



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Peter
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Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions
www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Peter Halley on September 29, October 1, and October 6, 2021. The interview took place in New York City, New York, and was conducted by Annette Leddy for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Peter Halley and Annette Leddy have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ANNETTE LEDDY: This is Annette Leddy, interviewing Peter Halley, in New York City, on September 29, 2021, for the Archives of American Art.

So, you were born in 1953 in New York City, is that correct?

PETER HALLEY: That's correct. As it happens, I have a biography written about me when I entered Hunter College Elementary School.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

PETER HALLEY: And it was either written by my grandmother, or a friend of my mother's. It says, "I, Peter Halley, son of Janice and Rudolph Halley, was born by cesarean section September 24, 1953, at 11:54 p.m., at Flower-Fifth Avenue Hospital, in New York City. I weighed seven pounds, twelve-and-one-half ounces, and was twenty-one-and-a-half inches long. From the very beginning, I was a bottle baby and the hospital formula agreed with me perfectly. At this particular time, my daddy was President of the City Council of New York, and he was campaigning for the office of Mayor of the City of New York. He came to see me at the hospital at irregular hours." So, that's how it began.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Can you tell me a little bit about why your parents—how your parents came to live in New York City, and maybe your grandparents, and your family background?

PETER HALLEY: Sure. I guess I'll start with my mom. And it's interesting, because it turns out my mom was a bit of an archivist. So, I have documents like this and a lot of photographs and newspaper clippings from my father's career. But she was born in Nanticoke, Pennsylvania, which is a small town near Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. She was Polish-American, her father was born in the U.S. Her mother immigrated to the U.S. at the age of eight or ten. I believe her mother had already come to the U.S., and then sent for her two daughters. I didn't really know my mother's father. Her parents were divorced, and my mother had negative feelings about her father. He was either an alcoholic or some kind of ne'er-do-well, and she seldom saw him. But I spent a lot of time with my mother's mother in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. And there was really nobody in my family who was a visual artist. But, my grandmother seemed to have a real knack for the arts, and she was always baking fancy desserts. And by profession she was a hairdresser. And I remember her apartment in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, had the most extraordinary Chinese furniture and Turkish lamps. For someone who had limited education, she seemed to have really sophisticated taste in culture.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Where did she get that furniture?

PETER HALLEY: I have no idea. And every year, she and her friends would go see the Bolshoi Ballet in New York City. Some people just come naturally by a certain cultural sensitivity.

ANNETTE LEDDY: True.

PETER HALLEY: My mother came to New York after studying nursing. She was a registered nurse; she studied nursing in Newark. She was born in 1920, so she must have finished nursing school about the beginning of World War II. By the end of the war, I know she's in New York working. And she always reminded me of Andy Warhol, because she seemed to

have an intrinsic and inexorable desire to come to New York City and live here. She didn't marry until she was thirty-one. Apparently she was engaged when she met my father. And I believe at the time of her marriage, she was living in the Barbizon Hotel—on the Upper East Side. I just read a book about it. It had an extraordinary history as a hotel for single women coming to New York.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Sylvia Plath, for example, stayed there.

[00:04:58]

PETER HALLEY: Yes, a number of writers that came to work for—was it *Elle* magazine?

ANNETTE LEDDY: *Mademoiselle*.

PETER HALLEY: *Mademoiselle*—their guest editor program. You know about that. The book is pretty good.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I'll look at it, yeah.

PETER HALLEY: And my father's family is kind of interesting. On his father's side, through Ancestry.com, I discovered that his earliest ancestors were among the first Ashkenazi Jews in New York—before 1800.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Wow.

PETER HALLEY: And apparently there's this book, *The First Jewish Families*, and that family name was Davis. I looked up the names of the people, but one of my forebearers was buried in the first Ashkenazi cemetery, which would now be across the street from Penn Station, but was moved, I think during the 19th century, out to Queens. So, they were sort of disinterred and shipped off.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, wow, they—yeah, they took them out from the ground. Yeah.

PETER HALLEY: Yeah. And eventually, somebody from that side of the family married a man named Rudolph Halley, who had come from Germany—I think Baden-Baden—actually, I might as well look it up on my laptop so I can get it right.

So, the fellow buried across from Penn Station was Benjamin Michael Davis, whose father was Michel Myer Davies, who was married to Jane S. Harris. And that was in the late 18th century. Sorry. I'll stop in one moment, let me just try one more time. Oh, there he is, Rudolph Halley—my great-grandfather—born in 1839. I was never able to discover anything about him except that he came from Germany. But reading about German-Jewish families in the 19th century, I think they sometimes sent for—at least brides, and maybe husbands. So, who knows, Rudolph might have been brought over in order to marry Henrietta Davis. So, I don't know. And my grandfather's name was Henry Halley.

Now, on both sides of my father's family, I have people who went to jail. My grandfather had seven or eight brothers and sisters. It was a large family. And things seemed to deteriorate after the parents died. And two of his sisters, who had gone into the real estate business in Harrison, New York, perpetrated a huge Madoff-like real estate fraud, ripping off helpless widows and older people out of their money. And one of them actually went to prison, and eventually a pardon was arranged that was signed by Alfred E. Smith, who—

[00:10:33]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Al Smith.

PETER HALLEY: —was the governor, and eventually ran for president.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right.

PETER HALLEY: Meanwhile, Henry—my grandfather—married my grandmother, Pauline Shipman, who was from a family that identified themselves as Austrian, and had come to the U.S. in the 19th century. Pauline's father was Benjamin Shipman—originally Schiffman—and her mother was Sarah Shipman. So, my grandfather Henry Halley grew up in Harlem. I identified the little townhouse they lived in, on something like West 118th Street. I believe my grandmother, Pauline Shipman, grew up in the Bronx. But anyway, Henry must have

been maybe ten years older than Pauline. He was a dentist. Pauline was about twenty years old. They got married, and it was kind of described as a Cinderella marriage, because she was from a working-class family. I think her father was a cutter in the garment trade, and Henry was from this old Jewish family. And according to my great-aunt, he had the first motorcar to come around to the neighborhood. I believe they were married in 1913, and their son was my father, Rudolph Halley—named for his grandfather. Henry, as a dentist, didn't serve in World War I. However, being a dentist when Spanish influenza rolled around in 1918, he died. So, he died when my father was five years old. And his mother never remarried.

Now, Pauline's side is pretty interesting. Her uncle was a Broadway playwright named Samuel Shipman, who wrote a bunch of comedies and farces that did very well in the 1920s. He was quite an eccentric figure on Broadway. I believe he must have been gay—he remained single and seemed to—well, let's say, be eccentric enough that he didn't conform to any social norms—anyway, I think he was gay. I think he was born in Austria as well. But despite that, he went to Columbia University and became a playwright. Now, after my grandfather died, Pauline, who was only about ten years younger than her uncle, went to work for him. And so, my father, during winters, would live with his grandparents in the Bronx—what is now the South Bronx. But in the summers, he would usually be at his Uncle Sam's house in Westchester, hanging out with people from the Broadway theater. So, in a way, he had a kind of extraordinary upbringing in which he was both exposed to a normal everyday life and this sort of glamorous, ephemeral world of interesting people.

[00:14:57]

Sam Shipman died in, I believe, about 1937. Meanwhile, my dad, Rudolph, was a real prodigy. He graduated from high school at age fourteen. He had to wait a year, but then went to Columbia and graduated at eighteen. And then, graduated from Columbia Law School at age twenty. Then, he went to work for a federal judge—I think first in New York. But by the time World War II rolled around, he ended up in Washington, and went to work as a counsel for the Truman Committee, which was investigating corruption in the war effort. It was a Senate committee—it was apparently highly effective. It elevated Harry Truman's reputation. And by the time the war ended, Rudolph had become chief counsel for the Truman Committee. Although Truman was, by that time, president. So, a few years passed, and my father returned to New York, and was in private practice as a lawyer. The firm was called Fulton, Walter, and Halley. And it was a bunch of guys who had worked for the government during the war. Then in 1951, he was appointed chief counsel for a Senate committee called the Kefauver Committee. The formal title was something like the Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in the United States. The FBI and J. Edgar Hoover said that organized crime, the Mafia, didn't exist as an organized activity in the U.S. But Kefauver, who also wanted to run for president—who was a senator from Tennessee—wanted to do an investigation that would establish the existence of the Mafia as an organized crime syndicate in the United States.

So, Rudolph was the chief counsel, and television had just been invented, and the committee hearings were on TV every day.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Wow. Prime time, or—?

PETER HALLEY: During the afternoon.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

PETER HALLEY: And it wasn't just in Washington, they would travel around the country. So, they had hearings in New York, and Chicago, and New Orleans, and a number of other cities. And my father, like a litigator, would prepare for these hearings, and be more or less in charge of questioning the mobsters. [Laughs.] And literally—he instantly became an overnight celebrity and national figure. I guess the most famous of these interviews was with the Mafia chieftain Frank Costello, who at one point refused to let the TV cameras show his face. So, instead, they focused on his hands. And he was wringing his hands as he spoke, which made quite an impression.

After the Kefauver hearings in 1951—that's when my parents met, during that time, and got married in 1951. As far as I know, they were set up on a blind date. But it was quite something, because my mom was getting married to the most famous guy around at that

moment. He returned to New York, there was a special election for president of the City Council—which is an office that no longer exists. He ran on the Liberal Party ticket, he got elected, and two years later, in 1953—the year I was born—he decided to run for mayor on the Liberal ticket, but lost. And then, he returned to private practice as a lawyer. And, by that time, we had moved to 160 East 48th Street on the corner of 48th Street and Third Avenue, where I grew up—and my mother lived for the rest of her life.

[00:20:14]

At the time, it was a kind of low-rise neighborhood. But while I was growing up, somebody told me, the zoning changed in the early '60s, and if you know that neighborhood now, it's steel-and-glass skyscrapers and office buildings. And so, during the time I was growing up, the character of the neighborhood changed a great deal. So then, in 1956, my father died—I'm going to read this to you. This is, again, from the biography. "Then, on October 16, 1956, my daddy suddenly fell seriously ill and went to the hospital. Mommy remained at his bedside constantly. My two grandmothers took care of Michael and me"—that's my younger brother—"with the help of our maid, Georgiana. Though my grams, who I loved dearly, took me down to the bus in the morning, met it again at noon, fed me, bathed me, and put me to bed, it was just not Mommy. I especially missed Mommy and Daddy when I woke up in the morning. This was a most trying and tragic time for me."

ANNETTE LEDDY: You don't remember this, however. This is a narrative written—

PETER HALLEY: I remember when my father was taken to the hospital, actually.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Even though you were only three?

PETER HALLEY: Yeah. I have a visual memory of it. He was taken out on a stretcher.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

PETER HALLEY: And he died in November, 1956. He had pancreatitis.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Pancreatic cancer?

PETER HALLEY: No, just pancreatitis. I don't know if it was cancer.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, I see.

PETER HALLEY: Nobody has ever said it was.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

PETER HALLEY: I think it could probably be treated nowadays. So, anyway—

ANNETTE LEDDY: That was completely without—I mean, there was no preparation for this? No history of this? He just suddenly fell ill?

PETER HALLEY: Well, he had uncontrolled high blood pressure. I guess I might describe whatever health problems he had was a result of stress or pressure, because as I told you, he was a very high achiever. And I don't know how much pressure he had from his mother to graduate from high school at fourteen, and so forth and so on.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Did you—is the memory of him being brought out on a stretcher your first memory of him?

PETER HALLEY: No, I have other memories of him. I remember riding in the back of a car when he was going to the airport. And I have a memory of being with him on the street. We must have been going to a parade, because I had a balloon and let go of it. And it was floating up to the sky and he was trying to reach for it, and couldn't. So, I have a few memories like that. And the summer before he died, we rented a house in Silvermine, Connecticut, and I remember being there.

ANNETTE LEDDY: What do you remember about being there?

PETER HALLEY: Well, it was quite a beautiful spot, and I remember a little stream going through the property, and I remember sitting on the grass, and I remember another child

coming to visit and being given a set of crayons with a crayon sharpener in the shape of a house.

[They laugh.]

PETER HALLEY: And I remember parts of the interior of the house.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That's kind of amazing, yeah.

PETER HALLEY: Actually, I remember once crying and getting in bed with my parents as well. Which was described here. After my brother was born, apparently I didn't want to sleep in my bed anymore. But my father's death was really difficult. He was only forty-three. My mother sort of had a breakdown, and she went to live with her friend uptown, who was a life-long family friend. But my grandmothers took care of Michael and me. He has no memory of my father. He was not even two. So, it was much different for him. And apparently, my mother didn't start to live at home again until January. And nobody told me my father died. So, it wasn't until January—I have been told—that I demanded to know what had happened to my father.

[00:25:18]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh.

PETER HALLEY: So, it could have been handled better.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Wow. And do you remember how you reacted?

PETER HALLEY: No. I don't remember asking.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

PETER HALLEY: But they definitely didn't know what to do about telling me about it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

PETER HALLEY: So, it—

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, your mother was gone for a few months, and your grandmothers took care of you. And then, your mother came back and she took charge again?

PETER HALLEY: Yes, in January. And, I mean, I remember her as being depressed a lot, growing up. And—well, let me start that part of the story next. There's somebody I shouldn't forget, though, before I go on with my childhood. One of my grandmother's other sisters, whose name was Ann Shipman, who became Ann Solomon, had a son named Carl Solomon, who is my father's first cousin. And

ANNETTE LEDDY: He was a poet.

PETER HALLEY: Yes, he was. That's touching that you remember him. He was much younger than my father. There was a huge age range with all those seven or eight siblings. And so, the other interesting member of my family is Carl Solomon. And he had met Allen Ginsberg in the mid-'50s, when they were both confined in a psychiatric hospital in Rockland. And the poem "Howl" is—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Is dedicated to him. [Laughs].

PETER HALLEY: —dedicated to Carl Solomon.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.] I know it well, yes.

PETER HALLEY: And Carl was very bright and very erratic. He had gone to France as a merchant marine sailor, and brought back books by Artaud and others. And I think that was one of his contributions to the Beat movement, that he was familiar with this French literature. Carl published two books of poetry, but he really was unstable and volatile. And Alan remained friends with Carl Solomon, but he lived a quiet life. He eventually became a book salesman at Korvettes department store, which was a discount department store in Manhattan.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I guess I always wondered if the first line, -you know—"I see the best minds of my generation destroyed by"—I always wonder if that is a description of the person it's dedicated to. I never knew.

PETER HALLEY: I think so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

PETER HALLEY: I mean, Carl was not so functional and didn't have the talent or the resources of some of the other Beat poets who were more successful in their work. But Carl did say that "Howl" being dedicated to him ruined his life. And Ginsberg, at some point, released an annotated "Howl," in which he addresses Carl.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, what was your relationship with Carl?

PETER HALLEY: So, Carl—it was, oh, a family relationship.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yes.

