Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Beatrice Wood, 1992 March 2

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Beatrice Wood on March 2, 1992. The interview was conducted in Ojai, California by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

BW: BEATRICE WOOD
PK: PAUL KARLSTROM
SD: STEPHANIE DRAGOVITCH
RPS: R. P. SINGH
DV: DAVID VANGILDER

Tape 1, side A (30-minute tape sides)

PK: . . . Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Beatrice Wood, at her home studio in Ojai, California. The date is February 2, 1992.

BW: March 2.

PK: Excuse me, March—it doesn't matter—March 2, 1992, which is the day before Miss Wood's 99th birthday. So this is the occasion for this interview. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom, West Coast Regional Director. Also present Stephanie Dragovitch, R. P. Singh, and David. . . . David, what's your last name?

DV: VanGilder.

PK: VanGilder. So we have a full house, and this interview is all in the family. Everybody is an intimate with, we think, of Miss Woods.
[Interruption in taping]

PK: Okay, Beatrice, here we are again. We haven't done this for . . . probably about ten, or maybe. . . .

BW: Ten years.

PK: Ten years. I think about ten years ago I was here. We were both much younger.

BW: [chuckles]

PK: And we had lunch and did a brief interview for the Archives.

BW: Um hmm.

PK: And I'm delighted to have this. . . . I really am delighted to have this opportunity to maybe go into a little more depth. At least [we'll] see what we can do. The interview of course goes along with your papers, which are all at the Smithsonian, so it makes a very nice package. And this. . . . I've been thinking a lot about this interview. How to approach it, how to get something special. Obviously it's, the day being March 2, 1992. . . . March 2 is, we're on the eve of your hundredth year, because in fact you're moving into your. . . .

BW: Yes, yes.

PK: And this is a pretty important occasion, and I think it's an opportunity for us to reflect upon this long life and career. We're not going to be able to deal with all of it, but there are certain questions that I've developed that really are questions that I would like to have the answers to.

BW: Okay.

PK: And so it's a kind of conversation, or a dialogue, which we will share with other people.

BW: Yes.

PK: So that's the, sort of the ground rules, the procedures. And there's no particular order to these questions, and if we don't like them, for one reason or another, we move on.

BW: Fine.

PK: If we do, then we explore.

BW: Fine.

PK: But one of the things that I've wondered about the many years that I've known you is why, why do you make your art? Now this sounds like a very simple, obvious question, but I don't think it is all that simple. Why do you make your art, why do you continue to make your art, and are there differences in these reasons from the early days, when you first began to make, and now, when you continue? You choose to spend your time making art. Why is that?

BW: Well, curiously enough, I've often wondered myself. What is it that makes man want to create? And if we do create, I think we [sterile]. . . . I wonder what it is. Because folk art, which comes from the heart, of uneducated people, let us say. . . . All over the world, there's great art. There's something in man that wants to reach out, and I thought, "Now, if I were on a desert island," and I think about this very often, "and had the strength and the means, what would I do?" I would immediately plan a beautiful [form, foam] in which to live. I would immediately arrange grounds around me. So I realized that even if I were alone I would want to create. Maybe it has something to do with energy. We have this energy, which is life, and it needs to come out, and probably touch what is the beauty of the universe in which we're all caught. But it's natural for everybody to, uh, want to do something. And in education it's a wonderful thing if we can release people. Years ago I was teaching for a short while at the Happy Valley School. I knew nothing about teaching, technically, but I was there just for a short time. So what I tried to do was to release the imagination of my students. And I was amazed, as what came out as soon as they felt free to make some statement of their own.

PK: Well, Beatrice, your answer is an impressive one. It's a philosophical answer. And, you know, I have no doubt that that is true in the bigger sense, but what I would be interested in knowing is if you can be sort of more specific yourself—not why man or humankind creates and the value of that; that's a big issue—but, you know, you yourself, personally. You, Beatrice Wood, in the very beginning, what led you to make things, to begin to create, whether it was drawing or ceramics, and then, later on, why you yourself continued to do that. You mentioned. . . . Let me just add one more thing to the question. I get the feeling in a way that maybe creativity for you could be a kind of sublimation, a way that you are filling parts of your life that maybe aren't full other ways.

BW: Oh, I. . . . I think sublimation is a very good word, because I've often said, if I were happily married, all this energy, imaginative energy I have, I would put it towards the man I was in love with. And I feel very strongly that this is woman's job, to release men, and that our creative activity should go towards the man in our life, and our children. And it bothers me a little bit, in this position of the [freedom] of women. I meet many wonderful women who have fine jobs, but it seems to me they pay a price for it, that they're losing their femininity. Um hmm.

PK: So you. . . . For you then. . . .

BW: For me. For instance, when I have been completely in love, I'm absolutely focused and interested in the man I'm in love with. I don't feel necessarily like making a drawing or doing pottery. I'm interested in him, and I think it's the way it should be.

PK: Boy, that's too bad for art history then, because if everybody's happily involved in a relationship, there would be very little art made.

BW: Let the men make the art. [laughs]

SD: [Beato]. . . . . When. . . .

BW: Women. Women beautify the house. It doesn't stop women from making art. No. As a woman, I want a beautiful house. Now this is my dream. This is not my actuality. I want a beautiful house, to the man I love to live with in. I want to see that his clothes are handsome. To me it's a very creative thing. I think, I think we've lost the picture, that a home is a very creative thing. That as a woman. . . . For instance, your luncheons, your dinners, all of these, for me, are my creative jobs instead of making a pot on the wheel. My energy goes. . . . Except now I have darling people helping me so they make a beautiful arrangement of the table. And I've said I'm very indifferent to food, and when I'm alone, I will eat standing, off a newspaper. I don't care. All right. Now the other day I had a very informal luncheon for friends. I went into the dining room, and there was a beautifully set table. R. P. Singh I think made the food, David and Stephanie had arranged it. They'd all done this together. And I exclaimed, and so did my guests. Here were flowers. Here was a charming-looking table, and what did it do? It immediately released something in us to which we responded. So it convinces me, in a way, that beauty is important. And a woman's job, let's say, if she has a beautiful life, a beautiful home, this all affects the way we live. Now, in '38, I lost my house in a flood. The torrent came, took it in one gulp. Friends saved me. They found me and took me to the Walter Arensbergs, the collectors, who were dear friends of mine, and I spent five days

with them. That night, at dinner, all I had. . . . I still had my car and clothes—and a hat—and we sat down at dinner, and it was very nice. And Walter Arensberg said, “You know we’re redecorating the house. And the color of the right wallpaper is very important.” And I giggled inside, and I answered to him, “Yes, it is.” Now here I was, nothing. Bankrupt of all my hopes. And he said the color of right wallpaper is important. And I was able to say yes, because it is. Because the color of wallpaper, all these things, have an effect upon us. And Neutra, the great architect, once said, “In designing the house, a wrong line affects people.” So I think that beauty is important, and man is tied up creatively, whether he’s making a painting, which in a way is secondary. Look at the beauty of aeroplanes, look at the beauty of highways, look at the beauty that mankind has brought into activity.

PK: Well, two things come to mind as you’re talking. One is that you don’t make a sharp division, or a distinction, between different forms of creative expression or. . . .

BW: No, I don’t.

PK: . . . or of beauty.

BW: I don’t.

PK: Whether it’s designing a house or choosing a color scheme, or. . . .

BW: No, no.

PK: . . . making pots and. . . .

BW: I think it’s all creative energy. I may be wrong. I’m just answering the way I feel.

PK: Oh yeah, that’s. . . . There’s no right or wrong answers to any of these questions. That’s exactly what we want. . . .

BW: Yes. [chuckles]

PK: The second thing that strikes me as very interesting in this liberated age, the feminist world, is that you have expressed what would be a most, I think, controversial, sort of provocative opinion that in fact for some reason men are the ones that _____ _____ properly should be putting their energies into the making of art, and that in the best-ordered existence, or social situation, the woman has other fish to fry. That means basically the man, if she’s fortunate enough to have one.
Now, let me ask you this, because I’m trying to get a little bit at attitudes in you that may span a century. And I wonder if this isn’t a little bit, then, looking back to nineteenth-century role ideas, ideas of the proper role for men and women. Did I make that question clear?

BW: If I understand it. . . . You see, I think there are two. . . . There’s duplicity in the universe everywhere, and there are these masculine and feminine forces. [BW’s use of the word duplicity seems to refer to dualities, not to trickery—PJK] Now, I’m speaking even. . . . If a man has feminine has forces, he still has them. If a woman has masculine forces. . . . I’m not concerned with that; I’m concerned with the force. So. . . . For instance, I read, and it made sense to me, with savages, the early primitive man, the woman bore the child, and her energy was protecting, was around keeping the home comfortable. The man had to go to get food, so the man had his aggressiveness. And I like to go with the idea that the masculine force is an aggressive force, and the feminine force, it’s not aggressive. But it is much wiser, I have to say as a woman [laughing] than masculine force. And I think if men didn’t have women, all they’d do would be to kick, kick each other to heaven, you see.

PK: [Poppycock].

BW: And that these two forces are very important, working together. So I like to think that the feminine force, that a woman who wants to be chairman of a corporation is a masculine force. And yet I think a woman as president would be wonderful. So I’m not altogether logical. But I like women, whatever they do, to do it through their femininity.

PK: That of course though would perhaps limit them in some ways, because if the masculine force, the more aggressive force, is the managing force. . . .

