Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Larry Jordan, 1995 Dec. 19 - 1996 July 30

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Larry Jordan on December 19, 1995. The interview took place in Petaluma, California, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SESSION 1, SIDE 1]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with Larry Jordan at his home in Petaluma, California. The date is December 19, 1995. The interviewer for the Archives is Paul Karlstrom and this is Session 1 of our projected at least two sessions.

Well, Larry, you and I, here we are.

LARRY JORDAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. And we've already discussed a kind of format for this interview, which seems to suit the case and your story. And, of course that's what this is, is your story. . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's also, though, of course, the story of someone who participated in some pretty interesting times in the art world. You're known principally as a film-maker, at least that's certainly how I know you. Nonetheless, you certainly have been described as someone who knows how to cross over into other areas of the arts. But one part, eventually an important part of this interview will be you talking about your career in film and its meaning for you. You're also associated with –– well, you're included in the current Whitney Exhibition. You're included in that with a number of your friends and associates from the ‘50s, late ‘50s, ‘60s and ‘70s, and so, of course, that will be another part of this story. You were born in Denver in, I believe it was in 19 -- . . .

LARRY JORDAN: 1934.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I'd like you to talk about that a little bit, but I can't help but note that Denver plays an important role as a city in Beat era more, at least as you read "On the Road" and you think of Kerouac. And Cassidy and then, of course, you have a very distinguished colleague that I guess you went to high school with over there. So, would you talk a little bit about Denver and, you know, your early years?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, thinking of Denver -- it was -- Denver was an okay place to grow up in. Once I left Denver I didn't –– and don't –– identify with Denver at all; I identify with Boulder. It's almost like a second home, because I go to the University of Colorado fairly often and know people there. But I did grow up in Denver. It was a very, very middle class situation. My parents were both teachers and I went through the usual grade school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Were they teaching at the University there, or . . .?

LARRY JORDAN: My father taught in one of the high schools, and my mother had her teaching credential and did substitute teaching. And then after my sisters and I got to a certain age, she went back into teaching, and I think she taught kindergarten for a number of years.

So, you know, we would trundle off two blocks to grade school and [laughs] without going into a portrait of the artist reminiscences, it was fairly uneventful. But I somewhere along the line picked up a rebellious streak that only came out at certain times. I mean, I was alternating between trying to please teachers and rebelling a little bit, which didn't really get going much until I was in junior high and . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: What form did that take?

LARRY JORDAN: Well, I was in the journalism class and the principal of the junior high was coming down hard on some kind of rules that everybody considered unfair –– at least I did –– and I wrote an editorial – I was assistant editor, and I wrote an editorial, which I knew would never pass the journalism teacher, so I took it down to the print shop directly and it was caught before it went into print and I was hauled before the principal. Nothing ever came of it much, but at least I found out that I would take on authority under certain circumstances. [laughs]

Other than that, though, I was really trying –– there were a couple of teachers that got kind of interested in me, and so I was trying to come up to the mark there. And that's –– I got the idea that if I was going to get anywhere

I'd better try to get into college and probably try to do the grade thing, so I spent a lot of time doing that. I kinda took pride in the academic part of it in high school than my time –- am I kinda going too fast through all of this?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, no. Those things that loom large in your memory probably are pretty much . . .

LARRY JORDAN: I assume we're trying to get to where we are now, in some circuitous way. High school was interesting as I look back on it because, I was doing this bit of getting a perfect record; all A grades, all the clubs and extracurricular activities, because my father had said that if I did these things then I could get a scholarship, because he wasn't going to be able to pay for college. So I did this over-achieving thing where I –- and it is a very big high school. I don't know, about 2,500 students, something like that. My class was, I think, 800. And I was second in the class. My friend up the street was first in the class. I had gotten one B in ROTC, but I had to overcome that by becoming the top officer in the ROTC, in fact of the whole city at one point. So I never once thought of military training as having anything to do with killing people. It was all an academic exercise. Anyway, I did that and then I applied for college and I got the best offer at Harvard, so I went there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now how did that come about? How did you . . .?

LARRY JORDAN: But there is one area of high school that I have skipped that's very important that I need to go back on.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

LARRY JORDAN: While this kind of being the model student was going on, I was living kind of a double life because I was a member of what we called the Gadflies, which was a club of intellectual rebels who kind of terrorized the teacher in making the drama teacher do Shakespeare instead of some little comedy for the class play, and various pranks. But there were people who were writing, who were composers, poets . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: These are all in high school?

LARRY JORDAN: All in high school so, anyway, we were known as the, as kind of elite and rebels at the same time. And that served me pretty well. I was mostly –- I was interested in everything. Science was ostensibly what I was going to do at Harvard –- go into medicine, but that faded pretty quickly when I lost interest in science at college. And my main interests were literature, drama, and then I found film and then never looked back after I discovered Eisenstein, Cocteau, and some of the early French and German experimental film-makers. I started making films there at the Film Club.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think it's interesting that on the one hand you had it both ways, in a sense, you obviously were doing very well academically, you were, you know, a leader, because you had a distinguished high school career in the very traditional sense.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you must have made your parents proud. And very much in the ‘50s –- the way we think of the ‘50s –- of a kind of conformity on that side, you toed that line and obviously had some sense of a goal of moving ahead. But at the same time you obviously were able to hold in balance, successfully, participation with the Gadflies.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this is interesting to me. What was behind the Gadflies? What is the inspiration for –- what were –- who were the models? What were the goals of this rebellious group?

LARRY JORDAN: Well, the high school was a very good high school in that it really did prepare people for college if you wanted to. It was large enough that you could take all the heavy stuff. In fact, when I was a freshman at Harvard, I'd already done the stuff we were doing there, in math and chemistry and so forth.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about literature and the humanities, though, in art?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, and, and we had a nationally famous English teacher, who did the creative writing in the English. Still, at the same time, all of that was very straight, and we wanted to look into more experimental things in the Gadflies and, you know, experimental writing, experimental film, more contemporary writing than we were getting at school. We didn't want to do some silly comedy in the Drama Club. We wanted to sink our teeth into "Romeo and Juliet", which we did and retired the drama teacher after that.

We were looking for ultimate challenges -- intellectually, I guess -- other than school work, because, you know, once you've been set off, intellectually, and have some interests you aren't going to find it in classes totally. We all know that, even as teachers, you know, now. So, what was keeping me going was that need to explore

beyond the academic boundaries.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But what about –– was there any contact or awareness on your part with the avant garde with the more modernist, contemporary?

LARRY JORDAN: That's what we wanted. See, the English teacher who taught us how to write well did not consider Hemingway as having good language. And so he read Shelley and Keats to us. So we wanted to find Hemingway and John Dos Passos and Truman Capote and the contemporaries who were more experienced. So experimentalism was just exactly what we were after.

Then when I got to Harvard and saw the experimental film, you know, I couldn't look back at that point. And since I was trying to write at the time, I found it was a revelation; it wasn't the word that I had the natural affinity for, it was the image. And film could catch –– I had no idea that film could catch images like that until I saw the experimental cinema and the Russian, Russian silent cinema and . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's back up just a minute, . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Sure, sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . I really want to pursue this point, because I think this is critical. But just for the record, I do believe that you went to Harvard with the idea of becoming a physician, a doctor, isn't that right?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, that was, that was the plan I had in my mind. Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then, somehow, you were derailed.

LARRY JORDAN: But I wasn't –– it's curious because I thought that would be a good position to have and I could do it. And I was still kind of thinking of the prestige thing. But I was interested in chemistry, but I was not a whiz at chemistry. So I –– that was really a false goal; I wasn't interested in curing people or, really that –– I'm still interested in science –– an overview of science is important in my art. But, no, it was kind of an artificial goal I had chosen for myself, it wasn't my real interest –– something I thought I had to do, I guess.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You discovered that –– and I'd really like you to talk about this . . .

LARRY JORDAN: But it led to a conflict which we can get to later.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, okay, well, whenever you think it's best.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, conflict in goals.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said that you discovered for the first time that images had a certain power. You'd been interested in writing and in the word, in verbal.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And here all of a sudden you have an epiphany, I gather, at Harvard.

LARRY JORDAN: You could say that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Could describe that? Also, part of my question is, it sounds like it's a real new discovery, and yet you certainly have seen the medium of film, of cinema, in the more conventional forms. And, obviously, it didn't have the same power until you discovered the experimental. Is that right?

LARRY JORDAN: Well, yeah, you said I'd seen the medium of cinema, but the cinema that I then saw was like another thing entirely. Like, it was like true cinema. Now, we weren't completely unaware of this area of cinema in high school. We rented D.W. Griffith's "Intolerance" from the Museum of Modern Art and showed it to ourselves. We, we saw one or two of the Cocteau films that came in the foreign film theaters, but not "Love of a Poet". But I hadn't seen the Russians. I hadn't seen "Eisenstein". I hadn't seen "Love of a Poet", which –– they had a very good film club at Harvard and when I started to see those things with imagery that were exploding in my mind, that was entirely different cinema. That was pure – there was a verbal, there was a visual language there, which I'd never been that interested in regular Hollywood movies before.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you weren't a film freak, the way so many people of our generation . . .?

LARRY JORDAN: No, I was not a film freak. You have to go a long way in the Hollywood film to find an image. I know the film folks would disagree with that because they think that a good shot of Marlene Dietrich is an image and that's as close as you get, you know, in most of –– but when you have a true theory of juxtaposing images as

a way of generating abstract ideas, which the Russians did have -– put Image A next to Image B, two concrete images, and you generate an idea like love, hate, fear or the juxtaposition of those two concrete images, you've really got something you can sink your teeth into in terms of creative film-making. So, and then, Cocteau going totally into the personal interior of himself, the dark interior in finding poetic images that are shocking and startling, you know, I couldn't let go of it. I started using the cameras that the film club had and shooting things on campus and so forth. So by the end of one year I'd done what I was supposed to do, kept up my grade average so I could continue my scholarship, but I had a mental breakdown. I couldn't face that academic life in view of what I was really trying to do now. So I had to leave. That is I had to not come back the next year.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it wasn't in that sense a choice, well, I've decided I'm going to pursue this area. You pretty much had to take that break with . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, yeah. I couldn't imagine going on another three to eight years on the East Coast. I wasn't suited for that kind of life. I loved what happened in the English department at Harvard. Every other week we'd have a famous poet or writer through there doing a talk or reading. One week it would be Robert Frost reading and then Archibald MacLeish would come by and then ee cummings had the Lowell Chair that year and wrote the six non-lectures for that, and he was wonderful. He wouldn't use a podium and he'd sit in an overstuffed chair with a lamp beside it to read. And that was wonderful there and they –- the people were excellent and the teachers –- the people there were tops, but . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was Robert Lowell . . .

LARRY JORDAN: . . . I had to, I had to start doing . . . Lowell? I was gone by then.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. So that wasn't enough to keep me going. I really wanted to start making films and getting out. A couple of my friends from the Gadflies had also quit eastern schools and we regrouped again in Colorado. And started a little theater up in Central City, Colorado, which is a mining town that has an old opera house in the summer. Famous opera people come out from New York and do opera there, so there are a lot of tourists.

We set up business in a surplus Army tent and did one-act plays -– Chekhov, Strindberg, stuff like that, to keep ourselves sane and keep going, and we also started a movie that summer. And I stayed around Denver for another year and a half working at, computing the efficiency of steam plants for PG&E [Pacific Gas and Electric] for a year, and then I left for the West coast in ‘54 or ‘55. And was out in San Francisco for a year and then spent some time in New York, about a year, half a year, then back to San Francisco.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's see if we can . . .

LARRY JORDAN: That's the mid -- ‘50s. Should we go back and sort it out a bit?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, just in terms of even a chronology, because just to, just to make sure that this is a reliable source, that you went -- was it two years, two full years, at Harvard?

LARRY JORDAN: One full year.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then you, as you say, suffered . . .

LARRY JORDAN: That was, ‘52 . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

LARRY JORDAN: ‘52 or ‘53. I was Class of ‘56.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. And so, then, you suffered this emotional . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, in the spring of ‘53, I guess it would be.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And then, there was -– then you presumably went home?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. To be taken care of . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . given a kind of security during that time?

LARRY JORDAN: Right. I couldn't function for a while, but then I got, got it back together.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it was fairly severe? I don't want to be too nosy, but . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Well, it was not -– I mean, I call it a nervous breakdown, it's not -– I didn't see any therapists or anything. I just assumed that it was what, you know, rebellious young people went through. Part of it then was middle class values became the enemy. And the search for the creative life became the goal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was this characterized by depression –- which isn't too unusual for Harvard graduates?

LARRY JORDAN: No, I didn't, well, my God, I suppose if you'd been around me I would have been depressed. I just felt, I just felt internal pain. I don't get -- I haven't suffered from classic depression anywhere, but, you know, it got very internal, to go through a painful kind of crisis and then work, work out of it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, so, in ‘50 -- , then, in the spring of ‘53 you were back in Denver, at home?

LARRY JORDAN: I think that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, and so you, at that point, you were regrouped with your Gadflies buddies, so . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, some of them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Isn't it interesting that they, several of them, at least, had similar experiences, I gather, at eastern schools, then came back?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, who were some of these? Any that come to mind?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, there are some that are known now. Stan Brakhage, who's known as a film-maker, . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

LARRY JORDAN: . . . James Tenney, who teaches music composition in Toronto now. And Romero Cortez, who was a composer and for awhile was a secretary to, in the latter years, to Igor Stravinsky. Bob Benson, who is doing very well in Canada as an actor.

PAUL KARLSTROM: These are all high school chums of yours?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: By the way, what was the name of your high school?

LARRY JORDAN: South Denver High School.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Good ol' South Denver, that's a pretty impressive group.

LARRY JORDAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And you regrouped then and, tell me again, the, town, the little town where you set up the [tent theater`].

LARRY JORDAN: Right. That summer, of probably ‘53. Central City, Colorado -- it's a tourist town and easily accessible from Denver, but up in the mountains –- it has some of the old mining town buildings and the opera house from that era, and it's a very colorful place.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You were very resourceful, it seems to me. And it also seems to me that you had it pretty clear in your mind what you wanted to be involved with at this point.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, that was – but we could – there was only so much we could do. Denver had no avant garde culture at all, so there was nothing to be done in Denver. But we began to hear about the painters and the poets in San Francisco. So we started to think that's where we'd better get to, you know, as soon as we could. So, you know, after working a year and saving up a little bit of money, then I and three others went to San Francisco.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that was in 1954?

LARRY JORDAN: Must have been ‘54.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Spring or summer, or something?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that when Brakhage moved to San Francisco?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, he, he had gone, I think a little ahead of when I went. Then I went and then two -- I'd left a car in Denver and two friends drove that out to San Francisco. And we started another film, a kind of abortive thing that didn't take place. And we tried to show the films that we did have made, going to small towns in California in a trailer and car. And we rented a whole -- the first place we got to; we picked Niles, California, because Charlie Chaplin had a studio there and we thought, well, there'd be some history there, and we rented a hall and set up our projector and nobody came. [laughs]

SESSION 1
Tape 1, Side B

PAUL KARLSTROM: Larry Jordan, Tape 1, Side B, continuing Session 1. Well, we have you now safely arrived in San Francisco which, as it has turned out, at least this area, Northern California and the Bay Area, has turned out to be pretty much the place where your career has unfolded. And what I would like to know is, number one, you, while you were in Denver, were beginning to hear stories about a scene, basically, about artists, poets, painters.

LARRY JORDAN: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it ends in San Francisco and you chose to come here, or to this area. Two things: what were the stories that you heard? What did you imagine you would find and then? In fact, what did you find? What was it like here?

LARRY JORDAN: I don't recall any over-exaggeration or any, over-expectation of what we would find; we heard that there was a poet named Kenneth Rexroth and we heard there was a poet named Robert Duncan. And I don't recall names of painters we heard about, but we heard, you know, that's where artists lived; artists lived in San Francisco. They obviously did not live in Denver, although we knew one artist there, Angelo DiBenedetto and he was kind of a patron of the arts; he had a big studio in Central City and so he helped keep us on the track there. And he had painting school in Denver. But other than that there were no artists that we knew of at all. And we heard that people, you know, lived kind of a creative community of artists in San Francisco. But I didn't overplay it in my mind. I just had some vague ideas that that was a more creative place to be so, when I got to San Francisco and did start to find people like Robert Duncan, Jess [Collins], Kenneth Rexroth and many, many others, it was like going to heaven. I mean, it was just -- it was better than I had ever thought it probably would be, though things were not easy. I had to go back to working as an orderly in a hospital and lived in, above what was then The Tenderloin and, you know, but we didn't . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you remember where, where you first located?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, it was on, on Ellis, well, the very first place I think we had was up around Clay, just off of Fillmore. But then moved to -- didn't get along with the landlord or something there -- and then moved down on Ellis Street. Those buildings are no longer there. And that was pretty ghastly accommodations, but then we'd, you know, we'd paint the walls and fix things up and have a fairly good time of it. But we got right away into being in Robert's play and starting films, and got rolling pretty well. And then Stan decided to go to New York. San Francisco was great but, then, we heard about things even bigger in New York and we heard about Maya Deren and Willard Maas and Kenneth, Kenneth Anger was in L.A. at that time and we'd seen some of his films and . . . But New York was supposed to be the cat's pajamas. So Stan left and then, oh, six months later, I went to New York, and kind of linked up with Stan, and we shared an apartment for a while and that's where I met Joseph Cornell.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, let's -- we'll come back to this.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm very interested to learn how you established yourself in San Francisco but, most of all how, within a short period of time you managed to meet some of these very important, very interesting people and especially, how -- how did you meet, for instance, Jess and Duncan and become involved . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Well, if you want to meet people it's not hard to meet people. You call them up and say you'd like to come over. And I always got the impression that Kenneth Rexroth – well, Kenneth had -- it was known that on Friday evenings he was at home, and people rang him up and went over, and we were young people, we were very young, early ‘20s, who would go over and sit at the feet of the poet. And he loved it and so there's no problem at all. And later, when he was having marital problems, he'd call us up and bend our ears and, you

know, there was no problem at all meeting people. Everybody wanted to meet people and if you were older you weren't necessarily -- I didn't find anybody aloof. We'd, you know, we'd call people up and say, "Could we come over?" And they'd say, "Sure." And we'd go over see what they had to say and what they did and then we'd become involved. We'd have a film show and they'd come. It was a small group, you know, there were only maybe 50 people in this, in this kind of pantheon. But there, you know, not everybody kept in touch with everybody. You'd have, you know, five to ten people you were regularly in touch -- And I was regularly in touch with Robert and Jess and to some extent with Kenneth Rexroth and then Jordan Belson, the film-maker. You sensed that everybody was very active and very creative and needed the support of the others who were. And it's not like today where there are 20 to 50 firmly established arts organizations that are always putting on events. No, it's very, very homespun and we did plays in Ubu Gallery which, essentially, was a long garage under a Victorian house and . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where was that, I forget?