PETER HALLEY: Well, I would see him at holidays. Oh, I forgot about my other great-aunt and great-uncle, who were very important to me. You know, the family was a bit of a mess — I should mention that in 1957, a year after my father, my mother's only brother died in his late 30s of a heart attack. I think he had had rheumatic fever as a child. And I know Carl's father wasn't around. So, the most stable or successful members of my family were my great-aunt, Rose and her husband Aaron.

[00:30:13]

Her name was Rose Wyn and her husband's name was Aaron Wyn. So, we would usually go to their house for Thanksgiving and other occasions, as well. The family members—different combinations of family members would gather—it would be my Aunt Rose and Uncle Aaron, my grandmother Pauline, my great aunt Ann, who was Carl's mother, and Carl. Sometimes my great-uncles. So it was always a smattering of Rose's brothers and sisters. And Carl would often get into a fight with someone, or feel he had been insulted, and make a scene. And somebody would burst into tears.

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PETER HALLEY: I tend to think Carl had some kind of borderline personality disorder. He was very volatile. But when I went to Yale, I once took him to a Harvard-Yale game, which he enjoyed. I was never close to him, but I certainly saw him around a lot, growing up.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And that model of someone who is a poet and a little bit mad, I mean, how did that affect you growing up? I mean, did you take it as a model, or did you take it as an object lesson? Like a warning? How did you feel about that?

PETER HALLEY: Well, by the time I knew who he was, I thought he was interesting. And I think I grew up in a family that had very tolerant values. Neither of my parents were religious, at all. But my mom's family was Polish Catholic. My father's family was Jewish. I really had no idea that Poles could be anti-Semitic, or that there was any tension between Catholics and Jews. I forgot to mention my father was married twice—or, technically, three times. But my grandmother, Pauline, lived on the West Side with my father's first wife's mother. They were roommates. So, even though the couple was divorced, the two mothers were still chums.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.] That's kind of sweet.

PETER HALLEY: So, growing up in Manhattan with a kind of culturally-oriented family, I sort of took it all in.

Rose was one of my grandmother's youngest sisters. Uncle Aaron—he was also Jewish, from a Russian Jewish family. And as a young man, I think, he wanted to be a poet. But, he and Aunt Rose started a publishing company in 1928. And the first thing they published were pulp magazines and then comic books. And during the 1940s, they had a whole range of comic books, dealing with crime, horror stories, the war—and Rose was in charge of the romance comics. And all these comics had marvelous art. I've looked into it a little bit, some of the artists they commissioned would later become known as fine artists. But in any case,

they were constantly commissioning visual artworks. Then, after the war, when the U.S. Congress passed the new comic code—which was intended to clean up the comics and remove all the violence and sexuality from them—they went into paperback book publishing. It was called Ace Books. And their biggest contribution was starting in the mid-'50s they were publishing a lot of science fiction. And they were the first ones to publish a whole range of science fiction authors. And—let me see if I can give you those names. They were the first to publish Philip K. Dick—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Wow.

PETER HALLEY: Samuel R. Delaney, Ursula K. Le Guin—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Wow.

PETER HALLEY: Some of the other names I don't know. Leigh Brackett, Gordon Dixon, Nick Boddie Williams, James White, Avram Davidson. It was quite a phenomenon.

[00:05:12]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

PETER HALLEY: This started in 1955, when they published Philip K. Dick's *Solar Lottery*. So, that was quite extraordinary. I don't think they ever knew the significance of what they were doing. But they were very lively people. And then, the other great story is that, in 1965, they found out that there was a copyright loophole, and that J. R. R. Tolkien had never copyrighted the paperback rights for *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

PETER HALLEY: So, they published it. They were immediately shut down, but I think that if they hadn't done that *The Lord of the Rings* would never have been published in paperback because Tolkien was against paperback books and the '60s would never have happened.

[They laugh.]

PETER HALLEY: And then, just to move ahead a little bit, Aaron eventually retired from publishing. Rose had been a big part of the business, but not when I was growing up. And he became a painter at about age sixty. He had a home studio—above his garage in his home in Larchmont, New York, and he made colorful geometric abstract paintings, very much in tune with the times. This was the second half of the '60s. They're pretty good.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did you like them when you were a child and you saw them?

PETER HALLEY: Like them—?

ANNETTE LEDDY: When you were a child and you saw those paintings, how did you feel about them?

PETER HALLEY: Well, by that time, I wasn't really a child. I guess, if he started around 1965, I would have already been 12 or 13. Yeah, I liked seeing them at his house. But abstract art was something—I really grew up with abstraction and modernist art—since I grew up in Manhattan. But when we get to the next part of the story— I began painting in his studio after he died in November 1967. So, that had a big effect on my life.

So, I guess we're back to the men in my family dying.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, could you just kind of describe your family home? I mean, the inside of the apartment, and what it felt like, and what was on the walls, and that kind of thing?

PETER HALLEY: Oh, I'd be happy to. It was a small two-bedroom apartment in a pre-war building called the Buchanan, which was made of brown brick, and the detailing was sort of like Neoclassical British architecture. I shared a small bedroom with my brother. The furniture in the apartment, I believe, had been brought over from a previous place where my parents had lived. I think the furniture was from a residential hotel where they had lived so it was sort of 1950s New-York-hotel historicist furniture. I still have a lot of it, actually. And so, the apartment had a kind of old-fashioned feeling. Actually, when I watched that series—I forget which network did it—about the young woman who becomes a comedian.

ANNETTE LEDDY: *The Marvelous*—

PETER HALLEY: —*Mrs. Maisel*. The set design in that series was uncanny to me. Their home was much grander, but the furniture was almost exactly the same as where I grew up. And my family became—or my mom became progressively poorer and poorer, so we seldom had anything new. And also, my mother was a timid or phobic person, so we could—she could never move, and had trouble buying anything new. The big purchase I remember from childhood was two twin beds for me and my brother. I remember staining the unfinished wood on the beds for her.

[00:10:18]

And the worst part about the apartment is it only looked out at other windows. It had no street view. The Buchanan had a courtyard, so the windows looked onto the courtyard and across to other apartments. And it was dark. When I grew up, I could barely stand being there. It made me claustrophobic and uncomfortable.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I mean, was it also because—did your mother ever come out of this depression?

PETER HALLEY: Yeah, she did. By the time I went to boarding school, she began again to work as a registered nurse. And actually, by the time I was nine or ten, she had a boyfriend. She never remarried. And then, later on, she had a second long-term boyfriend who was one of my father's former partners in his law firm. And they had a very nice relationship. And, I mean, it was a long period of adjustment for my mother, because with my father, they were at the center of all this attention. And with him gone, only a few people from their circle of friends stuck around.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right.

PETER HALLEY: One of them was a woman named Ellie Schachtel, who died this year in her late 90s, who was my mom's best friend. And they lived on Park Avenue. It was a kind of wealthy, old-line Jewish family. And they also had a big influence on my childhood. She and her husband, Irving Schachtel.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I mean, it sounds like, even though there's this sort of tragedy at the core of your childhood, that—what I'm getting from your descriptions is that there was this very supportive extended family and friends network that kind of helped to sustain you through this.

PETER HALLEY: Well, the way I usually look at it is, I had a kind of charmed life until I was three years old. My father had been married previously, and I had an older half-brother and half-sister, who were, I think, eight and ten years older than me. They got along very well with my mother. My father included them in everything. So, in a way, not only was I a first-born child, but on the other hand, I had this older brother and sister, who I think really doted on me. So, I imagine that in the first three years of my life I was sort of king of the hill. And then—[laughs]—things took a turn for the worst.

ANNETTE LEDDY: What about your brother Michael? Did you have—what kind of relationship did you have with him?

PETER HALLEY: We were very close growing up, by necessity, more or less. But by the time we went to boarding school, we sort of split into two different directions. And I haven't been on speaking terms with him for years. He's a very volatile guy, and I find it difficult to be around him.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Is he an artist, also? Or no.

PETER HALLEY: No. He was a kind of prodigy, too. He had a great deal of trouble in high school. Then he went to four different colleges in four years, transferring up each year, and eventually graduating from Cornell. And then, he went to get a PhD in French Studies at Berkeley. He finished that in record time. Then, when he couldn't get a teaching job right away, he joined the Peace Corps. But he only lasted six months. And then he applied to study at the New York Psychiatric Institute. He was the first non-MD to ever be admitted, but he didn't go there. But then, he went to Harvard Law School, and completed that. He became a lawyer, but has had unstable working relationships and a difficult life since then.

[00:15:41]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay, I'd just like to get a sense of the school situation. So, in elementary school, what was that like? Where did you go and what was that experience like?

PETER HALLEY: Well, I went to nursery school at Temple Emanu-el Nursery School. And— [laughs]— my mom kept the report that they wrote when I applied to Hunter College Elementary School. There's one part that I love. It says, "Peter's interest in art materials did not have the characteristics of his age group. He only created representations of real things out of clay. An airplane, a body of clay, macaroni for wings, and a toothpick and two buttons for wheels. A tree with a nest for birds, and a hollow in the trunk for squirrels. He did not mush with messy materials. He was more concerned at achieving forms that looked like real objects. They did. He did not care to paint at the easel. I often wondered if he kept away because he was not interested in experimenting with paints, smearing, mashing, mixing, et cetera. I felt that he would probably want to paint something recognizable and knew he was unable to do it. Showed a definite preference for working with small delicate art materials, and laboring over his work until he achieves the result he wanted." I don't know quite what that says, but—

ANNETTE LEDDY: She acts like that's something negative, right? I mean, why is it necessary—there's a value judgment applied to this.

PETER HALLEY: Oh, no, I thought this was positive.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, really? Maybe—it sounds like she's saying you didn't want to do these things that the other kids wanted to do.

PETER HALLEY: I'm sure that was true.

[They laugh.]

ANNETTE LEDDY: So you're thinking she's not saying that's negative. I see.

PETER HALLEY: Well, it said that I didn't have the characteristics of my age group.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, so that's a compliment.

PETER HALLEY: I believe so.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

PETER HALLEY: In other words, I wasn't just messing around. I had an idea of what I wanted to get done.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see. I think it's harder because you're reading it, so maybe it's a little harder to understand the implications.

PETER HALLEY: Well, anyway, first I went to Temple Emanu-el Nursery School. And then, I guess after my father died my mother had me apply to Hunter College Elementary School, which is this elementary school for intellectually gifted kids, run by Hunter College's Education program.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

PETER HALLEY: So, I just turned four in kindergarten. And there was a small group of us who were, apparently, particularly bright, who they decided to start in first grade early. So, I started first grade when I was five. And that sort of went all right, but then, someone in charge figured out it wasn't working, and so that whole group repeated third grade. I have positive memories of Hunter College Elementary School. I think it was an interesting mix of bright middle-class and upper-middle-class kids. One father was first violinist for the New York Philharmonic. And I remember another boy who lived in the Ansonia apartment building on Broadway—one of those marvelous, huge apartment buildings built at the beginning of the 20th century. But my brother had gone to St. Bernard's, a private school on the Upper East Side at the urging of this family friend, Ellie Schachtel. So, when there was an opening at St. Bernard's in the middle of fourth grade, I transferred to St. Bernard's School, where I stayed through eighth grade. And that was a real culture shock.

[00:20:24]

Most of the kids there were from very wealthy Upper East Side families, and the culture of the school was very British. Several of the teachers were English -- they taught British history, they taught Latin, French. I did very well there, academically. My family was living down at 48th Street and Third Avenue, and we didn't have a house on Long Island, and we didn't go skiing. So, I was sort of an outsider. And at the same time—by the time I was 10 years old—I was going to summer camp at a YMCA camp near Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, called Camp Kresge, with entirely local working-class kids. I stayed for eight weeks during the summer; most of the other families could only afford to send their kids for two weeks. So, they were people with very limited means. So, even from childhood, I was exposed, at the same time, to this Upper East Side New York elite, and very down-to-earth working people.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And the middle-class when you were at Hunter.

PETER HALLEY: Yes. Up until that point.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you see this as a positive thing, correct? Yes.

PETER HALLEY: I do. Absolutely. I guess Marx said that artists, or creative people, fall between the cracks in the class structure. And I do feel that being exposed to different kinds of people during my childhood was helpful to me.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Which group did you feel the most comfortable with?

PETER HALLEY: Well, it's a mix. You know, I continue to feel quite at ease and relaxed among working-class men, particularly. It's a kind of cultural attitude I understand, or feel at ease with. And yet, at the same time—well, I guess most of my friends don't come from wealthy backgrounds, a lot of them come from families who are in the professions. Of course, being an artist, most of my friends are artists. But I do tend to be friends with people from New York City.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, there's a kind of geographical—

PETER HALLEY: Somewhat.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so, this description of you making these models from clay, and being really intent on making them. Would you say that characterized your approach to art throughout your childhood?

PETER HALLEY: Well, I can't say I was much interested in art. As a small child, I was very involved with Lego. And so, I built a lot of things.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.] I actually had that idea as a question in my mind.

PETER HALLEY: I liked building things and I liked organizing things. St. Bernard's had a good art program. The head of it was named Andrew Lukach, who also taught at the Art Students League. In eighth grade we had an assignment to design a house, and I built a model of a house with a center courtyard. It was a square house, with a square courtyard in the middle, which is what I'm still painting. So, that seems to indicate some kind of psychological predisposition.

[00:25:01]

At Hunter and growing up around New York—the art I remember was abstract. I remember being in the halls of Hunter and seeing small-scale, painterly abstractions that sort of looked like Jackson Pollocks on the wall. So I really grew up with contemporary art.

ANNETTE LEDDY: In your home, too?

PETER HALLEY: Oh, no. The only art in my home was some satirical cartoons featuring my father. One was by Rube Goldberg, in which he credited Rudolph Halley with giving television an excuse for being invented. And there was also a caricature of Uncle Sam, who had wild red hair, apparently. And another was a cartoon of my father—who had horn-rimmed glasses, and a briefcase, and a bow tie—and he was with two little boys. Two dressed as cowboys, and a little boy dressed with the glasses and the briefcase. They were

out for Halloween, so the caption went, "He's the Lone Ranger, and I'm Hopalong Cassidy, and he's Rudolph Halley," as if he was the Halloween costume for the year. And along with that, three engravings of Paris street scenes in nice frames. Oh, and a—[laughs]—I have a pretty good memory—a kind of painting of a ballerina that was terrible, and a painting of my mother, which wasn't very good either.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And do you remember your first artwork?

PETER HALLEY: Well, yes, I have my first painting, which I did in Uncle Aaron's studio. I have several of them. And, from the start, they were dealing with abstract forms and geometric forms. I've never had any desire to paint representationally.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, wait a minute, that's when you're a teenager already, right? That first art.

PETER HALLEY: Right.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But what I'm wondering is—so, you weren't especially interested in art as a child. What was the turning point where you became interested in it?

PETER HALLEY: Well, I guess when I went to Andover. As a child I guess I assumed I was going to become a lawyer. But I always liked making things and building things, like with the Lego.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh.

