Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Charles Linder, 1999 July 10

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Charles Linder on July 10, 1999. The interview took place in San Francisco, California and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

TAPE 1, SIDE A [BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Paul Karlstrom interviewing Charles Linder for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, on July 10, 1999. The interview is being conducted at the interviewer's home in San Francisco. This is a first session, and it is directed very specifically to Mr. Linder's experience at art school at the San Francisco Art Institute. First, of course, is San Francisco, and then across the Bay, graduate work at University of California, Berkeley. Just by way of introduction, I should also say that Charles is an artist, I guess a conceptual artist would be one way to describe you.

CHARLES LINDER: Of sorts, yes.

PAUL KARLSTRON: And -- but beyond that -- or maybe not beyond it, maybe very much related, and we can talk a little bit about this if we have time -- you, until recently, were partner in the gallery Refusalon, right?

CHARLES LINDER: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In downtown, now, south of Market, two locations south of Market in San Francisco.

CHARLES LINDER: Right. Still in my studio there [first location].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Anyway, but let's get to this art education business because, again, just by way of preliminary, as we set the stage for this, California has had -- well, really, almost exclusively -- [an active] art school scene over the year, certainly through the [20th] century. And then I would say in recent years it has really expanded, probably because of the state university and college system. Each one has an art department.

CHARLES LINDER: Right, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And it wasn't always the case. In the very beginning, you had the California School of Design and the Mark Hopkins, California School of Fine Arts, and then San Francisco Art Institute, which you attended. And a few other places. And what I'm interested in doing here is to gather experiences of these various schools from individuals who attended at different times. So why don't you start with the San Francisco Art Institute. When did you enroll there?

CHARLES LINDER: I transferred there from a community college in Santa Monica in '89 -- actually '88, and I spent a little bit more than two years there at the San Francisco Art Institute, where I was on a fellowship almost all the time, or a scholarship and fellowship, and I had an opportun -- or the reason I came to San Francisco was I got this scholarship while in community college to SFAI which enabled me to go beyond my two-year education that I did in community college, and get a bachelor's degree, which I decided I wanted to do. And one of the reasons I was interested in the Art Institute was its -- just sort of its legacy in general and the independent spirit that it kind of evokes, and the sort of eclecticism that's embodied in it's alumni and staff and teachers. So there was a -- so I -- when I had that opportunity, that was, to me, the best thing -- best option I had at the time, which was to take this, you know, year-long scholarship to the Art Institute at that time in sculpture, to move from Santa Monica to the Bay area, which I did in the fall of '88. So the experience there was, you know -- I was really morphing quite a bit, and the longer I was there, the more I became interested in conceptual art and video art, working with Tony Labat who is a real firecracker and really kind of changed my whole way of thinking about art. By the end of that time at the Art Institute, I realized that I wanted to stay in San Francisco and I then I wanted to start a venture which would come out of my just general obsession with art and love of working with other artists. And so I decided to create Refusalon at that time, which was both a studio for myself, a home, and a little gallery and a shop. So it was a multi-purpose sort of entrepreneurial vehicle catchall, and I think I really kind of -- I imparted the spirit of a lot of what I took on in Tony's classes which were really -- what would you say -- they were just really -- his whole thing was like Ano limits,@ you know, place no limits on yourself. And I think that has both advantages and disadvantages, but to young students, like myself at the time, it really was inspirational. I think, though, in retrospect, it is necessary to put some limits on yourself to get stuff done, or to make substantial work, or to make memorable work. You have to put some limits on yourself.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I don't mean to interrupt, but you already raised a number of interesting issues. I just want to make clear -- make sure we're clear on this, that you were still at the Art Institute when you established Refusalon. Is that right?

CHARLES LINDER: Actually, it was really right afterwards. I graduated in December of '90 -- let's see, I always forget this. In '90 - spring of '90, that's right. Got the place in the fall of '90. Actually I was -- I had just moved into 630 Natoma as I was finishing at the Art Institute. Spent about six months living there and started Refusalon in the fall with a few of the one-night shows, mostly of graduates of the Art Institute, and that kind of became my --

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you opened in fall of '90?

CHARLES LINDER: Hm-hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: With showing fellow grads of SSAI.

CHARLES LINDER: Hm-hmm.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Second question, and I won't interrupt you for a moment -- you already raise a very key question, and it has to do with changing nature of art schools and the emphasis that used to be put on, well, learning certain techniques. Of developing tools beyond just thinking.

CHARLES LINDER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: In other words, conceptual thinking.

CHARLES LINDER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTRON: And, obviously, ideas about art have changed, and so forth and so on, but what you said suggests that at least with Tony Labat, and I don't know, maybe you can comment if that, in fact, seemed like a general one or an attitude at the school. But that there was almost a permissiveness that involved almost no real effort or teaching methodology on their part except -- well, why don't you tell me how you perceived them as teachers. What were they imparting? What were they doing?