BW: We have both forces.

PK: Um hmm.

BW: I understand that we’re born with masculine and feminine forces. Some women, as I said, are more masculine, some men more feminine. I’m not concerned with that; I’m just concerned with the force that I don’t like women to become masculine. I don’t like women to be so involved in their jobs that they lose interest in

men. And I can't speak about men. I'm not interested. I'm thinking of the feminine thing that I meet: beautiful women, and they don't even want to flirt with a man. I think that's a disaster.

PK: Well, so do we. [chuckling] Do you see that. . . . Is it fair to say that you see your own work. . . . Now, I asked you in the beginning, why do you make your art? And do you see it as an expression of your own femininity? Of this feminine principle in you, in Beatrice Wood?

BW: I don't know. Parts of me. For instance, I make a lot of figures, and they're usually laughing at men and women's relationships. Because men and women's relationships are usually, unfortunately, a disaster. They always have been, always will be. Nothing's harder than for men and women to get together—or for men and men, or women and women—to get together harmoniously. And I think one of the reasons of being alive is to be able to be harmonious with all the people that come into your life.

PK: Well, you know, this is very good, because that's going to lead us into the next question that I had, which has to do with the figurative work.

BW: Yes.

PK: Because I want to concentrate on that. But before we leave this question of why you make your art, I still want to see if. . . .

BW: Well, now, look.

PK: Excuse me, but to see if we can determine, or you can remember, were the reasons different years and years ago when you began. I mean, looking back, trying—I know it's hard to do—but trying to put yourself again back into. . . .

BW: I think I was born very eye-minded. Colors, forms, as a child, meant something to me. Now unfortunately I believe in reincarnation [laughing] so I accept the idea that I'm in life, and have come over with this interest in form. I'm not musical. Now musical men and women are not necessarily responsive or concerned about art. I always have been. And when I was very young my mother returned from Europe with a necklace. The moment I saw it I loved it, and she gave it to me. When I was in my teens, my mother would return—she went to Europe every year—would return from Paris with five or six French dresses. I was in boarding school. I would only wear the one that I liked, not that she chose. I'm trying to say I was very eye-minded.
Now, here I am as a child, an individual, why do I go into art? All children love to draw. We have energies. What are we going to do with our energies? All right. So, I was unhappy as a child. I wasn't allowed to play with boys and girls. I was [at—Ed.] boarding school, all girls. In summer we went to Europe, traveled through museums. I never played with boys and girls. So what was my interest going to be? I had to do something with my energy. And I'd been in these museums, and I was eye-minded, so I began to draw. If my environment had been different, it might have gone to cooking. Cooking is a very creative thing, and we downbeat it, but it's very creative. Full of variations, full of search.

PK: But you surely don't think that they're equivalent. Cooking great cuisine, the creating of great cuisine and the creating of great art. You don't see that as the same?

BW: You know, I really don't think there's any difference.

PK: Okay.

BW: There's difference in the thing that comes out, but not in the inner energy.

PK: Well, it's creativity of different types.

BW: And in a way I can say, no. I'm quoting now one of my colleagues. Vivika Heino, who's a very fine classical potter. One day I said to her, "I think it's a mistake to teach pottery in schools. The students only have half of, one half hour twice a week; you can't do anything decent. And the clay spoils." And she answered, "That is not the reason. It opens them towards aesthetics." So I feel a great painting, all right, it's wonderful. But the important thing is what went on in the painter as he was painting, rather than the result. But I am very caught up, let's say, in what you've just mentioned, philosophic thought. And that may ruin my conversation. [laughing]

PK: What? Ruin the interview, or ruin the artwork, actually?

SD: Yeah, because I wondered, when you, when you say that if you have the choice between art and a relationship, that you would choose a relationship.

BW: Without any question.

SD: Yeah, but when you were drawing at times—because this is before you got into ceramics—you did draw, and when you fell in love, did you put your drawings aside? Was there any conflict for you?

BW: Well, I wasn't interested in doing them, but if I had a relationship with a man, and he hurt me—and I am sorry to admit men have hurt me—and then, I wanted to draw to put that hurt into paper. It's very simple, there's no question of it.

SD: So when you did fall in love five times, whatever creative expression in high-art sense, was put aside.

BW: _____

SD: Drawing was put aside and. . . .

BW: Several years ago, a woman who's a very good decorative painter came. She had three children. And she said, "I'm beside myself. I haven't time to paint. I want exhibitions. How can I make money, how can I be successful?" Well, I think that word's an ugly word, because if an artist, if a person, pushes for success, that's a different thing from expressing from your heart. And I said, "Well now, you have three children. That's wonderful." I said, "Why, while you have them, until they're older, why don't you concentrate on them, because it's impossible to give yourself to art, to get mixed up in the market, which all of this takes a great deal of time if you're focusing on selling, and you can't do both." She wanted to make so many paintings a week, get so many sales, and I was taken aback by her ambition of success, rather than a release of her creativity. And much art, to me, is not really. . . . Well, you can't say. . . . There's a silly remark. "There's no such thing as taste; we all have different tastes." But I'll never forget Brancusi. When I was visiting him shortly before he died we were speaking about how many people were in art, and he said, "Yes, but how few touched the real thing. Most of it is merde, merde, merde." He repeated it three times. And I feel the same. But then life is merde for most people. And I think we're here to [lift out of it].

PK: Well, do you. . . . I'd like to move on now to. . . .

BW: What about Mr. Singh feeling. . . . You've seen me. Am I a monster just interested in art? Or what has happened?

RPS: Well, you've just said that there are different rules for men and women.

BW: Yes.

RPS: And the woman's role is to be supportive of the man more than making art.

BW: Um hmm.

RPS: And. . . .

BW: But our life should be art, you see.

RPS: Yes, yeah. I have to agree with that.

BW: You have to what?

RPS: I have to agree with that. Because I do believe that the woman is to support the man.

BW: All right, now here I am. I have a, and you'd have to say I'm in business, because my work goes to stores, it goes to museums, it goes to collectors. On account of our government there have to be invoices. All right, so I have to be a boss.

RPS: I know that.

BW: [You?] don't like it. Huh?

RPS: I know that you have to be the boss.

BW: How do you feel about that?

RPS: [laughs] Well, going logically by your description of the proper role of man and woman, the man has to be the boss.

BW: Yes, but we're in a situation that you should be the boss, and I'm the boss.

RPS: That is a, that is a. . . . That, as you say, is the duality of [man].

BW: So I make drawings.

RPS: So we'll forget that.

BW: So I make drawings.

PK: I think I'm beginning to understand. I think this is helpful. It seems to me, as you've been explaining all of this and the role of art in your life, that it could be described then very much as a lover—as a relationship, or as a kind of substitute for primary relationships. That if you had a lover, if you had a husband, a mate, then that's where your energies _____ _____ ?

BW: Certainly I'm not interested in making a drawing if I have a lover. That's what I'm saying. If I'm in love, and have a relationship with a man, I am concentrated on that man. And I feel that's woman's role. And. . . . Meaning in a very big creative way.

RPS: But do you think. . . .

BW: But if instead I had a love relationship, I have a lover, a husband, in my life, and I'm president of a big corporation, and I have to go over to meetings all the time, what's happening to my daily life, around. . . . There's no graciousness. There's money, competition, ambition.

PK: Are the. . . . Excuse me, go ahead.

BW: I [use, used] this word, let's say, "graciousness."

PK: Um hmm.

BW: I think, in the biggest sense, women are born to put graciousness into life. Which is a very big issue the way I mean it.

PK: Okay.

BW: Even take the women in India. When I went to the villages, I saw the role of the women. They made these lovely decorations, their homes, without any money, very simple, but their homes had a beauty.

Tape 1, side B

PK: Okay, this is, of our interview with Beatrice Wood, this is Tape 1, side 2, side B. And R. P. Singh was saying. . . .

RPS: My point is that, while I agree with you that the woman's role is to support the man, but the way you say it, it means there is a certain premise behind all of this, that the man is so wonderful, so idyllic, that you can concentrate on him 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, that is all that you think of, do, and act. For that kind of a ideal man, I don't know if it is ever possible. You see it is. . . .

BW: Well, nobody's ever ideal.

RPS: What I'm saying, it is impossible to find a man, to have that kind of a man, on whom a woman is entirely. . . .

BW: Yes.

RPS: . . . concentrated, her whole sole purpose of life is. . . .

