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Oral history interview with Peter Howard
Selz, 1999 November 3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Peter Selz on November 3, 1999. The interview took place in Berkley, CA, and was conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

Tape 1, Side A [30-minute tape sides]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. An interview with Peter Selz. Actually, almost like a follow-up interview many years after the fact. Because we were sitting in this very place possibly ten years ago. I'm not sure. And did at least two, perhaps three sessions. This is going to be just a one session, one hour long interview. The interviewer is, once again, Paul Karlstrom. The date is November 3, 1999. The interview is being conducted at the subject's home in Berkeley, California. And we're working from a list of six questions, some of which are fairly general, and hopefully provocative in getting Peter Selz to reflect on aspects of his long and, if I may say it, distinguished career. With the idea that some elements will emerge that could be useful in thinking of a format and thematic components of a biography. At any rate, we'll begin with the first question, which, Peter, you already said is a difficult one. And indeed it is. But I would like to state it as almost a theme for our conversation here. And that is my, my view is that your career is particularly interesting beyond a series of accomplishments in that you were positioned from a fairly early date to observe some very important developments, shifts and changes. Not just in the museum world and institutional structure, art structure of the United States, but also shifts and ideas about modernism itself, which of course is your field. Do you, do you think that's overstating the . . .

PETER SELZ: No, I think this is interesting. Let me start by saying that, I don't know, maybe I was very lucky to be in many of the right places at a critical time. I mean, my first job was at the Institute of Design, the New Bauhaus in Chicago. I was getting my doctorate at the University of Chicago. And then I started teaching the History of Art at Moholy's Old Institute of Design in Chicago. Now at that point I became very much, I became very much in touch with the whole Bauhaus tradition, in the whole, whole idea of art being an all-encompassing thing that its design or architecture or the biological, or the biological functions of individuals. And the whole idea of creativity in the old Bauhaus sense. So there I was with all these old Bauhaus and new Bauhaus people, brilliant students coming in from after the war. And so my really first experience, while I was studying art history at the University was teaching in this place which was the continuation of the German Bauhaus. Now at the same time, however, on a totally different aspect of German art I was writing my dissertation on German expressionist painting. So at that point I was in touch with really two main streams in German art at the early part of the century, German Expressionism, which I wrote my dissertation on, and the Bauhaus. At the same time in Chicago, and that was the third element, I came in touch with a group of very, very creative people called Exhibition Momentum. These were young artists, I was the only non-artist in the group, who looked at abstract expressionism. But were not very much impressed with abstract expressionism. But also felt that this was not the only way to go. And there was a new figure, post-abstract expressionist figuration was a do. And the most famous person coming out of that was my old friend, Leon Galub. So I had these three things very much at that point in my career. Then in the mid fifties the New Bauhaus was going to pot. It was associated with a minor institution called the Illinois Institute of Technology. And the time became time to leave. And I got a job in a marvelous little arts college at Pomona College in Southern California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was that, Peter?

PETER SELZ: That was in '55 to '58. And then I, my teaching changed from, the whole orientation in teaching changed from teaching future artists and designers to teaching art history as part of a liberal arts curriculum. At the same time in Southern California, the two most important art movements that I came in touch with. Again, they're totally different. On the one hand, I saw the work of Rico Lebrun. And it was enormously interesting. And again, this kind of contemporary, non-realist expressionist, but totally authentic kind of figuration, which I found extremely strong and powerful. And got him to design a major mural in the same building where the Orozco mural is on the Pomona campus.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah, that's called Frary Dining Hall.

PETER SELZ: At the Frary Dining Hall. The mural is called Genesis. And it's a great piece. And at the same time I got very much interested. Perhaps coming from the Bauhaus tradition in the geometric abstract artists, who had been totally overlooked in Southern California, artists like Feitelson, McLaughlin, Hammersley and Benjamin. And I started doing a show called Abstract Classicism of those four artists who had something very, very different and

new to say. In a way continuing the old Mondrian tradition, the old tradition of American abstract artists, but bringing it into a post World War II context. And, well, after that, again, it was very fortunate, I became Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art. Partly due to the fact which impressed, I think, the people of the Modern, that I had been teaching in both places, at the New Bauhaus and in a liberal arts college. I had published my German expressionist painting book, which had gotten good reviews. And a few other things. I was also very, oh, this I should also mention. In 1949, '50, the first year through the Fulbright, I got a Fulbright to Paris. And there I was very excited. My theme was, my topic was post-World War II French art, French painting. And there I got in touch with artists in the, very much in the here and now. On the one hand, artists we had pretty much forgotten now, like Manizer and Bazen. That's the local artists of the French tradition. But I also saw the work of people like Faurtrier and Dubuffet.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What years were these?

