Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Paul Soldner, 2003 April 27-28

Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America. Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Paul Soldner on April 27 and 28, 2003. The interview took place in Claremont, California, and was conducted by Margaret Carney 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.

Paul Soldner and Mija Riedel 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

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Paul Soldner in the artist's home in Claremont, California, on April 27, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Thanks very much for agreeing to do this, especially after just coming off of six weeks of intense interviews.

PAUL SOLDNER: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, well, I guess perhaps we'll just start at the beginning with where and when were you born?

MR. SOLDNER: Oh, I was born April 24, 1921, in a little town called Summerfield, I believe-Summerfield or Summerville. I believe Summerfield, Illinois, 1921.

MS. RIEDEL: And-

MR. SOLDNER: That makes me 82.

MS. RIEDEL: Just a couple days ago, actually.

MR. SOLDNER: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you describe your parents, their names, and siblings?

MR. SOLDNER: Well, my father was Grover Thomas Soldner. His first profession was minister, and then later he worked for a college as a fund-raiser, and then that led into selling mutual funds. So he became a salesman towards the end. Of course, there's not much difference between a salesman and a preacher or a teacher; they're all about the same.

My mother-and he was born, I believe, in Indiana-Bern, Indiana-and my mother was born in Ohio-Bluffton, Ohio. I don't know the years that they were born. Mother went to college at Bluffton College and met my father at the time, and I think they were married very soon after college.

They had three children. I'm the oldest. And then I had a sister Helen, who was three years younger, and a sister Louise, who is about seven years younger. Helen died about two years ago. Louise is still living. Louise was a schoolteacher. Helen was a nurse. She lived most of her life in Newton, Kansas. That's in the Midwest also.

How much more? About their marriage and things like that?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think we could move on to describing your childhood and how that relates to your own experiences.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, well I guess everybody has a different childhood. Mine was very, I would say, wonderful. There was discipline, but it was only when I acted up. It wasn't restrictive. In some ways my parents were very permissive, in the best sense, and always encouraging me to do pretty much what I was interested in, not so much what I wanted to do but what I was interested in.

I did the usual things: joined the Boy Scouts. We moved a lot, since my dad had been a minister. I was born in Illinois and I think within two years we moved to Souderton, Pennsylvania, where he was also a minister. Then we moved from there to Goshen, Indiana, for about seven or eight years.

I guess when I was a junior in high school, we moved to Bluffton, where my mother had grown up, and it's also the-I attended the same college, called Bluffton College, which was very small. I don't think we had more than 200 students at the time, two of whom have become quite famous. One was Hugh Downs and the other was

Phyllis Diller, classmates.

MS. RIEDEL: Amazing.

MR. SOLDNER: Amazing, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. I know you mentioned that early on in elementary school that you had really been interested in art and then -

MR. SOLDNER: No, I wasn't.

MS. RIEDEL: Not at all?

MR. SOLDNER: I wasn't interested at all. I had a bad experience with art when I was about, oh, whatever you are when you're an eighth grader.

MS. RIEDEL: Twelve probably.

MR. SOLDNER: Probably about 12 or 13. No, it was a bad experience because the art teacher made fun of what I was doing. He told us that we could do anything we wanted one day, so I decided to paint a sunset. I think maybe I'm more romantic than I need to be. So he held up the painting and showed it to the class and said, "Oh, look, Paul made a fried egg." So I was so turned off about art I would never go near the art room through high school or-not even until I got into about the second year of college.

I think it's one reason why I've never felt comfortable with critiquing art and have come to the conclusion that it's not necessary. In fact, it probably hinders real creativity, because whenever there's a critique, first of all it's somebody else's idea, not yours, and if you're an artist-I don't care if you're a beginner or advanced-that's the privilege of being an artist, is to be your own boss, make up your own mind. Plus students tend to worry about getting a good grade, so they try to figure out what they're supposed to do, what the teacher would like, and they end up compromising too much, I think, their own work.

So I didn't go near the art department until I got into college. In the meantime, on my own, I wanted-I had a desire, is the best way I can say it, or a hankering-to do something with my hands, or visual, and I remember one night-well, I started using my camera. I had got a good camera for graduation. So I was photographing landscapes mostly and occasionally working in the photo shop printing other people's photos, learning the technique of photography on the job. And this was before color film was available, so we used to have to color our black-and-white photographs with oil paints to give them some sort of color.

And I do remember one time-I believe I was probably either a senior in high school, or probably a freshman or so in college-one night I decided to copy a photograph of some South Sea island landscape, and I stayed up all night using the same oil paints that I was using to tint the photographs, but this time I actually tried painting them. So I was copying a photograph, which is where a lot of people begin when they get into art.

In college I was tempted to take some art classes because I thought it might help my sense of design or color or something in my photography, but they didn't teach it. It was not a course. However, the professor, a kindly old gentleman, John Paul Klassen, who was a Russian immigrant and had been trained in the classical sculpture art world in Russia, was very permissive, also in a good sense, in that when I asked him-I said, you know, "I know I'm not an artist; I can't draw, but I would like to use my camera instead of painting or drawing." And he said, "Well, that's okay. I don't know anything about photography. What do you need?" And I said, "Well, maybe an empty room where I can make a darkroom so I can develop pictures right there." So he gave me a closet that didn't have any water or anything, but it was dark, and I set up whatever I needed to haul the water in in dishpans and wash the things later in the sink.

He said-the only problem was that there was no course taught in photography, so I needed to sign up for pastel drawing, which I never did do. I mean, I signed up for it just to get enrolled in a class, and I then went ahead and used the camera.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there equipment there?

MR. SOLDNER: No.

MS. RIEDEL: So you just completely -

MR. SOLDNER: You know, you really don't need equipment. You do need a camera, but you can do as much with a box camera as you can with a view camera, if you have the sensitivity and begin to understand what the camera can do with the limitations of lighting and so forth. But, no, all you needed to do to develop the film was two trays, plastic trays or glass trays. You can buy the chemicals in a photo shop and mix them up yourself, and

if you're just making contact prints, you have to-the negative was dried-all you need to do is put the negative on top of the piece of sensitized paper inside of a picture frame and expose it briefly to light, and then you have a picture.

If you needed to make an enlargement, then you needed an enlarger, which I built myself, and that was fun. I've built several enlargers, including making the bellows, and I didn't make the lens but everything else.

MS. RIEDEL: So even before pottery equipment, you were designing photographic developing equipment?

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah. Oh yeah. Right. And also while I was, I guess, a junior or senior-probably a junior-I asked the same professor if I could make a potter's wheel, because I was curious about pottery, and he said, "Well, that would be okay." So I went out and salvaged some parts of automobiles, I think a crankshaft out of an old Model A Ford and a brake drum for the head, and actually made a stand-up potter's wheel, where you stood on one leg and made the wheel go around by kicking an arm that came off to one side. I'd seen a plan for it in a *Popular Mechanics* magazine, so I wasn't working completely in the dark. I wasn't reinventing it, but I did make my own adaptation.

The only problem was I didn't really know how to throw clay, and I tended to use the wheel more like a lathe, a woodworker's lathe, where I would start with a mound of clay about as big as I wanted to make the object, and then I would kick it, and with tools I would carve the outside shape and then carve the inside shape. I didn't know that clay could be moved, or should be moved, one place to the other. It was a year or so after I built the wheel that I first saw someone really demonstrate throwing. And it was an amazing revelation, because they didn't need to carve the shape, but they could throw it. And I think that was a very satisfying experience for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that at the World's Fair? Because I remember you mentioned you were-

MR. SOLDNER: The World's Fair was more of an influence, yeah. The World's Fair in 1933, my dad took me to Chicago, and I always say there were three things that I found really intriguing that I think influenced my life ever since. One was an interest in machinery or making things. I never was trained that way, but I was always curious how things work. And they had what would be like a ski-tow, called the Skyride, that went across the fairgrounds on some wires. That intrigued me how it would propel, how they'd propel it, how they'd make it move, and I guess even the structure of holding it all up over the top of the fairgrounds. So in a sense I can see that I had an interest in building equipment or mechanical things.

Then also there was a potter, who was I guess you could call an Appalachian potter, from, probably, South Carolina, who was hired to demonstrate how they made their pottery. So he was throwing pots. And I was intrigued, because first of all, he was kicking the wheel barefoot, and then, since he really knew what he was doing, fascinated by how fast you could make an object like a bowl or a vase or something with a potter's wheel. So that was also an early interest.

And then I always laugh and say, look, my dad grabbed me when we were walking through the midway-and she wasn't a stripper, but before strippers, Sally Rand, who was a fan dancer, came out on a balcony and did a little number to kind of entice the men to come on in and see more. I don't know how much more she showed them, but my dad pulled me away anyhow. I never got to go see her. But I've had an interest in naked women ever since. So when I got into art, that was perfect, because that was legitimate. You don't have to go to a stripper.

MS. RIEDEL: Hence the fun in the all the ads that followed years later.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah. Well, I think not only just the ads-that's a separate item but-you know, I use the figure a lot in my work. I haven't drawn the figure well, and I discovered that there was a real problem trying to draw a figure on a round pot. The two just don't work well, and particularly if you've been trained, as I had-was after when I went to graduate school-trained to draw in two dimensions sense, that's on flat paper, and it just never worked on a pot, even though I took a pot into a-not a classroom but to a group of professors who on Sunday morning would hire a model and then they'd just brush up on their skills by drawing. And they invited me to join them, and I tried to draw the model on the pot and it didn't work at all.

And I got to thinking about, well, how come the Egyptian and the Greek figures, in particular, on pottery worked so well? And I realized that they didn't try to make them three-dimensional; they were always just silhouettes, which are something that can wrap around a pot very easily. And at that point I started exploring, using paper stencils, just silhouettes of figures, and, yeah, I think for about 20 years I did a lot of the figurative work that way. However, I would still be interested in sometimes getting the original image by photographing women, or from magazines.

That really, in the end, didn't make much difference where the image came from. I used a lot of fashion photographs, like *Vogue* and [*Harper's*] *Bazaar*, because the images of these women wearing those outrageous clothes always made a strange sort of an abstract image that worked very well on a pot. Sometimes it had

nothing to do with the original. For example, one photograph was of two women, and I think they were advertising lingerie, and they were on a beach someplace in brassieres and panties, and one of them had a hair blower in her hand and she was blowing the hair of the other one in a sort of playful way. When I transcribed that without the three-dimensional, without the actual image, just the silhouette, it looked like a woman killing another person and her brains are flying out instead of her hair. So it took on a second meaning.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SOLDNER: And I found that happened a lot. When I would work from a photograph in a magazine, not my interpretation but the resulting image very often was quite different from what it was in the beginning.

I think I justified using magazines and photographs instead of drawing partly because it was easier, maybe because it was a little bit of the Pop Art movement, where things of common use around us were okay subjects, partly because after Duchamp and Jackson Pollock, all the rules about painting and drawing were broken, and so you didn't have to worry anymore about how skillful you were; nobody needed to do that. Jackson Pollock demonstrated you didn't need a model, you didn't need an easel, you didn't need anything; just a canvas on the floor, not even brushes, you could just dribble it. And that was a revelation: he was making art, important art.

So I never felt guilty about taking the easy way out, and just used magazine articles and photographs and so forth to my advantage instead of trying to draw realistically. And I think it worked better for the kind of thing I was doing.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's do the initial-your initial studies, going back to Voulkos and early in LA. Now, often that was really the experimental, and that seems to be something that was carried through from the start; actually, from the first time you started working with photography, you were inventing materials and equipment as you went along, so there seems to have been an experimental-more than a thread that's run throughout.

MR. SOLDNER: Right. Well, there are always reasons why. If you look back on it, it's kind of like psychoanalysis. I would say that the big reason why it worked for me was I had such permissive teachers and encouraging teachers, on one hand, and then also, you know, the freedom of coming through a period where there were no rules. And then add to that some innate curiosity that, if you're curious, about the only thing you can do is act on it and try it out. I think with me, the permissiveness of three or four of my important teachers I've already mentioned: Mr. Klassen and then later Peter Voulkos-

MS. RIEDEL: Is that Clauson, C-L-A-U-S-O-N?

MR. SOLDNER: K-L-A-S-S-E-N.

MS. RIEDEL: Great.

MR. SOLDNER: And also-

MS. RIEDEL: Katie Horsman.

MR. SOLDNER: Katie Horsman, and that's without an E, H-O-R-S-M-A-N, from the university.

MS. RIEDEL: She was in Colorado, right?

MR. SOLDNER: She was teaching one summer in Colorado when I happened to be a student, but she actually was at the Edinborough College of Art [Edinburgh College of Art] in Edinborough [Edinburgh], Scotland, but she was just a visiting professor one summer, and that was important. I thought, well, if they're bringing a visitor all the way from Scotland, they must be somebody important. That wasn't the real reason why she was invited. She was invited by a friend who was also at the University of Colorado at the time, and they just recommended that they bring her over.

It was a nice serendipitous event; not that she was that famous or that great, but she had good grounding in the tradition and the craftsmanship of pottery, all of which in only one summer was all I needed to then build my own studio, in the basement back in Ohio, where I was also teaching school, but it was good preparation when I then decided to find a guru, being Peter Voulkos, so I didn't go there empty-handed; I already had done a lot of work. I'd learned how to throw, as well as mix glazes and fire kilns, and dig clay and refine it.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were teaching. You were teaching art-

MR. SOLDNER: I was doing it at the same time.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, and then decided that you needed to-wanted to learn more.

MR. SOLDNER: Well, it was sort of-again, most of my life people have, sort of, told me what I should do, rather than what I wanted to do, which is all right. For example, I'd started as pre-med when I first went to college, but it wasn't my idea. It was my girlfriend's mother, who thought having a doctor in the family would be good. And so I started that, but then the Second World War came along, and I was drafted in my senior year.

MS. RIEDEL: You were a conscientious objector.

MR. SOLDNER: I was a conscientious objector in the army. There is a special rank and rating, or used to be, that allowed that. Of course then I became a medic, which was what I wanted to do. And I gave up medicine after three and a half years of being a medic, and also the girl broke up with me and married a doctor, so I was off that hook.

The same thing happened, almost, about teaching. I had no idea I wanted to be a teacher, but as soon as I graduated from college, there was such a shortage of teachers that the supervisor of art from Medina County in Ohio showed up in the summer between, after graduation, and talked to me about coming up to teach and become an art teacher.

And I said, "Well, I don't know anything about art teaching. I don't even think I'm an artist." He said, "That's okay. I'll see you Monday morning. Just show up and the pay is $2,400 a year," which blew my mind. I thought, wow, that's $200 a month. I showed up and he said, "Well, I'll just take you with me for one week, and I'll teach my classes and you can learn how to teach from that." So that's how I got started teaching.

Later he left and I moved with him down to Wooster, Ohio, where he had a new job, and continued teaching grade school, working with children in the morning, and then go through all the classes, ending up with seniors in the afternoon. Then he left there and went somewhere else, but at that point I became the art supervisor and took his job and we had-I think I had four other art teachers that would fan out through the county, and they all taught in a different school, a day at a time.

That was good, but it also led me, as the art supervisor, to spend time with the superintendent of county schools in his office, and I got to know him pretty well. In fact, he would invite me sometimes to take his place at a school meeting or something like that. And at some point he just said, "I think you should go get your master's in education. We need principals and superintendents." So there again it was not my idea; somebody else thought it would be a good idea. But I kind of dutifully said, "Okay," and the only thing that I did for myself was to say, "Well, I sure as hell don't want to go to Ohio State or anyplace in Ohio in the summer, so let's go west, to the first place with a training school," which was the University of Colorado.

I wasn't selecting a school at that time as much as I was an environment. It turned out it was a good selection anyhow because the University of Colorado had a very good art department, and for the first time I realized that art could be more than just a hobby, because before that, with Professor Klassen, we basically were just making craft-not quite like-oh, what's the name of that woman that shows you how to make craft art, gardening and home stuff?

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, Martha Stewart.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, Martha Stewart. It was not quite on that level, but it was not much better. Soap carving, you know, we called it sculpture. We did make plastic molds and we did experiment a little bit with clay and modeling clay, but it was not on a-it was on a hobby level.

MS. RIEDEL: So Katie Horsman really did something else?

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, she introduced me to-and also the whole art department, because I not only took pottery, I had to take painting, printmaking, drawing, art history, and several other courses over the period of four summers.

MS. RIEDEL: The plan was to get your master's and then teach?

MR. SOLDNER: Right. And it was all taught on a very professional level. For example, it was the first time it was okay to actually draw a naked woman, instead of from a drawing or from a photograph, a real live naked woman.

But they were more serious, and that's when I began to get more-there was a lot more art than just fun and pleasure, more than just therapy. In fact, it was not fun and therapy; it was damn serious, because we got graded by professionals. And then you learn all about the history of art, right up from early times through Picasso and all those guys.

It was good enough that I saw, I guess, the idea for the first time that I wanted to pursue something for myself,

and that was to learn more about pottery than even Katie Horsman could teach me. So I started thinking about going for an M.F.A., which I had to do. I already had an M.A., and the government was paying the GI Bill, you know, it was paying for all this, but they would not pay for the same degree twice. You had to always go to the next higher level. And so an M.F.A. basically was equivalent to a Ph.D., but in art. I needed to find a school that had a good ceramics department and one that had-was offering an M.F.A. degree, so I could get government support.

I started looking around and talking to a lot of friends, art friends, about where they thought would be a good place to study, and I considered places like Cranbrook University [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI], Alfred University [New York State College of Ceramics, Alfred, NY], University of Washington [Seattle, WA], Ohio State [Columbus, OH], but my search led me to a couple, Jim and Nan McKinnell, who I'd met earlier in Colorado but had moved up to -

MS. RIEDEL: Would you mind spelling that, the last name, M-C-K-I-N-N-E-L?

MR. SOLDNER: K-I-N-N-E-L-L.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Double L?

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, I believe.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SOLDNER: I'm not sure.

MS. RIEDEL: Jim and Nan?

MR. SOLDNER: Nan.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, thanks.

MR. SOLDNER: And they were good potters that I had met in Boulder, who were actually the ones that were responsible for bringing Katie Horsman over. And eventually I wrote to them, and they wrote back and said they were studying in Helena, Montana, with a young potter by the name of Peter Voulkos, and that they liked him very much, he was very skillful, and that he was leaving the Archie Bray Foundation [Helena, MT] the next year and going to start a new ceramics department in Los Angeles at the Los Angeles County Art Museum-not museum but Art Institute. And that had various names. Sometimes it was called the Otis Art Institute, but the year I went there, it was the Los Angeles County Art Institute [Otis College of Art and Design].

And it was the first time, I guess, that I really wanted to go someplace, not just because it was convenient or lucky. And when I applied, I was lucky in a sense that that was one year, the first year that Voulkos was going to teach; he was also going to be in an M.F.A. program. And because I already had an M.A. I was pushing straight to the top of the four-year program instead of starting all over like everybody else had to.

So that was the wisest decision, I guess, I ever made in my life, to go find a guru and actually pull up stakes, give up jobs. Both my wife and I had been teaching for about seven or eight years in public schools in Wooster, and we decided that it was okay or time to quit teaching children and get on to something a little more advanced.

MS. RIEDEL: This was 1954?

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah. Well, it was '54 when I actually moved to LA that fall. And Pete was perfect. He didn't-he was there to start a new ceramics department, but he had no physical plan of any kind. There were no kilns, there were no wheels, there were no clay mixers or-nothing. And I was the only student, so in the beginning we mostly just traveled to other schools to try and figure out where you got equipment and where you got clay. And in the end we decided we'd make our own wheels and our own kilns and most everything, which was one of the real reasons why I eventually ended up manufacturing pottery wheels and clay mixers and ware racks, because I decided it was a better way to make them than what was available, and then other people would see it and say, "Oh, make one for me."