BW: Well, your daughter-in-law does what I think a woman should do. She's concentrated on her family. And that is wonderful. And what is the result? She has three beautiful, well-adjusted children. I see where families are happy together, well-adjusted. There doesn't seem to be problem with the children. The problems come because there's no love in the family. What started me possibly, my mother and father in a way loved each other, but they fought—bitterly. He was very correct, very forthright. She was a beautiful, generous woman, but not interested. . . . She was socially conscious. [BW here uses "socially" in the sense of "high society"—Trans.] She wasn't interested in starvation, in employee—my father was very concerned about people—and she was very extravagant. And I don't know if this is helpful, but we were living at the Hotel Gotham in New York. We had three rooms, high up, and I could [sit]. I was fifteen, and he told my mother, he said, "I've had financial reverses. Please, don't be extravagant, please let me know how much money I owe for you, and I'll pay the bills, but I must know. And she was out, he was in, and the bellboy came with a package, a box. He opened it, and inside was the beautiful—eye-minded—blue silk hat with a feather, from I think it was [Tap-pay's], one of the expensive places. And this was, what? sixty, seventy years ago, with a, when he has up, for a bill of seventy-five dollars. He

took a knife and he cut it in pieces. And I understood. And I was fifteen. All right, and maybe because of this clash between them, that may. . . . And the fact that I didn't play with children, that I was either in boarding school, or on trips in Europe in museums, is what turned me towards art. On the other hand. . . . On the other hand, I was brought up on Cinderella and Little Women, so I was hopelessly romantic. And I still haven't given up the idea that a beautiful knight on a white horse is coming. It's. . . . Probably be the undertaker, but that's all right. [all chuckle]
[Interruption in taping]

PK: Okay, Beatrice, we're starting up again, and that was, I think, a very full answer to the first question. You said one thing that moved so nicely into the next question that came to my mind. And that had to do with the role of the figures, your figurative art. Now we know there was a wonderful exhibition that traveled around, and was at Oakland, where I saw it, of your figurative art, which seems to have a special place in your work. I would like to, through a little discussion about the figures, try to get to certain issues or questions that I see as important in your work—and in your life. Sort of concentrating on them. Now it's true that Francis Naumann has asked you many of these questions, and has even written about some of it in the book and the catalog, but now it's my turn and our time, to deal with some of the same issues. Remind me when the figures first appeared. . . . In the very beginning? Did they grow out of the pots? Did they precede? How did they first come about? Is there any story about that?

BW: I became a potter very accidentally. I was engaged to be married to a jerk. I was not really in love with him. All right. But I became engaged. I was lonely and he pursued me ardently. All right. I was in Europe for three months, and I awoke one day and I said, "Oh, you're engaged to be married; you must buy something for your house. You must begin to think about your house." I had very little money. I went into an antique shop and bought six luster plates. When I returned to America, I wanted to get a teapot to go with them, and Morgan Farley, a young actor, because I couldn't find one, said, "Go to the Hollywood High School and make one." The next day I went to the Hollywood High School, thinking over the weekend that I would make a luster teapot. Now, I was thirty, I think. This shows the extraordinary stupidity and innocence and ignorance of me [mine], of the business world. I thought over the weekend I could make a luster teapot. I immediately saw I couldn't. It was a very elementary. . . . Here are vistas, and I saw immediately that I couldn't, so to amuse myself I made a little figure. [showing something here?—Trans.] It was the height of the Depression.

PK: Uh huh.

BW: And somebody bought it for $2.50. So I made some other figures, and somebody bought them for $2.50.

PK: And this was after you had already started making lusterware and. . . .

BW: No, no, this is when I started pottery, at the Hollywood High School. And then. . . . I'd never touched clay before. I didn't want to be a potter. I just wanted to make a luster teapot to go with my set. And I say, this was my ignorance of the world. Nobody can believe it. All right, it was the height of the Depression. I had no money, and I thought, "My God, if I continue making little figures for $2.50, $3.50, maybe I can make ten dollars a month. So I played with it. And then after several months, I didn't make any more money, I heard that Glen Lukens had a class at USC [University of Southern California]. I still didn't want to be a potter. So I went to USC, and I played around with clay. He opened the world to what students could do with clay, but he was not interested in museum-type pottery. Then I read that Otto and Gertrud Natzler, from Germany, refugees, came, great artists. They were just new to the country. I wrote them a letter if they'd take me as a student. And because they were new, they did, and I worked with them for several months, still not wanting to be, thinking of being a potter. It was a great experience. I think they're wonderful, great craftsmen, and that some of Gertrud Natzler's things go right into heaven, they're so wonderful. Such a sense of [sheerness]. All right. Then, before I knew it, I think Evelyn Biddell of Raymond and Raymond's Gallery got hold of me, and before I knew it wholesaler shops began approaching me, making pottery, and before I knew it, here I was a potter. That's how it began. . . .

PK: But what about the figures? I mean, it seems to me there are two areas of your work: the pots, the pottery. . . .

BW: Oh, yes, the figures.

PK: Because they're so important, it seems to me, in your work.

BW: From the very beginning, I've always made figures. While I became interested in pottery, of course the Natzlers and Lukens had no interest, so I became interested in pots, too, but I never lost my interest in figures. And the early exhibitions I had. . . . I had one—I have the date; I think it was '43—at the Los Angeles Museum when it was at Exposition Park. It was under the potters', sponsored by the potters' group, whatever that name was. Then the Santa Barbara Museum gave me an exhibition in '54 or '53, '53. I have it all on the. . . .

PK: Yeah, don't worry about that.

BW: And '54, the DeYoung museum gave me a one-man exhibition, and I remember they had figures in that. So I've always. . . . And now the way I work. . . . I have great respect for my dealer, Garth Clark. If I don't supply him with pottery, he can't stay open. It's the responsibility of his craftsmen to see that he has their work. I feel that. I learnt this about living. Very important. All right. The way I work at present, and it's quite a few years, I make pottery, bowls. My dealer is not as fond of my figures, and he only really carries bowls. He's not interested in sculpture. So I get bowls in various shapes ready for him. He comes. We have a nice time together. Then I go off beam and make a figure. Something that hits me as funny or tragic in the relationship between men and women. Now, my dealer unfortunately just sold something I'm very fond of, called Chocolate and Young Men. Here on the wall I have four women in black called. . . .

RPS: Women without Men.

BW: . . . Women without Men. Here they are, looking very grim, all in black. What else have I? Oh, there, over there, I have Woman Dream. [chuckles] It's not a knight on a white horse, but it's a man on a blue horse carrying, walking off with a woman.

PK: [chuckles] Yeah, yeah, that one; that's a good one. It seems to me, Beatrice, that, that there's more of you in the sculpture, in the figurative work, and. . . . Do you agree with that? That you feel closer to the. . . . . .

BW: Well, yes and no. You see, in the, in bowls, you're limited. You can't get away from the circle. Yes, you can make abstract things, but the things that are done on the wheel, that limits you, but however I decorate most of them, um hmm.
Now where my figures are concerned, some of my, many people don't like them. Some people do. I'm not concerned. I make them because I enjoy making them. And in this technical world, I purposely have never learned how to make pottery figures. I have fun approaching it like a poor peasant. I have an idea, and I struggle to bring it into clay. And it's almost an engineering problem with me [laughing], to know how to get these different figures I make to come out. And I'm very concentrated on them, and it's a puzzle. Instead of playing cards, I make figures, you see. Many people get their puzzlement out of their system by playing cards, by gambling; I do it by making a figure.

PK: What I wanted to ask you was precisely that, or more than that, I think. And it has to do with beyond the little stories that they seem to tell. All of these figures, individually or in groups, in tableau, seem to tell stories that usually are pretty easy to understand.

BW: Um hmm.

PK: And I suspect that their meaning—Meaning with a big 'M'—that their Meaning actually goes beyond that, and I'd like to probe that just a little bit. But just for starters, how would you describe the meaning, the content, of your figurative work, beyond the little stories? Are you able to do that? Is that something you think about, or is that something I'm just thinking about? Their deeper meaning.

BW: I don't know.

PK: Um hmm.

BW: Now, I'm very eager to get back into my workroom, and I'm so busy this week I won't be able to. I have three ideas that I want to make. As soon as they're out of the way, I'll begin making bowls again. All right. All I can say, I have the idea, and it's like a white piece of paper, nothing on it, and then I make a line, and then I add onto it. Only I do it with clay. And there's the problem in making figures that technically you have to know a little bit about how to work with clay. And I approach it wide open like an ignorant little person, and feel my way through. Now one of my dearest friends doesn't even like to be in the room with the figures. She can't stand them. But what of it? We all have different tastes. And she's a very fine human being. We meet on other planes of existence. And other people like the figures, and don't care about the bowls. They say, "Oh, bowls. Everybody makes bowls, but your figures are individual."

PK: How do you expect, or hope, people to respond to the figures?

BW: I don't know.

PK: Do you have any expectations or. . . .

BW: I don't know, and I really don't care. The making of the figures is fun. It's a creative outlet for me. And I accept that some people aren't going to like them, and some are. And I feel the same about when people buy things. Some people want to buy, some won't. I don't care; it takes care of itself. I don't make pottery to make

money. I don't make pottery to have exhibitions. I make pottery because I enjoy it.

PK: I believe you! [laughs] I believe that. This is. . . . Let's pursue the figurative work, if we may, just a little bit more.

BW: All right.

PK: One of the things that strikes me, and actually intrigues me. . . . I love your figures, by the way.

BW: Um hmm.

PK: My taste runs towards your figures. I would say that I personally prefer, I'm one of those that prefer the. . . .

BW: I'm glad to hear that.

PK: . . . anecdotal figures to the bowls, which I think are wonderful, too. But what strikes me, and I'm sure strikes others, is that there seems to be a theme that runs throughout the figurative work. It's fairly constant. And it seems to have to do with the relationship, once again, between men and women. Very often there are dressed men with undressed. . . .

BW: Women.

PK: . . . or partly undressed women.

BW: Yes.

PK: And this occurs often enough that it seems to have some. . . .