PETER SELZ: Forty-nine and '50. And so then I wrote a little article when I came back, one of the first things that I ever published called "Paris of Mid Century" or something like that. And, yeah, so I was in touch at that point with the new stuff going on in Paris. And I got a little wind of what the Cobra people were doing, although I didn't meet them yet. So then when I got to the modern I put many of these things together. And my first exhibition there, which was called "New Images of Man" were people like the Chicago new figureation people, like Golub; people from California, like Lebrun from the South; and even Diebenkorn and Oliveira from the North, together with the major Europeans like Giacometti and Dubuffet and Bacon and Germaine Richier and some of the Cobra people. And of course, from New York the major two figures from New York were the De Kooning women, and Jackson Pollock's Black and White Paintings of '50 and '51. So all these things came together and started, you know, in a way a new way of, a different way of looking at modernism. Not the old idea of one is moving into another. And when I saw abstract expressionism, I said, "Well, this is pretty wonderful. But that is not the only option for artists."

PAUL KARLSTROM: You must have been, if not actually unique, somewhat unusual in that while admiring the achievements of non-objective painting abstract expressionism, gestural painting, that you remained open and interested in other forms of expression that you obviously didn't feel because the figure was there it was immediately dated old fashioned. Apparently you brought a more inclusive idea.

PETER SELZ: Yeah, but also, you know, you know, there was a personal response. I mean, I responded, let's say to Rothko's painting enormously. And I did a major, the first museum retrospective of Mark Rothko. But I responded, you know, in my own immediate response to Frances Bacon as much as to Mark Rothko, equally in totally different ways. And I could not accept the idea of people saying, "Well, all Frances Bacon is painting a figure and we don't paint the figure anymore." This seemed like nonsense since we are human and we paint the human figure. And then I saw all these people in, in France and in England, throughout America, both in New York, the Midwest and San Francisco and Los Angeles. And other places too. And Northern European painters. Not returning, that's important, in no way returning to the figure. But creating the figure out of what was already there in terms of abstract painting. I did not, I was not interested in any humanist kind of realism.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about, thinking of the Bay Area and your familiarity already then with California because of your West Coast experience, this is before, of course, your Berkeley period. This came from the years in Pomona. But already then the David Park, or just about that time, and company were, in fact, they already had emerged out of, and Diebenkorn, of course, out of the abstract expressionism of Still, Rothko for that matter, but especially Clyfford Still at the San Francisco, California School of Fine Arts, now Art Institute. Were you watching this? Were you interested in, let's put it this way, the connection or the origins of Bay Area figuration, return of the figure out of abstraction?

PETER SELZ: Well, I was very much interested in it. And when I did the show I picked Diebenkorn because I thought Diebenkorn was a very, very beautiful kind of structure using the figure as the central focal point of a, of a basically abstract structure. I was interested in Oliveira because of the very personal individual authentic kind of expression where he finds the figure, like [inaudible] in a way, in, by making an abstract painting and then the figure emerges. I was a great deal less interested in the other figurative painters in California, in Northern California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Does that include then your colleague Elmer Bischoff?

PETER SELZ: Yes, that includes Elmer Bischoff in part because I felt that in a way they were going backwards.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Ah, interesting.

PETER SELZ: They were painting in a way like 19th century painters. They were painting interiors. They were painting what they saw. They were painting kids on bikes and jazz concerts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Would this be like James Weeks as well?

PETER SELZ: James Weeks and Wonner. They painted nice still life paintings. Which are very, very well done. But I did not feel that they really contributed a great deal towards a new way of looking at art in the world. I mean, they were painting interiors. They were painting figures sitting around a table. And that, and they were doing it rather well. But it looked like a step backwards to me.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's interesting because you, you were never willing to disallow the figure. In other words, it wasn't a simplicity either/or this, you know, polarity.

PETER SELZ: Not at all. No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But that you still then had, what this suggests to me is that you had different ideas of what the essentials of modernism really were.

PETER SELZ: Right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And that's what you were looking for. Could you describe that a little bit? It's not easy, I know.