PETER HALLEY: But I remember once telling my grandmother that I'd become an architect. And becoming an artist was really unexpected. But when I went to Andover, the people I made friends with immediately had an interest in the visual arts and music. And I began drawing. And, I guess the summer after ninth grade I began painting in Uncle Aaron's studio. So, I would have been fifteen at that point. Or, about to be fifteen.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, your family went up there for the summer, or you just—?

PETER HALLEY: Well, no, just for weekends. It was a half-an-hour on the train from Grand Central Station.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, it was like your first studio, in a way. You went up there and—[laughs]—right.

PETER HALLEY: Yes. Aunt Rose was very comfortable with either me or my brother visiting—sometimes my mother would go—but we would go on our own, at this point. And sometimes—I remember a couple of times staying up all night painting in the studio. And the way I put it is, I've often heard of people who pick up the guitar, or the drums, or the saxophone, and they know it's for them. And I think that's what painting was like for me.

[00:30:06]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you just knew, also, the kind of painting you wanted to do from the beginning. That it was this geometric abstraction.

PETER HALLEY: Well, I didn't know I knew it, but — I didn't consider anything else.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so, were you able to continue doing this at school, like at Andover?

PETER HALLEY: Yeah, I mean, Andover was very important to me. In sophomore year, they had a visual arts program for all students. And you worked with photography, and in two dimensions, and three dimensions. It actually didn't include painting, which was probably just as well. And Andover was terrific in those years. Several—

[END OF TRACK halley21_1of3_sd_track02_m.]

PETER HALLEY: —of the faculty had gone to Yale in the Albers era, and —their approach to art education was kind of post-Bauhaus. So, a lot of the assignments were Bauhaus exercises.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, perfect.

PETER HALLEY: It was perfect for me, anyway. And then—in my senior year, I also took a painting course, which was actually at Abbot Academy, the boarding school for girls next door, and outside of the Andover art program. And it was taught by a wonderful artist named Virginia Powell. And, basically, you could do whatever you wanted, and I was sort of doing Color Field paintings while my colleagues were doing more figurative things.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And were you aware of the Color Field school, and did you go to see their paintings, and that kind of thing?

PETER HALLEY: I began to be. Phillips Academy has an art museum, the Addison Gallery. And the Addison Gallery had an art library, and I remember poring through books there. And I saw a de Kooning show when I was about fifteen at the Whitney. It was quite fortuitous, because I believe, in 1969, I saw Frank Stella's retrospective at MoMA, and I also saw Barnett Newman's retrospective at MoMA. And one was '69 and one was '71, I can't remember which. And I didn't really understand Barnett Newman, but one of the young teaching fellows at Andover, whose name was Robert Horvitz—who was doing sort of conceptual pieces with ink on paper—assured me of Newman's importance, and that kept me focused on it.

And it was not inconsiderable to me that Frank Stella, in his late 30s, who had gone to Phillips Academy, was having this big show at the Museum of Modern Art. It certainly made it seem possible to pursue a career as an artist. But it was a kind of counterculture era, and my main attraction was to artists like Barnett Newman, Georgia O'Keefe, Kenneth Noland. The idea of that kind of liquidity of paint, or sort of organic subject matter that had something to do with the natural appealed to me. And I remember I knew about Bennington, and artists like Noland, or Anthony Caro, as being up there. So, it seemed that there was art in other places besides New York City.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And so, you seemed to have been very focused on academics, and then on art, but what about your relationships with peers, or social—you were very serious, I get the feeling, but were there other things that were like—?

PETER HALLEY: Well, yeah. I feel I was at—well, I'd like to go back just a bit.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, yeah.

PETER HALLEY: St. Bernard's was great, because studying Latin, and French, and getting a very solid foundation in math and English and stuff was very important to me. I always got very high grades. I feel fortunate that I was academically gifted. And Andover is also very important to me because French classes were modernist literature, English classes were modernist literature, so I have vague memories of reading E.E. Cummings, and in French class reading Camus's *The Stranger*. I had a real exposure to a range of modernist literature. There was also a weekly film program. Students were beginning to be interested in film, so I was also exposed to progressive developments in filmmaking.

[00:05:08]

But being at Andover between '67 and '71 was really at the height of the counterculture. And the Vietnam War was going on, and universities were going on strike. And drugs were appearing, and by tenth grade I smoked marijuana and hashish, and had taken LSD several times. Interestingly enough, I didn't drink until a couple of years afterwards. The culture was much more about experimental drugs. And my friends were engaged in the same kind of experimentation. And of course, there was also rock music, which was very important to me. And when I was in tenth grade, Andover elected its class presidents, and all three class presidents elected that year were African American. In fact, *The New York Times* wrote it up. I remember all of them. They were all extraordinary guys, but I also felt that the students were trying to make a statement about leadership, and who they felt should represent them. And so, it was quite an exciting time. And the school completely changed during those four years, from coat and tie, and chapel, and number grades, to—eventually, they got rid of grades, and changed the dress code, and it was—well, interesting, or engaging.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And the class issues that had been at St. Bernard's were not there?

PETER HALLEY: Well, it's interesting, because some of the kids were from elite backgrounds. But it didn't seem to matter. Maybe that's always true in high school. But I actually went to high school with Jeb Bush, and a guy named Link Chafee, who became governor of Rhode

Island. I must say, in general, Andover was a very meritocratic atmosphere. So, it didn't really matter.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

PETER HALLEY: I'd like to get this into the interview, just for the record. The worst thing that could happen at Andover was—and I feel sorry for these kids—it was really bad if you were gay, because you weren't allowed to be gay. And if anybody found out you were gay, I guess you would have been kicked out, and of course, subject to ridicule. And, of course, things are much better now. But some of the boys I was close to were gay, or turned out to be gay, or came out as gay, I guess I should say. And looking back at it, I've realized how difficult that was. You could be anything else, but not gay.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what about your teachers there? Is there one in particular who—?

PETER HALLEY: Not so much. But they were all terrific. And the faculty was outstanding, but I guess I tend not to attach myself to teachers. You know, I've always been sort of self-motivated. So, while I remember a bunch of them fondly, I don't remember any of them so much as a mentor.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

PETER HALLEY: And a couple of my closest friends were artists, but I did feel—that my interests were a little bit different than theirs, because I was the only one who was so vitally interested in what was going on in contemporary art. And I remember by senior year—I discovered Andy Warhol. That was very important to me.

[00:10:15]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And were the other kids also interested in him?

PETER HALLEY: Not really. One of my friends said, "Oh, I don't like his work. The way he does his silk screens, it's so sloppy. He can't do it right."

[They laugh.]

PETER HALLEY: So, they weren't quite as attuned to the signifiers as I was.

The one thing, looking back, that I find interesting, is that at that time, what I knew about what was going on, was Color Field painting. And, at that time, Jules Olitski was also a big deal. I had no inkling that Minimalism had even existed until I got to Yale. And it was the sort of heyday of Minimalism, but I think it really hadn't quite gotten—on the radar of a wider public.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, Bruce Nauman was like—you had never heard of him, kind of thing?

PETER HALLEY: Well, I don't know how much he had exhibited. No, I'd never heard of him. I'd never heard of Donald Judd, or Robert Morris—that didn't happen until I got to Yale.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, do you want to stop here?

PETER HALLEY: Oh, sure. Wow.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Or is there more that you have to say about the before-college period? I guess we have a little time.

PETER HALLEY: Let me just think back. You know, my head's spinning with a lot of memories, but I think we covered it really well.

ANNETTE LEDDY: It feels like a very full account to me.

PETER HALLEY: One detail I remember is—in the visual arts class at Phillips Academy, they did show *Painters Painting*. Do you know that film by Emile de Antonio? It was a series of interviews with New York artists, including Jasper Johns, Frank Stella, Andy Warhol, and I forget who else. But it made a big impression on me. It's kind of a marvelous movie.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You see them mixing the paint, and—?

PETER HALLEY: No, no, nobody painted.

[They laugh.]

PETER HALLEY: They just talk. But it's one of Andy Warhol's classic monosyllabic interviews.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, that's funny. I don't know that one. Okay.

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[Audio break.]

PETER HALLEY: Well, I told you about my great aunt, who went to jail for real estate fraud, but I don't want to forget my great uncle on Pauline's side, because on both my paternal grandfather's side and my grandmother's side, somebody went to jail. So, one of her other brothers was Uncle Dave. And Uncle Dave was up in the Bronx, and he was kind of a guy from the neighborhood. And he smoked a cigar, and he wasn't particularly successful. I think one of the things he did was run errands for the local mobsters. [Laughs.] So, one day, one of them asked him to bring a package over to New Jersey, in his car. One of his brake lights was out, so he's stopped by the cops, and they discovered in the backseat that the package contained pornographic movies. So, Uncle Dave was convicted of transporting pornography over state lines, and he also went to prison.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay.

PETER HALLEY: I love that story.

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ANNETTE LEDDY: Great. This is Annette Leddy interviewing Peter Halley in New York City on October 1, 2021, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. All right, let's talk about Yale.

PETER HALLEY: Before we get started with Yale, just a couple items about finishing my high school experience. Besides painting, I was interested in media, and I was a programming director of the school radio station. So, that sort of impacts on my later experience with *index magazine*. And in my senior year, there was also a semester in Mexico, and I'd never been abroad before. They sent us to an industrial city in Mexico named León. The course was called—in masculinist terms—"Man and Society." And the experience there was based on reading about Mexican culture and literature, and the sociology of Mexico. So, it was certainly an early exposure, on my part, to the kind of sociological thinking that probably led me to get interested in people like Foucault and Baudrillard later on.

So, when I graduated high school—in retrospect, I find this remarkable—I had full scholarships to Brown, Harvard, and Yale. And somehow, I wanted to go to Harvard, but they didn't have an art department—

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

PETER HALLEY: —and I was extraordinarily ignorant of what went on at the various colleges. But I signed up to go to Yale. It was, by and large, difficult experience for me. Yale had become somewhat conservative in its choice of students after the 1960s. The art department had certainly become conservative.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So who was teaching there, then?

PETER HALLEY: Well, the dean was William Bailey. And the person who seemed to rule the undergraduate program was named Bernard Chaet—and they were both realist painters. And even though Yale has a famous MFA program, in fact, the undergraduate art major is a little bit of a handmaiden to the graduate program. But I began taking art courses, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what were the—was it sort of foundation courses in drawing?

PETER HALLEY: Beginning drawing, and in my sophomore year, beginning painting, which was a whole-year course. That didn't go very well. The teacher was Bernard Chaet, this

realist painter. They wanted us to paint still lifes and other exercises like that. I actually had a studio off campus—I rented a little room in this old 19th-century factory in New Haven, where some of the grad students and a few local artists had studios. And, meanwhile, I was sort of doing my own work in that space on weekends. And characteristically, at the time, I was pouring paint and staining it, and very interested in process.

So, let me see what happened. During the winter term, I went to New Orleans for Mardi Gras, which was a little bit against the rules, because I missed a week of classes. But I had a wonderful time and fell in love with the city. And I think, at that point, I dropped the beginning painting course, because it just was not working out. Chaet didn't like me—some of the things he said were dismissive and meant to be insulting. I remember he once said, "This is painted like an old lady," whatever that means. But it wasn't intended as—[laughs]—constructive criticism. And so, I dropped the course.

[00:05:08]

Then, as a result of my overall discontent, I decided to take a year off, and actually moved to New Orleans in —was it the fall of '72? So, I entered Yale in '71, sophomore year was the fall of—yeah, fall of '73. And found an apartment—I had a friend from Andover who had gone there. He had gone to study in Germany, I took over his apartment in the Garden District—a kind of run-down 19th-century building—and first I worked in a restaurant, and then I worked as a house painter during that year. It was really a wonderful experience for me. It was a really immersive exposure to a culture completely different than that I'd grown up with in the Northeast. And, I mean, it was akin to—for somebody else—going to Europe or Latin America. New Orleans—what I came away with is it has a distinctly anti-modernist ideology. Anything new or contemporary was really greeted with suspicion. Outsiders were greeted with suspicion, if you weren't born there. It had a really vibrant African-American culture, which it's known for. It's by and large a Catholic city, which gave it a certain feeling. And I made friends there with other guys who worked at the restaurant where I worked. And it was a very exciting year for me. I also took a drawing course at the University of New Orleans during the spring term, which I also enjoyed.

So, I went back to Yale—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, how was that different from the drawing course at Yale?

PETER HALLEY: Well, it wasn't much different. Let me think. I did okay with beginning drawing, actually. And I remember now, during my year in New Orleans, I had sort of fallen in love with Matisse as a kind of role model. And because this traditional painter, Chaet, had given me such a hard time, I was determined to—I shouldn't say learn—master drawing the figure. So, I began to do figure drawings in charcoal that were very Matisse-y. I still have a bunch of them. I think they're rather nice. And so, I sort of enjoyed that aspect of taking that drawing class. Plus, being in a school atmosphere.

At the same time, I was making work based on certain branches of conceptualism. During my sophomore year at Yale, I saw this Post-Minimalist show at the Yale Art Gallery that included Eva Hesse, Richard Serra, probably Keith Sonnier. By that time I'd seen the work of Lynda Benglis. These aren't really conceptualists. I'd also seen work at Sonnabend Gallery, like Gilbert & George, William Wegman, Mel Bochner. And so, the strategies I was experimenting with in New Orleans were very much based on those artists. I didn't use any traditional art supplies. I used mostly paper and poster paint from the local K&B drug store, and stickers, things like foil stars. And they tended to be geometric, or systematic in nature, and involved with trying to form a certain symbolism. But it was very much about taking these basic materials and seeing what kind of order I could bring to them, based on trying to amalgamate all those influences, plus I had a little bit of Matisse hedonism which I was sort of picking up from the environment in New Orleans. It was so green, and so bright, and generally so colorful that it did seem like a kind of Garden of Eden to me. Especially as somebody coming from New York.

[00:10:47]

So then, I remember, I applied to transfer to Tulane, but wasn't admitted. I applied more or less on a lark, and decided the easiest route for me would be to go back to Yale. And I actually discovered, because I had advanced placement credits, I would only have to go back for a year and a half. And I arrived back, and at that point, I discovered you had to

apply for the art major. And they rejected me, based on my portfolio of what I had done during my year off. So, they wouldn't let me major in art.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Unbelievable.

PETER HALLEY: Yeah, it was quite a disappointment.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, the Mangolds weren't there at that time?

PETER HALLEY: Pardon me?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Like Sylvia Mangold, those people weren't there yet?

PETER HALLEY: They only taught in the graduate school.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, they were there, but they were in graduate. I see.

PETER HALLEY: The full-time faculty—well, some part-timers—were in charge of teaching undergraduates.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see. And they were kind of the old-timers.

PETER HALLEY: Well, those two were. At the time, Robert Reed was a young faculty member, who was to be on the faculty for over forty years, and later became my colleague. But I didn't study with him. But really, nobody reached out, or nobody seemed very sympathetic. It was a little bit of bad luck because the painting program was very conservative. Actually, sophomore year I got to know a bunch of grad students. I'd go drink beer with them. And they were very unhappy. It was a very hierarchical, authoritarian place. People burst into tears in critiques. It was very harsh.

