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Oral history interview with Reuben Kadish, 1964 Oct. 22

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Transcript

Interview

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RK: REUBEN KADISH

HP: Let's let it flow where the current of interest takes it. I think, to begin with, part of the elusive thing which is not recorded anywhere is what was in the air? What is San Francisco like:

RK: To begin with, as far as art was concerned, of course, everything that was in art was in San Francisco, but there were probably two or three outstanding personalities from my point of view. One of them was Ralph Stackpool. The other one was Benny Bufano whom you probably know of. I don't know whether you know Stackpool or not. He is still alive. He is eighty odd years old. He lives in France and he is a young sculptor, which is very curious because I had a visit from a sculptor, and this man is in his thirties and Stackpool is near eighty and they are all part of the same group. And he is very highly thought of. In sculpture, Stackpool's yard was open to anyone who had any kind of interest in the arts. He was one of the first men that I met when I visited for the first time -- I think I was something like sixteen or seventeen years old. I went to San Francisco from Los Angeles. I always thought that Los Angeles was very provincial and very unreceptive, and the first chance I had I got out of Los Angeles and went to New York. After I was starved out of New York in 1930, I ended up in San Francisco. It wasn't easy to live in San Francisco any more than it was in New York. Since I had a home in Los Angeles, I came back to Los Angeles. It was one of those things, you know, floating around. Well, there was the Depression, which I am sure you remember. If you were not in school, you were supported by your parents and somewhere along the line you tried to make a living. If you were a stranger in a town, there wasn't any way of making a living. Stackpool brought Diego Rivera, who was a very dominant influence. Of course Bufano represented, I would say, from my point of view, sort of an amalgam between the West and the East; between France and China. He had been to both places, and he sort of carried those ideas with him: the ideas that there was great sculpture to be done. I am talking about who the dominant people were from my point of view. There were other people there, of course. There were people connected with the art schools, with the museums, and so on. Those were the people that interested me. Even though I was a painter -- I was studying painting -- they were the ones to whom I turned for some kind of direction, or to whom I looked with respect. My first contact, as far as the project is concerned, was after I had been to Mexico and painted a mural there with Phil Guston. We both returned to Los Angeles and painted another mural and this time under the Treasury Art Project. Phil went to New York. This other mural was in California, a Sanitarium, and I went to San Francisco. Having been there as a teenager - - here I was in my mature early twenties -- and I figured, "That's the place to make a world." I had friends who had left Los Angeles and were very excited about the city and that was it. So I took photographs and presented them to Gaskin, who at that time was heading the Project under Danysh, I believe it was. He got excited about putting me on. He liked my work. He liked my point of view; he liked the vigor and the energy and enthusiasm, having done large ambitious things and so forth, but there was this relief element. Of course, being a stranger to San Francisco, I couldn't get on the relief rolls. I was put on as a non-relief, and painted a mural at San Francisco State College, a Chemistry Annex, which, when I was out there a couple of years ago, now has half a building put up in front of it and the other half is exposed. Other paintings that were done in the same place have been painted out, unfortunately. I finished the mural. It was a one-year job. And I packed my bags and went to New York. It wasn't because I didn't like San Francisco, or it wasn't because I couldn't have continued on the Project, there was a young lady involved. Look, biology and economics. That's right. She was in New York studying dancing with Martha Graham, and I was bent on following her, which I did. Then we broke up. There was a letter through someone else; I wasn't solicited exactly, but it was by Gaskin saying that "If you decide to come back, there is a job waiting for you." I came back and Gaskin put me on again. I made something like ten or twelve designs for murals, and none of them passed. All of them were rejected; no sponsorship. Sso you did the next best thing. They made me a supervisor of the San Francisco area and then the northern area. So, while my particular work wasn't acceptable, it became part of my job to make other work acceptable. I worked pretty conscientiously and pretty diligently, and some of the things were accepted and some were not. I don't know whether you have seen any of the photographs of the work that we did. I don't think too highly of them today. It was an economic thing. There were a lot of outside influences, and there were conflicts. There wasn't too much direction, and this is one of the reasons that I am so sentimentally attached to Gaskin as a person, because he was one of the few who had some kind of an understanding that went beyond let's say, the topical, the current stresses that were being placed against the supervisory staff. As you know, there was a very strong radical militant labor movement in San Francisco. There was the social realism business that was coming to us from the East Coast led by Benton and the rest. There was probably the most underdeveloped American art audience that has ever been. Most of them came from the Midwest, of course, and took positions of authority, knew little or nothing. They hoped, I suppose, that something could be done theoretically, but they were, again, afraid of criticism. The abstract art was Communist art. Hearst newspapers had a big campaign in that direction. Even the abstract art that we did, when I look back on it today, the few things that I have left, were so tame. Of course, it is not art, just because it is abstract, we know that. Beck Young was another man who had been in

Europe. I speak of Europe and New York as being the kind of places in which, let's say, more significant art ideas were formed. These people that had been exposed . . . . For instance, Beck Young was a Hoffman student down at Munich, and he got bugged on the Constructivist idea, which is a valid idea as an idea, but naturally he couldn't do much about the thing in relation to some of the projects that were being done, some of the mural projects, particularly.

HP: What was it that took you to Mexico?

