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Oral history interview with Will Barnet, 1993  
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# Transcript

## Interview

**WB:** WILL BARNET

**SP:** STEPHEN POLCARI

**SP:** . . . the 25th of April. . . .

**WB:** Yeah. . . .

**SP:** All right. Steven Polcari talking to Will Barnet, April 9, 1993, for the Archives of American Art. That just gets this going.

**WB:** [asks about Robert Doty—Ed.]

**SP:** Yeah. He died, what, a short while ago, about five or six weeks ago.

**WB:** Yeah, right.

**SP:** He was in New Hampshire.

**WB:** That's right. And he lived in Manchester, New Hampshire. And Robert died suddenly, actually, because he was quite well when he went to the hospital and then he got a streptococcus infection.

**SP:** He's not that old.

**WB:** No, he was 58. It was very shocking to me. I guess it was an operation which was a very minor thing and he developed this infection and never came out of it. Went into a coma. And I guess they weren't able to treat it, whatever it was, and he died. And last night I was reading his book, on me you know. . . . [Doty wrote Will Barnet, New York: H. N. Abrams, 1984—Ed.]

**SP:** Oh yes.

**WB:** . . . just rereading it, [probably] getting a feeling about what he was trying to say about me. And the New England thread there is tremendous. . . .

**SP:** Oh, yeah.

**WB:** . . . runs right through it.

**SP:** Yeah, I'm familiar with it. There's this sort of aching. It's purity. There's a sense of purity here. Your work—the later work especially—has this quality of a cold day in New England, in the forest.

**WB:** Oh, yeah.

**SP:** I knew those days, very tonal there. There's a certain mood that comes about.

**WB:** Yeah.

**SP:** I grew up with it. I've never found it anywhere else. [telephone rings]

**WB:** That's right. And he kind of wrote about it. [telephone continues to ring] I wonder if anybody's taking it [the phone call—Ed.]. [Woman answers phone in the background; telephone rings again, again answered by woman—Ed.]

**SP:** Yeah, there's a distinctive sensibility. I don't know, in the twentieth century it comes through very well.

**WB:** Well, it's very different than anything done in the art scene today. You know what I mean. Very different. [Break] So it's a very, very different feeling, and the result is that it puts you in a. . . . Actually, all my work is different for that reason. It's nothing like the New York painters. It has nothing to do with their sensibility. And even though we might have been influenced by the same sources. . . .

**SP:** It comes out differently.

**WB:** . . . it comes out very differently. And it has a different motive behind it, even in terms of the strictness in which I [bound] my work by the fact that the form was so important, and that without form there was no art.

So that runs strongly through my work.

**SP:** Yeah. Well, I think that's absolutely clear.

**WB:** And it all began very early because it began when I was at the Boston Museum School when I asked Robert. . . . Not Robert but Philip Hale, "How do you put the world together?"

**SP:** Does he have a son?

**WB:** No, no.

**SP:** That's someone else?

**WB:** He has a daughter. I think, Sally [Nancy Hale]. And she died recently. She used to write for the New Yorker. I visited her once in Charlottesville in Virginia when I was artist-in-residence at the Virginia Museum. You know, he was a very interesting man, and I liked him a lot. He became. . . .

**SP:** Philip Hale?

**WB:** Philip, yeah. He came from that family of . . . I guess it either was his father or grandfather who wrote *Man Without a Country*. I never cleared that up whether it was his father or grandfather. But, anyway, go on from there. At that moment I asked him about how they put the world together. I was a kid, you know. I wasn't satisfied with the way all things were going. I felt that all I was learning at that time was a . . . I'd call it a fragmentary thing, a vignette, a singular thing.

**SP:** The museum school was probably very conservative at that time, so...

**WB:** Extremely conservative. Well, this was 1920.

**SP:** It was was pretty modern, you know. Did you have a cast?

**WB:** Oh, yeah. Working. Every day you worked [with them].

**SP:** He did the whole beaux-art number.

**WB:** Yes, you worked on a cast all day long. Every morning from about 9 to 12, 12:30, you worked on the cast.

**SP:** That's work!

**WB:** And it was good. In many ways it was the most important training you could have. People laugh at it today but I see. . . .

**SP:** Any training they laugh at today!

**WB:** Yeah, I know it. And I see the failure of the art world today for the very reason that no one really digs in into an idea enough to understand it so that they can be free.

**SP:** That's right.

**WB:** And that's where the problem lies.

**SP:** Well, a lot of the figurative stuff today is based on photography. It's a shorthand.

**WB:** Well, it's ridiculous. It's ridiculous.

**SP:** You just take a photograph. You don't draw, right?

**WB:** I know, you don't draw, right.

**SP:** You don't make a form out of it. . . .

**WB:** That's right.

**SP:** . . . which is [where—Ed.] the creativity is. It's really like you take something and do something to it. You're already [half] passive, because you're accepting a given document.

**WB:** You're so right. I mean, this is [only one problem, one of the problems]. So, anyway, that day when he

tried to explain it to me in a very arbitrary way, then I went on my own way. I began to search and try to find out what does make a picture work. How do you put it together? And that's haunted me all my life. How do you put it together? The reason I'm saying all this is because we're leading up to the [Indian] Space period.

**SP:** Absolutely.

**WB:** But you can't lead up to that unless you have the background that came before it. There's no such thing as just doing that.

**SP:** No, unlike art school today, where the moment you arrive is the only thing that's important, that you actually. . . . In the old days you actually had to train and learn.

**WB:** That's right.

**SP:** There was a respect for learning—in the process—as opposed to today which is all of this, you know, nineteen year olds are great individuals and have to express themselves and that sort of thing.

**WB:** I know. What are you going to do to change that? People ask me about that. Well, I'll go into that later on maybe if we have time. But I wanted to lead up to the subject of the day, which, of course, is the period in which the name Indian Space comes into play.

**SP:** Well, you were in New York in the thirties obviously after the Boston Museum School.

**WB:** Oh, yeah. Well, I left the Boston Museum School in . . . I think it was 1930, '31 because I felt that it was too limited. And, actually, when I left they fired all the old teachers, and they started what they call a modern school, which wasn't very modern at all. They simply got some people in the Slade Art School [to come, from] there, and then they got somebody—a commercial artist—to take over for a while. It wasn't [Shumai]. They had some Russian name [Alexander Iacovleff—Ed.]. They did very flamboyant work. And from then on it staggered along for the last fifty years—whichever way it goes, you know, more or less express yourself.

**SP:** Yeah, in the post-war period when I was an artist in Boston, it's a modern thing, you're up on the latest five seconds and, you know, that's basically it.

**WB:** Yeah, I know.

**SP:** And they function that way—as most art schools do, after the ascendancy in the fifties of Abstract Expressionism. All of the old ways of teaching and learning were thrown out it in. . . . As they were. . . . It would be interesting to study the effect on the art schools at that time of the ascendancy of that style. Because actually those guys—at least some of them—tried to learn something at some point. But there's this. . . .

**WB:** Which group? You mean. . . .

**SP:** The Abstract Expressionists, the New York School in the fifties.

**WB:** Well, some of them did come from training, you know, a certain amount of training. They had to because that's all they got in the art school when they first came there.

**SP:** That's right, that's it.

**WB:** So a guy like de Kooning had a certain amount of training in. . . .

**SP:** Oh, he had tremendous training in Holland.

**WB:** . . . in Holland, you see. So all that was a very valuable thing in many ways. But the poor students that came afterwards. . . .

**SP:** They start from where they develop.

**WB:** Yeah, well, they start from de Kooning or they started from [Franz—Ed.] Kline, and I remember going. . . . See, I taught a great deal in universities all over the United States. For ten summers we traveled all over, and I stopped off at Ohio and I stopped off at Duluth and I stopped at Spokane and I then went to Canada. And in those ten years I covered the United States educational system, as far as I was concerned. . . .

**SP:** More than you want to know. [laughs]

**WB:** . . . more than I wanted to know. It was interesting, but the point is that everywhere I went everybody thought they had something new to say. They said to me, "Come to my studio. I've got a new idea," and so

forth. And I'd look at it and it was just out of Art News that Tom [Hansen] projected on a page that month, you see.

**SP:** Things haven't changed whatsoever.

**WB:** And so I'd look at it, and what could I say, who was right, you know, in the heart of the situation? What should I say to these teachers, you know? I used to argue, and I did get myself into a great deal of hot water, and I did make a lot of people very uncomfortable, and it then became uncomfortable for me to argue so much. But I was like going against a trend that has continued for fifty years. You understand what I mean.