However, if I had been a sculptor, it would have been a lot better. The two programs were completely separate. Sculpture was run by an artist named David von Schlegell, who was very open-minded. They had studio visits from people like Robert Morris, and so forth. And they were all—all the graduate students in sculpture were doing work that was attuned to sort of more intelligent developments and contemporary art. But I didn't manage to become a sculpture major.

Anyway, I continued to take some art courses, more or less happily, and work on my own work. I ended up majoring in art history, and wrote my senior thesis on Matisse and Matisse's work up until about 1915. His thematic paintings, such as *Music*, and *The Dance*, and *The Red Studio*, and so forth. I studied with an art historian named Edward Fry, who was very smart, and rigorous, and quite eccentric. I definitely enjoyed my exposure to the Yale art history program, which at the time—had some important figures teaching there. —It was fun for me because they were all a bit eccentric and a bit kooky, as you would sort of expect an art history professor to be—at least in those days. [Laughs.] So, I enjoyed that. I remember a man named Sheldon Nodelman. He did contemporary art and Roman sculpture.

[They laugh.]

PETER HALLEY: And I also took several courses in avant-garde film. And I'm having trouble remembering the name of the guy who taught that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: What about your peers there? Did you have fellow students who you really could talk with about painting, and kind of saw eye-to-eye with?

[00:15:03]

PETER HALLEY: Not so much. I didn't really have much a community there. Just before I left New Orleans, I had fallen in love. So, I had a girlfriend in New Orleans, so I was very much looking forward to going back there during the summer, after I finished with Yale. And I had friends in New Orleans. I had some relationships with people at Yale. I had friends in New York, from Andover, who I talked about contemporary art with. Among the people who went to Yale in my class, or the class above, or below, are Chris Martin, the painter, who I knew a little bit there. He also had a very hard time there. But we knew each other there. There was an artist named Frank Moore—he was sort of the star of that art school class. He was very facile, did things in figuration—at Yale they had something called the "Scholar of the House," which, in senior year, you could basically do whatever you wanted. So, for an artist, full-time

studio time. So, he was awarded that. In contrast—[laughs]—to my situation. And I also was close friends with a woman named Lisa Hein—who is still active as an installation artist, in conjunction with her partner.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And may I ask, why did you not go to art school?

PETER HALLEY: Well, I guess—I still sort of feel this way—that as an artist, I think I was better off getting a liberal arts education. And many of the artists I admire also did that. I don't know if this is relevant or not, but when I was teaching at Yale ten or fifteen years ago, and in touch with more young artists, and more artists in general, I also noticed a lot of African-American artists went to college as opposed to art school. And many of the artists that I admire, like Barnett Newman, or Mark Rothko, didn't go to art school either.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That was kind of before the surge in art schools, right?

PETER HALLEY: Well, yes. I mean, Frank Stella didn't go to art school. I mean, to me, to some extent, becoming an artist is a kind of existential choice, not based on the idea that, "I don't know if I actually could do anything else." But presumably, by going to college, the different options for intellectual pursuits were laid out in front of me, whether it was technology, literature, law, or medicine, et cetera. And one chooses to be an artist.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right. Right; and, of course, you had great academic preparation. So, it's a different—I mean, a lot of times—I don't know; I mean, this is a whole separate discussion anyway.

PETER HALLEY: Well, I'm a real autodidact, but I did take basic courses in almost everything. Sociology, philosophy, I took several courses in literature, I even studied Italian. So, I actually think it did me a lot of good.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You know, I think that during that period it might have just been a more stimulating context to be at some place like CalArts, or some place that would have been more about the contemporary period.

PETER HALLEY: Well, you know, I'd never heard of CalArts.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

PETER HALLEY: I didn't know it existed. I don't think I knew that RISD existed. The college advising at Andover, it really never came up. So—I mean, I knew you could major in art at college. I guess I should say that I really didn't know what the art school option would be.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, well, it definitely would have been less academically stimulating, probably. But maybe just more in tune with what was going on in the art world, that's all.

[00:20:06]

PETER HALLEY: Well, it certainly would have been interesting to go to CalArts in those years. Many interesting artists did. But—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right, it wasn't on the radar. Yeah.

PETER HALLEY: It's interesting.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Or, like you said, you got into Brown. Like, there was that option where you could go to Brown—

PETER HALLEY: I know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —and RISD at the same time.

PETER HALLEY: I know.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But anyway, it doesn't seem to have harmed you, however miserable an experience it was.

PETER HALLEY: It was a depressing time in New Haven. The early '70s was the beginning of the oil crisis; the Northeast—remember, New York goes bankrupt in '75. The whole region

seemed sort of depressed and decrepit. And there's a certain romance in that. It wasn't all that upbeat.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right, right. You're saying, it's not just that you had a bad time at Yale, it's that the world, in general was—

PETER HALLEY: The Northeast was certainly not the happiest place. And New Haven, in particular, has never been that happy a place.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

PETER HALLEY: I mean, there was quite a bit of crime; at least one student was murdered. And it was considered dangerous. And the only bookstore was the Yale bookstore. The town had—nowadays you can get an espresso, or go to a bookstore in New Haven. But back then it was really pizza parlors, and bars, and the atmosphere was not urbane. I would go to New York frequently, which is part of Yale's appeal—in retrospect. I'm not exactly sure how I ended up at Yale, but I think the message to me was it had—I knew it had an established art program that was associated with Josef Albers.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right. And now, of course, you think of it as certainly one of the more stimulating art schools you can go to. So, I mean, it just seems like a funny transition period when you were there.

PETER HALLEY: It lasted a long time. I mean, when I returned there as director, I felt that nothing had changed.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Really? Because that was in—we're jumping ahead—but that was in 2005, right?

PETER HALLEY: 2002.

ANNETTE LEDDY: 2002. So, that's amazing to hear that. But we'll get to that. All right, so, let me ask you this question: when you graduated, did you feel like you were an artist?

PETER HALLEY: Oh, I felt like an artist when I got there.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, you always felt from the time you had moved into your uncle's studio and started painting in high school, you had this sense of yourself as an artist.

PETER HALLEY: Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And it never was disrupted by anything?

PETER HALLEY: No. I really had a strong desire to make things. And it's almost like they said in that kindergarten report, "to make things purposefully." At each stage of my life, I felt, whatever I was making, I was making for a reason. I was exploring something that made sense to me. And it was a—a means of gaining some kind of self-knowledge about how I thought, or why I was doing what I was doing. But also, I've always felt that whatever I was making had some kind of meaning iconographically. That I was making things that made sense.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did you—had you already begun formulating your ideas about abstraction, relative to 20th-century modernism? Or did that happen later, like, more in the '80s?

PETER HALLEY: Well, yeah, if we move ahead to the last year I was at Yale—I was somewhat in tune with things going on in other parts of the art world. And I was very interested in the relationship between geometric abstraction and non-Western art. And I was looking at Islamic art, West African textiles, Native American art, folk traditions. And it seemed to me that geometry and color was used in all those traditions, to express rhythms of nature, the structure of nature, something about the natural world or the metaphysical world, through the language of geometry and color.

[00:25:52]

And I do feel that that was the ideology of the time. Certainly, first-generation feminism, and many artists seemed to be saying that Western culture was defunct at the time, and that we

had to look towards non-Western sources to find something that had any kind of integrity or coherence.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But in a sense, that had been happening—Picasso had done that, too, and so it wasn't—how was that new?

PETER HALLEY: Well, he wasn't—let me expand. I'm having trouble thinking of a specific example. But this was the era of Pattern and Decoration, and certainly feminist use of patterning. And this was more about folk traditions. Picasso was about the sort of unbridled feeling in African art. They were fetishes, or sort of psychic objects.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, it was representing sort of unconscious urges, and so on. Yes, where it's not that kind of thing with P&D.

PETER HALLEY: You can see that in Klee, though. In fact, my work of the '70s was once exhibited with some Klee watercolors, which I thought was wonderful.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay, so you had these ideas that have just—I mean, the years after art school—I mean, a lot seems to have gone on in that decade after college. So, just—

PETER HALLEY: Just let me try to get this straight. After going back to Yale, I again spent the summer in Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras. My girlfriend, who became my first wife, Caroline Stewart was interested in archaeology and anthropology. And we went to see all the Mesoamerican sites, and particularly Mayan sites in the Yucatan, as well as Tikal and Copan. So, I saw a lot, and that was interesting.

So then, upon finishing Yale, I immediately went back to live in New Orleans. And upon arriving back, I rented a studio—I mostly lived with Caroline. She was finishing school at Tulane—I mostly lived with her, but I had another apartment that served as my studio. And I continued working and got a job in an art supply store. One day— during that year off, I had also taken a printmaking course at the University of New Orleans. Because one day one of the professors, whose name was Howard Jones, walked in and said they were starting a graduate program. So, I applied for that, and started graduate school. It must have been the fall of '76. So, for the next two and a half years, I went to grad school at the University of New Orleans. They assigned this professor Howard Jones to me as my mentor or advisor. Unfortunately, he wasn't too keen on me either—he gave me a C in one course, which, as a grad student, was a failing mark. So, I had to switch advisors.

[00:30:17]

And I was fortunate to start to work with a wonderful artist named Jim Richard—who I would say is one of the few mentors or role models I've had. There was also another artist teaching there named Calvin Harlan, who wrote a wonderful book about art fundamentals, and who was also very interested in this sort of global approach to art and form. There were many examples from non-Western cultures in his book. You know, that kind of thinking made a lot more sense in New Orleans. Not just the city itself, but—

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PETER HALLEY: —the whole of southwest Louisiana is very rural; it's Cajun, part of it is French-speaking, it's very old-fashioned. So, you have the feeling there of a kind of timeless, pre-industrial culture, at least at the time, that sort of fed this romance about non-Western cultures. And strong folk culture festivals, that sort of thing. And a lot of music. Then, I did a lot of work in grad school. Almost entirely gouache on paper. And continued to develop this vocabulary, and it became more and more pictorial, until, by 1978, I was embedding in these images—I would call one a landscape with trees, or one might look like a pyramid. They were sort of symbolic landscapes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, I saw those in that catalogue that I told you about. Do you have it here?

ANNETTE LEDDY:

PETER HALLEY: Yes, it should be right there. Nope. Shayna, are you there?

SHAYNA: Yes.

PETER HALLEY: Could you hand me a '70s book? Then, in 1978, I went to Europe for the summer, for the second time—oh, I forgot that I had gone to Europe in the summer of '74, and did a kind of grand tour, which was very interesting. So, I went back in 1978 to Europe and Morocco, and I think the big moment for me was going to Venice. And I saw the Tintoretto paintings in the Scuola San Rocco. And all of a sudden, I decided that—as a modern Westerner, it was really my—[laughs]—destiny to try to come to terms with the Western cultural tradition. It's a really rather odd thing that happened to me. What makes it even odder is, I think you had people like Francesco Clemente, Julian Schnabel, maybe Anselm Kiefer—they're all a little older than I am, but they seem to have had the same thought at the same time. They all started stepping away from conceptualism and began making figurative paintings using oil paint. And it's also the beginning of the era that we can label postmodernism. So, there were similar things going on in architecture, where architects were trying to embrace history.

I guess my particular take on that was Picasso. I've always gotten a great deal out of his work. And what really impressed me about this artist was, unlike Matisse, he didn't seem to be in any way pretending the world was any nicer than it was. Picasso's work is very much about cruelty, it's very much about darkness, it's very primal. And at the time that made a huge impression on me.

During 1979, I again started making paintings on canvas. I stuck with acrylic paint—I've never been able to tolerate oil—and they are Picass-oid type paintings. Sort of late-20th century interpretations of Picasso.

[00:05:06]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Which Picasso period?

PETER HALLEY: Well, there's certainly Synthetic Cubism. [Laughs.] Let me show you one. Oh, I kind of like this one. I guess you could say the 1920s Picasso.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, yeah. I see what you mean. And with this slide there, it's like you're trying to incorporate media, visual—like, mass media in some form. Right?

PETER HALLEY: How so?

ANNETTE LEDDY: It looks like a slide, right?

PETER HALLEY: Oh, I hadn't thought of it that way. I just thought of it as a painting.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, well, that's—it can also be that. But because of the dimensions of the frame and everything, you know? Oh, I see, yeah. Oh, they're actually really nice.

PETER HALLEY: I think they're kind of terrific. At the time I was involved with a lot of hidden geometry. So, I believe this is two squares, and—[laughs]—notice that I put everything on a horizontal base even then. And these are two figures—so, that's a head, and that's a head. And these are crossed legs, those are toes. So it had a kind of witty, residual geometry.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.] Yeah, and a little de Chirico, also, maybe.

PETER HALLEY: Oh, that's very nice, thank you. And this one is based on a Picasso painting of an artist and model. In this one I was looking at Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love*—I was fascinated by the geometric construction of that painting. I guess I've always paid a lot of attention to the geometric order—how compositions are ordered proportionally. How compositions are determined in terms of arithmetic proportions, hidden squares, that sort of thing. So, that was 1979.

I also got a job—I taught for one semester at the University of Southwest Louisiana in Lafayette, Louisiana, which was a nice experience for me. And it was nice to get some kind of job after graduate school. I should mention that I was allowed to teach every semester that I was in grad school at UNO. They actually let the grad students teach classes. So, I taught beginning drawing, I taught printmaking. And in Lafayette, Louisiana, I also taught a kind of design course. So, I took to teaching right away. And then, by the end of 1979, I was going back and forth to New York. My relationship with Caroline wasn't going so well, and I really felt I had to move back to New York. So, in the spring of 1980, I packed up a truck with all my work, and moved back to New York.

And part of the reason I moved back is I really felt that the '70s were over. And, believe it or not, I began to hear new wave music, like the Talking Heads, that was coming from New York, and decided maybe things were getting more interesting there.

[00:10:01]

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, where did you live when you came back to New York?

PETER HALLEY: Well, first I stayed with some friends in Soho for the summer. And then I moved to 128 East Seventh Street, to a loft in the East Village.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, it was a live-work space?

PETER HALLEY: Yes, it was. And, I always tell this story, it was very exciting, because it turned out my upstairs neighbor was David Byrne of the Talking Heads. He moved out after a couple months. But the first summer I was there, I would hear tapes of his record—I think it's *Remain in Light*—coming from upstairs as he listened to them between recording sessions. And I lived there until 1983.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Did you work? I mean, what was your day like? Did you have a job?

PETER HALLEY: Well, I didn't have a job. My grandmother had just died and left me a little bit of money. And, by the way, my grandmother dying was a big deal, in 1979. She had helped—she was a really big presence in my life growing up.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I remember, yeah.

PETER HALLEY: She often stayed at the house to take care of me and my brother. And, well, my first year in New York was very difficult. I felt very isolated, depressed. Part of it, I think, was that I was in mourning for my grandmother. And after a short period of time, I began making these very dark paintings. One of which is in fact entitled *The Grave*. And in the others—this triangular figure that I'd been using for the Picasso paintings became simplified, and there's this sort of triangular ghost present against these dark grey walls. It was a very existentialist, sort of Samuel Beckett, Camus kind of grim space. Let me grab the catalogue, just so we can look at something.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. *The Death of Socrates*, yeah.