LARRY JORDAN: On Fillmore, near Greenwich.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, did Rexroth at that point -- at one point he lived on Greenwich Street. Was that at this time, or do you remember? Was he down in that Marina area?

LARRY JORDAN: No, he was up, up near -– then some of us moved to a house across from a park at 707 Scott Street and Kenneth was in that area, which was the Filmore area.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which was [inaudible].

LARRY JORDAN: Nice Victorian houses, yeah, older Victorian houses.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not quite as upscale as it's become in recent years.

LARRY JORDAN: No, you just had good, solid Victorian flats to live in, cheap.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not anymore.

LARRY JORDAN: It was a good place to live. It was very good.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Before we abandon San Francisco for New York and then, of course, return to San Francisco, in this -– it seems to me this would have been a very important experience for you, giving you a sense of a real community; others who were vitally interested in the things that you were [interested] in. And who were some of the other people that you met? What about some of the artists, the painters that you later on you then became friends with? Were they -– on that first visit did you hook up with any of the San Francisco Art Institute people at all?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, we hooked up with –- probably when I came back from New York –- let's see, I hooked up with the McClures right away through Robert and Jess. I was introduced to Michael McClure through Robert and Jess. And then when the McClures and the poet Harman, Jim Harman -– we had a little press –- moved into 707 Scott, they were looking for people to fill out the upper floor. And I moved over there. And Joanna and Michael McClure moved out of there onto Fillmore Street. And I'd go over there all the time from Scott Street and right below -– okay, the McClures moved into the top floor on Fillmore Street near Clay, back to the area where I first lived when I first came to San Francisco. And we all pitched in to help them fix up the bare flat. Kenneth Rexroth and I carried up Joanna's cast-iron stove, old fashioned stove. Jess came in and helped do the wiring and we all pitched in and painted the place, so . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Jess knew how to do wiring, then?

LARRY JORDAN: Jess had been a nuclear physicist at Berkeley. Jess knew science.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Even more than you did?

LARRY JORDAN: [laughs] A hell of a lot more than I did. He was one of the bright up-and-coming nuclear physicists until the first atomic bomb was dropped. And then he dropped science flat. He said it's in the hands of black magicians, pooh. And would have nothing more to do with science and went into painting. So, right below, in the flat right below the McClures was Wally Hedrick and Jay DeFeo. So I'd see Wally and Jay often. I was very shy at the time; didn't go to their big parties. Jay would come up -– I was staying at the McClures for a while after I left 707 Scott Street and Jay and Wally would have big parties down below. And I thought they were kind of Bohemian and I was too shy to go down. And Jay was very concerned. She'd come upstairs and try to entice me down and saying that they were having a wonderful time, if I'd just come down for a little bit. She was very motherly and I really appreciated it. But I didn't, I have never liked parties and I still don't like parties. I like small, intimate dinners with people. But I have a hard time at parties where you have to stand around and talk

bull shit, so . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Nothing's changed in that regard.

LARRY JORDAN: [laughs] No. So, anyway, there was Wally and Jay. Okay, and there's Joan Brown and Bill Brown -- – she was married to Bill Brown then, who lived in the building next door. And Wally and Jay knocked a hole through the wall into their apartment and so, you know, there was kind of a communal arrangement there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They did? They knocked a hole in the wall . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, oh yeah, we tore out walls in those places. Never asked anybody; you didn't even know who the landlord was, you know. Joanna loved to tear out walls.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You guys should be ashamed of yourselves because now, you know, we value these Victorians, the integrity of the building. We don't want to do anything to them to mess them up.

LARRY JORDAN: Oh, no, Joanna can make a Victorian much better by taking out walls, as evidenced by her own beautiful Victorian on Ashbury today.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

LARRY JORDAN: That was the extent of the people I knew from the Art Institute, I think, right then.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was a pretty good group, though. And that was a pretty famous place. What was the address of that . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Nemi Frost was a painter. And I knew Bob, Bob Levine. Bob Levine did posters for some of our shows. But at this time San Francisco was under the aegis of what Kenneth called, the San Francisco Renaissance, which is the two-year period that preceded the Beat thing. But the Renaissance -– see, Kenneth is the one that started reading poetry in the jazz clubs. And that led right into what Kerouac – and readings with jazz and so forth. But Kenneth started that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How would you distinguish that? How would you describe this process? You said here you'd have the San Francisco Renaissance which was pretty much named by Rexroth, is that right? "Hey, what's going on here, we've got a Renaissance?"

LARRY JORDAN: Yes, he says there's an artistic Renaissance going on here. And they were in touch with people who published poets on the East Coast, Don Allen and other people and Grove Press and, yeah, they were getting it happening. Duncan was, you know, getting things happening and McClure and the painters were painting, painting away. Everybody just had the feeling that it was happening.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how did it become, then, suddenly, something called Beat, what we describe now as the Beat era, the Beat movement?

LARRY JORDAN: Well, to me, and to people who were there at the time, it just looked like the Beat was an interesting infusion of what was already happening.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But what was it?

LARRY JORDAN: Philip Lamantia –- I spent a lot of time at that time with Philip Lamantia. He lived at his mother's house way out on Mission and didn't have a car. And I would, we would stay around North Beach until late at night and I would drive him out there. And he would talk endlessly, and he knew all kinds of stuff about occult, surreal things, and the first time I heard the word "Beat" used was Philip using it as a kind of shortened version of beatific or beatitude. You know, there was a home-grown religious movement as was part of this resurgence.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sort of a mystical . . .

LARRY JORDAN: It was very mystical, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which was not present, uh . . .

LARRY JORDAN: But it wasn't old-time Vedanta mysticism, [inaudible]. Although Robert was interested in Blavatsky and things like that. It was a very present -– it was not an academic mysticism. It was an active day-to-day kind of, you know, you could see mysticism have visions in daily life. That's where it was –- what everybody was doing. And so the Beat thing was, well, there are these interesting people. There's Wallace Berman coming up from L.A.; there's George Herms, you know, he was around L.A., he came up to San Francisco, then moved up with Tuolumne and then back to San Francisco. And there is this novelist, Kerouac,

who blows into town every once in a while. Go up to McClures and there is Neil Cassidy hanging around. And, gee, these people are calling -- they're kind of calling themselves "Beats" and "On the Road", the people and, you know, it kind of came right in but things were definitely happening. These people, the so-called "Beats" were just coming to San Francisco cause they heard it was happening, just like I had two years before, because it was. And Kenneth was a very good P.R. person; he was really putting out the word to all the journals and literary people that he knew, that it was really going on in San Francisco. And he was on the radio every Sunday for an hour or two talking about all of this, and all his erudition, and reviewing books on KPFA and so forth. So the Beats were just looking for what was happening in San Francisco and coming in from New York, from L.A. and from Denver.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Would you -- this is very interesting and there are many ways, of course, to take this, but one of the things that occurs to me -- you mentioned the San Francisco Renaissance, and then the Beat phenomenon as having a strong mystical component and interesting surrealism and so forth. And, I guess, what I would ask is, in trying to distinguish, if it's possible, between these two kind of phenomenon was there -- it sounds to me as if the Beat attitude, the beatific mysticism, is squarely in the camp of the irrational. You mentioned surrealism. And would you point to that as perhaps distinguishing what became known as Beat from the San Francisco Renaissance? Or is that term "Renaissance" only mean a revival or renewal? Because Renaissance, as we understand it, is very rational, not irrational. Or is it just taught that way?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, I think what you're saying is correct. There were a few people who liked the idea of that Beat, meaning the beatitude, beatific, but also, kind of worn out by heavy experience. Some of it drug-related -- looking for -- the drugs were used not for thrills. In that time they were used for opening doors, you know, definitely psychedelic -- looking for doors into the inner, inner mind. And so some people got kind of a little worn down by that and so Beat, in that sense, was okay. I don't know if that expression would have ever caught on if Herb Caen hadn't coined the word "beatnik" after Sputnik. But it was coming to the attention of the authorities that there were nightly parades of sandaled and bearded characters on Grant Avenue. And blacks -- men, who were going around with white women. And the authorities were becoming aware that something untoward was happening and they had not a clue as to what it was, except it looked like there were drugs and interracial mixtures and they didn't like it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So the racial component really was important?

LARRY JORDAN: They put two heavy-duty cops on the beat on Grant Avenue who would really harass people on the streets and come in heavily -- stalk around the bagel shop or the other bars, and put a damper on everything. This was really a beautiful scene, very intense. Everybody around knew who just finished a poem, who had just finished a painting, who was going to do a poetry reading, you know, whose play was going to be read in some home or some gathering place. It was the most intense thing, I think, you could imagine. It wasn't -- this was not Bohemian. Bohemian was the era when Henry Miller was around; it was a fairly relaxed kind of a time. This is intense, this is intensity. People were almost reincarnating themselves in character roles on the street and in their lives. If they couldn't paint, they couldn't write -- their life was a creation. Women were wearing clothes that were different, which later became fashionable, i.e., black tights, etc. The Beats were setting trends. It wasn't proper, it wasn't nice, but it was alluring, it was starting to be glamorous. But people who liked to control things in the city didn't like it. So they harassed this, this regular thing that happened nightly on Grant Avenue. And finally the creative people had enough of it after a couple of years. And around 1961, they suddenly moved out – all went away -- to Bolinas, out to the country, back to L.A., you name it. Just said "Okay, you can have your San Francisco again. We're getting out." I did -- Berman and Herms and myself went to Larkspur and continued -- Wallace continued -- had a little gallery there in the Bend[?] and a boat house, Semina Gallery. And then finally they went back to Los Angeles; I moved on to San Anselmo. And a number of us had families by then, so we were getting work to support families, and going in and just starting our own little empires wherever we happened to be living and trying to crystalize our work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, what you have described then -- and we will, shortly, take a look at New York as well, your time there -- but what you have described, as I understand it, is a very strong social impact or social aspect of this creative community in San Francisco at the time that actually, then, brought on a reaction . . .

LARRY JORDAN: It must have been . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . a form of harassment, it sounds to me, is that right?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. It must have been like what the Dadaists had to do after World War I when the values of Europe had been wiped away and they could not go back to the world of Monet and Renoir. And as Max Ernst described, the young Ernst who returned from Switzerland to Germany after the war had -- their artistic and social values had just been devastated and they formed, he said, Dada to re-establish some artistic criteria. And San Francisco when I first arrived the first time, we were listening on the radio to the worst human being I've ever heard, Joseph McCarthy and his cohort Cohn going on in the hearings. That was the world that we were

inheriting. We were not about to live in that world. We set out very determinately to change that world and we did, to some extent, raise consciousness that that is not the way human beings live, under that kind of control, and especially not in this country. It was not the country of Joe McCarthy, it was the country of our forefathers who were free people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, then, what about Jack Kennedy, just a little bit later? How . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, that's jumping ahead, uh . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, that is, you're, that's right.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, that's ‘63.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I guess, just asking the question, did he, then, for some of you, embody -- but of course, he was assassinated in ‘63 –- but was certainly an important presence, you know, a great [reaffirmation] of a great hope, of values, at least for some. Was that the feeling that you and your group had, or is that a very, sort of, romantic view of what Kennedy represented?

LARRY JORDAN: I personally was pretty apolitical by that time. But it just felt nice to have somebody like Kennedy around, somebody who possibly had even experimentally smoked pot, you know . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: That was the litmus test.

LARRY JORDAN: . . . who wasn't going to put everybody in jail who, who . . . But we weren't thinking that -- see, running parallel to this artistic movement was then the free speech movement, in Berkeley, and the political activists, and, of course, they were very much involved with Kennedy, but the artists were –- they thought "We're lucky. We've got somebody who's, who's kind of cool for President." But they, they weren't thinking he was going to save everything. There was no illusion that politics or politicians could save the human spirit; there was pretty much a consensus that politicians mess up the human spirit. And so that wasn't what we were putting any great store in.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, let's –- since we're pausing, we should change . . .

[End of Tape 1, Side B]
[Begin Tape 2, Side A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing the interview with Larry Jordan on December 19, 1995, Session 1. This is Tape 2, Side A. I'm really interested in these distinctions you're making between the artists' community, the group in which you were involved, and then the political activists. This was a very important era for the formation of that. In both cases, I suspect, you know, both groups, brought about or attributed to a very important social change in America, especially through the ‘60s and a little bit later. But you do mention that there was this kind of distinction and it had to do with degree of political engagement, is that right?

LARRY JORDAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that what you're recalling?

LARRY JORDAN: Nobody in the group that I was connected with believed in the efficacy of politics. But there are two personages that I haven't mentioned yet who kind of spanned between politics and art, and that was Bruce Connor and Allen Ginsberg. And Allen Ginsberg would kind of sit at the kitchen table at 707 Scott and kind of quiver with all, you know, all of everything that was going on, both politically and poetically and so forth. And Bruce Connor would make works of art that would just condemn the atomic bomb and the violence of humanity and so forth. But I don't think anybody ever thought of joining a political action group. Maybe -- I never went to a rally or a demonstration in Berkeley. But they were very exciting because it was a vindication, finally, of somebody like Lenny Bruce, that one could say what one had in one's mind, and could use words in the English language. And then we were getting into the censorship trials, and linking that to the First Amendment, and making it not illegal to own a copy of Lady Chatterly's Lover or James Joyce's Ulysses. You see, when I grew up -- and you, too, to some extent –- America lived under censorship. We did not have freedom of speech. Even though it was in the Constitution, we did not have it. People don't remember this, don't choose to talk about it. There had to be people rioting and making a lot of ruckus in Berkeley in order to make the Constitution stick.

And that was -– we were looking on at all of that and feeling the exhilaration of it in the early ‘60s and, of course, those of us who were making experimental films –- then called underground films –- were having quite a heyday because getting huge audiences for – people weren't coming to look at our films for art, they were coming for social change. And these underground films would be taking on some kind of ironic or semi-political subject sometimes that -– but mostly social themes or surrealist themes that were just –- we were like the surrealists

trying to blow the bourgeois mind. That was the idea of the artistic revolution, if there was one. But most people weren't giving that too much energy. Mostly just exploring the mystical recesses of our own being. That was enough, but there was always social change happening at the same time, nevertheless. After Kennedy was assassinated and Lyndon Johnson went on with the Vietnam War, I was extremely affected by all that. The first thing I did, for three years I would not read a newspaper or look at television. I would not live in the world of Lyndon Johnson. Then I started giving speeches at the beginning at every one of my film showings about the death and destruction in Vietnam. Believe it or not, for two years my audiences didn't know what I was talking about. Vietnam? Where is Vietnam? What? We have soldiers that -– Americans did not know that we had soldiers killing people in Vietnam. And when I would talk about it, they wouldn't know what I was talking about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year . . .

LARRY JORDAN: It was actually kept under wraps for almost -– the Vietnam War was actually kept under wraps for almost two years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When was that, ‘62? Sixty-two, ‘63?

LARRY JORDAN: Well, after -– I'm not sure on the dates, but right after Kennedy's death.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Okay. Well, that's ‘63, ‘64. Because that was a critical time when many of us were blithely innocent with, uh . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. But I just felt, spiritually, under a cloud because that was going on. I'd been in the Merchant Marine in the early ‘50 -- in the mid and late ‘50s. I'd been in Saigon, gone up the river to Saigon. And then probably the ships I was on in ‘57, ‘58 were taking the first war materials into the country unbeknownst to those of us who were sailing the ships.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did you get into the Merchant Marine? It sounds like a side step from your interests.

LARRY JORDAN: That was –- yeah –- when I first came to San Francisco. But when I came back the second time my second cousin, who's a generation older than I was, was in the Merchant Marine during the Second World War and even though ships had been sunk under him four times, he had a ball during the war; he loved it. Anyway, he talked -– had great stories about the Merchant Marine. And I was in the doldrums then, living back in Denver again. And so I came out to the Coast specifically to get into the Merchant Marine, and I did that for about three years. You had to go to the Union School for six weeks, then take a test with the Coast Guard, get your seaman's papers. And then you could, then you had to wait around the Union Hall to get a ship. And I remember I had to wait one month sitting around the Union Hall and I read Ulysses during that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs] Takes at least a month.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, took a month to read it, so. . . . Then I would ship out to the Orient -– not very often. The union rules wouldn't allow you to work that much during the year, but about a third of the year you could be on the ships. And I did a few short films. I have a few shots in one of the films going up the river to Saigon.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean you had a camera with you?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, I had an old Bell & Howell 16 millimeter camera. Yeah. And I liked the Merchant Marine. You know, there are stories one could tell about all of that but . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's get our chronologies set again because all of this is good and all of this, I think, is important. But you -– we haven't allowed you to go back to New York. We've been talking, using your first visit to San Francisco then to open up all these other interesting things. But you actually only stayed about a year in San Francisco . . .

LARRY JORDAN: The first time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . then followed Sam Brakhage back to New York and actually, then, lived with him while . . .?

LARRY JORDAN: I was there one summer, in New York.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just a summer?

LARRY JORDAN: Just one summer. I caught up with Stan out on Long Island where he was living in the garage of a woman who donated a small amount of money as a grant to film-makers, to Maya Deren's Creative Film Society –- or whatever it was called then. And then that petered out. We came back and found a cold-water flat for $25.00 a month near the Bowery and lived there for one summer. Stan looked up -– oh, before we got that

we lived in Maya Deren's studio for a couple of weeks, just kinda camped out on the sofa until we could find a place, and then we did find a place. And Maya Deren thought that –- she took kind of an interest in Stan, not so much in me but . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: So she was still there, I mean, it really was her, her studio . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, she had a . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . that she lived in?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, she had the art-type Greenwich village studio and a Bohemian life. Stan and I filmed a Haitian wedding for her once and stayed in Long Island and . . . I won't get sidetracked with my stories about that but she thought that Stan should know some of the important people, people she considered important, and introduced him at some point to Joseph Cornell. Cornell was still making frequent excursions into San Francisco [corrects himself - ed.] -- New York City from Flushing. And one afternoon we were in the apartment there and Cornell showed up at the door and he had a young actress in tow. And he just sat all the young people down and just talked for about two hours. I can't remember a single thing he said, but . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, too bad.