CHARLES LINDER: There was a stringency. There was a sort of -- well, I guess I'd speak particularly about Tony. There was this sort of level of commitment that he is looking for which I don't think many of the students had, and that created a tension in the classroom, and this sort of apprehension, I think, to do just out there stuff, to do wacky, edgy activity or performance, object making. And, in one respect, it sort of seemed like it became a theater for him. With the types of work that were being produced in the class, for instance, really emulating a lot of the stuff he was introducing us to. And so, maybe in that regard, it's -- yeah, that was the -- one of the first encounters I really forced myself to examine, the difference in philosophies, perhaps, as you mentioned, like between a craft or a mediumistic type art, and an idea-oriented art. And I think maybe the thing I remember most about Tony is that he always adamantly preached to us about the -- this dichotomy and how that the materials should be determined by ideas [and] would end up -- that your ideas should be in order first, and that those should be cogent and, you know, compelling, and then you figure what the material is. And, then, in a way, I'm really -- I abide by this sort of central MO to this day, I think. I really -- I'm not interested, like I didn't go to the Art Institute or Berkeley to learn about the legacy of painting enshrined in these institutions or, for that matter, about sculpture, although I'm very interested in painting and sculpture. I think the most influential train of thought, to me, was a more intellectual approach to art-making, maybe a less gut level or less sort of expressionistic type of art-making than a cognitive and sort of considerate kind of art-making. Yeah, I think that would be something that, although coming from my background at that time, I had really done a lot more materialistic work, or a lot more -- I would say the work that I'd done was rooted more in -- yeah, more in the material or the manipulation of the material, but that a certain -- and I -- yeah, I still have that war within me. I like manipulating material and often not knowing why, and then I think it is important to know why you're going to do something. But at that time, as a student of Tony's, I really was struck by that and found -- you know, found that was something that was really important to me. I often felt like why introduce more art into the world. There has to be a reason. There has to be a cause for it or a need for it of some sort, and it has to have a kind of function. For the pure frivolity for it's own sake, just making objects for the rich luxury market items perhaps was not really what I was interested in, although I acknowledge I participated in that economy, and hope to continue to. And so, you know, I think that was where Tony was saying, you know, this has to be a therapeutic life activity that's sort of like, fuck the establishment; that's like you get to wreak havoc on the world at the expense of your ideas -- or, no, not at the expense of your ideas, but by way of your ideas, and it really embodied a punk ethos that I think was sort of in it's fledgling stages -- or, not fledgling, rather, but in it's -- perhaps in it's waning stages. I think the late 80's by that stage, punk was really kind of on it's way to being mass marketed and commercialized, and I think a lot more artists really were starting to consider, again, after the boom of the 80's artwork, how do you make art that is just purely for sale, and isn't like a political or

anarchic art. And, so, I was literally caught in between that tension there -- the sort of anarchist artist and the entrepreneurial upstart artist. And that's really where I think I still am today, trying to kind of find a functional union of idealism and realism. That's what I think art is all about to me. And if you're too much of an idealist, then you're unemployed and you have no money and you have debt problems and no shows. Everybody's had all of these problems. I've had these problems. But no one wants them. Now, you want to supersede those by way of healthy commercial activity.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did you feel that these inevitable problems, if you will, or issues were dealt with at the Art Institute? You felt there was any kind of addressing, you know, the reality of what the students would face when they get out of the place?

CHARLES LINDER: Yeah --

PAUL KARLSTROM: ... this -- this fuck-the-establishment thing was about, or whatever it may be.

CHARLES LINDER: Right.

CHARLES LINDER: This is the chasm of lack in art institutions, both of the ones I went through, at any rate, maybe not all art institutions, but it's sort of like a white ele -- or, what do you call it -- the proverbial white elephant of the art world, or the art institution, is what happens to all these graduates. And, you know, when I was in school there were no real -- nobody even talked about how to pitch yourself to galleries, how to get dealers to hustle for you, how to sell your own work independently. None of this was addressed.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No career guidance.

CHARLES LINDER: Career placement was a total misnomer. I think, now, that, at least at the Art Institute, they may have some little fledgling program devoted to that, but it's sort of like this chasm that isn't addressed, which -- and I think particularly for students in masters programs, I mean, beyond the assumption that there are teaching jobs out there for people, which there are not, you know, I think what do these people do? I don't know. They become -- you know, they get jobs, they work in galleries and museums, they become criminals. I don't know what they do. But it's -- I think it is like the white elephant nobody wants to talk about. Presumably, we're operating within a guild system but, yet, I think that most of my colleagues and most of the graduates that I went to school with operated in this void of what happens post graduation. I was always hyper concerned with it and really all of my attention went into creating something that I could do after graduating which, actually, I feel had little to nothing to do with what I did in school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So did you and your fellow students ever discuss this? Or let's put it in a different way. You were at the distinguished San Francisco Art Institute.

