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Oral history interview with Red Grooms,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Red Grooms on September 5, 1967. The interview was conducted by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding for the transcription of this interview provided by the Smithsonian Institution's Women's Committee.

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

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: On September 5, 1967. I would like to begin by talking about your film, Flat Feet, which was - which I saw here in Provincetown, in color, recently and had previously seen on television in New York. And a film which impressed me very much because of its play between reality of New York City, really fragments of the city coming into view and a cartoon world, constructed, in a way implied life sized, very often. I am not sure - sure - could be very wrong about that, but it seemed at times to be life sized. You could really see a real fireman rescuing a cut out cat and placing it in the hands of a real child. Anyway, before we go too much into the style of the film, we - since it is an effort which implies a lot of other people or a number of other people besides yourself, let's get the cast - you know, the dramatis personae -

RED GROOMS: Sure.

MS. SECKLER: Straight out first.

MR. GROOMS: Well, there were six people that were very much involved with the total film. Yvonne Anderson [phonetic] did the camera work and she technically put the film together with the soundtrack. And there is a great deal after the film is shot with the technical - getting it together. And then Dominic Falcone co produced it with me. And he also is the star. He is the cop in the film.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: The cop kind of holds the whole film together.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: That just kind of happened as we were working on it. My wife Mimi is co star. And she did a tremendous amount of artwork, along with Yvonne Anderson and also myself. And I was in charge of the construction. And then we - Sam Reilly [phonetic] and Gretchen Jessup [phonetic] also helped with construction and just general errands stuff.

MS. SECKLER: What in the actual - the artwork, was there any way in which each of you had specialties or could anybody? You know, it was starting on a street scene, would you begin and maybe somebody else pick up or would each one of you be responsible for a complete ensemble part?

MR. GROOMS: Well, there was a great deal of sewing things out of gypsum board. And I sort of was in charge of designing the things and sewing them. And then I handed it over to Mimi and she or Yvonne would do the painting a great deal of the time.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And with a set, the street scene, for instance, I would just pencil in sort of sections. And they would just start. And we worked on it like that together.

MS. SECKLER: You didn't make little drawings that were enlarged carefully or anything?

MR. GROOMS: No, not too much. Not - not really on the big set, which we did first at all. Then later, after we had the main street set, which was in a room about 25 by 50. And it was large. Actually, it was - we had a whole environment in there. Then afterwards, we did the animation and we could match our tabletop animation drawings with the big set. That set was done first. And then that way we could also give more of a bigger scale to the whole thing. And the actual studio, the ceiling was nine feet and we had large beams, about three feet, drop down three feet from the ceiling. And that was terrific, blocking a lot of our camera possibilities. So, we had to cover those beams with paper.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] Well, didn't you shoot some of it outside, too?

MR. GROOMS: No. None of us shot - well, yes.

MS. SECKLER: Yes? The fire engines?

MR. GROOMS: The fire engines. That was the only outside part.

MS. SECKLER: That is what I thought. Yeah. That was so astonishing. I couldn't believe it was - that - you know, anything but real.

MR. GROOMS: That was fun because we had done another movie, Shoot the Moon, and we - I was very - I didn't want to get out of the studio at all. I wanted to have a completely studio atmosphere.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And I felt actually - afterwards, I felt that it was a drawback in the film. That it is too claustrophobic and people don't really like it. So, it was - I had thought to get the fire engines outside would be a relief.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Sort of break the style, which everybody likes, really.

MS. SECKLER: Yeah. How did you get started on doing Flat Feet? Was this a kind of collective idea from the beginning or did it grow out of something else you had done?

MR. GROOMS: Well, Dominic and Yvonne and I met each other in Provincetown in '58. And even then we wanted to do some kind of movie about a city, something we vaguely envisioned. And this was - it just took us about ten years to get around to doing it. And this was it, actually. Actually, how it started, we thought we - I thought we could do it. They had come to New York for about a week's holiday and Yvonne brought her camera. And I thought we could do it in about four days. So, we started. We made a - some of the big feet. We made some cars. Before I knew it, the whole four days was up.

MS. SECKLER: Yeah.

MR. GROOMS: So, they went back to Lexington. And we all still wanted to do it. And they looked for about three months for a place we could use for a studio. And I sort of - I had other projects and I forgot about it. And some time in May Yvonne called up and said they had a studio. So, I said good, we will do then.

MS. SECKLER: Was that - that wasn't May of '67 was it?

MR. GROOMS: Sixty - let's see, when did we do it - '66.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: It was '66.

MS. SECKLER: [Inaudible.] Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. They - we - we went there in May.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And we worked from May until - we finished shooting I think - gee, some time in the middle of July. And then Mimi and I stayed on with the Falcones for another month and did the animation. So, it ran on into August.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] Now, Yvonne Anderson, I found out the same evening that you film was showing, of course, she showed a number of films made by her schoolchildren that she teaches.

MR. GROOMS: Right.

MS. SECKLER: Which were fascinating, too. And she has been doing this, I gather, for some years, working with the children, too. Was there - how did that get started? I mean what made you think about the city particularly? Was there - or was the work with the children involved in getting you started in any way or getting her started?

MR. GROOMS: I don't know whether the children actually - whether that is coincidental or it is really - it is pretty tightly woven, I think, in what we like, something to do with our taste. And the city as a theme just happened to be also something we were drawn to. And I have had - I have had the city on my mind for - you know, I have

used it a lot, ever since I can remember.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]Were you all -

MR. GROOMS: As a subject. And she has, too. And my wife, Mimi, has. So -

MS. SECKLER: There was a sense in it so often of a kind of movement that sort of vaguely recall the keystone cops of Charlie Chaplin movies, more of the Charlie Chaplin kind of thing. You know?

MR. GROOMS: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MS. SECKLER: Back and forth movements and so on, very abrupt changes in directional things. Was that a part of - was that specifically adopted as, you know, belonging to associations with the city or would that come into almost any form you would be apt to do?

MR. GROOMS: Well, actually, I really think of the film as a sort of theatrical. To me, it is like a theatrical event more than movie. I mean that is where I set everything up, so - in such a studio fashion.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: But it has something to do with getting the feeling of a live performance. And I think that the jerky movements, the pixelation, to me, give it sort of electrical quality that is possibly related to some type of idea about a magical theater or something like that -

MS. SECKLER: Marionettes or?

MR. GROOMS: Well, it is. It is like marionettes. And also my - you know, we had such confused ideas about the - well, I have a lot of interest in all 19th Century, turn of the century theater and theater activities. They interest me very much.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative].

MR. GROOMS: And just in some type of - not a straight line of - I don't have - go back to that movement directly through seeing the old time movies.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: But some idea I have about the way - the spirit they had about making it.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: It makes me like that jerky movement.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: It is not so much trying to get it to look like their films.

MS. SECKLER: I [inaudible] yes.

MR. GROOMS: Some kind of a -

MS. SECKLER: Both things come out of some -

MR. GROOMS: Some kind of a more mystical idea about the theater.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: As a grotesque expression of it.