RK: I worked for Siqueiros for quite awhile. He was in Southern California during the early Thirties. I worked with him as an assistant. I started as a student and worked up to a position where he gave me a little responsibility, in the sense that I began to paint things that were his, you know, from his designs, which was a very simple thing to do with his ideas on mural painting, the idea of a collective kind of effort. There isn't too much complexity in Siqueiros, when you get right down to it. He is very, very energetic, I haven't seen him in many many years, but those who have seen him say that, for a man in his sixties, he is still like he was when he was in his thirties. He was an influence in my life, I must say.

HP: What about method and technique? Was that the sort of thing you absorbed just by being there?

RK: He wasn't much of a technician, curiously enough. I mean, what I learned about technique, I learned after I left Siqueiros. I have a natural bent, let's say, to pick up technical solutions. I can do things with my hands. I know where to go to find the right book to get the right formula, and so on, and, as far as I am concerned, there is no mystery about techniques. Most of the things that we have done came out of the stone age. Bronze casting came out of the stone age and iron forging came . . . . So it has been around for many thousands of years, including fresco painting. If they could do it, we could do it. We, with our technology, we would probably change just minor aspects of it, rather than actually the major principle. Siqueiros was very much involved in the idea of making a five-year plan out of art. Being a devoted Communist, he saw the thing as a matter of industrial production, rather than the spiritual aspect of the thing. The idea of collectivizing art was also a kind of a thing with him, and he could point to things in the past in which such things were done, such as with the Byzantines or Egyptians. He believed in conflict. It is true that, up to a certain point, conflict has produced great works. The idea of seeing things in a new way for the first time is always conflicting to the status quo to authorities that are the pacemakers, whether it was the Impressionists, the Cubists, or whoever it was.

HP: The "pacemakers" only learned later that earlier they were not so smart.

RK: I personally feel that man can make any kind of order out of disorder -- it isn't that it is disorder -- I mean in painting and sculpture particularly. Whatever it is in this new way of seeing that's such a revelation for us, it becomes very disturbing for a certain type of mind. It wasn't disturbing for Rodin to see what Cezanne did. It certainly was very exhilarating for the young painters. When Cezanne was an old man, the young painters picked up and took off from him, as far as that goes, but it certainly was for the majority of artists that looked at painting, don't you think?

HP: Oh, sure!

RK: The wanted the warm and familiar rather than something new, something growing. They wanted security.

HP: In the Los Angeles area where you lived, you indicated that you worked on some murals there: one in particular, under the Treasury.

RK: If I remember right, it was under the Treasury. I am almost sure it was, because it was before the WPA days.

HP: WPAP -- the Public Works of Art Project? Edward Bruce?

RK: No, Bruce was the Treasury, wasn't he?

HP: Yes!

RK: The Treasury Department Art Project. Then afterwards it was the Works Progress Administration Project. The Treasury Department Art Project, if I remember right, was headed by S. Macdonald-Wright in Los Angeles, who afterwards was a WPA man. There was Merle Armitage and Mildred Sheets, I think. There were three of them. They were the committee that was in charge. I don't think there was any relief element there at all. The WPA thing was a matter of the large percentage coming off the relief rolls and the so-called spark would be non-relief. At least the thing was kept open to bring so-called specialists in, who had the abilities but didn't need the money presumably.

HP: I think they could employ some percentage of the total number on non-relief, or supervisory basis.

RK: Was it ten percent?

HP: I think it began at ten and then it was increased ultimately to roughly twenty percent. The Los Angeles things that you did, were they related to the WPA?

RK: They were not WPA.

HP: This was the consequence of a kind of competition too, I think, in the Treasury Department?

RK: Well, no, it wasn't any competition in this case. I may be wrong. I would have to look this thing up, but I don't think it was really the WPA thing that came afterward; I think it was some kind of a transitional thing. I remember receiving the checks. We were working in Duwardy, California in a sanitarium. It was a sort of quasi-public project. I had also worked before that as an assistant to Leo Katz. I don't know whether you know him or not.

HP: Yes! Out there? On the Treasury thing?

RK: Yes!

HP: My guess is this: that initially it was called (FERA), Federal Emergency Relief Administration, in which people were solely on relief grounds, where an artist might be placed on anything, like raking leaves, or something like that. They introduced, I believe, what was called the Civil Works Administration. An offshoot of this Civil Works Administration was the Public Works of Art Project. I don't believe it lasted longer than six months.

RK: That is right.

HP: The CWA administration worked for twenty-five cents an hour minimum wage generally. It was such a scare to Southern Senators when the share croppers were . . . . It was more money for them to leave the fields and go to the town and get a job this way. Anyway, they had to scuttle the CWA and with it the PWAP, so it was terminated in roughly six months. Not all the projects were terminated and I suspect that they were carried on under FERA until such time as the WPA was announced, which was June of '35.

RK: I know one thing, and that was, when we were finished, we were finished. That was it. When we finished, it was a matter of breaking ground and going somewhere else. And, as I say, Guston went to New York, and I went to San Francisco. The supervisors that I knew most intimately were very conscientious. They worked very hard. They were inspired. It was the only thing that was on their minds. Some of them were personally ambitious. But most of them were not. People like Gaskin and Beck Young, Ben Cunningham, and myself, I would say, were much more interested in the art aspect of the thing than perhaps some of the others, who looked up the thing as a means of personal glory. Gaskin's attitude toward Bufano was a real classical renaissance attitude -- the patron, the government -- hands off. The patron was the government and, in this case, we had a great magnificent chance to really put something over that was going to be a great value to the people. It was a magnificent dream, and in a sense, I approved of it. I approve of a man being bugged in that sense, that he sees that kind of drive on a large scale. He was the kind of man that would spend his spare time, for instance, reading Cicero and things. You see, it was exactly the same way in the days of the Romans. They had their problems. This man could be talking right today and, of course, they built these huge projects. Gaskin was a nice man to be with.