CHARLES LINDER: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Presumably you were at the right place. But did you ever really examine what was happening to you? What you were being given at the time? I don't mean, now. Retrospectively, you have these --

CHARLES LINDER: That's true, you know. I think definitely not. I think while you're caught up in the experience of art school, there's a day-to-day intensity of the experience which precludes being able to really focus on what is down the road. You're all caught up in your projects and the hype of the establishment, but, yet, yeah -- but, you know -- well, I mean, I can't think even to this day that I got a show out of my being a student there. I can't think that I got one grant other than while in school. I have never received a grant. I've applied for grants, never get them.

PAUL KARLSTRON: Oh, no.

CHARLES LINDER: [chuckles] You know, only while I was in schools, universities. But, so I can't really think directly how it did influence my "career" as an artist as it is today. I mean, other than that I'm still in contact with some students from that time and some faculty members, I cannot really say that -- yeah, that it really created my career, by any means. I think I did. And that it was really sort of a free-for-all, marble-grabbing instinct that just led to my survival by way of Refusalon. I didn't know what I was going to do. I didn't want to get a job, but -- and there, you know, I didn't really see myself being able to get a job other than, you know -- I don't know. Something like as a preparator, or something, which I did for a little while, which is dreadful work as an artist. So I wanted to try to make up some kind of ostensible business out of myself. And that's what I have done, I guess.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let -- let's hold, I'm very interested in Refusalon, and would like to talk about it. I want to sort of dig away a little bit more at school, your experience at the Art Institute and then, we'll, of course, move on to Cal, a somewhat different institution. But when we talk about the Art Institute we are talking about the

oldest art school in the West, which, of course, has evolved and changed and transformed. And it's, frankly, for some of us a little difficult to pin down what it's really about. In other words, what is it's --

CHARLES LINDER: Even more so now, I think.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And, usually, you chose -- one chooses places because of -- like people, for their personalities, you know, their histories, their identities. And you described what attracted you early on. But that was from a distance. You didn't have the current experience that [you now have].

CHARLES LINDER: Right. I really only visited the Art Institute once and decided to move up, and a lot of it had to do with my friend Chris Isner at the time, an artist who I went to school with in Santa Monica who got the same scholarship to move up here.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Was the scholarship an Art Institute scholarship?

CHARLES LINDER: The Art Institute gave money to a number of community colleges throughout California to encourage the students to come there. It was a one-year, partial tuition. It was significant. I ended up the first year not having to come up with any money.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's [fortunate].

CHARLES LINDER: And the second year I did have to come up with some, but I managed to get through art school without spending a huge amount of money but getting Cal grants, Pell Grants, and stuff like that. But the novelty you were just speaking about of, you know, the -- what attracts you to an institution, you know, I think at that stage, when I was at the Art Institute in '88 and '89, and finishing there in '90,you know, the idea that it was the only strictly fine arts school in the country, is what they described it as, that there were no commercial arts, there were no applied arts, no crafts like pottery -- or, there, you know -- glass blowing and knitting and things like this.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You must have had Richard Shaw there at the time.

CHARLES LINDER: When I was there he didn't teach there. He taught at Berkeley.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. He was already at Berkeley.

CHARLES LINDER: We had like a -- I can't remember -- a ceramist, and there was a ceramics department but, at any rate, I found even at that time that novelty of it being the only "fine arts school" in the country to that date it was wearing thin, honestly. It was -- I mean, I found it to be a -- yeah, it was sort of like a novelty of the punk ethos that was, that may or may not even apply any more. But, nonetheless, I think even when I was a student at that time, the school was far more interesting than Arts and Crafts -- or the California College of Arts and Crafts, which, at this date in '99, has totally eclipsed the Art Institute in terms of being a really -- a hot bed of intellectual activity and the highest caliber of design, craft, and application, I think, in Northern California, if not California . . .

PAUL KARLSTRON: Well, you've got to consider the Art Center school.

CHARLES LINDER: I was just going to say the Art Center --

PAUL KARLSTROM: … sort of exploding in size.

CHARLES LINDER: That's huge.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. But, you're point's well taken. I mean, that has a long history of combining, it seems to me, a contact awareness of -- or an involvement with "fine arts". But then a very strong program, I think it always has in crafts and --

CHARLES LINDER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Applied, I suppose.

CHARLES LINDER: Yeah, it might point up the same duelism that you're referring to in the first few pages here of this sort of conservatism versus the progressivism, and how that's embodied in the ostensible philosophy of each school. I think the flip side of the idealistic, perhaps narcissistic world of conceptual art and high fine art, is that realism has an all-encompassing toll. It's -- there's, you know, all can be said about the great utopias that failed and the great troubled intellectuals of their era. But how do they pay the bills? How do they -- you know, how do they make it? How do they allow for realism? And I was really wondering this at the time I was getting out of the Art Institute. I was terrified. I didn't know -- just realized I'd went -- I have a bachelor's degree, an

entirely useless degree, which enables me to go to the back of the unemployment line at McDonald's and start over. And there I am jumping out with a bachelor's trying to do something with myself. And didn't really have any, I don't think I had any career options at that time, so I created a pseudo career, but I -- that was something I just was -- I wondered about all through art school, was how are we supposed to apply these high and lofty ideals in a realistic day-to-day situation that we can pay for this astronomical cost of living in this ridiculous town.

