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Oral history interview with Ernest Briggs, 1982 July 12-October 21

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ernest Briggs on July 12, 1982. The interview took place in New York City, New York, and was conducted by Barbara Shikler 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.

Interview

BARBARA SHIKLER: This is Monday, July 12, 1982. I am in the home/studio of Ernest Briggs, 50 West 29th Street, New York City. He will be talking about his career as a painter and his association with Mark Rothko. Before speaking about the period of your studies with Mark Rothko in California, perhaps you could tell us something about those experiences that led you to the California School of Fine Arts. To be specific, where were you born, where did you grow up, etc.? I will take you to the next series of little questions on that subject after you deal with the first part of it.

ERNEST BRIGGS: Shall I start?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes, please.

MR. BRIGGS: Well, I had always drawn and painted from age 3 or 4. And, after getting out of the Army, I was in San Francisco and living and working there, and actually planning to, through the influence of some friends, my uncle, a friend of his, to go to Cranbrook. In the interim I became engaged and decided that San Francisco was too beautiful a city and environment to leave, and I knew that there was an art school up there on the Hill, and just decided to go there. And, inadvertently, fell into this very exciting situation. Douglas McAgy had started off a program primarily for Veterans and then the presence of Clyfford Still, David Parks, Richard Diebenkorn, Elmer Bischoff and others. It was a very small school, about 600 total enrollment, probably not more than 40 or 50 students in painting at any one time. It just took off, primarily through Still's influence and the fact that many of the students had already been through a couple of years of university or art school so that it was a totally unique situation in terms of relating things to my experience today even including graduate school. So not myself knowing much at all about what was even going on in New York or European art, but being like one of those kids who has probably only one thing that they can do and that's graphic expression.

MS. SHIKLER: Had you done a lot of that in high school?

MR. BRIGGS: Yes, but the programs were very minimal. For instance, where you would draw if you like drawing but nothing compared to the kind of programs that you have now where kids do sculpture, oil painting, casting and everything by the time they get out of music and art.

MS. SHIKLER: Were you encouraged at home? Did you see art in the home?

MR. BRIGGS: I had an uncle who was the primary supportive person. My mother was constantly typically worried about my starving to death if I persisted in this and, after having given up drawing Donald Duck at age 12, everything was down hill from there on. As I say, I was pretty vague but through various...the only real artist I had met was Mark Tobey who was a friend of the person that my uncle worked for, Rudolph Schaeffer, who had a little design studio in San Francisco and he had been there for ages and had known Mark Tobey over the years and whenever Tobey came through San Francisco he would stop off and they would remember their days in the Paris Exposition of '25 or something. But, other than that, at that particular time probably the artist that I was most attached to would be Paul Klee. I remember carrying a book of James Johnson Sweeney's with me all during the army of Paul Klee's reproductions, 2 or 3 in color, and a statement by Sweeney. So I was little prepared for the onslaught of what was happening. But I seemed to be able to adapt. In fact, my original experience, which was going to David Parks' class and he said to 3 or 4 of us entering the class, and it was a big studio with maybe 35 or 30 people painting, and he said: "Well, we don't use a model here, and we don't use still lifes, we just paint." And the evidence was there- they were painting. And that seemed to ring a bell.

MS. SHIKLER: I am going to stop us for a moment to make certain that we can hear you.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, I think that what I would like to ask you now are whether you felt...what were some of the long range effects of that program on you, even now? I will come back to the program particularly but I am curious to know how you feel about that experience and how it's shaped you?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, the program of course that McAgy had in mind was patterned on a Bauhaus idea. Being a

museum person and an historian and whatnot, he had this chart in his office with little tacks that he would move around, moving the students through this program. Well, of course, enter Clyfford Still which just blew the program apart, and McAgy didn't have any idea about what Clyfford was or whatnot, and it took Clyfford about one semester before he managed to get an advanced painting class in which he would separate out of 30 people, pick out 15 and put them in one little studio and then deal with the rest of the crew in another studio.

MS. SHIKLER: Excuse me for a moment, but how did Still blow the program apart?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, simply by doing that. Simply by...for the same salary teach two classes. And his idea explains itself. To create a pressure group, create a pressure environment, in which the students are going to activate each other and push each other. I mean his teaching. I often remark on it today. I go to Pratt, I get there at 9:00 a.m. and I leave at 4:00 or 5:00; the students drift in and out, so it's just the opposite. We were in the studio all day and still would drift in and out. He had his own studio in the building and of course he was doing his own work. And his teaching method was just to come in and there would be something on his mind, a letter from Mark Rothko in New York or a letter from Barnett Newman or an article in a Time magazine or Newsweek or something, and he would come in and extemporaneously talk 20 or 30 minute and....

MS. SHIKLER: Do you remember some of those letters? I am sorry to interrupt you during your thoughts. The letter from Rothko particularly would be of interest.

MR. BRIGGS: Yes, Rothko wrote him a letter on Newman's first show at Betty Parsons which Still read to us. And he was obviously agitated by it because Rothko used the phrase in the letter? "...the line stretches from heaven to hell." And Still said: "He is quoting me! He is quoting me to me!" [Laughter] Still was always suspicious of Barney, and obviously it has bee in the public knowledge for many years now, their conflicts and whatnot.

MS. SHIKLER: So that Rothko was quoting Newman in fact about that line?

MR. BRIGGS: Quoting Still. He had taken over a line that he had gotten from Still, talking about one of Still's paintings [Laughter] and applying it to Barney's paintings and obviously Still felt that he should be in New York taking care of his fences. [Laughter] But he was stuck in California teaching this class and taking care of his family who were there.

MS. SHIKLER: When did you arrive at the school?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, I started in the Fall of 1948, and Still had been there one semester I think, teaching a design and composition class. When I arrived he had managed to get this painting class organized and by that time McAgy knew who he was and more about him and more or less turned the whole...that segment...I mean the people who wanted to work abstractly, over to Clyfford. And, at that time, David Parks and Diebenkorn were still working abstractly; they hadn't switched back to figurative work yet. That happened I don't know when exactly--very soon, the tail-end of '49 or something. But David started...he just abandoned his attempts at abstraction and started doing representations just from his own experience.

MS. SHIKLER: May I...then just kidding you a drop, and say that you arrived in 1948 then, you didn't study, obviously didn't study with Rothko when he was there in the summer of '47?

MR. BRIGGS: No, I didn't.

MS. SHIKLER: You met him when he came up in '49?

MR. BRIGGS: '49, yes.

MS. SHIKLER: Had you met him before that at all?

MR. BRIGGS: No I hadn't, but the museum had a very beautiful Rothko painting which I think they got from Peggy Guggenheim--one of his late surrealist so-called paintings and then also "Possibilities" number one, that publication that Motherwell edited that the Modern museum published which ran one issue I think. We glommed onto it and in that Rothko had a statement, a very poetic, beautiful statement, and just back and white but several reproductions of that period of his work. And also Germain Agy was curator at the House of the Legion of Honor and had an annual in which she would have one room devoted to the New York School. She'd have a Still, a Rothko, a Pollock, a Gottlieb, Baziotes, etc., a Motherwell perhaps and that was our only real confrontation--a glimpse of what was going on, what had been going on in New York. There were also a couple of little de Koonings in the Modern Museum there, the black and white series. And so...we were not given views of Still's work. He didn't show his work to us, and I missed his '47 show at the deYoung Museum, and only saw a couple of paintings during the first year or two.

MS. SHIKLER: So did Still talk about Rothko's work to you? Did he proselytize? Did he...was he verbal about what

it was he felt about Rothko's work?

MR. BRIGGS: Oh, yes, sure. But not in an extensive way. Still's main thrust was a characteristic of his own problem which was to know what he didn't want to do. And that ranged all the way from philosophical, psychological, political, economic, all the aspects of the way art is dealt with and to that degree, I mean he wouldn't really, he never really talked about anyone else's work directly, including students' work. He did not criticize students' work. He talked on broad issues, art politics and the politics of art historically and whatever he knew about all the gossip of the moment. And, his attitude was what you would call populous and radical, not leftist, rather the opposite, conservative, but very, very stimulating. And I think he said once that he considered himself his position, his real function, to be an irritant and to get the student to question and to develop some position in terms of a philosophical approach or stance in terms of vis-à-vis the world or wherever their ambition was going to lead them.

MS. SHIKLER: Can you contrast the teaching methods of Still and Rothko? How did...I would love to hear for instance when, how you first met Rothko, your...the impression that he gave? How he introduced himself? How he led the class, what his direction was with you all in contrast to Still and for himself?

MR. BRIGGS: I first met Rothko, Still brought him into the class and introduced him. And there was of course a total difference in terms of personalities. Rothko was the epitome of the New York Jewish intellectual artist/painter and exuded an entirely different kind of energy; urbane, deep intent, quintessential New Yorker. And there was a tremendous contrast to Still's austere Puritan, almost Calvinist, manner. And at that particular moment, in 1949, we had a student gallery which we rented--a space downtown Grant Avenue--and there were 12 of us and we were going to have one person shows. And I happened to have a show opened; I had the first show actually, and Rothko came to see it and was very supportive. In the studio his attitude was very similar to Still's. He went from person to person. Whereas Still would come in and stand in the middle of the room and declaim, Rothko went from person to person in a typical manner, much as the same as I do today. And, was much more directly involved in the individual and had something to say. The big thing with Rothko's presence there in the program was that he gave a lecture once a week which was in a separate room and people came who were not even in the painting class came to listen to the lectures. Which again, was not a lecture. It was more like a conversational thing, responding to a few questions and then going on. But this was 1949, and there were no ideological programs yet in terms of their esthetics. Again, it was more in terms that they knew what they did not want. In other words eliminated, or attempted to eliminate, from their imagery and from their practice in order to arrive at what I think of as their big image, their big style.