HP: This put a premium, I suspect, on finding wall space, or walls for mural projects in San Francisco.

RK: What do you mean?

HP: Well, you said they had to have sponsorship.

RK: Yes! A percentage of the money that took care of the materials and so forth had to come from -- not necessarily all the time, with all the money -- the sponsor, but the sponsor had to put up a certain percentage of money. That sometimes meant perhaps two or three hundred dollars and in a budget in a small town at that time, there were very few people that could actually see ahead to the point where even a bad piece of sculpture, or a bad painting, is better than no painting. That was our point of view. If we can get enough things out and put them in front of the eyes of the people, sooner or later they are going to want better things. We assumed that. Many times I would go out and try to peddle a thing that I personally did not like, but I knew it might be sold. Where, on the other hand, if there was a thing that I did like, it might not be sold. I was also in charge of getting the thing hung up by a deadline, so that when school opened, or when the dedication ceremony was going to take place, it was there on the wall, which sometimes created a lot of problems with the artist. In one case, I loaded the artist and the mural on the truck and moved it in place. Set it up in a high school and said it was going to be finished in three weeks and, "You are signing your name on such and such a day." It was a problem with this particular person to finish his work. He had been on it with one extension and another extension. Our small problem was to get the thing out and get it approved and go on to another job.

HP: Were jobs in this time related to what it was you were able to sell, at least so far as the mural division was concerned?

RK: What do you mean? In what sense? Well, we couldn't do anything in the line of a mural unless we had a sponsor.

HP: At least the taste for interest of that sponsor had to be met to some extent.

RK: Absolutely! First, a design had to be made. The design had to be approved. When you have a board of education, for instance, it is really kind of sad. It was in very, very few cases that you really touched someone with the work in a very positive way. Then, when such a thing did take place, naturally we would be very excited to make quite a grand thing out of it. I had problems with the artists naturally. They thought that sometimes I represented the employer. Since San Francisco was a great union town, the WPA supervisors were considered to be the bosses, the employers, and the workers sort of considered to be the laboring class. Then the Artist's Union once passed a resolution that no one shall be caught off project time having a beer, or having a sociable conversation with Reuben Kadish. I was very amused by that, since I represented the boss class. I must say that there must have been times when I was perhaps a little short in wanting to see this thing put through as efficiently as possible. There was an awful lot of inefficiency. There is no question about that. We were constantly being subjected to criticism, as you know, a whole line of WPA jokes. We were very sensitive about the fact that here, for the first time, artists were a recognized part of the structure in society; especially some of us who knew something about the history of art and other times in which things like this had been created. I remember those periods of conflict more perhaps after some twenty-five years than the other aspect of the thing where things ran smoothly.

HP: I would think, offhand, that the sponsors at least were receptive to what was going on. That would be almost a requisite for work to begin.

RK: They were not always, no, but they were embarrassed with the idea sometimes of being classified as uncultured hicks. This is one of the things that Gaskin did on one occasion. I was present when he actually put the cards on the table. "Here you are, the president of the university, and you have to confess that you know nothing about art." The man, very embarrassed, said, "Yes, that's very true." There was a space there -- absolutely zero. They could live entirely without a work of art and Gaskin said that this is the first time in any age where the leaders of a community have been so without any background training and so forth, and that "regardless of whether you like it or you don't like it, we as experts are telling you that it is good and should go up." It did go up, which was a very good thing. He had a little conflict with the art department.

HP: In short, in the instance of every specific sponsored piece of work, it was a public relations, negotiations -- parade, practically -- depending upon the prevailing winds or whatever -- the human story, untidy.

RK: You speak of public relations. There was a very definite program toward getting as much publicity as possible. The feeling was, at least on our Project, that one thing is going to lead to another. I think in some cases perhaps it did.

HP: Did the artists who worked on the WPA in these various projects develop a better collective sense toward one another -- all in the same boat? Was this element present, or not?

RK: There was, I think. Well, the San Francisco art community was very closely knit to start with. Perhaps not as closely knit as the various aspects of the New York art community. I knew both communities, and I never could qualify on the New York project. I would say, knowing both communities, that more developed in New York because of a collective effort, if you want to put it that way. The whole idea of this contact being made forcible day after day, week after week and then of course, it ended up year after year. You had various strong personalities that really found their growth, and to put it in quotes, I think . . . . I won't say that the New York school would not have developed, but I would say that part of the maturity of some of the painters took place on the WPA art projects. I happen to know that to be so, because a good many of them were my friends. A lot of them came from the West Coast. There always has been, in New York that kind of thing, much more than there was on the West Coast. For instance, most recently in New York, there was the Club which was an idea in the minds of three or four or five or eight or ten people, and it grew to something when there was that need, so that this particular nucleus found the way so that innumerable people either had their say, or made darned fools of themselves. One way or another, they were able to verbalize, or at least attempt to verbalize, some of their feelings about direction. Before the Club, to keep gong back into this thing, let's face it, probably the tavern was one of the places in which such a thing took place, the cafeteria, the nickel coffee. I know of places like Fifth Avenue Cafeteria where a table would sit for six or eight hours. You would walk by and you would see this face and that face. The same face each day sitting at the same table. There was something being formed there. There was a bar on Thirteenth Street where all the artists went to cash their checks. It wasn't just a matter of drinking; it was a matter of some kind of communal force being able to find its way out. Likewise, the WPA

project did exactly the same thing, and it was probably the first time that such a thing was done. Before that, there was Tom Benton who was teaching at the League, and he always had a group around him. It was either for dinner or a party or some such thing like that. Those were not the only things. I won't say that they were. The old Whitney Museum used to have a club in which artists got together. This is where they got together and a lot of the things were threshed out and I think New York painters will tell you that too, if you talk to them. They did things that they might never had done in their studios by themselves.

