Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with George Herms, 1993 Dec. 8-1994 Mar 10

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with George Herms on December 8, 10, & 13, 1993 and March 10, 1994. The interview took place in Los Angeles, CA, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

Interview with George Herms
Conducted by Paul Karlstrom
At the Artist's studio in Downtown Los Angeles, California
December 8, 1993

Session 1, tape 1, side A [30-minute tape sides]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Taped interview with artist George Herms in his downtown Los Angeles studio. The date is December 8, 1993. This is the first session, and the interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. George, before we launch into this multi-session interview--I hope--you have some things that you wanted to put into the record.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. This would just be addended to the consent and gift form, which I have signed, and it dedicates to the public all copyright interest in the interview. And on the verso I have indicated a restriction for publication: "The researcher must receive written permission from the interviewee before publication, quotation, or reproduction of all or part of the interview with a termination date 10 years hence." [Publication restriction lifted in 2006.] My reason for this is that I would like to arrive at a formula, which we could call the Herms formula, which would be based on the year you are born, which is. . . . Paul, the year you were born.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Oh, mine? 1941.

GEORGE HERMS: All right, you're 1941. I'm 1935. Your monthly salary, which is....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Sixty [thousand], or something like that.

GEORGE HERMS: Sixty for the year and then divide it monthly.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yeah, right, I wish it were sixty [a month].

GEORGE HERMS: Right, okay, so 12 into 60. Let's say $5,000 a month. Okay, and the interview will take.... Let's say today is one-twentieth of the month, twenty working days in the month, so my time, then, being equal to the interviewer's would figure out to a fee of one-twentieth of the monthly salary. This is a point that I would like to raise, because under the restrictions it says that in any event the restrictions will automatically terminate at the death of the interviewee, which brings me to my children and my grandchildren and the question of the estate and what belongs to them and how are they remunerated for gifts such as this-this is a consent and gift form that I've just signed. So I'm signing away a little bit of what I feel belongs to them. I'm happy to do this, but as I say, I would like this addendum stated that somehow the artist's time is worth something and that this information.... If a commercial publisher was involved there would be advances, etc., and contracts, so we are working on something that I call education.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Um hmm.

GEORGE HERMS: In other words, there are activities that I get involved in that are educational, and most of the people that will be coming for this information would be research scholars. Okay, so I'm dedicated to that, but at the same time I raise this point of the estate, the heirs, the fee for my time, and I think that just about covers the points that I would like to raise. I think this is a very worthwhile program, especially in conjunction with the American Archives' keeping of papers, which in my case has been an extreme struggle, and due to recent floods

and damages I'm very concerned.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You had yours stored in the other storage space.

GEORGE HERMS: In the archival material that has been lost this past summer and in the continuing battle to keep together a body of what I consider to be raw material for my collages, which after I'm gone then once again become available to the American Archives. I mean, that's more or less our understanding.

I don't think we need to spend any more time on it, but those are the kinds of points that I feel needed to be expressed at the time of signing a consent and gift form. Okay?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Right, the "consent" and "gift" are underlined and I think rightly so. My comment on this is that I've always been aware of the fact that the artist is contributing time and knowledge and information, and that certainly where there's a possible commercial interest in publication the artists should be compensated for this. And that, of course, is the phase or stage we're at. So that's duly noted.

GEORGE HERMS: The very place that we're sitting costs $500 a month, and where does that come from?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Why don't you describe....

GEORGE HERMS: Where we are sitting?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: We're in a setting and I think it's unusual, and I think worth mentioning, joining your studio.

GEORGE HERMS: All right. This is an industrial building in downtown Los Angeles that has been kind of chopped up and sublet to various artists. A silkscreen t-shirt manufacturer next door. My studio is a storefront on one side of the building.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: On Olympic Boulevard.

GEORGE HERMS: On Olympic Boulevard. There's actually two buildings that have been joined together, and the large space that we are in-large to me, a couple thousand square feet, whatever it is, eighteen hundred-is totally filled with the storage. And then there's an 880-square-foot studio, which is on the other side of one wall, which I will probably have to fold into this space simply for economic reasons. I will be unable to maintain storage and studio at the present level that I'm operating. All of this is not necessarily a problem of the American Archives per se, but....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, it's the reality of your situation.

GEORGE HERMS: It's the reality of where we are sitting, yeah, at this time.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And also you're the subject.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, and if I'm not sitting with you I am endeavoring to cover those various rents-so we're back to that again.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: We'll revisit this whole issue of your different working environments and circumstances, but you've been at this location for how long now?

GEORGE HERMS: I've been in the studio since June of '92, and at that time I put all storage ten blocks away in a basement, which flooded in the summer of '93, and so as of September of '93, three months ago, we moved everything into this storage, which is high and dry, knock on wood, so far.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Sure. I think it's very important, as a matter of fact, to mention that you carry with you.... That your life's work is not easily portable. And it's not just your work. There are all kinds of things. I mean, it's almost impossible to describe, but these are the elements that represent the potential for future work. Is that a fair understanding?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, there's a certain amount of raw materials in here, in that all the archival boxes that go back over thirty years are in this room, except for, say, the last year and a half would be in the studio. There's all the Love Press publications, and the material pertaining to them is here in the storage. And the sculptures, maquettes for public art projects... . Basically, it's thirty years of work is what we're in the middle of, and as it becomes pertinent we'll address what those various bodies of work are.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: One more question on that. Last time I visited you, we went over to the old storage space, and I think that it had been flooding prior to that.

GEORGE HERMS: Um hmm.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Although it's an unpleasant subject I think it's important to record what you may have finally lost and specifically what kinds of things.

GEORGE HERMS: I took basically the.... There's two kinds of lists. One were works damaged beyond repair. There was water damage. There was also the plaster damage where the stripping that held the drywall in the ceiling-when the ceiling buckled from water, many things got splattered with plaster. Where there's a sculpture that has a patina of rust, and then you get the plaster on it, it completely changes it and that's not irreparable, but it does require a kind of setup that I don't have at this time to take things out of doors and hose them down and allow Mother Nature to repatinize. ...

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Let me ask you.... Sorry, I don't mean to interrupt, but....

GEORGE HERMS: That's all right, go ahead.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...how do you feel about accidents? I mean, in fact, unhappy as this event was-obviously one doesn't want that sort of thing to happen, but nonetheless it did in the course of natural events and then brings accidental occasion to change the work of art-how do you feel about that?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, it's devastating to me, because I am working with a process where things have their origin and then they begin to decay and are totally lost, and I cross paths with them somewhere in that arc and I want to freeze frame. Where I saw it that day it's fucking great. I want to keep it that way. And this is the problem. I worked with Carol [Mancusing-Garro] at the Menil Collection and did a lengthy videotape of just one sculpture of mine from 1961, Greet the Circus With a Smile, and for several hours we went over every square inch of that on video, and so she has a total understanding of my feelings. And there were some accidents that had happened to that over the years, and it's difficult, but conservators do understand that place in the arc of decay that I come across the object is very important to me-the coloration, the actual texture of the rust, etc.-these things are the way I want. It's egalitarianism. I want my grandchildren and their grandchildren to see these things, to get the same ride that you and I are getting today-or someone a thousand miles away as people here in Los Angeles. It's a responsibility that not all artists take on, but I do. And the conservators are in my corner with that.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I think it's very important to understand that there are those artists who incorporate accident over time as part of the piece, as part of that esthetic. But you are clearly not one them.

GEORGE HERMS: Right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: There is that moment when it's right or when it's....

GEORGE HERMS: It's called the joy of discovery. It's the joy of discovery. And these are inanimate objects, so only through neglect, see.... And one of the things that's a little upsetting is that when museums or organizations that are in charge of conserving artworks take care of them, we live happily ever after, but if these things are allowed to just be fumbled and bumbled. ...And since my life has been a long series of eviction notices, they end up in places where they are threatened-by plumbing pipes breaking-and so therefore I feel I've been remiss in my responsibilities, and anyone who's involved with the arts needs to kind of step forward, I think, and address these issues, that not all artists are able to properly care for their work continuously over a period of 30, 35, going on 40 years.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Tell me again for the record, what do you call that? That wonderful moment of encounter where you want to freeze....

GEORGE HERMS: The joy of discovery. I don't go out looking for objects much anymore, because people come to me. The dialogue sort of goes like this: They're driving along. They see this pile of shit. "And I thought about you." [laughs] And they stop and they put it in the trunk of their car and then they bring it to me, and they throw open the trunk of the car, and I have to kind of bow and say, "Ah, thank you very much, thank you very much." But they've missed the point, that it's that joy of discovery that's so important to a worker with found objects. And so what I do is then I try to take this gift, stash it somewhere in my storage or my studio, and let months go by, years go by, and then one day I'm plowing through things and I get the joy of discovery.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Do you see this process.... Is there any analogy to archeology for you? Is that a wrong word to use?

GEORGE HERMS: No, I don't think so, I don't think so. Nick Wilder called it gardening. I mean, he saw these things, that I put them out and let the sun and the rain and the wind work on them, and then at a certain time they were ripe and I plucked them. I go to the high desert usually once a year for a week, and I use it as a

rotisserie. There are rusty cans there that are beautiful on one side, and they still say Coors beer on the other side, so I turn them over, and then that side will get rained on and eventually you'll have this beautiful, totally rusted cylinder that will have a gorgeous glowing, anywhere from yellow to purple. And that's my palette that I work with.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, this sounds to me like we've moved right into it, because this is, I gather an abbreviated statement of George Herms' esthetic.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. Well, these are....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Very clear.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. And these are the.... You know, they're based on moments, which we will biographically try and work our way back to, where these moments come from. And my feeling is that it's in everyone's DNA. They have their own sense of color, composition, line. Each individual is born with them-you know, rhythms. We all sort of have our own song, and as children we do that. And then later in life we have to go out and get a job and put those childlike activities behind us, but an artist keeps them alive.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I wanted to make a brief introductory statement.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, I think this would be a good time, yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And I realize that.... I want you to bear with me on this, because this is intended to provide a possible context, and if I, even in this brief statement, get it not entirely right, that's what we will correct through this process.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, fine. Okay.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I think of you as the youngest member of a group of Beat Era counterculture artists who emerged in the 1950s' art/poetry scene, as it's called, an underground phenomenon that, among others, you, Wallace Berman, Jess [Collins], Robert Alexander, Bruce Conner, Jay de Feo, Michael McClure-of course the list goes on; that's just part of the cast of characters-really helped to create or certainly contributed to in a new way. At the time-and this would be the late fifties into the sixties-your work and, I mean, the work of that group in general, was characterized by its non- or anti-art quality, or that's how it was perceived. And it seemed to many so individualistic and removed from mainstream Modernism as to constitute, in terms of art history, perhaps just another region like eccentricity. It seemed maybe interesting but peripheral. Well, that's not true anymore.

GEORGE HERMS: Um hmm.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And now the California assemblage and collage movement has come to be regarded as one of the most significant developments in West Coast modern art. I think that's fair to say. Very much an important ingredient in the changes in American art over the past decades, that which seemed so ephemeral, so hermetic-no pun intended-is now seen in an entirely different way. So the purpose of this interview is really twofold: number one, to trace the events of your own life and the development of your ideas in art. That's obvious. And then secondly, to give you an opportunity to recall the individuals, community, and historical circumstances that gave rise to this particular California avant-garde activity. In other words, what role did George Herms play? You'll have your own ideas of what also is going to come in to the interview, but this is sort of a baseline of where I want to start.

But before getting into that, I think we need to know more about you as a person: your background, biographical information, family, education, and all of that. And sort of kicking off, I guess I can say that according to records you were born in 1935 in Woodland, California, which is up the Central Valley, near Sacramento. Say, Sacramento Valley, isn't it?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, eighteen miles north of Sacramento. Before we go on just let me.... Two quick points, if I may. One of them where you say youngest, I would substitute one of the youngest.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: One of the youngest.

GEORGE HERMS: Simply because I'm not sure about that. But certainly one of the youngest is quite true. And the second point would be, in the gallery guides-these things that go around called The Art Scene-a year ago, when my second Barnsdall retrospective was at Barnsdall, someone wrote about basically this same group of people you're referring to-the Beat Generation was another appellation that was given them-that they-that we-were "conserv-a-tive." That we were in charge of conserving an older set of values that were not engaged in consumerism and the materialism of post-World War II capitalism, I guess is what he was getting at. And that because we were interested in things like art and poetry, this was a set of values that was more traditional and

further back than the planned obsolescence that was prevalent in the fifties. You didn't use the word nihilist, but, I mean, that was kind of-you used "hermetic"-and, yeah, that we weren't serving the general population. We were not functioning in a....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, I was saying "the scene."

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, that's the perception. Yeah, that's what I'm saying. And now thirty years later the perception, as you point out, is changing. And as someone who's in the middle of it, one is kind of unaware of the perceptions. I'm the same person. Every decade as I walk down the street there's a new set of catcalls, you know, from the across the street, and they change, but I'm still the same person. So it's interesting that all of a sudden this turtlenecked, pot-smoking, bongo-playing [people] turn out to really be closer to Whitman and to some of the traditions that you know are truly valued by any civilization.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But you, I would expect, yourself became more aware of those connections through time.

GEORGE HERMS: Through meeting people like Robert [Alexander] and Jess [Collins]. [laughs] I mean, this is where you saw.... And in my case, when you find out that there are such things as poetry and beauty and jazz and that life does have a great and glorious, hopeful liveliness to it, it's wonderful, because, you know, one goes on a search in life to try and find a path. And I was very lucky, and this is part of being one of the youngest-you know, that I ran into these people.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So you really had mentors in this process?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, mentors who were totally nondidactic. I mean, the time of matriculation was incredible because there are no names involved. Everybody was "man." The dialogue was, "What's happening?" and "Everything's cool." There were no pigeonholes. It was just called "the work." "How's the work going?" Whether you were writing or making films, or painting, making music, or creating dances or films. So I was very fortunate, you know, because I teach now and I see young people trying to find their paths and that spirit of community. It was called Bohemia, you know.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Right.
GEORGE HERMS: And then we have had an ongoing.... It's like the "new improved Bohemia." You know, the media comes in with this, they have to package it each decade.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Right, exactly.

GEORGE HERMS: And they're still doing it, but it's basically what happens as the family.... When you go from the nest that you were raised in before you create your nest and raise a family. Sometimes a university covers you during that period, but then there is this place called Bohemia that has always worked as a spawning ground.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, of course, what we want to do here is walk along with you, or travel with you to the point....

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. Now we can go back to Woodland.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...where you encounter Bohemia.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And I think that that clearly is the goal. But we need to fill in those earlier years to try to understand in effect what you come from, where you came from.

GEORGE HERMS: Right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Family and so forth.

GEORGE HERMS: In 1979, with the first retrospective in Newport Harbor, I did a piece called The Alcove of Beginnings, which was meant to be your first encounter of me before you got into the actual works, which are extant. And on The Alcove of Beginnings there's my kindergarten class picture and between. ...Well, let's see, I wasn't kidding actually about the 24 hours before I was born because.... And I will ramble....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That's fine.

GEORGE HERMS: ...and you can just weave me back in. But I had an interest in astrology, quite heavily, at a certain point, and the theory with astrology is that the moment you're born, where all the stars are is very important. So if you followed that a little further, what else is going on the moment you're born? Wouldn't that also be important? And I asked my mother. I said, "What do you remember about my birth?" And she said that,

well, she had been in Roseville-which is about maybe 5 miles from Sacramento; it's about a 23-mile trip from home to Roseville where her sisters and her mother lived-and my father and my older brother were off fishing in the Sierras, and it was the Fourth of July weekend. She had gone to the park to watch the fireworks, and while watching the fireworks in the park she went into labor. And somehow my father got wind of this up there on his fishing trip and came back to Roseville, picked up my mother, drove her through Sacramento, and on to Woodland where the hospital was, and the doctor, took her home. And she went up and locked herself in the bathroom because she had been barefoot in the park and her feet were dirty and she did not want the doctor to see her with dirty feet. And my father was flipping out because here she had locked herself in the bathroom in labor, about to have a baby, and the water running, and everything. So she did get to the hospital and I was born a little after dawn on the fifth of July, which has given me a great source of pleasure to say that I was a dud-you know, one of those firecrackers that you light and it doesn't go off and then the next day, pow-ey.

And the other thing which she told me about was that-my brother's seven years older than me, and so she in my birth found out that by taking the ether, which was the anesthesia of choice at that time in 1935, through her mouth, she got the effect more quickly than just breathing it through her nose, so my first breaths must have been in a totally ether environment-which if you've ever read any of Alfred Jarry or Eric Satie and that whole gang in Paris, I mean ether was a very important drug of choice for them, too. So is it any wonder I'm whacked out? If the first breath you take, you know, if you mother's got a face full of ether. So those were the two pertinent things that she remembered of my birth.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Is she still living?

GEORGE HERMS: Yes.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Okay, what's her name?

GEORGE HERMS: Irene Lucille Ryder Herms. And there were three Ryder girls. I mean, I would love to talk about my family because my....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, let's do it a little bit then....

GEORGE HERMS: All right, yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...because we all come from that.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, yeah. And there were three sisters [in GEORGE HERMS's mother's family]; they were so close. And there was a brother George who died quite young, that I'm named after. And my Auntie Vi-Viola, her sister-Viola Ryder and Edith Ryder, both those aunts were very close throughout my whole childhood. Those three women at the kitchen table as a child growing up-I mean, their coffee klatches were just incredible, and I would get shushed and shooed outside. But that wonderful warmth of the coffee at the kitchen table has always represented a high level of communication.

On the other hand, my father is one of three brothers, and they are completely separate, and none of them are alive anymore. But they were never ever close.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Your father's gone.

GEORGE HERMS: My father's passed away. And I'm named actually for those other two brothers, George and Herbert, so I got all the names. In my family the firstborn gets William and that goes back through on the paternal side-the firstborn's always William-with the maiden name of the mother for a middle name. So my grandfather was William Broadbeck Herms. He was a professor of entomology in Berkeley, and that's where my father grew up, in Berkeley. And then my father went into agriculture and he was William Magley Herms. That was his mother's maiden name. And she lived with us after my grandfather passed away. My grandfather had worked up to 65 as a professor and then within a year passed away. To me, one of the blessings of being an artist is that there is no retirement, that you just keep getting better and just working, you know. And so then my older brother is named William Ryder Herms, so his middle name-it's a kind of, I guess, Germanic tradition. I don't know what other culture....
PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That is the background, German?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, on both sides, German. Some Scotch and a little French and a little Dutch. There's apparently a mural painter somewhere back a few generations. My mother's always tried to figure out why I'm the only artist that ever came out of all of this, and she remembers there being someone in New York, a mural painter. That's the only thing she's ever been able to figure out.

Session 1, tape 1, side B

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Interview with George Herms. This is tape 1, side B. George, you were telling us a little bit about your family background and describing where your folks came from. I wanted to just get it clear again for the record. Were they first generation? Second generation? Did their parents come over from Europe--you said there's a German background. Or was it that they'd been around longer?

GEORGE HERMS: I think they. ...My parents were both born here in the United States, and I believe that my mother's father and mother were born in Germany, and I'm not sure about my father's mother and father. They could have been born in this country. I know that I think of myself as a fourth-generation Californian. I mean that's really where I see....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That's unusual.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, I mean my grandfather was a mayor of Berkeley in the twenties, when he was teaching at Berkeley. And that family was raised in Berkeley, and then my father raised our family in the Central Valley. And I think around World War I my mother's father kind of got in trouble because they were somewhere traveling to Cuba or something, and he still spoke German and they thought maybe he was talking to-I don't think they had submarines in those days-but there was a little question about whether he would be allowed on the deck of the boat or something, so it's not that far removed. I would say the twentieth century has been in this country, and you'd have to go back to the nineteenth century to find relatives.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You seem less.... You talked very warmly and fondly about your mother and her sisters creating a kind of environment in which you, as I understand it, felt.... Well, it was a very positive domestic feeling. This was not so much the case on your father's side?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, that was a very distinct difference. I mean, the three sisters were thick as thieves. I mean, they lived on top of each other and were totally involved with each other's lives, and there was a kind of austerity in the relationship between the brothers. And, you know, we now question gender characteristics. Are males capable of that coffee klatch, kitchen table? Is it nurture or nature? You know, have men just been taught that they're not supposed to sit around the coffee table and bullshit? It's not that I don't have fond memories of both of my uncles-and my grandfather. See, we lived with my grandparents. At the end of World War II my father was stationed at Treasure Island, and so we lived in Berkeley with my grandparents for a while, and they represented to me, growing up in a small town in northern California, they represented culture to me because they had the grand piano. And one of the events that I still remember is a paddle-wheeled steamer that would leave Sacramento at sundown and pull into the ferry building in San Francisco at dawn with that incredible morning light coming in and illuminating the city with.... It was truly what in northern California is referred to as "the city."

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yeah, yeah, right.

GEORGE HERMS: I mean, it was like a Disney lighting job on that thing.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: A theme park.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, exactly. And that paddle-wheeled steamer and the music and the dancing. Of course, I'm only like four years old or something, so I don't have any idea what they were doing, but the arrival in San Francisco in the Bay Area represented, you know, walls of books in a professor's home.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Did they live in the Berkeley Hills?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, on Del Norte Street. A wonderful house.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Where is that in relation to the campus.

GEORGE HERMS: Oh, it would be north and a little bit west. There used to be the trains. The F train went through a tunnel. I don't know if you remember that. It's right by that tunnel, half a block from the entrance of the tunnel towards the campus side, on Shaddock Boulevard.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So how old were you when you were living there with your grandparents?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, let's see, in '46 we were.... No, '45 is the end of the war, so I'm about ten. And also being taken to the campus. In the entomology department, of course, they had all these cages with white mice in them and incredible. ...It was entomology and parasitology, so there were all these wonderful glass cases with butterflies and mosquitoes and, you know, that natural history presentation.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And you remember that? This is something that impressed you?

GEORGE HERMS: Oh, yeah. Oh, definitely. I mean, because the community that I grew up in was a small town

and it was a farming community, basically. It was a county seat. That's why we were there. My father had, after graduating from Davis, which was an agricultural college in the twenties all the way up to post-World War II, he got a dairy. That's how he met my mother. He ran a dairy in Roseville and that's where my mother was living. And then he came down to the San Fernando Valley, and he often.... I lived in Topanga Canyon in the sixties, and he would say, "Topanga, Topanga, that sure sounds familiar." I remember going on a milk run to look at a dairy, which was the Arden Dairy in Van Nuys, and at that time, in the twenties, the entire San Fernando Valley was pasture, and it must have been the most glorious site and a place for a dairy there.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And probably some of the orchards in San Fernando?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, that's right. But, I mean, it was just.... There were very few homes out there. So he did pass on that and.... I'm not sure of the chronology, but that may have been when he got the dairy in Roseville and met my mother. And then he had the smarts to somehow get hooked up with the government as a farm advisor and raise a family.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But he was a dairy farmer?

GEORGE HERMS: Yes, he actually was a dairyman; he ran a dairy, yeah, right, shortly out of college. And then he became the person that advises other farmers how to live. A lot of my psychological traits come from, as is normal, a kind of reaction to his having gone every day to the same office in this little town, of which there were three or four people in the office, and the man who was in charge had gone to work six months before my father, so that my father could never ever be the one on top. And that man that was on the top in a small town would have an affair with the home economics woman that would be the scandal of a little town. And my father was stuck in this office every day for 21 years, except for World War II. And the rage that he would have at that.... You know, he was locked into a harness, as is now my perception in 1993. Made me never ever want to get locked into that kind of situation, because in a small town you go home for lunch. I would walk to school and come home for lunch. And maybe I'm overdramatizing it now, but there's an underlying frustration, which he eventually was able to overcome after World War II. He left that office and became part of the public service branch at U. C. Davis, in which all of the people that came from around the world to study our agricultural techniques after World War II came through his office.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That's interesting.

GEORGE HERMS: And he would bring them home. By this time I'm kind of a bad adolescent.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: How so was that?

GEORGE HERMS: With alcohol, you know, and-well, puberty, I mean, throws everybody a curve. In my case I was an angel for eleven years. When I'm eleven my kid sister was born, and I was so responsible that I could totally change diapers and take care of her at age eleven, but within three years I'm being thrown into jail for drinking, you know, after football games and stuff.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That happened more than once?

GEORGE HERMS: Oh, yeah, it was definitely a problem. But the Christmas cards that he would get from around the world were absolutely incredible-hundreds, maybe even a thousand, all in different languages, and he would bring them home to see an American family and have dinner. He just blossomed in that job, so he ended his career being highly saluted, and really.... They list him in Who's Who as an educator. And what happened after World War II is the most glorious thing-I mean the Marshall Plan and teaching the world how to raise rice, which was what went on in the Sacramento Valley. I mean, the people that did not starve to death because they were given some techniques that started up there with the flood control. ...The Sacramento River used to flow over the banks every year, and then the Army engineers would have to go and dredge out the river, and they put in these flood control gates. Instead of the water, the spring rains, wiping out Sacramento, they'd open these gates and would fill up.... The size of the San Fernando Valley they'd fill up with water and raise rice in it.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Still do.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. And I would see the Army engineers as heroes, and this is my soapbox today in the nineties, that there's plenty of work to do, and let's- you know, this conversion of the World War II war machine into the things they were doing when I was a kid. The Army engineers have done incredible work, and to me they should be just like the fire department. You know, they can play gin rummy all year long; I don't care. But when there's a fire, or a flood, a natural disaster, they're trained. They know what to do. Anyway, that's a diversion that....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, no, it isn't, because what you're doing is describing the circumstances in which you got started....

GEORGE HERMS: Of my youth, of my youth.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Absolutely.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I was interested that you mentioned your idea of culture, what constitutes culture, and it had to do with the Bay Area, with [being] in Berkeley with your grandparents. ...

GEORGE HERMS: That's right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...and these objects or instruments of culture such as the piano. Do you remember. ...You were about, I think you said, ten years old at that time. Do you remember anything else that struck you or interested you in the cultural realm? Would you cite that as the time in your life that you, let's say, became aware of.... Well, I should ask you, not tell you. When did you become aware that there are individuals who were artists and they made things that were valued in some quarters and shown in museums and so forth? Did you go to the museums?

GEORGE HERMS: I don't have any recollection of there being a, quote, "moment" like that, but I would back up to that kindergarten class picture in which, as the audience files into the auditorium, the curtains are closed, and I'm out in front of the curtains in a smock and a beret and I'm sketching at an easel while the audience fills the auditorium. Then during the play there's the part [singing], "In the merry, merry month of May, while strolling through the park one day...." The two lovers come strolling through the park, and I'm there in my smock and beret at the easel and I do their portraits like in thirty seconds, you know, of both of them.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Is that right?

GEORGE HERMS: And I remember drawing them. I remember using the broad side of the chalk for everything. The point was used only for eyelashes. So that's at age five. And I matriculate....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, that had to come from somewhere.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right. Well, this is my point, is that I think we all sort of start out as artists, and I'll continue this a little. So I loved to draw, and out of all the kids in the thing I was the artist in that class. Now, that's from K. Now K through 12, I end up in the College of Engineering, so what happens in those twelve years? Now I havea recollection of being either in the kindergarten or first grade, and there would be this moment where you put your heads down on the desk and then the class would start and if you wanted to you could keep your head down on the desk, and the teaching saying, "Oh, well, his head's still down, so I can say this now." And she began to lavishly praise this landscape that I had done, and I became embarrassed and very self-conscious that I was being singled out. And about the same time I remember an erection, too, in a similar situation like that.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: _____ power _____, males....

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. They're tickling, this kind of tickling sensation. But I've always wondered if that embarrassment at being singled out had anything to do with ending up in the College of Engineering as opposed to a more exuberant artistic path, but what.... My sense of it is that I learned how to read, and I took to that like a duck to water and read a year ahead of everybody else all through elementary school.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What kinds of things did you read? Do you remember?

GEORGE HERMS: Everything. I was omnivorous.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Everything you could find.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, that's right. I would go to the library at a certain point and start with the A's and start reading through it. So reading took over, and my feeling is that psychologically that part of you which is good for the plastic arts has a direct relationship with the world. With reading, all of a sudden you get labels. And you can see this in children's drawings, where all of a sudden they put one, three, four legs on the horse. You know what I mean?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Um hmm.

GEORGE HERMS: Because they know there're supposed to be four legs on a horse. Yeah, and I think, yeah, that's right. I think that mentally you begin to approach the world-whereas up to this learning to read and write, you have a more direct plastic connection with the world. So I think that's sort of what took over, and also at age five World War II commences, and I believe that-it's not a conspiracy theory-but I think that all people of intelligence

were aimed towards the rocket factories, toward the sciences, and I was very much taken. I did a book report when they cracked the atom in Chicago. And I still have an interest in the sciences.

Just to continue this thought a little bit, how does this beret and smock end up doing calculus and trigonometry? I think because that part of the brain is what has perspective in paintings and, you know, Renaissance perspective. I mean, all of those things are, you know, they fit together. And the reading and the writing, I think-and theater, because that theatrical side of my development. ...I didn't go back to making objects of art until, I think, I was nineteen or twenty, something like that. So in a way I've sort of had a little dissatisfaction with the public big school system that I lost-say, from age five or six until nineteen-my development as an artist in a traditional sense, let me put it that way. That I didn't have the traditional training, you know, and so then at age nineteen or twenty I take over the reins, and begin to train myself.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So do you feel in effect this was a kind of detour in what would have been a, quote, "normal," "natural" development for you?

GEORGE HERMS: For an artist, let's say. I mean if you look back, yeah....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: For you as a kid, it sounds to me as if you were already leaning in that direction, and you did get encouragement, but you mentioned to the point of embarrassment, I guess.

GEORGE HERMS: Right, yeah, and why.... I mean, there are certain kinds of personalities that want to be.... I learned that if I gave the correct answers I sat up in the front with the girls. You know what I mean? In school.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: _____ a little girl.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right. And if I wanted to sit in back with the boys, I had to give a few false answers. And then sitting in the back I could feed-you know, like, "What did the Phoenicians contribute to our civilization?" Well, the alphabet, but I would tell someone to say Phoenician blinds. You know, so....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So you were a trickster from the beginning.

GEORGE HERMS: That's where I found the pleasure was at.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But expand on that a little. That is an _____ _____.

GEORGE HERMS: Well, the principal. ...All right, the principal of that elementary school.... See, this is the thing, when you live all your life in one house, practically. ...I mean, at age three we moved and then until I went to college, it was at 32 Palm Avenue, this one house, where my brother still lives. I mean, he stayed in the same house that we grew up in. And now I forgot where I was going.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, you're talking about the....

GEORGE HERMS: The continuity. ...Yeah, the continuity of staying in one place is that I went to one school-and one elementary school that I could walk to-and the principal eventually became friends with my parents after I had matriculated. I think maybe.... And eleven years later my sister came through the school. And he felt that I was his biggest failure as an educator, that he had never ever reached me, that somehow there was a potential. There was a potential there, which he saw, and he had never been able to tap that potential. And when I was told that years and years later... .

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: This was in grade school, right?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, this was on the elementary-school level, you know, up through, at that time, the eighth grade. And I think I know what he means, because this idea of an artist as being a viable profession was not afloat. See, I more or less grew up that art was something that happened in Paris in the twenties, or, you know, I mean, Norman Rockwell, Saturday Evening Post covers-that's what, you know, I was raised on.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, you knew enough to wear a beret when you did....

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. Well, I mean, that was probably the kindergarten teacher part of it-you know, this is how an artist should look. But my childhood-I would, you know, if you had to say was it happy, I would say yes. I mean, in World War II I think all families had.... And in that Richard Cándida Smith thing, he sent me a letter (which we can sometime transcribe onto it) of things that I wrote in my twenties about World War II and what happened with my parents-a very strange writing.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Where did Richard get that?

GEORGE HERMS: Out of the Jordan. ...Larry and Patty Jordan's....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Oh, good, it's in the Archives.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That's what I wanted to hear.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, right, yeah. No, I will get that, and you can make a note of that. Because one of the things that happens with me is that when I first address an issue or a question I give it my all, and I really concentrate and drive it home to a conclusion, and then later on I'll be asked the same question and off the top of my head give some kind of glib answer. And I have found, with Joe Leonardi, who did the videotape for Barnsdall, he asked me all these questions, and I sort of waved my arms around in the air, but we were also going to quote from some of my poetry later on in the videotape. And when I went to the books of my poetry, there were answers to absolutely every single question he had asked in the morning. You know, all these philosophical questions I had addressed at some point. And I've learned my lesson-that I can go back to something that I've written about a part of my life and it will have a very clear, concise answer. So as we go through this process and questions come up there may be already a paragraph that really addresses that issue.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, we'll certainly have the opportunity to do that. I used the word "trickster" in response to your anecdotal description of giving bogus answers to the....

