Society affiliated with the painters to gain some stature for the World's Fair at the time. I was very intensely interested in mural painting and the Mexican school of Orozeo, Siquieras, and so on. I sort of flirted with that but not quite. I felt at that time that our monumental public buildings had certain limits; I think it tends to be rather too decorative, ornamental work rather than the kind of expressive work that I sought in my own approach to expression at that time.

BH: Particularly with the International School coming in there was not chance of integration between the artists and the architects?

JV: Not yet, no.

BH: I think it was still coming to that.

JV: Yes, yes. On the other hand, a man like Anton Refregier did a beautiful mural in San Francisco, one of the best. I don't know if you've ever see it, in the post office there. I commend it to your attention.

BH: I'll have to see it the next time I'm up there. I didn't know about it.

JV: Oh! Also go down to that aquarium and you'll see some beautiful murals. Hilaire Hiler did a beautiful thing there -fish and marine theme.

BH: I've seen pictures of them and they look very lovely.

JV: Yes. Well Refregier did a sort of pictorial review of the Tom Mooney Case, which I recall called down the ire of the American people at the time. There was quite a bit of scandal about that. Most of the panels are still there and hopefully they will remain there. I think they are a national monument.

BH: Ed Biberman here was active on your Mural Project in New York at the time. Did you know him then?

JV: In New York? No.

BH: He was very active on the Project.

JV: Really? I don't remember him from New York, as a matter of fact. I met him here of course but I don't recall him from New York.

BH: And the man down in Cornado Island also was bit on the Mural Project.

JV: Who is that?

BH: Head of the Cornado School of Fine Art, Monty Lewis.

JV: That is familiar. In New York?

BH: In New York.

JV: Yes, yes. I had rather direct contact with Ben Shahn and Lou Blocke. I did not get involved as much as in the Graphics Projects which was more organically related to my subsequent entrance. But I started as an easel painter, shortly changed to the Mural Project, shortly after, half a year or so, passed to the Graphic Project where I remained.

BH: Do you remember any stories about Ben Shahn when you were working for him? Since he's no longer with us.

JV: What do you mean no longer with us?

BH: Isn't he dead?

JV: Ben Shahn? Who told you that?

BH: Am I mixed up? Probably not dead if you don't know it.

JV: No-o, not that I know of. Ben Shahn? No, Stuart Davis is dead. Stuart Davis passed away.

BH: Oh, how did you like his postage stamp?

JV: Davis? I'm not even familiar with it.

BH: You aren't?

JV: No.

BH: My goodness, it came out last month. I'll send you one, a five cents stamp.

JV: Oh, really? Oh, that was great.

BH: The colors are dreadful, I was so disappointed in them. They're red.

JV: Oh, Ben Shahn is with us, I hope so.

BH: Oh, well I beg your pardon, I beg his pardon.

JV: You'd better erase that from the tape.

BH: I will.

JV: It is definite, you know Ben Shahn is a very prominent eastern painter and graphic artist, sort of derivative of George Gross - and I don't care if he sees it, hears it or not.

BH: I believe we have a lot of his correspondence that was given to the Archives, and I guess that's why I thought he was dead because usually when people die that we get given things you know.

JV: You know you may have me there, but I wouldn't know about it.

BH: Oh, I'm sure you wouldn't. You mentioned Morris Canter?

JV: Oh, I knew him at the time I knew Rico Lebrun. We were together in a fresco class.

BH: You know Lebrun?

JV: Yes, in New York.

BH: Really?

JV: He had a studio on 6th Avenue on the top floor in the Industrial Building. And we were together in a fresco class at the John Reed Club in New York.

BH: Who was teaching?

JV: Alfredo Crimi was teaching it. A great friend.

BH: Was he Spanish?

JV: Italian. Fantastic when you think of all these people, each one you know adding a little bit to the sum total of what is essentially our national wealth which was so damn neglected. It is a pity.

BH: Tell me about Rico Lebrun.

JV: Rico Lebrun. I met him once or twice here, but of course he passed away.

BH: I thought he had such great influence on our young painters.

JV: Here locally?

BH: Yes.

JV: I think so. I think his influence sort of neo-Catholic mysticism, I would say, with a wonderful regard for the study of the figure and for the use of the figure. He himself was a great draftsman. I'm not too familiar with his painting as such. He was a curious phenomenon, even on a local scale.

BH: Such a very personal expression.

JV: Yes, this is a man who was "with" art of the best of the Renaissance.

BH: He was not on the Project, that you know of, in New York, was he?

JV: You know something? At that time he was gainfully engaged in private industry. He was a top illustrator for Fortune, I think, and for Esquire.

BH: Rico Lebrun?

JV: Oh yes.

BH: I didn't know that!

JV: Oh yes.

BH: Well, for goodness sake.

JV: Great draftsman. Pick up some old Esquire issues and you'll see.

BH: I'll certainly hunt for some.

JV: Beautiful drawings, you know.

BH: That's very interesting. That's why he wasn't on the Project, then, he didn't need to be?

JV: That's correct, he didn't need to be. He was doing beautifully without it.

BH: I think the commercial artists were the only ones who were free that way.

JV: He was what you would call at that time a fine arts painter, a graphic artist, essentially working independently and gainfully, doing very well for the times. But you want some anecdotes about Ben Shahn? Well, we were working on Rikers Island, on the mural, and playing horseshoes there at lunch time, and we got to know the prisoners rather well. Ben, of course, had made a very thorough study of criminology in preparation for his material, and so had Lou Brock, who worked somewhat differently. Ben, I remember quite distinctly as having been influenced by a trip abroad. He returned and I met him after the Sacco-Venzetti and Mooney series which he did. Great things. I remember seeing his first one-man show, I think it was the Sacco-Venzetti series at the Downtown Gallery when it was still downtown, which you know nothing of because you've not been to New York!

BH: No, but I have read about it.