PAUL KARLSTRON: Well, you know, I think you've hit on -- it's not the only point, of course, and certainly not the only aspect of the time that -- the only feature of the times you spent in there at Institute or there at [inaudible] Cal art education, but it's got to be in some ways the issue that has to be addressed, and seemingly is not being addressed, and I, frankly, am going to dive into that a bit in this essay I'm writing, because it seems to me I'd be irresponsible not to. I think there's a very romantic notion of, again, the Art Institute, being, to my mind, a great example of this lovely sort of monastery on Russian Hill.

CHARLES LINDER: And then your point -- yeah, of how it is an appropriated, almost Disney-scratch pad kind of --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sort of, yeah.

CHARLES LINDER: -- little reality that works. People walk in, the guy's quote here, "wasn't this some sort of monastery" -- or was it a "fake" monastery?

PAUL KARLSTROM: [chuckles] But is which is all, of course, interesting in talking about California, but this, in a way it seems almost to embody this kind of fiction, this idealism. And the reality is they've got a school going there and unless they say up front, "This is not practical. You are not getting life-coping skills or experience out of this, you should come in here understanding that the value of this experience alone unto itself it is important for your growth."

CHARLES LINDER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- and that's it.

CHARLES LINDER: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And my sense is that none of these places have --

CHARLES LINDER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- the nerve to do that. Why not?

CHARLES LINDER: I'll tell you what it is.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What are they about?

CHARLES LINDER: The whole system is precipitated by this illusion of the -- this romanticized illusion of the artist's lifestyle. That's why people go to art school because, really, for their rich parents, it's cheap day care. And they send them off there, they pay for every -- I knew I'd say more than half the student body when I was at the Art Institute -- this is a running joke -- was that it was some kind of just therapy day care for these rich kids, you know, credit card punkers, we used to call them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

CHARLES LINDER: They would have the complete decked out grand slam, whatever you -- what do you call that? You know, the trench-coat rocker look, death rockers, that were so mod --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Goths.

CHARLES LINDER: Goths. The visa Goths. And they paid for everything on their parents' credit cards, which was just operating this fantasy world of dungeons and dragons meets, you know, I don't know what. [Dungeons and Dragons aesthetic. CL confirmed by PJK]

PAUL KARLSTROM: I love it.

CHARLES LINDER: Internet hyperspace. And I think it was like, for most students, a four-year lag time where they were just allowed to fuck off and presumably end up with something, if not a few good paintings and maybe, you know, at least a 3.0 in their overall grade point average. So, I -- that may sound cynical, but, yet, I think, you know, my -- and this was another point that Tony always used to hammer into our heads. As we'd be sitting there in the class while he was making fun of our projects, he would say things like, "One out of ten of you will

amount to shit. One out of ten maybe. In this room, maybe half of one of you." He would say the meanest things. And he was right. And it creates this kind of competition in life, like I was going to be the one, you know. I -- to this day, I operate that way. But he --

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it's sort of a challenge that he's...?

CHARLES LINDER: Kind of, and then -- like that was your early foresight.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's either a challenge for your benefit or it's sadism, he gets his kicks from torturing you.

CHARLES LINDER: I think probably as a failed artist, he does get a thrill that way, because he's, you know, he's the ultimate, you know, you highlight that aspect of the California scene where artists are teachers, you know, but then there's the truism of those that can, do, and those that can't, teach.

PAUL KARLSTRON: Well, let's pursue --

CHARLES LINDER: And that applies, I think, and a lot of people do use their careers as interesting artists to teaching. But it's not just a New York or San Francis -- or California thing, really, but it's -- Okay, I'm straying from the point. But the thing, the only precursor I had -- or the only foresight I had into the perilous world of post graduation was Tony's niggling that, you know, one out of ten of you are going to amount to something, and I'm highly competitive. I wasn't going to be anywhere in the nine of ten -- the other nine, nine-tenths. I'm was going to be that one, and so it -- to me, I realized that the career was viciously competitive and that I'm opportunistic and cutthroat and backstabbing probably judging from all of his methods --

TAPE 1, SIDE B [BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Continuing this interview with Charles Linder on July 10. This is Tape 1, side B, and we were -- I don't know what we lost. Not much.

CHARLES LINDER: I was just saying about the preparation for the post graduation world. Just all I got out of the few tips from my teachers were that you had to be pretty opportunistic and ruthless and rule no options out in terms of how are you going to survive if you aren't a rich kid, which, in my case, I was not. And, I mean, I became spiritually enriched by, the all [inaudible], but I didn't come here with a bank roll like a lot of the students.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, would you say then that, if you had the charac -- if you were forced to characterize the experience, you pointed out, and I think pretty thoughtfully, some of the problems and the realities of that situation, some of the lax, shall we say, in terms of serving the needs of the students. But, obviously, you also feel that you got something and would you cast it sort of in the realm of the spirit? That it actually fed, not to be too romantic.