HP: Exactly. Somehow or other, with the government as a single and common employer, they could afford to hire a loft, a cup of coffee, ask speakers, find out what their relationship was. It was almost social in the sense of comradeship. I don't mean that word, what I meant was a sense of identity with a common employer and so on, and more especially, the modern artists, or those who were thinking in a more, let's say, abstract or modern vein. They had a miserable time in the Twenties.

RK: You bet they did. One of the things about San Francisco, in looking back, was its dogged provincialism; that it wasn't good enough, that it had to get its source from someplace else. Having lived there for twelve or fifteen years at one time or another, sometimes it might be Matisse, sometimes it might be analytical Cubism, sometimes it might be Carl Hoefer, who had a great rage when he won a Carnegie prize. Sometimes it might be Diego Rivera who was there as a personality. It was a strange thing about some painters, who went through these things every two or three years, depending upon what was current, and never really finding themselves. It is true that Picasso, Miro and, let's say, Mondrian, had their same kind of influence in New York, but there were still stronger personalities that dominated the thing. They knew that they had to find themselves. They gave the leadership which is what didn't happen in San Francisco. Of course, now we do have something there, I suppose, that you might call a San Francisco figurative school, but I find it quite dull. It is not very interesting.

HP: For an artist in San Francisco, what were the galleries?

RK: There were not any galleries to speak of, just as there are now. There may be two or three galleries. Whatever exhibitions we had that came there . . . . Doctor Morley, who was head of the San Francisco Museum in the Civic Center, was the one who probably leaned more to New York in the Museum of Modern Art. So we did have shows that did come there, you know, fragments of the shows that were here after the 1930's. It never was the same in the sense that it was here. I found that the last time I was in San Francisco. I was just practically stupefied by the provincialism there. It just struck me as, "My God, can't you see yourself? Can't you see what you are doing?" All right, so they are painting de Kooning or painting Gorky or painting somebody else's paintings in 1950, and here it is 1962 and 1963 when I was there. I went to visit a painter who was a friend of mine who was painting Rothko. I was dumfounded to think that he could have allowed himself to be so suppressed and to not find his expression. I like Rothko's paintings. I think he is great, but Rothko paints Rothko. You see, it is done in really a second rate version. That was the feeling I had about it.

HP: In short, but for the economic condition itself, this kind of sustained effort in the WPA to both market for sponsorship and to turn for ideas to make acceptable, is about the biggest sustained local interest in art, you know, of a native kind.

RK: One of the things that shocked me most was a number of painters that were there that were sustained by the WPA, that had given up painting; that couldn't find a market, that couldn't find any way of sustaining themselves as artists. Almost every painter, sculptor I know in New York earns a living by teaching, or some other way, but they still paint and they still sculpt. I found people who had allowed themselves to submit to an academic career who hadn't painted, let's say, in three or four years, which was shocking. Other people who hadn't done anything at all since the end of World War II had just completely given it up and returned to house painting, scenic design and so forth, or some other form. There again, it is a matter of what is the force that really sustains an artist. I don't think it is just making the money. I think there has to be something behind it that the artist has to believe in. There were some older painters on the San Francisco project, but most of them were young painters. Most of them were. I would be curious to see whether that were actually so. The older painters probably had some other source of income and didn't have to come. One of the men that I got to know and liked and got along with very well, was Hilaire Hiler who did the Aquatic Park thing. He again, of course, represented the Parisian idea. Have you seen it? Have you been out there at all?

HP: Yes, but he was not infrequently in Paris.

RK: Oh yes, he had spent a good ten or twelve years in Paris. That was his home actually.

HP: He wasn't on the relief thing, was he?

RK: No, no. You see, that is the thing. Hiler came there to visit his father or mother, something like that, and Gaskin found out about it and went to Hiler. If it had been solely up to Gaskin, I think the thing would have been a lot different than it was. He would have found other ways. Of course, there was this other thing. There were politicians sitting on top, and the project had to conform according to the needs of some of their demands. There

was this provincialism. It still exists there. I just spent two months in California (I don't mean that I spent it recently), but the two months that I did spend there was as if it were a punishment, in the sense that it was so unrealized. I worked on that lithographic thing at Tamerind in Los Angeles and then went to San Francisco. I was very upset about the whole thing . It was really something, I mean, the whole kind of sterility. Sentimentally, I am very fond of the city. It is a beautiful city to live in. You have everything there that should make a great world. Characteristically like the big poetry revival that took place there, the city did everything that it could to drive all the poets out, which has nothing to do with us as painters, except that it really does; it tells its own story. That was it. They were just finishing it off just about the time I was there. They were getting rid of these troublemakers.

HP: I guess you do have to draw distinctions then between the time and place and set of circumstances in which you operate, and in retrospect the leadership of this WPA helped give it whatever enthusiastic momentum it had.