JV: The Downtown Gallery is now uptown, more or less, in relation to downtown and still a great gallery. I think he's still showing there. That was a very, very great period, really; stimulating. There was an economic base for the artist's functioning, this in turn engendered some security and the artist would sit down and experiment and think and fool around with media. I recall distinctly we could get models over at the Project. They were both for the Mural Project and for painters, the graphic artists had several. An interesting thing is that I ran into a young lady here recently and she remembers having posed for me. I had completely forgotten. Then I recognized her, the first and only model I used on the Project.

BH: Is she still a model?

JV: No, she is an actress. She is a young lady Negro, Paulene Myers, she did rather well as an actress. You have probably seen her a number of times on TV or in films.

BH: I wonder if it wouldn't be interesting for the Archives if I talked to her? She would have a different perspective.

JV: I think so. I think you might have something there.

BH: There's an artist at UCLA named Mary who's been around here 30 or 40 years modeling. I thought I would try to track her down since several people have mentioned her.

JV: Oh, really?

BH: I'm quite sure it's the same woman who modeled on the Project.

JV: Pauline Myers posed back East, not here.

BH: Well, that wouldn't matter, you know.

JV: I think she would just as well remain the actress that she is now. It seems to me that she...

BH: You think it might bother her if I ask her?

JV: It might. I'm not sure. You know, it's not that important. She's due here for a party so I'll mention it and if she's interested I'll certainly be very happy to let you know.

BH: If you could do it without embarrassing either of you.

JV: No, that's not the case at all. I think that professionally she'd like to be known as an actress, you see? However I certainly think she might be interested, she's a singer and an actress.

BH: It could even be done anonymously, just using her first name as a model if she would talk to me and tell me something about it. The whole point is to get this historical picture. I think it's so wonderful that the Archives is doing this because the whole period has been neglected in our history of American art. We're just beginning to realize the importance of it.

JV: And the curious, the contradiction, the paradox is that on a shallow and awful basis like a depression there was planted what was the beginning of a national art renaissance. I'm not speaking only painting; I'm speaking of theatre, which was wonderful.

BH: Particularly in Los Angeles.

JV: And I'm speaking of the Writers' Project which made a contribution in the writing of the National Guide Books. Are you familiar with those?

BH: Oh, indeed I am, I own some of them.

JV: These are the definitive projects that I would like to see continued.

BH: And the "Index of American Design," that is ...

JV: Shouldn't that be continued? As a matter of fact, it is a terrible tragedy that this good thing is dead. That should have kept on. It was great, great, absolutely great. You know, I really look back on that period for myself as "The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man." [James Joyce title - BLH]

BH: Really?

JV: As my best living project. My best living period which I haven't duplicated since that period. We were very poor, cold-water flat, tiny little studios, this, that and the other thing. But certainly for the unattached man, the greatest point-of-departure as a painter or as a graphic artist. For the men with families it was a different problem. Obviously they could not get along on the little they earned. But for the young man who was starting out, what better way of reaching out for something which he could not have hoped for if he were working independently?

BH: You said you might not have gone on with art even, if it hadn't been for that.

JV: I know I would not have. As it is, by the time I am through and kick off, I will have made some contribution to what is more important than Viet Nam or anything of that period. In the broadest sense of the word, this is what counts. A nation is known by its art rather than by more tangible and more obvious remnants. Those perish. All we have to do is look at Greece...

BH: See what remains?

JV: Yes, what remains is art. And it's the only cementing force of a nation. I would like to see, and I hope, that President Johnson will see his way towards starting a discussion, a dialogue in Washington ...

BH: He touched on this last night. Did you hear his talk?

JV: Yes, yes.

BH: And there was much applause, I noticed.

JV: I'll say! I was delighted because he also stems from a depression. He understands. He understands. This is what this country is.

BH: But he's turned down Hecksher's offer to help, which has bothered me.

JV: Well actually he resigned, didn't he?

BH: Yes, but he offered to stay on and advise. He urged Johnson at the time to carry on the things already begun. The Kennedy Bill was going to come up the Monday after he died.

JV: I see.

BH: It was shelved.

JV: Well, it was the wrong period, the wrong time. I have an idea that President Johnson will see this whole thing in a new light. Certainly it refers not only to the graphic arts but also to the function of TV as a mass medium. Even more so I would say; even more so! Education TV, special TV stations obviously would make inroads into privately owned, private interest, but not to threaten them. What subscription TV failed to accomplish here, we may commence nationally on a mass scale and in the long run everybody will gain by it. This sounds perhaps a little academic and pontifical, but it is true. We need it. And I think the young people certainly have a total lack of orientation in the meanings of their own existences. If they only go to movies, if they only watch the kind of films they now see on TV. So perhaps a few million spent on art could be more rewarding than reclamation or developing of parks and so on. Let us try that; it won't hurt at all.

BH: I think private enterprise is trying to do something about it. Western Federal Savings put on "Hamlet" the other night. Did you see that? It was a British picture.

JV: That's fine!

BH: BBC - wonderful! It was filmed over there and that was a great contribution.

JV: Oh, yes. But I feel we need a Federal Arts Section.

BH: I think the Federal Government should do it.

JV: Federal Art. We need a USA Fine Art Department, like every other respectable country has. France has one you know.

BH: I know, all other countries have one.

JV: Oh yes. It's money well-spent. It is a true national treasure, I think, like forests, or parks or water.

BH: Mr. Feitelson told of something on his tape which I thought was very interesting, and I wonder if this had happened in your New York area? He was very conscious of the fact that there were artists working in different types of painting at the time who did not understand each other. We had several directors here in the Southern California area and he was in charge of it at one time. He held a symposium once a week in which individual artists could show what they've been working on and defend it or answer questions from other artists. This was a marvelous thing because realists and the avant garde artists were able to at least understand what the other group was working toward. I thought that was just great; it must have helped the whole community of artists. He himself was so conscious that the Federal Art Project wasn't going to last forever, that these people would be going on, and he wanted to give them a crutch, something to learn from it. Was this true in New York? Was there any direction?

JV: Yes, constant discussion of various levels and various phases. But on the whole, the period as I recall, if there was interest in the formal aspect of art it was a private interest, rather small groups. Then later on the abstract artist of the Hofmann group, Hans Hofmann school, would gather in bars somewhere on 8th or 9th Street and talk their heads off which was good too.