MS. SHIKLER: Did Rothko discuss what he was working towards in his work at those lectures?

MR. BRIGGS: In a very round-about way. I can't really remember anything terribly specific. I can remember when he was in the earlier period, the so-called surrealist period, he mentioned that he and his particular group, Gottlieb and Baziotes, were influenced by and very close to classical studies, classical mythology, and he would be quoting Herodotus or something at some of these lectures or repeating an antidotal story of Herodotus in answer to some inquiry on the part of a student.

MS. SHIKLER: Did that seem to be a dominant focus of his?

MR. BRIGGS: It was part of his past, part of his history, and he was obviously working away from that in terms of his own work.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he indicate that to you or is that a conclusion that you drew from the work itself?

MR. BRIGGS: No, that was apparent; that he stated that he wanted at this juncture...what he was attempting was to eliminate all temporal images, whether it is transparency, movement, space, etc., from his work.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he say why?

MR. BRIGGS: There was only that kind of vague goal which the phrase being "the personal image" or something. And the escape from Cubist form. The feeling that...in one of his letters to Still, "We are going to take painting outdoors," again meaning not back to Impressionism, but maybe out of their feeling of the boxed-in European special mode which Cubism had compressed but not transformed essentially. And, as I say, at that time Still and Rothko were very tight and a tremendous stimulus to each other and each in their own way, in their kind of poetics, probably stimulated each other to a high degree.

MS. SHIKLER: We are going to pause or stop for a moment.

MS. SHIKLER: Steven Polcary quotes you on Rothko; he writes that Rothko admitted to you that he was influenced by Still. Could you talk about that? What did Rothko say specifically about that sort of thing?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, there as an unfavorable review by Frankenstein in the San Francisco Chronicle. Rothko got a couple of us students together and we had lunch together and he was agitated. He thought that we should write a letter of protest.

MS. SHIKLER: The unfavorable criticism of...?"

MR. BRIGGS: Of one of Clyfford's paintings that appeared in one of the Germain McAgy's Annuals. And so we had lunch and he talked at length in a very passionate manner about how he thought that we should be supportive of Still and take a position and write a letter. And, in that lunch, two-hour conversation, he indicated his debt and his great respect and his profound kind of feeling for Clyfford and his accomplishments. And in his discussion why it became clear, I can't remember the exact words, but that he wouldn't have clarified his own ideas without their association and to that degree which is always part of being a painter, fact being an artist, that there was a direct influence on his attitudes and he was arriving at his big style and he was well aware that there was an inspiration from Still's big attitude of what painting can be, where we are and what they could do that gave him...not his start, but gave him his confidence, perhaps his heart to put in it. When you think of what his influences were, Avery, Baziotes, Gottlieb, and what they were doing at that period, was clear indication that, if he's going to get a charge from somewhere, it's not going to come from them because they were not doing big style, big form, painting. They were not leading him to color field; they were not anywhere near that. And Barnett Newman hadn't done anything like this 'till the '40's, late '40's, 1950. And so, if it's going to come from anywhere...and he acknowledged it. That's all. Still didn't teach him what to do or how to paint.

MS. SHIKLER: Well now, you say 1950's. Was this after you had left? This was after the summer of 1949 then, that this protest took place?

MR. BRIGGS: No, this was that late summer.

MS. SHIKLER: That late summer. So that the next question I was going to ask you, did Rothko ever indicate his progression to using broader areas of color was due to Still's influence? The answer obviously has to be in some way...you seem to be saying yes.

MR. BRIGGS: In some way, of course. You can see the influence in his first attempts at those shaped paintings. The format, to a large degree...some of them are even vertical and imitate some of Still's composition, and he was not about to evade the issue; he acknowledged it. They went from a kind of cloud horizontal with swatches of color to, you know, very soon he found his 1, 2, 3, or 1, 2 over/under framed color areas which to me were present as background in the surrealist work--sky, sea, sandy beach and then the figures dancing in front of them. Which again is very typical the way work develops.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he have his work around during that period? Were you exposed to it?

MR. BRIGGS: He brought a couple of paintings with him because he was hoping to make a sale and he was disappointed that the Levis and the Roses didn't, you know, weren't hip at all and he just dragged around to all the proper people and nobody took a flyer.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he bring the things then to the school or did you go to see him outside of the school?

MR. BRIGGS: He showed us...he had one work stretched there in Still's studio in the school and he invited us to see it.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you remember what it was?

MS. SHIKLER: Well, this was the summer of 1949, probably the end of the summer session and getting on into August or something, and I can remember the painting. The format was there. The two or three big pink and blue...but it was fat paint, it wasn't stainy paint. It was still fat.

MS. SHIKLER: Have you ever seen that picture again, by the way?

MR. BRIGGS: No.

MS. SHIKLER: I wonder when I show you some of the pictures perhaps in this catalog you may be able to identify it, I don't know.

MR. BRIGGS: I've got that catalog. I don't know whether they had the one that was in the San Francisco Museum. I can't remember whether they had that reproduced. Some of these early Rothko's Germain McAgy had shown at the Annuals. There were about 3 Annuals that we got a glimpse of what the progress was of Pollock and Rothko.

MS. SHIKLER: What did he say about that picture when he bought it in?

MR. BRIGGS: It was just in the room and we...he let us in the room, and we saw it. Everybody was very...we were not verbal. Everything was on a plane of...you know, you look at paintings, you don't talk about them.

MS. SHIKLER: And yet they were a very articulate bunch themselves, your mentors, Rothko and Still, certainly.

MR. BRIGGS: But nothing compared to the way art talk has developed in the last 15-20 years. Form, structure, space, all these. I had never bothered myself with what space was until the last 10 years. Or what color was or...these kind of formal fundamentals which...sort of a basic language. It was very strange. I don't particularly at this point, I don't repudiate what happened, but I don't particularly...I don't deal with my students in that manner at all.

MS. SHIKLER: In the manner in which Still and Rothko did?

MR. BRIGGS: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: Or the manner in which it's being done today?

MR. BRIGGS: No. I have to accept where we are at today and students are so much better educated than we were; they are much more...they have to deal in language; they have to approach it through language--that's a barrier. But they were so fortunate in that they did not have that barrier to confront that some of us.... Some of the students just stayed one day in class and walked out.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, what you are saying is that what you heard from Rothko and Still was more of a conceptual and a philosophical message than a formal direction.

MR. BRIGGS: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: And even then in discussing their own work, if ever, are you saying that they paid less attention to the formal development of the work than the philosophical? I am putting words into your mouth and I shouldn't. But I wish you would take it from me.

MR. BRIGGS: No. If you take the traditional way in which painting is dealt with or art is dealt with, that was still a three-year art school, craft-based rather than the way an art school is run today which is in the environs of a college or university atmosphere where everything is reduced to language first and then you go to the studio to paint. Well, their attitude was paint and then after the fact then you can figure out what you've done. If you wish. It's not required. It's totally visual and you eliminate in terms of what you don't want and you search for what you do want. And that has to be visual. It has to be visually not in terms of some idea. The idea is to circumvent what has been done. Not necessarily to just find a novelty but to take what has been done.... You're Americans; you can't paint Cezanne's mountain. What is your experience, you know? What is your life about? And here's the medium, If you can use it, use it. If not, do something else.

MS. SHIKLER: Was he ever critical of the form in which the students worked?

MR. BRIGGS: Rothko?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes.

MR. BRIGGS: No. he was always positive in a sense that, if he saw something which he responded to, he would say so directly. But, if he didn't respond, why he would gracefully get out of it.

MS. SHIKLER: And was he always graceful?

MR. BRIGGS: To my knowledge. I mean I have heard from others stories of his arrogance or something but, to my experience, he was always very supportive and he was looking for intensity. Some kind of feeling basically.

MS. SHIKLER: Okay, now you also said something that Rothko told you that he was influenced by DeChirico in his subway scenes. Do you have a memory of that?

MR. BRIGGS: I don't have a memory of that. And having seen those paintings in the Rothko show at the Guggenheim, to me they are very New York paintings and did not involve, except in some subtle way, any reference to DeChirico.

MS. SHIKLER: And he didn't make reference to something...?

MR. BRIGGS: I don't recall that. I know that he was very clear that he was indebted to Milton Avery. And he and Baziotes had a kind of compatibility in their surfaces they both developed. But they had at least grown up together and matured together and looked upon Avery as mentor.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he discuss this...I am showing Mr. Briggs catalogue number 22, "Subway Scene," at this point.

MR. BRIGGS: Well, he mentioned that he used to paint subway scenes. And then he mentioned that they went to trunk murders. You know, an arm here, a leg there, and a torso here. And that was a classical myth thing. The titles were always from classical literature.

MS. SHIKLER: He referred to those pictures as trunk murders?

MR. BRIGGS: Yes. [Laughter] And so there you are. I mean being totally involved at one moment under the influence of perhaps the European Surrealists art and rather than Cubist format or form idea, and then you know, seeing it in retrospect and giving it. You know? Seeing the humor in that. And then trying to get away from that. Trying to preserve what you could and then to go on and meeting time beyond. Well, similar to, say, Pollock burying the figurative elements in his network and he always called them veils. And Rothko's or Still's idea was to get rid of that start; get rid of that bed rock and move on to another more direct approach instead of, say, the De Kooning and Pollock thing of burying, burying, burying. And they wanted everything to come at once.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he seem to be displeased with his surreal period or the earlier period, the subway series?