PETER SELZ: It's not easy. And modernism has been too much defined in Greenberg terms as painting toward the flat color plane. Well, I look at modernism painting, this is the best way I can say, as artists who take on the inheritance of who I think had two great painters of the early part of the century, would take on the, the inheritance of Matisse and Picasso. And this is what's true of the German expressionists. I mean, when they first started out in Dresden they were looking at Matisse. And translating Matisse into a German idiom. And when, I mean, Kandinsky's abstraction would not have been possible without the foundation in Cubism. And so, you know, you look at, in a way, at the continuity, which goes back to the beginning. There was a master at the beginning of the century. And then it becomes how does one art, artist, it's always a dialogue, how does one artist expand this continuity? And but this was Mondrian and the constructivist and the New Bauhaus coming out of Cubism or expressionism coming out Fauvism. I see these, these are the origins. To say nothing of surrealism. And then I think, you know, in a way you cannot write well after Joyce and Hemmingway. And you cannot paint very well, you can paint anti-Picasso and anti-Matisse paintings. But he cannot deny the tradition and do well.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So you, you positioned them as the forebearers?

PETER SELZ: Yeah. Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You're not willing to go back to Cézanne or even Courbet?

PETER SELZ: I believe to go back to Goya, yeah, I think that's where it all began.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, let's hear about that. That's . . .

PETER SELZ: Well, I think Goya really, you know, instead of painting in the neo-classic tradition as his contemporary Dávid was doing, he was painting expressionist pictures. Especially the late black paintings. And as he goes late black paintings which are eternally internalized response to the world, that's where it starts.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, then it sounds to me as if there is an aspect of this that has to do with the introspective look.

PETER SELZ: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: The internal look.

PETER SELZ: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And reaching inward rather than simply observing nature, if you will.

PETER SELZ: Simply, yeah. And the same thing is true when it comes to abstraction. Let's say, the reason why I think Rothko is such a great painter because his work has an internal look they are all emotional paintings. They are paintings of the soul. He says, you know, he said, "I want people to cry and laugh when they look at my paintings." And I think there is a tremendous distinction between this kind of internalized abstraction and what Greenberg called color field painting, which is nothing but color design on a flat plane. Which has nothing to do with the human soul. But abstraction of the human soul goes all the way from Kandinsky through Rothko. And beyond.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, I, I for one would entirely agree with you on this. But this is quite interesting, because it seems to me, you at this point, and I don't know how you felt at the time, I'd like to hear about that, but that Greenberg at least in the absolutism of that prescription for modernism was really at the very least incomplete. But perhaps even more than that, was a wrong turn.

PETER SELZ: Well, the reason why it was a wrong turn is very simple. And it's because Greenberg really believed in a progress in art. And I have no, see, I just mentioned Goya. I have seen nothing better than Goya in the 200 years since that time. There's no such thing. This is not science. Art takes different directions and different turns. And the idea of a straight line is totally wrong. This guy was always interested in alternatives. And many of the artists that I've written about and exhibited were artists of the margin. But I first thought of his German expressionism, those were artists in the margin. Nobody even heard of Schiele. And this is absolutely true. When I published that book of German/Austrian expressionism nobody to speak of had ever heard of Egon and Schiele. So these were modernist artists. And I've always felt this was, this was exciting. I could never see that there was only one thing to do. And again, going back, I mean, just look 200 years ago there was Goya, there was David, there was Guardi and there was Reynolds. All at the same time. So the idea of, of multiplicity, it's not a thing of the 1980s. This has always been true. And I mean, from four artists, to say nothing what was going on in China or Africa at the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

PETER SELZ: Well.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's see. I get about four or five or six ideas come out of this. Let's take a look at Schiele and Gustav Klimt, the Viennese. I'm very interested, of course we did talk, we had talked about this before, but I think it's extremely, very much to the point. For some reason these two important artists, and I think Schiele in some ways is really the most interesting for me. And I think it has an awful lot to do with the window into, well, a psychological state, you know, the disturbed notion and modernity if you will.

PETER SELZ: Right. Very true.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But at any rate, for some reason these artists were left again on the margins of some sort of essential modernism. I have to assume that part of it has to do with, simply with the insistence on the figure. On the other hand, the other German expressionists were finally, you know, the other ones more embraced, I guess that wasn't actually though until the end of the 50s, was it?

PETER SELZ: Yeah. And then of course Schiele is becoming big more than anybody. You go to anybody, I mean, on the graduate student's houses they like to have a Schiele, an erotic picture by Schiele on their wall. I don't blame them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that's another issue too.

PETER SELZ: They're very sexy.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right. That's right. But so why do you think the, how do you sort of track this shift in what is considered a part of a modernist vision and that which is outside. It seems not too simple. I mean, Greenberg is part of the answer. But are there other reasons why?