RK: Well, I can't tell California how to live, or what its millionaires should do with their money, or shouldn't do with their money, but there certainly is money there. Nothing has ever happened in this world, as far as great works are concerned, without money. You may have had a very deceitful demigod-like Pericles, but at least he put that money to good use. The whole history of art is just chucked full with these extravagant and impossible things that men with money have brought into being, and then had the judgment to have picked the people with great imagination. I think the same thing took place in Mexico, without government sponsorship, for better or worse. I don't think too much of the thing in relation to . . . but at least it was something. The collectors in Europe make art collectors in America seem like little children. You have got to have a feel. If the government is going to do it, it should, of course, be very careful to put the person in charge that is really going to make the thing grow and live. That is the kind of thing that I am most cautious about. I don't want to condemn the very top, because it certainly had its ambitions, and a lot of times there were real ambitions for the good of the thing, the good of the whole, rather than for individuals. I suppose you might almost say that anything would be better than nothing. I would like to see a piece of sculpture on every corner in New York City, and it would be better than no sculpture at all. In the case of the art project, it was a shame that it didn't go on for twenty-five years. Something of significance probably would have happened.

HP: As I understand it, initially it was a "feed-them" proposition.

RK: Basically, you can't say that Cahill wasn't interested in art; he was, you know. But I am not so sure that Harry Hopkins was interested in art, you know, the man that dreamed the thing up. Was he, or wasn't he? It is like the theater project. I don't know whether you were here in New York during those days. Did you go to see any of those productions?

HP: Marvelous!

RK: Absolutely fantastic! I remember those things. I remember the living newspaper so vividly, better than any play perhaps -- not any play or every play. I remember the thing that Orson Welles did with Blitzstein, and "The Cradle Will Rock" and things like that.

HP: "One third of a Nation."

RK: There are innumerable things that were done and they were fabulous; the Negro theater and the rest of it. Somewhere along the line . . . . Well, sure, we should have had a government-sponsored theater for the last thirty years or more. We have known that we should have had just as we probably should have had government-sponsored art. Bruce sent me a letter once on one of my designs. I wish I had that thing. "This is the kind of art that we don't want the American people to see." I sent a design in, and he explained why I wasn't getting a job to do a post office. He was a nice fellow and all, but I would have liked to have seen someone like Forbes Watson completely in charge. He was an advisor. I don't know whether you know his writings at all.

HP: Back in the *Arts* magazine? He is marvelous. His editorials just leap off the page. Interestingly enough, quite early he took a position against the intrusion of government in the field of art, and it was a blistering thing, but he was open to conviction on a new set of facts, the changing scene. He was a powerful man with the pen. I think there was an attempt to develop a museum and this stopped whatever subsidy was necessary to continue the *Arts* which in itself was a great contribution. Young American artists got a chance. Forbes Watson has always intrigued me. Did you see much of Eddie Cahill out there?

RK: No. I just saw him about three times. He was always very impressed with what we were doing. He liked it. I think, if you ever see Gaskin . . . . Have you ever seen McDonald-Wright at all?

HP: No.

RK: Is he unavailable?

HP: I don't know. There are a few people on the West Coast still out there, but I don't know.

RK: He is not young, and neither is Gaskin. Wright must be in his seventies.

HP: Cahill sprang out of a public relations thing, pretty much, with the Newark Museum. Of course, he worked with a man who himself thought the museum should be mixed up with the city, right in the center of it. Dana had, himself, ideas of what it should contain, whether it should keep pace or be ahead of the game. Cahill was at least exposed to novelty. I suspect that when you get into the position of authority in the center, it becomes a question of how can you keep the band rolling, when you confront a nation of illiterates, largely where art is concerned.

RK: That's nothing, I think. I mean there can be any kind of government sponsorship where you consider that the censoring element really is undeveloped. It is either undeveloped, or else it will carry a prejudice in a particular direction. If the prejudice is a good, healthy, binding one, like the Academy during the time of Napoleon, fine. You have people like W. Eton carrying their prejudices. They are with government sponsorship. I don't know. It is a hard thing to stand and pass judgment after so many years, whether it was good or whether it was bad. I do know one thing and that is there was very little art created, from my point of view, that is worth more than just one look. That is part of the thing. You could say that there wasn't any art created anywhere, but at least there was some kind of growth in certain areas. There was hardly even any kind of growth outside of what it did for individuals, whatever sustenance it gave them. Would it have been better to have not allowed them to have this thing? I don't know. That is the thing that I can't decide. I know that there were a lot of people that went out and did a lot worse things, I mean, in display and left the world entirely.

HP: The choices confronting a fellow in the Thirties were not easy.

RK: What I am trying to say is that, as Americans, we had no cultural commitment. It is the kind of thing where we were torn between this rustic sort of business -- Benton, Grant Wood and the rest -- regional art, so-called, and the strong, very left attitude that was current, not only among artists, but throughout the country, and it was there. Then we had this very precious sort of thing that was with us too, this business of the small hard core abstract painters that were here, who were just as non-creative as far as I am concerned as the rubble-rousing labor cartoonists that were current. In each case, it seems to me, it was not real. That is the thing that is the important thing. In each case it was a matter of trying to find a tag for yourself. There wasn't anything that was really there. Of course, there isn't. You look at the work. I look at the Ashcan school and to me there was something real there. It was a kind of a thing that those boys had. You can't take that away, and you look at some of the other things that were done. The big real thing came perhaps out of this business of finding yourself, and find what you are, and I would say, again, that most of it came out of New York rather than out of San Francisco.