BW: Because I think it's an absolutely delightful, delicious fun idea. A stupid man with a high hat. It is my protest against prostitution. And yet I think prostitution is a needed and very fine thing. This is the conflict, of the duality, that exists in nature, that exists in the universe, that exists in my own nature, in my own being. I have this duality that. . . . The way a man approaches sex, like a commodity, like a relief, is very hard for me to accept, because being a silly, romantic woman, for me I only like the idea of sex with love. All right, I admit my limitations. On the other hand, I accept that men have different pressures than women. And the prostitution is a needed and very fine thing. And in certain culture, because of this, the women, the prostitutes, have been well thought of. This gets mixed up again with the masculine/feminine [thing, and—PJK] because of the way I was brought up, [how I—PJK] feel about it.

PK: Well, I was going to say that in your work there seems to be, beyond the very charming surface, and these humorous people that you create in these different interconnections. . . .

BW: Um hmm, um hmm.

PK: . . . that there's a sense of physical, sexual tension, but in addition there's also a sense of psychological and emotional potential. And although I don't want to put words in your mouth, as that would be being a bad interviewer, does this come close to your view of the content, the meaning of the work?

BW: Yes, certainly. Certainly they're sexual. And I am annoyed at the world, the hypocrisy. How do we get into this world except through sex? And then we like to pretend it doesn't exist.

PK: That's true. . . . But there was a second part to my observation, and that was that there was this erotic or sexual content, but also, at the same time, it seems to me, a definite psychological aspect. This psychological connection between the figures, an emotional connection.

BW: Well, you see, because I have been hurt with my love affairs. . . . . .

RPS: [That is it. That is it!]

BW: . . . have had bad luck. I've loved very deeply and what happens. . . . You either go under as a woman, or you go up and you laugh. There's no choice. And I laugh. And then. . . .

PK: And make wonderful figures.

BW: And that's it. I laugh. This is life.

RPS: You laugh, having gone through the agony.

BW: It has been an agony, certainly.

RPS: Right.

PK: Yes, yes, I can see this.

BW: You see. I feel that, in a way. . . . I have to be careful now what I say.

PK: No, you don't.

BW: I hope it won't be misunderstood that all activity is sexual sublimated.

PK: Including art.

BW: I think, yes.

PK: Including your art.

BW: I have said that—and I again I don't insist upon this [chuckling]—that all great art comes because of unhappiness, that very few happy people are capable. Because the energy is dissipated. There's nothing to block you. You're there, you're happily married. Whatever it 'tis, you don't have to worry; you have an easy happy life. But it's the blockages that come in, that force you to express something from within that, if you have the capacity, turns into great art. Or great cars, or great aeroplanes, as I've said. Great bridges, great buildings.

RPS: In other words, you have to be neurotic to be a good artist.

BW: Yes, yes, that's exactly it. And I am neurotic.

PK: Aren't we all? Most of us.

BW: [chuckles] And yet, you see, I should say I'm not interested in. . . . I can't quite find the words. I'm not interested in people who just live to have sex. I'm not interested at all. And I think television is debasing the relationship between men and women. Because they're making sex a fun, easy, cheap thing. And, you see, I'm one of these old-fashioned women who believes in love. And, if possible, faithfulness.

PK: But you don't insist upon that.

BW: If there's honesty, I don't. I have so much understanding now that I don't. But it was very hard. You see, my first great love with [Henri-Pierre—PJK] Roché, he was in love with me, so I couldn't understand that while he could be lapsed in fortitude with one of my good friends, and said it had no importance. I know now that it has no importance, in a way. But it was so terrible for me. I was young and full of this romantic stupidity that doesn't exist, that we broke. And I broke with him with tears in my eyes, and he had tears. And then I went up to Montreal for a year in the National French Theatre, and after that we came back—we had all friends in common—and we became very good, dear friends. And one thing that's been very wonderful about life, that I've kept in loving friendship with the men with whom I've had love affairs. The quality has changed. The color is changed. But the affection has gone on. I think this is very important. It shocks me.

PK: We're going to need to stop in just a moment, but you're moving into some areas that are. . . .

BW: I did, something different.

PK: Well, no, no, very important. This is exactly where I wanted to get, but I don't want to take the risk of losing some of this on the tape. . . .

BW: Um hmm.

PK: . . . but I think there're times that . . . to sort of sum this up. I gather from what you say then that you would describe your own work as an art of self-revelation.

BW: But whatever we do is self-revelation. We don't realize that. Whatever we do, of course. Um hmm.

PK: So this is, there's no exception; it should not be a surprise.

BW: But you see it shocks me that, let's say, society, that all of us get these infatuations. We live together or marry or whatever, and then it doesn't turn out, and we dislike each other. I think that's terrible. And I've had the blessing in my life that with three men whom I've loved very much I've been able to go on in loving friendship. And I think that that's the dream of the world. The dream.

Tape 2, side A

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Beatrice Wood in her home and studio at Ojai. It's March 2, 1992, and this is the second tape in a series of two for this interview. Also present at the moment with interviewer Paul Karlstrom and Miss Wood is R.P. Singh and a dog. What's his name?

RPS: Raja.

PK: Okay. This morning's session, I think, went very well and for the record I want to thank you, Beatrice for being such a good subject and such a candid and forthright respondent. And I really do mean that, and we'll take about, I hope, another hour covering some more topics that. . . . We ended up in a discussion where you seemed to acknowledge that your work, your art, grew—and maybe very directly—out of your own life, out of your own experience. And I want to make sure that I understand that correctly: That you perceive your work as an extension of your own life experience and that there is a pretty direct connection. Is that right?

BW: Yes, it is, but it seems to me obvious that our life is an extension of ourselves and that everybody we meet, everything we do, has an effect upon us. If we choose to live with cutthroats and people of evil thoughts, and spend our life like that, we're going to become like that. And that's where education, with it's impact on us, fills our thoughts. Everything is thought. And the more we go towards great thinking, the more we get understanding. Now, I think in this age, the genius of the human race is making a mistake. We're putting all our gifts, let us say, towards technology. We have an extraordinary, unbelievable technology. And what is this doing? It's gotten to such a stage that the world can destroy itself. And we have to begin thinking now how to get away from just this thought of possible destruction.
In other words. . . . I always speak of the duality which exists everywhere. We put it towards technology—educationally, let us say—rather than towards humanity. And slowly I think many people are beginning to realize the importance of human beings. And a starving human being is a very important person, whether we know them or not. And I feel this greatly towards people.

PK: Well this. . . . You're talking right now about a world view and a philosophy and I would like very much to wrap up later with that.

BW: Oh.

PK: Really what right now I was asking was about you specifically and the work itself and its connection to you; and basically I was trying to confirm what I think we were saying earlier—or what you were saying—that there is a direct connection, very direct connection between these things that you make. . . .

BW: Oh, yeah.

PK: . . . and your own life and experience.

BW: But definitely so. Because I feel we are what our life has been, and. . . .

PK: But we don't necessarily have to make art that portrays that so directly. Sometimes it's more concealed, and what I'm trying to get at is personality of your work which it seems to me is a very, very direct revelation of even specific experiences, maybe distilled. And other people make art that is quite far afield from their own actual life experience. This is what I'm getting at. It seems to me. . . . Or maybe you don't agree with that.

BW: I don't know. I just know as I said: I get an idea and I have the fun of wanting to produce it. And I like producing it without technical help to find my way. In other words, it comes from my heart, the way folk art comes from the heart of people.

PK: And I think that's an important point. But I think it also comes from your experience and the events that have been important to you, have hurt you, have affected you. To me, that's more interesting. . . .

BW: [Why, Well], certainly if I had had a happy marriage. . . .

PK: . . . than the challenge of finding your [wife, life, way] _____.

BW: . . . I wouldn't be doing what I do now, there's no question of it. [laughs]

PK: Because the stories, the themes, as we've discussed. The themes in your art are very clearly. . . .

BW: Um hmm.

PK: . . . connected to what you describe as a long life with many experiences. . . .

BW: Absolutely.

PK: . . . some happier than others. Well, with that in mind, I'd like to move on to a few more questions that will touch on this but maybe open up some new areas. And I would like to suggest—this is an observation of mine—it seems to me that your life is perceived by many as a work of art in itself. Let me explain. Certainly in recent years, you've been getting a lot of attention.

BW: Um hmm.

PK: I think certainly more than you did a decade ago. . . .

BW: Um hmm.

PK: . . . than ten years ago. So this is one of the things that has to have changed your experience, that you are a public figure. And you are. A lot of people are interested in Beatrice Wood—for different reasons. It's true some of them are familiar with the art; others are less familiar. But nonetheless, you've received a certain kind of fame and notoriety. National television coverage, for instance.

BW: Um hmm.

PK: Good Morning America, you know. Magazine articles are coming forth. . . .

BW: Um hmm.

PK: And this is great. One of the things that strikes me about the nature of this attention is that it focuses often on your age, your longevity. People are more and more impressed that this sort of exotic woman in the saris, makes art, and is. . . . This age, they are intrigued by this. In some cases I think that there's more interest in that than in the work itself—in other words, what you make. So there are two parts to Beatrice Wood. There's Beatrice Wood, the older woman who has managed to survive, and survive with style. And then, on the other hand, there are these works that she has created. Now I don't want to try to separate those two, but I'm interested to know how you feel about that. In other words would you prefer that these be separated? Beatrice Wood as a public figure who has a certain lifestyle that is like a work of art, and Beatrice Wood the creator who makes these objects? I asked a long question. I'm sorry.