PETER SELZ: Well, in America they're historic reasons. If you think, think back of the Armory Show, the Armory Show in addition to the more conservative American in the Armory Show, but it's almost entirely French. Then after World War I modern art in America, partly because of the war and partly because Germany being on the other side, what have you, modern art was considered French art. And this lasted a very, very long time. I mean, it's very strange when in 1961 when I was at the Modern I did a show of Futurism. And it was the first time that America ever even looked at Italian Modernist painting. And, but you had this idea, partly for political reasons, and for outside reasons, that modern art is only a French item. It's Picasso and Matisse. But they are not the only ones. And so anything else was marginalized. And the Museum of Modern Art was one of the few places where you could occasionally see a Boccioni or a Beckmann. But in most American museums that wasn't, that wasn't the case at all. And it really came about, I don't know if there was a time, but nobody could afford the Matisses and the Picassos anymore. And then you saw the Kirchners and the Noldes on the market and they were a lot cheaper. So people started, it was a market situation. That's with American art. I remember my former colleague, Alfred Frankenstein was teaching American art here, besides being the critic on the paper, and he said, "The only time people are going to get interested in American art is when the prices, the auction prices go up." And I think that has a lot to do with it.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah. Let's take a look at, and these notions of modernism really touch on the major thing throughout. But . . .

PETER SELZ: [inaudible].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hm?

PETER SELZ: [inaudible]

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is great.

PETER SELZ: Okay.

PAUL KARLSTROM: This is great. Don't worry about it. This is perfect. And you notice how then what you have to say makes me think of certain things. But I want to ask a very, going back to your youth. I mean, you were how old when you came to this country?

PETER SELZ: Seventeen.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Seventeen. And one of the interesting things, and what year was that?

PETER SELZ: Nineteen thirty-six.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. And one of the interesting things about that was that you had a connection, you had access to Alfred Stieglitz.

PETER SELZ: Well, that was true. He was a distant relative. And it was a marvelous thing that I met Stieglitz. And he took me sort of under his cape as it were. And I would hang around there as much as I could. And there again, you see, at that point in America, American art was either Regionalism West of the Hudson, or Social Realism east of the Hudson. And those are the two things that people paid attention to in the galleries and museums. And I didn't think either of them was very interesting. The regionalist reminded me somewhat of Nazi painting. And the Social Realists had themes similar to what Soviets were doing. And neither of them seemed particularly exciting to me at that point. And then I saw that there was a wonderful modernist painting going on in these people who were marginalized, except for John Marin who was not altogether marginal.

PAUL KARLSTROM: He was pretty famous.

PETER SELZ: Yeah, yeah. John Marin was pretty famous. But O'Keeffe wasn't. Arthur Dove wasn't. Hartley had already left Stieglitz because Stieglitz couldn't sell him. And the same thing was true with Max Weber. And so I thought this was, this was really wonderful art. And one reason why I thought it was so wonderful was because Stieglitz was so great in explaining them. And I heard the first time people really talking about modern art and the meaning, Stieglitz was great, and the meaning of modern art. And how it can affect your life. And the more I looked at paintings of Arthur Dove the more convinced I became that this was really, you know, wonderful art going on right here in America. And you asked me how did it shape my view on art. It shaped my view on art a great deal. Also, how, you know, how wonderful it was. That there was some extremely good American art being done. And off in the distance these artists were in the margin. I mean, Arthur Dove could hardly live and eat on his houseboat.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And one wonders how it was that these marginalized modernist then eventually came pretty much to define early American modernism. Isn't that something?

PETER SELZ: Yeah, but there are a lot of people who would still tell you that these people are provincial artists. I mean, I read this all the time in contemporary criticisms. People who still say that America really didn't come into its own until abstract expressionism. Which in a way was true in terms of worldwide recognition. But to us these were marvelous painters.

Tape 1, side B [30-minute tape sides]

PAUL KARLSTROM: . . . this one hour interview with art historian, museum director, etc., etc., Peter Selz. And this is tape 1, side B. We've already, I think, covered some very interesting, provocative topics. Stieglitz, without going further into that, it interests me the way you describe him. How he was influential on you by, by example by the artists to whom he introduced you. And it had very much to do with a separate vision, or a vision of something rich and creative outside of the mainstream notions. Is that right? Would you say that's the basic lesson here?

PETER SELZ: I think that's the basic lesson, except that I, I don't, I think mainstream notions, I don't believe there is such a thing as a mainstream really.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Okay. Well, why don't you talk about that a little bit?

PETER SELZ: Well, because, you know, with one thing, I mean, in those days people looked at Benton and didn't look at Dove. But now we think of Dove more than we think of Benton. So the idea is the mainstream keeps changing all the time.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Right.

PETER SELZ: I mean, when I first studied modern art in the '50s one of the people that was considered one of the major, major figures in modern painting was Derain. And now nobody thinks about Derain very much. But he was very much considered mainstream. And Greenberg told us that Olitski was the most important American painter alive. Now nobody knows or has heard his name. So I think the mainstream, it doesn't happen. I mean, to go back to what we were talking about a long time ago, was that [inaudible] more mainstream than Goya. Well perhaps, but maybe Goya was more important. You know. So I don't know. I think that . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: I guess maybe mainstream would have to do with the confluence of, of factors that, part of it being popularity.