GEORGE HERMS: Um hmm, right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And you seemed to respond to that as at least one aspect of your behavior and your personality during that time. Could you expand on that a little bit? Do you see a connection with your interests later on in the directions you took?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I think we would be pushing the point, because I was a very benign youngster. I accepted the program and really.... My mother says that I, you know, in being told that I couldn't do something that I would go and in about ten minutes I would come back and reframe the question of what I wanted to do. And she'd say no, and then I would go and then she would always say no, but it just tickled her that I would go and try and figure out another way around this set of rules that were being laid down. So I don't think that.... That trickster aspect really didn't surface that much until puberty. I think that that's probably when it became. ...I mean, I would run for class president and do Doodles Weaver routines. He was the comedian with Spike Jones and the....

The problem that I have in going back and looking at my childhood outlooks is that I went for the program, and so in something like World War II you would have Russia's a friend; Japan, enemy; Germany, enemy; China, friend. And then within just a matter of a few short years, China and Russia, enemy; Japan and Germany, friend. And so as a kid growing up-I mean by this time I'm an adolescent-but all of a sudden you're beginning to wonder what the hell's going on, you know, because I have become a complete iconoclast in terms of these things that are pasted onto us in saying, "This is the way the world is." Where does that come from? And one thing I've come up with is, maybe as the reward for following the program you were given ice cream and you ate it too fast and got that incredible headache. I don't know if you remember that?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yes.

GEORGE HERMS: Right. And so somehow the child says to [himself], "Jesus, if that's what you get for doing the right thing, I think I'm going to check out the wrong!" Because there came a time-you know, late adolescence-where prove all evils was really my working motif in all areas of life, whether it's religion.... You know, the search.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Was your family religious?

GEORGE HERMS: Methodist Church, went to Sunday School.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Regularly attended.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. And my main memory of that is kind of my father saying.... You know, because it was just one hour on Sunday, and that one hour didn't go through the rest of the week. And my question in this is later on when I'm beginning to get into solipsism and a lot of areas of just trying to find out what my religion was as opposed to my parents' religion. And him saying, "Gee, who do you think I am, Jesus Christ?" [laughs] You know, but that was the idea, is that why would you just one hour a week, you know, espouse this system, and then the rest of the week knife people in the back and stuff, so that the hypocrisies of American life... .

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Do you recall thinking about that at the time though, or is this now a retroactive view?

GEORGE HERMS: No, no, those were questions that I put to him. So I did....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Ah, so you were questioning authority in a sense.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, but until adolescence, not in an overt, challenging way. And I think that's probably kind of natural, I would say, given a small town where you could in the summertime when everybody's.... It's hot and the windows are all open. You could walk through the town and every house had the same baseball on, the Sacramento _____s. And as you walked through town you never missed a pitch. So that kind of childhood gives you such a solid foundation from which to spring off and embrace madness, you know, Baudelaire and The Cloak of [Sheeshans]. It was quite a while into life before I realized that madness wasn't a cool thing, that it really hurt a lot of people. But in my twenties I saw it as a really positive thing, because my background had been so static.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: When would you say that started? You mentioned that at some point you became something of a rebel.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: At least you behaved in a way that was counter to what you had learned would get you the ice cream.

GEORGE HERMS: Right, right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Do you remember at what point that was and what form it took? You mentioned starting to drink and getting caught with that and....

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, even before that, at age eleven on a bicycle, sailing along under these trees with the light coming through them, I saw my two enemies, and I set my lance at them. You know, sailing along. One of them was the impossible-this thing that it can't be done. I said, "Bullshit." I didn't say "bullshit" probably at that age, eleven, but I said, "If it can't be done, I'm the one that can do it." And the other one was tradition, that there was a certain way to do things, and that you had to do it that way. And my lance was set that I can do it better. "If it can't be done, I can do it. If it can be done, I can do it better." And those were two vows I took at age eleven, you know, sailing along on a bicycle by myself.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: At that point, of course, it had nothing to do with art. This was in terms of life.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: In terms of how you conduct your life and how you're going to behave.

GEORGE HERMS: Um hmm, right. And what we don't have are rites of passage. See, so with the coming of puberty, and my father being a farm advisor, we always went out to wherever there were sheep or a barbecue or this or that. I saw all aspects of farming life, and he would say, pointing at the sheep, did I understand about all of that? And I'd say, "Oh, yeah," but I had no sexual education, and remained.... And this was I think one of the most potent spurs to my.... That light's blinking. Does that mean we're nearing the end of the tape?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: No, we have just a little more.

GEORGE HERMS: Okay. Really, this mental development was so far ahead of emotional and spiritual growth and sexual growth that it culminates running computers for Remington Rand in San Francisco at age 21, and they say, "Electronic brains need your brains," you know [makes sound of electrical sizzling-Trans.], I got the chills, and the hair stood up on the back of my neck, and I walked away from that field.

Session 1, tape 2, side A
PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: This is a continuing interview with George Herms at the artist's downtown Los Angeles studio. This is the second tape, tape 2, on December 8, 1993.

George, we were on the first tape talking largely about your own background, your childhood and education and things like that, family, and I wanted to make sure that the impression I got from what you had to say is accurate. You were describing-or beginning to describe, just briefly-a little bit of personal rebellion and choices, goals that you set for

yourself fairly early on, early teenage anyway. But my overall impression was that you had a family situation that was basically reinforcing.

GEORGE HERMS: Um hmm.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And you really felt embraced by your family. Is that accurate?

GEORGE HERMS: Yes. I have very few negative childhood memories, and I don't think that's through

suppression. I mean, I've never gone through analysis, but I think you could probably find little cracks here and there where this subterranean volcano that eventually came out might have been spotted, but I think it's more an indictment of the "father knows best" kind of world that was presented in the fifties, and I think that the rebellion is a natural one, and I don't think that you have to come from a dysfunctional family in order to be rebellious. I think it's a natural evolution. The only way to subvert it.... The only person I've ever seen who did not go through adolescent rebellion was Tosh Berman, Wallace's son. He just stayed home and enjoyed his father and mother through all that was. ...

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: How could one _____?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. And so it is possible, and I do believe that the American Indians with their rites of passage, where you went out and you fasted, and you had your vision of what your life was to be, your dream.... But we don't. See, our rites of passage are almost drinking and driving, in my case, because the ones that survived got to the other side, got to be adults, and the others were killed or maimed. And in the nineties we have a variant on that. But I think my memories of childhood are of doing what I wanted to do in a totally structured environment. However, there comes a time when one has to kind of strike out. In other words, I had a healthy nest that I grew up in and that nest has sustained me on into my late fifties, and I still reflect upon it with nothing but beatific feelings, you know. With the coming of adolescence.... I would say.... There was one summer where one night-these summer nights, they seem to be very important in all of our lives-but there was an article in the paper about a bicycle tire with 152 stab wounds in it. You know what I mean? So certain things did surface, but it has to do I think with just channeling energy into constructive modes. And along with that, which would be preadolescent, then with the introduction of alcohol and several hundred dollars worth of damage to earthmoving equipment some night.... This again I think is channeling of energies. Thank god for sculpture.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Um hmm.

GEORGE HERMS: You know what I mean: That all those can eventually be put in.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Do you make that connection?

GEORGE HERMS: I do today in teaching. You know, when I go to Philadelphia to the second most depressed school district and they're punching each other out around the corner from where we're building assemblages, and I'm saying, "It takes the same energy to chisel a stone as it does to beat somebody up. And if you break the laws in art you get a lot of applause. [laughs] You break the laws on the street, they put you in jail. So come on over here, man." And some of them listen to me and some of them don't. But I really see that in everyone's lives, whether it's music or poetry, or writing.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, would you say that's a fair statement-or at least a partial statement-on what finally led you to your career as an artist, to deciding you wanted to make art this _____?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, basically. I mean, we'll get up to the computers and the engineering thing, where it would become very clear that I can do calculus, and I can do all this stuff with my brain, but I'm a total idiot sexually and emotionally and spiritually. And I'm playing football at the same time for Pappy Waldorf at Berkeley.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You were on the team?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, on the freshman team. I was on the freshman team, and ran pass patterns against Pappy Waldorf's Bears. But that's-it's a growth thing. I mean, when you're seventeen or eighteen you have to begin to find out what you're going to do with your life, and some people are very lucky and when they're age twenty somebody like Bob Alexander and Wallace Berman walk into their life. You know, I mean, other people you can see- all their life. I have students at the school I teach at now-37, 45, 50, you know. They're just finally realizing that they want to be artists, they've always wanted to be artists. So I'm very blessed. Now what spurred me to that, I think, is a search, a philosophical search that each of us embarks on. The theory would be the university is where you go for this, and I did. I attended the university many times, but it was really in Bohemia that I got my real....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, what about college? You know, have you....

GEORGE HERMS: Let me roll you through high school a little bit, okay?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Okay.

GEORGE HERMS: Because at that time you went through the eighth grade, then you went to four years of high school, at which point.... Well, all right, freshman year I worked in a drug store after school, riding a bicycle and

delivering things, and I began to steal booze and take it to a secret fraternity-which were illegal in high school, probably still are-called the Bachelors, and I was the first freshman ever to be part of the Bachelors, because I could come with all this booze, right. And that was an "in"-you know, an "in"-to an older crowd, and so I ran with people two years older than me most of the time. And most of them had girlfriends and I didn't, and so my approach to sexuality was to just get so shitfaced drunk that I couldn't perform.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You were frightened by it?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. Oh, definitely, totally unknown. And it's still a mystery to me, you know....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: [Inaudible sentence]

GEORGE HERMS: But at that time, you know, it was a small town and you just got some beer and you went out and hit the country roads and partied.

And a couple of things happened. I was college prep, so you took Latin, and the Latin teacher was also an English teacher, and I think she was the one that wept reading Edna St. Vincent Millay, and that really struck me, that you could be reading something and it would be that powerful that it would make you cry. And she also encouraged me to write, because, along with this drinking and running around with an older crowd, I kind of ran away from home, and I wrote this story of doing it, and it was.... She never ever let it see the light of day, because it was very disrespectful to my parents. So I had gone from this eleven year old who could take care of a baby to this fourteen year old who was out of hand. But her encouraging me to write made me a sports writer at sixteen on a weekly paper-not the daily paper, but the weekly paper. And I would give a poetic rendering of a Little League game that.... Of course, it was the parents of one of the kids in the game that would compliment me on it. And being the smart kid, I was always being elected president of these classes and things, and would be the class president, and then I would get thrown out of school for some contretemps. So there was always this kind of dichotomy of the good and evil in one person. So the writing was very important.

And then, you know, my starting in the library and going through from A, reading all the books, ended up in a vocational guidance book in which you take a test and it says what your aptitudes are. And what I came up with was a petroleum geologist. So when I'm sixteen I got a job in the field in a little town called Rio Vista as a doodlebugger with all these guys from Texas and Oklahoma and Arkansas.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Where is Rio Vista?

GEORGE HERMS: Rio Vista is on the Sacramento River halfway between Sacramento and San Francisco. I got my first car; I was sixteen and totally destroyed it.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So you were really in effect independent then?

GEORGE HERMS: That summer, yeah, that summer. And this old Hudson that I had-we used to drive around, throw the back seat out on the street, and I really wrecked it. And then tried at the very end.... I was supposed to be saving money for college, but I spent it all that summer, so I took the last paycheck and went up to Lake Tahoe with a fake ID to try and recoup all my summer's wages at the crap tables with this system I invented. And the security guard-obviously I was a very young-looking sixteen-so he just stood next to me the whole time. The system didn't work and I blew that, and the car was screwed up and I drove the fifty miles back to Woodland with only.... You had to get into the transmission with your fingers and shift it-there's two forks; one of them had first and reverse and the other had second and third-and you had to shift those things with all the transmission fluid flapping all over the car. And then I got to the levees on the Sacramento River, and I drove off it to make it look like there was a wreck. You know, not on the river side, but on the other side, to try and collect the insurance on it. They towed the truck in, and when they got ready to work on it, they said, "Wait a minute, this thing will only go in first or reverse. How could this guy have had a wreck going off in just first or reverse?" So, I was blown there. And then the parents coming home and finding residue of a party. You know, they'd been gone for the weekend and stuff.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Risky business.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. And my mother bringing out a towel once that was in her bedroom closet and saying "What's this?" I say, "I don't know," and I start to smell it and she grabbed it away, where somebody had come into the towel, you know. But I didn't know that; that's how naive I am, right? So that is probably in a way kind of normal, you know what I mean, in looking back at adolescent rebellion and all of this.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: They certainly make movies about it all the time.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right. And so anyway, the petroleum geology thing was actually work in that field, and then it turns out that if.... rather than if you go to study geology, if you get an engineering degree you make

more money. So that was advocated. And so I took the entrance exam to the College of Engineering. It was an eight-hour all-Saturday exam, and I was up till three in the morning drinking the night before the exam. Took the exam, and you had to have twenty percentile to get into Berkeley in the College of Engineering, and I got 94 percentile. So this is a natural engineer. And also actually paying.... One of the richest kids in town only got 13 percentile, so I learned that money can't always. . . .

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Can't buy you smarts.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. So that's how I ended up in the College of Engineering.

Now another event that transpired was a girl named Cheryl [Gerr, Gear] that I went with that senior year in high school, and she developed a goiter around February. They said, "Well, don't operate until June." Well, by June it was cancer, and so I hitchhiked back and forth to the hospital in San Francisco where they were giving her radiation and just.... I mean, I was prepared to marry her or whatever, you know, if it was.... And then she came back and threw me over for a previous boyfriend-after I had faithfully gone back and forth.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What lesson did you learn from that?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, to play. And that's what I did. And I went to Berkeley. This is 1953, forty years ago, and in the College of Engineering, and I lived in a coop, which was really wonderful, and was introduced to Stan Kenton jazz by some physicist and, as I said, played football and worked with one of the greatest quarterbacks I've ever been around who.... I was an end, and he could put that ball out there in such a wonderful fashion that it was soft in your hands. You know, it was right to you.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You were floated?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, no, it was fast. It was fast, but it came in soft. I don't know how it is. His name was Ronnie Knox and he became a kind of cause célèbre because his father, Harvey, took him out of Berkeley and brought him down to UCLA. It was the beginning of the agents, you know, moving people around. The freshman team couldn't play varsity football, but we could play against Stanford, so there were two Stanford games, home and away. And we would scrimmage against the varsity and run whatever team they were playing-we'd run their pass patterns against them-and I ran against Matt Hazeltine, who went on to become an all-pro linebacker for the 49ers. And what he did-when you go out to cut, you plant a foot and you cut to one side, and he stomped on that foot that I was cutting with and I still have a fucked-up toe from this guy that went on to be an all-pro linebacker. And then in a scrimmage-I'm like about a third-string end at this point and there's another third-string end, and I go in there and they would do running plays, and then this other third-string end goes in there and they did pass plays. He caught the pass. He went on to become first string, and as soon as football season was over I quit. I came to Los Angeles. I'll get into that. But I'll finish this football with the last time I put on pads.

Years later I'm watching a football game on TV. Here's the same third-string end that caught the pass. His name is Mike White. He went on to become.... I mean, he kept playing football and there he was in the same stadium coaching the California Bears. Now that sequence of plays: If he'd been in there on the running plays, I probably would have caught the ball. I mean, these are things that.... Now another thing.... I'll get back to coming to LA, because that's where a lot of good stuff starts. I applied for a Naval ROTC scholarship and got everything except that one eye was 20-40, and so I had two weeks to go back and I drank a lot of carrot juice and I got it down to 20-30.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Does that really work?

GEORGE HERMS: Hmm?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That carrot juice?

GEORGE HERMS: I don't know, I don't know. I have no idea. And it was canned carrot juice, so nowadays I would not-you know, it wouldn't do anything. So I almost had a full scholarship with the Naval ROTC, except for that one eye. Another one of these, "There but for the grace of God I might have been. . . ." So after football season was over I just stopped going to classes.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Was this your first year?

GEORGE HERMS: First year? Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You're a freshman then.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, I did six weeks of cal[culus] in the College of Engineering, and I met a guy named Pinky McLaughlin, and Pinky was born two hours after I was, and for a short space of time we were just so tight and then we've never seen each other before or since. [laughs] But he lived in North Hollywood and there was

another, an architect named Bob Beecham, and we all came down here for the Christmas break. It was the Christmas break. And we came down on New Year's Eve, and Pinky.... We stopped in North Hollywood. I heard my first what was then rhythm and blues, later to become rock and roll, and we went to a concert on, I believe, Adams Boulevard, somewhere downtown, where the Coasters were playing.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yeah.

GEORGE HERMS: And we were the only white kids in the audience, and we were backstage and the Coasters are like tossing this bottle of vodka from one to the other in time to the music, and we're kind of drinking with them and back in the wings, and then all of the sudden a fight started out, and people were flying through the audience, and we got the hell out of there and went up to Big Bear. And we just pull into Big Bear and there's.... There had been a shooting and the police are there and our car's full of beer and we're all three eighteen year olds, so we got thrown in jail. That's my first night in LA. I got thrown in jail. And I figured, "Hey, this is my kind of town."

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: All that happened in one night?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. Yeah, I had been here before in 1949 when Cal went to the Rose Bowl. We came down here and I'm fourteen and we get picked up at Union Depot to go out to Pasadena to these friends' home, and the kid told me-he was also fourteen that lived there-that one of the things to do as you went through those tunnels on the Pasadena Freeway is try and hold your breath from the first tunnel all the way through to the last tunnel, which I still remember as kind of a challenge, like a macho, adolescent thing. Of course, nowadays if you take a deep breath in that part of town you're dead, man, by the time you get out. [laughter] So I had been to Los Angeles many times, but on my own for the first time I ended up in jail.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, you didn't go back to Berkeley.

GEORGE HERMS: My parents said, "Please finish the semester."

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: At least.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, at least. So I went to class for five weeks, stopped for five weeks, and in the final five weeks I tried to take physics and.... Mechanical drawing was the one that threw me because I was messy. I would make these smears, and that, of course, knocks you out of mechanical drawing. At the same time I'm doing that, Franz Kline's in New York making giant smears. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Great smears! But you didn't know that.

GEORGE HERMS: I didn't know that, but I had begun to start to feel my way around, in that I remember some Mark Tobeys that I saw in a cooperative gallery in San Francisco, and I began to kind of tentatively-even though I'm in the College of Engineering-I'm beginning a kind of tentative, you know, to look out. ...

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Starting to look at that kind of thing.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, beginning to look around. And I think I might have pulled a C average out, you know, by going five weeks, not five weeks, and then in five weeks trying to do the whole semester's work. But what I did is I contacted a high school chum of mine, Don Holland, who was in Los Angeles working at Douglas Aircraft in Santa Monica, and he said, yeah, he thought he could get me a job.

So in the beginning of 1954 I moved in with Don Holland on Ocean Park Boulevard and began to work as a tab operator for Douglas Aircraft on the big plant that's now Clover Field, where I ended up teaching just a couple years ago. [chuckles] You know, it's like a full circle to come around. And that....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What did you call the work you did?

GEORGE HERMS: Tab operator.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Tab.

GEORGE HERMS: It's a tabulator-tab is for tabulator-and what it consisted of was working with an electronic brain, which at that time was a Univac. They were using Remington Rand equipment, and there was a battle between Remington Rand and IBM over the punched cards. IBM had a vertical rectangle that they punched out; IBM had a circle they would punch out. [One of these should have been Remington Rand-Trans.] You would program these various machinery to punch these holes out, and keypunch operators would type information in, and you kept track of all of the.... The same thing that computers do today. You know, the inventory, the payroll. And at this point I discovered jazz, really with the people that worked there. And Don Holland then married Donna, who was working there, and I moved in with a guy named Joe [Rigatano] into Beverly Glen.

So the year 1954 in Los Angeles was the first time I had a real job, money.... You know, I could go to clubs. I'm kind of underage, but, you know. I could have my own place. I began to collect jazz records enthusiastically, and then I planned to go to Mexico. You know, to save my money up and go to Mexico at the end of the year. And what I did that Christmas of 1954, I went back to home in Woodland and bought expensive Christmas presents for everyone and blew all my Mexican money. Like my kid sister got a bicycle, you know. But I had set up to go to Mexico City and stay with a family for $50 a month. Food, you got your meals, the senora would wash your clothes.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: How did you hear about this?

GEORGE HERMS: Somebody in Woodland. You know, some teacher, I think, knew these people and....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Like an exchange student.

GEORGE HERMS: Almost like that, yeah. They would rent out to you, and the señ ora just broke me in on the eating: You know, separate dishes, increasing the spicy, hot chilies, until finally at the end of the week I could the same food the family was eating.

And at this point my search is flawed. You know, in '54 I'm, what, nineteen at this point, and I've discovered when I moved to Beverly Glen with Joe Rigatano.... There's a guy next door named Owen Curney who really was a jazz buff, and I did not meet the Bermans, who are living in Beverly Glen at that time. I might have seen them; I don't know.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That was a kind of, quote, "arty," Bohemian section.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, Henry Miller had lived there, and it actually was up from....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I mean, you were very conscious of that, is what I'm saying.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You saw yourself then as beginning to participate?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, no, that hadn't, it hadn't really taken. It hadn't really taken. I had to sort of work my way through Nietzsche, Bernard Shaw, Stan Kenton.... You know, Man and Superman, Don Juan in Hell, and then....

And it may start to get kind of fuzzy at this point, because things happened fast and I'm not sure. ...I went to Mexico, and I was there for about three months or four months, and that's a whole....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: [Inaudible.]

GEORGE HERMS: Hmm?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Excuse me, I don't mean to interrupt. I thought you said you spent your Mexico money on nice presents.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, yeah, so I only had the $50 for one month, basically, when I went down there and....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Oh, I see.

GEORGE HERMS: Maybe we should just table the Mexican thing....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Okay.

GEORGE HERMS: ...and get into that, because at this point, as I say, the search is really fully on, and the one thing that I wanted to say is that-and I'm not sure if it was while I'm still working at the aircraft plant-but I began to frequent bookstores and in Westwood, either before I went to Mexico. ...Let me think. I could probably pin this down. I found a copy of a book of poems by Philip Lamantia called Erotic Poems, and that just blew Nietzsche, Bernard Shaw, and Stan Kenton out of the tank. All of sudden, language.... This was like the woman that wept reading Edna St. Vincent Millay. Those poems of Philip Lamantia's just.... You know, all of a sudden language became this absolutely magical realm. From being a sports writer at sixteen, three years later.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What was it about that particular group of poems that attracted you, that made you feel that it was truly a discovery and there was something different about it?

GEORGE HERMS: I think his gift. I mean, this is a man who.... I think when he was 16 he was the poetry editor for

View Magazine, and he's.... I mean, I'd love to see the poems again. I don't have the book. I would just say that it's the difference between journalism and poetry, and I was unaware of poetry. I mean Bernard Shaw is not, you know....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: He's a playwright.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, right, and there's a little bit of poetry in there, but he really suppresses it and he really.... He'd rather keep his Fabian socialist whip out there cracking, whereas with Philip you have this wonderful, surrealist. ...Even though it was called Erotic Poems, I'll bet you that if you went back there his spiritual/religious impulse that comes through in his work, I bet it was there.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, so this really was.... They use the term now, epiphany, for you?

GEORGE HERMS: Yes.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I mean, it truly was. It introduced you to, presumably, another world of possibilities, in incorporating language and presumably art.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, as... .

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I mean, you would cite that as the moment that....

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, as a writer. I mean, all of a sudden this freed up the sports writer.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So you then saw yourself as becoming a writer. You certainly were through with engineering.

GEORGE HERMS: Well, engineering was a means to an end. In other words, that side of the brain that could. ...Now, there are some Univac stories. They're very funny-Douglas Aircraft plant stories-and working in an aircraft plant, I could almost recommend that for rites of passage.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I worked at Northrup.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, yeah, see, and I think that you see that assembly line mentality, and, you know.... I'll see, I may check off some things. I mean we're now into the Douglas Aircraft, that's ten months. A lot of development went on in there, and then Mexico.... And then within a year I've met Berman and Alexander and we're really....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So this really was the key pivotal phase?

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, at this point, after the College of Engineering, then aircraft plant, you know, which is another form of the College of Engineering. But the Univac.

I'll just tell you this one Univac story, because that electronic brain is like, I don't know, thirty or forty feet. You know, it's a room, takes up a whole room-you know, ten, twelve feet high-and on the back of it it's all radio tubes. They didn't have transistors then. And what you could do with these punched cards that.... You fed in a stack of several hundred punched cards into the front of the computer, and what you could do is that you could punch.... There's a top half and a bottom half to these cards, and you could punch....

Session 1, tape 2, side B

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Herms, tape 2, side B. George, you were talking about Univac.

GEORGE HERMS: The electronic brain at Douglas Aircraft plant and what one could do when feeding a stack of punched cards into the Univac. One of the cards has Z's all across the top and all across the bottom and, putting that in the middle of the stack, you could go around the back and it's all radio tubes. And when that Z card went in it would flip out the Univac, and these radio tubes would blow out. And when a radio tube goes, if you remember, it's an ultraviolet light that burns off of those things. So there's this most incredible light show that goes off. [laughs] And of course the thing is BAM! comes to a halt, and the mechanics have to come in and replace all of those radio tubes that blew out. And so you sit around and you smoke and you drink coffee for a couple hours while they fix it. You could only do this like every six or seven weeks. Otherwise, they'd catch on, that it always happened on the swing shift when you were working. So I mean that's the beginning of what you referred to previously as the trickster.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And a way to move outside the system, it would seem to me.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, yeah. And the ongoing maturation, which is herky jerky. The mind is able to handle all

the programming of the Univac and everything, but relationships with the women there were all faulty-in hindsight looking back.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You mean your own?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. And once again....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Still struggling with the....

GEORGE HERMS: And once again drinking. I mean, I got a car, went out to Van Nuys, and I was underage, and I bought a Ford for $25, and I had to go to a coffee shop and sign someone else's name who was overage and a fake address and got this Ford for $25. And I left work one night and went along Ocean Park Boulevard, took a left on 17th. The police pulled me over and the first thing they said was, "What are you doing with a hard-on?" And I said, "Wait a minute, this is not a hard-on." [laughs] And they had me out of the car and the next thing I knew they're taking off, racing off with their lights flashing and everything, I'm standing in the middle of the street screaming after them, "You dirty mother fuckers, come back here. What the hell's going on?" They had a report a young guy in an old car had flashed somewhere in the neighborhood around that time of night-eleven, twelve, or whenever I got off work. That's all they had and I was a young guy in an old car. But I'll never forget that, being pulled over. And of course I was on my way down to Lincoln Boulevard to a place that I could buy beer with a fake ID.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Luckily they got you before you scored the beer.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, that's right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, it doesn't sound like at that stage you had quite found the direction. You were searching, as you....

GEORGE HERMS: Oh, yeah. And it's also life experiences, you know, that you build up. And reading in religions. I mean, I don't know at what point I find Self-realization Fellowship at the end of Sunset on the Pacific Ocean and _____ _____ that.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, did you sometimes _____ [address] there?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, as a place to go. That kind of search was ongoing. I'm thinking of one visit back to Woodland with the Methodist minister. You know, I had found solipsism. You know, that I think, therefore I am, and if I don't think it, it ain't happening. And he knew the word for it and he encouraged me to continue my philosophical searchings, but that wasn't it; I wasn't done. [chuckles] And, of course, what the family wanted was for me to go back to college, and they continually kept after that.

I don't know how much you want to go on, because there....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: No, I think that this is good. We could actually stop here, because I think that in our next session we'll move right into your meeting the Bermans and the [inaudible].

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, I have to set a little groundwork with Mexico.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, do you want to do that now and dispatch that? It's up to you.

GEORGE HERMS: Umm, I'm kind of tired. We could come back and just start with Mexico, if that's all right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That's fine. Okay, well, that's what we'll do. Thanks.

GEORGE HERMS: Okay.

Interview with George Herms
Conducted by Paul Karlstrom
At the Artist's studio in Downtown Los Angeles, California
December 10, 1993

Session 2, tape 1, side A [30-minute tape sides]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with George Herms on December 10, 1993. This is the second in a series of interview sessions. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom, and the location is the artist's studio-or, I think more accurately at this point, storage space adjoining the studio in downtown Los Angeles.

Okay, George, we covered a lot of ground in the last session, mainly background of the earlier years, and you suggested that we might want to revisit that discussion in the form of some, would you say, addenda, points that occurred to you subsequently.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, just a couple of things in, I guess, what we could refer to as the aircraft-plant time, when I worked in the aircraft plant in Santa Monica. I didn't mention that I attended Santa Monica College as well as working on the swing shift. The classes that I took were psychology 1A and a jazz appreciation class. The reason I thought this should be put in is the description of an artist as being self-taught, and yet there are quite a few times that I went to various schools-never lengthy and never for any degree. But there are people who champion this idea of a person being self-taught and I nowadays point out there's a problem, that if you're self-taught and your teacher turns out to be a lemon thirty years later what are you going to do? So I'm going to insert, trying to remember to insert these moments of standard education that took place.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: It is true that in much of what's been written about you that is the impression that's given.

GEORGE HERMS: Yes, and I think that either a case can be made that all artists are self-taught-I mean, that you study under someone and then you take what you're given and go on. I did not have a formal art school education, so that is true.

And the other was just an event. Working at that aircraft plant, I think I talked about the growing love of jazz and appreciation of it and a major event was the death of Charlie Parker. I can remember-I worked the swing shift-coming into work one afternoon, and another fellow worker who was a jazz fan was just heartbroken. I said, "What happened?" And he said, "Bird passed away." So that event left its mark. And those are really the two things that I thought should be added to those aircraft plant days.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, let me ask you several questions. That's interesting because there are all sorts of forms that education can take and what education does is add accretions, shall we say, to experience that then is drawn upon in some way. And I gather that you feel the aircraft plant in some perhaps very specific ways had a kind of culture that you absorbed. I don't want to reuse that word....

GEORGE HERMS: No, I think that is a good word to use in that I was immediately part of the assembly line.... I was not a blue-collar worker; I was a white-collar worker, but I kept the same hours, punched the same time clocks as, probably, the majority of Western civilization, and so I was part.... And it was an outgrowth of World War II. And we were making, I hope not the DC-10's that they had so many problems with but, I mean, that was it. And I could walk the line and see an entire airplane. And I was in charge of the inventory of all the parts and saw this wonderful system. What's maybe more important was the intrapersonal things that were going on within myself in relating to other people whose lives would be spent in that aircraft industry. And in 1979 when I had the retrospective at Newport I did a theater piece-evening, it was a retrospective-and one of the things I did was called "The Glass Pickle." I had found quarter-inch sheets of glass that were leaning on a rooftop in that studio on Figueroa, and I found.... There was a triangular piece of lead. I could do that fingernail on the blackboard effect, so that for a quarter of a mile away I could wake up every dog in the neighborhood. And so the retrospective evening of theater pieces at Newport, everybody filed in and sat down in seats, and the first thing I did was I took them outside to the sculpture garden at the Newport Museum and played what I called "The Glass Pickle." And all of a sudden my supervisor from the aircraft plant in 1954-and this is in 1979-he had a harelip, and I'm doing this and I look up and here's Archie Kinghorn, and he said [mimicking voice], "George, what in the fuck are you doing?" [laughing] Which is exactly what he would say in 1954 when I was at the aircraft plant, when the back of the Univac would be blowing light shows all over.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But you kept up with some with some of them.

GEORGE HERMS: No, I had not seen him before or since.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: How do you suppose he....

GEORGE HERMS: He saw the name somewhere and he remembered it.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So he showed up.

GEORGE HERMS: And he just out of the blue showed up at that museum. I'm sure he was not a museum-goer but saw the name and was curious.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: He remembered you and obviously there was some kind of a relationship.

GEORGE HERMS: Well, that's it. I think with this broad spectrum of humanity.... In teaching to get the students to realize the visual arts are such a narrow slice of the human pie and that we really need to make contacts throughout that human pie. So the aircraft plant was educational on that level, and I met people that were not

interested in poetry-or art. They had a whole different-and very full and rich lives. And I was taken in with them and became part of that.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You say that one of your co-workers, or maybe several of them, were very upset by the death of Parker.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, one. Just one. One jazz fan.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: One in particular. I was wondering to what extent did your relationship with that one person involve your mutual interest in jazz? Did you talk about it? Did you ever go to clubs together?