MR. BRIGGS: No.

MS. SHIKLER: He was not harsh about it?

MR. BRIGGS: No, very humane as a person. I mean accepting where you had been. And that there is a value and that's where you had been.

MS. SHIKLER: And that's where he had been obviously and you are saying that he accepted that aspect of his own development.

MR. BRIGGS: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: I am going to show you something now just while we have the catalog open. I was going to show you this, these two pictures. I am showing #73 and #74. But I didn't want you to look at the dates. #73 and #74 in the Guggenheim catalog and ask you whether you were aware of this kind of work, whether he brought any of these in, or showed any of them at the time that you were at California School.

MR. BRIGGS: I might have seen something similar o these.

MS. SHIKLER: #73?

MR. BRIGGS: #73. In one of Germain McAgy's Annuals.

MS. SHIKLER: But one of those....

MR. BRIGGS: But not as high-keyed color as that, as I recall. Much more subdued. Perhaps I've seen a reproduction of it.

MS. SHIKLER: Well now, this was from the period 1947 which is before you saw him so that if, in fact, you saw this at that show, or something like it at the show, how does it related in your memory to this #86?

MR. BRIGGS: Oh, this vertical red?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes.

MR. BRIGGS: I don't recall seeing anything like that until he came in 1949 and that was the one painting that I remember seeing. And then in 1950 I think Germain had another Annual although Rothko.... In fact I think the whole school was ready to collapse, one of his characteristic, very simple, two rectangles with color was visible at the DeYoung Museum.

MS. SHIKLER: Let me try to clarify something for the sake of the transcriber, whoever he or she may be. The first picture I showed you, the first 2 pictures I showed you, were #73 and #74 which you said you might have seen something similar to those in the Germain McAgy's exhibit. When was Germain McAgy's exhibit?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, they were annuals, so like every year from about 1949, 1950, 1951 or maybe '48 also.

MS. SHIKLER: 1947 and 1848.

MR. BRIGGS: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: So in your first year you might have seen these hanging or something like these?

MR. BRIGGS: Small paintings, not big ones.

MS. SHIKLER: But, as far as #86 is concerned, you haven't yet come across anything that looked like that?

MR. BRIGGS: Right, right.

MS. SHIKLER: Let's take a little pause.

MS. SHIKLER: This is Side II of interview #1 with Ernest Briggs, Barbara Shikler, interviewer. Okay, I just asked Mr. Briggs off tape whether it seems to have been the most exciting time to have been a young painter and he is now going to be telling us just why it was.

MR. BRIGGS: Well, the fundamental thing is just pure economics. We were set free economically. We had supplies, tuition and substance enough to live at that time comfortably.

MS. SHIKLER: You mean through the Army?

MR. BRIGGS: From the G.I. Bill. And the instructors were free also in a sense that they were not held to any specific programs. For that short period of 3 years--finally of course came to a close typically by the members of the Board of Directors becoming aware of what was going on through certain newspaper accounts and reviews of our shows we were exhibiting in the San Francisco Museum Annuals and they visited the school and I remember Douglas McAgy saying that the president of the Board wanted to know where the portrait painting class was, and that was the beginning of the end because McAgy found it impossible to continue as director. And then, when he left, Still left and returned to New York. Some of the people stayed and the school sort of limped on. But really, the point was that the G.I. students and the G.I. Bill in that particular area sort of dwindled and finally came to an end.

MS. SHIKLER: Who were some of those students? Do you remember?

MR. BRIGGS: Oh, yes. John Hultberg, Hubert Crehan, Ed Dugmore, some of the students that stayed on the West Coast were Frank LaBelle, Walt Coolan, Jack Jefferson and there were others that passed through but those are the ones that I particularly remember.

MS. SHIKLER: Shulick, was he there?

MR. BRIGGS: John Shulick, yes. The people that have since come to New York, John Shulick, Ed Dugmore, and myself. John Hultberg actually arrived in New York quite early, around 1949. Ivy, who is a Seattle painter, went back to Seattle. People like Sam Francis came over from Berkeley to really figure out what was going on. There were others who dropped out and passed on.

MS. SHIKLER: Did any student in particular have any kind of a special relationship with Rothko? Did he gravitate toward anyone in particular? Or seemed to be drawn to anyone's work? Philosophy, etc.?

MR. BRIGGS: No, Mark just come for the summers and then came back to New York. I kept in touch with him in the early years. When I first showed in the Stable Galleries in 1954, he came to the opening and was very supportive. I might add that the total population at the peak of the opening was about 12 people. But you know, if a couple of real artists came then that was enough gratification. And Mark and John Ferren and David Smith came to that opening and that was enough recognition for my first show in New York.

MS. SHIKLER: That is a special feeling. Were you around...were you aware of those discussions between Still and Rothko in California when they were planning the Subject of the Artists school?

MR. BRIGGS: Still mentioned an idea of starting something like that were two or three of the generation, perhaps Motherwell, Rothko and himself and some others could drop into a space and where younger artists could work there or bring work there and have a kind of conversational point to meet and discuss issues. It never really materialized, or it immediately transformed itself into something else, and I am not too clear about the history of that. It actually happened during 1949-50 and I didn't arrive in New York until 1953 and by then it had completely changed itself. When I had arrived in New York the Hofmann School was still going strong and that was the counterpart to what the California School had been in San Francisco.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you attend the Subject of the Artists' school at all?

MR. BRIGGS: No.

MS. SHIKLER: It was gone by the time you came?

MR. BRIGGS: It never really materialized I don't believe--maybe a season or so.

MS. SHIKLER: It's my understanding that it became the Club?

MR. BRIGGS: Yes, well, the 9th Street Show originated out of that kind of energy and moved on into the Artists club which I participated in to some degree. At least I attended it often enough during the '53-'54-'55 years that it was going and changing in the first years I was in New York.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you attend any of the lectures at Studio 35? Or was that gone at that point?

MR. BRIGGS: No, I didn't.

MS. SHIKLER: Had you attended any lectures in which Rothko spoke around that period?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, during the period that...by the time I came to New York in 1953, the Club was dominated by Franz and Bill and Pavia who were sort of the manager and kept it going. And Still, Rothko, Pollock was out on the Island and Newman represented another...I think Irving Sandler called it another "gang" you know. And there was a definite separation in their manner essentially. Certainly not in their ambition or their aspirations, but the mere fact that Still and Rothko were in the Betty Parsons Gallery, or had been with the parsons Gallery, and were more or less poised I imagine to go into the Janis Gallery, so it separated them from the 10th Street milieu and that whole excitement that was very genuine and very real and characteristic of New York's intellectual life. But they more or less had withdrawn into their more subjective.... Well, Still was withdrawn politically and had assumed the position of not showing in commercial galleries for commercial gain, and Still was arguing with Newman and Rothko and Motherwell about possibly circumventing the whole gallery system (which has come to pass within a few recent careers) and going straight to the top--that is, to the museums and then becoming commercially visible or what have you, establishing your career without the passage through the commercial galleries. But that whole question is probably best expressed or defined in Still's own catalogs, statements, etc., over the years. His position vis-à-vis the art marketing system. In fact, Rothko and Still's falling out came specifically over that when Rothko accepted Janis's offer and went into the Janis Gallery along with Pollock and others and eventually including de Kooning and Kline. And Still withdrew. And went into a period of a kind of isolation for about 7 years, and in the meantime, of course, Janis became the number one exhibitor of these prominent Americans.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you maintain contact with either Still or Rothko during that period?

MR. BRIGGS: I was very close to Still at that time. We had studios in the same building on 128 West 23rd. And I saw Rothko, I used to run into him at Jerry's Bar on 6th Avenue, and 54th or 56th I believe, and we were always cordial. But again, there was that necessity on my part...I didn't have that much free time or mobility to circulate. I was working at subsistence jobs and trying to maintain the studio and whatnot and keep my work going. Actually, I saw Still almost daily during that period, say '57 to 1960.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you have any correspondence with either Rothko or Still?

MR. BRIGGS: I had correspondence with Still, not with Rothko which, of course, I have already given to the archives.

MS. SHIKLER: In the correspondence between you and Still, did he refer to his relationship with Rothko or the lack of it?

MR. BRIGGS: Not in any specific way. He made general statements about the conditions of...you know, just the political positions of what he considered to be inevitable poor choices on the part of these artists. He felt that they had potentially enormous power--in other words, that they were the only thing happening in the cultural world at that moment, which was the late '50s into the '60's, and by following the usual patterns they were in effect strengthening the pattern because of the inherent power of the work, and that they had a real opportunity and a choice to buck it and to maybe start a different pattern. But his attitudes were, you know...naturally he would make enormous demands. He was willing to pay those dues but it was a little much to expect others who had already gone through 15-20 years of paying their dues to take that risk. I think that he was right, but it was just a question of personalities and in the end he himself of course, contradictory to all of his thinking or his statements at the time, ends up in the biggest commercial outfit of them all. So that nobody was really well served by all of this conflict during that period. It was very definitely a kind of cold war mentality, paranoid and anxious and very characteristic of the individuals involved. And a result of the years and years of neglect and the prices that they had to pay as American macho males putting their wives to work and all that, taking lousy teaching jobs and I mean lousy teaching jobs, nothing compared to what eventually transpired in later years. There was no possibility of a decent income from teaching.