MS. SECKLER: Did you have a scenario for it from the beginning or did it grow as you worked?

MR. GROOMS: At first, well, yeah, I did have a scenario. I had a scenario for the - more of the storytelling, narrative sequences. The one with the old lady who looks into a garbage can and finds different things.

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. GROOMS: And then she is pulled in herself.

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. GROOMS: And then she stays in there. And then the garbage truck comes up and they start to dump her into the machine and she gets - gets out in time and the beats up the garbage man.

MS. SECKLER: [Laughs] yes.

MR. GROOMS: Well, those type of little narrative vignettes had - I had drawn a storyline for them or story board. But the more abstract parts like the traffic scene and the - well, actually, the fire, too, I had a story board. But it was a little vaguer.

MS. SECKLER: Really?

MR. GROOMS: It was rough. It was, you know, in some things we improvised when we had the set. Like there was a scene - the bank robbery, I got that idea just because we had the bank painted in the set.

MS. SECKLER: Yeah. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: I thought we could use it.

MS. SECKLER: Well, that was a very nice sequence.

MR. GROOMS: Also, at first, when I thought it was going to be done in four days, I - you know, I figured it would be about a five minute film or less. And then suddenly I realized I had to expand it and I was pretty desperate for ideas. But they sort of came along as we worked on it.

MS. SECKLER: How long does it play now? I should have timed it.

MR. GROOMS: It is 20 minutes.

MS. SECKLER: Uh huh.

MR. GROOMS: Just a little under.

MS. SECKLER: It seemed - you know, it seemed very substantial. You know, like you had been in a place for quite a while. You know, you had been living in it. Would this be likely to be a kind of activity that you are going to continue with? Well, would it be your most serious activity as an artist, let's say, for this year or next year, as far as you can see?

MR. GROOMS: Ah, no, not - I can't do -

MS. SECKLER: Maybe serious isn't a good word. [Laughs.]

MR. GROOMS: I can't do the movies like I do painting because I am really more of a sort of dilettante or something. I mean I know guys that make movies that I can see it is absolutely their medium and they can just go from one movie right into the next because it is just - they have got it so much on the tips of their fingers. But for me it is a special effort. You know? I just get a - it takes me about three years to recuperate from something like this.

MS. SECKLER: [Laughs.]

MR. GROOMS: So, I don't have any definite plans.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: But I do. Sure. I am - you know, I am always planning our new something.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: I would like to do some live theater now maybe before I do movie. Because there is so much technically involved in a movie and you lose - you can't really - you can't control it all.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: You know, somebody else eventually takes over when the technical problems get -

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Become a paramount thing.

MS. SECKLER: What were you doing just before you did this? Had you been involved with live theater or with - happenings were a little bit back in time for you actually?

MR. GROOMS: Right. Yeah. I did my live things back - gee, there were 59. I only did three live things were in six months separated them, all three of them.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: They were within six months. And I hadn't done anything. Well, actually, I had done puppet shows. And we did shadow shows and things like that, Mimi and I.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: But I hadn't done any really - real live big production of anything.

MS. SECKLER: You had been painting a good bit - the time just before -

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. SECKLER: [Inaudible.] Well, of course, your painting itself had developed - we might, I think, touch on that development, which I - many people found it a very fascinating one from the painting, which was, of course, more traditional pending almost - I remember some things that I thought were most of them expressionists themed. That is what I saw.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah.

MS. SECKLER: With Johnny's there. The [inaudible].

MR. GROOMS: Mmm.

MS. SECKLER: And then you were beginning to work with the figures in Myers [phonetic]. How did that being? How did that get done.

MR. GROOMS: Well, that - I suppose that is partly from this theater business with the sets. The sets - well, I guess I have always been interested like in the same way with the turn of the century theater, I have been interested in any kind of eccentric projection art or anything oddball like signs or puppets. You know, anything that is not quite art, but it is - you know has a sort of presence.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And -

MS. SECKLER: Does it go through your work, let's say from childhood, were there interests that you had, you know, early years that reflected that?

MR. GROOMS: Ah, well, yeah. I was always crazy about all - you know, the circus and carnivals all that kind of stuff. I mean I had a - I was really attracted to them. And I wanted to make carnival rides. That was my big ambition. Then I actually - then I went in - I wanted to be a commercial artist in high school. That is what I thought I was going to do.

MS. SECKLER: By the way, let us, just for the record, where were you born and where did you grow up?

MR. GROOMS: Nashville, Tennessee and I was born in '37. I went through high school there and then I left. I want to Art Institute of Chicago, but just for a couple of months. And then I went to New York right after that. And just off and on slowly I got to study there.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: After a few set backs along the way.

MS. SECKLER: Yes. What - roughly, though, what time were you more or less permanently in New York?

MR. GROOMS: Permanently it was '57.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: From then on.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] And did you think of yourself then as being, you know, a painter or a commercial artist or designer?

MR. GROOMS: Oh, no. No, I - I considered myself a painter as soon as - right after getting out of high school. Then I just dropped the commercial.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Because I saw things that were - actually, I liked commercial because it seemed more exciting than the stuff I saw around Nashville. You know, the kind of things I saw.

MS. SECKLER: Hmm.

MR. GROOMS: And then I wasn't exposed to too much fine art until about the end of high school. And then when I saw that, I got excited because that stuff, it seemed more exciting.

MS. SECKLER: And what did you see then?

MR. GROOMS: Well, I saw a lot. Actually, they had the - was it AFA [American Federation of Arts]?

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: The traveling shows came there and I saw - I remember seeing Pollack and even Hoffman. And then through books I saw all the stuff at the Museum of Modern Art publications and things like.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] What did you particularly like of the things that were, well, let's say the abstract expressionist group?

MR. GROOMS: Oh, every - actually, I didn't. I wasn't actually - I was excited by abstract painting, but I just naturally I didn't - you know, I couldn't conceive of doing it myself because I just didn't have the feel for it. I mean I did try it a few times, but I just would have never known what I was doing. So, I just naturally gravitated towards figurative stuff. And I always have.

MS. SECKLER: When you came to -

MR. GROOMS: When - I was very much excited by the abstract expressionist atmosphere and the energy.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: That was all terrifically exciting. But I was - I liked everything. I think I have been influenced by practically every artist that I ever saw. And at that point, I would actually take up their styles. Lots of [inaudible] and even Buffet at one point.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: I liked him very much. And I can remember those. And Jomededi [phonetic]. Oh, I guess that was mannerism I liked. You know?

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: In about '56 or the middle '50s there was a lot of mannerism in sculpture.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Reg Butler -

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Marini [phonetic].

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: This -

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. GROOMS: And I liked that very much. And actually I probably still have some of that hung over because the scale thing where they would do, say, sort of a chunky body with a little head.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Long, skinny legs.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: They had this -

MS. SECKLER: Glasgow was doing those, too.

MR. GROOMS: That is right. Right. Joseph Glasgow.

MS. SECKLER: I wonder what happened to him.

MR. GROOMS: I don't know. He disappeared. He was very - I remember the Whitney, every time they would have a show, he would be either right in the front window or very prominently displayed.