HP: In many ways, most of this that came out of New York in that day was untouched by, unsullied by, unwrinkled by the circumstances that did exist in the Thirties. You know, some of those who did whatever it is they did, and had a steady line of development right straight through, no matter what, even if they had trouble keeping the wolf from the front of the door. Take a Stuart Davis. You go back in the Twenties and trace him along. Then suddenly in the Thirties you have an envelope under his arm and attending all kinds of meetings, Artists Congress, Artists' Union, marching on city hall, etc. etc., but it didn't touch his work.

RK: I remember a conversation about Stuart Davis. He was painting a very large mural for the New York project. I went up to meet a painter, a friend. I have always admired his work, as far as that goes, and this particular painter happened to be under Benton's influence and he said, "How can a guy as intelligent as that allow himself to be sucked in by that definite European point of view?" Here was a big flare of flashing color that he was working on at the time. It was the beginning of some of those ribbon-like meanderings, you know. I remember that. This painter, now dead, had changed considerably since that time, but in this case he was under Benton's regionalism. We made trips to Pennsylvania. We went to the coal mines and made drawings and so forth. Stuart Davis, of course, there is no question about the directness of purpose that he had. There are others, I guess.

HP: I think so. In short then, the Thirties in the project as a whole at least gave continuity for skills, development for even practice. You indicated that a lot of people simply gave up and are still giving up. You also said that San Francisco was a collection of younger people.

RK: That was my feeling.

HP: This would indicate that they had taken the dice and rolled it for whatever it was, and, "We'll take this route." What comes out of it, I suppose, is related to whatever it was that San Francisco was, but the problem of taking an idea and making it walk onto a mural and getting it accepted; that is not an easy proposition.

RK: It certainly isn't an easy proposition today. Again, you have got architects who refuse to set any amount of money aside. Some of them do as a matter of principle whether you like what they are doing or not. But, they

don't want their walls ruined. They don't want anybody messing them up. That is the same old thing. In this case, you have informed architects. They have been through Yale, or another school that has made them, but they still don't want their walls ruined. They don't want them messed up. They'd rather see nothing.

HP: This may be related to possessive instincts that a man has after a while.

RK: Of course, one of the good things about the Renaissance is that most of the architects were dead by the time the painters came along. They just went ahead and they didn't have the architect to contend with. They ruined those walls; they certainly did. They did everything to them that no architect would like to see done. I think it was better to take an artist and put him on an art project rather than any other kind of project. There was no question about that. I also think that, taking the country as a whole, by and large, it certainly did help develop a consciousness, not only among the so-called public, but more important, among the artists.

HP: This is the thing in the Thirties that attracted me; that is, the identity that a person had, let's say, in the clothing industry, through NRA, where you met people in the clothing industry from St. Louis and all over the country, who came together to a form of code. The were suddenly talking about the same kind of problems. They had never heard about this guy in St. Louis, and they had never heard of this fellow in Worcester, Massachusetts. The net effect of that is a kind of exchange, you know, an awareness, there is more going on in this sprawling thing called America than just me on my corner. I should think the same took place in art, though artists have been for periods of time the individualistic expressions in our society. Nonetheless, this created an opportunity to communicate even without words; just by sitting around a table, or as you put it, sitting in a cafeteria. You know, people shuffling in -- eagerness to know about others, or what was going on and maybe for the first time. The government, so far as the United States Government is concerned, invested its funds in non-controversial areas. It thought, in the sense of not interfering with the economic structure, when they weren't going to set up some steel mill to compete with some steel company that was flat on its back. It was nothing like this. But it could afford in a way to build public buildings and to support art, which was allegedly non-controversial. If you go back and read the Hearst press . . . . Fantastic! It just set off pyrotechnics in what was alleged to be a safe place. So ideas are not safe; they never are. They are open-ended. Whatever effect it had in terms of people . . . Well, for example, did shows come to San Francisco from other regions?

RK: There were shows at the San Francisco Museum, the Civic Center, from other areas and most of them were brought there through Dr. Morley who was head of the Museum. I don't know whether you know her at all. She worked with United Nations for awhile. I think she is in Calcutta now as some museum head. That's the last I heard. She had perhaps a larger point of view. The biggest influence was Mexico. There was no question about it at that time. Of course, Stackpool was very important in that influence. The other big influence was Bufano. The rest of them I thought were pretty mediocre, as far as their attitudes. Not to mention any names, some of them were trying to repaint Cezanne. Most of them were Post-Impressionists without really understanding Impressionism. Depending on who won what prize where, or got what kind of a spread; there was this thing, sponge-like. It was a community in which, like perhaps every other community in the world, it is like an octopus. It had eight things going on at the same time. And then twenty or thirty years later, I suppose what we consider to be French art today -- we think of French art as being Impressionism, let's say, in the 1880's and 1890's -- if we were there and saw the official French art, we would probably be appalled. I feel that much more could have been done. Let's say a painter got $89.00 or $94.00 a month. Okay, you'd get $1,000 a year. Of course, I was in the upper strata -- the aristocracy -- being non-relief, so I got even a little more than that. The mural that I worked on, I think took about $200. worth of materials. It was a fresco. A plasterer and an assistant were also employed. Altogether, that mural took exactly one year, and was $3,000. It gave employment to three people. What if the government had said, "Look, school, we are giving you this thing free without your having to put up the $200. or the $250." I mean, suppose they had added another few hundred to the material cost and, at that time, for $500 you could have bought a boxload of materials, canvasses and so on, to give a man an opportunity to work. Here you have this conflict of not really being able to see the thing right straight clear through. So that there wasn't any interest in art; it was more of an interest in a political kind of thing, a social kind of thing and so forth. I think we have to go back to that business where money has responsibilities, and I think money today, private money, begins to recognize that responsibility. It may very well be that there are tax dodgers here and tax dodgers there, but at the same time, there is that feeling. You can't be a Rockefeller unless you have a foundation, or you can't be a Ford unless you have a foundation. This is happening more and more. You just can't sit on your little pile. I personally feel that Lincoln Center is a big fiasco, but that is part of it. It is part of that thing of money having to do something in order to better the community. It is a fiasco, because you can't hear the music. The same thing is true of our repertoire theaters. Again, it is private capital that is really sponsoring this thing. They are operating this one over here, the ANTA thing, at a loss. They are operating the Phoenix at a loss and the Actors Studios at a loss. They are all operating at a loss. But, so what! At least you have got the kernel of the thing where something is going to happen. If a foundation were given an idea, and I think a lot of them are being given ideas constantly. I presented an idea to a university: hire a sculptor for three years and give him $30,000 for that three years. When he is through, there has to be a piece of sculpture remain on the campus. Now, don't bind him up with a bunch of routine classes and so forth. Perhaps he can become involved in graduate student work, or something like that. Just think, if you were to take 100 sculptors in America and set