**SP:** Um hmm.

**WB:** And that trend had led to all the different things that are even going on in politics today, you see.

**SP:** Oh, yes.

**WB:** So what are you going to do, you know? But as I grow older—and actually, in the last few years, I suppose—I stopped doing it. I just said, "Well, it's hopeless to try to argue about the thing because it's already happened and they've done it." In other words, they've destroyed any possibility of real knowledge. So I just simply try to live my own life the way it's going. I don't pay any attention any more. I don't care what the ideas are. Because it no longer is pertinent to my life, you know? I've always tried to do the best I could and I couldn't turn the tide and do anything about it. That's the way it is.

**SP:** Well, that exists in all kinds of spheres including art history today, the \_\_\_\_\_. [But go on.]

**WB:** Yeah. Well, it's the reason why, when I came to New York, why I tied up and got interested in people like Peter Busa and Wheeler, for the very reason that. . . .

**SP:** Steve Wheeler, yeah.

**WB:** . . . Steve—and Peter—were both very knowledgeable people.

**SP:** Um-hmm. You met them in thirties?

**WB:** Thirties. Actually, I met Busa in the early thirties.

**SP:** At the Art Students League.

**WB:** The Art Students League. They were having a show, and I saw a very small painting—a very beautiful small painting. And it had such a sense of order and beauty and [qualities] that I said, "I've got to meet this artist." In other words, I liked the picture and I said, "This guy's good!" So finally he came to the gallery, and I introduced myself and we became friendly. But the picture that I saw was an early Busa, which was two women on a stairway, and it was very influenced by [Pompeii]. Very beautiful. I have a small sketch of it somewhere.

**SP:** The frescoes at the Met? Or a visit to the. . . .

**WB:** A Visit to Pompeii.

**SP:** Ah hah!

**WB:** And I was very impressed by it, and then we became friends. And he began to change in his work, and I was trying to find my way. I was trying to get out of the thirties and I was trying to get out of the social statements and so forth. . . .

**SP:** That's right, that's right.

**WB:** . . . and I was trying to rid myself of illusionary techniques and illusionary kind of modeling and that sort of thing, light and dark.

**SP:** How long were you at the Art Students League? What were the dates exactly?

**WB:** Well, beginning say—let's say it was 1931—I was well encamped at the League.

**SP:** So [Thomas Hart?—Ed.] Benton was there and. . . .

**WB:** Benton was there, [Curry, Carry] was there. . .

**SP:** What's his name, [Geoff] Goodman.

**WB:** Who?

**SP:** Geoff Goodman?

**WB:** That name doesn't ring a bell.

**SP:** Oh, he's a Benton student.

**WB:** There was a Goodman I knew. [Bert] Goodman.

**SP:** Oh, no.

**WB:** Anyway, a couple of years later—'32, I think, '33—came [Stuart—Ed.] Davis, and [Hans—Ed.] Hofmann was there for a very short time. And I don't know whether George L. [Kaymars] had a short stint there or not. But, anyway, I was very interested in Davis. Which was interesting that, at a very early stage, he attracted me. And the only painting teacher at the League that I ever really spent any time with — which was very short, by the way, because he was fired because he didn't have enough students in his class. . . .

**SP:** In the mid thirties?

**WB:** Yeah, there was no students. And he also was not a very communicative kind of teacher. He was very reticent. But, anyway, I liked his work, that was the main thing. And then I happened to get a studio with George [Swendon], who was an abstract painter, very geometric, very influenced by Mondrian. And I liked his work and he was very friendly. But I was still working in the, I don't know, you might say the content and way of working that was indicative of the thirties.

**SP:** Yes, Orozco. I've seen some things.

**WB:** Well, I was very influenced by [José] Clemente Orozco, who was my god at that time. And I suppose. . . .

**SP:** He was very popular. People don't realize how popular he was in the thirties.

**WB:** He was considered a very great artist.

**SP:** Yeah.

**WB:** I still think he was a great artist. And he holds up very well for me.

**SP:** Yes, we need a show.

**WB:** A \_\_\_\_ Orozco, a real good show.

**SP:** Yeah, that's right.

**WB:** But it should be selected, too, because he did do some work which was kind of like off the sleeve, you know. But he was very important historically and, I think, a very great man.

**SP:** So you were looking at Mexican stuff at that time. It was important to you, typically.

**WB:** Yeah, I was a Mexican. . . .

**SP:** And Stuart Davis, who was essentially French.

**WB:** Right. I had both of these schools.

**SP:** That's right, School of Paris and Mexico, yeah.

**WB:** Right. I also was delving into medieval art a good deal, too.

**SP:** From the Met and places?

**WB:** Yeah.

**SP:** But why?

**WB:** I spent a lot of time because I liked the way they . . . I was intrigued by the way that the imagination . . . the way they organized an idea, you know. The unusual way of presenting, let's say, a spiritual idea. Which is mostly religion, you know. And I was impressed by their use . . . how they drew their figures, which were all very

free but not free in an expressionist sense, but free in a sense that their forms. . . . Like Byzantine. The Byzantine interested me tremendously and I used to lecture a great deal to friends of mine on Byzantine art. And the reason for it is that the Byzantines would take a human form and they would abstract it and stretch it so that it had a power to it of movement and expansion . . . a physical presence that was overwhelming. And that interested me. How do I get that in my work?

**SP:** That sense of presence and power?

**WB:** Power, yeah. That's the reason I've always been attracted to Orozco, because he has a certain power.

**SP:** Sure. Tremendous. Forcefulness.

**WB:** Yeah. That motivated my work a great deal. So the period was intensely investigative. I really was looking around everywhere—every little. . . .

**SP:** Did you go to the Met all the time because it was the. . . .

**WB:** I went to the Met. I would spend a great deal of time at the Natural History Museum observing more primitive sources.

**SP:** Oh, yes. And the Museum of the American Indian?

**WB:** Well, the American Indian art I really spent a lot of time at.

**SP:** Yeah, it's one hundred Fifty-Fifth Street.

**WB:** But that came a little later on. It was in the late part of the 1930s. That's when the thing began to open up and that's when I met Steve Wheeler. I knew Steve, but I didn't really get to know him until the later thirties, if I'm right. I'm not absolutely sure of the chronological order of it. But somewhere between 1936 and 1939 I met Steve Wheeler. And then he was working . . . he showed me his lithographs. He was very interested in me because I was. . . . My work interested Busa and Wheeler. It's a very interesting thing. They felt some respect or some feeling about me. So there was a trio there already.

**SP:** So you were friends, colleagues.

**WB:** Colleagues, yeah. And I respected their work, was very interested in their work. And at that time Busa was searching around and trying out all. . . . He had broken with his Pompeii period, and he really was moving into the very strong contemporary surrealist period.

**SP:** He always kept that color sense, though. Through the years later.

**WB:** Oh, yeah. Well, he evolved an Italian. . . . The Italians, they have taste. They have a sense of form, Italians. No matter which way they go, they always have it. It was right in their blood.

**SP:** Thank you very much. Go on. [laughs]

**WB:** Well, I'm not kidding. I mean, I just know.

**SP:** No, they're very visual. . . .

**WB:** They're visual and the perception of physical things is different than other cultures.

**SP:** Umm, could be, could be.

**WB:** Yeah, and [stronger]. But, anyway, so Busa was showing with . . . later on he was. . . . By the way, I was friendly with Hans Hofmann in the early thirties—I mean middle thirties. That's when he came. . . .

**SP:** When he came here and set up his school.

**WB:** That's right.

**SP:** Did you attend. . . . You attended that?

**WB:** No, I never did.

**SP:** No, you didn't.

**WB:** No, no. I was too stubborn, I was already on my way.

**SP:** [laughs] Oh! That's important.

**WB:** I was already a very, very stubborn kid. But I had to be because nobody, when I was a kid, ever encouraged me. Nobody was interested in me. So I had to go my own way, had to be strong. And in a very funny way—this sounds very childish—some of my heroes were western heroes—like Bill Hart. You don't know who Bill Hart is. Well, he was a gun-slinging guy. . . .

**SP:** That's just a few years before my time, Bill Hart.

**WB:** Before Tom Mix.

**SP:** [laughs] Oh boy, that's going back. Before Tom Mix. I came in at the end of Tom Mix.

**WB:** [chuckles] Right. Before Tom Mix. And he fought his way, all the time, you know. The other hero of that time was Daumier. It was a very strange mixture. Daumier was one of the greatest heroes of all.