PETER SELZ: Yeah. Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You know, which isn't to say more significant, in fact, in many cases it means less significant.

PETER SELZ: Well, you certainly didn't work in the mainstream when you did your doctorate on Eilshemius.

PAUL KARLSTROM: No.

PETER SELZ: Why did you do that?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, okay, I'll get interviewed for a minute here. I was at UCLA in graduate school in the late '60s, mid '60s. My thesis and then dissertation director was Maurice Bloch, who was the Americas, actually a pioneer Americanist. Because he worked on Bingham. And, you know, the eastern schools weren't awarding degrees, doctoral degrees in American art. Bloch at UCLA set up a program very early on.

PETER SELZ: Oh.

PAUL KARLSTROM: His were among the first actual, you know, he actually had a program, a Ph.D. program. Berkeley didn't have it. Frankenstein came and taught.

PETER SELZ: Outside? It was the outside?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Outside. And outside of modernism. I'm talking [inaudible].

PETER SELZ: Yeah, that's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So anyway, I was working with him. I was interested in Albert Pinkham Ryder. Talk about marginal and outside.

PETER SELZ: Yeah, right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And Bloch's advice, which I think was very sound, was that there wasn't a lot of travel money. I was on the west coast. Deal with something nearby that hasn't been done. And there were, Sidney Janis's brother, Martin Janis on La Cienega had a gallery and had a number of Eilshemius's. And the Kaufmans, Annette and Louis Kaufman, who was a famous violinist, had a big Eilshemius collection in Westwood. Therefore, I had things to work with. That's why I worked . . .

PETER SELZ: Oh. Because [inaudible] has a lot of . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Hm?

PETER SELZ: Hirshhorn has a lot of . . .

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, yes. That's how I got a book, Abram's book and an exhibition.

PETER SELZ: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But, but since you brought this up, this is not an interview with me, but I do know from interesting correspondence in the 30s Eilshemius and Stieglitz had, Eilshemius would, I think, actually visit Stieglitz. But maybe he was bedridden already, but there was correspondence. We have letters, you see.

PETER SELZ: Oh.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And my sense of it is that Stieglitz was very, very compassionate and patient with Eilshemius. Now this is the impression I got. And he talked about how O'Keeffe came and looked and, you know, was interested in Eilshemius. Now O'Keeffe, herself, when I wrote to her gave a slightly different account. But anyway, I just thought it was interesting that you might be able to give a little insight actually to me about Stieglitz from the standpoint of having this kind of interest and really of off-center figures.

PETER SELZ: Well, I think he was interested in off-center figures. When he first, you know, showed early 20th Century art at 291 those were off-center figures. Nobody had seen those. Brancusi and whatever it was. The fact they became famous later on was partly due to Stieglitz. But he had an eye. He was not interested, he was not looking for, [But] I don't think he was looking for people on the margin. He was looking for good people. And if they were on the margin that was all, it was just fine with him. But I think he probably liked Eilshemius not because Elshemius was so marginal, and eccentric, but he probably thought very highly of his work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I would ask then, and of course, in a way this is second hand. This is your recollection, although a lot of people looked at Stieglitz and tried to figure out, well, I guess an aesthetic if you will, or something like that. But with Eilshemius he's actually a pretty good example for a lot of consideration of modernists issues, because a lot of the advent garde actually was, was attracted to him. And we can't get into this, although I've written quite a bit about it.

PETER SELZ: No.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But it's fascinating because he was such a conservative figure in many ways. Really very much looking backwards. And yet there was something about him that appealed to those with a modernist vision, which it seems to me had to do with openness of, actually most important different ways of same.

PETER SELZ: Well, here was this, he brought Eilshemius, I don't know, but he may not have known much about the surrealist. But, you know, here was this native surrealist painter.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's right.

PETER SELZ: You know, that was very exciting to people.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And this would have appealed to Stieglitz.

PETER SELZ: Yeah. Sure.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So what I'm trying to do of course in part is give you a kind of paternity if I can. Because this was your early experience. And it had to have a big, big effect on what you looked for then.

PETER SELZ: Absolutely.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Let's, let's move on here to question four, which we've touched on a little bit. This is acknowledging in part, your background as an émigré, you're part of the famous story of emigrant coming to America and then coming to the US and making something out of it. Which you of course did. And then turning around and contributing an enormous amount to the culture. And I think, you know, it's okay for me to say this. You don't need to say it.