MS. RIEDEL: It was a serendipitous meeting, yours and Peter Voulkos's at that time, because you had that mechanical inclination and knowledge and experience, and there was a real need for it in an empty studio.

MR. SOLDNER: Right, yeah. And it was a great experience to be one-on-one with your teacher. I think it lasted about six weeks. Then there was a new-then we had a young woman from Switzerland and a young potter from Japan coming to study at the Institute. They were not really advanced and they weren't there very long. Then slowly others began to enroll, and word got out that something good was going on down in the basement at the

Los Angeles Art Institute, and other people began joining.

But for me, the remarkable thing was I was swept up in the, how do you make a studio, how do you put it together-and actually more than just how, but being part of inventing the equipment and manufacturing it.

It's pretty rare. You know, the difference is that whenever you go to most schools, everything works. It's all finished. They've ordered all the materials, and all the equipment has been there, and somebody knows how to use it or maintain it, and we had none of that, so that was a rare education really, to start with nothing and build it.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like that has influenced your decision throughout your teaching career -

MR. SOLDNER: Very much.

MS. RIEDEL: -to take the mystery out of the-the fear out of the mystery for your students.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah. And also, the real advantage was that Voulkos, because he just moved from Helena, where he'd been working, to Los Angeles, didn't have a studio. He didn't have a place to make his own work, so he had to work at school, and that's why that method of learning, which I call a -

MS. RIEDEL: It's almost apprenticing, you know?

MR. SOLDNER: Not really apprentice. Apprentice, you're helping the teacher make their own things. This was more of a guru, where you learn by observing, by watching and by being caught up in the challenge that he was caught up in, and that is to use clay to make something artistic.

Had he had a studio, which happened a few years later when he got his own studio off campus, students, you know, would only see him once in a while whereas we lived together. I mean, literally all day-whenever he was there; he wasn't there much through the daytime, but most of the nights until 2:00, 3:00 in the morning sometimes we'd be hanging out.

It was pretty hard on my marriage. My wife one time asked me for a divorce because she said I was in love with Voulkos. And I said, "Yeah, I am in a way," not in a sexual way but in a-I'm only going to be here-he's only going to be here for a year or two. I did stretch it to two years, but one year was all I needed. They told me I could graduate at the end of the first year, and I said, "No, I'd rather hang out another year," so they manipulated the books so that I could get more GI Bill for the second year.

MS. RIEDEL: And who else, was it John Mason, was there? Because he said he'd come in and work till 2:00 in the morning, too, and then go have breakfast. Was there a group of you that were all working at that time?

MR. SOLDNER: Not in the beginning.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SOLDNER: In the beginning I was probably the only one that was spending that much time with him. Now, after the first semester, then the word got out and people started coming from other schools. John Mason was not enrolled with Pete. He was enrolled actually with Vivika Heino at-or was it Susan Peterson? They traded jobs, so I kind of forget, but he was enrolled with one of those at Chouinard Art School, which was only about a block away from Otis.

So it was natural that he would begin to come over and just watch and kibitz, and became friends, and then eventually, I think in the second year, tried to join the program. But the president of the college decided that, yeah, it's okay, you've gone to Chouinard Art School and you know what you're doing in clay and you've even won some prizes, but you have to take our program from scratch, which meant starting as a freshman and go for four years, so John never did it. He quit. He and Pete opened their own studio together.

MS. RIEDEL: But that first term it was just you and -

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, just me and a few people, like that Japanese potter and that little girl from Switzerland. And then there were a few students from the painting or the other part of the Institute began coming in, I think some of them officially and some of them unofficially. And then people like Kenny Price came over from the University of Southern California, initially just to kibitz, and he became a friend, and then he did enroll for one year before he went to Alfred. Billy Al Bengston was supposed to be a painter at Otis, and he started taking clay classes. I don't think he had much of an interest in clay, but he liked the Voulkos environment and energy that was happening down there. Let's see, Michael Frimkess was a freshman; he signed up the second year. Jerry Rothman was also one who signed up about the second year. And so there was a cadre, small. Half of us were official and the other half were unofficial, illegitimate.

MS. RIEDEL: And if I remember correctly, Peter Voulkos put in an order for eight of your pottery wheels and so was born the Soldner Ceramic Unit Equipment?

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, well, because we looked at all the wheels that were available-being manufactured in southern California, or anywhere in the country. Pete didn't really like them. He said, "Let's make our own wheels." He arranged to have-because it was called the Advanced Kiln Company. Mike Kalan was the president of it and Mel Nordstrom was his assistant. And he arranged with them to let us use their equipment and some of their knowledge, like, we didn't know how to weld, so they would do the welding, and they would do the cutting, and we would do the designing and assembly. Pete's first wheel was a monster, kind of like his later work, way too heavy, too unmanageable. It worked okay, but it was hardly a classroom-designed wheel.

So I decided to try to make my own version, which was much lighter, and instead of using three-inch steel pipes, I only used one-inch. Instead of using a channel iron for mass, for strength, I used tressing, which allows you to make it strong without all that weight.

And then also I changed the design radically from wheels when they were first made at that time, using about 30 to 36 inches high, so you had to climb up into it. And I thought, well, that's ridiculous. I decided to make mine much lower. I got the idea looking at a person in a wheelchair and I realized that the wheelchair had to be strong enough to support a heavy person but light enough to fold up and put in the trunk of the car, and it was from that inspiration that I was able to invent a new way to make a wheel, which then became-well, Pete liked it.

First he laughed at it because it was so different, but then he said, "Well, look, if I get you a purchase order will you make eight of them for the school, because we're going to be moving to new facilities next year."

[END TAPE 1 SIDE A.]

We needed wheels, so I said "Okay." I made eight kick wheels. And then also we'd come together, started manufacturing a very simple electric wheel, where there wasn't much to invent there except the framework, because the motor and speed controller were all built into a unit that we could buy, but it definitely got me started inventing and manufacturing.

So then I remember Laura Andreson, who was teaching at the University of Southern California [University of California, Los Angeles], came to visit one day and said, "Hey, Pete, where'd you get those funny wheels?" And he said, "Oh, Paul made them." And she said to me, "Well, if I get you a purchase order, will you make four of them for me?" which that's the way it started.

I didn't even advertise locally or anywhere nationally for about 15 years. It was just word of mouth and if someone saw the wheel. I was not a manufacturer at the time; I thought I was a potter and I was doing manufacturing on the side, which ended up being what I did all my life, three things all at once, because even when I started teaching at Scripps College [Claremont, CA], I was manufacturing wheels in the garage and then later in a chicken house. I found somebody who rented a chicken house, so I needed to expand a little bit and get some tools.

So you don't know, do you, what adversity sometimes will do for you, because not having equipment, either you gave up or you bought something or you made it yourself. That was pretty interesting. And I did it, you know, for probably 30-at least 30-yeah, I think at least 30 years I made potter's wheels before I finally sold the business, and also made clay mixers for about 30 years. I probably would still be doing it except my factory burned down, and once your factories burn down, you can't really manufacture your own equipment.

MS. RIEDEL: Back to the garage.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah. And I tried doing it by subcontracting, having other people make parts, but the quality control goes down if you don't own your own shop.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SOLDNER: And when I realized that, I realized it was time to, instead of letting my name get ruined, I'd better sell it quick and have somebody who had their own factory finish making it. And that was good; that worked out well. The same thing is true of the clay mixers. After many years I finally found a man in Kansas who bought the rights and is making them every bit as good or better than I ever did. So the fire turned out to be a help. First, when it happens, you know, it's a disaster. But I remember a potter friend of mine, Beatrice Wood, wrote me a nice note-sympathy, but saying, well, you know, sometimes adversity is the best way to go in a new direction, and she was right.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds as if you've said that for a long time, that accidents or adversity are not necessarily bad things at all; it's what you do with them.

MR. SOLDNER: Right. Yeah, I often-since accidents have been important in my own work, I often tell my students, if you have an accident, it's only an accident the first time. After that, you can learn from it or you can forget it. But if you can learn from it, then it's something that is useful; it can be taught, can be written about, and then it changes the level from an accident to something more positive.

Too many times we reject an accident the first time because we've been trained to say, "Well, if it's an accident, it wasn't intentional, and therefore it's not good." You have to be intentional, and I've got over it.

MS. RIEDEL: You talk about that balance between control and serendipity-chance. How do you find that balance? How have you found that? What have you looked for that would signify that as a healthy balance between the two?

MR. SOLDNER: You know, that's an intellectual question [laughs], and I have to answer it by saying, for me, not for everybody, I think my intuition is what helps me through those opposite directions, something inside that I'm comfortable with, because I don't have to know the solution. I've learned to know that there's more than one solution anyhow and that relying on my own hunches and my own curiosity and my own experimentation, eventually a new idea, a new product, a new line, a new look can grow out of it.

You know, invention. You've heard the old saw, necessity is the mother of invention. I say dissatisfaction is more the reason for inventing something. If you're satisfied with the way things are, why bother? If you have some dissatisfaction with it then you can begin to think about it and say, well, how can I do it better, and then that becomes the inventor at that point.

But the same thing is true whether you're making a painting or carving a sculpture or building a house even. Unless you have blueprints you have to rely on your intuition and your past experience and knowledge, all of which takes the place of rules, regulations, and you-have-to-do-it-one-way solutions. And I think in the end, I would say that's when it becomes a pure creative endeavor or lifestyle.

MS. RIEDEL: You've said, too, that you don't want to just repeat what's been done before. Really, if people are just repeating what's done before, they're not adding anything new.

MR. SOLDNER: Right, exactly. You can do that. I have a very good friend who has made a professional career out of making very controllable, Scandinavian modern-looking pottery and has done well all his life. And I used to say to students, you can do that; you don't have to-if you're enamored with Japanese pottery or German salt glaze, you can learn to do it yourself, and you can continue to do it if you want to all the rest of your life. But you can take a fork in the road and go a different direction, so instead of emulating what was once done by somebody else and repeating it, you theoretically can invent something new and add to the history instead of just repeating it, which to me has always been more interesting and more challenging. But that doesn't mean that everybody has to do it that way.

There are an awful lot of potters now, for example, who are in love with the wood-firing kilns of Japan, and particularly the Shigaraki tradition of pottery-making. So when they decided that they wanted to make their own kiln, they study those kilns, and their work, even the shapes of them, end up being repeats of something that in Japan had a real meaning. In this country it's only a look. For example, in the tea ceremony, the water jar is an important vessel. Well, we don't have the tea ceremony, so we don't really need to make water jars, but a lot of young people, when they get excited about Japanese pottery, start to repeat and duplicate the same image, even the water jugs. There's no use for it.

That was the good thing about Voulkos. You know, he was aware of Japanese pottery and he was influenced by it and he learned from it, but he made it Voulkos. He didn't make it Hamada or he didn't copy the Japanese. The only thing that he copied was-a funny story about it-he saw in a magazine a beautiful Chinese pot that just blew him away, and it became for him a vision, a desire to make that kind of bottle. And one of the things he enjoyed about it was the monumentality of it, big scale or apparent big scale, so he forced himself to make his pots bigger and bigger and bigger and still with that same beauty. It was only years after that that he happened to see the pot that was in the photograph in the beginning was only about four or five inches tall.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs] That's great.

MR. SOLDNER: But it became an obsession that led him into a whole new direction.

MS. RIEDEL: Serendipitous accident.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, and relying more on his own curiosity, I guess.

So through the years you could still see the influence that was underlying everything, but it always came out of focus, which I think is a good way for any artist to go. I've watched him go through Picasso periods. I've watched

him do a Matisse period. I've watched him do a Fritz Wotruba, a sculptor from Germany [Austria], go to see a show of Fritz's work, and though Fritz was working with rocks, Pete was able to get the context of what the rocks might-using rocks, and basically made his sculpture for a period kind of from rock-like forms. You could just see the influence, but as I say, it never ended up being the copy. He turned it in a whole new direction.

MS. RIEDEL: I think you mentioned that Hamada came once to LA County, and you were really impressed with his ability to work anywhere with a different clay body, different materials, different tools, different kilns.

MR. SOLDNER: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And that seems like something that you've taken forward from there yourself.

MR. SOLDNER: Well, it was a challenge, definitely was a challenge, once I saw that you didn't have to have your own studio; you could travel anywhere, maybe take a bag of tools with you but using their equipment, their clay and their materials, their kilns; it didn't make any difference. What made it unique or special was what you brought to it, your own skills and your own aesthetic. And I do, I work that way now. I don't have my own studio. I have one up in Aspen, but I don't use it for making work. I do fire some pieces if I have to. If they need to be refired or if they come back unfired, then I do fire them.

It's a freeing experience. Not everybody can do it, and many people say, oh, there's no way I can work outside of my studio. Of course, those same artists say, there's no way I can work in front of people and I won't let people watch me. Having studied with Pete and the Hamada tradition of letting other people watch you puts it on a whole different level than keeping people out or keeping them at bay, and I've been so glad that that worked and that I came under that influence. That's a good way to put it: came under that influence.

Speaking of Hamada, recently someone showed me a photograph of Hamada throwing a pot at Scripps College, and he's down in kind of a courtyard with a wall behind it. There must have been about eight coeds sitting on the wall watching him. I think that's going to be my next poster: I'm going to be throwing a pot and the girls are going to be sitting on the wall watching.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs] There you go. You just mentioned influences. Certainly Voulkos is one and Hamada another; I know nature has been, but what would you say are some of the most powerful influences on your work?

MR. SOLDNER: Well, sometimes just movements, you know, like get caught up in the Abstract Expressionism, takes you away from classical. Or some people got all wrapped up in minimalism, so that's a movement that you have to think about, and it's definitely an influence.

MS. RIEDEL: Pop Art a little bit.

MR. SOLDNER: Pop Art, sure. Using stencils the way Matisse did later in his life had its own influence on me. So you don't always know what your influence is or where it's coming from. It could be really, not unconscious, but just not aware of it, that it is another-something led me.

Well, when I was making really tall floor pieces, for example, people tended to think I was more interested in the height or the phallic aspect of it, which I wasn't. I was reflecting on a book I'd seen in the library in college when I was an art student on plant life that had been looked at under a microscope or a high power lens, and the shapes of some of the seeds or seed pods or plants enlarged then became for me as much an influence as Greek pottery or Japanese or something else, but I didn't realize it initially.

At one point I would accept the idea that some people would say, well you're influenced by African sculpture, because they would make, kind of, totemic objects that were somewhat similar to what I was doing. But in the end I realized it wasn't the African sculpture that I was influenced by as much as it was the little enlargements, tremendous enlargements of a small seed or some plant life, and it was subconsciously imprinted, not consciously. So I never made drawings, never thought about that seedpod at the time. I could look back on it and say, oh, gee, now I know where that came from, but it was stored in my computer, I guess, from just seeing it the first time.

There are so many different ways to do art. You can be really logical and intellectual, and you can do research, history, other physical work that's been finished, you can go to museums, and you can spring off of all of that and find your own direction. But you sometimes can also just do it without that strict sort of, I would say conservative, way of approaching ideas. You can do it from a serendipitous or an unconscious, intuitive approach and be just as successful and happy as knowing what the hell you're going to make before you even start it.

I've always felt that if I knew what I was going to make, it would lose some energy in the making, that the

elements of newness and surprise and spontaneity would be gone, would be missing. So for myself, I'd rather not think about it too much ahead of time, work it out as I sit down at the wheel or after taking the various components and trying to figure out how to put them together. For me, it's more exciting.

Almost the same reason when I decided to work in bronze. No, you don't work in bronze, because it's too hot. What you have to do is make a pattern, and a pattern can be made of anything: wood, cloth, clay, whatever, oil, doesn't make any difference. Once you make a pattern, that's taken to a mold maker and they make a rubber mold, and from that they can make wax duplicates, and from that they can invest the wax in through the process called the lost wax and end up casting a piece that is similar to what you started with but totally removed through all these different steps.

When I started thinking about doing my own bronze work, initially I said, well, I think there's a danger in spending a long time making the original. Traditionally, classically in sculpture the artist would make an object probably in clay first and then work from clay to plaster, and from plaster with refining and adding and taking away over a period of months, you'd end up with the pattern. And I had kind of a feeling that all of that indirect making tended to water down something I find very valuable in art, and that is energy.

So when I started thinking about making my own stuff, I decided, well, look, I can make a clay object, a piece of sculpture, in an afternoon, not over months, and it's going to have a freshness about it; it's going to have movement and a lot of spontaneity because I have to make these decisions quickly. And once that's translated into bronze, it carries right through. The energy that I put into it in the beginning is still there, and I think that's the only reason, really, for me to make anything in bronze is to try to add that element of energy as against the refinement, refinement and refinement and overrefinement, to finally, yeah, it's exactly the way you wanted, but it very often loses a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: So the challenge is to make it in bronze and try and maintain some of the same energy or at least find energy in it?

MR. SOLDNER: Well, I make it in clay.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SOLDNER: And that energy carries right through into the bronze.

MS. RIEDEL: Into the bronze.

MR. SOLDNER: Yes, so that I've got to use textures and complicated shapes, which are sculptural, but they're more of-because they're done in a day or less, several hours, it's not overrefined, it's not overworked, it's not worked to death, I guess, is the word. There's some element left in there of the inspiration and the discovery of making it with clay, which then-at least I think it works that way.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems the bronze then allows you to also make more delicate pieces. I know you also have mentioned that the sense of movement can perhaps be greater in bronze pieces because you can have the longer, thinner, more attenuated pieces that are less fragile and -

MR. SOLDNER: Right. It's much stronger, and you can get away with murder.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs] And they can go outside [inaudible].

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, and they can go outside and you can drop them [inaudible]. Technically they won't last as long as the clay objects.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. SOLDNER: Really. Yeah, see, the clay object has already been through its rusting period. We call it rusting, but through the firing it's been oxidized. Metal, on the other hand, continues to oxidize. We put finishes on it and waxes over it to try to stop it, but all you have to do is go look at sculptures in the world and they're deteriorating from atmosphere, oxygen, but clay doesn't deteriorate that way. It's been oxidized. It can't rust any more. So aside from the fact that it's brittle and it breaks easily, it will outlast bronze; it will outlast almost all other materials.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fascinating.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, it is fascinating, but too bad it doesn't have more of an acceptance. And that may be only because for years, for centuries in the Western world we only thought of it being valuable for dishes, for utility.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that, I think, is one thing that you said that came out of those early days at Otis or LA County,

was I think you credited Voulkos with the idea that clay was just now another medium or another material which was a legitimate material used in making art, and whatever you did with it was what mattered.

MR. SOLDNER: Right. That was-I think that is the biggest tribute that we can pay to Peter Voulkos. Individually his objects are going to last, but what he gave us was the understanding that it's not the material or the tool that you work with, the brush or the color; it's what you do with it that makes it art or not. So I think he approached it from the point of view that art is art and material is material. You can use ordinary common materials and make something that can be perceived as an art object even without going to college or without going to art school. It used to be called primitive and now I guess it's probably called -

MS. RIEDEL: Outsider art.

MR. SOLDNER: -outsider art. Some of that is much better than graduate students can make, with all their information and their knowledge and critiques and all that kind of stuff, but that boils down to just feeling; it's a creative act. Where does that come from, is that something you learn? I think we need to think you don't. Now, it can be influenced, as you could be with a guru, and come under their influence, but they can't really make you an inventor. That can't make you an artist.

And sometimes schools think they can. They give you a degree to prove it, but all you have to do is look at what a lot of people do after they get their degree to discover that they missed it, they didn't get it, which is sad. I have several friends who have gotten M.F.A. degrees like I did, but they didn't get it, and their work never aspired to anything other than kind of an initial breakthrough when they were a student, but after that it didn't add to the whole history of art, whereas Pete's work definitely gave us that opportunity to use clay.