MS. SECKLER: He had a lot of verve and imagination.

MR. GROOMS: Almost all of those guys have sort of gone down the drain. I think except Dubuffet has held on pretty well.

MS. SECKLER: Hmm.

MR. GROOMS: Although he - his peak was earlier.

MS. SECKLER: Dubuffet had this wonderful quality in some of those paintings. Like there is one called something like Speed or Fast, Fast, Fast or something like that with all these little [inaudible] spraying around you.

MR. GROOMS: Oh, that sounds good.

MS. SECKLER: Some of them sort of almost lying down, you know, all different angles and askew in various ways.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah.

MS. SECKLER: And part of - and coming out of the pigment, as they did in scratchy lines, you know, very - I should imagine that with an imagination like yours, it would have been enormously stimulating.

MR. GROOMS: Hmm.

MS. SECKLER: Such a free to do anything.

MR. GROOMS: I just - it just sort of reminds me why I am like - like the series of subject is because being brought up in Nashville, I - you sort of dream of some kind of more urban place to go that is not just for the - that somehow it is like a place in the mind. It is more gothic. And since I naturally lean towards these eccentric things, then the city is a sort of gothic dark place.

MS. SECKLER: Did you ever like finding those drawings?

MR. GROOMS: Well, actually, people have compared me or [inaudible] with him. And I - actually, I sort of probably look for them after. I might have done a little bit in that direction.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And I sort of - you know how you sort of look for things that are like what you are doing?

MS. SECKLER: Yeah. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: I hadn't seen them at sort of earlier point.

MS. SECKLER: I came across -

MR. GROOMS: I liked them very much, though.

MS. SECKLER: A book the other day -

MR. GROOMS: Very much so. Terrific.

MS. SECKLER: Showing little models that he had made of little - you know, whole city facades.

MR. GROOMS: The toy cities? Beautiful.

MS. SECKLER: Yeah. I had never seen those before.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. SECKLER: I mean when you said the word gothic, I just - it just reminded me of that. But I can see what you mean, that the city would have that quality.

MR. GROOMS: It is not just - it is sort of a place that is sort of - it is more of an imagine thing. Also, from reading, you know, all the fairy tale books and so forth, the sort of European.

MS. SECKLER: Hmm.

MR. GROOMS: And actually even the American ones that were sort of either done in England or - somehow they had a sort of European tone to them, I think.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Or maybe it was the art nouveau or something that was -

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. GROOMS: Was still carried over in those books.

MS. SECKLER: Sure.

MR. GROOMS: And they sort of had a - sort of a gothic mood.

MS. SECKLER: Had you looked at a lot of those when you were coming up?

MR. GROOMS: Very - yeah, a lot. A lot. It was a big influence.

MS. SECKLER: It had to.

MR. GROOMS: Actually, all those books.

MS. SECKLER: I think that had more effect on me in art school than some of the stuff that I - you know.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. Actually, in remembering that, I think that I had just picked up anything that seemed to be in that direction.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: You know, I just went for it. And I have all along. And I think [inaudible] is just an extension of that somehow.

MS. SECKLER: When you came to New York then and began doing figurative work, did you find other companions in the art world who were doing similar things with a similar outlook?

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. Well, I found the Falcones here in Provincetown and they were running the Sun Gallery. And then they introduced me to Lester Johnson, who was - he was very influential to me.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: For quite some time. And actually the Falcones - I lived with the Falcones the first year I was in New York. So, we had - we were all working. And then after - we worked there during the winter and then Dominic's father has a parking lot in Salisbury Beach, Massachusetts. And we went out there and made three billboards. This was in '58. They were - we put up the billboards ourselves and made paintings on them. Lester Johnson did one and Yvonne did one and I did one. And this was a big project we had.

MS. SECKLER: Right beside the gas station or?

MR. GROOMS: It was - well, it is right in - actually, it was crazy because nobody knew what we were doing and we could do it because Val's father owned the lot. But he didn't quite know what we were doing either. He just kind of went along with it. So, we told him it would be good publicity.

MS. SECKLER: What kind of things -

MR. GROOMS: And I don't think anybody ever quite did that kind of thing. We just put up the boards with our money and we built them. And they are big, you know, regular billboard size. And then we just painted them.

MS. SECKLER: What did you paint on them?

MR. GROOMS: I painted - I sort of painted a scene. I painted two large figures with long legs and walking in front of the roller coaster, which was right behind the billboard itself. So, I started painting. And then I did cars and things, like the parking lot. So, it is something like the scene, except very exaggerated.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And Lester did a man and plant, a man's head in profile with a plant coming over and touching the tip of the head.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And Yvonne did a big face, a big, very simple face, a grotesque face.

MS. SECKLER: Did you ever get any kind of reaction from anybody?

MR. GROOMS: Yeah, later. Actually, not - well, there was probably a lot of reaction, but we just weren't around to hear it. You know? We didn't acknowledge it or anything. We didn't -

MS. SECKLER: You didn't sign them or anything?

MR. GROOMS: We signed them. But, you know, nobody knew who we were. And then a couple of years later they had an article in the paper, the local paper about it. And then there was an article in the Boston paper several years later.

MS. SECKLER: Are they still there now?

MR. GROOMS: No, I think two of them are down for sure. And I think - I think Yvonne's is the only one left. One of them - they lasted up until last year and the year before. They lasted about - let's see, six years.

MS. SECKLER: What kind of paint did you use?

MR. GROOMS: We used marine paint, marine enamel.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Very tough paint.

MS. SECKLER: Gee, that was an interesting project. Did you photograph it at least?

MR. GROOMS: Yeah, we got - not - well, we have just out of snapshots. But it was Dominic's idea. And also in connection with that, getting back to the theater, early phase, he was kind of the one that got me to do something in the Sun Gallery here, a live performance.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] What time was that? I don't -

MR. GROOMS: That was called - the first one I did, actually, the first thing I did in - gee, it was in '58 I did - it was - I made a painting in front of an audience. And it was called A Play Called Fire. And people came in. They didn't know it was going to be a painting. They just came in thinking it might be some type of play. And I had a pretty large canvas that I just painted right there on the spot.

MS. SECKLER: You started from a blank canvas?

MR. GROOMS: A blank canvas. I just painted it. And it was - I took fire as the theme. And just, you know, it was pretty wild. I just - right into it.

MS. SECKLER: So, it was flaming forms all over the -

MR. GROOMS: Yeah, it had flaming forms and things like that in it. And I was spurred on. There was a couple of sailors came up to the side window of the building and they started razzing me. And I started - it was sort of one moment I really didn't know what I was going to do. I was about - I had completely lost - I was - lost track of the painting and I was paying attention to them. You know? I was getting so furious, they were bugging me so much. And I was going to jump out the window and attack them or something. But, at that moment I made these ferocious black lines and sort of finished it. That - that brought it to a close, thank goodness. It took only about

forty five minutes. But then the next year I made this, The Walking Man, which was - that had five people in it with the set. And it was done -

MS. SECKLER: In the Sun Gallery?

