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Oral history interview with J. Fred Woell,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with J. Fred Woell on June 6 and 11, 2001, and January 9, 2002. The interview took place in Deer Isle, Maine, and was conducted by Donna Gold for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

J. Fred Woell and Donna Gold have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

DONNA GOLD: This is Donna Gold interviewing Fred Woell at his house in Deer Isle, Maine, on June 6, 2001, for the Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art.

So first, I guess I will go through the basics. When were you born?

J. FRED WOELL: Let's see. February 4, 1934.

MS. GOLD: And where?

MR. WOELL: Evergreen Park, Illinois.

MS. GOLD: Now, you moved around a lot as a child, right?

MR. WOELL: Quite a bit. I guess, let's see, I would have to count. I don't keep track. Decatur, Illinois; Springfield, Illinois; Peoria, Illinois; Decatur again; and then Ferguson, Missouri; and then finally back to the Chicago area, where I was born, and lived in Oak Lawn, Illinois, until my parents finally moved to live in the suburbs of Milwaukee, Wisconsin [Greendale, WI]. By that time I was in college and sort of on my own.

MS. GOLD: Can you talk about what kind of impact that had on you as a kid?

MR. WOELL: Well, I'm guessing. I mean, all of us have different personality types. I find in my later years after some therapy that I tend to be more of an introvert. But I do feel that all that moving, like an army brat, kept me from ever really having any close friends. I don't remember really anybody from my youth, and I have no connection with anybody, as a result, as other friends of mine who I've met or people in my later life that I know seem to have friends that go way back, because they lived in one place all through their adolescence and high school, which is very strange to me since I never had that.

So the friends that are more permanent are friends that I met in college and my adult life, not in my youth. And I think in many ways, always being moved just as I was sort of getting settled in, created kind of a pattern in me of never getting involved. Even today I'm not very active in anything except my job and my wife and I. So I have a few friends here, but not a lot. And I think that may be a part of that whole issue of never feeling secure, of growing up that way.

In fact, one of the stories that sticks in my mind, when we moved to Ferguson, Missouri, I think I was in eighth grade, and that was junior high, so that was a different school than when I went to high school. And so in high school it was the first time I had been anywhere more than three years.

And I was a junior and looking forward to graduating, and I guess at that point I had really kind of dug in. As they did traditionally there, your graduation ring you would order in your junior year so you could wear it in your senior year. So I had ordered my ring, and then my father announced that we were moving. So my senior year in high school was in a whole different town, and I never wore the ring. And that was kind of typical of how my life was.

The high school I moved away from was a smaller school. There might have been about 300, 400 students at the most. The high school I ended up going to was in a different town than the town that we moved to, another suburb. And that was, you know, one of those consolidated situations that adjoining suburbs bused their kids to. That school was over 1,200 students. I didn't get to know anybody in that. I mean, that was a hard year for me, my last year. It may be that as much as anything really kind of set the stage for me not trusting that I'd ever be anywhere very long.

So I kind of created a pattern of moving a lot after that. In my adult life I even moved quite a bit.

MS. GOLD: But you've been here a lot. I mean, you've been in Maine for quite a while.

MR. WOELL: In Maine I have, actually. On the other hand, it's an interesting thing. Let's see. My years after high school-let's see, how did all that work? I'm going to have to think a little bit now. I went three years to a small college in Missouri outside of Kansas City, Missouri, Park College. The church that my parents went to-I was brought up Presbyterian, I guess Congregational Presbyterian now. They've blurred, in my mind. And my best buddy in high school was also the son of the minister of the Presbyterian church. And, you know, the minister was a very likeable guy, down to earth, and I liked him, and his son was great.

MS. GOLD: Your best buddy was the son of the minister?

MR. WOELL: Yeah, at the church that we went to. So then of course we moved. Let's see what I'm driving at here, the fact that-I'm losing where I was going.

MS. GOLD: You were talking about moving a lot.

MR. WOELL: Okay. So the reason I went to Park College-this is the gist of this-is that Bob Long, my good friend, his father had gone to Park College, and Bob decided to go. When I got out of high school in Oak Lawn, Illinois, I pretty much had had it with school, but I didn't know what I wanted to do. And so my best friend at that time, Bob Long, was going to college, so I decided to go to college, I think maybe figuring-and this may be not true, I'm trying to remember back-but also in those days they had a draft, and I was eligible to go into the military, so I guess in some ways I didn't want to do that either. And somewhere in that vicinity the Korean War was starting up, so it didn't sound like a great thing to get involved with.

I suppose down in the deepest part of me, I hate violence and killing, and I guess I would be considered a pacifist, but I don't know if I'd ever qualify for it in terms of standing up and saying, I am to avoid the draft. But during those days you could go to college and get deferred for some time, so I went to Park College for three years. Now, that was a great time, because it was such a small college, and that was like a community. You knew everybody. And maybe those were three of the better years of my life in that time.

The one thing about it is I never had a very strong feeling for any kind of religion, including the one I was brought up in, because I guess I saw so much hypocrisy in it; people that were so devoted to their religion, on the other hand were so prejudiced. Well, this was a church school where you had required chapel, which I hated, and you had to sign a little receipt to put in the box as you left chapel that somebody sat there. So they kept track of you. And you also had to take a course on religion. So I was able to defer that every year, saying "I'm not coming back, I don't want to take that course." So it came to the senior year, and it was either taking that course or getting out, so I got out.

And I ended up at the University of Illinois in Champagne-Urbana for that year. And that was quite a jolt, because you go from a school that's 350 students, where you were so active with everyone, to a school that was about 20,000 at that time. And the thing that probably was good about that for me is I realized that I liked places that were smaller, probably the reason I've enjoyed being here [in Maine] for so many years. Because everything [at the University] was a line. And then of course I ultimately went into the service for two years, and that was just another bureaucracy of lines and all that kind of thing.

MS. GOLD: So you kind of created a parallel from your high school experience-

MR. WOELL: I went back to the same thing.

MS. GOLD: -in a college experience. You spent your last year in a place where nobody knew you. Do you think you were doing that on purpose in some way?

MR. WOELL: Well, you know, I'm also a realist, and I realized that I was going to have to deal with this eventually. And I hated it, although there were some good things about it.

MS. GOLD: The religion?

MR. WOELL: Well, not the religion part, but I mean going to a big place.

MS. GOLD: Oh, yeah.

MR. WOELL: There were a lot of qualities about it. Some of the teachers I had were really good, and better than the teachers I had at the small school. And one of the interesting ironies of all of this is that when I was at the small school, Park College-it was a one-man art department. The fact they had art at all was kind of surprising. And he was a very interesting fellow. He was kind of a dropout from New York City artists who was kind of angry and had all the right qualifications for me to be attracted to him.

And I learned a lot from him, but he said something to me once-I mean, it's amazing how people are affected by other people. And I was doing well and he liked what I was doing, so there wasn't any conflict there, but at one point he said he thought I'd be a good teacher. And you know, when you're starting out and young and think you're going to be a great artist, another Picasso or Rembrandt, and someone says he thought I'd be a good teacher, that was a pisser. And I quit art.

At Park I had taken two full years of it with him, as much as you could. There wasn't a declared major, but it was just kind of a slap in the face. So I just stopped taking courses from him, and I switched to economics, which I don't know why because-[laughs]-I have no mind for numbers. So that next year I was focusing on economics, hating every bit of it. And then when I switched to Illinois, I had all these credits in economics, so I ended up getting a degree at Illinois in economics. Economics and political science.

I was kind of interested in the nature of not politics per se but, you know, things dealing with the social nature of our society, and the history of it. It was at that time, taking one of the required courses to finish that part of my education was a guy by the name of Charlie Kneier-or Kneier, I think his name is [changing pronunciation]. Anyway, he was the most dynamic teacher, and interesting. He made political science fun, you know. I said, well, maybe being a teacher isn't all that bad if you can be as good as he was. And so I had no interest at that point of being-I got my major in economics, but I had no interest in going any further with it, so I decided to get a degree in art education because art-I continued to do art work all those years.

MS. GOLD: You did, on your own.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. And-it looks like our tape here is-

[Tape paused.]

MS. GOLD: [Mid-sentence as tape resumes.] [So your teacher at Park did encourage you to continue, though you resented his comment, am I right?]-encouraged you to-that you were painting, actually. That's what I wanted to make sure that I got in.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. The classes I took at Park were strictly painting. And there was a class in three-dimensional design and I did some sculpture work, but painting-fine arts, let's put it that way. No crafts. No jewelry. No anything else that relates to crafts. But when I started the B.F.A., the requirements necessitated that you at least take a full year of crafts. You had an option. You could take a ceramics semester, or two, if you liked it that much, or the other option was a jewelry class.

And so the first class I took was ceramics, and I loved it. I thought it was great. And I got along real well with the instructor. In fact, we got pretty close. And at the end of that semester, he said, "You can continue doing ceramics if you want; you're a pleasure to have in the class, et cetera, but there's this jewelry class being taught by one of the best people in the field," had the biggest reputation in the country at that time, or one of them, like Ron Pearson. His name was Bob von Neumann. He said, "Why not take advantage of that." So he talked me into taking the jewelry class.

Well, I liked jewelry better, and von Neumann was a great teacher. I totally enjoyed it. In fact, it was so exciting to me that I wanted to do more, but now I was graduated. I was out of there. So we had a conversation about what I would do if I wanted to go further with it. And he said he had gone to the University of Wisconsin at Madison and gotten a master's degree there, and he said, "Well, that's an option." And he said he would write me a letter of recommendation, which he did. Now, this is in the middle of the year, not at the beginning, in September, it's December 1959-or end of December.

So I applied, and I guess mostly by his recommendation, I got into Madison after only having one semester of metals. And I hardly, like, barely knew how to solder and cut, so it wasn't that I had much experience, and they took me in on kind of probation. I really wasn't in the graduate program, although on the surface of it, it looked like I was.

But I had this tug in me between my fascination with making jewelry, because of the nature of how you worked and the techniques appealed to me, and the scale of it was interesting, but I still wanted to be an artist. I still had that in the back of my head of being a famous artist. And most of all I wanted to be a sculptor. I wanted to do sculpture.

So I went to Madison with the idea of having sort of a double major, so I took a course in sculpture. There was only one person teaching sculpture there [Leo Steppat], and he wasn't a very likeable personality, and he totally discouraged me by the way he worked. Most of what I learned in the class was from other students who somehow were able to put up with his abusiveness. And I did learn some things; it wasn't bad in that sense, but I guess I needed a little more input than he gave me. Because I'd be working on something and he would come around, as he did-I mean, he didn't avoid us, but he'd come around and say something like, "That's good," then

he'd walk away. And I wanted to know what was good about it, and he wouldn't tell me. Or most often, he'd come around and he'd say, "That looks like a pile of shit," and then walk away.

MS. GOLD: Really?

MR. WOELL: Oh, yeah. And you have to understand, I never felt that I was made up of the kind of the intelligence that I probably should have ever gone to college in the first place, because I wasn't a stellar student, and so that just kind of fanned my insecurity. So at the end of the first semester, I quit sculpture. I went and took a course in graphics with another teacher and, of course, stuck with jewelry because the jewelry teacher and I hit it off. His name was Art Vierthaler. And he was very supportive and I ended up getting a graduate degree in metals through him.

MS. GOLD: Were you doing anything special? What were you working on? Or what were you working on that was in your creative ideas?

MR. WOELL: Well, you know, I think that I had no idea what I was doing. Let's put it this way. My dad always worked with his hands. I mean, he was an insurance adjuster, but he was always making tables and renovating the house. He had a little workshop in the basement. And I think through osmosis more than anything because the shop was there, I don't ever remember him really sitting down with me and encouraging me, but I just sort of got involved with it. So there has been and still is that strong thing about making things with my hands.

And I guess I never really felt that I was an artist. I was just somebody who liked to make things, and a lot of it wasn't very practical. But jewelry, since I feel I have a real strong sense of design, the early jewelry things were just pure design. In fact, actually I have a piece from that time I just got sent to me. I'll show you. And those early things were sort of very geometric. You know, typical. People still do those kind of things today. None of the work I do now has any connection to that, because now it's sort of a voice. It's dealing with social issues, things of that nature.

MS. GOLD: What I'd like to do at this point is go back and talk a little bit more about your childhood. I didn't mean to jump on.

MR. WOELL: That's okay.

MS. GOLD: You didn't have friends, or close friends. What did you do in your spare time? When you see yourself as a child, what are you remembering yourself doing?

MR. WOELL: Well, as a kid I suppose my social activities were things like Boy Scouts, where you made lanyards, and, you know, the kind of thing with camping out and nature. Cub Scouts. I went through the whole Cub Scout thing. My mother was a den mother, all that kind of thing.

I would say my strongest influence in those years was Boy Scouts. In fact, I looked a little bit like General MacArthur by the time I was a senior in high school, because I had merit badges that were endless. I was an Eagle Scout with three palms, and I had other awards. I mean, it was ridiculous. And I think my mother, who was always very frugal in the way she ever did anything, because she and my dad came through the Depression and of course that had an immense effect on them, but I can remember when she bought me my Boy Scout uniform I had to roll the sleeves up two or three times. And by the time I hit my senior year in high school, my Scout uniform finally fit.

MS. GOLD: [Laughing] She was expecting you to be there for a while.

MR. WOELL: I don't know if she thought that-[laughs]-but anyway, it became my life. In fact, I almost became a professional Scout, you know. I loved camping and the outdoors. And I think to a great extent that's why I'm here, because there's something about the outdoors and the space and nature here that always charges me up. It's so beautiful up here. And most every place I've lived, I've tried to put myself into places where there is a strong sense of the environment. And in my own creative work there's often comments about the environment and protecting it, appreciation for it or anger about what we're doing to trash it. And I think that all got started in those years.

I didn't have much of a social life in terms of dating, and I was very shy, still am pretty shy of women, but was extremely shy of women when I was in those years. And in some ways I think that-I had a brother, and my connection with the female half of things was very negligible, you know. [Laughs.] I did have a domineering mother, who didn't give me any great appreciation for getting involved with women [laughs]-maybe. I don't know. Although I was always attracted to women in all those years and always being too shy or finding that they weren't interested in me. So it was kind of this back and forth that was kind of difficult for me. So Boy Scouts was easy.

MS. GOLD: Was it easy that it was a regimented kind of thing, because you had trouble in school, you said, but in Boy Scouts you got to achieve something on different levels?

MR. WOELL: Maybe. I'm not sure, because I hate regimen now. I mean, after teaching 20 years in schools, where everything is so institutionalized, and now, you know, I've quit a good-paying job in college. I mean, I could be part of the SUNY New Paltz establishment and probably have quite a good salary. I quit the best salary I'd ever had to come back here and get paid almost nothing to be at Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME]. It doesn't make any sense. I wasn't married at the time and I could be as screwy as I wanted. And I was taking risks with my life that you can always take when you don't have any responsibilities, in the sense I had been divorced by then probably about six years. And I had saved enough money because I was pretty frugal anyway, so I figured I could get through about two years here and do my own work and things, and thought maybe I could start to make a living on it.

But in terms of Scouting and those years, I think the issues of respecting the environment and not trashing it. I'll always remember one of the credos of Scouting was to always leave a place as clean as you found it, you know. Well, that certainly is-

[End Tape 1, Side A.] [Begin Tape 1, Side B.]

MS. GOLD: Did you do exploring of the environment on your own?

MR. WOELL: What do you mean by that?

MS. GOLD: Well, actually, first of all, were you living in suburbs mostly, or in rural areas or towns?

MR. WOELL: Well, those towns that I lived in in Illinois, like Decatur and Springfield, were fairly small cities, I mean, by today's- they were like Ellsworth, you know. And you could get out of town really quick, so you could get on your bicycle and ride out to the edge of town and you were out in farmland, or not necessarily a woods like this, but, I mean, the United States has grown in population so much. I guess you grew up in New York City, right?

MS. GOLD: Mm-hmmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. WOELL: So you don't understand that quite in the sense I-but today, of course, even the places I grew up with have expanded. It's pretty shocking to me. And I find that's another interesting issue that we're going to ultimately have to face.

MS. GOLD: Population.

MR. WOELL: I mean, your children are definitely going to have to face it more than we do, but it's something that right now in many ways we're not addressing as forcefully as we probably need to.

MS. GOLD: So did you take your bike and on your own go out and go exploring?

MR. WOELL: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Well, the countryside was interesting, the space. There's something about space that's important to me. I've traveled all over the United States and I love the West, you know, Southwest. There's still a lot of space there. There's a sense of feeling your insignificance that's important to me, when you can get off the main highway about 50 yards and realize how vulnerable you are and how immense nature is in the real sense, in both the beauty of it but also the fact that you need to be respectful of it and understand it to survive.

And I guess there's another kind of thing like that in a big city, but there's something really beautiful about nature and how nature takes care of itself and all those different details of it. And a lot of that I got to know in Scouting, because you got merit badges for bird study and, you know, all those things that deal with nature, and how to survive, how to cook your own meals out in the bush, and what you can eat and what you can't, what you have to be careful of in terms of certain plants like poison ivy and snakes and things like that. So I had a pretty good background in that by the time I left.

Today I-I had a little camping gear. Patricia's [Patricia Wheeler, Fred's wife] not a great camper, so I haven't-we haven't camped as much as maybe we would if she was a little more enthusiastic about it, but we both enjoy being here, you know, and that. She loves kayaking. There's another space, being on the water, that is like being in the desert. You have to be very cautious and respectful, understanding, to survive. So that makes this a very exciting area in that sense, just as the West is.

MS. GOLD: Did you find yourself collecting things and tinkering as a child? Did you, collect, search out bones or sticks and do any of that?

MR. WOELL: Well, I was a collector, I guess. As a kid, one of the things I remember is collecting cards-you know, people had different playing cards-and buttons and badges, things of that. I don't think I ever was a big collector of bones. To a certain extent, I collected interesting-shaped rocks, which I still have a tendency to do, and some of them have found their way into the things I make.

But I think there was something more about camping, about just being in that space. It was kind of a-well, I would say it was kind of my own personal religion. You know, I didn't know it at the time, but I suppose it had something to do with beliefs of Zen and Taoists and those Eastern ways of looking at nature that I didn't know about in those days. But later in college I studied some of it and found it fit more into my own personal view of things. Though I'm not a fanatic on any of that stuff, there are touches of those beliefs and writings that certainly hit a chord in my own personal way of looking at things that I like.

I think when you're in situations like that-today, anyway, I feel this way-they can be very quieting and help you deal with a lot of the other stuff that is in your way.

MS. GOLD: So you were raised as a Presbyterian, then Congregationalist, but shed that pretty quickly.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. By the time I was in college, I had had enough of it.

MS. GOLD: And at the same time, you were sort of gathering this sense of nature all along, right, because you were doing it as a child.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. I guess the positive aspect of structure is that it does give you exposure to certain things, just like in a sense of what I mentioned about getting the B.F.A. and the requirements to have to take a year of craft. Had I never been required to do it, maybe I'd never have been a metalsmith. And so I can see the value of it, but I guess I'm a little more-I think sometimes we go at things of what we want, and when we go at it directly, there's a lot of side things that interrupt it that are important that makes you really get out of track.

My whole idea of education now-and I've written about it and I've also come to believe it-is that I would like to see, knowing what we know about what's important if you're, let's say, going to be an artist, or valuable, recommend it instead of requiring it. And when you recommend something, if you can give, by recommending it, some valid reasons, then a person might want to take it instead of feeling, "God, I have to take it." I like that kind of attitude toward educating better than forcing people to do it. Unfortunately, that isn't the way it works in today's educational structure.

On the other hand, I don't believe in education where you just sort of, okay, do whatever you want without anything there to guide you or help you, because in a sense, the first art teacher I had at Park was sort of that way. He hardly gave me any guidance; he just said, you know-well, he did to a certain degree, but when I wanted help, he said, "Well, you'll figure it out." So I think when somebody wants help, that's when they're most ready to learn something. So I think that's a responsibility of people that are in education, to be there. If they don't know it themselves, at least say, "Well, I know somebody who probably could help you with this because they're really good at that." And that's the better way of doing it, maybe. I don't know. That's the thought I've come to, anyway.

MS. GOLD: So let me just ask you a little bit more about your childhood. One thing that occurred to me in seeing the use of toys in your work is whether they have a kind of nostalgic value. Do you remember the toys that you played with? Does that have any resonance in your work today?

MR. WOELL: To a certain degree. When I was in Scouts, I used to whittle neckerchief things. I guess they're all gone. We had a bunch of them sitting there on the shelf for a while. But I don't honestly remember doing a lot of real creative things. In a sense, I was just sort of learning certain crafts, because the things I made that were neckerchief slides usually came from some I saw in a book and I just copied them. Mostly the things that I did art-wise, like drawing, et cetera, were trying to copy something as close as I could get it, like Bugs Bunny or things like that.

I didn't grow up in an environment that encouraged creativity. My mother to this day can't do anything creative, but she's-even at 93, she's still knitting and doing that, but she gets-[interrupted by telephone ringing]. She'll get designs out of *Family Circle* magazine or something, and she'll stick to it.