BW: Well, I don't think very much about what people think about my work. I'm not conscious of it. I think of myself as a tired. . . . I don't think of myself as an old woman. Yes, I know I am, but I don't think about it. I don't let it touch me. I let ideas touch me. And I'm involved in ideas. And in a way, I lead a quiet life as much as possible. And every night I'm alone in my workroom, and I'm unconscious of being what you call, thank God, a public figure. All right, every night when I go to bed, I think, "Now, tomorrow I must do four things. I must phone so and so, I must see that Stephanie phones somebody, I must start my kiln, and there's one letter that has to be answered. Then, if those get done, then I plan other things. When I wake up in the morning, I say, "Four things. Remember what they are." I do this kind of with numbers. How many things that I have to remember. And then I plunge in to the activity of the day. And I'm not concerned with the outer world—what people think—because I don't know it. All I know is my activity here.

PK: Um hmm. But obviously, you have to be aware of the fact that over the recent years many more people. . . .

BW: Yes, I'm aware. It's true. I'm aware that I've had a great deal of publicity—far too much—but I don't think about it. And thank God I forget it. And I forget many of the people I meet because I haven't that kind of memory, because I'm so focused on what I'm doing in the day, really focused, that I forget a lot of people who come here, forget a lot of. . . . I don't pay attention to compliments. We all make compliments. They have no real. . . . We shouldn't even listen to them, except in the moment. What is important are the criticisms that our friends give, because compliments are not always true. You see, I'm concerned, I say this often, with three aspects of living, and these are much more vital to me than making even pottery, but they're philosophic.

PK: Um hmm. Well, that's all right. [chuckles]

BW: I don't know if you want me to go on?

PK: Well, I do. If you could hold the idea. At the end, I have a couple questions that I think will very much embrace this. What I would like to do. . . . And I don't want to overwork this question, but it is curious to me. It seems to me that you—unlike some artists, very much like others—are viewed as a combination. The artwork is simply one aspect of you. . . .

BW: Yes.

PK: . . . as a public figure and that you're seen as a package. You're seen as this interesting woman who has known Duchamp and all of these things. . . .

BW: Yes.

PK: . . . and has had this long life with many interesting associations, and therein lies a lot of the fascination with you. And in some cases, it may even preclude the work, the art itself. And I guess my question again is: Would you prefer that that wasn't the case, that they were separated? That people would just focus on the work and forget sometimes about Beatrice Wood, the interesting person?

BW: Well, I don't know; I'd never thought in those terms. I appreciate that a lot of the publicity I've had is on account of my association years ago with very wonderful people in the art world: Duchamp, Brancusi, the Arensbergs, the Picabias. . . . You call them. Stieglitz. When I was in New York, I had a very wonderful, stimulating life. None of us realized then that it could be in any way historical fifty years later. But that is due a great deal to my publicity, plus the fact now that I'm such an old cronie. Certainly I accept that. But I'm not concerned with it, you see.

PK: That's the answer.

BW: And I like, I like living, reading gossip about other people, so why shouldn't people read whatever gossip goes on about me. I just let it pass. Um hmm. . . .

PK: Well, why not? That's a good answer to that question.

BW: I have a. . . . I wonder if this in any way answers what you're asking. I am naturally a loner and kind of a monster. When I was in boarding school, I said to a roommate, I said, "Look, you see this line dividing the room. You're there. I'm here. When I'm here, this is my room. I'm alone in it. I don't want to be talked to. I want to live in it alone." My God, this poor girl accepted that without any conflict. I must have presented it with a certain amount of decency. And that whole winter I never talked, and I lived as if she weren't there. This need of being alone. The next year I got a room by myself. To my mother, I said when we had an apartment in New York, one day I said, "Mother, you are not to enter my room; neither is father. Only the maid. This is my room." This need of being alone. And here I live nights. I hardly every see Singh. It's really a little bit his fault, but I'm glad too because I get more work done. He brings me dinner on a tray. Sometimes he will give me a goodnight peck on the cheek, but usually I don't see him. And Dr. Breslow who lives in back also, I never see him. So nights I'm alone. And it's then that I can work. And I have this need, when I'm working, of being alone. Great need. On the other hand, I enjoy people whom I meet, and I enjoy very much meeting them, but that's in another pocket of existence. Um hmm.

PK: So this is not unrelated to a kind of duality that both these things can be. . . .

BW: A duality. I'm very dual. In fact most of us are dual. Yes, that's my duality, part of my duality. [chuckling]

PK: Well, I think that's understandable. Well, there's a related question that I have. Are you, are you ever tempted to adopt a persona, too, that might reinforce or match this image of, that you have, how people perceive you. I think I probably know the answer to the question from what you've said earlier, but do you feel that there are certain expectations now of Beatrice Wood? Beatrice Wood, the public figure. That there is a public out there—admirers, friends—that expect you to be a certain thing and behave in a certain way. Would it, could it affect, some of the things you say?

BW: I don't think I think about the public figure. And I'm not interested in it. [said solemnly]

PK: That's a pretty direct answer.

RPS: Hmm. Brief.

PK: Brief and to the point.

BW: No, I don't think I do.

PK: Question much longer than answer, but that's okay.

BW: Um hmm.

RPS: Yeah, that is true, she. . . .

BW: If I really thought about the public image, I wouldn't wear a sari all the time. [laughs]

PK: Well, I don't know about that. I'm not so sure.

BW: No.

PK: I mean, some people would say that that is part of the public image which they didn't create, you created it, but that. . . .

BW: Yeah. No, it happened before I got this much publicity. I wasn't at all known in my work and—this was about 28 years ago—one night I put on a sari. Two friends call, and they said, "You look good in a sari. Why don't you wear it all the time?" And I said, "No, I'm not an Indian, and I don't move the way Indians do." They said, "But you look nice in one." And then they said the fatal thing. They said, "You always dress in costume. If you like a sari, why don't you wear it?" And I to myself, "Well, there's something to that. I think I will." I enjoy wearing a sari, and it never occurred to me that I would become so well known.

PK: Yes.

BW: And now I have nothing else. And that I've always dressed in costume. . . . I've always dressed the way that I've felt comfortable. And one day a dear friend of mine from New York, whom I've known since a child, came to Ojai and said, "Beatrice, you're not very dignified the way you dress. You really should dress more carefully." And I loved this friend, so I went out and bought a tailored suit. Three weeks later I was at a tea, and I wasn't talking, and I said to myself, "Oh I've been. . . . What's the matter with me? I've been so withdrawn these last three weeks or so." And then it occurred to me, my God, it's it the tailored suit. I felt so self-conscious. And I saw that, and I just said, "I don't care. I'm going to dress the way I want and people don't have to invite me if they don't like it." And I felt that very clearly, and if I had to go to the White House tomorrow, I'd go in a sari. I don't have anything else. And if they didn't want me to come in a sari, I'd be very happy not to go.

PK: Not to go.

BW: It's as simple as that.

PK: So, in fact, your public has found you, Beatrice Wood, the way you are and had been for some time, and . . . that's that.

BW: And that's it.

PK: Yeah, I mean, no adjusting, no responding to your ideas of. . . .

BW: No, I never think, and I don't like the thought of thinking about what the public thinks. I don't think that's true. You see. . . . This doesn't quite follow, but it comes to mind. What I'm deeply concerned with is being inwardly honest, free of manipulation. Now it doesn't mean where man is concerned. I'm perfectly happy to manipulate; that's a game. But I try to be free of the cunning of the mind. I really do. I try not to lie. Then, I'm very concerned about the world of people, great interest in the human race. And, thirdly, what I think is important for all of us, is curiosity. I have a great curiosity. And it has a wonderful outlet in my work, because I'm always on toes wanting to see what will happen to this glaze, that glaze, this form, that form. So I'm, my life is never sterile. It's always open, going towards these new ideas. And one of the things of education is to teach people how to think, to open their minds, and to activate curiosity, hopefully in good directions and not towards bombs.

PK: Are these the three principles you were talking about earlier? Or is that different?

BW: These three principles are actually what I, for myself, am concerned about far more than anything else. Because I think it's so hard. . . . This is touching on religion; I can't help it. All great teachers have said, "Man know thyself." And I think it's very important that we face what we are. We make our world. Um hmm. And I feel this. But, if we only think of ourselves and are never concerned about other people, it's terrible. And then if we just sit on a stool and meditate or play the piano and nothing else, what do we get to life? It's the curiosity, the desire of energy, which is so wonderful.

PK: I think it's interesting that you say, "Man know thyself," or however it goes, as an important injunction, request, admonition or whatever. Would you agree that Beatrice Wood's way of continuing to get to know herself is through the art? Is that finally what it comes to be? That you make art in part to know thyself?

BW: No, not at all. I make art only because I have an idea. [laughs]

PK: So you don't feel. . . .

BW: No, I'm interested in knowing myself when I think somebody else is in the wrong. To really see myself, to see my own fears, to face my own fears, my own greeds. I'm interested in that. And when I say honesty. . . . Many potters bring me pottery to look at, and I don't like it. I don't want to discourage them, and I don't want to say, "Oh, this is great." But I get around it another way. I will say. . . . I don't want to say, because if a poor, bad potter comes to me, I wouldn't like them to know how I escape flattering them, but I say something that will

encourage them if they want to [sounds like “brill leaze”—Trans.] without downbeating them, because it’s very wrong to take encouragement away from people. But I have a way. . . . I don’t like to. . . . In other words, what I’m trying to say, I don’t like social lies, and I try—one of the things—I try to live free of them.