LARRY JORDAN: . . . it was like he would go into transports, into another realm, and just, talk. People have written about how he'd talk to them on the phone for several hours at a stretch and they'd go to sleep. But it was quite wonderful, actually.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you know of Cornell before this? Did you know of him and his work?

LARRY JORDAN: Yes, I saw –- that summer I saw the show he had at the Stable Gallery and was just totally turned on to, to his work. I thought it was like an anchor. I thought it was the best work I'd seen in any of the arts and so I was completely devoted. It fit in so much with my own sensibility of delicate magic and the French literature –- Alain Fournier and James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as Young Man and the child's sensibility and the magic, the power and magic of it, not the sentimentality of it. Childhood is not at all as people write or remember childhood. Childhood is far different, and a few artists have captured it; Cornell is one, Fournier is one and James Joyce is one. And then there -– of the -– E. Nesbitt and some of the English writers on, on the magic of childhood. And, of course, Robert and Jess were very, very –- they had, they had their fingers on that one. So, Cornell, Cornell really had it for me of all the artists I -– I didn't meet very many artists in New York, because we were just totally confined, and New York artists were all tucked away and had their cliques and were much, much more aloof and stand-offish than artists in San Francisco, so I hated it. And as soon as I could afford bus fare, after a summer of intense heat and torture, I got out.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean that in terms of climate or in terms of . . .

LARRY JORDAN: I can't say anything good about New York, either artistically or weather-wise. So, yeah, the West Coast artists didn't believe in New York life, they thought it was degenerate to live under those conditions. And so West Coast art actually conscientiously contested the East Coast aesthetic, and was always much more mystical and the film artists were known as the West Coast Film-makers and had a whole show at Cannes Film Festival in 1974 because we were so distinctly anti-East Coast.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What form did that take?

LARRY JORDAN: Mystical interior searching and a positivism, whereas the East Coast was very negative and gritty, and that was supposed to be "real" art. Bull shit. But then you had people like Rothko, who was very mystical and we, we, we respected that and . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, this is a very interesting, and I think, very important topic because, you know, one imagines that artists who congregate in a certain place do so for certain reasons and that it has to do with the place, as well as, well, other considerations, including even the other people who may have gathered there. And this is what you are describing in terms of California art in general. One of the big issues is how these choices were made and these artists who, for one reason or another, choose to return to, remain and gravitate to California and you have begun to touch on that. But you were really conscious of this, then, of the difference between . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So was it a rivalry, even or that kind of thing?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. Well, in the film – among the film-makers, particularly, abstract expressionism kind of bridged the two coasts. They had Rothko and several others, but we had Hassel Smith and Clyfford Still at the

Art Institute and Diebenkorn and Bischoff and people like that. But, yeah, there was a real, a real split there. People doing such good work out here didn't have much use for the attitude that nothing happens outside of New York City or if you can't make it in New York, you can't make it. And it was very peculiar because New Yorkers would emanate an attitude that all those Californians are so laid back. Californians, the whole time, clear up to the present, have always tended to business and made, made art really work and they are, can be so inept and so fumbling in New York that this wrap was obviously a protection device and a rationalization and a projection. The New York co-op, film co-op could never make it financially and the Canyon co-op in San Francisco got along very well and got business taken care of. And they were the ones who were laid back, but would never admit it. So, yeah, there was, it was not a very intense rivalry, but it was just kind of a -– people would just get kind of aggravated with the attitude that emanated from New York because there was so much good stuff going on here. And then when the Beat thing started, a lot of the people from New York had to run out and take a look at it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So did you hear -- the Beat phenomenon actually, then, brought those artists together really?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. Not established New York artists, but . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: But at least . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Some of those that were more footloose, yeah. And . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of course traveling and moving around . . .

LARRY JORDAN: I mean, let's face it, Beat art is not very good art, in most cases. It's very personal, it's memorabilia, it meant more to the people who gave and received it than it ever did to the art world. But right in there -– you see, people who were just doing their thing right through it all were Rexroth, Robert and Jess, Jay DeFeo and Wally Hedrick. They weren't Beat, didn't particularly want to be known as Beat. They were just San Francisco artists. And, you know, they were doing monumental work right, right through all of the hullabaloo. Wallace Berman did enjoy the idea of being a Beat artist and hadn't really done significant work, except Semina until he went back to Los Angeles, then did really significant work when he finally settled down in a small studio there. George Herms was just getting started, basically, and doing beautiful things. But the heavyweight artists in San Francisco didn't care whether they were in a Renaissance or whether it was a Beat thing going on. They just went right on working and watching the changing times around them, and not ever thinking of going to New York. Sonia Gechtoff was there in the same building where Joan Brown was when I first moved to San Francisco. And she went to -– so there were some deserters from San Francisco [laughs] -– I say facetiously –- who did go to New York and Ronnie Bladen, who used to live in the room next to mine at 707 Scott Street, wasn't really doing much; he was painting here but, I mean, not getting ahead very much so then he went to New York and became a famous sculptor so . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, then, Madeline Diamond, did she go?

LARRY JORDAN: Didn't know her.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think she was one. There was a group, in fact . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . in San Francisco –- it occurs to me they were mainly, though, visual artists –- painters and sculptors and also, then, in L.A. that somehow felt obliged, for professional reasons, to go to New York where the galleries were. And, I guess, maybe . . .

LARRY JORDAN: That's right. But there were some good galleries getting started in San Francisco then, and there was another group of people out at the Art Institute that I never did really know -– I never knew Diebenkorn. I met Elmer Bischoff once. My wife at that time used to model at the Art Institute . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Patricia.

LARRY JORDAN: . . . and I didn't know Peter Voulkos, but we were aware of those people. I was always around -– very close to the Bermans. And we knew of those people and were aware of them, but they weren't ever part of the Beat movement. There were a lot of artists who now are in the Beat show that totally disclaimed Beatness at the time, like, like Bruce Connor never wanted to be known as Beat. And Robert and Jess always said that they were not Beat; they disclaimed that entirely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How did they describe themselves? Or did they need to?

LARRY JORDAN: They described themselves as strictly bourgeois. Robert says, "We are bourgeois. We like to live in a nice house, we like to have nice things, we like to cook, we like, we revere the gods of the hearth", and they

didn't like Ginsberg because he didn't understand things like chairs.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Didn't appreciate chairs.

LARRY JORDAN: But what can you say? Yeah. In the Gertrude Stein sense. A chair is a warm, loving personable personage of the home, and they did not have any truck with pad living.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, well, they . . .

LARRY JORDAN: That was part of the Beat thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They appreciated domesticity [inaudible]

LARRY JORDAN: I didn't either, I was much more into the domesticity, and always my home has been very important to me wherever I was. But it was exciting, you know, being young, to wear old Army fatigues and go around like someone who was a Beat person, you know, it's just part of a glamour to do that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, do you think that some of these forms of Bohemia –- I know that you say that this is beyond Bohemism and all that -– but that the –- certainly with the Beat group, which in some ways seems a bit of a construct, if you look at individuals [inaudible] . . .

LARRY JORDAN: It is a construct.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . it begins to fall apart, but do you feel that in some ways that –- you mentioned these artists that absolutely did not feel part of this, did not want to be associated –- do you feel that, to a certain extent, it became a matter of surface, of lifestyle -- of style, as a matter of fact -- rather than a kind of substance that involves making things, creating? In other words, the look of the style, the behavior was what it was really about, rather than art making?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, that's right. Artists, like everybody else in this society, had different values in terms of lifestyle. And some didn't get along with others. Some liked to live in nice places and furnish them out of the wonderful things you could find at second-hand shops at that time, things that are now valuable antiques or, you know, you could pick up for a pittance then. Others wanted to be on the road, wanted to live on a mattress on the floor and actually wanted to be dirty. And each group . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: It sounds like [inaudible]

LARRY JORDAN: . . . and each group felt that their own lifestyle contributed to their creativity. So, yeah, you had some who wouldn't allow the others in their, in their apartments.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs]

LARRY JORDAN: As I understood it Ginsberg could not come to Jess's house.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [laughs] I'll bet.

LARRY JORDAN: It didn't happen. Robert could meet with Ginsberg somewhere else, but it didn't happen there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, who wants a Barbarian in your house if you have a nice house, right?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. They had a very delicate –- Robert and Jess I'm speaking of now –- had a very delicate, very powerful magic in their house that could turn a young artist completely on to the world of the magic of art. And this could be destroyed by somebody who tramped through with, with heavy boots. So Jess wasn't about to allow that to happen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This notion of -– that we've touched on -– of the importance of one's environment, one's setting, one's domestic environment, and all that goes along with that, I think, is, is very interesting because we've described very different attitudes towards that. But you, obviously -– or at least as I hear it –- were attracted to those artists who, in a sense, were more quiet -- I don't want to necessarily say introspective –- but they weren't as much out broadcasting themselves and their ideas, their art, for that matter, there was, what should we say, a very private side to it as well. Does this have any resonance for you, in terms of your own feelings?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. I think so, to some extent. I don't know what -– well, it wasn't until ‘65 when I went to work for Cornell as his assistant that he actually said to me that he thought that the public should come to the artist. But I was split, in the film career, I was split both ways on that. I haven't gone out and stumped the country as much as some film-makers, but I have had to do that to some extent, and write to people and call

people and set up shows. I mean, you just have to do it, but a lot of times I kind of would be more quiet and let things come, I guess. So I'm somewhere in the middle on that, I guess. In terms of going out and creating and [inaudible] advertising my stuff.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Also, the art itself, at least that with which I am familiar, seems to be, in a sense, quiet and fairly reticent, I guess is the term that one could use, not only in terms of promoting it, but the fundamental quality of the . . .

[Tape 2, Side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing the interview with Larry Jordan, this is Tape 2, Side B. And we have you in New York, . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Nineteen fifty-five.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. And then, with, I guess, a stop in Denver, on the way. You did indeed . . .

LARRY JORDAN: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . make your way back to San Francisco.

LARRY JORDAN: That's right. Lived there for a few months with my parents, and then came to San Francisco the second time. That's when I, my goal was to get into the Merchant Marine, which I eventually did. And went to the Union School and got my seaman's papers. And so, between 1956 and ‘59, I was shipping out intermittently. And in that period, Bruce Connor had come to San Francisco.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Also from Colorado, isn't he? No, he was from . . .

LARRY JORDAN: No, he was from . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . from the university there.

LARRY JORDAN: Well, he was, had just taken his master's degree in painting at the University of Colorado. But we were corresponding. He'd grown up with McClure in Kansas. McClure knew him, introduced him to me. We were corresponding because Bruce was running a very successful experimental film society at the University of Colorado before I ever met him. So it was known that when he came to San Francisco we would start a film society in San Francisco, which we did, called Camera Obscura, which ran for a number of years. And then I started building a 16-millimeter experimental film theater on Kerney Street just off Broadway. Took a lease on an old after-hours club there and gutted it. And Bruce helped a bit on that. He was not one of the partners. He helped -– one day when he was helping unload sheetrock he very badly sprained or broke his ankle. But I did finish that theater. It still exists as a porno today; you can still see it down there running, I guess.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Where is it?

LARRY JORDAN: On Kerney Street just off Broadway.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Huh. What year was that?

LARRY JORDAN: That was ‘57.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. And so that's when Bruce came?

LARRY JORDAN: No, about ‘58.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Uh-huh.

LARRY JORDAN: Bruce had come earlier and we had been doing the film society. And then I built that theater. It ran as a 16-millimeter experimental theater for about five years, then it was a foreign film theater, and then it eventually got pornie. But I got out of that theater in ‘59 or ‘60, and was living on Potrero Hill in San Francisco. Then got married. My daughter was born there in 1960, Lorna Anthea, and then in ‘61, moved away from San Francisco and I haven't lived there since. Moved to Larkspur and was there for a year and a half and then finally in San Anselmo for about 17 years, where I built two studios, and did a lot of film work and a lot of -- some painting and box making and junk sculpture during the ‘60s. But I think you wanted to go back to New York again, or . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I don't . . .

LARRY JORDAN: . . . I think I've kind of covered that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think you've covered that. No, what I would like to do is -– we have you back, and you did that very neatly -– brought it up closer to the present –- but we got you back to the Bay Area and, somehow, you had met Joseph Cornell in . . .

LARRY JORDAN: In ‘55.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. Well, that summer, while you were in New York. And somehow you kept up with him. And then that finally led to your, I guess it was a year, or part of a year you spent, actually, with him in Flushing, you know, working with him. And so I would love to know as much about that whole story and relationship as you can tell.

LARRY JORDAN: Well, I think I described how I met Cornell. He came to the apartment in New York that I was sharing with Stan Brakhage that summer afternoon, and he did all the talking and we all just listened. He went away. Several years later when I was in San Francisco -– and this would be ‘59 -– I was working for a foreign film distributor then. And I sometimes brought the films home and showed them at McClures. And sometimes I would make -– take a camera and make stills off the wall while the film, or off the screen while the film was showing. And I have a good set of stills from Ivan the Terrible by Eisenstein, and I wanted to make it into a little book. So I started hand-making the photographs and pasting them in to a little hand-made book. And then I would take them down to City Lights and they would sell them. I sent one of these to Joseph Cornell in ‘59, and I said something like, "I thought you might like this". And I didn't have any idea that he would remember having met me. But he remembered perfectly and he was delighted with the Eisenstein book and so then that started a correspondence and a collaboration through the mail for about 10 years.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What form did that take? Of sharing of ideas, of . . .?

LARRY JORDAN: Well, I have a whole array of correspondence from Cornell that has been, some of it's been used in Mary Ann Caws' book, Cornell's Theater of the Mind. But he would write -– and he liked to be active in correspondence like a little project or, would it be possible for me to do some still photographs of, of women with a kind of -- what did he call it? -- Crusader theme. And so I did some photographs. And then he enjoyed writing little messages to my daughter. And so a lot of – and then he would offer to send a film that he'd done with Rudy Burkhardt. One came called The
Aviary and that was a wonderful film about things in the park in New York. Cornell's New York is marvelous. My New York was not. So I would look at his film and send it back to him. I never sent him any of my films through the mail because he said he didn't have a projector. I showed him my films when I went to work for him. But we corresponded then right up until 1965, at which time he called me on the phone and said that his mother had just left the family house and gone out to live with his sister on Long Island -– he was in the house alone -– and he had some unfinished film stuff there that he really needed some help on, and possibly some box work and other things, so would I be interested in coming back and working with him for a while. So I said I would, and did, in the summer/fall of 1965, where we worked on boxes, we worked on films. He gave me a group of films –- he didn't know whether they were finished or in what state they were and I was to take them back to California and finish them, which I did. And that's the group of three films by Cornell and then the second group, three more by Cornell, which you can rent from Canyon Cinema. So I finished those films. I also edited a film called Legend for Fountains when I was staying there in Flushing, shot by Rudy Burkhardt. And I would –- he didn't suggest what to do with it, but he would look at a sequence that I had edited and say he didn't agree with it. And I'd take it apart and do something else and then he'd say he did agree with it. And so in that sense, it was truly a Cornell film. It's a wonderful film about a young woman in a window, looking out a window, holding a cat, and other things on the street that happened.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was this one called?

LARRY JORDAN: Legends for Fountains. It's now known as Legends for Fountains, but he called it Fable for Fountains. It has some lines from Lorca, titles cut in.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But did you work on that out here? Is this one that you . . .

LARRY JORDAN: No, in the basement in Flushing . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

LARRY JORDAN: With some very primitive equipment that he had there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it was different ones that you brought back that he . . .
LARRY JORDAN: Different ones that I brought back which turn out now to be the first found-footage films ever were made and now there is a whole sub-genre of film-making of found-footage films. The history of that was

Cornell had an inspiration in the ‘30, late ‘30s, probably to re-cut film footage that he had not had shot, to find, and to use it like other things that he found and make boxes out of. He took an old Hollywood B movie called "East of Borneo" and re-cut it down to about 35 or 40 minutes and called it Rose Hobart, because he was very much taken with that actress, who was in that film, and showed it at the Julian Levy Gallery where the surrealists were hanging out in New York at that time. He had a very unfortunate experience with Salvador Dali, who was there, and told him to stick to box making and get out of films and how awful it was. It's a wonderful film but that experience – because of that experience he didn't show his films publicly, ever again.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Just because of that one experience?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. And hardly anybody knew that he made films. But now they're, -– after I finished those first three, museums all over the country -– bought them up, bought up prints of them. And they're shown. He became a posthum. He became a well-known film-maker after he died, essentially. He had two ways of making films: one was to find footage out of basements and flea markets, old film from Castle Films, anywhere he could lay his hands on film footage, and cut them into the gentle surreal pieces -– as they say, the first found-footage films. The other way was to have a film-maker he was acquainted with, like Sam Brakhage or Rudy Burkhardt or myself, go with him to one of his favorite places. Burkhardt did work on the streets of New York with him on Mulberry Street and in the parks and Brakhage worked on the Third Avenue el before it was torn down for Cornell. And I was taken to a cemetery where a young child that he'd been a patron of was buried. And we would shoot film as he would just point in a certain direction, but not say "do this, do that". And so we would shoot footage for him. But he didn't like the film to then be edited by the same film-maker who shot it because, I guess, it would be somebody else's film, so it worked very well for me to edit Burkhardt's footage, or something like that. So that was the other way he made films. And in most cases it worked out very well but, you see, where it didn't work was where Stan Brakhage shot footage, then Stan edited the film and Cornell didn't like it. He wasn't willing to give it up, so he found out that he could project the films backwards. Stan had called the film The Wonder Ring. So Cornell had a print made that ran backwards and he titled it The Wonder Ring spelled backwards, which you can't pronounce. And then it was a Cornell film and he then was able to relate to it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When did he -– I'm sure this has been written about –- but, you know, just from the standpoint of this conversation and your recollections –- when did he start making films? Now, everybody knows that he was interested in Hollywood . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Sometime in the ‘30s. We can't date those found-footage films, but it was sometime mid to late 30s, as far as I know. And I think that Jonas Mekas at the Anthology Film Archive in New York probably has good dates on that, when those were made. But while I was there he worked on collages, mostly. We did work on some boxes. And he wanted me to learn how the boxes were made, for one reason, so that I could repair them. So my own box work now, obviously, is very, very close to Cornell's. And I don't know exactly how the art world views something like that. I've kind of thought of it in some ways like when a famous Renaissance artist would have a studio and it was not at all out of line that students of that studio painted in that manner. You could tell the paintings apart, but they painted in a certain manner. This is not done, usually, in modern art in the . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of individuality.