MS. GOLD: But you grew up in an environment where people were making things by using their hands.

MR. WOELL: Yeah, all the time. But I never was encouraged to do anything original, really, until I left home and got in college, where I started painting, where that was a part of the menu of what you do; you try to do something that's your own, which I thought was a good break for me.

Since I grew up in a family that was, from my perspective, very conservative and one that was very concerned

about not being different, why would they want me to do something original? The best example of that is-maybe I told you this before-after I had had a cover story done on me in *Metalsmith* magazine in 1989, which was the first article on me in *Metalsmith*, I sent a copy of it to my mother. It's not often you get a color image on a cover of your work, you know, full-blown.

MS. GOLD: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. WOELL: And the next letter from Mother right after receiving it was mostly about, you know, the bridge club and things that were on her palette, which was okay, but she didn't start the first paragraph of the letter by saying, "Oh, how nice to get the magazine, and it looks very professional," and da-da-da. No, the letter went on for not a great length, but probably a couple pages, but it was in the last three lines of the letter she said, "Oh, yes," she said, "I got the magazine; it all looks very nice, but when are you going to do something ordinary people will like?" That was her take and always has been.

So, I mean, I'm a fairly insecure person. It's taken me a long time to, you know, even feel that good about myself. And I've had to live with that my whole life. And I, fortunately, have had enough therapy that I know why I'm the way I am, but it kicks in pretty easily, and I have to keep reminding myself where that comes from.

And the great thing for me is that my art is sort of my safe haven now; I just do it. I try to make a living out of it, but-and the fact that enough of it has been received into museum collections and has received attention, that I can at least feel a little better about myself for that, but, I mean, it certainly has never gotten any great appreciation from my parents about I've done. They like the fact that I made a decent, according to them, living being a teacher, and that's a respectable enough thing, so they never complained about that. But in terms of what I do personally, the most important thing to me, of course, obviously, is what I do as a creative artist, and that doesn't really read with them as being of any great significance. So, that's okay.

The thing about it is, I've always had this constant curiosity about ideas, and I feel pretty confident about the fact that I'm right enough about what I'm thinking and trying, and now I can sort of say I have some self-assurance about that, because my work has been published, and you did this lovely article about me, and that was published in *Metalsmith* magazine and so forth. So, I mean, I have enough background now that it's easier for me to feel good about myself there. So it's kind of a yin-yang thing, I guess.

MS. GOLD: Do you remember when you first started drawing as a child? Did your parents appreciate the fact that you could copy things well?

MR. WOELL: I think they found it interesting because, you know, they'd have these summer camps, day camps, you go off, and they have craft things there, and I would draw or make things. I was always drawing, always doing cartoon work. And of course, later I did cartooning at the University of Illinois, and I did that book that you saw. And I always kind of liked doing that. I don't do it anymore, but, yeah, I did that throughout my youth and I made posters for the church social, things like that, always drawing something, Bugs Bunny holding an ice cream cone advertising the ice cream social.

MS. GOLD: The church ice cream social? [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: Things like that. Made a lot of posters. So, yeah, I was always active doing that kind of stuff.

MS. GOLD: So you got good feedback for that.

MR. WOELL: Well, yeah, I would say, you know, that that was okay. And I can remember making a little-people would put little cute signs in their lawn that had their house number on it and it would be decorated with something, and I did a Bugs Bunny that was Bugs Bunny with his head like this with a little house number on it, and sold those for-it wasn't a big thing, but I must have done a number of those for different neighbors and I got paid a little bit for it. And that was when I was in probably junior high.

I entered drawing contests. I guess I got an honorable mention once doing a portrait of George Washington for George Washington's birthday. It was a contest that every year they did. I think I got an honorable mention that time for my take on George Washington. So those things were going on.

I mean, I don't think that my parents tried to stop me from doing it. And there was something harmless enough about it. It wasn't like taking drugs or something, something they would obviously frown on, but they didn't frown on it in the sense that they wanted to stop me from doing it. I don't think I ever felt that they thought it was that important, but it wasn't a bad thing.

MS. GOLD: You didn't know any artists, people who were working in creative fields?

MR. WOELL: Not when I was young. I don't think I knew any artists until I started in college. Really, I can't

remember any artists.

MS. GOLD: You know, one thing that interests me in reading the Columbia transcript was that you said you were the class clown.

MR. WOELL: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: And yet you say you're very shy and were sort of introverted. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about that. Do you remember when it became, started off there?

MR. WOELL: My dad had kind of a funny sense of humor. He didn't tell jokes, but he had the ability to be humorous. And I admire my dad. He's really a very good man, I think. And I think to a certain extent, you know, I was a little bit awkward, still am, kind of trip over things, and then I get a laugh for it, and I began to do it on purpose. When I was in college, at Park especially, I was constantly clowning around doing kind of skits, advertising the next social event, you know, for our club.

They had clubs, not fraternities, and I would get up and do comedy acts and things like that. It scared the hell out of me, to be quite honest with you, but it was-to this day I don't quite understand it. Sometimes I can be very funny when I'm talking, and other times I just fall flat. I can't read all that well, although I force myself to do it because I think it's important to-[laughs]-do things you're not good at. So when they have staff night here [at Haystack], I'll force myself to read one of my poems or something like that. I suppose over the years I've gotten better at it. And of course, all these years of teaching, you have to be up in front of people and talking, so I've tried to add a little humor to it.

You know, part of the humor is about my own kind of lack of confidence in myself. I can make fun of myself at my expense, and people think it's funny, I guess. Pat hates it, but I've done it so many years, I have trouble breaking the habit. And I think that is part of how it started, when I was a kid, because I was awkward, didn't have a lot of confidence, so it was a way of deflecting. It was a way of getting through life, I guess, in those years. So being funny was part of that.

MS. GOLD: When you were in college, you were studying economics and political science. Do you think that those studies and that line of studying reflects in your work, in the satirical, political nature of your work?

MR. WOELL: I would say the political science, in terms of studying the nature of politics and how all that works. I can remember in my junior year in high school, the American Legion ran-and probably still does-a program called Boys State. This was in Louisville, Missouri, at a military academy. They took over the military academy during the summer for, like, a week. And the whole idea behind it is to educate young boys in terms of what our government is like. So a certain number of boys were selected to be part of the judicial system, some of them were in the senate, some of them were lawyers, and others were those that governed the little state for that week. And they would have real cases that were argued in front of a court. And the kids there had a chance to do that.

I hated it.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: The politics of it were just-I couldn't understand it, and it was pretty grimy, I thought. And it wasn't a pleasant week. But it certainly pointed out, and to this day, you know, you see what politicians seem to have to do to do what they do. [Laughs.] It's really strange, you know?

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: Of course, I guess we all are a little strange. At least after what I've already told you, you can see that. And obviously, I believe in democracy and I don't believe in some kind of dictatorship, but it's interesting how the nature of the structure of how societies are set up create not only positive things but sometimes some very negative things. And I don't know how to avoid it, but certainly I voice it in my work a lot.

I think one of the important things to me about art-and maybe the fact that in our society art isn't, in my opinion, that important, so it can exist pretty free, because obviously the government is doing everything it can not to support the arts, and nobody in politics in the last few years is, other than trying to get rid of the NEA, has talked about the arts. I haven't heard a president say anything about it in any of their speeches and so forth. So artists are, in one sense, not considered very dangerous. [Laughs.] And, I mean, I have art sitting out in my front yard here and I feel perfectly safe putting it there, because no one in this neighborhood would want it.

MS. GOLD: Not dangerous, not valuable? [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: That's right. Exactly. I suppose if I put a case of beer out on the front lawn, it would be gone pretty

quick.

But the thing that I find important about it to me is that all of us who are artists are talking about what we're seeing and feeling and what's happening. As a result, generations from now will understand this time. And I think that's what we've always seen from every culture, you know? What would we know about the Egyptians if it wasn't for their art? And other cultures. Today, of course, we have tape recorders and other things that record the stuff, but the tape is going to wear out eventually and things. So, several hundred years from now, maybe it's just the art that will be around.

MS. GOLD: The art and the plastic.

MR. WOELL: Yeah, right.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: So we have to make things out of plastic. [Laughs.] But anyway, to me it's one of the interesting aspects of the significance of art.

But the other thing that's interesting to me about art, as you look back in time and study other cultures, you also get connected to people and understand who we are, because I think they in their own time dealt with the same things we are now, and there's that kind of link that's important that will never go away. And it's kind of reassuring, too, to see that as part of our humanness, you know? And I don't think anything does it better.

The thing, too, that's so important about art, I think, is the fact that it allows even people that aren't artists, who write, maybe just write a poem or write a little short story or scribble a drawing that, you know, they don't expect-

[End Tape 1, Side 2.] [Begin Tape 2, Side 1.]

MS. GOLD: -Fred Woell in Deer Isle on February-February! [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: That's my birthday.

MS. GOLD: That's your birthday. June 6, 2001. And we're in the-do you call this your living room?

MR. WOELL: Yeah, living room/kitchen.

MS. GOLD: Kitchen? Okay.

And you were talking about art and its importance.

MR. WOELL: Well, I believe I was saying that what all of us need in our lives is to feel self-esteem to really be healthy, and art does that, because what we do, if we really let ourselves when we're creating something, is make something that is just us. It's not-I mean, if we really let ourselves, it's not us trying to make something somebody else will like. I mean, some people do that. And sometimes what we make that it's our own, other people like anyway. But I'm just saying, in the truest, most pure sense of it, when we set out to make something that is an idea that's our own and we have finished it, there it is. No one has said, "Well, you should have made it purple instead of red," or some kind of thing. It's ours, we've made it. Now, it may not be very good as far as the bigger picture of things, and who cares? That's my take on anything I make. I have to think of it that way.

And so the best thing art has done for me is that I've allowed myself to be, in the most pure sense, myself. And what's out there today that has been received favorably is me. I've got a lot of things in the drawer that no one wants, but still it's me. And I've been able to do that. And that is a very healthy thing for me to know that I can do that and I can take that risk and go ahead with it. Because being creative is a risk-taking situation, you know, because somebody's going to see it if you let them, and they're going to have something to say about it. And if they don't understand it and have no appreciation for art whatsoever, obviously they're going to think it's pretty screwy, most often.

But what I'm saying is it's one of the key important things about the creative process in the purest sense, to be able to be totally you. And I think that's one of the things I've liked about Haystack for all these years, is that everyone can be themselves there. There's no judgment. There are incredible things that come out of there and there's incredibly mediocre things, but no one cares. Everyone is getting something for themselves out of it and walk away, if they really allow themselves, and most people do because there's no point at which they say, "There's going to be a 'crit' on Friday, and if you don't have your work done and mounted and da-da-da." That doesn't exist there, as far as I can see. There might be extreme exceptions to that, but that's not the nature of the place. So creativity, in the best sense of the word, happens there. And it's outside the sense of things having to be good.

One of the things that I say in workshops I now do working with found objects-I have a workshop that seems to be very popular; I've done it enough. It's called the "Art by Accident," the use of found objects. I've told you about that. But the key byline to that is that I ask people to accept the idea, for the workshop, anyway, that anything that's worth doing is worth doing poorly, so get on with it and get it over with, because you never know, it might turn out great.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] Yeah.

MR. WOELL: Because so often people go into everything trying to make it good, and by getting stuck in that, quite often they never finish it. And you never know what a thing is like until it's done. And there's so much, with regard to the aspects of chance or serendipity, that happen in a process that people don't let happen when they're trying to keep it contained under-you know, trying with all those voices telling them what's good and bad, that they can't ever finish it, or when they get it finished, it isn't very interesting quite often because they're not being themselves; they're being what they think they ought to be.

But if you can just let things happen, and when something doesn't go particularly right, instead of getting mad, you just say, "Thank you, I wonder where this is going to lead to," and that kind of opens-there's always something happens. For example, if you're sawing something and it breaks in the sawing, instead of starting all over and sawing something else so you can get it perfect, you use the break part as part of it and see what happens. That's all I'm saying.

MS. GOLD: Now, this is something that you came to in your own work, right?

MR. WOELL: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: How did you come to that sense that you can accept chance?

MR. WOELL: Well, it comes from a number of things, and it took a long time for it to get into me. But I can remember one of the key moments in my life is listening to John Cage give a talk at the University of Illinois.

MS. GOLD: This is when you were in graduate school, do you think?

MR. WOELL: No, I was undergraduate. It's when I was-

MS. GOLD: A senior?

MR. WOELL: Yeah.

John Cage was very popular at the University of Illinois, because they had a very progressive modern music department doing all kinds of weird things, and he was one of the weird ones. Anyway, I heard a number of his performances, which didn't make any sense to me, but it was all free. So this one day I saw he was talking, and he sat at a table on a stage. There were about 600 people there, at least. It was a pretty large auditorium. He had a microphone at the table and he had a little amplifier. And he was reading from a book that he had just published called *Silence*, which was about music. I've never read it, but anyway. And I didn't understand what he was reading. In fact, it's all kind of a blur.

But the thing that did strike me as fascinating is that when he wanted to emphasize something, he'd turn the volume up while he was reading, and then he'd turn it down.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: And he had made himself a cocktail and he had a mike on his throat and he drank the cocktail so you heard the sounds of his swallowing. He struck a match and lit a cigarette, and it was all amplified. I thought, well, that's interesting. Because he believed the sounds that we hear that are a part of nature are part of the music. He said everything we do is music.

Well, all that was strange to me, but the thing that struck me about Cage was, during the question-and-answer period after his talk, he was absolutely brilliant in his responses to the questions. But on top of all that, some of the questions were pretty hard and abusive, because some of the people thought he was a charlatan. There was a woman that was probably my age now sitting about three seats from me, and she got a chance to-he acknowledged her. That's what she asked him. She says, "Do you think you're a charlatan?" Oh, no, the first thing she said-I mean, she was very disrespectful. The first thing she said, she announced-I'll never forget this-she announced to all 600 of us sitting there that this man is laughing all the way to the bank. That was the first thing she said. I said, "Well, that's a good segue into a question, I suppose." Then she asked him if he thought he was a charlatan.

Well, Cage was smart enough, but he was a very generous-spirited man. He had probably been through this a

lot. He didn't put her down. He defined what he felt a charlatan was, and then he defined what he thought he was doing. And he did it with such tenderness, let me put it that way, that he totally won me over. I said, this man is great. And I was emotionally moved by that moment.

And I had never done this before or since. I went down and waited in line at the end. He talked to everyone that wanted to talk to him. I kept saying, I've got to get out of here, I'm so nervous. And when I got my chance, I just said, "All I wanted to say is thank you." You know? And he wanted to know my name and a little bit about me. And he looked me right in the eye. And I thought, gee, whew. And I've always, when I do talks and people have come up to me, I try to talk with them a little bit because, you know, obviously they're being respectful and considerate.

So Cage's-that always kind of stuck in my mind. Not that it influenced my work initially, but to be able to be so generous to somebody that was obviously being so nasty to you, I thought that's really a quality that is pretty special.

And so years, many years later, he was interviewed by Connie Goldman. She did a series of interviews called, "I Am Too Busy to Talk Now; Conversations with Artists Over 70," and he was one of, I think, about 20 artists that she interviewed. Well, you have to understand, I'm in my car driving to Boston on one of my many commutes, it's night and I'm listening to this, and there's John Cage. I hadn't heard him for years, you know. And the tape was just fantastic. It just brought back all this stuff.

And I found out through M. C. Richards, who was associated with Haystack, who was very close to Cage, his address. So I wrote him a letter and told him I had heard this, and I told him the story about that time. And he wrote me a note. He said, "That was 19 years ago." He remembered it, I guess. He didn't remember me, but he remembered the incident. And he wrote me this real sweet note. He says, "If you're ever in New York, give me a call." He gave me his phone number. And of course, I never-I wrote him a thank you and said I was a little bit shy about doing that, but I really appreciated it.

Now, the catch to this whole thing, it's interesting. Because of all that, that tape I started playing to my students, because I thought it was so important about the whole creative process, the way he talked about chance, and that's where it started kicking in in my own work, and taking a chance, you know, as well as the therapy I was going through.

But anyway, I did a whole conference of about 70 metal students from different schools, called "The Inside of Art." This was a conference that they've been doing at New Paltz for a number of years running, and that particular fall, the person that would normally run it, who was the head of the department, was on sabbatical, so it was my turn to do it. And I know we would never have done this had he been involved. In fact, he told me he wouldn't touch it with a 10-foot pole. But I wanted to see if I could get into this kind of idea that Cage had about taking chances and about things of that nature, so the whole thing was designed around that idea. And we played that tape, and then students wrote a poem based on the conference and things that came out of that.

But the thing was, the students that helped me plan, who were just a great group, one of them was sort of the director, coordinating everything. Everyone had heard the tape and they heard me going on and on about John Cage now for longer than they probably wanted. But Kim [Massa], who was just such a sweetheart, she was determined she was going to try to get John Cage to show up for this conference without me knowing.

MS. GOLD: Oh, my.

MR. WOELL: So that was going to be a big surprise. So she had tried to contact people in New York and finally got to his agent, who told her that she would have to write a letter and da-da-da. And there wasn't enough time. And wouldn't give Kim his phone number, you now, for obvious, good reasons.

But anyway, so you've got to picture this. Here Kim comes up to me. She's been trying so hard for weeks to get this arranged and make the surprise, and then she explains to me at this point what she's been doing. And she says, "Fred, YOU have his phone number."

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: She knew this because I had told everyone this whole story I told you. "You've got to call." And she said, "Promise him anything. He doesn't have to do anything. He can just be there. We'll have his special diet. We'll go down, pick him up." She was a character.

Well, I had sent him my poem book, by the way, because there's a poem in there dedicated to him. Actually, I partly dedicated the book to him. And he wrote me a nice note back from that, too. That was a couple years before this. So that night I sat in my room by the phone and I kept picking the phone up and putting it down, picking it up. I was so nervous. So finally, my voice was shaking like crazy, I dialed the number and I got John

Cage. And I told him who I was, and he remembered me. He says, "Oh, you're the Deer Isle poet." [Laughs.] I thought-

MS. GOLD: You came out a poet, huh?

MR. WOELL: I'm not a poet; I just wrote this. And I told him what, you know, the students had done and da-da-da, and he was very appreciative, but he said he couldn't do it. And he died not long after that, actually. I guess his health wasn't all that good.

But anyway, the Cage thing has had a real influence on me, partly because of his risk-taking, trying things that are unusual, which we're all doing in different ways. But I think it's an incredibly rich aspect of the creative process and wonderful.

MS. GOLD: So the time that you were listening to that tape, that was about when, in the mid-'80s, you think?

MR. WOELL: Yeah, I would say it was probably somewhere around '83, '84.

MS. GOLD: You were driving from here to-

MR. WOELL: To Boston to teach at Boston University. I taught there nine years.

MS. GOLD: Okay.

Now, when you began-your work requires a lot of technical control. Is that --

MR. WOELL: Yeah, to a certain-I would say it's true.

MS. GOLD: When you began giving up a little bit of that control, do you think your work changed?

MR. WOELL: Oh, yeah. In the first place, one of the things that Cage talks about is time and circumstance. Well, music's about time, so you have only so much time to perform a thing, and the circumstance is where you perform it. In fact, some of his things are about just going someplace and opening the windows and hearing what happens. And it would be different here than it would be in downtown New York.

So taking that into consideration, since time and circumstance are always a part of the situation, if you want to complete anything, I've found, when you have a busy schedule of teaching and everything else, if you want to complete something, you need to end up saying, Oh, this weekend I'm going to make a piece. And if you only have two days to do it in, then that's going to affect how you make it. Or if it's going to be a two-weekend thing, it will be different. Some things you can say, I'm going to take four years to do, and that will make even more of a difference.

I felt that it was important for me to start finishing things, because a lot of things weren't getting finished. I had pieces that were in a drawer that were 10 years old that weren't finished. And I started teaching that way, too, saying, okay, we have to acknowledge the fact that we only have a semester to be together, what's going to happen? This is our only chance to do it. Are we going to end up with only one piece done, or are we going to have five or six, or what? And if we're not going to finish anything, we will essentially maybe learn how to order the materials, but that's all. Is that enough to be able to make some assessment of what you can do as a creative person? So I thought it had a good effect.

The other thing is, not just with Cage, but other things I've learned, people seem to work better when, instead of saying, "Oh, you should have done this," you know, being a parent or criticizing, saying, "Oh, that's great." Now, there's usually something good about anything, even if it's not great. You know what I'm saying?

MS. GOLD: Yes.

MR. WOELL: Maybe the good thing is you've learned that you can't do that. [Laughs.] If someone's moaning about the fact that this solder didn't work and that, I said, "That's great."

MS. GOLD: Now you know.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. You probably should have used something else, maybe, but look how good that is in terms of what you learned.

And so I started going around, when I was talking to students each week about their work, as we always would do, individually as well as as a group, but they'd show me what they're doing, and I would be very positive. And one student caught me on it one time. She said, "Well, you say everything's great." I said, "That's true, because it is. You've got to understand that that's part of the process. If all we're doing is"-and I told her what I

mentioned to you. I said, when something goes wrong, say, "Thank you; I wonder what this is going to lead to." If it didn't happen, you probably wouldn't learn anything.