PK: I’m not entirely satisfied with your answer, not that it isn’t true, but I sense it’s sort of gliding over the surface. . . .

BW: All right.

PK: . . . the surface of what I asked.

BW: Ask again.

PK: And that again has to do with the role [of your art—PJK], especially the figurative work, which you acknowledge is so imbued with your own experience, and sometimes the disappointments, anxieties, your concerns. And, although I obviously can’t say this is the case with you, it seems to follow from what you said earlier that obviously you choose certain themes to deal with. These are things that are important to you. . . .

BW: Yes.

PK: And we already determined that they grow out of your life experience.

BW: Yes.

PK: It seems possible that this is a way for you to come to terms with, to sort of grapple with your own life experience and perhaps then, in making it material, coming to know yourself, or recognizing yourself in your work. I sound like an art historian, I realize, but I just wanted to raise the question again, you know, to give you a little further chance to reflect on some of the possible meaning behind these themes.

BW: Well, take Going to the White House. First of all, I saw the shape, and I said, “Oh, what fun. I’ll try to make that shape.” And as I was working with it, I said, “Oh, it’s a silly shape. We’ll call it Going to the White House.” That explains that one. Now, tomorrow I’m going to start two things. I saw a drawing that I made several years ago. When I looked at it . . . . I very rarely do drawings, but this time I saw a drawing, I said, “Oh, that would make a fun ceramic.” So tomorrow, I’m going to try to translate that drawing into ceramics. I forget the title just this minute, but it’s the idea that amuses me.

PK: The idea of the form?

BW: The idea of the form. Yes. And the idea in back of it. Now, I feel. . . . You see, this is kind of. . . . I’m not sure that I should say this. . . .

PK: Yeah, you should.

BW: . . . and my friend Mr. Singh is not going to like it if I say it.

PK: Don’t think about it.

BW: But. . . .

RPS: Say it.

PK: [chuckles]

BW: Actually. . . . [pauses] So much begins on the mattress. That’s why I believe in love. When I was in Japan, I had an exhibition there, and I was amazed how friendly the Japanese were with me. And I said to our attorney [for the armed forces—BW], “It’s extraordinary how friendly the. . . . Here I am an old enemy.” And he looked at me, our attorney for the armed forces, and he said, “Why shouldn’t they be? Thirty thousand of our men have married Japanese women and endless thousands slept with them.” [said in a stern voice—Trans.] All right, this is a fact of nature which we ignore. So I like to say, if we send fifty thousand to the Arab countries maybe something would change, because.

Tape 2, side B

PK: Here we go. It’s now tape two, side B, final one today. An interview with Beatrice Wood, who was I think finishing a point or. . . .

BW: I’d like to say one other thing if there’s time.

PK: Oh, yeah. There's plenty of time. Please.

BW: For me, that's a secret of living. It may be a secret because we don't face it enough. And that is: Violence never ends with violence. I've been in three critical situations where by being non-violent I probably saved my life. I can't prove it, but I say probably. From. . . . I just see life. . . . And take even war, each war has seeds of a greater war. War seems never really to have brought peace. It just brought more and more war. But then I admit that I'm anti-war, so what I say may not be logical.

PK: It's obvious, and I know you well enough, and certainly others know this too, that this is an important issue for you—as it should be and I think is for all of us, you know, the consequences of war and of violence. And, you've spoken to this issue, I think, many times, disarmament. . . .

BW: Oh, really? Good.

PK: Oh, yes. So this is not an unknown part of Beatrice Wood.

BW: [laughs] This is my propaganda. . . .

PK: This is not to undervalue or underestimate its importance to you, but it is very much, I think, a part of the record. And in the half hour left to us I think we might try to do just a couple things that perhaps haven't been covered in quite the same way—remembering that this is an important day. This is the eve of your ninety-ninth birthday, and as an historian I like to mark these kinds of things.

BW: Yeah.

PK: And so I have two final questions from the list that I've prepared here which are, I think, very important. And they're not easy ones, but I'll try to put them as easily as I can. And both of them. . . . They're related. . . . And made possible because of the fact that your life has spanned the twentieth century.

BW: Yes, absolutely.

PK: This is a big deal.

BW: Yes. Yes.

PK: And not very many people can say that. You are. . . .

BW: I'm the oldest now of all my friends.

PK: Well, you're also a witness and an observer of historic events. . . .

BW: That is true in the art world. Yes.

PK: . . . and changes that have molded the modern era.

BW: Yes.

PK: And so you're a modern. . . . You're a nineteenth century woman.

BW: And I saw the craft world bloom, not only in New York, but in California.

PK: Yeah.

BW: I actually saw it bloom into birth and become a wonderful activity.

PK: Well, let me ask you these two questions, and they're not easy. But having had this opportunity by accident or by birth at a certain time and longevity to really watch the twentieth century proceed almost to it's conclusion now and a time of tumultuous change and major events, wars, and everything else.

BW: Um hmm.

PK: Obviously we are not going to do a history talk right here, but how would you characterize the changes that have occurred in the progress of the twentieth century. I don't mean to sound, oh, highfalutin on this question at all, but you must have come to certain conclusions about. . . . Well, for instance, are you optimistic about the future of America? Or not so much? And why? And what are your feelings about the course of events during this century?

BW: Thank God, there are now coming some television programs and some articles making us aware that we're

slipping educationally. Right education is the basis of everything. That's why if a woman is with her infant, loving him and guiding him properly, he has more chances of being a normal human being than if he hasn't. Umm. . . . [pauses] Where. . . . I lost what I want to say about. . . . Just ask me that question again.

PK: Well, I guess. . . .

BW: Because I want to say something. It slipped.

PK: The basic question is this: What, how would you characterize the changes in. . . .

BW: Oh, yes.

PK: . . . the twentieth century from then to now.

BW: Oh, yes. I've seen these tremendous changes that women have come—let's say, economically—into their own trying to prove they're equal with men. Of course, they're equal, but it's been. . . . They've come. . . . Hundred years ago, woman was absolutely a secondary character. And then of course this great, extraordinary outpouring of amazing technical knowledge. Um hmm. And we've been so busy doing this technology, putting it mostly on destruction, that we've gone too far, because if we're not careful, we're going to destroy ourselves. This is absolutely a fact. Many of the so-called smaller countries, if they don't have the nuclear bomb, they're working at, and they'll get it. And I feel absolutely as far as one can be certain, if one of these bombs gets exploded, others will follow. And then everybody will be in heaven with me. I'm not going elsewhere.

RPS: So how do you see the future of America?

BW: Hmm?

RPS: How do you see the future of America?

BW: Oh, about America. I am really worried at present, because we're letting, as we were saying, education slip. The middle classes are being ignored with their needs. We're allowing poverty on streets. We used to laugh at Calcutta because people slept on the streets. Now this wonderful, beloved country of ours, people are sleeping on the streets everywhere. It's terrible. It's inexcusable. And, you see, if you are without hope, you are a destructive bit of energy, and Lord knows what's going to come when we have millions of people now without jobs, without hope. And I think this is very serious. And I quote so often Ted Koppel, a month ago on television was interviewing a young man in prison—very nice, clean-cut looking, young black man, and he admitted he'd been born in destitution, in filth, in drugs, in prostitution, in drunkenness. He said, "Why shouldn't I steal? What would you do if you were born like that?" And then at the end, he said, "Why didn't you educate me?" And that's, as far as I'm concerned, the whole answer. Education.

PK: Were things better. . . . Excuse me I didn't mean to interrupt you but were. . . .

BW: No, I'm finished.

PK: . . . do you feel that American society was on the whole, better off in nineteen hundred, let's say, when you were a little girl, than it is now?

BW: I don't know. Human nature I don't think necessarily changes. There's one very hopeful thing, I think, going on in the world—that heads of government had realization of the danger of self-destruction and are trying to get together to stop the nuclear bombs. And I also think in the duality everywhere with television—though I think they've gone too far with violence and sex—are also beginning to get some very good programs. And there's this other side of America which is holding up towards I call—I don't like to say this [but _____, sort of word]—towards the light. To me, let's say the light is right education, and murder is the darkness. Where abortion is concerned, I have no idea whether it's right or wrong. I only know this. I speak for myself. I've never had one nor wanted, needed one, but when I was young unknowing of the world, knowing how my parents would react if I'd been pregnant, with my bad luck with gentlemen, I would have gone and had an abortion. Even if I knew there was danger of dying I would have had it, because one's desperate. And we don't take that into factor. And we say we save lives by not having abortion, but we don't see that we even make more deaths because the mother is apt to get infected if she goes to a bad place for an [abortion—PJK] and she loses her baby in addition. And the reality is that a desperate person is going to act regardless. And if you were starving, you would steal. And you. . . . All I can say, I know that I am capable of anything if I were in certain circumstances, except perhaps I would never take another life. I don't know. We don't know. If one of us can do it in the human race, probably any of us can do it. But I'm so much against taking life, I doubt.

PK: Beatrice, again, you've been able to see shifts and swings in our society, and I think. . . .

BW: That's because I'm so much more interested in thought than in pottery.

PK: Moving it again closer, away from the cosmic or world view of nations. . . .

BW: Yes.