LARRY JORDAN: . . . the particularly post-modernist world of individuality. But I am making my own boxes, if they have the Cornell -– there are hundreds of artists out there making boxes. Some -– a gallery owner will say, "Well, your boxes are different because they have the moving parts" -– because everybody out there is making boxes. I know that a lot of people make –- so Cornell didn't either start the box form or preempt it, as far as I'm concerned but, then, the sensibility -- I am close to the Cornell sensibility, that poetic sensibility of hermetically sealed box -– naturally close to it. And so I can't do otherwise. You know, when I'm making boxes I –- they are natural to me, and they are different from Cornell boxes. There are certain motifs that I have in my boxes that Cornell used and they're used as an homage or tribute, obviously. There are a lot more motifs that he never did use in certain strategies in the boxes that he never used. And so I don't know how this is viewed in the art world. I wonder about it, but I can't do anything about it, so we'll just have to see on that one.

PAUL KARLSTROM: When did you start making boxes? You said that Cornell -– that you went back to work with him . . .

LARRY JORDAN: I had made . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . both on films and boxes.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. I had made some boxes before I went to work for him. I know I had made that collage, big collage piece with the Beatles things in it before I went back there, that I showed you. So I would have started making boxes and collages and junk sculpture in about 1961; that's when I started.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you had met Cornell by that time . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and no doubt had seen his shows.

LARRY JORDAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I'm just wondering if that experience provided a kind of impetus, a kind of . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Well, it was more than an impetus, I'd say it changed my life.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, Okay. That's a little more strong.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you made a very good point that there was an existing sensibility on your part that clearly then responded to that of Cornell . .

LARRY JORDAN: Mmm-hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . and so, it was a coming together -– would you describe it as a . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Mmm-hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . you discovered, in effect, a kindred spirit?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, I would definitely say that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And he must have felt the same way to invite you to work with him.

LARRY JORDAN: Well, I think so, I mean, we had corresponded a long time and exchanged things through the mail, so, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let me ask you . . .

LARRY JORDAN: We're not alike, but I think somewhere buried there is, is that connection with the photography, with the mystical French thing, and the child's world. All somewhat idealized.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And a juxtaposition of sometimes unrelated . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. See, he's not a true surrealist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What do you mean?

LARRY JORDAN: And neither am I, but we're very closely related, an offshoot. Surrealism, at least according to Buñuel, was not about making poems or books or paintings, it was about revolution, that is, destroying the bourgeois mind set. And Cornell couldn't take that kind of attack mode and disassociated himself from the surrealists. He didn't like Salvador Dali, obviously, but he stayed good friends with Duchamp and Max Ernst. And I don't have that attack mode, either. Surrealism does try to get under the skin through sexual strategies, erotic strategies and other strategies. Tries to get under the skin of conservative mind set. I'm not really that interested in doing that and neither is Cornell. Jess is, to some extent. Cornell's work, my work, is not, not very interested in shocking.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But there is the sexual and the erotic as pretty important.

LARRY JORDAN: But not in the way that Buñuel or Dali used it to disturb, like in L'Age d'or, implying that Christ had just raped a woman. You see that, that, . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: More subtle. You described your approach and Cornell's as really more subtle and "Pacific," shall we say . . .

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . rather than combative and challenging.

LARRY JORDAN: It's not combative. There's no –- I have no quarrel to pick with any viewer of my work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's not the work -– it's not the artist's work, at least in your case . . .

LARRY JORDAN: I mean, I know the world's bad and it would be like singing to the choir to keep harping on it. I'm trying to create some alternative to that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And, you know, there is another aspect to this that doesn't get discussed too often. There's a kind of arrogance and self-satisfaction in knowing that you have the truth and it's your job to shock the, an audience, or the rest of the beknighted world.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, well, there's a kind of poeialeternis child, childishness, I guess, in doing -– I don't put it down, I mean, some people that's natural to and there are brilliant artists who do that I enjoy it very much. But I've always been very eclectic; I do span Buñuel to Cornell, and enjoy both.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now, how do you mean? Well, of course, your talking about it -– a wonderful film-maker, somebody's also a film-maker, but, to me, his objects -– he's better known for that, I think. And you say you span -– what are the qualities of Buñuel?

LARRY JORDAN: Well, Buñuel's a social poet and Cornell is a totally personal poet.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Uh-huh. I see.

LARRY JORDAN: Buñuel probably did believe that film, like the Russians probably believed, that film was an instrument of social change. Look at Land Without Bread that he made, the documentary in Spain. Yeah, and Cornell, I don't think, like myself, would ever be interested, or fooled by the chimera that film would be, could be used a tool for the betterment of humanity. I'm just not interested. If humanity is going to get better, it's going to have to do it on its own.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you have a little bit of that, you say. You span the two.

LARRY JORDAN: Well, in my -– no, in my appreciation, not in my work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

[End of Tape 2, Side B]
[Tape 3, Side A]

LARRY JORDAN: This is continuing the interview with Larry Jordan on December 19, 1995. I think it's still the 19th. This is a first session and we are now at Tape 3, Side 1.
Larry, before we broke for lunch we were discussing -– we were talking about your experience with Joseph Cornell and something that I certainly wouldn't mind pursuing a little more. But what it led us into, quite naturally and nicely, was some discussion of your own, more recent, work -– the box -- your own boxes and some of the differences and then similarities and the shared sensibility. And as part of that discussion there was talk also of surrealism, [with] which you feel definitely an affinity and yet you distance yourself. There is a demarcation that you make between surrealism and your own work and that of Cornell. Let me ask you just a few more questions about surrealism. Would you say this -– that of all the "movements" in modernism, 20th century art, surrealism would be, despite the differences, the closest to your interest, or at least in terms of the imagery and the use of imagery?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: More so than, say, cubism or something?

LARRY JORDAN: Despite Buñuel's statement that surrealism was about revolution, that would be true for Buñuel, certainly for Max Ernst ... So some of the surrealists were more revolutionary than others. But the thing that's most important about surrealism and what I do is that I've been able to discover how the surrealists made conscious concerted efforts to be able to tap the unconscious and they called it "forcing inspiration". And I found methods for doing that as well, because I've intimated on one occasion for every morning for five years straight walking to the studio and be up to par at 9:00. How do you do it? So I've discovered ways to get in there and everybody has to find their own. That's one way. They were fairly conscious about getting into the unconscious and that interests me a lot. So, I've taken that to heart. I've always meant to get the quote right and I don't have the classic quote about surrealism. It is the meeting of a sewing machine upon an operating table -– it's something else besides a sewing machine –- anyway, finding something where you don't expect to find it is key to the surrealistic process. It's irrational and consciously using the irrational is a very interesting business. I like, I like being in that area. Cornell possibly knew a lot more about what the parts of his boxes meant than I do. I really try to stay away from meanings in the boxes . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Symbolism and so forth is not the . . .

LARRY JORDAN: I don't want a box where this little piece stands for this and this little piece stands for that; I

don't want a second-hand experience, so I'm, I'm working quite intuitively in the boxes. The symbols don't stand for something else. They only refer to things within that particular work. My job is to get them to come together and to balance in some way. So a lot of it is visual intuition, for lack of a better term. The pieces that come together in the boxes, in my collages and in my collage films, are very disparate material that somehow seem destined to come together. I know not why. To me, for instance, when I do a collage film it takes a long time to get to the place where I'm ready to go. It's like backpacking to some distant country and when I get there, finally, what that means is circling around the material and setting up the situation and maybe doing some cutting and pasting. But at a certain point I'm there in that realm and I know how everything works in that particular film. The same with the box -- the boxes are more difficult actually than the collage films, but it is still a process of bringing disparate material on certain themes together and maintaining some kind of balance between things that want to go together and things that shouldn't be together, to keep a tension, to keep some kind of fine light tension in the box. Now, when I speak of tension, literally there is a tension in the boxes in the form of a watch spring on which some visual element will hang and will balance back and forth, swing, or move in some way. That all came about in 1983 when there was a gallery in New York setting up to show and sell work from animation film. And since I don't have drawn or painted cells from my animation films -– I have only cutout material, backgrounds and cutout pieces -– I decided to put some of the scenes into little boxes. Literally abstract a scene from one of the cutout animation films, into the box where the background would be the same background that was in the film, and then the moving parts in the foreground would be the cutouts and they would be hung on watch springs so they could bounce back and forth and give some approximation of that animated scene. So that's when I started using watch springs. And most of my boxes now have that kinetic element. I'm very interested in variable composition and some of the pieces in my boxes move. Cornell occasionally used a watch spring without anything attached to it, in the boxes, a visual element. He never used springs to animate parts of the box, so far as I know. But, in my case, it came out of simulating a scene in a film. Now, the new boxes are not –- well some of them are still scenes from the animated films, and others are not, but that's one of the differences. And I would think that the -– everybody claims to be a surrealist. I don't offer that claim, I'm more –- if I claim to be anything, I guess I would probably claim to be an alchemist. I don't know anything about alchemy, but I would think that I am one.

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Laughs] Well, turning familiar materials into, if not gold, some evocative gold, if you will. Let's talk a moment about -– eventually we're going to have to hit the issue head-on of cinema, your collage, your animation, the collage animation in your film work, but at this point, what I would like to do is talk a little bit about the most recent boxes which -– it's not as if you've just discovered boxes, but there is, what should we say, a recent crop, or generation, if you want to call them that. And it might be useful to have you describe them; when they began to appear and what you would call, maybe in some family way, a group, with a certain identity and how that came about and how they are again are – how you began to suggest how they differ from their predecessors.

LARRY JORDAN: How they differ from . . .?

PAUL KARLSTROM: The earlier boxes that you did, thinking of the most recent?

LARRY JORDAN: Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, the most recent family of boxes began about a year ago. And then there was another family of smaller boxes, or more shallow boxes, that began two years ago. And I liked the shallow boxes. They weren't quite challenging enough to go on with. I made a series of those which I liked very much. And then I had an experience in the ‘70s somewhat like Cornell must have felt when Salvador Dali insulted him so much
about his first film, and he never showed the films. I had made some boxes that showed considerable Cornell influence, in the ‘60s. I showed them in the early ‘70s and got a second-hand comment from somebody who'd seen them, like "How could he do that?" Meaning, like how could he make something that –- like Cornell. I didn't take it as a compliment at the time and I closed down the box making. At that time I shouldn't -– I realize now I shouldn't have taken that as any kind of pronouncement from the art world and even if it was a pronouncement from the art world that's not my job to listen to it. So what I've done –- I don't believe that Cornell co-opted the physical outer form of the box, which he taught me how to make. I would not think there are many people who know how those boxes are actually made. There might be a few restorers who know part of how they're made. I do know how they're made; he taught me how to make them and I have just decided I'm old enough now I can do anything I want. And I don't care what anybody says about it. So I'm making boxes as my master taught me, and that's it. The present ones are just welling up out of me. I'm not thinking of the master's work, they're just coming. I don't know what Cornell would have thought about someone making boxes this close to what he did, but there is enough, I mean, we are different, we are different artists, so there is enough difference there. It's just something I feel very good about right now. I just need more of these in the world. And so the present group is coming from needing more of a challenge than the ones I did in ‘94.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What was unchallenging, or less challenging about the ones in ‘94?

LARRY JORDAN: Well, they were less intricate, but then that was on purpose. I wanted them to be simpler. And I

did that as far as I wanted to go with it. And now -– this happened in film work, too. I did a number of films that were done very swiftly and were fairly simple, and then as I got farther and farther into the mysteries of animation, I became more complex and more interested in holding more things in balance at a given time and it seems to be the same with the boxes right now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Are you attracted, in complexity, to the opportunity to include more disparate elements? In other words, is that the challenge?

LARRY JORDAN: Well, no. Well, that's part of it. What's driving it more than that, I would think, is that they become – have a chance to become more mysterious. That the complexity is able to envelop something that doesn't give itself away immediately on seeing it the first time, that can be lived with, perhaps longer, that can be explored a little deeper, it can be more, can have more, depth to the viewer. I think it's a matter of depth, both to myself and to anybody who's going to look at the box is probably what it is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why don't you describe, again, trying to keep, for the moment, anyway, focused on the more recent boxes -- many of which I've had the pleasure of seeing, many of which are around here, or at least in your studio, in storage. But why don't you describe the, if you would, the process involved, the sources for the imagery, what these images may mean to you and how they, how they emerged out of this process, your interest, the materials, and so forth?

LARRY JORDAN: That's harder to say. But let's see, right now I'm in kind of an explosive period where I really need an assistant because I have about four or five things that I want at any one time that I want to be doing, working on. I'm amplifying much of the material that was once used in the collage films, amplifying through color Xerox, both in size and color intensity, and combining them now on flat, still surfaces, flat collages and in boxes in ways that have infinite possibilities. I have several thousand black and white engravings that I have cut out and painted -– hand-painted –- that are now material that I can use. In my mind I can see so many different ways to use them that I don't have enough time to do everything. So that's how the present series of boxes is becoming more complicated. The finding of the materials; part of it is out of that rich mine that I have of all that collage film material. And then solid objects are things that I'm always looking for, in various places. Antique stores yield up a lot of stuff, because the stuff that isn't really antique but just kind of collectible appears there. And we have a very humble little flea market in Petaluma on the weekends and I get some things there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That must be great.

LARRY JORDAN: I'm just looking for objects that are, in themselves, characters or symbols of some kind.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, now, you say that -– you just told me that you don't think of the boxes or the elements as symbolic, that it's all interior reference, is how I understood it. But you just used that term in connection with these elements that you find.

LARRY JORDAN: Well, they are symbols. So what's a symbol is not a metaphor. A metaphor leads to meaning. That's what it is all about: taking one image and relating it to another image so that the mind can form some kind of meaning out of the chaos of life, of images. But a symbol, a circle, you can write five hundred books about the symbol of the circle and never explain the circle. A symbol by definition can't be explained away; it just sits there and continues to radiate significance to the unconscious. And so, yes, they are symbolic, but some people misunderstand what a symbol is; think that a symbol stands for something else. That's not what a symbol is. A symbol just is there. And it evokes -– the idea is that a symbol will evoke whatever the viewer is predisposed to have evoked by that symbol. That's the power of it. And that's what I want the films and the boxes to do -– to interact with the predispositions and the psychological filters of the viewer and come alive to that viewer only at the moment of viewing, and not to transfer some idea that I have in my mind to the viewer. I'm not interested in doing that. I'm interested in the viewer interacting with the piece or with the film, and whatever meanings that viewer makes out of that experience are the valid ones, not ones that I planted in there. No Western Union message sending here.

PAUL KARLSTROM:Give an example please of, maybe, some wonderful artifact or some object that you might find at a little antique store, flea market or, for that matter, in your engravings. You know, what would be a specific example of one of these that's a symbol of the kind you just described?

LARRY JORDAN: Large, amber-colored glass marble.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which stands for nothing else?

LARRY JORDAN: That's it. I don't know; in one box it might be putting in a box that has suggestions of astronomy; planets or something so that somebody would come along and say, "that's a symbol for a planet or an orb" or something, and another person might see it differently. That would be an example of that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about -– it is true that in your films, or at least the ones I've seen, and in your earlier flat collages were mostly based on the films or at least there's a symbiotic relationship. In the boxes themselves there are elements that would be seen very much or possibly as narratives. That is to say that there would be the appearance of stories. In fact, your boxes, I must say, the part that is delightful about them is there are these stories that you can't really recognize what they say, but they are stories. And then you think of some element like the toucans or whatever they are -– those very beautiful -– you like those birds and their beaks and their feathers. And I'm not trying to pin you down, but these are the questions that people would say –- why is it that Jordan keeps sticking these wonderful birds? Sometimes they move. How do you answer that to yourself?

LARRY JORDAN: Right. That's a really good question. Yeah –- the narrative element. One story, one anecdote here we can permit ourselves.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Absolutely.

LARRY JORDAN: I had done a five-minute collage animation film called Masquerade. I concentrated very hard on animating to the music, Vivaldi, Largo. The background is a winter scene. Evidently there had been a masquerade ball, and now we have two duelists in the snow, one dying. It was obvious that there was a story in the background, but I wasn't concentrating on making a story. I was concentrating on making the movement go with the music. And after the film had been out and about for a year, Channel 13 in New York, a PBS station, contacted me and they wanted to include this on a program of narrative films. And my jaw dropped, and I went and I looked at the film, and right there in front of my eyes is the whole narrative, but I didn't consciously make it. So the narratives that come out of the film are more like tales than a story -– a tale like a fairy tale that comes out as long as I'm kinda unconscious about it. I'm very deeply into stories: A Thousand and One Nights, fairy tales, psychological. I'm quite interested in depth psychology. Maria Louise Von Franz's writing on fairy tales, and I've got the complete set of Oz books, etc.

PAUL KARLSTROM: They're right up there above you on the bookshelf.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. So stories are just probably so natural in my mind that I'm not even thinking about them. And if they come out in the boxes, that's fine. Where I have trouble and what I have to watch out against is self-conscious stories and self-conscious humor. I'm always delighted if something funny happens in one of the animation films or one of the boxes. But if I try to make it funny, it's dreadful. So, if it happens, that's fine. But I've got to keep in a realm of letting these things take shape without -– that's what I teach my students not to force the issue, not to consciously, willfully make material try to conform to some idea in the mind. Nobody ever said that what we have in our conscious mind is so great. Yeah, so narrative elements do appear because I'm so -– I read classic literature all the time. I'm reading Pickwick Papers right now. One tumbling little story after another, and my head's just full of them. But I'm not trying to invent visual stories. They just occur. And that's about where I want it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about the duelists in the -– and I think I can actually visualize that one -– I've seen that box. I mean the film was some years ago, right?

LARRY JORDAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But didn't you incorporate that element in one of your recent boxes?

LARRY JORDAN: ‘82 was a film. I made a box of that last year, and a large wall collage.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. What was the . . .

LARRY JORDAN: I really need to live for about a thousand years because, over the years, if I count every frame of film
I've made -– I don't know how many hundreds of thousands of collages. So I feel like I'm a premier collage artist, having made that much work. I've often said that I'm a collage artist. The only thing I have in common with film makers is that I have to get the stuff to run through a projector. So I have to learn the paraphernalia of film making to enable me to do it. In a collage animation film, it's just one collage after another -– 24 to make one second of film. And it goes click, click, click. I can make collage like I can eat or sleep; it's just something I can do without thinking. Not that it's easy to make a box; a box is hard.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about -- I asked you about the toucans, the birds? Or exotic birds?