So I found toward the end of my teaching that I was really enjoying teaching, because I felt I was being more effective than I had ever been. And at the end of one semester I remember-not that the work was uniformly spectacular-when we all got down together and talked about it, as we-some people call them "crits". I hated that kind of thing-we just kind of all shared what we had done. Everyone applauded themselves. It was spontaneous. And my fellow teacher was sitting in his office and could see through the window, and he heard the whole thing. When I walked into the office afterward, he said, "My students have never done that for me." I said, "They were doing it for themselves."

So, I was really-I still enjoy teaching because that's what kind of comes out of it, you know.

MS. GOLD: One of the questions that they want me to ask you is your thoughts about the formation and philosophies of various programs that you've taught in. And I wonder if this is a good time to talk about that. You've taught how many-you want to name the places you've taught, beginning with elementary school, right?

MR. WOELL: Yeah. I taught in a consolidated school system in Shiocton, Wisconsin-that's up near Green Bay, Wisconsin-for two years. I taught all the grade schools, all the grades, and high school, including six country schools. Those are the old one-room schoolhouse things. Then I went and I taught one year as a visiting lecturer at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. That was Art Vierthaler hired me back. That was about eight years after I had left there. And then I set up the program at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater. They hadn't had a metals program there. And that was really my first bona fide college teaching job. I taught there two years.

And I had been coming out to Haystack teaching workshops when Fran Merritt was here. And Fran and Ron Pearson-I had met Ron-Fran-when his assistant, sort of the assistant director left; Ron and he had talked about inviting me to come here to work with Fran. And so they called me, and I was supposed to get part of my income during the year working at Ron's, and part of it working with Fran in the summer. And it wasn't very much money, but the idea of being here was great. So I came here. We moved out here.

And I worked with Fran for two years. And Fran and I didn't really ultimately get along very well, as it turned out. I mean, I loved the way Fran went about the whole permissive atmosphere, but the part that bothered me was that he wasn't very attentive to the facilities. He didn't have things there when the teachers arrived, and the place was falling apart and so forth. And I was kind of pushy about it, and I don't think that went over very well, especially with Priscilla [Merritt]. So Priscilla told my wife that I wasn't welcome there anymore, so that ended my second year. I left after the second year.

But we stayed on up here, and then I started doing workshops on the road. So during the summer months, when we couldn't rent a cheap place here, I would go off and do workshops all over the country. I did that two years, and then I got the job at Boston University. I taught there nine years, but we stayed here and built a house here, and I would commute. I'd go down once a week and be there three days and come home. So that's sort of how it went.

And then BU closed the program and it was transferred down to New Bedford at Swain School of Design. And that was a school that was in dire financial state, and it went essentially bankrupt. And the only thing that saved it ultimately was that the state took the program over, and it became part of what's now the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. But I quit at the end of the second year there because nothing was going right and I was really a basket case; things were really going bad down there.

Howard Evans had needed an assistant director, and he found out I had quit and asked me to interview to be his assistant at Haystack. And so I took the job with Howard. That was just a bit of serendipity. I didn't have any idea what I was going to do. I had about enough money to pay our bills for a couple months.

But anyway, then Howard was asked to leave. At that point I was going through a divorce, and I was suddenly in the midst of the quagmire at Haystack. And the board didn't know where the school was at financially, so they weren't sure they wanted to have an assistant director, because I was getting a pretty decent salary as assistant director under Howard. And they wouldn't tell me if I had a job or not.

And I never made really smart moves. I just figured, well I'll just quit Haystack and go somewhere else.

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

MR. WOELL: I've been at Haystack now 13 years. For 12 years I've been in the position I am now. The quirk to this thing was that when I resigned, they allowed me a couple extra months pay, and I worked on the facility in exchange for that. We had been, while I was there as quasi-director, looking for someone to take over the

maintenance position, which we couldn't find anyone, and so after I quit, I had an option to go someplace else that folded, and so I applied for the position [Haystack Maintenance Coordinator] that we couldn't get anyone. And by then Stu [Stuart Kestenbaum] was the director, and he hired me. So I've been doing that ever since.

And then after about the first year of being there as maintenance person, I got a call from my old associate at BU [Jamie Bennett], another teacher [Bob Ebendorf] was taking a one-year leave of absence, that they needed someone at New Paltz for one year because that person was leaving, and he wanted me to come and take the job. So I did. I mean, it was a nice salary; I had no money. And apparently they liked me enough that when the other person quit, they hired me without, you know, having anyone else being interviewed, which was a great compliment and I really appreciate it. I loved working with the students there, but I hated the bureaucracy of the place. I didn't like New Paltz as an area that much. And I was coming up here still working summers, and I liked it here. And I wasn't married at the time, so I quit.

MS. GOLD: So you worked there for, like, four years?

MR. WOELL: Yeah. And I had gotten an NEA grant, one of those big ones, that year. So I had that in the bank. So I figured, \$20,000, I can get through; the way I'm living, I could probably get through about four years.

So that's how that transition happened. Then Pat and I met and got married and ended up here. So it's been pretty nice.

MS. GOLD: And did any one of those programs that you taught at have a philosophy or approach to teaching that you thought was particularly valuable?

MR. WOELL: Of those universities?

MS. GOLD: Yes.

MR. WOELL: No.

MS. GOLD: Not one of them?

MR. WOELL: No. Well, I'll go back to some things I tried. What I gleaned from the years of coming to Haystack and teaching, and teaching other workshops where people seemed to be so turned on to learning, realizing that maybe the reason people kind of like to learn in these situations is because there wasn't someone standing over them forcing them to do things and evaluating them for what they did. So going way back-and I had taught at Haystack by then several times. When I was setting up the program at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, it was a brand new facility. The person who had designed the metal studio wasn't a metalsmith, had no idea what should go in there, so there wasn't anything there. It was an empty room. And they had no budget for the program. So I was hired to teach in an empty room, and it was very frustrating.

Anyway, so I had this idea. This got me in trouble. If it's true that evaluating people negates their enthusiasm for working, which I had noticed in teaching, then why not not evaluate them? So in the first day of class with my students in metals, we had this little chat. And I said, "I'm thinking of this idea." I said, "You can do one of two things. We can do this just like you always do, run it with grades and da-da-da, and that's one way, and you're all familiar with this. The other way, I'll give you this other option. That right at this moment, we elect as a group-you all have to vote on this-that you all accept an A today, so we get that out of the way. Now, if you don't want to come back after this, you can have the A, I don't care. That's your choice. But here's what I'm going to do.

They put a blackboard up in the room and gave me some chalk. And I said, "I will put down on the blackboard what we're going to do the next class so you know what's coming, because I'm going to teach the class just as I would otherwise. I am going to take attendance, because if you know what's coming and you decide that you're not interested in it, which is okay with me, then I just want you not to ask me about it later, unless you were ill or have some good excuse. And that's an adult decision and that's fine. I'm not going to criticize you for it. We will have get-togethers and talk about the work so we can share what we've done, and that will all be announced. And I'll help you every class learn the things I'm going to teach you."

So they elected to get an A, and one person never showed up again and got an "A." Attendance was quite good the whole semester. But where it was the best, which really surprised me, was at the end of the semester, when none of them had to be there, because they had more pressing things. But what I had noticed is that they were so into doing what they were doing by then, they had to finish it. They were excited about it. I thought it was a smashing success.

Well, I didn't tell anybody about this; I just did it. And of course the grades went in, and here I have this class where everyone got an A. And it hit the books someplace because the dean called me into the office and said,

"How come everyone got an A in your class?" And I told him what had happened. And he says, "If you ever do that again, you're outta here." [Laughs.] So that was the end of that.

MS. GOLD: Did you teach again there?

MR. WOELL: He didn't fire me. He just said, you're never going to do this again at this school. But, I mean, I've always been a pretty lenient grader anyway, because I haven't felt grades were that important. But the thing that was most remarkable to me about that semester was the fact that people were working so hard and they did so well and attendance was so good the whole semester. And only one person really flunked, in my mind. They took the A and left and learned nothing, so they flunked themselves and that was their choice. So that's their deficit. And I worked as hard as I ever did. It wasn't that I was giving up and saying, "I'm not doing anything just because you gave me an empty classroom, gave me no tools." We worked it out and I was very inventive and the students were, too. So it was an incredibly good lesson to me about that issue.

MS. GOLD: So Haystack and the classes that you teach yourself, this is the only time you've ever felt in control and able to do what you really wanted to do. Even though you talk about New Paltz as being a very positive experience with the students, the way the program was set up is not.

MR. WOELL: It wasn't any more positive-because it needs to be essentially patterned after some kind of-you know, all universities have to pass certain kind of national scrutiny in terms of how they evaluate the product and da-da-da. And so there can't be very much fluctuation and difference.

Now, one thing to understand is that I went to Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI]. Cranbrook is much more like Haystack. There's no grades there. People don't always pass there, but there was never that feeling during the course of any time that I was there that what I was doing was being scrutinized as being bad or good. We just worked. And at the end of the two years that I was there, I had a show, and the faculty jointly go around and look at the shows. And I do know some people haven't succeeded there, but by and large I never felt any critical pressure to perform a certain way.

MS. GOLD: Do you think that was your most rewarding educational experience?

MR. WOELL: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: Yeah. Cranbrook.

MR. WOELL: Now you know, the reason for that is that-and I will say Cranbrook wasn't perfect, but the thing that was interesting to me about Cranbrook is that it was almost hands-off totally in terms of the teacher; he didn't even regularly give you any help, which was more a negative part of it. If you had a question to ask him about something, he said, "You'll figure it out." It was that kind of thing. That was the worst part of it.

On the other hand, the thing that was interesting about it is that it really made you responsible for yourself. If you needed to know something, you had to somehow figure it out. [Laughs.] Now, I think it was unfortunate, that teacher might have been a little different than others at Cranbrook, because each teacher can do anything they want, okay? And I did learn things from that person in different ways.

But I think the problem with education is that people-well, what I'm saying is, when you stop and think of where people are when they go to college, they're right out of high school, and most of them, not everybody, but a lot of them, they've never been away from home-I'm not saying everybody, but this is kind of a general thing-and what they come from is a situation in a home where the parents set the rules, and they have to, obviously. Now the university takes over the role of being a parent. It sets up all these guidelines and da-da-da. And the teacher now becomes the parent to the student to make sure they learn it. The university makes the teacher make the students, you know, because of their expectations. And I'm not saying all that is bad, but I do think there needs to be more students taking responsibility for themselves, because they've got to get out in the world sometime. So in my opinion, universities could do better.

And let me just say-and I'm talking about art now, because art is, in my opinion, a situation that's totally separate from, let's say, mathematics or something that's more didactic in its nature, because art is about the unknown. I don't know who you are as a creative person, and you don't either, really, but you're trying to figure it out. I don't even know who I am. But the exciting thing about it is that we're given permission to try to do it.

MS. GOLD: Yeah.

MR. WOELL: And so what's the harm in an art school if people fumble for three or four years doing nothing but-working, but not doing anything that we think is any good? Maybe what they're doing is a lot better than we think. The next generation may be honoring it, you know? You think about the work we now look at, in many cases, and [Paul] Revere is a century before, and nobody liked it at that time. But now we all think it's great. But

things that are going on right now, we're saying, "Why are they doing that?" But the next 100 years they're going to be looking at that different.

MS. GOLD: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. WOELL: And nobody is hurt, in the real sense. If you're training somebody to be a physician, a surgeon, obviously you don't want to have that kind of-[laughs]-you know, you don't want someone saying, "Oh, just cut him open and see if you find something."

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: And I think that's the great beauty of art. And figuring out a way of helping people get to that is more important than worrying about, maybe, what they do totally.

MS. GOLD: Can you tell the difference between artists who have been trained in universities and artists who have been trained on their own?

MR. WOELL: Can you tell a difference? Well, we know those who haven't, and those who haven't, it's like the Picassos and the van Goghs and people like that, you know. Some of them were successful and some of them weren't, financially. But I think today so many great artists have, because of the nature of this society, have come out of universities, that it would be hard for me to make an assessment of that. And I've never really particularly tried.

I think that artists have a fairly rugged spirit. I mean, I've got two M.F.A.s and somehow I've come out, I think, okay.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] You mean despite that.

MR. WOELL: Despite that. The neat thing about a university environment is that it's such an incredible resource of information. And not only that. The thing is that universities by and large-and I would say this is almost universal-bring all these interesting people in there, you know, whether they've been to college or not. I heard all the great jazz people and I heard Werner von Braun speak, and I heard Carl Sandburg speak. I mean, it was all free. People just kind of trotted through. And as I said, John Cage. Did John Cage get any real academic musical education? Very little. I think he worked with Schoenberg for a little while. So you have that kind of community thing happening, which is pretty unusual, pretty exciting. And you're sitting right in the middle of it and just coming. I saw original plays and all that kind of stuff.

So, as much as what happens in the classroom that's educating, all these other extracurricular things that are all there free, it's like being downtown in New York and being able to afford it.

MS. GOLD: Right. There's a big difference.

So in crafts, too, and in metalwork, you think there's a real importance in universities, university education?

MR. WOELL: Yeah. I think it's very valuable in that sense, partly because the thing is that a university by and large has a facility that's valuable.

MS. GOLD: Yeah.

MR. WOELL: People who are getting started out need to somehow know how to use the tools. Some people can, and I've seen that happen here with Ron Pearson. He's taken apprentices in who have had no experience, who have gone on and set up their own shops and things. But at any rate, a university has all this equipment sitting around and they can get to know how to use it. If they can afford it when they leave is another thing, but at least they understand what they need and they can focus on it.

The problem, though, to a certain degree is the fact that universities now, because of financial reasons, are starting to phase out some programs like metals because, you know, you have to have this incredible facility. And one teacher can only handle maybe 15 people at a time, whereas one teacher can lecture to 300 people, who may be even, like, up and coming lawyers who are going to make a lot of money who would donate back to the universities. And we send out all these pauper artists who, you know, they can scrape through, maybe-

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: -but they aren't going to give a university much in the long run. But initially I was very Republican. I grew up in a Republican family, very conservative and da-da-da. So the whole idea of the arts being financed or subsidized by the government seemed wrong, that we all ought to go out and do it ourselves. The first place where I saw a difference of where I would change my opinion and became more independent in my politics is in

Wisconsin.

My first teaching job was in a little boonie town [Shiocton, WI] of 687 people that had an art teacher. And the only reason they had that art teacher is that the tax base of that town was so low that they couldn't afford having athletics or music or art unless they got a state subsidy. And in fact the state had decided that those were important enough that if the school didn't have those three things-you could understand athletics, but they felt also music and art were important, and they wouldn't get any subsidy at all unless they hired and had an art and music program.

So that community would never have at least art and music if the state hadn't set that up, okay? And that meant I got a job. But not only that, I was able to ask for things with some authority from a principal who only had an interest in the art program because he knew he had to have it or he wouldn't get those tax dollars.

There is a very interesting line of where government somehow, if it's smart enough and understands the importance of these things, can have an incredible impact on educating small communities, programs like Deer Isle and things like that, who probably, you know-Deer Isle wouldn't have an art program if the state hadn't initially put some money into it, starting subsidizing it.

So that's one of the reasons I find it unfortunate that the NEA has been reduced like it is, because it sends a message of sorts to a lot of sources that would say, well, you know. Well.

MS. GOLD: Yeah.

When you talk about your influences, you've talked about musicians, you've talked about John Cage, jazz musicians, but not many artists. Do you recall when you first started to recognize that people were making art, going to museums; do you recall being inspired?

MR. WOELL: You mean artists that are kind of visual artists that have influenced me?

MS. GOLD: Yeah, or, I mean, if visual art isn't important, then music or writers or-

MR. WOELL: Well, it is. And the first one was the one that turned me off, Vincent Campanella, the one at Park College.

MS. GOLD: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. WOELL: But Vincent Campanella still, in my mind, was an incredibly strong influence on me. And then you know I worked with Frank Gallo for those years.

MS. GOLD: Right.

MR. WOELL: And Frank was a very strong influence. I mean, Frank's maybe just a year older than I. We were kind of peers in some ways. But Frank's whole idea and attitude toward the creative process just blew my mind, because I had to work in the same studio with him, helping him make his things.

But I think this whole thing about art being created in this kind of straight, delineated line, you start here and go right straight to the end-I mean, Frank was all over the place, including motorcycles dissembled in the middle of the studio when he had a show deadline, or building a boat by the-or whatever else, I'm not going to talk about. But here was a very successful artist. He was selling his work and had become quite a success, and so you get these images of people that are successful, and you have the wrong idea of who they are. I mean, he was successful, but how he got there was just as difficult as me struggling in my own.

MS. GOLD: When did you work with him?

MR. WOELL: I think that was March '65 to August '67. That was just before I went to Cranbrook.

MS. GOLD: And was that at a university, or you were working with him in the studio?

MR. WOELL: No, that was privately. I had quit teaching at Shiocton, that grade school job, and I was going to see how many years I could survive on my own.

MS. GOLD: Yeah.

MR. WOELL: And I had saved some money, and my car broke down and it used almost all my money to get it fixed, so I had come down to the University of Illinois, because I knew, having been there, some of the people there, but I also knew that at the end of the first semester, a lot of people leave. They either flunk out or decide they don't want it anymore. So there's always a lot of vacancies and I could get cheap housing.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: And I knew that I could get a job at a fraternity or a sorority for meals. So I had it all figured out. And Bob von Neumann, who was my first teacher, I knew, and he invited me to have a workbench in his classroom. I could be there and work at nights when class wasn't there, so I had a place to work. On top of that, he told me about Frank Gallo, who was a person who had been on the faculty, and that he, being very successful financially with his artwork, was hiring people to help him for shows, and he was having trouble getting dependable people.

And so, I mean, money has never been a big thing for me. It should be, but it hasn't. And I thought, well, I liked Frank's work, and I'd been collecting work of other artists, and he was having trouble finding people that could really make his things, and I figured I was pretty handy. So I called him up and I told him this idea. I told him who I was. He didn't know who that was. But anyway, I said, "I'll trade you so many hours for a piece of your work, and I'll show you what I can do." I brought some of my jewelry in. And he said, "Well, what piece of work do you want?" So I come up with a piece, and that was that piece right there.

MS. GOLD: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. WOELL: And he said, "Fine." So I worked 500 hours for that piece of work.

MS. GOLD: Five hundred hours!

MR. WOELL: For, I think, I don't know what the piece was valued at. I think it was about \$1,200 or something. I didn't get paid very much. But I had my meals and I had a place to stay, and I learned how to do epoxy resin stuff. I own two Frank Gallo pieces. That one, and there's another one at the top of the steps. The other one I made. He said, "You can make anything you want." So I made that one. I had an option to make another one, too, for myself which I should have done, but I didn't get around to it. But then after that, I started working for him. He was paying me then. And I worked for him for two years, and I had a shop.

MS. GOLD: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. WOELL: And that's how I got to Cranbrook, because he had been to Cranbrook and he told me about it. And so, I've had a really kind of interesting life that way, because Frank was a big influence, just his whole style of working and philosophy. A lot of it wasn't good. I could never be like Frank and the way he was, but a lot of it was very good in other ways.

Working with Ron Pearson during that short period I did was very good, because I learned a lot about the discipline of sitting there eight hours a day making jewelry in production, and how to set up a workshop. And a lot of that I never knew. My little workshop here is patterned a lot after Ron Pearson's. And I ended up designing things that Ron ended up using in his shop, too. So, you know, it went both ways.

[Begin Tape 3, Side A.]

MS. GOLD: This is Donna Gold interviewing Fred Woell in his living room/kitchen on Deer Isle. The date is June 11, 2001. We are on our second day of taping and on our third tape.

I'm asking more about the creative process this time, and I'd like to talk about how you begin to make art, and maybe you can talk a little bit about some of your early pieces and how you developed.

MR. WOELL: Well, early on I was, as everyone is, influenced by your teachers-that is, the schools that you go to-which have deadlines; they have processes of keeping a sketch book and da-da-da. And I did that through the early years after leaving college, trying to kind of use what I was told was appropriate.

Over the years, I began to realize I didn't do drawing much at all. I've learned how to draw two or three times, it seems, and then I'd drop it. I was more of a cartoonist, so quite often in my head I'd be trying to work out details of the piece, so I just would draw the detail, how the parts would connect, some kind of thing to give me a visual reference to it, like a shorthand, somebody writing for, let's say, a script.

MS. GOLD: Yeah.

MR. WOELL: And so that's become more the pattern. And other ways I've come up with just ideas. Many times there will just be a title; I don't know what the piece is going to be. And I think part of the reason I started doing that, because when I was doing cartooning, you know, the caption to the cartoon was the thing that was funny, I thought, and then I'd have to draw something appropriate to the funny caption.

MS. GOLD: So you would come up with the caption first and then draw?

MR. WOELL: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: This was in high school, as well as college?

