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Oral history interview with Peter Alexander, 1995 December 13-1996 May 8

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Transcript

Interview

PA: Peter Alexander
PK: Paul Karlstrom

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with Peter Alexander in his studio in Marina Del Rey. This is session number one, December 13, 1995. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom.

Okay, Peter, here we go. We've known one another--this is fun. I want to start out by saying that, because we've known one another since graduate school days, UCLA, and see one another off and on. I've watched your career with interest. I'm sure I'm not aware of all the details of it, but we've kept some kind of contact, and this interview, this conversation, is something we've talked about before, and I've wanted to do for a long time. So I'm surprised it's taken this long, but here we are.

We were talking earlier about experiences that we shared, experiences in time and in place. We both grew up, or certainly, at least, went to high school in Southern California. As a matter of fact, we both went to school in the San Fernando Valley. You graduated in, I think you said, 1957, and I graduated in '59. Presumably, we crossed paths in one way or another, whether it was exactly at the same times, or in the same places. What I want to talk about today has very much to do with that. What I want to ask you about has to do with this place, which presumably, formed us.

I'm still working in my job as an art historian in California, very much in Southern California. You made a choice at some point really to establish your career here. However, this process worked itself out, here you are, you're still here, and are very much identified with California. So the first question I would like to ask with all that in mind is how was it that you made that choice to be a "California artist," an American artist working in California? I guess that would be the first question. But then leading on to what were the consequences of that decision, how did that affect, finally, your career, as you look back?

PA: Just as a way of explaining, my brother, who was also raised under the exactly same circumstances as myself, decided in 1965 to leave California and to go to New York, where he eventually became an art dealer, which he still is.

PK: That's Brook?

PA: That's Brook, yes. I say this in response to your question, that idea never even occurred to me. That is, I had no interest at all in going to the East. I went to school back there, and I like it a lot and blah, blah, but to move there was completely out of line with anything that I had imagined or do imagine. Just, there's no reason. Well, what I mean no reason, there was no sense to it, as far as I was concerned. There's many reasons why one would do it, but I couldn't find sufficiently good ones to act on it.

PK: Did you say though that you did go to school in the East?

PA: I went to school in Philadelphia for three years. Then I went to London. Then to [University of California-] Berkeley. Then another, USC [University of Southern California], and then finally to UCLA.

PK: I didn't realize you had this multifarious academic career.

PA: Most of that was in architecture. The University of Pennsylvania was for architecture, and that was three years. Then I went to the Architectural Association in London for a year. I did nothing but go to Paris for wild weekends. I was twenty-two and it was like that was just a joke, but it was a lot of fun. Everything's been downhill since then. [Laughter] Then I went to Berkeley for a year. Then I went into the Marine Corps. Then I went to the SC, and then after SC, and just short of graduating in architecture, I realized that I couldn't do it, because I was working for a couple of architects and it was just awful. So then I went into art. That was sort of the sequence. That's where we met.

PK: So that's when you appeared at UCLA--

PA: UCLA. Yes.

PK: --in the art department. You were through with architecture by that time?

PA: Yes. I had no interest in it as a profession for myself.

PK: Where did you get your undergraduate degree? Just to lay in a few basic points.

PA: I got it from UCLA. I was about three months short of a degree, and that's when I made the switch. I'll tell you if you're interested, I'll tell you the quick story of the switch. I was working for an archi--well, I worked for Neutra for a couple of years.

PK: You did?

PA: During the summers. I found that enlightening, because it gave me an opportunity to get close to a sort of international architect of some renown. Sort of got a sense of what his lifestyle was like and what it was like being--by lifestyle, I mean that in the broadest sense. That is how he behaved, what he thought about, a kind of sense of priorities, you know, all that business. I was, oh, God, nineteen, I guess, at the time. Eighteen or nineteen. Then after Neutra, I worked for Perreira, which is a whole different kind of architect, but equally interesting, because he was a corporate guy. I was working on a project in Perreira's office, and I had worked on it for three months. I was the chief. I was the designer. It was a small project that they turned over to me.

PK: You hadn't even actually graduated?

PA: I hadn't graduated from architecture, no. That's because I talk fast. I worked on this thing, as you can imagine, diligently on weekends and nights, and, you know, all my time, because they weren't going to pay me for that, because I just loved to do it. Well, about three to four months into it, the project was canceled, which was economics, but nothing to do with my involvement in it. I thought when that happened that I don't have the patience to do this again. I was driving home from the office, from his offices on Wilshire Boulevard at that time, and I was driving home, and I almost hit this telephone pole, I was so distracted by this thing. It was so vivid, the sensation, that I said, "This is it." The next day I applied to UCLA in the art department. So that's how that happened.

The aspect of working any place other than Southern California never occurred to me. I was in my early twenties when I started. I mean, mid-twenties, like twenty-five, when I started seriously considering being an artist/painter, whatever that meant. I've always been so connected to this place. It has meant so much, which I won't even begin to describe what it meant, but there was a quality, a connection, that leaving it was too sort of sorrowful. It was inappropriate.

PK: Is this beyond the basic attachment to home?

PA: Nothing to do with home. It had to do with the ocean. It had to do with climate. It had to do with the drive-ins. It had to do with all the aspects of what constitute this a place. Even though I loved being in London and Philadelphia, and, you know, all that kind of stuff, it never occurred to me to live in any of those places, other than beyond what I did as a student. It's still the same. I don't want to live anyplace else.

PK: Thirty some years later.

PA: Thirty, yes. Well, this is 1965. That means, yes, it's thirty years later. Yes, right. So I mean, certainly, I like to go to places, but, you know, all that business. So that without even describing what these qualities are, which are not really relevant, the point is, is that there was something pulling me, keeping me here, that was unequivocal.

So now the next part of the question, which has to do with what effect did that have on my career as an artist. It had a significant effect. I stayed here for the reasons I've just described, or for the feeling that I just described, but also I stayed here out of pure arrogance, which is that I wasn't going to buy, or I never felt that buying a system that was being presented in New York was what this process is all about. Whatever one thinks, feels, does as an artist/painter is not about buying, it is not about becoming part of a system. I mean, in other words, one can, and I'm certainly part of a system here, but to transpose myself into a system that was foreign to me was beyond my acceptance. I couldn't do that. I would be giving up too much for something I didn't really believe in.

If I had gone to New York as my brother did, I'm sure I would have had a much more illustrious career. There's no question about it. I think that's also a comment about how all systems work, which is that a great deal of it is based on flesh connections, on intimacy. I don't mean that in a carnal way. I mean, it's how we relate to each other. You can't do it from this distance with New York. New York certainly was the precedent that I was familiar with in the mid-sixties, and it still is in certain ways a precedent, not a precedent, but it certainly is the power, by virtue of the word, if for no other reason, that all the words come out of New York for whatever they're worth, which I have significant questions about their value.

PK: Remember when we were in UCLA in the early sixties, art form was here.

PA: In L.A. Right.

PK: So there were words for a brief time.

PA: Yes, but the fact that it couldn't sustain itself in L.A. is another comment, which is a much broader comment. I mean, I think that in itself will tell you what L.A. art, what this place is about.

PK: Well, how so? What do you mean?

PA: Well, because the fact that the place couldn't sustain a magazine, you could read that as--there's two ways of reading it. One is that there wasn't sufficient enough of an art world, so to speak, in L.A. to sustain it, and/or the interest in those issues were not sufficient to sustain it. By those issues, I mean that kind of writing.

PK: So what you're talking about here is, at least in part, the support system, or lack thereof, that we've heard so much about. What does it takes to make to create a critical mass, they say sometimes, to then really support, in a meaningful way, the creation of art.

PA: Well, I don't know. That raises all kinds of questions. We're talking about two different things. One is economics, and the other one is the making of objects. Now, the making of objects can be done anywhere. Primitives produce, without a doubt, the best objects that one can get, and certainly it's not based on an economic system. But within our context, and we're not primitives, although many of us wish we were, there is an economic system which you plug into, and that economic system is what one survives in or out of, or in some way related to that system. That system is the hierarchies that we all know, which are museums, critics, collectors, and so forth. As a package, it's a system which is incredibly suspect from an aesthetic point of view.

PK: Is this part of your resistance, your protest, your arrogance, that you recognized that at that stage? Is this true, or is this sort of retrospective?

PA: No. No. It is retrospect. What happened in the first few years of my involvement in the art world, I mean, it was remarkable in certain ways. I was a graduate student, and I got my first show in New York when I was still a graduate student.

PK: What year was that?

PA: That was 1968 or '69, one of those. Which meant that all of a sudden--and then I started selling. I thought, "Jeez, this is easy." It was like, whatever I did was a few hundred dollars, but in 1968 or '69, you know, a few hundred bucks meant something. So all of a sudden I felt I could sustain myself as an artist.

PK: Here?

PA: Here in L.A., yes. A lot of that was because of Bill Wilson, and also Billy Al Bengston, because they're the ones who sort of found me, so to speak. Because I entered a show at Cal State-L.A. called "Small Images," and they saw a piece of mine, were very impressed by it. Bill had just, by coincidence, been to the house a month prior to that to talk to my brother about something, because he was hustling some stuff from Marlboro in New York. I don't know why he was talking to Bill, but they met down there. So I had met Bill once. So anyway, that's how that happened.

PK: They helped get you--

PA: Bill did it critically and Billy did it economically. He called up his friends, who were collectors, and said, "You should buy one of these. They're cheap. They're a couple hundred bucks," and so forth. So he introduced me, so to speak, to the art world.

PK: What about the "Small Images" show? Were you in that show?

PA: Yes.

PK: So was that the first--

PA: It was the first sort of grand show. I mean, it was the first sort of show that I was in.

PK: A debut.

PA: It was sort of, yes. It was an open competition, and you submit slides. Then after the slides, they select, and then you submit the object. Then they did this exhibition.

PK: That's certainly a good beginning when you've got good support. It's hard to get attention. But I gather very quickly you ended up with a show in New York. Is that what you were telling me?

PA: Yes, very shortly after that.

PK: How did that happen?

PA: A combination of reasons. One, is that it was a very small world, as we know. There were very few players. If you were the least bit articulate, I guess is the word, or the least bit sociable, you could enter that world without too much difficulty. Both those qualities being present, I entered it easily. I remember the excitement, the thrill of being included. That was fabulous to me. That is, suddenly I was a part of something that was greater than myself. It was a system that I had complete--I was young enough and naive enough and I had complete belief in it, a belief in its hierarchy, a belief in its judgment. To me it was like, let's just say, at that time, to me, in my sort of psychic state, it meant a great deal. I was very pleased. I was very social.

PK: Well, you still are.

PA: No, much less so. Much less so. I mean, I'm not trying to be--I'm just giving you the facts. I was, at that point, very social. I loved it and I loved going out and going to shows and blah, blah, blah, and doing all that stuff.

PK: But it interests me that right at the get-go, practically, you established some contact with New York.

PA: That was Nick Wilder. Nick came to me because--

PK: Well, he had moved by that time.

PA: He was, at that time, on La Cienega.

PK: Yes, right.

PA: He hadn't moved to Santa Monica.

PK: Right. He certainly hadn't gone East yet.

PA: No, no. Oh, no.

PK: That was years later.

PA: Oh, that was years later, yes.

PK: But he had the contacts, because -Nick Wilder, of course, was a--

PA: He was sort of "the" dealer in L.A.

PK: "The" dealer--

PA: In contemporary art.

PK: Very much known in New York, as well. So he then introduced you to?

PA: To Castelli and to Bob Elkon. I had my first show with Elkon, but Castelli is the one who sold it out, because he liked the work.

PK: I won't say this begs the question or raises the question, but this is a most auspicious beginning for a rube from California.

PA: Tell me.

PK: What it tells me is a couple of things. One, is that in fact, New York, if you are situated rightly, and you knew the right people, always through contacts, that New York was receptive, interested in finding new talent, and it could be outside of New York.

PA: Well, now just a minute. No, I'm talking about--the show was very successful. It sold out. It garnered a significant amount of attention. It was highly criticized, both positively and negatively.

PK: Well, that's good.

PA: Yes. No. Fine. Fine. Of course, the only thing you ever remember is the negative criticism, you don't remember the positive ones. The negative ones called it sort of a decadent California art, which is to be expected. The positive ones sort of spoke of it in all sort of ethereal things. Whatever it was.

PK: So it's a lot about sensibility right there.

PA: Yes, of course.

PK: Not to mention prejudice.

PA: It was at that point that I became aware to the point where I could feel it, rather than just observe it, what polarity existed, and you would begin to get some sense of how you were going to deal with it. I dealt with it okay. I wasn't really that good when it came to criticism. I think that's also the reason why I was so happy to be included in this sort of so-called art world, was because I felt that need. That was very important to me, because I was sort of--I'm not going to digress on this, but I was sort of asking--I wanted it to be something other than what I really thought it was; that is, that inclusion. I thought it had a lot more emotional content than it really did.

PK: Did you think of it as kind of a fraternity then that you had invited to rush?

PA: I thought of it affectionately. Let's put it that way, affectionately.

PK: It had a paternal feeling to it.

PA: Yes, but also I must say the relationships that I have now with the artists that I knew then are the same. That is, they really haven't differed. But my relation to other people, people other than artists, has certainly changed.

PK: Let's pursue this a bit within the framework of that first question. You acknowledged that you would have had a more successful career, and I think in terms of economically, in sales, if you had gone to New York and reinforced this connection with the New York art world, which you chose not to do for reasons that you've expressed. How did that play out? Clearly at this point you have enjoyed--maybe you had some bad reviews, but, nonetheless, you enjoyed a success there. Dealers love to sell art. Your show sold out. Track it. What happened then?

PA: You mean why didn't it just go up and up and up and up?

PK: Yes.

PA: Because it wasn't in me to do that. For better or for worse. I mean, in a way I've answered my question. I would have been destroyed in New York. Had I gone to New York--

PK: Emotionally?

PA: Emotionally I would have been destroyed by it. It's not in my nature to do a lot of that stuff. I don't have the ambition, or else the aggressiveness, or the competitiveness, or whatever it may take to do that. What happened is that after--this was the late sixties. It was the first time that California, L.A., was being recognized as a force, and as a result, there was enormous national, international attention being focused on a small number of people. Ten or twelve people.

PK: That so-called Venice--

PA: Whatever it was.

PK: Yes.

PA: It was [Robert] Irwin, it was Billy, and Bill and--

PK: Ferus.

PA: --it was Craig, and blah, you know, everybody, right. That whole group. I was sort of almost a second generation to it, because I was not involved in the Ferus group. I came in later.

PK: No, but people, I think, would, in some ways, associate you with it in spirit.

PA: Yes, sure.

PK: If not actually in the stable.

PA: Right. So we used to do these shows like in Cincinnati, in Minneapolis, in Akron, in Kansas City, in Vancouver, where as a group, not always as a whole group, but it would be at least three or four or five of us, [Ed] Moses, you know, and we'd be invited to go to these shows. It was like a minor rock-and-roll band, and it was just as bizarre. Well, I somehow made a point of starting to burn bridges as fast as they were built, by

behavior. So that was going on. There was something that was--what all that was, was there was part of this process that I really disliked. I couldn't identify it. I could only say that there was something about it that was for me was not right, and my behavior was a way of my telling myself, "You don't like this." But I couldn't articulate it. I could only do it sort of animalistically, so to speak. But it was also the sixties and our perception of life and behavior was significantly different than we would--

PK: Our role models were rock stars.

PA: Right.

PK: Still are to some degree.

PA: Yes. So I was always pushing. I was always pushing the edge of civility and of taste. Not so much aesthetically, but I mean, more in terms of behavior.

PK: Did you feel that this was part of the bohemian idea?

PA: There's lots of ways you could rationalize it, and I was not the least bit--and I rationalized it beautifully at the time. But I'm saying in retrospect, if I were to look at my behavior and how, in fact, I feel about that world, I would say the behavior was about this. Meaning, it was saying, "There's something wrong here."

PK: Well, what was it that was wrong? Now you do have the benefit of hindsight.

PA: I'm a romantic, and I believed in it. I believed in the value of things. I believe that objects can be made that can have an extraordinary effect on me and others. But I'll speak very subjectively. So, given that premise, I believed that I was a participant in the making of these objects. There were times when I made something that I thought was extraordinary. I saw objects made by others that I thought was extraordinary, and, some, still do. That being the basic belief, anything outside of that process, or anything that deluded that process to me, was sort of corrupt, and that was being very naive. Okay? And I'm giving you the extremities of it. Again, this is in retrospect. So, having that sort of rather naive belief system--I'm exaggerating here. I mean, I'm not that naive, but I'm emphasizing this so the point is clear.

PK: It sounds like idealists are in some ways naive.

PA: Yes.

PK: I mean, what you're describing is an idealist.

PA: Yes. I don't feel that way now. I mean, I feel what I'm saying about the value of the objects, but I don't in any way have any illusions about the process, where I think I probably had some illusions about the process in those days.

PK: Were you trying to get yourself rejected? You mentioned behavior.

PA: In a way I was, because what I was doing, I was pushing my value. I was trying to determine the value, my value.

PK: "Just how good am I? How much will you put up with?"

PA: "How much will you put up with?" Exactly.

PK: You could do that in New York very well.

PA: Well, a lot of people did. A lot of people still do.

PK: Yes. That bad boy [unclear] still is at work.

PA: Yes.

PK: Do you feel that that is--well, this is maybe another topic.

PA: This is a completely other topic.

PK: We'll do this later.

PA: Yes. But I think that it also is an indelible comment on my relationship to this whole deal.

PK: The whole enterprise.

PA: The whole enterprise, exactly. If I was involved in the enterprise on that level in some way, it was a fragile, not necessarily appropriate situation. It was bound to be difficult.

PK: You felt, apparently, that to pursue the career, even from here, but in New York was--

PA: Frankly, it was a pain in the ass.

PK: Pain in the ass. The rewards, you were aware of the rewards were not worth it?

PA: They weren't worth it. I didn't care that much. There was too much hurt for me.

PK: Just through the bad reviews or through the--

PA: Oh, no. No, no.

PK: --through the recognition that this idealist--

PA: No, no. You know what it was? It would even get down to having to spend that time in New York. It would get down to getting on a plane.

PK: It wasn't your place.

PA: It wasn't my place. It was even exaggerated even more so by the fact that it was my brother's place.

PK: Well, this is good, because what we're talking about here, you know, our subtext here is the notion of place, of where you belong and the choices.

PA: I didn't belong there. I never felt I belonged there, ever. I mean, when I was in college, I used to spend weeks there, but it was always another place to me. It was never my place. I never felt it. But my brother did. He went to school back there, too, and he always sort of gravitated it. He gravitated to it much easier than I did.

PK: Was there a moment, a decision, or a moment when you recognized this, and made this decision, and said, "I'm just going to back off from this"?

PA: No, it was felt all along. I think what happened is that it became--

[Tape 1, side B]

PK: Continuing the interview with Peter Alexander. This is tape one, side B.

We were still talking about place. But then also consequences. Flirting with New York, having an initial success there, but then a decision that was made for the reasons you've expressed. It had consequences.

PA: But again, you can't remove arrogance from this, from what we're talking about. That was a big part of it, too.

PK: But you didn't need it, in a sense.

PA: Didn't need what? Yes, I didn't need New York. Fuck 'em. I remember, for an example, a dinner party over at Isherwood's and Bachardy's , with Pete--what's his name? Not Plagens, because that was much earlier, when Peter was still a painter out here.

PK: The critic?

PA: The critic.

PK: Not Fidel?

PA: Danielli? No, no, no. The guy from New York.

PK: Big critic.

PA: I keep thinking Stremmel, but it's not Stremmel.

PK: Schemel?

PA: No.

PK: No, no, no. Not Schemel, wait a minute. Well, we'll think of it.

PA: You know the guy I'm talking about. He wrote for *Art News* or not--for *Art America*, and also for *Art Forum* for a long time.

PK: Schjedahl.

PA: Something like that. Yes. Anyway, he came out, and this was sort of in his heyday, when he was sort of a hot--I don't know, maybe he still is. We had a small dinner party over there. He and I had always been very friendly. We were friendly in New York. We played cards together and all the rest of it. Basically, the content of our conversation was, I said, in no uncertain terms, that, "I don't see any reason to go to New York and buy into that shit and/or to feel as if we are in an inferior position because we're out here." And he never talked to me again.

PK: Now.

PA: No, seriously. He was really hurt.

PK: Hurt?

PA: He was hurt, because essentially what I did was I said that the value--his apparent sense of self was such that I had attacked that sense of self, and he wanted nothing to do with me after that. You get my point?

PK: Yes.

PA: Okay.

PK: I sure do.

PA: Greenberg, which I had dinner with Greenberg once, and he was with Ken Noland. I mean, that's when Greenberg's word was law. I remember having dinner with him, and just his behavior, I said, "This guy's fucked." The same way Neutra was. Neutra's arrogance I couldn't bear. I don't care how good he was. I used to take him drawings, or take him blueprints, which he would then color with his colored pencils. He'd spend a couple of hours in the afternoon lying in bed because of his heart condition. So he and I would sit around and talk. He would talk to me; I didn't talk. After a while I said, "I don't want to be like this guy." I mean, I don't see any reason for anybody to be like this. It was tragic. That's what I felt about Greenberg, and that's exactly what I felt about this other guy. So obviously something was operating there which said to me, you know--you know, you've got the picture. You understand what I'm saying?

PK: Yes, you resented the notion that you were obliged to conduct your career in a certain way to give it a value.

PA: Yes. Not only that, but that presumably once I had gone through the processes in order to attain stature, look at the kind of person I was going wind up as a result of that going through that process. I saw no value in any of it. You get what I mean? Not that I was going to--I'm just saying not that I had the wherewithal to even begin to do it, but it was that the whole process just was, I thought, was sort of disgusting.

PK: It sounds to me as if you thought it didn't have very much to do with what you valued.

PA: Exactly. Okay, let's not put a value judgment. My life was not really relevant to that, I didn't think.

PK: Did you observe, as you got to know these artists, East and West, that in some cases the other artists, or some of the other artists, were being distracted from what you felt was important now?

PA: We're all distracted. We're all distracted.

PK: But that there were greater distractions and it tended to be along commercial lines, you know, showing, being in the right place.

PA: Yes.

PK: Is this what you feared happening to you, in part?

PA: Well, I'm not exempting myself from all that shit. I mean, I do it out here.

PK: You did it here. Well, you chose where you wanted to do it.

PA: Yes, more or less. Also I could chose the degree to which to do it. I mean, I always felt that--I observe, for an example, yes, other artists, or even my brother, in what he has to do to sustain that process. He's been very successful, and there's a reason. Part of that reason is that it's a job. You do a lot, and a lot of it is not very

savory for me. I didn't want to do that.

PK: You didn't want to curry favor. You didn't want to kiss--

PA: I'm not trying to take myself out of that. I'm no sweetheart. But I'm just talking--I suppose it has to do with the degrees of tolerance, and I suppose a part of that has to do with the ambition. I think if one is really ambitious, then those things don't trouble you. But evidently I didn't have sufficient ambition and/or I wasn't sufficiently competitive because all of those issues troubled me.

PK: What you've said, as I understand it, is very interesting, but the consequences of not going to New York were both positive and negative. You were recognizing that that's the issue, that the consequences of going to New York would have been probably negative to you as a person.

PA: To me as a person, yes.

PK: I mean, maybe to your art, you can't say that for sure.

PA: Yes. But as a person, I knew it would do me in.

PK: But you also recognized, again, back to wrapping up this question, that the consequences professionally by staying here, staking your claim, setting up shop here, could be negative to your career, or at least--

PA: Diminished.

PK: --diminished.

PA: Yes.

PK: Now, this has nothing to do with the quality of the art that's being made; it's just your perception.

PA: Exactly. Because it's immediately limited. I mean, you put boundaries on it almost by virtue of the fact that you don't have the access to Europe and that whole sort of process. The other thing, which is that I think you have to consider there has to also, in all of this, has to be a certain amount of fear. I may have feared that I was not up to the task. I mean, I think that that could be part of it, too.

PK: I know that feeling.

PA: Huh? [Laughter]

PK: That's a familiar feeling for all of us.

PA: Well, I don't think you can separate that out of what we're talking about.

PK: But, Peter, that's fairly universal, and you responded to it in a slightly different way. It would also drive some people then to the challenge, to test where they feel is the most chance of failure.

PA: Okay. I don't think the marketplace, or the public, is a place to do that test. I think it's an internal test. I think I feel that the biggest problem that I have is with me. I mean, it's bad enough with me, let alone to involve all those other people or all those other circumstances.

PK: Did you then have additional opportunities to show in New York? Did you show again? I don't know. I don't have a little catalog with your exhibition history, but, say, at that time, early on, there was this one successful show.

PA: No, I did two, I think, three shows, with Bob. Then what happened is that I stopped making the pieces that I was doing.

PK: Were those the boxes?

PA: Well, they were the boxes, and then there were the big wedges. Then they went into the wall pieces. The last group I did, which was in the early seventies, was the wall pieces. That was the last show that I did in New York for a while, for years, several years, because it was at that point that I stopped using resin and started drawing pastel sunsets. It was '72, '71. That was also a reaction; that is, those drawings was a reaction against to several things. That was the beginning of minimalism, and when rhetoric starting getting real heavy, a lot of words.

PK: Theory, we call it.

PA: Thank you. Theory started getting real heavy, and I got angrier and angrier about theory, and wanted to do something that was really stupid. So I figured about as stupid thing I could do would be to do a sunset. I wanted to do a picture. I wanted to get away from all that stuff and just do a picture--P-I-C-T-U-R-E. I figured, well, a sunset would be about as dumb a picture that could be done. I mean, that is it was not--okay, it has all those qualities we're talking about. But more important in any of this, I was building a house up in Tuna, and the site looked west, and I was building it in the fall. You know, bang, bang, saw, saw. Every day I would see these incredible sunsets. So I thought, well, something could be done with that. And that was really the incentive. That's what got me into sunsets. But the other reasoning, having to do with wanting to make pictures and I wanted to rid myself of this material that I was getting toxic poisoning from. For an example, I have always drank, but I never drank vodka. At the end of the day, it started to get to the point where I would drink a whole bottle of vodka. Then as soon as I stopped using the resins, I stopped.

PK: How do you explain that?

PA: It was the toxicity. In other words, it was--

PK: Was it like an antidote, the vodka?

PA: Well, it was like--oh, I'm exaggerating, but I mean it's good drama if I say a whole bottle, you know, but a lot. It was a lot. But it was only vodka, and I never drank vodka up until this time. So something had to be going on that had to with the toxicity. Then I stopped, and then that was it.

PK: So when did you start the sunsets?

PA: '71.

PK: Well, this is perfect, because we're now beginning to talk about--

PA: Environment.

PK: --environment, but, yes, and your work.

PA: Yes.

PK: And your work. The next question I have for you, following from the fact that you cast your lot here, I was wondering if you would be willing to acknowledge, or if you, indeed, recognize in your own work a kind of sensibility, a kind of view you would call West Coast art?

PA: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

PK: Distinguished from--

PA: I'm not even sure I could describe it, but I mean, I could--but before you get into that, I just want to make one comment. Eva Hesse, for an example, I always love her work. I remember having a meal with her in New York before she died. She went to Yale [University] and she's real bright, and she was very connected to the cerebral world of art in New York, and very much respected, and justifiably. I was sort of envious that I couldn't do art that was as whatever hers was. I mean, how could you describe it? There was sort of an intellectual, and yet a sensual combo that I thought was fairly unique and very enviable.

PK: The art of idea.

PA: Well, it was idea, but she would always give it a little kicker of sensuality because of the nature of the materials and all the rest of it, so that they both worked. I mean, it grabbed you on both levels. I could never quite get the intellectual stuff in there. I am much more of a hedonist and much more sort of a populist.

PK: Well, do you think that then is one of the--

PA: It's inseparable.

PK: --issues that also separates East and West?

PA: Yes. I think so.

PK: So do I. Would you hazard that it might constitute a kind of world new, separable?

PA: Yes, absolutely.

PK: Would you go that far?

PA: I would.

PK: Would you expand on that just a little bit? You gave a good example.