GEORGE HERMS: Let's see. I was underage, so I had to have a fake ID to get into most clubs, the exception being in Hermosa Beach, the Lighthouse. I think you could. ...On Sunday afternoons I don't think they were that strict. So it was more record collecting, and since I did have money for the first time I began to collect records and could almost.... And that was the dialogue, is that somebody had gotten a new record and, "Have you heard this?" Or "Have you heard that?" Because it is a great area of discovery when you find out. To me many of the prime geniuses of the twentieth century are in that field.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So this was a revelation to you which in a way was-I don't want to say strangely; it sounds elitist-but in your case was encouraged or fed by contact with at least one individual in that blue collar assembly.

GEORGE HERMS: Right. Yeah. And I think that's.... And he was white, you know. There's a great book by David Meltzer now called Reading Jazz which is about how white writers have invented and colonized jazz, a very interesting book. I can recommend it highly.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Who used the term "white Negroes"?

GEORGE HERMS: Norman Mailer.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I think Tom Albright used it on one occasion-maybe even writing about you and the others. Does that mean anything to you?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, see, what's happened, I've spent so much of my life in jazz clubs, where there's a meritocracy, and the color of the skin has nothing to do with your ability to play the horn-or gender, for that matter-and I've been very blessed in that I have never had that kind of reverse racism in jazz clubs. I was there as a fan and was accepted for that. The pleasures that I was receiving from the stand were so obvious to anyone that I never felt alienated or out of place. I can't think of a single time that I was in a jazz club that I didn't feel totally comfortable and at home. I mean, there have been rock 'n roll situations in country & western bars, you know, where there's fist fights and all that shit. In high school, knife fights and stuff, and in a way maybe that should be injected here, that country-western music was the music of record in Woodland, where I grew up. Bob Wills and his western swing band, which is very close to jazz. Billy Jack Wills, his cousin, was the hottest band around that area. And so that what I call shit-kicking music was the folk music of Central Valley. And I sort of grew on beyond that into classical and jazz and then years later came back to appreciate it.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I'm sure we're going to be revisiting this topic because it's such an important part of the culture, at least it seems to me, that you and your colleagues were involved in.... It was an aspect of the underground. But while I'm thinking of it let me ask a couple questions. I gather from what you say that your interest in that-[and] presumably of Berman and whoever else frequented the clubs, whether it was San Francisco or Los Angeles-that this was a genuine enthusiasm that may or may not have had something to do with a self-consciousness. By that, I mean an idea of what being an underground, a Bohemian, amounted to. Do you have any thoughts on that? In other words, to what extent does the participation in the jazz world-and, eventually I guess, ideas of funk and so forth-have to do with a self-conception that you-you can only speak for yourself-were developing at that time? Any thoughts on that?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, in terms of bibliography, we need to go to Reading Jazz by David Meltzer and a section that Bob Alexander, in describing Berman and Alexander's just all of a sudden finding a complete home in the jazz world and that acceptance there. And I would just at some point insert that as a bibliographical footnote. It's a beautiful passage. Now this also reminds me. Another bibliographical footnote would be, in this time that we're speaking of, the middle of the fifties, Bob Irwin in his book. The early parts of it I found very interesting, because he has a very descriptive passage there of what it was like to be young and just feeling your oats in the fifties-in Los Angeles especially-and cars and how important they were. So that's another.... Every once in a while I come across people that describe scenes that I've been in that really ring true and David Meltzer is my favorite. I mean, he seems....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What's the name of his book?

GEORGE HERMS: David Meltzer's book is called Reading Jazz, and it's just published....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Oh, just out.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, and I have a copy of that. I'll show you so you can get all the information on it.
PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But Irwin's account-was that the one published in Weschler's book?

GEORGE HERMS: Lawrence Weschler's book, yeah. And the early parts of that....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Seeing is Forgetting the Name of the Thing One Sees.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, it's not a quote of Bob's, either. Did you know that?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: No, Weschler made it up.

GEORGE HERMS: No, no, it's someone else's quote.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Who is it?

GEORGE HERMS: God, I've got to.... I don't remember. A European. It's a quote from a European, yeah. But anyway the spirit of those times, which again is Lisa Phillips coming to do the Beat Generation show, and what Creeley insisted is that they have the poets and the artists from the Beat Generation for the Whitney show but they must include the jazz musicians. See, Bob Creeley is a very astute viewer of our culture in those times. And. ...

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Excuse me.

GEORGE HERMS: No, go ahead.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I'm trying to drag us now back to see where we are to come back to. I mean, we're in the right period, what we're talking about, very much so.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, '54.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yeah. You mentioned last time, in talking about this particular moment in your journey, artistic and personal, that you realized about then that you were embarking upon a search. You used the term "search."

GEORGE HERMS: That's right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I'd like to use that as an organizing principle or a theme to then move ahead through the biography, and of course the questions that we will touch on and then come back to later are how and where this recognition of the search came about. Who are some of the people that became important in it? What were the sources, the resources you mentioned: Hermann Hesse, for instance. Siddhartha. There was jazz music. And this begins to create, then, a picture of an environment that you saw, presumably, as the proper one for you to conduct this search.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So anyway, talking about jazz, which was an important part of it, music, how would you then recall or develop the progress from about this time? We're in, still, the mid-fifties?

GEORGE HERMS: Right. In the mid-fifties.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You're not married yet or anything?

GEORGE HERMS: No, I'm not married and I have completed ten months working at the aircraft plant, with my goal being to go to Mexico. During that ten months.... Just before we go to Mexico-I think we've got most of this down-but my high school chum, Don Holland, married Donna. That was my roommate, so then I moved to Beverly Glen and lived with Joe [Rigatano]. And next door to that place was.... A man named José [Hoss, Hass, Haas] owned the house, and he was to the [Golden Globes, Golden Globes] this Hollywood foreign correspondent for Latin America. And he also was my first contact with a totally gay life-style, in that he used to bring marines home and talk about, you know [mimicking voice], "They so beautiful and so strong," and then of course he would go into rapture over these military types. But renting from him was a man named Owen Kearney who was a devout jazz fan, and he and I spent time in the Lighthouse together and he would play jazz records for me. So there's kind of a cusp here where I go to Mexico. I return to the same place in Beverly Glen. And some of the things that happened were just prior to going to Mexico, some of them afterwards. One of the people that I meet

around this time is a filmmaker named Doug Cox, and he was friends with a woman named Carol Miller, and at this time Carol Miller introduces me to the works of Henry Miller. And I then, as I think I told you, went home to Woodland for Christmas and blew all my money that I had saved on Christmas presents and embarked then in January for Mexico City to stay with the Lopez family where, for fifty dollars a month room and board, and she washed my clothes....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What year was that, again?

GEORGE HERMS: This would be January of '55. And my experience in Mexico City.... I bought myself a portable typewriter, because the influence of Carol Miller and the interest in Henry Miller, the writing seemed to be something that I wanted to embark on. It was quite tentative but there was an interest in going beyond being a sports writer, which was the last time I had used those skills.

In Mexico City I would sit up on the roof. I had taken a pair of clippers, and at that time I would just clip my hair so it was just kind of always this quarter inch of stubble. And I got a sunburn on the top of my head because Mexico City is a mile high. And this yellow stuff oozed out and so I felt that I was an intellectual coward because this yellow was coming out of my head, I remember that.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: [laughs] You're making this up!

GEORGE HERMS: No, no, that was.... I would just hop on a bus.... I mean, we're talking about education now and the search, and I would just hop on any bus in Mexico City and just make the complete loop until it got back to where I had gotten on and get off it. And I would do this, that would be like a daily thing. I would go down to the Zocala, the main thing. I would look at the Tamayo mural above the perfume counter in Sanborne's, in this hotel. I would go out to the university and see the beautiful murals on the library out there. I began to hit all Mexican museums, and seeing drawings of [David Alfaro] Siqueiros, and the horses just knocked me out. I mean, this was, I guess, the beginning of the lust for art. But purely as a viewer. I almost said voyeur. [laughter]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That's called a Freudian slip.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, really. And I did jazz again. There was somebody down there that had some connection with the Lighthouse and was presenting jazz in Mexico City. And so the jazz continued on. Carol Miller was a jazz fan. She was in Mexico City. And I decided at a certain point.... Well, I was running out of money, for one thing, and I know for sure I stayed for one month with the Lopezes and I believe a second month, and then I went and I took a bus to Veracruz. And other trips I made had been to the pyramids and the floating gardens of [Zoachimilco, Zo-cha-mee-ko]. I just completely became engrossed with what would be a common tourist's love of all things Mexican at that time. I get off the bus in Veracruz and I've got my backpack with the typewriter in it and my one set of clothes and I started walking south. I wanted to visit the Mayan culture in Yucatan. And I walked for ten days, and I fasted for ten days. This is part of the search.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Where did you get that idea, if I may ask?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I think probably.... I would say maybe the Self-Realization Fellowship. You know, the idea of fasting in Eastern religions is kind of a de rigueur part of it. And the experience.... I learned that you can go without food but you cannot go without water. And that became my daily search, was for water. If I really needed something I could get these fruits off the cactus plant, [las tunas, los tunnes]. There's like a little prickly pear that has a magenta fruit there, and you can get some moisture out of that. And what that does to your urine is that you have this almost vermilion urine-I mean, this bright red-orange urine against that blue Caribbean Sea. I mean, it was one of those color things. Of course, when you're fasting colors become more vivid, too. But the search for water would lead me to someplace where all of a sudden there is water, but these fucking burros were all shitting in it-you know what I mean-but you needed to drink so you drank. And then after a while water is inland, and so you go kind of over a series of hills until there's a river basin and you can get down to a river. And then, towards the end of....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: This was the Yucatan?

GEORGE HERMS: No, this was from Veracruz. It's like 500 miles from Yucatan or more. [laughing]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Oh, oh.

GEORGE HERMS: And when I would be stopped and someone would say, "Ah, Yucatan," you know, that's where I was going.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But that was your goal.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, that's what I would say. And they'd all just shake their heads and say, "Man, what bus

did you get off of?"

But I would spend a large portion of the day naked, also, and I got an incredible sunburn around my loins because that hadn't been exposed to sunshine since I was a baby, probably.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Painful.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Because I'm sure you didn't have any aloe vera or anything along.

GEORGE HERMS: No. No, I didn't have. I did have some ointment for a cut, which when I finally... . There's a point where the bluffs come right up against the water, and it's almost impossible to go past there. I didn't realize this, but I could see these bluffs. I also learned certain lessons: That walking in a straight line is really difficult, but if there are these series of little crescents and you just walk to one point and you make that, and then you walk another crescent....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Incremental.

GEORGE HERMS: ...it's so smooth and so easy. And then, finally, there's like a little village on the beach with a thatched hut, and these guys sort of corral me and take me there and, you know, I've been fasting....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Mexicans?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, this is like maybe the eighth or ninth day, something like that, I forget.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: These are Mexicans, right?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Did you speak any Spanish?

GEORGE HERMS: Very little, very little.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Apparently enough.

GEORGE HERMS: I had Latin and French in high school and just, you know, enough to get by.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Did they speak Latin?

GEORGE HERMS: No, they didn't respond to any of my Latin things. And this little thatched hut there was their bar, and so they gave me a tumbler, like an eight-inch tumbler full of brown tequila, and insisted that I be a fair well-what's that?-met. ...They toasted....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Hail fellow well met.

GEORGE HERMS: Hail fellow well met, right. And so they toasted me, and I was to drink this thing down. And I just got really bombed out of my mind because I....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Because you hadn't been eating for days.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, yeah. And that was the first. And so then I finally tried to get away and I'm going down the beach and I turn around and it's like this vision from Don Quixote. All these guys have like rakes and brush hooks, and it's like some peasant army coming down that beach after me and I just keep walking faster and faster. They finally catch me and take me up these bluffs, like a path, to some.... There's an oak tree with this gnarled old man under it in an Eisenhower jacket. This wizened white-haired old man, and they tell him my story and then he signs some guy to take me inland to the highway, was the upshot of it. I couldn't tell what they were talking about. And so this guy takes me off. And in the meanwhile we stop by his hut where he lives. I say "hut" because that's what they appear. I mean, they're their homes. And I had a seersucker shirt which he liked, and he wanted to show it to his wife and so I handed it to him, and when I handed it to him that meant I gave it to him. And so I lost my shirt. But I think they might have cooked me an egg or something in exchange or something. So then he takes me into this highway where I'm to hitchhike. And in a way it was the right thing, because eventually you come to like a huge river that in no way could I have gotten over it without taking this ferry which connects to the highway. And then once I got over that then I was able to get back on the other side and down on the beach. And the culmination of it-and I'm a little fuzzy about, you know, was it a day or two after that-I get picked up by a guy on a burro and he gives me a ride that goes kind of through the jungle and around, not on the beach but still continuing south to a small village called Rocapartida.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What's it called?

GEORGE HERMS: Rocapartida. And he showed me how you can take an egg and crack it on your teeth and have a raw egg. So that was one thing. Then he took me to the patrone of Rocapartida, and so I had a kind of ceremonial meal there, in which they discussed could I work. And I had in high school worked with a machete. That was the question: Could I use a machete? And I say, yes; I had been on a survey crew for the Feather River Dam, where you're siting and you just go down and you cut brush so that you can, with a transit, site down a hillside. So I had swung a machete, no problem. And they said, okay, then, you know, I could stay in the village and work in exchange for living there. And there was one person in the village who spoke English and that's who I should go and stay with. That person was the lighthouse keeper, so I'm taken-this is sort of late afternoon by now-so I'm taken up to where this lighthouse is. There's a little stream that comes in at Rocapartida ...

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Where is Rocapartida?

GEORGE HERMS: It's between Veracruz and Yucatan. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Is it on the map?

GEORGE HERMS: It's ten days walk south of Veracruz.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Okay, okay. [laughs] So is that the Caribbean it's on, or the Gulf of Mexico? That's the Caribbean?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So the lighthouse is....

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, right there where there's an inlet of water, and fishing boats would come in there, see.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: It was a fishing village.
GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, they either worked the agriculture or fished. Those were the two jobs. So then I have a meal with the lighthouse keeper and his wife. And then there's a person living at the lighthouse. Do you want to stop now?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Let's turn it over.

Session 2, tape 1, side B

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: A continuing interview with George Herms. This is the second session, tape 1, side B.

GEORGE HERMS: Okay, in the little village of Rocapartida, the lighthouse keeper and his wife lived at the lighthouse, and that was where I was to stay because they had some English. There was another person that lived up there who showed up later that night. And his name was Francisco Manos. He told me, "You can call me Frankie Hands." And he was the only one in the village that did not either go out on the fishing boats or work the land in farming. He was a free spirit. I think he hunted, and he just patched together a life. And so he felt he had a real good understanding of who I was. Because I would tell people that I was either an estudiante-a student-or a escriviante-a writer. But I had this typewriter on my back that was broken, that I was carrying around. [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You were hauling a typewriter?

GEORGE HERMS: I was hauling a portable typewriter. It was about 4 inches deep, not unlike your laptop thing. It would fit in a thing. But the first day out it broke. So I'm lugging it around like some sort of penance. And he said, "No, no escriviante, no estudiante. Vagabundo." [laughs] And so that's how he referred to me. You know, he spotted me. He said, "You're just a vagabond; that's it." So then he had some fish that he had fixed, right, so then I had to eat with him. So after not eating for ten days all of sudden I have like three meals in the space of like four or five hours. And I'm to sleep in a hammock that night, outside, and I was so sick. It came out of both ends. And if you've ever been in a hammock, and you have to get out of it and back in it. I was just absolutely miserable. So then the next morning I'm to go to my job, to swing a machete. So I'm given the machete, and we walk out through the jungle to this clearing and I assume that we're going to cross the clearing and start whacking down at the jungle and clearing more space. That's not true. What happens is they stop in the middle of this clearing, and there are all these little creeping plants that are no higher than my hand, down flat, and they all have little tendrils that go out from all directions, and so you have a brush hook which you sort of hook around those tendrils and then you swing a machete about a half an inch from the top of the ground. So this is stoop labor, Paul, and I have. ...Over the years, I've adjusted-I used to say that I lasted two hours or you know.... It was probably maybe more like twenty minutes.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Is that all?

GEORGE HERMS: And that was my u-turn. I had gone as far away from my native culture as I possibly could. I grew to hate fences when I was running naked during those ten years like a wild animal, and then to settle in with the romantic, the peasants, and live at the lighthouse and everything. And so they'd given me a banana for lunch and I just took my banana and walked back through the jungle and got my backpack and started the return to the United States at that point. But as I walked through the jungle I can still see this incredible newspaper headline in giant block letters that said, "FAILURE." You know, I had gone to live this kind of life that I thought I would put behind all the materialism and everything, and I had failed at it-you know, in what I said was two hours was probably twenty minutes.

So then the return is always painful. I hitchhiked and got a bus back into Veracruz. I'm sitting in Veracruz with my arms behind my head and out of the corner of my eye there's something and I look and in my armpits are ticks that have filled up with my blood to about like three-quarters of an inch long. And so I spent, waiting to get a bus back to Mexico City, my time trying to get ticks off of me. And so I arrived back in Mexico City at Carol Miller's place and we got some kerosene and bathed me in kerosene to get all the ticks off. I was very sick and eventually wired my family to wire me money to come home. See, I had taken a bus.... Actually, it was great bus ride down from Los Angeles through El Paso, and my entrance to Mexico was on this bus that drove straight from El Paso to Mexico City, and the guys had like twenty-four bottles of Coca Cola in a case next to them, two guys, and they would just trade and drive, and that was one of the all-time great journeys, that bus ride. You know, stopping at dawn and the Mexican landscape's just totally wonderful. And going through Guadalajara, and I mean, everything just couldn't have been better. The return home, sort of with my tail between my legs, wasn't so great.

But I had visited the artists out at the City College of Mexico City, which was the hip art school at the time so I....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: These were Mexican artists or some Americans?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, well, some Americans went there, too.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Anybody you remember?

GEORGE HERMS: No, it was just kind of a visit and this overall impression that there are people making art, you know, and that this is now becoming a possibility.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, since you failed at peasant village life and stoop labor, you had to find something.

GEORGE HERMS: Right, yeah, that's right. So my return to Los Angeles.... Meanwhile the place that Joe [Rigatano] and I had rented together is rented to someone else. But there was a place in Beverly Glen right under it. What would you call it? Well, almost like a basement, although it was street level. Just a small room with a concrete ledge on one side that I slept on, and the landlady, Mercedes, rented me this. It was not a rental, but that was my.... And I then began to patch together odd jobs and. ...

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You didn't want to go back to the McDonald-Douglas?

GEORGE HERMS: No, that just didn't seem.... My search was leading me ever more into finding a path, and having experienced that aircraft plant there was nothing there that impelled me to return. And then in Mexico City I'd gotten into Tropics-Henry Miller's-and the works of D.H. Lawrence and so that side was....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Which ones, do you remember?

GEORGE HERMS: I'm trying to. ...I said Tropics, but....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Tropic of Cancer.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, I'm trying to remember which one that was. I can't remember if I brought Black Spring back or not, but they were published in Paris and you could not get them in the United States.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What about Lawrence? Lady Chatterley?

GEORGE HERMS: I don't think it was Lady Chatterley's Lover but that was.... We spoke about Philip Lamantia's erotic poems, okay, so some of these.... The specific sequence isn't that clear to me, but during this period the discovery of Lawrence and Henry Miller. And then Doug Cox took me to a birthday party which was at Bob Alexander's place called Contemporary Bazaar in the San Fernando Valley.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You had not met Alexander?

GEORGE HERMS: No. And I don't even think I met him then, you know what I mean? It was someone else's birthday. It might have been Kathleen's-Bob's wife's-birthday. And I met Jim Baker, a sandal maker, at that time.

For employment, I washed dishes at José [Hoss's, Hass's, Haas's] house next door; that was one of the things I did. And then I got a job as a janitor at Bullock's, Westwood.

And that's worth telling a little bit because I would walk from Beverly Glen-I don't know, that's a couple of miles down to Westwood-to work from 6 to 10 in the morning. And one morning all of a sudden it was like noon for just a second. And I took about 10 or 15 steps and I became violently ill and starting throwing up. I had no idea what caused that, and I found out that these were the atomic bomb testings in Nevada. They could be seen from Los Angeles, and they would set them off just before dawn, and so I witnessed one of those and some part of me knew how ugly and awful that was. And it was not a mental reaction. I didn't know what it was. I just knew that all of a sudden it was like noon, and I went down and I walked, and within seconds was just throwing up for no reason at all.

And then going to Bullock's to work as a.... You know, we would clean the toilets. There would be waxing the floors with one of the circular waxers going through the glassware thing. That was an incredible challenge not to hit the tables with all the glassware. And then also to see that shopgirl thing. We had to get off the floor at 9 o'clock when the store opened. And just before they opened the doors throughout the store they played that Gillette fight song: [sings] "Look sharp, da da da da, and be sharp, da da da da." [laughs] That would go throughout the store and that was the signal all janitors had to be off the floor because we were in, like, white jumpsuits and stuff. And my empathy for the sales person that has to, you know, at that moment, all of a sudden, boom....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Put on the smile and then sell!

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. In a way I knew that was not a path that I was going to do. [laughs]

And the other thing that is of moment from that Bullock's job was that one of the janitors gave me a joint to smoke. I had had one experience with marijuana in high school. It was totally negative. I went out with a sprinter on the track team, Bobby Martinez, and a guy named "Turk" who was a bad-ass character and....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: "Turk," huh?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yeah. And we went driving out of Woodland up to [Pewta] Creek, where, oh, various picnics and beer busts were going on, one of them being the Golden Hoof Society, which was the fraternity at Davis that my father had belonged to. And so these guys kept talking funny as we're driving up there, and I'm just a drinker; I have no knowledge of it. But then they reached up in the visor and pulled down this marijuana cigarette and smoked it and stopped the car and Turk would go out and beat the shit out of someone. And so we would then be grabbing him and pulling him back in the car. And he did this I don't know how many times. You know, we would stop the car, and I'm used to where you would just go and cadge a drink or get a beer from someone or something, but, no, this was like a totally different, violent, really ugly piece of business. And then of course it made the papers, and my father's sitting there, and here's his Golden Hoof Fraternity.... You know, like one guy got kicked in the nuts and somebody else's arm was broken, I mean. And so I was totally opposed to all drugs from that moment on, and totally into abolishing them. This would be age sixteen, say.

So then I was given this joint and I thought, "Well, I'll try it," and I smoked it at home, and then I went over to wash dishes at José [Hoss's, Hass's, Haas's], and it was the most incredible dish-washing experience of my life. [laughs] And nothing ever came of it. I mean, that was just.... But it made me revise my totally anti-drug posture at that time.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Let's talk about that a minute, because this is a theme that will be dispatched one way or another throughout the story.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: For one thing, it has to do with the times. But as you were describing your journey, your hike in Mexico for ten days, the image that came to me was one really of an ascetic experience....

GEORGE HERMS: Um hmm.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...and to the degree that that was conscious on your part, and perhaps invoking, say, holy men of the past, or I don't know-Saint Anthony in the desert or whatever. But you also described sensations. You had an altered consciousness, it seems to me.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, fasting does that, yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And I was just wondering if, even at that stage or maybe later, you interpreted that experience as something that was desirable, opening a window of perception, or something like that. Did you at

some point then relate that experience with the taking of drugs?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, what I think.... Maybe now is the time to do this, because, as you say, it is a leitmotif that will run through. I think we have to be quite specific, and marijuana is a plant that has a very special history and when you compare.... There have been no traffic fatalities, to my knowledge. Between marijuana and alcohol, no contest, okay. Emphysema and lung cancer between marijuana and tobacco, no contest. Okay, so why is marijuana illegal? Because a certain person in the thirties passed laws against it, and then it became part of the criminal cartel. In other words, the decriminalization of marijuana would be at this point in 1993 a healthy thing. Decriminalization. We're not talking about legalization yet; we're talking about decriminalization.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: The surgeon general, you know, thinks that.

GEORGE HERMS: Yes, yes. That's right, that's right. Indeed these.... But let me say about marijuana that it is not habit-forming. I've been smoking it every day for forty years and I can vouch for that-that's it not habit-forming. I think there's something mysterious about it in that it affects the spirit and the soul and some areas that cannot be checked out in a test tube. So that is why my friend Cameron says it will never be legalized, because how can you legalize something you can't understand?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So it's the ineffable.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right. And that side of it is what.... Now.... And we will return to this at different times and we will also confront the argument that it leads to harder drugs, too, because that's always been kind of a myth. That if it's decriminalized you don't need to go to the criminal element to get it. You know, you go to the criminal element they're obviously going to try and escalate you into something that's more expensive.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, I'm more interested, actually though, in the role that these experiences-however they're brought about; induced if you will-and marijuana of course, is one agent of this thing, but I'm really more interested in how you see these things working in terms of your own, what should we say, self-discovery? Self-fulfillment? Again, I don't want to put words in your mouth, but I sense that this is a primary benefit. I mean, clearly you enjoy; it's fun to smoke.

GEORGE HERMS: Oh, yeah, to get loaded, yeah, I mean.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So then, but everybody knows that. In your case, with your story, one would suppose that it came to play a role, let's say, at a higher level. Is that fair?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, yeah. No. Yes and no. Because, I mean, it's just like the ascetic that's marching along the beaches there. I mean, that ended up in like a Marx Brothers ending. You know what I mean? And I think that to place.... I know there's Cameron's.... Well, a lot of people talk about finding one's ally in life. And that one's ally can be something that you ingest. And Cameron feels that marijuana is her ally, and that when you-this comes out of a lot of the Castaneda books and things-that your guardian angel or.... You know, there's something that comes to you in your life that will help you get through life, and you can place that, as you say, on a higher octave. At the same time, there is this kind of party-level of just getting loaded, you know. And I don't think you can separate them. I mean, you have to keep both of those things focused. And in my case, back to just this single marijuana cigarette that a fellow janitor gave me, it did not induce in me the need to rush around and get some more or anything. It was a pleasant experience and it absolved me of an almost crusader's stance against drugs that I had grown up with.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Were they smoking dope around the jazz clubs at that point?

GEORGE HERMS: Oh, I'm sure. I wasn't involved with it but....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I mean, were you aware?

GEORGE HERMS: ...there was always an alley that you could go out and smoke in. You know, that's what the breaks are for, in between sets.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Because, see, that always was part of the intrigue, the fascination, of the jazz underground. I'm remembering back to my youth, and there was something fascinating and attractive and also scary....

GEORGE HERMS: Right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...about living on the margins and doing these kinds of things. Bringing it back to your situation, I'm trying to get a feeling for whether this sort of activity then was seen as a vehicle to move outside of conventional society and culture.

GEORGE HERMS: At this point in time that we're talking about, no. I think....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: It wasn't a project?

GEORGE HERMS: No. It became, I think.... Well, also, I think, philosophically, the hypocrisy of having something like marijuana being illegal when alcohol and tobacco are readily available.... I think young people coming up and getting loaded and seeing that it's a very benign experience-it could be the beginning of the end of total belief in the authority structure. You know, that this hypocrisy.... If they're being hypocritical about grass who knows what else I've been told. You see? And so I've arrived at a point right now where it almost becomes "prove all evils." In other words, the information you've received from on high is a crock of shit, and my feelings of.... And I can't exactly say when I began to articulate this, but that the generational job is to rise up-and I would say puberty being the trigger-and completely knock down everything that has been built until you get to the foundations of life, and then begin to build anew. Because there are natural laws: You touch the stove; you get burnt. Then there are man-made laws: "Don't do it." "Why?" "Because I told you not to do it." [laughs] And you begin to see life as this series of boxes where you're in the playpen until you can get some toys together and climb out of the playpen, and then you're in your room until you can get out the window into the yard. And then you get out of the yard and you get into the society and then society, if you fuck up, they put you in like a minimum security jail, and then it's maximum, and then if you fuck up it's solitary confinement, and then finally the law can put you in a pine box. So there's this series of boxes. And to find out which are the real laws and which are the paper laws. All laws should be sunset laws. You know what I mean? They should be passed. If it's a good law pass it again. [laughs] But don't just leave it on the books, you know. That's one of the problems.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, so do you feel, though, that at this stage already you were beginning to think in these terms?

GEORGE HERMS: I'd say I can't put my finger on at what point I'm beginning to articulate this, but I'm beginning to meet people who.... Owen Kearney, who was living next door to José [Hoss, Hass, Haas], wanted to be an actor. He worked at a credit bureau, and so he took me to some acting classes in Hollywood. And my next move from Beverly Glen is to Laurel Canyon to an acting school that Seymour Malkin and Harry Guardino ran. And these moves now are going to kind of come rather rapidly. We were talking like two or three months in one place, two or three months in another.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I should stop and force you to elaborate, properly because....

GEORGE HERMS: No, that's okay. That's about, yeah.... So I move in, the theory again being that I will sit at a typewriter and come up with little sketches for improvisational exercises for the actors. And this now is [Konstantin] Stanislavski-of which I read all of his works-and there's a kind of borderline of [Gurdjieff] and [Ouspensky] in the background. And the people.... I actually never did write anything. I think I probably smoked another joint or something and sat in front of the typewriter and watched the flies make circles around; I remember things like that. But I was hitchhiking around town, and I would be picked up by the macho, masculine.... There was one.... I can't remember his name. I think it was Henry Miller, actually, an agent, who changed everybody's names from Tab to Rory to this and that, and these guys would give me a ride and grab my joint and I'd get out of the car. But I saw the Hollywood image of this tough guy, gangster, cowboy, not being what I was taught they were.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You were hitchhiking?

GEORGE HERMS: Hitchhiking around Laurel Canyon.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And these were just strangers, not people you knew.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right. They'd just give me a ride, right. And then you would see someone who's like the all-American musical comedy, the most healthy image in the world, and when he gave me a ride and grabbed my joint, I was kind of in awe, and then awful.

And the acting, that Stanislavski method.... And also you have to realize around this time, [Marlon] Brando is really hot and Jimmy Dean, and there's some incredible. . . . You know, acting really seems like it's one of the paths to self-fulfillment and enlightenment. Not that I really saw it that way, but there was a vitality....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: [inaudible]

GEORGE HERMS: No, it was never anything that I wanted to do. As a writer, I liked being around that side of it. But what was it? Harry Guardino and Seymour Malkin split, and Harry Guardino said, "Never trust a dreamer." [laughs] I remember him hollering this. And another person who was around that group was John Saxon, the actor, who became a very good art collector, and I've seen him recently. There's just an intense....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You got to know him? Saxon?

GEORGE HERMS: Just briefly. There was an intensity in people's study of acting that.... Like a shrink came and talked to the group saying that the second highest IQs professionally were actors. Whether that was true or not.... But I could see that there were a lot of very intelligent people interested in mastering the skills of acting.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I can't pass this up: If that's second what was the first?

GEORGE HERMS: Oh, I'm sure he would have said shrinks; he's a psychiatrist. Wouldn't you think? Wouldn't you guess?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yes.

GEORGE HERMS: [laughter] So, anyway, I sort of needed to find employment, and Jim Baker, the sandal maker, was out in Topanga, and so.... Let's see, before we move on to Jim Baker in Topanga, let me talk about Doug Cox taking me during the Easter vacation that year on a motorcycle ride to Ensenada. And I was on the back of it, and I realized then that I would never be a good motorcycle rider because I have a tendency to throw my arms up in the air when I get excited, and, of course, you can't do that when you're on a motorcycle. But he took me, we went from Tijuana to, I forget what, what is it, Mexicali? We went sideways along the border, and then we also went south to Ensenada, and just up in some hills, and it was just like wandering around. It was that "on the road," just beautiful, enjoying every minute of it. And Doug Cox was a grass smoker, too, so I saw that there was a pleasant side to it that was not necessarily, you know, let's get loaded and party thing, but it was just part of, I guess, enhancing your sensitivity to the landscape or the people or whatever. And he made me go into the water in Ensenada; it was freezing. He had a mask and he said, "Just go out to skin dive." He said, "Just go out and put your head under." You know, this is Easter vacation. So, the water was cold. And I went out and put my head under the water, and it was about two or three hours before I came out. It was the most incredible, beautiful. And I think probably down around Ensenada it still hasn't clouded up that much in the water. But that's something that fed into me, that world under the water. And I've done very little of it until I went to Rome in the early eighties. But to see that world and those colors was just, you know....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Was this just a one-time experience? You didn't then take up skin-diving?

GEORGE HERMS: No, but I saw that world and how fantastic it was. I think probably the next time I'm that impressed is the paintings of Yves Tanguy. To see such complete. ...It was mesmerizing because the motion is as good as the colors. Nothing sits still. You know, the waves come in, and so everything is moved this way and you have one vista and then it moves back and you can't even see what you saw before but you see something else. Incredible. So these are the kinds of experiences that are feeding into this search.