BH: But it was within the group of its own kind?

JV: Yes, it had no bearing on the Federal Arts Project. In fact it was subsequently to that as I recall.

BH: I think that this would be one of the big problems now if the government took over, the fact that there are so many schools of painting in this country.

JV: There's nothing wrong with that!

BH: Yes, it is good, healthy.

JV: That is good, you see. But the mechanics of bringing art to the public - and I'm not speaking of the cheap,

chromo reproductions, horrible, distorting reproductions you see that you get for a dollar.

BH: "Mexican painting on velvet?"

JV: That is "contemporary velvet school," yes. I think the government can well afford to build in a few major cities some centers or certainly delegate the study to parks. And somebody, federally sponsored, could assume the kind of duty to bring art to the public. Because the public doesn't go for art. It is true that there is a great renaissance of interest, but it's an interest in collecting, a speculative interest. The fact is that it is already being distorted into repulsive channels. [Interruption]

BH: We were talking about what would happen if the government were to take over art when there are so many different schools of painting. Of course you always have political problems.

JV: And there are problems of aesthetics, yes. I'm less concerned with that than with the government helping, being a midwife, so to speak, in bringing art to the public. I'm speaking of good (the work "good" is in quotes you see, whatever is considered good) art. I'll abide by any definition. I like to see things like Lincoln Center. I'd like to see opera houses in various cities. I'd like it to manifest itself in art commissions which would help to make cities more beautiful. That in itself is a big project.

BH: Certainly it is.

JV: And in that sense President Johnson is very correct in helping make our surroundings handsomer because our cities are horrors.

BH: Oh, indeed they are.

JV: They're turning into horrors. Even a city like this, which still has an enormous potential for growing, I don't think has any supervision in terms of art and architecture. There is, I suppose, a functioning art commission which is probably defunct.

BH: They're allowed to denude all the hills, cut them down.

JV: Well, that's part of the growth, I imagine. I know nothing about it, but I'm all for the planning of cities generally and better highway layouts. I don't mind government participation, government taking the lead, taking the initiative to responsibility. It is its responsibility. We're not living in days when things can be delegated to small units. It is a national problem. I traveled from here across a number of states and what I saw makes me believe that the public generally should have its eyes and ears protected from such sights of ugliness. That is my memory of the trip. I don't envision a federal control in terms of a censuring body but rather as a guiding body.

BH: Stimulating things?

JV: Stimulating. Exactly. Where it would promote an interest in the arts, but not the proliferating mediocrity which is what we very often get. By acting as this midwife between the public and the artist, whether he be a painter, graphic artist, musician, or great actor or great playwright. I don't see art primarily related to the graphic artist by a long shot now. It's not, you see. I think on the whole there will be a gradual diminishing of the visual art as we have known it. It will re-emerge in films (it has already, good animated films such as especially for our interest here I have demonstrated). Or, in a sense, completely new graphic forms which will not be the known forms fixed on canvas. No need for that to remain forever, you know. Whole new areas are open. That's one of the reasons I became so intensely interested in films, because it transcends the fixed element in painting and graphic art which, however, in turn, is its power and strength. Something arrested in a form becomes per se. A cult has its own laws, they're quite immutable and they are formed and they date back through the ages. They already presuppose observation, and arresting that observation in some form, be it a piece of sculpture or be it a painting. In that sense it's wonderful. On the other hand, the animation industry and animation art have other areas which are equally vital.

BH: Which they haven't even tapped yet? Yes.

JV: Yes. Not at all. I know a few boys here, a few artists, who have done a lot of experimental work in color - in color imagery, abstract imagery in film. The Whitney boys, James and John Whitney, they're not known to you? I remember them. There are others.

BH: Are they here in Los Angeles?

JV: Ah, yes. They're totally unrelated to your subject, you know. But they've done some beautiful work in that field.

BH: Well, so are Jan Stussy and Gordon Nunes, you know.

JV: Yes.

BH: At UCLA they're working on art films going back to your Surrealism, I think you would classify them.

JV: Yes. Well, to come back to my "House of Cards," that's a stream-of-consciousness film and it...

BH: I wish I'd seen it.

JV: Well, you may run into it. It's still shown.

BH: Good!

JV: There I found perhaps a furthering of my earlier somewhat naive interest in Surrealism. I found a much more legitimate and logical place for it. But art, I think, the artisan element in art, will remain as a lab for all later artists. I'm convinced of that.

BH: Just as a matter of interest, does John Cocteau's film, "Beauty and the Beast," prefigure some of the things that are happening in the films?

JV: Jean Cocteau, of course, was the apostle of avant garde film experimentation. No question about it. There's an interesting example of unique combination of a poet, great painter and graphic artist and great filmmaker and director. I modestly don't aspire to such heights, but in a certain sense my orientation exceeds the graphic arts as we know them. I am very fundamentally interested in films as an extension of work as a painter. As you well know, some of the greatest directors have been painters. Oh yes, Serge Eisenstein, the great Russian director, was a painter and graphic artist. And an architect also, I believe. And Pudovkin also was also one, I think.

BH: I didn't know that! Bergman? Was he a painter too?

JV: Hm-m, I'm not sure, not sure. John Huston is an ex-artist. and Alfred Hitchcock is an artist. You would find the bulk of them, great painters. There's logic to it, you see.

BH: Well of course there is.

JV: Logic to it. If you regard it as the eye lent to another medium, our contemporary great mass medium. You can't ignore it. Now perhaps that is an area in which the Federal Government could help in establishing an experimental station, huge theatre or something, where all the artists combined - the painter, the musician, the composer, the graphic artist, the actor, the director...

BH: The dancers?

JV: ...the dancers. My god! What an enormous area; there's no limit! I foresee an enormous renaissance in our times. I think we ought to cut down on our doling out money into areas of the world where they are very self-sufficient now (and should be, you know) and channel a little of that to the arts, you know. Just a fraction of that would help us to see the whole world in a different perspective perhaps. We are a little insecure, and one way to get over that, I think, is to enlarge people's perspective on things. Then they're individualized, enriched. Then they see life as being richer.