MS. SHIKLER: Rothko used to teach children. Did he ever refer to his experience or related them as a teacher of

adults?

MR. BRIGGS: No. No. I know my wife Ann Arno was in the Art Students League when Rothko would come up and take a lesson in lithography and then go out to Brooklyn College and teach a class. [Laughter].

MS. SHIKLER: That is a very funny period. Somebody described him trying to fit a litho stone in the etching press. I don't know whether that is apocryphal or not.

MR. BRIGGS: I don't know. Still taught etching there for a semester or something and then he gave the job to Rothko, so it might have been etching. But in any event Rothko's only source was whoever it was at the time that was running a printing course at the League and he stayed one lesson ahead of the class.

MS. SHIKLER: I'm going to stop again for a moment.

Interview with Ernest Briggs
Conducted by Barbara Shikler
At New York City, New York
1982 October 21

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ernest Briggs on October 21, 1982. The interview took place in New York City, New York, and was conducted by Barbara Shikler 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.

Interview

BARBARA SHIKLER: Barbara Shikler interviewing Ernest Briggs, Side 3, second interview. We will talk today about Ernie Briggs himself. Ernest Briggs, rather than revolving around Mark Rothko as we did last week. There is one thing that I realized I had done. I interrupted you while you were describing a painting that Rothko brought to San Francisco to the school and you were about to describe it. I wonder, just to put that out of the way, if you could summon up what he had there. I think you said that he had it stretched out, the one picture that he had brought. Do you have any memory of that?

ERNEST BRIGGS: Yes. Well, it was sort of unique in terms of his later work. This was like the summer of 1949 that Rothko was there. In Still's studio he stretched up a pretty large canvas, about 6 feet by 5 feet, and what sticks in my memory is that, while the general format of his big style he had already arrived at, the paint was fat, unlike the stained matte kind of surfaces which I always felt related back to one of his mentors, Avery, and derived some of his ideas from that kind of surface. This was fat paint, oil paint, and again, while that was the format --2 or 3 large rectangles, he had an entirely different surface. I never saw another one like that. I am sure he had abandoned it for something else. A maturing of his style. There were other paintings of his which would seem early works but related to his major style, which were stained in that he was using a tempera on the canvas.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he comment at all about the surface or discuss what he had in mind?

MR. BRIGGS: No. No. His only comment was that he had hoped to sell a painting.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes, but nobody was buying.

MR. BRIGGS: No.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, then, let's go back to you. We sort of plucked you from your childhood into...swept you past the Army and got you into the palace... I mean into the school, and I didn't ask you very much or hear very much about what was happening to you in the Army or whether you came across work that interested you. So I thought I would try to find out a little bit about what your Army experience was like.

MR. BRIGGS: Well, the Army experience. I was fortunate I guess in gradually, after basic training, being taken up by the Air corps and Signal corps, the Signal corps attached to the Air Corps. I went to signal corps School in Missouri and that lasted about 9 months. And then we went down to Florida in the Tampa/St. Petersburg area where we were trained with this radar group, that is a company in which there are a half a dozen radar instruments and then a whole back-up group to sustain it. And they organized these outfits in relation to oncoming campaigns. And of course, by the time they got everything together, the campaign was either scratched or over with, so we would all regroup and they would be plotting us in conjunction with some future campaign. I spent about 18 months and some of the people there in Group D, if I recall correctly, outside of

Tampa, had been there already for 2 or 3 years. And it was a strange community. I recall there was even one barracks which was where people had been pulled out of radar companies because of some past association with leftist groups, which could be as slight as maybe having a subscription to the New Masses...[Laughter]...And of course, these were some of the most interesting people in the community. There were a half a dozen different companies and a bomber wing. If we felt like goofing off, why we would meet at the service club and have breakfast around 10:00 and then spend the afternoon on the sundeck discussing politics or novels. They also had a very good library. I remember reading Salvador Dali's Secret Life when I was stationed there.

MS. SHIKLER: That is interesting. Did your associations with people there affect your feeling about being involved with painting or had you already determined that?

MR. BRIGGS: I hadn't really committed myself to painting. I still had notions that maybe getting Jon Whitcomb off the cover of Cosmopolitan Magazine and make a lot of money and having a Jaguar and a beautiful girl.... [Laughter] Well, I guess my commitment finally to paint was sort of a...well, at least on the conscious level, very ambiguous. After I got out of the Army I came back from San Francisco where I had been before the war and later on really for about a better part of a year. And my uncle, Peter Sley, who manages a small design school there in San Francisco which is still going--Rudolph Schaeffer's School of Design--allowed me to sit in on design classes and whatnot, and I realized that something psychological had occurred. I really knew that I couldn't fit in with those areas of graphic design, industrial design, etc., so that I...

MS. SHIKLER: How did you know that? Why?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, by trying to do some of the problems. You know, just know, that you aren't going to be good at it. You're really bored halfway through the problems and they just don't mesh. This was after, of course, 3 and one half years in the Army, a year in Calcutta, India, and, although I was still extremely naive and totally uneducated, nevertheless some inner decision that probably just happened unconsciously and....

MS. SHIKLER: How long were you in India?

MR. BRIGGS: A full year, give or take a few weeks. And that was a very significant experience, a very moving experience on many levels since. It's such a totally different world from our own. And I had just the merest acquaintance with Indian culture. San Francisco is a great dance and music town and I had already seen Dance Company and I got the records and whatnot and was fascinated by that one little glimpse of Indian culture. But, after being back in the States, I realized that...well, I took a job at Gump's window trimming for a year which was good experience in the sense that the store is a kind of art goods store; we were dealing with all kinds of sumptuous material. But in any event, after about a year and a half, I decided that I liked being in San Francisco and that I would just apply to the California School of Fine Arts and had 3 and a half, four years of the GI Bill and I would just paint. And since I really seemed to be somewhat unemployable in the work-a-day world [Laughing], I just seemed to be repeating the military pattern.

MS. SHIKLER: Which apparently you did not find too agreeable.

MR. BRIGGS: Well, I didn't really have...I just found it stupid, you know? I wasn't at all really politically consciously an activist at all. It put me off. Then I had the opportunity which was given to us, you know. It's a stupendous thing compared with what students have to go through nowadays and, at that time, as remarkable as it may seem, with subsistence the allowance and tuition and supplies, you could actually in San Francisco live fairly decently if you were cautious and maybe had a supplementary income.

MS. SHIKLER: You could live in Philadelphia and Brooklyn Heights that way too, I can tell you.

MR. BRIGGS: Yes. And so, once I got to the school, of course, after about one semester of the excitement of the place became just central and all important to me. You were just swept away and just lived, ate, and slept painting and art and the new thing that was happening which we, of course, got second and third hand either from reports from Still and Rothko and Ad Reinhardt and a little bit from publications, but very little compared to what's now available in publication, but then to the annual shows that Germain McAgy put on with really good stuff. But while it was provincial, most of the students during that three-year period, 1949 to 1951, were GI's who had previously been in some kind of university or art study and were pretty sophisticated. So that it was really students interacting. And there were many from New York and Chicago and Seattle and various parts of the country and most of them had different kinds of experience in the service and so it was really an extraordinary experience. We socialized and saw each other 5 days a week at school, and worked after school and worked at home. Some of us had very clear ambitions to get to New York as soon as we could. Others opted to stick it out on the West Coast. A lot of the many people who passed through the painting department, as was usually the case, probably around 2 dozen had gone on to continue painting and sculpture.

MS. SHIKLER: Were you quite swept off your feet? You hadn't anticipated anything like that when you thought you would go there, had you?

MR. BRIGGS: No, I didn't have any notion at all that anything would be happening at that school. I thought that it would simply be an opportunity to do a conventional three-year art school trip. The thing that finally made it probably as stimulating as it was--shortly after I got there, David Parks and Elmer Bishoff, who had been painting abstractly, switched back to figurative work and then there was Weeks who was already painting figuratively, and then that set up the kind of interesting argument between the disciples of Clyfford and Mark and Pollock and then the new figurative people. Diebenkorn, of course, had been there while Bishoff and Parks were doing abstract stuff, but then he had taken off to get his masters degree and he was more or less absent for the next few years. He got his degree and then went off to teach someplace, and then finally got back to Berkeley. So the central people were David Parks and Still. And whereas they got along, they had to, you know, socially...they were not at all in agreement about much of anything, Parks being a very taciturn New England quiet person and Clyfford being the hyper-romantic but at the same time very articulate and very historically oriented. So those were the two catalysts and the mix of students was the other side of the thing. But for myself, immediately I knew that I had really lucked out and that this was going to be an opening phase of my commitment to painting.

MS. SHIKLER: What did you think of your own abilities at that time? And what were they?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, as I say, growing up on the West Coast, you are really...and because of my background, my family background, outside of my uncle no one was really interested in art. His interest was in his relationship with Rudolph Schaeffer and designers and some artists. I'd had the opportunity before I went into the Army to meet Mark Tobey who was a friend of Schaeffer's and he would visit him. And I was aware, say, during the War...I remember I used to carry around Sweeny's book on Klee around with me, so I had certainly strong interests and inclinations in painting and painters because of the usual ambitions which you get conditioned to growing up in a working class family of sort of denying...well, in fact being totally ignorant of the idea that there were such things as American painters. You know? Who just painted and somehow scrounged a living and survived. I was already aware of Tobey's predicament of being stuck up in Seattle and being taken care of by a dozen cultivated families. Painting on short boards and this kind of dismal life.