CHARLES LINDER: I really do. I'd have to say that, you know -- I mean, in retrospect --

PAUL KARLSTROM: It was good for your soul?

CHARLES LINDER: -- I cherished that time. I do. It's -- I -- the time that I spent -- although, I structured it so that, you know, when I was a 17-year-old I thought I might want to go to art school. But I don't want to spend four years in art school. I want to go to a public community college in California. I was living in Alabama at that time and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: I went for one semester to Valley JC.

CHARLES LINDER: Did you?

PAUL KARLSTROM: San Fernando Valley JC.

CHARLES LINDER: This is like a, in fact, another little anecdote perhaps that should be touched on, really, because I feel that my education in the community college was the most instrumental educational experience I had. In fact, because I was really ambiguous coming out of high school. I thought, oh, my God, choosing to be an artist, that's ridiculous, you know. And I never thought I -- I didn't know what I wanted to do. And --

PAUL KARLSTROM: You have just --

CHARLES LINDER: -- being in community college, you know, I took a lot of other liberal arts courses, philosophy, I studied German. I really enjoyed myself there as a part of a larger student body, you know, of 20,000 students or something. I went to a high school with a thousand kids and, for me, that was really liberating and it really set me loose on the idea that if I wanted to succeed at that, I could. That was my first inkling to go ahead and

pursue, an arts education was Santa Monica College and just having a -- what amounted to really encouraging and supportive, if conservative, environment in which to make art or learn about making art, and it cost virtually nothing. And so that was my whole rationale, you know, going to California, get a resi - or, you know, get -- because that was my residency, get a cheap education, or get an affordable, high-quality education.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you know, it's interesting, that's what Bob Colescott said. I interviewed him recently, and why his family moved to California from the south. A middle class, black family, both parents educated school teachers, was to get free admission to the University of California.

CHARLES LINDER: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I mean, the single reason. Not even for a job, I understood.

CHARLES LINDER: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, there's a distinguished precedent there --

CHARLES LINDER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- for that. You're really raising, I think, some critical questions and they can't be answered within any finality. Obviously, we can only talk, or rather, you should talk about your perspective based on your experience, but certain issues just come up glaring in this conversation. One of them has to do with what -- I don't want to use the word cynical, but it begins to sort of [go] in that direction, if you will. These teachers at these schools -- It's not just art departments, by the way, or art schools -- basically are selling a bogus product. Or one could view it that way if one of their jobs is to give an experience that will equip students to move on and function in the world.

CHARLES LINDER: I really, I'd have to agree with you. I really would. I think the landslide of modernism into postmodernism created not only an artificial economy of "poor" art, fine art, but it also disenfranchised a lot of the material -- you know, maybe materialistic or crafts-based artists.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, the kinds of artists that need to go to schools and study and learn [inaudible] --

CHARLES LINDER: To learn from masters, right. The people that don't know how to improvise and become masterful. Yeah, I agree. In that gap, or in the chasm, I think it's the same kind of thing that -- well, this illustrates to me a lot about Western culture, but people needing to go through institutions in order to get something that they think is legitimate or other -- I mean, the same thing could be said for churches, museums, investment firms. All of these things are -- it's possible to do it yourself in this era. You don't really need the institutions as much, but they operate on the presumption that people think you do need them, and that's why --

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, it's --

CHARLES LINDER: -- business.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So, it's an industry, it's a business. What you have described, I guess, we're just calling something by it's proper name which --

CHARLES LINDER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- we're not supposed to.

CHARLES LINDER: Well, yeah, I think we should be really forthright, and then we'll switch right over and talk about the Academy of Art College.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, yeah, I want to talk a little bit about that.

CHARLES LINDER: Which I don't know much about that. But people talk about rumors [images, reputations of] about schools as we have just done in talking about the Art Institute as a bastion of intellectualism and idealism, and then that's, as we've discussed, how the CCAC perhaps was once thought of a bastion of crafts and and applied arts. People talk about the Academy of Art and they say, "This is a real estate holding corporation." That's true. They supposedly own some phenomenal amount of real estate in the city. So then you're -- the questions immediately go, in my mind, to what is the ostensible product provided by the institution, in whatever case, but in the Art Academy's case, it's a more strictly applied arts, commercial arts, digital, everything, web, everything, and they have a film department. I'd have to say that, really, anybody that would have to talk shit about this school is not seeing the efficacy of their graduates going into really high-paying jobs creating all of the animations that everyone watches, building the web pages, that are the most popular web pages in the world --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, the Art Institute's people are --

CHARLES LINDER: They just got a digital department going a couple of years ago.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