And then, in Topanga, Jim Baker lived in basically a one-room cabin, is what it was. They had built a kind of shelving thing, with his wife Elaine and his son Beau. And Beau was a baby and Jim had a stitching machine that he'd got and was making sandals and his wife went from Topanga all the way downtown to the May Company as an illustrator. That was her job, so he needed somebody to look after the baby so he could work. And that was my reason for being there. And I slept in a sleeping bag next to the creek.

Session 2, tape 2, side A

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Continuing an interview with George Herms on December 10, 1993. This is the second session and this is tape 2, side A.

You were talking about your brief stint as a babysitter in Topanga Canyon and, I gather, mentioning that as just another step in this progress of accruing experiences that presumably are going to lead you to a certain goal.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right. Well, Camp Wildwood and that cabin was the headquarters out of which I would walk when I wasn't taking care of the baby, and I covered a lot of territory in the Santa Monica Mountains from that base, not unlike walking from Veracruz to Yucatan. I would just walk for miles and miles. And I'm reading a book by Hermann Hesse called Siddhartha, so Jim Baker always referred to me as "Sid"; that was my name for him. He had a motorcycle, and that was the one time that I did get on a motorcycle and I just drove it right straight into the side of the mountain, so I never got back on it again. [chuckles]
And he had.... His story is.... He's like the Flying Dutchman. I mean, he put high heels on sandals and scored so big you wouldn't believe it. He had come to.... Just briefly, I'll just sort of sketch in this personality. He had come to Los Angeles to be the next Tarzan, because there was a turnover in Tarzans. He didn't get the job. He was very pissed off. In World War II, he had taught nutrition and Jack LaLanne had taught exercise at that-where was it, in Minnesota?-that Great Lakes Training Center.

And so it's at this point that nutrition enters my life. In my walks through the mountains I come to a place call Eden Ranch, where people who had been given up on were thriving. You know, cancer people and things like that. It was basic philosophy and good food, good nutrition, and they had a very good recovery rate for people that had been passed on by the medical profession. And they had a salt called Dr. Bronner's salt which I use to

this day that's some sort of.... It had a lot of minerals and things, came out of San Diego, and I thought I had lost it but I just found another source for it. It had a great line on it saying, "Judge this product by one thing: the results," which I've always wanted to put on all my art works.

So nutrition came into it and what Jim Baker had done is.... Little baby Beau, I guess, was jaundiced at birth and the doctors were kind of going to give up on him. Jim literally stole him out of the hospital, brought him home, and in a blender would blend raw liver and tomato juice, and fed that in a bottle to Beau until his liver had enough-so that he was okay. It eventually turned out that Beau was deaf, and nobody knew that. He was-was he a year old?-about a year old when I took care of him and he hadn't talked. But Jim Baker then went on to become the most successful restaurateur, and he opened the Aware Inn, he opened the Olde Worlde and he opened the Source, three of them in a row, and by the time he got to the Source he had changed his name to [Yod, Yawed] and he was like a guru type. And he was also black belt karate, and he killed several people in his lifetime, including the man across the next cabin that had a dog that barked. I left, but within the year he had murdered a guy with his karate things.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Because the dog was disturbing him?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, the dog was barking. So his place in this culture of Alexander, Berman, Doug Cox, at that moment he fit. But then very soon it became obvious that. ...He wrote a poem for The Humanist magazine. It was turned down because it had the word "juices" in it. As in "human juices" or something.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Body fluids.

GEORGE HERMS: Body fluids or something like that. So there was a kind of basic philosophical discussion going on at all times there.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: In what way?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, The Humanist magazine, you know. I mean, the questioning of whether humanism had a place in America, almost. Again this is part of that search, and maybe I'm the one that brought the philosophical discussions to bear, because once you run into Hermann Hesse's ideas that opens up a lot of Eastern mythology, which Paramahansa Yogananda had already opened up. And then just walking through the hills is pretty enlightening also. And it all seems to coalesce-for me, anyway, in retrospect, looking back-on my twentieth birthday, when I was there at Jim Baker's in Topanga, on this little dirt road that led down to the cabin, two people walked down: Bob Alexander and Wallace Berman.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: 1955?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. And I have a book of poetry by Thomas Merton, Tears of the Blind Lions, and on it it says, "Have a good birthday, Wally B." We referred to him as Wallace Berman, because that was his preference later on, but at this time he was Wally. And I often slip back into that in my references to him.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Let me get this straight. You hadn't met before but they showed up, and Berman Wallace gives you....

GEORGE HERMS: Jim had said, "It's George's birthday. Why don't you guys come out." Or something, I don't know. I don't know the background. And since all three parties are now dead I don't.... I mean, it was a miracle to me, because I then leave Topanga with them and begin to meet the people that will to this day be my heroes.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Okay, now, we have to explore that just a little bit. You said, as if it was the most natural thing to do, you left Topanga.

GEORGE HERMS: That day. That day, yeah. And I've thought, where did I go? And I'm not sure. We went to Bob's place in the valley. Then where did I go? I don't know.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Where was Berman living?

GEORGE HERMS: He was living in Beverly Glen and my next address is Berkeley, which is in September. Now between my birthday and that September, I can't tell you exactly where I was or what I was doing, but it was the beginning of meeting people who were already in full stride.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What do you mean by that?

GEORGE HERMS: That if they were poets, they were writing poetry. If they were artists, they were making art. If they were musicians, they were blowing their music. If they were filmmakers, they were making films.

And my parents had asked me to please return to college, and they made me an offer. They said we will send

you a hundred dollars a month if you will return to school, and I took them up on it. And I went back to Berkeley. I got a room for like ten dollars a month or something, and I ate very little and I bought like eighty dollars worth of jazz records every month. [laughs] And I then began the kind of education that probably left to oneself, without the idea of it having to lead to a job.... I took Chinese literature, Russian literature. I eventually took a play writing class-I don't think that first semester I took that. But I began to hang out around the drama department in Berkeley, and I would work the sound or the lights on a production. The productions that were really meaningful to me were Yes Is for a Very Young Man, a Gertrude Stein play in which the star was Bill Bixby, who just passed away last week. And then there was a Cocteau.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Was Bixby a....

GEORGE HERMS: He was an actor then.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Was he a student at that time?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, he came out of the drama department at Berkeley. And there was a Cocteau play in which I ran the sound and a woman named Polly Comstock Levee ran the lights. And I peeled an orange for her and we fell in love. And she was married, had an eight-year-old son. She was married to an astrophysicist; they lived in Walnut Creek.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: She was in the production? She did the lights, you said.

GEORGE HERMS: She was working the lights and I did the sound, and we were like side by side as technicians on this Cocteau play. And so that year was.... It culminates with our falling in love. I also took a philosophy class, one of those big lecture hall deals with Plato's Republic. And a woman in the philosophy class named Lynn Gerard found out that I had never been laid. Her boyfriend was a sailor out of Alameda, and he was out of town, so she did that.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You became a project.

GEORGE HERMS: And it was the most incredible experience in my life, up to that time.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: How's that?

GEORGE HERMS: Oh, man, it was just.... I couldn't believe it, you know. And more or less she launched me and I've been a worshiper of women ever since.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, now, wait a minute. Is this prior to falling in love with Polly?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, that's what made me think of that. There were some other things that happened that year, I mean. I sort of jumped ahead to the culmination of that year in Berkeley.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What was her name, Polly what Levee?

GEORGE HERMS: Comstock was her maiden name. She was married to a guy named Levee, an astrophysicist.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: How do you spell Levee?

GEORGE HERMS: L-e-v-e-e. There must be an accent over one of those e's somewhere. But what's feeding into me at that time is a lot of jazz, and a lot of theater.... This is kind of a continuation of that with the actors in Laurel Canyon, working with them.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You still didn't see, though, this as a career objective?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: No, it was life experience in that actors.... The wonderful thing about them is that they're in their studio all the time [laughs], and so the discussions and the ideas of playwrights are great stepping stones for the search, for continuing to search. There's a lot of.... I think out of Owen Kearney down in Beverly Glen, he had all these spoken word records as well as jazz, and so there was a whole series that Charles Laughton did. I recited one of them just the other night, a great Tolstoy story. Man and Superman, the Don Juan in Hell section that's Charles Boyer and Laughton and Agnes Moorhead. Those ideas were in place and being questioned. And then there's the Phoenix Bookstore on Telegraph Avenue, which is the Lawrence center-in which Black Sparrow Press.... John Martin and I both frequented that at the same time. He bought all the Lawrence books and eventually sold every Lawrence book to set up Black Sparrow Press.

In conjunction with the Phoenix Bookstore, there was a woman named Thalia Guy that had a.... Oh, you wouldn't call it a gallery. It was like a combination of gallery and crafts, and a year or two later I bought a terracotta head called The Happy Man from her, but she was also influential in kind of setting objects of art as being a

possibility, that one could make these things.

And of course Pauline Kael has the cinema on Telegraph Avenue. So films are feeding into this . . . if you want to look at me as like this big pot, this big stew that's going on. [laughter]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Receptacle.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, this receptacle. And again there's that year, and then it's followed by a second year later, so some of these events I may be confusing between the two of them, but it's still the same process.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Let's, if we may, take a brief digression, another big subject that I imagine we'll return to. And that is sex and love, women. Because you yourself said that at this moment-at least it's convenient to remember it that way-you thought "women are terrific" and so they began presumably to play a role in your life and then in your work, certainly, in the work itself. Anybody who's familiar with it can see echoes of this. It's not exactly an invisible component.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Let me ask just a couple questions to sort of launch this theme. Again, we can go back to it. As you were talking about your experience in Mexico, you mentioned, is her name Carol Miller?

GEORGE HERMS: Carol Miller, yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And so it occurred to me-I didn't ask it at the time-if your relationship was more than a friendship? Was there anything sexual about it?

GEORGE HERMS: It never culminated in intercourse. There were erotic overtones but it never culminated, for one reason or another. I don't know.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I mean, did you view your friendship or did she view it as.... Obviously, it was something special.

GEORGE HERMS: A lot of it revolved around Henry Miller. I don't know why, maybe because her last name was Miller or not. But it was, "Oh, have you read this?" or "You should read this," kind of relationship, not "You should come to bed."

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Right, so it was an intellectual bonding of some sort.

GEORGE HERMS: Right. Which, you know, through those years-and again this is the fifties-and the inability to have relationships culminate in intercourse I guess could be viewed as a problem. Certainly from our point of view in the nineties it's really old-fashioned. But then I thought my father and mother were old-fashioned because they never had intercourse till they got married in the twenties.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: It's not unique.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, that's right. And I'm thinking-and I don't know where this fits-but did you know Earl Warren's daughters.... There were three beautiful daughters that he had. I went out with two of them at some point here in Los Angeles, and each one of them, after they went out with me, they married the very next guy that came down the pike. [laughs] And Dorothy....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What do you make of that?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I've often thought about that. And Dorothy Warren was wonderful in that she would come back from Washington, D.C., with a beautiful record and give to me, a Cherubini mass. And Nina, the one they called Honey Bear... .

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You went out with all of them?

GEORGE HERMS: No, just the two.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: There were three all together, so you got two thirds.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, Virginia I never met. But they're from the Sacramento Valley, too, at a certain point. And I would nude sunbathe and not have it culminate in intercourse. And, of course, there were some people that said, "That was absolutely wrong, George." [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Perverse.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, really, exactly. But in a way I was taking a kind of pride in that we could have this kind of intellectual relationship without it having to jump in bed.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You know, there are different ways to have sexual relationships, though. I mean, it seems fairly unimaginative to think that penetration-intercourse-is specifically and only, and that nothing else is related. So my next question, to the extent that it's relevant to this discussion, were any of these relationships-was there any kind of sexual contact at all, short of intercourse? Or entirely platonic?

GEORGE HERMS: Oh, well, it's somewhere in the middle. It's somewhere in the middle in that I think once the ice was broken then it was almost inevitable, but prior to that point.... I've never gone through analysis so I'm sure a lot could be made of that. I think a lot of the high school drinking was to become so incapacitated that I could not function sexually. That's in hindsight. That's how I see all that drinking until you're blotto was simply because you really wanted to make love and couldn't. Either due to mores or whatever, that was not a possibility, and so you would drink to cover that frustration. That's maybe a crackpot idea; I don't know.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Do you think it's possible that you were threatened by girls, by women at that stage? I'm not a psychiatrist, but the question does arise.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, well, I don't know because, see, I learned to dance, and I was a dancer, and of course the music then was.... You really cuddled up when you danced, and so there was a lot of that kind of contact. It seems to me if I was threatened I wouldn't get into that. I think it was.... And one's path is never really clear, even in hindsight, looking back, but. . . . The jumping in bed.... See, at one point Tim Leary said, "It wouldn't matter who you bounced up and down with on the bed. What would matter is who would you take acid with?" [laughs] And to me it is. It's the biggest mystery. I mean, they'll go to visit every planet, and when they come back and get off the space ship, I'm just going to ask them, "Can you explain boys and girls to me?" Because I think it is the most phenomenal mystery of all of life: What is that thing, that spark that goes off? Or doesn't go off? Or goes off and then it fades? I'm still amazed by it. It's probably as close to the creative act as any area of life, and we probably understand it about as much as we understand the creative act. What is it? Why are some people.... Why are some days in the studio.... Like David Meltzer says, every day he shows up at his typewriter, and chip, chip, chips away, and then one day there's this avalanche, and you live for those avalanches, you know. But the job of an artist is to just show up every day and chip, chip, chip away.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, this idea of mystery and sexuality being part of it does seem to inform your work, and I don't want to make any simplistic connections, but, well, let's turn it around. Do you feel, in looking at your work, considering the ideas, the impulses, that you gather there, that this is a major theme?

GEORGE HERMS: Without any question. Whether you want to look at it as the muse, the inspiration or... . The period before we started on this when I'm around the theater in Berkeley and the actress that played Antigone and rages against Creon on the stage, and to avenge her brother's death, and then there's the cast party and later that night, around dawn we ended up in bed, and it was phenomenal to have this kind of a Greek tragedian all of a sudden in your arms in bed. It was a wonderful way of art then following into life, because she was beautiful on the stage when she had her....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, let me ask you this. It occurs to me that maybe you had expectations for a sexual encounter like that, perhaps even requirements. You know, most people don't, it _____you know, I really want to do it, I want to feel it. But from what you've described, at least in looking back, you saw it as embodying something that was bigger than that, and that it was something to be approached carefully, shall we say.

GEORGE HERMS: You know, Zappa just died and there's a thing about....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I know; it's terrible.

GEORGE HERMS: Well, Frank has said, "Romantic ballads have done more to cause bad mental health in the United States." [laughs] And so you have to factor that in, that romantic music of the forties that I was raised on. If you believe in astrology, where the stars were when you were born, when I was born Billie Holiday was singing, you know what I mean? So I really feel that all those strains feed into this kind of romantic thing where. ...And I put that "l-o-v-e," that "love" on all of my work. And if there's the slightest resistance, on a sexual level, I just wilt. You know, it's absolutely amazing. And, to me, that's really mysterious, the sado-masochistic relationships, you know. Not that I haven't been, psychologically, in some, but I've never....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Not interested in _____s of power.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, I've only gone where I've been invited. And that's really been....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I think there are many of us that could concur with that.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, and that thing of romantic love certainly is instilled in us from the movies to popular music. Now D. H. Lawrence was a major obsession with me-to read everything he wrote coming out of the Phoenix Book Store. And the two books that come out of his novels are Fantasia of the Unconscious and Psychology of the Unconscious, and in those he states his theories-which, as I say, comes after the facts of the novels and the poems, not that he had these theories before and then wrote novels and poems based on them. And his inspiration.... I ended up loving the poetry most of all, to be honest with you, because there's a clarity there that is just absolutely the greatest, from my point of view. And of course, all of Miller's writings have to do with sex. You know, that's basically his.... When I finally met Miller, I mean, God, he was in his eighties, and he's corresponding with a woman from Japan who says that in Japanese they have all these other words besides.... All we have are these Anglo-Saxon four-letter words. He says that they have a thing where a woman's pussy is described as being a thousand worms. And he was saying, "Isn't that great?!" And he must be like eighty-eight when I had dinner with him.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Was this in Pacific Palisades?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, towards the end of his life. An ex-girlfriend of mine was cooking for him, and I went over and had a great dinner with him. So he's a hero.

And then City Lights Bookstore. I buy-because I have this hundred-dollar-a-month thing-I buy Kenneth Patchen's hand-painted books of poetry, The Boating Party. And then with Patchen you're almost up to date with the Meltzers and the McClures and people. These are the poetic groundwork for the San Francisco Renaissance. So all of this is going into the stew.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Now you still....

GEORGE HERMS: This is that first year of returning to Berkeley and just taking the classes that I wanted to take. The second semester I took a play-writing class with Hugh White, mainly because Polly was taking it.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And you were in love.

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I don't know if it had happened then, but it was on its way. And that was fascinating to see that there's actually a structure to a play, in the way he taught play writing. And the mechanics. And it is almost mechanical, the traditional play. And then I did act in one.... It was.... When you're studying directing in a school of drama one of the things you do is you direct a play, and this guy directed a Sholeim Asch one-act play called Night. And the story is simply that on this one night when the dogs bark. . . . There's a kind of reenactment of the story of Jesus. And the
fishmonger's wife is transformed into Mary. Well, the fishmonger's wife was Molly Barnes, and I got her up on a card table. I was the thief; I played the Jesus figure. Then there was my friend Justin Pope, who played the fool, who had this wooden sword and he was the leader of all the Christian armies or something. And it was very short and simple, but all of a sudden these people are transformed and I'm in charge of transforming them and getting Molly Barnes up on a pedestal in this white, virginal outfit of hers.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Molly Barnes, the....

GEORGE HERMS: The art dealer who later was Ralph Nelson's secretary, and then she opened her own gallery and I had two shows with her. And she always loved to tell people that I had made her into the Virgin Mary. [laughs] And the last line is.... Because it is then.... The dawn comes up and it's over with, and everybody's back to their original and once again I'm just a common thief. And the last line is [screams] "You dogs! You damned dogs!" which is screamed right at the audience, and then that's curtains. So that was an act....

Session 2, tape 2, side B

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Continuing interview with George Herms, this is second session, tape 2, side B.

GEORGE HERMS: Let's say starting in September of '55 through June of '56, this year in Berkeley, in which I have a run-in with the ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps]. You see, Berkeley's a land-grant college so everybody has to take ROTC, at that point in time. And I have a beard at this point. I've stopped shaving; I have a beard. That's against ROTC law; you have to shave. You can't be in the uniform and have a beard, but you have to take ROTC. And then there's also a loyalty oath you have to sign. And I refused to sign the loyalty oath. There are three people. One of them's a member of the Communist party. I don't know if he said that at the time, but that's basically what he was. I can't remember what the third person's reasons were. Mine were purely as an individual. I just didn't want to sign it. I didn't feel that.... If one went to college, why should you have to sign a loyalty oath? And so I was more or less going to be dismissed from school unless I signed that thing. And I eventually did sign it, but I wrote a letter to the editor of the Daily Cal explaining why I was signing it. And I was signing it in order to stay and fight. [laughs] So before this letter to the editor could go in the paper Clark Kerr, who was chancellor at the time, had me in and went over this statement that I wanted to make. I'm expecting a

battle or something. He ended up correcting some of my language. He said, "Don't say I feel; say I know. Things like that. He gave me tips how to make my statement stronger, and I was very impressed with that man. I'm just a freshman, you know me, I mean there's no.... Once he got writing.... I mean, a letter to the editor of the Daily Cal. But there was a stink. I mean, it was in the paper, people refusing to sign the loyalty oath.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Was that the time that, what was her name, Margaret O'Hagen, or Margaret Hagen. ...She was in the art department, and she was a faculty member that went down, or finally left. She was at Berkeley and she refused to. ...

GEORGE HERMS: I'm sure. Yeah, I'm sure the faculty....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I'm wondering if this was at the same time.

GEORGE HERMS: Well, the ROTC had a certain clout, because of it being a land-grant college. So that was one lesson learned, of coming up against authority and finding that not everyone in a position of authority is necessarily the enemy, that a dialogue can be had. And my reasons for staying to fight, as opposed to if I don't sign, boom, I'm out of there, and that's the end of it. Or compromising one's ideals. I mean, that's the other side of that coin. And this comes up, I think, throughout the career of an artist. This idea, are you compromising your ideals? Or are you selling a work of art to United Technologies, which is part of the war machine, but then you're going to use the money in order to keep your studio open and make more works which will be aimed at....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Stay to fight.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, yeah, aimed at giving it up. All right, another thing that happens is in the world of jazz-I'm not sure how it came about-but I met a drummer named Max Levitt who taught junior high school, and he was my plug-in to the musicians around Berkeley, including an alto-saxophone player named Marty who became a landlord of mine. I rented a room when Polly and I decided, you know, to go together, and that would be towards the end of the year. And during that year one of the great jazz stories is Max Levitt and Mary Fran, his wife, and I and Polly going over to the Black Hawk in San Francisco to hear Miles Davis and Sonny Rollins. And we get there.... We'd been listening to a lot of Sonny Rollins and really looking forward to seeing Sonny, and Sonny Rollins isn't with him. And we were so bum-kicked. I mean, "Well, should we just go? I mean, what's the point in sticking around?" And some tenor player from Philadelphia was taking his place. We said, "Well, we'll just hear a little bit, see if we like his tone or not." Well, that tenor player from Philadelphia was John Coltrane. [laughs] And from the first note he blew, I mean, we didn't leave our seats until they closed the club.

But that nourishment, coming with, I would have to say, Patchen, Miller and Lawrence-those things fed into me. Plus falling in love, even though she was a married woman. I mean, this is.... That was really a difficult call to make. One of the things I found out.... I went out and stayed at their place once in Walnut Creek, and her husband kept boxes of what were then rubbers, now condoms, and at the end of the month he would count them to make sure he got laid every night. So that's another.... This is the astrophysicist.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: [inaudible]

GEORGE HERMS: Huh? Yeah, so I mean all these things. We're talking about the stew and these ideas and these concepts that come into.... And the wonderful....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Wants quantifiable rather than.... Quantity rather than quality.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, yeah. Well, he would subtract for her period, and things like that.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Oh, how thoughtful.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. But we're talking about education of a young person, and the wide latitude for human behavior that's available. And we have no rites of passage, you see, so this is that search: How to find what kind of person do I want to be? Do I want to be the bean counter?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Or the condom counter.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, the condom counter. And I have to come to grips with this love thing. And so I take off hitchhiking from Berkeley to Los Angeles to try and figure out what I'm going to do.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Presumably _____....

GEORGE HERMS: Being in love with a married woman who has a child. Do you break up a family or not? I mean, it's as simple as that. And so somehow hitchhiking from Berkeley to Los Angeles I ended up at the Sacramento bus depot, which is not the way you go to Los Angeles, and to this day I don't know how that happened. But some truck driver gave me, dropped me off at the bus depot and said, "Get off." There's all these guys in

tuxedos around what we would now call a homeless person but then we called them winos. He had on an army blanket coat and a gunnysack full of wine bottles. These guys in the tuxedos were kind of making fun of him. I didn't pay that much attention, and I went into the bus depot, and that guy comes into the bus depot and he sits down next to a soldier and the soldier right away gets up and leaves because the guy smells of wine. And so he comes over and sits down next to me. I refer to him now as "the bottle man." And so the bottle man looks at me and he says, "I notice all these guys that are making fun of me. None of them have any hair. They all have real short hair," and he says, "Feel my hair." And he had me put my hand on his head, and it was like touching electrical coils, steel. I mean, there was so much vitality; it was alive. I can still feel that head. And then he looks at me and he says, "You know, it's all in the Bible, son. There's the makers, the takers, and the fakers. Which will ye be?" And he gets up and walks away with those bottles clanging in his gunnysack. So years later when I get around to printing poems or what I call aphorisms and/or presumptions, and I go to read that at a poetry reading-Jack Hirschman used to get me to read at poetry readings in Venice, when I read that "There's the makers, the takers, and the fakers," this voice from the back of the room says [mimicking:] "Don't forget the breakers." [laughs] So, you know, the Bottle Man crosses my path.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You're not writing anything at this point then, in terms of poetry, are you?

GEORGE HERMS: Hmm, what was I writing at that.... [pauses] I don't think so. I think I'm absorbing. I'll have to think about that, Paul, whether there's any writings extant from that period. I do know-and this is very important-that my return to the plastic arts came about through love, in that after that kindergarten kid that did the paintings, the drawings and stuff, the next visual work I do is for Polly and it's a door-sized collage, a corrugated cardboard collage, that was a valentine. So that's February 14, 1956, I guess is where.... And this is my return to making things, and it's out of love. It's an act of love.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Did you think of it primarily as that? As communicating an emotion, an expression, rather than creating an art object?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, it was definitely a labor of love. And I began to make collages, as time went on, that were very much like that. I mean, I don't think that particular one exists, but I had also had.... I took various-music appreciation, art appreciation. You know Hershel Chipp, one of his courses....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Oh, yeah, I knew Hershel pretty well.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. And so in a way that's kind of your liberal arts education, to take those appreciation courses from someone that really loves the material. And he did communicate, for me anyway. The art was really great that he was presenting in slide form.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Now did any of these people-like Hershel, for instance.... Perhaps this is too early on, but was he or any of the others on faculty aware that you made art as well, or that was just personal?

GEORGE HERMS: No, no. I hadn't made any art. Yeah, no I hadn't made any art. That's why I bring up this valentine, that that then all of a sudden, and is why that l-o-v-e, that love stamp is central ...

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: We may as well get this out of the way. When did you start using....

GEORGE HERMS: In 1960. In 1960 in [Oxford, Roxbury]. So it doesn't appear on the things.... I will show you a 1957 lamp that has "love etah," the concept that hate is love spelled backwards, and then that that evolved into just turning the e around on love. That's a piece I wish I still had. It was the one piece I was going to keep from the fifties.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What happened to it?

GEORGE HERMS: I don't know what happened to it. It just disappeared.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Maybe it's in somebody's collection.

GEORGE HERMS: That would be nice to think, yeah, nice to think.

The culmination of that year in Berkeley is that Polly and I decide, yes, we will live together, and we move into this attic apartment, and I begin to work, once again, for Remington-Rand in San Francisco, as a tab operator, a computer jockey. Saving up money so that we can then go, at the end of the summer, to Lake Tahoe, where.... Something that I did not mention, when I was fourteen we used to vacation at Lake Tahoe. We'd stay in campgrounds and things, and I learned to swim in Lake Tahoe when I was five. But on vacation, as a government employee, I think my father had three weeks, maybe almost a month at this point, and they bought a lot at Lake Tahoe, and stopped his vacation and then took two weeks towards the end of the summer in which he organized all the plans and got the materials delivered to the site, and my mother and my father and I built a

cabin in fourteen days. I've never worked harder in my life. Because I was the low man on the totem pole. My brother was an electrician so he could come up on the weekends and do the wiring. But I was the wheelbarrow and the pounding-nails guy. And the only thing we paid for was someone came in and blew a hole to put the septic tank in and a mason came in and built the fireplace. So there was that cabin at Elk Point, which we then went from Berkeley to the six-weeks residence, because it was on the Nevada side, and that got Polly her divorce. And then....

All of a sudden I had flashes of Lake Tahoe there which are from high school. I don't know whether I should step into that or not. Maybe it's easiest just to keep going with Polly, down to Los Angeles. And the first thing we did is we went to Ensenada to get married, and I had this old Nash that the front seats folded down so you had a bed so we could sleep in it. And we went to Ensenada and you just paid, and it said you had a Wasserman test for syphilis, and then you paid witnesses, and in the book you could see on all the pages these professional witnesses that _____ _____... .

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Same things. ...

GEORGE HERMS: ...had done it all. And they just sort of sent you around town and you gave so many pesos here and so many pesos there and the next thing you know you were married. And then for our honeymoon we were just going to go south. Well, we went south until there was no daylight below the car, there was just ruts in the road, and then we stopped and slept there and finally backed around. Came back to Los Angeles and both of us got jobs. She got a job in a blueprint place near the airport, and I got a job with Servo Mechanisms. Once again a tab operator, computer jockey-you know, ran the payroll and did all of that. And we got a place in Hermosa Beach. And at this point we.... We got two places. We stayed in one for a while, and then the second one was actually on Hermosa Avenue and had a little sand front yard. I began-I guess at both places-to beachcomb and to bring things home-rusty gears-and make small tableaus out of them. And I began to write voluminous, 25-foot-long rolls of shelf paper with no punctuation, no double-spacing, just line after line after line, sort of vomiting out all of my life. Just sort of getting it out.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Autobiographical?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, and also in reference to things going on. And so it's in Hermosa Beach that I list my birth as an artist. And it was that house in Hermosa Beach that the Bermans came to when Berman's show was busted at the Ferus Gallery. And we just moved into their house to cover the phone calls and everything and they had a place to retreat to. And through that house in Hermosa Beach comes John Altoon. A wonderful drawing of his I wish I had of. ...There were all these liquid shapes sort of running down, and then at the bottom he wrote that when he was a child he loved to draw but that his mother had put his crayons on the stove. And it's just a beautiful drawing of John's. And Walter Hopps comes there. And this is the beginning of what I have more or less made public my ...network, I guess is the word to say. There were about seven people around Los Angeles, and from Hermosa Beach you go to Venice to Charles Brittin's place, up to Beverly Glen where the Bermans lived, over to Serrano to where Cameron lived and Edmund Teske lived on Murray Drive. And then on La Cienaga there's the Ferus Gallery and Barney's Beanery and so there's this kind of.... Everything is about 45 minutes away from me.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Um hmm, right.

GEORGE HERMS: And the people that come into one's life during this period are the ones that... . Down the alley in Hermosa Beach Bobby Driscoll is living, and through Bobby I meet Dean Stockwell and Lester Ferguson and....

I'm just going to throw out images of Anita O'Day, in a white bathing suit looking over the fence at Charles Brittin's and seeing her-and going within the last few months to hear her sing again. Charles Brittin's wastebasket where the rejects have beautiful brown stains on them from the chemicals. To me this is like really a golden period in Los Angeles when there is no hierarchy, no.... I mean, seeing Jay DeFeo's jewelry in a gallery. You would expect that things like that would be at the height of the museums, but they weren't.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Right.

GEORGE HERMS: So there's. . . . And I suppose underground is a valid word to apply to this, but the quality of the light in Beverly Glen when the music is.... Wallace and Shirley used to listen to this counter-tenor, Alfred Deller, sing Purcell's "Come ye sons of art," and the light coming through greenery, and sitting in their front room and being introduced to the Motherwell Dada Painters and Poets book, or a book on Duchamp, looking at View magazines that came out of New York. I mean, all the doors got opened. Almost simultaneously. And at the same time this working a 40-hour job at.... I mean, Wallace worked in a furniture factory at this time, finishing furniture. And it's kind of curious during this whole period that people worked full-time jobs and still were artists, and it wasn't an either-or situation. I left the Servo Mechanisms-an incredible name. Finally I just couldn't take it any more. And about the same time I got called up to the draft board for my physical, and that's a great moment because I had to be in downtown Los Angeles at 8 a.m., so I jump out of bed, I pull on some pants, I race

downtown, I probably smoked a joint on the way downtown, and I get in there and there's like an auditorium room, and I go all the way over to one side and sit down, and then the guy comes out and you give him your papers and he tells you how to fill them out. It says, "Define your health in your own words." He says, "I want you to put down the word fine, f-i-n-e." [laughs] And there's these two things; you're supposed to be putting out duplicate. So I just wrote a poem across both those things. And then there was the attorney general's list for the loyalty oath thing at the bottom, and he told you how to put the yes's and the no's on that. And then at the very end there's a place for comments, and I wrote down the word "ridiculous."