LARRY JORDAN: Exotic birds are characters; they're raucous characters and they're like buffoons. They're colorful, but the toucan is a lovable buffoon in films. It has a raucous voice; every time it opens its mouth people laugh. The toucan that's in my film and in the collages is a fictitious toucan. I had never seen a toucan until we went to Trinidad last year -– in the wild. I never saw one in a cage. I didn't even follow a picture when I painted the toucan. I just made up the colors. So this is a costume character that recurs, and then it keeps recurring. A

lot of these things keep recurring. I keep recycling. When I find -- because there's a certain amount of theater. It's not like writing a story, some narrative, it's like theater. And certain characters become good actors in the collage work. And so they get used over and over.

[BEGIN SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, continuing an interview with Larry Jordan, artist film-maker, Larry Jordan. This is Session 2 being conducted on July 30th, 1996. It follows -- the previous session was way back in December of '95, December 19th, 1995. This is like a wrap-up session. The interviewer for the archives is Paul Karlstrom, and the interview is being conducted at the interviewer's home in San Francisco on Carmelita Street. Last session was at Larry Jordan's home in Petaluma.

Well, here we are. We waited over six months, it seems, to get together again. My, how time flies. Of course, we've seen one another during that time, and what I hope to do this afternoon is in an hour or so, couple hours maybe, to wrap up, perhaps touch on some of those areas that we may have missed in the earlier interview. And you said that there was something that came to your mind, I guess, out of our perhaps discussions we had at lunch, is that right, that you wanted to start with?

LARRY JORDAN: Reports you read from the last interview and what we were talking about at lunch, and I suppose it's kind of a caveat or an apologia to maybe not being as articulate as one might hope on some of these questions, and that is, I remember something that James Broughton said at the Art Institute during graduation ceremony when he was being presented an honorary doctorate degree, and part of his long poem, the only part I can remember, he said that "Esthetics is to the artist as ornithology is to the bird." And what that means to me is as an artist, it's difficult, I find it difficult in the extreme to respond to esthetic discussion. I think that's another province and -- but what artists seem to be able to respond to in conversation endlessly is artistic concerns. I mean it's a different thing, not entirely, but it's a different emphasis. It's just when I say that Cornell told me that he wanted to get a sense of timelessness into every box, that was a concern of his that -- it was a compelling concern. It was something that drove him. It doesn't have anything to do with the esthetics of the box, as I understand esthetics, that word, that term, that semantic area of research. It doesn't have anything to do with the content of the box, but it's what drives artists is what we were talking about at lunch, right? That's what I was talking about.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, that is --

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. What drives artists is an artist can talk about that thing which I call the artist's concerns, the concerns of your work in general, the concerns in this particular work, those you can go on and on about endlessly. The actual content of the work, the importance of the work, where the work is placed historically, where the work is placed in relation to other artists, where I, as an artist am placed in relation to other artists, or the time, very difficult, very difficult from this perspective to talk with any kind of coherence about that. I believe there are actual reasons for that which --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like what? Well, what would those reasons be?

LARRY JORDAN: My theory that artists really must have a wall placed between themselves in the content; otherwise, they wouldn't do the work. If I knew what this thing was about, wouldn't it better to go and write an essay to make everything clearer. And I've had specific dramatic examples of that happening with other artists completely denying the content of the work that everybody else can see. Why would the artist deny that content? Because you need to deny the content. It's always in the back of your mind, but you don't admit to it because you need all your attention, all your focus to execute formal concerns, to make the work strong enough so that people will look at it and get the message that you deny in the work. Besides, artists don't like being sociologists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Several of them don't.

LARRY JORDAN: We want to preserve a little bit of mystery, even if it's only for ourselves.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's see if I can bring this back. I had it for a moment as we were talking and it was one part of our discussion at lunch. In fact, maybe you can help me. Well, I'm going to turn the tape off.

[TAPE OFF]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Now I remember the part of our lunch discussion that seems to fit in here, and we began to talk about or consider the question of why artists do what they do very fundamentally, why they do it and what they may be after, why they make, let's say, a career choice or life choice that, in many ways, is unreasonable in a society that tends not to reward it. So, you know, what drives them to do that? And I guess the second part of that discussion which we just touched on at the time was -- well, I guess it was your view of

what the function of the artist is in society. It's a big question, but, you know.

LARRY JORDAN: Well, why don't I just talk autobiographically here then because I assume that's what you want more of rather than just a philosophical discussion, but out of the -- in my childhood when I was about eight, nine years old, there happened to live in the neighborhood a family, you know, I, my sisters had friends in that family. The father was a writer. The mother was an artist, and they lived in a very nice, little, bourgeois house because they had some kind of small inheritance, but he, in his basement studio, wrote books and published them and he was an established writer. And he talked to me as if I were a regular person. He talked to me about what he was doing and writing and I could understand it. He was the most lively and interesting person in the neighborhood, so I thought that's where the action is. That's what I wanted. That's what I would like to do. It was just a matter of art and creativity being much more exciting than anything else around at that point. I suppose that doesn't really speak to the question of whether you have any ability or talent for being creative, but it obviously must begin with interest in it. If you're not interested, you're not going to take up a career as an artist. But over the years, in school with various teachers and other people I met, it became -- people talked about art, and writing, and literature, and drama, and poetry, and a little later in high school film, as if it were kind of the high point of what people could do, you know, and I was interested in that challenge. It also was the most exciting place to be mentally. So originally when I went to college, I thought I would like to be a writer, then I began to see the films of the early Russian silent films, Cocteau films, Renoir films, and realized that it was the image, not the word that I was really interested in. I just wanted to plunge into it and see what I could do and that's -- now the broader question of why do -- or what the role -- that's what we were talking about at lunch and that's where we want to kind of end up, and over the years, it's been borne in on me, and this is my personal opinion, and as I've said to you earlier, it sounds pretty grandiose to say this, but I actually don't see it any differently than this, and that is the role of the -- look back through history. What role has the artist played? To my mind, the artist has exemplified the spirit of the particular culture that that artist was born into. All that we have left of the great civilizations or what the artists have left us. We have a few speeches from Roman times, but mainly, we have the art, you know. We have the plays and the art from Greece. Isn't that where the spirit of those civilizations were embodied? Then I began to think, well, does theirs just reflect or encapsulate that spirit or does the artist actually have a more active role in keeping that spirit alive in whatever culture that artist happens to be in? And that's what I do think now.

I think that there's an active role that artists are, in their way, avant-garde thinkers, if not in words, in philosophy, at least, in images and direction, and are not simply reflectors of the culture, but actually perform a function of keeping spiritual matters alive in a way that religion doesn't quite do, religion being circumcised [sic] -- a Freudian slip, circumcised -- circumscribed by ideology. Christian religion, for instance, cannot deal with witches and magicians and dragons; therefore, the fairy tale, European fairy tale, had to deal with that function of the psyche. Artists deal with functions of the psyche that politicians can't deal with, religions leaders can't deal with, and other institutions can't deal with. They are the break-away runners that is exciting and yet threatening to society. Every society has broken down and gone the way of mortality, but the human race has gone on, meaning that each society has changed into something else who led the way through the death into the new rebirth. Well, it's very complicated, but probably artist monks in the dark ages, tiding us over with their scholarship and their -- scholarship is close to art in my view. It's all about not just mirroring where we are now, but reflecting on and taking certain mental and imagistic jumps into where we're going. It's part of human evolution. That's what I think the role of the artist is. The artist has nothing to do with being a superfluous luxury for the rich. I don't know who -- I suppose conservatives who are deathly afraid of avant-garde art promulgated that kind of idea at some point, but you just have to tell my students, "You never, never, ever react or be affected by that art."

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mentioned religion. Do you see your work or, in a more general sense, the enterprise of art-making as not a religious activity, but somehow in that territory, in that same territory, an alternate, shall we say? Do you see that at work? You mentioned, you know, the idea of vision and so forth.

LARRY JORDAN: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that another word you would use?

LARRY JORDAN: Well I do because, you know, I was born into a Christian family as a child, embraced that as much as I was able. I rejected that. I've been seriously through years of Buddhist study, made film onto that sacred art. I've looked at all the ancient religions. I study Egyptian religion and art, and I've always wanted another religion for myself. And, boy, they are wonderful and they form part of my art, but they don't stick as a religion, and I have to say that the art-making is the religion. I've now come to the point -- I found out just a few months ago, I'm at the same point that Kazantzakis came to. I don't believe in an after-life. I don't believe in immortality. I believe that we face the abyss and that our task is to show courage, to face the abyss with joy and a positive structure to our lives, and with, well, with love, in the face of that termination.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This certainly calls for the next question. What you've described is a circumstance that, at

least back in the '60s when I was in undergraduate school, one would describe as the existential position or situation, recognition, you know, simply for the recognition of the futility or the absurdity of, well, of life, of existence, but that then despite that, you continue along anyway, and the words you used, that our job is to find ways to face the abyss with joy and love despite --

LARRY JORDAN: In a positive structure to our lives, yeah, rather than running madly toward the abyss or cursing existence or doing all those things that tear down a form of negative paragon.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Would you describe yourself and your thinking as existential in these terms?

LARRY JORDAN: I've never understood exactly what existentialism meant. It was very beautiful in certain short stories of Jean Paul Sartre when I was in high school, but I never understood it, the no-exit idea. That never seemed to cut it for me, particularly if you say there's no exit, therefore, and blah, blah, blah. Nothing is worth anything.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, it doesn't seem to me that that was a very optimistic, positive --

LARRY JORDAN: I have a couple early films that people say are existentialism.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

LARRY JORDAN: I think that all youth goes through the alienation phase where they're existentialists, to some degree, but I don't understand what existentialism -- I mean I don't understand existentialism as intellectuals understand existentialism, so I'm a little bit out of my league here to talk about that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, but, you know, it's interesting, not to digress, but to address that comment of yours, that somehow we're obliged to understand fully and thoroughly thought systems, to draw elements from them, and very -- this is actually very interesting. I'll be very brief, a story. I was talking with Bruce Nauman in New Mexico just a couple weeks ago and he had received a very negative, a very nasty, not a review of his work, but in discussing him. Arthur Danto and some European intellectual, a philosophical, esthetic journal, talked about Nauman at some length and criticized him, went so far as to call him a bad person because he felt that his work was immoral --

LARRY JORDAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- in some broader, philosophical sense. The reason I mention this is that he was most critical of Nauman's not understanding Wittgenstein, but still citing him as an influence, a source for some of his ideas. And Nauman correctly pointed out to me that the artist is in no way obliged to fully understand these systems, philosophies, whether it's existentialism or anything else, de-construction, I suppose, that -- and I'm interested in your view on this. But they -- you know, just to wrap up, but that they -- it is their job to draw from anything that attracts their interest or peaks their curiosity.

LARRY JORDAN: Well I agree with Nauman entirely and I think he's very successful if he got an intellectual to get worked up enough to use the word "immoral." That is a real triumph. It's hard to get an intellectual worked up to that kind of passion today, so that's a great achievement. And I agree with his premise that an artist doesn't have to understand semantic terms. I
teach art at a famous art school, and yet I don't have really the least notion what post-modernism means, but we have people in the letters and science department that understand it quite well and the students go there if they want to understand what this term that is being bandied about is all about, but I've never understood it. It's not my job at the Institute to teach where people are in the art world -- in the world of art historically. My job is to teach the creative process and let the chips fall where they may and people can then come along and form their opinions as to whether you fall into this genre or that genre, but I have -- if I start thinking about understanding art terms, esthetic art terms, it would probably confuse me enough that I might stop making art because it would probably introduce the fear factor. And, boy, you know, being an artist is like being an athlete. You have to be in there every day, keeping in shape. You have to be fearless. You have to be confident, and if you start getting thrown by criticism or esthetic terminology, you're going to fall off the balance beam and hit your head and do some injury.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's good Olympics.

LARRY JORDAN: Influenced by the present Olympic imagery, right. But I do identify with Olympic athletes quite a lot because they have to push to reach a certain plateau and some of them go on and some of them give up and some art -- you know, some people are very talented in art and do a few amazing things and then give it up and go on and do other things, and others are in it for the long haul, more or less long-distance runners.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well with that little observation from Bruce Nauman, I think that leaves it open for you

whether or not you understand literary existentialism that this could still -- the attitudes or ideas could have formed your work, and it does sound as if others, critics, you know, in the early '60s perhaps, noticed in your early films some of these. What kind of elements were they? Can you remember which films and what about them might have inspired these critics to think in terms of existentialism?

LARRY JORDAN: For my work?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

LARRY JORDAN: Well, it's just a poet, Robert Duncan, mentioned that --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well that's pretty --

LARRY JORDAN: -- at one of my films, it seemed to be existential.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which one was it? Do you remember?

LARRY JORDAN: It's probably referring to two films, one of which is still shown pretty widely and the other which isn't shown at all. The one that's still shown is Visions of a City with Michael McClure in it, and the other is called Trumpit, spelled with an "I" instead of an "E," trumpit. Seemed to be existentially --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now that has Stan Brakhage in it. Is that true? I think I read that. Did I remember that correctly?

LARRY JORDAN: Yes. He's [inaudible] also in The One Romantic Venture of Edward. All that little cluster of early films was probably -- I don't think of them as existential because as I said, I don't really understand that, but I do know that they were youthful alienation themes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well maybe that was enough.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So certainly, though, you wouldn't describe those works or certainly the body of your work as, in philosophical terms, existentential. That's just -- it doesn't have any meaning to you.

LARRY JORDAN: No. We all, "we" being the second wave of avant-garde film, that is, the American avant-garde from late '40s onward, seemed to have to emulate Maya Deren for a short period and those films are the ones that Sitney calls the trance films. You were curious about that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yes, yeah, yeah.

LARRY JORDAN: You wanted to get into that a little bit. Sitney called the trance film the film in which the actors in the film walk around as if they're in a trance. Maya's films have herself and others walking around as if they're in a trance and so do some of my early films which I was just talking about. But I don't think that's the trance film. I think that Brakhage's films are the trance film, not the early ones, but the middle and later ones where he goes into a trance when he films.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

LARRY JORDAN: I've seen him do it. He has a very large, bombastic personality, but when he takes up the camera, his outer personality turns off completely. You don't notice him; you don't look at him. He's disappeared down the barrel of the viewfinder of the camera. He's in a trance, and it's a trance of seeing. That's what makes his films centrally different from other film-makers that have tried to emulate him. He honestly is in a trance with what he sees in the viewfinder, and that's what I think of the trance film.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it's more the author than the subjects --

LARRY JORDAN: Than the subjects, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- than the characters.

LARRY JORDAN: The creator rather than those portrayed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's, if we may, turn to a few of these questions that I thought of before you came over hoping to cover a few areas of interest to me anyway, and we don't have to certainly spend much time with any one of the others, just to see where it leads. What I wanted to do first was -- well, what I think what I'm going to

do first is turn this tape over because this a breaking point. We're almost at the end.

[END TAPE 1, SIDE A]
[BEGIN SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay, here we are continuing with Larry Jordan. This is Session 2, Tape 1, Side B. Again, just a series of questions that may or may not prove productive, but in these initial questions, what I wanted to do was turn a little bit to you as a film-maker and some of the films, and I don't pretend to be -- have been immersed in your filmography. I've seen a few examples, but I was interested in what some other critics had to say, and I wanted to start this out by asking you a question that you now earlier in your caveat said you don't think you can answer anyway, but nonetheless, we'll run it by and see if there's something in it that can elicit a response, and that has to do with your self-conception, you know, as an artist, but specifically, as a film-maker, how you see yourself placed or where you would see yourself perhaps comfortably placed within the film avant-garde, particularly late '50's to the '60's, into the early '70's.

LARRY JORDAN: Well I don't know what the criteria are or what the yardsticks are really. I, you know, I've been part of the movement. I first started to make films in 1952 and really get in -- by 1954, become aware of who the other film-makers were; by 1956, started a film society with Bruce Connor, then we were in it and it wasn't very big. There were maybe 10 film-makers in the country and we were showing all of them that we could get our hands on in our film society. Then I built a theater to try to show these films in San Francisco. It ran for five years. The thing I hear is that I'm aloof and that I'm the best or the least known of the famous avant-garde film-makers, so I don't -- that's somebody else's viewpoint. I don't know what the yardstick is. I've just mainly been interested in doing my work, putting the films in the co-op and going on to the next thing. Rather, once I gave up the theater and went into teach, you know, first, I supported this film work with doing carpentry and they took me up in New York from living in San Anselmo, so where is San Anselmo? And New Yorkers don't take up West Coast film-makers very much, and so I didn't realize at the time the significance of that. I thought it was supposed to be that way. But there they were. I learned years later sitting in the theaters in New York, yelling "yeah" or "nay" about things of mine that were shown there and very raucous about it, and anything that came to me, came through the East Coast through Museum of Modern Art, through anthology film archives, the P. Adams Sitney/Jonas Mekas/Robert Haller and those people who were an establishment of the East Coast American avant-garde film movement, so I -- at some times, I think they feel I'm a minor figure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You mean the critics?

LARRY JORDAN: I believe they don't take seriously my live films. I believe that they think that I'm an important film-maker for my collage films, my animation films, and I've been, half the time, feeling like a film-maker, particularly when I make a live film and feeling like I don't have anything in common with film-makers at all when I do collage-animation film, but the only way I can get it to move is by the mechanics of film and just being a collage artist. So I guess since I'm kept out of the limelight, and that could happen when you're in academia, when you're teaching, you can support yourself and not have to be an activist. My personality is pretty much opposite to Brakhage's, you know, who makes sure that everybody knows what he's doing and the latest thing. But I also don't think that my work appeals that much to the hard-core, avant-garde film audience. They appeal to people who teach film and who, as I said, those establishment figures on the East Coast. My work appeals to them, and here, I'm talking about the collage work. And it appeals to -- this summer, I did a workshop at Bennington in Vermont and there was a writers' conference there and those people went nuts over my animation work, these intellectual writer people, and they're not young; they're all different ages. So there's a whole audience I've never even tapped all this time that seem to just -- they'd stop me as I'd walk around the campus after the show and tell me that they thought it was phenomenal. I've never -- the films connect with regular people who have open minds. People who are in that very tight-ass avant-garde film audience have reservations because I don't think they feel that avant-garde film is supposed to be quite as open and joyous as my work tends to be. I may not have that pegged right, but the people that I connect with are people who have never seen much before and are just kind of open and ready for anything and are amazed, or people who have seen a lot and are tired of the tiredness of the avant-garde film. Who knows. I don't know whether I'm putting this right. I don't even know if this perception will last beyond this moment or not. As I say, it's very hard to place one's self.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you must, whether it's consciously or not, think about that once in a while.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It would be unnatural not to do.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, I do think about it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I might ask, I might make an observation, number one, is that there's a certain poetry and lyricism to your animated films of which, oh, they don't tell stories as such; they have a kind of inherent

beauty, it seems.