**SP:** Well, he's a profound man, and so it's \_\_\_\_.

**WB:** Daumier was like an idol.

**SP:** Yeah, I can see that, sure.

**WB:** Yeah. And he influenced my early work very, very much.

**SP:** Seen the show of drawings by him?

**WB:** Yes, yeah right.

**SP:** \_\_\_\_.

**WB:** And I have some drawings here that I copied when I was fourteen years old. Only fourteen years old and I loved Daumier. Anyway, so you see there's a lot of history that I was involved with. As a matter of fact, to be an artist it was twenty four hours a day. But I had to make a living because. . . . I won't go into that but so I had to do all sorts of things to make a living. I came from a family that had no money, and so I had to make my way. But, anyway. . . . And I don't want to lose track of where we were.

**SP:** So you learned something of Hofmann at that time and you knew Wheeler and Busa.

**WB:** Yeah, well, Hofmann came to visit me.

**SP:** Ah!

**WB:** Yeah, and I remember that visit. It was in. . . . Before he came to visit me there was a party at Joe Cain's—C-a-i-n. He was an artist. He taught up in Rhode Island there, and he had a party and invited Hofmann and myself and a few others. And I remember Hofmann telling me at that time—it was very interesting—he said to me in his German accent that he had a closet full of paintings but he didn't know what to do with them. It was like that woman that had a closet full of pancakes, you know, the famous one. Well, anyway, a sarcastic joke. So . . .

**SP:** You should have called André Emmerich. But you did—twenty years later.

**WB:** No, he got a break when Peggy Guggenheim came and began to show his early drawings. You know, the quick ones—which I think are among his best work at one time. So Hofmann became noticeable in the New York scene, and then he came to visit me once. I'll never forget that. And the reason . . . one of the things he was impressed by. . . . One of my pieces was called Early Morning. I'll never forget that. It's when I freed myself [on, from] the block, and I was working quite abstractly and my work was flowing. And he said, "That's good. That's very good. I like that." So that was my relationship at that moment, that he liked something I was doing.

**SP:** Well, that's very important.

**WB:** Yeah. But I never went to his classes. I had a lot of friends in his class. I mean, the monitor I knew well. There were two or three monitors, ten monitors. I knew them all, practically. Yeah, there was a certain relationship there that took place but I wasn't interested in Hofmann in a deeper sense, because I felt that it's too sketchy, too fragmented, and too much directed in a kind of superficial way of hitting the surface that didn't interest me. So I walked away, as far as my relationship being influenced by him like so many students were. But I wasn't a student then anymore. I was really on my own way. A young artist searching.

**SP:** Yeah. Early twenties, you'd say. Just so the artist school, you are just getting your feet wet, but you no longer do this group or that group.

**WB:** No, no, no, I was moving my own way. So, anyway, so that's the thirties—part of the thirties. And then during that time there was Orozco, there was Byzantine painting in my work, all these influences.

**SP:** The intensity of Byzantine, in that simple form. You did some social things but that was probably tired by the end of the thirties.

**WB:** I was through with it. Actually, I was finished in 1936.

**SP:** You know, I think that's a big year. I don't think people realize that. That was sort of the turning point for [many].

**WB:** Yeah, I was through with it.

**SP:** It started to decline after that.

**WB:** Yeah. Actually it began to decline around '34, '35.

**SP:** Did it? Like when it hit the public it was already starting on its way out. [laughs]

**WB:** That's right. It was on its way out.

**SP:** Yeah, frequently it happens like that. And by '37, '38 people were really looking for something else.

**WB:** I'll never forget. The other thing that was important to mention to you is that I knew Arshile Gorky, you see, very early.

**SP:** Ah hah.

**WB:** See, I knew him back when he lived in Massachusetts.

**SP:** Oh, yeah, he was in Watertown.

**WB:** That's right, Watertown. And I visited his cousin, John [Harshin, Hutchin], who Gorky more or less had very little to do with him, because at that time Gorky wanted to be known as a relative of Maxim Gorky.

**SP:** Oh, yes. That's right, yeah.

**WB:** He didn't even, I mean, the Russian. . . .

**SP:** Well, yes, we know that Gorky had these problems.

**WB:** Oh, yeah, I know. It's a side. . . . I appreciate it, you know. I didn't hold it against him. I visited him and I have a few anecdotes, but I won't go into those. But I thought Gorky was a very interesting guy. Now, he had a cousin in Chicago. . . .

**SP:** Yeah, family's in Chicago. . . .

**WB:** . . . who was influenced by Léger, which interested me.

**SP:** He was a painter?

**WB:** Painter, yes.

**SP:** Oh, the fellow. . . .

**WB:** He painted like Léger. Yeah. And then I got involved with. . . . I mean, I like Léger's work a lot but I wasn't ready for Léger. He was way beyond me at that moment. And then trying to develop my work so abstractly as his work. And I wasn't yet in the Cubist stage. I hadn't hit that yet. I was moving towards it and I was talking a lot about it in the classes—you know, about Cubism.

**SP:** In classes you were teaching?

**WB:** At the League.

**SP:** Oh, yes.

**WB:** See, I was teaching from '36 on.

**SP:** Painting and drawing?

**WB:** I was teaching graphics until '41.

**SP:** Oh, that's right, that's right.

**WB:** And then in '41. . . . But in my graphics class I taught only the. . . . Technically, I was already a professional printer, so I lost interest in teaching technique. I was interested in the image and the form on a stone. So instead of talking about how to make a print, I talked about that the only good printmakers were artists—real artists, painters. Not printmakers. That's a subject that always boiled a lot of people up.

**SP:** Yeah, it still does, I think.

**WB:** Well, we're going to have a symposium on that [painting versus printmaking—Ed.] at the National Academy, end of the month. You might like to come to it. I mean, \_\_\_\_\_ of printmaking.

**SP:** Oh, yeah.

**WB:** So I was teaching graphics but I was teaching aesthetics. And one of the guys I [felt] a great deal about was Juan Gris who was my god too. I felt an affinity for Juan Gris. He was very important in my life. Did a lot for me and gave me a lot of information. And so. . . .

**SP:** So you studied his form. Must have seen him at MOMA and the other collections.

**WB:** Oh, I was very much involved with that was going on. I knew everything that was going on.

**SP:** Well, what you're saying is there was a lot going on. There was a lot of modern art going on.

**WB:** A lot of modern art going on, and the expressionists. . . . And whatever they say is American painting is baloney. It's French painting. French. French all the way through. Influenced by the French. The French were having a tremendous influence. A very big influence. And I was being influenced by the French, too. I mean, admit it. I was interested in the French way, way back. Well, Daumier's French, too! But then the Italians. So all these cultures were merging in on us. And the result was that. . . .

**SP:** You seem open to all of these cultures. I think that was very distinctive at this moment in time.

**WB:** \_\_\_\_\_.

**SP:** The Americans were looking at all arts of all periods.

**WB:** That's right, that's right.

**SP:** They didn't discriminate.

**WB:** No discrimination.

**SP:** Aside from high Renaissance—they didn't do too much high Renaissance, you know, Baroque—but virtually everything else. . . .

**WB:** Everything up to the Renaissance.

**SP:** That's right. . . . they wanted to look at and put together and it's very weird. Because certainly the students afterwards, in the sixties, had no idea of that. And I'm not sure they had that idea before, say, the twenties and thirties.

**WB:** Nobody had as much culture as we did at that period.

**SP:** That's a. . . .

**WB:** And that's the truth. No one since then has had that culture.

**SP:** Yeah.

**WB:** When I was at the Boston Museum School I remember telling the students, "For God's sakes, don't look at Michelangelo. Look at Giotto." That's how early. And that's in the twenties. I was already telling them Giotto, not Michelangelo. "I'd go where Michelangelo came from but not where Michelangelo is. And I used to

say Michelangelo in his last period was—I hated to use the word decadent—but his work was decadent according to the way I was looking at it at that time. This was very presumptuous on my part but, anyway, you know how kids are.

**SP:** But that simple, powerful. . . .

**WB:** Yeah.

**SP:** . . . economical. . . .

**WB:** Right.

**SP:** . . . expressive form shows.

**WB:** See, I wasn't impressed by Michelangelo. I was impressed by Giotto. That's the kind of thing. So you see this. . . . You're right, we were wide open. Now, for instance, my library here still has the stuff I collected in the thirties.