MR. WOELL: No. Well, in high school I was one of the cartoonists for the school paper for, I guess, about a year and a half. When I went to college, I'd always done cartooning. Cartooning was a thing I found handy for posters and things that I did for different groups. But I liked the cartooning. Charles Schulz was, I think, interesting to me because of the way he depicted action, and his kind of humor of the, kind of, blank stare. And that reminded me a little bit of one of my favorite comedians as I was growing up, Jack Benny, who always had this deadpan, or Buster Keaton, those people. Some of the things they said were not always that funny, but the way they did it was funny.

And so that carried on into my more serious work, I would say. And as I was listening to the radio, there would be some topics, social, political thing, and I'd just somehow come up with a satirical kind of title for that idea. And I'd write them down and I'd stick them on my spindle in my studio, and maybe years later I would get to doing the-getting around to it, or maybe I never would. I can remember one time I had a whole list of interesting titles and I lost it. And I've always regretted that. I thought I had a bunch of good pieces in there someplace, but I lost that piece of paper.

Now as I said, originally I would try to draw the ideas down, sketching it out, maybe even rendering the thing, even drawing it to scale, early on when I was in college. And I found that preplanning began to create problems for me. I'd kind of run out of ideas because it was all on paper first before I made it dimensionally. I mean, if it was a three-dimensional thing like jewelry or sculpture, it didn't work too well for me.

MS. GOLD: You mean it wasn't that just you got disinterested, it was that the two-dimensional didn't translate into the three-dimensional?

MR. WOELL: What I found would happen was that when I'd start interpreting my drawings, even if they were decently rendered in a perspective manner, as it became something, it looked different. And when I ended up sticking too close to it, quite often I'd be dissatisfied. Plus I found myself sort of circling back on myself, kind of doing the same thing over and over again. I found if I didn't let things begin to happen as I made them, the drawings always seemed to make me do the same thing or something that was a variation on that same thing. And it got boring. And initially all those drawings were more geometric, abstract kinds of things. I couldn't seem to make things that were more organic.

MS. GOLD: And these were jewelry items, or sculpture?

MR. WOELL: Well, jewelry was what I started out doing. I don't think I ever did draw sculpture, because in grad school it was a requirement to keep a sketch book, and that's when I was majoring in jewelry. It seemed more convenient for jewelry. But when I worked in sculpture, first, like modeling the clay, the head up there, that was modeled in plastilene clay, and that was very immediate, very spontaneous.

I had an idea that I wanted to try, and it was a series of helmets. Another sculptor, Frank Gallo, who I mentioned, when I was working with him, he did a series of figurative things that had helmets on them, but they were all borrowed from another period of time, like the Spanish conquistadors with those kinds of helmets and other types of armor from way back. And I started thinking there are similar things in our contemporary society, like the helmets that motorcyclists wear, helmets that the military wear, et cetera. So I started doing a spin-off on that. But that was just the starting point. So I did a series of those. And I didn't draw them. Sometimes I had photos. I had a piece that was sort of a take-off on a scuba diver, you know, with that rubber cap.

And so the faces in the portraits sometimes came from just, bang, out of my head, or sometimes from photographs. And so there was an idea, a theme that I played with.

And in my jewelry, I happened to have the opportunity to see a collection of souvenir spoons, the old classics that commemorated cities, centennials, and all that kind of stuff, which were very popular toward the end of the 19th century and into the beginning of the 20th century. How I got into it is that my first wife's grandfather collected these and he had a whole set of them. And I said, boy, that's kind of interesting. Then I started trying to translate it into contemporary ideas. And I realized that you go to Dairy Queen and they had a spoon that had a cone on the end of it, or went into Colonel Sanders and he had his portrait on the end of the fork. I mean, everyone was doing it. It's not very popular anymore. And I found I could cast the plastic. So I would end up taking and modifying all those-or combining them together and cast them and make sort of what I considered this period's similar kind of spoons. And I did many, many of those.

MS. GOLD: Was the final object a spoon-

MR. WOELL: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: -or was it incorporated within something else?

MR. WOELL: Well, those were all cast in sterling, and there were a lot of them. [Laughs.] They were the same size as a normal spoon.

MS. GOLD: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. WOELL: And they were usable. I mean, I tried to make them functional. Some of them had propellers on them, because some of them were little airplanes and things of that nature.

MS. GOLD: What happened to them?

MR. WOELL: Actually, those have sold over the years and have gone all over the place. And I still make them periodically, but they're pretty hard to make. Not so much the spoon handles, but the spoon bowl is also cast from plastic spoons, and they're hard to finish if you mirror polish them, because casting things without any porosity sometimes is a problem. So I got tired of doing it. And they didn't sell for all that much. I mean, they did in one sense. It seemed to be a lot of money to buy a spoon for, you know, 150 bucks when you could go and get one-[laughs]-even an antique one for probably 20 bucks.

MS. GOLD: And a plastic one for-[laughs]-

MR. WOELL: Even less.

MS. GOLD: Free.

MR. WOELL: A whole box for a buck. And I can make a piece of jewelry faster than I can make a spoon that would bring more money. And so it had kind of a flaw [sic] in the ointment there. So the prices, I started edging them up, and the sales dropped, which was nice because I didn't want to make that many after a point. So that was a part of a whole thing that was fascinating to me.

In terms of how I work, the plastic toy parts, the way I went at it was to fuse them with heat. So what I would do is break the pieces that I wanted off whatever I was taking it from, and then I'd heat the two parts I wanted to stick together and I would just-sometimes they'd catch fire and I'd just-[blowing air through his lips]-you know, fuse them.

The thing I found interesting about that is that you had no idea what is going to happen, because sometimes they'd burn too fast or something and you'd lose the whole thing or you'd lose more than you wanted. And so I had to relax with a kind of, you know, serendipity element. And then that became part of the whole thing. I liked that.

Now, others have done that kind of thing, and what they'll do is cut the parts and glue them together so everything's real organized. But I got more and more-well, you could say sloppy, but also allowing chance to enter in.

MS. GOLD: So was this part of that development of --

MR. WOELL: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: -just letting things to chance?

MR. WOELL: Well, you have to understand that part of what triggered it was that after college and the M.F.A. program I went through, I had come into gridlock. I had kind of run out of ideas, really, because I had to preplan everything, and I was looking for ideas and trying to kind of bring it into something I felt comfortable about.

The other thing, too, when I was younger, I was much more trying to please, trying to figure out how to make a living out of this. So I would end up, through the influences of college and my teachers and what I saw out there and what was seeming to be the latest thing that people were interested in, I was trying to do my version of it, like everyone was.

And I didn't find I really liked jewelry that much in the sense of it being a decorative thing. I admire other people, like Ron Pearson, who have been able to do it-or did it-for over 30 years or more. And it fit him, but me doing that kind of stuff just-and I tried. And I really gave it a pretty good shot. I thought that on occasion I came close. But still, I wasn't a very good marketer, and I suppose those things that were more commercially oriented, if I had been a little better as a businessperson, maybe they would have succeeded.

On the other hand, the other part of me always tugged me away from that to do something goofy. I'm more of a goofy type of person. I'm always doing things that are sort of insulting the media, in that sense of jewelry is supposed to be something that sort of complements the wearer and sets them off, and I'm always making statements about the world as I see it, and usually people don't like to wear my statements. Some do, actually. I

haven't been a total failure at finding some people who find my work interesting. But on the other hand, using jewelry, and now sculpture, to do those things has probably been the best thing for me. It's what's got me here today talking to you, I think, and certainly is the thing that's gotten my work published and so forth.

And I think the thing that I found pretty shocking to me, on one occasion I was at a meeting of a bunch of us metals people, and a person who was a writer for *Metalsmith* magazine was doing her take on contemporary jewelry and, you know, the influences. I knew the person and she had slides of mine, but I never thought she'd include me in a program. And so now suddenly there's my work up there and she's making this comment about a pivotal point and da-da-da, and I was one of the people who she picked. I thought, well, that's interesting. I mean, that work that she was talking about at that point I had done probably 15 years ago, and at that time it had been published and was considered interesting, but I never thought of it as being of that much significance as she kind of postured it. And that was nice. I mean, in those 15 or 20 years, I hadn't sold much [laughs], which was always the thing. You know, you always want to somehow live from your work.

MS. GOLD: Did that get you more sales, the fact that you got noticed by *Metalsmith*?

MR. WOELL: Not really. I mean, I do think that what it has done is given me the opportunity to travel and the opportunity to do workshops and things. And I've liked that. It doesn't make a living for me, but it has allowed me to meet people. The whole process of being an artist in the long run is a cumulative thing. You hear those stories of people who are discovered, quote-unquote, and suddenly shoot into rocket fame. Well, that's probably true for the movies and things of that sort, but I'm not really sure that's so true of artists. It may be in some cases. But if you look at most artists, it took them a long time to hit that point where their work was really starting to sell. And they had to be persistent over a long period.

MS. GOLD: When you look at your work, when you look back, do you see pieces that were pivotal for you? And if so, could you describe them?

MR. WOELL: Well, probably the one that was most pivotal was a piece called *Come Alive, You're in the Pepsi Generation* [March 17- May 14, 1967]. That piece was in a show that I had, actually kind of a mini one-man show at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts.

MS. GOLD: In New York?

MR. WOELL: New York, yeah. And that piece was, as I understand-I didn't see this, but I heard it was on the cover of the *Jewelers Circular Keystone*, which is a trade magazine, which doesn't seem appropriate for their kind of thing. But also-and I didn't see this either, but my wife's mother watched the *Today* show and they were talking about unusual work in the city of New York, and they showed my work.

MS. GOLD: What did it look like?

MR. WOELL: I don't know. It was one of those pieces. The one I'm talking about was shown on TV. And I always have regretted I wasn't watching the *Today* show that day. It probably flashed on the screen for about a minute. I mean, the whole conversation.

And then as a result of that show, a year later there was an article on me and my work in *Craft Horizons* magazine [L. J. Loftis. "The Jewelry of J. Fred Woell" *Craft Horizons* March/April 1968]. And now that did make quite an impact, and from then on I was asked to-it seemed like there was a whole series of magazines or books written on jewelry; they wanted a sample of something I did.

And now over the years, photos of my work are in probably at least 30 publications of one sort or another, and a lot of show catalogues in prominent and important shows that I've had a chance to be invited to. So I really haven't had to enter my work in competitions, although I have on occasion. And certainly that piece was, I think, very pivotal, because everyone talks about it; everyone shows it when they talk about my work.

MS. GOLD: Can you describe it so that people reading this can "see" it?

MR. WOELL: And that was an interesting piece from two points of view. One is that it was-going back to that thing of planning everything out in advance, I had drawn that piece on a piece of paper, and then from the drawings on the paper, I transferred it directly onto metal and cut everything out to scale.

It looked like a half-circle with a rim on it, and right in the center of that was a picture of a woman who-the "Pepsi generation" thing, I don't know if you ever remember the commercials, "Come alive, you're in the Pepsi generation," and then there were ads for all these young people running on the beach and having a good time. And so this photo was not one of those people, but it was kindred to that concept.

And off of the bottom of that, there was Pepsi bottle caps that were dangling. And what I used as a segue

between that and the Pepsi bottle caps were bullet shells. And on the top of all this, the crown of that semicircle piece, there was a little star. And then the idea was that the pop-Pepsi-bottle caps, of course, had red, white, and blue and said "Pepsi-Cola," and that was going to be the color in the piece. Then the background for that woman's face was going to be oxidized copper, which oxidizes black, and it was a black-and-white photograph of this young woman's face, close up, about that much, around just the face itself, smiling with ecstasy.

MS. GOLD: When I think of that sign, I think of big white teeth.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. Her mouth is open. She's, like, joyous.

The thing that's interesting to me about that piece, and why it was so pivotal, was that when I started assembling it, I cut everything exactly, I started soldering the frame on it, and the thing started buckling and warping. And as I was trying to get the solder to flow and push the parts together, it flipped off the solder bench and hit the floor. I mean, it was one of those nights I shouldn't have been working on anything. I was too tired, I guess. And I'm not the world's greatest solderer anyway. But, well, it dented it. And, you know, the tension is building, and I decided to leave the dent in and push the thing together. At a certain frustrated point, I just said, well, I'll just let the thing be damaged and finish it. Then there was a little lens that went over the woman's face, and I actually intentionally broke the lens so it was fractured along with the dent. And then I ended up burning the Pepsi caps so they looked old.

MS. GOLD: By accident or on purpose?

MR. WOELL: No, I decided to do that. I was on a roll of totally screwing up.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: I mean, it was an idea I liked so much, and it was all going amok. Nothing was working. And I was just letting it go. The oxidation would not go flat black; it went dark on one side and too bubbly white and splotchy. And well, it was as close to the perfect disaster, it's like the perfect storm. And so what happened was I ended up deciding, since I couldn't get a perfect black background, I ended up painting it red, white, and blue. I had never painted a piece of metal before. And then to make it seem old, I ended up putting layers of [Japan gold size] varnish over it and lightly heating it to kind of char it. And, well, there were a lot of other things about the piece that were a disaster, but I finally just finished it and got it out of my system.

Well, everyone thought it was the greatest thing they ever saw, for some strange reason, with the dents and the burnt paint. And then when I had the show, that was the piece they put on the cover, and that's the piece that went into the *Today* show.

Well, I was working with Frank Gallo at that time that I made that piece, and Frank had been an influence on me anyway, because when I started working with Frank, the deal was that I wanted a piece of his work and I was going to trade him so many hours. And I showed him my work and he saw I could work with my hands, because everything was perfectly finished and so forth, so he agreed to the arrangement.

So the first project he gave me was an edition of a female nude that was sitting on a pedestal with her legs crossed. And Frank was a little bit sloppy. He was a good sculptor, and I still think he is, but in the interpolation from modeled clay to cast epoxy to the finishing, I really finished it up so there weren't any nicks and whatever, and I had these five gorgeous pieces completed. And she sat on the pedestal perfectly and all that, which he never did. And I showed them to him and he said, "Oh, my gracious, they're too clean."

MS. GOLD: Oh, dear.

MR. WOELL: So he took a torch to them and burned all the surfaces, which blistered and cracked the material, and then he told me to finish them off the best I could, but not overdo it. So the whole idea of burning things became a spin-off, and that's how I ended up using it in that piece.

This piece here is a piece I made of Frank's for myself, and you can see where the parts have been burned. And even we developed a method of cracking the piece and then gluing it back together so the crack showed, the creative-certain kinds of flavors to the piece that help describe the form. All those little things I did with Frank for-I guess I worked for him for two solid years-kind of began to creep into my work.

MS. GOLD: So this was in the mid-'60s that you were working with him?

MR. WOELL: This was the end of the '60s. Well, yeah, '66, actually I think '65 to '67. Then I went to Cranbrook.

MS. GOLD: And so as you were working with him, you gradually got to be less and less perfectionist in your own work?

MR. WOELL: Oh, I was dropping things on the floor intentionally by then.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: And Frank, I mean, he was a kind of funny character, because he would hit pieces with hammers to break them, and then trying to fix him, you never could fix them perfectly, so it looked pretty damaged. In fact, Frank collected antique guns, and he could not always buy the ammunition for the old guns. He'd had a-I don't know what caliber rifle that it was, apparently from the Civil War, and the best he could do was buy an ammunition that was sort of a couple calibers under what it should be to make the bullet, you know, go out of the barrel without just kind of flopping out. And he was trying this rifle out on a stump in the studio. And the studio wasn't that big. It was probably maybe a little bit bigger [than this room, the size of a two-car garage.]

[End Tape3, SideA.] [Begin Tape 3, Side B.]

MR. WOELL: And I was on the bench behind it with my back to him, working on a piece of his sculpture, finishing it, and he was shooting this rifle into a stump in the room, which didn't make much sense to me. But there'd be this shocking kind of explosion because the thing would --

MS. GOLD: Whoa.

MR. WOELL: -go off. So that it would be "kapoom," and at one point, after I don't know how many shots into the stump, and I was getting a little bit nervous, I heard this "Kapump," and he said, "Oh!" And the bullet had bounced off the stump and ricocheted back and hit him in the neck.

MS. GOLD: Oh, my God. [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: But the shells, you know, were not calibrated to the barrel, so they didn't come out with much force, and it just kind of lobbed back and hit him. I thought, "Give me a break, Frank. [Laughs.] This doesn't make any sense."

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: So anyway, he would shoot his work sometimes just to break it up to make it more interesting.

MS. GOLD: So at the time you did the *Pepsi Generation*, you were already doing the social commentary.

MR. WOELL: Oh, yeah.

MS. GOLD: The social commentary started, and then making it become more chancy was not necessarily part of the social commentary originally, but then it became-

MR. WOELL: Well, let me just back up slightly here, because the reason it all happened was the fact that I had gone to New York in 1965; I drove a show of Frank's, to New York in a rented station wagon. Part of the perk of working for him is that he allowed me to use the car for, I guess, a full week, and I went up into New England, which was the first time I'd done that. But I thought, well, while I'm in New York, I'll take some of my jewelry, which was the more conservative Scandinavian-type work, and see if I could find a gallery, because New York is Mecca for all of us.

And so I knew a couple people in New York. One I stayed with, who wasn't an artist, but the other one was a woman who I met at Madison who was a jeweler, and she pointed me to some places. And there weren't any galleries per se. There were individuals who had their own shops and were selling.

One of the things that I found out, however, from conversations is that the Scandinavian kind of slick metalwork was being marketed by a shop under the name of Georg Jensen, which was very successful, I guess. They made beautiful work and it was quite affordable. And all the people in New York who were Americans who were making metals couldn't compete, and so they, as I was told, they had switched to gold. And the work that I was doing was all in silver. And I was working at that time with some oxides on silver that were a part, you know, coloring it, that I found interesting. And I couldn't do that on gold.

You have to understand, after all those years in college and trying just to make it and still make things that I felt were my own, this was the final insult. I had come up with what I thought was a variation on the Scandinavian that had this color and da-da-da, and here now I had to change it to gold. And I had run into that problem before, thinking I almost had a good, marketable thing and then there was something wrong with it. Well, this really pissed me off, so I went home and I decided to make things that had no value, period; I'd make them out of junk.

And I had collected old bottle caps and things anyway, and my upbringing through my parents, they're very frugal people, and cheap, so I had that influence. And so that gave me permission just to start putting things

together. The irony of that is, that's what made me famous. That piece I just told you about using bottle caps. The piece that I did first when I came home was a piece just using staples in a board and some broken mirror and a postage stamp of George Washington torn, glued.

MS. GOLD: And this was a jewelry piece?

MR. WOELL: Yeah. It was a little pendant that was probably about three inches square.

MS. GOLD: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. WOELL: That's now in the Detroit Institute of Art. It's in their permanent collection. And they bought that several years ago for, I guess, around \$8,000, which, you know, it took about 30 years for that piece to sell, but that was a nice compliment.

MS. GOLD: Did they buy it from you or from a gallery?

MR. WOELL: Through the gallery. This is the gallery I'm going to have a show in this September.

So pieces like that have gone into collections now that have sold for quite a bit of money. But they're kind of pivotal pieces from that period. And I think people that are now collecting based on pieces that are significant have decided I'm significant enough to include them, and there now aren't any left. So what they'd have to buy is something that's more contemporary and didn't happen at that time.

MS. GOLD: So you went back and you made this piece that was reactionary.

MR. WOELL: Right.

MS. GOLD: Or a reaction.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. Exactly.

MS. GOLD: "Reactionary" isn't quite the word. And then you kept going making-what kind of --

MR. WOELL: Well, the thing about it was, you know, it's a strange thing that when you're trying to posture yourself in some creative way to please somebody else or a market, it's a forced thing. You can use all your creative juices as best you can, and you can somehow feel satisfied with the results and say, okay, I've done a good job designing it, it's inventive; but it also is trying to create something that will hit a market.

This had nothing to do with the market at all, and suddenly it was all me. The pieces had some of my cartooning captions to them. They were about my belief in preserving the environment. They had things to do with my Boy Scout days. They were venting my anger at, maybe, art and society. But they were fun. Now it was a lot more fun. And since I'd given up this other completely as hopeless, I was free now to have fun doing my work. And suddenly people started liking it. And the pieces were not cheap. I decided I was going to make them-well, at the time they were fairly inexpensive compared to what I've just stated to you about the piece that sold to the Detroit Institute, but, I mean, they weren't like 50 cents or 10 bucks; they were maybe a couple hundred dollars or something.

MS. GOLD: They were worth more than the sum of its parts.

MR. WOELL: Yeah, right. [Laughs.]

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] A bottle cap and a staple.

MR. WOELL: There was nothing of value in them. And when you're having fun at last, that's a motivator if anything is.

MS. GOLD: Yeah.

MR. WOELL: And especially when you realize that it really is what you are about. And I think when you grow up in a world where you're always trying to please, as I have been, because I was taught to do that, then you don't know who you are. You get to a point that who you are has disappeared and all you're trying to do is make somebody happy. I still have a problem with that to a certain extent, but at least in my art I broke through. And I knew that was me.

And I think it in many ways is the thing that's saved me emotionally, because I have never let go of that. Since I've been able to teach and do other things to keep alive financially, I've always allowed what I do creatively just to be as close to who I am as I can. And I always hope people will maybe like it and hope somebody might want

to buy it, and it's happened, but it doesn't happen annually.