LARRY JORDAN: There's a narrative gloss on them, too.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, but it's -- again, I would think that those who respond to your films would be those who are not embarrassed or put off by the miracle in the poetic --

LARRY JORDAN: Exactly, exactly.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that isn't perhaps as fashionable right now
perhaps --

LARRY JORDAN: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- from one who prefers, as you say, the assault approach of Bunuel. With Chien Andalou, you mentioned that at lunch, and here is a movie that basically announces directly with an image that this is an assault to the eye, and then you think of much or not all -- I'm sure some of Bruce Connor's work where you have disjointed images, but a lot of disaster and so forth. That seems to be -- that's appealing --

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, it's very socially connected. Most of Connor's work --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you think that that is, then, one of the requirements within the, let me just say, hard-core avant-garde group?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, yeah, I do, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well it makes a kind of sense.

LARRY JORDAN: And it's curious because it's almost -- East Coast esthetics is almost switched to the West Coast.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you mean?

LARRY JORDAN: Avant-garde film-makers are supposed to be really connected in with what's happening. Now rather than give an individual song, and it used to be the other way around. It used to be that West Coast film-making when I began, '60's, '70's, was a known quantity. West Coast film-makers were presented at Cannes Film Festival 1974 because we were mystical, that, i.e., extremely individualistic, but that isn't what West Coast film -- almost all the venues have switched over to films about social difficulties, and I've seen that happen before. It happened 20 years ago and I deplored it then; I deplore it now. Those films are going to be forgotten quickly. They're topical films that people go and see and talk about for two or three days and then that's it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about would you include in that genre, that group, the photographs or the films of Larry Clark, you know who did Kids? Did you see that? You know that film at all? I mean it was a release. It was released in the theaters, so I don't think it caught avant-garde [attention} -- you know, bogus documentary.

LARRY JORDAN: Gee, I missed that one, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And his photographs, I don't know if you're familiar with his photographs, so the question may not be helpful, but he seems to immerse himself in the most depressing, dangerous, sad aspects of being a kid, a fringe, a real fringe, heroin use, all kinds of, you know, sex of practically barely pubescent youngsters, and -- well, I mean I don't want to describe it on this tape, but just to give -- that's an example of a kind of pictorial or visual essay, if you will, that seems to be prevalent. Is this the sort of thing that you're talking about?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, focusing on --

LARRY JORDAN: Right, um-hum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- the disasters.

LARRY JORDAN: Well, as you were framing that question, which I agree with completely, I was also forming an image in my mind in trying to clarify here, has to do with a large subject of differences among art and artists, which is the art -- you used the word "depressing" images of childhood. Some artists put into their work images which they wish to hammer home to the viewer, images that are not pretty, images that are depressing or violent, that they believe people ought to be aware of and should see, and they can be sincere and they can be insincere in doing this. And then there are artists who don't have anything in their work [sound of phone ringing] that they don't actually like to see themselves.

[PAUSE]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sorry, Larry.

LARRY JORDAN: Well I found out I was actually talking to you and I couldn't talk to the microphone.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sorry about that. I try to turn off the phones [inaudible].

LARRY JORDAN: I was being very slow in getting my point out, but there are artists who push tough imagery and there are artists who don't push anything they don't actually like to look at and contemplate. Cornell, I don't believe, has any imagery in his boxes that he wouldn't love to look at over and over and contemplate, and my work tends to be in that line, and you'd say, "Well isn't that on the pretty side? Isn't that on the -- beauty can be a cesspool." That's like painting pretty landscapes or pretty flowers or, you know. There are all kinds of artists that paint lovely things that you like to look at, okay. I think there's a challenge on both sides to make a really strong artwork out of rough images. Buñuel is one of my heroes who can do that. And on the other side, Cornell is a prime example. On the other -- it's really a challenge to make high art that's beautiful and not falling into a cesspool that still is not just pretty, not just candy colors, that has mystery and depth, and conjures up things other than social misfortune.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you obviously see a role for both approaches, but you think the pendulum --

LARRY JORDAN: Oh, definitely a role for both, but one artist probably can't do both, or maybe some.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about somebody like Kenneth Anger, for instance? I haven't actually seen --

LARRY JORDAN: He can do both.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's what I thought.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. He can do both, that's true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because certainly, I've seen some of his films that are painfully poetic and beautiful, I mean just -- like that [inaudible] Fountain one, you know, with the little figure.

LARRY JORDAN: Eaux d'Artifice and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

LARRY JORDAN: -- Rabbit Moon, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But you think that's pretty unusual, generally

LARRY JORDAN: Now those have an undercurrent.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's true.

LARRY JORDAN: Those have an erotic undercurrent that is close to the surrealist thrust as I understand it, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We've been referring to Sitney, P. Adam Sitney, who was a critic, historian --

LARRY JORDAN: He doesn't like to be called a critic.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Historian?

LARRY JORDAN: And I think he's right. He likes to be called a film writer.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Film writer, okay.

LARRY JORDAN: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anyway, he wrote a book, Visionary Film, the American Avant-Garde, 1943 and 1978, in which you appear, and he gives a fairly lengthy, and I thought quite thoughtful, analysis description of your work, or at least what he sees in it as important, and I was wondering to the extent you can remember, how much you agree or do you recognize yourself in your work in what he has to say?

LARRY JORDAN: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this isn't the interview, one which we can refer to as well, with a written interview

[inaudible.]

LARRY JORDAN: Well, first, let me say that whatever Sitney has written, he's written from extremely thorough observation. He wrote a lot about the film called Duo Concertantes in an early collage animation of mine, and I was surprised to find out that at the time he wrote about it in Visionary Film, he had undoubtedly seen the film more times than I had because he took a bunch of films on tour in Europe and he showed that and other films night after night after night, and didn't turn the films over to the projectionist and walk out of the theater. He sat there and looked at them over and over and over again, so whatever he's describing is accurate observation. Now whether I recognize myself in it or not is harder to say because he zeroed in on certain, what would you call it, certain movements in space, that to him give off certain metaphors.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, right.

LARRY JORDAN: And I've already tried to make it clear that I don't think in those terms when I'm making a film. They may be floating in the back of my mind, and so when I read Sitney, I was delighted and amazed to hear things put in explicit language that have floated in the back of my mind at the time and reminded me that they floated in the back of my mind at the time that I was doing them, that I was filming the film, but never in the codified form that he eventually saw them. So I actually recognized myself more in a critical review in "The Village Voice" in which the woman described in detail a scene from one of the animation films which did not exist, and I thought, "She's hallucinated." That's what I'm trying to get. I've succeeded. She's had a full, complete hallucination during that film.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, no, wait a minute. Tell about that. You got to tell us about that.

LARRY JORDAN: There isn't a whole lot more.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is a review of "The Village --."

LARRY JORDAN: It's a review of a film called Hamfat Asar, which I did in 1965 and I can't remember the woman's name. She was writing in "The Village Voice" and it was shown in one of the theaters in New York at that time and I got a copy of her review of the film, and it was a favorable review and I don't remember what else she said, but as reviewers do, she started to describe part of the film, you know. Film writers like to describe part of the film so their readers can kind of get a mental picture what they're talking about. And she described in detail a sequence I would love to have filmed, but I hadn't. It wasn't in the film. There were things like that, but this was so specific that I knew that she'd seen the scene in her mind and put it together from the film in general, but I hadn't made that sequence and I thought, "Well, the images engaged her to the extent that she put them together with all her mental imagery and her predispositions and her filtration of imagery in the world and made the sequence," and that's what -- that was the first time I realized that that's what I was trying to do. I wasn't trying to pass what was in my mind to somebody else's mind. I was trying to put up a Rorschach inkblot kind of imagery on the screen that other people would then take and combine with their own, I call predispositions, and make meaning, their own meaning, not my meaning out of it. So I thought, "Boy, I recognized myself in that review."

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's extraordinary.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you account for something like that? I mean seriously, how do you account for that? Does it --

LARRY JORDAN: I think this is --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Go ahead.

LARRY JORDAN: It's a known technique in psychology, has been for a long time, ever since whoever invented the inkblot. I mean it's very old-fashioned now. I don't know any -- maybe to criminally insane or children who are having severe mental problems, they show inkblots and say, "Tell me what you see," and get -- it's simply a method of getting inside of the psyche of a disturbed person because the inkblot is nothing; it's an abstract, but it has the power of unlocking that disturbed person's psyche so they can verbalize what's going on inside them. And I think that the way I make these collage films, and I think much collage -- certainly, the collage of Max Ernst is like a very sophisticated inkblot, Rorschach kind of --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now he was one of the influences on you. You were attracted to him.

LARRY JORDAN: Direct influence.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

LARRY JORDAN: I got the idea for making these films from looking at the collage novels in Max Ernst's -- I think I said before. Yeah, you take one of those collages out of A Woman With a Hundred Heads and look at it and what's that all about? Everybody's going to say something different, and what they say will have nothing to do with Max Ernst; it will have to do with themselves. And that is -- is that modernism in art?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well I don't know.

LARRY JORDAN: Is that a new function of art? I don't think it was the intended function of art previous to modernism. It may be the accidental function, but, you know, now you have people like Ernst functioning specifically that way and I function that way, that way being what I just described, that we don't really place a meaning on the collage, but we know something's happening and we put it out there, and then the interpretation -- we only do half the work. The viewer has to do the other half of the work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interactive that we call it now.

LARRY JORDAN: It's very interactive. You know, everything was interactive before computers and now computers have to get back to interactive.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sticking with Sitney for a few more minutes, to get to some specifics, he makes a reference to Maya Deren's Meshes in the Afternoon in discussing your film, Patricia Gives Birth to a Dream by the Doorway, and he goes on, not at considerable length, but for a while, making these connections or explaining, and one of the key terms he uses is the image of anteriority, and if you'll indulge me just a minute, he goes on -- at the end of the section, his idea seems to be that there's a central metaphor involving the distinction between interior and exterior and its evaporation, presumably [inaudible]. And I wondered if you, as specific, if you agree with that.

LARRY JORDAN: Well, here again, I believe probably Sitney was traveling with Meshes in the Afternoon at the same time he was traveling with Duo Concerntantes, and seeing the two films over and over again at the same time in a given evening, and probably was forced into seeing some parallels and trying to figure out what the base metaphor was that he was seeing, if he was seeing something happening in an image of Maya Deren reflect at the window with reflected branches coming from her hair and my image of a woman standing at a doorway with the sea or the lake beyond and things happening out there on the horizon and saying, "What am I seeing here that's the same in both of these?" And then he wanted his own term there, his own terminology instead of taking up psychological terminology and saying the unconscious or something or saying the -- or bringing in the psyche or he wanted to coin his own expression and he coined the word "anteriority" and I agree with him because I'm very much aware that when I make the animation films, it's my inner face with my inner world, and when I make live films, it's my inner face with the real world, so-called, the outer world, so anteriority works fine for me. And I agree also that that is what Maya Deren's film is about. So I tend to trust Sitney's observations because he doesn't do his writing on the basis of one or two viewings of a work. He looks at stuff over and over and over again before he usually -- before he is worked up enough to write about it, and I believe that's a pretty good way to work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's change tapes at this breaking point.

LARRY JORDAN: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So this is end of Tape 1.

[End Session 2 Tape 1, Side B]
[Begin Session 2 Tape 2, Side A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, continuing a second session with Larry Jordan. It's July 30th, 1996. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom. The interview is being conducted at my home in San Francisco, and this is Tape 2, Side A.

Larry, pick up on our conversation which I suspect, or I hope, will be related to the rest of the themes of this interview. And we were talking about notions of Bohemianism. Let me see if I can frame this properly, and certain artists we mentioned, Varda, for instance, and then this artist who's still with us down in southern California, Jirayr Zorthian, but both of them seem to embody like a popular notion of what it is to be an artist and the freedom, for instance, that it gives you. This is very attractive to people, and my point was harkened back even to earlier conversations, I think, is that this, again, is a role that artists and the arts can play which is to, in a sense, reassure us that there are other possibilities, not that we have to conduct our lives that way, but in the human experience, it's not so locked in and limited. And then I was saying that, or observing, that -- it's interesting how, like with these two individuals, who
-- especially the one who's operating [living; Varda is deceased] now, -- that there's something charmingly antiquated and retrograde about that whole position, you know, that you create a life of this nature, the art

utopia, and what seemed appropriate in the '60's perhaps doesn't fit, seems uncomfortable here in the '90's, that the circumstances, the times, to a certain
degree, either privilege or perhaps discourage a certain kind of expression. You pointed out, though, that that's not necessarily so, and I think you said that there can also be certain times -- it's not just the times themselves, but certain times within our lives that can allow revisiting the past, if you will, or what was our past being now lived out by somebody else. Is that right? Is this --

LARRY JORDAN: Well, I was thinking of the writing of Mary Butts that you can sometimes go back into the lives of people in the '30's Hilda Doolittle and, you know, get a sense of their experimenting with lifestyles, experimenting with sexuality, and some serious work coming out of it. In the '60's in San Francisco, there was a lot of Bohemian, you know. Bohemianism can take many forms. At basis, you want to separate yourself from boring,
Judeo Christian values is at the heart of it and some people want to get really far out with their lifestyle and spend a lot of energy and maybe they don't have too much left for serious work, but others get away from those constricting values and yet remain bourgeois, but have an imaginative household, but not a Bohemian household, so to speak. There was a whole array of lifestyles in that time, 1958 to 1962, when the so-called height-of-the-Beat movement was taking place. You had people with no home, who were just bumming around from one person to another. You had people who had family money who were living in nice studios in North Beach, but living a Bohemian life. You had people living in very clean but very simple pads because they had no money at all and making good art, and you had, you know, every possible thing. But there are come-along anomalies of history, and one of the ones I've noticed, a kind of a side, a kind of a footnote to history which we might as well have in the archives here is the case of Bruce Connor and his connection with the "Beat movement." He's been featured as one of the main Beat artists and film-makers in Whitney's Beat show, and that's very curious because at the time that I was living in very close association with Bruce Connor in those years, we did a film society together. I saw him constantly. He made his first film on my editing equipment. We were associates and collaborators. He was adamant and he was beyond adamant. He was furiously adamant that he was not connected with the Beats. They were Bohemian and they were -- he was contemptuous of them, openly. But that is not his view at present, and so I just want to note that interesting --

PAUL KARLSTROM: What you're describing is, probably won't say opportunistic revisionist view, but at least the kind of revisionist view that, oh yes, in fact, he was truly a part of that and --

LARRY JORDAN: Whatever, you know. Yeah, I don't know. Yeah, I had no trouble at all with thinking of myself as a Beat at that time because I was walking the walk and talking the talk.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's get at it a different way, and I think that interesting things can, in a more general way, come out of it. If Bruce, at the time, was openly contemptuous of the Beats, at the very least, did not want to be associated with that himself, his work associated --

LARRY JORDAN: Of course, this had exceptions, let me cut in for just a moment, that didn't include people like myself or Michael McClure or -- but the whole scene in North Beach was something he wouldn't touch with a 10-foot pole.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Why was that? How do you think he saw himself that then required that he separate himself?

LARRY JORDAN: Well true artists were above that sort of thing. They stayed at home in their bourgeois houses with their chaotic studios and made serious art. That simple.

PAUL KARLSTROM: How do you explain this? Of course you don't have to, but subsequently, he has, you know, over the last years, even though he has his health difficulties, I don't know whether he still lives out, but some years ago, he did. He would go and document and immerse himself, actually, in, well at one point, the Punk movement.

LARRY JORDAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And as an observer, as a voyeur, whatever he was drinking at the Fountain of Youth, I don't know, but I thought it was real interesting that he felt drawn to that kind of a scene. The Beat scene was a scene, the hippie scene, and do you have any insight into that?

LARRY JORDAN: No, I don't, and I don't know whether it was because he felt he missed the boat on the actual Beat scene or -- and, you know, was a way getting -- I can't say. I really can't say, yeah. But he did insist upon artists being outrageous, for himself as an artist being outrageous and probably identified with the Punk movement as being outrageous.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which it was.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you were pretty -- at that time, though, you described a community -- I realize this is going back to something that was discussed in the first session. You've described the community, certainly here in San Francisco, that was pretty closely knit at that time. You all knew one another and did sell the same things, walk that walk and talk that talk.

LARRY JORDAN: But everybody did it in a different way and you mustn't have the impression that there was a kind of uniformity. These were all extremely individualistic people and there were many animosities and many people repudiating other people and being jealous and were being avid partisans of other people, so it was, I thought, from what I read of other intense artistic communities, rather typical. Each age is going to have a different orientation toward the society. See, this came directly out of the repression, nothing happening of the Eisenhower years. That's what the Beat movement is about; the sexual repression, the social repression, McCarthy-ism, the censorship, couldn't buy a copy of Lady Chatterly's Lover. I had to buy -- I mean today, people just don't realize that as of the early 1950's, we did not live in a free society as we think we always have done.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right. You and I can remember --

LARRY JORDAN: We had the people being sent to jail for un-American-ism. We had people --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Whatever that is.

LARRY JORDAN: -- persecuted for writing beautiful images about cocks. You know, that wasn't a free world, and the Beat movement was saying "This will not stand; this will not --."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Or we don't want to be part of it.

LARRY JORDAN: "This kind of hypocrisy will not go down."

PAUL KARLSTROM: Now do you feel that the Beats had this sort of revolutionary feeling at base or that it was more an act of rejection and almost retreat?

LARRY JORDAN: It was both. It was rejection and retreat. Everybody revolted in their own individual way as best they could. There was not an army -- but in another way, there was a loose army that was, you know, dressing differently in that kind of funky dress out of the army surplus store has had its fashion repercussions for the next three decades. But, you know, the so-called -- well, I would start rambling now.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it's complicated, I know, yeah.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. We --

PAUL KARLSTROM: You have to focus it.

LARRY JORDAN: A specific focus.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about this, just to throw out something. I mean there are a number of questions that come to my mind and this -- you're absolutely right, this is a huge subject, you know, this big exhibition and books and writing about and so forth, but I guess what I'm trying to get at, for our purposes and out of your experience, not what other people have written about it, is the, which was it, political ramification or social ramification [inaudible].

LARRY JORDAN: There was a socio-political ramification, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And what form -- you know, the Beats aren't associated with, at least in my memory, with the activism of like the movement, like the '60's.