MR. GROOMS: It was done in the Sun Gallery, which is tiny, absolutely a tiny place.

MS. SECKLER: Yeah, I remember it. But I don't remember the - all this happening. I was probably -

MR. GROOMS: This - it happened about - gee, it was about -

MS. SECKLER: I was [inaudible] in '59, come to think of it.

MR. GROOMS: It was a little later than this, actually.

MS. SECKLER: Later? And after summer was over?

MR. GROOMS: Yeah, it was after Labor Day.

MS. SECKLER: Oh, that time?

MR. GROOMS: It was about a week after Labor Day that I did it.

MS. SECKLER: Had you already been associated with people who were doing Happenings at that point?

MR. GROOMS: No, actually, this is the historical thing which was the first Happening. Capro [phonetic] had come to Provincetown that summer. And I was - and also Bob Whitman [phonetic] and Lucas Samaras. And we were all talking about doing live performances. And Capro, the year before, had done one in the Hansa Gallery, except there were no people in it. It was a set piece where he had a sort of maze of paintings, hung paintings with tapes. And then I knew that he was going to put on a large performance at the Rubin Gallery in - first of the year, I think in October or November, which he did. So, it was a lot of talk about doing it. And that was exciting. I felt like at that point we could just go ahead and, you know, we could do a lot of them.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: I was planning - it didn't matter too much to me, the - well, I thought of it like a collage, like a big collage. And the literary part didn't matter so much.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And I had this good theme. I had the fire as the subject. And that was very - it seemed to lend itself pretty well. You could work it out in a lot of different ways. So, I carried on. Then I did another one and two more in New York. But at that point, after that, they got a pretty good - well, just the name Happening drew a lot of people. And I became self conscious about, you know, the literary possibilities and so forth and just collapsed and couldn't do any more.

MS. SECKLER: How many did you do?

MR. GROOMS: Just three.

MS. SECKLER: Three all together?

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. But when I started I felt like, you know, like I was very unself conscious about it in a way because I thought of it as collage.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And I wanted to build the sets.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] It was more theater than collage for you. Had you done collage as of this point? Had you been constructing things?

MR. GROOMS: Yeah, I had done - actually, I started doing - I would - on a painting that I was working on, if the - sometimes I would work on it and the paint would get so muddy that I would just stick cardboard into the paint.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: You know, to get a - something in there definite. So, I - that was sort of the beginning, I was doing

collages in that way, using other materials.

MS. SECKLER: Were all of your Happenings on the theme of fire or would you branch out?

MR. GROOMS: No, the last one I had I varied my theme, possibly a disaster. Well, I knew I couldn't keep doing the fire things, even though they were popular. So, I did - the last one was called The Magic Train Ride, which was vaguely about a train trip. And I had a lot of hocus pocus before that. I actually got to take up time to - before I got the train ride. The train ride was okay. You know, that was sort of what I really wanted to do.

MS. SECKLER: How many people were you working with then?

MR. GROOMS: Actually, in the - the first two, I had only had five people. But the last one I wanted to get all my friends in, so I had - gee, I think there was at least nine people in it, which was quite a lot on this, you know, these tiny areas we were working in.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] So, what kind of things would the nine people have been doing during the train ride where they? I mean I know that it - in the Happenings that I have seen, I am sad to say I never did see one of yours. But, you know, it isn't like a logical sequence, so you wouldn't have them all sitting in the train, they would be doing other things.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah, well, actually mine were somewhat - slightly more logically oriented. Mine were more presidium type theater.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: I was interested in the box theater where -

MS. SECKLER: Did it get the audience involved in the action?

MR. GROOMS: No, I was actually quite definitely against having the audience involved. And also it was - once we - once the structure of the thing was established, there wasn't any improvisation actually.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: So, it was just the opposite of. My idea was just that you would show this extraordinary amount of energy in the box itself. But it wouldn't be a matter. It would be - all come from the performance and the situation on the stage and not so much from the participation of the audience.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] When you say the box, you mean the stage space? The -

MR. GROOMS: Yeah, the box. Yeah, inside the presidium.

MS. SECKLER: Presidium? Yeah. Yeah.

MR. GROOMS: And I think everybody else thought it was much more, and I agree, it is actually - you know, it is the - I think a much better direction in a way, but it has just sort of been exhausted anyway, the presidium -

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm [Affirmative] -

MR. GROOMS: Even though I still love it, was to have a more open theater. And that there would be - there is no - my - my theater, the things I did were very short in time. The longest would be ten minutes. So, in that, everything would happen very fast.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: I mean there would be no let up within the ten minutes, one thing right after another.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: But the other guys had a much different sense of timing.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Where each act would be - actually, Oldenburg said that his things - he thought of his things like a still life. And so each thing, it didn't matter how long it sat out there, you were supposed to - you know, it had a sort of action with the audience that was not strung up on a dramatic time thing.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And you really can't fight that. That is one reason they are so boring, but also they are interesting. Most performances were boring in a sense. To me they were.

MS. SECKLER: They are also intended to irritate the audience to some extent, you know, to really provoke them, whereas yours weren't. Would that be true?

MR. GROOMS: No, actually, I don't know. I - I actually had a sort of - I had an idea of being aggressive towards the audience, you know, to have a sort of a - overpower the audience, but not necessarily to bore them, just - possibly just the opposite.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: But -

MS. SECKLER: In the ones based on fire, how would you have created such an effect? I mean how would you overwhelm them? Did yours involve fire engines and that sort of thing, too? I mean -

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. Yeah. Well, also it was the - the fire is such an impossible thing to present theatrically. But also you can play with the fact that that is what you are trying to do. So, in that - in that ironic situation, you can get a lot of energy going.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: You know, by pretending what - toward one thing, toward this kind of violent thing, and yet not being able to do it. It is a nice kind of a - a field to manipulate in between.

MS. SECKLER: Could you describe any sequence of one of the ones dealing with fire, one of the Happenings? What kind of thing might have been going on?

MR. GROOMS: Ah - let's see. Well, you asked about the train ride before.

MS. SECKLER: Yes, I did.

MR. GROOMS: The - the - I had a train, a cardboard flat train that had - was hung up. Actually, it was quite large. It must have been maybe fifteen feet long or twenty feet long and seven feet high. And then it had - the smoke was coming out of the smokestack and had a bell and a coal car. And since it was hung up, it could be shapened [sic]. And so we - oh, and I had - Bob Thompson had - I - it was right after Christmas, so I found three Christmas trees on the street and put the Christmas trees in baby carriage. And he was supposed to be the landscape, which he did very well. He was terrific at it. And he went by in one direction and behind him was Joan Hertz in a house. She had a house costume on. And she was the - also, you know, part of the landscape going by to give it movement.

MS. SECKLER: [Inaudible.]

MR. GROOMS: And then everybody in the train was very activated in the train, yelling and so forth. And this - this all went very fast and the lights were flashing.

MS. SECKLER: Hmm.

MR. GROOMS: So, that was a nice spirited moment.

