



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Claire Falkenstein,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Claire Falkenstein on March 2 and 21, 1995. The interview took place in Venice, CA, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

TAPE 1, SIDE A

PAUL KARLSROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Claire Falkenstein at her Venice, California, studio, on March 2, 1995. This is the first session, and the interviewer from the Archives is Paul Karlstrom. Okay. Now, Claire, I'm just going to say a few words by way of introduction before I tape.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I think what I should do is try to summarize my position now in relation to my work, in relation to my place in art and try to find how I arrived. Now, the important thing is, several events. When I went to Paris, I didn't know anybody, I couldn't speak the language, but I had to go to Paris.

PAUL KARLSROM: What year was that? What year?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Nineteen-fifty. I finally stayed in Paris for thirteen years and then I returned home. However, those years in Paris have been very important to me because that gave me the time, the freedom, the isolation, the--what can I say--to be alone and to work out certain problems that I had to have answered for myself, and I arrived at a vocabulary of art for myself. The vocabulary consisted of the never-ending screen, the sign and the ensemble, topological structure, lattice structure, and then the combination sometimes of any two or any three. When I did St. Basil Church, I had the idea of using my never-ending screen, but in three dimensions. And with this part of my vocabulary I was able to, how can I say, express not only form and architectural relationships to the architecture of the church, but also a very good idea that works with a religious attitude. The Cardinal [McIntire] asked me, "Are you religious?," when I presented my idea to him for the windows and the doors. And I said, "Oh yes. I'm very religious." But he didn't ask me what religion. If he had asked me, I would have said nature, because through nature I came to the never-ending screen. And he said, "How do you show religion through these windows." And I said, "Well, if the observer really goes and looks through interval after interval, between the sections of my never-ending screen," I said, "the observer will find himself either in eternity or infinity," And he said, "That is wonderful. I want you to do these windows." To my knowledge, they're the only abstract windows for a Catholic church. I've never heard of another one. I know that Matisse did a kind of abstraction with the figure, but this is a complete attitude of abstraction. Well, the topological structure has held me in good stead, because I've had many, many commissions and through my vocabulary in various ways, I've carried through many commissions. For example, I did a piece for a reflecting pool at the California school in Long Beach.

PAUL KARLSROM: California State University?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: At the state university. And it's a piece fourteen feet high, twenty feet long and ten feet through. It is a piece that fits into the environment very well. It has a water wall behind it, and it is of copper tubing. It's a topological structure in the sense that all of the curving parts of the tubic structure makes the idea of penetration and then surfacing. But it also takes on the sign in the ensemble, because the sign is the sign of the "u" and it's in repetition over and over, which would be causing the ensemble. But this is just a note of how I proceed during the years when I returned from Paris and used my vocabulary. But way back in the earlier days, I found the basis for developing a vocabulary when I was a junior in the university, when I was nineteen.

PAUL KARLSROM: This is the University of California?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: The University of California at Berkeley. I was a junior, and I had majored in art and minored in anthropology and philosophy. At a certain time in my junior year, it was required that I draw from the nude. Well, the professor who was suppose to teach the course had a nervous breakdown. He had been in Paris the year before and had become acquainted with a very good artist, who was not only an artist but a philosopher. He had gotten his Ph.D. at the age of twenty-five. [Interruption] --I was to draw from the nude, a requirement for my curriculum to graduate with my art major. Well, because the person who was supposed to teach it had a nervous breakdown and had to get a substitute, he thought of this one artist that he had known when he was in Paris, when they both met at Andre L'hôte's studio. Now, in Paris the very noted artists usually have an atelier where they accept people to come in. Now, it isn't teaching, it's just an ambiance for work. And so here they had met the year before and so he wrote to him and said, "Will you come and take my place?" So he did. Well, he was such a breath of fresh air, because the professors of the art department, at that time, their

method of teaching was to give an exercise and then walk out of the room and you'd carry through the exercise. And it wasn't very inspiring and it wasn't also very personal. I mean, I can think of a lot of words that it wasn't. This person--

PAUL KARLSROM: Who-- Claire, who was this person?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: His name was George Lusk.

PAUL KARLSROM Lusk.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And he proved to be a very fine artist, and, as I said, also a philosopher. Well, the very first day when we had a nude to draw from, all students began to measure. I don't know whether you've ever seen a class drawing from a nude. They go like that, that, that, because what they're trying to do is copy as closely as they can the model, the human form, that's what they tried to do. Well, I didn't do that. I just sat there and was looking and thinking about it and wondering how I would approach it. He came up to me and said, "Look within." And I thought, "Oh my God, he's given me freedom." And from that first day, I know now how I treated the model. I didn't know it at the time, because I just did it. But, I treated the model as a point of departure, not to copy, but to infuse and to express how I felt about the model. Well, those drawings have now become my own mentor. They were drawings of such passion and expression of motion, of form, of everything you can think of. And, as I say, I was nineteen going on twenty as a junior in the university. Not long ago, oh, maybe it was about a year ago, I got letters from the National Museum of American Art talking about these drawings. They had some of them. I don't know how they got them, but they had some, and they were trying to document them. They were trying to find out about them. Now that meant they were done in 1928 and 1929. It was a time of the big crash. My father, who had been director of the biggest lumber mill of the Northwest, the Simpson Lumber Company, had left on some kind of an invitation to go to Mexico and run a banana plantation, which he knew nothing about. He lost everything. He had borrowed money to ship the bananas. He did the best he could, but he lost everything. It was such a terrible time politically and personally. We were so affected that my father just lost everything and my two sisters found work. They found work by--well, one of them found work because she had a degree of business training, and the other one married. But all I had were my drawings. So I decided to go to San Francisco, you see, I was living in Berkeley at the time, and get a show. And I did. I got a show, and it was---in a commercial gallery of some these drawings that I was doing as a junior. Well, anyway, those drawings since have been a kind, as I say, my own mentor, because when I get into a period of repetition or some kind of non-meaning situation, I just look at those drawings and it just spurs me on. They're marvelous. I'll show you some of them.

PAUL KARLSROM: I think I've seen some, but I'd like to see them again. Claire, was that the exhibition at the East West Gallery in San Francisco?
Around thirty, thirty-one?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Wait a minute. Frankly, I don't know what it was called. It was the first exhibition I ever had.

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah. I think that was the East West Gallery.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah. East West Gallery, that's it. I didn't ever get over it. But, you see, what that did was give me authority so that I went back to teach where I had graduated from, well, three years before. This was, well, four years before. This whole thing happened over a period of a year. So it was when I graduated that I had to get a job and so on. Well, I went back to the school where I had graduated from, that was the Anna Head School in Berkeley. And Miss Wilson, the principal, said, "Well, Claire, you've had an exhibition in a commercial gallery. You certainly are prepared to teach art." And I was the one, really, to start the art program in the school. And I was there for seven years, and then I began teaching here and there, but I wouldn't teach continuously. I only taught master classes and summer sessions and that sort of thing, so that it was one means of my continuity with the past. But those two things, when I established a vocabulary and when I developed my mentor through the drawing from the nude, and the admonition to look within, has always kept me going, and I have gone and continued not to look outward, but to look inward. Now, you absorb outward, but it's when people are always copying each other, that they don't establish their own identify as an artist. So it's a very good admonition to look inward.

PAUL KARLSROM: You said that you found the basis for establishing your own vocabulary way back at Berkeley with these drawings.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: No. No I didn't.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, okay.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I didn't know then what I was doing, except I was expressing myself through the nude, but

it wasn't in connection with my vocabulary. My vocabulary didn't come into being until I went to Paris in 1950. I think, I taught until around 1957-- I mean forty-seven, and forty-eight, forty-nine. Then I went to Paris.

PAUL KARLSROM: Why did you go to Paris? How did you make that decision?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I felt that Paris was the place to be as an artist, especially a contemporary artist. And when I got there, I certainly found that I had come to the right place at that time.

PAUL KARLSROM: What was it like? Was it what you'd expected it to be?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I'll tell you. It's very interesting. I had gone to a class-- not a class, a studio that it was called a free studio, where you paid a certain amount to work. You had space, and if you wanted a model, you could pay and get a model. Anyway, it was a free studio. I met a man there who said, "Look, I know of a sculptor's studio where you can--" or either-- I remember I said to this person, "I'm drawing and I'm painting here, but really what I want to do is sculpture." And he said, "Well, I can tell you where you can go and do sculpture. You can rent space from this man." I can't think of his name. Well, anyway, I went there and rented about, let's say, three feet by six feet of space.

PAUL KARLSROM: Was that all?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I had to rent space.

PAUL KARLSROM: But that was little.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I'll tell you why it worked. He was getting logs from Africa, by buying them in Africa and having them shipped, of mahogany. And he liked me. When I went in he liked me and he said, "I'll rent you that much space and a log will just about fit that. But I'm afraid that when you carve on it, you've got to sit on it, because there's no more space," And I said, "Well, that's all right. I'll do that." So, I began carving sitting on this log, and who should come in but Michel Tapié. And Michel Tapié, at that time, was the most avant-garde of all critics and he was also very good as an historian. And he saw me sitting on there, hammering away on this log and was absolutely dumbfounded, and so pleased that he invited me right away to come and meet with the group. He had a group and I finally became part of the group. And through that I received an invitation to become a member of a gallery, Gallery Stadler. And not only did I become a member, but I was a paid. I was a paid artist. And I was earning my living as much as was required by exhibiting with Stadler. When Stadler opened his gallery, he commissioned me to do two sculptures; one was a stair railing; the other was a suspended lamp which lit the stairway going up to the upper areas. And the banister was a sculpture that was sixteen feet high and could be hung. You could hang on it as you walked up the stairs. And it wasn't like a banister, but it was a sculpture and you just hung on it where you walked up. And he was very pleased. And I had a show and he paid me. I was a paid artist.