PETER SELZ: All right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So that's all well and good. And you found yourself pretty quickly back to that in New York. New York being the port of entry and all. You were at the Museum of Modern Art. But what really interests me is that pretty early on, in fact, almost right away you were in the Midwest.

PETER SELZ: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Chicago is not exactly the provinces, but nonetheless, it's the Midwest.

PETER SELZ: Yes. That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But then, for heaven's sakes, you were way out . . .

PETER SELZ: In California.

PAUL KARLSTROM: On the west coast. And that is, was dancing on the margins for sure. And yet you seem to very quickly look around you and find things that were interesting and go to work on it. And I guess the question, as we've stated it here, and then of course, you came to, to Northern California where you have been, where we are now, where you've been since, but how do you feel this geographic diversity of your early experience affected the way you looked at art and American art, but beyond that art?

PETER SELZ: Well, I just moved around which I was very lucky that I saw different things in different times. And I already mentioned how when I really started out after the war in Chicago the Bavhaus and the experience and the new figuration experience. These two poles had a permanent effect on me. And my being in New York and seeing this Stieglitz artist. And then going to California and seeing the geometric painters here, the color field

painters, whatever you want to call them, geometric abstractionism, hard-edged painters. And Rico Lebrun, you know, it was just possible to see a little more than my colleagues in New York, who at that point really didn't see, because they were in New York and New York was the most important things where abstract expressionism was happening. It was so exciting they didn't, they didn't see anything else. And I had had the opportunity of being in Chicago, being in California and of having the, of seeing all these other things that were happening. And I think that formed, and then I did the "New Images of Man" show, which had a lot of American from the hinterland. And after that, you know, I did another, you know, we did a [inaudible] and I had [inaudible]. We did a whole group of Americans who had not been paid attention to. Like Mark Tobey. And that was extremely important to do Tobey show. Here is one of the great American artists who has never got recognition. And the main reason, there are two reasons why he wasn't recognized as far as I can see. One is because he was not in New York. And two is because he worked on a small scale.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, that's a good point. Because I've read, well, maybe Irving Sandler, let's say, somebody like that who would talk about Pollock, Tobey and try to deny that there was anything at all.

PETER SELZ: Excuse me.

[Break in Recording]

PAUL KARLSTROM: Picking up after a brief intermission, interruption. The last question from the list, and this is skipping over a couple, but we've answered parts of them anyway, the last question on this list has to do with your operating as a very real presence within the world of contemporary art, modern and modern art in the broadest sense, but in a very much with living artists and the art of our time. And one of the things that I would point to, in fact, I do this, to kind of distinguish you from many of your colleagues, many of our colleagues, is that you've maintained this curiosity about what's going on in the art world. And this vital interest in the artists themselves. And I'm wondering how you feel that that, these relationships have contributed to your own career and perhaps in some ways fed your, or even directed a little bit, your interests?

PETER SELZ: Well, I'm not like many other critics or curators or historians of the contemporary period. I have always felt you have to be close to the artist who make the work. The idea of the critic as some kind of a lord overlooking the artist and not connecting to the artist may be all right for some people. It's not for me. First of all, I like the company of artists. Artists have always been among my closest friends. I think artists are wonderful people. I've even liked artists whose work I didn't care for. But that's beside the point. But artists are wonderful people and I like being with them. And they have formed my way of looking at art, by knowing them, by knowing how they work. When I've written monographs of artists, like Sam Francis or Eduardo Chillida had to go to Spain three times while working. When I last spoke with Barbara Chase Riboud, who I spent time with her in Paris. Now I'm working on Nathan Oliveira and I'm spending a great deal of time with him. The artists have the kind of information that you want when you write about them. They may not have the final word, but maybe in a way they do. And I see the work as a critic and an historian and the writer as almost as a medium between the artist and the written word. That's what I do. I have not written in the last 30 years or so about dead artists. I'd much rather write about live artists. And, you know, it's so much more fun.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Sure.

PETER SELZ: When I was on the Fulbright in Paris in '49 and '50, I think there were three art historians. And the other two would spend their time in the libraries and in the archives. And I spent my time in the cafes and the galleries and in the studios. And I had lots more fun. You know, I spent my time with the artists and wrote about what I saw and what they were doing. What could be more enjoyable? You know, I mean, so my work because of my close contact with the artists has always been and continues to be a great deal of fun.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, that certainly makes sense to me. And I guess that's one of the reasons that I like my job, since the job description is spending time with the artists and people. Can we talk about, specifically some of the artists whom you feel have been especially important for you? And I can think of several certainly around here with whom you have had long time friendships, and in some cases still do. Gatherings at your home, always there are at least half of the people there are artists. And that's how when I moved up here in 1973 it was at this very house that I met, well, I was like shooting fish in a barrel. You know, there were all these artists. Which was great. You know, I think of people like Bob Bechtle whom you've known many years.