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: [laughs]

GEORGE HERMS: And so, sure enough, the seat I'm seating in is the first one to be called, so you go up to the front of the room and the guy's there with his cup of coffee first thing in the morning. He looks down, he sees that word "ridiculous," and he starts talking to me in this soft southern voice, like, "You-all shouldn't make any fun of this. A lot of people put a lot of work into this." I didn't want to spend any time on this and then it's even more ridiculous than I thought. You know, just softly talking back to me. And then he looks at the two which are supposed to be the same and he sees this poem written across both of them, and he says, "Seems to be a slight discrepancy here." And he writes "Room 5" on my paper, and he says, "Follow the yellow line." I said, "What?" And he points down. And you look down at your feet and sure enough there's a yellow line that goes across the room, out the door, and turns the corner. So you follow the yellow line, and here's the guys in their white coats and army uniforms and you're supposed to strip to your socks and your shorts. Well, I was wearing sandals, so I had no socks on and I didn't have any underwear on. So there I am standing starkers; they all flipped out. "Put something on! Put something on! Cover him up, cover him up!" They were all going nuts. So then I go through the line. It's a physical. I assume my body because of all the athletics and swimming and track and everything, that I'm in fine shape. But this guy comes along who I thought was a janitor or something-he was not in army garb-and he says, "Room 5's busy, come with me." And so we go into a little room like a desk and he's sitting there. And the poem I had written.... Well, first of all he says, why am I wearing the beard? I said, "I just don't shave." He says, "You gotta have a reason. I mean, Samson had long hair but that was his strength." And I said, "Well, I don't know." I mean, people react funny to a beard in the fifties and you'd get called names from Santa Claus to Jesus to Castro to. . . . I said, "Maybe a beard is strength. I don't know. I just don't shave." So then he says, "Now what about this?" Because in the poem I wrote I said-because this guy told you how to put your words down-I said, "God does not speak to us in the voice of a rabid, eared...." You know, ya, ya, it went on and just carried on. And he says, "Does God speak to you?" And I said, "Well, I don't know. What's happening in dreams? I mean, what's happening when you make a work of art?" And the guy's writing all this time. And so he said, "Well, we're going to declare you 4-F." [laughs] And I made a copy of his statement and what he wrote down was, "This applicant wears a full beard for strength. He claims he receives instructions from God in the form of dreams and in his work as an artist...." (He had also asked me about why I was unemployed, and I said, "I couldn't take it any more, working for Servo Mechanisms.") "and that he recently left a job for obscure reasons and this shows an obvious delusional pattern, S-1" (which was some kind of schizophrenic code), "and 4-F." And he asked if I would take some tests, and I said, "Sure." And so I go back out and I'm sitting with my papers, and here this little-I think I call him a bantam rooster or something in the poem-but this little guy comes out, this sergeant, looks at the papers. He sees the word "artist," takes the papers, and he throws them down on the floor. [mimicking] "Another fucking Rembrandt!" he says, and he threw the papers down. So then I'm going through the line and I'm having my blood taken, and all of a sudden I hear this voice, "George!" and I'm looking around and I can't tell where it's coming from. It turns out it's the guy that's supposed to draw my blood. He says, "You-all don't"-again, it's southern; he says, "You-all don't like the army, do you?" And before I can answer he jabbed that fucking needle clear through my arm. Man, it was a drag. So then the tests, which I took, were Rorschachs and just some of that stuff. And that was it. I was out of the army. And I had felt.... Oh, another thing I had mentioned to the guy that I.... He put down that I was close to being a conscientious objector but I didn't want to have to get involved with having to be part of an organization. So what I saw was-whoever this guy was-that I was somebody that would not mesh. You know, what I mean? That would bollix up the gears of the army. And he just wrote me out. And so that's the draft board story.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Lucky you.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, exactly. And also because it was called a physical. I think if.... You know, at some point I might have wanted to talk to somebody about being a conscientious objector or something, but whoever this guy was because Room 5 was busy.... [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But they were going to send you for a proper physical?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, it was. I got it. I did have a physical that day.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You got the whole set.

GEORGE HERMS: I mean I went through all the thing. And everything and the body was fine, but they knew that I

was not proper army material.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, at least you didn't have to compromise in any way by joining the military.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. It soon became a thing of people trying to stay out of the army, as Vietnam really.... That became like a major thrust for people, and I was very blessed in that just at that time I was totally honest about who I was and what I was doing.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Now you were still.... I think this would probably be a good point to stop until next session, but during this time in which you're calling up images, you were then in Hermosa still?

GEORGE HERMS: Right, yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: In the second place, in Hermosa Beach, which is _____ _____.

GEORGE HERMS: Right, yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And that was where? On Hermosa Boulevard?

GEORGE HERMS: Hermosa Avenue.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Avenue. Is that right down by the beach?

GEORGE HERMS: It's in about two or three blocks from the beach, and about fifteen blocks from the lighthouse, and Walter Hopps is trying to find out if there are any photographs of that place, if anybody still has photographs, or where Polly is, or if Charles Brittin ever photographed it.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, I hope he finds something.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. To my knowledge, I don't think, I don't have any.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And I also wish Walter would get around to turning all that he's promised to the Archives over, but that's another story.

Interview with George Herms
Conducted by Paul Karlstrom
At the Artist's studio in Downtown Los Angeles, California
December 13, 1993

Session 3, tape 1, side A

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, a continuing interview with artist George Herms in his Los Angeles studio. This is session 3, December 13, 1993; interviewer is, once again, Paul Karlstrom; and this is tape 1.

We were doing a chronology, or a more or less chronological review of your life, career, and I think we got up to about 1960, sometime around then-at a very important point, as a matter of fact, it seemed, and we need to pick up there. But in terms of the story of your life, there are certain problems you've had to face which are, I suppose, of a professional nature. A dilemma which you have faced, and apparently it's still the case, is to devote yourself to making art and then at the same time to produce the wherewithal that allows that to continue. And you I think wanted to share some more recent or current experiences on that particular theme. What's happening right now, up to the moment we just started taping again? What have you been doing?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, when we finished the second session, I was served with a three-day notice-pay rent or quit-on this space that we're sitting in right now doing our interviews. And we had biographically gone through a period called "The Search," and then we began to look at the stew of ingredients that make up this particular artist. And I remember us getting to 1957, actually.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Okay.

GEORGE HERMS: Where the starters is what I saw, and I do have some notes that I made which I can put in, and then that way we'll be able to remember to go back to them, since I look at 1957 as a birthdate.

I won't get into the eviction notices anymore. I think it's just an on-going problem, and I think. ...we'll just face it. Every so many years an eviction notice will come in, so like with a string of pearls, biographical pearls.

In 1957 I want to talk about Lester Young and the Count Basie Orchestra at the Shrine Auditorium. The Baza

Shack, which was Bob Alexander's print shop, where he made the announcements for the Ferus Gallery, and the Berman show in 1957, and its impact on me. And also there's an illustration of The Lamp from 1957 which has my writing in it, and I think we need to put that. I wrote under the pseudonym Eric Hammerscoffer, and we need to talk about the secret exhibition of 1957, and my friend John Reed, who was very much a part of that Ferus Gallery backroom mix. And even beyond, going back in that direction, in 1956 there was another one of these Univac incidents that I would like to tell the story of at some point, of working at Remington Rand in San Francisco.

These are things that occurred to me since our last session which ended, as I recall, in Hermosa Beach and the realization that neither Polly nor I were happy working at these jobs and that perhaps.... She had eleven years of college education and never got a degree. So we made a plan that she would return to school and get a teaching credential and that she would teach and bring in the money, and I would be free to pursue my budding interests in art. And towards that end we moved from Hermosa Beach back to Berkeley and rented a thirteen-room house from the university on [Haste] Street, a couple blocks from the University, and she went and in the space of a year got her teaching credential. And I worked and paid the bills during that year, worked as a stevedore at Paper Editions in San Francisco. And that was a very prolific and fruitful year for both myself and the Bay area because the North Beach Beat phenomenon was just in full bloom. There were poetry readings with thousands of people marching through the streets. In fact, at some point we'll get to The Asphalt Fountain Pen, the theater piece that I did that covers that era and go over. ...There's a ton of incidents that continue to sustain me as a young artist just beginning.

On a personal level, this thirteen-room house allowed people like Wallace and Shirley Berman and their son Tosh to come up and stay with us until they found a place in San Francisco, followed by Artie and Betty Richer and their four children and cats and dogs. They stayed for a lengthy period of time, and I would come home from work, and stay up all night with Artie painting murals on the walls in the house. He taught me how to stretch canvas at this time.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You hadn't really painted before this.

GEORGE HERMS: No, not in that classical sense of painting. Nor drawing either-I mean, not since kindergarten. It came back to me through, basically, the Bermans' influence, through books like The Dada Painters and Poets, and the View magazines that had a Duchamp issue, and Ernst, and Yves Tanguy, and seeing that whole. ...To me the twentieth-century medium is collage, and that's sort of what I fell into. But Artie felt-not immediately, but within a few years-he felt that my assemblage works should all be cut off and I should do nothing but draw from life and paint, because he was a traditional artist-a wild man, but a traditional artist. And when I worked in the book warehouse I went back and forth across the Bay Bridge with a guy named Gene Flood and after work we would smoke a joint as we took the Bay Bridge back to the Oakland/Berkeley side. I would give him a little grass and he would always want, economically, to get a lot of grass because it would cost less. And I said, "Well, I never see any, just a very small amount is all I ever have." And then Artie said that he had a friend in Los Angeles who wanted to bring some marijuana up to the Bay area and did I know of anyone. So I told Gene Flood and Gene Flood brought over to my house in Berkeley this guy that was supposed to represent Hawaiians from North Beach. I should have seen something there because North Beach is an Italian section of town. So this guy wanted some grass, and so the guy came up from L.A. and then he was sleeping and I'm just trying, I'm kind of a go between, and all of a sudden nine narcotics officers kicked down the door of this thirteen-room house and came in and arrested me and my wife. And there was a guy named Justin Pope up in the attic. He had a darkroom and he was developing pictures and he got really pissed off because they came in with their flashlights and ruined his film. I mean, there were a lot of people living in that house at that time.

It was a wonderful house and a great deal of music and art and poetry came out of that house. But they hauled me away, and by this time Artie and Betty had found an apartment towards the Oakland side of Berkeley, and so they drug me over there and wanted me to go in, and I started saying, "It's no soap, it's no soap," and they throttled me and took me into the bushes. And then they go in and this guy from L.A. had some heroin on him, had a little paper with some heroin in it. And so he they took Artie and myself and this guy to the Berkeley jail. And Artie and I both had full beards, and so they called us the Smith Brothers. And they immediately let go the guy from L.A. figuring he would go right back to the car that had the marijuana in it, and of course he went to the San Francisco airport and lived happily ever after. Artie had all these kids and so it was just like probation for him, but my parents.... And I had just learned how to stretch canvas so in like the couple of weeks when I was out on bail before you go to your preliminary hearing or whatever, I painted about twenty-four canvases, and I was having a terrific time painting. My parents got a civil lawyer instead of a criminal lawyer. He pled me guilty, which I found out means that whatever they put in the police report, that becomes part of the record. Now the police said I was the biggest marijuana dealer in northern California, and I have yet to this day, in 1993, sold a single joint in my entire life. But that's how they do it. And I went before a lady judge who was the first woman to ever legally murder a man in California. She sent a guy to the gas chamber and she made the Sunday newspapers. So she threw the book at me. You know first offense-and last offense-and I got a sentence of six months to Santa Rita Rehabilitation Center. And I learned that maxim, that you never plead guilty, and that's

why you don't, is because whatever they say is held against you.

And so I did my six months. I mean, part of it while you're having a probationary hearing, so you do four months and twenty days. You have five days off every time you give blood, so the trick is to give blood right away, and then so many weeks go by and you can give again. And the education I got, instead of being at the Art Institute, I was in this county jail where I was introduced to every illegal way to make a living: where to fence goods in Oakland, I was introduced to heroin, every kind of narcotic, in jail. I mean, there were people that had to get busted on the outside to get back to their connection in jail. I mean, the education that I got was absolutely incredible. All totally illegal, you know, and I'm a naive, small-town kid, but some of the things were fantastic. Just a quick one was a guy who knew I was a painter and saw me painting abstractions and wanted me to take all the ingredients of auto theft-the registration, the license plates, Sacramento, engine number, all these things-and do a painting, mixing them up and giving him a new way to steal automobiles. That's the criminal mind; it's fantastic! When I left, after six months. ...Of course, in this time Polly finishes her schooling, gets a job in the little town of [Tuolome] up in eastern California....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What year is this now?

GEORGE HERMS: 1958. And yeah, it's going to go very fast, Paul, these things. Always ask what year and where, because that's the skeleton we want to establish, and then I'll always go off on a tangent about the philosophical events. So Polly had to move while I'm in jail and she took all of my work out of this thirteen-room house and put it in a pile in the back yard and set fire to it, burned everything. So anybody that says they have my work from the fifties is lying, basically. I mean, maybe Dean Stockwell, he's the only one....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yeah, some of your friends must....

GEORGE HERMS: But very little, because I'm just starting to bloom and I go to jail, right? Now what I did accomplish: When I first went to jail you could only have a pencil and paper to write your lawyer, and by the time I left there was a quonset hut devoted to painters, and I read my poetry the night before I got out. So a little was accomplished in this rehabilitation center.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So you were writing poetry in prison, in the lockup?

GEORGE HERMS: Right, and I have somewhere a stack of.... I smuggled out all the paintings I did, too, paintings and drawings.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What were they like? What would-kind of expressionist?

GEORGE HERMS: They would be abstract expressionist, mostly, with some figurative work in it. Somewhere they're around, and we could look at them. I saw them recently. They're not that interesting to me because they're just studies, basically, in that environment and very little of the assemblage-what came to be called assemblage, or collage-work went on in jail, for instance, because I didn't have glue that I could use. And sculpture's almost out of the question.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But how did they fit with your other interests that had begun to be developed starting, I think, in Hermosa?

GEORGE HERMS: Um hmm.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What did you turn to, given the limitations of what you had at hand? Was there any connection, or carry-over interests?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I think that the painting that was going on in the big world at that time was called action painting, so if you worked for more than thirty seconds on something you were over-working it. So there's quite a bit of that feel to it. One time Artie-this is after I got out of jail and was living with him after the "Mother Lode" deal fell through-said I was painting with my eyes closed, that I wasn't watching what I was doing, which is kind of a good description of an emotional moving of colors around. In other words, the organization that came through compositionally in the assemblages later on didn't really show itself in those paintings-to my eye looking at them now. It's more just noodling around.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So it was kind of a detour. I mean, you were involved in making these things-you were making art, you were interested in art-but in terms of interests that you had begun to develop this was peripheral.

GEORGE HERMS: I don't think so. I think that what happens.... It's back to the self-taught thing, in that you have to prove all evils and try all mediums, and I painted from the mid-fifties until I lost a son in 1965. That was really the pinnacle of painting, and stretching canvases. And I think that my return to-not that the found objects ever

went away; they were just in tandem with.... The Zodiac Boxes are a wonderful document, where painting and drawing and poetry and found objects and objects that are formulated as well all co-exist so that.... In other words, the painting and the drawing were there when I was five, and it took all this time to get started again and work to a certain place, which I would say occurred for me in the mid-sixties. And then with the Love Press the printers' inks took over the place of oil paints, because they were oil-based printers' inks and they began to be that outlet for.... My color instincts are kind of monochromatic in the rust, Southwest desert area. But then there's this uptown set of values, the bright printers' inks and paintings with high values. It's that "Don't fence me in" pendulum, again, that wants, you know, "Don't pin me down." My obvious affection is for all these rust tones and earth colors, but every once in a while I want to wax magenta with a bright hot red or something and that's.... And that sometimes borders over into theater, too. Sets for theater would be of that nature. The painterly side would come out. So I don't see it as a detour but just kind of opening up another rivulet that had sort of been stopped by this thing leading to the College of Engineering, and that vein that got opened and trickled and then gushed, actually, for a while when I had shows in New York and paintings and there would be no assemblage works.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But did you feel then.... You were becoming more and more aware of the broader art world....

GEORGE HERMS: Right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Did you feel then as if you were a participant with, well, say, the San Francisco, the remnants of the Art Institute crowd and those who were carrying on the gestural abstract action painting mode? Did you feel part of that group in a sense?

GEORGE HERMS: No, not so much part of them, see, because I got most of it from Artie and John Altoon. Artie moved up there, and then Joan Brown and Manuel Neri's work and Jay DeFeo's work are all influences on me. There's no question about that. The sequence of when I became aware of them, I would say a lot of it was through the filmmaker Larry Jordan, because he was friends with Robert [Duncan] and Jess [Collins]. And Jess had a beautiful show. Many, many rooms, of his early paintings. And I think the joy of painting-there's no question about it-and Artie's presence and his kind of almost conservative-you know, that that's really where it's at is in stretching canvasses and drawing from life and that's really what he was advising that I do. And I'm a very pliable person; someone says do something, I try it. Sometimes they say don't do it, I try it, too.

So at any rate, when I left jail I left with a stack of paintings under my arm, and in a way I was two feet off the ground. After you've been in jail for six months that first time they let you off the bus in downtown Oakland, I mean, you walk.... It's unbelievable, because for the first time you're free. I learned certain things in jail that are to this day.... I mean, it marks you, obviously, at twenty-two to be in jail for six months with murderers and violence and a barracks with forty guys and their teeth gnawing at night and then somebody's head hitting the concrete in a fight and watching epileptics have fits and realizing that that's something that one could practice oneself to get loose, and ending up, strangely enough, with every outfit in the joint. I couldn't believe it, because I'm a pot smoker. But somehow I would.... They called me "Way Out Willie" because I was a painter. But somehow I ended up with all these outfits, and so people when they.... On Sunday during the visits, somebody would smuggle something in, and one time a guy got caught putting some grass in his sock or something and made a run for the fence, and this one guy was just mouthing off about, "Jesus Christ, fucking punks, you can't do your time without having your grass. I mean, what bullshit." He was really carrying on really loud and then, after the lights went down, he came over and asked to get one of the outfits from me because he'd had some heroin smuggled in to him the same day. So all of a sudden this lesson of that loud voice is often the one that is really the most hypocritical.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Protests too much.

GEORGE HERMS: Exactly, yeah. There're all kinds of things I got.... And then two really good friends. ...Michael Bowen was this guy who stuttered unless he had some smack, and so whenever he talked straight to you without stuttering you knew that he'd had some smack, and he was the one who introduced me to it as just like a friendly thing to do. He dug it and it cured his stuttering. So I didn't stutter but.... Fortunately I was not the type that was attracted to that particular sedation.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You tried it?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. And would be offered it over the years at different times from different people for different reasons, and then all of a sudden all those people were dead and I haven't seen any since the middle of the sixties-you know, for thirty years.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: We touched a little bit on this earlier and probably will talk about it again, but a lot has been made of the California, well, the Beat underground of that period, the underground around the counterculture being heavily involved with drugs, almost to the extent that the drugs practically provided the

vision, that it was an essential ingredient to the lifestyle and perhaps then ideas about being an artist. Here you're at a point, you're describing a particular....

GEORGE HERMS: I'm talking about jail.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yeah.

GEORGE HERMS: I'm talking about jailhouses, and there was no Beat generation thing going on in that jail.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But outside, as I say, a lot has been made of this, and you might want to respond to it.

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I think that what they miss out on is that there's this beautiful smorgasboard that is laid out in those years. I did a piece called Something Surfaced, and something surfaced in American international consciousness with this what is now called the Beat Generation, and it's never been driven back underground again. And on this smorgasboard there's a few canapés that are stimulants or sedatives, but what the main dishes are, are art and literature and music. And people miss the bet. It's like when they go to Cameron on Halloween and want her to talk about witchcraft and black magic and all this, and she responds that the real true magic is in the palms and in the paintings. Of course, this doesn't make it on the six o'clock news.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: No.

GEORGE HERMS: And people don't like to think that the Beat Generation was other than a bunch of bongo-playing, nihilist types. And it wasn't that way at all. There was a great camaraderie that turned its back on the materialistic consumerism, basically, was what it was. Nobody was interested in washer/dryers. They were interested in coming to see a thousand people walk through the streets to go to a poetry reading in North Beach. It's absolutely incredible.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: A thousand!

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. To a hall that would hold a thousand, and the hall was full.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Where would they go for these readings?

GEORGE HERMS: Oh, [Fugotti] Hall was one. I can't remember the one that everybody marched to, but it's in all of the photographs of [John] Wiener's and McClure and Lamantia and David Meltzer and Ginsberg. And hearing people in the audience trying to get Allen to speak up, and he would say, "Listen. It doesn't matter how loud I read my poems, you're not going to hear it." [laugh] Isn't that something? [mimicking loudly, raucous audience] "Louder, louder, Allen, I can't hear!" [laughter] But he's right. I mean, the one that heckles is never going to hear it.

I don't know, and the films, the underground film revolution at that time. To see Larry Jordan's work, and [Stan] [Brackhage]'s work, and to see all of that just exploding. And, of course, the tragedy was that I was in jail when a lot of the activities concerned were taking place.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, so do you feel that the timing was really bad for you....

GEORGE HERMS: Really, yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...that this was really a critical.... Why do you say that? Was it that brief a period of what you feel was a really creative, dynamic or _____. . . .

GEORGE HERMS: Well, it has to do actually with somebody like Artie teaching me how to paint. I mean, how to stretch canvas. Let's not say how to paint. And that you're at that point where maybe the next thing would be to take some classes at the Art Institute. You know what I mean? I mean, that's a possibility. I was there working.... Seems like half my life I've been putting women through college to get a degree to teach. But so I was doing my part but in that moment I didn't need to be having to deal with auto theft and violence. I could have been checking out....

Anyway, so Polly burns everything, and she moves to a little mountain town and tells everybody her husband's a salesman, he's on the road, and he'll be along in a little while. I get out in November and move up there, and, of course, we had worked hard to arrive at this goal, at this dream, and once having achieved it, it went sour, and by the end of the year it wasn't working, and so I moved back to San Francisco and stayed with Artie and Betty. They had a house on Buchanan Street in San Francisco.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Buchanan and what?

GEORGE HERMS: It's in the Fillmore District; I can't remember what the cross streets were. But I lived in the

basement and then.... Actually, there was a whole year spent in Tuolome; it wasn't just by the end of that year. And during that year I made some visits to San Francisco and to Los Angeles-which I should at some point address because one of them was to visit the Richers. At this time we're living in Venice and Life magazine did their spread: the us against them, Kansas versus Venice, Beats versus squares. And from Tuolome, I wrote a letter to Life magazine saying they're trying to start World War III with this divisiveness. And my mother said, "You're real smart. Both you guys are on probation and one of the conditions is that you not be with anyone that has ever trafficked with drugs," and here I am in a national magazine with my picture on the floor at the Richers in Venice.

So there's that. There's a lot of things that happened in San Francisco in 1959 that.... Again, I'll get up a list of the items that went into it.

And the Mother Lode is where I have my first public exhibition, in that little mountain town, and that has a wall of all of my paintings from jail. That's in the middle of '59. And a woodblock announcement, a carved woman dancing, and assemblages and paintings. And the piece called Lamp was also in that show.

And then when it didn't work out with Polly in that situation.... And there's different things in 1959 I have to give you. Somewhere in one biography it mentions the peyote and magic period. You know, it referred to that, so we can delve into that.

But to get our bones, our skeleton of the biography, when I got out of jail I met a person named Wilder Bentley in Berkeley, and he came over to Artie Richer's and saw me in the basement and took me to another place to live called Fort Taylor. Do you want to change the tape now?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: May as well.

Session 3, tape 1, side B

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Continuing the interview with George Herms. This is the third session, tape 1, side B. Wilder Bentley?

GEORGE HERMS: Wilder Bentley was the son of a painter and a fantastic inspiration to me. He came by and saw me living in the basement on Buchanan Street and moved me to an attic in.... Ed Taylor was a piano player that rented a house with many rooms and then sublet the rooms out, and on New Year's Eve of 1960 I was living in the attic and Louise [Dacklund, Tackland] was living with Dick Higgins in the basement. And Louise and I met on the stairs and fell in love and began a thirteen-year romance, with children. We took a little room just below Coit Tower over in North Beach, and I would work as a janitor cleaning out the Coffee Gallery and I also had a job mopping the floor at City Lights. In those days you could live on fifteen dollars a week. I would finish mopping out the Coffee Gallery at dawn and steal a couple little splits of champagne and we'd go up to Coit Tower and watch the sun come up, so that was our courtship.

All during this period Berman has been putting out Semina magazine and living in a house on Scott Street and it had become kind of out of hand. John Wieners was selling five-dollar matchboxes out on the street wearing blue eye-shadow and. ...So the Bermans moved to Larkspur, and I helped them move and Wally pointed out an empty boathouse at the end of this string of houseboats and said that was a possibility. So when Louise and I got thrown out of the place on Greenwich Street.... At three in the morning the cops came by with flashlights and they looked in and they found us sleeping there because this was a place that no one was supposed to sleep or something, and they just got so excited. It was kind of cute. [mimicking an excited voice] "There's someone there! There's someone there! I see someone! I see someone!" "Yeah, where?" "There's someone in there!" And, then, what do you do? You put your clothes on and walk out, and there we were. And so Louise and I moved to Larkspur and that's the.... I almost feel like saying, "And the rest is history," because that's where Bill Seitz comes and picks out a piece for the Museum of Modern Art, Berman shows me at his Semina Gallery, Batman Gallery has a show of seventy-seven of my works in May of 1961. Our first-born daughter Nalota was born there, and that was a wonderful, wonderful moment.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: How do you spell her name, for the sake of....

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. N-a-l-o-t-a. In other words, where we lived there was a tidal creek that would come up, and where I lived in the boathouse there was no boardwalk that led to it, so when the tide came in you were stuck in our house, and so visitors had to be on that tidal pace, which was very nice.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: In touch with nature, the ebb and flow.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right. And if you want to come visit, come visit, man. Don't just bop in and bop out, you know. But we were declared a public nerve, a public nuisance. A public nerve is what it was. I touched a public nerve, that's for sure, and had to leave. And so I had no car, and I enlisted.... I asked some people to help me

move and picked a date, this particular Sunday, and one bicycle showed up to help us move. [laughs] And so we picked another date a couple weeks later, and Paul Beattie and Marilyn Rose showed up-Marilyn with a trailer and Paul Beattie with a VW van-and we moved in with Bobby Driscoll in Topanga Canyon. Bobby had lived down the alley in Hermosa Beach and we had stayed close.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Why would you make that big of a move? What brought you back to Topanga?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I'm not sure what it was, other than Bobby visited up there and said, "You know, you can stay with us." And probably being declared a public nuisance kind gives you an edge so that wherever you can get out, you want to get out. And that was a solid offer.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What year was that?

GEORGE HERMS: 1961 is when we left Larkspur. And then in Topanga we stayed with Bobby and Susanne and her son Nicky. And then a writer named David Bartholomew had a house over on Valley View, and he offered to rent it to us, and he was sort of living there with us at the same time, until there was a brush fire. He left, the first brush fire that went through Topanga. It's terrifying, your first experience with one of those. And so we stayed there till. ...We were supposed to be paying the rent and, as usual, I fell behind, and there was a couple that he was buying the house from in Europe, and they were really counting on that money, and when it didn't come through.... You know, a guy shows up at the door and gives you a notice and you have to leave immediately. And I felt like, "Tell me to put postage stamps on everything and move it."

During that period, I was part of a show in Pasadena at the museum that Walter Hopps curated. I always called it the California Collage Show but it's got some other name-Directions in Collage or something. The Kurt Schwitters retrospective was in Pasadena, and I was one of three kind of one-man shows. On the other side of the wall from me was Kurt Schwitters' work, and I was very honored. And then there was one wall had a hundred California artists on it. And the American Legion took offense to this one piece that had an old American flag on it. And so they closed the museum and the board of trustees met, and they figured the case out.... Well, first they call me, would I take the piece out? And it was a corner, finely tuned with thirteen works. And you take one of them out and it's totally unbalanced. There was no way to do that. So they decided to back me and reopen the museum. They took it through to the Supreme Court and figured out how the nine justices would have voted on this case....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You mean, they projected it; they speculated.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, they projected. ...Yeah, right. If it worked its way through the courts, that the museum would win, so they voted to open the museum the next day. And that night somebody broke in. Sawed through a pipe and a gate, jimmied two doors, got back to the exhibition room, ripped the flag off of the piece. So I'm called in Topanga to come look at the damage the next day. And I go over there and.... The nature of assemblage is an additive process, and so when you have this, like, good bone structure and then the muscles, and then the cosmetics. And so this flag had been ripped out of the heart of it. The piece is called Max and it's illustrated in the Newport Harbor, the Prometheus Archives retrospective. And I looked at it and the flag had been ripped out of the heart of it. The rest of the piece was intact, and structurally it was all right, so I wrote a note where the flag had been, and I said, "This piece has been raped by a madman and despite this degradation the forces of creation will go on." And I signed it, "Love, G.H." Put that note where the flag had been, hung it back up on the wall, and told them go ahead, open up the museum. So that work happened in 1962.

Unfortunately, the L.A. Times came out to interview me and wanted to see me at work, and I would throw a ball up in the air and hit it with a hammer and I had on a doctor's coat that I used to wear, and they put my home address in the newspaper, and I got hate mail with, like, a brown substance xing across my face, or a noose tied around my neck, and all these flag.... I wish I had all this material. I don't have it anymore. But it was an excellent example of the state of the art of the public in relationship to desecration of the flag in 1962. Which first....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: How did it finally resolve? The show....

GEORGE HERMS: They opened it up with the piece damaged, with the note....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Throughout the scheduled time?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, with the note in there, saying what I just said.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But there were no more incidents at the museum?

GEORGE HERMS: No, the American Legion was happy; they got what they wanted. Again, it's an insult to your work, and you have to.... You're either going to fold, I guess, in the face of the.... It's like the eviction notices, you

know. So for Valley View that was an eviction notice, and we had a big square deal and a free musical show which was a Tap City Circus, a presentation in Topanga. The first Tap City Circus presentation was in Larkspur when we were declared a public nuisance and then.... At some point in your files you probably have Larry Jordan's invitation to that. It says "New Sense on the Marsh," and it's dated September whatever it was in 1961, and there were free puppies and kittens for the children and.... So the Tap City Circus would ride whenever one of these eviction notices would come through.

And so, casting around for a place, no one in Topanga Canyon seemed.... There was a guy named Bob DeWitt that was supposed to be everyone's hero and really good to the artists, and he sent me to some woman in the Palisades that sold me a bill of goods. She rented me for a dollar a day this cabin in the Malibu Mountains. It was wonderful. It was like Eden. There was a hundred acres with this cabin next to a spring. Just totally isolated, a dirt road went in to it, and so I paid her first and last month. I thought, "This is great. I'll live forever, a dollar a day." You know, there's no electricity in there. We lived by candlelight, a wood stove to cook on. And my second daughter was conceived there, and it was just, it was Eden. It was an absolute Eden until all of a sudden somebody showed up with a big gun and a huge bottle of rum, and these kids were really pissed off, and they came out there to shoot their guns, and my dog as soon as a gun was let off went right for their throats. And so they split and the next thing I know, a few days later, it's like the FBI comes in, these guys with guns on the hood of the car and the owner. This woman who had rented it to me, all she knew was how to get out there. She didn't own it. So the owner's the L.A. Bail Bonds' original person. He was a giant of a man with huge ears on him, and he and his wife, during their honeymoon, had with poles behind horses, what they called travois, had brought in all the materials and built this house. It was like their honeymoon cottage. And so instead of throwing me out of there he saw me with my wife and kid and the vegetable garden, and I'm totally knocked out by.... My Packard, that I'd gotten from Bobby Driscoll's dad, had died on the dirt road trip, this two miles, just died, and I was taking it apart, and I had an exhibition out of all the collage materials in one American motor car, and I was just thrilled. I was showing him all this stuff, and so he ended up giving me five dollars. He said, "Your dogs are too skinny. Feed the dogs." And he gave me five dollars and he split.

So then I thought, "This is...."

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But he let you stay there?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, he let us stay there. And so.... Louise was working as a housecleaner down the road and almost had a miscarriage, and Paul Beattie came through there.... A lot of people came through there. John Coplans.... Larry Rivers was wonderful to the people that visited there. I called it the "Groove Grove."

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Larry Rivers visited this pad?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, I drove him out there with Virginia Dwan and he was scared shitless, like white knuckled, because he's a tough city guy but you get him on these dirt roads where there's cliffs and things, and he just turned as white as a ghost.

That was a very nice time because Betty Asher would bring by.... To the Valley View place. Armand came and we traded pieces. Virginia Dwan's gallery was really very important at that time in Westwood. [Ed] Kienholz had a dinner at Virginia Dwan's, and this would be about this time. Assemblage was relatively new and already it seemed as though there was the social protest wing, which Ed was to be in charge of, and then the poetic wing, which I was to be in charge of. This is a dinner at Virginia Dwan's in Malibu, and Ed sold her a piece of mine that had been at the County Museum that no one had bought. And Ed came out to this Groove Grove when I wasn't there and took a piece, which he paid for eventually. But it was concrete or cement. It was called Marsh Bandit, and so in a way he's been a collector of mine over the years. I mean, it was a supportive role.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I don't mean to interrupt, but I'm curious to know. Did you have two have much interaction, you and Kienholz?