LARRY JORDAN: No, but they started things. Michael McClure wrote a poem about the death of 100 whales before anybody even thought about preserving whales, and that poem became a classic. And just like Peter Kubelka's films about senseless killing of animals in Africa, became a
classic. Those things start -- you drop that big rock into the pond and the ripples never quite stop. They become movements. They become ecology. They become societies. They become institutions. Oh, yeah, the Beat movement had started things that are big-time business today like saving the whales, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so that's interesting, so Michael did this back in the early '60's?

LARRY JORDAN: That was an outrage to one poet's sensibility that was put into a strong, effective poem that could not be overlooked. Just like Howl was a broader outrage to one poet's sensibility of what the society was

doing to its best minds, i.e., repressing them and putting them under McCarthy's toilet seat and driving them insane, and out that comes. You couldn't put the toothpaste back in the tube, as they say, after works like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about -- I guess a specific example, The Beard -- that play by Michael McClure which I could have seen but didn't; I missed it, but --

LARRY JORDAN: You know I've never read it or seen it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You didn't see it before? That's what I was wondering.

LARRY JORDAN: No, no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It got him in a --

LARRY JORDAN: But see, I had moved to Marin County by that time and I was in a different view. I was among young but fast-moving, brilliant, well-to-do professionals. They were psychiatrists, lawyers, and architects, and they were all taken with that play, that it was a hot, wild, exciting thing in the city, in San Francisco, and they talked about it, but I missed it, you know. I was aware of it, but I didn't --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well did -- but you were aware of it as -- it became a kind of symbol of a challenge, a challenge to what, to laws, for one thing, a challenge to certainly conventional morality or what was permissible to art and in performance.

LARRY JORDAN: The Beat movement ended when everybody left North Beach and people who remained artists went off and did their
own thing and honed their own styles, and The Beard is part of that whereas The Death of 100 Whales is part of the core Beat movement or part of the beginnings of it. It came very early in that time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The Death of 100 Whales.

LARRY JORDAN: On the Death of 100 --, I'm not sure that's the exact title, but I think that's the exact title. And Dave Hazelwood put it out through the [inaudible] forum.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about -- let's shift -- this is a topic, obviously, that would be fun to talk about at length, but I think you're right that, you know, it's just taking on the big picture. Let me go back briefly to some of the writing about your work. You'll have to forgive me for this. I know that you, you know, how much can you really say 'cause it's somebody else's take on your work. But there are some things that just stuck with me as generalizations about avant-garde film, in general of the time and including you as well that -- ideas that I would just like to test with you. And this, again, is, let's see, who are we talking about now? This is still Sitney --

LARRY JORDAN: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- Sitney's book, and the section about you, and he makes the observation that film of this period, avant-garde film, the '50's and the '60's especially, these films were exploring temporality. I sort of wonder really what that means. I know what temporal means, but anyway, it's a term that he uses here, and he goes on then to describe it further, that these films are seeking a "healing moment" in which, again quoting, "cinematic time and time of its perception would coincide." That's pretty sweeping generalization about avant-garde films, especially if he was on the West Coast at that time, and you, and he talks about --

LARRY JORDAN: Well, again, Sitney is one of the few people who's tried to understand this movement in a serious, critical, analytical way, and, you know, he's sitting there seeing these things over and over and meditating and contemplating them and trying to figure out what it is they are and what it is they come from and what it is they are doing that other cinema isn't doing. And one of the first things that -- and so was Jonas Mekas in a different way in a lot of his writings in "The Village Voice" in the '60's about avant-garde film. And Mekas pointed out that these avant-garde films were making their subject and their technique one thing rather than having film just a vehicle for telling a story about something or using film simply as the medium for something else. If the subject of the film were joy and dance, the images were quick and colors flashed and light flashed and the technique was the same as the subject. Now that was an essential difference that the avant-garde film had. Now Sitney is saying that avant-garde film -- would you lay that out again? He said --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well --

LARRY JORDAN: The biggest quote was --

PAUL KARLSTROM: The last -- he's talking about temporality.

LARRY JORDAN: Temporality.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What it comes down to, as I understand it, is the film is seeking the healing moment --

LARRY JORDAN: Healing moment, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- in which cinematic time and time of its perception would coincide. I was hoping you could explain to me what that means if it's meaningful to you.

LARRY JORDAN: Okay. Take it part by part. Cinematic time, I've come to the conclusion -- I came the conclusion a long time ago, we don't go to the movies to see real time. We go to the movies to see condensed time. We want in two hours for the film-maker to bring a whole life or a whole epic or a whole problem to state the essential dramatic situation, to develop it, to give us characters within that dramatic situation that we care about, and then our curiosity is to see how they handle the situation and how it's resolved at the end, and this is all done in two hours, and we go for cinema -- that's what I mean by cinematic time. That's exciting. That's engaging. That's a revolution in art, cinema, and cinematic time. It's not the time of novels. You might read a novel in three hours if you're a fast reader at one sitting, or you might read it three weeks if you take it piece by piece, in, you know, a leisurely fashion. So the narrative written form is not cinematic time because you go into the cinema; you pay your money. You go in and unless the movie is just completely outrageous and it bores you to tears, you don't leave. You see the work all in one gulp, and that's revolutionary, but it relates to the theater, okay. Theater is similar, but cinema has much more capacity to change from location to location, from mode to mode. Cinematic time is definitely a product of the modern world. Then the avant-garde film is seeking a moment of healing. These films are generally short. They could go up to 50, 60 minutes like [inaudible], but they could be like Maya Deren's film, 10-, 12-, 15-minute films, and they're going to try to get packed in even more than the commercial film, the commercial film being like a novel. Well the avant-garde film is going to be like a poem, and so if you follow that analogy, the poet is going to pack a lot more into a one, two-page poem. Time-wise, reading-wise, then a novelist is going to pack -- the content may be the same in one poem, one novel, but the time element is going to be a function of condensation, elliptical movement from one subject or one image to another, and the avant-garde film is doing the same thing in relationship to the commercial film. So exploring temporality where he says the cinematic time would correlate then with the time it takes to watch this moment of healing take place, it's really a very simple idea, but it's not a commercially viable -- poetry isn't commercially viable either. Poets don't make money off poems. A few do, but generally, poets make money off teaching and lecturing and other things. The same with the avant-garde film-maker, you don't make money off the avant-garde film. A lot of people do, and the impetus is exactly the same as the poet's [make them anyway - ed.], as far as I can tell.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But another idea he has, and I take it from your response that you can see yourself that this, at least to some degree, raises your interest in working with film.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. That's important for us to --

LARRY JORDAN: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Another thing that he mentions and raises other issues in connection with your work, in fact, your imagery, some of which we may be able to get into again, but there's a notion of nostalgia that he brings in and, you know, without going into how he's using it. It immediately then brought your imagery to work, which I don't think you would describe in those terms, but there is an awareness of the efficacy or value or usefulness of the past images for the past. We were talking earlier about sort of dropping back into our own past sometimes through other people's experiences or stories. And obviously, what I'm leading up to here is in your own work, there seems to be this attraction to these 19th-century images and engravings and so forth that have to carry with them or can carry with them a kind of maybe even invented or imagined nostalgia for a past even beyond our experience.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, it goes beyond the 19th Century, for sure. Because of the fact that I do use engravings which are the commercial art of the 19th Century, I always have to deal, after I have a showing and answer questions with an audience about this question of nostalgia, why do I use that imagery, and I've never dealt with it successfully, in my view, but I was --

PAUL KARLSTROM: [Inaudible.]

LARRY JORDAN: I always have to say something, but I start with the fact that I use engravings probably for one of the same reasons Max Ernst used them. They're very graphic. They are very suggestive, and by "graphic," I mean there's no half-tone involved in engraving. It's either the black line or the white background. That makes them photograph very sharply, photogenic, much more so than the half-tone of photography. So I like that crispness. The crispness translates for me into aliveness. And it is not that I want to go back to the scenes depicted in the film, like the 19th Century or something like that; it is that I had a classical education. I read

Latin. I read Virgil in Latin. I lived in the Roman/Greek world in my early formative, intellectual years. That world was made live to me by fantastic teachers, some of the best -- a world-class high school teacher who was written up in Life magazine because he was so good, brought me into this world and, at Harvard, the policy was that the top professors were in contact with the freshmen. So I forget his name
now, but anybody in academia would recognize the classics professor emeritus at Harvard for years and years. At that time, was in his forties, long hair, strode across the stage, and talked to us about home and spoke half in classical Greek and half in English, and it made your hair stand on end because it brought the world of Homer a live for you right there on the stage. So if this is nostal -- to me, it's not nostalgia; to me, I would feel claustropho --

[End Tape 2, Side A]
[Begin Tape 2, Side B]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Larry Jordan, Tape 2, Side B. Larry, we ran out of tape just as you were finishing a thought. You were talking about this inspiring professor at Harvard and I think you got most of it, but you were -- I think your quote that you were trying to distinguish, or you were distinguishing, between a notion of nostalgia and something more productive [inaudible].

LARRY JORDAN: Well, I know the feeling called nostalgia or times of youth. I had it hit me unexpectedly when my mother gave me back a high school annual that I haven't seen since high school, literally hadn't thought about high school companions for many years and, suddenly I was really in a fit of nostal -- I know what that feeling is like, but this work is not nostalgia. It's freedom. I was saying that if I was trapped in just this time --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

LARRY JORDAN: -- and the problems of this time and its social difficulties and solving all of that stuff, I'd feel a little suicidal because I'd feel claustrophobic and like life was limited, but I feel freed by going back in time. I feel it's alive to me and it's open in its space, in its expanded horizon, and I feel a kinship. I feel that I'm part of the brotherhood/sisterhood of artists from time immemorial. That gives me a lot of strength that other people don't seem to have. Those are my roots. I mean I don't go back to Germany because my grandparents came from Germany. I go back to Greece because my -- I identify it not as a nationality. I hate nationalism. I despise nationalism. I identify with craft and my craft is making art and [I] identify with the people who have done that for thousands of years, and I get very emotional about that. So it's not nostalgia that I'm dealing with, it's freedom. We're not immortal. Each one of us dies, but we have children and the race goes on, and we're evolving, and artists are the ones that leave the record of that. If we didn't have the inspiration of what had happened in the past, would we have the courage to go on? I mean this art game is serious stuff as far as I'm concerned. Of course, to me, I'm biased, but it's the most serious stuff as an evolving race. You know, maybe we'll botch it; maybe we'll screw it up; maybe we'll completely disappear. The planet has only to hiccup and we'll be gone. On the other hand, things may hold and we may develop into something beyond this experimental model that we're in right now. I tend to think in that it's hard to pin me down to specifics 'cause I do think in those broad, sweeping strokes. The only time I can get specific is when I get into the collage. Even there, I think the
metaphors that I come up with are pretty broad and hard to pin down. And that's what -- there hasn't been a lot of serious writing about my work. It's very difficult for a writer to say something about these images that doesn't sound silly or pretentious.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well speaking of writers, there's Robert Russet in this book right here called Experimental Animation; Origins of a New Art, he's co-author. This came out in, I don't know exactly when it came out -- but in your section -- the bulk of it is drawn from a 1974 interview which you said was written. This is one that you responded to.

LARRY JORDAN: Written interview.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Like a questionnaire.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. What I thought was interesting about that was that surrealism was invoked over and over again. This is 1974 and you're writing your responses, and at that point at least, it seemed that this definitely provided the framework, in your mind, for your work. You also, if I remember correctly, felt that -- said that you, in a sense, it completed at that point a phase of your work and that you were anticipating, you weren't sure what it would be, moving into a new phase. And what struck me about this section was that you seemed very willing to, number one, put yourself within that camp as you understood it. And the other thing that interested me was that in our talking about this earlier at lunch, you said when it first appeared, you looked at it and really couldn't understand it. I think that's what you said, and then you said --

LARRY JORDAN: My own interview, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Your own interview, but then if I remember correctly, you said that more recently or at some later point, you indeed did understand it. Can you explain what all that means?

LARRY JORDAN: Well, since it -- I'll try, but since I haven't re-read that interview recently, I just remembered that in the '80's when I got -- I give that and many other sections of that book to animation students, and when I happened to start re-reading that sometime in the '80's, I thought, "I don't understand what I'm saying here," and that may have been simply because I wasn't concerned with those particular problems at that time. And then, oh, maybe three or four years ago, I was looking at that writing and thinking, "Well I do understand what I was talking about," but I'm sorry this is going to be so vague because what those problems are, I can't remember right now, so I guess what happens is that somebody writes to you a series of questions, you sit down and go into your head and try to answer those questions as best you can on your perspective of your own work and the times and what movement, i.e., surrealism you might identify with, and then later on, things change and you're not thinking that way, and then -- thinking is a funny thing. Sometimes you find that you don't throw the baby out of [with] the bath water. You go back and pick up things you had thought earlier and redo them and you are concerned with earlier problems and ways of looking at things, again in new form, and I think that's what happened with that interview. Did you find something in there --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, yeah, I guess as you're talking --

LARRY JORDAN: Surrealism, which you say I invoked over and over, in there, I understand differently now than I did then.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Because you certainly do that. You even say, well, for instance, "The enigma is quite sacred to the surrealist like myself who are openly arrogant about symbolism and allegorical amenities." That's introduced by this, so this is your response. I'll just read it real briefly. "The basic act in my work is of freeing the objects from the chains of convention and connotation. The whole thing is symbolic of the surrealist philosophy which, by definition, is inexplicable." Then you go on to say, "The enigma is quite sacred to the surrealist like myself." This is sort of randomly drawn from here, but it suggests to me -- all I'm saying, it suggests to me is that you saw yourself as, at that point, very firmly within the --

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. Well I'm changing my mind a little bit again because I said I was not identified with trying to make an assault like the surrealists particulary Buñuel openly said they were trying to assault the bourgeois mentality, and they were interested in revolution and bringing down the bourgeois mentality. I'm not at all sure that I haven't always been interested in that as well. It's the thing that there was a '60's expression, "Blow their minds." That was what that was all about, you know, bring down that high-bound, tight-ass, conventional thinking, inhibits our revolution. So at that time of the interview, I was in my forties and would say things like "the openly arrogant image" and "the enigma is sacred" and flamboyant statements like that that I probably wouldn't say now. But I still do it. I'm halfway -- you see, Cornell wouldn't do that, wouldn't assault the eye, wouldn't use an arrogant image, and I'm halfway between Cornell's rejection of being a surrealist and Buñuel's open flagrant --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Aggressive.

LARRY JORDAN: -- insistent, aggressive insistence on revolution and assault. What I do have in common with surrealism, I never get that classic image right, but it's something like a sewing machine upon an operating table, the idea of being the sewing machine doesn't belong on an operating table, and so if you present that image, it's an assault of some kind. You have to re-think the whole world. I mean, you know, put -- that's essential to surrealism, putting something where it shouldn't be so that you have to re-think all of your conventional ideas. If a chair is hanging from the ceiling, well the chair is something beyond a chair now, and you can't just be complacent about the image of a chair. It's been -- that I do have in common with surrealism. I do use that strategy constantly and that I learned from Max Ernst, from Jess, and others, and I find it -- it's what I'm -- it's not that it comes easy to me. It's not easy to make those images. It's a struggle to make those images, but I think it's a more incisive tool than anything else I found.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well it seems to me that this is very much what your work is about. I mean if I was forced to describe your work, that which I've seen -- including things like this, you know, this flat collage that we're going to be getting into in a few moments, the kinds of things you've been working on recently, or at least showing recently, to my eye and experience and the [my] response to the films and to these still animated collages, that it's very much about bringing into conjunction in all possible combinations and surprising ways these disparate elements, things that you just sit there, watch it. It says, "Wait a minute, why is that there?" You know, "How did that get in this picture?" and, to me, that seems -- your way is not assaultive or aggressive, but seems to me that it achieves some of the same things that you're talking about.

LARRY JORDAN: It's a very subtle assault because it is causing -- I mean I'm very aware that it's causing people

to question everything, and that can be disturbing to anybody who has the what's-that syndrome, "What's that? What's that? What's that?" and they don't know what that is and "Oh, my God, this is crazy, let me out of here."

PAUL KARLSTROM: In a sense, it's not -- excuse me for interrupting, but it occurs to me since it's not finally telling a story or at least a conventional one, a narrative story, then you have to finally perhaps come to the point where you understand that the story itself, the story, is a story by you, the viewer being shown things in different ways in order to liberate or expand your thinking. Is that right?

LARRY JORDAN: This is as good a time as any to get clear on "story" and narrative. Narratives are eternal verities. Stories are told before written language, told around the primitive campfire, stories about animals and heroes, instructing the children on how to deal with life. Narratives told how to handle life and they still are just exactly that, true stories, tell how the character that we're interested in handles life. That's story; that's narrative. Now, narrative as we generally use the word, is from the story teller completely worked out in the mind of the story teller, transferred as directly as possible according to skills of the story teller into the mind of the listener, whole and intact, the idea complete. In my work, the story is interactive. I put up narrative elements, elements of narrative that are out of place, that shouldn't be where they appear, and the viewer has to tell him or herself the real or complete meaning of the story. This is a new kind of presenting narrative ála surrealism, and that's what I do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Good. I think that's a good, very clear description. It certainly seems to match, in terms of my experience, of looking at your work.

LARRY JORDAN: Let me amplify it just a little bit more. I used to do -- I've done about three feature-length narrative films where I wrote the script; I transferred the story over to the viewer in the conventional manner, but I became suspicious of that kind of story-telling. I don't think that most story tellers have a good enough story to tell in the modern world to make them very worthwhile. I really don't, so I am trying to tell a more psychologically meaningful story in which I, the story teller, and you, the viewer, are working interactively on a meaning, and the story has to make sense for you. I don't want the arrogance anymore of my telling you how life works, my telling you the story. I want you to figure out how life works via the elements, story elements I put up on the screen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe, in part, it's suggesting different ways in which phenomena can be seen.

LARRY JORDAN: That's the first time I really got to a clarification of a conventional narrative and the kind of narrative I do, and if we get to a point of transcription, if I could have a copy of that little short section --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure, sure, of course.

LARRY JORDAN: -- I'd appreciate it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Absolutely. Related to this, you said in that 1974 written interview something, and I could look it up here to get it exactly right, but it was basically about the difference between artists constructing images, sort of forcing them, or film-makers, forcing them to match some notion of what their story is that they want to tell, which should be there, and what you preferred or hoped to do, at least in some of your work, which was to be patient and let those images determine themselves or suggest the next one. Can you clarify that, what that means and how it actually happens?

LARRY JORDAN: Well tell me a little more clearly what that difference is in your mind.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that there's a preconception of kind of a --

LARRY JORDAN: In the first instance?