PAUL KARLSROM: Was that an unusual--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: That was a very, very important period in my life, because I was finding myself in Paris and also needing to show my work. I was producing a lot.

PAUL KARLSROM: All in that small space? All in the small studio?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I was in the very small studio first for nine years. It was the concierge's lodge right off the street, and the toilet was down in the courtyard. It was really something to live there, but I did it. And I have a twelve foot sculpture in the catalog there, I can show you. I'm wondering if I did it there or if I did it-- Yeah, I did it there.

PAUL KARLSROM: Oh, yeah?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: The ceiling wasn't tall enough, so I had to stick it out the window, and I had a platform. There's a platform out there that I could walk on, and so I finished it outside on this, putting it through the window.

PAUL KARLSROM: Now this was--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: It was twelve feet high and I think the ceiling of this one room was about nine feet.

PAUL KARLSROM: Now, just for the record, this work is titled The Couple from 1956.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSROM: And it's now in the Pompidou Museum in Paris?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yes, that's in the Pompidou.

PAUL KARLSROM: Is that when you started working in wood at that time in Paris?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I started working on the floor with that one log, and I kept working in wood, and then I developed the lattice structure, which is this, My Homage to Gaudi. Again, I had to put it out the window. But that's all welded.

PAUL KARLSROM: But, look, tell me how that all came about. How did you begin doing the lattice sculpture?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I'm trying to think. Oh, I know. I got a commission from Michel Tapié to do-- I did a wire piece. It's downstairs, I have it on the-- I think it's downstairs. Just a minute. May I have a word here? [tape turned off] I didn't have enough money to do a form and have it cast. He wanted it cast in bronze. He didn't offer any money and I didn't have the bravery to ask him for any money. So, I thought, what can I do to give it form? I began to weave stovepipe wire and welding it together. And that's also when I discovered topological structure. And I have some down in the garden, I could show you that is topological and woven.

PAUL KARLSROM: Now, would you for the sake of our interview, define those terms precisely, topological structure and weaving.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, topological structure is when the surface becomes the interior. It's the constant motion. But with the lattice, you can have visibility all the time. It isn't a solid. I mean, you can have a topological structure with solidity-- I mean, with opaque structure. But with the lattice, the wonderful thing is, not only do you have the motion (the moving of the interior to the exterior; the exterior to the interior), but you also have the vision. It's transparent. It's wonderful. Many people, I think, have used it in an opaque way, but I don't think anyone before me did it in a lattice. I want to see if I have that wire. [tape turned off] -- Wednesday said, "You've improved so much you can go home anytime you want. You have to keep your walker, but I'm not afraid of anything happening to you."

PAUL KARLSROM: I should say for the record that, Claire, that you're sitting here doing this interview about a week after returning home subsequent to hip replacement surgery. And so you're having a little trouble getting around. You have your walker.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: You see, the reason is, I've got to keep my legs close together. I can't cross my legs. I can't bend over. I have to keep this in mind all the time.

PAUL KARLSROM: I think that I'm going to turn the tape over so that I don't have to interrupt you when you start again.

[END OF SESSION 1, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

SESSION 1
2 MARCH 1995

TAPE 1, SIDE B

PAUL KARLSROM: Claire Falkenstein continuing Tape 1, and this is side B. Go ahead.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: The reason I'm talking this way is because I have never stopped. I am continuing to paint now. I'm not doing sculpture, but my painting has advanced farther than I've ever pushed it before. I'm capable of doing things that I never did before because of what I've gone through, because of my vocabulary, because of these things that have been awakened in me. Like with the drawing from the nude opened up avenues of expression and design and action that continues in my life. As I said, they are my own mentor, those drawings.

PAUL KARLSROM: Did you start sculpture then? Did you begin work as a sculptor opportunistically because these big logs were available?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: No.

PAUL KARLSROM: No?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I wanted to. I was feeling dimensional, three-dimensional. I had just begun when I left for Paris. And here was this opportunity of a log from Africa, which I thought was great. And I have a photo of it someplace. I can show it to you later. And it ended up in, when I finished it, in one of the big gallery exhibitions of the year. And I'm trying to think of the name of it. It has a name. But that particular thing that I did on the

floor there ended up in one of the gall-- No, it's not in there.

PAUL KARLSROM: Okay. Not in the catalog?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I-- well, they put a lot-- Jack did this. It was his choice, and he got a lot of things in there, but a lot of things were left out, too, that should have been in there.

PAUL KARLSROM: Go back to the terms. When did you start using these terms? You talk about the vocabulary, and at some point it must have gone from idea to terms.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: In Paris. In Paris.

PAUL KARLSROM: Yes, but how did that happen?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, it was because I was part of this group of Michel Tapié and working intellectually, as well as artistically, and trying to express inter-- What would you say?

PAUL KARLSROM: Intermedia?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: A kind of depth of thought. I mean, it was intellectual, as well as artistic.

PAUL KARLSROM: Oh, verbal and in forms, as well?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah. That's right. That's right. Now, for instance, the sign and the ensemble is one of the most important parts of my vocabulary. And all of these things that I have named are now in use. I'm using them. If you look at my work and if you find any kind of rhythm or quality of continuance, it's because I've entered not only formally, but also intellectually. See those paintings over there? They're called Calf Branding. I did those around forty-three or forty-four. I have to look at it because I've forgotten. It's on there.

PAUL KARLSROM: Three.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Forty-three. Well, if you look at that now and you look at something I'm doing now, you'll find a continuity.

PAUL KARLSROM: It's true!

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: That's it.

PAUL KARLSROM: Like these behind you, these paintings.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And yet there is no copying, it's just within me, looking within. That "looking within" was the most important thing that ever was said to me as a person who was a teacher. And I must tell you, I became the most--how do you say?--infamous art student on the campus.

PAUL KARLSROM: Why?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Because of my drawings, because of my actions.

PAUL KARLSROM: Your actions?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I wouldn't take any kind of criticism. I knew my own criticism. [laughs] I'm trying to think. You know what they called me? "The Incurrible."

PAUL KARLSROM: They did?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I was "The Incurrible."

PAUL KARLSROM: You mean the instructors? Your professors?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oh, they did it to themselves, but I got it also from the students.

PAUL KARLSROM: What about in Paris? Were you just as incurrible?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: In Paris I fitted in very well.

PAUL KARLSROM: Tell me about the Tapié group and the Stadler Gallery.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Actually, I don't have the names, really. I tell you, there was Matheau, was one of them M-

a-t-h-e-a-u. I have a painting right around the corner. Look at it. See it? Down on the floor. Now, what's his name?

PAUL KARLSROM: Oh, Appel.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: What?

PAUL KARLSROM: Appel, he was part of the group. So you knew these people?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Michel Tapié was like a miner, digging out artists who were expressive of his attitude. His attitude was called Art Autre, A-u-t-r-e. I think you spell it. Autre. Other. And anyone who he could find, any artist who really was expressing something that had to do with a new attitude might find his way into the group.

PAUL KARLSROM: Did you all get together? Did you have a social life?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Very little association. Our association was in the exhibitions and in the association with Michel Tapié. Some of us became very good friends. For instance-- What's his name again?

PAUL KARLSROM: Appel?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Appel and I finally had a friendship. He did a portrait of me and I did a portrait of him. His portrait of me was bought in America by Martha Jackson, who had a gallery in New York and was a very important dealer and very close to this Art Autre group in Paris.

PAUL KARLSROM: Did you feel that you and these other artists had something in common, or was it Tapié that thought you had something in common? How did you feel?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: The only thing I can say is I always kept that admonition: "inward".

PAUL KARLSROM: So you didn't feel necessarily connected to Appel and the others?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I didn't. Sometimes I would make a friendship, but you can see his work doesn't resemble mine. It sort of came together in a philosophical way with Michel Tapié. Now, I have several writings, books by Michel Tapié, and you can borrow them if you want.

PAUL KARLSROM: I would like that.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: But to me, Michel Tapié sort of sprang fresh out of the --how do you say?--not tradition.

PAUL KARLSROM: So, you identified with him and with his ideas?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: The ideas were of what Autre meant, fresh, new attitudes towards-- My God. I wish-- I have a portrait. I tell you, we better go up in my other room. I have a little apartment in the first building, and I have a picture of Michel Tapié with some of the sculptures, some of the work and some of the people that he-- well, I wouldn't say follow, but kind of felt a comradeship with. But it was his idea about Autre, and the artists were kind of innocent of-- I mean, they were just themselves. But he would find artists that weren't in the traditional way, even in the contemporary traditional way.

PAUL KARLSROM: So, they were associated with some other groups, with a movement? They were independents, is that right?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Any kind of association other than a show and a performance of the work that had a quality of freshness and newness.

PAUL KARLSROM: So he was interested in performances, as well, performing arts, not just visual arts?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: It wasn't Dada. See, Dada came before. And Dada, their attitude was anti-art, but it was a kind of mistake, I think they would think, because some of it turned out to be good art. But this was not anything like Dada. It had to do with personal qualities each artist that Michel Tapié-- I think I have a letter by Michel Tapié. Do you read French?

PAUL KARLSROM: A little bit, yeah. Let's look later.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: It's up on the wall.

PAUL KARLSROM: Okay.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And I think he talks about my work.

PAUL KARLSROM: Okay, we'll look at it later.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: What time is it?

PAUL KARLSROM: It's four-twenty.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I better go down. I want to show you these pictures. We'll have to have another time.

PAUL KARLSROM: Okay. Well, we'll wrap this one up now.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Good.

PAUL KARLSROM: Thanks. Ending session 1 with Claire Falkenstein.

[END OF SESSION 1, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

SESSION 2
21 MARCH 1995

TAPE 1, SIDE A

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: [tape begins in mid-sentence] --self-importance. Putting these two things up is interesting. It's so stupid.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, let's see now, what we need to do is practice just to get some --

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I like Clay Spohn. Clay Spohn and I were friends.