CHARLES LINDER: And probably for the same kind of reasons that they fetishized "commercial" art for so long, finally realized, okay, digital art can be a, you know, ostensibly a fine art medium, which I think, of course, it can. And they've got a department there, but compare that department to the Art Academy, oh, it's [SFAI dept.] minuscule and it costs five times as much. But what you're paying for, again, there, while you're paying five times as much at the Art Institute is for the largess, the cache that comes with the history of SFAI, even though the digital department's only three or four years old. But you go to the Art Academy, it's a given that the reason you're going there is you want to learn HTML, you want to learn Flash and Macro Media, and everything you can learn to be creating websites and interactive commercials and all those kinds of stuff. None of which I really know, incidentally, and it's one of the things I am beginning to wish I knew a lot more about because I have to hire people that know how to do that. So then, you look at the viability of them overall. I think you look at how many students go to the Art Academy. Thousands and thousands have campuses all over San Francisco, and buses to get them around.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It must be the biggest art school in -- maybe in the world.

CHARLES LINDER: I think it's pretty huge. They have -- I don't remember how many students, but it's big business. They import kids from Asia to go to school there. I don't want to sound like --

PAUL KARLSTROM: No --

CHARLES LINDER: -- I'm weird about that at all.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, yeah.

CHARLES LINDER: But they actively recruit students from Asia to come to San Francisco, again, kind of coat tailing on the cache of the Bay area as this hot bed of digital culture and cyberspace and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, it's the -- clearly the Art School then reverting to the professional trade school's approach.

CHARLES LINDER: I think so, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But the advantage to that, as much as you and I, because we both operate in this -- finally, in this sort of elitist thinking about art, no matter what we say --

CHARLES LINDER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We hope that somebody still hangs on to this specialness of it.

CHARLES LINDER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The specialness of it is almost entirely lost in a place, I would think, [like the Academy] --

CHARLES LINDER: I have to kind of agree, yeah. It's a much more perfunctory affair. It's more -- although I don't know, you know, enough about their curriculum --

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, I don't either.

CHARLES LINDER: -- to really know that I'd feel safe making a blind statement like that, but it's a factory. Kids are out front chain smoking, they can't wait to get back into learn Photo Shop, they want [inaudible] --

PAUL KARLSTROM: I know. I walk by them on the way to Tom's [Tom Marioni's studio, Howard Street].

CHARLES LINDER: There's tons of them out there. Tons.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is very interesting, though, because it's right on the mark in terms of identifying some of the major problems that these art schools -- backing up, if what are these schools -- what are their characters, and what are they about? What is the Art Institute about? How does it keep somehow focused on what it can be and should be, especially in a world now that has an Academy of Art about which, clearly, I'm going to have to mention in here in my essay because it's, in some ways, that's where what is really happening. That's where it happens from the standpoint of preparation for engaging a changing world.

CHARLES LINDER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I guess it becomes, then, maybe a philosophical question. Perhaps the Art Institute and places like that that finally are going to have to just admit they represent a philosophy about art --

CHARLES LINDER: It's an antique philosophy, really. It's --

PAUL KARLSTROM: And look where it comes from. I mean, I'm sure -- were you, as a student, knowledgeable yet -- knowledgeable enough yet about your art history to be aware of that golden era of the Mac Agy years at the Art Institute, Clyfford Still.

CHARLES LINDER: Oh, yeah, yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Which, of course, is a long time ago and has absolutely nothing to do with the Art Institute in subsequent decades.

CHARLES LINDER: Well, that kind of was the heyday of modernism that was -- that was when --

PAUL KARLSTROM: But, I mean, was that something that made --

CHARLES LINDER: -- art spirit, you know, just coming into the Bohemian era and the beatniks, and that was really probably when San Francisco was the shit, you know. And then I really think at the moment I came to San Francisco I felt like I saw all these people that were still trying to kick-start that. Whether at the Art Institute or on the Haight, or whereever. It was this lost Bohemianism that sort of functionally maintained in the schools, but, not [inaudible] --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Basically through the 1960's. I mean, what we're talking about is mid-40's to, we'll give it, like, at the outside, 1970. That puts the late 60's, would you agree with that?

CHARLES LINDER: Yeah, although I think that maybe in the 70's, again, you know, with the conceptual art, the Art Institute sort of became a hot bed again, but, then -- I mean, I don't really know. Now, it seems to be really dead, from what I can see. I mean, I shouldn't say that as an alumni, but, boy, it seems dead over there.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, this -- this is -- we're talking about the truth here. We're talking about the truth for history's sake, and we don't have to be nice to places that go astray. It's not our job . . . in fact, it's not your job . . .

CHARLES LINDER: But, see, even the people that are in charge over there and all the dignitaries that support it and stuff, it's all like it's still operating under the presumption that everything's okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

CHARLES LINDER: Nobody's really willing to try to redefine it that much. They're just -- I mean, they haven't even had a gallery director over there for a year and a half. I mean, that's my little personal grudge, actually. But, they -- you know, it's [inaudible]

PAUL KARLSTROM: They've actually had some galleries there.