GEORGE HERMS: I think that dinner in Malibu.... He was obviously around the Ferus Gallery when I watched Berman hang his show. You know, that's one of the events of 1957 we have to get into. He wasn't that much of a presence, to me. I mean, there were people like Altoon and Artie Richer and Berman and Bob Alexander.... Not Berman so much, but the others are very flamboyant characters. And Ed at that time.... You know, I've talked about The Lamb, that piece of mine, that's the kind of work I'm doing, and Ed's basically just taking little pieces of wood and nailing them on a board and brushing them with a broom, colors over them, calling it The Urination of Los Angeles, and they're not very interesting. You know what I'm saying? And he eventually became a really fantastic artist, but at that time he wasn't impressive. He was more impressive that he gave me thirty-five dollars buying a piece of mine.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Good taste.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, that's what I liked. And then once.... When he and Mary split up and he kept the kids and

he did all this taping there was kind of a question whether Louise would maybe be his housekeeper, or something. We had dinner with him. So our paths have crossed sporadically.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Presumably. ...Clearly he was interested in your work or something?

GEORGE HERMS: Oh, yeah. Well, I did The Meat Market in 1960 at Batman Gallery, and what follows Meat Market is Roxie's, which is a whorehouse. So I think the two of us were approaching a lot of the same material-he in Los Angeles and I in Northern California, in Larkspur. And Walter is the go-between. Walter Hopps is.... At that point I'm patting it down every time, because he has this reputation of going into artists' studios and stuffing drawings in his trenchcoat.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Who, Walter?

GEORGE HERMS: Yes.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Aah!

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, and especially with someone like Artie Richer that drank a lot and was kind of out of it. But then what happens thirty years later, you begin to wonder, now who's the thief here, because some of things are preserved and available, whereas before they were just on the floor getting walked on top of, so it's really a mixed situation, of a curator like that, that is part of.... I don't know how many curators really got involved with Beat Generation artists, many of whom were total lunatics.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Can you think of anybody else?

GEORGE HERMS: Jim Elliot, who was very supportive. He came through Larkspur and brought me some things that the County Museum was throwing out. Billy [Armark] had some raw opium-it was in powder form-and gave Jim a cup of coffee with some of that in it, and Jim drove to.... Oregon, I think, was where he was going. He says it's the greatest drive of his life. [laughs]

But, let's see, who else? Walter and Jim.... Well, Bill Seitz came through Larkspur and he was very impressive to me, but that's more a traveling curator, not a live-in situation, which Walter is more of.
PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: How did you meet Walter? Do you remember the occasion? He included you in the show at Pasadena. Is that right?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. I would say that I probably.... I would have met him around the Ferus Gallery. John Reed was living in the back, Berman was putting a show together, and I was around a lot then when I lived in Hermosa Beach. And Walter visited me in Hermosa Beach, and we've just had a very comfortable, almost jostling, kind of humorous relationship. I think I am the kind of artist that he likes, and he certainly has put on a lot of the shows, from Duchamp to Cornell, the Schwitters show, which I don't think he originated, but, you know, all of my heroes. I mean, he put a Cornell box in my hand during this period, one of those sand boxes that you can tip upside down.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What do you mean, he put it in your hand?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, just like we're sitting here right now, yeah, and he handed me a Cornell box, and that was in the early sixties.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That was special to you?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I mean, it's a fantastic moment when you take one of those boxes and you tip it upside down.

Now, another thing from 1957 we have to get in is Rachel Rosenthal and the Instant Theatre, because Rachel put a Bob Rauschenberg in my hand. I didn't know who he was for years and years, and then I finally put two and two together. A wonderful little weathered wood box with glass front and back, and these square nails driven through it, and then some ball bearings in there, so you could take this box, and tip it and all the square nails are tuned. It goes bing-bong, bungle-bing, bing-bub-al-a-bing-bing, goong. Beautiful. One of the best Rauschenberg's I've ever seen, and he's done some good ones. And that's coming out of the theatrical situation.

So back to the skeleton of the biography. Paul Beattie visited the Groove Grove, and said I could move in next to him up on Mill Creek Road outside of Healdsburg, where he has finally left the city. He and I have collaborated on a lot of films, when I lived in Larkspur, and he said, "Fifty dollars and a half-assed carpenter and you can have a house." And so that's what we did. We moved up to the Redwood Forest, and we started building-this'll be spring of '63-and we started building a house, and all summer it was beautiful, until the fall when I realized I'd built a wooden sieve. We had a great skylight that looked up at the redwood trees. It was based in, nestled in redwood trees. It had a living tree for one of the supports for the ridgepole, that went across the top of it. Paul Beattie had

designed a starburst floor for it, and my daughter Lily Belle was born there in this house, so that was the.... [speaking of tape recorder:] Thinking of _____ that light?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yeah. Go on.

GEORGE HERMS: So with the birth of Lily Belle.... I'm leaving out a few exhibitions. At some point we can go through them. In other words, in 1962 that Packard was shown at the Aura Gallery in Pasadena. It was described in that show as, "He said the forces of creation would go on, and they did." And this was a year after the flag was torn off at the museum. So the Aura Gallery was an artists' cooperative. Paul [Sarkissian, Tsarkissian] and Carol were the main people there. So there's the Aura Gallery show, and then when Lily Belle is born in the Redwoods in '63, Rolf Nelson wanted to have a show, and that was called Joy Jump, Temple of Light for Lily Belle. And everything was brought down in the trailer from Healdsburg to La Cienega to Rolf Nelson's gallery, which had a black and white checkerboard floor that your eye immediately hit and went brrrrrrrrrrrrrrp over to the corner. And what I did is eventually throw him out and just stayed in there and hung the show myself, which was my way of working. But that was all works from the Redwoods, and they're all.... And a lot of photographic work was done, called Hymn's Delight, and A Chunk of Redwood was a photograph, a big work, and everybody seems to like mounted and....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Photographs mounted in....

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, I would carve out like a four inch by three inch notch in a redwood slab and glue one of these Hymn's Delight, which is pushing like a.... Similar to Rayograms, except I'm using transparent things to push light through, not just to get the shadow of it. The lid of a cut crystal sugar jar, things like that. And a certain plate that I love very much, I put Karo syrup on it, and then make a-you know, put contact paper under it, push light through it. These were Hymn's Delight. And also doing quite a bit of painting in the Redwood Forest, and because I had to chop wood all winter long to keep us warm-there was just a wood stove to fight the mildew-I ended up in the springtime with these forearms as big as my thighs, and I carved heads out of redwood and oak and different logs, telephone poles, so there's a whole body of what I call "Heads." They're actually faces because I would just start at the tip of the nose and drive back till finally the face would say, "Stop hitting me in the face with that chisel, man," and then you knew you were done. So that body of work in the Redwoods was part of Rolf Nelson's show....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: It seems to me-just a comment as we're going along-that you're really rather opportunistic.

GEORGE HERMS: Yes.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You find yourself in a circumstance and somehow then what to do next appears to you.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You know, what are your materials and what can you do with them. Is that a fair description?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, exactly. Because that's what the search was. One of the things we have to go back to is this Univac experience in 1956, working for Remington Rand, and the lecture came down: "Electronic brains need your brains." We were all supposed to go to this lecture, and I just got the shudders. I wanted to be able to use all these other centers of my human condition, and thank God I met artists and poets. So that everything.... That to me is the great joy, is that your life is your raw material for art, that you don't.... And there's something I call the Meadow of Dedication, that at some point you arrive at and you walk out into this Meadow of Dedication, and you just give yourself up to art for the rest of your life, and no matter what it is you turn it to creative use. Whether it be an eviction notice, so then you send out announcements. You know, the Tap City Circus was an announcement that I was being thrown out.

And from the redwood forest-where there's a beautiful stream there. It was, again, a kind of idyllic thing, but Russian roulette at the mailbox, because Diana [Zlotnick] in the Aura Gallery show had bought a lot of things and would send me ten dollars a month, and that was about it. So I went.... I was doing a lot of drawings on butcher paper and I brought them to Los Angeles and sold them during the holiday season, and Michael McClure had written a play that Diane DiPrima was going to put on in New York at the Poet's Theatre, and would I do the sets for it? And because Michael visited in the Redwood Forest.... And Bruce Conner, there's a lovely little portrait he did of me up there, sixteen million, sixteen millimeters--just straight, no collage elements to it at all-of that house and that life up there.

And so I agreed to do the play, do the sets for the play. To raise the money for the tickets, Jim Elliot went around a cocktail party and got enough to get the family-by now four of us-to New York, and we stayed with Diane DiPrima in the spring of 1964. And they were all doing courtroom drama because of Jack Smith's Flaming Creatures, and LeRoi Jones' Brig and The Dutchman. They were fighting these pornography charges and

obscenity charges, and I was kind of twiddling my thumbs. A friend of mine got me a little eight-foot cubicle as a studio in the Lower East Side. But Diane gave me a set of haiku poems that she had written and suggested that I illustrate them. So I began.... I'm twenty-nine and for the first time in New York. I have William Blake sitting on my shoulder and I have all this patience that I'd never had before, and I began to carve illustrations out of cherry and pear wood-nice, wonderful hardwood-and then eventually did the sets for the play.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What was the play?

GEORGE HERMS: The play was the The Blossom, or Billy the Kid. It was a historical drama.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That's before The Beard?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. And I didn't see the play until we got on the plane in Oakland to take off. And you open it up and the very first thing it says is, "This play takes place in eternity." So I knew that the sets were cool, at that point. [laughs] It was great working with Diane, and then I also met the dancer Freddie [Herco, Herko] and did, well, sets. It was basically the altar in the Judson church. I put in, created this halo of flames from the altar. The Palace of the Dragon Prince was the name of it. And the poet Kirby Doyle sat on this throne, and basically all I did was just put this fire right in the heart of the church.

And '64 was a wonderful time in New York, because there was great jazz going on. You could stand outside the Five Spot and Yvonne Rainier's dancing at the Judson Church. Dance is really just exploding everywhere. I loved the dancers because they were with their instrument all day long. You know, they didn't have to have a studio to go to....
PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Let's....

GEORGE HERMS: You've got a blinking light.

Session 3, tape 2, side A

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: This is a continuing interview with George Herms, session 3, on December 13, 1993. This is tape 2, side A, and the interviewer is Paul Karlstrom.

Well, George, we've been bouncing around a little bit but I think productively: Different experiences and different locations, traveling around. We've had you now, at least briefly, in New York. You were doing some sets there for a production of Michael McClure's play Billy the Kid....

GEORGE HERMS: The Blossom, or Billy the Kid.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Okay. . . . and enjoying it. You said it was very exciting time in New York.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You were involved with theater, I gather, dance, or at least interested in it.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: How long were you there?

GEORGE HERMS: I'd say from February to June. Yeah, that's right; we flew back on the solstice, and there were fires burning all over America on the summer solstice. And the one thing that was kind of sad is that at that point everyone sort of believed that speed or amphetamine was a cultural boon because you didn't have to sleep, and so you could do cultural work around the clock. And that was part of New York in those days, and then soon, eventually, people like Freddie Herco went out a six-story window, and the bubble was burst. And I think, thankfully, and unfortunately in his case. But certainly the whole Warhol factory revolved around crystal meth We've lost a lot. I mean, we talked about, before, rites of passages, and that was a tough one to go through. However, Lady Byrd Johnson opens a wing of the Museum of Modern Art. [mimicking Texas accent] "Friends, just the other day Lyndon was saying to me that the windows are the eyes of the soul." And you get to see.... I mean, it's such a treasure trove in New York because it's where all the pirates have gone out and stolen art from around the world and brought it back, and Ginsberg knew where there were, you know, a Tibetan museum. I mean, the input.... Unfortunately, I had a little baby that cried the whole time she was there. And from the Redwood Forest I had watched salamanders mate in the stream, one on top of the other, rolling over and over in this beautiful clear water, and the next day we're in New York City where two cars pile up on top of each other and roll over and over outside the window.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: [laughs]

GEORGE HERMS: So the culture shock was kind of wild. And I just basically worked the whole time I was there.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Did you ever have any desire to relocate there for art reasons?

GEORGE HERMS: No.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: No?

GEORGE HERMS: No, because I always had children, and it just didn't seem a cool place to raise kids. I visited it many times. I had a show the following year of paintings that Diane set up on Tenth Street. Mostly I just go from jazz club to jazz club and I have all this list of museum and gallery people I'm supposed to go see and I never see any of them. [chuckles]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, George. [mock huffy]

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, really. But I hear Roy Eldridge, you know, or see someone that.... And in those days a lot of New York musicians never came to the West Coast; they just stayed in New York. But I also heard the Guggenheim acceptance poetry readings of [Robert] Creeley, [Robert] Duncan, and Denise Levertov, a wonderful, wonderful evening. And hearing Frank O'Hara and Paul Blackburn read at Columbia, again with Denise Levertov. And Diane through the Poet's Theatre was active-I mean, after they got through the courtroom scenes.... There was just a ferment, is the way I would put it. And you just moved continuously from one event to another.

As I say, it was fine with me but the wife and children were not thrilled. So we returned to the Redwood Forest, and I'm now carving these wood blocks for Diane's haiku. So the first season was done in New York, then I did a season in the Redwoods, and then this idea of.... Earning enough to weather the winter in a rain forest is a big deal, with Russian roulette at the mailbox. And so the butcher paper drawings, and peddling their papers in Los Angeles. It seemed that Los Angeles was where there was a market for my work, or at least I could peddle them on selective front-room rugs around town.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You already had these contacts, is what....

GEORGE HERMS: That's right. Yeah, I could go to Betty Asher's home, and so in 1965 I moved the family down to Topanga Canyon. At this point Nalota's five and about to go into kindergarten, so the bouncing around kind of stops at that point and you anchor, you root, and from 1965 to '73 I lived in Topanga Canyon.

And there's much to be said about what went on culturally and artistically, musically. You know, the raising of families and being a PTA president.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You were a PTA president?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, at my kids' school. This is up now into 1972. I don't know, I'm kind of tired. I think maybe I should just give you kind of the skeleton outline of what we did.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yeah, sure.

GEORGE HERMS: We'll bring it up to date and then, at our leisure, sometime when I'm ...we'll go in and fill in the details on things.

During all those years in Topanga Canyon, I worked and was part of the Southern California scene. And a club called the Topanga Corral opened up. In other words, Topanga was kind of a redneck, individualist area, and then flower children happened and rock and roll happened, and one of the best things I ever did there was called Dunk-a-luck, where they had their annual Strawberry Festival up at the community house, and the Republican women had their booth, and all these different booths. My kids had gone and said it just was kind of boring; nothing was happening there. I thought back to my childhood in a small town, the Lion's Club Bazaar or whatever. My favorite thing is where you threw the ball, hit a target, and somebody went in the tank of water. So I built one of those devices, with my engineering background, and you threw little balls that were like a kids' billiard ball game. You threw those balls through a television set, hit the target, and went in the drink. And I borrowed a 48-star silk flag from a battleship that I used as a backdrop for all of this. And I put that flag up and they all just flooded at me-the Republican women and the postmaster-that I was going to have a booth where you threw balls at the flag. And the Dunk-a-luck, I worked this whole weekend, and that was the bridge that was built between the rock and roll and the flower children and the rednecks and the right-wingers. And at that point Topanga kind of cooled out for a little while until that asshole Manson, whatever....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Oh.

GEORGE HERMS: And then I had to go back and be a PTA president and try and convince people that people with beards and long hair that are raising their family are just, have the same interests as anyone else that's raising families.

The Topanga Corral opened. It used to have jazz on Sundays. I think the first time I went in there somebody punched me in the arms, and I went to order a pizza. And then it turned over and became a rock and roll bar where you could see Mick Jagger in the parking lot and many of the groups.... Joe Turner would work there regularly, and it was absolutely fabulous. It made me think that when they went on the moon and they got off and they looked around for a blues bar like the Topanga Corral, they couldn't find one, they got back on the space ship and came home.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: [chuckles]

GEORGE HERMS: You know, there should be one of these every half mile around, where there's music and dancing and beer. They built a new one because the old one was too small, and all of us put our art up. There were Bermans and a giant painting of mine called The Pisces Dancers next to the.... Dean Stockwell had collages, Russ Tamblyn had collages in there.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Did all these people live nearby? The group was pretty much ...?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, at one point, Topanga Canyon was really a community of artists. No one has really ever dealt with that because.... Neil Young was there. Because Bob Alexander had made me a minister in the Temple of Man, I performed the marriage ceremony for Neil and Susan [Asaviedo, Azaveeto], and he became an American citizen. So it's just like I went to the American Archives to have clout with the IRS over my papers; at some point I'd like to say, "Look, look at all the money you got from Neil Young. I was the one who made him an American citizen. Give me a break." But so his music was there. And it's the first time I ever did what many people do, which is have a bar that you go to.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: A club.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, a club, in which, once again, the boy-girl thing becomes a problem. And I tried, unsuccessfully, the European style of having a girlfriend on the side, and it didn't work, and my wife....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Why didn't it work?

GEORGE HERMS: I think constitutionally I'm a monogamist, basically, is what it is. And it also just put a lot of pressure on.... I'm not good at lying because it's hard enough for me to remember the truth. And that trying to lead a double life and stuff. I mean, there's a kind of animal side that was wonderful. I would run through the hills of Topanga from one bed to the other at night. But it did stir up that side that I think most people are supposed to go through in adolescence and I didn't. I think that had full reign. Then the event of the death of a baby boy. See, I delivered all my children at home.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You did?

GEORGE HERMS: And what happened is that Louise was Rh-negative, and what happened.... The firstborn is okay but that starts the mechanism, and then the second one's fifty-fifty. And when Lily Belle was born up in the Redwood Forest she wasn't breathing, and Louise and I just hit the Lord's Prayer immediately. It was like an automatic thing. And this ultraviolet aura burned off the baby and she started breathing. Lily, just for that little split second there, wasn't breathing. And I didn't know if that burns off of all children, because Nalota had been born by kerosene lantern and candlelight at night. And then Reed, this little baby boy.... We started to take him to a hospital, actually, in the valley, and they wouldn't let us in because we had no hospitalization. They said we had to go to the County General which is over in East L.A.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Ten miles away!

GEORGE HERMS: Right, yeah, and so Louise said, "Oh, let's just go home," and so we delivered Reed and within three days he turned yellow, and Shirley Berman said, "Oh, he's a golden child." Well, it was jaundice and he. . . . We had no car. The people who lived down the hill from us, we got. ...And so we drove from Topanga in to St. John's in Santa Monica and he expired several times, and I gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and kept him going-even once in the elevator in the hospital. And they really raked me over the coals because, you know, they were trying to get infant mortality down to a very small percentage, and here I was, one out of three. And so they gave him a triple, a complete blood change, and kept him in the hospital for a long time, and then he came home and we got a goat so that he could have goat's milk and after seven months.... He laughed. He was very weak, and we never knew what the lack of oxygen when the heart expires and all that, what that would have.... But I had gone to help Ben Talbert move. He was an artist, a really wonderful artist. And I was doing this kind of thing of staying up for three days and then sleeping for twelve hours or something, and during this night Reed passed away. I woke up in the morning and I've always faulted myself that if I hadn't been doing this strange staying up for thirty-six hours I might have been aware more that night and heard something.

And during that seven months, this is when the Zodiac Boxes were done, and I did a lot of painting-big paintings

that would say "Reed lives"-and it was quite a jolt. And his death kind of curiously reconciled my family to my situation a little more and towards.... The house we lived at at 2215 was wonderful. It was on four acres and I had a studio on the top of a two-story house. The family lived on the bottom, and there was even an outdoor shell that....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Topanga Canyon Boulevard, it was called?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, and it was.... That's a wonderful story-the story of that house and the work that went on there. And the Tap City Circus would have these raffles every few months when I was broke.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So that continued?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, that continued.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Wasn't abandoned after Larkspur?

GEORGE HERMS: No, unfortunately, it.... There was raffle, was the first part. You have to learn how to throw a raffle: Chapter Eight, "How to live by your wits." I can't remember the sequence of them, but then there was one called "Baffle," which was all words instead of numbers. And the winning word was "knockers," and Helena [Calianotes] won on that one. Then there was one called "Waffle," which was a wall full of prints. And of course the idea is everyone puts a dollar in a jar, and you take a number-or in the case of Baffle, a word-and then the winner gets a choice of any of my work. And we would also give away Love Press books. You could squirt the artist with a hose; that was always a popular item. And then one of them was called "Roof-Hole," with a little poem, "I can see the sky through the roof." You know, sort of fix the roof; we had a roof hole. Then there was one called "Rawful" and one called "Earful," which took as its premise that the ear and the eye are one. And only one person ever gave me an argument about that. And that led to some, a couple of theater pieces sort of grew out of that. And so in a way the theater pieces sort of took the places of the raffles after a while. As this kind of community coming together, a lot of people coming, and an event kind of situation.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But they started out as a means for you to generate some income.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, I was just copping out with the fact that I was totally tapped out; that's what the Tap City Circus meant. And rather than go down morosely I announced it and invited people. [laughs]

So at the end of that stay at 2215.... The landlord was an absolute idiot, really a jerk, so it was always a fight with him. But my parents came down and they have always.... They always did and always will hate this idea of paying rent, because you're not building up equity. So they took an insurance policy that I would have gotten upon their death.... I mean, my mother's still alive. It was $25,000, and they bought a house in Topanga that Louise loved. It was perfect. There was like a dance floor living floor and a room for each of the girls and then a bedroom and then a kitchen. It was under an oak tree and there was a little guesthouse and a little garage. I had to move my operation from a sprawling four acres to a guest house that was about eight by twelve. So everybody was covered there except me-and the garage, which was kind of full. And Louise had said, "If you ever get involved with another woman, don't stick around." Well, I went to an opening of Clara [Copley's] gallery on La Cienga and went to a party afterwards, and Terry Allen was playing the piano and all these people knew the words to all of Terry Allen's songs. It was incredible. And this woman punched me in the arm, and it made such an impression on me because I had been the PTA president, you know, pillar of the community, rotten to the core: I would do a PTA meeting and then go to the bar and meet my girlfriend. So that was refreshing to me, and so I just moved in with Margaret Nielson in downtown Los Angeles on Figueroa Street-what's now the new convention center.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: This must have been in '73 or so?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, '73.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Because I should mention that I visited you. That's when we first met.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, that's right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Because I visited you at that place. Where did you say? On Figueroa?

GEORGE HERMS: On Figueroa, that's right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And Margaret was there? This sounds like recent history, but....

GEORGE HERMS: To you.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That was twenty years ago.

GEORGE HERMS: Twenty years ago, right, yeah. So there's that period with Margaret Nielsen from '73 to the retrospective in Newport Harbor in '79. And while working on that retrospective, Margaret had gone to be "an American in Paris" at the Beaubourg. They had two fellowships that were across the street from the Beaubourg. And I went over to just kind of hang out with her and bring her bags home towards the end of her fellowship. I was preparing to do a retrospective of films and theater pieces in conjunction with the Prometheus Archives. And so I'm preparing for a theater piece, and at this time Margaret Nielsen punches me in the ribs, and almost breaks my rib. So at that point I said, "I don't need this." It was refreshing in the beginning but I don't need this hostility.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Did she have a thing about this?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, she's a very small girl and very feisty and just-and that's what I always liked about her. She's an excellent painter, as well. So I came back, and during that retrospective I had been teaching at Fullerton, Cal State Fullerton, my first teaching job, full time. I got pneumonia out of that, as a matter of fact. I tried to do my complete teaching job and my complete studio-artist job simultaneously, and at the end of the year I had pneumonia. Never went to the hospital; I nursed myself back from that. And one of the students was named Kathy Morehead. She was from Orange County, and so I moved in with her, and then took the studio next to the body shop in Orange around the time of the retrospective in '79. And Cathy Morehead being a young graduate with an MFA....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So you met her at....

GEORGE HERMS: At Fullerton. She was a student of mine. So somehow I.... Let's see, she got me to apply for the Prix de Rome. It was one of the things that she came up with as things that would be available to someone of my stature. And I had gone to Denver, the University of Denver. I guess someone was on sabbatical, and I took over their sculpture department for a semester. And while there I did a theater piece and an exhibition and applied for the Prix de Rome and did my yearly application for the Guggenheim. And both the Prix de Rome and the Guggenheim came in simultaneously. [chuckles] And it was a terrible weekend where the Rome Prize was 95 percent in my hand, and the Guggenheim was just money. You know what I mean? So which.... I didn't know; I was like the fox with the grapes looking in the water, or whatever that Aesop's fable is. And eventually the Guggenheim people said, "Well look, just take the Prix de Rome, and at the end of it we'll start your Guggenheim."

So in the fall of 1982 I went to Rome on the Prix de Rome in sculpture. And that's a year.

And then while I was there I met Gaylyn Grace, who was a research scholar over there, studying Guercino. We started hanging around with each other, seeing how comfortable it was. I had my student lover here and she had a student lover in New York. And this was really comfortable; we're like a couple of old shoes. There's no electricity between us. And of course the next thing you know you're wearing a wedding band and you have two kids.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: [chuckles]

GEORGE HERMS: So that was my exit from Orange County.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Now what year was that?

GEORGE HERMS: This would be '82-'83 in Rome. And then in August Gaylyn and I then took up residence in Venice for a couple of years, and then we lived on Military Avenue for a couple of years, which is in West L.A., and then we moved to Culver City four years ago.

And at this point my studio has kind of bounced around. From Orange County things were put into storage, and then.... Part of the storage opened up into half a studio that Ned Evans let me use in a great old building, the old Andrews Hardware Building at Seventh and Union. And then from there I moved down to Skid Row on Boyd Street, and then when that was.... The building was sold twice. Finally everyone was thrown out of there, to make it into a toy warehousing alley, and that's where we are today. Then I ended up putting that in storage where everything got flooded, and over at First and Santa Fe, and then the studio at Tenth and Irwin _____ Santa Fe.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, let me ask you just one question. Because this does bring us up to the present, and then obviously we'll have the opportunity to revisit aspects of the past, but it's interesting: you're, I guess, one of the earlier artists to actually go into space downtown. There was a movement at one point-I can't remember exactly when it was-a movement of artists establishing themselves downtown, and that then seemed to.... Well, I won't say peter out, but it seems a number of the artists then left. It seems you were in the vanguard. Is that right, were you?

GEORGE HERMS: I don't think so. I think I was just.... I mean, Margaret Nielson, you know, and Nancy Gowens was her roommate, actually, in that place. John Schroeder had a place downtown when I lived in Topanga, and I think that John Mason still lives downtown, has a great place over on Central. I think that it's kind of a quiet-kept secret, and that at a certain point it became kind of vociferous and then there was the Boyd Street....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Oh, at the time MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] was announced there was a lot of activity.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: There were all kinds of galleries.

GEORGE HERMS: Well, it actually was an attempt to make it habitable downtown in the evenings, and to a certain extent all downtowns in all cities have that same problem-and have had it for quite a while. It's called urban decay. And what happens with gentrification: artists move into a scene and then all of sudden it becomes real expensive, the artist can't afford it. And also the proliferation of guns and gangs. I mean, that's another element that has to figure into it. I think in my case, it's like my kids in Topanga. They were fine at home, these two girls running wild in the hills, but wait till they have to go to school. Well, the kindergarten teacher was an absolute jewel. They loved school from day one. Okay, but that's Topanga elementary school, and they said, "Wait 'til they have to go down in the valley to junior high school. They're gonna eat it." And so the principal, when they have their meet the principal from the junior high school, I have my retrospective in Newport Harbor and we end up going over my catalog. You know, that's the principal of the junior high school. So there's always this storm that was supposed to break. I lived in Topanga for years and then I moved to downtown L.A., and everybody said, "Oh, you'll never work again. You need nature, you need these trees, you need these children running through the dappled sunlight." And I've worked everywhere I've gone. And then from downtown L.A. I moved to Orange County, and everybody said, "Oh, sterile city, you'll never find any junk in Orange County." And I did an incredible body of work there. Did an incredible body of work in Rome.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: They have great junk in Orange County?

GEORGE HERMS: You follow railroad tracks anywhere. That's how I found that studio. We started with the railroad tracks in downtown L.A. and worked until we came to the city of Orange, and that's where I got that body shop, next to the body shop.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, is the lesson here to some degree that your work is, finally, interior, internal? The sources are within you, and as we were saying earlier, you're opportunistic, you look around you. I mean, you don't have to find, necessarily, specific elements that have been associated with your work, are associated with your work. They do not preclude other materials, or other sources, shall we say?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, I have very strong opinions about everything, but at the same time I do have a kind of catholic approach to life, because I'm really curious about everything. You see, I've never been suicidal for that very reason. I've always been curious: could things get worse? You know what I mean? So I'd never kill myself just to find out. And sure enough, man, there's something else you've never counted on that's even worse than the situation you're in, right? [laughing]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And what next?

GEORGE HERMS: That's right. So insatiable curiosity, it's a given.

Interview with George Herms
Conducted by Paul Karlstrom
At the Artist's studio in Downtown Los Angeles, California
March 10, 1994

Session 4, tape 1, side A

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, a continuing interview with George Herms, at the artist's studio in downtown Los Angeles. The date is March 10, 1994, and this is the fourth session-perhaps the last, but then again, maybe not. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. This is tape 1.

All right, George, here we launch right into it. As we were reviewing just now, we in the previous sessions adopted pretty much a chronological strategy, and actually did that at the end of the last session, bring your journey up to the present, what was the present at that time. And it became pretty clear to me, certainly, that your life experience is tightly linked with your activity as an artist-presumably your ideas and what you think is important, and perhaps what you think art is all about, which if that isn't too ambitious we might try to get to today. [chuckles] But what is interesting-certainly in the early period the alternative culture, the counter culture

of the time, very much informed your art. You were very much a part of that, and it seems to me that really that group, that phenomenon melded, drew fewer distinctions between the way you conducted your life-what you did-and the making of things. It was seamless.

GEORGE HERMS: Right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And so one has to assume that those values and those interests and that living experience formed the basis, really, for the George Herms aesthetic. And as you said earlier, you really view life as raw material for art. Well, since our last session there's been a rather, again, dramatic change in your situation, your domestic situation, as I understand, certainly in terms of your partner and your base of operations. You're talking about moving into a new studio, and I'd like to start there with this next phase. It's like you're entering another phase, and I'm just curious what the circumstances of that are and what you think the implications will be.

GEORGE HERMS: This is the beginning. Two years ago when I was, I guess, in the second year of teaching at Santa Monica College of Design, Art and Architecture, my Tuesday afternoons, Art Schmooze 101, a painter named Pixie Guerin....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What's her last name?

GEORGE HERMS: Pixie Guerin. G-u-e-r-i-n. Guerin comes from John Guerin, a jazz drummer that she was married to for ten years and left about five years ago. And after a year and a half in which I would put out proposals to the school, to the class, usually the only one that would take me up on my proposals turned out to be Pixie. Part of my teaching method is that the class ride shotgun with me on my projects. The basis of the school is, what would you teach students now that you've been a professional artist for thirty or forty years? And then, they're starting out; what would you want to give them? And so the marriage that I was in with Gaylyn for ten years had left me with a feeling that I was in harness and just going to plug away and the next stop was the cemetery. And I was working and continuing to plod along, but it was a situation that had deteriorated-several years ago actually. And with Pixie all of sudden the doors opened and I left a negative relationship for one in which I'm now never allowed to say anything negative about myself, and all the bills and the problems are merely challenges which as a team we go after. I went to Houston to do a series of theater events and lectures last either October or November, and Walter Hopps took me outside on a Sunday morning, got a couple of chairs, and said, "Sit down. What is going on?" [laughs] And I told him what was happening between Pixie and myself and how the Culver City family attempt to live the American dream in this small house with a backyard and the cable TV and the bottled water at this exorbitant rent-which, four years ago when I had a UCLA half-a-professorship, was doable but hadn't been since the recession set in-and I felt that I was in a vortex and being sucked further and further down into a depression and had to swim out of it. And so Walter said, "Well, you've got to get out of Culver City." And in reference....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Did he mean out of Culver City or out of the marriage?