PAUL KARLSROM: You were? I didn't know you knew him.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, he was in that group at the San Francisco Museum.

PAUL KARLSROM: Right.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: He was teaching. I was teaching at the California School of Fine Art. Oh, he was teaching and I was teaching, and I thought he was the best artist on the faculty.

PAUL KARLSROM: You liked his work?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSROM: He's becoming much better known.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, at that time, there were all these others who were better able to get publicity, but he was a good artist.

PAUL KARLSROM: Who also was teaching with you at the Art Institute? I mean California School--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: [Richard] Diebenkorn.

PAUL KARLSROM: Oh, is that right?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Who was a younger guy, but he was a teacher, and I liked him.

PAUL KARLSROM: But his work was quite different from Clay Spohn or you.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, he was more related to the great one, Clyfford Still. But Clyfford Still and I were very good friends.

PAUL KARLSROM: You were? You didn't tell me that before.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: He never had a friend with a man artist, a painter that is, but I was a woman and I was a sculptor, and so we were very good friends.

PAUL KARLSROM: I can understand the woman part, but why the sculptor part?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Because I wasn't a painter!

PAUL KARLSROM: And didn't compete with him?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: He kept himself away from all painters, men painters or any kind of painter. He isolated himself.

PAUL KARLSROM: Did he seemed very distant?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: What?

PAUL KARLSROM: He seemed very distant, from what I heard.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Distant?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah, that he kept his distance.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, because he was inventing a whole new attitude towards space. I consider him and [Mark] Tobey as the great innovators of the Twentieth Century as far as space goes.

PAUL KARLSROM: Really?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Of course. Don't you?

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, I could. Convince me.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Tobey was structure and Still was space. Clyfford Still was a great, great artist.

PAUL KARLSROM: Did you ever sit in on any of his classes or visit his classes?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I was teaching.

PAUL KARLSROM: The professors never went to see the other ones teaching?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Each one was very conscious of being an individual at that time and working out their own problems. There was no connection, as far as I know.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, I want to talk more about this, but what we need to do is stop here. [tape turned off] Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with artist, Claire Falkenstein in her studio in Venice, California, March 21, 1995. This is the second session and the interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. Claire, you were already beginning to talk a little bit about the late forties and when you were teaching at the--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Not the late forties, the whole, all of the forties.

PAUL KARLSROM: Okay, all of the forties. You were talking about Clyfford Still and Diebenkorn.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: The California School of Fine Arts was the leader in the nation of all of America as far as the development of contemporary art.

PAUL KARLSROM: Did you feel that way at the time, when you were there? I mean did you and the others feel that you were doing something special?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSROM: Is that right? You were taking about some of the people there.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, there were quite a few artists and we were lucky in having a director of the art department as Douglas MacAgy, because he also was a creative person, to be a head of an art department. He furthered the actual development of contemporary art by engaging such people as Clyfford Still and Diebenkorn. You name some of them and I'll tell you.

PAUL KARLSROM: Elmer Bischoff.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Who?

PAUL KARLSROM; Elmer Bischoff was there.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: No.

PAUL KARLSROM: Mark Rothko was there briefly. But these are not people you knew?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: The people who were really pushing, I said his name before, what was it?

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, Clay Spohn.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Clay Spohn was very inventive and very contributing to the development. It was a long time ago, I can't remember all the names. I just remember some that I didn't particularly care for, but I'm not going to talk about them.

PAUL KARLSROM: Right.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: But, especially the one person who influenced the school and the times, I think, nationally, maybe even internationally, was Clyfford Still. And it was his attitude about space.

PAUL KARLSROM: What do you mean? How would you describe that attitude?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I don't know if he consciously did something in relation to the opening up of space, but that's what he did. It was the attitude of -- Stop! [tape turned off] --happening in relation to the picture plane. I wrote a statement that was printed in the catalog of one of mine at the time. Shall I read it?

PAUL KARLSROM: Sure. When was this?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, it had to be in the middle forties. Cataclysmic changes in acceleration occurring in life today parallel an evermore penetrating knowledge of our planet Earth within the totality of cosmic forces. The Euclidian world of one visual center on the picture plane in contracting space has become the decentralized space of relativity. Moving focal points without number relate to a moving observer in our contemporary world of expansion.

PAUL KARLSROM: And so where did you get this statement? In your catalog?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I wrote that for a catalog.

PAUL KARLSROM: How did you develop those ideas in part?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I was within it. I was within it, working within it. It expresses the attitude towards the universe and towards the earth in relation to expanding space. Clyfford Still got into that to the point of influencing the use of the picture plane as a medium of expansion rather than holding to the center of the canvas, but expanding it beyond, going beyond.

PAUL KARLSROM: You were friends also with Sam Francis, weren't you? I was wondering if you would describe his work in the same way?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, Sam, to me, was not a developed artist, particularly. He was very intelligent in using ideas that were popular at the time, but he didn't innovate anything. The innovator for that particular idea of expansion was Clyfford Still. He was the innovator. Now, people like Diebenkorn had other qualities to make him more of an individual. He had a development as an artist. Sam came into art because he was wounded in the war-- not in the war, he was in a camp. He took an airplane up and ran out of gas and had a crash and--- Oh no, I shouldn't go into this.

PAUL KARLSROM: But still he did go into art?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: He was influenced by people from the school going to the hospital and giving him-- opening him up to art as a means of bringing him out of his misery, which was a kind of, almost lack of motion. They had him suspended and he would face the floor suspended and paint. They brought him pictures of various artists and he used them as a beginning, but he never had the attitude of moving into art from a very young person, but he came into it later.

PAUL KARLSROM: So it wasn't from inner necessity?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: No. It was brought to him as a means of alleviating the action of his grave wounds.

PAUL KARLSROM: Where was he in the hospital?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Over at San Francisco.

PAUL KARLSROM: So did you meet him then? Did you know him at that time? You met him later, in Paris, maybe?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah, I met him in Paris.

PAUL KARLSROM: How did that come about?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, as Americans in Paris, there was a kind of communality of action, and we sort of gathered together because we were Americans. I don't like to talk much about Sam. I have a feeling about him that is so different from my feeling about Diebenkorn, for instance, who was an artist for years and years and came to a kind of maturity in a way that was very, very good. I don't know, is he still alive?

PAUL KARLSROM: Who?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Diebenkorn.

PAUL KARLSROM: No. He died about a year ago.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, he was a true artist, I think, and worked out his ideas, changed, developed. I consider him one of the important artists of that period, of the forties.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, back to the forties. What was the nature of your interaction with these people? You were teaching with them or you knew them at the California School of Fine Arts. What was the nature of your interaction? Did you talk about art? Share ideas? Get together and socialize? What was the relationship?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, when I was nineteen and I was a junior at the university in Berkeley in art, I had majored in art and minored in anthropology and philosophy. And when it was time, when I was a junior, to draw from the nude, I had a wonderful professor--

PAUL KARLSROM: Now, Claire, we did cover this.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I don't care.

PAUL KARLSROM: Oh, okay. I just wanted--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And he said, "Look within." That stuck with me all my life, and rather than gathering from forces outside, I was usually looking within to build a kind of vocabulary for myself. I must tell you, at my age now, 86, I'm still doing it, I'm looking within. I'm growing in painting in a way that is unbelievable. I'm doing work now I consider, probably, my peak and here I am at this age. A lot of it has come because I have been looking a lot out here or out there, but I'm trying to grow with what I have and what I've developed, and build a vocabulary of my own. When I went to Paris, of course, that stimulated me a lot because what I had to offer was unique. I was stimulated by the outside. Rather than copying. I think, I influenced a lot of people. And a lot of it had to come from the action of Michel Tapié, who had a group called Art Autre. I was one of them, one of the group. I'm still, let's say, remembered. I'm still active here in a way that I was there, now.

PAUL KARLSROM: How do you mean?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I mean I'm growing from my own sources, my own resources. I haven't had the big, how do you say, explosion of publicity or anything like that, because I've gone along, working out my own problems and not clinging to something that happened to be popular. However, now, strangely though, I am being noticed in a way I never was before.

PAUL KARLSROM: What is that?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I think I'm being recognized as an individual in art. A lot of people are doing things that so-and-so did and so-and-so did and taking on something other than their own interior, which I have been doing all my life.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, what are you saying then, looking back to the forties in San Francisco, that your contact with these important artists, whom you admire, really didn't influence you directly.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, if you look at my work, of course there's some influence. You can't just go through life not being influenced at all. But there is a kind of action always in my work that is of a kind of interior growth, rather than exterior association with some style or some subject. I've always worked out my own direction.

PAUL KARLSROM: Let me ask you about working in California compared to working as you did for ten years in Paris?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I tell you, Paris was a remarkable experience, because the French allowed a kind of individual action. They have the quality of centuries of--how can I say it--of culture and of art and it sort of spills over. You feel it within yourself when you're there. I felt it so strongly that right away my so-called "looking within" really worked. That's when I developed my own vocabulary, was in Paris. I guess I told you what it was, did I?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yes. Although it wouldn't be bad to say--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: It's about five things: the sign and the ensemble, the moving point and the lattice structure, the topological structure. Anyway, I had about five areas that I worked in and each time I approached something I would work out a part of my vocabulary. It didn't necessarily look like something I had done before, because I had treated it in a different way. I'm still at it. I'm still working out my vocabulary here. When I came back to California, the thing that was great here, not only was it the climate and the way I could live, and I had better resources in every way, because I was given commissions, so I had more ease in my life. And also satisfaction, because some of the things I did I never could have done anywhere else in the world, except in Los Angeles. I'm thinking of St. Basil Church, where I did all the windows, which were fifteen and the nave windows were eighty feet. Then I did all the doors. I did eight sets of doors. I never had that possibility in Europe.