PETER SELZ: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And I think of Pete Voukos, of course.

PETER SELZ: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think, especially for some reason of Harold Paris, who is gone now. Could you talk about some of these people and maybe the different ways in which you ended up collaborating?

PETER SELZ: Well, I think the first one was with Leon Golub. We talked a lot in Chicago about, you know, what is the way for art to go after abstract expressionism? How can we reconnect with the figure? And he talked to me because I knew a lot about German expressionism and because I had just been in Paris and could tell him about Dubuffet. And I talked to him because he was doing it. And then this continued over the years. And I think when I got to Southern California the extraordinary work of Rico Lebrun, of how an artist indeed can deal with the Holocaust in a meaningful way. Many members of my family had been killed in the Holocaust. I mean, and how this can be done. I mean, this had a tremendous impact on me. And then I went to New York and who are the important artists? Well, at that point Mark Rothko was very, very important. And, you know, I mean, how can you paint an abstract picture that affects your, your life?

PETER SELZ: Peter Voulkos was at Otis at that time, yeah. And that's when I first met him. I never saw anybody do anything like what he was doing, his skills. And so I gave him a show, one of the shows at Moma in New York. That's right, the very first show, a little Penthouse show, the Pete Voulkos show called "The New Talent Show." And Harold, Harold Paris. Harold was especially important because I saw an artist who, who is so many different, the reason why Harold never got, made a name for himself to speak of is because every year he was doing something else. He was working bronze. He was working in ceramic. He was working in paper. He was working in plastic. And, and the creative mind of that person ran a mile a minute. I was very much impressed by that. And I guess the other two artists in Northern California who had the greatest effect on me over the years were Bruce Conner and Nathan Oliveira. And, I mean, these were the artists I was always close to, whose work I admired. And I don't know if they learned anything from me, but I certainly learned a lot from them.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, how did your, we should mention at this point, of course, that you're at this moment engaged in a big essay, a monographic essay on Nathan Oliveira for a show that's coming, oh, when is it?

PETER SELZ: 2002.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Oh, that's a long ways away.

PETER SELZ: I know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Anyway, and I gather it will travel. But speaking about Nate, you, there's a long history there I do believe from what you've said. You go back, as they say, a long time. And that you feel that you were instrumental in some ways in giving a boost to his career, introducing him somewhere. Is that right?

PETER SELZ: Well, I put him in "The New Images of Man" show, where he was barely out of school. And showing with Bacon and Dubuffet and Giacometti and De Kooning. It was a tremendous boost for him. But later on he tells me, and it's been written briefly about, it was hard for him to live up to this early boost. And then he had, what he called erroneously, I think, a number of barren years when he couldn't paint. Well, he didn't paint but he made great prints. He did have a show at the Charles Alin Gallery in New York. But I think I did put him in the limelight. And the same thing with Bruce. And so there are a number of artists who I think I helped get started in their career.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What interests me is, again, and this becomes sort of a theme, your openness to difference. Your refusal to line yourself up with one type of expression.

PETER SELZ: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And when you look at Bruce Conner and Nathan Oliveira this is a very good example.

PETER SELZ: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Of fair divide between, even thinking about art, maybe especially. Not to mention the look of the art. How do you, did this always seem quite natural to you?

PETER SELZ: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: To just be able to respond to . . . ?

PETER SELZ: When I see some quality it's great. You know. I went out here for a jury, back in 1960 I think it was, for something called the National Council of Churches. And they had a show called "Human Want". I see this child in a black box by Bruce Conner. And I had never quite seen anything like it. Well, it was true, there were, Rauschenberg was doing assemblages in New York. But they weren't quite like that. They didn't have quite that power, wonderful as Rauschenbergs works were.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But without, if I may interject perhaps, without that kind of edge that . . .

PETER SELZ: With Bruce?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yeah.

PETER SELZ: That's right. And the kind of, and then he did the child, you know, which has the, had the political purpose. A political meaning. And it, you know, it just hits you, it just hit me. And, you know, it was, you know, you just, you know, just saw it, well, this is an authentic piece of art. And it didn't matter whether it was abstract or figurative or assemblage. Now I'm very much interested in people doing it. [inaudible] and because I think that's extremely important. Some people do it well. That's what I'm looking for.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What about the friendships that are formed though? This, this is not to say that art historians or critics don't have the capacity to establish friendships with artists, although some critics think that it's professionally not a very good idea.