GEORGE HERMS: Both. I mean, he has known me as long as anyone that's around now, and my feeling that I was in harness and just plodding off to the graveyard for the rest of my life, he said, "No, there is much more living to be done, George." And so I took that as my New Year's card that I printed, said, "There's more. 1994." And then to make this transition, which was very difficult, especially for Gaylyn, and when there are children involved and a marriage goes sour you hang in there it's long past the point of it being healthy for the children. And it becomes counter-productive in that the boys see nothing but fighting and squabbling for role models, and Gaylyn has a temper and throws tantrums and our four-year-old began to emulate that behavior, so on December 7th-a date which will live in [my memory]-told Gaylyn what was happening and moved into Pixie's small apartment in Hollywood. And Pixie moved into the storage where we're sitting now and carved out a studio for herself to paint. And all of a sudden all the things.... She had been married to a jazz drummer, she knows all the jazz that I love dearly, she works on a psychic hotline with tarot cards. So all of my interest in the occult, which had been bad-mouthed for ten years, is now back. We talk astrology and we look at the stars. And the basics, which are to me art and poetry and music and love and laughter, are again the sole constellation of our life together. And the eviction notices and the being behind in the rent and everything is no longer this utterly depressing albatross around one's neck because there's two necks involved.

And so we are in the process of moving. On April 1 we will be out of here. We're moving right back into the same building hall where the flood that damaged all the archival material last summer.... [laughs]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Really!

GEORGE HERMS: And if you can imagine my trepidation in taking a place in that building, which also has a basement part to it. But in order to move we're doing a raffle, which I did in the sixties. There was a whole series of them. I don't know if we talked about them previously.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yeah, a bit. You said every time that things....

GEORGE HERMS: Every eighteen months or so. It would be called the Tap City Circus. It meant I was broke and people would come....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And everybody understood.

GEORGE HERMS: Yes, and that that was the announcement.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: In Larkspur, you....

GEORGE HERMS: It started in Larkspur. That was the first one, in Larkspur. Actually, the second one was also a motion benefit-in Topanga Canyon, another eviction notice. It was a square deal and a good free musical show. A bluegrass banjo player let me do it in his garage around the corner. So once again this one is called Eyeful. It went Raffle, Baffle, Waffle, Rawful. The last one was Earful, and so now we're following Earful-a space of twenty years-but with Eyeful. And I carved a woodblock with the word on it, and we will have little eyes. You will take an eye-they used to be one dollar, they'll now be five dollars-you put five dollars in the jar, and the winner gets the choice of any of my work or Pixie's work.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That's pretty good.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, and Pixie's very worried about that, that someone will walk off with a giant, huge thing. But in all the times, no one ever took advantage of that. You know, everybody was very beautiful and picked something very special and personal to them. And of course there'll be smaller things like a print. You can win a print or a book or things like that. In the old days squirting the artist with a hose was a very popular item. People would get to.... [laughing] In the Topanga days that would go on. So, I don't know, we'll have to come up with something like that, interior. So the move is....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: A fresh pie in the face.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, something like that, yeah, a cream pie. So it's ten days from now, actually, that this will happen. And what we're doing is trying to move out the extraneous parts of the storage so that it will be nothing but art in here, and then ten days after that everything will have to be moved to the new place, where we will both have studios and we'll both live. It will be a live/work situation and what I'm calling a love/work situation. And I took my four-year-old, Errol, over there yesterday. We moved some of the boys' things into the downstairs basement room and, curiously enough, he took it over and claimed the whole space as his studio and told me that he was going to call his studio "Life is Art Studio." [chuckles] I think later in the afternoon he changed it to "Art is Life Studio" or something. But, I mean, this concept that the two are completely related has now been passed on to another generation. He's only four years old. He'll be five, actually, the day after the Eyeful. So there's again a kind of conflict; he'll have his birthday party in Culver City at the same time I'm doing a fund-raiser here.

And that's the conflict with. ...What I tried for ten years was to have a separation between studio and home, and it was death. The first family, Nalota and Lily, lived in my studio, they grew up in it, and they survived, and they have beautiful children of their own now. That division somehow is really.... You know, "know thyself," that admonition that comes from the Greeks.... I'm just the kind of person that I need to be in the middle of my working space, and that's how Pixie feels also.

So we're moving into ... actually, it'll be the fifth decade for me. If you look it up there's the fifties, the sixties, the seventies, the eighties, and now the nineties, and I've been working in all five decades.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That's incredible.

GEORGE HERMS: So what you're talking about-perspective-there really is a perspective. Now, as I move, all those boxes of archival material to the new place....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Not down in the basement?

GEORGE HERMS: No, they will not. But what is happening is that Pixie and a great sculptor named Chris Sam are going to use all those boxes and build a room in the middle of the space, which will be our bedroom, and so there's a sculpture now. It's going to be made of them. It will be called Box Springs. That's the first two words to the title. It's actually rather a long title. Box Springs Eternal from the Heart of a Young Man's Archives is the complete title. So, going through these boxes, I'm finding such incredible stuff. Some of it will be pulled out and available at Eyeful. There's two rows of boxes at this point over there in this empty space, which are all the past, and then there's a corner, which are my current boxes, the boxes that have been filled since I've been in this space. And that's called The Present. Then there's another corner which has the unfinished Semina Project, and

next to that is the library, where I'm finally going to get the books out of all these boxes and have them separate. And then there's a space which is going to be Pixie's studio, where she'll paint, and then another space which is the sculpture studio, with a big roll-top door. Perhaps we'll go by it today so you can see it. It's an incredible....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Wow, that's great. How many square feet?

GEORGE HERMS: Thirty-four hundred and something, which is actually what is here and in Pixie's apartment in Hollywood.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: It's perfect.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. Plus she's an organizer, and so a lot of what I've just sort of piled on the floor, mile after mile, we will get shelving and get things up off the floor.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, do you view her at this juncture as a source of redemption for you? You described a situation which deteriorated. Certainly it made it difficult, I gather, for you to work.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That you lost some of what you look for in a relationship to stimulate your work, or feed your work.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And so she came really then almost as a muse, the appearance of a muse?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, no. It's actually the opposite in that we are like two halves of a walnut. And if you believe in the soulmate thing or something, everything is just, you know, that art and life seamless meshing, here's two human beings that our thoughts, our emotions, our desires, our goals, our whole value system.... I mean, there's just no.... We haven't found any basis of disagreement. You know, she likes flamenco music, I don't, maybe, something like that, you know....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Nobody's perfect.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right. But actually she is perfect. See, that's what the book of perfection is about-and this is a little hard for her to understand-but she's a completely developed thirty-seven year old woman who knows what she wants to do and is doing it. She works a full-time job, she's a full-time student, and she does her art. And these times it's very difficult to keep body and soul together, and she's doing it. So it's like finding another one like me. She happens to be a beautiful woman, which really makes it for me.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Is this something that, at least initially, you found in each of your relationships, of which there have been, serious ones, I think, five?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. Well, falling in love is a mystery. And I certainly don't know what that is. Why, out of a group of people, one, there's that little electrical thing that goes off. Obviously, reams have been written about sexual attraction, and I think in my case I am pretty much a monogamist, in that I usually have several years of monogamy with a woman without any playing around, and the brightness of the light of the initial period is sometimes quite glaring, and I think that.... I have a mistress always, which is my work. And I think that there are some women that that's more difficult than not to deal with, because I'm always leaning into the studio. And in this case, with Pixie, she's leaning into her studio also. You know what I mean? So it's not as though.... The pull with Gaylyn, it was always, "Come home, I'm going to murder the kids." And so it was like pulling teeth to get studio time in. And to this day she doesn't think I have a job. She's going to have to go out and get work now. And Gaylyn is saying, "Well, you're not going out and getting a job." You know, I've been working for forty years here, and it was still never accepted that what I was doing was what I was supposed to be doing.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, this of course is a problem that artists face in society, that most people really don't believe that making art is work.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: It's a scam. And they sometimes resent it. Usually they're tolerant, but they say, "Well, it's interesting but it's not real work." And yet, it strikes me as a bit surprising that Gaylyn, who is an art historian, would, when it comes to her personal situation, domestic situation, wouldn't appreciate the fact that you as an artist.... I mean, she knew you were an artist when she took you in, let's put it that way.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, yeah. Well, she was going from country to country in Europe speaking different

languages. She was a professional.... You know, she was researching a dissertation.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Some people think that's not work either.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, right. [chuckles] In the beginning.... And she ended up after ten years not answering the phone, not opening the mail, not going out into the world, letting me be the entire outside person, plus getting up in the morning with the boys and putting them to bed at night, and she just had more and more migraines and withdrew more and more and got into lithium and five or six sleeping pills at night. So she now is back out in the world. She's having to take care of those boys all the time, and she's coming back to life. She's being reborn. Very angrily. But it's just not in the cards for one person to do all.... I mean, Robert [Duncan] and Jess [Collins] had a kind of relationship like that, where Robert went out into the world and Jess was the recluse.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yeah, right.

GEORGE HERMS: But that's a different situation.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But that was agreeable for them.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. And they also outlasted four or five of my marriages, too. [laughs] So they had a really great match there.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, they were the two halves of.... Fortunately, those two halves of the walnut came together early on, and that's the secret. There's nothing one can do about it. But I wanted to ask you, in these relationships.... Because to me your relationships seem so important that one can't understand you, what makes you tick, I think, and perhaps your art, without reference at least to these relationships. Do you find that, at least in the beginning, with each of these relationships, the important ones, that there was this kind of reinforcement, that you seek, that you apparently need for your work, and it's something that somehow along the way it changes, it's lost, is this a pattern? Is this a process?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I've been accused of this-you know, that I'm running away from myself into someone else's arms, and that what really needs to be done is that I need to find out what my needs are, why I have to go off to someone else. I mean, this is a kind of first evaluation. There was a curious moment when Pixie and I began to go places together, and I hadn't yet really announced to anyone that there was someone new in my life. I would introduce Pixie as the light of my life to someone like Ed Matesky, and he says, [mimicking deep, gruff voice] "Where are your wife and kids?" [laughs] And someone like Diane DiPrima who saw me last August and said I really looked like shit and she had never seen me look so awful, came a month or so ago and was just thrilled to see me-she got her old George back, is how she felt about it. I mean, the Tap City Circus is riding again. In other words, instead of closing in and being very circumspect about my activities I'm now just throwing.... It's difficult because with the earthquakes and the floods and the fires and the riots everybody has all these tragic stories to tell, and I've never been happier in my life. You know what I mean? I just feel like I'm soaring. It's a constant taking off. The signing of the lease for a thirty-four-hundred-square- foot space when Pixie and I had thirty-six dollars between us, with the same landlords that I owed several thousand dollars back rent on these spaces to, and we had no first and last months rent, no security deposit, and we signed the lease and got the keys. I mean, that was absolutely one of the strangest things I've ever sat through. But we're launched. We're putting it all under one roof, is what we're doing. It's like at Peter Gould's L.A. Louver operation, where instead of being scattered all over town it's all going to be under one roof, and we have a place for the boys.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So they'll visit?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, they'll have their own playroom, place to stay, and that's an important aspect that Pixie's been in on from the very beginning, because she's known about-Errol has special needs. She comes from a family of nine. She was the middle sibling and raised the bottom four. She has no interest in children because she's thirty-seven and she's ready to get on with her life as an artist. She was a musician by environment, as she put it. She was part of the nine [Weir, Wehr] Family, it was. It was like a rock and roll band, and so she was raised in music.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Really?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. And one day she met a guitar player by the name of Robin Ford, who said whenever he's sad or whenever he's happy he goes to his guitar. And whenever Pixie was sad or happy she went to her pencils and paints, and then she realized that she was just environmentally a musician because that's. ...I guess if you have a family of nine kids the thing to do is get them all musical instruments. [laughs] You know, keep them out of your hair.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So they'll have something to do.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. So she has that background and she.... I mean, as we speak she's taking a child psychology class at SMC, Santa Monica College, to get some of her academics cleared up, but just to find out what's the state of the art, where they're at right now.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What do you see this most recent change doing for your work? Does it make any difference in that way? In other words, are there new insights? Certainly you're happier, which has to have an effect.

GEORGE HERMS: Um hmm, yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But in terms of that which you produce, that which you create, does there seem to be any difference that we'll be able to see? To sort of track you, to mark you.

GEORGE HERMS: I find that the. ...In the studio right now I have a piece from 1962 and a piece from 1963 up on the wall right alongside the ones from 1993 and 1994, and it's very difficult.... I mean, a trained eye could do it, but they look very similar. My line has always been, "Growth, where is thy sting?" But so I don't know that you would actually be able to [tell the difference], because the work is a separate entity, and what you will find will be references to Pixie in the work, in the autobiographical aspect of the work, and I think there'll be an exuberance that will come through. I mean, that's just a guess.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What form might that....

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I think just that there's, you know, my "salad tossing" work, and then there's the dartboard-you know, where they're like bull's eyes, where the object has been perfectly centered on a ground. And then there's others where it just goes bananas and it's like tossing a salad. And oftentimes I realize that I sort of.... My pendulum has swung, and I'm just doing dartboard after dartboard of mounting objects-perfectly, I mean, they look great-but there's a kind of.... The adolescent joy of juxtaposition gets lost in this kind of perfect pitch that I have visually, and so I think you'll see some of that come out.

It's hard to talk about my work, because I don't have the architect's blueprint when I start out on pieces, and whenever there's a move I come across all this unfinished work, which some of it then gets finished during the move. I think with Pixie's love of color-and she finds in my background a different set of colors than the established rust and faded newsprint. I mean, she sees with the printer's ink, the things that I've done with that. And I think there's a kind of collaborative air about in the arts, has been for about the last ten years. Young artists coming up and forming cooperatives and working with each other-kind of an equivalent of jazz groups or rock and roll groups-and I think, you know, Pixie shows her work in coffee houses and so there's a less rarefied air about the exhibition spaces with her generation. And in a way it puts you back into the arena where the public is saying, "My kid could do that." Which I think is very healthy, because, okay, if your kid could do it, why isn't your kid doing it? [chuckles] You know, it's that thing of when are you going to go out and get a job, if your kid can do it. You know, all these issues, I think, are coming to the fore.

Session 4, tape 1, side B

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Archives of American Art, the Smithsonian Institution, this is continuing session 4 with George Herms and this is tape 1, side B. Okay, I'm sorry I cut you off there and maybe broke the train a little bit, but certainly I had some things occur to me as you were talking. As a matter of fact as we've been talking, really for about half an hour, and you said something that struck me as perhaps revealing. And that was describing two poles of your art, the dartboard on one hand, on target, and then on the other, the salad....

GEORGE HERMS: The tossed salad.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...the more open, the ....

GEORGE HERMS: More baroque.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...the more baroque. But actually the terms that have been coming to mind to me in this regard are classical and romantic. Art historically, of course, these are traditionally viewed as the poles.

GEORGE HERMS: Right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: The one being more controlling, more orderly, more perhaps intellectual. The other being more subjective and emotional, more free, and I wonder how that strikes you. One more comment I would make is it seems to me, and you can tell me if this holds up, that during times when you're not particularly-when you feel constraint, when you aren't happy, your work then perhaps falls more into this classical mode, which in a way perhaps your life seems chaotic and it seems a bit out of control, and that would seem as a way through the art to gain some control, to bring some order to it, possibly.

GEORGE HERMS: Um hmm, right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And then, on the other hand, if you feel more secure-reliberated, if I can use the term-then this would free you up for a more expansive type of statement, this salad.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Does that make any sense to you?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, yeah, it makes sense except for this, and that is that I'm not in it for art therapy.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: No, I'm sure.

GEORGE HERMS: In other words, I don't go to my work for something that it gives back to me to make me psychologically straight. I make myself become psychologically straight, grounded, centered, whatever you like, before I lift a finger. In other words, that's a commitment that one makes to one's work so that alchemically my emotional life is kicked upstairs to a higher octave before I work. In other words, I digest all the malaise of my existence, and then I express myself. So I have never used the word.... I mean, I have, you know, drunk, written, "That fucking asshole landlord," stuff like that, but that never ever makes it into my work. The work has its own life and I am, once again, a saxophone in the hands of the divine creator, someone like Charlie Parker who blows through me, you see. So the work, you would be hard-pressed to find.... Because once an exhibition is set up, work jumps over a line into the public arena-and this isn't to say that those boxes aren't full of all kinds of very personal moments in my life, but if you wanted.... My take on that analogy is that after the Renaissance came Mannerism, and then came the Baroque, you see, so I think that in our time we have seen Jasper Johns certainly, go from an explosive revolutionary to a very stylist fine-tuning of the actual marks that he used to make his revolutionary paintings, if you like, and I think that's a very normal.... He had his renaissance in the fifties and early sixties certainly, and then he became a mannerist, and I have no problem with that, with the artist becoming more attentuated [sic] as time goes on. You know, if there's a kind of bold adolescent, youth, kick over all the standards, and then let's see what comes up again. I think that's very healthy; I think every generation should do that. I feel sorry for a generation of artists that doesn't do that. And I'm always kind of looking for the young ones coming up that are going to make fun of me or do a satire on my work, and someone the other night.... There's a small-image show in Santa Monica, two hundred artists all making small pieces, and there's a thousand works in the show. There's a riot. I mean, there's floor to ceiling, all these little things you never knew who did what or anything. Half of the students in my school are in that show, so it's student work and then a piece of mine mixed in with it, and Laddie Dill will have a piece and stuff. So rising up the hierarchy of the art world and then kicking back in at that emergent level, I think is really a healthy thing, which I have experienced before with Margaret Nielson. And now with Pixie Guerin I'm seeing what it's like to be kind of starting out, and having that thrill of putting your work out to the public, you know, so I'm getting that.

Now the romantic-we sometimes think of the Beethoven Sonata, which was a print that went around, like a nineteenth century violin player and the beatniks were all on the floor listening, huddled up. It's a classic and it was used to represent the Beat Generation. So that down side of romanticism-the morbid or the melancholy-that is kind of counter to your feeling that when you fall in love and you start....

Now Alastair Crowley, the magician, he would change his name every time something happened. He would consider himself a magician on a higher level. He'd hit a new plateau, take over a whole new existence, a new name, a new persona. And I have in my background all these pseudonyms that I've worked under, and they're aspects of my personality. You know, the schizophrenic is finally at peace because he's gotten into group sex, you know. So I see it not so much that we're able to say a restricted life experience produces that classical thing because I'm really dedicated to art and life being totally seamless. But to me, art-it's like a religious aspect of existence. In other words, I'm out to turn you on, not to put you on or to bring you down. You know what I mean? The reason I make this stuff is so that somebody sees it and they get as much of a rush as I do off of these found objects that I've found.

Now the strange line that weaves through all my work is this decay, this.... Berman's first and only thing that he ever wrote about my work, in Hermosa Beach in 1957 was, "Courtyards of rust and decay. God's night humor." He saw that as being my turf, if you want to use that expression, and I have explored a lot of areas and that seems to be the recurrent turf that I work upon.

So the fact of relationships and the joy of new love and all of this is being expressed through things that are fading and on their way out-materially going on the way out. See, because the one thing that lasts forever is the spirit. We've gone over this so many times, but the underpinning is that all material things decay; the only thing that lasts is the creative spirit.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What was it, "God's life's humor"?

GEORGE HERMS: "God's night."

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: "Night," yeah. Sorry, I wanted to get this right. And that was Berman's?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. And there was more. I wish I had the poem. And I know exactly the.... They were little drawers that I would paint white and put in a tintype and some of my poetry and an old rusty tin can, and it was the beginning of my developing my vocabulary.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, if this analogy that I proposed, this convenient analogy, doesn't fit precisely-or misses the mark-how would you explain these two poles in your work, which you described?

GEORGE HERMS: Psychological need, in that chaos.... I mean, it's very curious in our time how many of things which I was attracted to are now being scientifically backed up. In other words, Pixie working on a psychic hotline and using tarot cards is something we would have talked about in the fifties, something that Cameron would say.... I mean, we used to.... I made a giant table as a zodiac that had [a mechanism] so that you could move the planets around, and I made little sculptures for each of the planets so you actually could physically see the relationships and the aspects: A sculptor digging astrology. And we would talk about things like that. And now they've come to pass. And all the interest in chaos. There's now chaos theory, there's fuzzy logic....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Right.

GEORGE HERMS: ...dark matter, which occupies 98 percent of the universe. I don't know where that is.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Can't see it but it's there.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, and I have that headline says "Dark Matter," and there was some... . All of the Republican presidents were in a photograph and I put that with the "Dark Matter" article. [chuckles] The need-and this is the thing when I teach-is that one really has to know where you are psychologically so that you know what your needs are and allow the pendulum to swing, so that if you need to be very precise-almost tight in your composition-go for it. And if you need to be loose and just thrashing and kicking and splashing, go for that, too, because that's all part of the system of expression. And I'm sure that if you were more objective and less intuitive one could figure out that you have certain times of the year when you're like this. Or on Tuesday when I taught, somebody was saying something about their work and whether they should do this or not do that, and I said, "Look, it's springtime. Burst!" [laughs] "Just do tons of them, man. Don't sit there and think about it. Start doing.... If you want to do a bunch of them, do a bunch of them." You know what I mean? So I'm sure that spring is a great time and fall is a great time because the light is changing every day; it's moving very fast. The pendulum of light is in the summertime-it stays there for six weeks or more the same amount of light every day. You know, you can count on it. The shadows will be in the same place. Same thing in winter. The same amount of light, same length of day for about six weeks. Then that pendulum starts swinging. When it hits the bottom of its swing, it's moving fast. And if you have a couple of nails set up for sunset-you know, that the sun set's there and this nail casts a shadow on that nail-every day it's moving about an inch. So the shadows are different every day. And that's very exciting to an artist who lives with their eyes.

And the psychological needs are determined by your relationships, and I think that what I do is try to be in a relationship where when I put that L-o-v-e on all my work it's for real, because there's a great danger that you fall into a rote, the rituals become mechanical. Rudolf Steiner, before World War I-let me put this one to you-every August, he did it for four years-he did these mystery plays because they hadn't been around since Greece, so he wrote these four mystery plays in rehearsal, these four Augusts before World War I. It had to do with reincarnation, and people changed gender and switched around, and it wasn't till the fourth year that you found out what it was all about. And what it was about, it started in Egypt with the high priest and the priest who was supposed to look into the flame and see the vision for the coming year and tell everybody what crops to plant and where to get water for irrigation, et cetera. And the priest goes up to the flame, he looks in the flame, he says, "I don't see shit, man." [laughs] And that's the start of it. So it was the high priest who was supposed to check him out and who had just become mechanical and had not checked him out, and the other priest who was supposed to see the vision was in love with a woman who was outside the temple and they wanted to be together. He wanted to be with her; he didn't want to be in the priesthood. And so these three went through these various incarnations throughout history-in changing gender and that relationship-because of that one moment when they had screwed up because the ritual had become mechanical. And that's the danger. When you're going to work for five decades as an artist you don't want it to become mechanical.PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Did you see Orlando?

GEORGE HERMS: No, I don't think so.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: The movie. ...

GEORGE HERMS: On Virginia Woolf's. ...

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...based on the Virginia Woolf....

GEORGE HERMS: No, I didn't see that. I've read Orlando, though.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well then you know. The story just comes to mind as you're describing these transformations over time.

Then let me ask you.... And I'll preface it by saying that what I would like to do is, through you, get a little bit of insight into the group in California, back in the fifties and sixties, and still continuing, as perhaps a counterpoint to, what shall we say, New York-described mainstream modernism, to try to get a handle on this from your experience. What about the role for you and your associates and friends in the counterculture, if I can use that term. What about the role of emotion? An aspect of romanticism, to be sure.

GEORGE HERMS: Um hmm.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But the primacy of emotion, of subjectivity, of the senses, of the irrational. In other words, "privileging," as they say now, these qualities. Does that sound right to you? I mean, looking back, do you think that this is where your emphasis, or where your attitudes and values lay?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I'm reading Philip Lamantia. Okay, he's sixteen years old. He's the poetry editor for View magazine-in the forties-and that's a great vehicle for surrealism, okay, that comes to.... If you want to think of us as the West Coast, it comes without a great deal of, oh, edifice in the sense that there's this.... What I found in Europe, there's this edifice of history which really weighs on young people, young artists, that they have all of this superstructure of history above them and it really weighs them down. Whereas on this coast we had the wave coming in from the Orient. We had the wave of Europe, which was diluted as it came across America. We had the Native American Indians coming up from the soil. And I feel, both in San Francisco and Los Angeles, we had the spirit of Africa coming through jazz. So that I've always sensed that these four waves were breaking here. In other words, a fantastic place to work, because you didn't have just one edifice coming down. I have Oriental students who are ace at painting but they were taught how to paint a specific way and it's impossible for them to not paint that way, and so they come to me to get loose of this yoke of tradition that is on them. The reason I bring up Philip Lamantia is that the great joy in his poetry, the exuberance, is.... It has all of the black Baptist church, all that resonance of singing to it. And so the emotional.... Because if you look at the fifties as the organizational man, and the gray flannel suit, and all this Eisenhower years' lock-step conformity, then you can't have emotion. Emotion's got to be way low on the system of values. So obviously anybody who's going to rebel against that is going to have a great interest in emotion. And certainly jazz at that time, with people hollering, "Go, man, go!" while music is being played is a long way from the cathedral with the Bach fugue in it. And even to this day I love to sing along with the band, and there are people around me that want me to shut up. [laughs] But at that time you didn't have to....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You didn't have to shut up?

GEORGE HERMS: You didn't have to shut up, because everybody was saying, "Go, man, go!" It was like that was part of it. And even the words like "blowing" and "to wail" and "to groove," I mean all of these things are kind of expansive. And the warmth of humanity, that's what's the raw material that's being put into it. And the intellectual... . I mean, Ginsberg addresses this a lot lately. I have the thing in there that says, "We were out to save the planet," is one of his headlines. And he has a very interesting.... Because he came from the stockbroker flannel suit.... You know, he had that taste just as I had the electronic brains.

Now one of the things-just to diverge a moment-is that because Pixie works with computers in her graphics in making announcements and things, I'm around computers for the first time since the fifties. So I'm seeing that, okay, so what just was to me death, "Electronic brains need your brains," and I split, now all of that has come and is now just a tool like a typewriter. You know, it's like a typewriter or some sort of....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Um hmm, and appropriated by artists even.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right, and now....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Who would have thought?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, computer literate. I mean, before literature was something else, and now they talk about being computer literate. But all of that was kind of looming in the fifties in way that seemed to be.... I don't know if I told you about Lamantia. When Merrill Greene wanted to do this show back East, which was San Francisco 1945 to 1960....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: "Art as a Muscular Principle."

GEORGE HERMS: ..."Art as a Muscular Principle," she went to see Philip and see if he would take part in it, and he raged at her because she was part of the university system, which was involved with the Vietnam War. He said,

"You are part of the people that are bombing the shit out of Vietnam. Get out of my apartment." Threw her out. See, because that goes back to when you saw, and it's still in place, that war machine. You know, I mean, even with Russia down! I mean, it's really hard to get them off of all the money they made in World War II after the Depression, and meanwhile the scions of those big families are coming along and if they want to be part of that family money they've got to hew to the family line, which is "Keep the war machine busy."

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Was that a main theme or motif for people that you associated with, with your group?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: In other words, was there quite strongly this political element, or was this just one of many aspects of antiestablishmentism [sic]?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, it was something to turn your back on. So it wasn't.... I mean, there were some-Bruce Conner, obviously-there were some people that overtly attacked it. Kienholz, you know. But in my case and say in Jess's case.... Berman's exceptional in that he covered both things. He was extremely political at times and very esoteric at other times. But I think the viewpoint that I found-I can't remember if we've got this on tape yet or not-of when I had my Barnsdall show, somebody said that I was part of the Beat Generation which was "conserve-ative" and that we were conserving an older value system of beauty, art, and poetry. And so in a way we were thrilled about it. There was no show business side to it because there was just a handful of us. There was no feeling that there would ever be an audience for it. That's what was really wild is that you were happy that there were three or four people you could show your work to. And those three or four people didn't necessarily talk to you about it. I mean, Berman never, I think only once pointed out something about my work to me in all the years, and he saw everything I ever did.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, why was that?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, it was simply because it's innate in the work. You know the work is.... And I still feel that my work is the most articulate side to my nature, you know. And all the exclamations-I mean, explanations-that those explanatory notes are just that-they're explanatory notes-and that the meat is in the work itself. And so there's a whole.... You know, a cottage industry has built up about explanatory notes.

The value system which the dominant culture had was one of conformity, of materialism. It was racist; it was sexist. Those words I don't think were even used by any of us at that time. But it was certainly understood. And to this day I'm so much more comfortable in a black night club with black musicians than almost anywhere in the world. You know, I mean I go to post offices in different parts of Los Angeles and the one I'm most comfortable in is where the Parisian Room used to be at Washington and La Brea. [laughs] And I just go in there because there was a club there. For some reason I feel totally at home, and I have none of the standing in line and irritation that I have in other post offices. So that, and the fact that the meritocracy of.... It didn't matter what color the hands were on the saxophone, what's coming out of the saxophone. That meritocracy was very strong, and it was the work. It's in the poems, it's in the music, it's in the sculptures, in the paintings.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You were describing yourself earlier, when we were using our art historical model, I believe, as a mannerist. You chose that term.... We were talking about the renaissance, classical, baroque, and all that. But you, it seemed to me, focused in on the mannerist phase....

GEORGE HERMS: I was talking about Johns, really.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yeah, well, so the next question I was going to ask you at that point is how do you place yourself? Is mannerism a useful term in that respect or not?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I started beachcombing....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And what does it mean?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. I started beachcombing in Hermosa Beach, and I had stopped drawing around five or six and I didn't do any visual work till I was nineteen or twenty, something like that, so it was a long time-twenty-one maybe. So I lost a lot of those formative years. Not the real formative years, but the adolescent years, in which I was living life but I wasn't practicing my art. And so I had to then self-taught, if you like, painting, drawing, lithography. Photography I'd started at age twelve. But many of these mediums I had to explore and find out for myself what they were about. As I teach today, I say you should master all mediums so that when you have an idea you know which is the best medium to express it in. Because some things make it better as a drawing, or maybe you should just photograph it and it doesn't have to be a sculpture or an installation. Or maybe it should be a performance and you just tell the idea, because a lot of people are raconteurs rather than narrative painters. You have to find out what you're good at, and what is satisfying to you.

So I sort of made all of these explorations into other media and came back to my natural beachcombing instincts. They went on simultaneously with them, but if you look at the Zodiac Boxes in 1965 you will see someone who's doing many different mediums, each month. And yet the boxes that then follow the Post-Pneumonia Boxes in the late seventies, the painting has dropped out, I don't think there's hardly any drawing in them, I don't think any of my photographs. ...They're almost all found-object collage works. So I don't know if the definitions of classical, mannerist, baroque really.... It's more that there are exploratory modes, and then there's like coming home to the basic manner of expression.

Fidel Danieli once.... I don't know if this was ever published but I have showed L.A. Louvre, which he took me out afterwards and grilled me about every single thing that was in that show, and he then ended up.... It was published, because out of all those notes he pointed out that I was
a classicist. You know, that all this wild stuff with the junk that was so upsetting to people early on, but that basically behind it there was a classical artist.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I wonder what he meant. Well, let's save this for the other side of the tape, but I'd like to pursue that.

GEORGE HERMS: Okay.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And I guess you remember what he said, so let's turn this thing over.

Session 4, tape 2, side A

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Continuing an interview with George Herms. It's March 10, 1994. This is the fourth session and this is tape 2.

George, we were talking about these ideas: periods and styles in history and desperately trying to place you. [chuckles] And you mentioned that Fidel Danieli wrote a review, an article after a show at L.A. Louvre-it must have been some years ago, ten years ago or so....

GEORGE HERMS: Um hmm.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...and decided, and apparently convinced you, that you were in fact, appearances notwithstanding, a classicist. Do you remember what he meant by that? How did he define the term in connection with your work?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I would like to, in this move that I'm making now, try and see if could locate that article, because I merely agreed with him, and I felt that he had spotted something that, beyond the shock value, if you like, of using junk and discarded materials, there was someone who was organizing space and developing compositions that in a through-line went right back to classical art. And no one had ever spotted that, to my knowledge, or expressed it publicly, that what I was doing was in the service of beauty-the classical sense of beauty-that none of this was really intended to jolt the viewer. There's, I'm sure, a kind of youthful quality to early works in which anything goes and to follow up the futurist's thinking that any material could be used in a work of art. That's hardly revolutionary, though; that's been around all of the twentieth century. I'm thinking of the works from the Batman Gallery period. There's always been a projection out into real space. A piece called Prong, that had like a three- or four-foot extension that came sticking out. But basically my.... You know, they have arrived at this point in time as being almost a figure-on-ground classical sense, in which the ground is either a found board or a faded newsprint or a piece of rusted metal. All of the attempts to kick down the barriers that say, "Art can only be this," I think those were taken care of in the fifties and early sixties, so that an artist was allowed to just express oneself. You didn't have to go out and beat down an opposition to it. And I'm sure that there are people who.... Well, it's like in every field. In the last half of the twentieth century, I don't care if it's librarianship or biology, a great explosion has taken place. There are some people who only know about the explosion in their field, and they still think that art is about Impressionism. I mean, some very avant-garde jazz musicians. Or dancers, modern dancers. I worked with [Catherine, Katherine] [Lanazza, Lenaze], and this one dancer didn't like what I was doing for Catherine with my found-object sculptures that she used in her dance, and she said, "Well, have you ever gone to any museums?" It's almost like, "What's a museum?" was the question. "Well, what kind of art do you like?" Well, it turned out he liked Impressionism, see, and yet he was dancing with the most cutting-edge dance troupe in town.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Isn't that extraordinary?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah!