MS. SECKLER: Did you take movies of those, by the way?

MR. GROOMS: Of course, I never saw them.

MS. SECKLER: You never? Oh -

MR. GROOMS: See, I was in them.

MS. SECKLER: Yeah, but you didn't -

MR. GROOMS: So -

MS. SECKLER: Nobody took movies to show you what it looked like?

MR. GROOMS: John Cohen [phonetic] and Robert Frank both took photographs, but - and they came out. They got some interesting pictures. But I haven't even seen them in a long time.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And also Max Baker [phonetic], with his wife, Fran, the Ruben Gallery, he took photographs which have been printed before. But his is actually more like snapshot than the other guys.

MS. SECKLER: Hmm. It would have been nice to have movies, wouldn't it?

MR. GROOMS: We did take a movie of the burning building. And I never saw it. I don't know how - it was said not to come out too well. I don't know how it came out.

MS. SECKLER: So, after three, you decided that that was about as much as you wanted to do Happenings?

MR. GROOMS: It - I didn't decide it. I just was sort of in a bind. I couldn't - well, it takes a lot of energy to do one. You know?

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: It is sort of a daring thing to do. Unless you read - I was putting - you know, you - sort of - it is sort of slightly suicidal, the way we were doing it. Because we - it was just like a totally handmade production, the whole works, and finding a place to do it. That is also another thing that, to me, I sort of related to doing something in my own room, like a kid might do.

MS. SECKLER: Hmm.

MR. GROOMS: And as long as you had a place that was familiar to you, say the Sun Gallery, which I knew so well -

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Then I absolutely knew what scale I was working on. But as soon as you - as soon as I lost that feeling, I didn't have a definite place.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: To do it. So, that also threw me off.

MS. SECKLER: Did it ever worry you about the possibilities of really a fire? Because did you use actual flames?

MR. GROOMS: Oh, yeah. When thinking back about it, it is terrible because the place was - we used - it was a lot of set. I couldn't describe the set, but there was quite a lot of set. And we did use candles and things.

MS. SECKLER: I had a feeling and from friends of mine telling me about some of those.

MR. GROOMS: It is pretty dangerous.

MS. SECKLER: It is pretty dangerous.

MR. GROOMS: In fact, once - oh, actually, another time I had this place called the Delancey Street Museum and Marsha Marcus put on a ballet, which was very interesting and unique. And I know that Dick Bellamy actually caught on fire at one point. And somebody out of - a girl - a woman out of the audience - jumped out of the audience and then put him out. But he was actually ablaze.

MS. SECKLER: It would have scared me.

MR. GROOMS: It scared. And I remember another time leaving the Delancey Street Museum and we left a candle burning, you know, sort of laying on its side. And that would have - somebody just happened to go back to get something and -

MS. SECKLER: Hold on a minute. I just want to -

[END OF TRACK ONE]

MS. SECKLER: I just want to make sure I have got it recording. It seems all right. So, do you mind repeating what you were just saying? That all the magazines began to pay attention to these things and so on?

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. Well, this - Bob Whitman and Alan Capro and myself and then Jim [inaudible] and I think Al Hanson [phonetic] all did different performances in the beginning of - was it '59 or '60, at the Ruben Gallery. And the - it was just, you know, caught up immediately by the press. And people - the audiences were big. You know,

you could really feel - actually, I was in a quandary. You know, you wanted to do something more spectacular because you could see this enormous audience building up. It would have been a great opportunity to go on with something else, but I personally couldn't do it. But the other guys carried on. And the next year I had gone to Europe, but they - they - the Ruben Gallery was totally devoted to performances. They did a lot of stuff.

MS. SECKLER: Did you feel that they shared a - pretty much a common outlook? That they were - took certain things for granted about the value of this activity in terms of, you know, audience involvement, you know, the provocation [inaudible] other things going on at once and so on?

MR. GROOMS: Well, I think each person had a completely personal vision of it. And I think the thing that killed it together was that everybody was an artist, basically. It was really a painter's theater really. And I think it was just at a moment when - with somewhat the end of abstract expressionism and the abstract expressionists had made you so conscious of having a presence. And it just was a natural development to go into theater because of, you know, the possibilities of -

MS. SECKLER: They have said, of course, that Pollack was treating [inaudible] as an arena for action.

MR. GROOMS: Sure. Yeah. Right. Sure.

MS. SECKLER: And then, of course -

MR. GROOMS: And, actually, all the painters that took this up naturally had, in somewhere in the back of their mind wanted to be in show biz.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: You know, just had a natural leaning toward it.

MS. SECKLER: Do you think -

MR. GROOMS: I mean I started - I didn't have any talent, you know, no talent whatsoever, but I had all this enthusiasm to do something theatrical. I mean I didn't have any specific theatrical talent in any direction. But I felt that if I started with the set or the rig, the - that I could proceed from there and make something that would last a certain number of minutes and could be a theater piece. But Capro, I - Capro always - he talks terrifically. He has some brilliant ideas. But his pieces always to me are horrible flops. Because I guess actually I am personally more interested in sort of vulgar theater that comes off.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: You know, I am interested in the old type theater.

MS. SECKLER: Did you see his courtyard one?

MR. GROOMS: No, I didn't. It actually looks great in pictures.

MS. SECKLER: I liked that one.

MR. GROOMS: That one looks great. I have to admit, it looks terrific. In fact, actually, everything he does looks very good in pictures.

MS. SECKLER: [Laughs.]

MR. GROOMS: It does. It looks good. Except you have to realized that whatever that picture is of probably took - you looked at it for thirty or forty minutes when you were actually standing there.

MS. SECKLER: Well, that one had more movement in it and more mystery and it was really when - in another world. But that is another story.

MR. GROOMS: The guy that I - I right now feel close with and we actually are, we are neighbors and we see a lot of each other is Bob Whitman.

MS. SECKLER: Yes. He is going into film, of course, in a wonderful development.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. Right. I think he has done a lot of advancements.

MS. SECKLER: Oh, I am fascinated by what he is doing.

MR. GROOMS: And he is going to have a show this - in about a month.

MS. SECKLER: Where will that be?

MR. GROOMS: A big show at [inaudible] Gallery.

MS. SECKLER: Oh. Great.

MR. GROOMS: So, he has been working on it all summer. I don't know what he is doing. I think it is going to be wild.

MS. SECKLER: I hope I can do a tape for the archives with him.

MR. GROOMS: Oh, you should. Yeah.

MS. SECKLER: Because I have been wanting to ever since I saw his last film, live theater film thing, you know, film playing on live actors and [inaudible].

MR. GROOMS: Did you see that at the Cinematheque?

MS. SECKLER: Yeah. Yeah. With Bob Rauschenberg and [inaudible].

MR. GROOMS: Right.

MS. SECKLER: I was fascinated by it. So, you both feel very - you know, you have been friends and associates and so on for quite a while?

MR. GROOMS: Yeah.

MS. SECKLER: Well, when did your painting get done in all this? In the middle of all of this.