**SP:** [Excellenté]. But remember that today.

**WB:** Yeah, but if you were to. . . . Not everything but a lot of it. Like the volumes by Smithsonian Institution in 1887.

**SP:** The Bureau of Ethnology?

**WB:** Yeah, right.

**SP:** Oh, you [have, had] them, too?

**WB:** I had them, too, sure. And Pollock had them, too.

**SP:** Pollock, and [Birrell] had them, Joe Campbell had them, Miró had them. [laughs]

**WB:** That's right.

**SP:** They were sort of the basic books on Native Americans.

**WB:** Exactly, exactly.

**SP:** And if you were interested they were readily available.

**WB:** Exactly. Well, and then there was [Franz—Ed.] Boas, you know.

**SP:** Benton.

**WB:** [Ben Good. Yeah. There was Boas, too.

**SP:** Yes.

**WB:** Franz Boas.

**SP:** Yeah, did you read his. . . .

**WB:** I read his stuff. I was very impressed with it.

**SP:** [Primitive art, Primitive Art] and, of course, he had a big effect on the. . . . The American Museum of Natural History is his view.

**WB:** Exactly, exactly. Now these are very important. So there was this strange mixture of everything going on at the time. The thing was, how you put it all together again. You see? It was not simple. And so I was struggling all the time. There were plenty of times when I almost gave up. I felt, how do you solve it? How do you become your own man and yet you have all this stuff in your work? And this was really a major struggle.

**SP:** It's like teaching yourself painting culture.

**WB:** Yeah.

**SP:** You're essentially acculturating. You're learning all the past American artists, who didn't have a great visual culture here, of course, in comparison to Europe so people went abroad. So over here, with the

Depression, you had to do it yourself. And they really did it. It's really quite phenomenal.

**WB:** Yeah, it is phenomenal. And we took care of. . . . You know, very early in my school they took care of Sargent and all of these people. You know, put them away.

**SP:** [laughs]

**WB:** I even did a painting of Sargent for my thesis but I didn't want to do it. But the teacher told me to do it so I did it. You did what they told you do to. But I sneaked in an El Greco just to satisfy myself. So I did an El Greco. You know, I used to copy the paintings and stuff like that.

**SP:** It's [a, the] way to learn.

**WB:** Yeah. Well, it was wonderful. I mean I learned that when Sargent did a hand it wasn't there, really. It just looked like it was there. But I also learned that when El Greco did a hand it was there. It was quite different. So these are very important attitudes. So it shows you that from the very beginning I was. . . . I wanted something that had solidity, that had a certain timeless quality about it, and it was realized and everything was understood, and that the excitement was in the final presentation not in doing it alone. Not in the process alone. The real achievement that this thing came together and you couldn't move a form without destroying the whole production. And so it came to. . . . In the late thirties I was lecturing on Vermeer and analyzing him, just like a Mondrian. Taking him apart and showing the classes. You can't imagine how much culture went into this thing. And then. . . .

**SP:** Yeah, there's that quality in Vermeer, yeah.

**WB:** Yeah, and then in my class at the League it was really like a college of art rather than an Art Students League class. It was different from the other classes. It wasn't just working from the model, or that sort of thing.

**SP:** You were teaching them how to go about educating themselves.

**WB:** That's right, yeah. So when the veterans came in, of course, then they were overwhelming because they were hungry as could be. That came later on, late forties. But that was one of the great periods in the Art Student League's life, you know? It was a renaissance. It was like a renaissance.

**SP:** All these guys who had life experience, so they weren't juvenile.

**WB:** They weren't juvenile [at all, enough]. And they wanted. . . they kept after me. . . . They'd get to a class and we'd go and have a beer and we'd talk till midnight, just to get these ideas clear. Talk about Kandinsky, Klee, and all these things. They didn't know about them, never heard of them. Some of them were grocery clerks before they went in the army, that sort of thing. It was a fabulous time to teach, and I was already a young instructor, you know—I was on my way—and I was struggling with my own work, so we'd kind of work together—the teaching and the painting all in together. But anyway—we're skipping a little bit—the important period. . . . During the war, which was a very strange period—that's the period when all these refugees came over—then I saw all the influences in Busa's work of surrealism. It became very strong.

**SP:** Yeah, that came on very strong in the early forties.

**WB:** Right, it was very strong. It didn't hit Wheeler that much but it hit Busa very hard.

**SP:** Um hmm. Yes, I think that's true.

**WB:** [Because, But] Busa did an awful lot of moving around, too.

**SP:** Yes, in his styles he did—over time.

**WB:** He really did. Much more than Steve. Steve was more set in his way. Now I'll tell you the key to Steve's work, the real key. And I admire Steve. To me he's one of the most important American artists. When we met, he said to me, "You know, I'm doing a lithograph. I'd like you to see it." Now, I was well known as a lithographer, and as a printer too, you know, who did stone work. And so he brought me over a proof that he showed me of a man looking in a mirror. I don't think that exists anywhere. I haven't seen it. But I remember it vividly. And in the mirror he had his portrait, and he had double lines. In other words, it was like forms within forms within forms. And that was the beginning of Wheeler.

**SP:** When was this? Early forties, you think?

**WB:** Late thirties, early forties. And that was the beginning of Wheeler, and from then on most of Wheeler's

work [was, had] self-portraits.

**SP:** Well, he had a lot of domestic life, and I've heard people around him. . . .

**WB:** But it's mostly self-portraits. That is, it can be a domestic, but it's a self-portrait view. Or like, for instance, two guys meet in a street and say hello to each other. . . .

**SP:** Yeah, one of them is Wheeler.

**WB:** . . . and the other guy is Wheeler, too.

**SP:** [laughs]

**WB:** It's wonderful but . . . he's a very wonderful guy.

**SP:** Well, you know there's a show opening.

**WB:** I know. I love it, I love the. . . . I just have it here.

**SP:** The announcement, yeah. Damn it, It's the same time as mine, exactly.

**WB:** I don't know how I'm going to do both. You'll have to excuse me on that night. I'm sorry about that.

**SP:** Yeah, yeah.

**WB:** I have to go to Wheeler. The same night there's a big affair here, and I have to go here because [Placido] Domingo is being honored and given a gold medal. And Jim Levine is supposed to be here, too, the conductor, and I'm supposed to do a portrait of him. So I have to go down. . . .

**SP:** I would say you just get a limousine, just takes you here, takes you there, takes you there, and here at seven-thirty. [laughs] . . .

**WB:** [laughs] I don't think I can do that. I wish I could see it.

**SP:** [laughs] No, I know. No, I understand.

**WB:** But I'll try to get to see it. It's too bad you have the same night. Are you going to see the Wheeler thing?

**SP:** Oh, yeah. I would be there if it weren't for it being my opening.

**WB:** You're going to be at your own opening.

**SP:** Yes, I have to be there. [chuckles]

**WB:** Well, anyway, going back to Wheeler. And so the key for that one mirror piece, that was the beginning of the whole work.

**SP:** It's like he's . . . it's from. . . .

**WB:** Well, you see, what I'm trying to say is, he got it from reality first. He got the idea from reality. But then, of course, later on I know he didn't work that way anymore. He had enough knowledge to go ahead and do what he did. And we became very good friends, very close. I used to go to the Cooper Union, which was right next door to where he lived, and he lived on Tenth Street, something like that—East Tenth Street—and he used to make lunch for me, and we'd sit there discussing the latest situation. We were like rebels in the period. We were really rebels against the art world, too.

**SP:** There's so much to rebel against, let me tell you.

**WB:** Even then. And actually, we were rebelling against New York School.

**SP:** Sure. The idea of the New York School is very. . . . Oh, I don't want to get into that.

**WB:** Yeah, don't get into that. Anyway, so Steve would read to me letters he was going to write to [Clement] Greenberg—you know, arguments and so forth—and I remember he one day was very impassioned. We were sitting there eating our sandwich and whatever else he'd put on the table there, and he was saying, "Imagine that sonofabitch"—he'd call them names, you know—"he accuses my painting of having holes in them," you know, like that, so he sent out this card. Did you ever see that card? He told me, "Because you have a hole in your head yourself." That sort of thing. But now you can't do that and historically get to be known. You're

going to be crushed. And he was crushed. Really crushed.

**SP:** Well, I think the painting, of course, [moved] all that painterly stuff in the fifties, that kind of took care of any precise work for many, many years, and it only came back in the form of color field and that was a totally different.