MS. SHIKLER: What did your paintings look like then?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, I didn't really do any oil painting. I did mostly water color and mixed media kinds of things. They had imagery. I wasn't aware of any of the basics of formalism or expressionism. Of course I was aware of Cezanne and Van Gogh, you know; just sort of discreet individual cases and career and styles. But any historical orientation I was totally lacking in.

MS. SHIKLER: Were they non-representational? Were you influenced by Klee to that extent?

MR. BRIGGS: Yes. Yes. I was in the figurative symbolic area and not really knowing what to do but somehow walking into the studio. David Parks was instructor, and David said, "We don't have a model; we don't have still life, we just paint." And there were maybe 30 people in there all painting away and not looking at anything. And he picks up the painting and the palette and each other's work influenced each other. So that just sort of opened the door in my head, you know, that this is what I had been looking for, you know? It was simply the idea that you had to have a subject which in my head meant a significant subject, maybe something like the Ashcan school had or the Regionalists or something. Things I was vaguely aware of--graphic kinds of relationships suddenly dissolved and, whereas you could still incorporate subject matte or representation, the idea that you could also include your own imagination as the starting point or as the interpretive element or dominant element and that you could just paint paintings and not pictures. That was sort of a crucial thing that liberated my enthusiasm and energy and I immediately started just stretching, you know, learning from the other students on how to build a structure and stretch a canvas and size it. And just doing big color shapes, and not really knowing what you were doing but just feeling your way. And of course the most sustaining thing was the activity of the other students and then we...well, I studied under Parks only one semester and quickly transferred into Still's class because he already had the reputation of, you know, having something to say; whereas David Parks would come around and slap you on the back and say just keep it up and that was it. And then he would disappear back to his studio. This is the thing that I just mentioned the other day to my class, that when you have a school where they pay very little, and with faculty salaries, they always give the faculty a studio. And of course that means that the students see very little of the instructors. [Laughter] You were lucky if they showed up for 20 minutes a day and then they would go back to their studio.

MS. SHIKLER: You had said something funny on the last tape about how today you are there for how many hours in your class and your students wander in and out and when you were in San Francisco students were there all day and Still wandered in and out, which is just what you are talking about now.

MR. BRIGGS: Right.

MS. SHIKLER: So you stayed three years, you said...no, you stayed until '55 as I recall?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, I stayed in San Francisco until 1953, but I was through with the school at about 1951. I

stretched it out to a full four years including summers.

MS. SHIKLER: What did you do in the two years?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, I did things like house painting and then I got into the exhibit display business. There were about 3 large shops in San Francisco called exhibit display builders. It is sort of like schlock cabinet work. You know? But it was very interesting. You learn a lot of basic stuff about carpentry and faking and whatnot on cabinet work. And I worked at that and it was good experience. And the problem there was that they were very busy and they wanted overtime, and it sort of became too much. So a friend of mine, another ex-student, and I started doing a little contracting in painting but we were very bad at that and we didn't make any money with that, so I went back I think to the shop work. And I had a marriage that collapsed and then saved up enough money to come to New York and that was in 1953 in the fall. And then the process was that Alan Frumkin had seen my work in San Francisco and offered to show some pieces in a group show in his gallery in Chicago and so he offered to take my.... Well, I had left a lot of paintings and then I rolled up my recent work and he offered to ship it, to take it to Chicago and then show the work and then ship it on to New York. So all I had to worry about was getting on a bus and coming to New York and that was September or November, something like that...September that I got to New York and I stayed with some friends over in Hoboken. He was fixing up a large studio loft there and eventually during that year--it took about 3 months I guess...wait a minute. Yes, it only took a couple of months and Ed Dugmore and myself found a place down in the Fulton Fish Market and it had a couple of floors where we could paint and one floor which had some heat, a fireplace. But it was over a bar and it didn't get too bad and we spent the winter. And it was during that winter--I can't remember even the dates now--when I had my first show at the Old Stable Gallery.

MS. SHIKLER: It must have been the most exciting year of your life at that point, wasn't it?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, it was because of the kind of fantastic things that can happen in the city where things can click and you are suddenly swept into a whole milieu where you meet dozens and dozens of new people. I needed some kind of job so I remember Philip Pavia got me a job doing some carpentry or something like putting tile under his sink or something, and he invited me to join the Club, you know. Of course it was again a very different kind of an art world that we have today. It was smaller; it was still very...pretty much still fighting the battle, maybe the last battle of modern art, but still fighting the battle of modern art in the '50's, the early '50's. And there was still lots to develop. There were still things to be done in the mode of abstract expressions. And I feel that a lot really had never been done in the mode as it came and went too fast; everybody traveled and moved too fast.

MS. SHIKLER: Why do you think that was?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, I think it's just the pressure of the anticipation, something feverish about it all. It actually sort of established patterns of behavior or patterns of showing, ways of showing. What a gallery interior should look like. The whole business of presentation and building reputations. Everything was sort of finalized and refined during that period, during those few years in the 1950's, '57. '58. And some of it...well, I don't know, sort of energized by the same kind of growthmanship that was energizing the rest of society.

MS. SHIKLER: Don't you feel that it passed before it peaked, in a sense, as though there was more to be done with it than was done?

MR. BRIGGS: Yes, I suppose there's replays and recapitulations possible now. You know, attitudes, styles and modes re-introduced and re-examined.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you have anybody in mind when you say that? Who is doing it now?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, I think that Roschenberg's work came out of the New York School of Abstraction. It was like taking very intelligently and very perceptively taking what was peculiarly the insert of Bill de Kooning's work and then re-translating it into another kind of format. But making a kind of radical leap and mixing Dada and de Kooning and Picasso and Cubism and Collage ideas and then radically restyling it and redirecting the energy and abandoning very much the traditional ways. At least Rauschenberg had the kind of rigor to call them combines; he didn't call them paintings. I don't know what Schnable calls his constructions but they really are not paintings. I mean, you know, Schnable owes something to Rauschenberg. But then, you know, the personalities of Rivers, of Roschenberg, are in what they did and how they did it. And where they directed their energy and attention.

MS. SHIKLER: I am interested in getting back to the way you were working. I think your first exhibit was in 1954 or am I remembering incorrectly? What was the effect upon you and your work and your feeling about work during this whole period of the new period, the New York period? Did you perceive changes?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, some of the pieces that I had in the first show I had done on the West Coast but at that time I

had become aware of, just through reproductions and a few paintings of de Kooning's work and the possibility of gesture in a sense of my incorporating drawing and kind of...uh, well, improvisational, probably thinking mainly in terms of quality of color, in trying to use color and eliminate or recapture and restore some kind of quality to it that eliminated or freed it from some of the decorative aspects. At that time we were very prejudiced or biased in terms of the French School--the Bonnards and the Vouillards and Matisse's attitudes and whatnot. As I say, we were totally uncultured. We weren't...it wasn't a strategy of sophistication...I mean we were simply dumb. [Laughter] And "prided ourselves in our ignorance," to quote Sorayan.

MS. SHIKLER: Who are the "we" that you are speaking about?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, Frank LaBelle or myself, Jeremy Anderson, a West Coast sculptor who was a little more middle class than we were but he was still pretty dumb as far as art history goes. And our enthusiasm was just pure energy and trying to make something out of our own experience.

MS. SHIKLER: So did that begin to change in that couple of years after you arrived?

MR. BRIGGS: Sure. Sure. Like here is the big real world and, you know, stakes were high and the commitments were thorough and ongoing and the museum collections are formidable and the activity...you know, things were happening constantly. You can't help but get educated.

MS. SHIKLER: Were you motivated to learn or was it a conscious effort that you made? Did you read and look at older art, that sort of thing?

MR. BRIGGS: Yeah. I had always read a lot but mainly literary criticism and, in fact, I find it is really sort of a chore to read art criticism. You know, I was constantly reading and was really trying to educate myself through my eyes and the activity in the art world as it evolved and as it grew and expanded and ultimately, of course, became totally commercialized. And really I think I really experienced that transition, the aspirations of Eleanor Ward, say, as opposed to Miss Boone. Eleanor took the attitude that it took 3 to 7 years to build a reputation. And she knew perfectly well what was entailed: a certain amount of critical appraisal and articles, a consistent kind of showing of progress. But that was the consensus then. It took a gallery perhaps that 3 to 7 years to establish an artist's name in relation to the older generation and the powers that be, etc. Well, I always find the turning point in that particular kind of attitude towards handling artists, and attempting to deal with the establishment and the economics of it, I find the turning point probably around, somewhere around, the 60's and the real change occurring with the introduction of pop art and a total switch in the manner in which contemporary art is dealt with. Maybe traditional art had been dealt with the kind of strategies that were then transposed and moved into the contemporary field and the reputations of some of the critics like Greenberg and whatnot and the kind of power that they acquired, as the money flow started to pick up. And the whole move can be seen positively in the sense that you have a larger and larger audience and more and more business being conducted but a lot of things get missed and the anxiousness to...this sort of being locked into the idea of the new, and finally the inability at any level, whether it's the curatorial in the institutionalization of novelty. Because the critical faculty that has not kept up with the energy and the money flow.

MS. SHIKLER: Speaking about the art world and it's commercialization.