MR. GROOMS: Well, I have always been very erratic about different projects that I am working on. No, you know, the theater things, well, the movies - you see, actually, there was another, in '62, when I came back from Europe, I worked eight months on picture called Shoot the Moon. I worked with Rudy Burkhart on that.

MS. SECKLER: I missed that.

MR. GROOMS: And my wife Mimi did a terrific amount of work.

MS. SECKLER: Tell me about that. I am sorry to be ignorant about that.

MR. GROOMS: Well, that is my first big picture, you know, that I -

MS. SECKLER: You mean a moving picture?

MR. GROOMS: Moving picture, yeah. And what it is, it is a remake of Georges Melies' trip to the moon.

MS. SECKLER: Oh, yes, I remember that.

MR. GROOMS: And that was just called Shoot the Moon. In Europe I had made a - I had seen Lou Jacob's book on the movies and seen the stills and read Melies' life story. And I had remembered seeing the trip to the moon. It was a little trailer before Around the World in 80 Days. I saw that in New York. And they showed the whole - his trip to the moon. It was so magical.

MS. SECKLER: Yes, they had [inaudible] Modern Art Library, too.

MR. GROOMS: Fantastic. And I had just, you know, knocked out by -

MS. SECKLER: Yeah, it was magical.

MR. GROOMS: That is exactly what I was looking for, this kind of magic theater.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: So, this was several years later, I just - I just decided to try to do one. Although, I had a mixed up idea of his. You know, I didn't - I just had a vague idea of the way his was and I just wanted to go ahead and make one - something - well, using the old stock story of going 19th Century gentleman going to the moon.

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. GROOMS: So, that took eight months. That was a terrifically big project.

MS. SECKLER: [Inaudible?]

MR. GROOMS: It was in ways, yeah. It had - it was harder in certain ways because it was much more drawn out. Fat Feet was concentrated and we all worked every day on it. But this, I was working on the sets almost entirely by myself, except with Mimi's help, which she did a great deal.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: But I did almost all the construction myself.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And I would work six weeks before we were ready to shoot the film and then we would get our friends together and we would work on a scene. And it was -

MS. SECKLER: How many people were involved with that?

MR. GROOMS: Actually, a lot of people are in it. And Rudy was terrifically involved with it. He, again, did the camera work and he did the technical work on this film.

MS. SECKLER: Oh, yeah? What year was that now?

MR. GROOMS: Sixty two.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: I know it very well because it took a whole year. That was exactly - almost exactly the whole year it took before it came out.

MS. SECKLER: You were married then at that time?

MR. GROOMS: No, we weren't married. But, you know -

MS. SECKLER: You were working together at least?

MR. GROOMS: Yeah, we were working very close.

MS. SECKLER: Well, I am sorry I missed that one. I hope [inaudible].

MR. GROOMS: You will have to see that one. It was sort of a giant flop. But [inaudible] intolerance or something. Because it - there is an - just when it came out, the underground was just sort of - Flaming Creatures had just come out, as a matter of fact. In fact, I think we played on a bill with Flaming Creatures once. And all the sex pictures were coming out. And this is like the most uncensorable film ever made with no sex in it at all.

MS. SECKLER: [Laughs.]

MR. GROOMS: And it was a sort of disaster. Audiences hated it. And, you know, we would put - actually, we made it, as I was hoping it would be, the world's greatest success. You know, I thought if we put everything into it, you know, you go all the way with it, it has got to - people are going to like it.

MS. SECKLER: I was reading in a story about what audiences like on television. That they can't sell any program that doesn't have some way of dealing with death.

MR. GROOMS: Oh, really? Gee.

MS. SECKLER: So, you see, you had no sex and no death.

MR. GROOMS: That is true. No. That is right. Yeah. That is right. Exactly. And worse than that, almost, is that we had - we were using a stock story that everybody could anticipate. That is - I [inaudible] pictures like that myself.

MS. SECKLER: [Laughs.] We do like to know something is coming next that you might be surprised by, I suppose.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. Well, yeah, I had - there are twists in it that aren't like Melies. You know, we have certain things that are not like his. And, of course, his is taken from Jules Verne's in the first place.

MS. SECKLER: Yeah. Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: But actually now it has mellowed a little bit. And people don't seem to mind any more. In fact, even a few people say they like it. But well making Fat Feet was like just the opposite of making a film by popular demand, sort of by unpopular demand. I wanted to get - in fact, we, you know, did a lot of things. We did, you know, first of all, you can't anticipate what is going to happen, I don't think in Fat Feet.

MS. SECKLER: Well, you can't.

MR. GROOMS: And - and generally it is more - has a more abstract structure. Also in Shoot the Moon, we were using a silent film structure with titles. And that is kind of death now.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Unless it is very sharply done.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] No, I must say Fat Feet gets away from any kind of storyline and into a kind of interweaving of action sort of thing.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. And somehow I found myself in the position where, as I started out saying, I am interested in all these eccentric turn of the century things. Not really because I am interested in the turn of the century, but it seems that was a supreme moment in a sort of grotesque theater tradition. I think it was.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And then there was terrific, fantastic, grotesque things done. And then, you know, things became more and more realistic. And I suddenly found myself, whereas my first thing had been considered an okay with the avant garde, I suddenly seemed to be following the same line, was getting farther and farther. I mean in other words, my stuff was like super reactionary in a way. Even though I didn't want it to be. I was still on the same line that I had been the first - with, say, the first Happenings I did.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] But you seem to be very well regarded among the so called avant garde.

MR. GROOMS: Well, it could be just because my things are eccentric - eccentric enough not to be to classifiable. I hope - I hope that is the salient factor. It is funny, I thought I could see it happening in way. But that is just what my interests were - tended at one point to be more old fashioned. You know, I had a sort of period quality, I guess.

MS. SECKLER: A number of pop artists also have that like Bob Indiana, for instance.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. He does. Sure. Sure.

MS. SECKLER: And they began to allow that to come back in some ways.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah, I think people -

MS. SECKLER: I think it will probably come back more, as a matter of fact, in the next year or so in certain ways.

MR. GROOMS: Well, I know pop art, to me, although, you know, I have always loved pop art, but the - say, Liechtenstein, for instance, chose things that were sort of surprisingly contemporary. They didn't have the sort of nostalgic quality at all, the things he did.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] In the beginning they didn't. But then recently, of course, he -

MR. GROOMS: Now recently he is - exactly. Now, he - and also he does the twenties, the modern twenties architecture.

MS. SECKLER: Yeah.

MR. GROOMS: So, his stuff now seems much softer.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: But at first it was shockingly contemporary. You know? It didn't -

MS. SECKLER: Walking [inaudible] and things like that.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah, it was - I just wouldn't have - and Warhol, too.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] That is true.

MR. GROOMS: Was very - I think that is why they were sort of shocking.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] How do you feel in regard to what Warhol has gone on doing recently?

MR. GROOMS: Oh, good. I like the Chelsea Girls.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And he is terrific. I think he is terrific. And he is so historical, everything he does is so embedded into history that you can't deny it anyway. I mean somehow I think he is, you know, he is bigger than just art. He is like, I don't know, what is it - it is political.