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: We assume that all of this is overlapping and that you participate in avant-gardism and you have an understanding that can apply to anything. Not so.

GEORGE HERMS: Not so, no. And that's why I always tell my students, "Don't just stay in the very, very narrow slice called the visual arts." It's a very, very small slice of the human pie. And you need to be in touch with all the other slices of the pie, because that's.... In my case, it feeds my art, and it's also the audience. It's a two-way thing.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Let me ask you about this very portentous term "avant-garde." I'd be interested in your thoughts of just what that means. There are those who say there is no such a thing any more of an avant-garde, that that was really an early twentieth-century thing at best.

GEORGE HERMS: Right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But again in looking back to the fifties and the sixties, and focusing especially on California, on your experience, did you at that time, you and your friends, or do you now looking back, think of that as.... Did you think of yourselves as avant-gardists? Did you have a concept of the avant-garde?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I somewhere wrote that I resigned from the avant-garde when I was nineteen. [laughs] And I think that that was a response to a kind of.... You know, setting oneself up a little bit. It's like if someone comes to you and tells you they're a mystic, somehow.... They don't have to tell you. If they are, they don't have to tell you.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Yeah.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, right, and so for someone to say that they're avant-garde at that structure, to place oneself in the avant-garde in the fifties was kind of bullshit. You know what I mean?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Self-conscious.

GEORGE HERMS: I mean, there was no name. Nobody called themselves anything. We were friends. You know, nobody called themselves anything, and the Beat thing was really distasteful. I mean, it's only recently that I have allowed it to be associated with myself, or to even acknowledge that I was part of that Beat Generation. You know, it was so distasteful. And also, because of Life magazine, and my being in that '58 issue of Life magazine that separated Lawrence, Kansas, squares versus Venice Beach Beatniks, you know. And this divisiveness was well known in our circle, that this is how you divide and conquer and this is Love and Death, the book about Time and Life and how the advertisers run the show, and that it's all yellow journalism, and it's in the employ of the arms manufacturers, what we now see in John Hartfield's work. You know, it was absolutely true about America at that time, and the things that he did on Hitler were totally applicable to our times, in the fifties. And in the nineties. So you talk about perspective, but what perspective? Nothing has changed. You know what I mean? We still have the same problems. The quantity: You know, I talk about the wave, which is the population growth, which I don't know if we have this on tape or not, but very briefly it took from the beginning of time-it's a bar graph-from the beginning of time it starts a mile down there, comes up to 1850 to get one billion people. Okay? And then to get two billion people, 1935, when I'm born. Okay, and then all of a sudden it's going up to six billion. It's like a wave at the beach, like a giant wave, you know, this bar graph; it just takes off. So that's the fact of my life, is that we have now tripled the population, and so there's three times as many everything: kooks, artists, killers, serial killers, scientists....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: It cheapens everything, doesn't it?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, this is the thing. I'm into this like serial imagery. At what point.... There's a great story-I don't know if I told you-where Berman with those hands of his, his radio ether hands.... And he did-there would be like one, and then there could be four, and then there could be nine, and then there could be sixteen, and they went up, and he finally did this one giant one that was about ten or twelve hands high and about twenty hands wide. And I always put his plexiglass on for him. I drilled through it and put his plexiglass on for him. We got this big sheet of plexiglass and drilled it on, on the plywood ground, and it got done and he looked at it and he didn't like it. And we had to take the plexiglass off and he took it apart-his largest piece he had ever done.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Why, too much?

GEORGE HERMS: Because it was too diffused. If you look at those pieces of his, when it gets to sixteen of them or something there's always right in the middle either a cross or a rose or something right in the middle that really anchors it. And this was just, it became diffused. And so this is the question I always have with multiples. Of anything. Armand really got into it in an interesting way. But how many does it take? I mean, there's one and then there's two and you compare, and then there's three, and you're kind of like one is better than the other two, and then four, and at what point does the uniqueness disappear? And at what point do you start not looking? Because if you look.... Art is made one at a time, and you start looking at them as unique works, but then if you keep this series going at what point do you stop looking at them as unique and then your eyes just kind of glaze over? You know what I mean? And you become, you just sort of pass by them. It's like you're

looking at each piece of wood, and it turns out it's a picket fence. And at what point do you stop looking at each piece of wood and it becomes picket fences?

And I don't know if I can tie this in to your avant-garde question or not, but the thing is that if you were setting yourself up as.... To me, the avant-garde was cool, but I really think of it as being Cocteau and Baudelaire, before him, you know what I mean?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Oh, those old guys.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, poets and. ...Like I grew up thinking that art was something that happened in Paris in the twenties, and that's where an avant-garde took place. And obviously with View magazine in New York, when they came out of Europe to there there was an avant-garde going on. But I think when you're in the middle of it, it's kind of pretentious to say, "I am of the avant-garde." And in looking back, because I really didn't talk until I was thirty.... I listened and I felt that everybody else was really in full stride-you know, in my early twenties when I met Berman and those people. And so I just enjoyed hearing what they had to say, so I would, if you like, place myself as being in the audience of the avant-garde, even though I was working throughout it all. I was not putting forward manifestoes, let's put it that way. I read something in.... It's like André Breton is.... I love him dearly, but there's a side of him that's really a pain in the ass. [chuckles] You know what I mean? It's that organizing of the avant-garde side of it and making it like a corporation or something.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: There seems to be, would you say, a pomposity, an arrogance?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. Yeah, now the arrogance is real good in the individual artist in relationship to the work. I think that there's a great place for arrogance. But when it starts involving people, then I shy away from it.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: As we talk, all these ideas come up and I keep wanting not to lose them. Of course, I will, but the idea of the quality of uniqueness, of the object itself. When you mentioned this and I understood you to mean-with the Berman anecdote, for instance-that there comes a point when it slips away from you. I gather that this is something important, this quality that matters. The idea of the individual-of the individual piece-as if perhaps it has maybe in the spiritual quality that it carries with it that-well, you said diffused-that if it's spread out too much it's illusive. What about the whole notion of originality and uniqueness versus multiples? Is this is an important thing for you in your work?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, in two ways. One of them is that when I find one rusty circular saw blade it's fantastic. And then I find like twenty of them, and it's a stash. And so then they start feeding into the work. Whereas the one I would just mount it, just by itself, like a T'ang dynasty vase, under a glass case or something. But when there's twenty....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: A precious object.

GEORGE HERMS: That's right. And that's it; it has to do with precious. Now a lot of what went on in the fifties was to make art that was not precious. I mean, this is a Bermanism kind of thing, is that he wanted these books, these Seminas, to go into your hand, that you lived with it, that they fell on the floor, they got a coffee stain on them. Art was to be part of life, not something precious and separated from life.

Okay, but what got us started before, Paul, was the population explosion, okay.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Right.

GEORGE HERMS: So what is important. ...And now we have with this.... You know, Rachel Rosenthal would like to have single people that don't produce children be given medals in the next century. She thinks they should be the heroes. The people that don't reproduce should be acknowledged and saluted because they at least are not contributing to this population explosion. Okay, so. ...And here I am with my mother who came down and I told her about Pixie and everything. She was just here overnight. I put her on the train at Union Depot to go back up North, and the last thing she did was she put her hand on my cheek, and she says, "No more babies, George." [laughter]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You've been given your instructions.

GEORGE HERMS: So I've gone too far in one direction, perhaps. But what we want is the value of human life to not be cheapened. Rugged individualism, which is sort of the generation that I came out of, and the fact that you did do original things because that was what was fun, to do something original. And I still am in that business.

Now, Jess, his six cardinal sins of contemporary art.... I don't know if you're familiar with those. Originality is one of them. Spontaneity is another one. I mean, the whole list, I'm guilty of every single one of them. But the

question of whether or not these values can go on into the next century in terms of art, I think absolutely. And I think that they're.... And this is again maybe utopian, pollyanna. I see a golden age as being when this spiritual light is spread throughout the entire population, and a dark age is when it has receded till there are only seven monks-or monkesses-on the seven highest mountains on the planet and they are praying and it's just nothing but darkness all around. And that we have, as a race, this pendulum has swung from these moments when there's. ...And we thought with the flower child phenomenon that we were entering the Aquarian Age and that the golden light would be in everyone. That's what it felt like. And it was chemically induced, in many cases... .

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Was that right or wrong?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, it was, it was. I mean....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Did this make it a great lie? Or a misapprehension?

GEORGE HERMS: No, I think at that time I think it was absolutely happening. I think that you had masses of people-twenty, thirty, forty thousand people dancing and singing, no fistfights. And I think that there were children, and every... . I'm thinking of Elysian Park here. And on Easter, when they came in from the sky, and I think it was an honest moment of possibilities.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But can it be sustained in any type of society?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, now we're back to love. Now we're back to love, you know. Can you sustain a marriage beyond that moment, that golden glowing moment?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Hmm, interesting.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, see. So I believe.... I'm a believer, see, that we are improving. I mean, we have made progress as a species, and we're maybe overly successful, but, you know, it's the Buckminster Fuller that says there's this ark of problems and that we keep coming up with solutions and that our ability to come up with solutions is.... To me I always saw it as the cartoon characters that run off of the cliff. There's a chase scene and they're in mid-air and they're running and running and running and they don't fall until they feel conscious that they're in mid-air.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Not aware, yes.

GEORGE HERMS: Right, yeah. And that's they way I see it is that we're out there in mid-air, that's where civilization always stays, right off the cliff. You know, just one step off the cliff. Beyond what we are, have enough food and shelter to take care of our population, it's beyond that always. And that that's where we live, in that space, in air. And as soon as we become conscious of it, we drop. And meanwhile we're working on some way to like get cantilevering back to the cliff. And that's where the artist comes in.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: How so?

GEORGE HERMS: Because imagination is a muscle that will atrophy if it's not used. And imagination is what artists are about.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Does that keep us suspended, is what you're saying?

GEORGE HERMS: We'll come up with a way to stay connected to the cliff in some way, yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That's a very romantic idea.

GEORGE HERMS: Exactly. But it has to do with originality, too, is that if it's an original problem then you need original solutions. See, so, I think it's.... To be quite frank with you, I think the question of originality in art is a kind of very insular, New York art magazine jerk-off. I don't think it's....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You think that misses the point? In your view this really misses the point of what's important about art activity, making things, creativity?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I mean, I could see it as like a classroom, a set of assignments: Don't make original art. And then you have some of them do it better than others. The better students make less original art, on that assignment.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Do you see yourself in any way aligned with the Pop artists? And I don't mean stylistically, of course. That would be absurd. Nobody I think would make.... I'm not so sure about that. But that's not the connection I'm making. But the whole notion you were just talking about of.... Well, let's see, what precisely was it? The idea that there isn't.... Well, let's see, help me, George. What was it that you just said to me that got me

on to this? The notion of originality. This is it. You were talking about the classroom assignment, and then it seems to me Pop Art very much calls into question these notions of the sanctified original. In replication, advertising, popular art, our popular culture. Do you see yourself-I mean at that time and with your interests-aligned with these concerns?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I have a lot of.... You know, the Irish Firewater collages are booze ads from Life magazine. See, my feeling about Pop-and again romanticized perhaps-is that all it did was open up an area of raw material to go into the work, that it wasn't anti-original, it's just that you can now use these magazines and anything that's part of popular culture just as well as you can use all the Greek myths and the Biblical stories in your work. So I saw it as a continuation of what went on at the beginning of the century when the doors were kicked open and you didn't have to do academic art. See, I think that's what Pop Art really was, is that it was.... And also it allowed people to get back into recognizable imagery after Abstract Expressionism, just as assemblage allowed people to use objects once again. So it was this swing which goes on within the individual artist and within generations of artists between the abstract and the figurative.

Now, Pop Art-one of my students saw the Lichtenstein retrospective and I said, "Well, what did you think?" and he said, well, the first eight years he liked, and then he thought it was thirty-eight years of repetition. And he put down everything. Now I went through the show backwards, and I was totally in love with everything he's been doing, and I thought that the earlier ones were, at this point in time, kind of weak. You know what I mean? They had a revolutionary aspect, but in terms of the boldness and everything, they weren't as bold as the recent work.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You see, that's an interesting observation you're making. Because inventing something, breaking the mold, creating something, moving into new territory, is what the avant-garde is supposed to be talking about.

GEORGE HERMS: Right, yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That's practically one definition. And that's valued not for, necessarily, the craft, for the resolution of imagery but for pushing into new territory. And there's even a different value, a different way of judging I think at that point. It's interesting that you, while recognizing that, at the same time are looking for a certain development, certain qualities, almost in a formal sense, dealing with....

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. Aesthetically, the recent work is just right on the money for me. And the other. . . . I mean, this is today, as I look at today it with my eyes today. And I'm sure I had the same reaction with the earlier work-you know, at that time, thirty years ago when I saw it. It looked fresh and bold.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So freshness and boldness, or freshness and newness, really isn't enough for you. This in and of itself is not, what shall we say, the proper objective or goal of the artist, in your view?

GEORGE HERMS: No....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: It's just one aspect.

GEORGE HERMS: I think that the first person to use oil on canvas didn't necessarily make the best paintings.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: [chuckling] Touché. Good point.

GEORGE HERMS: It's hard for me to.... Because, you see, I love people. And I love attempts, I love stand-up comics. You know, I'll listen to them forever because the joke's not funny but you can see where they're coming from. You can see how their mind.... You can see the wheels turning in their mind as they're trying to come out with a joke. And you see artists doing things where they're trying to be original or they're trying to break fresh ground, and they just never ever saw any of Matta's paintings, that's all. [laughs] I don't know. In other words, I would encourage everybody to.... And I face it in teaching because when they realize that the vast amount of explorations that have gone on visually in the last half of the twentieth century-and the first half of the twentieth century, let alone all the previous centuries-and then you bring in, geographically, the various cultures around the world that have their own, that go back for thousands of years. Incredible. And all of this to me, as a found-object person, is fruit that's just dropping into my lap, to be worked with. And so I have.... You know, I'll be doing a theater piece called Panel of Experts on June 10, a fundraiser for Beyond Baroque.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: All right, June 10?

GEORGE HERMS: June 10, yeah. And so my panel of experts.... Pixie wants to do a backdrop, of what she sees as the panel of experts. And one of the things that.... And poor Tosh Berman, who's running the thing, I'm like on the phone every other day with him. He has to write the copy to go into the calendar about what this is, the panel of experts. And I said, you know, the artist as hitchhiker, next to the information superhighway. We're

going to bring him in.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: What an overhyped phenomenon.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, isn't it great? And there's a cartoon I tore out of the paper; it's already made the cartoon pages: The guy with his hand out, finger out, standing beside him. But one of the things is the guards and gardeners. We're going to have them appear. So you have the avant-garde and you have the avant-gardener.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You're a trickster, after all.

GEORGE HERMS: Well, I love life, see, and I think it is all fair game. So in a way, nothing is safe around me. Because there's found objects, there's found ideas, but everything is sacred. Nothing is safe but everything is sacred.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, it strikes me that basically you're quite optimistic and.... I see this thing [the tape recorder] blinking so I'm going to, if I may, restate my thoughts.

GEORGE HERMS: Do you want to turn it over?

Session 4, tape 2, side B

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Herms, session 4, second tape, tape 2, side B. George, I cut myself off. I was trying to ask you a question, and I'll try to restate it again. On the basis of some of the things that you've been saying, I detect a very definite strain of optimism in you, but then I think beyond you and your work in a broader sense about perhaps even the possibility that society-people-kind, mankind, womankind-eventually, will get it right. That there is an element of hope. You were mentioning like the cartoons-Wiley Coyote, or something, in the Roadrunner... .

GEORGE HERMS: It's in a lot of them.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...goes out there and then all of a sudden he's off the cliff, he's way out there, and he looks down, whoa!! and he goes down.

GEORGE HERMS: That's when you fall.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: And without restating what is your story, or your metaphor, that this is the fate of mankind, civilization, and that the role of the artist is to somehow keep some connection with the cliff, with the terrain as we try to work our way through. I gather this is it. Underlying this seems to be-for me anyway, since we're talking about the art field-a very traditional kind of high-modernist notion that in fact society is, if not perfectible, at least progress can be made. It can improve. I don't want to read too much into what you have said, but in your own view are you sympathetic a bit to that mid-century or earlier century high-modernist notion that through art society can be redeemed eventually?

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. Well, yeah, I subscribe to that magazine [chuckles] but I keep moving and so I don't always get the magazine mailed to me. Yeah, I more than subscribe to that. I see it as being a question of evolution of the species, and that our next step that we are about right now is to walk wide awake into our dreams-that's what is taught-and that the artists are very close to that in our work. And so we are the, if you like, avant-garde of the species. Not just civilization being.... Civilizations come and go but this experiment called life.... In my theater pieces I read a long, long section called "Retrospect on Races," which talks about the different kinds of creatures that we have been before we are now, and we are.... It starts with pure spirit and works through the dinosaurs and sometimes we have two spines and sometimes the larynx is the agent of procreation. It goes through a series of.... There are these different races. We're like the fourth or fifth subrace of the sixth subrace, maybe, or the fourth race or something. In other words, spirit has gone down into materialism with the dinosaurs and has gradually started to work its way back to pure spirit. And that's the big picture that we're looking at, and they keep getting more and more scientific information to show how long we've been on this planet working. And so the joy of art for me is that you are able to engage physically, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually your entire being with your work. See, that's the search that I went off on. It was when "electronic brains need your brains," I took a hike. College of Engineering, I took a hike. I wanted a life's work that I could use my entire life. This separation between one's work, the forty hours of hell, which.... Gaylyn now has to go out and get a job, and she just assumes that's hell. You know, that a job is hell. My job as an artist is not hell. It's a complete spectrum of heaven and hell and everything in between. And the artists are the ones that have to figure out how to take everything that life throws at you, very chaotically, and organize it into a composition-which, in the case of the plastic arts, you can read all at once. Or if you want to add time to it then you have the narrative arts: poetry and music and theater and video. So I have no problem with being considered avant-garde if you look at it as a species kind of thing-like if you look at insects, and there are certain ones of the insects that have to go out and be the scouts-that we are scouting and finding that many of the

things that I used to do are now like a whole field. Many of the things that Berman used to do are a whole field. You know, mail art or performance art. It's like the boat going through the water, and it leaves that wake, an ever-widening wake, behind you. I'm not interested in going back and checking out, necessarily, any of the things I've done previously. I want to keep plowing ahead through the sea of experience. And I never tell anybody to do exactly what I did. They can just see the ever-widening wake. In my case, I leave physical evidence in sculptures and assemblage works and films and other media. [knocking sound] Someone's knocking on my door. They'll have a hard time finding me. It's all right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: You describe a situation where.... You've been making art for you.... You describe a very attractive situation-I mean, with its inconveniences and difficulties. ...
GEORGE HERMS: Sure.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...some of them financial, that nonetheless it's rewarding, it's fulfilling. You feel that it's an antidote or an alternative to I guess what you describe as a rather stifling situation that, frankly, most people have to operate within. So my question is, this is great for you, and you've made that commitment, made that choice, and taken the bad with the good. But how does that help the rest of.... To the extent that you connect with the species and you want to see yourself as operating as a scout, how.... Eventually, this has to have some impact. It has to have to find a way to benefit the family of man.

GEORGE HERMS: Right.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Do you believe that is happening, will happen? How?

GEORGE HERMS: Recycling. That wasn't even a word in the fifties. And it's now a major industry and it's very beneficial. I went to the garbage dumps and brought it back and put it in the art museums. That was my way of recycling, but now, just that people will look at things that have been thrown away and consider is it possible that there's some more life in it. And then to extend that thinking into the area of human beings. Are we throwing these people on the scrap heap too soon? Is there more? Like the Eskimos, where people of age should be treasured and asked, what do you think? How does it look to you? I mean, it's things like that. It's by example that I'm teaching. I'm not saying, "Everybody follow my path," but just check it out again. There's a David [Orozco] up at Barnsdall I became close to when I had a show there. He's a docent and he takes school children through my exhibition. He goes around Los Angeles and he sets up little shrines out of found objects around a construction site or somewhere, organizes them into a nice little composition and walks away from them. And he's also the one that said to me-he doesn't have a car, he takes the bus everywhere-if he didn't see a million people everyday he wouldn't feel right. I love this man. [chuckles] You know what I mean? Here is a person who is totally at home in his situation. There's a checker up at a Ralph's on Sunset Boulevard that no matter what you do when you take your groceries through he looks at what you've got and he says, "How come you didn't get any cheese? You didn't get any onions. You don't have any cream for the coffee." Everybody, everybody. He spots what they've got, and he busts them for something they didn't get. This oriental guy. He's actually hysterical, he's the most Zen person that Pixie and I have run into in a long time. He's completely at home in what he's doing. See, so I'm not saying that everybody becomes an artist, but everybody begins to look at what's around them, and juxtaposes some things and maybe gets a laugh. You know what I mean? The humor part of it, you know, people that get too serious about my work are missing a whole bunch of it, because there's really a kind of jokey side; there's a light side, it's not all heavy. It's not all about death and decay. And it's not all about that the spirit lasts and materialism decays. It's that there's some funny stuff going on. And of course we love Picasso who took the bicycle seat and made an ape out of it, okay?

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Right.

GEORGE HERMS: That kind of way is how problems are solved. And if you just start looking at the world that way, you've got a better chance to come out the other end of it.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: So this is the social function, perhaps. This is the form that the social function or contribution of art, certainly some of your art tends....

GEORGE HERMS: The mechanics of living by example.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Do you think assemblage lends itself more to this kind of contribution, this kind of function?

GEORGE HERMS: Well, assemblage. ...

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: More so than perhaps some other....

GEORGE HERMS: Well, Hal Glicksman really loved it because people were not in awe that you had to study for twenty years to learn how to draw realistically, but that you could just grab stuff and start putting it together, and that it went through the Latino community, it went through the feminist community. It liberated lots of

people who were kind of uptight that you couldn't go into art until you had a very expensive education.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Right.

GEORGE HERMS: See? So assemblage was egalitarian.

[Interruption in taping to answer knock at door]

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Assemblage. We were talking about assemblage.

GEORGE HERMS: The egalitarian aspect of it, the easy entry.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But what about.... That's from the standpoint of the artist and that's attractive to the artist. But I was thinking more of an effective media or means to accomplish some of these goals that you described as the role of the artist: the examples.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. It comes from the Duchampian pointing is as important as painting; it really comes to that. Even when you teach drawing you have to teach people to look at the object before you can get them to draw it. And so developing our senses, I feel, can only make life richer for people, and to become insensitive is allowing the blood bath of killing the Jews, things like that. That's just insensitivity that allows those things to happen. So with all these....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: On a monumental scale.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, it's widespread. I think that there's some sort of basic thing in all of us that really responds to poetry and music and art and that it gets beat out of us as we grow up, but at age two, three, four, five, it's still there, it's very alive, and just needs to be encouraged.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: It seems to me quite clear that you-certainly now, and perhaps always-thought of art as having a very real social responsibility-a function-and looking back to the years when you started out, do you see that view, or attitude, as perhaps distinguishing what was going on in California-especially with your group-from what was going on in New York City with certainly the whole of mainstream modernism in America, with the whole gallery scene and so forth, and more of the commercial-eventually the commercial _____?

GEORGE HERMS: Well....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Is that one of the areas where you would.... My question of course, ultimately, is what do you see as the differences.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. Is there a difference? And what are the differences? Now by the time I'm in New York in 1964 there's a generation who have come along and modernism has been already established so they don't have to knock any of that down and they're able to just explore freely at the Judson's church and in various venues, so that at least the group that I associated with in New York was very simpatico with what was going on here. There was no provincialism accepted and even, I think I told you, in the fifties it was the circuit between the Village and the French Quarter in New Orleans and Mexico City and Los Angeles and San Francisco. And it was just a free-floating bohemia. If you got over to London or Paris or Amsterdam also.... But that free-floating bohemia was in a way an offspring of-just to continue the way we've been talking this morning-of the Romantic side of high-modernism. And I think that intellectually the thing that's amazing a lot of people in studying the Beat Generation was what a high intellectual level that whole thing took place at. You know what I mean? There were people with many languages and translations from Chinese. I mean, a whole lot was going on there. And of course, the media's take on it was this nihilist, you know, drinking and smoking pot and playing bongos thing-a mindless, mindless thing when it wasn't that at all. It was....

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...a rejection of values, true values.

GEORGE HERMS: Of, actually, the mindless values of consumerism. That's what was being rejected. [laughs] And of course the advertisers didn't want any of that to go into their magazine.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, so you really don't, at least in your circles, make this distinction between what was happening in New York and in....

GEORGE HERMS: There was no us-against-them going on. It was like, to see Berman look at a Rauschenberg with a baseball umpire thing.... He just pointed it out and said, "That's cool!" There was no us-against-them thing in it at all.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: But what about emphasis or priorities? I realize it's difficult to generalize about these things, but would you not in retrospect see something that set your activities apart in some way-perhaps an

emphasis, let's say, of

values and social concerns and so forth-from much of what was going on in New York. What was the difference between the scenes?

GEORGE HERMS: I would say probably the publicity that was generated for activities in New York made for a.... Oh, there was a lot of light shed on everything that was done, okay, whereas we're talking about bedrooms and apartments and cabins here in California. In other words, things were shared amongst people but even despite the fact that Artforum started out here, there was. ...The people who wrote about art, there were really just poets that were writing poetry, and occasionally some art would weave its way in there. But in the case of [Michael] McClure, he's talking about Jackson Pollock, and Berman is saying to him, "Why don't you write about artists you know, not somebody back there?" And it's like poets writing about jazz played by Bud Powell in New York or Paris when they could be talking about Hampton Hawes, who was playing right here. So the attention, what we now call PR, that sort of thing, in New York it had Madison Avenue. See, and there really wasn't a Madison Avenue out here.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Do you think that in any way had an inhibiting effect on some of the artists? Perhaps forcing their activity ultimately to accommodate itself to the grander scene, than this world of Art and Culture (in capital letters).

GEORGE HERMS: Well, success. You know, will success spoil Jasper Johns? You know what I mean? These guys struggled at a certain age and had a certain amount of success come early, and that can ruin people. Also lack of success can ruin people, too. So I would say the dangers inherent in being well-known at a young age, those are very real dangers. But as a friend, Paul Brach, said once, he's seen a lot more artists hurt by nonrecognition. So I think that in my own-and I can only speak for my own sense-that we had peer recognition here on the Coast.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Um hmm.

GEORGE HERMS: And there was an audience. And we would have an opening. Like Bruce Conner said, they were mostly just an excuse for a party.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Right.

GEORGE HERMS: But you felt that you were a community, if you like. You were part of an artistic community that was not large and the openings did not get written about in the newspapers or covered on the radio or television. And I think that the commercial side of art really took off in New York-as it should being the trade center that it is. I mean, that's where all the pirates went out and robbed and brought it all back to New York. That's what it's about.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, that's interesting what you have to say, because there is one view that New York basically, because of the power as an art center, representing the center in some way almost intentionally, precluded significant activity or certainly recognizing significant activity anywhere else. And what seems to have happened over the past few years, certainly in the assemblage movement in California, is that it's becoming virtually impossible to not acknowledge that as one aspect of the modern art movement in America. And so everybody, of course, people are curious to try to determine what the consequences are. You know, what those differences may be. And I judge from what you're saying that in many respects, in terms of the people that you thought were important, you had shared interests. ...

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: ...and then values and goals and it didn't matter particularly where you happened to work.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah. Well, and a lot of it, too, you have to realize that-in Jazz they use the expression "Keep your day gig" You know what I mean? And you worked at other things, and your art was not your sole source of income. The idea of art as being a source of income was really late in coming to this coast. And it was actually developed by people outside my circle.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Can't that keep you more pure, though? I think this is one of the things I'm getting at. I mean, honestly, do you think that.... Integrity's a fragile thing and I don't want to cast any, make any judgments about anybody certainly on the basis of where they work, but the distractions can be incredible when you're operating in a self-conscious situation with notions of high art and possible sales success. And from what you've described in California you have a situation where that virtually was not available.

GEORGE HERMS: Right, yeah. It was much later in becoming part of the artistic milieu here, that you could make a living off of art. Even amongst my friends there weren't that many academics, so that even teaching wasn't really.... Because that seemed to be a foreign land also. But what-and I've mentioned this before-that Henry

Hawkins, in putting him down as a recommendation for a Guggenheim year after year after year after year after year.... He said, "Well, just keep applying. The cream will rise to the top." And I responded, "Well, what happens if it turns sour before it gets to the top?" [laughs] See, you talk about integrity, but that's the other side of that coin is that you can become very discouraged and some people even suicidal at that inability to feel effectual, that your work is having an effect on people. I think it's different for different artists, but in my case my friends who are still my friends, who are still alive, we're all really just interested in the work. And we just want enough financial flow so that the work can continue-you know, that it doesn't interfere.

The issues in New York that. ...I think it was best described by Susan Larsen, who's writing about me for Barnsdall, and who had just been at the Whitney for a couple years. She said, "Back there you meet people and immediately they want to know where you fit into the hierarchy of things." And I think that would be a curse. Because here you just met people and you just wanted to see what kind of work they did, what kind of music they played.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: Well, Susan's observation.... And that's very useful; I guess that's what I was trying to get at. The word that would fit there is "careerism."

GEORGE HERMS: Yes.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: "Hierarchy" and "careerism."

GEORGE HERMS: I never heard that word for.... I can't remember when I first heard it. I never heard the word career. I never used the word for years.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: That seems to me a fundamental difference, that it has to finally have an effect on the way one operates and works, that there is at least the possibility of a kind of, quotes, "innocence." At least for a time. We all lose our innocence at some point.

GEORGE HERMS: Yeah, that's right. Well, I think in Los Angeles with the Ferus Gallery, you have the beginnings of a New York-type gallery situation, and then, you know, things came from that.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: We should wrap up, but let me ask you quickly one more question. It has to do with what we were talking about earlier. It was the importance of- well, the issue of individualism, individuality versus conformity. You were talking about the fifties and gray flannel suits and mentality and the war machine and all that. And a culture in which you participated that valued the individual. The whole notion of the individual, of the self, seems very important. It seems to me that if there's anything you and your activities, your work, were about that was it. I mean, in my view. But doesn't that come into conflict with another value that I believe you hold, and that is a domestic one, where you have family and community? Now there comes a point where the self, especially the self of an artist, has to be at odds with this other value. Do you have any thoughts about that? Your whole life, of course, provides some example of the perhaps difficulty of maintaining that, but do you see these as opposing principles?

GEORGE HERMS: I at one time was in search of the universe, and I wanted, and I had friends that wanted to take all gender out of the poem, all tense, and remove, as I, in doing a piece called ["Poe-a-tree"], I listed all the languages that Jehovah's Witnesses published their little brochure [in] every week, with seventy-two languages, and one of them was ["gunn"]. When I copied them over I threw in Yastrzemski-Carl Yastrzemski, the Boston outfielder-as one of the languages. The point being that your poetry has to be cool enough so that it is translatable into all of those languages, and if you make a reference to Carl Yastrzemski, most of those people in those other languages aren't going to get it. So that was the purification of one's art so that you only used universals. I mean, this is something that I worked on from the mid-fifties on. Took me about ten years or so, and I worked my way to the point where the only thing that was left, that everybody that spoke all these languages had in common, was the self, the I, the me. So that when I spoke in my most personal, that was the universal. It took me a long time to arrive there, but each of us is an I and each of us is a me. And we have all these other things, geography and language, that are very specific. So that is not a conflict to me. You know, the family and society and all these things. The fact that it is a solo, that I do pull back into the studio to do my work is anti-social, but the goal is that what is done there then is sent out into the world. And, again, pardon the Pollyanna, but I really feel most of the world's problems are a lack of hugs and kisses. And it's impossible for one person to go around and give everybody hugs and kisses, so we invent art. And we put all of that affection into a work of art, and we cast it out over the pond, which it skips-into exhibitions-like the stone, and circles of affection go out from it.

PAUL J. KARLSRTOM: I can't improve upon that.