BH: On the whole, American life gets more dignity when people...

JV: Well, of course, of course. I'll never forget one time. It probably made news copy. We were in Paris, my wife and I, waiting for a ticket to the Paris Opera. The woman in back of us asked us about the opera. She said, "Oh, you know it is state-controlled." She said, "My god, it's happening here - socialism, you know." It's been owned by the state for hundreds of years! Was built by one of the kings (I don't know which one) and is a great national treasure. Why can't we have that? Sooner or later we're going to have it as we have Social Security. It may take us into a greater security, and that would be art, I think.

BH: It's exciting to think of. I hope you're right.

JV: I think eventually we will.

BH: I hope it will happen soon.

JV: I think with greater leisure people who want to know more will be reaching out for meaning in their own lives. They'll find it, not in acquiring another rug,necessarily, but rather in contemplation in seeking a greater answer

than, say, a new washing machine can provide. Do you know what I mean?

BH: People certainly are ready for this education too. If you try to get an art book from the library you find they're all checked out. People are really hunting for culture.

JV: You know, my class at Chouinard is an adult class.

BH: Oh, really?

JV: Oh yes. And you'd be astonished. I have many people there and I applaud them for it. Some old lady will take a trolley car because she has no car; her hands are arthritic, but she still wants to learn - it is the last, last grasp, a reaching out for something, for a certain richness. And those people interest me most in a sense because they're missed. Their lives have been filled with that need.

BH: It is great that they still want it!

JV: Oh, God, it's absolutely fascinating. Like one old lady: she's about 70, a kind of primitive. Obviously she doesn't draw well, but it's literally poignant to see her reaching out. END OF TAPE PART 2

BH: This is Betty Lochrie Hoag on January 5, 1965, continuing the interview with Joseph Vogel in his Los Angeles home. Mr. Vogel, in between changing the tape we were talking about the effect that the work done on the Federal Art Project had on American art today, and you started to mention pop art. I wonder if you would tell me now what you were going to, please?

JV: Well, since I am both teaching and observing, my own career, in a sense, conditions me to observe this phenomenon in relation to the period which we were discussing, the Federal Art Project period, where the stresses were social and of a different sort. Whereas that was a period of relative economic instability, the artists delving into socio-political problems, we find that the new generation of younger artists (not speaking now of pop art, but rather of so-called beat art which is also in poetry as related to the graphic arts as well) this new generation has a disengagement from the social-political and instead rather a preoccupation with the self. There's nothing wrong with it - I'm not being critical now, mind you; I'm just trying to evaluate it for myself.

BH: Yes.

JV: The younger artist, the abstract expressionist as we know him, is, in a sense, a further extension of the pure expressionist - I would say, of the Ozenfant-Leger origin although there is a link also to the Hans Hofmann School and Mies and Gropius. The new crop of painters I see in the galleries are somewhat disoriented, I would say. It's not their fault; preoccupation is rather with surface than with the content. By content I don't mean necessarily subject matter, I mean even plastic content.

BH: Yes.

JV: When I watch the student at the Otis School or even this school where I am now, Chouinard, I think he blunders pathetically in a quagmire of a sort of stylistic preoccupation. I think the most concrete of all of these pseudo-movements is probably the pop art phenomenon, which in a curious sense is another kind of social protest against the mass mind - mass-commodity mind, mass-consumption mind, the over-abundant attitude, and so on.

BH: Conformity.

JV: And conformity, yes. As such it becomes a unique and true and active social expression in a most curious, most oblique manner because it tends to pinpoint and attract our attention to the repetitiousness or, as you say, the conformity of the label - the can of beans repetitive motif...

BH: Campbell soups all around you?

JV: Yes. It becomes a ritual of repetition of dullness. Now whether that is the true intention of pop art as such or not, I cannot say. But in the sum total of its effect it is that. Whereas the surrealist, a post-first World War phenomenon was a protest against a social order which caused the war. These artists make the same protest but their protest is against an over-abundance, against a fatuous compactness of mind and body and against a sterility...

BH: Yes.

JV: In that sense they're very important, I think. I don't know how far they'll go, but they are a juxtaposition to the surrealist. They haven't added very much, I mean they're not great innovators, you know. After all, Man Ray putting a bunch of hats on iron has made a very powerful statement that is almost satirical; it's a cartoon, but it

was done. But the surrealists represent the same, but the protest is against a different kind of preoccupation. In other words, the pop artists are our surrealists of the day. In sculpture you find shock value of a demonstrable abortion, as I've seen the whole conglomeration of objects. It's nothing sensational to me. The only aspect of it which I find somewhat annoying or disconcerting is preoccupation with the horror aspect of things, not without considerable loss of humor and satire.

BH: It fits in with your new sentimentality and the horror movie man whom you mentioned, Hitchcock.

JV: Oh, yes.

BH: There seems to be a direct connection between them.

JV: That's correct. Of course the pandering to fear, the pandering to shallow sensationalism and so on, that's Hitchcock, yes. On the other hand, how great can the horror of a Hitchcock be in relation to, say, the horror of mass murder at a concentration camp? In nature, the horror is much greater than the human imagination, shall we say. You know, in true life, curiously enough. I've seen the Auschwitz concentration camp when I photographed during the war. I got to all the German concentration camps, practically all the camps with a motion picture camera so I should be particularly inured, yes?

BH: Yes.

JV: Yet I cannot watch a Hitchcock precisely because it's a vulgarization of horror. It's not pure, it's cheap, it's pandering.

BH: Your pure horror exists more in a thing like the recent event in New York when a girl was raped and murdered on the street in view of individuals watching and not doing anything because "they were not their brother's keeper."

JV: Yes. She was killed, wasn't she? She was wounded or pursued or something?

BH: Yes. She was murdered anyway.

JV: In other words, the detachment, the disengagement, the non-involvement of themselves officially called ...

BH: That, it seems to me, has a direct parallel with your pop art. There is a difference between that and this painting of yours on the wall of yours. Because yours is a tremendous emotional protest against the social conditions, and pop art seems to me to be an individual unemotional acceptance of it. There's something very cold and cruel about it, like the murder in New York.