PAUL KARLSROM: Was that because you were an American or that the opportunities just weren't the same at that time?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I have a feeling that also they're kind of made. Los Angeles is on the make. Even San Francisco, where I grew up, I chose Los Angeles rather than San Francisco because I felt there was more possibility of working out some ideas here that I couldn't have in San Francisco.

PAUL KARLSROM: Did that turn out to be true for you, that the opportunities--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah. The opportunities were here. When I came back from Paris, I came back to do a job, to do a commission and to have an exhibition. When I had them, it was like one thing following another. I had to build my place and I did. I built my studio, I established myself on the beach here in Venice, and it's proven to be a wonderful choice.

PAUL KARLSROM: What was the commission and the exhibition that brought you to--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I came back by invitation of a gallery-- and I'm not going to say the gallery--to do a commission for them and to have an exhibition. Well, when I came back, I was very disappointed because they didn't prove--oh gosh, I shouldn't say. Well anyway, I was disappointed.

PAUL KARLSROM: This is your oral history.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: However, the very day of the show, the last day at six o'clock-- see, I had a gallery in New York for about four years, the Martha Jackson Gallery.

PAUL KARLSROM: You said you were friends.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I was very well received. I was given a paid contract and Martha Jackson was getting commissions for me. It was very nice. When I came here, landed here in sixty-three, and right away began to work out what I would have as a show. I did all the work for the exhibition right here after I arrived. Then the time came for the commission, and I started that. Well, Martha Jackson came here at the time of the show, and she sent a telegram to Ric Brown, who was then the director of the L.A. County Museum, and told him that he had to see my exhibition. At six o'clock, the last day, he came to the show. He saw the exhibition and decided that I was the one to do the commission that he'd been working for a year, and had been looking around for a person to do the work that he felt should be done. When he saw my work, he decided I should do it, and he arranged the commission. I had no money, particularly, and I had no place. I was living in their garden cottage, this gallery that had invited me here.

PAUL KARLSROM: The unnamed gallery.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Unnamed. I won't say. So anyway, I then had to buy a piece of land of some sort in order to do the commission, or rent it. If I would rent it, it would be impossible to get it where I could get good air. It would have to be like in South Central Los Angeles. I needed good air, because I have a history of asthma. I had to find good air, so it had to be on the beach or near the ocean. So, on my own, I bought a car for \$150 [laughs] and began driving around Los Angeles looking for a realtor, who could find me a lot or something where I could do this commission. Well, I found a woman who wore a snood and who was very, very sympathetic. I told her what I needed and she said, "Oh, I know exactly where you should go. You should go on the beach in Venice. I will arrange it with a friend of mine who has that for sale and she and I can divide the commission between us."

As I told you, I had no money particularly, but I got a contract from the museum and the big corporation who wanted this project. And the loan company would take that as my collateral, this contract between the corporation and the museum. So I got a big loan.

PAUL KARLSROM: Got an advance?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, it's a loan. I got it and paid him cash. He was so pleased because--this is a funny story--this lot had been argued with him for two people, two organizations that wanted it for \$5,000 less, and he didn't give in. When I gave him cash for \$5,000. I mean, the whole amount, and didn't ask for any less, he gave me back \$5,000. [laughs] I never forgot it. Anyway, it's where I am now, it's this land here.

PAUL KARLSROM: Now what was that first commission? Was that the California Federal Savings?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: California Federal Saving and Loan and the L.A. County Museum.

PAUL KARLSROM: How did the Museum get involved in that? Is it because they were nearby?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, because Ric Brown was the director of the Museum. He was the one that Cal[ifornia] Fed[real] went to for the choice of who should do this work.

PAUL KARLSROM: But otherwise, it had nothing to do with the Museum? This was strictly--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, why should it? He was the director of the Museum and they wanted advice and he was it. They thought, the director of the Museum would be the one who could advise them.

PAUL KARLSROM: That was a terrific piece. I remember when I can to graduate school at UCLA, that piece, which is in sixty-four, the piece I think was just being installed.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Sixty-five.

PAUL KARLSROM: Okay. I remember it well. What ever happened to that piece?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Some vandals got in there a year, two years ago, and cut it up and sold it for scrap.

PAUL KARLSROM: That's incredible. Incredible.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: No, this is a terrible thing about America. There doesn't seem to be control over public sculpture the way it should be.

PAUL KARLSROM: Where were the police? Where were the patrols? It must have taken some time to cut up that piece of sculpture. It's a big sculpture.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: How they did it, don't ask me. I think, they had quite a few people go up there one night and they had trucks down below and they cut it up and threw it over and loaded it onto trucks and took it. It was made of copper.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, is there that much value in scrap copper?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, copper, it's valuable. It's a mineral, you know. I have no idea how much they got.

PAUL KARLSROM: It would have had to be quite a bit to make it work that kind of risk? It just seems crazy to me.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I don't want to say that the owners got a big cut by having it insured. I don't want to say that.

PAUL KARLSROM: Of course, you shouldn't say that. That's right. It's a shame, though, because it was a wonderful piece. It was a real landmark on Wilshire Boulevard.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, it was there for a long time. Twenty years. Something like that.

PAUL KARLSROM: Thirty years.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: The director, Ric Brown, would come and visit me, give me courage to go on, go on, and go on.

PAUL KARLSROM: Did he ever come here, I mean, to you studio?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oh, I-- [tape ends]

[END OF SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

SESSION 2
21 MARCH 1995

TAPE 1, SIDE B

PAUL KARLSROM: This is Claire Falkenstein on March 21, Tape 1, Side 2. Claire, we were talking about the commission, about your coming here to Southern California and about that big commission at the California Federal Savings.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I came here with a promise of a small commission and an exhibition. It turned out to be a big commission and an exhibition that evidently was very successful and brought the director of the museum to the show, and from that to give me the big commission that he was supposed to deliver.

PAUL KARLSROM: We were talking about Wilshire Boulevard, and there was another very, very important commission you had also on Wilshire Boulevard, which of course is later--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And that was the church. St. Basil's Church. And it was very interesting. The architect was A.C. Martin, who is a very well-known architect in Los Angeles. Through him and his designers, I was brought in for ideas that I had been developing and talking about. And, you see, as I told you, my vocabulary, part of my vocabulary, was the never-ending screen. The church was built on a very lean kind of attitude. Somehow the designer decided that it could be worked out from--the windows could be worked out to help, let's say, develop the kind of design that the church was, to help the design, and using my never-ending screen in a three-dimensional way. Of course, nothing like this had ever been done in the Catholic Church. It was completely abstract. The Cardinal was McIntire at the time, so he and A.C. Martin decided that I should do a section of it and show what it would be like if it were carried out. So I went ahead and did a sixteen-foot section. Nothing was on the land there at the time, and so a house was built. My piece, when I finished it, was put inside, and the Cardinal would go in and study it from time to time, and finally made a decision that he would go ahead with it. That's when he asked me, "Did my idea have a religious connotation?" And I said, "Oh yes, if the observer looks through the intervals, they'll finally arrive at either eternity or infinity." And he said, "Well, that's enough for me." And so we went ahead with it. I have that piece that I made for him to observe and to study right now in my garden. It's sixteen-feet high, and it's had sort of bad treatment, with the wind and the rain and also some of the workers that I've had have broken some of the glass, but you can still see it. In a way, it was interesting because I had to have the glass made by a manufacturer in Long Beach. This piece is the only one with sixteen colors, and the 16 colors of glass in that piece does not show at all what happens in the actual church. Some of the windows have only five pieces of five color and so on, but the sixteen will finally resolve in the church some place. So it's interesting that that piece still exists.

PAUL KARLSROM: How tall are the windows?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Sixteen feet. We are talking about that piece out in the garden.

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah. But the actual windows--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN Well, the actual windows for the nave are eighty-feet and the tower is one-hundred and thirty-feet. They're all built on this modular relationship. They're all done in modules, modular sections.

PAUL KARLSROM: And how big are the sections?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: You'd have to go to the church, because there are various widths, but the modular sections are all the same.

PAUL KARLSROM: That's right.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: They're sixteen-feet. But the widths vary and some are very narrow and some are very wide. I would hate to say how much exactly, because I don't remember.

PAUL KARLSROM: And so these modular--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: But that was done in--sixty-five to sixty-six, sixty-seven, sixty-eight. From sixty-five through sixty-nine. It was really a full three year's action on my part.

PAUL KARLSROM: Were the pieces themselves, the modules, fabricated at the studio and then transported and installed. How did that work? What was the procedure?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah. Well, I had to cut them. They had to be brought here in my studio here and cut for

the shapes, because the screen, the never-ending screen, has variable shapes that make up the module, and it's all three-dimensional. They were done in a shop. I did models, quarter-scale models, which means three inches to the foot--four inches to the foot, and then scaled up in a shop. I found a shop that would do it with about one-hundred men, finally, and I was there every day carrying through, insisting upon advising and so on.

PAUL KARLSROM: Overseeing.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Because you have to be very careful about the scaling up. It had to be exact. In fact, my models, I had a tolerance. Now, a "tolerance" means how much can you make a mistake in measurement, a tolerance in scaling up. My scaling up was a tolerance of one-eighth of an inch. Which meant no kind of mistake beyond one-eighth of an inch could occur, because, on the church itself, there are stainless-steel sections or stainless-steel pieces that hold those modular sections onto the church, and they have to fit exactly. That was nerve-racking. I was sick for about a year after that whole job.

PAUL KARLSROM: At the time, did you know of any other project like that?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I think it's the biggest project I ever heard of for one artist.

PAUL KARLSROM: Now, for previous projects, have you been using others-- Did others assist or is this one of the earlier projects where you had to have a whole team?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: What are you taking about? There's no school. I'm just myself.