People might use wood, marble, paintbrushes. People are surprised sometimes when I make a print. They say, "Oh, I thought you were a potter." Well, it's almost the same thing with bronze: "I thought you were a potter." I say, "Well, I started as a potter, and I can still make pottery and I can teach pottery, but I am interested in other methods of making images, and printmaking is one; photography would be another."

MS. RIEDEL: You even made some jewelry.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, sure. You can do it so many different ways. Whatever you're doing, you're still making decisions, aesthetic decisions, and that's when it becomes art or not.

That's the tough part: when is it finished, or what should I do next; what else does it need? Too many times we turn to someone else and say, "Well, what do you think?" And we really shouldn't do that. Sometimes people would come to visit me and say, "Oh, you're so lucky to be surrounded by other artists and friends of artists. Where I live I'm the only one that's interested in art and I have no inspiration, nobody to help me." And I let them go for a while, and then I finally look at them and say, "Where do you think Picasso went for inspiration?" Sure, he's aware of other things like African art and so forth, but he didn't need it from somebody else. He went to himself, and that's a hard lesson.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Paul Soldner at the artist's home in Claremont, California, on April 27, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number two.

So I think we're going to talk a little bit about teaching and the things that you've-your manners of teaching and things that you tried to teach and the manners in which you've tried to teach them.

MR. SOLDNER: Okay. You know, first of all I didn't want to be a teacher exactly. I always said I didn't want to be a teacher, preacher, or traveling salesperson. I think they're all the same now. But I stumbled into teaching at the college level. Well, actually, as I said earlier in the tape, I was invited to become a teacher even though I didn't have teacher ed, because there was such a shortage of teachers. Then later, Scripps College needed a replacement, and I was invited to take a temporary position there, which lasted for seven years.

Then after that, I decided to give up teaching, tried to give it up, and it only lasted one winter, because the University of Colorado asked me to come help design a ceramics department, and that lasted-the next winter the University of Iowa asked me to come teach, filling in for Jim McKinnell, who had been teaching there and gone on sabbatical. And then the -

MS. RIEDEL: This is the same Jim McKinnell who, years ago, he and Nan suggested Voulkos?

MR. SOLDNER: Right. And then after that I decided I liked teaching. First I thought I didn't like it and I thought I should give it up. I moved my whole factory up to Aspen and relocated, which in a way was a mistake, but at the same time, it worked, so it wasn't a mistake.

But I found that I enjoyed being with students, enjoyed trying to-I think one of the things that I do as a teacher that isn't common, and I think it's-I don't know where it came from but first of all I tend to talk in icicles. An icicle is starting with an idea, a subject or something, and you get involved with all the complexities, but you don't keep going endlessly; it comes down to a conclusion. And when you're teaching, it's so easy to just keep rambling and losing the syntax, just getting lost in the things you want to talk about, but then you lose what you started to talk about.

So I used to kind of help myself by limiting most of my discussions with students to 20 minutes to a half hour, which forced me to come to the point and not get involved with a lot of superfluous things. That could wait till the next day. And then the other thing is to simplify. Sometimes I believe teachers make things way too complicated, and there are probably reasons why they do that. One is pedagogy, where they're supposed to be a teacher and that ends up just being someone that doesn't know when to stop. It also sometimes is because they need to make themselves feel or seem to be important in the school, so by making huge assignments and long lectures, that becomes the teacher, the professor.

I've never felt comfortable in that position. What I've always felt was-well, first of all, if I didn't have to teach, that's even better, but since we have to teach, then my osmosis method of letting students watch and teaching by inspiration is more valuable than by assignments and critiques and lectures and exams. I never gave an exam the whole time I taught. Actually, I never even told students to go read anything. I hate to say it, it sounds stupid, but I never even went to the library the whole time that I was teaching at Scripps, never worked from somebody else's ideas-not directly, not as an assignment.

Most of my teaching had to do with letting them-showing them how to do something very simple. Oh, for example, of course, like how to throw a pot, how to center it, how to raise a wall, how to glaze it, how to fire it, but not what to do to it, not what to put on it. That was their challenge, and the shape was theirs, too. I never told them, you have to make teapots for your next assignment, or you have to make this or that.

As a result, I didn't look very good. You know, when there was a student exhibit it really didn't look very good, and that's another reason, I guess, why some professors who are more insecure worked so hard to make everybody look good. And it's too bad, because that's not what learning or education is all about; it shouldn't be about making somebody else look good.

Now, there are problems that arose for me in that-with that belief that everybody should teach themselves and also that we need to give the student more independence and self-sufficiency in teaching themselves. How the hell do you grade it? That became for me not an issue but a question, how can I on one hand encourage these students to teach themselves and on the other hand not criticize it and have to grade it, because, like it or not, we do all have our own prejudice and our own likes and dislikes. When you go to an exhibit with a friend, what's the first thing you discuss? You'll say, how do you like that piece? Or even worse you'll say, I don't like that, which only means that you're reflecting your own preference and your own opinion. It may or may not have anything to do with the quality of the work. A good old guy by the name of Vincent van Gogh taught us that lesson. But as a teacher and you have to grade it, then you run into difficulty.

So I got really interested-I read very little. I really don't read much other than *Popular Mechanics* and *Penthouse* and a few interesting magazines. So-where was I going with that? I did read a book somebody recommended-*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* [Robert Pirsig. New York: Morrow, 1974]-to me years ago. I did read it and I related to it because this professor was doing what I felt we should be doing, and that is-or he was trying to do, trying to give the students self-determination, freedom to chart their own course, to teach themselves. The problem was how do you grade that? And he had to grade it because he was a professor. So he tried everything from the curve, the bell, self-grading, everybody give grades, grade yourself, throw them up in a hat, give everybody an A, give everybody a D. He tried all these different things, but it didn't particularly motivate anybody, and I found sort of the same problem. I never felt like I was God, and therefore how could I judge somebody's work and say it's not worth anything or it's worth a lot, it's only a D or an F?

Eventually, partly out of my own maturing, I evolved a method that everybody laughs at when I talk about, and that was to grade people, especially beginners, only by the work they produce, not by the quality of it, just the quantity. And to do that I arrived at a formula where I would divide the semester into three five-week grading periods. I discovered very early if you only grade at the end of the semester, they won't do anything all semester long till the last week, and all of a sudden turn in a pile of shit and want to get an A on it because they worked so hard.

Well, I decided to break it down into three five-week periods instead of a whole year, and in each five-week period they would get a grade, and then the next five weeks another grade, and then I could total the three together and divide them by whatever to get the final grade. So I would put on the chalkboard-the first day I would say, here's how you're going to get graded. If you make-to get an A, and I would write A, B, and C-to make an A you had to make five pieces weighing a total of five pounds, and a B would be half of that, and a C would be

half of that. A D wouldn't be worthwhile talking about.

They'd say, "Well, what about the quality? What should I make?" And I'd say, "Honey, you're the artist. You can make anything you want." "Well, what about a bong?" Well, sure, if it takes work. All I'm interested in is work, so make whatever you want. It has to be finished, has to be fired; you can't have it in progress. And once it's finished, you can bring it to me or to one of my graduate students or my TA. They'll count it and weigh it and we'll put it in the book. Just like putting money in the bank, you get a bank deposit and you get a grade deposit, and you can see at any one time what grade you're getting so you can't argue with me. You can't come along at the end and say, "Oh, this class was so wonderful; I really got so much out of it. I'm sorry I didn't make enough." You can't do that, because you've known right from the start what had to be done.

Then the second five weeks they should be better, so I upped the ante, 10 pieces weighing 10 pounds each, and then the same thing with the next five weeks.

So anywhere in the middle of the semester, if somebody was worried about how they were doing, I'd say, "Well, look at the book. Look at your deposit. And you can bat your baby blue eyes at me and say, 'Oh, I'm sorry I didn't work harder; is there anything I can do for you?'" I'd say, "No, it's too late for that."

But that only worked, of course, for beginners. The next year when they were more advanced, they didn't want something that silly, so I would have to invent something else. For example, if I wanted to teach them about a tri-axle method of testing glazes and colorants and so forth, a tri-axle can be a very academic way of measuring or comparing what happens when you combine three materials together; that's why it's called a tri-axle test.

But if I demonstrated it to the students in a lecture-

[END TAPE 1 SIDE B.] -nothing would happen beyond that unless I'd make an assignment. But I don't believe in making assignments, so I would have to handle it differently. I'd say, "Okay, if you make a tri-axle, you get a straight A. If you make half of a tri-axle-now,- that would mean instead of 10 numbers being cross-referenced, which would be 30-some tests, - you did half of that, you'll get a B." Or I'd say, "You'll get an A if you can make any object over three feet tall, and if it's only half of that, you're only going to get a B, and if it's half of that, you get a C." So it was very obvious and it was just based on what they wanted to do, and all I wanted was the work.

The dean did call me in one time because one of the students complained. She didn't like my grading system because I didn't give her an exam and I didn't give her a test and I didn't give her assignments, and she thought that it was stupid. But after I explained it all to the dean, she just smiled and said, "Well, I wish the other professors had something that clear, because they can't argue with you; it really is up to them." I said, "Well, why are they here in the first place? They're here to learn." That was always interesting, too.

New professors-or new deans would ask me to come in for a visit, and the first thing when I sat down, I'd say, "Okay, before we go any further, I was hired to teach; now what's your job?" [They laugh.] I wanted to get that straight. And then secondly they always got around to, "Well, that's nice, but what's your vision for this school; what should we be teaching; what should we be doing?" Well, I taught in a girl's college, a women's college, so I'd say, "Our purpose is to make women out of the girls, and it takes a couple years to do that, but if we're successful, they'll go out of here and you'll be proud of them. They'll be on their own."

So, let's see, I'm getting off the subject about teaching and grading.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, also, didn't-the idea sprang from that quality comes from quantity.

MR. SOLDNER: I still believe that. You can talk about quality, but it's like you can't give that really unless it's your quality, and that's not really learning. You can talk about skiing if you're a skier. You can talk about technique; you can demonstrate it. You can have a student work it out and show you, and you can follow them down the hill, photograph them. You can do all these things. But the one thing you can't give them is your experience, and we tend to forget that that's probably in the end the most important thing, your own experience, and that only comes from quantity.

MS. RIEDEL: And also as an antipreciousness way to work.

MR. SOLDNER: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. It eliminates all that preciousness and puts it right on the line.

One day I came to class and two of the women had just finished unloading a kiln. And as I came around the corner I said, "Good morning." And one person was in tears, and the other one looked like she was going to barf, upchuck. I apologized and said, "Did I say something wrong?" And they said, "No, no, no, but we really wanted to get an A, and look at this mess."

And I looked in the kiln and it was a mess. And I said, "Well, what happened?" And they said, "Well, we decided

we wanted to try a low-fire." Now up to that point they had only had experience doing high-fire, cone 10. So at low-fire, nothing was melting, and what was on there, half of it had scaled off anyhow. And they were so sure that they had failed.

And I said, "Well, bring the stuff over to the scale and let's count it and weigh it. I'm proud of you; you decided to do something on your own. Did you learn anything?" And they said, "Oh yeah. We're going to ask for some help next time." But that was a good example of how the system worked even when you'd think it shouldn't. With normal teaching that would've been a disaster.

One of my best students came up missing one pot for an A. He could have gotten a B, but I knew he was much better than that. I wanted to just give it to him automatically, and I thought, no, I can't do that. Then pretty soon if that happens then my system doesn't work anymore. So I asked him, I said, "Well, did you give anything away at Christmas or wedding presents or anything like that?" He reached into his pocket and he pulled out a slip of paper and he said, "Well, I entered a show up in Cal Poly [California Polytechnic State University] at San Luis Obispo, but," he said, "it was rejected. Here's my slip. So I guess it won't count." And I said, "Of course it counts. You made it; it counts. That's exactly what I wanted. Don't worry about being rejected. Keep entering. We all have rejections."

So the system actually turned out to be very helpful, and it also never put me at odds with my students. So many times teachers and parents are fighting with the students, and nowadays it's even worse than it used to be because of legal action; you can sue; you can go after the school. The school itself is responsible for some of this problem, because at the end of each semester they give out a questionnaire called a teacher evaluation, and students are invited to evaluate the success of the teacher, which is too bad, because it's just an opportunity-it's giving the student permission to bitch and I think it's terribly wrong, because it puts the emphasis on the wrong thing. What would be the right thing? Well, I think the president and the dean ought to come to your classroom once in awhile to visit and see what's going on.

But my point was that I also, because I removed myself from that absolute judgmental, godlike place, we were friends. I fraternized probably more freely than I should have with my students. And I'd be fired today, because we'd hot-tub together and massaged each other and, oh, had wonderful times together. I'm glad I lived through it. And nowadays when I run into some of my former students, that's what they remember. They don't remember the pedantic quality of it. Sometimes they'll call me and say, "I remember you once showed me how to make gloss wax casting and I kind of forgot. Can you do it again?" And I will, but at least they remembered that it was possible until they needed it. Too many times we teach them stuff they don't really need, so where does it go?

MS. RIEDEL: That kiln story seems like a great example of a couple different things that I think of when I think of your teaching philosophy: trial and error, and also via dissatisfaction and how that really is another form of inspiration if it's funneled the correct way, in a healthy way. So that story seems to illustrate -

MR. SOLDNER: Hopefully it reinforces what I wanted.

MS. RIEDEL: Accidents. Curiosity.

MR. SOLDNER: Sure. As against-oh, I've had students who were afraid that if they took the initiative, they'd get clobbered, so they would come to me and they'd say, "Is it all right if I do this or do that," or "I don't suppose it would work if I put this glaze on top of that glaze," always very negative but also insecure. They didn't feel like they had the permission to try it themselves, that I was going to clobber them at the end. But with this system I'd say, "Sure, go ahead and do it. We can count it, weigh it and count it. It may or may not succeed." Like those girls, half the stuff blew up and I'd say, "Well, bring it all over here. Show me which was one pot and we'll weigh those parts as one piece, and that will work."

Graduate students are another problem, because they're too good for all of that, and the only way I could handle them was to say, "Well, at the end of the semester you should be able to have a little exhibit of your work for the semester, and we have a little gallery out back, so you work towards having a one-man show, one-person show; I'll spring for some cheese and wine and you invite your friends and maybe another professor or two and just see what happens. I don't think it's necessary that we have to talk about everything, but get it out there."

It was sort of the same thing when they would want me sometimes to critique their work in the middle of the semester. I'd say, "No, I'm not interested in looking at your most recent piece or a piece you made last week. Get a body of work together and then we'll look at it."

And that's when I said, "We'll have a little exhibit of your work, and if you have the exhibit, I'll give you an A. If you're good enough to get it into a downtown art gallery, I'll give you an H." An H was honors, which you do very few in graduate school. I only had two people that I ever gave honors to. One was Dennis Parks and the other was Jun Kaneko. They both arranged to have an exhibit of their work in an uptown gallery. The rest of them, I'd

give you an A if you just have an exhibit in our little gallery off the kiln court. And if you don't do the show, but you can show me you made the work and it's still in your studio, I'll give you a B, but under that you failed.

So it was fair. That was the bottom line. I was stuck with this problem that the school imposes on faculty to have to become judges and god figures, and I resented it and I felt that in art that's the last thing in the world. It's quite different from just, like, taking an automobile test where you learn everything and then you memorize it and you go in there and you answer the questions and you'd better not argue with the question. I have a hard time, because I'm used to saying, well, it could be this, it could be that, it could be a lot-it doesn't work.

I was always trying to avoid that absolute, there's only one way to think and one way to answer. I think there are lots of ways. There should be lots of alternatives in almost everything that you do in life, not just, you know-I mean, why do you think one marriage is the only way to go, or why do you think only one kid is bad when everybody else thinks you should have five?

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like you weren't trying to teach specific aesthetics. I always think of you saying courage and curiosity and the curiosity to pursue that over a prolonged period of time and have the courage to do so. It seems that was more the philosophy that you were trying to teach.

MR. SOLDNER: I guess so. I hope so. I like that.

MS. RIEDEL: What do you think is the difference, if any, between a university trained artist and one who has learned outside of formal training?

MR. SOLDNER: Well, the first thing is, if you want to teach in college you have to have an M.F.A. degree, and you can't get that outside of a college. But the advantages and disadvantages become apparent, I believe, after you leave that situation as to what you do yourself, partly with what you saw, what you learned, what you were taught. And I'm not sure that an academic situation is the best for any artist.

I sometimes think the old art school method of teaching is still better; that is, your teachers were painters; they were not pedantically trained historians and all that kind of stuff. You simply went to the classroom and painted, and they would maybe come around and talk a little bit about your technique or your ideas, but they encourage you mostly to develop the skills and the techniques and the abilities to know your materials and what to do with them, whereas in college it tends to be a right and a wrong way for everything. I'm not sure that one is better than the other.

We have people who never graduated from college, like John Mason, very successful, enough that he taught in college, but he never finished. And we have people, outsider art, that make work that has just as much reputation, perhaps, as insider. I think it boils down to whether you plan to teach in college or not, as to whether you need to go that route.

Curiously, some art schools, like Kansas City Art Institute [Kansas City, MO], for years in clay have been putting out undergraduates at the level of graduates in most graduate programs, so what do they do after that? Well, they go to Alfred or some school that does give a degree, and maybe they learn something, maybe they get screwed up. I've seen as many people get really confused as successful by going into a graduate program or advanced program, because there's so much pressure to go their direction.

Just today I got a telephone call from a former student. When she came to me, she had already been a production potter, she had already studied in Scandinavia, she knew a lot about pottery, and I was thrilled to have her. Within a semester I saw less and less of her, till I didn't see her at all in class. I would see her on campus and we would talk and she would come for casual seminars and hot tub with us and then we'd go dancing, but she stopped making pottery.

And the reason was that she'd gotten brainwashed in the graduate program that placed more emphasis on thinking about making something rather than making it. And she eventually ended up-well, Kathy asked me today, she said, "What was her senior project or final project?" And I said, "She made doorways." And she said, "What do you mean she made doorways?" And I said, "Well, she made a doorframe with a door on it." There was some sort of-she wrote up some sort of thing about the importance of a doorway, how it opens and closes and you can talk about life that way and all that kind of stuff. But I said, "As far as I'm concerned, she got screwed up.

However, after graduation she picked up photography and became a very good business of photographing for magazines interior installations of wealthy homes, and she went on to do some other things. Today she said, "I'm now the editor of an architectural digest." I don't know which one, but an architectural magazine.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. SOLDNER: So, you know, drawing conclusions about any of that stuff, you just have to wait until it's all finished before you can really say whether-though I was disappointed initially, I'm glad I never got on her case. We remain very good friends instead. She had a gorgeous body and I photographed her a lot. But we've remained closer friends through the years, I'll bet, than any of those other professors that she was involved with. In fact, she called me today and said, "I can't believe we haven't seen each other this year," because we always try to get together for at least one day. So we made an appointment. She'll be out to catch up.

MS. RIEDEL: That's great.

MR. SOLDNER: No, I think there's so much more to life and education than the degree and the grade and, you know, the success.

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe this is a good time to talk about Anderson Ranch and how that was different and-that you started-that started as a co-op in the mid-'60s?

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, maybe late '50s. I think it was about '58 [1966].

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. SOLDNER: When a woman I had met in Aspen who-at the time she was just clerking in one of the gift shops-so, because I had work there, she knew me as a potter. One day she came out-she was very shy, but she said, "There are a number of young people in Aspen who are interested in learning how to make pottery. We were wondering if you would teach us." And I said, "Well, I don't mind; I'm a teacher. But I don't have a place to do it. If you find a place, I'll help you."

So they rented a storefront, an empty storefront, had been a restaurant, and we went in there, and in one year we built kilns, we built wheels. I taught them how to do this, how to do that. I would go in maybe-I think it's more than once a week maybe, not for long, and it was real friendly; no grades. It was a great thing, no grades, real friendly, but people were learning, having a wonderful experience.