JV: Well, I disagree with you, because, per se, as a phenomenon, as an artistic phenomenon, who are we to moralize? Do you understand? We can express an opinion about a thing but we can't moralize about whether it is cruel or not cruel. I'm only trying to evaluate it as a social phenomenon in relation to surrealism. I make that distinction strongly. In other words, I will not subscribe to what you have just said at all, because I say, per se, as such, it becomes a demonstrable reflection and arrests people's attention about the kind of society we have. Surely we, neither you or I, can evaluate the prime motive of the artist, whether or not it was a genuine poetic sense of frustration with the kind of society we are living in, the kind of world we have about us. We don't know. The beat artist withdraws. The beat poet, so-called, is a useful human being by his sheer withdrawal; he establishes a protest against the conditions that prevail. Because the true vulgarity, the true cheapness, the true cruelty does not come from that source, the artistic; it comes from those who make things to sell and utilize the various mass media to precondition people to the acceptance of certain state of mind which dulls them to the true nature of things. This is what I mean. In other words, I concede the following: I concede that vulgarity cheapens the violence on TV and establishes a state of dullness, numbness in thinking, which in turn allows a subliminal effect of the commercial upon the audience. So that where I go to the market, I automatically reach out for something that I have heard most of - which may be lousy, meaningless, in fact, health-wise even detrimental. Yet we buy it. So it is in this sense that I refer back to the needs of certain Federal guidance in relation to our mass communications media. And art is just at the tail-end of the parade.

BH: Well, let's pray that they'll get someone who realizes this and is able to help things out.

JV: So the corrosion is not from the pop artist, or the "theater of the absurd:" the corrosion is from (and here I hark back to what I like to think of as my sense of evaluating things in a social perspective) those who have most to gain by it. And this is a dated, involved, much abused point-of-view, which is to challenge, examine things, in the scale of commodities, of things. Who gains most by it? I know this will sound awfully dated. It takes me back many years, yet it still holds true today. People who control. I can tell you, I know, because I go to story conferences for TV and I could tell you of some revolting conditions and situations where even producers and story editors - this is on mass media - are captives of the agencies, who in turn are captives of the sponsor, who

in turn is a captive of the stockholder. So it's a vicious circle. Where does the freeing come from? God knows, but it will come. It has to, or we'll all sink lower and lower and the streets won't be safe, Madam. Right now my wife thinks twice about going out late on this quiet street. Why? The newspapers have the answer, yes? So come back now to what you were referring to - the new sentimentality, yes?

BH: Right.

JV: The new sentimentality, whatever you may think of it, or how ill-disposed you may be emotionally to it, nevertheless has a bright look about it. Including the Beatles because challenges form values, attack false values, false morality values; which are a shield for real corruption, which is not by teenagers but by parents who are misplaced, who don't deserve to be parents. How many people do you know like that? I know many. They don't know whether they're coming or going with their kids. They're caught up in things, and so on and so on. I won't harp - I mean it becomes possible for me to extend it beyond our interest, of course. But art is related to it. Art is the purest of it all yet, whether it be pop art or the "theater of the absurd," because it channels it, and it siphons it into constructive purposes. In a curious fashion it becomes constructive. You go to see the "American Dream" or "Waiting for Godot" or any of the "absurd theater" productions - or "Zoo Story" - have you seen that?

BH: No. I saw "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?" the other night.

JV: That must be a shocker. I've never seen it, by the way.

BH: Yes, it's a shocker.

JV: It's a minor one. It's not as good as the others, I understand. I saw "Zoo Story." Now offhand you sit there and you behold a cruel horror, nightmarish sort of thing. But by the time you're out, you're deeply touched by the sorrow of a man who is trying to reach out for love and found nothing, only ugliness. Well, this is what art should try more. And the change in more's for example, the new morality, the new sentimentality, seeps in through literature, through art, through the theater; it's always a true reflection of conditions. Don't blame it on art, blame it on society such as it is. It has nothing to do with art. It has to do with more basic relationships in society, their money relations, profit motive, - an old-fashioned and (as I said before) pretty dated consideration. What kind of world are we living in? We're living in a capitalistic world, which presupposes profit. And people will try to get profit by selling pornographic books, by selling their fellow man down the river, god knows what else. These are postulates of which I am very conscious.

BH: But they have always been with us?

JV: They've always been with us, that's true. That's why we always have war, one worse than the other, one greater horror than the other. We graduated from ten million-fifteen million in the first World War to 50 million in the second World War, plus outright, deliberate mass murder of people in gas chambers. Now we wouldn't have thought such brutality possible before. But this is what we are coming to, and art is on the tail end of the parade, I tell you. Hence, the examination of man's motives and man's being, whether it be in existentialist philosophy, existentialist art, whether it be in surrealism, or pop art, if you please, abstract expressionism, or "theater of the absurd," it has a distinct and definite relationship to the overall question mark. It's a big, goddamned question. We don't know where we are, as things are. It's a quagmire; we don't know where we are, if we don't have simple answers to some fantastic, obvious things yet. Take Medicare for instance, I bring it up because art is related to that too, to human vision, to clarity; or to people's not knowing whom to vote for because their emotionalism is so ingrained that they cannot see beyond the immediate horizon. You talk to people and find sentimentality or false romanticism is so ingrained. It's the 5 and 10 cent store consideration of art, the fake sunset. The sunset exists, it's magnificent, but what it's reduced to is a 5 or 10 cent store mentality of pure association. It is destroyed for us.

BH: This is your vulgate again?

JV: Yes, it's reduced to that, you see. So we come back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. But the artist is never to blame. The artist, in a curious, crazy fashion synthesizes everything, if he's true.

BH: Well he's reflecting it.