PA: Well, if art is about ideas, then ideas are not a populace concept. Populace concepts really originate from something that's felt. One of the reasons why I've always dealt with clichés, more or less--I mean, when I started working in resin, it was plastic. Art was not made out of plastic in those days. Art was made out of all the things that history has said art is made of. So one of the reasons why I liked plastic was that it was sort of anti-art, so to speak.

PK: Sort of like a Dadaist.

PA: It was very hedonistic. Well, I'm not talking about the Naum Gabos and those others. Also the reason why I got into it was because of surfboards. I mean, when I used to glaze surfboards, my surfboard, I remembered the resin in the bottom of the Dixie cup. That's how I got into the idea of casting the resin. I didn't know that there were other people here doing the same thing.

PK: Really?

PA: Oh, no. That was completely coincidental. I subsequently met them, meaning I met De Wain [Valentine], and I met Ron Cooper, and Terry [Terrence] O'Shea, and Ron Davis, and Doug Edge. Who else was in there? There were a couple of other guys whose names I've sort of forget. Eventually Bruce Beasley was another guy. Oh, the guy who was at the County Museum, did those really kind of beautiful pieces, and he sort of disappeared. Maurice Tuchman was a big advocate. He was in that show, the Sculpture of the Sixties. And [John] McCracken --

PK: McCracken?

PA: No, not McCracken, but another guy who did these sort of layered things that were beautifully made. They may be acrylic and they had color in them. I don't know. I don't know what happened.

PK: Not Fletcher?

PA: No, no, not Fletcher Benton. No. Well, actually, McCracken, I think, was teaching at UCLA. He was teaching there, wasn't he?

PK: Yes, I think so.

PA: So I remember he was like ahead of me in terms of the introduction. He was already sort of established when I came into the arena. I was sort of always very admiring of him. Yes, he was teaching down in sculpture at UCLA at the time. I'm off track. We were talking about?

PK: We were talking about--

PA: Oh, the populace business.

PK: --the populace and world views. The distinctions between Eastern and Western.

PA: Well, you're a historian. I've often thought about making a comparison between Florence and Venice in the 18th century. That is, Florence was the intellectual center, and it's the one that we know most about in terms of what was written, and all the rest of it. It wasn't until sometime later that history began to sort of catch up with all those guys that came out of Venice. Venice was much more hedonistic than Florence. I mean, you had Veronese. You had--who's the "Angels in the Sky" guy?

PK: Well, I don't know. You've got Titian in Venice, a little later. "Angels in the Sky" guy? [Laughs]

PA: Simon's got a fantastic painting of his out there, you know, the babe and then all the putti floating around. He always did this. [Jacopo Robusti] Tintoretto.

PK: Yes, and then later [Giovanni Battista] Tiepolo.

PA: Right. No, it's Tiepolo.

PK: Yes.

PA: Yes, that's the guy. There you go. But all those guys came out of Venice, right?

PK: Right.

PA: And, of course, Canaletto, which is always pretty funny.

PK: Yes, there are these kinds of differences. But let me ask you this. You mention this group of artists who, of course, became, in fact, to a certain extent, they're the ones that attracted attention to especially the Los Angeles area at that time. These then were identified with--

PA: Ken Price, Bob Irwin, Larry Bell, certainly, because of the glass. Then myself to a certain degree, and McCracken and Valentine and Cooper, at the time, and Terry. I mean, O'Shea was a real odd bird. Did you ever know him?

PK: I don't think so.

PA: Craig Kaufman.

PK: Certainly Ron Davis.

PA: Yes, and Ron Davis and Craig Kauffman.

PK: So these were the big shots. My question is this, because here I have a chance to ask somebody who was really there and involved, and you said something interesting that I didn't know that you, because of your involvement with the recreational side of your life, which is surfing, surfboards, that you, for some reason, which we might be able to get into to try and speculate about this, were able to make that leap, take this activity, this craft, this fabrication, and transform it.

PA: I mean, I can tell you exactly what was going on. I was doing a piece at UCLA. It was a little bust of plaster. I don't know why I was doing it. It was a figurative piece, and I was carving this little--chipping away at this piece of plaster. I thought, "Jesus, this would be much more interesting if it were cast in resin, because I could put this head inside this box, and you could look into it." It was the looking into that I liked. Like [Jan] Vermeer. I always thought Vermeer was incredible, because you were always looking, you're watching. The idea of watching, that kind of voyeurism, or that kind of containment, that is, a place that's still, that's quiet, that is full of light. I sort of would transport myself into these objects.

This bust was ridiculous, the object itself. I still have it, in fact. It was sort of stupid, but it was the beginning of the process. Then I got rid of the bust, and went to using straight abstraction.

PK: Did you know the work of Joseph Cornell at that time?

PA: Well, sort of. We all loved Cornell for the same reason, because you're watching. But I would say that he was not an influence. I would say that, I don't know, it was the material. I think permission came from Larry, because he did those glass boxes. Even though what I was doing was different, I'm sure that there's a relationship there.

PK: So this was all going on at that time. It brought a great deal of attention and fame to L.A. In fact, rather extraordinary when you think about it. This was like all of sudden, there was art in Southern California.

PA: Right.

PK: There are those of us now who maybe are a little more reasoned to think that perhaps there was some art beforehand. But, nonetheless, this really attracted the big attention.

PA: There was plenty of art beforehand, which we know, but it was never--

PK: But nonetheless, the exciting news--

PA: The system wasn't in place to allow this to happen.

PK: Of course, this is how we read about it now. This is canonical. This has become the art history of this region. But from what you're saying, it sounds as if that was very much the case. I mean, the descriptions that you read about entertainment--scratch that. But recreation, low art, or, it's not even art, it's that lifestyle indeed was--

PA: A participant?

PK: Yes. For artists here, artists here, it was an easier bridge for some reason. It was less of a leap from--

PA: Lifestyle was inseparable from what you did.

PK: Cars, surfboards, and so forth to art.

PA: All the rest of it. Oh, yes. Because it was all an extension of.

PK: So this is not, then, a convenient sort of art historical construct.

PA: Right. Where suddenly you took on art with a capital A, and you mold over what is history expecting now, or what can I do now which is significant, in the lineage of art history. If you look at [Frank] Stella, he's a perfect example of those black paintings he did at Princeton. He thought those out. I mean, you don't just do those. You know, you think them out, because the guy's really smart. He knew what was not expected, and he knew what would work, and he did it, and they're terrific. I think they're the best paintings he's ever done. But I don't think anybody here thought anything out. You felt it out, or you kind of went blah, blah, blah, blah, you know. But you didn't do it--you know, my point's clear.

PK: Yes, and it's a good one. I just wanted to make sure that I understood that, indeed, is what you were reporting here.

PA: Billy was one of the best proponents of this, too. That's the best work he's ever done, those Dentos.

PK: When did it become, or did it, become self-consciousness? Let me tell you what I mean by that. [Brief interruption.]

I don't know if I was very clear in my asking this particular question, so I'll try it again. But I was trying to ascertain that, indeed, what has now become sort of an accepted notion of California art history, a sixties' style, and very nicely written about in a way that sounds important, it gives a certain character to this area, is, from what you said, indeed, the case, that there was a lack of self-consciousness about developing these new forms and materials, in particular, and that there was apparently something in place that would allow this kind of mood without conceptualizing it the way, perhaps, similar moves were made in the East.

PA: Yes. I mean, this is presumptuous, but I think, yes. It's not completely one or the other, but certainly I would say that the emphasis had less of a historical consciousness, and it was more sort of felt or fallen into than contrived.

PK: What we're seeking here, it ain't easy, something that's ineffable, really, and that is, what is the spirit, in a way, of an art environment context. Would you say given that, indeed, these developments, the experiments, that you tried, you and the others, were possible because you were working at a distance from New York--

PA: Sure, of course. Of course. You could not take on what was taken on here and not have that distance, because then that was the virtue, and from other points of view, it was a negative.

PK: Well, next question. At what point did you see that as one of the attractive qualities for making art here?

PA: It was not even about a choice. It's the same. That story I told you about the architecture and saying, "I can't do this anymore." It was the same thing. I think the reason why I never even imagined going to New York was because there was something telling me that this is not for me. In other words, which meant that if what is possible here, I somehow sensed what was possible, and knew that whatever I was could only be done here.

PK: So for Oliver, it was philosophical. I mean, there is no question, he is a--he has written about. Let me try to ask this question. Or maybe you know where it's going. That Robert Irwin, I always thought, was finally, in some ways, in the realm of the senses, and that it hadn't been articulated as high philosophy, in theory, which, of course, now is, if you read Ren Weschler's book--

PA: He's a fucking hedonist. You know, he had the best butterfly collection I've ever seen. Would you think of Irwin and butterflies? No. But he knew what it took. He knew what had to be done was that it had to get put into words and it had to be put in sort of philosophical discourse. Which is exactly what he presents, and he does it incredibly well. But if you've ever heard him speak, you come away from one those things and you say, "What the fuck did he say?" [Laughs]

PK: But this isn't about Irwin.

PA: No, and I have enormous admiration for Bob.

PK: No, I know that.

PA: And all the rest of it, but it's like "Huh?" But look at Nauman. Nauman was here, and nothing happened. He went to New York--WHAMBO!

PK: No, I wouldn't say nothing happened [unclear] Bruce was here.

PA: No, but Bruce's sensibility is not about this place. It is sort of, because--

PK: Well, yes, what about that? Tell me about that.

PA: I was thinking, and I'm thinking out loud, is that actually Bruce is about this place in an odd sort of way. And probably--oh, I don't even want to get into Bruce. Let's keep on a subject that I'm more familiar with, which is not Bruce.

PK: Well, okay. This is not a bad way of doing this, though, because what we're describing--and we'll stop whenever you want to stop--we're trying to identify--we agree, more to the point, you agree, you feel that there is finally a certain sensibility that you associate with California, or especially Southern California?

PA: Let's just call it comfort. I can only speak subjectively here. It has to do with my level of comfort, and, yes, I find it here and I don't find it in New York. I find it here and I find it in Mexico.

PK: That, of course--and you can't speak really, only for yourself.

PA: Right.

PK: But what we're also trying to do, another part of this question, maybe it's a little bit speculation, maybe it's based on your relationship with other artists over time, going through this period, we're talking, I guess, about the sixties' generation, sort of two generations a little bit, but close together, and saying, "Okay, they're making art in this place. For some reason they're here. How does that show?"

We have to turn this tape.

[Tape 2, side A]

PK: Continuing an interview with Peter Alexander. The date is December 13, 1995. This is the first session, and we're now on tape two, side one.

Peter, we were still wrestling with another one of these difficult questions that have no final definitive answer. But it's about trying to identify some quality, whether it is a perception, an attitude, a psychology, that one could attribute to this place and to its culture.

PA: Well, you know, man, we used to surf and smoke dope. You know, I mean, you can't surf and smoke dope in New York all the time.

PK: No, you can't. You especially can't surf.

PA: You can't surf. [Laughs] That was the prevailing Eastern thought, and my brother was a great exponent of that.

PK: So you couldn't be what? You mean that you couldn't really be serious here.

PA: No, I'm serious. Many Easterners, the collective Eastern thought appeared to me, at that time, to be that all "we" do out here is to--man, you know, smoke a little dope.

PK: Well, they were taking their share of stuff. Well, it's a dismissive attitude to me. What you're describing is very simply dismissive attitude towards the coast, which was seen in many other areas, as well. But turning that around a bit, at this point we're more interested in what was here and not how it was dismissed or perceived in the East. That's a later question.

PA: Well, part of it, and I was thinking about your question, and in many ways what it has to do with, how do you spend your day. What do you do? How do you spend your day? By what are you confronted or not confronted on a daily basis. What one is confronted by here is completely different than what you're confronted by in New York. I will say New York, but, you know, other cities. And that is what's different. This could be a real stretch, but the ephemera of Hollywood, probably that fact has a great deal to do with the nature of a lot of the work that comes out of here, or certainly did for a long period of time. I suppose that *Helter Skelter* was probably the biggest breaking point, or that *Helter Skelter* established another generation of--

PK: You mean the show at MOCA?

PA: Yes, that show. Not so much that show, but it was the first collective demonstration, it seemed, of a point of view that it became apparent that L.A. has now become a city, because it's painful. Cities are not a city unless it's painful. So what happened in the sixties, L.A. wasn't painful then. It wasn't until of sort of the mid-eighties, I suppose, that this place started to garner pain.

PK: So you really do believe that hedonism is part of the character of the sort of the situation?

PA: Attention to the senses.

PK: That's what I said about Irwin that didn't fit. That I see it much more as an interest in the senses or perception, if you want to.

PA: Than in the cerebral.

PK: So in general you would--

PA: Well, look it, when the Santa Anas blow in the fall and you smell those orange blossoms, which you still do, I mean, I can't think of any equivalent anyplace else. I mean, there are up in, I'm sure, in Morocco and blah, blah, blah. But that's certainly pretty unique.

PK: Well, I think that's a very interesting observation that you really then are describing a major change in the environment and in the quality of the urban experience here from the sixties to the eighties.

PA: Oh, yes.

PK: You sort of document it by that exhibition at MOCA.

PA: Well, I think, again, it was the most public statement, to my knowledge. It originated here. Certainly, the work that was done in that exhibition is not anything like the work that was being done at say the one that Fred White did at UCLA. What's that one, you know, the little one he did which was Irwin and Larry and myself and Craig Kaufman.

PK: I probably saw it. I don't remember what it was called.

PA: Well, it has a certain sort of infamy to it. There was a beautiful little catalog that came out, *Light Reflection*, something like that. I forget the name of it. But it was always being referred to.

PK: Oh, that color light thing?

PA: I don't have the catalog. It's in the biography. The catalog, actually, is very rare. I mean, it's unfortunate you don't see it very much. It's a beautiful little catalog. I'm only using that as a reference to how exaggerated the differences are between *Helter Skelter* and that exhibition.

PK: Yes, this is for the benefit of our tape audience. Show entitled *Transparency, Reflection, Light Space*, four artists: Peter Alexander, Larry Bell, Robert Irwin, and Craig Kauffman. It was the 1971, end of the sixties at UCLA. The point you're making is that--

PA: That was an authentic representation of how we thought, how we felt and how we thought, meaning not just this four, but how collectively we thought and felt about Los Angeles, about this environment. Well, *Helter Skelter* is equally a collective thought of this environment and they're significantly different. You could gear the changes that have occurred by those two exhibitions.

PK: Very interesting. Was there more of a--despite your notorious behavior, the sort of bad boy image, to a certain degree, or playboy image--

PA: I didn't do anything anybody else didn't do.

PK: I don't mean you. [unclear].

PA: But everybody did it. But I'm just talking about why I was doing it.

PK: But I'm talking about the sixties, which, of course, and the group at that time. But despite that kind of behavior, the liberated behavior, the bohemian ideal, which is associated with the--

PA: I don't think bohemian. It was rock and roll and Hollywood. That's not bohemian.

PK: Yes, but if artists are involved, we call it bohemian.

PA: No, we don't. That is a perceptual shift also. If you were talking about 1950, I'd say bohemian, but we're talking about the late sixties. I wouldn't say bohemian. I would say it's not about black leotards. It's about being a participant and equal to other systems that exist, and those systems could be Hollywood and rock and roll. But not bohemian.

PK: So in a conventional sense, it's not--I mean, bohemian basically has to do--the notion has to do, go back to the--

PA: It's a fringe. Bohemian suggests a kind of fringe.

PK: Outside.

PA: It's outside. This is not outside. This is part of and equal to, and that's critical.

PK: You're right. That's a very good point.

PA: We thought of ourselves as being as good as, and as important as, all the other industries in this town, which were rock and roll and movies. Not certainly economically, but from a point of view of aesthetic impact and so on and so forth. It was a distorted perception, but at least it--

PK: Of course, rock and roll--

PA: That's what it was.

PK: --does have an aspect, at least a lifestyle, of counterculture. Anti-establishment. But that's perhaps rhetoric as much as anything [unclear].

PA: Yes.

PK: Posturing, shall we say.

PA: Look, you don't have Capital Records and A&M and Warner Brothers. That's not counterculture. [Laughs]

PK: No, no, of course not.

PA: That's business, and anything other than that is just flash.

PK: Let me rephrase this question. Despite--

PA: Look, everybody thought of themselves as being artists. Okay? Actors. I mean, this is when Jack Nicholson started and this was *Easy Rider*. This was all that stuff, right? They were artists. The rock-and-roll people were artists, and we were artists, and we were all the same. We were all either a part of, or on the fringe, interchangeably, or simultaneous, or something, but what I'm saying is that it was an equal playing field. At least that's how we thought of it.

PK: But you're still sixties' people. Forget the term "bohemian," which has connotations of the beat era, and then going way back to Whistler and so forth. Forget about that. But indeed, the people that you've described, whatever industry, and I think it's real interesting that you're saying about the self-perception as participants with these other more lucrative industries.

PA: Yes, but we used to go to the same parties.

PK: Well, that's right. But the notion of devil-may-care, of pushing the limits as Michel Foucault would say, I guess, his theory, that behavior, in some cases outrageous, seems to be a part of that with--well, certainly with rock and rollers, devil-take-the-high-most kind of attitude. You know, we are operating by different rules, because we are special.

PA: That's right. Exactly.

PK: So this is what I would describe. But despite that, what you--

PA: People were so forgiving.

PK: Well, you know, everybody had their day to a certain degree. But the fact of the matter is, it seems, from what you've said, that in terms of the work itself, and as a response to an environment, there was a kind of innocence in the work itself, or a reflection of an environment that was more forgiving, more salubrious, more comfortable, less problematic than what we have at this stage in Los Angeles.

PA: Yes. Oh, yes. Much more tolerant.

PK: I don't know if "innocence" is the right word, but it's--

PA: I think innocence would certainly would be a word of many. It was cultural innocence. It was the first go, so to speak, so nobody knew what to expect. All these factors came together at the same time, meaning the sixties and rock and roll and drugs and art and blah, blah. So there weren't many judgements being passed around, because nobody was in any position to make these judgements, except the ultra right, and nobody paid any

attention to them, so you were okay. You were in safe territory. You would not be in safe territory now by any matter of means.

PK: Things have gotten--

PA: I mean that behavior would never be acceptable.

PK: Well, things have gotten, of course, more complicated.

PA: I'm not sure it would want to be repeated. I mean, it couldn't. There's no context for it.

PK: Certain things have their place in time, there's no question. We've got other problems, and there's always far more antisocial dangers and antisocial behavior now, if you really want to look at it. Not necessarily in the art world. But remember also you and I have grown up a bit, too. We're middle-aged gentlemen.

PA: Middle-aged. Gentleman, I don't know. You are. But there was an innocence in it which was--meaning there was no malice in any of it. I think a lot of behavior today is malicious. If we're talking about the same thing. We're talking about the urban environment and the kind of activities that occur here, but that was so rarified.

[Laughs] For an example, I'll never forget, it was really great. This is how removed it was from reality. Maurice Tuchman organized an exhibition for the Black Panthers. It was at the Grinestein's house, and what it was, was an auction. The money for the auction--it was to go for black political cause. It wasn't the Black Panthers, but it was for black political cause. It was a white boy supporting the blacks. Well, the guy who organized it, got Maurice to organize it, all the checks went to him, and he just took off. [Laughs] I don't know what happened to the money. It didn't go to any black organization; it went to this guy. But, it was perfect. It was like the fact that it happened at the Grinestein's. And here we all were, right? Sort of all giving pieces, and all the collectors were there, and everybody was all being real cool, da, da, da.

PK: Tom Wolfe gave that a name.

PA: And this guy just--what?

PK: [Unclear].

PA: Yes, right. And that's what it was. This guy just walked with it and it was just great. [Laughs]

PK: When did you find out about it?

PA: Oh, much later. Much later.

PK: Somehow that would seem fitting.

PA: It's completely fitting. Completely.

PK: [unclear] .

PA: But the guy who was doing it, I mean, you know, that was reality. That wasn't art. That was "Give me the bucks, babe."

PK: I'm very interested, and I want to make sure I get this right, this business of theoretical, or philosophical, if you will, intellectual underpinnings for art, because it seems to me really are touching on an important distinction between the L.A. art world of that time, of the sixties, and the situation in New York. Do I understand this correctly, that most of the artists you associated with, and in many cases now their work is understood and described in highly theoretical terms, post-structuralist, post-modern terms, early, that they, in fact--this really had nothing to do with their art-making and what they brought to their art, the theory.

PA: You're talking about people out here?

PK: Yes. You're friends, your colleagues here in Los Angeles, who are now, in fact, shortly thereafter by New Yorkers began to be described, their work began to be described very much in formalist first, and theoretical--

PA: [Laughs] Those words never were part of the vocabulary I knew.

PK: Isn't it interesting how--

PA: Yes, but so does this surprise you? [Laughs]

PK: No, but on the other hand, as you say about Frank Stella, you feel that he brought that with him to his work,

that this informed, the theoretical underpinnings, the intellectual discourse or concerns, were consciously brought to the art that in the West--and you can tell me if this is right or wrong, but I'm trying to make sure that I understand what you're saying--that in the West, in California, these artists, whose work eventually began to be described in similar terms, be interpreted in similar terms.

PA: Had no concept. They had no concept at all on many of these issues.

PK: Including our friend, Ed Ruscha, of all these artists. If you read the critiques of Ed's work and his compositions--

PA: Today.

PK: --absolutely extraordinary.

PA: Oh, yank it higher, baby. It's like--

PK: What do you--

PA: That's it. That's the way the guy is. That's how he thinks. It's nothing to do with any of that shit.

PK: Would you point to Ed as one of the quintessential L.A. artists, in terms of what we've been describing, or response to a place and liking it?

PA: Yes, yes. Ed's response to L.A. is one of the best. But I think where Ed was brilliant, or is brilliant, is that he put words into it. And by putting words in, then he took it out of the strictly hedonist California territory and brought in and allowed those in the East, so to speak, to chew on something.

If you look at [Jasper] Johns, Johns is fucking brilliant. Twenty critics could write books about Johns, nobody would be wrong, and nobody would be right. But, boy, they could sure go on and on. Going back to Stella again, I remember the Protractor Series he did in the late sixties, seventies, in the seventies. I wondered if, in fact, which I thought was a brilliant notion, that those things reproduced so beautifully that he called his colors, and the idea came from the idea of reproduction, which I would not put it past him. He had the smarts to come up with that kind of concept. I mean, talk about marketing. Some of those paintings are pretty good. I don't think they're nearly as good as the black ones. But if you look at it from the point of view of, nobody ever did that before. What? You mean, God, making these paintings that are big, flat, bold colors that, God, they reproduce so incredibly in offset. [Laughs]

PK: Why not?

PA: I don't know, it's just a possibility. True or not, it's a good idea.

PK: The work that we've been discussing, or the artists that we've been discussing, who are your friends and colleagues here, out here, enjoyed rather amazing--well, they were overnight sensations, when you consider what it takes sometimes to get attention in the art world and so forth. The right things were in place at the right time. For some reason--

PA: I wouldn't say overnight.

PK: Well, it doesn't mean that many of them hadn't been working for sometime, but they certainly didn't work like--

PA: There was something that coalesced, which was outside of the artists themselves, and they were a participant in this coalescing. I'm thinking about some of the artists that came out of New York in the eighties. I would call some of them overnight sensations.

PK: Schnabel.

PA: Well, yes, but I think Salle and Schnabel, they purposely put themselves on that track. Meaning that they maneuvered--

PK: They're careerists.

PA: All of it. I'm not saying this to diminish any of their accomplishments, but that was their priority. They made moves based on--and that comes from an enormous amount of cynicism. I mean, that's the only way that that can operate. They were educated out here. But the difference is John Baldessari who, I mean, he's a whole other territory. I shouldn't say Baldessari, that's not entirely true. I mean, there were other factors.

PK: He was real influential.

PA: I think he was very influential in it. But we didn't possess nearly the smarts, so to speak, or the cynicism to allow that maneuvering, or else to be that sophisticated at maneuvering.

PK: So you can't point to any strategy. It wasn't strategic.

PA: There was some strategy, like, what are we going to do tomorrow? No, there was no strategy. Not in that sense there was no strategy. Even in my time, it was strategic to go to New York. Some tried and didn't last too long, or did it for a while, or what have you. Moses was always making little forays into New York. You do that because you know it's good strategy. Look at Vija Celmins, she was at UCLA when we were there. Vija is amazing in the sense that she, even at UCLA, she knew exactly what she was doing. And she's not changed at all. She's still doing exactly the same thing. Her moving to New York was not strategic. It did a great deal for her, but she was very comfortable here. I mean, she was certainly accepted, respected, and all the rest of it here, it was just a bigger audience back there. But I wouldn't say her move was strategic in any way, as I would call Schnabel's, or Salle's move strategic. I mean, she just happened to go to New York, but for completely different reasons.

Now Bryan Hunt, his was strategic. Nothing happened to Bryan out here, although I think some of the best work he's done was done here. But he couldn't get any attention, and I don't know why. But as soon as he went to New York, off he went.

PK: Let me tell you briefly, since this is your interview, not mine, a story that--I don't know if it's really set down anywhere. I was interviewing some years ago, at his Dana Point home, John McLaughlin. He was absolutely a dear man and much admired by his group of artists.

PA: One of the best.

PK: Yes.

PA: Without a doubt.

PK: One of these youngsters, who was beginning to get a reputation, younger L.A. artist, I think it was Jack Barth, if I'm not mistaken, came down, interrupted our interview.

PA: He showed up?

PK: He just showed up, knocked on the door and there he was. Well, of course, John had to receive him. He was actually annoyed, because I had come down--

PA: No shit.

PK --from San Francisco to do this interview with him. He was gracious, always the gentleman. I said, "No problem." Jack--I do believe it was Jack--had come to say goodbye, because he wanted to say goodbye to John and he announced that he was moving. He had a studio downtown L.A., I think, and he was going to be moving to New York. The Holy Grail, I suppose. I don't know. So they chatted, and actually it was touching, because Barth really did--

PA: It was like an homage.

PK: Yes. So anyway, we chatted for a little bit and then he left. As soon as he left, McLaughlin looked at me, and he said something to the effect, he said, "I don't understand it. What's wrong with these kids?" He says, "He has everything he needs to make his art. He has a nice studio. He has a home. He has his place to make his art." I really got the sense that McLaughlin simply didn't get it.

PA: "Why go there?"

PK: Yes. "Why go there?"

PA: Right.

PK: Now, that may be disingenuous to a degree.

PA: No, I don't think so. You can't make the paintings that he makes and be disingenuous. One of the great things about those paintings is the fact they're so fucking sloppy.

PK: Yes.

PA: That's an inseparable part of the joy of those paintings. You could only do that with enormous confidence and comfort. I mean, I'm not saying he didn't. He knew what New York meant, he was not naive from a career point of view, but I don't think he cared. You tell me. You interviewed him.

PK: Well, I will. But at this moment, I'm much more interested in your view of somebody like John and what he might have represented.

PA: The only thing I know about John is that Nick Wilder adored him and also adored his paintings. When I first saw his paintings, my first reaction was, "I don't quite get it." Then after seeing them and being around them a little bit, I began to get it, and thought these things are unbelievable, and not the least of which you would never know that in a reproduction. You would have to see the painting. That was one of the things I really liked about them, was the fact that they were made the way they were.

I met him once in the gallery just to say hello. I didn't know anything about him, other than the paintings. Presumably that says a great deal. If he were like the paintings, I would think the guy was terrific. I'm sure that Greenberg must have been praising his work. I could not imagine that Greenberg was not aware of it, particularly since Nick was so keen on it. So, given that, he certainly had the opportunity to go East, or he must have been invited or something. I don't know what he did, but he didn't. I mean, he didn't go there with any permanence.

PK: No, although he came from the Boston area.

PA: Originally?

PK: Yes.

PA: How long was he out here?

PK: Well, from right after the war. He was in the service in intelligence, Japanese language.

PA: He was a cryptologist?

PK: Language instruction, I think. I'm not quite sure.

PA: Did he live in Dana Point all his life?

PK: That area of Laguna.

PA: Really? Isn't that interesting.

PK: Yes. But it seems instructive to me, in terms of our conversation, hearing this, this issue, that he's a useful one to look at, because in some ways he doesn't seem necessarily to fit, or be necessarily of this place and yet--

PA: He's the same territory as Graves, in that he's sort of an oddball, in the fact that he knows Japanese, or the fact that he's familiar with Japan, suggests that Buddhist influence or that kind of--

PK: Zen.