MR. BRIGGS: Yes. The commercialization really took off during the pop art phase, around '62 or '63, when the techniques of promotion, ordinarily associated with the fashion industry or Broadway promotion, or film promotions, etc., were applied quite skillfully by Leo Costelli and in conjunction with his wife at that time, Sounabend, and Eleanor Ward, etc. They rode that fashion, that trend of pop art, to great financial success. And it proves that a promotional strategy applied to contemporary art could be successful economically and politically. That is, you could make reputations using typical strategies of investment capital. And that significantly changed the whole landscape of...and ways in which reputations were made, art was made, attitudes of the young people coming out of graduate schools and ultimately what the public, interested or not, gets. You can go across the country and from public collection to public collection and you see the same kit. An example of this one that one and the next one, all of it predetermined to a large extent right here in New York. That is, no regional selectivity. They are things that have to be in the collection whether it's this or that, individual artists. And, of course, the Modern Museum's been the primary engine for determining that taste, determining that historical profile to a public collection of contemporary American art. And that is a strange thing but it is part of the society in the way the society forms its patterns of consumption. And there is resistance to it, There are complaints about it but nothing seems to really change it. There are backwaters, of course. There are Chicago styles and San Francisco styles and Los Angeles styles of presenting and emphasis, but still there are certain necessary connections. Robert Irwin has to get to New York at some point in his career. He can't just stay in Southern California and become a nationally or internationally known artist. And he brings his laid-back Southern California vision to New York and then becomes a part of it--a part of the contemporary American culture. Really a very synthetic way in which society defines itself in terms of its art culture.

MS. SHIKLER: It seems to have been in always, it swept so many things before it. How did all of that affect you when you.... Well, what was your experience for instance, after those early years when you became a professional. I assume that you got married. You were working seriously. What happened? What happened to you between then and now?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, I had some opportunities which, because of my own ineptitude, I probably failed to take full advantage of it but I managed to survive through various ways and means. I showed twice at the Old stable and then, probably through the intervention of Clyfford Still, Dorothy Miller came and looked at my work and included me in an all-American Show. And, while this would ordinarily be a real stepping stone or launching pad for some kind of a career prospect, the whole...well, the conjunction of being in the show and the fact that I still wasn't making any kind of money and struggling along at a little subsistence job, and finding the attitudes of both the dealers and the curators sort of nerve-wracking, I....

MS. SHIKLER: What do you mean?

MR. BRIGGS: Their expectations didn't seem to jibe with my experience and....

MS. SHIKLER: How so? What did they want from you?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, it wasn't what they wanted from me, it was what they could see or what they hoped they could see on the horizon. And at that particular moment I had some kind of a foreboding and withdrew from showing with Eleanor and so for about 4 years I just sort of painted and went on with my jobs. Then in 1959 or 1960 another gallery opened up and I started showing with Howard Wise. And that was a good experience as far as it went, but at the onset of pop art, Mr. Wise was a very sincere person and not particularly a...not very smart when it comes to the business of art, and the art business, and the ways of surviving in it. And he decided to switch from painting to some other kind of art like some form of kinetic art and gradually phased out of the gallery business. So that didn't sustain much, although we did have 3 years of very good shows, consistently good shows and modest sales. Modest success, fairly good coverage in terms of reviews, etc., so that it wasn't nearly as disappointing to us as artists participating in that. It was quite grand. The gallery was handsome and the envy really of most of the other galleries at that time. And again, set the pattern for large, super large extensive installations as far as galleries went. But, as I say, the leadership there kind of collapsed and so then there was another period which has more or less gone on almost every couple of years having an invitational with some gallery, and my teaching which has been steady since about 1961 on a part-time basis at Pratt Institute, and then some side jobs, a year of teaching at Yale, drawing, and some lectures at various visiting artist deals, but primarily teaching drawing and painting at Pratt in the undergraduate school has been the main sustenance and made it possible for me to just continue to work and, as I said, about every two years show invitational until the last...until 1980 when I joined the Gruenebaum Gallery where I had two shows. And again, some success financially, so that my own particular situation hasn't been all that much different from many, many others and, in fact, the primary difference maybe being that whenever I had an opportunity to show I generally took it, feeling that it was better for me and better for the situations to just show even though there were probably no commercial prospects in the effort.

MS. SHIKLER: Was that true for the most part over the years until recently?

MR. BRIGGS: Yes. Actually, I think that Howard Wise probably made a big mistake. He could have stuck it out...he certainly had the financial resources to stick it out another 3 or 4 years to turn the corner in terms of the business end of it because he had very fine people, very good people. He could have had anybody he wanted.

MS. SHIKLER: You mean as a gallery?

MR. BRIGGS: Except the very top artists on the roster.

MS. SHIKLER: Who was there with you when you were there?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, Ed Dugmore, Milton Resnick, George MacNeill. What's the name--Chairman Van Weigand.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you still see those people? Most of them?

MR. BRIGGS: Oh yes. Yes. Sure.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, how do you perceive the changes in your outlook over that period of time?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, probably more than most people in my generation I've poked around and journeyed to different shores in my work. I have always felt that that was sort of a possibility rather than something to be shied away from, that is to grind away and refine the style. I guess it's basically not in my nature...I at times made radical changes and at times made deliberate changes. But all in all, there's still an overall consistency. I

went, oh, when was it, about 1963, or '64, I went from oil paint to acrylic and making the acrylic paints up myself out of the basic materials, using dried dye pigments and mediums and whatnot, and I....

MS. SHIKLER: Why did you do that?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, because I was in a studio that was heated by gas heaters, space heaters. And when oil paint is drying and oxidizing and at the same time you have a gas flame in the area, you get a very noxious if not poisonous kind of fumes. So the acrylics which I had experimented with just on a small scale gave me an out there and I found it sort of exciting to try out some of the new mediums and it has certain characteristics which are very different from oil paint. And I worked on that right up through roughly 1974 or 1975. And then I felt that I'd used that up that possibility, and got anxious to do some oil paint again. And I did and I worked on a smaller scale. All during the '50's and '60's it seemed like most of the work that I did was 6 feet in height and up, and that whole idea gradually somewhere around the '60's, the beginning of the '60's...many of the things were being rethought and re-questioned and partly because of the...not only the pop art movement and that whole attitude as it took over the art scene, but also the minimalists and the hard-edge painting, so that those of us who had been working in this kind of abstract expressionist, improvisational style felt those onslaughts very significantly and, in fact, many of the artists who had been more or less committed to expressionist styles really got blown away and ended up doing hard edge or something else.

MS. SHIKLER: And did they do that because they were in fact persuaded that it was an interesting direction to go or do you feel that they were afraid of being left behind?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, there was an enormous amount of criticism which dogmatically attacked abstract expressionism. Don Judd made his reputation with these endless diatribes against, and snotty reviews of, abstract expressionist shows. It went on and on and on. Plus, curators at the Met saying that painting was obsolete medium and whatnot, all that kind of stuff from all quarters. So, that there was...you were backed into, particularly with that particular style and attitude, you were back in a very hostile environment, like back in the '30's dong abstraction or something.

MS. SHIKLER: Or, the beginning of the abstract expressionist movement which....

MR. BRIGGS: Yes. When you had to physically stand there and protect your work.

MS. SHIKLER: Right, but that served as a stimulus initially. You find that in this case because there were alternatives perhaps, that people cut and run, or ran I should say.

MR. BRIGGS: Well, sources that had been supportive looking elsewhere and throwing their support wholeheartedly and simultaneously, the commercial exploitation of the whole thing, so that not only it seemed like, "Well, now that we got rid of abstract expressionism, we can make some money too." [Laughing]

MS. SHIKLER: Right, and that is the difference between what happened before.

MR. BRIGGS: It's just like I found parallels, you know, like when they got rid of jazz and started getting rock and roll, they started making money, you know?

MS. SHIKLER: Right.

MR. BRIGGS: And maybe a thousand ex-painters and a thousand ex-musicians are lolling around the streets of Manhattan.

MS. SHIKLER: Right. So it was much easier then for the early abstract expressionists to be true to themselves because they had fewer alternatives--they were not being beguiled by the money.

MR. BRIGGS: Sure, sure.

MS. SHIKLER: So money is the root of all evil. [Laughter]

MR. BRIGGS: Well, perhaps our native innocence about the reality of what really dominates the exchanges and communications in this society and our desires and hopes and belief system, I mean we are educated for one thing. You know, that education is going to improve the world, that there are people who can sustain a serious discussion or dialogue with the artist and whatnot. Well, those are really the exception even historically, they are the exceptions. And not the rule. But too often...I mean I resent lurking resentments about what my instructors, the amount of true information that they divulged to me, I mean whereas they might be critical of the establishment, they were not clear about the historical reasons for the establishment or all this other stuff. It takes you to be 40 years old and a lot of reading before you can put it together. And....

MS. SHIKLER: Experience begins to tell you what is pernicious about it?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, the way human beings interact and what the real kinds of effects and pressures are. Of course, even if you know it, and I suppose a lot of older artists...I mean I tend to be very political in terms of art with my students, and caution them to do some reading and get any handle on what society's structure is. But, I suppose a lot of older artists when I was a student were feeling that they didn't want to scare you away. They wanted to encourage you and they wanted to give you some of the real American dream.

MS. SHIKLER: What is it that you want to give your students?