Then we lost the lease, and the big question was, now what do we do? At a cocktail party it was discovered that a developer by the name of Jannes Corporation from-well, they had done all kind of development in Hawaii and all around-had purchased about four ranches in the valley outside of Aspen with the intent of making a development there.

Initially I didn't understand what a development meant, because they throw a golf course at you, they throw ski areas at you, dance programs, and then they wanted an art program, and so you think that's what it's all about. The bottom line is they're developing-they're selling the property, the land, to other people, and they only have these other things, the golf course and so forth, to entice you to come there.

Well, they said, "We heard that you guys lost your lease and we have four of these ranches. Most of them have usable buildings on them. You're welcome to use any of them you want to for your co-op."

Well, we couldn't believe our luck, and we went out and looked at it and eventually looked at one that had more appeal than the others, which happened to be called the Anderson Ranch, which was in the Anderson family, had a ranch there for years. It was a mixture of falling-down log cabins and barns and things, but it had a character to it that we really felt was a little better than some of the other farms that were a little bit more formal.

It also happened to be up on the road, whereas the others were down in the meadows and beautiful sites, so it was a temptation to go to the meadow. But we decided to stick with the road and took over the lambing shed, where they used to have lambs, and we got out all the manure and threw it out and put in concrete floors, built some wheels, built some kilns, and continued the cooperative out there.

Unfortunately, the next year is when I got-two years later is when I got the job at Iowa [University of Iowa, Iowa City] and then Colorado [University of Colorado, Boulder]. So when I left, you know, the guru was gone and it almost fell completely apart, except another potter in the community needed a place to work and he just took it over for himself, not with the cooperative, but he kept it alive, kept it going, and then through the years he expanded it and even started teaching some classes.

MS. RIEDEL: Who was this?

MR. SOLDNER: His name was Brad Reed.

MS. RIEDEL: Brad Reed?

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah. And then he tied in with the local Colorado Mountain College, where they would give credit

if the students would come to him to learn ceramics. They didn't have ceramics in their program, but you could put it on in the book and you could get credit.

And it was working pretty well, maybe too well. At some point a woman [Sherry Heiser] who had started a photography school in Aspen, had elevated it to a very successful international status, called the Center for the Eye, and she decided that they were paying too much money for the bottom of a hotel, the basement of the hotel, for classes, so she approached the woman at Anderson Ranch whose husband was in charge of development and asked if it would be possible for her to bring her school out there.

Well, that woman liked the idea, because it already had an international status, and she said, "Yes." But there was a problem in that the other pottery school that had been pretty successful and was tied in with the junior college didn't want to share the campus with her. So she fired them. That left half of the campus empty, and that's where I got into it the second or third time, third time.

MS. RIEDEL: And this would have been?

MR. SOLDNER: That would have been in the '60s, no, '70s, late '69 or '70, or the '70s.

And she asked me if I would create a counterpart to her photography school, and I said, -well, against my wife's best advice-I said, "Okay, and we'll call ours the Center for the Hand and we will be an alternative to college," which means we want to give you as much information and skills as you might hope to get in a college, but you won't get a degree and you won't get a grade and you won't pay any tuition.

You're going to have to work for us four hours a day, everything from digging ditches to making artwork to sell and learning how to sell it. You're going to live communally. You have to take care of-there were 15 people, I think, and so each one would take a week and prepare the dinner that night, and next week somebody else would take their turn. Everybody had to fix their own breakfast and their own lunch. Sleeping quarters were a sheet down the middle of a bedroom, and one person slept on one side and one on the other.

As far as I was concerned, it was very workable, but the lady who was running-whose husband was managing the ranch, it was not the direction she wanted it to go, even though she told me I could do anything I wanted to do. And she began nibbling away at the program, suggesting that it wasn't really a school because nobody ever sat down in seats in front of a blackboard, that we were a factory since we were having students and then teaching them how to manufacture things that we could sell to pay their tuition, that there must have been some hanky-panky going on in those bedrooms, that the girls had to wear brassieres.

And it was at that level that I resigned. I said, you know, "This is not my vision." What she wanted is what they now have, and that was-oh, she also complained about our program being a full year or longer. We said students can stay here until they can't learn anything more. Then they have to leave. But she wanted summer programs, two weeks at a time, and then a new teacher comes in and two more weeks and two more. That's exactly what it is now.

But after I resigned, it continued to do well. Each director seemed to be able to make more money, to the point now that it's on the level or par with the equipment and so forth as most art departments anywhere, better. The ceramics department has better equipment than I ever had at Scripps College. The print department is way better. And it's successful in that way.

I have long since given up on the idea that you could have an alternative to college without a degree, without the equivalence anyway.

Curiously, now it's been there long enough that it's become so bureaucratic, it's like any college. If you look at any college directory, over two-thirds of the directory are services: secretaries, security, gardeners, everything except teaching. Less than one-third is involved with the teachers, and that's the way the Anderson Ranch has gone. It's success-it's successful, but it's becoming so convoluted and bureaucratic that sometimes-like they have an annual auction, and they'll ask me to put something in it, to raise some money and I'll agree to it, and then about a couple months later I get a telephone call from somebody else who doesn't know that I agreed to it, wants to know if I would be involved. So that the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing and everybody is protecting their own turf, which is just like the government.

MS. RIEDEL: So it started out being different than a university but-and it maybe still is, but -

MR. SOLDNER: Aside from the fact that they still haven't given grades.

MS. RIEDEL: -it's just different problems.

MR. SOLDNER: But there's pressure there, there's people on the board who think, well, if we're as good as a

college, then why don't we give grades, why don't we give degrees? I keep-I'm only the godfather now. I don't give any real advice but that's the one thing, whenever they ask me what I see for it I keep saying, well, "Don't turn this into a college. Don't give degrees."

Now, you can go to a-if your college will recognize that as an important school, you can go there and I guess the teacher is supposed to grade you and it goes back to your college and they give you the degree. So it's a halfway house.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you done any work with Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, North NC] or Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME] or Archie Bray [Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts, Helena, MT]?

MR. SOLDNER: Yes and no. I've never gone to Haystack, for a couple of interesting reasons. In the beginning they didn't pay enough and I was building my own home, and to give that up for a couple weeks every summer and go all the way out there for free basically-they might pay your transportation and meals-but I just couldn't do it. Penland invited me one time to come do a workshop one weekend. I'd never been involved with Archie Bray, and nowadays they don't ask me anymore; they know that I'm the godfather of the Anderson Ranch and that I give my support, financial and teaching and whatever, to the ranch, and that that takes a load off my shoulders. Sometimes I wish I had experience there in the other schools, but they're all so much the same that I don't think I need to.

And the Anderson Ranch is the most lucky of all of them in location, not that the others aren't beautiful-they are-but they don't have the wealthy support that Aspen gives. So when they have an auction, if they don't make a half a million dollars on the weekend, they're upset, and they do that at least three times a year, in addition to enrollment, tuition and grants and endowments now. So they're very well off financially, even though they're constantly expanding and still building.

I think they'll reach an end someday down the road, I'm not quite sure, if for no other reason than the physical, the ground that they're on is limited.

MS. RIEDEL: How is Anderson Ranch and your teaching at Scripps and Iowa and Colorado different from teaching workshops?

MR. SOLDNER: Well, workshops are two days, at the most five days, and you don't get involved with the students other than you learn their names and you learn to know the cute ones and the bitchy ones. But you always know at the end of the week or your two days, you're gone, you go someplace else, whereas when you're teaching, it's kind of curious. Because you're going to be there a whole semester or year, you don't give them everything that you have to talk about right away; you kind of piecemeal it out, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, whereas on a workshop, first of all, you have a captive audience.

I don't do hands-on workshops. That's the other thing that disappoints people. And my reason is that you're not going to change-you're not going to really make a conversion in two days just by my telling you how to make my work. You're going to probably end up doing your same you've always done before. So I'm not going to teach you or not give you the hands-on. You don't need to take a souvenir home to mommy, but you do need to listen, observe, ask questions, photograph, document, whatever, in the hopes that when you leave, something happened there that will help you go another direction or give you another insight or something else, whereas in a school you don't give all that information right away. I've often said I think my workshop people get more out of me in two days than my students do in a year or a semester, because they're also involved with other classes, social events, and if you get them for 20 minutes, you're lucky, then they're gone or they don't come back and all the other activities.

I used to look at my students and say, "I don't really know you. I wish I knew what you do at night, where you go, who you're with. All I can put together is that you're here for a degree and somebody's paying for you to be here, so you'd better take advantage of it, but I'm not going to make you. That's really up to you."

What else was I going to say about that? The difference between teaching and a workshop situation. I guess that pretty much sums it up.

MS. RIEDEL: You also have to work with what's on hand in the workshops, too.

MR. SOLDNER: I'm not sure that that gets as appreciated as it did for me. I'm not sure. It would be interesting to find out.

What I do get back sometimes as feedback is from somebody-I don't even remember if they were in a workshop-but years later will maybe write to me, or they'll say that something I said turned them around in a new direction or gave them permission to go someplace else, do something. And you never know; that's maybe the

value of a workshop, where you don't have to grade it. You don't know whether you're being a success or not. It's just too much later that somebody might say, "Yeah, boy, I'll never forget that one little thing you said or demonstrated, and it changed my life." I can't even think of examples of that, but it could be as simple as just questioning why are you doing that, why are you getting a degree.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like there's often an element of performance art or humor that you incorporate into teaching. I think about the first raku firing-that was exciting for an audience to watch. I think about the story of you throwing the piece of rope inside the clay, even the slide shows where you juxtapose different images. It's almost a way of getting attention, getting people to pay attention.

MR. SOLDNER: That's a headline on one of the chapters I wrote, you know, for that little book. It says, "Teaching is like training mules. First you have to get their attention." And we do that by entertainment. We do it many different ways-mostly it's entertainment. Even information, pedantic information in the way of slides and videos and all that, is still entertainment for students.

And it's quite different from the serious apprentice system that used to exist in Japan-I don't know if it still does-where you're almost trampled on or shoved down, made to feel insecure for the first couple years, just sweeping floors and washing and everything. But the attitude, then, of that student is you don't have to entertain them and it's not the teacher's responsibility to make them happy, which is our method. It's the student's responsibility to, not make themselves happy, but take advantage of the fact that they're in a very special situation and only probably two or three in the group. Sure, you're helping them do the grunge work, but you're developing other understandings of what it means to be an artist. I don't think we really learn that in graduate school today.

Simple things, like the necessity to build crates to ship your work, the importance of learning how to make very high-level photographs, they don't teach you that. They teach you to go hire somebody to do it. They don't teach you how to inventory your work, how to keep records and keep track of it, but you do learn that in the more apprentice system because you're watching it and you're part of it.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like what you did a little bit when you started at LA County with Voulkos. You had to build that studio from the ground up.

MR. SOLDNER: That was one other thing; when I did do the Anderson Ranch Center for the Eye, we tried to draw up, not a dictum, but a statement of intent, and one of the things was the faculty had to be studio potters or studio faculty, woodworkers or whatever, working on campus. We provided them a studio and a place to live, and live on campus and work on campus. And we also said for the beginning students, here's an empty room. It's up to you to build your own studio. Well, here's a pile of wood and here's this and bricks and so forth, whatever you need, but you need to learn how to do it yourself, and that was a direct outgrowth of working with Voulkos and learning how to build a studio. And I often would say, you know, if you go to another school, everything is done for you, so we don't do that. We're teaching you to do it yourself and learn by yourself.

There were other things like since schools charge admission, we would not charge admission. Since schools had formal classrooms, we had no classrooms. That was one of the things that that lady complained about. She said, "I never see your students in class." We didn't have blackboards. We had a pay telephone. We didn't want anybody to call us. If we wanted to call out, we could -

MS. RIEDEL: What was her name, the director?

MR. SOLDNER: Mary Martin.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MR. SOLDNER: She's kind of softened herself a little bit in recent years, but she was a tough cookie. And unfortunately, she feels like I'm getting too much credit for starting Anderson Ranch.

MS. RIEDEL: So you deliberately, from the start with Anderson Ranch, tried to be the antithesis of a college program?

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah. We would not check attendance. Anything they did, we did the opposite. And that's why I say it was more like a-not as an education but as far as living together, that was another thing, living together; it's a communal experience. You're sharing your cooking skills.

We had this one bastard in photography who had gone to graduate school and, of course, when he got-I didn't realize this; when I hired him, I thought he was hired as a photographer, but he was off already on that digital stuff. He wasn't really interested in-he was more interested in concepts, conceptual art. So when it was his turn to cook dinners- most everybody just knocked themselves out with elegant recipes and great everything-He

said, "Well, we'll have an all American dinner, hotdogs."

He didn't last too long. I think he phased himself out. I don't think I had anything to do with getting him to leave, but he realized that the program was meant to be a hands-on experience of learning, not regurgitating or not getting so away from the fundamentals and the basics.

I think it was really important that we wanted the students to end up with the knowledge, experience, skills, and aesthetics that any artist needs, but sometimes it gets lost in the shuffle, a big campus with all the other activities and about the only thing that seems important is whether you pass a test or the grade you get at the end of it.

So we take away the grade, and why are you there? Really fundamental. And I still run into some of those kids that were there at that time.

[END TAPE 2 SIDE A.]

And they're doing fine. The fact that they went without the degree doesn't matter at all. If they wanted to teach, they went and got a degree after that, and they were everything from a cowboy, who every Wednesday night would ride the bulls and the bronco horses, to others who were really more interested in a lifestyle, say, oh, touchy-feely masseuse, healthy living, and all that kind of stuff; so you had all these extremes together. It was a real nice, interesting combination.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you find a wider spectrum in students than in a university program?

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah. The university program, it boils down unfortunately sometimes to what you can pay, the tuition, or who your parents were. My grandson right now is going through that whole thing. He's ready to go to college. I'm not sure he really wants to, but it's expected. And he's been primed in a private school for it, and so now he has to expose himself in ways to get into the school, whether it's Stanford or whatever, and maybe find out in the end that there are other alternatives if he doesn't make it that way.

We've had to talk about that, because even though he was a good student and had great everything, the competition today-oh my God, it's unbelievable what people are doing with their kids to make them get into the right school, and we've faced up to the fact that he might not get where he wants to go. Then what, right?

Basically it came up, well, there's always college without walls. You make out your own program and you can study with this person, study-you can go to Poland if you're interested in theatre and you can study with Jeff Walaski [ph], or whatever his name is. Or if you're interested in pottery, you can go to Japan to Shigaraki, or you can go anywhere you want and get your education and still make it.

Kathy's sister married a guy who did the university without walls. He's a very successful lawyer in Singapore. So education is not what it's cracked up to be.

MS. RIEDEL: I always think of that Pete Seeger quote, "Don't let your studies interfere with your education."

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, right. That's a good one.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, should we talk about the Scripps Annual [1957-1992 Annual National Ceramics Invitational, Scripps College, Claremont, CA]?

MR. SOLDNER: Okay. I inherited the Scripps Annual; I didn't start it. It was started years before me, I think by Mr. [William] Manker, and then Ricky [Richard] Petterson had continued it, the ceramic part. And when I got it, it was pretty local, and he might go as far up as San Francisco or San Diego with potters showing their work.

MS. RIEDEL: And how was it structured when you took it over?

MR. SOLDNER: Really no structure other than Petterson would invite the people that he wanted to show, and they tended to be the same people year after year, people like Voulkos, when he was available, or Tony [Antonio] Prieto out of Mills College, or Martha Longnecker down in San Diego, or Laura Andreson. It was almost always the best of the locals. And it didn't have any particular structure or you couldn't apply for it. It wasn't competitive. And it was just friends.

When I took it over, I don't even know that I was conscious and aware that it needed a new direction.

MS. RIEDEL: And you took that over late '50s, early '60s?

MR. SOLDNER: Fifty-six.

MS. RIEDEL: Fifty-six.

MR. SOLDNER: Or maybe '57. So I inherited it. And I guess the first year I probably continued to do it pretty much the same way, where I probably invited people or curated it. But I very quickly decided that everything looked alike, and I was in a position that I could make the rules or change the rules, and I decided that-and I can't remember the moment of revelation that this happened, but it evolved anyhow that instead of me inviting people and instead of me curating, I decided to send an open invitation to a gallery owner, a collector, a teacher, an artist, anybody else involved with the arts, not to exhibit, but to give that invitation to somebody who they thought.

Well, there were a few things they had to be able to do: give us five pieces, get it there on time, could never show more than once, and that the person doing the nominating felt secure enough that this person had the potential of contributing to the field, that we could use his name as the curator and usually we did do that. We'd say this was this person, invited by.

So in a way I ended up with a weird situation where if I had 14 vacancies, I'd send out 14 letters, and if I got 14 back, it would be people I'd never heard of usually, totally brand new, and that was the beauty of it. I had 14 one-man jurors canvassing the world and handing out this invitation.

So the work always came in without a focus. It was the opposite; it was random, no focus, and out of that chaos I think we found a more focus than we were getting by each year having a new curator who invites his or her friends and they tend to send what they're interested in. So it gets monotonous, and there's a lot of people complaining about it. I said, why can't it be as exciting as it used to be?

Well, the reason is that now they don't have the-it takes a certain amount of security on my part to allow me to let somebody else make the selection and accept it and not worry about it.

I only got in trouble once or twice. Usually it was over censorship, something that was so outrageous that somebody would challenge it and say, "We can't show that." And I'd say, "Well, we invited these people; we have to show it."

MS. RIEDEL: Can you give us an example?

MR. SOLDNER: Jerry Rothman had a student who one time made some clay vaginas and put them under Plexiglas and pressed them down so that it spread the body part out, and it was very obviously looking at a clit situation, and it would perspire during the thing and ooze and drip and-and they were done quite realistically. So right away Mr. [Millard] Sheets, who really wasn't involved with Scripps anymore but had been originally, raised a stink and tried to get the college to censor it, but the college stuck to their guns and said no. I think that was the worst. Sometimes we'd get work that really didn't involve clay, even early on.

MS. RIEDEL: So that wasn't one of the stipulations?

MR. SOLDNER: I had to face that eventually. That was not originally a problem. Originally everybody was involved with clay, but then one day somebody sent a vase form of broken shards glued together with red, green, blue, yellow oil clay, you know, modeling clay, not real clay, so it wasn't fired. And at some point I had to face up to, well, with this randomness I am giving up control, and it got more and more conceptual and the more conceptual it got, the harder it was for people to get five pieces together because they thought in terms of one big installation.

But I rolled with it. I never entered into, no, we won't do that. I felt sad that it had changed, but it was not-it had taken on a different life, it evolved. So do you mess with evolvement? I didn't. Now that it's 10 years since I did it the last time and since then they've had 10 years of their own method of selecting, which I think it's one reason why this year, next year they've decided to try to not go back to my system but to change and have kind of a celebration of-they're calling it "Under the Influence," and so basically they're inviting as many of my former students as we can remember who are still working to send one piece. It's going to be a mix, a mismatch. I mean, it's just going to be a bunch of stuff, but I'll bet it will have a lot more interesting energy than where it's controlled. I really think so. And where they go after that, I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it sounds like under your direction it got much more international, much more diverse.

MR. SOLDNER: Oh, terribly diverse. And we would stumble onto people you'd never heard of, and years later they're famous. Case in point, if you went to the collection and said, "Do you have an Arneson?" and he said, "Well, yeah, let's look it up." And it would come back with a little tea bowl. Arneson was in the show. Twenty years later, 30 years later it's Bob Arneson. And that reverse was often very true; a flash in the night, I'd say, a meteorite, some young graduate student just finished his degree and hits on some sexy glazes, or something like that and he gets written up and documented and gets invited; he gets a good job; haven't heard from him

ever since. That was it. So it can work both ways.

It was always interesting; sometimes I would ask, like I asked Arneson one time, sent him an invitation. He was well advanced. He was teaching. So I sent him an invitation to invite somebody, and he wasn't the only one; he invited his lover. [Sandra] Shannonhouse.