PA: --Zen stuff. So you tell me, I mean, that's where he comes from. He would not come from Greenberg.

PK: No.

PA: He came from across the ocean, basically.

PK: Even though it would appear on the face of it--

PA: On the face of it that he might, yes. But he did not.

PK: Let's switch this over.

[Tape 2, Side B]

PK: Peter Alexander. This is tape two, side B, and it seems an opportune moment to--

PA: Change questions?

PK: Well, move on a bit. We're still dancing around the same issues, as we will for the remainder of our time.

PA: It's all connected. It's inseparable.

PK: I don't want to post this in any way as simply an East-West confrontation or a binary thing, as they call it now, either/or, because things aren't that simple.

PA: Well, but it is and it is not. It's a constant issue. Certainly much less constant now then it ever has been, thank God, because nobody gives a shit.

PK: Well, this is exactly what I wanted to get to next. We talked a little bit about this earlier, attitudes in the East towards what they often call "the coast," and they really mean, I think, usually Hollywood by that. I'm talking about on the part of certainly critics, those who write about art, the dealers who are in a position, curators, and, let's face it, there's a collective in New York, it's very powerful, and our view of our own art and art history is formed, perhaps disproportionately, by that perspective. To a lesser degree maybe artists, and it interests me to know your experience and how much they participate in these kinds of these perspectives, these attitudes towards the West and towards the regions, regionalism. I guess the next part of that question has to do with just what you said; that is, have the attitudes changed as you watched from 1960s to now.

PA: Dramatically. In the sixties, I remember Michael Balog, whom you may--no, he's dead now. But I remember he was part of the group that went to Chouinard with Laddie and Chuck and Guys and a few others, Tom Little, I think. Michael was a surfer from Ventura and a very, very funny guy. In fact, he was having an affair with Keaton, Diane Keaton. He was wacko. But I remember his going to New York. He was like Barth. He was similar, meaning he said, "Oh, I'm going to go to New York." What he did is, he went to the dentist and got all of his teeth cleaned, and he had a physical checkup, went down to someplace and got a suit, and his ticket and went off to New York. It was like the hick, so to speak, going to the big city. That's exactly what it was like. I think Michael--I mean, he was amazing. He started living with [Robert] Rauschenberg, or else set up--he became a participant in Rauschenberg's entourage. I'm not saying sexual, but you know.

PK: Right. In the orbit.

PA: Definitely in the orbit. And he had the personality where he could do that very easily and very well. He had a show at Castelli and then that was it. But what happened to Michael isn't so much the point as it is about the preparations of going there, and that was the prevalent attitude.

So now, no, for a number of reasons. The primary one, I think, is that as Los Angeles started to develop an economic base and a support system, the need to go to New York was less and less. You didn't have to go there from an economic point of view. But from a career point of view, from a critical point of view, you had to have representation, or you had to have some contact with it, because that's where the words come from.

Now what's happened is that the economic base is as strong here as it is in New York. Of course, you don't have Europe here, and Europe is still significant. We did have the Japanese, but they bailed, but they'll come back in again.

PK: Sure. And the Koreans.

PA: Yes, the Koreans are real hot now, too. But now what's happened is the critical aspects of it, you don't give a shit about, because there's something about the art world has had too many critics for too long and it's too transparent, so that even that factor, that is, the rhetoric that is supplied, doesn't have nearly the effect that it once did. I'm not saying it's impotent, but it doesn't have the potency.

PK: That's very interesting. Would you look at a magazine like *Art Forum* as an example of that shift and change that at one time it seemed to be--

PA: It was *the* magazine. When was the last time you read *Art Forum*? Do you care?

PK: No.

PA: It isn't just our age. My daughter's an artist. She couldn't care less.

PK: Has it become irrelevant in a way?

PA: It's become irrelevant. Who cares?

PK: Because it's too--

PA: *Art and Auction* is much more interesting. *Art in America* is a little bit better. I mean, better than *Art Forum*, but not as good as *Art and Auction*. I think *Art and Auction* is good because it just talks about trends in a broad sense from the point of view of the marketplace. It doesn't talk about--it gets into esthetics, but not in the same

way that that analytical stuff is. What was the other point? Oh, I know. I was reading a thing on Ross Bleckner. It was a review on Bleckner. I think Bleckner is a good artist. I like him. But this review, I couldn't believe it. Just a minute, let's find something in here that's sort of, if you care.

PK: Yes.

PA: "Furthermore, we may wonder what subject is that designated in *Remember Me* by the pronoun 'me.' Is it the artist speaking in propria persona, or perhaps the painting itself through a trope of personification? Or as in Poussin's *Arcadian Shepards*, could death be the speaker? The tone of Bleckner's work makes it hard to exclude this reading, yet the painting itself could never show us how to decide. *Remember Me* tells us the someone or something must be remembered, but we never know," da-da-da-da-da. Okay, you got the idea?

PK: Yes. Who wrote that review? It's in the *New Art in America*, *Current Art in America*.

PA: Yes, Barry Shabowski. Shabowski . Swabski. I don't know who Barry Swabski is, but he--boy, he's got a stiff dick on this one.

PK: Is your point that it's difficult to imagine what this could possibly have to do with the--

PA: Yes. Who cares?

PK: Well, it's a separate industry.

PA: "Or a disabuse contemplation of the simulacrom." What's a simulacrom? The head?

PK: No, no. It's a substitute for something. Something that appears--

PA: Oh. Similar to.

PK: Yes, but it's not the real thing. It's a stand-in kind of thing.

PA: Okay.

PK: But I take your meaning, and I guess your point is that criticism has detoured so far, veered so far off having a connection with the art itself, in many cases.

PA: There's a great piece written by Umberto Eco, which was written in 1980, *How To Write The Introduction To An Art Catalog*.

PK: Oh God, I'll have to read that.

PA: I may even have a copy here.

PK: I'd love it.

PA: It is fabulous. In fact, I thought it was written in the nineties, because it's so cynical, but apparently it was written in the eighties, 1980. [Tape recorder turned off.]

PK: You couldn't find the Eco book, but that essay on *How To Write An Introduction To An Art Catalog*, to you, seems very much to the point in terms of the irrelevance of much art writing except, of course, the kind I do. [Laughs]

PA: Yes, exactly. That's one of the reasons why I appreciate Wilson so much. The downside is that he gets into that place which you kind of go, "Oh, give me a fuckin' break," but which is not over intellectualizing. It's just exposing himself too much. But when he is on, I mean, for an example he wrote a review of a Monet show, it was unbelievable. I mean, the fact that he would hit on the points that he could hit on with such clarity where anybody could read it, and you'd get it by the tone as to what was going on. I mean, he was translating these paintings into words as best as that could be done. And I think that that is extraordinary. As opposed to, at a distance, commenting about the paintings. He wasn't doing that. I mean, you felt the paintings.

PK: Peter what you're saying--what I think as I listen to you--is very much in keeping with your point of view from the very beginning, as you expressed it, and that is that you, yourself, are attracted to, feel more comfortable and natural with an art that comes perhaps even more directly out of experience and out of the [unclear].

PA: It's biographical.

PK: It is not laden, too heavily burdened with the theoretical instructions to give its meaning.

PA: Right. Yes.

PK: I gather also that you feel this is one of the qualities that you associate with--

PA: It characterizes work that comes from this place, and that's one reason why I'm comfortable in it. Yes, that's a very good point.

PK: That's well said. To dispatch the question about attitude--

PA: But that point of view can be very easily dismissed and very easily nailed, meaning that from the cerebral point of view, the position that I take is very fragile because of the level of the attack.

PK: What do you mean?

PA: It's not supportable. It's not easily supportable.

PK: Well, it's an opinion.

PA: Exactly.

PK: But, so what? There's no science in this art.

PA: Well, no, but if you read the critics, there's a science and they believe it.

PK: That's the whole interesting aspect of theoretical theory and literary criticism and so forth, that there's this enlightened group that can bring methods to bear, to understand, to tell us what things mean. what is the meaning. But this leads to another, I think, important question. We agree that there is less method, less concept, intellectual underpinning, theoretical underpinning, of much of the work that came out of California, Southern California, through the sixties, and perhaps up close to our time. That becomes a different issue, I think. But, nonetheless, I've said this earlier, when something is prominent and is evident, shown, it has to be written about. It has to be explained. It has to ascribed importance by critics in certain terms. It doesn't do for them, given the way the intellectual side of the art world operates, this world of discourse and ideas. It doesn't do just to say--

PA: This is not very fertile territory for that group or for that point of view.

PK: Yes, but the point is, when they have to deal with it, or choose to deal with it, then it has to be somehow validated in these terms, and you get art writing about, as you're saying, Irwin and O'Shea. Ed just keeps his mouth shut. Irwin, of course--

PA: Right. Tells everybody. [Laughs]

PK: But this, then, is like the scholar [unclear], the philosopher, looking at products, cultural products, and assigning meaning to them. It doesn't mean it's not there. How do you, and others that you've talked with from the sixties who were involved in making these products, feel about some of the take, the writing about these works? I don't know how much that even interests you.

PA: Well, it depends on who's writing. I think Hughes is one of the best. He does not take on much in this territory. I think he did a great article on Kenny Price when Kenny had the show, I think, down in Texas, sort of a retrospective. It was a very reverential and very accurate thing on Ken. But I don't think he's written about many others in this area. He's very good. Is that your question?

PK: Well, sort of.

PA: Your question is not about who, but I think the question had to do with, how do I feel about the people who do?

PK: Well, not so much the people who do the writing, but the fact is that this art has been written about. The sixties have been written about, and not just locally. But finally, certainly, in the sixties and afterwards, everywhere else you get your essays about this art. It has to be written about in terms of [unclear] . I know this as somebody who writes about art. So you gotta get a hook. You gotta get a hook.

PA: No, it's a difficult problem.

PK: So here you have an art that doesn't demand, as you say, and certainly in terms of artistic attention, this kind of post structuralist if you--

PA: No, there has to be an incredible leap of faith when you take on the territory. I keep thinking of Asian art. I keep thinking of classical Chinese and Japanese painting. One of the things I always loved about the structure of Japanese, let's say, Japanese painting, is that the subject matter is always a given. You've got bamboo, you've got birds, you've got monkeys, you've got frogs, you've got whatever. But what differs is the attitude. The materials are always the same, too. It's always pictorial, and there are very definite boundaries within which the artist will operate. But if you take Hokusai, or if you take--what the hell is the guy who did the twelve stations on the way to Kyoto?

PK: Hiroshige?

PA: Hiroshige, yes. And a bunch of others. Even people that only scholars would know about, like early 14th century stuff. You look at these and you look at ones that--you can have ten views of Fuji, and one of them would just jump out at you and you'd go, "Wow!" Now, okay, how do you describe that? How do you take on the difference between all of this? Basically, the problem is the same. I'm not saying that there's the artistic similarity. Well, there is, but I don't want to be too presumptuous here. But what I'm saying is there is a territorial similarity, which is that, how do you do it? What do you do?

PK: Well, that is the question, and without the devices of, let's say, of formalist criticism, Marxist criticism, if you will, or literary criticism, which is pretty much what has been operative recently in the art world, just about completely, and [unclear] art criticism almost everywhere else. But without these constructs or methods, it's awfully difficult. As you were saying, this is awfully difficult to make these distinctions.

PA: Well, maybe we should start with Japanese criticism, or is there such a thing? Are there critics who write about--

PK: I believe there are, but it's not something I'm real knowledgeable about.

PA: It could be an interesting start.

PK: This is a big subject, because I think you're right on. There may well be that there were certain conventions that were so carefully observed, in fact, you didn't breach them. You didn't jump outside. So you've got a difference between Eastern and Western, at least, as it developed in the late century.

PA: Oh, no, I'm not even suggesting anything that's similar.

PK: So criticism, in other words, -has a different function, I think, in the East [unclear].

PA: Well, it would be interesting to see if there were Western criticisms of Japanese work, for an example. Or also, is there such a thing as an Eastern criticism? Of the books that are written, certainly there must be Eastern critics who write about whether so and so is better than so and so. But I would be curious about is, if they are, how do they describe it, or what do they say? They don't talk about materials. The materials are all the same. They might just identify it, but we both know from our observations of this territory that there are huge differences in quality between all these visions of Fuji.

PK: I would think that that would be the key then to criticism and qualitative distinctions and of skill, and perhaps some evidence of dedication, or [unclear] over and over again. It's like something [unclear]. Morandi would be more like--

PA: I see. I see. Well, okay. But that--

PK: I'm talking about an Eastern aesthetic. I'm speculating. I'm suggesting a more limited, more closed, art environment then what the West [unclear] opened up to make it possible for you guys here in the sixties to do almost anything, and it was the possibility that it could be [unclear].

PA: Oh, no, I'm not making any comparisons between the lineage between the Eastern and the West. I'm only talking about, how do you discern, since what you're basing your response on to these objects is basically emotional. It's how it feels, because you don't have the rhetoric to back it up.

PK: Well, I think there's certain standards of accepted [unclear] and measures of qualities beyond just the--

PA: The felt.

PK: The emotional response. I think that it would be a combination of these things.

PA: Yes, yes.

PK: But I believe that the emotional response, since they're limited subjects and so forth, as you indicated,

derives somehow comes the most effective use of the means. So that's where the art [unclear], because you certainly aren't going to shock people with assumptions like what happened in the West quite early [unclear].

PA: Yes, which brings up another question, which has to do with the avant garde, if you want to get into that one. It's really fascinating to see. I was thinking about the guy, the British guy who cuts the cows in half, or the animals in half, and they are exploding in formaldehyde. I was thinking about--

PK: Yes, I can't remember his name.[Damien Hirst]

PA: Yes, bit he's up for the big award, the Turner Prize or something. I was thinking about the work, which I saw once, and I was thinking about that work, and I was thinking about Rauschenberg's *The Venice [unclear]* , and when he did the goat with the tire around it. Maybe it's animal to animal, but the impact that image made in the *Venice [unclear]* , and to the art world as a whole at that time, was significant, and, I think, one that showed enormous sort of optimism and balls. The guy who's doing the things in formaldehyde which, I would imagine, is sort of the quintessential avant garde.

PK: Apparently.

PA: Apparently. Who gives a shit?

PK: That's a good point. It's shocking only in terms of what I would say [unclear].

PA: It's certainly not optimistic.

PK: Oh, I see what you mean.

PA: Or it doesn't allow for--it doesn't provide a departure for a lot of other things, whereas the Rauschenberg was an incredible departure for many people.

PK: Let's pull this then back again to California art in general, but particularly the period when you started out. What about that notion? We talked about innocence, but what about the notion of optimism?

PA: Things were very optimistic. But it was inseparable from the sixties, meaning that the art was really a reflection of the sixties. It was the optimism that--you must have had that feeling, as fleeting as it was, along with the rest of us, that we really thought that our generation was going to change things. I think every generation does to a greater or lesser degree, but I don't think any generation since then has believed it as strongly as we did.

PK: So this is, indeed, almost a utopia, or social component of the activity of making art.

PA: They were inseparable.

PK: You really did feel this.

PA: Oh, absolutely.

PK: It's not retrospective.

PA: No, no. At the time, I remember feeling it vividly, feeling very potent and very powerful. I mean, internally. Like I was in the right place, at the right time, on the right track.

PK: How did you imagine that these objects you were making would accomplish--

PA: Objects have no sociological--I've never asked them to have any political influence, any sociological influence. What I do are surrogates. They are narcissistic, and they are all about wherever my state of mind is at the time. That's as far as they go. And they do it in some kind of historical context. I make pictures, because it's populist. That's the populism in me. So it's not difficult. Certainly, there's no intellectual challenge at all in it. That's where they come from. There's no political statement. I mean, don't misunderstand me when I was talking about the sixties. I use that example of the sixties because it was the sense of optimism, it was the sense that things--

PK: In general.

PA: In general. Things would change and what I made at the time was simply a reflection of that, and not in any way--what I did was not--I didn't think these objects would--I was not desirous of these objects to make change or to have that effect. It was more of a manifestation of a feeling.

PK: Well, in part is that then acknowledgement that the times gave permission, made possible--

PA: Absolutely. "Permission" is the perfect word. It gave permission for that.

PK: So then it was just another form of participating in these bigger changes, which were hopeful?

PA: Yes.

PK: And that the world, indeed, would be better, not because of the specific, the actual objects within the art itself.

PA: No, it was consistent with the time. At least how I felt. But you know, it was sunshine. I mean, it really was. It was the sixties. This place was still, you know, all the things you remember it, and I used to surf a lot.

PK: Is this something, though, that you would talk about with--was this part of your discourse with the other artists? Was this Peter Alexander's personalism?

PA: No, this is mine.

PK: Responding to your [unclear].

PA: This is mine, yes.

PK: Yes, but would you speculate on any of the other artists around here?

PA: Well, I think everybody sort of acted it out. People didn't talk about it much. I mean, behavior was consistent with what I'm saying. Behavior was more important than the words.

PK: What about the works? You know, there are those who say, it has been said that, especially the Venice group anyway, the Southern California artists of that time, that the lifestyle, to a large degree, became as much the work of art as--

PA: That's Hollywood.

PK: Well, do you agree with that? Do you think that's a fair--

PA: How would I know? I was in the middle of it. [Laughs]

PK: Well, what do you think? How important was that?

PA: I don't know how much it affected my lifestyle. If I were living in Oakland, I'm sure my lifestyle would have been different. I'm sure it had an effect, but to what degree, I have no idea.

PK: Well, what I really meant--and I maybe didn't ask that exactly clearly--it has been said that the lifestyle, that lifestyle itself, the way--

PA: You mean, fuck the objects, this is all about--the objects are a means to the lifestyle?

PK: No, no. That's not it at all. That would be a very simplistic and simple-minded way to look at it, and talk about cynical.

PA: No shit.

PK: No shit, Charlie. But the idea that more than just the objects themselves, the way you lived your life, the look, the style, the parties, and other things like that, become, in a sense, a kind of performance art.

PA: Oh, yes. Oh, completely. Totally. But that was not unique to here. That was happening in New York, too. I mean, Max's Kansas City was, like, what went on in there was unbelievable. I mean, like Barbara Rose, I think this is true, when she was married to Frank Stella had a child by Carl Andre. Andre was the father, but Barbara and Frank were still together. Now, if that doesn't suggest--I'm not saying it's unique historically, but it does suggest a certain kind of--it goes back to Bloomsbury and it goes back to all those times.

PK: Taos and Santa Fe.

PA: Yes, it's all the same stuff. Maybe that is of a time which repeats itself, and this was a time of repetition. That is, the sixties was. Where things became very permissive.

[Tape 3, Side A]

PK: Further continuing this exciting interview with Peter Alexander on December 13, this is tape three, side A.

Before we started taping, we jumped into the dangerous area of modernism and so-called post-modernism, trying to see what term might be most applicable to the situation in L.A. You had some thoughts on that.

PA: Yes, okay. If we were to take Greenberg as being the manifestation of modernism, the only place that Greenberg, in theory, was going to go was to nothing. The closer it got to nothing, the more it was. But I don't think nothing in the Zen point of view, but I think nothing from the point of view of if you took his thinking to a certain conclusion, that's what you'd wind up with, So the great thing about so-called post-Greenbergian theory is that suddenly everything got embraced all over again. As a result of that, then it allowed for not only very many different points of view--I mean, suddenly taste got much more catholic. As a result of that, everything got very confused. So nobody knows what's up from down, at least comparatively speaking, certainly compared to what it was in the Greenbergian times.

It makes me think of sort of a theory that I've sort of diddled with, but have not really pursued much. It makes me think of Rembrandt and Van Gogh as painters, and it has to do with the touch. You could also take Frans Hals and--who was another one who was more contemporary that sort of had that touch of Hals'? He was good.

PK: Dutch?

PA: No, not Dutch, but just--particularly somebody who's not Dutch, but let me just go back to Rembrandt and Van Gogh. There are several things being said here. One is that most of us are learning art history, most of us are seeing paintings as reproductions and not as objects, which that in itself has had and will continue to have, if Bill Gates has anything to do with it, a big influence on what art is without really having the vaguest idea of what it's about. The reason why I use touch as an example--and this addresses the issue of "better than," that things get better, is that if you look at Van Gogh and Rembrandt, let's say for the sake of this argument that their touch is pretty much the same. I would say also that the manifestations of that touch are similar. So what you have is not a "better than something else," that things get clearer or what have you. I think what happens is that it's part of a cycle.

We identify with artists because these artists most represent how we feel. Artists are like everybody else; all they do is paint, so to speak. I use painting in the broadest sense. I'm going to digress here for a minute. But the thing that's remarkable about painting, as opposed to any other of the so-called forms is that it has touch. It has more touch than virtually anything else. This aspect of the touch is critical to others, the observers, connecting to it in ways that are quite ill-defined.

I'm not sure that many people address this issue, meaning critically and otherwise, but I think it's a conscious/unconscious means of communicating with the audience. That's why I use the business of Rembrandt and Van Gogh. It's like Van Gogh was not better than Rembrandt, or Rembrandt was not necessarily better than Van Gogh, it's just that they were the same person. They were very similar in people.

So then it comes back to this business of post-modernism, which has allowed us in many ways to see that these objects we make are really about people, and they're about the relationship that they have to people. They're not about historical lineage. It's not about ideas. It's about expressions.

PK: Presence.

PA: It's about presence. Exactly. Thank you. That's a much better word.

PK: The notion then of what you're describing could be, in current jargon, have to do with marks, maybe. The marks on the surface. This is a term that tends to be used.

PA: Is that a popular term these days? [Laughs]

PK: I've seen it once or twice.

PA: If it's popular, I don't want to use it. [Laughs] But, yes, sure. We could talk to marks. What's so interesting about Gates, as an example, is his wanting to digitalize all the famous paintings. It's a pictorial. It's a distant pictorial consideration. It's got nothing to do with a mark, which means it has nothing to do with the flesh. which means it has nothing to do with people.

I know this is not addressing your question.

PK: No, no, no.

PA: Well, it is, actually. It is in the sense that out of this sort of so-called catholicism, I think something really good is coming out of it ultimately.

PK: I framed the question off tape regarding modernism and the post modernism. I made the statement that, or expressed my opinion, that Los Angeles, in particular, was a prototypical, almost textbook, post-modernist environment from the very beginning.

PA: Because it was such a melting pot?

PK: Well, that's part of it and the things I said earlier off tape.

PA: In everything we said earlier about the lack of precedence and the invention.

PK: And the diversity, but also the openness, the openness to try, to take certain risks without being, what shall we say, restricted, or at least burdened, by the notions of how it is supposed to be. This high modern stuff.

PA: It's always been more so here. It's always been. I think it's getting less so. The more the city, the larger, the more popular, the more economic base, all those things tend to chip away at the invention. But it's always been more so. It's always allowed more than New York has. There's no question about that.

PK: One of the things, Peter, that you said earlier, you've said several times, is the presence of Hollywood and film in this area, which is certainly not to be denied. You acknowledge that it's like being in, literally in the air or in the drinking water, or something, it's part of being here. What we often associate with Hollywood, and I don't want to make this, again, too simplistic, the connections too direct, but there is, of course, at base, an artifice about it, it's storytelling. It's in effect--

PA: It's sinful, too.

PK: Well, sinful, but it is artificial. That is to say, that which appears real on film is fake. I'm thinking of movie sets. These are real simple images, but images that are very telling. There are those, of course, who characterize the whole legion in these terms.

PA: [Unclear] fake.

PK: Well, artificial. Disneyland to name one. A lot of the greenery, transforming a semi-arid desert, reinventing the tropical paradise. I don't know that this is unique, but it gets, in modern times, pretty close to it.

PA: It is.

PK: I guess what I sense, without going on, the architecture, the appropriation of styles, the casting about and trying to find that which invokes, that symbolizes something, invokes feelings, regardless to how it may have been appropriate to a certain setting, how it grew in a certain setting. Pick it up and then reproduce some of that feeling, age, antiquity. This is not, of course, unique. America has done this in many ways from the very beginning.

PA: Yes, but it's definitely catalyzed here in a way that it has not anyplace else.

PK: So I was just wondering--

PA: How that is effecting our behavior? Our artistic behavior?

PK: Well, that or just kind of a way of--

PA: Our artistic choices?

PK: --viewing the world. Exactly.

PA: I think it's definitely there. To what degree, I don't know.

PK: Well, what about you? You can't obviously draw direct connections, but would you describe that kind of environment, that kind of situation, as attributing to these images that you produce?

PA: I'm sure. But I don't know how.

PK: But you don't know how.

PA: Maybe in my adherence to sort of pictorial imagery of late. Maybe it's pictures. Pictures, pictures, pictures. Maybe that's it. But we're all exposed, anybody in the world is exposed to film. So it's not about the film. It's about--what is it about? I don't know. I have no idea, but I certainly feel it.

PK: See, it is different here. There's a good feeling of the ephemeral. You used that term.

PA: Well, I did, but you like it a lot more than I do. No, I shouldn't say "more than," you keep coming back to the idea, even though I did bring it up. But you like holding on to that, to the artifice, which is sort of the same as the ephemeral.

PK: Surface.

PA: Surface.

PK: Look.

PA: Look.

PK: Style.

PA: Style.

PK: Blah, blah, blah.

PA: Okay. Okay.

PK: Prettiness. Beauty.

PA: Pretty. Beauty. Yes, "pretty" and "beauty" are words that you'd never use in New York. That would be sinful, if you thought of something as being pretty or beautiful. Beautiful.

PK: Young.

PA: No, let's take young out of it, because then that gets into flesh.

PK: Not necessarily. That's just the way you think. [Laughs]

PA: Well, okay. People sometimes would describe my work as being very beautiful. Sometimes it still is, but I used to get a pang when I would hear that.

PK: You didn't like that?

PA: Oh no. Because--

PK: It wasn't serious.

PA: It wasn't serious. If it was beautiful, it was too easy. Now, fine. I feel fortunate to be able to make something that's beautiful.

PK: Well, you should, and you do. Well, I suggest that we could sort of worry this one for a while, and it could lead into some interesting discussions, but for our purposes, I think we'll get back and get grounded, as they say.

PA: Okay. So are we going on to number six?

PK: Yes.

PA: Haven't we said that already?

PK: I think we probably have touched on this. Yes. I think we have, in terms of California culture being separated in certain ways from New York. Another question, separated from other regions, but I think that that's inherent in the descriptions we've made. I suppose, and, again, this is maybe not easy to answer directly, but I asked, and we've talked about these issues, a good number of them. Your own work, we haven't really talked about its development or its evolution. We got to the sunsets, and you explained why you shifted to do them. I thought it was real interesting, and I think this is key. Maybe this can key a little further discussion. You wanted to do something that was dumb, I think was the word you used, and that was the dumbest thing you could think of.

PA: Well, something that didn't need a lot of rhetoric. You didn't have to explain it. That's the thing that troubled me most about what was going on in those days, is that you just couldn't understand stuff, because it all had to be explained. As soon as you have to explain something, as far as I'm concerned, forget it. I'm not interested.

PK: That is a statement, of course.

PA: What is? As soon as you have to explain something?

PK: No, no. The reason. The reasons for you choosing, as your subject, as dumb. You use the word "dumb" to describe these sunsets. That was actually a provocative statement, I think, making those words. Deciding to make those words was an answer to something that you were critiquing, what you view to be an important aspect of the art world, or understanding works of art.

PA: I was reacting against it.

PK: Yes.

PA: Yes, but I want to preface it by saying, first, I came to the idea of picture-making, because the idea of wanting to make a picture was a combination of, one, to rid myself of this material, which the thing that's characteristic of this material is you can't touch it. There's no touch, and no touch speaks of a kind of anonymity. I wanted to do something that was all about touch. So it was a 180 on that one. So I did pastels, the pastel sunsets. I wanted to do something that--maybe I'm doing exactly what I was accusing Frank Stella of doing. I wanted to do something that--but I must say it was not received as well as his paintings were. I mean, I was devastated critically of the first few years of my doing this.

PK: Of the sunsets?

PA: Oh, man, it was like, I didn't know how we were going to live, it was so bad. It was just like--I was oh, God. Nobody would touch them. It went on and on. But whatever.

PK: Where were they shown? Just here?