JV: More than that. Even by reflecting it he pinpoints a light on it, he illuminates it, and something happens. As an example, take the history of art; 50 years ago who would go out and buy a Utrillo or a Picasso, even a cheap print? These days suddenly they find themselves into people's houses. Taste has changed. And hopefully with it people's point of view will be changing. Naturally they're still thinking in terms of the old watermill and the water and cheap, phony, romantic layers of snow and what not. Their thinking is rooted in that epoch which is no more with us. So they have to reorient their thinking in terms of taste and the demands of their own homes, the designs for their rugs and so on and so on. The danger is the superficial adaptation of design into plastics, let's

say, where the mechanics of production control it. Hence awful loss - horrible, unalterable loss of craftsmanship. Dreadful; it's awful. I think a good thing would be for all good people to get together and picket places where they sell these awful things. This is probably the greatest loss of all - handicrafts as they have been known. On the other hand, our mechanical age accepts it. Our cars are great nevertheless.

BH: There is a car in every garage and there wouldn't be if they were done by handicraft!

JV: No. That's correct. But I say our cars are a mass product, they're great. So there is an area where great things can be made, but not made cheap. I suppose the question of how cheap they make them it's still an area outside of my competence. But nevertheless there is the danger of cheapening taste, loss of man's relation to the things that are made by hand. That's where art still remains the great lab for human thinking. One man still makes it; one man lives through it; one man's emotions are contained in it; one man's ideas are contained in it.

BH: Initially it has to be so.

JV: Yes. It's not a conveyor belt. I don't mean just the uniqueness of it's being one-of-its-kind, but the fact that what remains on the canvas or whatever is felt, is an emotional thing, and it's felt by one man without any other outside influence upon it which may change it, or reduce it quantitatively or qualitatively. That is important, you know.

BH: Mr. Vogel, you've gotten out a lot of pictures for me to look at here from the Project and I'm very grateful to you for this, and I'm looking forward to it. We probably should stop so we can.

JV: Of course.

BH: We've been taping all afternoon.

JV: Of course. What I've done here is just eliminate. I would like to show you some of my paintings. If you care to make any use of them, by all means do so.

BH: I would appreciate it so much if we can borrow them and have them photographed for the Archives. That would be wonderful.

JV: All right. Fine. Fine. I don't know how many you usually would like to have but you can have as many as you want as long as I know I'm going to get them all back. These are my personal archives.

BH: I'll guard them with my life.

JV: Some of them are one-of-a-kind, you know.

BH: I realize that. I appreciate this interview; you've been so kind to go into it for the Archives.

JV: I, in a sense am even more appreciative because it's like a recapitulation of my own credo, in relation to an era when all these values were challenged and created, my own humble beginnings as a painter and graphic artist. It is my concern that no matter how the world goes on or how art goes on, every man has his little niche and there he stays best. From there he looks out on the world whether he works in painting, or whether he's a film man, or a theater man...

BH: You've done beautiful work from what I've seen. I'm so happy to be sure that we got you in the Archives because of that as well as for the work you did during the Project.

JV: Well I'm delighted, I was really delighted to hear about it and I actually owe a debt of gratitude of Magrose (?) who called it to my attention. He had assumed in his letter to me that I would be contacted so I made ...

BH: Well, you would have, because I had Mr. Gillian on my list to get to, but I might not have gotten to him for a couple of months.

JV: I would most certainly urge you to see Ted Gillian.

BH: I certainly will see...

JV: ...To see Irving Block, Manuel Tolegian, who might have some interesting anecdotes - Manuel Tolegian.

BH: M A N U E L T O L E G I A N. [sic]

JV: Yes, he's Armenian.

BH: You don't happen to know what part of town he's in?

JV: Indeed I have. I'll give it to you and you look him up. I'll give it to you now before you...

BH: Before we turn off the tape, do tell me about the trip that Jackson Pollock and Tolegian made, which you mentioned to me.

JV: No, I won't tell you. I'd like Tolegian to tell you that. So you'll have to - Tolejian is a painter, a very fine painter, and a very curious painter, you see, and I can only suggest that you visit him, he's a very, very severe painter in many respects, a traditional painter, but a very good one, and when you see him give him my best. He also manufactures the unique electric easels; I have one in my studio.

BH: An electric easel?

JV: Oh, yes. I should have shown it to you. I'll show you how it works afterward. Apropos of Jackson Pollock, I probably have the dubious distinction of having manhandled him when he was quite drunk during an Artist's Union dance. We had to raise money and I was in charge at that time - I don't know why, I was on the membership committee or some silly thing like that...

BH: One of the youngsters who had a lot of energy and time?

JV: Oh, yes. He came along drunk and started to throw his weight around. He was big and huskier than I so I think I had to get some help. We got him out of there, but he could get pretty violent and he did. I tried to make things up, tried to calm him down. I remember his girl friend and his present wife (what's her name? - oh, God, begins with a K - (Krasner) - I've forgotten): we were all involved in the Artists' Union exhibits which were quite renowned. One of the best sculpture shows we ever had in this country as by Artists' Union, I think, on 18th Street: from Noguchi to Ben Shahn; great, great, wonderful things!

BH: What year was that, do you remember?

JV: Oh God, it must have been '31, no, '34, '33, or '34. I'm still trying to think of Pollock's subsequent wife.

BH: An artist also?

JV: Oh yes. She's a fine artist. In some respects I considered her work better than his. I've forgotten but Tolegian will know.

BH: Good, I'll ask him.

JV: Tolegian was the one who started out with him here and they ended up in New York, of course.

BH: I've been trying to find out whether they were on the Project here and no one seems to know for sure.

JV: Here?

BH: Yes.

JV: I'm not sure they were here. I know definitely that both Manuel and Jackson Pollock left from there together. They had various experiences which should make interesting material.

BH: I'm looking forward to talking to him. Do you have any paintings by either one of them?

JV: No.

BH: Artists don't trade each other's pictures very much?

JV: Yes, but we just neglected it. I guess we should have.

BH: Did you get Pollock put out of the party that night?