MS. GOLD: Uh-huh.

MR. WOELL: So it's kind of a long pull. But now after almost 40 years of doing it, quite a bit of that stuff has been sold and has gone into museums and important collections.

So I guess it was the right move for me to make in the long run. You really have to be persistent and just stick to it and not try to figure it's going to happen if you do this formula of success for business. And I think in a sense, in the long run, if art all becomes an artificial thing in terms of what is popular, then I don't think historically it's going to have any real impact to the next generations.

And so I guess I have to look ahead. There's a Zen comment that I-I don't know what they call these things in their philosophy, but the comment was, "Go slow, reach fast." And the way I interpret that is that you just keep working at it, working at it, and then suddenly it happens. But it takes years, and you keep trying to keep consistent with what you believe, and then something happens and you get there.

MS. GOLD: But for you, you actually had early success with this unusual form of jewelry that you were making.

MR. WOELL: Well, I had success in terms of it being published.

MS. GOLD: Yeah, recognition-[off mike].

MR. WOELL: Recognition. Yeah. In that sense, that was a real plum, but I still couldn't sell any of it. I think in those early years I might have sold two or three pieces over a period of maybe-and traded some things with people that liked it that didn't, you know, have the money to buy it, for other things.

MS. GOLD: You have here in your questions for your students to ask at interviews, "How does an artist stay at work day after day?" Was it the fact that it was fun for you?

MR. WOELL: Initially, certainly it was the fun of doing it, but the other thing is that with therapy and other things, I learned art also is a healer, you know, emotionally. It esteems you. If you're really being yourself, it helps you stabilize. And that's what's been good for me because I've had my disappointments like anybody, but also I think it's in some ways-as I mentioned that story about my mom, to have no real support system, the art having been recognized as it was publicly and in publications and shows, and the fact that I felt I was allowing myself to be myself in the best sense, really helped me get through the hard stuff of living. And that's why I think art is so important if people can use it that way, you know. Even if they're not trained or feel they're an artist, I think that doing it is incredibly important, because what they've done is totally them, instead of something that's a collaboration or for somebody else who is influencing the final result.

MS. GOLD: Now, it's interesting to me that you were working with Frank Gallo and you were creating your own work and really developing-it seems at that early age you developed your own sense of your style, and then you went back to Cranbrook after that.

MR. WOELL: That was my second M.F.A., Cranbrook. I'd been at Wisconsin probably about 10 years earlier to get an M.F.A. And as I mentioned, I wanted to get an M.F.A. in sculpture there, and it didn't work. And I'd always had an interest in sculpture, and still do. And Frank had told me about Cranbrook and wrote me a letter of recommendation, and I got a scholarship to go, which allowed me to finally do what I wanted to do [seven] years earlier. I wasn't so much interested in the degree at that time, but he made it sound so special.

And you know, the thing about Cranbrook is that it's an incredibly beautiful place. The architecture, the landscape, the whole way the woods are planted with flowers and trails. They kind of try to blend the wildness with the element of man's hand in such a way that it's very poetic. And it's big. I mean, there's not just Cranbrook, the academy. There's a prep school, a grade school, a prep school for boys and girls that are in two different parts. There's sculpture all over the place. There's a man-made lake that looks very natural.

Well, I like being in places that are beautiful. I have a hard time with the city. And that's why I'm on Deer Isle, because it has that. I need that. I need that buffer against man's way of going at things in a city and kind of paving everything over and destroying a lot of the nature but also even some of the great things that have come to us, architecture and so forth. They'll put another building up, like a Dunkin' Donuts, and destroy a beautiful old handmade house. I find that insulting, and-[laughs]-very depressing.

So Cranbrook, he talked about that, and I said, I've got to go there. And it was a great time. It wasn't totally easy, but it was really important. So it wasn't for the degree. The way Cranbrook's set up is they give you the time to work just on your own work, period. There aren't any requirements of taking other courses and things and running to one class; the bells don't ring, that kind of thing, which is a lot like most grad programs in

universities, where you have to take seminars in art history and write papers and all that kind of stuff.

MS. GOLD: So having a scholarship there was essentially a two-year sabbatical for you.

MR. WOELL: Right.

MS. GOLD: Or a two-year residency. You could do your own work.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. Exactly. And it still is that way. It's probably the most unique program in the United States. And it taught me a lot about the whole learning process, too, because in some ways the hard part of it is for the first time I was in a, quote-unquote, institution of learning where there weren't any guidelines. Just you were supposed to work all day, and you could work all night, too, up to a certain point. I think they closed the place at around 12:00 and opened at 6:00 in the morning. But there wasn't any class, and you did that seven days a week, actually, but the requirement was that you should be in your workspace working Monday through Friday, anyway, from essentially 9:00 to 4:30. People worked beyond that but, I mean, it just was the way it was.

The problem with that is that a lot of people who had learned the other way, where somebody had come around, you know, and say "There's a crit at the end of the week and you have to have your work ready for it; midterms are going up and da-da-da." That didn't happen. And so you had to self-discipline yourself to be there, in a sense, and work, which wasn't hard for me, but I think some people had trouble with it. You had to come to terms with yourself. There was no one saying, "Well, the work you're doing right now is inappropriate, or maybe if you worked in another medium, or maybe the shape of this should be altered this way." There was no help that way. You just did it. If the instructor that oversaw the class came through, he would chat maybe about the weather. And you'd say, "Would you take a look at this?" And he'd say, "No, you just work it out," and walk away.

MS. GOLD: Was that frustrating to you?

MR. WOELL: That was at first because, you know, I couldn't get any help on anything.

MS. GOLD: And you were working on-what pieces emerged from those-

MR. WOELL: Well, that [cast iron] helmet [*Iron Helmet*] came out of that. There was some technical help on how to do the processes, so I learned that through that. And I already knew how to do the epoxy resin, and I did some pieces there. I was probably the only one doing it there at that time.

MS. GOLD: And that you learned with Frank Gallo, right?

MR. WOELL: Yeah. And I wasn't doing the found-object work at that time. That came much later. So the pieces, like that piece right there with the gold piece in it, that's a cast bronze piece, and I used my metalsmithing skills to raise that gold oval dish and then had it plated. But all the parts were cast and then assembled, so the thing, kind of, is clamped in there.

MS. GOLD: So you were doing found-object jewelry before you went into Cranbrook.

MR. WOELL: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: But you didn't carry that over into found-object sculpture until later.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. I had been working more out of that venue of Gallo, of the modeling clay initially. But I shouldn't say that, because there's a piece in the back deck here that was a part of that found-object idea. In fact, there are several that I don't have visible right now. But what I would do is take all these different things like egg cartons and buttons and badges, and I'd take a sand mold of them and then take them all out and then cast them.

MS. GOLD: Okay.

MR. WOELL: But it wasn't the objects themselves. They were represented through a cast.

MS. GOLD: I was going to ask you that. Okay. So you used the casting, then.

MR. WOELL: For example, that Madonna, Mother Mary face up there?

MS. GOLD: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. WOELL: That was from a thing my first wife had that was a little thing that said "Mother Mary, pray for us." She was Catholic and she had that, and I just took a mold of it and it went in there. That little tag there with the star in it, that was a token badge from parking or something I found. I put it in there, made the mold and took it

out, and then cast it. So that's the way it worked in those times.

On the back side of that is a toy sheriff's star with a buffalo. All those were assembled and then cast and then put back into this thing. So there was a lot of that going on.

MS. GOLD: So when did you start collecting things? You didn't do this as a boy.

MR. WOELL: Well, I didn't collect junk so much as a boy, but I was a collector in terms of cards and buttons and badges, and we used to trade. I don't know if that was an influence in my later life. I think the Boy Scout thing was the biggest influence because of my learning that a Scout should respect the environment and not trash it.

MS. GOLD: But when you were a Boy Scout and cleaning up, you would clean it up and put it in a bag and throw it away.

MR. WOELL: Yeah, in a proper place.

MS. GOLD: At some point, you took what you were cleaning up, essentially, and began to look at it as-

MR. WOELL: Interesting.

MS. GOLD: As interesting, and something more, something representative of-

MR. WOELL: Well, I've come to realize that the things we throw away tell stories about who we are. The things we use and buy and the junk. Some of them are the throwaway containers, but also there's things that go to the dump, you know, the personal stuff that we throw away. And I think I like the element of, number one, those things you kind of just find in certain places, and then they get put in a box someplace and you end up years later, maybe, when you're playing around with some ideas, you find it again and it fits into what other things happen.

In fact, one of the processes I have sometimes is kind of a game I play. Out of the junk pile of stuff I have, I'll take, like, six or seven things at random and say this will make the piece, somehow. I don't add anything else. I just use those, and I tear them apart and assemble them. So that's another way of motivating myself and getting ideas. And so that, in a sense, is a bit of that element of serendipity that you use to your advantage.

MS. GOLD: Are there times where you say, "I want to juxtapose the Madonna with a tag of some sort"? Are there times where you're more deliberate in choices?

MR. WOELL: Oh, yeah. Yeah, there are pieces that, like I said, I have a title for the thing in advance. And if it's on some kind of topic, I will end up finding something that I have in my trash that somehow speaks to that topic.

MS. GOLD: So you'll go looking around, rummaging.

MR. WOELL: Yeah, I rummage. I'm selective. And I'm even selective with what I take when I only limit myself, because what I do is I will cut pieces apart and throw parts of them away, so I don't use the whole thing. To me, that is an important ingredient anyway, just because if all you're going to do is assemble a bunch of things you've found and you don't alter them in any way, then you're just putting things on display you found. And I don't feel that's legitimate for me.

So a lot of the things get covered up or destroyed in part, because they have to somehow add up to a whole new thing. And in many cases, when I'm doing that, I'll actually destroy something I kind of like. I don't want to, but I let myself do it because I know the lesson of if I hold onto it too long, it's going to just screw everything else up that's going on.

And when I do the workshops on assemblage and found objects, I try to make that point right up front, that none of this stuff is really precious; you just brought that to your mind, that you found this rock, you were with your boyfriend, and it was a precious moment. That's the memory. If you can't let go of that rock in some way, by breaking it to make it the right shape or covering part of it up, then don't do that. Keep it as a memory of that, and don't incorporate it in this work, because now you will procrastinate too much in the process of trying to make it work and it won't be a unique piece.

So there's that interaction between yourself, the work, and something that's beyond anything you can control. I think that's part of the thing that is the-I'll use the word the "spiritual" aspect of creating, that connects you to something that you can't see, that connects you and gets you connected in ways to that abstract of what life's all about, you know. And that, to me, is a very healing thing emotionally, to be able to accept that and go with it and appreciate it and understand it; that life is not a straight line to anything, it's a lot of zig zags and back-and-forth, and it's never clear. It's just a thing you just keep at.

MS. GOLD: One of these questions here is, does religion or spirituality play a role in your art? And it really seems to me from your talking that the act of creation itself is a spiritual act of some sort.

[Begin Tape 4, Side A.]

MS. GOLD: This is tape four, Fred Woell, interviewed by Donna Gold in Deer Isle in your kitchen/living room-

MR. WOELL: Yes.

MS. GOLD: -on June 11, 2001. And I had just asked you about art as a spiritual act, and you were answering.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. I think that's one of the most significant things about art, is that as a religious experience, nothing for me is more connected to that idea of the spiritual than the creative process, or even art that you can appreciate and see that others have done. I've had some very spiritual moments in front of other art, as well as in cathedrals, made, you know, for the kind of thing. And I think the significant thing about it is that it allows you to receive that feeling, that emotional connection, without the rules of what bona fide or institutionalized religion does.

I feel religions, for me, are too controlling of people's individuality. And I don't say that there's not merit to a lot of what the best of what is in religion. Certainly the idea of not killing and things like that, I totally agree with. On the other hand, religion has a tendency to program people to do certain things to reach their promise of whatever that is that religion is to promise, which is being saved, whatever it is, you know, to go Heaven or to Hell, based on whichever direction you may take.

And I think that that's unfortunate, because I think the principles of a lot of what religion is founded on are good, but as soon as you put it into some kind of a bureaucracy, those who run it have to have rules to keep it going and then will make everybody comply, you know, like not to eat meat on Friday for the Catholics for years and things of that sort. And I think it's created in many cases more problems than it's worth.

MS. GOLD: Yeah.

MR. WOELL: So if you could skim off the good stuff and kind of get the other stuff out of your way, it could be pretty good.

Art, on the other hand, allows you to be who you are, which is important. And I don't mean that-I don't look at art by saying that as it allows you to go out and kill somebody or rob from people. Certainly that's not what I'm looking at. But there are a lot of things that are frowned upon, that are objectionable to people. Sometimes it is to me unfortunate. For example, that show in the Brooklyn Museum where the Madonna was black and they used dung and whatever. I don't know who that artist was. But the material that is used to create things, whatever how repulsive it might be, to me doesn't seem to be-I mean, you may not like it because it stinks, but the fact is the Africans have used dung to color things, they've used blood and other things to create magic and whatever, and we now like their work, you know.

MS. GOLD: Yeah.

MR. WOELL: And the other thing is there are certain things that may be objectionable in terms of what a person does with their work, like some of the objection to Maplethorpe's work. So subject matter sometimes can be objectionable, but I think it's a lot safer in that context than someone going out and enacting that on somebody, you know.

So what it's made of, whether the artist is just using an old rusty saw and painting a landscape on it for their art instead of using a canvas, or someone painting on black velvet, to me, it's not my taste, but I don't see why we have to get upset about it. If truly that person is doing something that pleases them, it probably is doing something to keep them sane and maybe being able to cope with their own demons or maybe even be a better person in other ways, you know?

So I think one of the important things that is missing with this society is the fact that we are unable to allow people to esteem themselves. We try to program everyone into what they should be as good citizens, and so we set up rules. And many of them are wise, but we don't give them anything to fulfill that other emptiness. So if they adopt a religion, they hope they can get it from that. But the fact is that what we have done is, to take care of people's deficits emotionally, we've patented all kinds of drugs to, you know, kind of take care of them, or people drink, or they end up taking the real hard-core drugs, smoke; there's all kinds of eating addictions, et cetera, that kind of take care of those deficits. But I think art can help people avoid some of those more unfortunate diseases, I would say they are, drugs, et cetera.

MS. GOLD: Yeah. It's been a long-term healing for you, has it not? It seems like through your art is how you

came to realize who you were, as opposed to the person your family thought you ought to be.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. Yeah, I think that's a good summation of it. I have a brother who has gotten very involved with religion and has become a lay minister of a church. He's now retired, but he did that for years. That's the way he got through it. And he's a very good man, brought up three good kids, and they have sort of adopted that religious path, all except one, who is still a good kid-or young man, I should say, now. But he is probably going to be a college professor, a teacher, and probably deal with it through his interest in teaching and so forth.

And, you know, this doesn't work for everybody, I'm sure. But I do feel that based on what I've seen and know is true, promoting the arts, as I think we ought to more so there's more opportunity for more people to have access to it and have it as part of their life, is a critical, critical thing; and in the long run we won't have to spend so much on prisons and law enforcement and so forth. That's my belief. It may not be true.

But I have known-as I mentioned that moment of Cage, having that-I've had that same kind of feeling at a movie where it was beautifully orchestrated, the theme; by the end of the thing I'm totally weeping, you know, or laughing out loud. Emotionally it is a cleanser, you know, that just kind of picks you right up. Or a symphony or a great jazz thing. Well, with kids, maybe a rock concert, I don't know.

But there's all kinds of evidences of that kind of thing being very good for a person, and that all has something to do with the arts, the creative process, as well as it makes a lot of money in some cases, so it's good for the economy. So that's always the bottom line of everything, it seems to me, and yet it doesn't seem like the government looks at it that way, in the way they posture their-

MS. GOLD: Not these days. Not these days, I guess.

I want to fill in some of the holes, I guess, in your biography.

MR. WOELL: Okay.

MS. GOLD: Were you married when you went to Cranbrook?

MR. WOELL: Yes.

MS. GOLD: So how did you meet your first wife?

MR. WOELL: Well, let's see, how was that? I started teaching in a grade school/high school in Wisconsin, and I ended up making enough money to be able to take what I thought a year off to do my own thing. I was somehow programmed right from the beginning to think that eventually I'd be able just to do my own thing and make a living of it, which never happened, but I always kept trying.

So after those two years, I quit teaching, and then I ended up at the University of Illinois and I met Kathleen there. She was a grad student in art education. And my old teacher that I had gotten my undergraduate degree in art education-one of the grad students who was teaching one of the classes had dropped out to get married and he needed someone to teach that class. And I was perfect to do it, and so I needed the money and I taught that class that semester, and Kathleen and I shared an office together. She was teaching another class like the one I was teaching. And that's how we got together.

And then I was also working with Frank Gallo at that time, which led me to go to Cranbrook. So Kathleen and I got married and spent our first two years of marriage at Cranbrook, and she taught in a high school. She had a degree in art education. So then after that, I went on to teach at Madison for a year and then at Whitewater and then came out here. And she and I built a house together here on Deer Isle and so forth.

We were married, I think, 21 or 22 years. It was a long time. And she's a very talented person in her own right, really a good person. There were a lot of things that worked in the marriage and things that didn't, and so finally, we ended it. It wasn't easy. But anyway. And then I was off on my own for probably about eight years before I met Pat and we got married.

And through all that time, I was either creating somewhere-[laughs]-in a process. I had a one-man show in New York at the Garth Clark gallery. I've forgotten what year that was. And most all that work was done in the winter months at Haystack after the school had closed. And I was working with the maintenance at Haystack that-no, I wasn't working there. I had been discontinued as a person, but I was allowed to stay on to finish closing up the place. And there was no heat in metals-

MS. GOLD: I was going to say!

MR. WOELL: -but I had all these heaters all around me to keep me warm, and I worked every night after work during the day. I did, I think, about 30 pieces of jewelry there, cast them, and I finished them and had the show,

which was a nice thing. There was an article on my work in the *American Craft* magazine as a result of that show. But Garth Clark didn't find jewelry that marketable as he found ceramics, and he ended up discontinuing his little jewelry gallery right after that year. He did it, I guess, only a year. But it was an interesting experience.

MS. GOLD: So most of your working life, you have not had extended periods of times in your studio.

MR. WOELL: No, it's sort of been fitting it in. The best time I've ever had as an extended period was a sabbatical I got from Boston University. I had been there seven years. I guess I'd been in there eight years at that point. And they gave me-I guess you're supposed to get one every seventh year or something. So I had almost eight months. I had started in December and went back the next September. And that's when I did more work during that time than I've probably ever done in my life. And that was great.

MS. GOLD: Were you working up in-you had a studio in your home?

MR. WOELL: Yeah. I was still married to Kathleen at that time, and I had a nice studio in our home.

MS. GOLD: There are a couple of questions that I don't think I'm going to be able to work in, so I'm just going to ask them. [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: Okay.

MS. GOLD: Do you see your work as American or part of an international tradition?

MR. WOELL: I feel my work is American. That was one of the questions that I read that I thought, well, how am I going to answer that?

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: I mean, I know other contemporary metalsmiths and jewelers from other countries through their work and admire some of what goes on in Europe. But I don't feel that they've been influential to me, if that's the question. In fact, I have a tendency to be rather insular in terms of looking at other people's work, since that early days in college when that was sort of-you know, you saw a lot of other people's work and had to study it and so forth.

And I have been influenced by other people's work in that, for example, the casting plastic toy parts; I first saw the work of Ed Higgins, and he was doing that. And somebody showed slides to me of his work, and I said, "Oh, that's interesting." And that kind of triggered my trying it with my class when I was teaching it, just to show them how it could be done. And then I started doing it myself, and have ever since, actually. I thought his work was quite interesting. And I don't know what ever happened to him. I never, you know, went after that to find out who he was beyond seeing those slides.

There was another person who-and this is kind of an interesting story in that I was included in a show, and I think it was 1965 at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts, called "The Art of Personal Adornment." And it must have been in '65, because that's when I went to New York with Frank's work. And I saw this show. You know, I was in it, which made it kind of fun for me to see it. But there was a person by the name of Karen [*sic*] Surendorf [Tamara Karla Surendorf]. Her work was in the show, and she was making things out of bottle caps and old parts and pieces of forks and beads and toy pistols and things. And I thought, boy, that's really neat. It was very crude. If she ever hears this, she won't like hearing me say that. But it was very inventive, I thought. And when I came home, I was sort of-you know, I had a lot of junk like that, so I think in many ways, seeing that kind of gave me a kind of an idea. You know how those things kind of-

MS. GOLD: Yes.

MR. WOELL: But the other thing, even before seeing her work, there was a show that I was included in in Minneapolis. And you'd have to look this up to get the true story on it, but I think Peter Voulkos, who is a famous potter, who is kind of a real outrageous rebel and very creative guy, and a jeweler whose name I can't ever remember [Christian Schmidt], pretty conservative work in sort of the Scandinavian approach to things, were the jurors for the show. And apparently they felt that-to get this accurate, you'd have to look in the books-but they felt that the show didn't really have anything particularly new and interesting in it, so Christian Schmidt, who was one of the jurors, made a piece to put in the show, snuck it in, made out of a steak bone, an old sheriff's badge, and whatever, and it was given a first prize.