CHARLES LINDER: They should have great, world-class shows there. In order to attract students and art viewers, ostensibly, and they don't do that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about -- we certainly aren't here to dish any institution. This is not what this is about.

CHARLES LINDER: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTRON: And, yet, we are truth seekers.

CHARLES LINDER: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We are seeking the truth. And, again, one of the things that comes out of your remarks is -- it interests me, is you talk about the community college -- used to call them junior college situation -- as now, as you reflect in some very basic solemn way, of providing you more that you could actually use now and hold onto.

CHARLES LINDER: And I'm like still in touch with those guys down there. The teachers, and it's -- I go do little guest lectures there and stuff and --

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really? Well, is it that you were getting educated in, perhaps, a more traditional way? You were being exposed to a body of inherited knowledge. Which is, for the most part, Western civilization.

CHARLES LINDER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this is going to lead to a question, but, do you agree that that is part of what now you think of fondly -- that, "Hey, I was doing a little bit of English literature, I was studying German, I was studying another language." Maybe a little psychology, these kinds of things that have to do with the areas of knowledge that have made this culture and this society.

CHARLES LINDER: Right. And that's where I didn't realize, going to the Art Institute, what a cloistered little world I was getting into.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Here's the question, and you answer this however you want to, but I think that this is so fundamental. Perhaps at the Art Institute they assume students come already with this kind of experience, although they have rated -- they have an undergraduate program, you know, you got your degree. So that raises the question about that. But I guess the big question is, do you need educated people, intelligent people who think critically to be conceptual artists? Do you have to have ideas and information? Or is it all intuitive? You get the conceptual out of your intuition --

CHARLES LINDER: You've touched on the touchstone of my work. And I like to think of myself as a naive conceptual artist. I like to get away --

PAUL KARLSTRON: Tell me about it [chuckles].

CHARLES LINDER: -- with [inaudible] heinous blunders at the expense of not knowing. And I think allowing myself that liberty is -- it's kind of like I -- sometimes you end up with your foot in your mouth, but the other situation, the flip side is you know too much and you don't know how to apply any of it. So I think, again, it comes back to the central clash with Tony Labat's world of conceptual art. I like manipulating material, I like finding things and putting them together with other things, and so there -- that's sort of a materialistic urge which is at odds with my conceptualist nature which thinks that everything has to be explained or there has to be a reason for why it's there. So, I like to kind of think of myself as either a conceptual folk artist or a naive folk artist.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let put it -- well, the first question, do you think, then that is encouraged within the Art Institute? Is that a good place to be for working on that kind of self-image, which is what you just claimed?

CHARLES LINDER: Yeah, I think they do. I think it's really good for kindling the fires of idealism and utopianism, and perhaps what art is really supposed to come from, although it's just the chasm again of what do you do with this stuff outside of an institution. That, I don't know. I know what I've done. But, I mean, I can think back to, you know, the 20 students in those classes and there are like one or two of them doing anything. And, so, I don't really know. If that's good or if that's worthwhile as late adolescent therapy, maybe it is. But in terms of somehow a career in art, that's where the oxymorons start to rush in. Have I answered . . .?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I don't know if it's easily answered. Actually, this is a whole philosophical discussion, I suppose, where the concepts come from. To be a conceptual artist you have to be able to think.

CHARLES LINDER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTRON: Because conceptual artisting is a thought. It's an intellectual or cognitive process, and I suppose we have to allow then that all of us have that one way or another regardless of education. There are those who think that if you chose to operate in this way in the world of art, that if you don't know where you come from, you are going to be so referential -- refer to popular culture, and refer to things of the moment. In other words, it is a really, thin, shallow, and, you know, the intuitive is great, but I suppose my question is, do you feel in -- if an artist is going to go to school, what do schools give that other places don't? If you're going to be intuitive, why go to school at all?

CHARLES LINDER: Right. Then you have the argument, you can't be a, like, for instance, an authentic folk artist if you don't [inaudible] just automatically contaminated by virtue of the vernacular -- And, so, you know … I don't know. Is that something that should be promoted? I guess. Although, it seems just such an increasingly antique notion, really. I think that what is in demand in the world of -- I don't know, high art, maybe, but culture, in general, in society, is just impactful, memorable imagery, and that's -- it all borders on the Pop. And there's just little to no demand for esoteric or ethereal or personal or transformative imagery. I really don't -- I mean, you look at billboards and all of that stuff looks just like high art now, I mean, for the most part. So, I think the end product of what ostensibly artists are supposed to be creating is media copy and billboards and magazine ads. I mean, that's pretty jaded. I'm a fine artist and I wish I had one-tenth of the advocacy of a billboard. I'd love to be able to go and get this billboard at Third and Harrison. It'd cost me -- well, I checked into all of it. Making the poster, getting the billboard for three months, ends up being like $20,000, but, that's the kind of advocacy I'd like to have as an artist -- or the efficacy, rather. But, yet, those worlds are kind of at odds. The demand for my imagery on a billboard, I'd have to finance that, so whereas, on the other hand, advertising's demand for an

incessant flow of imagery to be put on these billboards, I mean, they're more and more mediocre, I think. They just get progressively less effective and -- but, yet, the -- you know, what artists maybe are limited to is, I think, trying to be artists, that [is how] I see myself. I wish I could be half as effective as a billboard.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, do you think that you, in effect, wasted valuable time at the Art Institute?