PA: No, well, they wouldn't touch them in New York until much later. But, yes, I showed them here, sort of a lot of reluctant showing. I did a show at Irvine with Jim--not Jim, what's his name, not Glickman. Hal Glicksman and he was great. This was the pastels and the velvets. I started doing the sunsets on velvet, which I did about ten of them that were sort of framed. Irvine was a very cool place in those days. This was like '74, '75.

PK: Melinda Wortz wasn't there.

PA: She wasn't there yet, no. Poor Melinda.

PK: Yes, sad. We have her papers, by the way.

PA: You do?

PK: Yes, we have a lot of them. All her art history.

PA: Really? She's just completely non-conscious--I mean, unconscious, isn't she?

PK: Alzheimer's, yes, I think that's the case.

PA: Yes. So Hal did the show down there, which was fabulous. It was one of the best things he ever did, because it gave me the confidence in what I was doing, because I was so battered around by the public.

PK: Were these reviews and so forth? Maybe the works were reviewed and it was so negative--

PA: No, it was just people. People would see them and just--

PK: Didn't like them.

PA: Yes.

PK: These were your friends?

PA: Like completely thought of them as retrograde.

PK: Did you feel that you had gone off track? Did you doubt yourself then?

PA: Oh, yes. I mean not--no. Yes and no. I mean, I didn't doubt how I felt, but I thought, well, maybe there's a better way to express this than what I was doing. But the positive aspect of it was the fact that the source of these images came from a real source. I was reacting to something that I was feeling that was real.

Let me briefly go through a series of things. There was the resins, and there was the sunsets, and there was the velvet sunsets, which were followed then, more or less, by the big tapestry velvets, which were sort of underwater-at-night images. That came from an experience that I had, that is, finding that image. Then after the velvets--and those were probably some of the best work I've done. They were critically very well received, but

economically nobody would touch them. But about that time, the sunsets started to work, so you know, it was like this.

Then after those, then after the velvets, I started painting. I had been avoiding painting all my life, because I was terrified of it. I was afraid to put my--I was always using exotic materials like pastels, resin--not pastels, but resin, velvet, you know, da-da-da.

PK: Well, how were the images put on the velvet?

PA: They were spray-painted, and I used metal flake with an adhesive.

PK: Oh, boy, L.A. materials.

PA: Oh, yes. I went out to this place in the valley called Sparkelit Company. They had the best metal flake going, I mean, the best colors. It was fabulous. I'd go out to get bags of this shit, and I'd sprinkle it on, and do all that. Because I didn't want to do imitation Tijuana paintings, but I wanted to use velvet because it was so black. Which is, that's how I got into it, because it was so black. I was doing some black paintings. I had a piece of velvet pinned up to the wall next to it, and I could not even come close to the blackness in that velvet. So I took a leap of faith and said, well, fuck it, I'll just do some painting on it. Boy, did that get me. Jesus, people just gave me shit for that. But after the velvet, then I started painting. I started painting sort of sunset-type paintings.

This was all sort of autobiographical. Those went into sort of explosions and things like that, which I'd been playing with for a while, and fire and burning the city. Then those paintings led into the city nights, which is because I was seeing this girl who lived--lady who lived in Burbank, and I kept driving over the San Diego Freeway and looking down in the valley all the time, and saying, "Jesus, something could be done with that." Just like the sunset. So that kicked off the city night paintings. Then after the city nights, I started doing these really dark--that was when L.A. started to really get painful, sort of around the riots. Before the riots, and I started doing these gloomy, dark paintings that were black and white. Here, I'll show you.

PK: That's before the L.A.--

PA: No, after the L.A.--

PK: --after [unclear].

PA: It was all biographical. Then I did these riot paintings. These are the resins. Then these are [unclear] sunsets and then those are that. I have a thing for the velvets. Then these, here are the sort of the darker paintings. The L.A.--

PK: Oh, yes, I've seen these.

PA: I mean, dark, they were a little bit gloomy, but not--but they're actually sort of optimistic. Then I did the riot paintings. Then I left L.A. and went to Las Vegas and did the Las Vegas paintings. That's sort of the last batch I've done. Then somebody said, all of these periods usually has something to do with a woman, which it does.

PK: With a woman?

PA: With a woman, yes. One way or another.

PK: We like that. [Alexander laughs.] That's the way it should be.

PA: There was a terrific girl that I was seeing, who loved Las Vegas, and so that's what got me there.

PK: So did you actually work there then?

PA: No, no, no. I'd go there. I went there back and forth for over two years.

PK: Did you take pictures?

PA: Taking photographs up the yin-yang. I had no idea what image to hold onto, until I got to Caesar's Palace and the fake statues. So most of the Las Vegas paintings came out of that.

PK: Of course, for many of us, many would say that Las Vegas is the great post modernist environment. It has a sort of kinship to L.A. in many respects.

PA: Well, it--yes, it definitely--yes. It's an extension. It's artificial. I responded to it. My first response to it was, of course, it was an extension of lights. So my first response was the lights and thinking, well, yes, something could

be done with the light. I did a few sort of signage paintings that had to do with--I think there's one in here that had to do with the Vegas strip. Like this one.

PK: Oh, yes.

PA: Which was sort of out of focus, and you couldn't look at it. It's real bright. It's much brighter than that. So you can't really look at it, just like Las Vegas. Then after that I did the finger paintings, and that was sort of about it.

PK: Come back to the microphone.

PA: Oh, yes. Sorry.

PK: We don't want to lose any of these things.

PA: Well, this is not answering your question. This is sort of a chronology. I only give it to you because its an affirmation of something that I wasn't even aware of, was how autobiographical all this work is. That painting was done--

PK: Which one?

PA: The big one there. The long one. That one was done, I was in India in the early eighties for about four months. I stayed with a family that lived in the jungle that had this incredible pool, swimming pool, that I would sort of swim in at night in the moonlight. A year later, a year after I came back, I had these dreams about these paintings, and I started doing them. I did about ten of them. Small ones. This is the biggest one. And that was it. I mean, that's where they came from. That's called "Vindaloo". They're some of the best paintings I've done. They all came from this dream, and it was about a certain kind of peace that existed there.

PK: One of the things that I've realized by this conversation now is that you really are a landscape painter.

PA: Basically.

PK: Gee, surprise, surprise. I should have noticed that anyway.

PA: Yes.

PK: But very much of it is, and this, I think, is the best kind of landscape, an interior landscape, as well. Nature itself.

PA: It's just a vehicle.

PK: A vehicle for the realization of--

PA: A state.

PK: A state. It now becomes very, very evident that that is the case. What I would like to do now, just for wrapping up, is to take a look specifically at one painting, then sort of the series, what that represents in the series that's up around it. But this is the Delean, from the Delean Collection. The specific work, well, it wasn't helpful at all. It's untitled, 1985, it's oil.

PA: No, it has a title.

PK: Does it?

PA: Yes. Hold on a second, I'll get it. [Tape recorder turned off.]

Oh, here it is, it is titled. Just a minute. Yes, it's called "Chapala."

PK: Is that Mexican?

PA: Yes.

PK: 1985?

PA: 1985. Thirty-by-thirty-three, oil and wax on paper, on paper on canvas.

PK: What can you tell me about that work that would place it, fit it within this Peter Alexander story?

PA: At that time, '85, I started painting with oil, or acrylics, or some combination thereof, and in 1984. I think in order to do that comfortably, because I was so terrified of painting, that I started using images that I was familiar with, which would have been the sunsets or explosions. But it was landscapes with horizons, and it had to do with light and clouds. These were inspired by--the thing I like most about this particular piece was that it was one of the first ones I did using wax. The use of the material was very critical to the nature of the image, because I could get brilliant color, brilliant translucent color, and also be able to apply the material with my fingers. So, in other words, what I'd do is make this--which I'm doing now. I mean, I haven't done it in years, in ten years, and here I am doing it all over again. It's part of that cycle. I use this wax--

PK: You're finger painting.

PA: Yes, it's finger painting. Yes, that's exactly what it is. Which is, speaking of the touch, that's what that's about. That's all finger painting. There's some brush work, but it's all--mostly--

PK: Indian?

PA: Yes. There is brush work in it, but most of it's done with fingers. And that's what I liked about that particular piece, was that it was the best of that group, of which there are maybe eight or nine.

PK: But they're not all done in Chapala? They all done in Mexico?

PA: No, no, no, no. They're all done here in L.A., but the series--

PK: Based on photos or sketches or memory?

PA: No, no, no. I just looked at the map of Baja and pulled out names of places.

PK: Oh.

PA: That's what I did for the city of lights. I'd go to the Thomas Brothers and pull out Alhambra and Monrovia, El Monte, you know.

PK: They're all constructs. They're all made up.

PA: Yes. They're all made up, yes. Your observation about it being a state of being is, these are just vehicles to explain a state. These were of a certain state. Sort of explosive, you know, exuberant.

PK: So they're really not about the place at all.

PA: No.

PK: It's not even that Baja evoked these things.

PA: No. No, it had nothing to do with it.

PK: Gee. [Laughs]

PA: But I love Baja and spend a lot of time there.

PK: Yes. Well, I think this is a good time to wrap up since we're running out of tape.

PA: Good.

PK: What do you think?

PA: Yes, I think so. You've gone through three--how long? Three hours.

PK: Two and a half.

PA: Two and a half. It's okay with me.

PK: We'll pick up another time. This is great. Thank you.

PA: Thank you.

[End of session]

[Session 2, Tape 1, Side A]

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with artist Peter Alexander in his Marina Del Rey/Venice area studio on April 11, 1996. This is session two. There was an earlier session in December last year. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom.

Okay, Peter, here we are again, finally getting started after all this setting up. You were about to tell me a story, so tell away.

PA: Well, you brought it up when you were talking about aging, but one of the things that was interesting about last night was that most of the people who were at this party were--everybody had known each other for twenty years or more. So it gave a kind of density to the gathering, and it allowed--because everybody has seen everybody else be a fool. So nobody had any pretenses, and there was enormous comfort in that and that can only happen after a long period of time, I mean after significant amount of time of knowing each other. I thought to myself, this is one of the pleasures of aging.

PK: Right, exactly.

PA: That's all.

PK: Exactly true, and that's pretty much the observation I was going to make, that you perhaps allow one another a little more and you want to be cut some slack yourself. You know you need it. God knows. And you're grateful for it. Also, maybe another aspect of this, which could be relevant to you or to us in this interview, is the fact that your expectations and also your requirements for yourself are not really the same. You can become comfortable with some of the realities of your situation. You don't have to necessarily be the absolute greatest at whatever you do. You can become comfortable with who you happen to be and what you're interested in doing and then you just enjoy that.

PA: Well, I think you don't have any choice either way. So that, well, the point is, I think that after doing what you do for the period of time it has been done, you do reach a point, hopefully, where you realize that you are impotent in it, meaning that it is going to happen and be exactly what it is and there's nothing you can do about it. And whether it's going to provide you with whatever the fantasies are is irrelevant. They will or won't, and that's context.

PK: Tell me, for the sake of this interview, about the party, at whose party, what was the event. This was last night?

PA: Yes, it was Chuck Arnoldi's fiftieth birthday party and Frank Gehry gave it. I guess Frank--I don't know who did the guest list, but it was either--I don't know who did it. But everybody knew each other.

PK: About twenty people?

PA: Yes.

PK: That's pretty small.

PA: Yes, but it was at Valentino's. The food was not very good. It started off slightly tight, but then everybody got shit-faced and--

PK: See, some things don't change.

PA: No. [Laughter] It just got funnier and funnier. And somehow everybody made it home. But it was a real pleasure. It was real sort of joyous. It was very joyous.

PK: Let me ask you this. It brings us back to something we discussed, actually at some length in the earlier interview, how does this represent a continuing sense of community among artists in this area, that particular group? Just think about last night, the people who happened to be there, going back these years you're talking about. Looking at that group, how would you describe the art community, or at least one part of the art community here in the L.A. area?

PA: I don't think it had anything to do with the art community, although the people who were there were all involved in the art community, but I don't think--that was just sort of coincidental. That was just the glue that--but it was not the issue. It had more to do with everybody had been friends all this time and the fact that those relationships have been sustained, all of which have to do with the interaction of people has nothing to do with it, and art is only incidental to it, or that is the fact it's the art world, so to speak, is only incidental to it.

PK: I can understand that. But, of course, the reason that you're friends--

PA: Is you interact a lot, and the reason why you interact a lot is because you're in the same territory. But that

could be true with anything. It's not necessarily--

PK: That does make for a community, don't you think?

PA: Oh, absolutely. No, absolutely. I mean, you're trotting right to the issue, which is that's what was so vivid about last night, was that that community does exist, it still exists. Ed Moses had a birthday party, and we did a party for him up here.

PK: Where?

PA: Up in the--upstairs I've got a--

PK: I didn't know you had an upstairs. I thought you meant up in the rafters or something. [Laughter]

PA: No, there's an apartment up there, which is sort of an echo of this, but a little bit smaller. It's usually leased out, but it was open, it was available. Do you want some new offices? [Laughter]

PK: Well, I wouldn't mind. [Laughter] Mine is very sweet, but it would be nice to have an annex.

PA: An annex, that's exactly what you need. It'd be perfect for you. It's got a kitchen. You could live there. It's everything you'd want.

PK: The Archives Venice, Archives West.

PA: That's right. Well, at any rate, because it's between people, you know, and so Tom Vinetz and Hope--

PK: That's your daughter, right?

PA: Yes, who works for Ed, sort of holds Ed's hand. And Peter Goulds wanted to do this party for his birthday. I think it was his seventieth birthday is when it was. Not that he was going to let anybody know which birthday it was. So they had this party and everybody was there. It was exactly the same thing. It wasn't nearly as intimate, because it was a much larger group. It was sort of like--you know, they had music and food and booze and, you know, all the rest of it.

Two things were interesting. One was that people came out of the woodwork that I had not seen in twenty years, which substantiated the issue which we were hovering on, which is that there is definitely a community and it's a community that has been around a long time, I mean relatively speaking, and it's fairly dense. I mean, it was an exhibit of density that I had not expected. Let's put it that way. The other thing that was interesting was that the party started off, it had all the earmarks of being a party that occurred in the seventies and it was going to go until four in the morning. At quarter to twelve, the place was empty.

PK: [Laughter] That's succinctly and accurately put. That's exactly the difference.

PA: Yes.

PK: Pretty much across the board. I am interested in that point. I think it's a good observation. We don't need to dwell on it, but as you know, observations from elsewhere and sometimes even from here are that Los Angeles as a place, as an art center, lacks center and lacks community; there is no community. I think that's a bit of a canard. I mean, in my own observations that's not the case, no matter even what you want to call it. There are these relationships that are ongoing and pretty long-term among artists. They do know one another. They interact. I don't know if we talked much about the nature of that interaction, but that is also of interest. In fact, maybe you want to say something about that. What you're describing, of course, is a social interaction, which is fine. Certainly in the Bay Area I remember everybody I would interview pretty much said that was the nature of it. It wasn't like in New York where at least you imagined that they were sitting around, gathering at the seat of [unclear], wherever it was, talking art issues and going to one another's studios and critiquing. Maybe that happened, maybe it didn't.

PA: It happens when you're young. It doesn't happen anymore.

PK: But it did happen at one time here.

PA: Yes. Oh, yes. Sure. Well, I don't think that had any--it had nothing to do with Los Angeles' chronology. I think it had to do more with the people's chronology. In other words, I think it's characteristic when you are in your twenties or so to behave that way. I mean, you and your peers interact in a way very differently than you do now.

PK: Without revisiting the past, although we're going to need to do that because, just as a reminder, our last

session was really quite focused, which is good, because that's what we wanted to do, without going too far back, nonetheless, could you describe what it was like, this kind of more useful interaction that you or you all had like in, let's say, the late sixties, the early seventies, when there was this phenomenon, this sort of Venice group of artists? What was it like? Did you talk about something that you were all trying to do or did you just party down?

PA: Well, both, but I think the fact that it existed in the sixties is a critical issue. Younger artists today don't have nearly--there seemingly does not exist nearly the kind of interaction that occurred then, for several reasons. Because it was the sixties, there was an optimism about things were going through very significant changes. That was the illusion for anybody who was of that age, meaning in their twenties, is what it was. And you really believed it. Also, because the art world, as a group or as a consciousness, it was fledgling out here, so it was just being seen internationally as something to pay attention to, I guess. So you had that kind of optimism, the beginnings. What's it going to mean? What's it going to do? All that. Then you had the ambition.

You put all those mixes together and you're going to be provided with a food that is very unique, but mostly was unique because of the times. Where else can you go and duplicate that? I don't think you can. In other words, if Sydney, for an example, suddenly became the focus of an art scene now, the late 1990s, its behavior would be completely different because of these times. So does that answer your question?

PK: Yes, it does.

PA: I feel as if you want some juice or something.

PK: No, that's fine. That's fine. Beyond that, and I think that that sounds certainly accurate, even according to my memory, but even more specifically, there was a certain quality, an aesthetic, that became attached when critics and others of your age started to look at what was going on here in the early sixties, I suppose, late fifties, but, it seems to me, especially early sixties. There was an aesthetic, an attitude, and certain qualities to their work. I really don't know the answer to this, so I'm asking genuinely. I'm not trying to set this up. I don't know. I've always wondered to what extent you all who are involved in various ways were aware of that and were, I won't say strategically operating with that awareness, but aware with it and talking about it, conscious of being separate or unique or special, doing something a bit different.

PA: Different from what?

PK: From art elsewhere.

PA: From precedence?

PK: Or art being done elsewhere, especially in terms of materials and so forth.

PA: I think everybody was vividly aware of that. I think one of the reasons why there was a conscious choice to involve exotic materials.

PK: But I'm looking at this little book right here, polyester [unclear].

PA: Yes, but it's also simultaneous. In other words, who knows what the hell it was. I remember the interacting like with Larry or with Bengston or with Kauffman or with Irwin or with whoever, the kind of thinking that was going on was of a very particular sort. It was a kind of a consciousness that everybody was a participant in it. Everybody fed off everybody else, so to speak. I mean, even Kenny Price, who was not using necessarily exotic material, but certainly there was a point of view that was still very consistent with what everybody else was doing. For better, for worse. You did feel as if it was a collective effort.

PK: So you would go so far as to describe it as what they used to call "school." The "School of L.A." A particular movement that can accurately, not completely, but accurately--

PA: Yes. But I think the individual's involvement was probably more different than one would think, but it definitely was something that fed on itself. I mean, everybody gave everybody else permission, so to speak, consciously or unconsciously. Unconsciously.

PK: Presumably encouraged.

PA: Yes.

PK: Was there a sense of mutual support?

PA: Very much so, yes. In other words, there was--yes, it was very supportive, I felt, because it was sort of isolated and because it was so small, and it's because there was not much in the outside. I mean, there weren't

many collectors, there wasn't all this sort of stuff. So it fed on itself, or it sort of took care of itself. It was a lot of fun and it was bizarre. I mean, the things people would do, I mean, outside of what they made was equally as bizarre. But you'd never do it again, but you would do it then. I think that a lot to do with the sixties.

PK: Sort of like Ruscha's books. I'm thinking of *Crackers*, for instance. Who would imagine involving your friends--well, we'll talk about that later. I now see certain threads back to the sixties, maybe, in some ways in some of the recent things that you're doing. But we're going to hold that. So you don't even respond to that.

PA: I'm not going to. [Laughter]

PK: Good. Thank you. I appreciate that. I'm getting myself in trouble by anticipating here. I don't want to dwell on the sixties, although I think we all recognize it was a period of unusual activity and interest and it's holding up that way. We have historical perspective now. It's '96. We're talking thirty years ago. There is a continuing interest and sort of a renewed interest in that period and certainly in the art and artists. So you're a source, a wonderful opportunity for me to learn and also to test some of my conceptions of that time against your experience. But one of the things that I've always wondered is who were the leaders, the key figures. I'm not saying the best artists or anything like that. You don't have to get trapped into that.

PA: You mean who were the most verbal?

PK: Well, who were the ones that seemed to take a leadership role in terms of ideas, maybe the work itself?

PA: You know, it's irrelevant.

PK: Really? Do you really feel that way?

PA: Well, what you're doing is you're making it hierarchial. I think the issue, hierarchies are a product of outside observation. I don't think that inside it's not hierarchial, because everybody's going to do it different. Whether the perception is that so-and-so is a leader is a social perception, but it has nothing to do with the issues. Do you know what I mean?

PK: Well, yes. Yes, and of course that's right. You're absolutely right, we historians tend to want to describe--

PA: Well, it's not unique to you. I mean, we all do it. But what I'm saying is that for an example, there were some pieces that Craig did, Kauffman, that still are absolutely extraordinary. Not everything he did was, but certainly there were some pieces done at that time which--

PK: You're thinking of the vacuum?

PA: I'm thinking of the bubbles, you know, those. There are some things that Bob did that were also extraordinary, but there were also some things he did that just didn't quite make it. There are some things that Billy did. There are some things that Larry did. There are some things that I did. But not all of it, but it--there was a hit that would come periodically, depending on where one was.

PK: Let me put the question then a different way. Do you recall that there were these hit moments with other artists that were exciting and stimulating to the others?

PA: Yes. Yes.

PK: That you personally would say, "Wow!"

PA: "Wow! What a pleasure." Yes. Like, "Ohh. Ohh, they're on." You know.

PK: Yes.

PA: You know how short-lived that can be, but you also know the pleasures of it, and so you get vicarious pleasure in their pleasure.

PK: Would you get these hits, would you be privileged to get these hits by visiting the studios and say, "Come on, Peter, come on over and take a look"?

PA: Yes, that. There was much more of that than there is now.

PK: See, this is interesting.

PA: But when I say than there is now, I'm talking about the fact that we're much older, so you ask for different things.

PK: You get it at shows. You wait until they get a show.

PA: Yes, usually. I mean, you know, because the point is, is that now you've done it for such a period of time that you realize it doesn't make any difference what they think, what anybody does, because you can't do anything about it anyway. So you just do what you do and then you make it public.

PK: Wasn't that what we were saying earlier when we started talking on this tape, that this is part of that comfort in the self, or acceptance of self, that comes with age?

PA: Well, yes. I mean, either you can destroy yourself or you're not. I think if you continue thinking that you should be something other than what, in fact, you are, you've got problems, because it's too late.

PK: Let me ask this still a different way. Who would you describe as having, or perhaps not having, the most influential or productive ideas, but perhaps articulating well? [Alexander laughs.] In other words, who were the verbal, who were [unclear]?

PA: Well, we know who that is.

PK: Bob.

PA: Yes, of course.

PK: But he was seen that way? Did that give him a special role for you guys at the time?

PA: You see, I can speak of it only from my point of view.

PK: Of course.

PA: Which is that I was younger and I came in, I was sort of like an odd--the Ferris group was in place and then I came into the scene after the Farris group was already established. So I was sort of the younger version or the young one entering. So that immediately set up a kind of dynamic of perception, from my point of view. Jim Turrell, though, he's interesting in this. Now I think it really gets into a lot about personalities, I mean, people's nature.

PK: What do you mean?

PA: Well, Jim and I are about the same age and I think he entered, I think, about the same time I did. Entering, whatever that meant. I mean, suddenly you were kind of a part of it or something, a part of something. I think Jim's a Mormon.

PK: I don't think I've ever met him, actually.

PA: Well, he's a really interesting guy, as you can imagine, and he's just wacko. I mean, this is not a value judgment.

PK: No, I understand.

PA: But he also did some really smart work. There was a smartness to it that I think provided--I realized that he was much smarter than I was, from the point of view of--

PK: Strategically?

PA: Well, yes, I think strategically, but I think, too, I mean, I think Jim does what Jim is. Don't misunderstand me. I don't think it was like as if he wasn't role-playing or careerism. But I'm just thinking about how different we are as people and how what we do is such a reflection of that difference. That's all. So it's sort of, that's my issue is that, you know, that's why you do what you do. If one is a formalist, in a way what you are sort of tends to not enter into what you do. You know what I mean?

PK: Yes.

PA: Because you involve yourself in formal issues, which are not necessarily personal issues, or not necessarily gut issues. They tend to be a little bit more cerebral. Would you agree?

PK: Yes, absolutely. In fact, this is a perfect segue to what I see as a progression of our conversation. Let's see, last time, back in December, we ended up with a discussion of the sunset, of your sunset paintings, as part of what you call a progression of work. You used that term--

PA: Reaction or whatever.

PK: But anyway, if there was, I don't mean that progress towards something, but a progress as such it was moving along.

PA: Well, time was moving. I would just shift in it.

PK: At any rate, you said that throughout the work ran this thread of autobiography.

PA: Yes.

PK: You didn't say the theme was set. I would say that, you might not. But you further described your act as a response to the environment, and I quote that. But that's a lot of what we talked about last time, but it's also very much related to what you've brought up now in talking about the role of the individual, the character, in the work, coming through the work, and then affecting the work, the individual affecting the work.

PA: Let me give you an example. I can give an example of this, also.

PK: Okay.

PA: Which is, look at Larry. Larry really is an incredible technician. In other words, his involvement with what he does has a lot to do with just hands-on stuff. In other words, what he likes to enter into is the mechanics of doing it. This is why he loved that tank that he has, because--

PK: I saw that tank.

PA: --he starts talking about that tank and his eyes glaze over. So his connection to it is very significant, it's such a part of him. But he's also one of the funniest people I've ever met. I mean, which is also inseparable from what he does. But it doesn't surface quite as obviously as it would in others.

PK: It sure as hell doesn't surface in his work, if that's what you're getting at.

PA: No, it doesn't. No, it doesn't.

PK: It's truly foremost.

PA: Exactly. And this is what I mean by contrast or by comparison. All of these factors set up what the individual is. I mean, if you look at it, what's the function of this stuff? It connects to other people because it speaks to them somehow. How does it speak to them? It speaks to them because somewhere in these objects is represented other people and how others feel. So, say, if you're a formalist, then your audience is going to be of one sort. If you are a biographist, or whatever the hell it is, you know--

PK: A personalist.

PA: Whatever, okay. Then your audience is going to be something else, or other people. I couldn't begin to presume what the connection is or that what specifically is said in whatever it is that I may do, that other people can connect to, but something is there. I don't think it's all hype. You know what I mean? But this is the part of it that you cannot touch and the part that you cannot describe. But it's the crux of the whole thing. But being the crux, it's like if you have to--what was it in, oh, Pozitano, the [unclear] thing?

PK: Right, yes.

PA: What was it, with the guy, the poet, what's his name?

PK: Oh, God, see now you ask me on tape and I can't remember.

PA: Whatever, it doesn't make any difference.

PK: They'll know.

PA: But he did say, I mean, it was so clear. He said, "If you have to explain this, forget it." So, I mean, it's the same issue. I hate to use that for an example, but you know. We know that. But I think we also--never mind. You know what I mean.

PK: Well, that's, of course, the term they use, is ineffable. Ineffable, indescribable. It cannot be described. Also it moves into the realm of poetry, which is what you were saying, you know, Pozitano.

PA: Well, what I'm saying is that it talks about a kind of communication, or it addresses a kind of communication which is very unique.

[Session 2, Tape 1, Side B]

PK: This is continuing this good interview with my friend Peter Alexander. This is tape one, side B.

Just to make sure we know where we are on this, we're going, I think, in a productive direction. But you brought up, really, the theme, I think, of the individuality, the individual personality, the way they're wired, who they are, determining ultimately the work. You were pointing out one sort of extreme is the formalist person, or type, if you will, reaching a certain audience. For whatever reasons that we can't understand, but that what I understood this to mean, at least in part, and I think this brings us right back to you, is that you operate in a different realm. You mentioned Terrell, you mentioned yourself, and some fundamental differences, even though you both, same age, entered about the same time.

What I wanted to do for the rest of this interview is kind of track you with this basic idea in mind, that Peter Alexander's work is a very definite reflection of Peter Alexander the person, the awareness. So maybe we could start this way in this attempt to walk through kind of your career, start with the fact you're talking about formalism. You, yourself, started out with purely form. It was very beautiful and very, I think, sensual in their beauty. But nonetheless they would be described as formalist, cast resins and shapes, very simple. No other way to describe them. Got clouds in some of them, that begins to sensualize it in a different way. But nonetheless. Nonetheless. At some point that lasted until, I'm not sure, maybe even '70 or somewhere around there.

PA: '71, '72.