PAUL KARLSROM: I didn't say "school." What I asked was, for any of the earlier projects, did you have the assistance of others working on the project for fabrication?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I think the thing happens. You develop a working with shops with workers and so on as time goes on. Every commission builds up experience, and so finally you have confidence, you build up confidence, in approaching a commission only because you have worked on other commissions. Little by little, you develop confidence.

PAUL KARLSROM: What was your first important commission? I believe it was while you were still in Paris. Was it Tapié?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, it seems to me I didn't do any commission before I went to Europe. I'm trying to think if I did. When I arrived there-- Oh, I did, because Martha Jackson certainly-- But what were they? I don't know. What I did-- I'll tell you. Before I went, I was exploring techniques, for instance, I did a whole period of working in wood with a bandsaw. So what I was doing was developing my techniques to a degree so that I could apply what I knew to commissions. When I went to Europe, I had a chance to do several commissions. I did the gates for the Princess [Luciana] Pigitelli and I had never done a gate before in my life.

PAUL KARLSROM: That was in fifty-seven?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: That was in the fifties.

PAUL KARLSROM: Fifty-seven.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Then I did the gates for the Guggenheim Foundation in Venice.

PAUL KARLSROM: People are interested in that project. Can you tell me something about how that came about and what was it about?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, it's a very funny thing. I led a tour through France, and on that tour we went to Italy also and we went to Venice. I had known Peggy Guggenheim in New York. She had had a gallery there and I knew her. So I arranged that we go to Peggy Guggenheim's gallery and foundation. This is the group from San Francisco, from the San Francisco Museum. As a matter of fact, I think I was the first one to lead a group from a museum into a European place.

PAUL KARLSROM: Really?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I had come back from France, that's right. Let's see, why had I come back? Well, I had to come back because I was a speaker representing sculpture in a--what would you call it?

PAUL KARLSROM: Symposium?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah. So I thought, as long as I'm here, I think I will stay a little while and have an exhibition, which I did. I taught again at the school, the California School of Fine Arts. Then the museum got this

idea of someone leading a tour and the fact that I had just come back from being in Paris, they thought I was the one to lead it. So, I said, Okay. So we went off with about twenty people and, on our tour, we went to Venice. Well, I had done the gates for the Princess Pignitelli. And Peggy said, when the tour was leaving her place, she came up beside me and we went through her gates simultaneously and she said, "Now, look out, Claire, because those iron insets in that wooden gate might fall out, and if they hit you, they'll kill you." And I thought, "Oh my Lord." I said, "Well, let's look out." And she said, "Would you mind doing--Would you like to do new gates for me?" And I said, "I sure would." And I took it very seriously. I didn't take it, as probably I would now. I'd wonder, does she mean it or doesn't she? But, I thought, she meant it. So, when I got back to Paris, I called her. I said, "Listen, Peggy, I'm coming again to America and I think that we can arrange to do your gates now because I have to come to Venice. I have an exhibition there." And she said, "Well, I don't know, Claire." And I said, "Well, I'm coming anyway, so I'll see you." And she said, "All right." So when I finally got to Venice and my show was being prepared, I went over to see her. And she said, "Claire, I don't know. I really don't know whether I want to go through with it." And I said, "Well, what if I do a model and I say, 'proposed for the gates of Peggy Guggenheim's Foundation?'" She said, "Well, if it doesn't mean that I have to go through with it, all right." So the day of the show, I had done not only one model, I did two models. I got little greens and I put them up and I arranged it on a wall. I put up, "Proposed for the gates of Peggy Guggenheim's Foundation," the garden gates. Well, the day of the opening, she came with the director of the Boston Museum. I can't remember his name. So he looked at the gates and said, "Oh, Peggy, don't take that one; take this one, but take the glass out of that one and put that in this one." He took it for granted that I was going to do those gates. I just said "proposed." Well, I kind of laughed inside of myself. The next day, I was working in my studio across the lagoon and I knew somebody was behind me. I turned around and there was Peggy. And she said, "Well, have you started the gates?" And I said, "No, but I will." So, I started the first gate. It had to be twelve-feet high and each gate had to be four-feet wide. So I was laying it out on the floor, just beginning it, and who should come to town, but Herbert Read. And Herbert Read had been very friendly to me. I don't know whether you know Herbert Read, but he is one of the greatest aestheticians of the Twentieth Century. And he came in. He wasn't very friendly, and up to that time, he'd been very friendly. He'd even written an introduction to one of my catalogs. I thought, "Well, that's funny." The next day she called me. She says, "Claire, I want you to come over." Well, he had gone by that time. He had been staying at her place, but he had been gone. And she said, "Herbert says you can't make anything strong enough to protect my foundation, my collection." And I said, "Well--" And she said, "I'll tell you what. Finish the first gate and I'll put it in the museum." Because she had a museum attached to her foundation. And I said, "No. I want it at the portal." And she said, "Claire, it's mine. I can do with it what I want." And I said, "Okay" and I left. Well, pretty soon, I worked and worked, and I had it finished. Have I told you this before?

PAUL KARLSROM: No.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Pretty soon I had it finished and I set it up. I don't know if you know about Venice, but the first floor is for storage and open areas and I had rented a storage area for my studio, and you go right through. It was like a tunnel. You go in and the first floor is really the second floor. You come in with the gondola and you get off and you come in this tunnel. Well, in this particular place where I was, I had a studio with one of the storage areas. And I had a window, and I could put my back to the window and do the welding, anything I want, and in back of me was a garden. So I leaned the gate, the first gate that was finished, against the side wall looking out onto the garden and when you came through this dark tunnel, you would look right through the gate onto the garden. Well, I don't know how, but everybody in Venice seemed to know this thing was going on between Peggy and me. And there were well-known artists there, and I'm sorry, but I can't remember all of their names, but I got the cook to make some lemonade and cookies and make a table. I leaned the gate up against the side wall so you looked through it into the garden. Well, all these artists (there were about five of them) stood out in front looking at it the other way, from the garden into it, on a line, and then drinking lemonade and eating cookies. Well, pretty soon Peggy came with her daughter, Pegeen.

PAUL KARLSROM: Pegeen?

CK: Pegeen. The two came up, they got out of the gondola and they came up. Pegeen saw my piece and she said, "Oh, Claire, it's wonderful!" And with that, she ran up to me and kissed me and said, "Oh, this is marvelous." Peggy didn't say a word. She walked right by and stood with the rest of the artists out in front, looking at it the other way. So, when the day was over, I took it in and put it again in my studio storage area. While I was working on a little commission that I had, I knew that somebody was behind me. I looked around, and it was Peggy. She said, "Well, have you started the second gate?" And I said, "No, but I will." [laughs] So I started the second gate. Well, when it was finished, she said, "Claire, even though you've done the gates, it doesn't mean that they'll really be put up because the Belli Arti Committee in Venice has to accept them. Well, the Belli Arti Committee is called because they think of Venice as a, what do they call it, a treasure--

PAUL KARLSROM: National treasure

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: --a national treasure. And so they have these committees and they're composed of architects, of critics, of professors and so on. Well, this one is composed of about five of these very highly-

educated people. And she said, "I'm not going to be here, Claire, I'm going on a trip. But I'm going to pay you before I go so that you can leave right afterwards." And I said, "Okay." Well, I happened to have a friend, who was the American consul, and I asked him. I said, "Look, I'm going to get some champagne and I'm going to have the cook make some cookies. We're going to have champagne and cookies for the Belli Arti Committee. Will you be my host?" He said, "Sure, sure." And it's very interesting, because this gate into Peggy's garden that I did the gates for is like that in relation to the American Consul. So he just came over and was behind the table serving champagne. Well, finally the Belli Arti came and they walked up and I must say, they couldn't have been more than one, two, three, four, five about six-feet right up from the canal. And they were talking and laughing and coming up. They came to the gates and they came in. See, we couldn't install them, because we had to have them accepted. So they were just leaning against the space. They came in and they were looking and drinking champagne and eating cookies and, after a time, I went up to them and I said, "Well, what do you think?" And he said, "Why it's wonderful. It's not Venice. It's nature. We like it. We love it! Well, I had my money. I'd been paid and she was off some place. I don't know, she could have been anywhere. So when I went back home, back to Paris, I was sort of disturbed and unhappy. Right after they accepted, I stayed long enough for the installation. It was done with electricity and everything. It was a very contemporary installation. So the very night I got home, I thought, "Oh, this is terrible. This is such a let down. I'm going to go to the opera." So, on my own, I went to the opera, alone. At the opera, in Paris, someone who never, never liked me. I don't know whether he was in competition or what, but I'm not going to say his name, but he came up to me. It was during intermission, and he said, "Well, does she like them?" And of course, she hadn't been there with the Belli Arti and she hadn't seen them installed. And I said, "Oh yes, she loves them!" Of course, I didn't know a thing about it. About a week later, I got a letter from her, and she says, "Claire, I came walking up from the canal and I came to the gates, and I pressed the button and everything worked perfectly, just beautifully. They are so wonderful." Well, from then on, for years, I would get letters from her from all over, wherever she'd be, and says, "Claire, I was at such-and-such place, but nothing compared to the gates." I never saved those letters. I don't know why. I should have saved them.

PAUL KARLSROM: What a shame.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Isn't that something?

PAUL KARLSROM: They should be a part of your papers.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I know it. I never saved them. I suppose somewhere, because I'm not very neat, I'll find a letter or so. I don't know. But up to the day she died, she was so--how can I say?--devoted to me as a person for having given her these gates.

PAUL KARLSROM: Did you see her after that time? Did you have the chance to visit?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: She visited me here and I visited her there. Then she was bedridden because she had, oh, I don't know, something, but finally she died. But she got more experience out of that experience than anything she ever had before. [laughs] And all the time I was kind of insisting that, you know, that we go on, that they'll be at the portal and this and that. And here she was pulling back all the time, especially after Herbert Read was there. And this is something funny. Later, Herbert Read wrote a foreword to one of my catalogs and he talked about my gates at the Guggenheim Foundation as probably one of the best things I've ever done. Can you believe it?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yes. Was your studio actually in Venice?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I would always get a studio.