PETER HALLEY: These I consider sort of transitional. But—oh, this is still 1980. These are the grey paintings that emerged.

ANNETTE LEDDY: *Lamentation*, yeah. *The Grave*; oh, that's so sad.

PETER HALLEY: So, *The Grave* is sort of a rectangle, sitting on the ground.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And this is the tombstone?

PETER HALLEY: Pardon me?

ANNETTE LEDDY: This is the tombstone?

PETER HALLEY: Yes, the tombstone, I should say. Oh, here's what happened. So, after the tombstone, I got the idea to make a prison with cinderblocks, also very dark, and a cinderblock wall in dark colors. I was very interested in Philip Guston, who had a big influence on young artists at the time.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, you can see the Philip Guston on that side, I hadn't thought of that. You're right.

PETER HALLEY: Pardon me?

ANNETTE LEDDY: You can see the Philip Guston in it. I hadn't made that connection, but I see it now. Yeah.

PETER HALLEY: I like it because the connection is not really stylistic, it's more thematic.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

PETER HALLEY: I do have this theory that a lot of good art happens when people are having a breakdown. And 1980 was a very difficult, isolating year for me. And, by comparison—I mentioned how interested I am in Picasso. When I looked at Picasso in 1908, his self-portraits, or his images of other people—and I believe there's some historical basis for this—I think he was, like, really in bad shape psychologically. I believe his girlfriend had just died, and to me he was having a kind of crisis about self. And I know that there are examples of that in other artists. So, by the end of 1980, I guess I decided, "I'm going to paint prisons." And that seems, in retrospect—well, even at the time—to have been a kind of psychologically-driven decision.

[00:15:37]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Do you think it also had to do with, maybe, that your grandmother dying kind of brought back your father's death in some way, too?

PETER HALLEY: Oh, yeah, I mean—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Because it feels so dark, you know?

PETER HALLEY: Yeah, returning to New York, for me—that's very insightful—I think was a huge psychological reckoning, because in New Orleans it was all so far away. And in many, many ways, I belong to New York. My family—my father's family had been here for several generations. My dad held political office here. I have a strong identification with the city.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, that seems—it's almost like you speak of it—the city itself—as almost like your family. I mean, it feels—

PETER HALLEY: It is.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.] You know what I mean? It's like, you're so deeply identified with it.

PETER HALLEY: Yeah, and my mom was a real prototypical New Yorker—or Manhattanite, anyway. Now, the other thing I was thinking about, though, was Pop art, and Minimalism, and abstraction. And all through the late '70s, I was trying to find—I don't want to call them representational—but signifieds to a geometric signifier. What does geometry signify in a painting? And the idea that signifieds had multiple signifiers was something that was emerging in the thinking—in the books of Roland Barthes, and how any sign does not just have one predetermined meaning, but will have many meanings built by the audience. But in my case, what I really wanted to do was take the language of Minimalism and Neoplasticism—take it out of this realm of self-referentiality, and bring it back into the social world of architecture—well, I guess I'd call it built structures. So, to make a long story short, I took the modernist square—Malevich's square—put this stucco on it to make it feel three-dimensional on the canvas, and put bars in the middle, and said, "The square is now a prison for me. It's no longer an idealist platonic shape, but rather an image of confinement." This is one early version, a little painting called *Little Spanish Prison*, which was also an appropriation of a title from Robert Motherwell.

So, by 1981, things had brightened up a bit, and—

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you can see that. [Laughs.]

PETER HALLEY: Yes. I was more connected to New York City, and I said to myself that, "Yes, I'm sitting here in a prison, I'm alone at home. But the telephone's ringing, I have electric light, and plumbing—water going in and out." I thought how people in the contemporary world are really connected to each other by all these systems. And even though they may be physically isolated, they're still connected by all these technological pathways. So, I stuck a second canvas below the first canvas, to represent an underground space. I painted a line across it that went up into the prison, and said, "These are conduits going in and out of the prison." So, that's the basis of my iconography.

[00:20:29]

And then, shortly thereafter, I decided to add to that iconography with a second form. And, I guess it doesn't happen until 1982; a cell. So, again, I used a square, I got rid of the bars, it still is covered with a Roll-A-Tex surface, and the Roll-A-Tex square became—I began calling

them cells, so the vocabulary became cells, prisons, and conduits.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But it still has—I mean, it's multi-valent—I mean, it can be anything. It could be a windowsill, it could be an electrical current, it could be—

PETER HALLEY: Oh, yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —I mean, it has so many different possible referents, whereas before, it was mainly the prison, right?

PETER HALLEY: Well, yes, that was the point. It was a generic model of a prison—based on the idea that the model precedes any specific reality—like the way every McDonald's restaurant is based on a single model. I should mention, at that point I started using florescent color. And this Roll-A-Tex that I've been talking about is the stuff that—I would see all over the suburbs in New Orleans on ceilings and walls. It's a pebbly powder that you mix into paint to create a kind of fake stucco. And so, all those materials which were sort of anti-natural, ersatz, commercially-made—that vocabulary of materials also became very important to me.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Were you part of a community at that point? Did you start to meet other artists who you were friends with?

PETER HALLEY: Yes, I want to try to trace that for you. Through friends, I began to meet people in the art world, and a friend of mine from Yale—who was not in the art world—happened to be friends with Jeffrey Deitch, because they'd both gone to Harvard Business School together. So, one day in the summer of—I guess it must have been 1981—he invited me to have a quick bite to eat with Jeffrey. And at the time, Jeffrey was writing a lot for *Art in America* and other publications. And, shortly thereafter, I read an article he wrote about Jonathan Borofsky, which I liked very much. And I wrote him a note, and Jeffrey wrote me back a postcard saying, "Peter, you should write something." And since I didn't have much else going on, this sort of rang a bell with me. And I decided to start writing about what I felt was going on in contemporary art. The first article I wrote was called, "Beat, Minimalism, New Wave, and Robert Smithson."

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, I read that one. Yeah.

PETER HALLEY: Somehow, I forgot during this whole discussion how important a figure Robert Smithson was for me. And his writing. So, the title alone sort of indicates—looking back, that essay is so autobiographical, I was trying to get everything in there. The Beats being my cousin Carl, and Allen Ginsberg, Minimalism. The New Wave was New Wave art, as it was being called, and Robert Smithson.

[00:24:57]

ANNETTE LEDDY: It feels like the first one—like, maybe the first several essays in that book, you're synthesizing all of these ideas. And then, when you get to the '90s, suddenly it's all crystallized. Do you know what I mean? It's you're—you've integrated it all, and it's yours.

PETER HALLEY: Pretty much. I mean, it was a period of intense learning for me. Because when I wrote the first couple essays, I was really not familiar with any French critical writing. I think I first read Foucault in '81; it made a huge impression on me. I read it because I was making these prisons—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, *Discipline and Punish*?

PETER HALLEY: Yes, *Discipline and Punish*. And then—I'm trying to think back the order in which I met people. But, shortly thereafter I did meet Jonathan Crary, who became a professor at Columbia, who had a wonderful understanding of all these writers. So I would go around to museums with him, and he would sort of give me an ongoing tutorial in French theory. So, that was very important to me. After I began writing, I also joined a critic's discussion group. And there was a young man—a young artist there named René Santos, who unfortunately died of AIDS a few years later. But he was brilliant, and would talk about Roland Barthes, and he was the first one, I think, to explain Richard Prince to me. He really had the most subtle understanding of the relationship of what was going on in—well, essentially Pictures Generation art as it relates to French critical theory.

Then, in 1981, I saw Ross Bleckner's show of striped paintings at Mary Boone Gallery, and I decided to write about it. And after I wrote about him, I went to visit him and he told me about his good friend Barbara Kruger. And after that, I went to visit Barbara Kruger, and we got to talking, and she told me about this guy, Jean Baudrillard, who was very interesting.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

PETER HALLEY: She called him a working-class philosopher. And that's how I first learned about Baudrillard's work.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And what was the first one you read?

PETER HALLEY: *Simulations*.

ANNETTE LEDDY: *Simulations*. Yes, that was good. I interviewed him once. He did his book about America.

PETER HALLEY: I had a rocky relationship with him.

ANNETTE LEDDY: How so?

PETER HALLEY: Well, this is jumping ahead, but when I had my first exhibition in Europe, in 1986, in Paris, at the Daniel Templon gallery, Daniel decided to invite Jean Baudrillard to dinner with me. And he wasn't very receptive to my use of his work, in my writing. He said something to the effect of, "*Simulation* is a precious jewel and should not be touched by anyone else."

[They laugh.]

PETER HALLEY: It was quite something.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, well, he's not someone with a small ego, for sure.

PETER HALLEY: Yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, back to—so, you started reading Baudrillard, and I saw that in your essays, that it starts to come in.

PETER HALLEY: Not until, really, '84.

ANNETTE LEDDY: The idea of the model.

PETER HALLEY: Yes. I think probably the best essay I've written is "The Crisis in Geometry," in which I basically associated Foucault and the idea of confinement and coercion with artists like Richard Serra and Robert Morris.

[00:30:04]

ANNETTE LEDDY: The one that I have three asterisks next to is, "Geometry and the Social."

PETER HALLEY: Oh, that's a little later, though. But that is a good one. And then, I went on to talk about artists like Sherrie Levine, and Jeff Koons, and myself as having more to do with Baudrillard.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right.

PETER HALLEY: After writing about Robert Smithson, I sent the essay to the art dealer John Weber. And we became friendly.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you showed with him. And you did a show—the *Science Fiction* show with him?

PETER HALLEY: That's what I'm going to tell you about.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay.

PETER HALLEY: You know, he made a big contribution to the art world. And actually, as we talk today—

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PETER HALLEY: —what I find interesting is, I wrote to John Weber—or, I wrote to Jeffrey Deitch, and they wrote back. I sent my essay to John Weber, and he responded. I think I was really able to enter the art world—I'm a reasonably shy person—in the context of a kind of intellectual discussion, in which you could write to people and they would respond.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Do you think that would still happen today? I mean, with the young—

PETER HALLEY: I'm sure it does. But it's more difficult, I think. And anyway, after a while he invited me to curate a show at his gallery. And I did an installation called *Science Fiction*. And I'm not sure I should be proud of this, but one of the artists in the show was Jeff Koons. And I also wrote about Jeff in "The Crisis in Geometry." And at the time, he wasn't showing anywhere. He had done something with Mary Boone and Annina Nosei. But then, the next year, I also introduced him to our mutual art dealer, Meyer Vaisman, who was the primary person at International With Monument. So, in retrospect, I give myself a lot of credit for quote, unquote, discovering Jeff, for better or for worse.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Were you the first to review his work?

PETER HALLEY: There was one other review, but I think what was important is I put him in the context of Baudrillard. And I think that was crucial to people responding to it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And did you—these were all published in *Arts Magazine*, is that correct?

PETER HALLEY: Yes, up until that point. That's also something that was very important to me. I sent the first essay to a number of magazines; nobody responded except for Richard Martin, the editor of *Arts Magazine*. He was also head of the FIT exhibitions program at the time. But, as I soon found out, Richard Martin read everything coming in. And he really was the only one who would consider contributions by unknown people. And he published it the next month.

ANNETTE LEDDY: One thing I wondered, as I was reading these, is who you thought of your audience as being, as you wrote those essays.

PETER HALLEY: Well, that's a good question. I think my peers.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Fellow artists.

PETER HALLEY: Well, artists and critics, and people at galleries, people in the New York art world. I seldom encountered people who had actually read anything I wrote. But—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Really?

PETER HALLEY: Well, not very often. But I knew that people read art magazines, and that the ideas presented in art magazines had some impact. And they had on me, as well.

ANNETTE LEDDY: They had, at that time, an enormous impact.

PETER HALLEY: Yeah. I think there was a debate that took place in art magazines about what was important—what was the meaning of what was going on, et cetera.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And meanwhile, your work was shown during this period?

PETER HALLEY: Yeah. Things were slow. Nobody exactly went crazy over these paintings, at the time. But looking back at it, steadily, people were getting interested. I had this funny little show at a bar in the East Village called Beulahland. And, I think the year after, a bit of my work was shown at the Drawing Center. I'd shown it to Tom Lawson who was the curator there at the time. And, I think in '84, Artists Space showed my work.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That's not in here. We have Beulahland, and we have International With Monument, '85. But probably it's in the group show section—yeah, the Drawing Center.

PETER HALLEY: Oh, yes, it would be.

[00:05:04]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Artists Space, '84. And Hallwalls.

PETER HALLEY: Is that '84—?

ANNETTE LEDDY: Also '84. So, you were really—even though you weren't at [Metro] Pictures, you were kind of shown in similar venues as Pictures artists.

PETER HALLEY: Yes, it certainly overlapped. And in '84, or '85, I also met Collins & Milazzo, the curatorial team. And they played a big role in bringing a bunch of the artists of my generation together and in forming a kind of ideology about our work. But, I guess a big moment for me was a bunch of interesting galleries began to open in the East Village run by young artists. There was Nature Morte, there was a place called Cash/Newhouse, and International With Monument. So, one day in 1984, I walked into International With Monument and introduced myself to Meyer Vaisman. And Meyer had just seen my work in a show on 57th Street called *Brilliant Color*. And he immediately wanted to come see my work. And most of the Pictures Generation artists were more or less gallery-less—without galleries, at the time. Neo-Expressionism, and then Graffiti, had really sort of dominated the marketplace. And even Metro Pictures wasn't showing Sherrie Levine or Richard Prince.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Cindy.

PETER HALLEY: Yeah. They had stuck with Cindy Sherman, and Robert Longo was the person who had a kind of market success in the early 80s. So, these young galleries were able to show work by these artists. And, in particular, Meyer showed Sherrie Levine, and Richard Prince, Laurie Simmons, I believe, and one or two others. He showed several of them in the first part of 1985. And then, in spring '85—in April—I had my first show, followed by Jeff Koons' first show in May '85. And so, Meyer Vaisman and his colleagues, Liz Koury—and Kent Klamen—were really the ones who put us on the map. And they were all of 25 years old at the time. But they did a great job running the gallery. They were really charming and welcoming to people. And by contextualizing the work of Jeff Koons and myself, in the context of the Pictures Generation work, it created a certain context for it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so, were they reviewed, these shows?

PETER HALLEY: My second show in '86 was reviewed, and widely enthusiastically received. The '85 show had a lot of buzz. The only review was in the *Village Voice* by Gary Indiana. And I believe Ross Bleckner sort of twisted his arm to do it. But, by '86, it was really a phenomenon. And Robert Pincus-Witten wrote an essay called "The Scene that Turned on a Dime." And, all of a sudden, Neo-Expressionism was out, and Neo-Geo was in. Oh, I forgot about Pat Hearn Gallery, as the fourth one in the East Village.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right.