PK: . . . and the whole century which is pretty difficult to grapple with. But moving closer to arts, literature, and creative expression, you certainly have been aware of and had the opportunity to observe swings or shifts in, within this country, in terms of what is allowed, what is acceptable. The whole issue of censorship. I know that you are steadfastly against prudery and hypocrisy on issues of sex and so forth. But then, in this country, in the arts, this seems to remain kind of a battleground. Right now, in the last several years, it's a major conflict—where art in fact is being politicized at this very moment. That's not the issue of our interview, but I would be interested to know what your thoughts are on that. Again, you're thinking back to practically the Victorian era. And now we seem to be in a somewhat conservative, perhaps repressive time in terms of that.

BW: Well, of course, I'm against censorship because it just excites curiosity. Look. . . . Is it Mable Thorpe, what's the name?

PK: Robert Mapplethorpe.

BW: Here the director [Dennis Barrie—PJK] of the museum [Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center—PJK] was so highly criticized. All right, and what happened? Thousands of virtuous, conservative Americans flew to the exhibition to see it. Isn't that the answer?

PK: Well, that's one of 'em.

BW: Well, that is the answer. And. . . .

PK: Does this alarm you though, now, to see this again?

BW: Oh, I think these things have always existed, but with right education and. . . . [chuckles] Artists are more used to nudity. I think it'd be far better to have nude beaches than beaches with, than beaches with little bikinis and things like that that awake prurient interest. While if a person's naked, they're naked, and there's no curiosity. There's no problem. The moment you say no, you create a problem. The moment you say don't.

PK: It seems hard for our society, at least this society, to learn that lesson. Judging from recent developments, for instance Frohnmeyer, the head of the NEA. . . .

BW: Yes.

PK: . . . National Endowment for the Arts resigned—or actually was fired—recently.

BW: Um hmm.

PK: And this is not a political discussion here, of course, but it does show that there are political pressures that are moving, or have moved, into the art world to determine what is okay and what is not okay. And I guess my question, again, is, looking back to the earlier years, the Dada time, your own experience with publishing Blind Man and so forth.

BW: Um hmm, um hmm.

PK: And you were involved with artists who were pushing the limits, trying to do things that were provocative and shocking. How would you trace this development and, you know, the activity and then the response or degree of response, over the decades up to now? Do you see a pattern there, or what?

BW: Well, you know, I don't know if I answer what you wish, but it seems to me in a way Marcel Duchamp had a tremendous influence because he was trying to free art from the racket and to. . . . I don't know what to say.

PK: From the racket?

BW: From the racket of art. Art's a great racket.

PK: Okay, well, tell me about that a little bit.

BW: Many people buy just on account of names and so forth. It is a racket.
But look at the hypocrisy of our society and I, who do not believe in violence, become violent every time I think of it. Here we're trying to stop a man like [Bill] Clinton [presidential candidate—Ed.], who may have had an affair out of marriage. Surveys show eighty percent of men, if not more, have affairs outside of marriage. Eighty percent. Plus we have television exciting people sexually. Then we're teaching condoms to children in school,

and then we try to ruin a man because he may have had an affair. It is absolutely insane and hypocritical.

PK: It is. That's the word. It is hypocritical.

BW: And I'm. . . . What I mind is the hypocrisy. Now I may talk, you may think, very liberal but I'm not. I think the more restrained one can be emotionally. . . . I wouldn't like a daughter of mine to go and have a lot of affairs.

PK: Well, _____ _____ though.

BW: If she had two or three, it might be natural. But just. . . . I don't like sex, for play, and appetite and all that kind of thing. I'm very puritanical.

PK: But what about. . . . What about as entertainment, though?

BW: No, I don't think sex should be used for entertainment.

PK: Eroticism as entertainment. . . .

BW: Oh. . . .

PK: Well, I mean there are kinds of entertainment.

BW: Well, there are all kinds of, yes, that's. . . .

PK: . . . and art is [hardly, certainly] entertainment.

BW: Yes, that's true, but when these present. . . . I take. . . . In a way, I enjoy seeing some of these prurient televisions when they show a woman's limb. As an artist, I enjoy it. I love limbs. But I'm not a man, and if we have a lot of raping, the people who do this kind of television should think.

PK: Do you think there's a connection?

BW: Oh, of course I do. Plus the fact of how they've been raised. Like this poor black man raised in filth. You see, practically all of us have had connections. We have friends. But a lot of people have no social connections. I don't know.

PK: Let's turn again to the art world. You said something that I think is important, and it's the idea of art as a racket. You used the term.

BW: It certainly is.

PK: And I think we understand what you mean, and it's interesting to me that you're thinking back to the beginning of the century. . . .

BW: Yes.

PK: . . . and said that there was very much that aspect of it then. . . .

BW: Um hmm.

PK: . . . although there certainly wasn't the same kind of art market that exists now, what about that?

BW: The group of people that I knew in what is called now the Ahrensberg circle, Walter Pach, Marcel Duchamp, Picabia, Gabriele Gleize, Stella, Sheeler, so many other. . . . Mina Loy. They just quickly don't come to mind. They were all interested in what is art? What is this racket? The jury is such a vicious thing. A jury can inhibit a real artist and give glory to a person who's not an artist. All right. So they started the Independence after the Armory Show. The Armory Show was in 1913. The Independence was that anybody who sent six dollars, that the artist could choose what he thought was his own art. Evidently it didn't work. But that was the idea of trying to break through this racket. And I remember walking with Marcel through these acres of paintings, and I wasn't interested in them. I was only interested in Duchamp with whom I was in love. Thank God in that period I was in love really with two men at one time, but only sleeping with one at a time.

PK: Well, you were a very conventional woman.

BW: It didn't have much meaning for me. Hmm?

PK: A very conventional person you are.

BW: [chuckles] Yes! Only sleeping with one at a time because I was a very conventional person. And to show you how conventional I am, Jack and Frances Case had acreage in Del Mar [California—PJK] before it was built up, and every weekend in good weather they'd go out, live in tents, eat out of a, out on the open air and invite their advertising friends and their writers and their artists, about twenty, to join them. And I went down several times. And it was fun to live in the open, just it was simple. And everybody would go into the ocean naked.

PK: Um hmm.

BW: Everybody. Never. . . .

PK: I hope it was summer.

BW: . . . anybody thought of it—except one person.

PK: Who was that?

BW: That one person was conservative, hot mama, Beatrice Wood. This is the ridiculousness of life.

RPS: [laughs]

PK: That's the duality. On the one hand this, on the other hand. . . . . .

BW: This is the duality. I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it, you know. And yet I believe in it. But I believe in it. I think it's the right thing. And let me assure you there was nothing erotic or raping or anything like that going on. We [they—PJK] all, men and women, went in naked, great.

PK: Well, that was just like the German Expressionists, you know. They did the same thing. They would go off in Germany to the islands somewhere in the North Sea or someplace and run around naked.

BW: Um hmm, um hmm. What I mind so much, and I think many, I think possibly artists do, is the hypocrisy of society.

PK: Well, do you believe then. . . . Let's bring it back again to you and your art. Is this something that you're hoping to achieve through your art itself, and these looking. . . . [inaudible]

BW: Oh, no. I don't want to influence people. It's fun for me to make the figures. Let people react the way they wish. I'm not concerned.

PK: But don't you think that it makes people think about certain things in certain ways. I mean, surely art is. . . .

BW: Well, that's not the way, that's not the reason I do it. Maybe it makes them think. But I do it for my own pleasure, a great luxury.

PK: Um hmm.

BW: Um hmm. I need money, but I don't make pottery to make money. I make pottery to have a good time.

PK: So in a sense your art is not a means of communication or contact with other people?

BW: I never think of it that way, no. When I meet a person, I think of a contact, and I'm very interested in meeting people and how they think. And I also feel that we all are tied together and influence each other.

RPS: So in a way her art is purposeless.

PK: Well, no not necessarily so, Mr. Singh. Please stay in the background, here. [said teasingly—Trans.]

BW: What did he say?

PK: I'll tell you later. Well, actually it's an interesting point. He says that in a sense your art is without purpose. It's purposeless. Or maybe. . . .

BW: He's right.

PK: Or maybe selfish.

BW: It is. Maybe it is. It's a self-indulgence. Why, feeling the way I do about humanity, am I not under a bridge trying to feed a starving person instead of working at the wheel? That's a question isn't it?

PK: Um hmm. I guess so.

BW: All right.

PK: I guess that's one we have to all ask ourselves.

BW: I come around it this way. It is impossible for me to cure the evil outside. All I can do is to function as harmoniously as possible with the circle that surrounds me. And when people come here, I'm very happy if people are interested and we get into what I call a good discussion. And I'm very pleased because most of the people who come here are not Republicans. [laughter]

RPS: That is a _____ _____ statement you've _____. . . .

PK: Oh, yeah, we have to be careful since this is a. . . .

BW: The FBI. . . .

PK: . . . Smithsonian interview, remember. We have a Republican administration.

BW: Oh, I had a wonderful time with the FBI once. This was years ago. I had long golden hair, eleven o'clock in the morning. Knock on the door, and there were two nondescript-looking men saying they came from the FBI with badges. Now I knew that they were non-descriptive-looking so that people could forget them. And they came in, and I knew that they went indirectly to try to get information. So they began asking me all kinds of questions. And this went on for about twenty minutes. I was having a wonderful time. They even asked about my mother, and I said, "Look, she's been dead years and I can assure you she was never an agent or a spy." All right. And then they asked me about who was helping me clean house, and then they said, "Do you know. . . ," very indirectly, "Do you know anybody by the name of Dali?" And I said, "Yes, indeed I do. Dali is in this house. I will let you meet Dali, since you want to." And I called out, "Dali, come here now!" and in walked my little dachshund. And that was Dali. And then I felt I put it over on them, but not quite. Because three weeks later I found out that this very nice Mexican boy, nineteen, was using my house as a go-between for letters, and he would. . . . Dali was the password through which messages came.