JV: Oh yes, that was very funny. Minutiae, nothing really. But the curious thing is that he became so famous. One of the curious aspects of this whole thing is the fact that at that time I was sort of part of this coterie of younger artists, of sandy white-haired boys. I'd get some excellent reviews whenever I showed. But those boys remained in New York which was the center, you see, and continued exhibiting, continued exchanging, and so on. And now I read about Bill de Kooning. I'll tell you another angle which I remember. I came on a furlough to New York and visited a dancer friend of mine, Marie Merchaffsky - it must have been in 1944, I think. I went up to her studio and there I saw a rather large decor, background for a dance by her. Marie was a Martha Graham dancer. I said, "Who did it?" She said, "Oh, Bill did it." I think she had paid for the material, the paper, and maybe $50, something like that. I went back to New York recently (about 1959) and dropped over to Marie

Merchaffsky's and there I saw a black and white photo of the mural. I said, "Whatever happened to it?" She said, "Oh, I have a story to tell you." [So now I get it third generation, yes?] Here's the story: She had folded this thing and put it away. It was done with gouache or cheap tempera colors on paper. Some years later a photographer came to her and said he would like to photograph it and just casually mentioned a sum. She opened it up. By this time it was all creased, broken up and what not. So he said, "Let me take it out where I can do a color photograph of it." He took it home and a few weeks later came back and asked, "Look, how about taking $500 for it?" She said, "Well, it's kind of silly, I'd better not." He had shown it to Bill de Kooning's gallery man (what's his name?).

BH: I don't know.

JV: It's a big gallery in New York, he used to be a shirtmaker before he became a gallery man. The Sidney Janis Gallery. Apparently Janis thought he would take a flyer on it by making a certain offer. She played it back and forth, back and forth. Finally they offered $6,000 cash toward 25 - final if she would give them an option on this decor for a year, or something like that. It was nothing but a background, not even on good paper! And then they had it mounted and restored...

BH: How big was it, incidentally?

JV: Oh, it was quite big, I would say it was 8 feet by 7 feet. She took that option and they did not succeed in selling it. She remembered the $6,000, subsequently when her husband came into the picture. Their divorce wasn't final and he said, "It's mine after all..."

BH: He owned half of everything she did?

JV: Sort of. These were good friends of mine. Later I understand that it sold for $100,000.

BH: Why, how amazing!

JV: Yes. And Marie is a rich woman.

BH: She got it all right?

JV: They sold it for - I don't know how much.

BH: They got a commission?

JV: Some crazy thing like that. Isn't that fantastic!

BH: Oh it is. Especially since the thing must not have been in good condition if it had been folded up all that time.

JV: Well, I'm trying to find a reproduction of it. I have it in color on a small program somewhere.

BH: It probably wasn't one of his mother-pictures either then, if it was a background.

JV: His mother-pictures?

BH: Well, that's what we called them in school when we studied him. All these voluptuous women are all a mother-image, our teacher told us. I don't know if it's true or not.

JV: Your teacher said that?

BH: That's his interpretation.

JV: Yes, I know. The women aren't his mother...no, no. Now another curious thing is that Bill's first wife - no, Bill's girlfriend - they parted. His first wife was a circus performer. She came out here to the Coast and met Man Ray and married him. In Man Ray's book you will read about it. She went back to Paris not realizing that Bill would become very famous here. He did. The book is really very exciting. Great man.

BH: It's amazing! Do you remember how to spell her name, Mr. Vogel?

JV: No, I wouldn't want to try. Marie owns this painting in the collection of Milton Roberts. [He indicated.] She was married to him.

BH: Incidentally, you mentioned Jackson Pollock. A couple of years ago we saw a lot of his things at Peggy Guggenheim's in Venice. That was very interesting.

JV: Oh yes.

BH: And I guess she was the person who championed Jackson.

JV: Now I mentioned Helion before, you remember?

BH: Yes.

JV: Peggy Guggenheim's daughter was married to Helion.

BH: Oh! Is she still married to him?

JV: No. Divorced.

BH: Mrs. Guggenheim showed us some of her daughters's work, of course, when we were there.

JV: Yes, oh yes.

BH: She was very proud of her, like any mother.

JV: Yes. This is what I call the knitting type of painting. I remember seeing her painting when I was at their home in Paris - Helion's - and the daughter's.

BH: I think they had little children and quite a few of the things that we saw were pictures of children.

JV: Oh really!

BH: Yes. And I presume they were young at the time.

JV: I'm not familiar with that at all.

BH: It was rather strange. We had gone to Europe where our son was in the Marines. He had met us and come with us on the Italian trip. We had an invitation to meet here and she was perfectly charming, had us out for the evening, although...

JV: Venice, did you say?

BH: Yes.

JV: She has a whole pallazzo there, doesn't she?

BH: Yes. And that's where we were for the evening with her.

JV: Are you familiar, by the way, with the somewhat coarse beginnings of the Jackson Pollock career and the patron, Madame Guggenheim?

BH: No. And I haven't read...

JV: [Inaudible]

BH: I can imagine it was rather...

JV: Well, what happened he was invited to her home, and according to Art Law he said that he pee'd in the fireplace to make an impression.

BH: Oh, my heavens!

JV: Yes. It goes to show you the lengths to which some artists have to go to make history.

BH: Well, this makes my story a little bit more understandable.

JV: Please.

BH: We had this very handsome big Marine son of ours with us, and I had not had a chance to tell him of her relationship to the arts. He loves art, but doesn't know very much about it. He was impressed and thrilled with everything from the primitives right on except the things in the Jackson Pollock room. She took us in there, and said, "What do you think of these?" And Peter looked around and answered, "I think they're awful; they're the worst things you have in your collection." I thought, "Oh, we'll have to leave!" Instead she asked him, "Why?" and Peter, who is very vociferous, told her just why he thought so. They had a wonderful talk. After we'd gotten

home, our mutual friend, who lives here said every time Peggy writes here she wants to know about "that wonderful Marine." Which just tickles me no end!

JV: I think your Marine son had a very valid point, perhaps not on the grounds that it was the worst of the collection (she may have had worse, for all I know!), but I personally never went for Pollock's work. I think I am not of the automatic school of painting. I certainly try to be more figurative and I feel that although the accidental can be very exciting, to me that is not enough. I think art is an act of will, of human will, of human - not discipline necessarily - but will, the asserting of a person's will. It is true of the best in history it seems to me, the man asserted...

BH: And controlled...