MS. GOLD: Hmmm.

MR. WOELL: And I saw that in the catalogue when it was published. And you know, all those years I had seen the potters, like Voulkos, tearing pots apart and doing strange things with them that weren't purely functional, and I kept wondering why the metalsmiths weren't doing something that were a little more outrageous instead of this

pure simple Scandinavian stuff. And so all those things kind of popped together when I saw that, and then Surendorf's work was a few years later, I guess, and then the fact that I was rejected because I wasn't working in gold in New York. I thought, "Why not?" So all those things kind of dovetailed eventually together that finally gave me the courage just to go and do it, because I wasn't trying to please anyone anymore and it felt very comfortable because my own kind of background.

Years later I was able to contact, through-I've forgotten how I got her name and address, but I was doing a slide show that was sort of a survey of using different kinds of materials in making jewelry, and I wanted to have some pictures of Karen [*sic*] Surendorf's work because I thought it was interesting, some slides to show. And so I contacted her. And I don't know who she is even today, but I guess she was a-she was from California, and as far as I can gather, and I don't want to be quoted on this, she was probably a person that was something of a hippie living up in the hills and raising sheep, or I don't know the whole story.

So when I contacted her, I think I sent her some slides of my work to kind of give her an idea, and I told her I had seen her work and I appreciated it and so forth. She wasn't very-as far as I could tell, she wasn't actively making a lot of jewelry. She made those things and probably went to fairs, bead-type things and so forth. But anyway, she was very insulted by the fact that I was doing things with bottle caps and whatever.

MS. GOLD: Insulted that-

MR. WOELL: She felt that I was ripping her off, I think. So I got a fairly poor response from her, but later she did send me some slides, which weren't slides, actually, they were 2 ¼-inch-square transparency things, which I was able to cut out. I don't know who took the pictures. They weren't very good. I still have them and I used them. And I thanked her and never heard from her again. But I think she felt that she didn't get proper credit and I got the credit for doing it. As I said, I think she had kind of an incredible, wonderful, primitive, genuine beauty to what she did, and I don't think she had much training, really, as a jeweler. Not that that made me better, but I don't think it was her thing to pursue it the way I was pursuing it, you know. And I would love to know what's happened to her in terms of her life and so forth.

MS. GOLD: What was her name? Karla!

MR. WOELL: Surendorf. I do think I have a catalogue from that exhibition someplace, and we can get a better fix on her name.

MS. GOLD: Now, you tell a great story about renting an apartment that was filled with toys-[laughs]-as being one of the influences of your life, or one of the things that propelled you into using toys in your jewelry.

MR. WOELL: Oh, yeah.

MS. GOLD: Was that at this juncture in the --

MR. WOELL: No, this was later. Working with plastic toy parts came quite a few years later. I had been hired to teach that one year at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and we rented our apartment out in the country, actually. And the former tenants had young children that had all these-they left all their junk. And when I had seen Ed Higgins's work with the plastic toy parts, I was teaching casting, and I had all this junk at home, and I thought I'd just take it to school and show people how they could work with it. And so that's sort of how that started.

MS. GOLD: So something propelled you not to throw that stuff away but to keep it.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. Well, I'm kind of a keeper of junk anyway. But see, I think it's interesting how all those little things dovetail, circumstances dovetail. And the other thing that was interesting to me about it was the fact that the apartment we lived in, in a little, teeny town, it was kind of in the valley and the town kind of went up on little hills, but I could see up on a ridge a car dump. And the guy up there would burn the cars, and there would be all this smoke and pollution. You have to understand at that time was the first Earth Day. And I participated in it at the university there and was very much involved with the idea of recycling and things, because I'd always felt that way. And then I had all these plastic toy parts, and I thought they were kind of like these torn vehicles and whatever. So I made a whole series of small sculptures that were sort of about what we throw away.

And I liked-again, this was before I got my M.F.A. I could interpret sculpture in a jewelry scale and not have it wearable. Some of those pieces I still have; they're sticking around here. So it was seeing that smoke, I was making kind of a comment about what we're doing. In fact, I even went up to try to talk to the guy one day about burning his cars. He didn't much appreciate it. Well, there was a problem there. He was the only black person in the community, which made we feel pretty reticent about talking to him, because he probably thought I was just prejudiced.

MS. GOLD: Yeah.

[End Tape 4, Side A.] [Begin Tape 4, Side B.]

MS. GOLD: Did you think of yourself as a political artist early on?

MR. WOELL: Well, the term "pop artist," or "pop jewelry," was what was tagged on the first pieces that I did with the found objects.

MS. GOLD: Yeah.

MR. WOELL: Not as so much, you know, Andy Warhol and all that pop-you know, the tomato juice cans and things. I was using things that were cans and kind of pop. I never looked at it like that, but that was the tag that people put on it when they first wrote about it.

MS. GOLD: Did you connect yourself to Andy Warhol?

MR. WOELL: No. In fact, it's interesting. A man came from England. He's done a book on contemporary jewelry, and I was in a show in England that he curated. And he traveled around the United States and met different people he wanted to include in the show and interview them to write up this thing for this book he was doing. We sat out on the back deck and he asked me one question after another trying to get me to refer to Andy Warhol.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: And finally he just came out-because he had it all figured out exactly who I was before he arrived, and finally he point-blank asked me that question. And I said no, and he was very disappointed. [Laughs.]

MS. GOLD: It seems like pop art was using the-was unmodified, using commercial objects without modification, and you were really incorporating it into another object.

MR. WOELL: Yeah, I felt so anyway. And I didn't dislike Andy Warhol's work. It just didn't occur to me that that was an influence. As I said, I think that my own personal feeling about the way we were trashing the environment, and I was trying to save it, in my own way and talk about it in my own way, I don't think that was Andy Warhol's theme at all.

MS. GOLD: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. WOELL: There's a lot of things about him, in the way he conducted his life and promoted his work and so forth that I didn't even particularly admire, or couldn't even get close to in my own. So. And you have to understand, at that time I'm living in the Midwest. I'd been to New York more than once, but my feeling of being connected in any way with the New York scene or that way of going at things creatively wasn't where I was coming from and never have been, really. I mean, the idea of wanting a place to show my work and to sell, and the fact that New York supposedly was the place to do it, was always a dream, and I never felt bad, when I had an opportunity to show in New York, about it, but I can't connect to New York in hardly any other way.

MS. GOLD: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Do you have relationships with dealers that have continued over time?

MR. WOELL: Yes. Yes. Helen Drutt in Philadelphia. I've known Helen ever since she's-or before she started her gallery, and she's always been very interested in contemporary jewelry. And now it's not just American, but international. She's quite interested in European work and shows it. She is probably one of the pioneers in it, in my mind. And, you know, she's been very supportive in a lot of ways, but she has never-and most recently she's actually sold a few pieces. And she's bought things. She's bought a lot of the spoons. She likes the spoons. And since she can get it wholesale, it makes it easier for her.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: And I have a lot of respect for her. She's a difficult gallery to work with because she tries to do too much, so it's hard to communicate with her. But she's very sincere about what she's doing.

There haven't been that many other galleries that I've had a really elongated relationship with. Some of them have come and gone. Right now the Sybaris Gallery in Royal Oak, Michigan, which is not too far from Cranbrook, I've had a one-man show there some years ago, four years ago, and I'm having another one here in September. And I've shown with them off and on in group shows and things. And they seem to be a good gallery and try hard. But they mostly sell when I have a show. I hardly sell anything in between.

And there's a good craft gallery in Atlanta, Georgia, the Connell Gallery. They don't sell all that well for me, but I like the people there and what they're trying to do. There's another gallery in Cambridge, Massachusetts,

Mobilia, which is a very good little gallery in terms of-I don't know if they ever sell anything. They've sold one piece of mine in I don't know how many years, a decade. But the gallery is beautiful and they have some of the best people in the country. And they really try hard.

MS. GOLD: And they keep asking you back?

MR. WOELL: Well, they're always having these-I have never had a show there. I've been in group shows they've had there. I've tried to get them to give me a one-man show, but they haven't been interested. But they have a lot of my work down there in a drawer someplace.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: And I say that because on one occasion I dropped in. They're very nice people. Two sisters are running it. And they had seen a photo of a piece of mine that had just been published in *Metalsmith* magazine, and they brought that subject up when I was there. They said, "Oh, that's such a nice piece." They made some comment about the fact that they would like to see it, and I went to the drawer and opened the drawer, and I said, "That's it right there."

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] Were they embarrassed?

MR. WOELL: I don't know. [Laughs.] Anyway, so I don't have a very active gallery situation. Actually, the little gallery here in town in summer sells some things for me.

MS. GOLD: Which one is that?

MR. WOELL: The little Main Street gallery right on Main Street there. And they haven't-Jennifer Burton is a metalsmith herself. I've known her through many, many years, actually. Jennifer, when she was a student at Maine College of Art, came to interview me at New Paltz. She had a paper to do for her work. And she's never let me see the paper. [Laughs.]

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: But anyway, we've gotten to be friends since. She worked at Haystack for a while and then opened this gallery.

MS. GOLD: So the magazines, the publication of your work has had an impact.

MR. WOELL: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: That's been important.

MR. WOELL: I think so. I think one thing that I've always said to students, I've said, if you can, get into-if you're invited or whatever-into books being written on metalsmiths, like the ones I just showed you, because it's just sitting there on somebody's shelf for years and years. A catalogue gets thrown away quite often, but a book that's about how to do jewelry, people hold onto, or books on the history of jewelry or whatever are like a show that never ends. And as a result, I've been invited to do workshops places. I've met people who say they've followed my work for years, and I don't know where, but usually they say, "I've seen it in the book I bought." So.

MS. GOLD: What about magazines, like *Metalsmith* and-are there other jewelry magazines that are important for craft?

MR. WOELL: Well, there's a very good magazine called *Ornament* magazine. It's really gotten bigger and better over the years. I've had some work published in that. I don't subscribe to that. I do subscribe to *Metalsmith*. But I think *Ornament* is a good magazine. Of course, *American Craft* magazine is the kind of premier craft magazine. It originally was *Craft Horizons* for many years.

MS. GOLD: And you've been published in *American Craft*?

MR. WOELL: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: And did that have an impact on your development?

MR. WOELL: Well, the first article that probably did have an effect was in *Craft Horizons*, and that was right after I had that one-man show. That was a good thing for me. And I've been, you know, in shows, and there would be a picture of my work here and there over the years. *American Craft-Craft Horizons* became *American Craft*. And when I had the Garth Clark show, they did a nice article on me at that time. But periodically there are things where my work shows up.

I think the articles, like yours that you did for me in *Metalsmith*, are the ones that I feel have done the most --

MS. GOLD: Hmm.

MR. WOELL: -to kind of call attention to my work. And there have been now four of those kinds of things over the years that have happened that I think are kind of at different intervals of my life that kind of keeps, maybe, my name out there to a certain extent, because I do hear from galleries and things periodically when they're putting together a show, and they'll-I'm sure because they have seen me someplace-ask me to exhibit.

MS. GOLD: Has what has been written influenced you? And are there important writers that you look for or hope to be written about by?

MR. WOELL: Other than yourself?

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] Yes, right, other than me.

MR. WOELL: Well, I mean, when Helen Drutt did her survey of contemporary jewelry, she did a nice write-up on my work. But writers-to be quite honest with you, I'm not a great reader, so I don't keep up with writings on contemporary jewelry. I usually will skim through *Metalsmith* magazine when there's something that really catches my attention. Especially there's generally the editorials in there and little articles by different metalsmiths about the field at this time or some theme I like, and many times, like the article you did on me, others have done on other people I know or new people, I find helpful. I guess *Metalsmith* is the one that I follow the most closely. *Ornament* I see periodically. And *Craft Report* has now come out with-they used to have kind of a newspaper; now it's been condensed into a nice little magazine. And they did an article on me last summer and I got some interesting feedback from that for my book, actually, because I had announced that the book was coming out, and I have had a number of people order the book through that.

MS. GOLD: This book, the-

MR. WOELL: Yeah, the handbook [*Handouts from the 20th Century: A Collection of Teaching Aids created and/or gathered by J. Fred Woell during 20 Years of Teaching*].

MS. GOLD: Yeah, that's what I'm trying to say. So this is something that you have available; it's not just for your own students?

MR. WOELL: Well, initially all those handouts were things that I would prepare for a seminar and just hand them out. And after 20 years of teaching, I had boxes of them. And so I redid it all and I put it into this booklet, because I was getting ready to throw it all out and I thought, well, maybe some of this stuff-and there was a lot of work put into just creating it. I thought maybe I would put it in that form, and if people found it useful-and I've sold quite a few of them, actually. So I guess it has struck a chord. And it just came out last April-or last August. I only had 500 of them printed because that's all I could afford. I guess I've sold almost half of them now without really advertising it. So. And it could be now that it will be in the Haystack store, where a lot of people see it, there might be enough to finally pay for the cost of it.

MS. GOLD: Tell me, have you created now a studio that is your optimal space? It's large, right?

MR. WOELL: Well, interestingly enough, as I've gotten to this point in my life, I've tried to compact everything. Jewelry has allowed me make things pretty compact anyway, so all my jewelry's made in that little space out there. I have the garage, which is a studio for my sculpture, and half of it is put together and insulated so I can work out there in the winter with a little space heater, and the other half is where I can cut boards and do that kind of stuff. And I have no real plans of building a big studio. That, I think, will be enough. The barn we use both to store our boats in and a lot of junk that I collect.

And I may have mentioned, I want to build some bigger pieces around the property. And I have toyed with the idea of, once I get through with Haystack and I'm free of other things, I may want to try to do some commissions for Percentage for the Arts. There was one for the state capitol, for the new wing, that I had come up with this great idea. I don't have time to do it, but the idea is one I can incorporate for other things in the future. So these are things rolling around in my head that I want to try to do.

Also, I have another poem book. I'm not a poet, but there's something about writing in that way that allows me to talk about aspects of myself that I can't do in my creative work.

And I want to do-I do still photography and slide shows with kind of multimedia, and I've been trying to learn enough with the computer to be able to put them on tape and actually make videos. And this idea mostly got started by a fan of mine who loved my slide shows. He attended Haystack, and he said he wanted me to make a video just with music and my slides, like I usually do. And that got me started trying to do this, which has been a

big waste of money so far, because I spent thousands of dollars on equipment and it all seems to be obsolete now, because everything has moved on.

MS. GOLD: Oh.

MR. WOELL: And I don't know how to do it too well, but now I'm getting closer. And I don't know what I'll do with them, really. It's a little bit like everything that I do; I don't know what I'm going to do with it.

I always wanted to do a poem book, and I had the money. This was after my divorce. And so I did it. And I had all those cartoons in a box and I wanted to put them together, so I did it. And this is another one of those kind of things. Probably I wouldn't even know how to market it. So it would just be when I'm dead and they're throwing things out, they'll say, "Oh, he did this, too." Whssssh. [The sound of a book being tossed.] [They laugh.]

MS. GOLD: Have you had commissions? Do you have commissioned work?

MR. WOELL: Yeah. Yeah, I do wedding bands on occasion. I'm just finishing some for a couple people. I've done commissions for-well, actually, the Maine Art Education Association wanted me to do a pin that would be a thing that they would wear. I did that. And I did one for the Maine Craft Association one year. I did one for the SNAG, the kind of past-president badge. I've been doing that for them for about 15 years.

MS. GOLD: Have you had open-ended things, where you can make what you wanted?

MR. WOELL: Well, those were all kind of open-ended. They asked me to do a pin and I did it, and they liked it. They didn't tell me what to do, you know. I just did it. Commissions that are more specific, I don't think I've ever-well, I've only done one, really, like that, and that was from a patron of mine. And she is a great-one of the sweetest people on earth. Rose Mary Wadman had collected my work before anyone even knew who I was. And I was in a traveling show, and she bought the piece in the show. This was in the '60s, early '60s [1962, "Young Americans," Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York], I guess. And the show came to Washington, D.C., and she saw it and got my name and wrote me and asked if she could buy the piece, because they couldn't sell it out of the show, and I said, at the end if she still wanted it when the show ended, which was like two years coming, that she could have it to purchase.

And so she said, "Well, do you have any other work? Can you send me a catalogue?" You've got to understand that, I mean, I've never had a catalogue. I've never thought of it that much as a business in that way. But I sent her a bunch of slides, and she bought several pieces, and then she ended up buying that piece when it finally came back. And then she commissioned me to do a piece that I did.

And then her husband contacted me. I had never met either one of these people, but just through the mail, contacted me and said they were having their 25th wedding anniversary and wanted me to make a piece, because she liked and wore my work and so forth. So I did make a piece for that occasion. It took me more than a year past to finish it.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] Twenty-sixth anniversary.

MR. WOELL: And I finally did meet them, actually, and we became friends. And actually, Rose Mary-well, since the divorce, Rose Mary and Kathleen, my first wife, have gotten very close. I mean, not that Rose Mary dislikes me, but they've become very close friends, have stayed in touch. And I haven't been in touch with Rose Mary very much at this point. I guess she must be in her '80s now, so she's not collecting so much anymore.

MS. GOLD: Does it make a difference to be asked to do something? Was this piece for her, the first piece she asked you, on the 25th wedding anniversary-

MR. WOELL: That was very hard for me to do because of the way her husband phrased the letter, you know. It was difficult for me to somehow rise to the occasion. It was quite poetic, and obviously it was a good relationship, and he somehow wanted to have it come up to a good marriage. And I was having a hard time with that, and I played around with it in a variety of ways, you know. And so, yeah, that was a hard one to do.

MS. GOLD: Especially when your work's a little satirical.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. Well, you know the thing about-I mean, the one thing to understand about this is, as hard as it's been to be an artist and because of the lack of income from it all, it has been such a fulfilling, incredible experience. Just like Rose Mary, you know, she has been a gem. And she doesn't buy that much to support me, but it's just something that has become a friendship over almost 40 years.

But the thing I have to tell you, I had never met these people. And I had sent-she had bought pieces periodically. And one year, I think it was the end of the first year of working at Haystack, Kathleen called me and said, "There's somebody that's coming out to school that you know, that wants to see you." And I said, "Okay." So

they show up. And I didn't even know who they were, you know?

MS. GOLD: You had never met them.

MR. WOELL: I'd never met them. But here's the thing about it. After working on this commission for him for over a year-it might have been longer-I'd send him something and he'd say, "Well, I like it, but that's not quite it," and back and forth. He sent me a snapshot of he, his wife, and his two children. Now, he was a photographer. I ended up, through my good friend Eleanor Moty, who is a metalsmith that does photoetch plates-she made a photoetch plate of the Wadman family, and I put it into this piece that I made, which they loved. So the thing is, I had never met them, but I had had that photo.

So they show up in the kitchen-this is some 10 years later, you know, I guess, I've forgotten how much the time was-and they walk into the kitchen; they said hi and da-da-da like I should know who they were. I drew a total blank. And they were getting a great kick out of this, because it was all part of a little game with them, I guess. But anyway, they said, "Do you know who we are?" And I said, "No." [Laughs.]

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: And they only had one daughter with them at that time on this trip. But they got into the position of the photograph, and I knew instantly.

MS. GOLD: Oh, that's nice.

MR. WOELL: But, you know, those are such great moments, you know. After that, we got to be quite close friends.

MS. GOLD: Yes.

MR. WOELL: And we'd stay with them when we went to Washington, D.C., and so forth. And they got a big kick out of it. And they didn't collect much art. They just collected me and one other person. So it was kind of an honor.

MS. GOLD: So at this point do you have winters to work?

MR. WOELL: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: So this is a good-this has been for how long?

MR. WOELL: Well, ever since we moved here about nine years ago, I guess, I worked during the summer at Haystack, and in the winter I work in my studio. So winter for a lot of people, you know, they hate the winter, but I love the winter. It's quieter and it gives me a time to focus on my own work. After I'm through with Haystack this summer and have the summer and winter, it's going to be great.

MS. GOLD: Oh, this is it for Haystack?

MR. WOELL: Yeah. I'm retired.

MS. GOLD: Are you retiring?

MR. WOELL: I'm retiring. Well, I'm 67 now, so I should have quit a couple years ago. But I have stuck it out. Because I've enjoyed Haystack as a place and the kind of interesting people that come through. I like the way people learn, you know, and work, because it's a permissive atmosphere and people seem to get more out of it.

MS. GOLD: So will you be able to focus on your work day after day?

MR. WOELL: I hope so. I don't find I go at my work like somebody goes to an office, you know. I work very hard and very intensively when I get involved with something, and then I'll-

[Begin Tape 5, Side A.]

MS. GOLD: -interviewing Fred Woell, tape five, June 11, 2001, in his kitchen/living room in Deer Isle for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

And you were just talking about your working process and the tape ended.