**WB:** Yeah, that's a different ball game. Nothing to do with it. The so-called Indian Space is a very unique thing in itself. It's a moment in history that's extremely unique. There was never anything like it before or after.

**SP:** Yeah.

**WB:** But you see the thing is—and the beauty of it is—that each one of us is very individual, and each one of us dealt with a certain reality. And we had our own reality. Steve had his, Busa had his, and I had mine. And each one had a certain amount or concept as to how far the form can go

in a certain direction. And Steve, of course, he always talks about the line—which he uses with great skill and I think almost miraculously sometimes, you know what I mean? So that line of his is like a million-dollar line. But Busa was not [particularly] line. Busa was trying to grab a hold of a kind of element. . . .

[Break]

**SP:** Yeah, we're good. [referring to the taping process—Ed.]

**WB:** Well, Busa's was. . . . See, Busa's culture was so different from Steve's. Steve is Polish and his Polish background—Ukrainian, whatever it was—was very strong. He was stubborn and tight, religious. He wasn't religious, but I mean there was always a religious intensity to the way he works. It's spiritual and meaningful, his whole life, everything meant everything in that picture. So he really expressed. . . . And he said so in that little [blurb] there in the catalog, Hello, Steve. Makes it very [much] about life and death and about immortality. Immortality meant that. . . . The only way you get immortality was to be a painter. You just read it. That's all it's about.

**SP:** Yeah, yeah. Well it's true.

**WB:** Yeah. But Busa was very different. Italian, laid-back, and had a much freer view of life—and sometimes a little bit too free, you know what I mean? But that isn't the point. The point is he was his culture, too. Very interesting. And it shows in his work. A very knowledgeable sense of form. I think his best work, as far as I'm concerned, is the forties, up to about 1955. And when he. . . . If you don't mind my skipping just for a moment, digressing. In 1959, '58, '57, Provincetown?

**SP:** Yeah, he went to Provincetown. His stuff changed.

**WB:** He said to me, "I can't go on. I've gotta change." I said, "You can't change now. It's too late." In '60, it would be another school. Expression would be finished. So he looked at me and didn't say a word, but he went right ahead and changed. That was fatal. That was fatal. Because you can't go back once you've changed. You just cannot do that. So he tried other things later on. He went back to doing geometric painting and things like, but he lost that wonderful quality of the early work, of humanity. Lost his humanism. Which I was always interested in—that sense of humanity—and he lost it.

**SP:** It's very hard to be out of fashion, very hard to be alone.

**WB:** Alone. Well, that period I was having a terrible time but I was really painting some great pictures, and I was really excited and created a lot of enemies in the art world.

**SP:** Having an individual voice will do that for you.

**WB:** Yeah, and Tom Hess wouldn't have anything to do with me, because I had once spoken about what he was doing, and he didn't like my attitude. So it ended up where I wasn't reviewed in the Art News for twenty years almost, while he was there. So it doesn't pay to do all these things, but you did them anyway. My wife suffered with me and she knows what it's all about. It was tough. But I was doing some of my finest work, I mean really great paintings, but. . . . And they were being shown at Bertha Schaefer and a few other places, and museums here and there picked up one or two, so underneath it were a few people that appreciated it, you know. A very modest amount of people. There were a couple of collectors that bought one or two, that sort of thing. Gradually the paintings of that period found their place in private homes and in the museums. There are a lot of them of museums now. I say a lot. . . . a few of them in museums. There are two very good ones at the Guggenheim, one at the Modern, and there are about three or four at the Whitney, one out there in California, and there's some in Washington [D.C.]. You know, they're spread around. But the fifties was a very growing period, a very exciting period, a very important period.

**SP:** Well, it must have. . . .

**WB:** And it lasted into the sixties, into about '65. I felt I had explored that whole area, and I was trying to find another way of expressing again a certain kind of reality without basing it formally on the structure that I was using in the previous ones. But they overlapped, so that if you looked at my theater work from the sixties you'll find a very strong correlation between that work and the abstract work—a very strong correlation. And it's all in there. Except I wasn't using the one thing which I think—it may come down to a cardinal thing—the question of the space between two major forms. The intermediate form. And that's where I think I made a real original contribution, because nothing like that was done before. I'm saying it in this sense. Busa was interested in the idea. Wheeler had his own way of handling it. I say it in this sense that it had something to do with tradition again. I was trying to take the negative and make everything. . . . Because you hear about it a lot today, but when I was doing it it was new. Everything was positive. Now, how do you make a picture positive and make you feel the space of nature itself? That was the question. So I wrote an article in 1950. Now there's a journal. . . The Art Student League was a very important—the bulletin, whatever they called it [The League Quarterly]—was a very important voice for a lot of us.

**SP:** Oh, yeah?

**WB:** And Wheeler wrote an article in it.

**SP:** Oh, I'm not familiar with it at all. Is it being still put out now?

**WB:** Yeah, but it's not the same.

**SP:** When was this period? It contained statements, you're saying. . . .

**WB:** Articles that we wrote. I wrote . . . very early. . . . The earliest article I wrote was on [Jean Baptiste Simeon] Chardin. Very interesting. I have them here if you ever want them. I think the Archives has some of those. Then, in 1950, I wrote an article on the Tuscan Madonna ["Painting without Illusion," The League Quarterly, Spring 1950], in which I spoke about space, all nature and space. And in that I laid down all the rules of my ideas. Now Wheeler did the same thing when he wrote his article, too. A real sounding board. So the League in many ways was a very important place to be.

**SP:** It still is, I think.

**WB:** In it's own way, yeah.

**SP:** I went to the League.

**WB:** You did? When was that?

**SP:** In the sixties.

**WB:** Sixties. Oh, right. Anyway, that whole question of how to handle that space is something that I lectured on at the League, and I influenced my class and some of the people you saw in the Indian show were my students. It was the only class that discussed this idea, because the two other modern teachers at that time were Cameron Booth and [Leeter Check, Vidacheck], and they were purely on the Cubist side.

**SP:** That's right.

**WB:** They were Cubism. And I'd already left Cubism, was no longer involved with Cubism. And as Wheeler said in some of his statements. . . . I got a few of them recently from Barbara Hollister, things that he wrote for the [Four O'clock Forum], in which he talks about going beyond Cubism and going beyond abstract painting that were being done at that time. So we were right in that socket. . . .

**SP:** What you're saying is, it was you three together. You were sort of the elders. These other people really came in as students and transitional figures. Howard Dong. . . .

**WB:** That's right.

**SP:** . . . Ruth [Lawing, Lewing] . . .

**WB:** And she was my monitor, for my class.

**SP:** Aha.

**WB:** And Barry, \_\_\_\_ .

**SP:** And Gertrude [Barry].

**WB:** And what was the other one?

**SP:** Orloff? Ruth Orloff?

**WB:** Well, no, it's another one. Who had a show recently, and I met her.

**SP:** Barrier?

**WB:** Barrier. One of them.

**SP:** Yeah.

**WB:** And the guy that ran the magazine.

**SP:** Burgoyne.

**WB:** Not him but [Oscar] Collier.

**SP:** Oh yeah, Collier.

**WB:** Collier. He's an old student of mine.

**SP:** Yeah.

**WB:** And [Cameron] was a student of mine.

**SP:** So basically you were Gorky! There were two generations here, yourselves and. . . .

**WB:** That's right.

**SP:** Abstract Expressionism just sort of got so much PR nothing else was allowed to grow.

**WB:** Nothing was going on. Yeah, no, no. It was like. . . . I used to call the Abstract Expressionists Stalinism. "They're left over," I said. The king at that time was Pollock, and then came de Kooning and then came Kline. They had this trinity, you know? That's it.

**SP:** Well, they got so much PR in the fifties. . . .

**WB:** They got so much PR, you cannot imagine. It was just too much. It's like what happened in Russia, you know.

**SP:** Yeah, the people think in very simple terms. They're celebrity-driven. It's like one person becomes the focus of everything for everybody, and it wipes everything out and it takes years later to restore the landscape.

**WB:** It'll take a long time.

**SP:** But it's happening now.

**WB:** It's just the beginning; it's the tip of the iceberg. It'll take generations to. . . .

**SP:** It'll take. . . . But it's there.

**WB:** It's there, yeah, it's like. . . .

**SP:** The impulse is there, the recognition.

**WB:** It's like a little node of history that's coming alive.

**SP:** That's right. It needs to be done. I wrote a book on Abstract Expressionism, and now ten years later I would say that the way to look at things is only see Abstract Expressionism in the context of all these other things going on, in which these ideas are not unique to a dozen people, but actually shared by the culture. This is the American art culture at this time.