PK: Was he a Communist? Was it, was this something to do with Communist spying?

BW: I don't know. I never knew. I was very sorry, very nice young boy but he had a large correspondence. I never gave it a thought. He was cleaning the house for me. But it was just wonderful to have a little dachshund come out and introduce him to these men as Dali. [laughing]

[Tape 3, side A]

PK: You know, you have lived through most of modern American art history—or for that matter international art history, and you've been a player; you've been involved in one capacity or another from a seminal point in New York when all of a sudden things really started to happen. And you obviously are, you know, have developed some ideas about the different movements and so forth in American or twentieth-century art, not that you waste your time studying it too much. But you're aware of the different groups and directions and probably know something about contemporary art as well.

BW: Yes.

PK: The question is this: How would you place yourself as an artist?

BW: I can't help you. I've never given a thought and I don't care a darn.

RPS: [laughs]

BW: But I will say this. In the craft world, it's been wonderful how it's grown due to universities that have cera[mics]. . . . We're doing wonderful things in the craft world. And one potter, Toshika [Tockesa?—BW]—I can never say her name—she helped me so much on the wheel. Just changed my life. I've been very lucky, because I've had three great potters help me at different times. And very interesting. Tony Prieto, who died several years ago, he was head of Mills College. He went over to Spain with his wife and I was to join him, and I wasn't strong enough and I gave it up. When he returned, he said, "Europe teaches nothing." He said, "America is wonderful." This was years ago. "America is wide open changing and exchanging ideas."

PK: Well, you've already described yourself to a degree. You've placed yourself on several occasions in this interview within the crafts movement, as a ceramist.

BW: Um hmm.

PK: And that is a categorization, you see.

BW: But when I'm dead, I'm not going to care. I don't know, and I'm not working to get that. I'm not interested in that.

PK: I understand that, but a tape like this is. . . . You're right to say that. But what is happening through this very process is our effort, because we're interested in you and you belong in a sense, now, to American history, American art.

BW: All right.

PK: Like it or not, there it is.

BW: I'll tell you what I want on my tombstone. Three sentences. The first is "now," because I think it's in the present as we're focused that things happen. The second is "shit," because nothing really matters with time whether I'm known or not. Nothing matters with time. And the third thing is, "I do not know," because none of us really know anything. This is my tombstone. This how I wish to be remembered.

PK: Good. Well if it isn't down in your will or your instructions, they can refer to the tape because here it is again.

BW: [laughs] I don't dare put it in my will because my trust officer would be horrified. [laughs]

PK: Winding down here—or winding up, whichever way you want to put it, there was one topic we touched on that I don't think we carried quite as far as it could go, or at least I don't remember the answer, and that had to do with the course or progress of American art. I don't know how much attention you pay to recent art—you know, the exhibitions in the galleries and in the museums. But to the extent that you do look at magazines, what's your impression? You were involved in the early days and what's your impression now?

BW: I haven't been too interested in the painting world, but I have been very much so in the craft world. And I think it's wonderful what materialistic Americans have developed. We've done very fine things in craft. We have a handful of great potters. We're doing things in weaving and glass, even in paper. I would say that the American public is very creative and that the museums have done a wonderful job. Now, in the forties, the Arensbergs were still alive. There was great discussion—a lot of it from their house—going on. The museum people were beginning to wake up and coming alive.

PK: Meaning to crafts, to an awareness of crafts.

BW: And the crafts world began. . . . If you have time I'll tell you how I think it began, the craft world. Evelyn Bidell, the director of Raymond and Raymond's, wanted a little group of potters, and Frances Case, the manager of a defunct Town and Country market opposite the Farmers Market, wanted to attract people, so she approached me and said, "We would like craftsmen to [getting, giving] art in action to attract people. Have them work on their wheels, hammer when they're doing their shoes and so forth."

PK: Shoes?

BW: Help me gather some craftspeople.

PK: Shoes?

BW: Well, homemade, handmade shoes. Glass, weaving, several different kinds of craftsmen. And Eleanor Rex, a girl of great imagination but not accurate, interested some well-known people—the Arensbergs, Ruth Maitland, the director, Robert Gross, the head of one of the aeroplane things, I forget which one, Dorothy Liebers and so forth, Sumner Spaulding, an architect—in being on the board. Telling them it was the beginning of a Modern Museum, and that no money would be needed. All right. Dorothy Liebers phoned me. She was great movement in the weaving world. You know of her, Dorothy Liebers? Shows what fame is. Famous in the nineteen . . . early forties. She did so much for weaving, for changing the approach to weaving.

PK: And was she. . . . Where was she working?

BW: Hmm?

PK: Where was she working?

BW: She put on the World's Fair. When was that? In 1930?

PK: Where was she based?

BW: She was married to Liebers in San Francisco. . . .

PK: I see.

BW: . . . but I think she worked in Washington. I really don't know. But anyway, she phoned and said be careful. Elena Rex is great, but she's not always accurate. And I knew that if these people were told there would be no money involved that they'd possibly be happy to be directors. And we craftsmen were anxiously waiting for it to open, but we needed five hundred dollars for shelves, and we were assured that as soon as the board opened, we'd have five hundred dollars. Well, of course, the board met, and they never said a word about needing money. So I went to Ruth Maitland who was a good friend of mine. I was not on the board. And I said, "Ruth, you must know. They didn't tell you, but we can't open without money." So they withdrew—Ruth Maitland, Walter Arensberg—because they saw also it was not a beginning of a modern museum.
But the Town and Country market, now defunct, had a wonderful group, about fifty good craftsmen of that day, and a wonderful opening in the market.

PK: Where was the. . . .

BW: Crowds coming.

PK: Where was this, the market?

BW: Opposite Third and Fairfax. . . . What is it? What is the market on. Opposite the Farmer's Market on the corner. All right. They wanted it as a competitor you see. Crowds came, making money, but no management, and the board disgusted because it was not. . . . They wanted money from it, and they thought it, they saw it was not immediately for a modern museum, so it fell apart. Then Hatfield, who had a gallery at the Ambassador Hotel, took on the Natzlers and some others and began interesting [things—Ed.]. And from that very quickly developed an art, very strong art movement in California. It was around '43.

PK: Was it. . . . Was that, do you think, the first in the country? Was there something similar in the east, or was this really. . . .

BW: That I don't know. This was just. . . . I saw it actually begin to happen here in California. Lukens. . . .

PK: Yeah, Glenn.

BW: . . . had a first class at USC. But Lukens was interested more in mass production and what clay could do. He was a great potter, in his way.

PK: Um hmm.

BW: The Natzlers had this very important thing of lifting it to museum levels and we're grateful to them for that.

PK: Well, that's of course where ceramics and the crafts movement are what we call high art, and _____ _____. . . .

BW: Yeah. And I'm interested in the museum type of thing.

PK: Well, that's what I say. . . .

BW: The individual potter. . . .

PK: See, so whether you protest this or not, you are an artist. Your ambitions and aspirations are to what we, is generally seen as a higher-level. . . .

BW: Oh yes, I'm delighted if I can get a museum show. I'm not delighted if I have to fulfill a wholesale order. Turn it down. Not. . . . I don't want a mass produce order. Um hmm.

PK: Let me ask you, and I promise this is it, the final question, and it moves a bit aside from what we've been talking about—although it very much follows from our theme of the day, which again is the day before your ninety-ninth birthday. You know, most of us who have arrived at fifty, at half-century, find ourselves reflecting upon the past, trying to come into touch with our past, [to] perhaps understand ourselves better in these terms. But one of the things that's unavoidable is that we find there's this big surprise, that there's this youthful spirit or mind inside a body that is no longer so youthful. And it's. . . . You know, whether one is fifty or almost a hundred, I think that there, this is the same process that's, that's going on. It's something that concerns us more and more and it seems, in a way, like a mean trick of nature. . . .

BW: It is a trick of nature.

PK: Well, I wanted to ask you, how, from your perspective, you feel about this. What the rest of us, if we're lucky, will have to look forward to.

BW: I'm just not the least bit concerned with being ninety-nine. I don't like old people. I don't think about it. Yes, you can say I'm ninety-nine. I'm not ninety-nine to me. I don't know what age I am to me. This bundle of energy that I am. . . . Interested in being honest, interested in bringing beauty into the world, interested in helping suffering in the world. That is the bundle of what I am. And when I think of myself, I think of that. I don't think I'm ninety-nine. Now, the only time I will face that I'm in my hundredth year, I'm getting an award in New York in May. I may not be physically able to go. I have a ninety-nine year old spine, and he and I are warring. I am now taking traction every day and getting better. Everybody is surprised that a ninety-nine-year-old heart can improve, but I am. And if this keeps up, I will go to New York. But maybe I won't. It'll depend. I may not be able to go. Because under stress I collapse, and I have to face that what you think of me is really a fact. Otherwise I won't face it.

PK: Well, how do you know what I think of you?

BW: Well, I know what you might think. [chuckles]

PK: I mean, I know you're older than I am.

BW: [laughing]

PK: But I also know that I suspect that in your mind you probably think about the same. That's true.

BW: [still laughing]

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *August 31, 2004*