So the reasons for inviting some people were everything from who they were sleeping with or wanted to, to who they really thought could make a contribution. But I had no control over it. I accepted whatever they sent. Some of them were simply trying to help a kid get started, too, I think, I suspect, or they thought they saw some talent and would continue. I'm sure some did it.

MS. RIEDEL: That is the end of disc two.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Paul Soldner at the artist's home in Claremont, California, on April 27, 2003. This is disc number three.

So shall we talk a bit about your work and its evolution and the different stages it's developed from into, starting perhaps with the tall floor pots and the idea behind this?

MR. SOLDNER: Oh, maybe we need to go back a little farther, because initially I wanted to be a production potter, somebody that would sit by the side of the road and sell pots that they made, sort of an early hippie attitude, but -

MS. RIEDEL: Was this when you were in Colorado still, or before that?

MR. SOLDNER: Well, that was-the germination was beginning. I remember being with my wife one time in Colorado up on top of the one of the mountains, and I wouldn't say I was dissatisfied with my life, but I guess I was at that point not sure what I was going to do. I was still teaching grade school, and I think I was getting dissatisfied with that and wondering what else could I do, and I remember saying, you know, maybe-and I was looking at all the Aspen trees around me, I said, "Maybe I could become a woodcarver and carve salad bowls and forks and spoons and stuff," something that I'd seen in Switzerland when we were over there. It seemed romantic, I guess, and appealing.

So at least there was something working in the back of my mind, I believe, to try to come up with another career, and so that's when I made the decision to become a potter. That's when I looked around for a potter, and Voulkos was the man. He was not the artist. He was a very, very wonderful functional potter winning all the prizes in the country but only pottery.

So he was perfect when I went with him that first semester, and he was good because, first of all, he was now on salary, where at Archie Bray was not on salary; he had to sell everything he made to pay for his living. He also was now a professor in an art school along with other art professors, so there was a peer pressure there. Also we were in Los Angeles, had access to galleries and museums, Japanese town. And I think the move out of Montana to LA for him was very stimulating, and in the end it had to be why he became-why he started altering his work from production.

When I first went with him, he would sit down in the morning and he'd throw 20 bowls, big bowls, and then we'd go have lunch, come back, and they'd be stiff enough that he'd trim them out;production, exactly, and no excuses for it.

But then at the end of the first semester, the beginning of the second semester in '55, almost suddenly his work began to evolve and change and he began, still using the wheel, but not to make production pottery, mostly to make objects that he could manipulate; he could alter them so they were-they might start out round, but they could end up square, and started stacking them together and building more sculptural things. And that's when I got caught up a little bit in that as well. I wasn't pleased with it, I don't think, because I still thought I wanted to be a potter, but you have to have a thesis when you graduate and that was in the back of my mind: what am I going to do?

And one day Pete was throwing some lamp bases, and he would throw the main body of the lamp base and then the next day he would add the little top. And I asked him rather casually, I said, "How many times can you keep adding clay and still keep throwing?" And he said, "I don't know; why don't you try it and see." So I tried. I made a vase probably this tall; it took about seven additions.

MS. RIEDEL: From the floor or the table?

MR. SOLDNER: From the table. It was only about two feet-less than two feet, it was probably 20 inches, and it

took seven different additions and it was really scary, because I had no idea how you fasten new clay onto old clay and how you continue to throw and what do you do with this new shape and all that kind of stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you let it dry out a little bit or firm up a little?

MR. SOLDNER: Not much, no, because it had to stick. It had to-the base would get just stiff enough, not dry, stiff enough that it could take the weight of a new ring of soft clay, and then I have to turn the wheel on and actually throw backwards for a little bit until it got fastened. Then I could pull it on up again, and then I could make decisions about shape.

So that, you know, I got excited about that, and that led to my thesis, which I called extended throwing, or floor pots, and I suppose I made a dozen altogether that last year for my show.

MS. RIEDEL: Did they get progressively thinner at top, too, or were they thicker?

MR. SOLDNER: No, no.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. SOLDNER: In fact, I was not interested in that. Those would be bottle forms, and there was a guy called Sheldon Carey, who taught someplace in Kansas, probably the University of Kansas [Lawrence], who had become famous for making that shape, and the reason he made it was that he-pretty clever-decided that one of the problems with throwing a pot is you're always working against gravity. So he would start his pot on a wheel. Then he had the wheel on a gimbal so he could turn it upside down, and then he could get under it and pull the clay down, which was easy working with gravity. And he became quite famous for a period of time for making these really long, tall, skinny bottles.

Well, I realized Fifty-six I don't think I ever tried it, but I was able to figure it out, that's the only shape you can make. It's like an icicle. It would always come down to this point. So I made a conscious decision to use the ability to add clay but to go in a new direction.

There were other people at the time that were making tall things: Carlton Ball, who was teaching at the University of Southern California [Los Angeles]. He was also making really big pots, like four or five feet, but I became somewhat critical of what he was doing because they were only big; they were blow-ups of a small pot, the same idea, just enlarged. And I thought to myself, well, if I'm going to make these big why not do something new, something different with the shape?

So I would test myself and try and make it come out to end up in a ball or just the opposite of anything I'd seen, which is important in creativity, that you have to let go of the way it's been done before. And sometimes you have to do it the opposite of what you've always been trained in order to break out into a new direction. To the extent that I have done things, like after throwing a vase on a wheel right-side up for years, at one point I decided to close the top and then turn it over later and use that excess clay that was in the bottom to re-form, to make a new shape. Well, that opened up all kinds of possibilities. Then I could make a pot that had a very narrow foot, would swell way out and come in again. There was no way you could throw that; the clay is too-is not strong enough. It's kind of like when you have a big overhang like that, it's like huge breasts; it sags. It needs underpinning.

So I gave up on trying to recreate small ideas, I guess I'd call it, or Carlton Ball's ideas, and try to invent other shapes using that same technique, which was very successful. I entered a show. When I entered the show in Florida at the Emily Lowe Gallery it was a national competition; I got the purchase prize. I'm not sure if there was a first prize but I got the purchase prize, which was $500, in 1950-something, tremendous, and I was an absolutely unknown person.

There was a huge fiasco, a hue and cry about that, because Voulkos was one of the jurors, and he gave me that prize along with-he had other students that were there, John Mason, and he selected everybody; everyone was one of his students. Well, everybody in the country got really pissed, and you can read the letters to the editor about it. And it was so bad that the museum director wouldn't show the piece. He disliked it so much; he thought it was so ugly, so poorly crafted that he wouldn't show it after they gave me the money.

Thirty years later I had a retrospective and happened to travel around the country and ended up one time in that same museum. Now it's a whole new director; he didn't have any idea about that history, so I asked him when I went to the retrospective if he knew anything about it and he said, no, but he was intrigued. He said he was going to look into it. So the next day he said, "I found your piece; it's still in the basement."

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my goodness.

MR. SOLDNER: Louana, in fact, wrote an article in *Ceramics Monthly* ["In Their Own Words: 50 years of Letters to the Editor." *Ceramics Monthly*, Louana M. Lackey. Vol. 51 no. 1, January 2003, pp. 77-83] last fall about that letters-to-the-editor fiasco, through the years of people complaining about everything, and one of them that she pointed out, was that moment when I got that prize and how the director wouldn't show the work. So when that article came out all of a sudden collectors started calling me and saying, "Is that piece still available?" I had to call the gallery, and they said, "No, it's not available; it's in the office now."

MS. RIEDEL: That's a great full circle.

MR. SOLDNER: Well, I continued to do that. That was mostly high-fire. At the same time, with my left hand I was still making pottery. That's when I was teaching at Scripps. And that's what the students wanted to know, and that's what I liked to do.

MS. RIEDEL: So this is the late '50s.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, '56, '57.

So then I was teaching that high-fire, functional pottery and at the same time doing my own exploration and sending-I won several prizes with those tall pots, partly because nobody was doing it, that uniqueness, not because they were great or better than anything, but just because it was new.

MS. RIEDEL: And you had to invent a whole new technique in order to be able to throw them that tall.

MR. SOLDNER: So that continued for about 10 years. I seem to work in 10-year cycles. The first 10 years it was mostly high temperature, cone ten, stoneware with the tall pots as the main focus, but at the same time continued to make and sell lamp bases and covered jars and pitchers and things.

Then there was a visitor showed up one day at school, a Japanese potter. I had a woman in my class, Helen Andreson, who was a sister, I believe, or niece, of Laura Andreson, who was teaching pottery at UCLA. She came to my class and she said, "Well, Paul, I think he's a potter; he doesn't look like one, but Laura said if I could use him today, she didn't need him." And I said, "Well, bring him in."

So she brought this guy in, and he was dressed in black suit and tie and couldn't speak any English, and I spoke no Japanese, but I got a ball of clay and I held it and offered it to him. So he took off his coat and rolled up his sleeves and indicated I should sit down at the wheel, and he sat on the other side and indicated that he wanted me to kick it and make it go faster or shake his head no to slow it down. And so he started throwing, just little sake bottles and little objects that, here I was involved with doing massive stuff, and I thought, "Well, this is some kind of funny potter." And besides, he didn't seem to have much control; he wobbled all over the place.

And I kind of dismissed him. In the afternoon things had dried out enough that they were ready to trim the foot, and he really blew my mind, because instead of putting it back on the wheel and trimming it the way Pete had taught me, he broke off a branch from an orange tree in front of the school and he just used that branch, a broken stub, to kind of make a foot, sort of. Never saw anybody do that and that was terrible. I mean, really it was.

So after he left, I was confused. Why in the world was he here and why did she send him over? But through the weeks following that, I discovered I couldn't keep my eyes off of them. Every time I'd walk past them, it was like they'd reach out and say, hey, look at me. And I couldn't put it together. Eventually I saw Laura and I said, "What in the world was that about?" And she said, "Oh, didn't you know? That was Kaneshige. He's a living national treasure in Japan of Bizen tradition." And I said to myself, and I got him for free?

Well, that influenced my work tremendously, got much, much looser, a lot more exploratory. At almost the same time we had to put on a public demonstration to the public, came to the college, and the art department would go out into the courtyard and do what we normally did, drawing or painting, printmaking. The potters always made pots.

And that year was the year I decided to do something different, and the only thing that I thought about doing differently was I'd read about raku in Bernard Leach's book on raku, and it sounded really intriguing. The story as he told it was that he'd gone to Japan as a painter, as an artist, and at some point became more interested in ceramics in Japan, so he started working with Shoji Hamada. And as often happens, you're invited to a tea ceremony, and he said at one of these there was a potter outside the teahouse who had a little kiln rigged up, and he had some tea bowls that were already fired once-we call it bisque, and he would invite the people coming to the tea ceremony to decorate them. And then while they were inside having their tea, he would quickly fire them, and when they came out, they were finished. So it seemed like, hey, that's something that could be entertaining.

And I decided to do it. So we built a little temporary kiln, at about nine inches in diameter, and started glazing and firing the pots using Leach's glaze formulas, and it was-the work was not very good, but it was sensational to be able to open a kiln when it was red hot, look inside, and even reach in, pull the piece out. And I misunderstood one of his-he said they were quickly cooled, but he didn't say how. So I thought it had to be quickly in water, and we'd run through the crowd with this hot pot to a fishpond and quench it.

MS. RIEDEL: Did they hold up?

MR. SOLDNER: Yes and no.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you have to have a special clay bottom?

MR. SOLDNER: They cracked and the colors were terrible. The cobalt was a bright blue. The copper was an ugly grass green. The clay was sort of a baby-shit yellow. And I couldn't understand why Leach went on and on and on about the subtle beauty of raku, which he did.

MS. RIEDEL: Because these colors were pretty garish?

MR. SOLDNER: Absolutely. However-and they cracked. However, we had to do this for two days, and so overnight I went back to the studio and mixed up a new clay body using Leach's admonition to have 30 percent sand in it, and threw a bunch of little tea bowls, which we quickly bisque-dried out and bisqued overnight, and the next day proceeded to fire them again.

We were outdoors under a pepper tree, and I had the serendipitous hunch that if you don't like something, do something else with it, so instead of going to the pond first, I decided I'm going to roll it around in these pepper leaves and see if that tames it down a little bit and, of course, raku was born, Western style, because now the clay was smoky black and the copper was red and the copper was not so green, much better.

And I got hooked on that, and I was invited to demonstrate it at the Los Angeles fairgrounds, which was I think a three-week or longer-so I was there every day. We built a little kiln, every day could experiment more and more and more.

MS. RIEDEL: So that would have been 1960 or so?

MR. SOLDNER: Mmm, yeah, probably.

Then I realized that I was now more interested in making things small than big. I also had a kind of secret reason for making them small, and that was criticism that people had begun to make in letters to the editor about the disadvantage that they had compared to Western potters, who had bigger kilns and bigger wheels and more power; so there was an unfairness, and I began to think about that and decided they're missing the point; size has nothing to do with it. Historically, Greek pottery, pre-Colombian-most pottery was small.

So I decided to try to enter one of these in a show, and I was pretty sure it wouldn't be accepted because it was not high-fire, it wasn't glazed, it wasn't pretty, but it got first prize.

MS. RIEDEL: Is this the Everson Museum [Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY]?

MR. SOLDNER: Yep.

MS. RIEDEL: In Syracuse. Then this would have been '60?

MR. SOLDNER: That's when I really made the transition to the next 10 years exploring raku and being invited to go around the country to teach it, demonstrate it and make it and exhibit it. And that was a great period.

MS. RIEDEL: This was also when the work became more asymmetrical, no?

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, more lopsided, starting with the Japanese pottery.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SOLDNER: I mean, compared to Voulkos, he was loose. Voulkos was still pretty controlling it.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SOLDNER: His Greek ancestry gave him more of that.

So my work was getting less and less controlled, more and more accepting of the organic, I would say, not so much asymmetrical, because a lot of it was still symmetrical, but the way it would be glazed or not glazed or

smoked or whatever was different. And then that also did lead me to begin to alter the shape and begin to experiment with more asymmetrical, I would say more just casual, looser. I never thought about it like giving up symmetry at that point. I didn't even see it happening.

MS. RIEDEL: The all-new clay bodies, all new glazes, because it had been high-fire.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, you had to open up the clay so it could take the thermal shock. You had to use glazes that were melting at low temperatures. And I had to change from-I only used lead-based clays once. That's what Leach was using. I immediately gave that up because of the toxic problem, and substituted Gerstley borate or colemanite, and developed a whole bunch of low-temperature glazes. There again, the glaze was not terribly important; it was what you did under it, to it, and how you reduced it, smoked it or oxidized it later that made it different. So it was no longer important to be glazed, and it was no longer important that it hold water. It was no longer to be anything other than what I wanted it to be. So it began to become more and more sculptural.

When I had my retrospective [*Paul Soldner: A Retrospective*. Scripps College. Claremont, CA, 1991], I discovered without even knowing it that the foot began to get smaller, and the body of the pot that I used to decorate with figures and so forth got so tiny that there was no room, and the top kept getting bigger and bigger till finally I realized one day, I'm not making pottery; I'm making sculpture.

So the next 10 years was let go of the raku and connected with that, was another accident, where I fired my work in my bisque one time in the presence of salt vapors from a salt kiln and everything turned orange or yellow; wasn't supposed to. And at first I thought it was a mistake, but later I thought more about it and thought I could use that. So I then developed a whole new direction I called low-salt fuming that shouldn't even work. According to the books, salt glazing, which is a high temperature, would have no effect at low temperature, but I discovered, I guess by experimentation, that that wasn't necessarily true if you're not glazing. I wasn't glazing these pieces.

Then if I put the salt directly in the flame instead of inside the kiln, it would volatilize and it would affect the raw clay without going to high temperature, so here was a new technique to explore, taking advantage of the colors, which were now more sensual, and gave up on the black raku and continued doing that for another 10 years.

And the work got pretty well known, won some prizes on it, was exhibiting and selling, and so pretty much all history.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs] That was definitely the nutshell version of it.

Do you want to take a break for today and go into more detail tomorrow? Okay, so we'll end now. This is disk three, the end of session one and we'll pick up again tomorrow.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Paul Soldner at one of the artist's homes in Claremont, California, on April 28, 2003, for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution, and this is disc number three, the middle of, session number two.

And we were saying that we just finished up raku yesterday, so we're going to move into the next stage of your work.

MR. SOLDNER: But before we leave the raku completely, I think it's important to say how important the accidents have been in my development. One, of course, was accidentally discovering Western-style raku, which I talked about, but it was not an intention; it was nothing that had been taught; it was nothing that I could really read about; so in a way that was an accident.

And then that opened up other accidents. The discovery that you could make copper red glazes at low temperature, now that's been done by Persians in somewhat similar way by reducing copper at low temperature; but they were always more after a luster or-yeah, I guess it was just the luster, and I think the accident that I discovered from my interest in raku is how you could make a copper red glaze through low-fire smoking after the piece-after the glaze has melted and pulled out of the kiln, Western-style raku, and smoke it and, if you do it quick enough, and that's the important thing; it has to be within a split second, otherwise it will go green. You have to get it out of the kiln and into the smoking chamber to produce the reds.

Also the so-called halo, or that's what I called it, a lot of people called it ghost image. They have some other images, I forget what, but it's a white line that sometimes would develop around some of the calligraphy, where I would be embellishing the piece with calligraphy.

And calligraphy was mostly a stain, a copper or an iron, and at some point after I finished a piece and pulled it

out of the smoking chamber, there were little white lines around all the decoration, which I didn't put there. So that was strictly an accident. And I thought I could figure out why and maybe even repeat that over and over and use it, but it was very elusive. I didn't discover what caused it probably for 15 to 20, years and before that it was always just happenstance. Sometimes it would be two, three years between happening.

[END TAPE TWO SIDE B.]

So that's a good example of something that happens accidentally, and then you can learn from it and turn it to a little more positive approach.

In a certain sense I mentioned a little fire salt fuming yesterday, and that too was an accident. If you can recall, I think I said on the tape by trying to utilize waste heat coming out of a salt kiln to bisque-fire a secondary kiln. That worked all right, but also it discolored or colored all the bisqueware in ways that I'd never seen before. And that intrigued me, particularly yellow or orange colors that seemed to be produced from the combinations of salt and reduction firing and probably an oxidation or reoxidation after it was all finished. Sometimes following that trail, trying to figure it all out, I would go up the wrong way, and I, for example, would try hard to reduce the pot really hard, and all it would be would be to turn black.

One time I had an exhibit in Nagoya in Japan, and I was interested in showing them a little bit about raku, and specifically the halo, but I could not make it work. And after several days of futile trying, I almost gave up, except I couldn't sleep that night, and I woke up almost with the subconscious solution to my problem.

In Japan, they didn't have the metal garbage cans in which we could reduce the work; all they had were plastic, and I couldn't use plastic, so I decided to make my own cans. I found a 55-gallon oil drum, and I hack-sawed it in half, very carefully made a nice clean cut, and then I found a roadside metal highway sign that I could use as a lid. But I could not make the halo appear until I really thought a lot about it, I guess, and subconsciously said, well, what's different about how I do it in the United States when it does work and it's not working here, and all I could come up with is all my cans in the United States were old beat-up cans that didn't have a tight lid, and that therefore my problem was using the oil drum with the road sign that was too tight and I needed to get some oxygen back in there to reoxidize the halo.

I still can't explain how it works, not scientifically. Some scientist tried to tell me one time, but he lost me with all kinds of formulas and things, but he didn't make it either, so whatever I do by trial and error seems to be better than-I learn better from that than I do from analyzing.

Even Dan Rhodes tried to analyze it one time. He had a theory that there was some fluxes that were migrating to the side of the decoration, which would resist smoking, but when I tried that, as he suggested, it didn't work either.