PETER SELZ: Yeah, I know.

PAUL KARLSTROM: It's too bad because they miss out on a lot.

PETER SELZ: That's right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But, and I think this was the case to a degree with Tom Albright, if I'm not mistaken.

[Break in Recording]

PAUL KARLSTROM: We were talking before the phone rang about your relationships with artists. Your friendships. And I was commenting, or observing, that you seem to quite easily and quite naturally move beyond just the interest in the work, and this happens to be the person who did it. But out of many of these connections came really long, long lasting friendships. And you mentioned a few of the, a few of the individuals involved. In every case was the first contact professional? That is to say, that you were perhaps, have you encountered work and then became interested in the . . .?

PETER SELZ: Yes.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Is that . . .?

PETER SELZ: Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. In almost every case.

PAUL KARLSTROM: So it would be rare for you to be at a nice gallery reception or maybe a party, meet an artist and have that then convert . . .

PETER SELZ: Into a friendship?

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, or convert into an interest, a real interest in the work. I think, it doesn't seem to me it makes a kind of difference.

PETER SELZ: Yeah. And it's really the former way. It really, really is the former. You know. In almost all the cases.

PAUL KARLSTROM: You said earlier in some cases that you enjoy the friendship of artists whose work you didn't necessarily like?

PETER SELZ: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Did that ever create any problems?

PETER SELZ: Yes. Yes. You know, why didn't you put me in the show? You're my friend.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And what would you say? Being diplomatic I'm sure.

PETER SELZ: Well, I don't want to put this on the tape.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Well, you don't have to name who it is.

PETER SELZ: Well, there's one artist for instance who I was very close to, a very long and close friendship. And when he saw the book come out, The Theories of Contemporary Art, or Theories of Document of Contemporary Art he found that he was not in the book. And he got very, very angry at me. And he said, "How can you do this to me? We've been friends for decades. And now you put out this book and I'm not in the book." And that was the end of that friendship.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Really?

PETER SELZ: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSTROM: That's too bad. That is too bad. Do you feel, and this begins then to move into the realm of the personal, of the ways in which we, ways in which we recognize in people qualities that we like. That perhaps when these qualities are in an artist we are hopeful or almost expecting that they would then be expressed in the works of art. But what you're saying, and I think it's realistic, is that isn't necessarily the case.

PETER SELZ: Not always.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And if you . . .

PETER SELZ: Many, much of the time, but not always.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And so that fantasy that some of us may have that the work actually is a reification or an externalization of the mind or even the soul, if we're attracted to that mind or that soul we will expect or we will hope that there would be images that . . .

PETER SELZ: Yeah. But it doesn't always work.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Interesting.

[Break in Recording]

PAUL KARLSTROM: We're wrapping this up.

PETER SELZ: Good.

PAUL KARLSTROM: And several things come to mind from our conversations. But following on what we've been talking about most recently, which has to do with the artists as human beings, as individual, and your penchant for establishing connections. Enjoying fully the person as well as the work of art. It seems to me that this is a typically humanist position to take. The difficulty of separating the work of art from the creator of the work of art, or the individual, and then in effect, well, I don't want to say, answer the question that I put to you.

PETER SELZ: No, you're right.

PAUL KARLSTROM: But how would you articulate that? And what I guess I'm getting at is sort of an overriding perhaps on your point, an overarching view of what art is with a human experience. That sounds too big, but you know what I mean, I think.

PETER SELZ: Well, that's a pretty tough question. What is art in human experience?

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think I made it tougher than it really was. If we back up just a minute. Let me rephrase it. To make it more manageable, what I guess I was really thinking of was this. The point of view that art, if it doesn't reflect human values and human experiences is something.

PETER SELZ: Yeah. Yeah, I think, I think that's very important. And I think if, art, you know, the art that I have always liked does reflect human experience. And does reflect human feelings. Feelings. Thoughts and feelings. And, and I think it also I'd like to add something. I mean, [inaudible] and Andy Warhol does reflect human experience. But it's an unimportant, banal kind of experience. It's not an experience like making love. You know, it's different. Eating the Campbell's soup is not the same thing.

PAUL KARLSTROM: Not in my experience.

PETER SELZ: That's right. And I think good art, you know, reflects and articulates and is a metaphor for, good art, for a significant human experience. When I see that then I respond to it. And everything, you know, you talk about Oliveira and Bruce Conner. This is what I respond to, what I like, what art means to me. It's important in our lives.

PAUL KARLSTROM: I think that that's great. I think that we've covered a lot of ground.

PETER SELZ: I think [inaudible].

PAUL KARLSTROM: Yes. Thank, thank you.

[End of Interview]

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