**WB:** That's right. Exactly.

**SP:** There's no question about it.

**WB:** The thing you've got to realize is that the thing that separated Busa and Wheeler and myself from the expressionists was the fact that—at least, I know, I think Busa shared it with me; I'm sure Wheeler did too but he didn't express it the same way—is that we thought of the expressionists being illusionary painters. Now remember that, going back in time, I was trying to get rid of illusion in my work. And they were bringing it back in a new form.

**SP:** Um hmm. Yeah, sometimes that happens.

**WB:** And so if you look at a painting of de Kooning, or you look at a painting of Kline and so forth—Kline a little less than de Kooning—but you'll find that areas just sort of wander off into a mist. They just disappear and there's nothing there. It's just a vignette. It's very dramatic, you see. So we were avoiding that; we wanted to get beyond that. And then Motherwell we considered a softie, sort of this sweet painter, you know, a nice painter, and his work had a certain amount of chiaroscuro to it—which we didn't want. You know, that sort of thing. I'm just telling you all things because these are things we talked about. And they were important because we were clearing the decks for what we wanted to do.

**SP:** I think Motherwell was following fashion.

**WB:** This is not in any way criticizing, merely indicating what he was doing. And so when Gordon Brown interviewed me in *College Art Journal*. . . .

**SP:** Oh, yeah, in the early fifties.

**WB:** Yeah, early fifties. I helped him make a table of contents of what each painter was like—you know, we put it all together. You know that [piece].

**SP:** Yeah, a neat piece.

**WB:** That was due to myself and Busa—and Wheeler. But you see. . . .

**SP:** Well, I think we're finally coming to understand the forties and fifties. The fifties needs so much attention because it's so driven by this idea of . . . Rosenberg's stuff.

**WB:** That's right. Harold was a nice man, though. Hal was different than Greenberg. See, I knew both of them, and Hal was a very sweet personality, actually.

**SP:** Well, I think it was very charismatic and brilliant, and yet it sort of overcame everybody and sort of addled their minds. [chuckles]

**WB:** Yeah, right. Well, anyway, when my son [\_\_\_\_\_ Barnet] wrote a thesis on me, for his college, he sent out letters asking what each painter thought of me, you know, so he got Greenberg's answer and he got Rosenberg's answer. It's interesting how two personalities are so different from each other. And that's back, I don't know, twenty years ago, thirty years ago. My son graduated [NYU]. He's a painter, so forth. Very interesting. He got some nice letters back from Paul Jenkins and [Weston, Westin]. . . . I think Weston; [he might not have]. A number of well-known painters that he wrote to. And they all answered, and it was very nice.

But anyway, to come to [the crest]—the high point of that period for me, anyway—was the fact that during the forties I resolved the question of how to handle that form. Resolved it only up to a point, naturally.

**SP:** In terms of modernism?

**WB:** [Direction]. Yeah, modernism.

**SP:** And with the combination of Native American [stuff].

**WB:** That's right, yeah. And then in the fifties I \_\_\_\_\_ [topic, possible] keeps going. So the fifties was a very productive and a very rich period of ideas and concepts which were quite consistent through the period. They varied a little bit but they were consistent where the forms were held together by the intermediate space, and the way the function of the painting took place. You know, the total relationship was always related to that intermediate space, how you handle that. And then, of course, it had a lot to do with everything else. But I was trying in that period to make my abstract work—which is basically figurative—as you know—and these were. . . . Like *Fourth of July* in the show I have now—I don't know if you saw it—but, anyway, it's on the card. . . .

**SP:** Oh yes, yeah, sure.

**WB:** . . . those are three figures, three children, you know, and they came from other three children I did

which is a little less abstract, and then from other children who were less abstract from that. And so it was a gradual evolution to reach that point where I could make a statement so strong and so, let's say, consistent in its structure.

**SP:** They should show those things together.

**WB:** Yeah, I could. It would make an interesting educational thing.

**SP:** You know, that picture dominates the show so much.

**WB:** I can show you just briefly later on how the Fourth of July came about.

**SP:** Yeah, I'd like to see that.

**WB:** So these came from nature, from long, long periods. Time was very important. It was no such thing as doing it over night. It was sort of gradual—always gradually developing over the year. Like with the painting called *Awakening*, I worked for two years on that trying to understand it.

**SP:** Oh, yes.

**WB:** And I remember lecturing to my class about it and talking about it. It's a big favorite of Robert Doty. He's got in the Curry Museum. Robert Doty is a very wonderful man, in terms of my work. He really appreciated it. He appreciated everything I did, no matter what period. [laughs] Which was very nice, you know, to know that each period was important to its next period.

**SP:** Oh, I think that's very important. Basic. He left the. . . . When did he leave the Whitney?

**WB:** I think back in the sixties. Then he went to Dayton, Ohio.

**SP:** Ah, that's right. Was it Dayton or Akron?

**WB:** Akron, maybe it was Akron. I don't know.

**SP:** At the Akron Art Institute.

**WB:** That's right, that's right.

**SP:** He was there a short time.

**WB:** Then he became head of the Curry Museum. That's when we picked up again. He began to do a lot of shows of mine and so forth, which were very important. You have some questions you were going to ask me?

**SP:** Oh, I'll just feed these in to things.

**WB:** Let me just say one other thing about the fifties and the early sixties. I think there I was able to merge old culture, tradition, and modern together. Because I never wanted to destroy the modern idea—like Cezanne said he wanted a link between himself and tradition. I never wanted to destroy that link; I wanted that link to be solid. So I feel that work of that period was the culmination of a fresh way of doing certain things—imagery and form and structure and color—and yet, in the same time, it had a certain tradition to it.

**SP:** Yeah, I think that's the distinctive thing, and that's one of the things Rosenberg got upside down. He said the tradition of the new. He had that backwards. It's the new of tradition. On the one hand, it's rooted in this profound artistic culture [and learning].

**WB:** That's right.

**SP:** On the other hand, you want to do something new and different.

**WB:** That's right.

**SP:** But you didn't want to throw over the other one.

**WB:** Well, no. Now how could you throw over Piero della Francesca? It's ridiculous. It just doesn't make any sense.

**SP:** Yeah, I know. It's an art world kind of thing, a tradition in the new.

**WB:** Yeah, I know.

**SP:** But the students took it seriously.

**WB:** Yeah, well, that's the biggest problem of all.

**SP:** I think it's probably American culture.

**WB:** Probably the culture, too. I think you're right.

**SP:** There's no respect for what happened yesterday.

**WB:** That's right.

**SP:** Yesterday is somehow unrelated.

**WB:** That's true, that's true. And finishing off the subject matter: So that period falls into two divisions. One part of it is figurative and the other is landscape. And the landscape came about late fifties. Began in middle fifties when I was in Provincetown. I did Clear Day and others that were landscape paintings—basically. And then later on in the sixties they were all landscape—you know, Spokane, Big Duluth, all these pictures [tapping on book?] were influenced by nature.

**SP:** [looking at book—Ed.] Um hmm, yes.

**WB:** So during this period I was trying to do the figure in terms of the New York scene. In other words, you'd think of New York as being a figure, you know. And when I went out west I thought of landscape as being the figure. So I was able to eventually be a landscape painter and a figurative painter at the same time. That is, do both.

**SP:** Yeah, do both. And these are the categories of tradition.

**WB:** That's right, tradition.

**SP:** These are the things that everybody responds to. And we would respond to if we had artists who paid attention. [chuckles]

**WB:** That's right. I know, I know.

**SP:** More of these people instead of working with photographs from. . . .

**WB:** Oh, that's all nonsense. [both mumble a few phrases—Ed.] You see, the reason why it's so important to work from nature is that you can never capture the physical presence unless the thing is alive, you see. And I learned that very early because one of my gods, again, was Ingres, and Ingres wouldn't let his students cut up dead people, cadavers. He said, "You have to work either from a beautiful sixth-century Greek cast, which was alive, or you work from art. But you couldn't take someone who died. You just couldn't work from that. You couldn't learn anatomy from that. He didn't want that at all. And Philip Hale was an Ingres . . . "Ingres-lophile."