MS. SECKLER: [Inaudible] lives.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah.

MS. SECKLER: That is the feeling that people have expressed before and I thought there was something to it. He is like a phenomena of the time.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. Also, he is sort of something warm. Something. I don't know. At first he was - you know, people - I remember people despised pop art, you know, the - say, for instance, especially the second or third generation of abstract expressionists were really uproariously against them.

MS. SECKLER: There was an outstanding abstract expressionist painter stopped speaking to me because I wrote an article about him.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. And it was just a couple of years. But now actually they seem pretty much like humanitarians, all the pop art thing. This all seems pretty good natured. And also actually they are all very good artists. I think they were terrific artists. You know, they were very conscientious artists. Like Liechtenstein, I don't think anybody has ever - you know, he is a super conscientious -

MS. SECKLER: He was always a good [inaudible].

MR. GROOMS: Artist. Yeah.

MS. SECKLER: He was a wonderful [inaudible].

MR. GROOMS: Terrific designer.

MS. SECKLER: So, what does the immediate future seem to hold for you? Red, I don't want to keep you too much longer. We have a little while, yet, if you feel like talking about it. What interests you right now? What are you attracted to? Outside - I mean, you have already defined the theater thing. In terms of what is going on in the art world today, where do you - what do you see your own place in it?

MR. GROOMS: Oh, well, actually this summer I have been interested in a sort of - well, a three dimensional documentary style where I would work on a very specific, say, for instance, I am working on my father in law's porch. I am doing a whole porch. And I guess what I would like to do is try to literally transport a real place into three dimensions without making any kind of a - try to do it just straight, you know, except the fact that what comes out funny is that you can't do it naturally. You know, you get all these goofy things go wrong.

MS. SECKLER: You mean - say that again about what you are doing with the porch, with Guy Gross's porch.

MR. GROOMS: Well, actually, what I am doing is that I built a platform and I have started doing a lot of his friends. And I had cut them out.

MS. SECKLER: Oh, I see.

MR. GROOMS: With - some of them are nearly flat, cut out figures.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And they are roughly two feet high. And they have - some have, say, for instance, arms that are cut out and projected or set back at an angle and so forth, little projections in each one.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And what I will do is scale the whole porch, which is the whole side of his house, to the figures eventually. And the whole piece, I think, will be at least eight or nine feet tall and no telling how wide.

MS. SECKLER: [Laughs.]

MR. GROOMS: It is going to be gigantic.

MS. SECKLER: So, it will be -

MR. GROOMS: So, what I am interested in -

MS. SECKLER: On the porch, a module on the porch of itself?

MR. GROOMS: Exactly. It will be the thing itself, as literally as I can make it.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Except that what interests me, I hope will save it, is the fact that you can't really do it. You know? As much as you try, funny things happen.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: That gives us a little bit. I think it might be - I was, in fact, worried about this one because when you start to do the portraits, in a way I don't - just - I am not trying to do an academic portrait, but you get - you know, at the same time, I am trying to get the energy and life quality of the person. And so you - you really get hung up on trying to make it look like them, which gets a little tight after a while, I am afraid. But I hope - I hope, this project I was going to finish this summer, but I didn't. So, I am going to start work on it again next summer. And I think there will be about twenty people, portraits of twenty people.

MS. SECKLER: Really?

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. So, it will be a big thing.

MS. SECKLER: How much is there in the [inaudible]? I mean as your - you know, changing an arm on one, then do you have to rush over to the other side and change a hat on somebody up there because it is a different spot of color or something?

MR. GROOMS: No. Actually, I don't work like that. I take it more as a sort of field of action, where I will take the chance. If somebody comes into the set that I am copying and they are there, I think that since they are there in the set, I can stick them in the same place in my thing.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And if it is - I mean I am not trying to make a picture, you know, like a - not a match up picture. I mean actually it seems to work out okay. Like, for instance, in a frame from a documentary movie, even if you just shoot it straight out, if you shoot a picture of people on the street and you freeze that frame, it looks pretty good in design.

MS. SECKLER: Well, [inaudible] that and that was what led to his way of using what he called all cause and no color. You know, there was no color scheme and no -

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. No, I -

MS. SECKLER: [Inaudible] because he said in real life everything goes together.

MR. GROOMS: Exactly. That is - that is very well put, I think. That is exactly what I would like. Because I think if you recognize that fact, somehow it works out.

MS. SECKLER: Would it - is it only because it is a three dimensional thing or what makes it work out? And why didn't other artists - why have artists all these years imagined that you had to have color [inaudible]? Is it because of the three dimensional thing?

MR. GROOMS: Gee, I don't know. I think it possibly - well, of course, I am not a formalistic artist. So, I mean it appeals to me, the fact that it won't be formal. That it will be eccentric. In fact, I won't even be like art. In a sense, it is related to folk art, I suppose, in that way.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] Yes, that is interesting. I think all pop art is related in some way, like sophisticated [inaudible] art.

MR. GROOMS: Right. Yeah. Yeah.

MS. SECKLER: That is one of the things that I -

MR. GROOMS: Although, in no way, say, for instance, Liechtenstein is no folk artist.

MS. SECKLER: No.

MR. GROOMS: I mean he is like terrifically far from it.

MS. SECKLER: They are all extremely sophisticated, so they don't have the naivety of the folk artist. But the idea of relating to a place and telling a story about it and that sort of thing and no holes barred on how you can do it, you know -

MR. GROOMS: Yeah -

MS. SECKLER: No academic [inaudible] must be respected. You can find a means to do it.

MR. GROOMS: I guess it is just a way of keeping it open.

MS. SECKLER: Yeah.

MR. GROOMS: You know? Just keeping it open as a form. In a way, I don't know, I guess it goes pretty far. You know - well, I know, remember once being - when I first - I saw a Rothko that impressed me very much because it didn't look like art at all. It looked like this sort of glowing thing on the wall. And it is very exciting. Because you knew it wasn't anything else. It had to be art. It was some kind of a magical presence. But it certainly - it was absolutely undefined. And I think that that is what I would like to get.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Something that has a presence but, you know, is a surprise.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: A total surprise.

MS. SECKLER: Does minimal art fit into that category for you?

MR. GROOMS: Well, I love minimal art as a foil to my stuff. Since I stick everything in, it is like bric a brac art.

MS. SECKLER: And they take everything out.

MR. GROOMS: And they take everything out. So, it is a nice foil.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: No. I guess [inaudible] is a total surprise to me, too. In fact, I - it has been about the last six art movements I totally unanticipated. And minimal especially. That absolutely came from nowhere, as far as I am concerned. It is very interesting. It is good. I am sure. And I think they are very good artists, too, all those guys.

MS. SECKLER: Well, they are very involved in a way with fantasy, but not in their work.

MR. GROOMS: But they are so strict. Scary.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: They are very -

MS. SECKLER: They write things about science fiction.

MR. GROOMS: Do they?

MS. SECKLER: [Laughs.]

MR. GROOMS: I don't really know any minimal artists.