PAUL KARLSTROM: In the first instance with constructing images or series of images, a preconception of what should follow, what would be appropriate to follow a given image and perhaps in terms of a mood that one wants to evoke. And then another way is --

LARRY JORDAN: Are you saying kind of thinking this out before --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes.

LARRY JORDAN: -- you execute the --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes, [inaudible] type of thing.

LARRY JORDAN: Okay. I see what you mean, okay. And in the second instance, you don't think it out beforehand. Is that-- but you start with image one --

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that if you're patient, which is the term you used in this interview, the film-maker is patient, that somehow and some way -- and I'm asking you how this, in fact, may happen -- the image reveals itself, identifies itself in the next one and so on.

LARRY JORDAN: Well today, I would convert that word "patient" into "trust." Generally, I work in the second way which is that I don't figure everything out beforehand and then do some kind of re-enactment, i.e., the film, and that can be -- I try to get students out of that mode if I can so they don't fall into a mold of planning everything out in their heads and then executing the film. The films tend to be a little stiff and what I say to them is,"Whoever said what you see in your head is so great," and I ask them to meet their material halfway, that is, build their imagery out of the material they're working with rather than get -- wake up in the morning with a wonderful image in their head and then go to the studio and try to make a pale simulation of that image and be doomed forever to frustration. People that try to work that way are doomed to never having a first-generation image. It's always a pale illustration, something in the mind. And it's just the opposite of the way somebody like Jay DeFeo, would work; get in their with the paint, get
some paint up on the canvas, who knows where this is going, but you trust. I don't think patience anymore, but it's trust that somewhere amongst this paint or somewhere among these cutout figures is going to be something significant, and if you have the trust and keep working, pushing the material around and meeting the material halfway and seeing where it wants to go, you're doing a Rorschach in motion. You're finding it out of material itself. That's what I'm talking about in that interview. I tend to believe more in that creative process than -- I'm curious how other artists do this and I ask painters constantly, "Do you see images in your mind, then go to the studio and try to paint them or do you put some paint up in the canvas and push it around and see what comes out of it?" The answer I get usually is something like, "I try everything." So you can't pin that down. Some people always paint one way and others another way, but for students, at least, I think it's very frustrating to get these grandiose plans and images in their minds and not have the technical skills to execute those images and come out frustrated, whereas if they just started
with one image and trust that they -- out of image one will be a suggested image number two and they can go to that and trust the two-link up, and what comes out of image number two, well image number three does, and it keeps moving from one to another, and trust that those images will tell a tale when they get on the screen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think I understand that. You know --

LARRY JORDAN: Well there's some reasoning behind it. The reason I do that is because I believe that's my entree into the unconscious. Free association is a way of getting past the rational mind into the unconscious, and if I freely associate -- if I use some free-association images, I can bypass this. I mistrust too much ego and too much will in putting images together. It comes out surface, surface meaning surface message doesn't come out with a deeper meaning that the unconscious has. It doesn't come out with the continuity that the unconscious has. It's all this planned stuff, planning, planning, planning; will, will, will; force it into shape. I mistrust that a lot, so if you trust that setup image number one, image number two will be suggested by that and go for that suggestion. You have -- again, you have to trust it. If you get in -- don't use this process if you're an equivocator. If you always have to be thinking, "Oh, that's not a very good second image," "Oh, I could do something better," for instance, you better not use this associative process. It won't work for you. But if you do trust it, you're in the surrealist mode and it will work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So once again, you come back to it despite your qualifiers and so forth. You basically see yourself with --

LARRY JORDAN: Oh, I definitely use the techniques of surrealism. They develop many techniques for what they call forcing inspiration, you know. You don't feel inspiration every day when you go into the studio, but you do want to work every day, and so how are you going to get inspiration and not just do rote stuff that, okay, you're -- one's personal methods of free association are ways of being inspired. Let's describe the collage that you have on the wall. It's an interior, architectural fantasy by a Dutchman named Duvrees [phon. sp.]. It involves several encased holes on the floor, open, out of which anything could fly up. To one side is standing a 17th-century couple. A man is looking down into the cleavage of the woman. The woman is staring off into space. Out of the portal on the left, a toucan has inserted himself hugely into the scene and is gobbling up a light bulb coming out of one of the openings. Out of the opening in the foreground comes a blue cube and sphere, geometric form. What's that all about?

PAUL KARLSTROM: I don't know.

LARRY JORDAN: And one element first started with the background and that 17th Century couple should not be there and they are inserted there, and so anachronism is set up first, then something slightly humorous and certainly unexpected and bizarre, the toucan, comes in through the portal and that can happen in a theater of the mind. Anything can happen. I mean having set up the anachronism, anything can now happen. All bets are off in terms of what we assume the world has to be. All preconceptions are annihilated. Anything can now happen; therefore, anything I want or anything that's suggested to my mind can happen and that's limited only

by the material that I have around me cut out. In comes the toucan. Out comes the yellow light bulb. They're interacting with each other. Is the woman looking across at the toucan or is she staring into space or is she just --

[End Tape 2, Side B]
[Begin Tape 3, Side A]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, continuing our second session with Larry Jordan at the residence of Paul Karlstrom, the interviewer. The date is July 30th, 1996. This is Tape 3, Side A, concluding, presumably. Larry, you were talking about one of your collages that happens to be hanging in this room, so it's nice to be able to look at something and talk about it. What is the -- before you continue, what is the title of that work? It's toucan something.

LARRY JORDAN: No. This is the Delight series. This one is called Paul's Delight.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Paul's Delight, okay, the Delight series. This is recent, but just by way of further description, I think this is important to know, you absolutely work in series and it seems that you adjust these images. In some cases, they're in boxes. This will lead us into a discussion of your recent work.

LARRY JORDAN: There are sub-series and this is a sub-series, and the total series I've been engaged on for three years, I realize now, though. Everything I've been doing for the last three years is a series, and where that will end, I don't know. Well that series will end when I go back to doing films.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Before you tell us a little bit more about these works, this body of work and what it means and where it's going, it was really interesting, and as you were walking us into sort of guiding us into the imagery here, and I don't know if there was more you had to say about it, but I hope so.

LARRY JORDAN: Well, I was going to insert one thing, and that is, when this Delight series goes up in front of people, the first thing that comes out is a quick association with sexual inappropriateness of some kind.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

LARRY JORDAN: Almost everyone jumps into that couple in which the man is blatantly looking down the chest of the woman, and in present-day terms, that's a no-no.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Also, his hand is underneath --

LARRY JORDAN: Very politically incorrect --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Maybe not [inaudible] --

LARRY JORDAN: -- holding up the breast, handling the woman as if she is a used car that you might buy. This is really, really insensitive. Most intelligent people immediately also realize that it's from another century and so they can't immediately jump on it, and that there's probably something else going, and there may be a joke that the artist is playing on them, and the artist may be sticking it to them a little about their pomposity, about political correctness in sexual matters, and they hesitate to jump on it. And some people, ardent feminists included, have really gone -- that have liked this image. Why? I have no idea. I tend to think it may throw a little lightness into that whole contemporary problem of sexual appropriateness and male insensitivity and domination, but I may be just reading my own thoughts into that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well if it were inappropriate, it would seem that that's appropriate [to the intention - ed.], but it's a combination of images. Exactly what you're doing here is how is that toucan appropriate to that scene? I mean what does -- I would think what this is about --

LARRY JORDAN: There's nothing happening in the scene that is strictly appropriate or predictable or rote in terms of what we think could happen in that atmosphere. It's not a real interior of a palace; it's an architectural fantasy. The squares and the perspective lines are highly accentuated. It's very geometrical. It's almost like being in a geometric fantasy, and so as far as I can determine what it's saying is that there is an area of the mind you can go to where anything goes. You can think anything without censorship. Anything can happen without it being reasonable or logic, that the rule, strict rules of physics do not apply, although they are in evidence.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well you could say, I suppose, that all kinds of rules are suspended.

LARRY JORDAN: Why would anybody want to do that rather than the -- this is -- isn't this going in the opposite direction from the age of reason? Yes. Now if somebody someday will explain to me post-modernism, I don't know if this is modernism or post-modernism 'cause I don't know what either of those terms -- I know what

modernism is about, but I don't know what post-modernism is about. Again, they have to go to the other -- to another department in the art school to find out what post-modernism is about. But there are precedents for this in ancient art. There are elements of the spirit that are quite unconscious going back into Minoan art, you know. Ostensibly, the artists are making images about, literal images about their own culture, the Minoans of Crete, where the athletes jump over the bull. They don't kill the bull. They play with the bull. This is very dangerous, but it makes it very strong and very graceful and it -- the artist is depicting the joy and the strength of their lives. At the same time, there are completely irrational elements in some of that work that come into play. I'm aware of those images. Those are not un-influential in this collage here. There's a toucan instead of a bull. Instead of an athlete, there are two archaic figures, but there's a kind of joie-de-vivre that is in there, kind of cutting loose in a very controlled kind of way. Things are floating up that shouldn't be able to float up. Light bulbs don't float up. It's floating up like a hot-air balloon. They are visual puns. The light bulb is compared to a hot-air balloon which is being eaten by the gigantic toucan. The whole collage is filled with hot air, but I'm inventing here; I'm inventing. I don't' know if that's what the collage is about. The collage is about anything you want to make it about. And then you come to the question, "Is that approach of any value to anybody?" You see, when I said things like this after a film showing in Boulder, Colorado, a gentleman who happened to be from India was told that I didn't know what these sequences and images meant, and he didn't accept that; he would not accept that as being valid.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sounds like Arthur Danto's criticism of Bruce Nauman.

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The artist doesn't know completely the meaning of the imagery, right?

LARRY JORDAN: Something like that. So what would be the value of putting up images that you don't know the meaning of, and surrealism is very much about that kind of thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: From what you say, this particular work and presumably the series from which it comes, not to mention the films upon which it's all based, could be viewed in a simple way as a celebration of the irrational, a celebration of the irrational. What do you think? It's not all it is, but that's certainly -- from what you've said -- that certainly seems to be part of it.

LARRY JORDAN: Well my own belief is -- I found this out when I did the long 90-minute animation called Sophie's Place where I held strictly to free-association image. When I finished one image, I had to do the next. The first image suggested itself next. I couldn't evaluate it and say, "Oh, I could do something better." And I found that coming right out of the unconscious like that, I had more continuity than any film I'd ever done before. And it wasn't only the continuity; the intricacy and the harmonies and the relationships were as close as I could get to what Bach did with music coming -- okay, yes, we do not operate our lives from our heads; we operate from hearts and loins, and the head comes along and cleans up the chaos, but our strong impulses don't come from -- age of reason didn't really do it. Human beings conduct their lives from much stronger sources than the rational mind. Modern psychology is pretty aware that there's a difference between the rational mind and another stronger, powerful, larger mind, more powerful and archaic from which our drives come, and that's what impels our lives. And, yes, we'd better get in touch with that undercurrent of our lives or we'll just exist on material crash course to distraction.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Tell me a little more about these series. You say you've been involved the last three years with works that are related to this which seem to be, in many cases, variations on certain themes. Again, some of them are three-dimensional; they're in boxes, [inaudible] more usual flat-wall cases. This activity seems to play an important part in your work for the last few years. You had an exhibition not too many months ago. Recap that if you would. You know, why did you turn to it? How did it come about?

LARRY JORDAN: Well I did years and years of tapping into the unconscious and freely associating images in all the animation collage films, and those are in the form of films that sit in the can and only come to life when they occasionally get on the projector and people see them on the screen and the images take place almost instantaneously and then they're gone. And when I worked with Tibetan lama, they loved film because the images were ephemeral and they were like the world. They come and they go, and they're gone, you know. If anything starts to take concrete form like that, I'm going to resist it and go the other way. Right now, I'm trying to solidify these ephemeral images so that they can be put on the wall or put in a box and kept in a room so that you can see them night and day and live with them and they're not ephemeral like in the film. This image on the wall here that we're talking about is a version of a scene in the film. It's in the latest film called Visible Companion --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

LARRY JORDAN: -- in which you actually see those things coming up out of holes in the floor in motion. You see the toucan gobbling up the light bulb --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right, yeah.

LARRY JORDAN: -- and something else coming into that opening and so forth. You see a lot of action going on there. That was all a very intuitive, free-association image at the time of the making of the film, and there's a strong feeling that I have right now that I don't want those to be just there in film form ephemeral.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's like getting them out into the world.

LARRY JORDAN: An illusion of light and dark. I want to get them -- and there's a trade-off. Now they're fixed and cold and hard. In the film, they're warm and alive and noisy, but it's a trade-off. I mean it's a different -- so I like to work with an economy of image going back and forth in different modes, different -- one mode being movement in film; one mode being collage that you can put on the wall in two dimensions; another mode being a three-dimensional box that has a moving part in it that you can move by jiggling the box. It's different versions of the same image. In there, I'm being metaphysical. I'm playing with the metaphysics of motion as change, i.e., film, two-dimensional fixity of still collage, and three-dimensional limited motion of hermetically sealed boxes, and for me, it's a very engrossing metaphysical exercise, those three forms. Maybe I'll discover some others along the way, to use the same images.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So part of your interest other than this metaphysical investigation, you might say, in addition to that, there seems to be an interest in, well, making the images more available to people who might be interested, the viewers, even randomly. If something is in this dining room of yours, people who have never seen your films and may never, although their interest may be stimulated, can at least come into contact with --

LARRY JORDAN: Well maybe this is a poster for the film and maybe people will go and buy the video.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It could be; it could be. We certainly will tell them about it.

LARRY JORDAN: That's a strong -- I mean some -- I think some artists adhere to that path, that viewer response, critical response will have no effect whatever on their personal vision, and they will do an installation, put it in a gallery. People don't respond, so what. It's not what they're after. I definitely respond to what people respond to. Some of the first collages, a series of objects and images on painted backgrounds, the images being on a grid in lines, I was very excited by doing those. Other people who have not responded much to those, and I probably won't continue to make a lot of those collages that people don't respond to. I definitely am doing an interactive thing and going in the direction of imagery that people respond to. I wouldn't make art if I were on a desert island by myself. I'd make practical things like chairs and tables. I don't do this just for myself. I don't do this just to explore my own vision.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Some artists whom I've interviewed take that position and I'm always a bit skeptical when they say that, and I think that if you pursue it a bit, it becomes clear that, of course, it matters.

LARRY JORDAN: I do this to communicate. It just happens to be communication from one unconscious to another rather than from one social consciousness to another.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let me ask you just one more question, unless there's more you want to say about this series.

LARRY JORDAN: Not really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. To sort of wrap up, I would like to touch a little bit on what you bring with you now to the 1990s, 1996, approaching the year 2000, from what amounts, really, to the late '50's and the '60's in San Francisco and that whole ambiance milieu in terms of some of the ideas. And I don't want to even limit it to the same Beat, but to ideas and even people and relationships that may remain meaningful to you in terms of perhaps nurturing your work, that are important to you as you continue to, well, function and make art. That's the big question maybe, but do you take some of my meaning with that?

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, it's very broad, but I think I see where you're going. Do you mean like specific influences, for one thing?

PAUL KARLSTROM: For one thing, or are those aspects, that which was valuable to you in terms of ideas, people --

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah. What nurtures mean, I mean I'm very eclectic and I love almost all kinds of art and almost all kinds of film. There are no categories of art that are no-nos, that are no good, that you can't do today. All that's bull shit. I don't want to close my life. I like to enjoy things centrally, and if I closed down this or that kind of art, it's a loss to me and I don't want to consciously impoverish myself under the banner of concentrating on what's "important," but there are very few people that have really nurtured me directly and I can name them on

-- there's Max Ernst; there's Jess; there's Wallace Berman; there's Joseph Cornell; and George Herms, are the operative ones, all of whom I knew personally and was close to at one time except Max Ernst. I feel very close to Max Ernst who came to me through Jess and gave me the idea of doing the collage animation films. Now anybody could see a relationship doing those arts, all of them working with a found material of this culture, all of them being -- Jess makes original paintings, okay, but another hat that he wears and that's collage artist and that's the one that has been a direct influence on me using all the found images of our culture, and the same with the Ernst collage, novels, Herms using all the objects that have fallen into deterioration. Berman alludes to many tabloid images coming through his hand transmitters, and Cornell trying to save the fragile, ephemeral things of the past.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you feel a sense of community with --

LARRY JORDAN: Yeah, yeah. It's very clear, very explicit that is a kind of thing that I really vibrate with, and so when I teach this kind of thing at the art school, it's called the Lost-and-Found Department; that's the name of the class where you go out and find the [inaudible] of the world and bring it and put it into either two-dimensional or three-dimensional form. You're not, in most cases, creating original images by drawing or painting them. The use of the image or the use of the object, it's not exactly sculpture what we're talking about because we're not talking about the high-classical sculpture, the Michelangelo type of sculpture. We're not even talking about the great German/European carvers of wood images. Those are, by and large, original images that come out of the artists. We're talking about going out and finding things that have been thrown away, definitely not valued. I used to get books of beautiful engravings for 50 cents because the bindings were no good; otherwise, the book seller would have sold them for $50 for rare books, but the bindings were at fault, so the engravings were throw-away. All this stuff is throw-away and why are this group of artists collecting them? Is this nostalgia? I mean isn't there a broader statement here? Isn't there a very strong statement that civilization is very heedless in throwing away the wonders of the past. And there's a kind of resurrection going on. There's a kind of saviorism; there's a kind of resurrectionism.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Redemption?

LARRY JORDAN: Redemption. Yeah, there's a kind of working with ephemerality and mortality and there's a kind of making sense of eternal values out of very fragile, perishable goods.

PAUL KARLSTROM: On that note, let me ask you a last, quick question because that's all we have time for here. The tape is about ready to run out. Resurrection, that term, being retrieved from death, reminds me that at one point, I'm not exactly sure where some of this reading I've been doing, it may be the earlier interview, the whole notion of death seems to play a role in your ideas, or at least in your work, some connection there, but --

LARRY JORDAN: We want to free ourselves from the hope of resurrection. Life and death are not different. They're one. Then we want to free ourselves from oneness. We want to free ourselves from the hope of immortality. We want to have a freedom of an intensity of the present moment. The present moment is not oblivious of all of the past, everything that's happened in the past. It's a celebration of the mind.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And would you say that that then is sort of at the core of your thinking and --

LARRY JORDAN: That's as close to the core as I can get, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well we can't do any better than that since we're going to end right now.

LARRY JORDAN: Probably not.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Thank you so much, Larry.

LARRY JORDAN: Well it's been a pleasure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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