**SP:** Um-hmm, he wrote a book.

**WB:** Yeah, he wrote a book on Vermeer. Not on Ingres; on Vermeer.

**SP:** But he wrote one on anatomy, didn't he?

**WB:** Yes. No, no, that's Robert Hale.

**SP:** Oh, that's right.

**WB:** That's Robert Hale. But anyway, so what I'm trying to get to is that there's nothing like the actual physical quality of reality itself—you know, that emanates from the physical field. I know that from doing portraits all the time. To try to do a portrait from a photograph is ridiculous.

**SP:** No, it's a way of grounding yourself in experience, which I think is one of the reasons we've lost things.

**WB:** Lost. . . .

**SP:** Because it's all abstraction. And the proof of that is the influence of French thinkers, who never could relate to anything. [chuckles]

**WB:** Anything. Well, you know how they're taking [Michel—Ed.] Foucault apart now.

**SP:** Yeah, well good.

**WB:** Yeah, but I mean they're; . . . Did you read the article [in, of, on] \_\_\_\_ in the. . . .

**SP:** Oh, in the New York Review of Books?

**WB:** No, in New Criteria.

**SP:** New Criteria, yeah, that's what I was trying to remember.

**WB:** Yeah. [chuckles] Oh boy, because this guy. . . .

**SP:** Roger Kimble.

**WB:** . . . Roger Kimble \_\_\_\_.

**SP:** S & M. I mean, the French tradition of this sort of bestiality going all the way back to de Sade. . . .

**WB:** I know, this is \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_.

**SP:** You know, and to make his a political statement, come on. [laughs]

**WB:** [There's a bridge], yeah.

**SP:** I mean, every sort of grotesquerie they have to make into a political statement.

**WB:** I know, I know, it's incredible.

**SP:** It's silly. Anyway, so Wheeler kept on, Busa changed, and you yourself changed in a different way eventually.

**WB:** Yeah.

**SP:** The Indian Space thing was, what, fifteen years? Twenty?

**WB:** It's from about. . . . The beginning of it in—and I tried it off and on—which begin around 1939, '40—the beginning of the idea percolating inside. And in between doing these intimate pictures I did of the family and so forth, I used to make sketches that were different, but I wasn't ready for it yet. So I'd say that in 1947 when I did the bird chasing the cat I was already in it. I mean, almost totally into it. And as you see, Old Man's Afternoon you can see the thing is already percolating. That's 1943, '44, around that time. Things were really happening.

**SP:** So you were almost doing for almost twenty years.

**WB:** I did twenty years. I'd say about twenty years, yeah. It lasted [to] about 1965, and it was a very rich period. My dealer would like to have a show of that period.

**SP:** Terry Dintenfass?

**WB:** Yeah, and the thing is it costs money to put it on, and unfortunately I'm on these foundations and I can't have it for myself. I can give it out to other people, but I can't get any money myself. I don't know how to raise money. I could maybe raise it.

**SP:** Yeah, there's a foundation you were on. . . . What is it, the Florsheim?

**WB:** Florsheim, yeah.

**SP:** This is strictly grants for artists, not for. . . .

**WB:** Yeah, and over 55, and for catalogs and all sorts of things.

**SP:** The catalogs. . . . Or the production of their work. Not for. . . .

**WB:** Yeah, like [Leo] Manso's show at the League. Did you see that? [Yale, Gale] Manso. Beautiful show. And we arranged to supply him \$20,000 bucks for the catalog.

**SP:** So you support some of the catalogs for these shows?

**WB:** Oh, yeah. And it's been wonderful for the artists. It really save their life.

**SP:** At last they have something put together on themselves.

**WB:** Yeah. No, they're a good committee. There's \_\_\_\_ [Cole, Kohl], and [Gus] [Kreudlich], and a dealer down from Naples, Bill [Neetz, Neitz]. And then [Better] [Wampler] from Provincetown is on it. And then there's Jack [Lennon] from Chicago, the publisher, a very nice guy. And we're a nice team. We were down in Tampa last weekend, and we gave out a couple hundred thousand. Not quite that, but, you know.

**SP:** Oh, you met down there?

**WB:** We met down there and we gave out grants. I think we gave out that day a hundred and ten thousand, something like that \_\_\_\_.

**SP:** Up in the Archives we're always ready for grants.

**WB:** Right. Well, we can do things. I mean, it has to deal with . . . it has to do with publishing.

**SP:** Well, sometimes the Archives does publish some things.

**WB:** There might be some project we can help.

**SP:** We have, for instance, artist interviews. We have several of them. I mean we have several . . . we have thousands.

**WB:** Yeah, right.

**SP:** We thought of doing a project on them, but. . . .

**WB:** Right, yeah. It's possible. Also another one now, a new one being formed called the Elizabeth Foundation. It's a new one, brand new, just Katharine Kuh and myself.

**SP:** Ah, Katharine Kuh.

**WB:** Yeah.

**SP:** Aha!

**WB:** Who I admire a great deal.

**SP:** Yeah, I'd like to try to get her to be a \_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_.

**WB:** Yeah. She's not very well but. . . .

**SP:** No. But she's ninetyish!

**WB:** Almost ninety, yeah, but she's incredible, an incredible woman.

**SP:** So what is this foundation going to do?

**WB:** This is going to give out money to artists of all ages. It won't be a limitation like we have on the Florsheim or [with] the [Dupont]. This'll be something. . . . I think they have to be out of art school about eight years, something like that.

**SP:** And it's the same thing? Catalogs, again?

**WB:** No, not catalogs. Just helping the artists. Just giving them excitement money. And I'm also on another one, called the Creative Artists Network, in Philadelphia, and we give out money for two years to help a student who's been out of school, say, eight, ten years, and they have a rough time, so there are two years of support. But the three institutions aren't connected.

**SP:** Terrific. Well, there are a lot of different ways out there, different needs to be met, and it's very important.

**WB:** Yeah, these things are very important because there are moments when a guy needs a real push, particularly older painters that we work with, and it gives them a new lease of life. They give them twenty thousand or fifteen thousand for a catalog. It means a lot. Did you see the one I did—or we did—for Manso?

**SP:** No, I didn't see the Manso.

**WB:** I'll show it to you later.

**SP:** I remember we got one last year on [Eales]. Do you know a guy named Theodore Eales?

**WB:** Oh, I know Theo, yes.

**SP:** He had one done a few years ago, and it was obviously a big thing. You could see that for once, you know, he had all his work put together in one spot.

**WB:** Yeah. But as exhibits go up and down, you know, the catalog or whatever it is. . . .

**SP:** It's like the historical record.

**WB:** Yeah, it's a historical record, and it's so nice that way, so that's what we concentrate on. We're busy, we're busy.

**SP:** Well, let me finish with a few questions here, just in general. It must have annoyed you when the Abstract Expressionists were getting all this praise for doing American Indian stuff when you had been doing it for years!

**WB:** Well. . . .

**SP:** I mean, as though they were really unique in doing this, and the truth of the matter is, they weren't unique!

**WB:** I know, they weren't at all. Matter of fact, they didn't develop it. That's the biggest problem I had with them. I wouldn't have minded if they developed it. They picked it up and it was a little superficial.

**SP:** Yeah.

**WB:** It was like a sketch of an idea. They never made it a full-blown formal imagery, or a full-blown formal relationship. I mean, it never got to that point.

**SP:** They blended it in and so forth.

**WB:** The blended a little [schmeer, smear] here and a little [schmeer, smear] there, and they got it done.

**SP:** Um hmm. They moved in with other cultures and. . . .

**WB:** That's right.

**SP:** . . . mixed them up together. There was a show—the art of the Pacific show, South Seas in '46.

**WB:** That's right.

**SP:** Did that have any impact, as such? That was a really big Oceanic show for MOMA.

**WB:** Yes, now I remember, yeah. It had a certain impact. Not a great one, if I remember correctly. That was right during after the war. Things were very funny then, anyway. The War was a very strange period because it took a lot out of everybody, you know. It was exhausting.

**SP:** It must have been emotionally and psychologically exhausting.

**WB:** Yeah. It was very hard. It was difficult.

**SP:** Because everyone's family was involved \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_.

**WB:** Oh, I was always being drafted, and then when I wasn't drafted I had to work on war work. So I used to teach all day and work in a factory all night, so I was exhausted.

**SP:** Yeah, I'm sure. Materials were hard to come by. They [checked] people out. A lot of people didn't do that much because it was hard to get materials.