CHARLES LINDER: Oh, God. [inaudible]

PAUL KARLSTRON: It's a hard question. Did it -- you've stated reasons why you -- where you were basically disappointed, and your friend, your colleague, our mutual friend, David Jones, calls it an empty promise. And he, too, is not real happy with that aspect of art school.

CHARLES LINDER: He was an Art Institute grad?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, he was at Cal.

CHARLES LINDER: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, and then a Cleveland -- no, a Kansas City [Art Institute] artist before that.

CHARLES LINDER: Yeah, I know what -- I mean, that's, again, where like I realize I chose the career and I don't -- there's no one else to blame but me, and I take 100 percent responsibility for every atrocity I've introduced into the world. And I hope to create many more. I think it's all a matter of, do you want to do that with your time and resources, and I do [chuckles].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

CHARLES LINDER: So, it's pursuing the opportunities, or getting discouraged by a lack of opportunities is a common occurrence among artists, I think. It's tough to not focus on that and to remain focused on even vague opportunities down the line, or to create situations that are edifying enough to even think of as a career.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I'm certainly not asking you if you regret choosing to --

CHARLES LINDER: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- be an artist. Not at all, because I've never met an artist who actually regrets that.

CHARLES LINDER: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But I think that's something that is just too important and it really has to do with your whole life, being yourself and how you be in the world.

CHARLES LINDER: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I wouldn't ever ask that question. But I am asking the [related] question, how necessary was the San Francisco Art Institute program to your getting on with the business.

CHARLESD LINDER: It was crucial. It was crucial. As the Art Institute amounted to the next phase of my experiments at community college, so Refusalon became an experiment after getting out of the Art Institute. And, then, later, going to Berkeley. And now I'm in a stage after Berkeley and after Refusalon where I feel there's a much higher -- much larger challenge, which I am really grappling to identify with the challenges or how to meet it. But it's just higher profile, higher budget, higher impact, bigger audience, more sales. That's what the goal is for me right now. I mean, that equals good art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you have a pretty realistic notion of all that, it seems. It's obvious for all of your legitimate, thoughtful criticisms, critiques of the Art Institute as you experienced it, as it now seems to be operating. Nonetheless, for you and, hopefully, for some other serious young artists, it was a positive experience. It was something that fed you that in some way, that helped you to move along. And, you know, that's a good thing. So if that's how you finally feel about it --

CHARLES LINDER: Yeah, I do.

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- then, it served you.

CHARLES LINDER: It was a time, like crucial frivolity.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Crucial frivolity?

CHARLES LINDER: It was like, without having that quality of time -- I produced little to no work, really, as an art student. I don't even remember any of it. I mean, I produced a couple videos that I thought were the best work I did in school there. But the sculptures that I made, I don't barely even remember them. I don't think they were that instrumental. I think the social art became more of my concern while in art school.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Social art?

CHARLES LINDER: Yeah, the social art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Social art.

CHARLES LINDER: More so than the object-making art. So, whereas I used to really think of myself as a sculptor, I realized getting out of art school that people are my medium, and I'm a mediumistic being. I'm supposed to just work with other people and be decent and try to create an authorless, impactful, memorable thing or idea, you know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's sort of like me. People are --

CHARLES LINDER: Yeah, it is. You're [inaudible]

PAUL KARLSTROM: -- my medium. -- authorless impact, I think that's interesting. In other words, to kind of submerge yourself, there's no idea of the heroic abstract expressionist. It's sort of the opposite.

CHARLES LINDER: Partly. I mean, I struggle with that because I like making objects, too, and it is a schizophrenic aspect of my nature, I guess. I like the invisibility of projects like my collected letters. And I think that doesn't suggest a lot about me. My stock -- well, you know -- I make two different kinds of art.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Do you realize you're one of the youngest artists that I've ever interviewed?

CHARLES LINDER: Really? Didn't know that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

CHARLES LINDER: I like that.

PAUL KARLSTROM: We're not ageists, you know.

CHARLES LINDER: When I go into a museum, the first thing I look at, even before the art, is the birthday next to the artist's name on the card. I think, am I getting too old, yet? When I see the dates there in the 60's, and even the 70's, I really start to worry.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you've got to get -- eventually, you have to get used to that.

CHARLES LINDER: Now, a completely side note. Have you seen Samuel Yates' show [at Refusalon]?

PAUL KARLSTROM: No, not yet.

CHARLES LINDER: It ends today.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, maybe we ought to go to it.

CHARLES LINDER: At 5:30. I really -- I was just going to say, do you want to go together?

END OF INTERVIEW

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