that three million dollars aside and create 100 pieces of sculpture, it would be very important. I would do it. It is an idea. The thing that I am basically interested in is the creation of works of art, and I want those works of art to be here now, not yesterday and not tomorrow, because we are here now. There were very few of us on the WPA that really were interested. Some of them were interested in making sure that they could organize the artists so that they could be a political this or a political that in the labor movement. We knew that. There was that kind of a thing in there. I won't say in all cases, but in a large majority of cases, they were the worst artists on the Project, and a good many of them had given up painting. They were just using this thing as a kind of a thing within themselves. There are others that didn't know what they were interested in. Some of them had gone to art school; some of them had been to Europe, and so forth. It was a strange way in which to put together a group of people on the basis of economic need, but we had to preserve the country and that was the way in which we did it, I mean our system. I don't know of any country where government sponsorship of the art has created works of art. I really don't. I'd hate to look at official Russian art. I go to see the exhibition. I look at it, and I am just dumfounded. What's official French art? Official Italian art? It is really a problem when you look back on, let's say, five thousand years as official government art.

HP: You are right. There is a sadness to it when you do look back on it. Yet, the guys who are able to sustain themselves and compromise for the government the sense of their own statement that they want to make, not even discovering it for awhile, may ultimately come up with, or burst forth with a statement -- just smash through. I think you do have to link yourself up historically somehow. Take your ideas, stew with them and go steady with them, as one does with a woman, and then, somehow or other, it comes smashing through, or it doesn't.

RK: The best way government has functioned is, I think, the way they functioned with Rodin. Give a man a place to work. There is a responsibility there of the government. Fine, go right ahead, smash your head against the wall, make something come out of it. He is an unusual personality and a man with a lot of drive and something behind him. We need that kind of government leadership, I think, in order to be able to see through a thing like that, because the artist doesn't see through a thing like that. When you have people who do see through -- Malreaux is the kind of a guy who is going to do it too, I don't know. Right now, there are a lot of people very upset with what he is doing.

HP: The choice or a chance that allows some to surface in our society with opportunity to choose and select. That's a vague process, too.

RK: I don't see anything wrong with people making mistakes. The Ford Foundations gave awards to a number of painters and sculptors and, in most cases, it wasn't that they were not deserved, but in some cases they didn't need it. You don't know what is behind this thing. They want to be sure. They want security too. They want to be sure that this guy is going to perform. So they pick people who are going to perform. To get back to the theater, they didn't sponsor the living theater, which I thought was a very vital, vigorous kind of counter guard, kind of *avant garde* kind of thing, because they were always operating at a loss, which seems kind of funny in a sense.

HP: There must be a standard then, other than the one which is acceptable in the market place. They are in a sort of a double-entry bookkeeping bit -- profit and loss. It just doesn't figure. There must be a new standard for a philanthropist, or for people with funds to sustain. The creative impulse cannot be sustained solely on the basis of nickels and dimes on one side of the ledger as opposed to another. I don't see it. It may well be that this is a restriction and limitation on our thinking as a people, quite apart from just the issue of government.

RK: We are very immaterial in our feelings, socially, philosophically -- attitudes and all. There is no question about that. You start out with something like the Treasury Department project -- just within our history -- and you end up with the WPA. You have spent millions of dollars, and you are not left with very much to look at. You are only left with the flesh that might or might not have survived. That is a hard thing to say one way or the other.

HP: Even if it had to find its own way.

RK: I don't know what the answer is. I was very amused. In the *Times* there was a little paragraph on the fact that after Kruschev had had a battle and not seen his way through, those who succeeded him put their foot down on the poets and the painters. It is going to be even tougher for those poor guys. Suddenly Kruschev becomes our hero, and God knows he was outspoken enough against any kind of creativity. Apparently, those who now rule are going to be even harder.

HP: It was a strange period anyway in American history, because this nation ground to a stop. A lot of people caught up to where farmers and artists had been pretty much all through the Twenties. However, it did sustain an impulse, however diluted the ultimate product was. This is maybe no more than a noble gesture on the part of government. It may vary from region to region. San Francisco, and its own past and momentum may have helped shape and configure and therefore diluted the process.