PAUL KARLSROM: And how long were you at that studio in Venice?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, it depends upon the jobs and what I was doing in Paris and so on, but I was about eight months on those gates.

PAUL KARLSROM: But you then were actually working in Venice more than once?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, that was the big thing, but I've had two or three big exhibitions there.

[END OF SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

SESSION 2
21 MARCH 1995

TAPE 2, SIDE A

PAUL KARLSROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, continuing the interview with Claire

Falkenstein on March 21, 1995. This is Session 2, Tape 1 [2], Side A. Claire, you were recalling the experience in Venice and working with Peggy Guggenheim and doing the gates. And you said that you kept up with her, that you maintained a friendship and corresponded and visited. And I was curious to know if you continued, if discussing art was part of your relationship? Did you talk about art or other artists or modern art?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Actually you don't with her. She was very independent, an independent thinker and I think she would, I intuitively felt, stay away from any kind of discussion, because it would come down into who was her special artist and who were people she didn't-- She had some wonderful artists, some of the great artists. I'm trying to think of the one, the great one--

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, the Surrealists. Max Ernst?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, yes, Max Ernst. Actually, wasn't she married to him for a while? But, the great one who-- I should have looked around my place downstairs and got some of these names. But she did have some of the greatest contemporary artists in her collection and they were treated in a way that wasn't particularly special. She had them installed outdoors and a lot of people never would do that. I'm not talking about paintings, I'm talking about sculpture.

PAUL KARLSROM: Who, Arp?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Arp, but there's someone even greater. Who? Who?

PAUL KARLSROM: Brancusi?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSROM: What about her collection? What about the Surrealists? She seemed to favor the Surrealists. And do you think--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Not necessarily. The Surrealists, sure, but she also went to the extreme in Abstraction, too, and also in contemporary attitude towards Realism. In fact, I don't think she put any stops on her acceptance of various styles. And that is one of the reasons her foundation is so interesting, because it so broad in stylistic expression.

PAUL KARLSROM: She does have, though, a very, very important Surrealist collection, because she knew the artists.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, that's kind of at the time, too. It was very popular at the time.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, do you think there was anything in your work that would have appealed to her in connection with Surrealism and some of that modernism?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I think, she was kind of amazed at me, that I, as a woman, had established an independent road for myself. And she was very pleased.

PAUL KARLSROM: So do you think it was, to a degree, what you represented, the life you had chosen, the life as an artists would also appeal to her?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: That and also she wasn't limited like some of the collectors are--to just work. I mean, she was in life, my God, was she. She had all these experiences that related not only to art, but to living. You know, I left out one of the interesting things before. You see, we talked about the gates and then I had my exhibition. No, no, I guess, I had my exhibition later. She came to New York, and at that time I had this studio in New York with Martha Jackson as a dealer. She came to New York to have a lawsuit against a gallery, and I don't know what gallery it was, but Pollock, Jackson Pollock had a contract with her in exclusivity. Do you know what that means? Not being able to show with anyone else. Well, Jackson Pollock was dead at the time when she came. But she came to sue him or to sue the gallery because they were showing Jackson Pollock and selling him. And she came to New York, and that's when I had that studio there for four years and was with Martha Jackson. So I had her over and I had some friends over for an evening. Well, before they all came, I said to her, "Now listen, Peggy, this is the time for us to make a contract for the windows, I mean, for the doors." See, I had come back after the tour and had gone to New York and was using that studio there.

PAUL KARLSROM: What year was that, that you were in New York?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, it was in the fifties. It had to be around fifty.

PAUL KARLSROM: Fifty-nine?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oh no. Oh no. Fifty-four, something like that.

PAUL KARLSROM: Oh, earlier.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And so I said, "Now is the time, Peggy, for us to make a contract for the doors." And she said, "Oh, Claire, I don't know. I don't know." And I said, "Well, I'm coming to Venice and we'll talk it over." So I had two chances at her before I finally had a contract in New York and later in Venice. And it never was resolved, actually. We decided on how much money she was going to pay me. And I think that was-- I don't know if we ever had a contract. She never could bring herself to make that decision. In the first place, I was a woman and in the next place I was talked against by Herbert Read and then who knows who else talked to her. I don't know.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, you mean, your being a woman, then, would work against you in that case?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oh, of course.

PAUL KARLSROM: But I thought that was one of the things she admired.? You as an independent woman.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oh no, no.

PAUL KARLSROM: No? Oh.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Scared stiff.

PAUL KARLSROM: I misunderstood you, then, because I thought you said this was attractive to her, the idea of an independent woman.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Doing gates. Now, that was what Herbert Read just put the fear into her about, these gates, that I couldn't do anything strong enough. And later, change--turning right around, flip-flop and saying "They're the best things maybe you've ever done, Claire." Have you ever seen them?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Actually? In Venice?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah. When were they finished? What year were the gates finished? 'Sixty--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I came home, I think, I did the gates in sixty-one, which was just the tail end of my staying in Europe.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, I saw them. Because when I was a student I went for summer travel. And it was in the summer of sixty-three.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Because I came here in sixty-three.

PAUL KARLSROM: That was the year I visited Venice for the first time and visited the gates.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I had worked on those gates almost a year.

PAUL KARLSROM: I thought those gates had been there forever, from the Renaissance.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: That's what the Belli Arti said, "We don't know anything about them in relation to Venice, they're nature." [laughs]

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, what do you think they meant by that? Do you agree with that? Is that a good description?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I just think that they weren't in the fashion of Venetian art. There are various ways of thinking about Venice, Venetian art in Venice, but they related to them the way anything would. Anyway, they all agreed it was like nature.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, how do you feel about that description?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, the only thing I think is that I am working with interval and harmony and all these things that are universal. Now, if that's nature, then that's what it is.

PAUL KARLSROM: But, it's not particularly then in the forms and--?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: It doesn't copy. It doesn't copy plant forms or anything like that. But it has to do with a kind of underneath quality of--

PAUL KARLSROM: The essence?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: --the upgrowth of--, as I said, interval or--

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, do you see your work, then, as maybe reflecting essential essence, essential fundamental principles of--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Nature.

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSROM: So that would be a fair description.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: But it's not copying an exterior quality. It has to do with--

PAUL KARLSROM: Structure.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: --in-depth relationships, relationships. It doesn't have to represent a damn thing, you know.

PAUL KARLSROM: I understand. Is this then the basis, a part of the basis for your vocabulary?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSROM: This idea of the essential?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah. For instance, if you look at this.

PAUL KARLSROM: What we're looking at now is a recent painting.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, it's ninety-two. If you examine it you'll see how intervals are related one to another and how the whole thing comes into action because of--not the representation particularly, but how the intervals interact one with one another.

PAUL KARLSROM: Is this an athlete represented here?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Coming through. This is one of the fires. It's falling through a burning building.

PAUL KARLSROM: This is a male, a nude male figure?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSROM: And it represents-- It's from a series of fires?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I did six. That's Crash Landing and this is Falling Through.

PAUL KARLSROM: How did you come to choose these subjects, this theme?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Don't ask me. [laughs] No. This, of course, is the [inaudible]. I use a lot of representation. But actually the fires in general are pretty abstract. See, I haven't limited myself in any way to whether a thing should be, should represent something or represent a human being or not. I like the broad stroke of everything. You've seen the bathroom, haven't you? Oh, downstairs? The drawings of my mother, my father, my husband, my sister. You've never seen them?

PAUL KARLSROM: No, I'll have to look.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I've always drawn, all of my life, from the time I was seven.

PAUL KARLSROM: And now you've returned to drawing and painting.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I've never left it. I haven't. You should look through all the photos. There's drawings all through my life.

PAUL KARLSROM: Okay. I believe you, but for a period of your career was heavily--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I was earning my living through commissions.

PAUL KARLSROM: Through sculpture commissions. So, presumably, you weren't as active as a painter from that time as you had been in recent years?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I did some awfully good painting during that period. You'll have to see it.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, I believe you. But you, yourself, said to me the other day that you, in a sense, returned in a big way to painting.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I was known more for being a sculptor. But now I concentrated on painting. And a lot of it is because I've never done that before, and I had no commission, so to hell with it. I'm enjoying myself.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, why don't you tell me about the recent paintings, the series you've done. You're very excited it seems to me, very excited about the recent work, the current work.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, a lot of it-- I mean, it's all--how do I say, conceptual. A lot of it is prehistoric. See, like that is taming the horse. If I hadn't been working as I have in abstraction, I could never have control in working with figures. horses, so on, objects, because it all relates, again, as I say, to interval and relationships. And nothing is copied. It comes out of my memory, and association and history, and pre-history.

PAUL KARLSROM: In some of these works, though, you've been responding--I think this is true--responding to contemporary events. Most of the works are figurative--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah. I like that. I like the idea of the human experience and especially-- Now, for instance, did you see those drawings over there--forty-three, I think, they are of calf branding.

PAUL KARLSROM: Yes, yes.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I mean the experience, the human experience of life.

PAUL KARLSROM: Do you see that as a different emphasis than in you sculpture, or do you see something that ties it all together.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I think one interval. I think, they're interrelated. Everything interrelates.

PAUL KARLSROM: And how is that, do you think?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, in a three-dimensional way, in a two-dimensional way, for instance, those windows in St. Basil's are not-- I mean, because I have been working in three-dimensions a lot, I didn't want to do a single dimension. I wanted to do a three-dimensional example of the idea of a window. But, if I hadn't been working in sculpture, I don't think I would have thought of making those windows three-dimensional.

PAUL KARLSROM: Of course.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: You've never seen a three-dimensional window before?

PAUL KARLSROM: No, I never have. Of course, these are formal considerations.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Especially in church windows. They're telling stories on a two-dimensional plane. You see, another thing about me, I'm working with motion all the time.