It was many years later that I realized it had nothing to do with the smoking of the pot and had everything to do with letting oxygen get back into the smoking chamber so it could burn off or oxidize the carbon around the decoration. Once I knew that, then I could show other people and teach them how to do it.

So I'm sure there were other accidents along the way that I've learned from, and many of them are almost serendipitous. I know, for example, when I was trying to make a clay mixer, I reached that point where I had to think about how, as the clay is being mixed, it would be scraped away from the tub, from the side of the tub, and all scraper bars I'd ever seen were flat, with a sharp edge to actually scrape away. And I think I tried that, but it didn't work. And I don't know why I decided to try just using a round bar, because a round bar is not thought of as a scraper, but for some reason I decided to try it, and it worked really well.

Years later I learned that it worked because I'd stumbled onto using something called a Coanda effect [the effect that indicates that fluid tends to flow along a surface, rather than through free space], which is a law of physics. I can't remember the description of the law, but it has to do with a liquid moving across a round surface will tend to cling to it. Therefore teapots drip if the surface of the spout is too round and too smooth, and the only way you can prevent that is to break that roundness either with a-I mean, your grandma used butter underneath the lip, or when you make the piece, make sure you don't glaze that so it's nice and smooth and round. But that was a serendipitous discovery; I was not looking for it.

Other serendipitous events that happened that I wasn't looking for but were important was when I decided to make my clay mixer tub out of concrete; everybody thought that was stupid, because the concrete would-they theorized the concrete would wear off and you'd get lime or calcium from the cement and your clay body would ruin everything. Well, after 30-some years I haven't had any complaints, so I guess it's another thing you learn working with accidents, is don't make a problem that doesn't exist. Don't worry about something that might go wrong, because until it's proven, it's an unknown thing.

The serendipitous event of using a concrete tub, I was using a tub because it was heavy and I thought that it

was cheaper to manufacture than metal. I had no way of forming big metal tubs. And I thought it wouldn't rust, which would be important, and the fact that it was heavy, there would be some centrifugal assistance whenever it hit a big chunk of clay the centrifugal-or not centrifugal but the-yeah, I guess it would be the centrifugal force of the heavy machine rotating would carry it through that blockage, which turned out to be right. But what I wasn't looking for and was pleased to discover was that when the concrete got wet after mixing clay, unlike metal tubs, the concrete tub would begin to strip the clay away from the round bar, from the plough bar, and so there without even knowing what I was doing, I had something to boast about, that this was a self-cleaning tub, or almost so.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like your inventions have gone hand-in-hand with your own work. I mean, you constantly have been inventing, and you've got seven patents, I think, for different mixers and kilns and wheels.

MR. SOLDNER: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: But you've always been a proponent of the low-tech, too, as opposed to the high-tech, and that's an interesting combination.

MR. SOLDNER: Well, I guess the reason is that through my experience with equipment I've discovered the high-tech equipment is too touchy, too sensitive to be around constant use. They're okay maybe the first couple years, but if they break down, there's not much you can do about it either. If it's high-tech, nobody knows how to repair it. It's kind of like a pipe organ. I saw a pipe organ-a Wurlitzer pipe organ-that had been converted to electronic keys instead of pneumatic and theoretically that was going to make it quicker and more responsive. But nobody knew how to maintain it, so when a transistor would go bad, that whole part of the organ was unworkable.

And I have definitely strong feelings that the simpler the solution is, the longer it will function and probably with less headaches and less frustration.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you think that came out of your early travels? I know in 1963 you worked in the Peace Corps in Puerto Rico, I think, developing kilns that were going to-they could build with local materials and fire locally. Was that the catalyst for -

MR. SOLDNER: No, I think I was on that before then. That may have been the reason they asked me, because they knew that these volunteers would be going into Third-World countries, where they'd have to-they didn't have high-tech equipment to work with; they had to work with whatever they could almost make themselves, and that included how to heat the equipment, the kilns, so that I think I was invited at that point because I'd already established in writing, in printed articles, ideas about how to make kilns simply, how to make burners with minimum equipment, how to -

MS. RIEDEL: You'd written the kiln booklet already, yeah? [Paul Soldner. *Kilns and Their Construction*. New York: American Craft Council, 1965.]

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, right. And there again, when you write about something like a kiln, you can get really technical and really get involved with all sorts of theory, but the bottom line is, what's the minimum that will work, what's the minimum of design, and that's what I call low-tech technology.

It's funny how sometimes people don't even see in front of them solutions, and it may be something they should be aware of, but somehow or other we tend to overlook them. For example, Kathy Koop, my friend, was teaching clay in a small college back in Pennsylvania, Westminster College [New Wilmington, PA], and she was telling me that students were having such a hard time, they just couldn't get it how to center clay, and it was so frustrating that they would end up quitting the class or they'd cry and whine a lot.

So I said, "Well, you know, let's think about it. Where do they get the clay? Do they make it themselves?" And she said, "Oh no. Although we had a clay mixer, the students always went to the bookstore and got packaged clay that was premixed." It was simpler for them to just go buy a package. And I said, "I think I know the problem." When they manufactured, made that clay, you force it through some machinery called an extruder that compacted the clay really tight, and then you also put a suction line on it to suck any air out of it, which you might say theoretically would be to your advantage to get rid of air in the clay. But for a beginner, the clay is so resistive they don't have the skill or the muscle to make it move, so they get frustrated. It won't center or they can't center it. Now, I could sit down at the wheel and I could center it, but first I would loosen up the clay by heavy wedging. Once I realized what the problem was, it was too much high technology mixing their clay, I told Kathy, I said, "Well, why don't you have your students go get a box of clay, but before they use it, take it out, throw it in your little mixer and also add any scrap clay they may have accumulated, and I'll bet you that that clay will be movable, and it will open up and when they press on it, it will go somewhere." She did, and sure enough, that was the solution.

She said within days, people who had been frustrated all of a sudden were happy that the clay was moving, and they understood what throwing meant; throwing meant moving the clay from a solid to a hollow, then forming it. But it took that detached observation on my part to help solve a very-what seemed like very clear problem, but something most people overlooked. And they still do. Whenever I do workshops, I always insist that the clay that I'm going to be using not only be my formula but that it not be de-aired or pugged in a pug mill, because that makes it too stiff, even for me as an advanced, experienced potter, to really control.

I don't know where else I was going with that.

MS. RIEDEL: You've traveled so much and you've done so many workshops. Shall we talk a little bit about how that's influenced your work, because I know that variety and those limitations imposed by being in different studios with different bodies under different conditions is something you've really been able to capitalize on and work with, which is not always common. You've done, I think you said before, 400 workshops the last time you counted, and that was 10 years ago.

MR. SOLDNER: Well, that was 10 years ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, and all over the world, from Switzerland to Nicaragua, Japan, Hawaii.

MR. SOLDNER: Well, sometimes you can learn from traveling and observing other people working and their solutions. When I was in Nicaragua, for example, I was amazed at how the potters could make basically a huge salad bowl or a punchbowl, maybe 20 inches across, out of the local clay and fire it in about 10 minutes, 20 minutes at the most, with just grass and brush. If I'd done that, it would have blown up, but it caused me to question how could they do it, what was different, and then I discovered it was as simple as having a minimum of clay and a lot more sand. You could also use straw, but by opening up the clay, you could fire it quickly, and it could take thermal shock, and any moisture left in there could be driven off more easily than if it had been a real dense manufactured clay, as a good example.

Also one time I was visiting an Appalachian potter by name of Cheever Meaders. He was well-known as one of the last of the early American potters. And he was using simple equipment, like a donkey going around in a circle, to mix his clay, pulling a log or something behind it. His kiln was not anything like our modern kilns, but it functioned and it was what we call a-not a beehive, I want to say hog kiln, but anyhow it was half underground, which he had built himself, and he'd learned it from his grandfather. He never went to college or school to learn these things, but it worked.

He also had a clay grinder, a glaze grinder, not for clay, for glaze, made of granite, a big granite block that had slightly hollowed out, and a corresponding male piece of granite with the same curve as the inside of the female curve could be-you could put your rocks, crushed rocks in there and add some water and then start moving-it was like a huge oversized mortar and pestle, but because it was so big, it ground up a lot of glaze all at once.

He also had a really nice low-tech method of breaking up the rock. He would find a rock in the river, and he knew that it was feldspathic or something that he could use to make a glaze, but how do you break it? If you hit it with a hammer, it flies all over the place, so he invented a low-tech method of using a piece of pipe, dropping the clay down into the hollow pipe, then taking another pipe that fit inside of that with a cap on the end and just pound the two together. Well, every time he hit the rock it couldn't scatter, because it was inside of the pipe, so he could just keep hitting it until it was pulverized. It was an amazing thing.

I also learned from him how to make your own cones. Now, most potters, when they fire a kiln, have to know exactly what temperature to use, so there are different ways of figuring that out. The most common is to use a piece of clay in the shape of a cone that's designed and calculated and guaranteed to melt at a specific temperature.

MS. RIEDEL: Pyrometric cone.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah. So this hillbilly didn't have access to that, but he had cones and they didn't look like regular cones. They weren't cone-shaped; they were more like your finger with arthritis and knobby. And he had some blue ones and some yellow ones and some green ones.

So I asked him, I said, "Where did you get those cones?" And he said, "I made them." So I thought, yeah, well that must be possible. And I asked him how he did it, and he said, "Oh, I just take the glaze" that he's interested in testing and dries it up with a little ball of clay and makes a cone. So, of course, when it got hot enough and the glaze needed to melt, since the cone was made of glaze, it would melt. It was that simple.

I think I've seen other solutions by traveling that have influenced my work or my ideas about equipment or materials, so many that it's hard to even put your finger on them, but the low-tech ones are the ones that have always appealed to me. One of them I recall learning about was how to make jewelry by melting brass or silver

or gold with a torch, with an oxygen acetylene torch directly on the metal, on the surface of the metal, and then after it became liquid, you could pour it into a mold that you had made in a casement with a ring or whatever it was inside. But in order to get it to really go into it-because the surface tension of hot metal is such that it won't flow easily; it tends to just freeze halfway down into the mold, but I learned a technique from an old dentist who used to cast gold teeth in a bucket centrifuge. Nowadays centrifuges are, you know, commercially made and they work well, but you don't really need one. If you understand the concept, you can take a bucket and tie a rope on the handle and pour your metal into the investment and pick up the bucket quickly and sling it around in a circle, which is the same thing as a commercial centrifuge. The force drives the metal into the cavity.

MS. RIEDEL: I think there's a photo of you doing this, spinning something.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, there's a movie.

Also there's another simple way that dentists used to use, and that's using steam. Now, steam is powerful, and it used to drive locomotives and battleships, and it's still used to run generators to make electricity. There is a way to cast jewelry. Instead of slinging the hot metal with a bucket or with a centrifuge, you simply cap it with a tin can, a tuna can will work, and a little wet paper towel in the top of it, so when you clamp down on the molten metal, the water and the paper towel turns to steam and the steam immediately drives or forces the metal into the cavity, just like a centrifuge would do.

MS. RIEDEL: Probably not many people know that you've actually also made jewelry.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, well, why not? I also make prints. MS. RIEDEL: And now furniture. MR. SOLDNER: When people are-and when they're amazed, I say, "Well, look, I went to art school."

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like there is a real appreciation of the low-tech that just runs through your life and your work. Do you think there's any correlation between that and growing up in a Mennonite community, an appreciation for low-tech ingenuity, no?

MR. SOLDNER: I don't think so. I don't think so. My father, who was a Mennonite, really had no concept of how things were. He was a gardener. I think underneath all of this is something I've evolved, a belief that if anyone can understand how something works, in other words the concept, then you don't need rules and you can make your own.

So whenever I designed a kiln, for example, I'd say, what is the concept, not, what does it look like or how it should be done, what's the best way. First I say, what is a kiln, and reduce it down to its basics. I would say, well, a kiln is just a box or a container to accumulate heat in order to melt a glaze, and it has to be built of something that won't melt down or burn up. So about the only thing left is make it out of clay products. You can throw a kiln if you want to. You can make bricks from clay or you can buy bricks or you can ram clay into molds, but first you have to understand the concept of what is a kiln in order to appreciate the need to use certain materials.

Connected with that is when you begin thinking about how do you bridge the gap between two walls, what kind of lid can you put over it. Well, the lid can't be made of metal and it can't be made of wood. It can't be made of anything that's going to melt or burn, so you're stuck again with clay and how do you bridge clay. You can almost look at the history of architecture and discover how other people have done it and then apply that to modern design.

Early on, people used corbelled arches, which could not stand very long or big distances, but at least it was a beginning. And you could make a small kiln by simply stair-stepping bricks one over the other. I discovered if you made it round, you could make a big kiln, but you couldn't make a square kiln very big, because the tendency is for the walls to fall in on themselves as you built it.

Also history taught us that the Romans discovered and perfected the arch, the so-called Roman arch, with the keystone that, once the weight of the walls were contained in a very massive exterior wall, then the Roman arch could support the weight of the roof.

Later, the Gothic architects discovered they didn't have to have the massive weight of the wall; they could have flying buttresses that would do the same thing, and they could even pierce them and make them elegant. It still provided the strength that a massive wall would do and which was needed to contain the thrust of the heavy roof. In modern times we still build kilns that way, but we use steel bands, kind of like a corset, to contain that thrust.

And then later, architects learned about-like [Antonio] Gaudi-the simplicity of catenary arches, and most of his church constructions are catenary designs. And the beauty of the catenary is that it does not require massive walls, and it doesn't require steel to hold it in place, because all the weight of the roof is turned through the shape of the catenary down into the ground where the ground's not going to move, so that makes it simpler.

But you have to know these things to appreciate how you can use them, and I guess you can always find out about them in books. All my life I've been interested in men's magazines that explain how things work or how to build things, everything from, oh, photographic equipment-the first strobe light I ever used was one I made from drawings or plans in a mechanics or in a photo magazine.

But there is something not everybody seems to share, and that's the curiosity about how it works and also what I call a kind of a latent or not naïve understanding of structure. A good example of people who get frustrated, who don't understand structure, are students in a clay class, and they have a wonderful idea to manufacture, to make something that's going to stand out in space and be real thin and, of course, it will collapse, and they're confused; they don't know why. And you say, "Well, it needs to be structured." That doesn't help them either. Not everybody gets it. You can go through and illustrate the importance of a buttress, for example, to support a cantilever, or you can explain-you can explain how to make anything work, but not everybody gets it.

I hate to say it, because it sounds elitist and I don't mean it at all, but I don't think we're all born equal. I think some people are born with, maybe it's in their DNA, what do you call it, a chromosome that you've inherited that gives you that understanding that somebody doesn't have that.

I've wondered a little bit about myself. Now, I was told that my great-grandfather on one side was an excellent woodworker, and, in fact, I have I guess they call them highboy, a desk, a highboy that he built and I inherited. It had to be built in the 1800s, before a lot of power tools, and yet it's exquisitely built, with dovetailed joints and fits so tightly that even though it was built back in Ohio and now it's in Colorado where it's really dry, things still fit really tight. His hobby was building pipe organs, and he made the pipes himself, some of them metal, some of them wood. These were small pipe organs for the room.

So if that guy had that sort of understanding of how things work, maybe I got it. My dad didn't have it. Now, I don't know where it comes from.

MS. RIEDEL: Skipped a generation.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah. I've also got his bald head.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you speak a little bit about what you found unique about clay and specifically its expressive ability?

MR. SOLDNER: Well, there's no other material that I know of that will do as much as clay. First of all, it's truly plastic. By that, I mean most plastics that we refer to as plastic like dishpans and so forth, the garbage cans, to form them you have to heat up and melt plastic and then push it into a cavity where it cools, and then it's no longer plastic, even though we call it plastic. But clay has the unusual property of being movable, stretchable, shrinkable, plastic, even when it's cold.

Clay can also be glued together without any other glue, by itself, just with a little water and a little slip, a little clay and some pressure, you can join a teapot spout onto the side of a teapot and with skill-not everybody can do it the first time-but with skill, it will be there forever.

It also has the unique property of reflecting or accepting anything you do to it in the way of marks, scratches, impressions. Sometimes trying to tell students where they can find clay, they want to know how can you recognize clay. I say, "Well, one of the first things is if you are on a new highway that's just been cut, if there is a clay bank that the bulldozer cut through, there will be a mirror image of the blade that cut through that clay bank. It will be hard and it will be smooth just like the blade. If there was a nick in the blade that also will show." And I don't know of many other materials that will take an impression that easily. Sure, you can heat up metal and forge it and pound it, but again to make it plastic and to accept that, it has to be super hot, whereas clay can do it on a cold side.

And, of course, clay is the one material that will outlast all others, because in the firing, the process that we call rusting has already taken place. In the process it's been oxidized, which is what oxidation, or what rusting results from. So unlike metal that continues to deteriorate through the life of the metal-well, shortens the life of the metal-once clay is fired, it can exist for centuries without further deterioration, especially if it's been fired hard or high, high temperature, where it can resist moisture and ice coming into it.

At low temperature then it's not so strong, because moisture can be absorbed, and then when it gets too cold, that can freeze and expand, and that can break the piece, but if it's clay that's been tempered, is one word that is often used, and fired to the proper temperature, it should never become altered just from time.

And, of course, there are so many different ways you can work with clay. You can make a liquid out of it, pour it in a mold. You can make it semi-solid, put it on a potter's wheel and form open vessels and closed vessels. You can carve it. You can sand it. You can pull it.

MS. RIEDEL: Extrude it.

MR. SOLDNER: You can extrude it, obviously, taking advantage of its plasticity to stay together while you're pushing it through a die, in a cold sense again. You can do that same thing with metal, but it has to be red hot to form it.

So those are the things that I've enjoyed. In addition, you can make it waterproof. If you heat it up high enough, you can make it beautiful with glazes that can be colored and they will last almost forever.

Some of the best examples of how clay has survived, of course, are, like in China, those tombs where the soldiers are all lined up, hundreds of them, and they've been underground for many, many centuries, or almost any geological dig will turn up clay, what we call shards, that maybe broke, the pot was broken somehow or other but the pieces are still-you can find the decoration on them that was there in the beginning.

I have a handle from an amphora that was buried in the Mediterranean Sea for I don't know how many-this is probably from the Roman period. And the fingerprint of the potter is clearly visible in the clay handle today, 2,000 years later.

MS. RIEDEL: I have some small shards that I found in a ploughed field in Peru that are clearly parts of anthropomorphic pots.

MR. SOLDNER: A lot of the modern Third World potters like-let's see if I can remember their names-the Ortiz family, they did not learn originally by a tradition being passed down to them. They discovered these shards in the fields, and a few of them were intelligent enough to realize what they were looking at, to analyze it and without scientific instruments reproduce it, and now we have modern pottery made extremely beautiful. It's traditional only in the sense that it's low-fire and uses slips instead of glazes, but they self-taught them, taught themselves just from looking at these shards and figuring out that, oh yeah, it must be from that mountain over there. That must be from a riverbed down there.

So it's possible to rediscover, I guess, reinvent anything. It's nice if the information is handed on down through a succession of years, through people and books and movies and stuff like that, but it isn't absolutely the only way. I think the human brain, as long as they exist on the earth, will continue to analyze and discover and experiment and make stuff.

Isn't that the definition of art?

MS. RIEDEL: Making stuff.

MR. SOLDNER: Making stuff. Now, I know you have to add some other things to it; like Rene D'Harnoncourt, years ago, from the Museum of Modern Art, was addressing an American Craft Conference in New York City, Columbia University, and in his keynote speech he obviously was trying to make all the craftspeople feel important, so he tried to describe craft. And if I remember it right, he said it was a handmade object imbued with art. No, he went for a handmade functional object imbued with art or aesthetics. Well, that made everybody in the audience feel pretty good. It never solved the problem of what is craft.