MR. WOELL: Well, the thing about me is that I am little bit like General Motors; I'm very diversified. [Laughs.] There are times when I make jewelry, there's times when I make sculpture, there's times when I'm working with photography and that kind of thing, or I'll jump back and forth and do all of them. But I'm not just a sculptor. I

can't just do that alone, because I think there's something fascinating about the scale of jewelry and the techniques, et cetera, of how things go together that always have fascinated me. And I take a lot of that into sculpture, but I also like the way I can work in sculpture that's different from jewelry, because when you're making a piece of jewelry, even though people question the wearability of some of the things I make-or maybe not the wearability, but just the content and the nature of it-my jewelry is crafted in such a way that you can wear it and it doesn't tear your garments, that kind of thing.

Sculpture you can make rougher, you know. It can be kind of jagged-edged, because no one's going to rub up against it. And it can also-I don't mean to be sloppy, but it can use processes that are different than jewelry in terms of jewelry having to articulate to fit on the body and things like that, where sculpture, at least the ones I do, don't need to deal with that in that same way.

I can also put different kinds of patinas and things on sculpture. Even though I mentioned I have painted jewelry, I've only done it in rare occasions, where I can use other ways of coloring sculpture and that kind of thing. So that appeals to another side of me. And as I mentioned, poetry does something else for me. And the thing I've always wanted to be is perfect, of course, and never have achieved that, but there's something about cameras, in the engineering of cameras, in the way things fit together that, I mean, blow me away. And now they have computers in them so they can think for you to give you the proper exposure and auto-focus and all that kind of stuff.

So my interest in photography has really been started through-well, when I was a kid, I used to have a darkroom, and I wasn't very good at it, black-and-white photography, but then it grew into slides and slide shows. And my interest in, early on, being kind of a comic, stand-up performer, so I used slides for that. And then as an artist, you had to document your work and usually had to talk about it through slides. So that allowed me to create kind of multimedia presentations about my work, which then grew into multimedia presentations of images that I see that are connected with music and sound tracks and so forth, which, if I ever get it all together, will end up being on video.

The other thing about a project I want to do, whenever I do workshops, I usually have a slide show illustrating a lot of things that we're going to do in the class. And as with the handouts booklet, I want to put those on tape so they might be instructive, and maybe that would be something I could also get out there some way.

So those are things that are down the pike, as well as things I've been thinking about a lot of years that I feel are part of my creative process. And some of those things actually help make money because, for example, when I do workshops, that's quite often when I sell the book, because a lot of what is in the workshop is in the book. So it's a little bit of an income maker.

MS. GOLD: So when you start working in the morning, do you know which room you're going to go into?

MR. WOELL: Not always. Right now, this winter I knew I was going into the garage and make sculpture, which I did all winter. Now the gallery has called about two months ago and said, "Well, we don't know why we didn't think of you also, including your jewelry," which they did last time. So now I have to go in there and make jewelry for the show.

MS. GOLD: This is the show in September?

MR. WOELL: Yeah. Well, I have continued to make jewelry right along, but it hasn't been-I've been focusing more on sculpture, so I have not made as much jewelry as I need for the show.

MS. GOLD: So you're somewhat deadline-driven, then.

MR. WOELL: Oh, yeah, that's a good way of putting it, although that isn't totally true. The jewelry that I've finished and will go in the show that's new wasn't for anything but for me to make. I will get started on a series of things that are about something that fascinate me, so I'll make several pieces of jewelry around that kind of thing.

MS. GOLD: Has it changed over the years, your jewelry?

MR. WOELL: I would say no, not particularly.

MS. GOLD: So do you want to describe the series that you worked on this winter and that you currently are working on?

MR. WOELL: Well, I've continued to make a lot of jewelry using the cast toy parts. They're kind of playful things. But also I haven't done much-well, stone setting is something I always kind of hated doing. In recent years, in the last 10 years, I've done a lot more of that. But I don't set stones like other people set stones. Well, I say I

don't, but I'm sure others do it like I do. But I have no idea what the stones are. Sometimes I know, I can identify some stones, and that's different than-it seems most jewelers are able to tell me how-many-point diamond this is and all that, and I don't. I see something that looks like an interesting-shaped stone and I usually incorporate it some way. But I don't buy stones very often. I usually-I use beach pebbles and I cut my own beach pebbles in my lapidary thing. Some of them are cast in place instead of setting them, because I can do that. And I also use stones, not to show off the stone, but I use them as a kind of a found object integrated into the piece.

MS. GOLD: Do you ever use precious stones in that way?

MR. WOELL: Well, I guess some stones I have, like jade, some people might consider it precious. I like opals-or moonstone, I should say. Moonstones I like. But part of the stones I have have come, again, by serendipity. A friend of mine-of ours-well, mine, actually, Pat didn't know her-who I met at Haystack and who had a summer home here, she taught in New Bedford, she was dying of cancer at the time that I was also teaching in New Bedford; and I went over and saw her on occasion. After she died, she-well, she told me before she died she wanted her jewelry studio to be-all the stones and things given off to students. She didn't want to have a garage sale. And she gave me the responsibility of getting rid of all her tools to people I thought, students, et cetera, could use them.

MS. GOLD: What was her name?

MR. WOELL: Margo Neugbauer.

MS. GOLD: Margo Neugbauer?

MR. WOELL: Yeah. So anyway, I had this whole pile of stuff, and tools and torches and lots of stones. And I gave a lot of it away to students, but I also kept enough of them. And I made a series of things from those things sort of, I guess, in honor of Margo. And that kind of got me started doing it more than probably I'd ever done it before. I think I still have a few of those left, and I'm still kind of using the stones up that have come into my life one way or another.

And I have set some stones on one or two occasions for people who wanted something made and were willing to take the risk that I'd do it the way I was going to do it-

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: -not the way they might have wanted it done. So it has to be a special kind of person to want me to do a piece of jewelry for them. [Laughs.] That's for sure.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: It's a very risky situation.

MS. GOLD: You know, I remember when I looked at your photos a couple of years ago that they were much more traditional. They were images of nature, scenery, beauty. And it was interesting to me that that's reflected in the photographs but not in your jewelry or your sculpture.

MR. WOELL: Well, you haven't seen everything I've done. The things that I do with the slide shows are-because I can make images move-

MS. GOLD: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. WOELL: -I will use all kinds of fragments of things and kind of mix it up. In fact, I never thought of having my photos framed. And when Pat had the gallery, you know, she liked my slide shows and she said, "Why don't we have a show [photography] of your work?" And so I did. So that was the first time I'd ever tried that. And of course then I sorted out and tried to find things that I thought-[laughs]-going back to that idea of things that people might find interesting that were more, you know, viable. And it was great fun. I liked doing it, especially since I had never seen my work that way [35 mm photographs enlarged into 16-by-24 inch prints]. Of course, the gallery was in the front room, and as we were eating, I would look through and walk through and enjoy it. But I've never done it since. I'm still more into the slide show thing.

MS. GOLD: So you manipulate what you see-

MR. WOELL: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: And Pat was a dealer for you before?

MR. WOELL: Well, Pat had opened a gallery in New York City. I've forgotten what year. It was during the time I

was teaching at New Paltz in New York. A close friend of hers had been to Haystack, and I had met Audrey there. And Pat had known about my work because she worked with New York State Crafts Organization doing fund-raising. And she had approached me by mail, because I was living in New Paltz and was, so-called, a New York artist at that time, for a piece to be donated. So I had sent her a piece and we had correspondence. So I remembered her name, because after the piece sold-and this was probably the only reason I remembered her name-she wrote a thank you note, which quite often you never get after you donate things, and told me what it sold for and whatever, which hardly they ever do.

MS. GOLD: Oh, this was for auction.

MR. WOELL: To raise money for the craft organization.

MS. GOLD: And this, I should say, is Pat Wheeler, who is now your wife.

MR. WOELL: Correct. So anyway, Pat knew of my work through that, and also Audrey had seen my work in one of those slide shows they did at Haystack. And since they were close buddies, Pat was looking for people to show when she opened the gallery, and so I guess they talked about me and she was wondering if I'd show. And I guess Audrey was the one that approached me and said would I show there, and I said, "Why not?" I mean, actually it was interesting; in my mind I was thinking I'd like to have a show in New York again. It was another one of those moments of serendipity, and here this phone call comes just at the time when I was-well, within the time I had been thinking about it.

And so I had never met Pat until the show, when I brought the show down and set it up. And she did a nice job with the show. We actually had two openings, two nights in a row. One night was, sort of, people coming and seeing the work, and the second night was one in which I did a slide show. And I commuted back and forth. It was close. And then I didn't see her until the show came down, and then I packed everything up. She kept some things, and over the year I'd have some correspondence periodically from her about this or that had sold or the possibilities.

And then toward the end of that first year, she had mentioned in one of her-she had been to Haystack, I might add, before I met her, took a workshop here-and in our correspondence back and forth she sounded like a New Yorker. She said, "Maybe I'll buy a place in Maine"-because she liked Deer Isle. They have a summer place; there's a lot of New Yorkers that do that.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: And I said, "Well, I'm making a commute to Deer Isle every weekend until school's out in May, and if you want to go up there just to scout things out, while I'm working at Haystack you can use my car." And I was staying with another craft artist here, had plenty of space, who was willing to put Pat up. And so she thought that was a good idea. So that was really the first time I visited with her in any way and got to know her. And the rest is history, so to speak, as those things happen.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] Well, when I asked you about your relationships with dealers, we didn't get into that one.

MR. WOELL: [Laughs.] Yeah. That was the only relationship I've had with a dealer that got this permanent.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] Well, you know, I probably should get back to talking about how you work, because you say you spent most of your-can you describe it? Do you have a typical day of working?

MR. WOELL: Well, in the winter, when I have the whole day to myself, I like to get up early. There's something about the morning, the quiet of the morning and seeing a new day begin and the light and so forth. I like seeing both the sunrise and sunset. There's something magical about that. And I think in the morning, for me, I'm fresher in terms of being alert and able to focus on things. So I will usually have breakfast, a quick breakfast of something like oatmeal, I do some exercises, and then I'll start in the studio.

Usually I'll work, maybe not the whole morning, take a break someplace and maybe go get the mail, have some lunch, and then work in the afternoon, then take a break at some point. I like to take a walk, weather permitting. In the summer, as I don't do now, but I probably will start when it warms up a little more, I usually go over to the lily pond in the morning to swim.

MS. GOLD: Oh, nice.

MR. WOELL: And I know next year, when I don't have Haystack, we'll probably swim maybe in the morning and maybe in the afternoon, both, or one or the other, probably kayak, because Pat loves kayaking and I've gotten to enjoy being out in the water when we can, and try to walk at least three times a week or something like that around on the roads back off where there's quiet. I do that even in the winter. It's probably a little better in the

winter, because no one's in the summer cottages and there's not so much activity and not as many people out.

Then in the evening, I'm kind of a nut on films, so I like to watch movies if I can. If not, there is-it seems to me in the late afternoon I have a slump. Sometimes I'll get so tired, I'll just kind of flake out for about a half-hour or so and take a nap, a short nap to kind of get the energy back.

So in the evening, late evenings, if I'm not watching a movie, I'll quite often go back and work in the studio. It's quiet again. The phone isn't ringing, that kind of distraction. And sometimes I'll go very late, but I try not to do that just because it's harder to get up the next morning and get started. If I get too far out of sequence that way, it doesn't seem to work too well for me.

MS. GOLD: So you really stay focused and work for hours and hours at a time.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. Once I get going, it's fun, so it's absorbing. Also, I work at things in different ways. If I have to be, as I have been this summer-or this winter getting this show together, I felt I needed a certain number of pieces to get done. I wanted to get about-I guess I got 24 pieces done. So I would end up sometimes working, focusing very hard on one piece and just try to get it done in a week. It's important for me to do that, because if I don't, what I find happens is I'll get started on one thing and then do something else and not get back to it. And I have enough of that going on in my life anyway.

According to what Patricia's discovered, I have ADD [Attention Deficit Disorder], which is one of the frustrations that she has with me. So one of the things in reading about ADD, that you're not supposed to handle things more than once. So when you get started on something, you try to not put it down, to get it done. And interestingly enough, I had sort of created a pattern of doing that before I knew this was one of my afflictions.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: And the other thing I think about creating is that I find that everything is an accomplishment. And maybe I made that statement earlier. But I used to get frustrated when I didn't get something done within a time that I thought, like completing a piece. Now I look at it differently. Completing something on a piece that is important is getting the materials together or getting everything out and getting ready to go. Another thing might be just completing some fastener I need to create to make something else work. So I think of those now more as positive accomplishments than negative, as I used to think, well, unless I've finished the whole piece, I have not got anything done. And so that's made it easier for me to keep working, because at the end of the day, if I hadn't finished the piece, I'd get frustrated with myself, think I hadn't accomplished anything.

The other thing I have done traditionally, even before I knew about the ADD thing, is I'd make lists at the beginning of the day in the morning and write everything I felt I needed to get down, and then check off the things I'd try to do that day. And so if I could scratch something off, whether it was just making a fastener for the piece, or whatever, it made me feel like I was going somewhere and getting something done.

MS. GOLD: You seem such a focused person, it's hard for me to believe that you would have ADD.

MR. WOELL: Well, I probably have a lot of other things I don't know about, either. I don't know how serious a case I have of ADD. But I also have-I realize I have some dyslexia problems, which is typical of a lot of artists. I have a hard time reading. Interestingly enough, I've done all this writing in my life.

MS. GOLD: Yes.

MR. WOELL: But I think I'm driven by ideas, you know? I get a notion about something that I think is worth putting someplace, and I just do it. I don't know how to punctuate. I don't really know much about sentence structure. When I was in college, they held me back. I had to take what they called "dumbbell English" for a semester. And so the way I write probably doesn't make a whole lot of sense, and I have to rewrite things a lot. And Pat, fortunately, is a little better at that. She helps me restructure things. But even before I met her, I would go back and try to rewrite my things. And I've been told I should get a professional to help me with some of that stuff, and I probably should. But I do have one problem, and it's maybe not totally a problem, but I have a tendency of wanting to do everything myself.

MS. GOLD: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. WOELL: And so I make a lot of mistakes, where I could have called somebody else up and said, "How do you do this?" and they'd tell me and I would have it over with.

MS. GOLD: So you're never at loss for ideas. You never go into your studio and say, "Now what?"

MR. WOELL: Oh, no. I am constantly thinking of something else I want to try, and I never seem to be able to get them all done in the time I want to. And it's just like that cartoon book that took me 30 years to finish. It was

always there. I had it in my mind it would be exciting to see it done, and it was when it was done. And it's just like these videos I want to do. I even want to create music.

And I have a music program I can do if I ever learn how to use it. [Laughs.] Because it seem to me there's a lot of interesting sounds in the world, and I can see them with slides and video things. And I think that over the years, I've been doing this, with other people's music of course, which is illegal, actually. But I don't do it for money or whatever, so it's more like a home thing. But I've always wanted to see if I could do it myself, because I have seen it in movies and things, how music can somehow orchestrate a thing.

MS. GOLD: Have you thought about working with Pat, who's an installation artist?

MR. WOELL: Well, we are in a way, of course, working together a little bit on this project that she's doing, or have worked. Initially it didn't work out very well, but we seem to have gotten to a point where we can stand each other. And it's very exciting.

Actually, it's interesting to me, because she was relying on me to do the video stuff because I was supposed to be the one that knew, and I was pretty new to it myself. And that was the frustration for her, because she figured I could just get her ideas on it. Now she's done a video on me that she filmed and edited, which is very clever. And she finally edited all the stuff that we put together. So she has that talent. She's even done more than I have with it now. So maybe at some point we will collaborate that way, and I'll let her do that.

MS. GOLD: Your earlier works, a lot of your breakthrough work, was done out of anger or reaction. And I'm wondering if you have a need for that sort of reactive presence in your life.

MR. WOELL: Sure.

MS. GOLD: And do you have it?

MR. WOELL: Oh, yeah.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: [Laughs.] Constantly.

[Begin Tape 5, Side B.]

MR. WOELL: I lived through the Second World War and the Korea War, the Vietnam War. And the presence of war has never gone away. They're smaller, maybe, they're not real war-type things in the sense of what I was born into, but there's plenty of material that is there, and there's a lot for man to really accomplish to somehow get along with each other and make this world a better place. In fact, I just saw a movie, you probably have seen it, it's not a great one, but I enjoyed it and it was moving to me, was this movie called *Pay It Forward*, about the little kid that gets the idea you do three good deeds, with the idea that those three people you help do three more.

I think of teaching that way. When I do the workshops, I think I'm paying forward, because quite often over the years, I've had so many people come back to me and say how much they got out of the workshop I did 10 years ago, or they saw a slide show. And I think as an artist, to continue not only teaching but making your art, you're paying forward, because you don't know who it's going to touch, but it does. And it's happened enough time in my own life to know it's happening. So that's another thing that makes me realize how important the arts are. And it's certainly affected me with other people's work. Just the mention of what I said about John Cage. So it doesn't have to be visual arts, but there are so many things that touch you and nourish you in ways that are positive and helpful.

And I also know that one of the things I like about the workshop and connecting with people through the arts like Haystack is that those people are people that are somehow understanding or have some kind of connection to what I've just talked about. And they in their own way connect back to me and help me go on, in ways they don't even know. At times they'll just-you know, I have people who, we'll talk about something, maybe for an hour or maybe just a few moments, and in the mail will come a postcard with an address of a place that maybe I could use for a source of supply, or a book that I ought to have, or maybe they'll send me the book, or they'll send me some little thing they picked up on the beach they thought I could use, you know.

MS. GOLD: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. WOELL: And that's had an incredible impact on my own spirit, but also on my creative process. I mean, those little squares, those eight-inch squares, those got started initially with the idea of a collaboration with a woman that I met at a workshop in Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN]. She was doing these little weaving collaborated things and we talked about that idea. Of course, that never went

anywhere, but I did 31 of them.

MS. GOLD: Those are eight-inch, almost three-dimensional paintings, or two --

MR. WOELL: Yeah, they're little found-object things that hang on the wall. You saw some of them. They were up on the wall up there. Well, they got started with the idea of "back to square one." That was the name of a show I was going to do, which never happened. That was the theme piece. There's the one.

MS. GOLD: There's the one, yes.

MR. WOELL: But then the funny thing was-and I was showing these slides at a workshop of these pieces and my other work, and this was not at Haystack, but it was out in Colorado. And there was this woman who wasn't in my workshop but in another workshop in this kind of summer workshop series. I was at lunch, and she came up. She broke into line.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: She grabbed me. She says, "I couldn't sleep last night after seeing your slides!" [Laughs.] She went on and on. She was a character. She said, "You've got to get out of those squares," she says. "You gotta break loose."

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: And she convinced me I should, so I ended up, when I came home, I started making things that-well, those bigger pieces. And, you know, I don't know who she is or what ever happened, but it was a very intense conversation and very fun. And I thought, well, maybe I should try that. So it was sort of a pivotal moment in the lunch line. [Laughs.]

MS. GOLD: And you don't even know who she was.

MR. WOELL: I don't even remember her name. But she was a character, and fun, actually.

MS. GOLD: So when you think of community, as a metalsmith, as an artist, do you think of these quick communities from workshops? Do you think of Haystack? Do you think of Deer Isle? Or your teaching experiences?

MR. WOELL: I don't think of Deer Isle in the sense of the community here, of the people that live here, other than the people that I know that are, you know-well, some of them are artists that are friends that take my workshop here, or just friends. But there's something about the energy of a workshop, where people have come to do something, and the kind of feedback, you know, it's very intense for maybe two or three days or whatever. I mean, like in Florida, when I gave my slide talk, there were several people that-I didn't do it because I didn't have time to fit it in-that were almost demanding that I come to their studios, because they wanted to connect with me in some way, which was too bad, because I didn't have the time to do it.

But this has happened over and over again. There's kindred spirits out there that are, you know, in their own way going through processes. And when they see somebody else they connect to, just as I feel that way, there's magic that happens. And you may not even remember their name or see them again. But the thing that's [telephone ringing]-

So I think that is for me a very rewarding and special thing. For example, when I gave that commencement address, which is in there, I make a point of saying I think I've come to maybe meet one person who will then take something I say and be more inventive than the way I have presented it and really get it out there. I still feel that's true. When I talk to people about some of my harebrained ideas about how important art is, and if it can be postured in the right way, it can get further and be embraced by more people, who then can take it the next step, because I think that's a critical aspect of what needs to happen in our society to get it to be not so sick. And I think eventually we'll get the message.

I think it was James Madison, one of the early presidents, that said, first there's the revolution and then there's the intellectuals and then there's the arts. You know, there's a phase of how society evolves? We haven't hit the arts yet, really.

MS. GOLD: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. WOELL: I mean, we've had the revolution. You know, we've had the other aspects of what he suggests. I wish I could remember that quote, because I've heard it a couple different times from different people. In fact, Jerry Brown, the-

MS. GOLD: Yeah.

MR. WOELL: -he used that very same thing in one of his talks. And the interesting thing about him is he's had this other side of himself, you know, having studied Zen and other things that make him an interesting kind of politician. And I wish more politicians had a little more of a breadth of thinking the way he has.

MS. GOLD: Do you think about where American metalsmithing is on the international scale?

MR. WOELL: No.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] Do you travel outside the country much?