PK: Okay. But then there was a change. And so what I would ask you, to start this, is why the formalist work coming out of Peter Alexander in the beginning and then what brought that change in the world, which then seemed to develop in, it seems to me, quite a different arena.

PA: Well, the resins were a product of the time. I was given permission to buy the context from which these came, to make objects that showed no touch. That's the most significant aspect of it. They were distant in a relative term, they were engaging, but yet they were distant. The distance was a product of how much you want to reveal and at that time what I wanted to reveal, evidently, was what I revealed, which was distant. I mean, they were all self-portraits. But I was very much influenced by my architectural training. I mean, that was inseparable because of the way one thinks. I think the reason why I stopped doing them was because they became much too inhibited for me. I couldn't touch the material. I couldn't stand the smell anymore. The toxicity had an effect. The distance that they provided no longer satisfied.

PK: Do you mean a way to distance yourself?

PA: Of course.

PK: Through the work, from an audience.

PA: How much do you want to reveal of yourself? I'm only seeing this in retrospect. I didn't know I was doing it at the time. I thought that's what I was, and that's what I was then.

PK: True.

PA: Or that's how I thought, or whatever it was, you know. But the point is, is that it was very clear when I stopped doing them, that these had to come to a conclusion, because I was no longer that person. I mean, I say this from this vantage point. At the time I don't think I was quite as clear. I mean, I don't think I was as clear or as aware of it.

PK: You mentioned some factors that brought you to a decision.

PA: You mean the toxicity?

PK: Yes, some very practical considerations, as a matter of fact.

PA: Yes. But all those things are inseparable from it. I mean, they happen by a kind of inertia.

PK: But was there anything else, I mean, do you remember any other, say, external event or epiphany, if you want to use a fancy word, a recognition, self-recognition or otherwise, something that triggered that change? Or did it just happen?

PA: No, I think it just sort of--I haven't the vaguest idea. It just sort of happened. I could feel it coming. I mean, it was like I could feel something dying. I remember that. I remember thinking, I can't do this anymore, because it didn't satisfy. But I'm really glad I did it and I have no reservations about what those objects are. I look at some of them now and I love them. I mean, I think they're really--some of them are very, very--they're doing exactly

what I wanted them to do. And I remember the pleasure of the times vividly.

PK: But I gather you feel your self-portrait would be, at the very least, fragmentary or exclusively with the early pieces.

PA: I would say that it would be extremely fragmentary. I would say that it would be--I would be like an Albers , which I am not. [Tape recorder turned off.]

One of the things that I always thought interesting about Bob, for an example, was he--did you ever see his butterfly collection?

PK: No.

PA: One of the most exquisite butterfly collections I've ever seen. Ravishingly beautiful. I feel as if that butterfly collection provided him with all the beauty that he needed, so it gave him permission to do something else. You know what I mean?

PK: Yes, I think I would have to say that in terms of beauty, those disks, the first time I saw the disks at my friend Larry Uruttia's house, who actually bought one early on, '65 or something--

PA: You mean the ones that were lit?

PK: Yes.

PA: Yes.

PK: I mean, I thought they were transcendently beautiful.

PA: Yes. You know what's interesting about those?

PK: Very beautiful. I thought almost too beautiful, but very seductive, and yet I think they're wonderful.

PA: Yes. No, I agree. They're not domestic. They're institutional. Because the only way they work is institutionally; they don't work domestically.

PK: How do you mean?

PA: The set-up, because they need all the stuff.

PK: True. Well, Larry had a--

PA: This is not a criticism. I mean, this is just--

PK: No, I understand that. But I don't know, we'll see how far this may or may not go. But the idea of beauty, and then the butterflies and the permission to then not be beautiful, I want to make sure I understand this. All I know is that when our friend Larry Uruttia, who used to work at Benton Lytton Center. Did you know Larry?

PA: Oh, sure, I know Larry. Yes. I haven't heard that name in twenty years.

PK: Yes, isn't he wonderful. But he invited Ann, my wife, and me over to his house. He lived up in Mount Washington there and in sort of a--I don't know if it was a Craftsman house, kind of Victorian. But anyway, he had this alcove and this is where I--I'm going to just raise the question of domestic versus institutional. Bob had come over and there he was very proud, very excited, he wanted us to see this. He made us sit down--it was very orchestrated--in this alcove on certain chairs and then had speakers out.

PA: Don't you think--because I remember Larry--don't you think that disk and everything that disk represents is inseparable from Larry?

PK: Yes.

PA: I mean, they are the same.

PK: Yes. Yes.

PA: That's the audience.

PK: Yes.

PA: We won't go beyond that.

PK: But just the notion of beauty.

PA: Well, I was thinking actually--

PK: It's gone further--

PA: No, you're raising a good point. I was thinking more about Bob's more conceptual pieces, which like, you know, the piece that he did down in San Diego.

PK: At the university?

PA: You know, of the chain link, you know, the--

PK: The eucalyptus grove.

PA: The eucalyptus grove, which I think is fantastic.

PK: I saw it. Yes.

PA: Some of the scrim pieces that he did, I think we really good. What else? What's that have to do with butterflies? Well, maybe I could be off on this, because actually all that stuff is also very beautiful.

PK: Let me try this out in that regard. He was free then to--

PA: Maybe to do something otherworldly, maybe. Not of this necessarily.

PK: To concentrate on idea, rather than the sensual, the surface, even in the object. He was released from the object.

PA: But one does respond sensually to what he does. I mean, it doesn't go through your head. I mean, you get optical--

PK: A phenomenologist.

PA: Yes, whatever it is, you know. Whatever.

PK: So you really feel, then, you actually would reconsider that observation, I guess.

PA: I think the butterflies were inseparable to whatever was going on.

PK: Maybe it's all the same, then.

PA: Well, or else it is the same. But the butterflies allowed him to go, and I use the word "permission" again. They gave him permission to go someplace, whatever that place is.

PK: Well, what about you? What is the thing in your experience or life then that functioned in that same way?

PA: Being permissive?

PK: The butterfly collection. Let's just make it simple. There was something in that that--

PA: Well, I-- [Pauses]

PK: Is there anything that--

PA: No, I mean, it's not quite the same, because--

PK: You're a sensualist.

PA: Yes, but I don't really like objects. Meaning I don't--I guess I was taken by his butterfly collection because it was so beautifully displayed, it was so evident it was--you could tell that he just loved it. Maybe I was envious of the pleasure that he took in its possession, but I took enormous pleasure in seeing it or being around it. I think I'm observing something from the outside and I'm being presumptuous in doing it. There's nothing that I know of that is similar to me in that sense. One of the things that always happened when I go from one group of work to another or things would shift, is that I would always be fearful. I'd always be afraid. It would be the fear that would drive me to it.

PK: You were attracted to the fear?

PA: I wouldn't say that I was any--I couldn't comment. I would only say that I know fear was there. Whether I was attracted to it or not, I don't know.

PK: I don't want to misunderstand this. Are you saying that--

PA: I was afraid of the sunsets. I was afraid of the velvets.

PK: You mean afraid of not of the subjects, surely, but of the material, of the form?

PA: Whatever it is. Whatever it is. But I was afraid of the sunsets because of the subject. I was afraid of the velvets because of the material. I was afraid of Las Vegas because of the subject and because of the impossibility of the subject. I was afraid of the erotic drawings, because I was afraid I could never make something erotic.

PK: Yes, well, we'll talk about that, because that's seems maybe like there is a kind of logical--not aggression, but something like that, that these things do indeed, in a sense,lead to one another. But the fear of things is interesting. What I take you would mean is that you were attracted to, at a certain point, after your early pieces, for which you became known. We should state that. For a long time I always thought that was Peter Alexander. But after that time, you became interested in apparently more low-brow subjects. "Degraded" is a term that's been used. Cliches and so forth.

PA: Cliches.

PK: I don't know if it was right off the bat or if that's something that grew.

PA: Well, now, remember, too, that plastic was not an art material.

PK: That's true.

PA: At the time it was trailer trash.

PK: But it certainly wasn't a cliche within fine arts.

PA: No.

PK: Whereas certain landscapes are.

PA: No, exactly. But sunsets are a cliche because of the subject. Velvet is a cliche because of the material. The resin was not a cliche; it was just not something from which art was made, so to speak. But also inseparable from the plastics was the idea that if you used a material that was sufficiently exotic, then you didn't have to be judged in the same arena.

PK: Well, that's a different type of fear.

PA: Exactly. Exactly. And this is what drove me to painting.

PK: Not just a painting, though, but to painting very specific subjects using certain materials, right?

PA: Well, no. I mean, if you use the exoticism of the plastics. I mean, I got to the plastics from surfing, because I was working when I was at UCLA, I was working on this project and I suddenly went, "Oh, my God. I remember that stuff in the bottom of a Dixie cup. I'll bet I could cast this, and I can make it transparent." So that's how I got there and then I realized what it was after the fact. But the velvets were similar in the sense that the material is what it is, but because of its exoticism, again, I could avoid painting or being confronted, or else being judged. The pastels--

PK: You didn't want to hang next to Jasper Johns.

PA: I didn't want to be in competition. I didn't want to stand in there. That way. Whatever, you know. So it wasn't until much later. I really wasn't until the mid-eighties that I started painting.

PK: Oh, really?

PA: Yes. Actually it was '84, was the first paintings I ever did. Not the first. I mean, I'd done five, six, seven paintings. That was because I just said, "What the fuck are you doing?"

PK: What were you doing? Pastels?

PA: "Let's get on with it." Well, no, I did the--some of the most beautiful pieces I've ever done are those velvets.

PK: All right. Well, let's talk about that. Walk me through that.

PA: What I'm describing to you is where I was chronologically and what thoughts, what I remember as feeling during these times, okay? So that's what I'm saying here. I'm not saying it was good, bad, any of it. I'm just saying this is what it was.

PK: So right after the cast pieces--

PA: After the cast resins, I did the sunsets. But that was inseparable from--

PK: [unclear].

PA: No.

PK: Not yet?

PA: Not yet. But the sunsets were inseparable from moving up to the Santa Monica mountains. That's where I saw them, and I said, "These are great. Something could be done with this," right? But I didn't know what. So I eventually did little reportage drawings like this every day at four o'clock as the sun--this was in the fall--I'd draw what I saw with little pastel pencils.

PK: You still do that, don't you?

PA: Yes, of course. Because you'll always--you know, you keep--yes, of course. So then they got into more lush, and blah, blah, all that sort of stuff. But the obvious conclusion of that was that if you can do sunsets--I wanted to make a picture. I wanted to make--I remember the conscious decision-making at the time was, it was in the middle of minimalism and all the gobbly-gook that went along with the rhetoric of minimalism. My response to all that stuff was, "This is just--I don't believe this shit. You've got to talk about all this stuff? What do you mean?"

So my response to that was to do something that was really dumb, and that was to do a picture of a sunset. But it was simultaneous with being floored by these sunsets, the sun setting. So then if you continue the logic of it, you know, I'm talking about the conscious logic, what one does and what one describes are not necessarily connected. To presume that you know why you do what you do is absurd. So I'm just giving you that sort of conscious level, or else the articulated level, for whatever it's worth. But it's sufficient enough to move you in a direction, that is, what you can articulate. So again, if you do the sunsets, they can be done on the velvet. It's just the next step. So I did some on velvet, that were sort of like this and they were framed and all that. I remember at the time I didn't really know what the hell I was--I knew I had no idea what I was doing. I had no confidence in it whatsoever, and Hal Glickman gave me the show at Irvine. I went down there to talk to the students about what I was doing, and they ridiculed me.

PK: Now, wait a minute. Tell me about that. What do you mean, they ridiculed you? How rude! You were the guest speaker.

PA: Oh, it was the rudest, it was the most--I mean, I was in no way prepared to defend myself, because I had no idea what I was doing. They were like they threw eggs at me.

PK: When was this?

PA: This was '74, I think. I mean, it's a metaphor, they're throwing eggs.

PK: They're painting students, right?

PA: Yes, they were all those, you know, they were all the minimalists down there. And here was some schmuck.

PK: That was nice of Hal.

PA: I know. [Laughter] Well, Hal meant it as a support system.

PK: What was the grounds of their criticism? This is interesting.

PA: The show was up, okay. I had showed pastels, really lush, beautiful pastels, and the velvets. That was the show.

PK: All sunsets?

PA: Yes, all sunsets, right. And it was completely contrary to what was being taught at that school at that time, right?

PK: You might say that. [Laughter]

PA: And I'm sure Hal set it up that way. I mean, I didn't know. No, what do I know? So I went down to give this talk to the students in the gallery, with all this stuff hanging up, and they just yelled at me. Comments like "Take it back to Mexico, asshole." You know.

PK: No.

PA: Oh, yes. It was outrageous.

PK: At least they took their art seriously. They were passionate about it.

PA: Whatever it was.

PK: Highly narrow-minded and opinionated, but, nonetheless.

PA: So what else is a student? [Laughter] That's why you're a student.

PK: Well, that must have been terrible.

PA: It was.

PK: Since you were, as you say, somewhat insecure.

PA: It was incredible. I had no idea. So I couldn't defend it because I didn't have--

PK: What did you say?

PA: --I didn't have any distance on it. I didn't have--I didn't know what it was.

PK: So what did you say?

PA: I just sort of turned red. [Laughter]

PK: God.

PA: I mean, I was completely open. And this is another thing. I mean, this is another characteristic of me. So you have to sort of protect yourself in these things, and I opened myself up and I had no protection. Do you see what I mean?

PK: Yes, I see what you mean.

PA: It hurt.

PK: It hurt, and so surely you must have said to yourself, "I'm not going to let that happen again."

PA: Not that way. No, I learned from that, meaning that if I'm not sufficiently clear, or else distanced of what it is that I'm doing, I'm not going to put myself in that position.

PK: That's wise. But it didn't affect--

PA: The doing of it. No, I went right back and kept right on doing it, yes.

PK: Do you see yourself at that point, though, as actually then separating yourself from what amounted to sort of the ascended movement at the time?

PA: Yes. Not because it was a conscious decision to do that.

PK: But you were aware of the fact?

PA: I was aware of the fact that I was no longer a participant. I was not a participant. And I was not a participant because I couldn't be a participant. But that was not a choice, it was a fact.

PK: Was Phil Leider teaching there yet at the time? Maybe not.

PA: Well, it was close enough so that his effects were being felt, and I was not a favorite. In fact, there was really

nobody there at that time who would even begin to--I mean, I was completely out in left field. In fact, I remember at that time also I was accused of being retrograde. That was a public consensus at the time.

PK: Public?

PA: Well, I mean, I would pick that up from people.

PK: Well, where the hell were you supposed to go with your work?

PA: I didn't--

PK: You didn't know.

PA: I didn't ask the question and I didn't make a comment. I mean, I'm just saying that this is the perception. I thought, well, that's interesting.

PK: Well, of course, what you were, one might say that you were a perfect early post-modernist.

PA: You know, there's all kinds of ways you could frame it now.

PK: But that's a positive spin. That's a positive spin.

PA: Whatever. You know, who cares? It's irrelevant, because you're going to do it anyway.

PK: But I mean, the move, the direction that you took, the move you made actually was more anticipatory of what was to come than the hardcore minimalist.

PA: Well, evidently, but, you know, whatever. You know, whatever.

PK: Well, that's sort of interesting.

PA: I don't find it interesting.

PK: I do. [Laughter]

PA: Well, okay, then you find it interesting. [Laughter]

PK: We agree to disagree. So by this time you had moved to your new home in--what's it called, Tuna?

PA: It was up in Tuna Canyon, yes.

PK: Tuna Canyon.

PA: Yes.

PK: Your family was with you, and at that time--

PA: I had the studio in Venice. I had both of them.

PK: So you maintained--

PA: The studio in Venice.

PK: --the studio, which is where you had been working before in the earlier years?

PA: No, the early years was downtown. It was in the barn of the old house. But there's a family house down there.

PK: That's right. That's right, you talked about that last time.

PA: So I converted. When all this sort of stuff started to happen, I converted it into a real nice white studio, very pristine. It was a generic white studio--white floor, white walls, you know, everything. So we left there and went up there. So I was affected by all that. Then what happened is I got rid of the--we sold the building down here. Cooper Gans and I were partners in it, the one in Venice. We sold it to a group of movie people. I think it was Jack Nicholson and Mike Medavoy and Tony Bill and some other people bought it.

PK: Tony Bill is still there. Is that the same building?

PA: No, they've since sold it. But they got into it because of the tax deal. Who knows what it was. We made a lot

of money in it, in the sale, you know, because we got it for $75,000 in 1970 and we sold it in '75 at the height of, at the time, the market, for five times, six times, seven times, whatever it was.

PK: That's the way it's supposed to be.

PA: That's the way it's supposed to be. It is once in your life and then it never is again. [Laughter]

PK: No, that's right.

PA: So I put all my eggs in one basket and moved up there, out of arrogance. I was naturally the fool.

PK: Why would you say that?

PA: Because I felt that I could sustain whatever it is that I was doing, sustain my relationship to the community and to the economy, so to speak, up there. Meaning that my presence wasn't needed, because I was so great. If you follow what I mean.

PK: Why does it have to be that way? Is this again retrospective or did you see it that way at the time? "Well, you know, I'm established. Hey, man, I don't need to hang out with--"

PA: Yes. I mean, it was arrogance. It was real arrogance, because it was an example of a move where you don't have to abide. But the basic point is that I wasn't operating on a sufficient--it was very uncomfortable for me up there.

PK: How so?

PA: It was great for maybe the first year, year and a half, then I didn't really know what I was doing. I got very confused, because I think by separating myself from the environment, I sort of wanted to go up there and do--my fantasy was to do Hudson River landscapes. Right? Because it was the perfect place to do it. I built the studio for that, with that in mind. But it didn't work.

PK: Were you introduced to Hudson River landscapes at all by old Maurice Bloch. Did you take his American art course?

PA: I did not take Maurice Bloch. In fact, at the same time what happened, I didn't take any art history at all. Well, maybe, you know, minimal stuff. So I didn't know anything about art history. I, obviously, with doing the resins, I don't have to know anything about art history, right?

PK: Right.

PA: But what happened is that when I made this decision I wanted to do Hudson River landscapes, it came from, I taught myself art history. I started reading voraciously.

PK: Really?

PA: Yes, and with absolute fascination. And I realized that we're all the same, that none of it changes, and the presumptions that we started out with are absolutely absurd. But they're also the presumptions of youth, and certainly they were the presumptions of that time.

PK: Well, let me make sure I'm clear on this. You say we're all the same, nothing changes. You're talking about, in this case, specifically artists. Are you saying that you're fundamentally involved in the same endeavor?

PA: Yes. In other words, the symbols, the historical symbols that we are presented with, which are the paintings, say, are representations of people's states at the time, which the context in which they're done that alters the mechanics of it. But what is essentially transmitted is exact--

[Session 2, Tape 2, Side A]

PK: Archives of American art, continuing an interview with Peter Alexander. This is session two on April 11, 1996, tape two, side one.

We're on a new tape, and we've had a little bit of a break. Just to get us up to speed, you were talking about art history and teaching yourself, reading a lot, teaching yourself art history. But beyond that, that came out of your remembering that after about a year up in Tuna Canyon, you felt you were becoming--

PA: I was too isolated. I didn't have enough juice to feed off of.

PK: What did the art history have to do with that?

PA: Because as soon as I started drawing the sunsets, as soon as I started making pictures, then I became interested in art history. That was when I realized I didn't know anything. So I started reading all these books and I found it absolutely fascinating. The point I was going to make is that over the years, whatever is done, the symbols are different, but the symbols are determined by the time, but what the objects evoke is exactly the same. That does not change.

PK: Sounds right to me.

PA: Okay. I don't know how one could--okay. Just as an example, if you were to talk about touch, the touch of Frans Hals or of Rembrandt is not unlike Van Gogh. It's virtually impossible to do an analysis of touch verbally, to try and articulate what it is, because it's so much of the senses. So there's something characteristic in these people that is the same. I mean, we don't even have to use those examples, I'm just saying, let's say Rembrandt and Van Gogh. Frans Hals is something different, because he's about virtuosity.

PK: So it's not in the material, it's--

PA: It's what's desired in the mark, what's desired in the do, in the touch, in the do. Right. Okay. This is what's so interesting about Gates and his owning the copyrights to all this art, so he can digitalize it. He's missing the entire point.

PK: Well, I think you've got that right.

PA: That's not what you'd call a significant observation, but I mean, it's like what? [Laughter]

PK: No, no, it is. I mean, within the context of what you're saying, it seems very relevant.

PA: Well, I think it is very relevant.

PK: Did you see yourself all of a sudden participating in this phenomena that you had discovered by looking at a lot of pictures and reading art history?

PA: Yes.

PK: Do you remember what books you turned to? That would be interesting, I think.

PA: I don't remember. They all got burned in the fire, so I don't remember. I know one, in particular, is the John Canaday book on the lives of the painters. That's why I love biographical material, I mean, particularly on people like Blakelock. It was like unbelievable what happened to that guy. I mean, you could make a movie out of that.

PK: Well, yes, of course. Artists make good movie subjects.

PA: Well, some do. I mean, I think he would, that's for sure. You know, drawing money in the hospital. You know, like, woo, talk about what's telling.

PK: We're always attracted, of course, to often the casualties.

PA: I keep pointing to these books which are on the table over there, the three volumes, and then there's the volume of plates. Eighty percent went mad, or else they died in poverty. I mean, even people like [Albert] Bierstadt, who was one of the wealthiest artists ever, died in total poverty.

PK: Bad money managers.

PA: Very bad money managers. You thought I was going to keep right on going.

PK: That's why you spent so much time with [unclear] studying the market on your computer. [Laughter]

PA: Well, I think it depends on what you want. I mean, this is a very important aspect of it. How much do you want economics to affect your decisions? I mean, how do you enter that arena? I mean, what decisions do you make? That is inseparable from what you do. If you look at the economics of situations, it's a very telling story of artists. Good, bad, whatever. I mean, the point is, it's how one chooses to enter that is a very critical issue.

PK: I don't want to bounce around too much, but this seems to me, coming around to something that brings us right back to you and your situation, where a certain ennui or discontent, a sense of being lost, I guess, came about after you moved up in the Tuna Canyon. Let me see if I can formulate this. There is a notion, a popular romantic notion, that out of some kind of personal life experience, usually suffering, is born, not a sort of great art, but art may be born. That there this is kind of--

PA: You know what's coming to mind? Magritte. Do you think he suffered? [Laughter] Would you call Magritte a great artist?

PK: Well, sometimes I think so, but sometimes not.

PA: Well, I agree. I would say it more, I think so than think not. "Great" is not quite the word. Somewhere you think of Rembrandt as being great or Van Gogh as being great. They all suffered, right?

PK: That's right.

PA: But what about Giorgione?

PK: Ryder at least suffered.

PA: Well, I'm not sure Rider suffered. He may have--

PK: His awareness may not have called it, okay.

PA: Yes, he was a very odd man. But Giorgione, do you think he suffered? I mean, he was a madman, but he did fantastic paintings. Do you think Raphael suffered? Fuck, no.

PK: No, I don't think so.

PA: He went to the best cocktail parties going. Or look at Rubens. But then again--

PK: Okay, but nonetheless, without being too specific on it there is--let's reiterate the romantic notion.

PA: Yes, right.

PK: Let's not deconstruct it at this point.

PA: Okay.

PK: Because nothing will hold up, of course. But there is this notion that perhaps out of adversity, perhaps out of struggle, perhaps out of reversals, that doesn't mean that they don't get corrected, because I think almost everybody undergoes these, but out of this kind of friction in life, the life experience, comes a time of creativity. If everything is even and routine and mundane, one begins to wonder.

PA: Well, how do you define friction? Do you define fiction because what's happening is not meeting your expectations?

PK: Could be.

PA: Wouldn't you say?

PK: Could be. Or there are events in life that--

PA: You mean, that happen to you?

PK: Let's not talk in the abstract, because this is about you. Let's get back--

PA: It's not about me.

PK: Let's get back to--we're going to make it. Let's go back to where we were. We have you up in the Tuna Canyon and you're describing a kind of discontent. You've been talking about fear. You've been taking about things like this. You know, eventually there is this fire. There are certain life experiences or tragedies and events that are traumatic, at least destructive, and personal relationships and so forth. At any rate, what I'd like to do, I can't say this for you, because I don't know, I can't set you up for this, but it's a line of sort of biographical thinking that I'd like to pursue if you--

PA: Okay. All right. So we built the house with absolutely no money. I think I had $5,000 to start with, and out of sheer arrogance, sort of put the thing together myself. It was like a wooden tent, is what it was. And it was fantastic, because it was so romantic and the kids were young and it was a purpose. It was a purpose. A focus.

PK: This is a domestic artistic utopia for Peter Alexander.

PA: Oh, yes. It was my Giverny. I mean, that's what it was.

PK: So you saw yourself as Monet?

PA: No, I didn't see myself as Monet, I saw myself as a painter who was in a place. That's what it was. I'm sure I had fantasies about a lot of things. So, creating this place, this context in which to work, was the excitement. Then trying to do something there was a whole different issue, and I did not have the wherewithal to sustain it. I could now, but I think I'd still get bored.

PK: You mean internally?

PA: Internally.

PK: Experience.

PA: Experience, conviction. I need more food. I wasn't fat enough.

PK: And you came to recognize this, if not in those terms. There was something missing.

PA: There was something missing.

PK: You got off track.

PA: I got off track. I mean, there was a lot of sort of ambivalence for maybe a year or two.

PK: Even though you could watch those beautiful sunsets?

PA: Yes, and this is the paradox. I mean, I had set up scenically the ideal situation, but it wasn't, and for various reasons which I could identify now. I think it had something to do with the marriage. It had something to do with economics. It had something to do with where I was, etc., etc. But it was all these factors just happened--they didn't happen the way the fantasy expected them to happen.

But one of the interesting things that did happen was out of aggravation, or out of whatever this was that was going on, I produced the velvets, the big velvets, the ones that are of the bottom of the ocean, which are actually glorious. And it was out of complete and total frustration that I got there. It was a combination of things. One was that I started a larger tapestry in '75, but I didn't know what imagery to use and so I didn't know where to take it. In '77, I was on a fishing boat in the channel with [Jim] Ganzer and Ruscha and I think, Joe Goode and this guy Jim Isserman, and--

PK: All those dudes fish?

PA: Well, we used to take the boat, the one at Pier 22nd Landings, you know, in San Pedro. You get on the boat at midnight and then the boat goes out and it stops in mid-channel, gets the bait, and the morning you're at San Clemente Island, and you fish, right. Then you come back in the afternoon. It's just sort of a kick in the ass, right. Well, there was experience I had on that boat visually in the middle of the channel which gave me the idea for the velvets. It was about the squid and the fluorescent water and the whales blowing phosphorescence and sharks and squid, and Santa Ana winds and all this stuff came together, and I went, "Oh, my God, this is it." So then I started to do--

PK: How did you have this epiphany? You're out there at night?

PA: It was three in the morning. The boat had stopped to get bait. What they do is they have this huge light and they shine it into the water to attract the squid. It's like moths to the flame. So it's pitch black. The water is brilliant green, but it's also phosphorescent. It's during the red tide in the fall. The Santa Ana winds are blowing, gently. You got the picture?

PK: Sure. Raymond Chandler stuff.

PA: Okay. And it's pitch black. You can't see the horizon from the sky. It's all pitch black. Outside there's [unclear] light. I was up on the top deck. There's like three, four decks, three decks. I looked down and I saw this arc pink squid, thousands, sharks underneath, gray sharks.

PK: You could see them?

PA: You could see them. Gray sharks underneath going [makes sound]. Outside this arc were two whales, symmetrical, blowing phosphorescence.

PK: So you really did see this?

PA: I saw this. Yes, I think I saw it. [Laughter]

PK: All right, I won't hold you to it.

PA: Whatever.

PK: Okay.

PA: I thought, "Ah, this is the image." So that was the image for the velvets.

PK: And you said, then and there, "Yes, I have to--"

PA: "This is what I'm going to do." Then I started doing then up there, and I knew they had to be big. And the bigger they were, the better they were.

PK: That was a fishing boat fee well invested.