When I was growing up and we debated all those things, we used to say, "Well, a good craftsman was somebody who can make something by hand to look like it was made by a machine," and I think that's still one of the best definitions, although there have been many, many other definitions of what's a craftsman.

It gets muddled, because we use the term not just for clay. We have woodworkers. We have carpenters. We have electricians, plumbers, all who have to learn their craft. To me, the big difference between that kind of craft and craftsmanship and art or artists-artists also have to know how things are going to be made, but in order to pass the exam to become a plumber, a licensed plumber, a licensed carpenter, you have to learn how it's supposed to be done over and over and over again. Given a blueprint by an architect, the whole outside look of it may be unique or different from the next one, but inside the two-by-fours, the studs, the rafters, all that, there's a right way to do it. Those are true craftsmen. They have understood the craft. And the same thing would be true with a plumber and an electrician. Once they've passed their exams, they don't vary very often.

Maybe there will be a maverick that will figure out another direction, but by and large the difference is that an artist needs the craft skills to manipulate the clay, to mix the glazes, mix the oil, maybe make his brushes, how to use it to put it on the canvas. That's the craftsmanship part of it. But then what makes it art, I think, is the difference, instead of knowing how it has to be done, the artist is interested in finding a new way. He wants to discover another way. He's not interested in repeating each piece he makes, making it again exactly like the other one. That's what a craftsman does.

[END TAPE 3 SIDE A.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Paul Soldner at the artist's home in Claremont, California, on April 28, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is session number two, disc number four, total.

And I thought we could talk about a really wonderful, important little pot you made in 1982, which you always have mentioned as really changed in your work, which changed the proportion, changed a lot of -

MR. SOLDNER: Well, before that moment I was interested in pottery, and to me a pot had-consisted basically of a round form that was thrown on a wheel, could be oblong or could be round, and it also usually had a foot and/or a rim, which were not as significant in size as the belly of the pot. And the belly of the pot was useful and fun to embellish or to decorate either with calligraphy, or I like to use stencils a lot, and stains over it. It didn't make any difference what was there; it was like a canvas.

And I guess it was in 1980, was that the date?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, '80 or '82 I think.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, '80 or '82.

MS. RIEDEL: And I don't know if you want to talk a little about your earlier work before that, the stenciled pieces and the wall platters.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, I could. The stenciled pieces that I was making and wall platters that had sometimes a stencil design on it or sometimes a bas-relief from a template, but it would still be a silhouette of, usually, an object or a person, but it always required space to stencil or to imprint.

And I guess I was stuck with the figures for years, partly because I enjoyed them and partly because I thought they might have some meaning, in that they reflected a lot about our life and our culture, because most of the images came from magazines about our culture and our life or from things around me, people who use, like, doormats or milk cartons, plastic containers that I could press into the clay and make an impression. But it always required a big area without any other purpose or function.

And without knowing it, however, that surface that I enjoyed embellishing got smaller and smaller and smaller as the foot got bigger and bigger, and the top in particular became more dominant, until one time when I was doing a workshop in Peters Valley, New Jersey [Peters Valley Craft Education Center, Layton, NJ], I made a little-I thought it was a pot. I threw it and then I added a top and I added a bottom, and at the last minute I realized that I had worked myself into the corner, so to speak, in that the belly was no longer big enough to do anything to, because the top had become dominant, and the bottom-and the realization was that I was in a very slow evolution from making pottery to making sculpture.

Now, I continued to make pottery after that, but it became more clear to me when I was making it that it was a pot, or it was a piece of sculpture.

The difference is hard to define, except in the sculptural sense, it's a complex shape in three dimensions. I know that sounds like a screwdriver.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs] Well, the texture became more important and the negative space, color even more so.

MR. SOLDNER: Right. Yeah, all that other stuff, so that if you look at my retrospective, it's pretty evident that at some point I let go of more and more and more of the decorative aspects and involved myself more and more with the sculptural qualities. And like most of my growth, it was a very slow, unconscious evolution, simply following my nose.

You know, Hamada, years ago, when he came to this country and he was part of a group called Mingei Artists, taught us one thing that I still think is important and not universally appreciated or recognized, I think, and that is the necessity for each artist to find their own way. Sure, we can go to school and be taught. We can look at magazines and learn. But in the end, if the work is going to be unique enough to be yours, it's not going to look like anybody else's. And I think that's what they meant in finding your own way.

They also are probably referring to the skill required and the sensitivity, the aesthetic understanding, which doesn't come quickly and easily; it comes with time, observation, repetition, the experimentation.

When you look at a tea bowl, for example, you can look at it and say, well, it's just a bowl to hold tea, period; that's the only reason it exists. But if somehow or other the person making it was able to imbue other qualities, aesthetic qualities that others recognize, then I think it becomes an art object, not just a tea bowl.

And it's confusing sometimes to beginners to understand what makes that bowl a really unusual tea bowl,

because sometimes when they look at it and all they see is a rough surface, I mean a blemished surface or even a crack running down through it, and they're confused as why it's worth $50,000, and, of course, the problem is they have not grown their own aesthetic appreciation, understanding of what makes that tea bowl different from an ordinary tea cup. They're both made of the same material, but one transcends the making and the material and all of that and gets recognized by a tea master as being aesthetic or an art object, more worthy of protecting and only using for special events like a tea ceremony than commonplace in the kitchen.

There I go sounding like a preacher again.

MS. RIEDEL: There's a moment when you were making platters and they stopped being for the table and they went on the wall. Was that at all related, or what was that about?

MR. SOLDNER: I suppose, you know, what's related, again, is the evolution, the process of evolving from one place to the other. Initially, I guess because I thought I was a potter, if I was thinking of a bowl or a round object, especially if it was thrown on a wheel, it always had that bowl shape. When I started making slabs or slumping slabs into a hole in the ground, then when they'd dry out, they'd have a curvature so they could hold the bananas or the mayo. They weren't really functional in the sense of anything else, but I still thought of them, I guess, as bowls.

At some point I challenged myself on that and said, well, look, after I made them hopefully they're interesting enough to put a hook on them and hang them on the wall, kind of like a painting. So I challenged myself, then why do you make them like a bowl? It's not going to hold anything. Why not go like a painter and make it two-dimensional onto the wall? You can still texture it, and you can still build out of it, but why do we hang onto an object, the making of an object, forever, when its function may cease to exist?

I have to even say that in a critical sense of someone as sensitive as Peter Voulkos, who made wall pieces, but they're basically bowls. I don't think I've ever seen him make just a flat wall piece. He would always throw a big bowl, and he'd deconstruct it and reconstruct it, but it had more bowl shape. And I never asked him about that, and I was a little intimidated to question him anyhow, but now that I realize that, I look around at people who are still making wall pieces, and they're mostly pots that they have a hollow thing to them and they hang them, on the wall and call them wall pieces.

I would think that somewhere down the line some art critic would pick up on that and question it, but they don't seem to. Since I don't like to think of myself as an art critic, I'm not going to do that myself, but it allows me, then, the freedom to know the difference between a bowl and a wall piece, and I think there is a difference.

So there is a lot of confusion, has been a lot of confusion in pottery, especially when, after Voulkos freed us from the pot form per se, then people misunderstood his altering the round shape by padding, by carving, by adding on, by tearing it apart, and they misunderstood that that was a constructive direction, as against destructive, but they always called it destructive, so it was just, one of my friends used to say, just goofed up.

I had the same problem when I was starting to teach people how I make raku and I foolishly said, trying to define raku, that I thought it sometimes had to do with spontaneity, had to do with happy accidents, had to do with the unexpected, and that got me in a lot of problems, because people would shove a pot off the edge of the wheel, pick it up and say, hey, it's raku, or now it's sculpture, when, in fact, you can't make sculpture without thought, and that was a very difficult time for me.

I think it might have been one of the reasons why I lost interest in raku, because it can become-it lost its original meaning in terms of symbolism and subtleties of the tea ceremony, and it became very commercial, became glitzy, highly decorative, mostly sold only to go with the couches and the drapes, and it became a moneymaking way of working.

The only thing retained, that has been retained that I thought was important in the beginning, was the use of, with beginners, to let them understand what fire is about and how glazes melt and how pieces get fired. It was and still is useful that way. Many, many teachers tell me that's the fastest way for them to get the point across, what pottery or what clay can be and what it can do. But it has to be something you can almost see and smell, and the raku is an excellent way to do that, because it happens so quickly.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

You really started with an emphasis on pottery, we talked about, and then it evolved to more of an interest in sculpture. How have your thoughts about the vessel changed?

MR. SOLDNER: I remember Voulkos making a major change with the vessel. One day two women came over from the Chouinard Art Institute, potters, and they were gorgeous, and, of course, as soon as they walked in, our eyes all got big and Pete talked with them a little bit and they said, "Mr. Voulkos, would you throw a big tall pot

for us? We hear that you can throw really tall, beautiful pots." So he said, "Oh sure."

And he cut some clay out and he threw a big, tall pot. At the time he made it like he'd been making pottery up in Montana, where at the top, when it came across, he added I guess you'd call it, a neck or a spout, but it came up. It was part of his thesis, you know. His thesis was exploring tops, lids and tops and spouts, so this was a very Greeklike form, then, with ending up with a little Greek top. It probably wasn't important whether you could put wheat in it or not, because it was beyond function.

And when he finished, the girls were satisfied and he asked them if they'd like some coffee. So while we were sitting around kibitzing, I noticed he kept looking at that pot that he'd just finished. It was still on the wheel. And when the girls left, he surprised me by going to another wheel and throwing four more spouts, which he connected around the one he'd already put on there, almost like candles on a cake, and I thought what the hell is he doing? And they were still Greeklike spouts.

He went farther with it. The clay was still soft enough that he turned the wheel on, and as it rotated, he made some indentations about a third of the way from the bottom and two-thirds of the way from the top, destroying the roundness that he'd just thrown, and I thought, why is he doing that?

He didn't say anything. Later that pot was exhibited, and he jokingly called it-titled it *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* [1955], which was a popular movie at the time, but with all those little penises hanging on the top. Interestingly enough, that then was picked up by many, many, potters and for a while everybody was throwing a closed form with a little spout coming off the top and a little flare out, kind of like a Greek top. It got so ridiculously small sometimes that Carlton Ball challenged that openly and said that we should adopt some rules that if you can't put a pencil down through the opening, it should be rejected. Of course, Pete laughed at that and said, well, I can close it up if I want to.

He did go even farther, and that was after he started experimenting with adding extra parts. Initially they were thrown, and they were almost like parts of the bottle, but then he would begin to break off that round part that he just threw. He realized that in order to go farther with this than a pot, he had to go farther and partly it was to destroy the controlled throwing that he could do so well. That's one of the things that was a genius.

The same thing when he began to take a round thrown object and paddle it or drop it or hit it with a meat cleaver. He wasn't just adding texture; he was getting involved with form and shape, and he was headed towards sculpture. It's very clear now to look back on that, and you can see how he got into sculpture from the pot.

I still like pots. I love them and I like to make them. I often challenge my students who want to make pottery; I say, "Well, make it at least as good as it's ever been done before, or better. Don't settle for anything less." But I'm not sure they all understood what I meant.

MS. RIEDEL: It makes me think of something you'd said; I think it was something you'd said to the students about don't be afraid to take something farther than you think it might go, just to push it beyond.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, I think-I'd say-yeah, I'm glad I said that. That is important.

We are so afraid to go farther. Of course, if you want to get off of ceramics into philosophy and so forth, I think fear and guilt are two of the biggest problems in our lives, and as artists or as craftsmen it does stop a lot of people from going far enough. Because somebody can laugh at it, it's not going to be what everybody thinks it should be, and it takes a lot of courage really to deviate. Sometimes it's easier to think of people deviating or not really thinking much about it but just doing it for the novelty or the shock value, and to a certain extent you can't do that. You can use shock as well as the opposite from shock.

But nothing changes if it stays the same. So the only way to change it is to take something-obviously you can be working in a familiar direction, but if you stop at the end, always at the same place, it hasn't gone anywhere. And what you're going to do next to push it farther is-people have difficulty imagining that, I guess, because they're so used to working from, emulating, by emulation, something that somebody else has already figured out, and they're not comfortable with taking the risk of changing it.

I thought it was interesting that at Pete's memorial there were maybe about six, eight, 10 friends that were invited to say something, and over and over the thing that came out more than anything else was their appreciation of he did it his way. He wasn't always easy. Sometimes you'd get really upset because a simple thing, like when are we going to go to dinner, that should be a simple thing, but Pete could turn it into an event. He didn't want to go an early sitting. He'd say, call and find out when it's the last we can get in. He wouldn't-you know, it was like five or six hours before we could eat, whereas everybody else was ready at 6:00, but you kind of respected him.

Those years that he was living upside down, sleeping all day and working at night, I think was part of that his creative need, not just to be different, but to do it his way. And he got a lot of criticism, a lot of flak for it and also, of course, for his alcohol problems and his drug problems, but in the end none of that mattered and it shouldn't matter. It shouldn't matter that we now know that van Gogh was mental, had a mental problem. Look at what he left us, what he did.

I remember Pete demonstrating up at the Anderson Ranch a couple years ago, and there was a woman in the audience who fancied herself as a big collector from Iowa, and she'd never seen Voulkos. She only knew about him and had collected some of his work, which had been the more early, safe work. But in the workshop Pete was already pretty heavy into drugs, so he was just falling kind of over the place and couldn't barely speak. She started to jump on him outside the demonstration area to me, and I finally just stopped her and I said, "Listen, you respect his work; that's all you have to do. Forget about who he is or what he looks like or how he lives. He doesn't have to please you that way, and that's not what you're interested in, not what you're collecting."

But that's difficult for people, and it's related to what we started talking about, the necessity to go farther. One of the biggest problems in all art-I don't care if you're a painter or a sculptor or a potter, a printmaker-when is it finished, and how do you know. Well, experience. Don't pay attention to what the teacher says or anybody else, an art critic. As soon as you do that, you have ceased being the artist; now you've become a puppet, I guess.

So it's very frightening and very difficult. I guess that's one of the things I used to like about some people that we tend to think of as-what's the word, when they're outside of the boundaries?

MS. RIEDEL: Eccentrics.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, eccentric. Oh, like Beatrice Wood, quite eccentric. She was not a Hindu, but she rested or most of her life she wore only saris and jewelry, or George Ohr. I don't like George Ohr's pottery. I think it was sophomoric. But what we do respect about him was he didn't pay any attention to anybody else. He might have been trying to shock them, but he didn't-he did it his way and that's probably the most important thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Thinking about the story you just told, if you're finished with that thought about Peter Voulkos, and just your experience with dealers over time and your relationship with dealers.

MR. SOLDNER: This shouldn't go in print, but I call them pimps.

MS. RIEDEL: I think it should go into print. Your thoughts are really important.

MR. SOLDNER: Well, if you define a pimp as someone who sees a beautiful young whore out on the street working by herself, he says, "Well, I'm going to help her; we're going to get guys and I'll get a commission." So in a sense you can think of a gallery as being someone who is hoping to make some money off of somebody else's work. Sure, they take chances, sometimes but what they really prefer is the one that's really good looking, so to speak, has already proven he's able to sell, and they want to take the money.

It's a symbiotic problem. An artist kind of needs a place to show their work and someone to talk about it, to sell it, but the gallery person who doesn't make it is totally reliant on the artist and what they create and what they make and what they're willing to let them sell.

The average public doesn't realize that very few artists are ever paid for their work until it's sold; in other words, it's on consignment, and the gallery is paying for the lights and the gas and the carpet and the secretary and mailers, things like that. But they will very often test a young person by saying, well, we take care of the opening wine and cheese, will you cover the cost of mailing or printing. In other words, they're perfectly willing to exploit that person. They don't think of as exploitation, I know.

I got into a serious argument one time about that with Garth Clark, because he had asked-he was asking a well-known artist to give him possession of their original slides, and in exchange he would give them a copy and also keep them in better condition and protected, he said, than they would, which may be true. Artists have been notoriously bad about preserving important documents like that.

So in a sense he had a point, but when he got down to questioning what are you going to do with these, it was to make money. It was to create what he called a slide library, which you could rent, and that was good, schools needed it. The problem was, of course, and that's where I got kind of involved in an argument with him-I said, "Well, it seemed to me that there should be something more given to the artist who made the thing, who had it photographed, who had years of experience, should be more than just giving me a copy of it, and aren't you in a sense -" oh, he said, well, and I said, "How do people feel about that?"

And he said, "Well, most people really want to be in the library, and they're happy to give me the work." Well, it's obvious why; they wanted promotion, and that's again something that a gallery can help you with; they can

promote you. But I got upset and I said, "I think that's also exploiting young artists, because they're doing all the work and you're selling it." So we didn't talk too much about art after that.

One time he curated a show, I believe it was in Sioux City, Iowa, and he invited me to send some work, a half-dozen pieces, which I did. But then he called me, and he was very upset, because I had sent low-fire soft pieces, and he hadn't seen that. He was expecting my raku pieces, and he wanted to know if I-he said he was disappointed, and would I take the work back and send him raku? And I stiffened up and said no; I would take everything out of the show, but I wasn't going to substitute for what I had sent.

And I explained, I said, you know, the museum that is sponsoring this exhibit, it's a museum; it's not a dealer. I recognized the dealer has to sell work to pay the rent and the lights and all that kind of stuff, whereas a museum, especially in a school, it's funded; it's part of their budget, so that's an opportunity to teach people.

And so here's my new work; it's an opportunity for me to show people what I'm doing now, which is different from what I did before, and if you don't like, it it's unfortunate, but I'm going to stick to my guns.

Well, it ended without his demanding any more, but about three years later he showed up one day kind of excited and he said, "I thought you might enjoy seeing this cover of this new book I just wrote," and it was one of those little soft pieces that he had rejected.

MS. RIEDEL: On the cover.

MR. SOLDNER: So they don't always-writers and art critics and museum people don't always have that insight. I'm always amazed that someone like Peggy Guggenheim, who was palling around in Paris at the right time, but more than that she had the sensitivity to, and the ability, to recognize quality and to follow through with it, learning to know the artists, and must have collected a bunch of work.

Fred Marer, who put together the Marer Collection of Pottery, which is now at Scripps College, another perfect example of one who approaches collecting from the best reason, out of curiosity and love of it. He never thought about selling it or making a living from it. Invested a lot of his own money. Thank God.

Now, what are his qualifications? Math teacher. He had no artistic background, but he was a man who had a mind, who was curious and loved to debate and talk, and we would spend hours trying to justify something he didn't understand in a new work, whether it was ours or it might be out of New York. Sometimes we didn't understand it either, but we felt a need to at least try to understand, because we didn't like the criticism of something that somebody was doing and because it wasn't conventional.

But he was very open-minded and he learned quickly. Pete and he would go around and look at what the students were doing, very casually. I don't think they even wanted us to know that they were doing that, but I could hear them mumbling, and then Pete would be probably saying, "Well, I think this is a good direction" and whatever, and then finally Fred developed his own eye and he didn't need Pete anymore, and he could begin to find work that other people overlooked, because he had trained himself to be that sensitive and that open.

MS. RIEDEL: Can I ask what kind of effect it had on everybody at LA County to have him there so early and so interested and so interested in collecting? It must have been very positive and inspiring.

MR. SOLDNER: Oh, I don't think we even realized it. He was just a friend. He wasn't a buddy, because he was gone all week teaching math classes, and he'd only come down on Saturdays when he was off, and he'd always bring us a pound of Yuban coffee, because that was the strongest coffee you could get. And they would just, very casually sipping coffee and walking around, sitting down, watching, questioning. He might go up to Kenny Price and say, "Well, what are you doing?" It wasn't a criticism, just what are you doing? But he learned so quickly, so fast, and way outside the normal level that collectors seem to work at.