PAUL KARLSROM: Motion.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And when the observer is inside the church and moves around, those colors change because they change position with the position of the observer. Have you thought of that?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yes.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And to me that's exciting.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, let's carry that over to these paintings then, these recent paintings which are figurative. They're representational.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: No, they're not. They're not at all. This happens to be, but--

PAUL KARLSROM: No, I'm looking around me at this one.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: All right. Come over here.

PAUL KARLSROM: Okay, but let me finish my question.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah, but I don't like you to generalize that way.

PAUL KARLSROM: Many of these paintings have figures in them.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSROM: And they're sort of figurative in the literal sense of the work. They represent the human figure or horses and so forth. My question is this, that your work is abstract for the most part. Your sculptural work tends to be abstract. Not all of it, because you have, like these figures here, but the middle one. And yet you say that you find these similarities between the recent paintings and these sculptures. Is movement, then, one of the keys?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSROM: Would this tie them together?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Right. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSROM: And so in a sense your subject is both in motion. Is that right?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Which relates to vitality. I mean, the vital signs. I think motion is one of the key elements in my work.

PAUL KARLSROM: So that would perhaps then be a uniting, a unifying factor throughout your work?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah. You know, that painting back there, the surreal painting.

PAUL KARLSROM: Right. What's that called?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I don't know. I forget. But it was done in '46.

PAUL KARLSROM: You say "surreal" ironically. Does that mean you don't think it is surreal? Why is that? What's different between this and some other Surrealist work?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, a lot of these terms were brought into being by artists.

PAUL KARLSROM: Or critics and art historians.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Or critics? Yeah. And probably there's a unifying element throughout. I don't know. I just enjoy working.

PAUL KARLSROM: What is it that's attracting you in the recent work to the nude figure? Does that carry you back in your mind to your early studies of the nude at Berkeley, when you were a student? Is there a connection here?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: What attracts me to what?

PAUL KARLSROM: I say, much of your new work, as we look around incorporates the nude human figure. And I wonder if that in anyway for you provides the connection or has a connection to your earlier drawings, when you were a student, because you say how important they were?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: You know, it would be very hard for you to find my early drawings connected with any of this, because this is new, too.

PAUL KARLSROM: You recently said that those early drawings were very important. You called them your mentors, your teachers.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: They are. And the reason is because I use the figure as a point of departure. I don't copy it. And that's the way I feel about practically everything. They're points of departure. I don't want to copy.

PAUL KARLSROM: I understand that. I think that's pretty evident. Let me, if I may, shift gears a bit. There was something you said earlier that I think is interesting and very important. You keep describing yourself as an independent, an individual, independent woman. This is a subject that is of great interest now especially, because when you were starting out your career, it was probably even more unusual. Can we talk about that? Can you see yourself that way?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I think because I build a vocabulary for myself, and it's not a matter of copying a style, but rather having words, not words, but forms and shapes and ideas that can relate to feeling and expression rather than copying objects or using objects as a means of work. I'm not using objects. For instance here, look at this. I was just looking at this. Where's my cane?

PAUL KARLSROM: Here.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: When I sit down a long time, I get stiff. Well, look at this. I just want you to look at this.

PAUL KARLSROM: And we're looking again at that figure. We can see fire.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Forget the figures.

PAUL KARLSROM: But we have to describe it, because we have a tape recorder here, not a camera.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Just that area there and see how everything relates one to another in intervals.

PAUL KARLSROM: Okay. Show me an interval on this painting. Show me specifically what you mean. Okay?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Here's the shape.

PAUL KARLSROM: Yes.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: It comes up here.

PAUL KARLSROM: Right.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Here. I'm just taking this one area here and just see how these lines form intervals. It would be good if you could lop off everything and just have certain areas that would be examples.

PAUL KARLSROM: So you think of this work, even though it does have a figure in it, you think of it, really, in abstract terms?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: It's abstraction. I consider it all abstraction here.

PAUL KARLSROM: Technically it is, but when we can recognize a figure there, sometimes it's compelling, it commands our attention. And obviously what you're doing is creating. Well, why do you use the figure then, if the abstraction is what you are really after?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Because you don't start off copying, you start out phrasing, shaping, leaving in, taking out--

PAUL KARLSROM: Has this always been true in non-objective painting?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah. And it can be any kind of painting. [inaudible]

PAUL KARLSROM: But for you non-objectivity is less interesting than having a figure to start with?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: It could be or it could not be. It doesn't matter.

[END OF SESSION 2, TAPE 2, SIDE A]

SESSION 2
21 MARCH 1995

TAPE 2, SIDE B

PAUL KARLSROM: Claire Falkenstein. This is continuing the interview on March 21, 1995. This is Tape 2, Side B. Now, Claire, I asked you a little earlier a question and you answered it strictly in terms of your work, of your painting. And it was a good answer, but what I was really trying to get at was something a little different. And that is your independence, the way you've conducted, chosen to live your life as an independent person. The art, of course, is a major part of that.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I consider it myself.

PAUL KARLSROM: I would be interested in knowing just how that came about, because you're very much an independent.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, when you look at those early drawings that I did when I was nineteen, at the University of California at Berkeley, the art department was composed mainly of three teachers. And these teachers, in order to teach, had evidently gone to school to learn to teach, or had picked up some book that had told them how to teach, but how they taught was to give the students exercises and then they'd walk out of the room. And the students would then work on the exercises and the teacher would come back and do some criticism. But that was the main way they taught. Well, then this man came from Chicago to take the place of the teacher who had a nervous breakdown. Anyway, that man actually caused a revolution in me by saying, "Look within." Well, if you can imagine. [phone rings] --exactly what he meant.

PAUL KARLSROM: Look within?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And I said to myself, "Oh, I'm free." And those drawings from the very beginning used the figure as a point of departure, not a point to copy. And that's the best thing, that's the best way I can describe everything I do.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, Okay. And did that then give you a freedom in your life? In other words, what about your life? What about Claire as a woman?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well. I married, but I never gave up art. I kept working. And I married a lawyer who was very sympathetic and our marriage lasted--the actual marriage lasted for twenty-two years, but it wasn't close. It wasn't that close for twenty-two years. We finally were divorced because I wanted not to live in Oakland. I wanted to go to Paris and that was it. But now we're great friends and it's as though the whole experience of being together all those years-- He was my-- I told you before. I knew him in high school. So it was kind of like a lifelong relationship, but not in the conventional sense. But I don't know what I would have done without him. And even now I need that relationship.

PAUL KARLSROM: What's his name?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Richard McCarthy. He's Irish. [laughs] And a very good lawyer. He's a trial lawyer.

PAUL KARLSROM: And he's still alive. He's in the Bay Area?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: He's eighty-eight and I'm eighty-six.

PAUL KARLSROM: You've never had any children?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: No. Thank God. Oh no. Cut-- Take that out.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, we'll take that out. [laughs] Well, I mean it's not easy to have children and then be committed--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: No. If I had had children, that would have been an career in itself. I know that.

PAUL KARLSROM: You keep coming back to this notion of freedom. I guess what I've been interested in knowing is if you finally felt that you had to have this freedom in your entire experience, in your entire life, and so that, in a sense, no matter how much you--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, it's freedom, but it's not. I'm very disciplined. I'm not a ne'er-do-well. I'm very disciplined. I know exactly what is it I can expect of myself. And I'm happy, really happy, when I'm engaged on something I am working out as an expression of something that I haven't really resolved and I'm working on it, and it has to do with life, and it has to do with all kinds of things in relation to people and so on. But I don't think that you can really be free in the sense of just not having a disciplined life. I don't believe in that.

PAUL KARLSROM: But you can make your own choices about how--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I make my own rules. Well, I don't worry. I'm coerced also by the fact I have to earn a living and I have to pay attention to the rules of law and so on. I mean, I'm part of a society.

PAUL KARLSROM: Sure.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And also I have got to pay my bills. I've got to be careful about paying my bills. Well, you know, you have to take care of everyday things in order to survive.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, nowadays, of course, people are interested in the role of women and new opportunities for women. There's even a group of feminists that-- Art historians or historians, and it's a way of looking at the experience of a gender.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSROM: But do you cast yourself in that role? Do you see yourself as breaking out?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: No, I don't. I don't profess to promote anything except how I feel about life and how I am and how I'm able to express myself. I'm an artist. I'm not a politician or whatever. There's a difference.

PAUL KARLSROM: But still you made choices in your life that allowed you to pursue a profession, if you will, pursue your art, which was your highest objective.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I tell you, the choices are always pretty practical in order to go on. You have to adjust to circumstances in order to survive. I mean, I'm conscious, I'm not unconscious of necessities and possibilities and the meaning of things and so on. After all, I got a doctorate.

PAUL KARLSROM: You did?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I have a doctorate from the University of Utah. It's an honorary doctorate.

PAUL KARLSROM: Right. You told me.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And I wouldn't have gotten that if I had been just, oh, you know. I taught there one summer session twenty years ago. Well, it's more than that now. It's about twenty-two years ago, because it was about two years ago that they gave me the honorary doctorate. Did you know that?

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, you told me just now, yes.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: [laughs] I can show you. Do you want to see my receiving it?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah. When we're done.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Okay. But I tell you, people who say, oh, I'm free, free, free and I can do anything I want, usually, they end up in the ash can. What you have to do is be disciplined.

PAUL KARLSROM: But you have avoided, as far as I know and I don't know a lot about your personal life, of course, but you seem to have avoided domestic entanglements that would perhaps interfere with--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I'm entangled with this. I mean, I built all this on my work. I have real estate. I've got this and then I have another place about two miles from here, I guess, for storage. I earned every cent. On that, I have no mortgage, on this I have a big mortgage.

PAUL KARLSROM: Did you ever think about marrying again?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: No.