MS. SECKLER: In other words, I don't think you can [inaudible]. It is just a guess that you can't really exclude fantasy completely. And if it doesn't come into their work, it comes into something else.

MR. GROOMS: I know.

MS. SECKLER: It sneaks in in some way.

MR. GROOMS: But they - well, maybe they have that aggressive quality. They make those things so big.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And they are so determined.

MS. SECKLER: You know, I wanted to come back again to the question of scale on your film. Because, you know, you really could imagine that this was almost life sized, but obviously it wasn't if you are ceiling was nine feet tall.

MR. GROOMS: No. No. Actually, it was very under scaled.

MS. SECKLER: How large was it?

MR. GROOMS: Well, I think the set itself was in a - sort of a - roughly in a C shape and then I would say it was maybe forty feet long, forty five, maybe it was fifty. I don't know. We never measured it. If you stretched it out.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: But since it was in a C shape, you couldn't quite tell.

MS. SECKLER: And how high would it be?

MR. GROOMS: And I would say it was about nine feet high at the top.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] How could you get the illusion of like a fireman climbing up a ladder?

MR. GROOMS: See, that is why I was - it is hard to get. But, see, when we did the animation -

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And I am very much at a loss how, since our other stuff is animated, too, but that is with live action. This animation is just done on a tabletop, on an eight by ten piece of paper with cutout figures. So, that we could - you know, I could, for one thing, since we knew exactly what our street was like, we could just copy it, but use, say, for instance, overhead angles. That would give you a much bigger sense of scale. And I think it works. I think it is, in a certain way, you get confused what is animated and what is real.

MS. SECKLER: You absolutely do.

MR. GROOMS: Since both are painted.

MS. SECKLER: I had to think twice to figure it all out.

MR. GROOMS: See, that is what we - yeah, it is very much what I wanted to get. It is sort of like a trick.

MS. SECKLER: But, look, in that one, where the fireman goes up and rescues the cat, let's say, he is a real person. So, how do you get him onto that thing?

MR. GROOMS: Well, we had a shot of the fireman. Well, what - it was very funny because, see, we - I don't know what our [inaudible] ceiling was, but it couldn't have been more than ten feet. And we had these big steel beams coming down. They were going the width of the room. And they were maybe three feet deep. But actually it turned out that it was terrific because we had rested our ladder on that beam and we would have our fireman go up to the top of the ladder, where he was just pressing up against the ceiling. And then because we were using stop action, which is like animation, you just shoot two frames at a time.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: He just gets off the ladder. He comes back down and he is disappearing. He has disappeared. You see him disappear at the top of the frame in the movie.

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. GROOMS: Actually, in reality, he was squashed up against our ceiling and then we took him off with another ladder.

MS. SECKLER: Oh, I see.

MR. GROOMS: And then we would switch to our paper - tabletop paper animation.

MS. SECKLER: How big was that cat? He had to hold it in his arms.

MR. GROOMS: The cat was this big. But we also did our little animated scene with a cat this big. So and then we cut them together and you lose - if you saw it again, I could point out exactly which is -

MS. SECKLER: I will see it again sometime and now I will look closely. Because I was completely bewildered by it. What am I looking at?

MR. GROOMS: You see, in the fire scene, you know, with the flames?

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. GROOMS: That is very complicated because we would change. There was, I don't know, maybe a dozen different flames and different positions in the windows and doors. And there were maybe eight people involved in changing those flames. And they were changed every two frames. But, at the same time, we had two real firemen in the picture. And so they have to hold still for, say, three hours, while we are shooting this - changing these frames and it takes - I mean the flames. Sorry. Every two frames, the flame positions are changed so that when you see it in the film, the flames are animated and the firemen are holding still. So, it -

MS. SECKLER: And they were really there for three hours?

MR. GROOMS: It is really there. Yeah. They really -

MS. SECKLER: That is a strange role. You really had to be - this was all new territory. Nobody has ever done anything like that before, as far as I know. I mean except Melies, maybe.

MR. GROOMS: Yeah, he did terrific - he did - yeah, they did fantastic tricks like this. That is true. They did do these things. But they hadn't used them too much since.

MS. SECKLER: Isn't it very expensive to do all this sort of thing? And how do you get your income then? I mean is it enough from showings to -

MR. GROOMS: Well, actually, we have done very well being that it was distributed by the Film makers' Co op in New York. And there is a terrific outlet they call colleges and film clubs and stuff all over the country.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: And, of course, we have - it cost us I guess rough - about - totally about three thousand dollars to make it.

MS. SECKLER: That is pretty reasonable, I think.

MR. GROOMS: Which is really peanuts. I mean nobody would - you see, it is made guerilla style. I mean you couldn't possibly do it in the professional way. The only way you can do it is amateur, I think, because nobody got paid. So, the only expense is in the film itself, the equipment and the production costs for wood and costumes. Which was quite a lot, actually. We had a lot of lumber and stuff.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] I can imagine.

MR. GROOMS: Paper and paint and all that stuff.

MS. SECKLER: Well, it was a fascinating experiment.

MR. GROOMS: But we just, you know - just went ahead and did it ourselves. We just - there was no backing at all. We just put our own money in it.

MS. SECKLER: Well, so, for a little while you will be involved with other things. And then we might look forward to [inaudible] catch your breath?

MR. GROOMS: Yeah. Exactly.

MS. SECKLER: Have you any other plans involved that - we have just a minute or so left on the tape?

MR. GROOMS: Gee, let's see, what plans do I got? Oh, I am pretty interested in perspective right now. That is

one thing I like.

MS. SECKLER: Mm hmm. [Affirmative]

MR. GROOMS: Because somebody - one of my favorite painters is Piero di Cosimo. And I just saw one of his paintings in expo and it was so terrific.

MS. SECKLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative] He is certainly strange -

MR. GROOMS: He uses a very nutty perspective.

MS. SECKLER: Yes.

MR. GROOMS: And so I am interested in perspective. And I am also very much interested in this live - you know, extravagant situations in real life to be copied exactly. Oh, I would like to do Mike and George Kutra, two film makers I knew in New York. I would like to make a great big one of them and use perspective somehow as though it was a wide angle lens.

MS. SECKLER: Now, who are they? I mean I am not sure. They are film makers?

MR. GROOMS: They are two - they are young guys. They are about twenty four years old and they make sixty millimeter films. They live in the Bronx.

MS. SECKLER: And you want to do something with them or on them?

MR. GROOMS: I am sorry, I want to make a portrait of them.

MS. SECKLER: Oh.

MR. GROOMS: But it will be three dimensional.

MS. SECKLER: I see.

MR. GROOMS: And I want to do it in some way where I distort them like a wide angle camera lens would distort them.

MS. SECKLER: Oh. Yeah.

MR. GROOMS: Some - I like to work with perspective in that way.

MS. SECKLER: Yes. Well, that sounds like an interesting area I hadn't read. Well, for the moment, I think we might just be happy that we got a lot on this tape today and come back to you in a year or so.

MR. GROOMS: Swell.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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