PA: It was. I didn't do any fishing. I mean, I was just absolutely enraptured with this image and the possibilities of it. I mean, it was like it had been sitting around for several years and I didn't know what to do, and then bango, there it was. It's the same thing with the City Nights. I mean, that idea of doing the city at night I had in the early seventies. I did some preliminary drawings up at the top of Tapanga overlooking the valley, and then it wasn't until the late--when was it? Mid-eighties, late eighties, that I actually knew how to do it.

PK: You mean the LAX--

PA: Yes, that it came together. The idea was there, but I didn't know what to do or how to do it.

PK: Those are great paintings, if I may say so.

PA: They're very popular.

PK: Are they?

PA: Yes.

PK: Well, they should be. It shows good taste. This is another issue. Does it devalue--

PA: I always have good taste.

PK: --does it devalue something if indeed it speaks to a lot of people?

PA: That's a very good question. I mean, it depends on how populist you want to be. Personally, I feel I'm very much a populist.

PK: Yes, well, good. You're a good Californian, then.

PA: Well, you know what it is. I mean, it's--you know, you've heard many times before. Thinking about Diebenkorn, you look at some of his early painting of those, like of the spoons, those things, they're absolutely unbelievable.

PK: Gorgeous.

PA: I personally am more attracted to those than I am to his Ocean Park, as brilliant and I think the Ocean Parks are, but out of pure visceral attachment, I would take one of those little paintings any day.

PK: I agree.

PA: Speaking of visceral, I mean, you talk about, I mean, that's the same territory as the Van Gogh as the Rembrandt.

PK: The touch.

PA: The touch. The touch, yes.

PK: Okay. So you have found a bit of redemption, or at least distraction very productive with the underwater series on velvet, the paintings on velvet. This was mid-seventies?

PA: Late seventies, early eighties. Then my father died and I got a divorce, all in the same year.

PK: All when?

PA: '81.

PK: Let me ask you, and I don't want to get personal in this, but you had a college, sort of graduate school romance, or maybe it went back even further.

PA: No, that's what it was. That's what it was.

PK: That's what it was.

PA: Right.

PK: Then a nice family. Okay, the domestic side of your life, from the outside, would appear to be very--

PA: Perfect.

PK: --fulfilling and satisfying and all that.

PA: Yes.

PK: Art career, for the most part, was pretty good.

PA: Yes.

PK: You know, I don't want a probe into biography too much, but it is part of it, your art is related to your life. What went astray, in simple terms? Just growing apart or something like that?

PA: Without--it would get complicated, but to simplify it, it's complicated and boring. But, again, to simplify it, it just--it didn't work anymore. And it was extremely painful. I wanted to sustain it, she did not. I did everything I could to try and keep it together, but the damage had been done. The damage was, in part, my behavior. I mean, frustrations on both sides. So it didn't work.

PK: At some point you recognized--that must have taken a lot of your attention at that one point. Your father was ill.

PA: Yes, and he died.

PK: So this is one of those moments.

PA: It's one of those moments.

PK: Dramatic.

PA: It took me two years to recover from it, or to actually be able to participate again. I mean, I came out of that thing with a two-bit Toyota with my clothes in the back, and $5,000. I mean, that's how I came out of this divorce. So I had nothing.

PK: So you didn't have the house?

PA: I didn't have the house. She got all the money. I mean, I didn't have nothin'.

PK: But you recovered the house?

PA: No.

PK: No?

PA: No. She sold it to [Jonathan] Borofsky, and she kept all the money. We were married a long time.

PK: So when was the burn?

PA: Oh, the burn was just last--in '93. This all happened--

PK: That's a different property?

PA: Yes, that was another house that I built. Yes.

PK: Well, I'm trying to sort this out.

PA: Yes.

PK: Well, I visited you in--when I visited you, it must have been, this was years ago, I came up one time and dropped in and that was the Tuna.

PA: That was at the top of Tuna, yes.

PK: So it must have been in the early eighties or something.

PA: Early eighties, possibly, yes.

PK: Not that this is relevant to this.

PA: No, but whatever. That's what was going on.

PK: So that was the first--

PA: So then I sort of floated around for a while and then I went to India for six months and dah, dah, dah, you know. Then I came back and I took over Laddie's studio. It was all ready to go. It was a place to be and it was the first thing I'd settled into in two or three years, almost.

PK: Where was that studio?

PA: It was over on Wavecrest and it's right on the boardwalk, or right actually on the alley. It was at the back of a building that was on the boardwalk. I lived there and it was sort of miserable living, but the studio was good. And that's where I started to paint.

PK: Was there near Claire Falkenstein?

PA: Yes, not far. Three, four blocks away. Yes, exactly.

PK: You were hanging with Claire.

PA: Not really. I mean, I like Clair, but we didn't really--you know. That was a real good time. I mean, I loved the painting and that's when I really just started to do it. I think--I'm sure that it came as a product of what had happened, where I finally said, "Okay, you're going to paint." Meaning, "You're going to confront the canvas and the mark on the canvas."

PK: Did this really knock the pins out from underneath you, these series of experiences? It must have.

PA: Oh, totally.

PK: Did you blame yourself in some way? I mean, you were talking about arrogance. You look at it like that now, and arrogance has its own supposedly--

PA: No, I don't blame myself at all. It's a fact. It's a given. No, I mean, it's just, if you're arrogant, you're arrogant.

PK: It doesn't necessarily lead to having bad things happen.

PA: No. No. I mean, just under the circumstances, just certain conditions and things happened that it didn't work.

PK: No divine intervention?

PA: Hardly. [Laughter]

PK: So you went and then ended up--by now it must be the mid--

PA: Now we're in '83, '84.

PK: You're in Venice.

PA: I did the show at Arco, the velvets at Arco in '83, and that was a very--that was a spectacular show, one of the best shows I've ever done, because of the union of the place and the image, that is, the velvets in that showroom.

PK: '81?

PA: '83.

PK: Who was the curator then? Was Fritz there?

PA: Fritz. Fritz was. The guy who was really responsible for that was Smith, Michael Smith. He's the one who set it up.

PK: Did he?

PA: Yes. And I'll always be grateful to him for that.

PK: Was he on staff at ARCO then?

PA: No, he was--I think he was still doing the Cal Tech deal, maybe. I'm not sure.

PK: Yes, the--

PA: I don't know. I'm not sure. Whatever.

PK: Yes. Yes, that's right, because he was, I think, the last director of the--

PA: He was at the Armory. Or, no, he was the director of something. It wasn't the Cal Tech.

PK: Baxter [Art Gallery].

PA: It was Baxter, right. Exactly. Yes.

PK: Was that show well received?

PA: Very well received, yes.

PK: So you really then--that had to make you feel--

PA: Yes, it made me feel real good. It made me feel real good. I liked the work enormously. It looked--the lighting system they had there was perfect. It was the kind of a union that you couldn't ask any better of, and it just happened that way. Simultaneous with that, I did the show of the sunsets at Barnsdall. Those, they appeared simultaneously. I mean, they were on at the same time.

PK: Oh, really?

PA: Yes. So as a result, there was a kind of exposure that was very good for me.

PK: This is all in '83?

PA: Yes. So that sort of gave things a kick-start out of--

PK: Who was at Barnsdall at that time?

PA: Josine [Ianco-Starrels].

PK: Josine was there?

PA: Yes.

PK: Okay. I've got to set my times. Okay. That's pretty unusual, actually.

PA: It was. It was unusual. It was great fun. I mean, it gave me a real kick, as I say, out of that state , you know, of the divorce and my father dying, who I liked enormously. So I started painting. As you know, I mean, when you're confident, things happen, and that helps your confidence, obviously. Those two shows did.

PK: Did you then shift? Did you continue with the same [unclear]?

PA: No. No, that's when I--well, I started painting--

PK: Started doing the city thing?

PA: No, I started painting sort of some of the sunsets. I mean, I started doing it oil on canvas, rather than drawing. I sort of did those and then I did some--I had a dream one night in '85 about India, and I woke up the next day and started doing these jungle paintings from that dream. I did maybe ten of them.

PK: You say you were a year in India?

PA: No, just four months.

PK: Why did you choose to go there?

PA: To get out of here and because I was asked to go. There was a place I could go and be sort of taken care of very comfortably.

PK: Where was it?

PA: It was in Ahmedabad, which is in Gujarat, which is halfway between Deli and Bombay on the west of India. Ahmedabad is a big textile town.

PK: Is there something interesting about how this came about that you were there?

PA: Well, there's a family called the Sarabhais, who are an old family in India. Very rich. They had a house that was designed by Corbusier in Ahmedabad. It was a house that I saw in a magazine when I was a student in '55, or '57, at U of P. I was studying architecture. I said, "This house is one of the most beautiful houses I've ever seen." Then here we are how many years later, whatever it was, twenty some-odd years later, I was asked to go stay with them. This is through Lynda Benglis, who set it up.

PK: Who just visited. We have to put that on the tape.

PA: Right, exactly. So it was just perfect timing. It was the thing to do, get out of here and to go there. So I stayed there. I was going to stay a month, and I stayed for four. They were extremely hospitable people.

PK: Was the idea, in effect, that it was sort of a retreat for you to work?

PA: It was a work thing, yes.

PK: They're being like patrons?

PA: Yes. They give you a studio and a place to sleep. They have like twenty servants, so one more person isn't going to make any difference.

PK: Did Lynda Benglis ever do that? Did she go to India?

PA: Oh, yes.

PK: Other artists?

PA: Oh, yes. Yes, there was a whole--most of the artists were from the East Coast. I mean, Stella did it, Lichtenstein did it. Everybody you would know. Rauschenberg did it.

PK: What are these people's names?

PA: Sarabhai, S-A-R-A-B-H-A-I. They live in a compound in the middle of this city. It's a walled compound. It must be ten acres. I don't know what it is. It's a jungle. Ahmedabad has a climate like L.A. It's like a desert. But the original spring for the city of Ahmedabad is inside this compound.

PK: So they have the water rights.

PA: Well, they don't, but, you know, you know what I mean. This jungle is sort of man-made, but it is a jungle and it's unbelievable. You enter this thing--

PK: How dramatic.

PA: It is. You enter--I remember when I got picked up at the airport and the car drove us into it, and there are these huge bronze gates with a big "S" on them. The gates open up, a guard opens them up, and you're saluted, and you go into this jungle. It was like, "I don't fuckin' believe it." I used to swim in this pool, which is in the middle of the jungle, all the time, and that's where I got the dream for these paintings.

PK: How big is the compound?

PA: Well, there's the original palace that was built by the great-grandfather, which is three hundred rooms, that's off to the side as you enter. Then there are members of the family, each have a house, but you can't see them because of the density of the jungle. There are maybe four houses in there, five. It's very bizarre.

PK: It sounds great.

PA: It was. And they were absolutely the most extraordinary people. I mean, absolutely extraordinary.

PK: What did you do while you were there?

PA: I did some work on mosquito nets. I did some fabric work. That was layered mosquito nets that I would dye.

PK: Did you ever show those?

PA: I showed them in New York.

PK: Did you think of them after the fact as what you would say successfully realized works?

PA: Some of them were very good.

PK: I don't think I've ever seen any of those.

PA: No. I have them in storage. I didn't show them much.

PK: Talk about a response to the place, though. In that jungle there must have been mosquitoes.

PA: Yes. Oh, yes. I mean, you slept under mosquito net all the time.

PK: Even though it was like a desert outside. There didn't have to be mosquitoes. They created an environment in which awful mosquitoes--

PA: Monkeys, peacocks, you know.

PK: This is incredible.

PA: Yes, it was like Disneyland.

PK: Then it was sometime afterwards you say you had a dream?

PA: Well, I came back and I'd settled into the studio of Laddie's and he moved over to the one he's in now. Then I had a dream maybe six months later about these paintings that were about this jungle and about the pool at night. So I did these paintings. I knew exactly what to do. I knew what materials should be to make them, which was wax, and I mixed indigo with the wax, and I applied it with my fingers and made these jungles. Actually, they are beautiful paintings. I did very few of them.

PK: I'm not sure, I don't know that I've seen any of them.

PA: Most people have not. I mean, there's an enormous amount of things that I've done that nobody has any idea I ever did it. That's why I'm looking forward to this show that I'm going to be doing with Henry at the Hammer.

PK: That's great. When that's going to be?

PA: Oh, not for a couple more years.

PK: Well, yes, that's pretty soon. At our age, two years is--

PA: The further away the better, as far as I'm concerned.

PK: That's great news. I don't know if you told me that. Is this something that--

PA: It's in the works.

PK: --was agreed upon recently?

PA: We've been talking about for a year, and then finally--

[Session 2, Tape 2, Side B]

PK: Alexander. Tape two, side B.

PA: So I mean, it afforded the opportunity to put all this stuff together, from the resins, to the sunsets, to the velvets, to the night scenes, and the Las Vegas, and the little drawings, all that stuff. So what maybe is clear

now, that all of these things, all these places that I've been, you have no choice, if you know what I mean. They're all responses to where you are and what you are. Do you see what I mean?

PK: Yes. It's very, very clear.

PA: So that's what I mean about you have no choice, meaning that at this stage, after realizing that's what you do, then you can't--it'll happen. It does itself. So if you're not getting what you think you deserve, forget it, because you don't have any choice, anyway, where if you are getting what you deserve, it's just circumstantial.

PK: It seems to me that, well, you started out as a kind of a minimalist, and you're talking about the different--well, I can't remember exactly the terms we used in this respect. But that a minimalist artist, although the choice of minimalism, the choice of that kind of expression, indicates something about that individual that nonetheless that there's a lesson, it would seem to me, less opportunity within that expression to reveal the kinds of things that you've been talking about, this very direct response to place and to sunsets and to the jungle and your life experience.

PA: Well, what I'm saying is it's all autobiographical.

PK: Right. I understand that. I understand that and then it's very clear, and I'm trying to formulate a question and I may have to just ditch it. But I guess the observation has to be that the opportunity for a fuller, broader range of this kind of response, everybody's responding to themselves and to their environment. But for a broader, more inclusive range, you're perhaps better off offering within, first of all, realism, some form of realism.

PA: You mean images?

PK: Yes, some connection to--

PA: Pictures.

PK: Yes. Minimalism then in a sense is a confining, very confining mode or direction or expression.

PA: Yes.

PK: Well, I don't want to get off the subject too much, but let me just throw out another idea that maybe we can tie into this. That is, I'm thinking of Marfa [Texas] and Donald Judd, and I don't know if you've ever visited there.

PA: I've been there, several times.

PK: I had to be there last summer. It strikes me as kind of odd, and I'm not going to say anything more about it. But I'd be interested, in light of what we've been talking about, you know, what an artist chooses in terms of place. Can you follow that a little bit?

PA: Well, I first met Judd in '69, I guess, something like that, and we were in a show together in Minneapolis. He wore an outfit and I looked at him and I said, "This guy is really cool." He had a jacket on, kind of a generic blue jacket, but it was slightly different. He had on slacks that were gray, but not quite, slightly different. He had these socks on that were kind of peach socks. The decisions that were made in this outfit were totally controlled and acute and in exquisite taste. That's Judd. His deal was, he had a fiefdom, and he ran it like a king, and he was really good at it. He knew just how much to give, when to give it, and how much not to give and what to throw out and what not to. I mean, it was like the guy was just--he was really smart. I don't think that there's anything in what he did that reveals to me very much about himself, other than that aspect of it. I mean, it's sort of one-dimensional.

PK: So what about Marfa? Why Narfa? We're talking about place. See, you're an extreme example, I think, of a very direct and evident response to experience and place.

PA: Yes.

PK: Donald Judd, I mean, we're just using him as an example.

PA: Yes, yes.

PK: Seems to be at the other pole. Or maybe Larry Bell, for that matter.

PA: No, I think Judd is more extreme.

PK: More extreme.

PA: Yes.

PK: But, nonetheless, for some reason he choose Marfa, and I guess I'm sort of intrigued by this since we--

PA: I think he choose it because out of perversity.

PK: Really?

PA: Because there's nothing there. And he was going to make something there. And he could and did. It also gave him an opportunity to rule the roost completely. He made the people come to him.

PK: Well, you do learn a lot then about that. It seems to me that in some ways what you've said there's the theme of nothingness, which is the direction that some people say minimalism is going. But we won't get into this theoretical [unclear].

PA: No, that's all another sort of aesthetic thing. I'll tell you what's most interesting about it is not the aesthetic, it's about the people.

PK: Yes, well, I agree with you.

PA: And the choices.

PK: But Marfa, now that I think about it, is in a sense a minimalist landscape itself.

PA: Absolutely. No, it's completely consistent.

PK: So his work is, in a way--

PA: About Marfa, yes, right. Or Marfa's about his work, you know.

PK: I agree if you put it that way.

PA: Yes. Thank you.

PK: That's more important.

PA: Right. But that also was a product of those times and the Dia and the fact that the Dea was throwing money at Judd and Turrell. Who's the guy does the neon tubes?

PK: Flavin?

PA: Flavin. I mean, you know, talk about one-dimensionality. Un-fucking-believable. Not to say there were not some brilliant works done, but give me a fucking break.

PK: Well, it's one idea.

PA: Oh!

PK: Once it's been once, frankly--that if, of course, really a very different topic. But, yes, these were--it tells you about the times, as well as--

PA: Yes, but it also, you know, it's like Flavin is perfect. He's got the product and he uses that to manipulate his life, rather than the other way around. [Laughter]

PK: All right. Let's see, where do we have you? We have you at a very good point right now, I mean, in our chronological excursion here. You have that wonderful show. Two shows in '83. It's now '96. Obviously things followed. Presumably you were getting some attention. I imagine there was some sales, perhaps, here. Who was your dealer? Was Corcoran around at that time?

PA: Yes. Jim and I hooked up probably around '85, '86, yes. '84, '85, yes. He pretty much--that was it until he left. In fact, I showed the velvets--the first group of velvets I showed with Jim. No, actually, we hooked up in the late seventies. Because I remember the early velvets that were done in the late seventies I showed at Jim's. Then it wasn't until later, '83, that I did the show at Arco, which were some other pieces.

PK: But he was your dealer still or then you went back to--

PA: No. No, he was the dealer.

PK: The Santa Monica--

PA: On Santa Monica Boulevard. The first dealer I had here was Nick Wilder, but Nick and I didn't get along very well. But we did some business. Then I sort of was flailing around, and then Jim and I hooked up, and that worked out pretty well. That's all.

PK: How would you characterize the subsequent years, the chain of events?

PA: Since '84, say, or '85?

PK: Yes. Yes. Post the two exhibitions. Stayed in the studio in Venice?

PA: I was in that studio until late '89. I came here in '89. So the first LAX paintings came out of that studio in '86--'86, '87. So, the jungles, I did jungles and I did some moonscapes and then I started the LAX. Then I started with these drawings and I turned those into paintings. They were very successful, and also that was a very successful time for everybody, as you know. By successful I'm talking about just economics. But it was not necessarily a great time, because people were completely indiscriminate. It was sort of tragic in a way. Having gone through enough cycles, I knew that it wasn't going to last, meaning that the crazies of the late eighties. So I made a fair amount of money at that time and so I put a lot of it away.

PK: Oh, good.

PA: I mean, for me, you know. There are others who made millions. Millions. I'm not talking about millions.

PK: But it's an interesting observation. You're saying that the buyers were indiscriminate.

PA: Yes, I mean, they'd buy it and put it in a warehouse and not even look at it in here. It was commodities.

PK: This was the great commodification of our period, which almost everybody regrets, even artists, I think, who did well.

PA: Yes.

PK: Or so I judge from reading in an article in *New York Times Magazine* about a year ago with famous artists who--

PA: Oh, yes, right.

PK: Did you see that?

PA: Yes, I did. Yes. Actually, it was an interesting article. Like Longo. I mean, he's a classic example of that whole thing. He's a really smart man and I like him. But I first met him when Brook showed him and I first met him through Brook when he was just starting.

PK: Your brother?

PA: Yes. He never did any of his work, it was always done by others. The drawings, the men in the cities, you know, those things. There was always something odd about that, I thought. Not that one necessarily should do them. I'm not saying that. But all the focus was on the manipulation of the marketplace, which is not a value judgment. But for me it was foreign, because I'm not a very good manipulator.

PK: You got to work on those skills.

PA: They're definite skills. I mean, again, if I perhaps paid better attention to the marketplace, I would probably be in a different place. But since I did not or do not, then what the hell can one expect? I mean, you get what you do.

PK: You must feel some kind of "order of things," or justice. It must be gratifying to have this show coming up or being planned with Henry Hopkins at the Panoramic.

PA: Yes, that's good.

PK: That's a real validation, because Henry, of course, has been around watching the California art world longer than almost anybody and they only do so many shows a year. It says a lot about what he thinks of you and your work.

PA: I see it as an opportunity for me and for others to--I think it's going to be a really good show because for reasons of the diversity, if nothing else. That's good. No, I feel very good about that.

PK: So, what, you didn't manipulate or strategize in some ways how you might or others did during the boom times, but I guess what I'm saying--

PA: I mean, there were other opportunities. I was offered a show in Pasadena once and I turned it down.

PK: When was that?

PA: With John Coplans.

PK: Oh, a long time ago.

PA: A long time ago.

PK: Why did you do that?

PA: Because I didn't like John Coplans. [Laughter] And there was another one, I was going to do one with Maurice at the County, and that didn't pan out, because I didn't kiss ass well enough. So it's not as if they were not completely possible, it's that I didn't do it. I'm not saying--this is not a value judgment. It's the same thing I'm saying about what you make, is that one does what one can. I am envious of people who can do things other than me, I mean, who could do whatever it takes. It's an attribute I would like to have.

PK: But you clearly don't regret having turned down those earlier opportunities, even though possibly this could have--

PA: It would have fueled the whole system, but that again is not the point. I think it happened the way it happened and that's what you get. [Laughter]

PK: Well, it's about choices you make and the choices are yours. I mean, it's actually--

PA: It's not about choices. That's my point. It's about how you can function, and this is not a choice.

PK: Some people would say it is.

PA: That's why I use the example of the touch in the paintings. I mean, one does not choose to touch a certain way. One touches.

PK: Well, by that logic probably one doesn't choose anything. I mean, that's a whole philosophical point of view.

PA: Well, I mean, it depends on--yes, where you want--yes.

PK: That's who you are and ultimately, unless you're untrue to yourself, unless you force yourself to go against your nature.

PA: We all do, don't we?

PK: Yes. So you do have the opportunity. But this gets us into theology and philosophy.

PA: Right. Right. Well, my point, obviously, is that I think the closer you are to what it is, to what you feel, is--and I don't have any corners on that market. But what I'm saying is that, you know, that's the object. So that's what it means by it not being a choice.

PK: I understand. That's interesting. So Coplans offered a show in Pasadena back in the late sixties, it must have been.

PA: Yes.

PK: And Maurice. Well, good for Maurice. That shows that he has taste after all. [Alexander laughs.] Sorry, Lewis. Now, let's do this. We have a little more time on this tape and there's much more ground to cover, but what I'd like to do is turn to this current work now, because I think that's going to sort of elucidate or amplify some of what we've been talking about already. How I'd like to start with it, I'm going to let you describe what these works are. We've got a lot of Polaroids around us. I'll let you describe them as well. But they're erotic content and they constitute subject matter for a recent series of little pastels, which you've exhibited. What interested me, though, is that you started out talking about various subjects and materials that you were attracted to. One component of it was fear--I guess, could you do this.

PA: Right, could I do it? Is it possible? If you don't do it, then you never know. But if you don't know, then it's as good as--you know what I mean?

PK: Yes.

PA: I mean, you don't have to confront it, so we always don't want to confront it.

PK: Let's talk about these.

PA: Okay. I'm going to have to call Claude and then we'll-- [Tape recorder turned off.]

Let me preface it with this business about Las Vegas. The Las Vegas paintings were--my attraction to Las Vegas was that I was feeling very gloomy about L.A. at the time. This is after the riots, or before the riots, actually, and things were very dark. So I wanted to go to get someplace else. It also had to do with a woman. Even the LAX paintings had to do with a woman. I was seeing this great girl out in the valley and I'd go over the San Diego Freeway and over the hump and I'd look at these things all the time and I'd go, "That's it."

PK: That's incredible.

PA: Yes.

PK: It's a great view.

PA: No, I know, exactly. There was this girl I was seeing who loves Las Vegas, so I used to go with her all the time. I said, "This is great. All this light!" But I didn't know what image to do, but eventually I settled on Caesar's Palace and these awful statutes as figurative stuff.

PK: This was like '93, isn't it?

PA: This is '93, yes. '93. I was always fearful of doing figurative work, because I never thought I could add to it, so to speak. So I started doing these images, and I though, hey, gee, these are pretty good. So I think that gave me the confidence to take on the drawings that I'm doing now. Let's put it this way, it was a step into figuration that had sort of been on my mind, but I didn't know what to do and all that kind of stuff. But the little drawings are sort of like chipping away at another block, I guess. Who's that painter who's actually pretty good, went to Cal Arts, got a lot of attention in the eighties?

PK: David Salle.

PA: Not Salle. The one who's--

PK: Fischel.

PA: Fischel.

PK: Good painter.

PA: Good painter. He did that big painting of the little boy with the purse and the mother on the bed.

PK: "Bad Boy."

PA: "Bad Boy."

PK: Great painting.

PA: Terrific painting. I thought, "Jesus, that painting is really hot." I mean, it has heat in it, right. I always liked--I saw some Degas mono prints years and years ago. Little tiny things of figures that he just whipped out. They were really good. Real sensual. Some of [Egon] Schiele's, not so much Schiele. Schiele's a little bit too hard for me. But historically started thinking about all those things that actually--the feeling you get from that kind of excitement, which is unequivocal and it's absolutely visceral.

PK: Fairly universal.

PA: Yes, and I wanted to enter into that place. Can I do this? And I never thought I could.

PK: Can you be explicit on that, what you mean, enter into place and to represent and capture the feeling?

PA: The feeling. Or to make something that would elicit that charge of "Ooh!" Like, "Oh!" I remember when I was at school at Berkeley and I was living in the Carriage House on the north side. You know, these old boarding houses, like two-story, three-story boarding houses around. One day I walked into the kitchen. I was on the second floor. There was a girls' sort of boarding house next door and it was maybe thirty feet away. The light was off in the kitchen, and so I walked in and I could see through this window this girl who was dittling herself in

front of a mirror, and I went, "Oh, my God. Oh, Jesus."

PK: Lucky you.

PA: I thought, "Oh, ah, ah, ah," it was so hot. It was that voyeurism. So that's why these are what they are. Some are obviously more successful than others, but that's why they're small so you have to--you know. The material is absolutely crucial, the pastels, because the images are massaged with the fingers.

PK: Not all of them, but most of them were blue.

PA: Well, I've got a bunch over there that are red and white. But the blues ones are particularly good. Because of the nature of that blue, it sort of sucks you in, which you vividly described.

PK: So it works.

PA: So it works, yes. No, it's like velvet. It's the same stuff.

PK: I understand this very well, and as a phenomenon it's fairly simple. I mean, what you describe is a fairly simple, fairly basic, fairly universal--

PA: Feeling?

PK: Feeling, yes.

PA: Yes, yes.

PK: So that could be understood in terms of artistic intent, to tap into that and communicate it.

PA: Right.

PK: But let me ask a couple of questions. Well, first of all, let me ask you, did you see *Atlantic City*?

PA: Kirk Douglas? I mean, Burt Lancaster?

PK: Burt Lancaster looking across at Susan Sarandon.

PA: I don't remember that. Did you ever see *Blow Up*?

PK: Sure.

PA: Remember that scene when the girls were dressing in the background in *Blow Up* and this girl took her bra off?

PK: Yes, very [unclear].

PA: And it was like a flash like that?

PK: Especially then as a society.

PA: Yes.

PK: But these are all the same kinds of moments. Let's see, the key issues, I mean, voyeurism is a topic that we can't explore, but we can do it some other time.

PA: Yes.

PK: I hope we have the opportunity, because for some, for many of us--well, I'm not going to assume anything, but it can have a deliciousness that even actually interacting with another person doesn't have.

PA: Absolutely.

PK: It's a different time.

PA: Absolutely.

PK: But it's like the potential, infinite potential.

PA: Exactly.

PK: There's also, of course, that guilt and shame of being a voyeur.

PA: Perhaps. [Laughter]

PK: I mean, typically.