PETER HALLEY: But it was a really exciting time, and I was naïve enough that I thought that all this postmodern theory would actually have an ongoing impact in the art world. In some of the reviews and discussion of Neo-Geo, by '86 I was seeing words like simulation emerge in critical writing, and in the titles of shows. So, it was a time when I felt I was making a contribution—in terms of bringing this kind of post-structuralist French theory to bear on what was going on in contemporary art.

[00:10:51]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Do you want to stop now? We're at twelve-fifteen, I think.

PETER HALLEY: Well, I have a—well, that one's wrong.

ANNETTE LEDDY: What time do we actually have? Oh, okay, we have a little more time.

PETER HALLEY: I think we're approaching a good place to stop.

ANNETTE LEDDY: The only thing I don't understand yet—okay, I see how your career developed, and the different steps, but I still don't—like, who did you hang out with? Who did you have coffee with, or go for drinks with?

PETER HALLEY: That's what I'm trying to focus on. In '82 or '83, I met a critic named Alan Jones. And Alan and his partner, whose name I believe was Sue Etkin often had people over. Through them, I met a lot of people. I became friends with Saint Clair Cemin, I met Peter

Fend, the artist, who I spent quite a bit of time with. It was Alan that first suggested Jeff Koons for the *Science Fiction* show. In New York, I had met Ronnie Fischer who's known as R.M. Fischer—whose work was already known in the early '80s. Through John Weber I met Lucio Pozzi, and the artist Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe—it seemed, as the '80s rolled along, I felt that I had quite a rich range of friends. None of them really saw eye-to-eye with me, but we were all interested in overlapping things. Meyer Vaisman became my best friend, after '85.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And then, were you married?

PETER HALLEY: I got married in 1983 to Caroline Stewart.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, she moved up here?

PETER HALLEY: Right. Let's go back to that. She moved to New York in '82. And we moved to TriBeCa. And my daughter, Isabel, was born in 1986, and my son, Thomas, in 1989.

Caroline has a master's in social work. Up until the time we had kids, she was working different social work jobs in New York.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, a lot happened to you in the 1980s. [Laughs.] I mean, it was your decade.

PETER HALLEY: Well, I guess so. Well, you know, the first half of the '80s, in retrospect, was quieter. Whereas in the second half, we're going to talk about Sonnabend, and showing in Europe, and being asked to participate in all these big international shows.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you moved into some really big-dollar galleries, too.

PETER HALLEY: Yeah. I mean, I didn't—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Bischofberger.

PETER HALLEY: —I didn't have a one-person gallery show until 1985. So, my life was actually pretty quiet. And I was a house-husband; I didn't work. My wife worked. I had a nice circle of friends. But it was still a formative period for me. I used to tell younger artists, "Your life is over when you have your first gallery show, because then you're going to be considered a professional artist, and you have to worry about what you're going to produce, and how it's going to be received." So, I think of the first half of the '80s as a little bit more inward.

[00:15:33]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, yeah. Almost like you were struggling, but then it seems to have panned out.

PETER HALLEY: Just in closing, let me also mention—I was also reading—Roland Barthes and Paul Virilio, other publications by *Semiotext(e)*. Later on, I met Silvère Lotringer, who ran *Semiotext(e)*, and I realized he was probably—the person most influential in my life in the early '80s through the texts he chose to publish. And, the music of the early '80s was also very important to me. Not only the Talking Heads, but quite a few bands, like Joy Division, and—I don't think I can put together a list right now.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Did you listen to them while you painted?

PETER HALLEY: A little bit. Painting or drawing. Yes. And, you know, just summing up what we've been talking about. Robert Smithson really was an important role model for me during this whole time. And I should mention the person who guided my first essay, Ortega y Gasset, and his book, *The Dehumanization of Art*—which sort of laid out a road map that said that modern art is skeptical and devoid of illusion.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And reflective—always reflecting another process, rather than being immersed in a process. But it seems to me, as I read these, that—yeah, Robert Smithson and Ortega y Gasset seemed to be your two models as a critic.

PETER HALLEY: That is—if not models, certainly two big influences at the time. And in a way, Ortega y Gasset said everything to me that somebody like Roland Barthes would say later. And in fact, to me, Smithson totally anticipates all the themes in—

ANNETTE LEDDY: —everything. It's incredible.

PETER HALLEY: —post-structuralist theory. It's quite remarkable.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah.

PETER HALLEY: And, of course, Smithson was such a model for creating expressive forms outside of the norm. The fact that his essay writing was, in fact, a means of creative expression.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right. And so connected to his work. You know? I mean, they were just fused, really.

PETER HALLEY: And you know, the other thing—if we can—I was talking about my father's New York Jewish family, and my mother's Polish Catholic family from Pennsylvania. [Laughs.] So, on a personal level, you could say that Barnett Newman could almost have been my grandfather on my father's side. And Andy Warhol could have been—

[They laugh.]

PETER HALLEY: —a family member on my mother's side, an Eastern European Catholic.

ANNETTE LEDDY: This sounds like what they call an enabling myth, you know?

PETER HALLEY: It has been.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

PETER HALLEY: And you know, both Jews and Catholics were somewhat excluded from culture before World War II. And so, for me, this sort of synthesis between these—let me just call them intellectual traditions—in my work, is maybe an enabling myth, but I think it has something to do with whatever spark my work has, by bringing those two together.

[00:20:12]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay.

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ANNETTE LEDDY: This is Annette Leddy interviewing Peter Halley in his studio in New York City, on October 6, 2021, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

PETER HALLEY: Well, I'll jump right in where we left off at. I feel I had an unusual and valuable experience since I started exhibiting with an artist-run gallery in the East Village.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Now, is this Monument?

PETER HALLEY: International With Monument. And the artist who was the principal person behind it, Meyer Vaisman, became a close friend. In '86, Meyer decided he no longer wanted to run a gallery, and he wanted to come up with something where he and his artists could go elsewhere. So, he arranged a group show at Sonnabend Gallery in October 1986, with Meyer Vaisman, myself, Jeff Koons, and Ashley Bickerton. And this show received enormous attention. And these new artists were labeled Neo-Geo. Until 1992, I continued to work with Sonnabend Gallery. At that time, I had small children. It was really a privilege to work with Ileana Sonnabend and Antonio Homem. She really was a brilliant person, and responsible for so much of the direction of postwar art both in Europe and America.

But by '92, I felt that most of the sales of my work were being initiated by the European galleries where I was also showing.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And those were?

PETER HALLEY: Well, at that time, it was Bruno Bischofberger in Zurich, Rafael Jablonka in Cologne. I had a show with Lia Rumma in Naples, and my first show in Europe was with Daniel Templon in Paris. Right from the start, there seemed to be more intense interest in

my work in Europe than in the United States. And over the years, I thought about that a great deal. And I've gotten a certain amount of feedback that confirms this. Among cultured people in Western Europe, they generally see the 1920s, and the era of Neoplasticism, and Suprematism, the Bauhaus, et cetera, as a real cultural renaissance. And so, geometric abstraction and those artists have tremendous meaning there. And, by and large, I think people see me as a postmodern response to Neoplasticism and the abstraction of the '20s, just as much as they see me as relating to the painting of the '60s, or Minimalism. That's the best I can do to figure out the enthusiasm for my work there. And, especially in Italy, which is great. The Italians were also very supportive of the Minimalist artists. But in my case, I think there's also a kind of affinity with postwar Italian architecture—Sottsass, Mendini, et cetera. But I think we talked about that last time.

So, anyway, in 1991, I was approached by Gagosian Gallery, and they wanted me to show with them. And I left Sonnabend and signed up to show with Gagosian. Ileana Sonnabend was very bitter about it. They hired an attorney and sued me. It was all over *The New York Times*, it was very embarrassing. To make a long story short, they eventually dropped the suit. Now, at the same time, this was at the height of the complete collapse of the art market. And somehow, because I had a sort of steady career, my market and life hadn't been too much affected by it. But finally, in 1993, one of my works came up in an evening auction at one of the big auction houses. I called Larry Gagosian and said, "You really need to bid on this painting. It's a big moment in my market." And he said, "No, Peter, don't worry about it."

[They laugh.]

[00:05:16]

And, subsequently, I talked to another friend of mine who said she was going to bid on it. And the auction house said, "No, don't bid on it. We already have so many bids." So, in any case, the painting was bought in, and all of a sudden, there was a kind of lull in my market. And that seemed to turn Larry off. He cancelled the show I was supposed to have—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, my God.

PETER HALLEY: —in October '93. I wanted to do an installation; they didn't want to do that. And eventually, he stopped paying me the monthly stipend he was obligated to pay according to my contract with him. So, I left. And between Sonnabend and Gagosian, it did a lot to make me less trusting of putting my fate in one person's hands.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Did you regret leaving Sonnabend?

PETER HALLEY: No, they really were a mess. It was at the height of the Jeff Koons craze. I think that had a lot to do with it. And they were just trying to deal with Jeff 24-7. And as far as I can see, there was really no focus on my work. And in many ways, they were marvelous people, but they weren't the most on-the-ball art dealers.

And unlike many artists nowadays, I work with a number of European galleries directly. Usually, one in each country. Many of them have stayed the same over 30 years. Sometimes one comes or goes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, who are your—may I ask who are your dealers now, if you're talking about this—?

PETER HALLEY: Sure, because some of them have changed. In Italy, I work mostly with Massimo Minini in Brescia; in France, I work with Renos Xippas in Paris; in Germany, I work with Galerie Thomas in Munich; and in Belgium, I work with Maruani Mercier in Brussels, in Spain Galeria Senda in Barcelona; and in the UK, Stuart Shave Modern Art in London.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, wow. And so—but these are not the ones you first were working with in the '90s. Or, which one was?

PETER HALLEY: Well, they're not ones I was working in the '80s. But I started with Minini, Xippas, and Senda in the '90s.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And you were with Bischofberger for a pretty long time.

PETER HALLEY: Yes. I'm still associated with the gallery, but he's no longer active.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see. And Ropac, also, for a long time. Yeah.

PETER HALLEY: Yes, I worked with Ropac I think until about 2005.

ANNETTE LEDDY: How do you find the European dealers to be different from the Americans?

PETER HALLEY: Well, I must say, I find it easier to work with the Europeans. I'm a little cynical about New York, and I've found New York galleries treat the artist in many cases, shall we say, as a kind of wholesale supplier.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

PETER HALLEY: And you deliver the goods, and they create a kind of retail display about them. And, you know, I find the whole thing a little bit cutthroat and cold. Especially at the larger galleries. You really don't deal with the person who owns the gallery, or who is a principal of it. You're assigned a director, and that can be very alienating. And so, I mean, I've come to be in favor of smaller, old-fashioned galleries. And I always say about the Europeans, even if the ultimate result is no different than what happens in New York, they're going to treat you far more politely about it, and with a kind of a minimum of respect for you as a creative person. Which I think is invaluable. It is hard for me to understand how younger artists negotiate the mega-galleries.

[00:10:11]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, I guess they also step into it at a different point in history. So, maybe their expectations are slightly different?

PETER HALLEY: I guess so, it's hard for me to imagine working in what I assume is a relatively impersonal setting. I mean, I did try it at Gagosian, and got in trouble.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right, right. Do you have a New York gallery?

PETER HALLEY: Yes. I'm working with a younger gallery called Karma.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I actually love that gallery.

PETER HALLEY: Pardon me?

ANNETTE LEDDY: I love that gallery, actually. I just saw the Lee Lozano show that was there. It was so amazing, I thought.

PETER HALLEY: Well, it's run by Brendan Dugan, and I've known Brendan ever since he was a graphic designer who then began to show works on paper in his space. And the gallery has just grown and grown, and he has a wonderful eye. And it's kind of a little unusual for a 68-year-old artist to be working with a young gallery like that. But as Brendan was getting started, I used to tell him I thought he was going to be the next Leo Castelli. And for younger people, I don't know if that means much, but that was a high compliment. So, when people read this in 20 years, they'll see if I was right or not.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.] That's right. Okay, so, maybe we should go back, then, to where we sort of left off in terms of the development of your work and your ideas. Because it seems to me when we talked a bit about this last time, how your criticism facilitated, really, your entrée into the gallery world. They were kind of hand-in-glove. And so, then, what was your motivation for writing these essays? Was it really a process of helping to clarify your ideas about the work you were making? Or was it really on a separate track to participate in the art world's dialogue about abstraction?

PETER HALLEY: I don't think it was solely to present what was going on in my own work, but it was certainly involved with that. I also feel fortunate that, arriving in New York in 1980, it was a time in which French post-structuralist writing was becoming abundantly available.

ANNETTE LEDDY: In English.

PETER HALLEY: In English—in English translation at the St. Mark's Book Store, and with the books published by *Semiotext(e)*. I read Lyotard; I tried to read Derrida, unsuccessfully. I

more successfully read Roland Barthes. We talked about Virilio and others. And to me, it was a revolutionary moment. The ideas in those writers was already being reflected in the work of the Pictures Generation. I often think about Richard Prince. He challenges the idea of nature as an absolute, he challenges the idea of authorship, et cetera. But I think my motivation was to try to show how these ideas were applicable to what was going on in contemporary art. And how the artists were sort of talking about the same things as the writers were.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right, but not just the contemporary art of the Pictures Generation, which was sort of media-image centered, but really also in abstraction, right? It was kind of unusual that you applied those theories to abstract painting, as opposed to the kind of image-based work of the Pictures Generation. Right?

PETER HALLEY: Well, I went back and said I wanted to use a kind of Roland Barthes methodology to open up the signifieds of 20th-century abstract painting. So, I emphasized the idea that Mondrian was about the urban grid, and that geometric abstraction, in general, was really about the fact—why was there geometric painting all of a sudden in the 20th century? Because the social space of our society had become much more geometricized, dominated by human-made structures, both on an urban level and a communications level.

[00:15:33]

So, it was like a strong mis-reading of what had come before. I'm not deeply interested in Harold Bloom, but his phrase, "a strong mis-reading," I find fascinating. And then, it was the dawn of the digital age. And many of the French writers, especially Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition*, were directly addressing this. And I found that the spatial systems I was trying to create, as the '80s progressed, really described, shall we say, the physical space of digital processing within a computer. And so, that was very exciting for me.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right. And you have this theory about abstraction being the dominant intellectual paradigm of our time. And in one essay, you go through all the different fields in which that would be true. And then, you come to art. But you also suggest that abstraction is a tool for critique of an image-based culture.

PETER HALLEY: Yes, those are, I think, two different thoughts. When you say abstraction is the dominant paradigm, by that I meant structuralism. That taking a specific phenomenon and categorizing it, and finding its underlying characteristics as a process of abstraction, is, I believe, a paradigm that applies to physics, biology, sociology. Even when we think about life as being made up of a genetic code—

ANNETTE LEDDY: The DNA, yes.