JV: Well, he can't always control. But at least he can assert a will. Otherwise, we're living in a free-will world which we may return to, where people just essentially won't be at all. Which is quite likely; I'm not putting that beyond the realm of possibility. But in art the designation of erecting of something on a surface or in sculpture or in anything, is important. I'm not speaking just of physical control. For certainly the drawing of a figure doesn't make art, nor the realistic rendering of an object make art. It must be related. As I talk I hear myself and I say to myself, "There are areas of art perfectly valid, just color areas; color areas speak volumes of emotion. There's so much contradiction in art. For myself I haven't got the answer by a long shot. I'm trying to evaluate what I've just said, you know. I find myself backtracking a little but it still relates to my position on Jackson Pollock. I still feel that the non-contact with the canvas, the brush, the hand, is a curious phenomenon to say the least. And it's no less curious, I say, than kids dancing these days with their bodies not touching. In other words, it's what we refer to as the "new sentimentality."

BH: The other side of the coin from Zen philosophy of Zen painting when the painting comes from the spirit and the soul through the arm, through the brush, through the contact?

JV: I confess I'm not too familiar with Zen; I know Eastern painting, I know Japanese painting. Observation and contemplations that what you're thinking of?

BH: Yes; it's their philosophy.

JV: I'm concerned with the artist representation of a state of mind, of a state of being which may be related to definite concrete objects or not; but it has to be controlled by him. And Pollock's shaking of a brush against a canvas may produce an interesting pattern, but...

BH: So does the ocean on a rock, yet you can't call that art?

JV: That's correct, that's absolutely correct. So perhaps, in answer to your question, I'm going around in circles...but these are...

BH: No. I see what you mean.

JV: I happened to be involved in something else where I'm asking this question. It has nothing to do with art.

BH: I see.

JV: It's like writing dialogue; it's true nevertheless. The exercise of man's will in control of nature, let's say, yes? If that is adaptable to the arts, then man at best, on the highest level of art, is always in control, always in control. He may disinherit what he does, he may destroy. In the case of Bill de Kooning you can see where he started the disenchantment, the destruction. But that, too, is an act of will. Picasso can block in certain areas, then scrape them out; but then he puts something else in its place or he turns it and twists it until it suits his purpose, which is an act of will, rather than he arbitrary phenomenon. There's a fundamental difference there.

BH: I presume that Pollock would have said that he was controlling the drips. Remember that film that was made of him?

JV: Yes, oh no, you don't...

BH: It shows him...

JV: You control a bit of pattern, a bit of texture and so on, but essentially I don't call that a true act of will. It becomes an act of will when you regard the act of dripping, of paint, as a form of your own life, as a way of life.

BH: Getting back to your new sentimentality again, don't you think maybe that the reason that it became important is because of the shock appeal?

JV: Because of what?

BH: The shock appeal that you were speaking of a while ago. That is, a lot of people were shocked with the way he painted; and they were shocked with the way it looked.

JV: Oh no, because there's nothing new to what he has done really. I know some better painters than he who never reached the heights of notoriety and fame that he did. Boris Margo way before - I'll show you - look at Herbert Reed's book on surrealism and you'll see paintings done in lunatic asylums where the free forms derived from a whole system of doodling.

BH: Well, maybe they just needed a publicist, a good advertising agent?

JV: Don't look to the artist for an answer - this is what I'm trying to say. Look to the dames like Peggy Guggenheim for an answer. If they find satisfaction from such a shallow experience and pay for it, the artists will produce it. Whereas the primitive, the native in the depths of the jungle, out of a sense of fear, or homage, or desperation will buy a little votive piece of sculpture which embodies his fears; but he feels intensely. She doesn't - what of her? - that patron? What is their level of emotional participation generally like? Zero.

BH: Well, who can tell without knowing the person?

JV: I can tell.

BH: Can you?

JV: Yes. I arrogate that to myself. The best proof-of-the-pudding is what they support. You know there's the whole snob aspect in art and in patronage it is enormous, as you know. Our people who buy are not the Medici's, who exercised taste at least. They are not the art patrons in art history who had erudition. I question a lot of buying of art by people who don't give a damn one way or another, who buy out of convention, and so on. If styles are derived from that kind of support, naturally the styles per se, are not lasting. They don't merit lasting very long. The fact of the matter is that that kind of automatic painting is already finding it's own end and logically so. Now you see the pendulum swings constantly from inside the studio back to the outside, back to nature. And it swings not accidentally, it swings with the times as society regards human struggle as more important (or human growth, I would say) as against its putrifiction and its dessication. Then they go - do you understand?

BH: Yes.

JV: Because after great historic disasters man tends to withdraw into himself to think about what has happened. I think artists are like that, the painter, the poet, yes? The playwright.

BH: Very definitely.

JV: Then they begin, to say, "Gee, let's see, let's have a look at the sun and the grass, and see it all over again. Maybe it's worthwhile living after all." So the great questions are being constantly asked and literally, simultaneously with that there is a movement back into the studio. Then, when the questions have been at least haphazardly answered, or as rapidly as we can answer any question, out we go. Right now do you know what I'm going to do? I'd like to go to the beach, I'd like to surf; I've always had an inclination for it, my appetites are relatively speaking extroverted, you understand, although in my work I'm also introverted. On the whole I look to the outside. Due to a variety of circumstances I haven't really given myself a full chance. I'm going to do more painting, I have already made paintings about surfers, football players. A great deal on the Project I did prints like that. Now maybe it's purely stylized things; that's another thing. I'd like to see what I would do now without the outside. Or with things and objects as people for me that does good, I'm looking forward to it. I haven't done any for certain specific reasons, I haven't done any to amount to anything - there is something I was going to tell you. There are signs, that the figure and the object are becoming more popular. I think it's nothing but a reflection of our society. The word "decadent" is misapplied. If society is decadent, the art is decadent, everything is decadent.

BH: [Since my tape recorder was beginning to develop its old squeak being near the end of the tape, and since we'd been recording all afternoon, Mr. Vogel and I decided to stop and go through the material which he had gotten out for me to have microfilmed for the Archives. So this is the end of our interview.] END OF INTERVIEW