PA: Well, that of course, is what makes it so appealing. I mean, you can't have one without the other.

PK: Let me phrase this, take it a little bit further, in fact, to clarify what I'm leading to in terms of you. Part of the thrill of voyeurism, maybe, and this moves back to my earlier description before we were even taping, of being--

PA: Manipulated?

PK: Manipulated and ambushed with these works.

PA: Yes.

PK: You walk up and we talked about, I don't want to say this, you should be saying it--

PA: You say it. [Laughter]

PK: Very quickly, that there are these works that are--the forms, images are a bit ambiguous.

PA: Yes. Androgenous or ambiguous?

PK: Ambiguous.

PA: Yes.

PK: That is, the form itself is indeterminate. You see it as just some imagine, a blue thing, and then you're drawn into it and then there is this shock of recognizing the subject. In some cases it goes beyond erotic to what one would say intercourse, screwing, and so forth. The recognition, then, it gives you that shock and perhaps--

PA: That's not my interest.

PK: No, no. Well, we actually did talk about it in terms of being surprised, being surprised and being drawn into something and being--I think we used the term in a way, "set up," because you're confronted with something that you are seeing in a different way, a very different way, and then you recognize it. But my point--I don't want to go on about this, this is your interview, not mine. We can erase this part. But my point is that in true voyeurism, there are a couple of elements and one of them is that you don't want to get caught. You're in a dark room looking across the way.

PA: You do not want to get caught.

PK: If found out, it would not only wreck the experience--

PA: Absolutely.

PK: --it would be embarrassing.

PA: Absolutely.

PK: Because you would be shown to be something that you would not want to present publicly.

PA: Yes, of course. Of course.

PK: Now, how much of this then is Peter Alexander acknowledging in a public arena--

PA: His voyeurism?

PK: Yes.

PA: I am swimming in it. I love it.

PK: See, it took me a long time to get to that point. [Laughter]

PA: I love being a voyeur. The fact that I'm attracted to this sort of images just gives me such pleasure, to be able to objectify them. You mean, to be known as a voyeur or to be seen as a voyeur?

PK: Well, it just shows your interest. One might even say an obsession.

PA: Yes, I would hope so. It's okay. I mean, who cares?

PK: I see this as many, many things, but one is, I guess, a conscious, even calculated self-revelation and opening up.

PA: You do?

PK: Possibly. I'm asking.

PA: No, I'm not saying it isn't. I'm sure that for me to allow myself to do it, certainly there is an aspect of that in it.

PK: Which in the past has gotten you in trouble. You know, you got in a little bit of trouble at Irvine, certainly, by--

PA: Yes.

PK: [unclear].

PA: But we can also speak of it in another way. There's no metaphor. The palm trees are metaphors.

PK: I love those, too.

PA: All of this work is metaphor. This is not a value judgment. All I'm saying is that these images of the ladies or whatever, or the tits and the ass, there's no metaphor. That's the thing that I also find interesting. I find it curious that I'm doing something that is not a metaphor, whatever that's worth, whereas everything I've done before is.

PK: You mean it's directly--it is what it is.

PA: It is what it is, yes. It's exactly what it is.

PK: This subject stands on its own?

PA: Right. But it's critical as to how it's done, meaning how it's made. That is absolutely crucial, I think, for it to work.

PK: You were saying earlier that--

PA: I don't think I could make paintings like this.

PK: I mean, the intimate small scale is [unclear].

PA: Is absolutely critical, yes.

PK: I lost my train of thought. One interesting observation you made, which seems certainly true and compelling to me, is that as you frame these elements, and you work from Polaroids, which are taken from--

PA: The first black and white--well, I do it from live models, sometimes, but also purposely, these old black-and-white stag movies that we saw as kids, you can get on tapes.

PK: Well, you can get anything. It's a wonderful world. [Laughter]

PA: And the black and whites are much better than the ones in color, obviously.

[End of session]

[Session 3, Tape 1, Side A]

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, a continuing interview with Peter Alexander. This is session three on May 8, 1996, at the artist's studio in Marina Del Rey, a mile from Venice. I've figured that out now. Anyway, the interviewer, as usual, is Paul Karlstrom.

So, we begin. Okay, Peter, last time, I think, we ended up talking about this series of pastels that you're working on. These are small works. In fact, you're working on one right now. We'll admit it, you're actually not one to waste time, As we're interviewing, you're drawing. You're using your fingers a lot, by the way, to work this

material. You might even say something about that.

It's an interesting series, and one laden, or one suspects laden, with a certain personal meaning or implications. But it's a series of erotic drawings drawn from a variety of sources. It seems to me, just commenting on what I see in front of me on this table, a lot of Polaroid pictures that you've taken and that you seem to use and you sort of shuffle through them. They come from, I think, X-rated videos and various sources. But, clearly, there's more to these than simply that. That's just a straightforward description of what I see. I thought we could pick up that topic, talking about this series now and just see where that leads us. But I want to ask one thing. These are actually being done in preparation for a show, is that right?

PA: Yes.

PK: Why don't you sort of fill us in on that.

PA: By the way, do you know Noriko?

PK: Yes.

PA: Do you know her well?

PK: Pretty well.

PA: She called today and she's going to come by on Monday and we're thinking about showing these there at the museum, which might be a good place to do it.

PK: I think she's terrific.

PA: You do?

PK: Yes. I've known her quite a while.

PA: Would she respond to these?

PK: I think so.

PA: Yes, okay.

PK: I don't think there would be a problem. Frankly, nowadays--well, I mean, this is actually a good question for the tape, for our discussion, is that the subject matter itself is not difficult for people who are well versed, experienced in the art world anymore, because we've taken big steps, even though, to me, half of them look like Mr. Corvay's pastels, especially that one you're working on now. The subject matter is not, for the most part, offensive, and so maybe your question--I don't know if that was your question to me about Noriko, but maybe it would be in a different respect about her own taste.

PA: Well, it has to do--again, I'll give you an example. You get very mixed responses from these, particularly from the gender. Woman either hate them or they like them, or else they just love them. What I've learned is that, in general, women--and this is not a blanket statement--don't like pictures. They don't like images, when it comes to eroticism. They much prefer words, as opposed to men, who always, you know, they're all about pictures.

There was someone in here the other day who was from San Francisco, a lady I've known for twenty years, twenty-five years. She hadn't seen these before and she walked to these and turned around with a horrified expression on her face and said, "These are disgusting."

PK: No.

PA: Yes.

PK: This is a friend of yours?

PA: Yes, you know, it's a friend. We do business together, too.

PK: She didn't like it or--

PA: She's sort of a dealer. I sort of laughed, because it was so adamant. There was no forgiving, so to speak. I thought, God, that's interesting. I wonder what that says about her. I'm not saying that it--but it was so adamant. Then a few days later, a lady was in here who was from the Near East and--

PK: A collector or an art-knowledgeable person?

PA: An art-knowledgeable person who is actually a filmmaker. Her response was, she was enraptured. I use that term because she was just like this. [Demonstrates]

PK: Where was she from?

PA: She was from--

PK: Iran or something?

PA: Iran, yes, right. So I was wondering, well, now is this cultural? But then again, the few times that people have seen these, usually that's the response.

PK: What, [unclear]?

PA: Well, no, it's either complete sort of infatuation or complete negation.

PK: In other words, it's almost binary.

PA: Yes.

PK: Either/or.

PA: Yes, it's either/or. Yes. But I mean, the subject matter, I mean, you could open up a*Hustler*, so what's being depicted has nothing to do with the issue. In fact, most recently, if you look at this stack of Polaroids, because what I do is I shuffle through them all the time and edit what I'm interested in at the time. What I'm interested in now is the faces and women masturbating, or some kind of autoerotic thing, which is even more voyeuristic, particularly in these colorations.

PK: What do you mean "in these colorations"?

PA: Well, because of the blue, the dark, you know, looking, hidden. Hidden, yes. In fact, today I had spent two hours down at Hennessey and Ingalls, looking at books. I couldn't find the German book, by the way, not to say it wasn't there, but I--

PK: Well, I want you to know I'm going to get that for you. Actually, if I'd had more time today, I would have picked it up. So you don't--

PA: Where can you get it?

PK: Well, this is at Rizzoli's. I know where it is at Rizzoli's in old town Pasadena.

PA: Okay. If you get it, I can't let you buy it, I want to pay for it, because I know those things aren't cheap. I got this book of Rodin drawings, which I never realized he'd done. Which is right there on the table. It made me rethink Rodin completely, because I always thought there was a kind of amazing sort of arrogance about him. I mean, what the public sees about big statutes and sort of a certain grandiosity, and these drawings are absolutely beautiful. They are, in fact, because of their simplicity, they are very erotic, I find. That's the hard thing. That's the thing that's so difficult. I don't want to labor this issue.

PK: Well, no, but it's interesting.

PA: I think we've talked enough about this already.

PK: But what is interesting, I think, is the cultural conditioning, the cultural experience that [unclear] a response, or at least this is one possibility for these dramatic different responses. This is something like as a subject of a paper. I mean, it can't be figured out. I mean, it can't be figured out by us here. But it does seem to me that your work indeed calls that issue, whether you want it to or not. So that becomes part of the work of art, and there's a political dimension to it that you may not want to engage, but it's just there.

PA: All art's political, whether you want it to be or not.

PK: In this case it's especially so because of a feminist perspective. For instance, now I'm going to ask you about this, your friend Claudia mentioned to me after the last interview that, talking about your work, this series, and she said that you would show her these and ask her if they were arousing, if they turned her on. She said she had to say, "Gee, sorry, Peter, but no." You would say, "Why? But why?" And her only comment was that--well, along the lines that you have described, that, gee, no, they just don't do it for her. It could be a gender thing, an

issue of the visual sources of arousement.

PA: Right.

PK: Yet that isn't, in her case, it's not as if she objects to the subject at all. She's an artist. I mean, that's not the issue.

PA: No, no.

PK: So there's another layer, there's another element here of this rather dramatic response that you described.

PA: Yes.

PK: So then that carries it into a whole other realm, the fact that these are--what did you say, hideous or something like this.

PA: Disgusted.

PK: Disgusted.

PA: Right. Now, Claude doesn't find them disgusting, they just don't arouse.

PK: Yes. I mean, that's the point. There's a big difference.

PA: But I'll tell you another story, which is that I showed these to Bill Wilson and Tim Ruttin. Do you know Tim, who writes? He's an editor for the *Times*? Real interesting guy. At any rate, we have dinner every once in a while, the three of us. I showed these to them, and they started drooling. But they're two, I mean, they're certainly art-knowledgeable, obviously. But they were kind of like [panting sound], in a way. I mean, like--

PK: How interesting.

PA: Yes. But it was so male, the response. It's like the thing with when I--Larry Shopmaker, who's the director of the gallery, Barbara Mathis Gallery in New York. I called him and I said, "I've been doing these drawings." I said, "I hesitate to send them to Barbara because I don't think they're the kind of thing that Barbara would either like to look at and certainly not show."

He said, "You're absolutely right. Send them to me, but make sure you label them 'personal.'" So he looked at the slides and said, "Yes, we can't show these." And his comment was that he wasn't sure how Barbara's son was ever born. This is not an attack on Barbara, but it's more of a--I don't know if this is a particularly interesting conversation.

PK: Well, we'll get it to go somewhere. Because it is a series, I mean, you are engaged in it now. Obviously for various reasons you, as an artist, have selected the subject, it's not entirely self-indulgent, although there may be an element of that. But I frankly respect you too much to say that that's the entire reason. You have chosen this subject and so there are clearly implications of this work. Artists choose subjects for reasons, and this is a particularly loaded content for the reasons that we've discussed. I guess that's kind of what I'm trying to get at, to what extent is this range and response of interest to you. You'll remember I described last time, I can't remember how I described it, but my own response to the work, not being able to identify it. They're small, and not really knowing what it is, and then going up and looking at it and then there's that kind of shock of recognition.

PA: Yes.

PK: That, I think, is probably a pretty standard response.

PA: Yes.

PK: This question is for you, not for me. With that said, I guess what I'm trying to get at is, what is some of the motivation? What are you seeking in choosing this subject and presenting it in this medium and in this way?

PA: Most importantly is, given the subject matter, what I'm doing is I'm touching women. And the reason why I do them with my fingers and the reason why I mush it around like in pastel, and in fact that they're small, is all about touching.

PK: It's tactile.

PA: Yes. I'm touching breasts, and I'm touching thighs, and I'm touching that anatomy. So because of it, I have a

very direct--sort of hopefully a very direct response to touching.

PK: That's interesting.

PA: Because I'm describing thighs, belly, breasts, what have you. I'm sure that there's a response, something going on, which is indeterminable when I'm doing this, because I sense it. I don't know what it is, but there's an influence and an effect going on. So through this process--and this wouldn't happen like this with anything else. I mean, what other--I mean, if this were a sheep, you know, I wouldn't quite be feeling the same way about it.

PK: Well, it depends on how you're bent. [Laughter]

PA: Yes, right. [Laughter] I used it because, you know--right. Well, I don't know, could be pretty good. That's why I'm doing it and that's why--so I'm presuming that whatever it is, which is indefinable, is in fact happening. A lot of that is because of how I feel about art right now.

PK: How you feel about art.

PA: Right now. About the function of this stuff right now relative to the bigger picture.

PK: You mean the bigger picture in terms of the rest of your work?

PA: No, nothing to do with the rest of my work. Having to do with my feelings about the observer, viewing this. What do people want to feel? What do they want to see? What do I want to feel and see? It's all very confused right now as to what's important. Can this stuff continue to carry some kind of a message or can it enlighten? What can it do? What is it doing?

PK: Is this like in some respect getting back to some fundamentals in terms of subject? Does this have to do with--

PA: Oh, because it's figures?

PK: Well, not only figures, but sexuality and the nude, the erotic nude. Which is one of the few, along with landscape and a few other things, one of the few constants in the history of art, even lasting through abstract expressionism in one form or another. Is that it?

PA: I don't think--I'm not sure that it is as a subject. I'm thinking of it more as I'm much more--I don't think of it as a subject for art. I think of it more as a subject for me.

PK: Well, here's this personalism rearing its not so ugly head.

PA: I can spend my time taking Polaroids off of porno videos and/or photographing, taking Polaroids of real people, and/or drawing real people, which I've only just touched on in this territory. Then I can draw images from that, and in the process of drawing these, touching these images, bring up all those feelings that I had, have, have, do, whatever. Wouldn't you like to spend some time doing that?

PK: Sure.

PA: Playing in that territory.

PK: Yes.

PA: Okay. That's all it is. That's why. If it excites me to the degree that it does, then hopefully this could be transferred over to the observer. This has to do with--I'm not sure what excites me much about what's going on out here in the art world, but I know this does. This has a kind of reality-based feeling that is so primal that I want to kind of--this is what it's about. This is why I'm doing it.

PK: That's what I was kind of getting at in terms of sort of fundamental primal basic themes. It sounds to me as if there's--you say you're interested right now in scenes of autoeroticism, and the way you describe this process, it sounds very much like autoeroticism or in part for you. So it's about you in that respect, that you're stimulating feelings. This is something you enjoy doing and looking at. Is that fair? Is that a fair observation?

PA: Yes, yes.

PK: My next question has to do with the reception. This is the making of the object or what goes into it from your side. But then we started talking about the reception, and I think this gets interesting because it's a real basic problem in art, in the intention and then the response, which is not controllable.

PA: Right.

PK: But in this case you just said that you would hope that some of this interest, some of this feeling, tactility, and everything else, the touching, the sexuality, would somehow come through to the observer.

PA: Yes.

PK: Well, a couple of questions. Do you think that that happens? But then the second part of that question would be, we've already established that you're recalling perhaps a certain kind of observer, probably a male.

PA: Except that I also gave the example of that other woman who saw it. There have been more women than I would have imagined who actually get a response to this, and I think one of the reasons why it was told to me, one of the reasons why, was because of the touching.

PK: So it's a generalized sensuality or eroticism that this depiction or feeling doesn't have to be the object.

PA: No, it's not about the object, it's about how it's made. So it's the making of it, which is trans--

PK: Let me ask you this, and you're right, you can only go so far with this, but it seems like it's a scenario playing itself out as we speak. In other words, in some sense it's an experiment for you, at least in terms of reception, how these things are received, how they're responded to. What about Claude? How does she respond when she says it doesn't turn her on, but she certainly, presumably, has commented beyond that on them as works.

PA: She likes the metaphors, which are the palm trees. Because it's less--the palm trees and the faces are what she likes.

PK: What about this business of tactility, or the tactile?

PA: She gets that from the palm trees more than she does from the--

PK: Because you're caressing the palm trees [unclear]?

PA: Yes, it's the same. But the palm trees then again are your--it's just like masturbation, I mean, for me, sort of.

PK: Sort of. [Laughter] All right. Well, it's interesting it's not something that, of course, can be resolved. It is one of those things that remains ineffable and mysterious, and I think maybe that's the territory you're really playing in. But when you get these negative responses, do you feel basically that those people have missed the point?

PA: I think that it's more of a comment about the observer than it is about me, I mean, about what's being seen. I think the response, when the response is that negative, it is about the subject matter, it has nothing to do with the way it's done. That is, the subject matter is found for whatever reason to be so offensive that--

PK: It's sort of off limits.

PA: Off-limits. That as soon as the subject matter is recognized, then it's negated, or that judgment is, or that whatever is past. That's just what that is. But certainly some of these are--you know, I mean, some are better than others, that's for sure.

PK: Well, what you've done, I think that you're moving in an area that is problematic in this respect, but it's potentially so laden with significance and meaning and, you know, personal--

PA: To the individual.

PK: Yes.

PA: Oh, yes. Oh, absolutely.

PK: That it's almost impossible to separate, well, what I would call perhaps prurient, if you want to use the term, but at least the one's own erotic life experience from the artistic--

PA: Not everybody's going to get off on a rub, you know.

PK: Oh, I think most people would. [Alexander laughs.] This is a rub. It strikes me that this, what you're doing is a rub-up.

PA: It's exactly what it is.

PK: Now, we've committed this word to the art history.

PA: It's a rub-up. It's Paul's rub-up.

PK: Absolutely.

PA: Rub-up. Rub-up.

PK: Beyond that, what's interesting, and it seems interesting throughout the interview with you, is this sort of early recognition on your part that you do your art, your relationship to your art is very much dealing with it on your terms, or its terms, if you will. This strikes me--you're not a bit of afraid of letting yourself--revealing yourself in the work. You seem to think that that's pretty much what it should be about.

PA: Yes. Yes, exactly.

PK: I'm just saying that because in this case that's--well, this is a very clear example, this series. It's like pushing it even a little bit further, this business of voyeurism and self-revelation.

PA: Well, it could be just, you know, dirty-old-man stuff. I mean, there's always that possibility. Because you sort of wonder, you know, of course, when you're in academia, you wonder why the faculty or the teachers who are usually male and are usually sort of middle-aged men are always sitting around drawing nudes. So you feel, "What is this?" But aside from that--what? I don't know, I think I've said it.

PK: Well, with these works, I mean, that would be perfectly fine, but presumably they wouldn't have the same kind of broader interest, especially to people who are sensitive or interested in art, that this series seems to have. They wouldn't have that interest if it were simply Peter Alexander and doing little dirty-old-man stuff.

PA: Oh. Well, hopefully--

PK: I mean, there's something that presumably you--again, this transcends.

PA: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, sure. I mean, it's about a feeling, which is more important than anything else. It's not about, "Oh, my goodness, look at this."

But back to the question that you raised, which was about doing something that even though is self-revelatory, yes, I don't see any reason for doing it--I don't see any other reason for doing it, because basically that's the connection I think you make with your audience, or with people who look at it, is that at certain times people can see themselves, or they feel things that they feel. All of this is completely untranslatable, so that if things are revealed that are--if you are as confused as you are and all this stuff comes through in what you do, then you have an audience out there who can feel that. I'm not saying feel the confusion, but by that I mean you don't have any idea what you're doing, really, or why you're doing it. Again, we talked about this, about the fact you can build up this great sort of line of rhetoric as to, "Oh, yes, I'm doing it for the blah, blah, blah. I went from here to here to here." It's all flat.

But there's something going on, and I'm just saying that that something that goes on, I don't think you close it down at five o'clock. I think that it's an ongoing sort of constant and you keep trying to find vehicles that are of sufficient interest to let it out. If you keep doing the same thing all the time, then you're doing the same thing all the time. It's not necessarily a revelation. I mean, it's not about revealing more. So why I'm doing these is I think it's a way to [unclear] or to discover, either or both. [Tape recorder turned off.]

PK: Picking up again. We took a little break. So all this, well, leads to possibly a number of questions, but there are two that I have in mind. First of all is the whole political dimension that you invite, or the response along political extra art. Not art, political lines with this work. It's particularly in the area of gender politics and these issues. It's very provocative nowadays, it's a provocative statement. I think it's must easier for women to do imagery like this because that's themselves, than it is for men. You get cast then, potentially. One of things, people will think they're learning about you is--

PA: That you're a white male, right?

PK: And you objectify--

PA: Objectifying women.

PK: To what extent--

PA: I hope so. [Laughter]

PK: I guess that's the answer.

PA: [Laughter] It's a comment on an aspect that men have for women. And if a man said that he did not have this aspect, he'd be full of shit.

PK: Or gay.

PA: Whatever. So that's what it's a comment about. For a woman to take offense at that behavior is for her to be foolish, because she's not recognizing a given animalistic behavior that is male.

PK: So this is partly about that?

PA: Yes.

PK: Basic instincts?

PA: Yes. If she takes issue with it, it's a dead-end. This is not learned behavior. This is visceral behavior. This is genetic behavior.

PK: What about the further political aspects, though? Given that, acknowledging that, that we're animals, that we're basically wired in certain ways, it's an important part of feminist theory, feminist revisionist history, if you will, to try and provide a corrective to what is viewed as the male dominance partly through images such as this. That these images are used and they reflect, are sometimes to used to make them.

PA: I would say this is female dominance. What are you depicting? You're depicting--

[Session 3, Tape 1, Side B]

PK: Continuing the interview with Peter Alexander, third session, tape one, side B.

Peter, you had further thoughts on this particular issue being the feminist response to this kind of imagery and its political implications having to do through imagery control or limiting them as human beings. They become sexual objects, basically.

PA: Okay. But it was about power, too. It was about male power, male dominance power. I say that the power is in the woman because my energy is being spent on the woman, and I'm speaking of her power. It's pretty potent. That's all.

PK: What about the other political aspect of it, though, the woman maybe even acknowledging that, but saying it as an historical device, representative of a historical pattern of control and describing them, rather than their being free to describe themselves in different ways, that men have determined what they're about and what they're for. Does that resonant for you at all? Is it relevant at all?

PA: Well, yes, but the appreciation that men have for women on this level is a mutual appreciation. That is, that women have the equivalent appreciation for men on the same level.

PK: Expressed differently.

PA: Expressed differently, that's all. I mean, all I'm saying is that men like pictures, so I'm depicting pictures. But if I were a woman, I'm not sure I'd be doing this, I might do something other than this. But it's so primal that it's irrelevant. It's not a subject that becomes an issue to discuss or to argue.

PK: Well, actually it has become that, maybe it shouldn't, but it has indeed become that, especially in academic circles and in the gender wars.

PA: That's imagining that--that's saying that you can think yourself out of a hard-on. I mean, you know, what are you talking about?

PK: No comment. [Laughter] No comment to that. Okay, another aspect of this, another dimension, we've discussed the personalism in your work and the strong strain of autobiography. Almost from the very beginning of this interview you came clearly out on that issue. I would ask the question about personalism in art, the artist doing as you say you've done with this series and other series: simply revealing yourself. Go ahead, Peter, you disagree with that?

PA: No, no, no. Keep going. Keep going.

PK: Okay, but the question then is this. Why do you think people would be or should be interested?

PA: Oh, real good question. That's what never ceases to amaze me. [Laughter] When I was much younger, and

it's so typical of artists and people like that, is that when I was much younger I couldn't imagine they wouldn't be fascinated. I mean, it never even occurred to me they wouldn't be interested. Then as you sort of move along, you begin thinking, ohhh, maybe they're not. [Laughter] And why should they be? I think there's a certain truth in that. I don't know, it never ceases to amaze me entirely.

PK: There's got to be some reason.

PA: I don't know. I mean, you know, you people can speak of whatever it is one does and they can make it sound very eloquent and as if it's something of real value, but I'm not so sure. [Laughter] I'm not demeaning myself in this. I don't know how we determine that. I mean, this is where the salesmanship comes in and it's part of the whole hype of the deal. I mean, you know, let's go back to Jeff Koons, I mean, why are most people interested in Jeff Koons?

PK: I, for the life of me, don't know.

PA: Well, I mean, but you know one of the reasons why he attracts the audience, the numbers in the audience, is because of words, because of print. It's not to say that there isn't interest there. I mean, the way he uses materials and the fact that he and Chiccalena are fucking and you know all the subject matters. I mean, at least what he does is he addresses a part of us that is--he's sort of like the Las Vegas, you know, of us in its most base way. I find it fascinating because of the way he maneuvers within the confines of the system and the structure of perception. That's what I like about what he does. I don't have any sort of heartfelt feelings about the objects. I don't really care very much about the objects. They don't move me at all. But I care about his choices and I care about how he manipulates. I find that sort of really interesting.

PK: Well, of course, you're all doing it in one way or another, right?

PA: Yes, right. He's just choosing to manipulate in a way that is pretty good. [Andy] Warhol did it first, I think. I don't know if he was the first. I mean, a lot of these nineteenth century guys were good at it, too. Like Church. I mean, he was a real pro.

PK: Church, you think?

PA: Yes, in a different way. I mean, in other words, the way he would--for example, he became a very wealthy man because he kept all his publishing rights to his paintings. The money would not come from the sale of the paintings; it came from the sale of the lithographs. But what he would do is he would have his paintings go from city to city and he'd have exhibitions, and the context in which he would show these would be sort of black velvet curtain in a dim sort of room with lights, with a lot of candles on the painting or whatever it was.

PK: Sort of a religious experience?

PA: It was religious. It was like cinerama. People would view the painting through toilet paper things, they would sort of scan it and get lost in the various sort of--as if they were transported into these never, never lands. You know, like the jungles and Niagara. What was that one about the Andes, and the iceberg ones. He would take people to these exotic places and he would charge admission to these things and then he'd create this stir through publicity and then he would sort of be hawking the lithos at the door. That's just another variation of the same thing.

PK: The one thing that strikes me that's pretty interesting, a possible connection, anyway, between you and Church. You mentioned how he would display these works, most of them truly exotic in terms of the locale. But you're right, he wasn't the only one, but he certainly did a very successful exhibit of these pictures in a way that was designed to give them grandeur and importance. He put them on black velvet, or at least the curtains around them, there would be this theatrical presentation.

PA: Yes, right. Ohhh! Ahhh! Yes.

PK: Then taking people to places where maybe they hadn't been before. Well, you know, that sounds to me a little bit like some of Peter Alexander's earlier work where you bring the two together. The materials presentation, you mentioned the black velvet, and then the scenes themselves, which then are in this case on, you know, the [unclear].

PA: Right. Yes.

PK: What about that idea?

PA: It's the same drama. Black velvet has a lot of drama. But also black velvet, the disadvantage of velvet, black velvet particularly, is that it has a tonal range, which is sort of like Wagnerian. It's not Mozartian, it's like it's a little bit heavy and it's loud, and there's a limit to how much you want to work in that sound, and that's one of

the reasons why it's great to play there, but I think there's a limit to it. Because you're always going to have that sound. It's just a question of how you do the melody, with that, sort of those notes.

PK: Do you think in terms of these musical correspondences or analogies?

PA: No, not often, but I found I've often thought about how to describe the velvet, my experience with the velvet, and this musical metaphor, it came out just spontaneously once and I thought it was a particularly vivid way of talking about it. You know, the same way sometimes I'll use food metaphors. Like making an omelet is just like doing--sometimes doing certain objects is the same thing. It's like the choices and the time. It's a quick process and making some very fast choices.

PK: Do you remember, of course you remember, after our session we went to Dave Hickey's lecture.

PA: Yes, right.

PK: It just now dawned on me, it just occurred to me that one of the things he was talking about was the use of the figure. He was talking about Wesselman.

PA: Right. You know, you didn't get a feeling--

PK: Actually, he didn't talk that much about Wesselman.