PETER HALLEY: —that's what I'm describing as an example of abstraction. Then, on the other hand—and it's an idea I grew up with—actually I think of it as a received idea—that an abstract painting or abstract work is often about the bare bones—the actual mechanics of how a picture is made. So, it's an example of pictorial grammar stripped of its narrative purpose. If Richard Prince makes a picture of a Marlboro Man in the western landscape, the horse is important, and the mountains are important, but there's an underlying structure that makes that painting or that photograph either powerful, or not powerful. And understanding that underlying language, I think, is a crucial analytic tool.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You mean the lines and forms and—

PETER HALLEY: How it's composed, how space is made, how scale is used, all the, quote, unquote, formal tools that a visual artist uses.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But is that what you mean when you say that abstract painting subverts images, like in media? Is that how you mean it? Because it almost seemed to have an aspect of critique that you were suggesting, and I wasn't quite sure I was getting that.

PETER HALLEY: Well, I think I was referring to my abstract painting, which I don't consider abstract—on the other hand.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right. [Laughs.]

PETER HALLEY: But in my view, when I was creating these landscapes of cells and prisons

connected by conduits, and trying to diagram the space in which we live—and I'm still convinced we live in that space—what I thought I was doing was addressing a professional, managerial class that is responsible for constructing that space. And so, it was a critique—or a self-critique—of the class that I belong to, the society I belong to. Whereas I think a lot of media critique is condescending, and preaching to the converted. I mean, nobody who is interested in contemporary art is going to be shocked that the old-fashioned cigarette ads were manipulative. We all already know that.

[00:20:33]

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right.

PETER HALLEY: But this idea that, "Let's get at what we as college-educated, middle-class and upper-middle-class professionals have wrought in this world," is more a self-critique.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, I see it, certainly, as a depiction and a portrayal, but I'm just not sure where the critique part comes in.

PETER HALLEY: Well, that's a very good point. I probably use that word loosely. During the '80s, I remember participating in a panel discussion called, "Complicity or Critique." And I think many people, including myself, believed that a real outsider critique, such as that advocated by the artists of the '70s—that you could step outside, and somehow we were going to get rid of capitalism, and everything was going to be great—was no longer possible. That the most you could do was expose forces within the system, but not create a critique in the old, neo-Marxist sense.

I should say—and this is a very important point to me that I think is very hard for younger people to understand—but, growing up in the early '70s, with artists like Richard Serra, and other artists doing earthworks and installations at the height of the Vietnam War and the counterculture, those artists were very serious about the decline of capitalism, and that it would be replaced by something better. And that the works that they were doing, which you experience in real time, were a statement against capitalist alienation. And since I grew up with that and saw it fail as a revolutionary goal—that definitely had a big effect on me. I think it was a heroic, marvelous experiment, but an experiment—or a revolution that obviously didn't succeed. When somebody sells a Bruce Nauman for five million dollars, we know it didn't work.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Although, I guess his—

PETER HALLEY: I could have chosen a better example. His work certainly remains, in a positive sense, uncomfortable.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I mean, I don't know about a critique of capitalism, but I certainly feel that that last series that he did where he's walking in the studio and it's kind of 3-D at certain points. And I don't know—did you see it? It was at Sperone Westwater.

PETER HALLEY: Oh, to be honest, I really misspoke. He was the first name that popped into my mind. But all I'm saying is, in the wake of the '70s, one saw the ability of capitalism in general, and capitalism as represented by the market in contemporary art, to absorb everything and anything. Like a vacuum cleaner.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I was just thinking that it seems to me that he's gone to these much more eternal kinds of themes now. Themes about death and—

PETER HALLEY: I agree.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —I don't know.

PETER HALLEY: I always think of him in terms of Samuel Beckett. If that's what you're saying.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yep. Anyway, one of the other questions I had—is you talk about the empty anguish of abstraction by Rothko, or de Kooning. Now, this is so many years ago, you may not—

[00:25:07]

PETER HALLEY: Oh, yes.

ANNETTE LEDDY: —agree with that anymore. But, I'm simply wondering how that fits with today's abstract painting, the painting that we see in New York today.

PETER HALLEY: Well, only barely. You know, artists like Mark Rothko and Philip Guston, they really were anguished. And I do believe in important ways we live in a society in which the psychological parameters have changed. And honestly, we know much more about mental illness and mental health—I always used to joke around that art changed when antidepressants were developed.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.]

PETER HALLEY: I mean, what would have happened to Mark Rothko if there'd been antidepressants? And part of that anguish was socio-political anguish of living in the '50s. But I think the general range of emotional expression in art since the '80s has been on an entirely different scale.

ANNETTE LEDDY: A different register.

PETER HALLEY: Register, yeah. My own work comes out of a certain kind of anguish, but you can almost see it, step-by-step, also being swept up, first of all, in the idea of connectedness. And then, in the idea of color and almost ecstatic hyperactivity at times.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see that. I see how that change has happened. And how do you explain that change—that transition?

PETER HALLEY: Well, part of it is autobiographical. I mean, I have been very, very fortunate. First of all, being able to make a living as an artist and gaining some recognition for my work, as well as my writing. And then, running *index magazine* and teaching at Yale. It's all been wonderful. And so, I often feel ecstatically connected, and feel that kind of energy. But at the same time, I flatter myself that the actual spatial relationships in my work, and the proliferation of connections—which I call conduits—and the explosion of the increasingly complex number of elements, and complex use of color, has something to do with the proliferation of the internet. Because, really, around 1990, as the internet was taking off, my work became much more baroque. In particular, up until 1989, there was usually one conduit going in and one conduit going out, which was like the electricity in an apartment, or cable television, or your landline telephone. But actually, beginning in 1989, the conduits began to start going everywhere. And somehow, I think I was connecting with this idea of a web-like interconnectivity, multiple connections that would characterize a web.

ANNETTE LEDDY: You know, I kind of pictured you, when you said that, kind of being in a room and just sensing where all the electrical connections are. Almost like with some kind of antennae that are tuned just to that.

PETER HALLEY: Early on that was the case. I mean, I think we discussed last time, I really think that some of the work that I admire by important artists was made under a condition of psychological stress. And in 1980, '81, I felt very, very lonely. And I do remember sitting around late at night and realizing I was connected to the whole world by a telephone, or that I simply had to switch on an electric light. And as slight a gesture as that feels, it does mean, when you turn on an electric light in a room, a lot of people are taking care of you. A lot of social effort goes into that lightbulb illuminating.

[00:30:19]

ANNETTE LEDDY: I mean, it's not a direct human connection, but I see what you mean. It's a connection to a world of human making.

PETER HALLEY: Or, a social connection of working together. In the early-'90s, I read two books that were enormously important to me. One was called *The Fall of Public Man* by Richard Sennett, who was a professor right here in New York, at NYU. And the second was *The Civilizing Process* by Norbert Elias. And the books taken together are the most acute history of—

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PETER HALLEY: —human manners and how public and private life is conducted. And Sennett, in his book, which was written when he was just in his early 30s—I think it came out in the '70s—really traces the disappearance of the 18th- or 19th-century heterogeneous city, where people of different classes and from different places would be constantly exposed to each other. And he brings us into the 20th century, to the point where we get shut up in suburbs and placed in front of the television set, and we actually became far less exposed to multitudes—to situations in which we're constantly interacting with random configurations of physical human beings than we used to be. And to me, by the time we get to the computer terminal, and then the iPhone, that's the apotheosis of that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: All right, so, like what's often called the "privatization of everyday life."

PETER HALLEY: Yes, that is tied directly to it, as well.

ANNETTE LEDDY: What about this one, *The Civilizing Process*?

PETER HALLEY: Well, Elias describes how self-inhibition develops over the centuries. The control over our own behavior. You know, from medieval people eating with their fingers, and we know that they were much less concerned about bodily functions and the privatization of bodily functions, to a point in the 19th century where we become so highly self-inhibiting that we're afraid that, if we act spontaneously, we're going to reveal some negative psychological secret about ourselves. That our inner impulses are to be hidden. And I also found that very interesting.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That's really—yeah, that sounds great.

PETER HALLEY: I do think, though, that this trend reverses in the 20th century, with the rise of Surrealism and the movements of the '60s, that self-inhibition began to loosen during the last century, and we're in a somewhat different situation now.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, there's also a kind of reversal that you discuss in the "Images, Masks, and Models" essay, where it seems that the image is associated with the irrational for many centuries, and then, suddenly, this instrument of rationality, the computer, is generating all these images and it starts to be associated more with the rational.

PETER HALLEY: Well, thank you for pointing that out. I mean, Foucault constantly talked about the classical era, by which he meant the 1600s. And as far as I can see, he meant that was the century in which logic and reason gained validation as truth. And imagery and things that were imaginary were no longer felt to embody truth. And that includes intuition, et cetera, et cetera. And I think it's a subtext in Foucault and a lot of radical psychology, as well as Surrealism, that vast areas of the human mind were shut down. And that they reemerge in the 20th century. The unconscious, et cetera. And so, what has struck me is that, when I began to see movies with highly imaginative digital effects, I all of a sudden realized that, yes, the imaginary is back. But the most effective tool to feed it, to give it truthfulness, is digital technology. So we have this fascinating situation of this ultra-rational Cartesian machine producing the imaginary. And I do think there's a good deal of truth in that.

[00:05:18]

ANNETTE LEDDY: There's also a statement—I'm sure this was written a long time ago—but you say, "Gone are the irrational decisions in irrational leaders that governed earlier epochs." But I thought, after Trump, no one would probably argue that anymore. I don't know.

PETER HALLEY: Yeah, I mean, that certainly was written at a certain moment when the technocrats were—

ANNETTE LEDDY: It seemed to me that—yeah—

PETER HALLEY: —at their high point.

ANNETTE LEDDY: It was almost like on automatic pilot, it seemed like. You know? That there would be a certain guarantee of democratic functioning that would just be base level. But now, I mean, can you agree with that? Or how do you look at that statement now?

PETER HALLEY: Well, it is very difficult for me to understand the forces that have become so powerful in contemporary politics around the world. To take a stab at it, I do think one crucial factor is quite simply education. And I think Trumpism and a lot of right-wing activity is the result of people who are essentially not literate, and can't make considered decisions based on information. I'm sure there are many other factors, as well. But I tend to worry, I think the United States is a largely illiterate country.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I mean, in other words, you have this concept of the grid and this connectedness that almost is part of that baseline guarantee of smooth functioning. And I just wonder how this world that you depict, how does that fit with this explosion that we're seeing now, of things so irrational. I mean, in other words, is the grid partly responsible for the kind of decline of democracy that seems to be occurring? Or is there no connection?

PETER HALLEY: Well, I mean, I do make a lot of prints with explosions.

ANNETTE LEDDY: That's true, that's true.

PETER HALLEY: In my graphic work, the explosion is the dominant imagery in the installations that I've done since 1995. Way back in 1983, I did a digital animation of the cell being lit up by an illuminating gas—which was a phrase I got from Duchamp—and then exploding. And the tension between that which is solid state and that which is constantly in flux has always interested me. In my own mind, it's sort of equated with the classical and the romantic. And the paintings, I think, by and large, occupy a classical world, whereas the graphic work, centering on explosions, certainly can be tied to romanticism. And in fact, in a negative way, these kinds of politicians, like Trump, are in a sense irrational romantic figures.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right. Going back to individualism and—

PETER HALLEY: And a mythic story, which I think is at the basis of the romantic rebellion against reason. It all gets very complicated.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Well, yeah, because rebellion can have multi-facets—but anyway. All right, well—so, can you describe the major transitions in your painting? Like, since 1980, where would you say the junctures are?

PETER HALLEY: Well, in 1989, I said to myself, "I've been making the same speech over and over again. I've laid out this spatial system, I want to push it further." And so, I began to use artist pigments, alongside fluorescent pigments—in the '80s, I only used fluorescent pigments, along with black and white. And the conduits began to proliferate, they began to do irrational things, it wasn't particularly clear whether you're going in this direction or that direction.

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Then, as early as '93 and '94, I also began to use metallic paint. And in the '90s, I also got interested in pearlescent paint. And those have remained elements of my work off and on since then. On a formal level, I'd grown up with Albers' color theory, and the idea of complementary colors, and primary colors, and secondary colors, and so forth and so on. But increasingly, I got interested in what the paint brings to the color. So, if you put a Day-Glo red next to a cadmium red, funny things are going to happen. And, in turn, if that's next to a pearlescent red even odder things are going to happen, because they have different levels of light intensity. So that's become a real theme in the work, that color and what the paint is made out of are strongly related.

My work is a kind of psychic diary. I mean, I really don't know what I'm going to paint next. I've gone years painting only prisons, with no cells. I've gone years in which I painted cells and no prisons. Sometimes, the image becomes centralized—it's one cell in the middle—sometimes there are two forms in the painting; how they're connected is something I'm constantly working with, in terms of drawing.

Another crucial moment in my work was 1993 when I got an Apple computer and started using Adobe Illustrator. Up until that moment I worked on graph paper, and the work had arithmetic proportions. And as I went from painting to painting the transitions were relatively simple, based on changing those proportions. Once I started using Illustrator, I found I could stretch things horizontally or vertically however I wanted, and plug things in and take things

out. So, the space of my painting became much more elastic. On the one hand, I could stretch the whole painting, vertically or horizontally, which I sometimes did. But I could also stretch elements within the painting, and take them out and put them in like actors appearing or disappearing on the stage—it was so spontaneous. I've composed solely on the computer since 1993.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, well, that's a huge change, yes.

PETER HALLEY: And I think of the images mutating or evolving on the computer, from one to another.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, like this painting, for example; explain the process. You started out on the computer and you mapped it out?

PETER HALLEY: Well, I drew it on the computer. In this case, I probably started moving the prison rectangles around and stretching them in different ways—horizontally and vertically—until I got the proportions I wanted. And this painting started in a very humorous way. It's six prisons in a kind of circular configuration with a space in the middle, with no background, and an irregular form around the perimeter. For years and years, I've been doing grids of prisons confined within a rectangle. And in the last year or two, I began to get the idea that I wanted to throw them up in the air, or connect them in a more dynamic fashion with each other.

[00:15:06]

ANNETTE LEDDY: And at this point, when you've been using this image for so long, does it still relate to real prisons?

PETER HALLEY: Well, it does and it doesn't. I guess I should start at the beginning. In the '80s, there were a lot of artists who became project-based. So, they would do one thing one year and one thing the next. But I'm much more grounded in the idea of a continuous, contiguous development of one theme. Sort of like Cézanne, or for that matter Rothko, or most of the other artists I grew up with. So, I wanted to stick with this space. As time goes on, the issues in my work become much more about the work itself, and the space of the work, and what happens in the work. So, as you point out, in a lot of ways this painting reacts to a painting I made previously which was tightly controlled inside a rectangle. I do find it humorous, though, because those tightly packed rectangles were like prisons in a sardine can. And they felt claustrophobic somehow. But all of a sudden, I thought of just tossing them into the air—the idea of this sort of daisy chain of prisons seems humorous to me.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But is it like a way of breaking out of prison?

PETER HALLEY: Not exactly. The prisons seem to be simply being thrown in the air.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I just meant in the sense of, if a prison is the image of unfreedom, an extreme unfreedom, are you always looking for combinations that will somehow break you out of that, whatever unfreedom is?