MR. BRIGGS: I want to give them some awareness of the mechanisms and the possible way things work and I'm not trying to be cynical or teach them how to manipulate but to prepare them for some of the realities and try to recommend reading and so that they can see the world that they hope to join after their confidence is built up and maybe hopefully through some training that we can give them. But art students are generally of a peculiar nature and often, as I was myself, sort of drawn to it as an escape from other problematical areas, or what seemed to be problematical to me at that time when I was a kid growing up, going through various changes. Eighty percent of our students have an identity problem and they are searching and they hope that through expressive means and aiming at sculpture or something, that they will find or restore or develop their personal identity. And they spend more time worrying about that than worrying about learning how to paint or learning who their parents are and grandparents are in terms of their particular desires, in terms of their plastic expression.

MS. SHIKLER: Isn't that unique to our time? That is a fairly late development in the way people take on a life career, don't you think? In other words, in the period after World War II or certainly before, people were involved in the field for its own sake.

MR. BRIGGS: Right.

MS. SHIKLER: At this point with all the involvement people have with their own motivations I think almost anything is being used that way.

MR. BRIGGS: Well, I think it's the idea that everybody should be educated, you know. Is it really that everybody should be educated or are you just trying to keep 20 year olds to 26 year olds out of the labor market? I don't know. Like give the 40 year olds a chance. There is no place for them, you know. So if they had the resources and the education, business is like everything else--it expanded and expanded and expanded. And, you know, certainly it adds up. You have 8 or 9 million people in higher education, it's bound to pay off. But in the meantime you've got people in art school who are not there because they have a basic desire to make the sacrifices--you have maybe 5 or 10 percent. There's a statistic that like one out of 2,000 art students will actually continue. That is not to be a success, but just to continue. And so I would consider that a fair ballpark estimate. Not that the other 1,999 are going to be totally divorced but they will be doing commercial art or maybe the training will have some effect on the value of what they are doing. And at least they will have had an education, whether they repudiate it and hate art for the rest of their lives or whether they end up continuing to have.... Some find it resource or a solace, an education or a stimulus, and a place to grow, who knows? But it's a totally different atmosphere we have. As I said, the kind of art student who is the exception now was the rule, say in the '30's or '40's. You simply didn't go to art school unless you were crazy about it. Because there was no future.

MS. SHIKLER: That is right. The rewards were very slim.

MR. BRIGGS: The rewards were the doing of it and the learning about it and the love of it.

MS. SHIKLER: Whereas today you're promised stardom in some subtle way, I suppose.

MR. BRIGGS: Well I certainly don't promise them some stardom. You see, the art world is not exceptional any longer. It's not...it's lost all of that position. It has gained other things but it has lost that special domain where...which is based upon that kind of moral and aesthetic commitment of the artist. The dealers have always been dealers; always stealing you blind, or lie to you or back you up and sacrifice for you, etc. There has always been all kinds of dealers, and all kinds of artists, too. But that special high intensity art world is now of a totally different nature in its broad outline at least. But, like most things, I think like for most areas the U.S., and New York in particular, is still the land of opportunity; it's the land of opportunity for the Japanese artists, English artists, for German artists, the same kind of open-ended...you know, they have opportunities here which they do not have in their own countries.

MS. SHIKLER: Except in some funny way the opportunity is always coupled as it were with great risk. It seems to me that you had to deal with less risk even in that very lack of commercial success that you spoke of, you were permitted somehow to maintain your direction more easily. You spoke about a period in the '50's where you refused to show. Was that in any way tied to Still's feeling about exhibiting? Was that during your friendship with him?

MR. BRIGGS: Yes, I was very influenced by Clyfford's attitudes, and I felt that, well, I probably took on what I shouldn't have. That is, a kind of ideology that he had struggled with and which came out of his experience which was totally different than mine. But I had a kind of an agreement with his attitudes which was why I took them so strongly. I mean I had in relation to society as a whole and in relation to the way artists were dealt with and the way that artists deal with each other--I found at the same time the warmth and the acceptance. I also found god-awful anxiety and competitiveness and the gossip and whatnot. You know, people talk about the Cedar Bar and what the great conversations were, they were about who was selling.

MS. SHIKLER: Even then.

MR. BRIGGS: Yes. Because everybody was waiting for that moment when they knew that it was inevitable that it would be...they knew that this was where it was happening and whatnot and so it was inevitable. And then there were these internecine warfares and a lot of poor and puerile behavior because it was so tight and it was so small in the sense of any kind of economic rewards.

MS. SHIKLER: Where did it make that transition from philosophical and ideological dynamic interchange? I remember reading about the various lectures that were being given at the Club, etc. Where did the commercial thing take over?

MR. BRIGGS: The Club was, you know, you meet and--of course I wasn't around during its foundation and whatnot--but they were.... You know, some evenings were interesting and some were not. And then, after the round tables and the discussions and group therapy and whatnot, there would be a few drinks and some records and some dancing and some socializing and whatnot. There was always this fellow feeling, but the sustaining...you know, it was like a group of individuals. It wasn't a group in the sense of...it was a community of individuals and the careers of the various people. Franz and Bill, or something, were being handled and they were being promoted and they themselves were on call, and things were happening to them and so everyone felt it can happen. And in my innocence, I felt, well, you know, if you have the work it can happen. But it's a lot more complicated than that. Because there is only so much, there is only so much even now. Certainly not enough for even a tenth of the artistic population. And, it's...I suppose in reading Arnold Hauser he talks about the Dutch in the 16th Century were in sort of that situation where they had all these tremendous painters and no church subsidy any longer, no patronage. It was strictly art business. And they were exporting paintings to England and here and there and they all died broke. They simply were overproducing and there were too many of them and there was not enough to go around. And every little fluctuation in the economy, why bam! They were in and out and up and down and bankrupt and broke and had nothing to do with the quality of work.

MS. SHIKLER: It rarely does. Now that you are showing again and obviously you are having a measure of success--you're selling a little bit more, right?

MR. BRIGGS: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: How do you feel about that in terms of...?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, it is sort of a revelation to me that, after years and years of people not being able to sell my paintings, here is somebody that can sell them. So it's not the painting.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, not the paintings alone anyway. The time is certainly....

MR. BRIGGS: The style is not "in" and it's limited. It's no big deal, there's not a retrospective in the offing at the Whitney. It's just a question of certain breaks and certain conditions. Now they are not selling once the market has gone down. The kinds of young collectors who had that spare money to enjoy have since more or less vanished.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. Yes. I see. It's very ironic, isn't it, that the timing is such?

MR. BRIGGS: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you have any feeling about what you want to do now with your own work?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, I don't know. It's just sort of automatic to a large degree; as you get older you become more critical, you become more...there is less that satisfies you and the problems aren't as seemingly insurmountable or maybe as profound in terms of your own works. You can always keep working and do more. Then there is constant sources of stimulus--certainly in terms of thought and feeling. Everything is changing constantly around us and those changes and your own experience just keep it going. I suppose I have gotten basically less determined, you know, to break down the walls and more inclined to maybe try to keep a few of the bricks in place. And not in the sense of refinement but just in re-investigating and sort of trying to really find out whether there was anything to it, rather than barnstorming around. I mean not that you ever will really know, but there

will continue to be questions and I suppose like in most creative endeavors you are constantly waiting for the moments where something really happens in a rebelliatory way and reaffirms that possibility but, in the meantime, you're struggling with doubt, with your own illusions and your own delusions and just trying to penetrate that and overcome it. And if, within the whole program as I inherited it and espoused it and worked with it, does it yield some truth? Well, it has obvious meanings for me but then I throw away an enormous amount of stuff that I produce. And I think that's my responsibility. I'm not going to leave it up to somebody else.

MS. SHIKLER: Let me stop you for a minute because I think it's going to run through in a second.

MS. SHIKLER: You were speaking about the choice of throwing your own work away rather than leaving it to others.

MR. BRIGGS: Right. I on occasion, just through necessity, moving the studio or something, have gone through these rolls of paintings for storage and during those periods have thrown out things that don't seem up to snuff. And then a couple of years ago I did a whole inventory and went through everything and found lots and lots of things which I no longer needed. And it's part of our attitude to sort of paint a painting and, if we had a show coming up, we would show it and then roll it up if it weren't sold or wasn't going to go anywhere else. And not paying much attention to editing or what was past was past and sort of like was to respect that moment of your past and maybe wait to a later date to decide if it were of real value to you or not. And so that's been an ongoing thing--to re-evaluate instead of being very, very certain when your work is complete, piece by piece, show by show. And I find that maybe because of the sort of extreme circumstances I feel art is in today--although there is a lot of action, it seems also to be a lot of...there seems to be a lot of surface action rather than any kind of penetrating action, so that it's just as extreme as it ever has been to commit one's self within the medium. And I find that maybe, as the year progresses, within a very short time I can abandon maybe 20-30% of what I accomplish. And sometimes merely just painting everything out and re-doing or starting out fresh but often simply throwing the canvasses away.

MS. SHIKLER: Historians would hate that, you know.

MR. BRIGGS: Yes, there's that too. Maybe Picasso didn't throw anything away but his situation and our situation is entirely different. We really have to decide everything for ourselves and I think probably it's healthier in the sense that one can be so easily misled even by one's self that a lot of surrounding opinion, positive or negative, can be very misleading. And the strength of the work has to ultimately be determined by whether it transcends its moment in time and yields something to coming generations or new viewers at least, and strengthen the work in terms of personal involvement is pretty much the same. If you look at something that is a year and a half old and you can't put up with it, then you throw it away. And quantity no longer seems to have that much significance. I know that in the '50's you were all into production--are you painting, are you working? How's your work going? And that quantification of the effort seemed to give value, add value to it, your share of the amount of work that was done that season.