PA: He didn't talk very much about Wesselman. I mean, he talked about the territory. You feel he wasn't really wasn't that keen on Wesselman.

PK: I don't know if this will carry us anywhere, but he making this distinction between an analog to the real thing and a substitute for the real thing. I'm not sure I entirely followed that whole thing.

PA: Hey, tell me, babe.

PK: But I wondered if in any way that--

PA: Well, I've always thought of this as being a surrogate. That is, what we do is actually a surrogate for ourselves. I think that in that way, I think that's kind of what he was talking about, was that--maybe that's what was so significant about Manet when he did "Olympia," I mean, when he did "Luncheon on the Grass," was that that was one of the first times that the observer felt that there was something really quirky going on in the head of the person who did it. I can't quite believe that, because you look at Blake or you look at Fuseli, you know, you look at some of those paintings. I mean, look at Giorgione. I mean, the Monet is just an upbeat Giorgione. But I guess, I mean, at this point I get sort of confused about all the hoopla about that painting. Maybe it was because it surfaced in that context at that time, which made it significant. But I think that's really good surrogate material.

PK: Besides, it was an admixture of the familiar, the possible, the contemporary, with a precedence.

PA: The immediate precedence, which was like Ingres and David, very stylized sort of--

PK: So it was like real and not real, fused together.

PA: Right.

PK: Most of these other representations--

PA: Were all about fantasy.

PK: --like fused, there's no question that they're out there somewhere else.

PA: Right.

PK: Even Giorgione could be seen within some tradition.

PA: At the time, yes, he was in a context, right.

PK: These are always difficult areas to get into and to pin down. What's important, though, is how you see yourself, for our purposes, anyway, how you see yourself in relationship to these phenomena. By virtue of you bringing them up suggests to me that there are inducing connections, that you do feel affinities with some of these fellows.

PA: Oh, you mean with history?

PK: Yes, but then the examples that you sometimes cite.

PA: Oh, well, that's only because I don't--I think we're all the same. I think if you go through the history of art, or of painting, say, because this is what has the most obvious density, that is there's more of it and more people have done it, and more of these pictures are available to us than even with sculpture because of physical things. What you identify with is the sense there's somebody who translates in these objects. There's a person that translates. What you would have is you identify with the person. The symbols change and the symbols are only of a time. They're the symbols of that particular time and the formalism is of that time, but the decisions that are made within that context are exactly the same as decisions that are made today. The symbols change.

For some reason I was thinking of Chardin and I was thinking of Chardin's pastels. Or I was thinking of that great painting, "The Bubble Blower." You look at that painting and you go, "Oh, God." There is such a joy, there is such optimism. It's kind of stupid. I mean, it's completely unpretentious. It's such a commonplace thing, but he's transformed this into this magical experience. And that's what you identify with, is that feeling. Then you take someone from another time who has accomplished the same thing and you could even say--I'm thinking about Monet's "Water Lilies," for an example. They're different, but certainly you could put Chardin and Vermeer in the same boat, in terms of that sort of transformative power. Angelic almost is the word.

PK: Presumably these artists that come to mind are ones that, as they say, resonant for you in particular.

PA: Yes, but that resonance is not unique, I mean, obviously, you know, because we know about them. The reason why we know about them is, for one, usually it's because they were known in their own time. The reason why they were known in their own time is either because they really did go to the right cocktail parties, and that was it, and so they just hung in there and became part of history, and it's just passed on down. Or they were known in their own time for a combination of reasons. But I would hope to think that it was because there was something that was--it was the communication that was believable communication that gets transferred down.

Like Blakelock and Ryder, those are two really good examples. Like Blakelock's life, somebody could do a great screenplay on that one. Ryder is this sort of--there are parts of all of us in these people, and there is in all of us a certain kind of reclusive, idiosyncratic, unmovable, obsessive quality, and this is Ryder. It's in that part of us, that's what translates. We see that in his paintings and you go, "Oh, my gosh." What, in fact, does resonant, I'm just taking about the recognition, but what, in fact, happens when you do recognize it is something you can't describe. I don't know what it is, but something more--it's not just recognition. There is a transference of some kind.

PK: You say you identify with artists like Ryder and Blakelock?

PA: Well, I'm not Ryder.

PK: No, of course, you're not. It's a matter of opinion, he's where you feel--

PA: I can look at a Ryder painting and go, "Ohh, my God." Just go--you know, my jaw drops. I don't know how he got there. There's one at the museum in Boston, it's a woman in a boat. I don't know what the name of it is. It's large for him. It's about this big. It's all kind of gray and green. She lying in this boat and the boat's sort of on the water, and it's like a skiff, no master or anything, I don't think. There's just--there's something about, I don't know, there's just--there is--the thereness of it. The there--it's so there. It's worth looking at.

PK: From what you've been saying, and this is not to try to pin you down, but let's say this is about me trying to make sure I understand what you've been saying and how you've been expressing yourself in relationship to your work. I find invoking Ryder very useful and specifically in this way, because my sense is that your work, again the series of nudes or erotic series you were talking about, but beyond that, that certainly that work, but others as well, has very much to do not without objects, they're not about objects, not about content per se, but really about feeling. This is what this subjectivity, this intense subjectivity, is released with different vehicles.

PA: Yes, it's the vehicle for that, exactly.

PK: With Ryder that's finally, I think--I'm a big fan of Ryder--what we respond to. What that means is it's a moving into the area of poetry.

PA: Water meant something to Ryder. Light, moonlight, or light, meant something to him. So he chose these themes or these images, or these symbols to allow him--it would take him someplace. That's it. That's why he drew the images that he did, because they meant something to him.

PK: Don't you feel, if you had to reduce yourself to kind of a simple, kind of brief description of goal, of motives in your art, wouldn't you say that you are very much about communicating your own feelings? Your discussion of the literalness of rubbing these pastels, of touching, of working with that, and the feeling that you have, as you

said earlier, you hope somehow would then come through and carry on.

PA: Well, the velvets are all about touching. You can't keep your hands off that stuff. When you work with it, that is, when I just take, even if I just pin things up on it, I'm always around it and you're always brushing it. The India paintings that I did, which we talked about, which were the wax and indigo paint mixed up, which I would apply with my fingers and mush it around, it's all about the same stuff. I think that part is very significant. To me it is.

PK: Would you describe yourself in any way at all in terms of traditions as a symbolist, meaning not working with symbols so much, but as a symbolist artist? Ryder, of course, is described that way going back to the nineteenth century.

PA: What is a symbolist?

PK: Well, it's certainly a case where the subject matter is chosen to invoke feelings and response, an emotion. That subjectivity can be communicated to the viewer.

PA: Through the choice.

PK: And there are shared responses that all of us share as a universality.

PA: Oh, sort of like a cheap shot then. I mean, if you did a sunset, you would be a symbolist.

PK: No, no, it's not your subject matter. No, no, it's much more the notion that we are joined together, that there's a shared or response that could be touched and evoked by the artist.

PA: By certain symbols? By certain images?

PK: No, it's more the attitude towards them, the feeling that comes through them.

PA: Oh, yes. I mean, wouldn't you? I mean, how many personality types are there? Eight?

PK: Well, I don't know, but anyway that is a kind of tradition in art and art history. It comes early in the nineteenth century France and then Wagner. You mentioned Wagner.

PA: Right.

PK: He, of course, was the hero, the musical hero of this group and then--

PA: Who was the artistic hero? I mean, the visual hero?

PK: Well, I mean, there are a whole--well, ultimately Gauguin who would be a part of that, but also Redon, these artists that--I'm trying to think of another one that would really come to mind. I think certainly some of the post--not the impressionists so much, but the post-impressionists would fit into that frame. Then certainly a lot of the Viennese artists could be--

PA: You mean Klimt?

PK: I mean, there's more to it than that. Gauguin is a particularly good example, and very directly so. Then there's Moreau, the "Salome" pictures and so forth.

PA: I was thinking about Moreau, yes.

PK: Obviously these categories are useful to a point, but I guess what I was trying to determine was your own view of yourself, possibly in relationship to these kinds of goals and notions that you put your feelings in simplest terms, you put your feelings into these pastels.

PA: Okay, hold on. This is the [unclear]. You think you do, or you feel you do. The biggest question is, maybe you don't. The issue becomes, is it a lie or is it not. And usually if it's a lie, that's perceptible. If it isn't, I mean, if it's real, that is equally as perceptible. And it's what's real is what gets translated, what we get passed on.

PK: Did I send you that little book on [unclear], by any chance? Because he's a symbolist. If not, I'll send you one. It's a thin little catalog that--

PA: Yes.

PK: A weirdo guy with a--

PA: With a landscape on the cover.

PK: Yes, but then there's a weird worm on the back of the cover.

PA: Yes.

PK: He's an American symbolist, that's how you would describe him.

PA: Right. That's not a very good word for describing--

PK: Well, no, it's a movement.

PA: Yes. No, I mean, I've heard it. I've always been confused as to what it, in fact, meant. Because I keep thinking that it had to do with the images that were chosen.

PK: Although certainly images seem potent and--

PA: This is Jungian stuff.

PK: Well, you know, your images are potent. Look at what you're doing.

PA: Yes. Potent in the sense that it's sort of like a cliche?

PK: No. Potent in that it powerfully evokes a certain response where you believe--and in this case it's probably true because it's sexual, but beyond that, that is a shared response. In other words, it's a language. It's a common language and the symbolist believed--I don't want this to turn into sort of a seminar on symbolism, but basic to it is the belief that there is this sort of shared, maybe even going back to origins or something, this human experience that allows--it can be touched upon by the artist, if the artist is good and does it effectively, that can then indeed evoke responses close to what--

PA: Okay. All right. Yes, yes, well, then I guess I am.

PK: But you got to believe that there is this common language.

PA: Oh, I don't have any doubts about that. I mean, I think there's no question about that. I think it's a question of whether it's--the images that you see in parking lots on Sundays, or in those kinds of things, are certainly a means of communicating on a lesser level to a broader audience what we're talking about. They're fairly banal, but it certainly is an affirmation. You know those guys, those two Russian guys, who do the favorite choice paintings? They take a poll as to what people like most in paintings and they'll put it all in, and then they'll take a poll of what they like least and they'll do a painting of the least favorite and most favorite. God, that's such a great comment on the art world. It's so beautiful. I mean, the directness of that approach, it's just--and there's such a truth in it.

PK: We're almost at the end here. Let's take this--

[Session 3, Tape 2, Side A]

PK: Peter Alexander, third session. This is tape two, side A.

Presumably this will be our final side, so this is very important, we have to wrap up in some cosmic way.

PA: Yes, now we've got to wrap it up.

PK: We've got to something big here. But in all seriousness, when the tape recorder was off, we've been talking about where this discussion seems to have been leading in terms of really understanding your relationship as an artist to your work. By that I suppose I mean what you hope for from it, or what you think its business is, or what you think is possible from it.

As I was saying, throughout this interview I've learned a lot, of course, about you. But what I have found most interesting is that I really do think I have a much better understanding of what lies behind these works. I have known your work for a long time and admired it, but I think it's rather exciting. I feel through these conversations that I do have a better picture of what the work is about and what you bring to it. So, that's by way of preamble. We were talking about, and seeming to agree about this term "territory," this territory in which you operate. Everybody has their territory.

PA: Right.

PK: Doesn't mean it's exclusively theirs, but it's descriptive.

PA: Right.

PK: I suggested, just for sort of a historical crutch and for convenience, I have suggested the term "symbolist" meaning the symbolist group, not to stick you in an old-fashioned historical slot, but to try to describe what may separate you or distinguish you and your work now with--

PA: From other contemporary--

PK: --contemporary art. Well, I wonder if what your response is then to that discussion we were having.

PA: Well, I mean, if given that to be the case, not having a really clear idea of what symbolism means, other than in the way you've described it, or else it's being described by certain artists, such as Redon and Ryder and Gauguin--would Turner be a symbolist?

PK: Could be. Not usually described that way. Certainly an arch romantic. Which symbolism, by the way, fits within the much broader romantic movement.

PA: Would Caspar David Friedrich be considered a symbolist?

PK: I tend to let him squeeze in there a bit. Again, you're thinking of the classic romantic.

PA: Yes, but also I'm thinking of Wagner and Friedrich, not just because he's German, but there is a similarity.

PK: There was an amazing appeal to the emotions, whether it's through music or visual. That is a big important part of it.

PA: Of the symbolism?

PK: Yes.

PA: What's interesting to me here is that, okay, now if we've found a category, a slot into which I can be placed, then, in fact, it opens up a whole revelation of definitions; that is, of a way of defining. This is the first time that I have imagined myself as being part of a spot. Not to say I didn't think I was being particularly exotic. I mean, these are fairly conservative things that I do. But for you, who are, in fact, a historian, that is particularly significant, because now you've got a handle to grab onto. Now you can pull in all that stuff that is known about symbolism and apply it, or not.

PK: Or at least some of it.

PA: Or some of it. But the point is, you have a vocabulary to draw from.

PK: It's a point of reference.

PA: Exactly. This also explains something else, which is that I don't think anybody knows that's what I do. Do you know what I mean? I mean, I think what I do is mostly nobody knows quite what it is. Not that people are thinking that hard about what it is. But what I mean is that if you were to look at McCracken, you could look at McCracken and you'd say, "Oh, okay," bang, there's McCracken. He does this." Right? Or you could look at Kenny Price or you could look at any number of people and there's no problem in categorizing or else putting them in a school, so to speak, or whatever the place is. It's a little bit more difficult with me. Would you agree?

PK: Yes.

PA: Because you don't know quite, "Where's all this shit coming from?" I mean, "What's all this about?"

PK: That's exactly it. That's why, as I said, it's gratifying for me personally to take this journey through this tape, which apparently even has offered you kind of a fresh look at where you might fit.

PA: Yes.

PK: Let's expand on this just a little bit since we've got our tape recorder going and this is all tentative. I personally find this territory, this camp, useful in describing artists, contemporary artists, who are not then--it's not as if they're *retardetaire*, they're not looking backwards at all. That's not it. They find certain tools that are in a way timeless in art, that are useful for them in what they want to do now. How it separates for me, and then you can--

PA: I've got a question. Could Rothko be called a symbolist?

PK: Yes.

PA: Okay. So in other words, it has nothing to do with images or abstractions.

PK: No, not a bit. In fact, the symbolist tended to be most effective often when they got rid of the image, because then he moves into a realm of--

PA: Into the sound.

PK: Yes. Then pretty soon you get pure abstraction and music and that's--

PA: Right. Oh, so that's why you asked the question about the musical metaphor.

PK: Yes.

PA: Oh.

PK: But it has very much to do with evocative power and whatever these tools may be. So you don't get caught in that whole business of realism versus abstraction. But I guess--and I don't want to talk too much, but I want to say a few things that maybe can elicit a response from you. One of the reasons I find this kind of thinking useful in terms of contemporary art is that there are those artists who don't seem to fit comfortably, even though contemporary art seems to have opened up so much in this post-modern era, I think part of it is the romantic legacy, which is basically optimistic and believes in the emotions and believes actually in a realm of human experience from which we can learn or which we can share. There's a community here. Much contemporary art, and this is real simplified, is cynical, I think.

PA: It is.

PK: I think that the minimalism is cynical to a large extent. I certainly think Jeff Koons and company and that whole crowd--

PA: It's all about commerce.

PK: Yes. Fundamentally, it--okay, another way to put it is much contemporary art and that which is valued has to do with a critique; a critique of culture, of society, of governments, of human behavior, but almost never in a positive sense. It's a very depressing picture if you want to look at it that way. Or it's a critique of art itself.

PA: Using the Whitney as an example, that last Biennale. Not the painting one, but whichever one--you know the one I'm talking about.

PK: Yes, perhaps. But that sophisticated art is supposed to come, this is about philosophy, perhaps. It's about the realm of ideas, but very often it is self-referential, referential to the art itself, or to the society. Where does this leave artists who believe in the authenticity of human emotion, senses, and that this is a time-honored and very legitimate area to mind.

PA: Well, it's not a very ripe territory. I mean, it's not a very popular territory for all the reasons you've given. But I think that one doesn't choose the territory. What happens is that you fall into it. I mean, just like the revelation that I'm having, "Oh, my God, is that what it is?" I mean, I've always thought of myself as being a romantic, but I don't think of other artists that I know, my peers, who are particularly romantic. I keep trying to think of who that might be.

PK: Well, this is a good question and this is exactly to the point, because we're trying to describe the options available, the territories, now in contemporary art. I think I've made it clear, I don't need to say any more how I see you with an--and it's helpful because I begin then to say, "Oh, yes. Oh, that's it. I get it now."

But the other question would be, it's much more interesting how you see it. The other question would be, what about your peers? What about the contemporaries? Where do you feel a sense, or is there a sense, of what you're saying, community, or do you feel affinities? Are there others whom you feel are working also in this territory?

PA: I'm thinking. I mean, I'm running down the list of people I know in L. A. I think there are some photographers who are there. I couldn't name them, but I know them by observation.

PK: What about David Hockney? David just came to mind, and I know how he's written about, it's not in these terms usually, but--

PA: Lately, he hides so much behind the cerebral that I think at the base is exactly that. I think that's what the base is. Bob Graham [phonetic], I suppose, could be considered that, too, but he denies it with such--he doesn't allow--he does everything he can to keep his feelings out of it.

PK: You said it. I agree completely. I mean, these are high classical. That's the high classicism.

PA: Right. But I think underneath it, he's more than he reveals.

PK: Well, what about his subjects? What about the erotic component of these [unclear]?

PA: Nonexistent.

PK: Okay.

PA: I mean, but yet those wax pieces, you know those little pieces he did in the sixties?

PK: Yes, he used to show them at Nick's.

PA: Yes. Those are some of the most erotic things I've ever seen. I mean, they were unbelievable, because, I mean, you were such a voyeur in those things. You know, these babes in bed, you kind of ohhh, you know.

PK: They're marvelous little--

PA: Oh, they're fantastic. So it's not as if it's not in him.

PK: So what he'd do, turn that off and then did he start doing these bronzes?

PA: Maybe that's, in fact, what's appealing about the bronzes, is the fact you can feel that conflict between wanting to--I hate to be so crude, but keep his dick in his pants and let it hang out. I think what he's trying to do is keep his dick in his pants all the time.

PK: But I don't think he's entirely successful, because there's an obsessiveness.

PA: Yes. I mean, yes. He did some pieces recently that he showed, I saw them, that he showed in New York. I don't know how that went, but they were the most--it was the first time that I'd seen a head that only that head could have gone with that body. So all of a sudden a personality was being revealed in the model that heretofore was nonexistent. It was a woman who was being manipulated. I'm not commenting about that, but what I'm commenting about more is the fact that all of a sudden these figures became people to me and I found that very exciting. Who else is in that? In a way, it also has to take on a sort of autobiographical territory, doesn't it?

PK: I would think.

PA: But then again Rothko--well, at first he did, but then he started just knocking them out, so then--

PK: Georgia O'Keeffe's an example.

PA: Georgia O'Keeffe is a very good example of that, yes, and Dove.

PK: Yes, absolutely.

PA: Would be another one. I mean, Dove is--

PK: Right on. You understand then [unclear].

PA: No, Dove is fantastic.

PK: To a degree, actually, Marsden Hartley.

PA: Yes.

PK: So that's the group.

PA: Yes.

PK: These are the people.

PA: I think this is what Barbara Mathis recognized in me, which we never really discussed this clearly as we are now. That's why she likes this work, is I think she--and I don't think she even knows that that's in fact what it is.

PK: Well, maybe she's making some of those associations.

PA: She's very keen on Dove and she's very keen on the early twentieth century stuff. I mean, she's primarily a modernist, that's her art history knowledge and information. And I think that's why she got interested in me, but

she wasn't able to articulate that, and I didn't realize what it was until, you know, here we are talking about it. Oh, of course, that's why. That's very interesting.

PK: Seems clear to me. Doesn't mean I'm right, but it--

PA: No, no, it seems--we talk about all the motives and all the feelings that at least that are discernible first, and then from that you get the category. So you don't get the category and put the feelings into them. You know? So I mean, that's what interesting abut this, is that we started with all that stuff that we didn't know what it was and you piece it all together and all of a sudden, oh, there's a precedent for this. There's a precedent for these feelings or this ambition or this whatever the hell it is.

PK: See, we don't start out a priori as symbolist.

PA: Exactly.

PK: We deduce.

PA: Right. Right, that's what's--yes.

PK: Yes, deduct it.

PA: Yes.

PK: Well, it certainly seems comfortable to me.

PA: Very.

PK: I look at you and I look at your work and I see you comfortably fitting--

PA: But what I find astonishing is that there are so few contemporaries, or else maybe we're just not thinking about it.

PK: Well, I think there are reasons for that, and I think that there are probably more of it even in artists that are pretty well known than is acknowledged. I think that our age doesn't value this in the way that I think that it should be valued. I think your work, again it seems to me, is in a sense a celebration of a whole range of human experience, without a critique. This is not a critique. You are simply saying, it seems to me, these are the emotions that we--

PA: Share.

PK: --human beings have and share. This is my version of that. It's a celebration of this, as you say, a very basic one, and yet that that is worthwhile in itself and it's a kind of communication. What we said earlier off tape was that it's a way to access, as they say in computer talk, really a kind of transcending.

PA: I'm glad you didn't say interface. [Laughter]

PK: A transcendent realm that it is one way to access that and that we then, as human beings--and this is a worthy enterprise--can communicate, can interact at that level. Not to put words in your mouth, but this could be one of the special functions of artists and art.

PA: It's one of them. I mean, I have no doubt about that. I don't question it, because the number of paintings, historical paintings that I've seen, evoke the issues that we're discussing, so of course it's there.

PK: But earlier you were saying, yes, well, maybe that is something that you, yourself, would be willing to acknowledge, that it's possible to operate through art on that realm.

PA: Oh, yes, absolutely. But what's interesting is how we got there again. I got there out of either my own boredom or out of indulgence or out of whatever reason to doing this, to dealing in this area, not because I recognize it as a place to be, but because I fell into it. I fell into the hole. But only I would fall into that hole. I mean, not everybody would fall into that hole.

PK: Well, clearly, true, and that's a very good point. Clearly, you've always been looking around. You knew what was coming down or going on, and yet for one reason or another those areas, well, weren't you.

PA: Right.

PK: Then that's what it's all about. It's by a process, perhaps, almost of elimination.

PA: Yes.

PK: Here you are. Not a conscious choice. But this is actually very helpful, I would think, for others to get a grip to come to terms with your work, which to a lot of people, I think, seems anomalous, because they can't stick it in one of the familiar categories.

PA: No, I think people have a real difficult--this explains a lot of the degree of attention I have or have not gotten, I think.

PK: What about that? This is sort of like a retrospective, looking back from the position where you are now, looking ahead to some interesting shows, I think, and so forth. But looking back at the way your career has gone, and we talked about this a little bit, but this maybe then provides another perspective.

PA: Well, we looked at it from the sort of kind of revelation of this discussion. It makes complete sense to me that the confusion that an observer would have in determining where I fit. And it's not been easy. It's not been easy. Nobody's particularly interested, because it's not particularly topical. It's okay with me. I mean, the only thing that I would feel in it is that, and it was a comment that Billy was making, he said, "You've not had any major museum shows in all this time."

PK: See, he just, he was over here [unclear].

PA: He was over here when we were just talking about dah, dah, dah. He was thinking, he said, you know, he was thinking back--because we've known each other a long time. He's had gobs of them. He looked at me and he said, "Why do you think that is?" I said, "You know, Billy, I have no idea." I mean, that's the only reason why I'm looking forward to this show with Henry is because I can hardly wait to get all this stuff together, to be able to see it all together. That's all. That's all.

PK: Well, it seems to me, and this is a truism, that those artists who--people need to feel reassured, secure about their enthusiasm about artists. One of the ways to do that is, whether it be validation from other sources, and the way that comes about, for the most part, not always, but for the most part, is if there is a group, a movement, a category, which then bestows importance.

PA: Well, that's one of the reasons why I got the kind of attention I did with the resin pieces, because that was part of a very clear movement.

PK: People have real difficulty, truly they have difficulty, I think, going as deeply into where art comes from. It doesn't always happen and it's generally not going to happen within the hurly burly of the exhibition world.

PA: No, no, no.

PK: It has to be more reflective. You have to spend a lot of time.

PA: Well, you have to sort of want to think about, and not very many people do that with me. I'm not saying this with any sort of sour grapes or anything; it's just the way it is. It's so clear as to why. I mean, it's just so clear, that it's too confusing. [Laughter] You wouldn't get there unless you spent some time at it, as we have.

PK: Yes. One of the problems, it seems, or I suspect one of the problems is that maybe a good number of people would say, "Well, what has happened to Peter? What's he up to now?"

PA: Right.

PK: I've actually heard that.

PA: Oh, yes.

PK: I'm sure you have, too. [Laughter]

PA: Yes. "What are you doing now?"

PK: Yes, and, "What is this stuff? Are you trying to fool us?" This kind of thing.

PA: Then on the other hand, like Teresa Miller was in here last week. You know Teresa.

PK: Yes.

PA: I've always liked Teresa a lot. She was looking at these drawings and she wrote me a note, it was a terrific note, and she was talking about--

PK: It's in your papers there?

PA: Yes, yes. It's somewhere in--

PK: It's part of the archives.

PA: Yes. In the note, she said something about, "Well, here you go again. You never know what's going to happen." But she said, "I think these are some of the most exciting things I've seen you do, but again it's just one more surprise." So it's like, you know, what's he doing now? That kind of stuff.

PK: Which is interesting, it seems to me, appropriate, but I think that there's a matrix, there's a structure to the playing out of your career and your interest is absolutely consistent. It could be written about in--

PA: In a bigger picture.

PK: Yes, and be written about [unclear].

PA: But nobody has any idea what the bigger picture is.

PK: Not random.

PA: Nobody has any idea. Henry has no idea. I mean, he's doing it because I've been around a long time and he likes me and he likes the work, but he has no concept of it in the bigger picture, none at all. Unless he does and he hasn't revealed it, but judging from the conversation--I mean, Henry and I have great conversations, but it's not about art.

PK: Are you going to have a catalog?

PA: Yes.

PK: Well, you'd better make sure you get the right writer.

PA: Well, we were talking about that, about Dave Hickey [phonetic] doing it.

PK: Yes, he's a good writer. But I do agree with you.

PA: No, I know what you're saying, though.

PK: Because I think what--I don't know if we want to get into this conversation, but I'll say this much, that I think that it's going to be the temptation to give, bestow importance upon you and your work, many would be tempted to try to cast it within fashionable or theoretical contemporary theory. I personally think that that's unnecessary and that would be missing the point.

PA: Now, explain that. When you say, fashionable, you mean by--

PK: That which is valued. The area in which the discourse takes place, the art world discourse.

PA: You mean put me in it.

PK: Yes.

PA: Because--

PK: To cast your work in these terms. To try to draw connections--

PA: Oh, I see.

PK: --which I think I [unclear].

PA: Because it's much easier to qualify it?

PK: Yes, then use it with significance, too, by association. I think that in my view, based on our conversation, I mean--

PA: It's a whole different ball game.

PK: Yes. And that's good. It's your personality that sings through.

PA: I'm thrilled with it.

PK: And to force you into do something that's high theory or something like that--

PA: Oh, God, forget it.

PK: --absolutely misses the point.

PA: No, forget it. For an example, I would be the worst possible person at Cal Arts.

PK: Yes, right. No, no, there would be no value.

PA: There would be no--no--it'd be nothing. I mean, there'd be no connection whatsoever.

PK: Well, for one thing, they wouldn't like these. They would misunderstand.

PA: No, no, no.

PK: Or they would understand and not accept it.

PA: They would understand it and then say, "Forget it. This is old hat shit. We're not interested in this," or whatever it is.

PK: Well, I think this has been--

PA: This has been real interesting.

PK: This has been great. I mean, we had to work a bit to get here.

PA: You did. It's all because of your persistence, I must say. You know, we never would have gotten here, wherever we got, but I mean, certainly we never would have without your persistence. I really appreciate it.

PK: Well, me, too, and I think that we've got something that--

PA: I'm going to buy you a martini. [Laughter]

PK: All right, let's go do it. Thank you, Peter.

[End of interview]

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