MR. WOELL: Not a whole lot. I went to England last summer to teach a workshop. I've been to England. That's the second time. I've been to Canada quite a bit. And that's about it. I guess for some reason I want to go to Australia and, you know, out that way. And I feel that I ought to go to Europe and see some of the art that I've studied about. And Pat and I have talked about going to Italy. But as of yet, I don't know, maybe because I'm not all that secure with even English, whether I'd be that secure with another language. Oh, yeah, we went down to Belize, which they speak English there. That was interesting. But I guess I'm not that much of a world traveler in that sense. I've been all over the United States, and I enjoy that.

MS. GOLD: Your work seems to me to be based very much in the Midwest, in a very American tradition.

MR. WOELL: Well, I certainly am a Midwesterner, even now. I think one of the things that's interesting to me in this second marriage is Pat is from New Jersey and New York; her whole way of looking at things and dealing with things is much different than mine. It's created some schisms. There is something about the space of the Midwest, the openness, that I find I can feel comfortable with here on Deer Isle because of the ocean. And I can feel comfortable with it in the far West, you know, out where there's mountains and desert, and even the West.

But I don't feel that comfortable-well, the trips I've made into New York City are fascinating. I find the city is fascinating. I don't think I could survive there. I mean, when Pat had her apartment in New York City and essentially I'd go in every weekend and stay there, I'd be getting up in the morning and want to take a walk, you know, and occasionally I would do it, but it seemed like there was something uncomfortable about, you know, the people sleeping in the streets and things like that. You'd kind of want to do something for them, but I didn't know how to deal with it emotionally.

MS. GOLD: But that's not gone into your work. The urban concerns really haven't.

MR. WOELL: No.

MS. GOLD: It's more the political-

MR. WOELL: Yeah.

MS. GOLD: -and environmental concerns.

MR. WOELL: On the other hand, of course, since I'm so interested in photography, I have dealt with New York City for 30 years. I have ordered out of New York ever since I bought my first camera, almost. I have certain places I've dealt with that-not that they know me by name, but I am in their computer, so they know I have dealt with them, so I have a good working relationship with those outfits.

MS. GOLD: Did you make a decision not to have children, or did you-

MR. WOELL: Well, that's a good point, isn't it. I think I did. Kathleen thinks I did. Kathleen wanted children. And I think when we first got married, we both were not in a place that we could afford it. And I didn't have work and she didn't have work, and we kind of put it aside. But we kept doing things, she and I both together, that didn't really put us in a position that gave us the kind of income, et cetera, to, you know, raise a family. Well, by the time-although Kathleen did get pregnant once and then lost that child. But it wasn't that far along, but.

Not so far after, probably we had been married about four or five years-who is it-Paul Ehrlich came out with a book called *The Population Bomb* that I read. Well, I saw him on Johnny Carson one evening and then I went out and read the book. And then I made it required reading for my design class that I was teaching and gave them a written test on it-

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: -which was totally inappropriate for a 2-D design class. But I got very involved with the whole idea of population expansion. Still am, actually. And I do feel that the next generation is really going to have a

problem. And I don't see any kind of real concern on the present government to take any action to try to encourage some responsibility in that regard worldwide. It's not just the United States, because-well, we know that issue. And it certainly is one that I address in different ways.

There was a piece I made called the *Late Great Disposable Society*. That was a kind of a paraphrase of Lyndon Johnson's the Great Society he talked about. I mean, at the present rate of us consuming and expanding, and the problem of where we're putting all this garbage, the messages are there for us to heed. And of course one of the things that I am very delighted with is the fact that Maine is recycling a lot more than some states, or a lot of states. And so that's another reason why I'm kind of happy about being here.

But the other thing that is interesting to me about the state of Maine is that, I mean, it's a big state and there is a lot of-there's fewer people here per square mile than others, but it's growing fast, too. And the whole, you know, prospect of how to somehow have jobs for people and also-because a lot of these plants are closing, et cetera. So what's going to happen? What are they going to do to try to somehow deal with that issue and the growth thing, you know.

MS. GOLD: Do you address that? Are you doing social commentary in your current work?

MR. WOELL: Well, I edge into it in a lot of different ways, but not, maybe, that blatantly.

MS. GOLD: Not as much as you did.

MR. WOELL: Well, this most recent show with all the found-object sculpture has a number of pieces that are into that kind of thing. I have a piece that has so much stuff in it you can't focus on anything. It's called-

MS. GOLD: It's the ADD piece? [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: Right. It's called *More is More*.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: And if that isn't a statement. Huh.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: There's hardly a square inch of anything that doesn't have something on it. Yeah. And the titles for a lot of these pieces are about issues like that. Some of them are kind of lifted from things I've read. I read Peck's book *The Road Less Traveled*. One of the pieces is called that. And then there's one dealing with Marilyn Monroe. I think I called that one *The Royal Flush*, something dealing with-what was it-I don't have the title in my mind, but it's sort of what Hollywood did to her, you know?

And a lot of it has to do with where we put our priorities in our society. I think all my work is somehow about that.

And sometimes the titles are kind of cutting, but other times they are kind of funny. I think I've said this before, that I try to make work that people can laugh at and take seriously, because I want them to somehow understand what we're talking about here. And I think that that's incredibly important. It's important to me, you know.

And I think I try in my own life to support the things that I think are doing something to resolve it, even though I'm not out there marching in the streets in every case-hardly ever-but I also try to talk about it and try to, in my work but also when I discuss things with people, to try to have a conversation about things and see what kind of ideas and so forth can maybe bring another slant to see something that's positive. It's like that *Hope* magazine that Jon Wilson has started. I take it around and try to get people to subscribe. I think it's incredibly important stuff to be thinking about.

MS. GOLD: If you were to create your own catalogue of your work, what would you have on the front cover?

MR. WOELL: Huh. That's an interesting thought. Probably I would have that piece I just mentioned, *The Late Great Disposable Society*. That was a hard piece. It took me months to make it because it was so complicated to put together. It's maybe not the best piece I've ever done, but it certainly is a piece that brought to my attention or brings out my strong feeling about our wastefulness.

MS. GOLD: How big is it?

MR. WOELL: It's just an eight-inch little panel.

MS. GOLD: Oh. So it's a panel piece.

MR. WOELL: Yeah. It's one of those I did some time ago.

MS. GOLD: And what's in it?

MR. WOELL: Well, it's a combination of almost every kind of thing we throw away, you know. Cigarette butts. Broken glass. A broken pushbutton ballpoint pen. A crushed pop can. The pop can lids. There's a couple bullet shells in it, an old rusty nail. The whole thing is just solid. The thing that's interesting to me about it is not just the theme. And I guess my feeling for why I felt it was so successful is that all that stuff sits there vertically and yet looks like it should just fall on the floor.

MS. GOLD: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. WOELL: And you can't see how it's put on there. It's kind of this fascinating puzzle. And also there's a piece of broken taillight, and I've got some little LEDs behind it that flash. So I got a little involved with the electronics, and it worked pretty well on that one.

But that is as blatant as-you know. And the title kind of says that if we don't get going here, we are not going to be the Great Society. So it was the Late Great, not, you know, the Great Society.

MS. GOLD: So what would you put on the back cover?

MR. WOELL: The back cover? A piece that I just finished that is going to be the title piece for my next show. And this is kind of a put-down of myself. *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. [They laugh.]

MS. GOLD: Do you want to describe that?

MR. WOELL: That's me talking too much and probably thinking I have the answer or think I know what the answers are or what is important, whereas-[laughs]-the rest of the world, in my opinion, seems to be somehow on another track. And maybe they're the ones that are right, and maybe I think I know too much-[laughs]-and don't. So that would kind of capsulize the show.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: [Laughs.] It would be a perfect ending.

MS. GOLD: All right. So what have I not asked you?

MR. WOELL: [Laughs.] Well, you've been great, I tell you. This has been great fun for me.

MS. GOLD: I think we've covered this. You-

MR. WOELL: Well, it's certainly a lot more than anyone will ever want to know about Fred Woell. [Laughs.]

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.] Well, maybe I'll ask, have you been involved with national craft organizations?

MR. WOELL: Not really. Well, I should say my involvement is being a member of SNAG. And I've attended some of their conferences and given a couple presentations, but I haven't been active in other ways.

MS. GOLD: But jewelry making is part of your entire output.

MR. WOELL: Oh, yes.

MS. GOLD: I think we need-I just want to make sure that I'm clear about this. But when you identify yourself, do you identify yourself as a metalsmith, as an artist, as a sculptor who works in various fields?

MR. WOELL: Well, the truth is I've always identified myself as a person that makes things. Certainly I'm better known as a metalsmith or jeweler or whatever, because that's what's mostly published and that's where I do most of the workshops, et cetera, so people identify me with that. And I have made more jewelry, certainly, than I've made sculpture or anything else, and I'm still interested in it. It's still fascinating. So certainly that would be a way of doing it.

But I think that the whole problem-and I'm not ashamed of calling myself an artist, but there is this thing about the word "art" that is so lofty and so unattainable, in one sense. And it's unfortunate that it's held like that, because it keeps a lot of people from getting involved, because they don't think they can be an artist. And yet a lot of the people that we now acknowledge as being great artists didn't think they were at the time they were doing it; they might have just been a painter or something else.

So it is an interesting situation in terms of the idea of what art is and what art isn't. So I think the most important thing is to make. I think Cage says that in one of his quotes, and it's in that book. That's the most important thing, is not to analyze but to make. And certainly Cage has certainly lived that kind of life. And whether everything he did was that great or not, what he did as a life was-

[End Tape 5, Side B.]

[Begin Tape 6, Side A.]

MS. GOLD: [In progress]-interviewing Fred Woell. It's our third visit. It's January 9, 2002. And we're going to just touch on a few items that we felt we had missed in the last two conversations.

So, when you look at your body of work, the work that you've done over the last-how many years would that have been?

MR. WOELL: It would be a good 38 years, I guess, starting in really, I think, grad school in 1960, early '60s, to where I would say I had decided to be an artist. Obviously, going to graduate school is a step, a major step to decide you want to be an artist. That would be over 40 years, I guess, now. It's kind of surprising how time flies.

But looking back over what I've accomplished, there is in my mind a positive feeling, unlike, maybe, what you might imagine looking at early work and feeling like it wasn't significant or good enough. I find continuously how surprised I am and pleased with what I did accomplish. There's been changes, obviously, in style. I think that in some ways I learned enough technically to do things with greater skill, and I can see philosophically the changes of how I look at things, from early work that was fairly abstract, simple, very basic geometric-type things, to things now that respond a lot to the environment and social-political issues.

But I get a sense in all the work that I've ever done there was a caring about what I was doing, whether anyone else can see that or feel it was significant in their eyes. Obviously, the work has not achieved any great financial rewards for me, and I have drawers of it and stuff sitting the attic, so there's going to be plenty to get rid of when I'm gone. But still, it's a statement about my life that I feel is at least a positive one.

I can see that the frustrations that I've worked out through my work, in terms of my feelings about a lot of things, had I not had the work, who knows where I might have taken those frustrations? And I think in some ways there's a significant thing about the whole creative process. And I'm not saying that I might go out and take violent action, but I do think that some people do. And yet when they're able to go and create something in a positive way, they can work through things that they might take actions that aren't so positive.

If you take the most recent thing that has consumed the world since September 11th, you can see things that have built up to those moments that continue to go on in the world. I'm wondering, had art been a more significant part of every culture, honoring the uniqueness of each person and allowing them to have an opportunity to somehow to express themselves, then I'm wondering if these things would be on our mind right now and people would be dying as a result of the terrorist act, as well as our reaction and trying to control terrorism in the world.

In my opinion, we haven't learned this lesson yet, and we deal only with things on the surface. We don't deal with things below the surface, what goes on emotionally in people's life. Certainly we need to give people the opportunity to have employment, but not just employment that gives them a job that's boring, gives them no opportunity to be able to be involved in some creative way or significant way. The idea of someone sitting at a machine, punching out things that go into Wal-Mart and have almost no intrinsic value in the long run other than taking care of just basic needs, is not a kind of job that does much for a person emotionally. It gives them a certain kind of security, maybe, but it does not take care of the things that are bothering us.

MS. GOLD: And do you think that if everybody had the ability to make art, everybody would be creating art?

MR. WOELL: Well, there's a couple things on this. I think that one is that if there was an acknowledgement that art was a way of people getting themselves balanced emotionally-and it doesn't need to be based on the idea that everyone has to go out and make something or write a poem or a novel or whatever-but that we acknowledge the importance of it in our life, so that they might go to a reading of a poem and find satisfaction and, in a sense, a way of them resolving some of the things, the feelings, or going to a symphony and having it in some way fill them up.

There's a great void in our life, I think, in that sense. And the way we've tried to give solace to those moments of emptiness in our life is we go into therapy, we take drugs, we have all kinds of addictions that we use to somehow get us through these moments, and some of those things aren't very good for us in terms of our personal health. But I think that emotionally we have to be pretty well balanced and be able to handle the hard things that we're all going to face and know how to do it, and not think that just taking a pill is going to be a way

of taking care of it. I'm generalizing in rather a sweeping way, but I don't even see us trying to make that a part of it.

And I think that the thing that is significant in our culture right now is the fact that there's billions of dollars being spent on putting up new museums across the world that are state-of-the-art facilities, and there's a lot of people going to exhibitions and shows. So something is happening there. But I'm wondering if the way we're posturing the importance of art is right. I think there is an opportunity here to link these two ideas together that art is good for you. And I'm not just talking to us who are artists, but making that a part of the palate and diet of people generally.

As I mentioned earlier, the fact that Wisconsin had an art teacher and a music teacher in that little community was because the state of Wisconsin decided that low-income communities, in terms of their tax base, that would not otherwise have an art program would be getting special money for their school if they had those people. So that was an acknowledgement that was quite significant. That community would not have had me as an art teacher and had the opportunity to have young people be exposed to that.

And the thing that's interesting to me about the arts maybe coming into a new age on the island of Deer Isle, where I live, is that they've just put up this wonderful little auditorium in the grade school, and I witnessed, on one occasion when I was over there setting up for Patricia's program, a brass band, five-piece brass band playing to the kids, these grade-school kids. And there was a moment there these five people would stop and ask the kids if they had any questions, and they were full of questions. They were so excited.

And I saw in that moment something that probably would never have been an opportunity for the children of Deer Isle in the future. I could see those kids getting excited about these performers and maybe taking up music as a thing that might be part of their future, instead of just fishing or some other thing. Not that those things are bad; it's just that there's something happening there that's really incredible. And I think that all schools should have this as a major part of their curriculum.

MS. GOLD: So even though your work is more political than personal, at least from the outside, you feel that it has had a personal impact, an impact on you emotionally and personally.

MR. WOELL: Sure. I believe it's got me, as I said, through a lot of things personally, but it's also a way for me to make statements about things. And the work goes out and I don't know who sees it, but I do know that, as I've mentioned before, people have come up to me years after seeing things of mine that have been published, et cetera, and saying that they've been impressed with the work, moved, or liked it, however they want to posture those thoughts. And they didn't need to come up and say anything to me, and yet they have, more than once.

And I don't know if I mentioned this, and I don't remember reading this in our interview yet, but I'll never forget the time that I had done a slide show in which I used music and two projectors and a dissolve, so it was sort of a visual poem. I didn't do any talking. And a woman came up. After the show and program was over, everyone else had kind of left, and I was packing up my projectors and so forth. And she stood there for a while. I could tell that there was something that she wanted to say to me, and also she was having trouble moving it into words.

And she finally came around the table that was between us, where I had the projectors, and she gave me a hug and she started crying. And she said that she had lost her mother about a year before that, and the thing that struck her about this is how it moved her and how good it was for her to be able to kind of let go a little more and process. I didn't know this woman, and the show wasn't about anything about death or anything, but it was about nature. And there was something about it that was very personal, because it was something that was personal to me.

And I've shown that particular slide show many times and have had responses that were similar. I mean, people didn't come up to me, but I've seen people walk-even men-walk out of the auditorium crying. And it was a hard time in my own life. It was the time I was in the midst of-I hadn't gotten divorced at that point, but Kathleen and I had had a separation and it was hard for both of us. But anyway, there was something I got into that that was about all that, that has touched others as well as it helped me get through the hard aspects of that.

And so my work isn't just purely a political statement about environmental issues and population and so forth. Those are certainly strong issues that I feel we're going to have to address, but what I've just mentioned about those inner emotions that have to be dealt with, if we aren't able to do it in a positive way, they will certainly come out in other ways, such as illness and so forth, or maybe us reacting violently against others or becoming a part of some radical group that's going to get even. Because based on what I've been reading about the people who have been involved with those terrorist attacks, they weren't all poor people. They came from fairly well-to-do families. So what's the message there, you know? This isn't all about poverty, but it's about people that have emotionally some real deficits.

MS. GOLD: It's also interesting that the Taliban are the people that destroyed the artwork of the Buddhists.

MR. WOELL: It's amazing. It's just totally amazing. On the other hand, it's interesting, I heard on the radio a gentleman who's mustering finances to restore that whole thing back to its original. So that's a hopeful thing.

MS. GOLD: I guess you can't possibly say that people who create art are not warlike, though. Even if you consider in this case people who are against art are, the converse isn't absolutely true.

MR. WOELL: Well, I think any extremist group obviously have in their mind that if things can be controlled-I mean, the thing about art, in my mind, anyway, is that it doesn't have any real rigid rules. I mean, it opens you to the possibilities of trying a lot of things. Not all of them are, maybe, positive. On the other hand, it seems that creating things in the best sense of the word, even if it's creating something that self-destructs, like some of [Jean] Tinguely's sculpture, and just destroys itself and it's documented, is interesting. It's like going to the fireworks.

And there's other examples that are more extreme, maybe even more violent than that, but some of which I wouldn't even approve of, maybe, in the sense of what we're talking about. But is that not better than ramming an airplane into a building? And think of all the people that affects. I'm not really sure that that kind of statement is creating any positive repercussions, because look at what's now happened.

I mean, there was on the radio last night about an Afghan woman who went back to Afghanistan. She was brought up in this country since she was five, so she's really an American, but she has an extended family in Kabul, actually. And her family, knowing about the bombing and all that was coming, decided to go to their country home some two hours away from the city, to be away from it, because their home in the city was close to the Taliban headquarters. And as it turns out, an American helicopter apparently designated their summer retreat as a Taliban headquarters and bombed and killed women and children. Fifty-five of the relatives that were out there, 19 of them were killed running away, and they were being strafed. So I mean, when you stop and think about the fact that solving things by war is just meaning that that family is going to have bitterness for generations. Against who? Probably the United States, you know. It's hard to erase that kind of thing.

MS. GOLD: I had one other question I was going to ask you, and that was, you say you have lists of titles for your work, and I was wondering if you could or felt like giving us your current list, what's on the list now.

MR. WOELL: Well, based on my projects, because I'm interested in photography and have thousands of images, I've wanted to combine images with the poetry that I've written. And I may not be able to afford to do that. It's cheaper just to publish a book of words and combine it with color photos, but somewhere down the line I want to try something like that. And I've been reading about ways of doing it through the computer and so forth, and scanning and so forth.

Whether I will ever do the museum project or not, I have it in my mind. I can see it so clearly walking into that barn and seeing all that work. One of the things that was so wonderful about the gallery when Pat had it in our house was the fact that I could look into the gallery and see the works that were on display. That was moving for me emotionally. So I have that kind of in my mind. As I say, I may not do that.

Also I have this idea of starting to build bigger pieces on our premise here, and that's exciting to me. I'm very fortunate, Pat and I are, to have about 10 acres of land here which is kind of interesting topographically. And so there's places I can put them back up in the woods and so forth, for me to go to and enjoy, maybe others who want to see those things. So that's another kind of project.

And then there's a project that I have in the works with a musician who has been interested in creating the music for a video from my slides. I've done slide shows for 25 or more years when I go to places and talk about my work, in which I use two projectors and a dissolve, and sync it to sound. And those have always been positively received. And it has come to me as a thought to be able to make something like that. I've always liked movies, so this is sort of my own kind of project in that way.

And another thought that's been on my mind is, I did this book, *Handouts from the 20th Century*, which has been a fairly successful seller. When I do these workshops, I do slide shows illustrating process, and it has been on my mind to put some of those on videotape, so they could be sold or used by others that teach. I still feel that teaching is one of the more exciting aspects of this.

And part of my teaching has always been that I have vented my feelings about the importance of art, as I have here, and I always feel that maybe somebody else-and I posture it this way-I lay it out in terms of why I think art is important, and I say somebody that I meet and talk to about this idea is going to be able to put it in a way that many more people will understand it better than I'm telling you and will really get it going. If we can sell Pepsi-Cola and Coke to millions of people with those commercials, there must be a way of posturing art to make it seem so tantalizing that nobody will not want it.

MS. GOLD: [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: But I don't have those skills, but somebody does.

MS. GOLD: Well, that would be a good place to stop today. [Laughs.]

MR. WOELL: Great. [Laughs.]

MS. GOLD: Anything more?

MR. WOELL: No, that's good.

MS. GOLD: Okay.

MR. WOELL: That's great.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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