**WB:** I was still painting all the time. \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ that work [they're, just] showing up here. [\_\_\_\_] still working all the time, painting. But it was physically very exciting. You had to be pretty strong to stay alive then—if you wanted to be a painter.

**SP:** I would say psychologically, too.

**WB:** See, the other thing, too. . . . The younger generation will never know it; maybe they will, the way things are going [these days]. We never had any dough or made money on painting. No one thought of a painting being an object with a price on it. It was just doing paintings. And if you sold them, fine, but it wasn't a question of money—anywhere—because there was no money for it. So there was this long period between the drop in the stock market in 1929, where everything crashed, until about [the] 1960s where paintings became valuable in terms of money. And the beginning of the Pop period was the beginning where money began to become part of the art scene.

**SP:** Oh, yeah. Celebrity \_\_\_\_ . . . .

**WB:** Even then it wasn't very big yet. When it really began to explode was in the eighties, actually. The seventies was pretty good. The money in the seventies was mainly concentrated on the middle class, which was buying prints. That was my golden renaissance, where. . . .

**SP:** Yeah, it was a good. . . .

**WB:** It was a wonderful period for me because for forty years I didn't make a penny on my graphics, and then that was ten years where I made my money. Which was a very modest sum even at that, but still it was money compared to what it was before. It was strange. You could sell out an edition in about a week, three hundred prints.

**SP:** [That's a lot].

**WB:** It shows you. . . . See, there was a middle class. It was very vital, and it was educated and they were sending their kids to school and things were really hopping. And then came Reagan and it was the end of the middle class. No more. Now it's part-time work.

**SP:** Yeah.

**WB:** Now it's part-time. More and more you'll see it. You study what's going on politically. . . . You see, the thing is I was also a political person. The nice thing about all of us were we were politically conscious, so we knew all about crashes and we knew all about social things, and so we were not babes in the woods when it came to knowing about systems. So it was very important, culturally, that we were aware of what we were dealing with. But we weren't totally taken in by any one ideology, although we were at times attracted to it. But a lot of us were never totally convinced.

**SP:** Well, you have longevity and with this kind of broad approach you were never going to be taken in by one thing for a long period.

**WB:** Nothing, no. Of course, as you get older you're taken in by very little. [chuckles] Would you like a drink of water or something?

**SP:** Ah, no, I'm okay here.

**WB:** Okay. So if you want to say that it was annoying, that's a mild word about that period.

**SP:** Yeah, well, yes, I must admit. How about the Four O'Clock Forums?

**WB:** Oh, that was [why]. . . .

**SP:** Just starting to ferret them out and what happened. I tell you, if we can find what was said then that would be very interesting.

**WB:** Well, they made recordings.

**SP:** Yes.

**WB:** Wheeler had them.

**SP:** Pardon? Wheeler had them. And I think Barbara Hollister has them.

**WB:** Has some of them, yeah.

**SP:** And, you know, eventually this will be put together, I think.

**WB:** I hope so, I hope so. Well, the Four O'Clock Forums were, I can tell you a lot about them because I was one of the founders of it, with Wheeler and. . . . Actually, it was Wheeler and myself that were basically the

founders, and Busa was part of it. There was the beginning of a certain antagonism between Busa and Wheeler at that time. These things happen, you know.

**SP:** Yeah, a long life, sure.

**WB:** Yeah. And Wheeler was using me as a front man, because he was very passionate about what he believed in, but he wouldn't come out in out in the public. He would write it down, but he wouldn't state it in front of people, so. . . . When they had these Four O'Clock Forums, he got me on the floor to talk, say the things that he wanted to say.

**SP:** Well, you could take the heat.

**WB:** So, I would take the heat, you see.

**SP:** [laughs]

**WB:** And he says my wife. . . .

**SP:** Things haven't changed.

**WB:** My wife was very upset about it at times, and she was right, but I was too much emotionally tied up to listen to her. You know, she pointed out that it wasn't such a good idea what I was doing. She was right all the time. It would have been better if I'd just shut up at that point. But anyway I was led on by Wheeler, who kept coaching me, and in those days you didn't want to feel like a coward, you know. So you made statements which you wouldn't do today.

**SP:** Well, you wanted to say what you think. Saying what you think often gets you in trouble.

**WB:** Yeah. All right, I remember one where I had a very funny duel with de Kooning. It was a riot. It's in one of the Four O'Clock Forums. I was trying to show that their spaces all felt hot and all that, and I used Vermeer as an example, and it went beyond everybody and nobody understood what the hell I was talking about. I remember that very well, and it antagonized . . . who was it now? He's still alive and he's a sculptor, he writes a lot. They had a show of sculpture last year at the studio school. Sid something. Not Sid Simon. [Sid Gordon]? No. Another name. [\_\_\_\_\_—Ed.] But anyway I knew how annoyed he was. That sort of thing. They took their position very seriously. Naturally, they're being challenged. And I don't blame them. Now when I look at it I can see where, you know. . . . And I didn't have the . . . at that moment, I wasn't seeing the whole picture, that it was not the right thing exactly to start arguing the way I was because they were already set in their ideas and they would quash anything that came in their way like a steamroller. Which they did. And they had a very strong alliance among themselves—the League—and I was friendly with a lot of them, like I was a close friend of [George] Herms—who was third on the scale, he told me. He said, "I don't want to be on top. They knock you off," he said. "But it's comfortable being the third [one, rung] on the scale." And I was a good friend of [William] [Baziotes]. I was a very good friend with him, saw a lot of each other. So I was still cultivating a certain area there. But there were more people who were a little more open to other things. Some of them even liked my work—you know, they really liked it. They saw something in it. So there was something going on. It was just that the bigshots took all the publicity and all the money and everything. They just simply. . . . Pollock—you know, Time magazine would call him "The Champ."

**SP:** Oh, yeah.

**WB:** That sort of thing.

**SP:** "The Champ," "The Wild One."

**WB:** It must have put a lot of pressure on him to be a champ, to be able to fulfill it.

**SP:** Well, obviously he couldn't handle it.

**WB:** Yeah, he couldn't handle it in the end. You know, it was hard to handle it. I think probably de Kooning handled it as well as anybody. Heavy drinking. . . .

**SP:** Women.

**WB:** He had it all, you know, women.

**SP:** [laughs] He had a good time handling it, apparently.

**WB:** Well, up to a point. Also there were other artists, see? And that's where the other thing came in. I was

close to the American abstract painters, you see, and I was very close to . . . I knew [Stuart] Davis reasonably well, and then I was a friend of George L. K. Morris and some of the other abstract painters. So there was this thing. . . . We published this book called *The World of Abstract Art*, and when I wrote the article I included the expressionists, everybody, in it. So I tried to keep as open a mind about the whole thing as I could. It's an interesting book. You know that book called *The World of Abstract Art*.

**SP:** Um hmm.

**WB:** He and I were editors of that. So there was an intellectual life there going on all the time. Interesting.

**SP:** Well, yeah, it was still [in] the [beginning]. You survive, you endure, you move on, the art world moved on.

**WB:** The art world moves on. Yeah, that's the way it goes. [chuckles]

**SP:** And by the time \_\_\_\_\_ Greenberg started going after de Kooning, by the end of the fifties, he was the guy to react against, you know, and. . . .

**WB:** Yeah, yeah.

**SP:** You know, some people have a moment in the [sun—Ed.].

**WB:** Well, then, you see, then I became very friendly with the second generation Abstract Expressionists, the third generation, and the fourth generation, and I became good friends with so many of them. Later on things began to change a great deal. because expressionism was finished by the sixties. And anyone who tried to be an expressionist after that was not going to get anything out of it as far as monetary values or recognition. [It's, He's] going to be always on a very limited scale. That's what happened to all of them.

**SP:** Yeah. Well, I think it happens to any star. [You get, Look at] cubism today, you know, [do a big] impressionism, you know.

**WB:** Right.

**SP:** You can't revive a style quite like that.

**WB:** You can't feel the same way.

**SP:** It doesn't work any more.

**WB:** That's right.

**SP:** You can do certain things in them, as your generation did. You looked at all this art from all over the world. But you have to also make it contemporary.

**WB:** Right. But it's so important to be alive to the period you're living in. You can't. . . .

**SP:** Well, you can't avoid it.

**WB:** You can't . . . yeah. But you also can make use of it. That's the thing. So it's so important to be able to. . . .

[Interruption in taping]

**SP:** And this last question I have is Indian Space is often related to Northwest. . . .

[End of interview]