PETER HALLEY: Currently, there's a lot of that in my work. I mean, they're no longer confined within a rectangle. I'm not making rectangular paintings anymore. They all have eccentric shapes, and things seem to be bursting out in different ways. But not the confining forms are still there, but their relationship to the space they're in has changed.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PETER HALLEY: I guess I think somehow both the cell and the prison are on some level, autobiographical. I mean, I think of myself as—not in a tragic way—this figure who is imprisoned, by convention, or whatever. So, I would still think of this as a relationship between six confined—not necessarily people—but spaces.

ANNETTE LEDDY: But you think of yourself as an imprisoned person. Can you say more about that?

PETER HALLEY: Well, that goes all the way back to 1981, with putting the bars on a square.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Or does it go back to just childhood, also?

PETER HALLEY: Well, yeah, my own psychology. But to some extent, I associated the square with a kind of masculinity. So, by taking the square and saying it's not an ideal shape, but putting bars on it—as a young person, as a middle-class guy, I thought, in many ways, I was imprisoned. I wasn't the most spontaneous or outgoing person. You know, philosophically, one can feel oneself imprisoned or isolated from others. I mean, women have been imprisoned or confined in many different ways. But this self-confinement, this idea of inhibition seems like a kind of masculine trope to me.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Do you think of these as self-portraits, then?

[00:20:01]

PETER HALLEY: It's just much more complicated, because I don't know whether the prisons are me or somebody else.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I see.

PETER HALLEY: Or even that they're people. I mean, they're also just structures, or enclosing structures for me. But they also have windows, which is important.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And I've read in one of your essays how you related this to Rothko, or that Rothko had his squares—tell me how you see it in relation to Rothko, because that seemed to be an important point.

PETER HALLEY: What was the relationship?

ANNETTE LEDDY: You said something about that you took the squares of Rothko's—

PETER HALLEY: Oh, that was in 1981, when I was still painting cinderblock walls. I wanted to take that kind of spiritual Color Field space, and put a wall in front of it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Yeah, because Rothko's paintings do seem like windows into the spiritual—or they can, depending on how you look at them.

PETER HALLEY: Part of my early development was also a rebellion against American transcendentalism. And I connect Rothko and Newman to that. I was exposed to that kind of transcendentalism at Andover. And as a child, I was brought up as a Unitarian. So American transcendentalism was kind of the body of water in which I was naturally swimming as a teenager.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And do you mean also, like Thoreau, and—yes, the theory.

PETER HALLEY: Andover is near Walden Pond and Concord, Massachusetts. Emerson, Thoreau, et cetera. The whole ethos of the school had a New England transcendentalist bent.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Right.

PETER HALLEY: I view it very positively, but as an artist I certainly saw French post-structuralism as in opposition to that.

ANNETTE LEDDY: [Laughs.] Yeah, I guess I see that. So maybe we should go now to your life as a magazine editor, because that seems to have taken up, certainly, at least 10 years of your life. And just tell me what impulse led you to that, and how did it relate to your painting and the rest of your life?

PETER HALLEY: Sure. In the mid-'90s, I thought New York was very, very boring. The art world had fallen apart, and the city as I perceived it was not a very exciting place. I did have the idea of starting a school, but nobody wanted to collaborate with me on that. And at the time, I was very close friends with the art critic and curator Bob Nickas. And somehow, we convinced each other that we would start a magazine called *index*. And the first issue was in February 1996.

We pretty much knew what we wanted to do. I was the publisher; he was the first editor. I didn't really want to be the editor; I was more interested in how the thing would be organized. So, we decided to concentrate on long interviews with interesting people. And direct snapshot photography, as opposed to studio photography. And very simple graphic design. And between me and Bob and the contributors we assembled, it turned out that

within a couple years we developed a magazine that seemed to encompass a wide variety of voices from issue to issue. It was always a diverse group of voices. Bob would always choose something from pop music, or maybe an interesting artist. I tended to be interested in architects or people I had met in the art world. And our other contributors brought in people from film, fashion, literature, et cetera. Bob left after a couple of years, and we had two other editors. I remained the publisher, and sort of creative director. Gradually, I began to work more directly with the photographers. But it was just the most wonderful ten years.

[00:25:07]

Our first cover photographer was Wolfgang Tillmans.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Those are very nice photographs.

PETER HALLEY: Yeah, that was thanks to Bob, who was very familiar with his work. Tillmans agreed to do the covers for the first year. And so, Wolfgang very much set the tone for the magazine, and his presence attracted other photographers with a similar alignment, such as Mark Borthwick, or Juergen Teller, and eventually Terry Richardson and Leeta Harding—who was a young photographer at the time. I think the photos over the years were wonderful, as well as the range of people we covered. And with every issue we would have a party, and it was really a Warholian experience—you walk into a room and you see everybody in New York you might possibly want to have a conversation with, in one place.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, was part of the impulse behind it to create a social world that you would be interested in entering and participating in?

PETER HALLEY: I'm not sure it was. But if you think about the idea of conduits, it certainly worked that way. And as it went along, we would often get people we had interviewed to interview other people. So, we were definitely consciously trying to create these interconnections within the magazine. The model was very much Warhol's *Interview*, but I felt by the '90s, *Interview* wasn't what it had been. So, that there was a need for somebody to do something that more embodied the original attitude of *Interview*.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so, how would you describe that, then? How would you describe that—I want to say social world—but that milieu that you capture in that?

PETER HALLEY: Well, it was a very special moment. I think the key word was indie culture. It was a heyday of indie films, indie music, indie fashion. We very consciously covered the stores and designers in Nolita—the Lower East Side. It was when people like Todd Haynes were beginning, and there were just tons and tons of very worthwhile independent movies. And it was also the era of the music revolution from Seattle, with—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Nirvana, you mean? Nirvana?

PETER HALLEY: —It wasn't all Nirvana-like bands, but—a lot of bands had emerged, again, that you could describe as indie.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Grunge. Wasn't it called grunge?

PETER HALLEY: Well, at first it was grunge, but there were really many other forms. But the idea that they were being produced by small record labels, and had small but interesting audiences. Another one that I like is Le Tigre. That comes to mind. That was another indie band.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so, you did this for ten years, and then, why did you stop? It seems like you loved it. But why did you stop doing it?

PETER HALLEY: Well, in 2002, I became director of the Yale Painting MFA program, which was a lot of work. And so, it still amazes me that I did both for about three years. And I kept trying to find a publisher to take over day-to-day duties of *index*. And it probably comes as no surprise, but it's really hard to find somebody who wants to do the kind of routine day-to-day stuff that it takes to keep a magazine going, or to keep the trains running on time. And I was never able to find a publisher. And then, when our third editor left, I wasn't able to find a new editor who could do the job. And I kind of felt, just like with a band or something, that the team had fallen apart, and that it was time to stop.

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ANNETTE LEDDY: Was it also the end of the indie era, though? Was it also the era shifting?

PETER HALLEY: I mean, the timing was pretty good, you know, with the rise of culture on the internet. It certainly coincided with the decline of magazines. So, I probably stopped at the right time, but I wasn't so aware of that. There are two other things that I would like to talk about—one is that starting *index*, I pretty much stopped writing. I like to say that I moved up from labor to management, as a publisher.

[They laugh.]

PETER HALLEY: And commissioning writing, and commissioning interviews was a lot of fun.

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PETER HALLEY: And secondly, I've always loved doing interviews. And I did a number of them for the magazine with some fascinating people. Among them my favorite is probably Wayne Koestenbaum, the poet, who I had the opportunity to meet, and we're still friends. And even nowadays, when a former student or one of my artist colleagues wants me to write about their work, I always say no, but I'm willing to interview them.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Why do you say no?

PETER HALLEY: Well, two reasons. I'm really not able to delve into their work that much and write about it in an insightful way. But the whole point about *index*—

ANNETTE LEDDY: Because it takes too much time, or it's just a huge investment?

PETER HALLEY: Yeah, I mean it would be a distraction from my own focus. But I also believe that, as we're doing now, there's too little published about artists in their own words. And that the most important thing that you can do for an artist is give her or him the opportunity to sit down and tell you what he or she thinks. And I think that applies to journalism, as well. When somebody writes an article about somebody, they have an agenda. But if there's an interview, the interviewee gets to say what's important to them.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And, of course, I agree with that, too. With this one caveat, which is that sometimes the interviews that you read, say in the general press, seem to always repeat a kind of standard sort of self-portrait that the artist wants to project that they can't manage to break out of. You know?

PETER HALLEY: Ours were usually 2,000 words. And in reply to what you're saying, people would be confused, because we would hardly ever want to interview anybody who had something to promote. We would try to get a hold of people when they didn't have a book or didn't have a movie, et cetera. And sometimes they were reluctant, but sometimes we could convince them.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, anyway, then you go on to teaching, and you become the head of the MFA program in painting, which must have been—I mean, hugely satisfying, in terms of just a reversal after your poor treatment there. [Laughs.]

PETER HALLEY: It was. It was a real challenge, too. I learned a lot about politics and that if you wanted to change something, you had to convince people that it was a good idea before you could do anything. But I also felt very strongly about mentoring young artists. I've hardly ever actually taught in a classroom. The Yale model is the 45-minute studio visit. So, it's almost like being a psychotherapist. You sit with somebody for 45 minutes and talk about their work. And as I've been saying, I really do like to listen and hear what people have to say. Most of the students were in their 20s. And what I observed was that it's a time in which, as artists, they were trying to form a kind of meta-history of who they were, in terms of family, and society, and their own history. So, oftentimes, we'd be talking about somebody's grandmother or grandfather, and what they did, and what that meant to the student. Or what it meant to be Chicano, or grow up in the plains of Canada. The students were, by and large, North American, but they came from all over. And it was an enormously rich experience. Plus, the fact that they were all very gifted, so you didn't have to do any remedial work.

ANNETTE LEDDY: And so, what direction did you take it in? Or what was your plan for your tenure, and how did it pan out?

[00:05:03]

PETER HALLEY: Well, the most important thing was to make it a supportive environment. So, I did a lot of stuff that was —and I've heard rumors I've been criticized for this— a little bit like being a camp counselor. Because I'd write them a letter before they arrived, and the week of their arrival I'd have a private meeting with everybody to introduce myself and tell them I had their backs. And I tried to make final critiques a little bit less frightening or dehumanizing. There were only 40 students, it's not a huge number. And many of them had been just swept in from some small town in Nebraska, or all kinds of places from around the country. And so, they were in an intimidating environment. I wanted them to be able to thrive.

I think the most important thing I did was I empowered the entire faculty to invite people. So, we had a big range of visiting critics. And I tended to invite people to give seminars. So, I remember we invited Jack Bankowsky, when he was working on Pop art, to give a seminar about Pop art. And I invited the art historian Katy Siegel who did the exhibition *Hard Times, Fast Times*, a show about developments of painting during the 1970s.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Oh, that's a great show, yeah. Great book. Yeah, Katy Siegel.

PETER HALLEY: Yeah. Well, she gave a seminar on it. So, that was great. Robert Hobbs, who was a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, did a seminar, I think it was, "From Kant to Baudrillard in Six Lectures." And it was enormously productive for students, because they got some grounding in the range of philosophical ideas in the West. So, those were some of them.

So many of those students have done well. I stay in touch with a good many, and along with all my individual favorites, I'm very proud of the fact that there's three MacArthur Grant winners from the ten years.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, you did that for ten years.

PETER HALLEY: Nine, actually.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Nine years. And now, you don't teach anymore.

PETER HALLEY: Well, unfortunately, nobody wants me. When I stepped down, I guess, without realizing, I took myself out of the field. And I think part of it is generational. But I do miss it. It's sort of an addiction I had.

ANNETTE LEDDY: So, now, you don't teach, you don't edit a magazine, you don't write essays. You focus completely on painting.

PETER HALLEY: Well, not exactly, because I do these enormous installations. And they're very, very intensive. And things have picked up in recent years. So, first there was an installation at Lever House, *New York, New York*, in 2018. And then, shortly thereafter, the following summer I was invited to do a big installation in Venice, which was called *Heterotopia I*. While I was working on that, I did a big installation in Paris at Galerie Xippas. And then, the next year, I did an installation at Greene Naftali Gallery called *Heterotopia II*. That's 2019.

ANNETTE LEDDY: I saw that. I remember that. But that is a painting, right? It's a giant painting, correct?

PETER HALLEY: Well, it was a structure with paintings within it. But the structure, in turn, was based on the paintings. And it included two floors, and every surface was painted. In some ways it was very much a culmination of my career. I was hoping other opportunities would arise from that. Since then, I've done one installation, which just is closing at Museo Nivola, a small museum in Sardinia. I used graphic elements from previous installations, and reordered them in this space. So, it ended up having a retrospective feeling, at least in my own mind.

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ANNETTE LEDDY: What do you feel that the installations accomplish that the paintings, by themselves, don't?

PETER HALLEY: Well, if I go to Europe, the first thing I'm going to go see is Baroque churches. Anywhere, anytime.

[They laugh.]

PETER HALLEY: And actually, on the way to Sardinia I went to— Palermo in Sicily and saw the Norman churches from the 11th century. And they completely bowled me over as Gesamtkunstwerk. I guess I've always been interested in the idea of Gesamtkunstwerk, and particularly how one's experience of architectural space effects how one perceives two-dimensional images. So, churches, and palaces, and probably Buddhist temples, and Mayan tombs, and Egyptian tombs are all about that. And it's become an important thematic for me. How you move through a space, and how you experience images within it.

ANNETTE LEDDY: Okay. Now, we're coming to the standard closing questions. What has been your contribution to American art?

PETER HALLEY: Well, I like to think I shook up the idea of abstraction. And in the '80s and early '90s, I was aware that there was a certain amount of response to my work, enough to give me the feeling that I did that. My work was a bit iconoclastic, because ideas about spirituality, or the purity of abstraction, or even the idea of an abstract painting as being something particularly beautiful, were all things I was against. And I was also saying, "Hey, my paintings are not really abstract. They reflect what is going on in the socio-political world. Abstract paintings are not hermetic. They're entirely related to society."

And then, in terms of my writing as well as my work, I'm sometimes credited by younger people for really anticipating what was going to happen in the digital world, you know, the complete dominance that digital technology was going to have on our lives. And I think in the '80s and '90s, that was also a contribution.

And at this point in my life, what I feel pretty good about is that, in my own terms, I'm a kind of maverick. I don't show at a mega-gallery. I do, quote, unquote, "geometric abstract" paintings covered with this ugly Roll-A-Tex material, I do these extravagant installations, and as the art world gets bigger and more and more money gets involved, and culture gets more and more transferred onto social media, I hope it's an important model; somebody's willing to do their own thing that sometimes has its rewards, sometimes doesn't. But you're going to do what you want to do. Also, with a certain sense of humor, or irreverence is still very important to me.

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ANNETTE LEDDY: Should we stop there?

PETER HALLEY: Yes, that's great.

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