PAUL KARLSROM: No? Why not?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I'm not interested. I really am not. I'm interested in work.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, this is what I'm getting at.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: As soon as you entangle yourself with other people, then you have another life to live. I considered it, just like having children. It's a career.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, what about other people who can seem to balance the two and be very successful.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I don't think they're very successful I mean, when they try to do something other than carrying on their relationship, it's very hard.

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah, but it doesn't preclude being successful even in the creative realm. There are plenty of writers, for instance, who have families. It's not impossible.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: It's very difficult.

PAUL KARLSROM: So you see it as that the two, the one precludes the other?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I think so.

PAUL KARLSROM: But is that just for women or for men also?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I think it could last for a certain length of time maybe. In the beginning it was very, very helpful for both of us, but as his trials and tribulations began, and as mine began to emerge, it was very difficult to keep the relationship. We finally divorced. And I think we gave it a good try, twenty-two years.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, again, you still keep contact. I mean that--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And usually the case, the trouble with people, is especially if they're creative, one of the other might dominate and affect the other.

PAUL KARLSROM: What about other relationships?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oh, I think I have scads of friends from thirty, forty, or fifty years. I'm a very good friend keeper.

PAUL KARLSROM: You keep up with people? I mean, you described yourself earlier not as a hermit exactly, but as somebody who doesn't have that many friends here in Venice. Is that right?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I have lots of friends, and friends from years and years and years. For instance, Allan Temko's coming on Thursday. He's one of my best friends and I've know him for thirty years.

PAUL KARLSROM: Where did you meet Al?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: What does he do?

PAUL KARLSROM: No. I know what he does. He's a critic.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, he's a columnist.

PAUL KARLSROM: He won a Pulitzer Prize.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah. Last year.

PAUL KARLSROM: And I do know Al, and I was asking when and where you met him?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I met him in Paris. He was there on that-- I'm trying to think of it. At that time it was just after the war. Who came on some master-- some kind of scholarship?

PAUL KARLSROM: Fulbright?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: He was on a Fulbright.

PAUL KARLSROM: Fulbright. So do you feel that you keep your art and your personal life quite separate, then? You have your friendships, your relationships, your loves you may have had.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, that influences your work to have these friendships. I guess, you know Kay?

PAUL KARLSROM: No, I've heard about her. I haven't met her.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, she's a very interesting woman. She's never been married. But she is a professor at two universities, and she does all kinds of things. She's picked out four women in the world that she considers important. And she devotes her time traveling to each one in turn and continuing the relationship of friendship and interpenetration or whatever you want to call it. And she just got back from New York. And before that she was in Paris. She has a woman in Paris who is a photographer, a woman in New York who is a dancer, another woman who's just a woman that she thinks is important. And then she has me here. And the whole thing is a kind of way of maintaining something in her, I don't know what, of interest in life. That's like for me my art is, and for her, it's these four women. Isn't that strange? But I don't--I never heard her speak much about men, although men are very attracted to her. Have you met her?

PAUL KARLSROM: Didn't I just talk to her on the phone? She just called. I haven't met her.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSROM: How old is she?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I have no idea. I think she's about sixty.

PAUL KARLSROM: You said she's a teacher. What does she teach?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Humanities.

PAUL KARLSROM: Is she doing a study of all of you? Is she going to write about you?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I don't know.

PAUL KARLSROM: Maybe?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I enjoy her when I see her and I don't pay any attention. She doesn't intrude, that's the one thing.

PAUL KARLSROM: Are there any friends, any of the artists in Venice or in Southern California with whom you've become friends?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I'm trying to think. I've had artist friends from time to time, but usually it doesn't work out. I had a meeting here when I finished the fires. I had a gathering here. And I asked--I'm not going to say his name--a person that I've known for a long time, an artist. And he gave me no kind of indication of response to my work. So finally, I went up to him and said, "Well, what do you think?" And he said, "Well, I like it when you're abstract." And he didn't understand at all what I was doing. So, again, that's a kind of a cliché, this abstract stuff.

PAUL KARLSROM: Do you think it's important for the artist-friend to appreciate your work for you to have a friendship or a relationship? Do you think it's difficult?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I know one thing, when I get into these things, I'm completely engrossed. Now, if somebody comes in and says, "Well, you know--"

PAUL KARLSROM: Right.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: What the hell? Why bother with him? [laughs]

PAUL KARLSROM: That's a good point. If you had to describe yourself--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Especially if you're serious about your work. If you give it your all. Are you married?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: How many years?

PAUL KARLSROM: Thirty.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Thirty years? Thirty?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Good for you.

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah. We both have active careers and she lives in San Francisco and I work out here.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: How many children?

PAUL KARLSROM: One.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: One?

PAUL KARLSROM: At dinner I'll show you their pictures.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oh, will you?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah. Let me ask you another question. And I'd like you to think about it a bit. I know that you consider yourself independent. That's how you describe yourself. But nonetheless, you are viewed as being a participant in Twentieth Century modernism. What does that mean to you?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: It means that you absorb your environment, but it doesn't mean that you are copying somebody. It's impossible not to absorb the life that you're living with and in. I don't think you should--well, you have to make choices.

PAUL KARLSROM: Right.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: You could have-- No matter who or how you are being affected by, you've still got to make choices.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, do you feel associated with any particular place or any particular, any individuals? Would you connect yourself in any way to a place, a time, a--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, as I told you, I think there are two great innovators in the Twentieth Century, one for structure and one for space, and that's [Mark] Tobey and Clyfford Still. But I don't copy either one of them. But I consider them very important and I consider them, they're both dead now, but they were both terribly attached to me.

PAUL KARLSROM: So these were personal friends? Tobey as well?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Tobey and Still.

PAUL KARLSROM: And Tobey, did you go see him in Switzerland? Did you visit him there?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I visited him in Switzerland. I met him in Paris originally, and that's where I'd see him, in Paris and Switzerland.

PAUL KARLSROM: You didn't know--

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And Clyfford Still, I was a teacher in the school when he was. I got the idea of what he was when I taught there. But I was working out my own development at the same time. It didn't bother him that I wasn't at all like him and it didn't bother me, but we were great pals.

PAUL KARLSROM: You've been all over the place. I now know that you, of course, spent time in Paris. We all know that. So you've had a European experience. You had time in New York; you had a studio in New York; you've been in the Bay Area, and, of course, you have been here these many years.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: You know, of all the places, I had a studio in Rome for four years. I had a studio in New York for about five years. I had a studio in Milan. I had a studio-- where else--Venice. And finally I got here and I like this the best.

PAUL KARLSROM: Really? So you obviously then have settled down. You're an internationalist. I mean, there's no question about that, but do you see yourself as more within an American or European tradition? Or do you see that there's any difference?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: A lot of it has to do with "freedom." New York was awful. I didn't like New York at all.

PAUL KARLSROM: Why is that?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And Rome was confining. When I came here and did that piece, the big fountain, and built all of this, this has been a great experience for me, this place.

PAUL KARLSROM: Why is that? Or how so?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I think I had more freedom, more chances of my own decisions of allowing myself the freedom of making my own decisions, of wonderful hospitality. I like the weather. I like the people. I just like it here.

PAUL KARLSROM: It hasn't interfered with your growth as an artist?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: It's all been very positive.

PAUL KARLSROM: It is said that if an artist chooses to work away from the great centers, and now, of course, that would mean Paris or New York, then you're handicapped. But you haven't found that true? This hasn't been a handicap?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I'm looking within anyway, so what the hell?

PAUL KARLSROM: [laughs] I love that. Well, I think that's a good point to end. I don't see how you can top that. Do you want to call it an afternoon or is there something more you want to add?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I'm trying to think of achieving, of achievement and what it requires. It requires time, it requires health, it requires all of your sensibilities, it requires money. I mean, if you start thinking all the things, and if you don't look outside and expect somebody to give them to you, you get them for yourself. That's the

important thing.

PAUL KARLSROM: Let me ask you one more question. Do you have any shows coming up, any exhibitions that you're preparing for?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Any shows?

PAUL KARLSROM: Exhibitions?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Only about six.

PAUL KARLSROM: About six exhibitions?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: That's terrible. I have been with galleries for many years. And this has always been--well, I'm not going to say few and far between as far as shows go, because I don't think you should have too many anyway. But, since I've been working for myself, which means I've been doing nothing except working, people have been coming to me and they just, for instance, now the show in Fresno has been decided. They're taking three sculptures and that painting for Fresno.

PAUL KARLSROM: When will that be?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: November.

PAUL KARLSROM: The Long Beach Museum is working on a retrospective. And Hal Nelson, who is the director, is just wonderful. He's doing a book on it.

PAUL KARLSROM: In conjunction with the exhibition?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I don't know. All I know is that's what he's doing. Then there's that Armand Hammer, whatever that is.

PAUL KARLSROM: Pacific Dreams?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah. First it's in New York, you say?

PAUL KARLSROM: Oakland. It's in Oakland now.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oakland. Then it's in Armand Hammer.

PAUL KARLSROM: And then I think it's going to go to Laguna, as well.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And then there's something in New York. Still Working is still on. Don't you know about Still Working? That show?

PAUL KARLSROM: Oh yeah, yeah. Still Working. You're in that.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: That's still going. I'm trying to think of all the things. I think that's why I fell down. I was so exhausted thinking about all these things I had to do. Then I fell down. I'm out of everything, trying to get over my broken hip.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, you look great.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I do?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah. You look great compared to last time when you had your walker, when we did the last interview.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oh yeah. How long ago was that? Two weeks?

PAUL KARLSROM: Three, I think.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I've had the cane about a week.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, anyway you're on the mend.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oh yeah, I am.

PAUL KARLSROM: I think we've about wrapped this up today. The tape's almost over.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oh, look it's blinking.

PAUL KARLSROM: It's blinking because it's telling us it's over. So I want to thank you for the interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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