RK: The people that were in the West, some of them, of course, came East, and some of them did make their contributions and they are making them now. There are teachers, if teachers are considered to be anything in forming the ideas that are to go on. The community itself, according to my feelings, is a community that always considered itself to be a cultured community. They are an opera house community. They are a Civic Center community with a museum and so forth. There are three museums, which is saying a lot more than you can say for Los Angeles, but there is this other thing. In all the years that I was there, I never sold a thing, that is, locally. There are New York painters today who are selling like hotcakes, who may not have sold for four or five years, but at least there was some kind of recognition. You have to face this thing that if an artist doesn't receive recognition of some sort, whether he is considered to be an honored member in the community or whether he is placed at the top economically, or whatever it is, he is going to sour somewhere along the line. A guy like Soutine, perhaps, has soured for the good, but at least he was honored among artists. I say soured -- he was a man with many conflicts. Well, you can name a number of people. This is the thing that probably should be said in favor of the WPA, that it did place the artist on a level where he could be considered as a member of society, where he couldn't have been in the Twenties unless he were a painter of society portraits, or unless he did cartoons for the sports page, or commercial art. It did give many painters an idea that they could function as creative human beings. In that sense, I would say that people like Cahill who had that feeling, if they didn't put it down in writing. There was someone else. I was trying to think of this gal who came through from Washington, I think, who looked at prints. This was a strange kind of business. We never considered that anything we were doing was of any value to anybody else. Suddenly we realized that these things mean something to someone; not only that, they are sending them to Paris for an exhibition. In that sense, it did give a big thing that perhaps did help. I don't know whether there is anything else I can tell you. I can give you some of my bitterness about some people.

HP: You mean about the WPA?

RK: Yes. I think there were some people who actually did not help the situation just as there were people like Gaskin who did help.

HP: In what sense did they do disservice to it?

RK: Well, in the sense that they thought paperwork was more important than a tube of paint. The proper form hadn't been filled out and so forth. The artists who were functioning as supervisors generally speaking, thought the other way. We get the tube of paint and then we worry about the paperwork, that sort of thing. That was one of the reasons that I was fired, which I was. I was cut off, because of that kind of conflict, that paperwork became more important. It was in the last two years. I guess it was on its last legs anyway as far as the need of the country was concerned. Neininger was fired too for the same reason. There was energy and there was vigor, and it was more than just an adventure.

HP: Oh, sure. Was there any effort along the lines to change and alter its purpose to meet the oncoming expected war, preparedness?

RK: Yes. Most of the artists were very definitely anti-Nazi. There is no question about that. Stuart Davis, for instance, was very much that way. The Artist Congress always took a stand and most of the outstanding artists in America belonged to the Artists Congress, gave themselves the taint of being Reds, as did most of the writers. Hearst was completely justified perhaps, except that he latched on with this -- but it was good for the country -- the idea of this liberalization. There is no question in my mind that this occurred. Going through and across the country in the 1930's, through Kansas, I came across a huge sign -- we were hitchhiking -- that read, "Catholics and Jews keep out!" That was the kind of thing that naturally artists were fighting against.

HP: Strangely, there is this collective of impulses at the same time where there is this anti-repression thing. I think the Artists' Congress quite early made a statement in terms of Spain, was one of the early ones. The notion that you could have an idea and express it and go to a meeting and vote on it.

RK: It did something else too. It tied you up with Europe, which we needed very much. When we heard that Lo had been shot, for instance, there was a sadness there. You felt that Picasso had taken a stand and there was joy. I think we have learned more about things from World War II on than we did in the ten years afterwards, as far as how an artist should function in America, than before World War II. There was a great community among artists. There is no question about it. Money wasn't involved. Nobody had any money. At the same time there was a great confusion among artists. Today, it is true that we have a lot of elements that are negative elements as far as creativity happened, the artist in relation to gallery, in relation to critic and so forth. I do think there is much more vigor taking place and more potential in painting today and sculpture than there ever has been. Maybe I won't say that ten years from now, if I am around.

HP: You wouldn't tie that in with a development thing?

RK: Of course I would. I think that what happened on the WPA was very important, in that communal kind of

thing of seeing things through. It is just like what happened when the European artists came here during World War II. Having them come here was very important, as well. To get back to this San Francisco thing, I don't think that San Francisco has made it, and I do think that New York has, in the sense that I feel we have painters here who have had their say and who have made themselves felt. It hasn't taken place anywhere else in the world in this same way. Let's say, for the first time you can call yourself and American artist and you don't have to hide. Before, even during the WPA days, the only time that you were an artist was if you were an European artist.

HP: Right. It was felt -- that identity, I think, has come.

RK: That is definite, but I wouldn't like to spend my time looking at the 99 out of the 100 works that were made at that time. It is that kind of a thing, having seen them, the post office murals and a good many others. I ran across a WPA book someplace. Of course, the Index of American Design, that was something else. It was a terrific job.

HP: You didn't come into that in San Francisco?

RK: No. I had one thing that I failed at miserably, and that was heading a thing of documenting waterfowl for the San Francisco zoo. It was not within my thinking. It was given to me after somebody else had flopped at it, more or less as a punishment because I was outspoken about certain things. I had some poor little old ladies who were doing some water colors, or oil paintings, of waterfowl and that was a miserable memory.

[END OF INTERVIEW]