MS. SHIKLER: Is there a consistency in the amount of work that you do?

MR. BRIGGS: Yes. Actually, you know, I would say that during a year I probably paint a painting a week but will end up with about 12 paintings.

MS. SHIKLER: So you do throw them away?

MR. BRIGGS: Mainly I work over them. I found that recently it's not a roadblock or a hindrance. There are times when you want to start absolutely on a fresh surface and that's very much a part of your image and your form. I don't know, I have had that as a constraint in the past when you want just that one layer present and not a lot of textured build-up.

MS. SHIKLER: Let me ask you a question while you are on that subject. What's the procedure, how do you conceive a painting and how do you set about doing it, how long does it take, that sort of thing? Do you sketch or draw? What's involved from beginning to end?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, right now I did 12 acrylics on paper this summer in Maine during July and August and I've pinned up two or three of them and I'm sort of working off those ideas now while I'm working in oil on the larger scale. I don't stick in any way to the exact. And as for color, I will probably start out with similar colors and similar format and design. And then the images themselves will develop sort of out of the process and then I will sort of grab onto a motif and incorporate it into maybe a series...it will keep coming up, that is, where it will be the basic formal arrangement of the canvas, whether it's a vertical rectangle or a horizontal rectangle. There was an image of sort of a gateway that has re-occurred in the middle '70's off and on in various formal ways. And then there are other images which are derived from a figure, like a torso or a head shape, and then other elements almost seem inevitable. If you have a horizontal rectangle and some horizontals in it, it has a landscape reference.

MS. SHIKLER: Are you conscious of that when you are doing it or is it just by chance?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, pretty conscious, I am pretty conscious because when I call it a motif that means that I am conscious of it. If it develops in the process of a particular painting, as the painting goes along you discover something, and I like that word serendipity because it has a lot to do I think with the whole creative process and some people I guess have a kind of psychological predilection or talent for taking advantage of chance accidents. I really don't believe in accidents because after all you are making it happen. But there are change events, things that come together, and you suddenly see something that you would not ordinarily see necessarily. And that plays an enormous, a big role in my painting and the method. I think of it as improvisational and if I am.... I just have general scenes working in terms of the kind of color, light palettes, high keyed, dark and low keyed, earth colors, or maybe just a dominant color--a yellow painting or a red painting, a white painting. And all of that of course has all kinds of reference and resonance to your mood and your psychological being.

MS. SHIKLER: And what are some of those things that do affect you?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, everything. Everything has or anything can get into the painting, exterior or interior, what have you, because of the nature of it, it's a free spongy kind of area and that's of course what attracted me to abstract expressionist modes in the beginning was because it could in a very direct kind of way avail itself of your particular mindset and psychological set and mood and the medium itself becomes an instrument to carry on that interior dialogue or response to exterior experience. Visual or other sensual levels. And I think that in a peculiar way this mode had to come about, and maybe or probably in our particular kind of a society which has less patterns, enduring patterns, in terms of the past, and then the whole political, social, economic conditions in this society have been peculiarly different in the emphasis and structure than European societies or Asiatic societies which to a large degree are contiguous and continuous with the past and go back a thousand years.

MS. SHIKLER: So you are saying then that what seems to constant in our society is our interior landscape, as it were?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, not in the society. No. But in this society does have peculiarly different structures; they are not better or worse, and they're not more sophisticated or more efficient, certainly. They are different from almost any other than you can study or perceive or know about and I think that the kind of...when you think of American painting, there of course the Luminists, the Hudson River School and a few other elements to it, but when we think of American painting, we think of post-World War II, the Dominant School, abstract expressionism and various ancillary groups, the minimalists, the neoplastic take-offs on European modes. But the particular kind of energy and imagery, whether it's Clyfford Still or de Kooning, we really think of that as not just in the new York School but as the first real breakout of a possible internationally influential style in painting, and of course it was. It didn't yield much from the Italians or from the Australians but they were affected by it, including the Japanese, English and whatnot. And certainly there is direct precedence and participants and whatnot with.... There is something different about it and I think the differences are eventually traceable to the kind of social life that we lead and I mean structures of the social life, not the fact that you grow up in Brooklyn or you grow up in San Francisco. The structures are pretty much the same throughout and the economic pressures are pretty much the same throughout the society and that is the kinds of insecurities that are...that a Ford plant worker has in L.A. is similar to the Ford plant worker in Detroit, and those enter into the consciousness and Pollock and Guston grew up on the West Coast and their language, once it becomes developed and commands attention and gains an audience here in New York which you know it is speaking about something deeper than just the New York School or what painters developed in the '40's or something in this particular milieu.

MS. SHIKLER: I wonder if I could ask you whether your work has been in some way affected by living with a sculptor. Your wife is Anne Arnold. I don't know how long you've been married.

MR. BRIGGS: We were married about 1960 and we had known each other since 1959 and probably, in terms of my own vision, in terms of my own understanding, the most important thing of being married to Anne and being familiar with her work, which is dominantly figurative and formal, I would say that it opened my experience up, my eye up, to whole other areas that I hadn't really paid that much attention to. And peculiarly and significantly I have never been too taken with modern abstract sculpture. To me Giocometti probably remains the most significant, the one that I can respond to the most clearly in terms of the modernist sculptors, and now David Smith. I admire the craft and the productivity and this and that, but I am just simply not--stainless steel--I mean that is not a very engaging material; you're surrounded by it anyway, visually, you know. Every time you sit down at a lunch counter there's stainless steel all over the place. And that kind of thing, and the kind of structural elements of a Snelson or something are of no more interest to me than one of these cranes that are constantly visually around the streets of Manhattan; building something or tearing something down. But visually Manhattan is a really pretty tough competition for modern abstract sculpture and so becoming familiar with Anne's work and her vision and her preoccupations which begins with the Egyptian animal sculpture, and on down through the ages from all over the world, well that was definitely an enlarging thing in terms of my

consciousness because I hadn't paid that much attention before and only thinking of historical things or the African sculpture and it something, you see, not really thinking about it. But seeing a sculptor work and all the various processes, casting, wood carving, plaster, all of that renewed an interest. I did sculpture for about a year and a half when I was in art school and then, simply in order to concentrate, I had abandoned it.

MS. SHIKLER: Had you ever done it again?

MR. BRIGGS: No I haven't. I have no real inclination. I know some painters who do a little, you know, and it kind of relaxes them. And some painters do seriously get involved and keep both things going. But I really think of painting as physically it's there on the flat surface and it can be very physical but it's essentially visual and subjective in perception. And that has sort of become my turf or my terrain, my realities on that. So when I do look at sculpture I really need some kind of an image to get at it, the mere physical manipulation of space and form doesn't...really doesn't move me.

MS. SHIKLER: Are you ever drawn to the idea of writing about your work or painting?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, I have written just sort of short statements here and there, but I am not trained as a writer. I failed English grammar consistently and, just out of necessity, I may have gotten a little improvement over the years but organizing my ideas in terms of written language is very difficult. I would need at least 2 or 3 editors constantly at my elbow.

MS. SHIKLER: I suspect that many writers do.

MR. BRIGGS: I remember an amusing little anecdote where Alex Katz told me Tom Hess asked him to write something. I forget what on, but he wrote it and he handed it in and Hess looked at it and he said, "Oh well, fine, great. We'll take this last paragraph and put it up here in the front and that could be the lead-in...." [Laughing] and he started collaging his efforts and all.... [Laughing]

MS. SHIKLER: That is what word processors do now. They take the place of editors. You can do that very easily. Instead of cut-and-paste, you punch some magical button and all your sentences are moved around at will, a kind of collage as you say. In fact, the sequence is arbitrary the way in which we speak or paint, and can be re-arranged since it all comes out of one large place in us. So it doesn't...it's not as impressive a concept as you might think, that somebody is moving it around. It is all of yours anyway.

MR. BRIGGS: Yes, well, sure. But I always think of written language as a kind of linear script. I mean it's...you take it in and you make sense out of it in a linear progression. You know?

MS. SHIKLER: Well, you release it in a linear form, at any rate.

MR. BRIGGS: Yes, you release it but then your mind can snap back and forth and you can fill in and say--oh, I forgot that and bring that in. And I think of the invention of collage and plastic art as really one of the most profound inventions of modern art in that it imitates mechanical production processes and apprehends it and introduces it into art. In a sense it's mechanistic but it is also of course a liberating thing for the consciousness and perhaps your consciousness or expressive forms which were too closely monitored by a kind of classical or traditional modes dominated really language. And now language maybe is inevitably, since we live in such visual environment, inevitably taking on modes of adapting a kind of simultaneity of vision. I remember Rothko, probably the first older generation artist that I knew, discussed with me that he had a television set and he just enjoyed the succession of images, not the content but just the endless flux, you know? From commercial to the filler, from the commercial to this and that, to the news, the drama and to the comedy, moving back and forth. And I think that was 1954 or somewhere around that time we had that conversation. And of course now I am dealing with students who have grown up with television. I remember talking about kids growing up with television can take to Pacman but those of us who grew up with baseball took to pinball machines.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes, that is true. That is absolutely true. Well, I think that unless you have something that you would like to add to all of this, we....

MR. BRIGGS: I think I will leave it up to you.

MS. SHIKLER: well, I don't know what lurks there inside. Do you feel that there is a significant and key set of experiences that you would like to...would like the historians to know about you?

MR. BRIGGS: Well, I am not dead yet. Maybe we can do it later.

MS. SHIKLER: All right, well, in that case I think we will stop here.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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