Collectors, too often they're more impressed by the price, by its potential, by its history, whether it's been documented, whether it's been written about, photographed, whether it represents an historical turning point, seminal kind of pivotal change, or whether the work of the artist has some seminal influences that will encourage others to go in new directions, just as Voulkos was seminal in that sense. And a really smart collector will also want to know all of that, but that's not the-especially not the blue chip idea, not the bottom line.

It is a problem with collectors sometimes, that we know they're-you know you're kind of being purchased as an investment; they're hoping to buy cheap and sell high. And I'm not quite sure what to do about it, because everybody wants to sell their work.

So we're in an interesting bind. Coming back to the original discussion about galleries and so forth, it upsets me a lot that, nowadays particularly, so many of the invitation shows, the artist is expected to provide everything, shipping fee, to help pay for the price, I suppose, all the photographs, and I often compare it to-well, it's like a

musician in an orchestra, a philharmonic orchestra, buying a ticket to play in his own concert. It's not much different; as much as we'll put up, with that much more they'll expect.

I was kind of rough, wasn't I? [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Any long-term or happy relationships with galleries?

MR. SOLDNER: Oh, yeah. I've never had really nasty ones. I've had galleries that would fold and you never got your work back. Whenever you have work overseas-for example, once in Australia I had an exhibit in Sydney, and then I was flattered by the gallery person saying, "Well, there's another gallery in Perth and there's another gallery in Adelaide that all would like to have, after we're finished with this show, they'd like to have it come to their place." So it traveled around a couple years from gallery to gallery, and I never knew when it changed or anything; I wasn't there, I couldn't check on it, and eventually I found some of the work in people's homes, and how it got there I don't know.

And the same thing happened about eight years ago. I had a one-man show in London, and after it was finished she called me up. I think she meant to flatter me by saying, well now Madrid wants the exhibit, and I said, "Oh, okay, send it to Madrid." From there I think it went-eventually I caught up with it in Belgium, and by that point it was halfway broken or disseminated, and eventually I only have, maybe, four pieces from that whole exhibit.

MS. RIEDEL: And how many were in it?

MR. SOLDNER: Oh, at least-oh, close to 20.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. SOLDNER: When I was teaching, we used to have what I'd call a seminar but really was just an evening to have a potluck and maybe a little serious discussion, maybe not, end up in a hot tub, but it was fun. One evening I said, okay, when you come to this, this is going to be called the horrors of galleries. So each of you be prepared to tell us your story. And they were unbelievable. I think the one that I was the most disgusted with was one of the students had been approached by a gallery in Santa Fe, very good, well received craft gallery, and he sent work down to it, and while it was on display, a tourist bumped into one of the pieces, knocked it over, and broke it. Well, a good gallery would be insured. This person running that particular gallery called him and said, "I'm sorry, a piece broke. Now I'm going to return it to you and I'm going to send it UPS, and so when you get it, you shake it, and if you hear anything rattle, you call UPS and collect the insurance for me."

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. SOLDNER: "I'm insuring it so you can collect and send it to me." That was a horror story.

MS. RIEDEL: I've never heard the likes. That's the worst.

MR. SOLDNER: Another horror story that I had, turned out in the end it was really amusing. A well-known collector-I won't name her-visited Aspen, and the woman called me up and said she'd like to come see my work, so I said, "Well, unfortunately it's all downtown in a gallery on exhibit. You're welcome to go see it. And by the way, one of the pieces, that's on the cover of a documentary film"-I think it was called-I think that one was called *A Potter's Song* [*A Potter's Song: The Art and Philosophy of Paul Soldner*. Video recording. Aspen, Colorado: Crystal Video, 1994], I'm not sure. Anyhow, the photograph that's on the cover was taken-is one of the pieces in the collection. Immediately that's the one she wanted. They always want the one that's on announcement.

MS. RIEDEL: Documented.

MR. SOLDNER: So she got it and paid for it, not to me, to the gallery. He shipped it out, and she called me up, really upset, and said it arrived broken and what was going to happen. And I said, "Well, that's between you and the gallery owner; I didn't ship it, I didn't pack it."

So she called him, and they went up and around and around and around over it. She demanded not only-she wanted the full value of the piece, and I don't remember, I think he ended up having his insurance company pay her, right; because then the insurance company called me and it said, "Well, we have the broken piece. Is it of any value to you?" And I said, "Well, maybe, why?" They said, "Well, we're willing to sell it back to you at a big discount." And I said, "How much?" They said, "500." Now, I had sold it for 2,500. So I said, "Boy, I don't know, a broken piece. Gluing it back together might be iffy, but okay."

So I sent them $500 and they returned it to me. When I opened it up, the break was unimportant; it was not major. The piece was actually better. All I did was touch up the little stains, the breaks, so that it looked real.

One of the advantages of working organically, by the way, is that piece can break off and it's not the end of the

world.

But the story goes on, believe it or not, because now I had this new piece, old piece back in my possession, and I sent it to Esther Saks Gallery, I believe it was, in Chicago, or some other gallery, who decided to take it to SOFA and has it on exhibit in SOFA.

MS. RIEDEL: Sculpture Objects Functional Art, the SOFA exhibits?

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, SOFA.

[END TAPE 3 SIDE B.]

MR. SOLDNER: So it was on exhibit, and a collector came by and bought it. The next day who should come by but you know who, the woman in the first place. She did not recognize, it but she fell in love with it and said, "I want it," and I said, "Sorry, I sold it yesterday." And she threw a little snit, you know, that she should have have had first choice and all that kind of stuff. So all I can do is just laugh.

MS. RIEDEL: Hence your sense of humor has been so finely developed.

MR. SOLDNER: It was sold and I got the money out, but the funny part was that she threw such a fit about it being destroyed and here it was such-okay, kind of like, see this black one over here? Clear to the lefthand tip, see the little break?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. SOLDNER: Now, when I touch that up, you won't notice it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. SOLDNER: That's what it was.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.] If it was hers, it could have stayed hers.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, right, just greed.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, the other problem with collectors-we should be talking about gallery I guess, but they're interrelated-is that they-once they get their token piece, they stop collecting many times. Not everybody. Fred Marer was unusual.

MS. RIEDEL: Collect in depth.

MR. SOLDNER: Collecting in depth, yeah, but too many times they're trying to accumulate a body of work that eventually will be a tax write-off by donating it to a museum, if a museum will accept it, and museums are part of that whole thing. It's a good way for them to get something they might not ordinarily get. So I know, like [Robert] Pfannebecker or something, then one down in Charlotte at the Mint Museum [Mint Museum of Craft and Design, Charlotte, NC]. I forget who that collector was, somebody from New York City.

MS. RIEDEL: Can't remember off the top of my head, but I know the museum, yeah.

MR. SOLDNER: But I see that it's up in San Francisco; it's at Saxe, George and -

MS. RIEDEL: Dorothy Saxe had a big collection.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah. And in the end, it works for everybody. I was pleased when the Saxes came out with a catalogue of the show. They put one of my pieces on the cover in full color.

So, you know, it's all a symbiotic relationship we have. Some of it's more pleasurable than not. By and large, it works and it's workable. I have to say that the best gallery I've ever worked with is Frank Lloyd in LA. He is not only interested in learning and in educating the public about your work, but he pays on time within a month and doesn't quibble. He doesn't get involved with some of the whining and complaining and so forth that can often happen.

But the one side of all of this that is also a problem, and that is the government, in terms of when nonprofit organizations want to have an auction and they ask you to donate a piece, we're allowed to donate its cost, not the value, but when you pass away, your estate is inventoried and taxed on its market value. It is unfair.

I've tried to protest that several times by saying, when I was invited to donate a piece for an auction, I'd say, "Well, if you get your lawyers to change the laws, I will." Well, they never do, and I give in and send them a piece anyhow. At that point you're just philanthropic, but there's no financial gain.

MS. RIEDEL: So there's no write-off for you at all.

MR. SOLDNER: No. And I understand why. My CPA says it's very clear why. The tax people say it's all about money. Well, when you made it, how much did you spend? You don't charge you for your time or the value, only the cost of the clay, and maybe you can get $50 from firing and the clay; then that's it, whereas if that same piece is around when you pass on, it will be taxed at its market value, which makes it really difficult, and then you can't believe how many nonprofit organizations are holding all kinds of auctions and sales, soup bowl sales, you know, just everything, anything they can use to use the artist, I think, to exploit, make something for themselves.

It's not as bad in this country as it is-where was I? Oh, not Spain, Chile. I attended a pottery exhibit and it was in a gallery, but in discussing some of the things, the artist had to rent a space in the gallery and supply the cards and the announcements and the liquor and everything. They really have you by the balls.

MS. RIEDEL: So they're basically just renting a space?

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, that's all. Did I talk about the Ivory Tower Gallery?

MS. RIEDEL: No, not yet.

MR. SOLDNER: Oh, that was a good one. Well, when I was a student at Los Angeles Art Institute, Millard Sheets was the director and he was a pretty interesting guy, but he had some real reasons that he wanted to, as the president of the school, what he wanted the school to be about, and it was to learn to make sculpture, mosaics, paintings, pottery, to enhance architecture. And if you know anything about him, the Home Savings and Loan building had a bronze sculpture of mother and child. Lorenzo Fetchi was the sculptor / teacher. You see a Voulkos piece over in Pomona on the mall. Voulkos was a teacher.

So in a way it was good; it was a place to sell your work, but because Voulkos was changing so fast, the student work ceased being what he wanted, ceased being-it became what we were interested in, not what he wanted it to be. So he rejected all of our work at the spring show, and he got up and made a big speech about getting out of your ivory tower and coming down to earth, you know, work for the industry, design for architects.

Kenny Price, myself, I think-I don't know if John Mason was-he might have been involved-some painters, some other people decided, well, okay. So we went to Sunset Boulevard and rented an empty storefront, put sawdust on the floor and made tin can lights, and each of us would pay one month rent and we'd have our one-man show during that month. And we had to be there or a wife or someone to sell and to meet the public.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, the public comes in.

MR. SOLDNER: It was simple. So over a period of a year, if there were 12 of us, we each had a one-person show. But the beauty was we got great reviews, better than the school, and for a while it was a really vital art place. We started hiring models and having drawing classes, and, you know, it was fun.

MS. RIEDEL: That's wonderful. What year was that?

MR. SOLDNER: Oh, it had to be in '55.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you-did you call it the Ivory Tower Gallery?

MR. SOLDNER: It was called the Ivory Tower, sure. We got critical reviews in the *LA Times* art section.

MS. RIEDEL: That's great.

MR. SOLDNER: Just like a regular gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: And how long was it open?

MR. SOLDNER: About a year.

MS. RIEDEL: That's marvelous.

MR. SOLDNER: Once we graduated, you know, there was a new group, well, then the school changed anyhow.

And I've told that story when a lot of students have complained that, you know, there's no place for me to show, and I say, well, go rent a storefront and start your own gallery or your own school.

People ask me sometimes why does it cost so much to go to school, and, my low-tech way of simplifying it is to say, well, you know, you could start an art school in your garage, and it's affordable because you're only paying you, but if it's successful, you probably need help, so you'll hire someone else, and then it gets a little more successful, you have to get a secretary, then you have to get phones and maybe a computer, and pretty soon you have to add on to your buildings, and then you need gardeners and security. That's why it's expensive.

MS. RIEDEL: The gardening does add up.

You had a retrospective in 1991 that traveled, and you mentioned that you had learned a lot from that.

MR. SOLDNER: About myself.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, because when you're working, everything is right in front of your nose and you don't see the big picture and you don't-maybe some artists do, but when I say "you," I mean myself. I really work from piece to piece to piece without a plan. And I didn't realize that, even with that dumb approach, I was growing.

So when we had the retrospective and it got up and catalogued, it was mind-blowing that I could see growth and I could see progression. I guess that's what the retrospective is supposed to be about, but the work in the beginning was important to the public because they're blown away that I once made a dumb pot. They somehow forget that everybody starts at the same place. It's like walking; everybody starts by crawling, and some end up walking fast enough to become runners, but we all do start at the same place.

So it was really interesting, you see, to have illusion for myself and say, well, my God, you know, I thought I wasn't doing anything or making any direction, going anywhere other than just I knew I was changing, like, from stoneware thrown objects to low-fire raku, and then I would change to salt. I knew those changes, but I wasn't aware that I was going from pottery to decorative pottery to landscape pottery to other kinds of forms and then ending up in sculpture. That all came-the realization was because of the retrospective.

And I know that that's helpful. Even sometimes Voulkos was criticized in recent years for not changing. He made a stack and another stack and another stack. And if you line them up in a room, they'd look like a roomful of similar objects and people did come down on him and said, well, he stopped growing.

What they didn't do, which takes a little doing, but that is to have a mini-retrospective or examples of a piece he'd made 10 years ago, five years ago, even one year ago, beside the piece he's just working on right now; all of a sudden it now is-well, I always say, it now has more authority. He now has-he's reached that point that I think any successful artist reaches, which is, on the one hand, frustrating because every time they make a new piece, if they had had success in the past, the new one has to be as good or better.

If you compare it to as Doc Pomus playing in concert, not every concert is as good as the one before, but he knows that and it drives him nuts if he doesn't come up to it, and I think the same thing is true with people, like Voulkos, who have had tremendous success. Each piece they work at has to be better, in their mind. The public may not recognize that. It may be a very subtle change.

I know the last year that Pete was working, I watched him and said to myself, he's either a genius or he's nuts. I mean, he was pushing so far -

MS. RIEDEL: It can be a fine line.

MR. SOLDNER: -that I should have known better, but it was confusing. But his own vision was really pushing out there, and he had to do everything that he talked about, letting go of how it's always been done before and letting go of his past success, and he's now got to prove it again and again and again.

Isn't that why people like Pollock commit suicide or whoever did, I think it was Pollock, somebody, because they wanted to change and the gallery didn't want them to change and he wanted to outgrow his dribble; he got in trouble with the galleries and the collectors.

Collectors, in the end, run the galleries. We have to keep that in focus, because they're the ones that say, I want this or I want that, and that's when Esther Saks said after a very successful show one time, "Well, let's do it again next time, but be sure you send me major work," and then that's where I thought a lot about, what the hell, why did she say that. I came to the conclusion it was because major work is what collectors want, and she was selling. So the collector was the one that wanted it to be all those things we went through a while ago, documented, photographed, critiqued.

MS. RIEDEL: Exemplary of a certain particularly style.

MR. SOLDNER: Already collected, an investment, protected in a museum or displayed and protected, all those things that, I guess if they-if an artist achieves that, then that begins to say, well, maybe it's art. If you're trying to define art, all those things are important. But it was kind of a frustration for me to realize that it was-that I had to learn that from a collector. I had to deduce it myself.

MS. RIEDEL: Your work has been really well documented. There's been a lot of writing about it, certainly a number of books, a lot of articles, and you've done a fair amount of writing yourself. Are there particular art critics that you have respected or really appreciated reading? Are there certain-do you feel the writing is better if it comes from a fellow artist; the reflections or the criticism ring more true?

MR. SOLDNER: I've avoided art critics, if possible. Now, a lot of people welcome them, even go out of their way to seduce them or get them under their influence. And I've never really had much in the way of critical writing about my work. Mostly it's been about the evolution, the growth and the periods, and partly I avoid the criticism, because I shouldn't pay any attention to it in the first place. Well, what's the value of listening to somebody who doesn't really know anything about it? Genghis Khan was one of those guys-what's his name? Genghis Khan, something like that. I think he doesn't know much about the clay world. He knows about the Seattle potters.

MS. RIEDEL: I know. I'm trying to think of who you are-Genghis Khan is not who -

MR. SOLDNER: Anyhow, it's like that, maybe Genghis something.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, Matthew Kangas?

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, okay, okay. [Laughs.]

MR. SOLDNER: No, he's very myopic, and I would never want him to criticize my work.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, criticism is something certainly that you have -

MR. SOLDNER: Don't need.

MS. RIEDEL: -steered away from and repeatedly in your own teaching.

MR. SOLDNER: Right. I see no value in it.

MS. RIEDEL: What about all the work within NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts] or any kind of clay organizations? Have you found those helpful or -

MR. SOLDNER: For myself? No.

MS. RIEDEL: But you've participated over the years in NCECA events?

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, if they invite me, but I don't-I rarely get anything out of it that helps me or changes me, other than the self-motivation to make something for them, if I'm given an invitation. That's important. Then that's something I'll rise to try to make something, give them something that is really good.

But so much of the ceramic world now is spinning out into directions that I'm not interested in, so I don't feel like I need to affect it or be affected by it. It's become so complicated and so -

For me, I think I've spoken about it before, I have a particular interest in-what's the difference between, say, the ceramics of today and the ceramics in Japan a hundred years ago, or put another way, what makes cotemporary ceramics different from-let's see if I get this straight. We're all using the same material, but we use it differently, and what's underneath that?

Well, to be superficial, I would say there's a Western art and there's an Eastern. And I analyze it, and my own theory, that's probably very debatable, that it's based on religious backgrounds. The Western art reflects Western religious thinking, beginning with Egyptians and on through the Greeks and on through the Renaissance, all based on the Christian concept of right and wrong, good and evil, heaven and hell, so we have a symmetry that influences our work, fantastic.

Whereas in Japan, their religion-if it's a religion at all; it may just be a philosophy, an aesthetic understanding-gives that artist the opportunity to enjoy, has a different kind of beauty, asymmetry, accidents, breaking-oh, you learned to open a door -

MS. RIEDEL: Shall we pause?

MR. SOLDNER: We can pause.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Paul Soldner at the artist's home in Claremont, California, not the home in Aspen, Colorado, on April 28, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is session number two and this is disc number five. And I think when disc number four ended, we were talking about religion and its impact on art.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, my idea-I'm not sure that other people would agree with me, but having been raised in the Western world and then being confronted by, not conflicting, but opposite ideas from the Eastern world about art, life, the hereafter, things like that, that's one of the benefits of travel, I guess. It forces you to realize that you might be from a little hometown back in Ohio, but there's a big world out there, and people that never knew what a Jew was or never knew what spaghetti was or pizza until you're thrown into it.

I guess everybody deals with that in their own way, and my way, I think, has been to embrace a lot but also try to figure out why, why, for example, do I now pretty much reject my background, not just the religious aspect of it, but the conformity, the need to-you know, the guilt that you have to have if you're raised as a Christian, which can either hinder or probably either stop your interest in anything else or development, because it's too dangerous, or the opposite is to just forge ahead and want to look at it and explore it and see what it's all about.

Well, when I was a senior in college in this little Mennonite college, Bluffton, there was a required course for graduation. It was called comparative religions and it was taught very fairly. We studied almost all religions of the world over a semester, and the last one we talked about, the teacher said, "Well, it's not really a religion, but some people believe in it, and it's called hedonism. And hedonism pretty much rejects the idea of a heaven or hell other than to say that it's here right now, and you may as well enjoy it or worry about it." While on earth, this could be a heaven or it can be a hellish situation, depending on everybody's possibilities, but it's opened up for me a lot of freedom, because I was no longer controlled by a church that said I had to be born again or had to do all these things that they believe in.

And then when I started getting involved with the art, and especially going to Japan, I had some pretty interesting conversions there, too, not religious, but understandings might be a better word than conversions.

For example, one time I had admired Shigaraki tea bowls. I admired them for their beautiful simplicity and for their color, texture of the Shigaraki clay, and I assumed, which it's always wrong to assume, I assumed that the simplicity of it was an aesthetic reason, but when I went to visit one time and actually to work, I said, "What kind of clay do you have to work with?" And they said, "Well, we have some from Bizen, we have some from Seto, and we have some Shigaraki." So I got excited and said, "Well, you know, I've always loved Shigaraki tea bowls; they're so elegant in their simple way. I think I'll use Shigaraki clay."

Well, I discovered that Shigaraki clay-I ended up calling it Shitaraki because it was so bad-that I was puzzled; why were these bowls so beautiful, and then I realized all of a sudden, really important understanding, the difference between East and West in terms of clay is that the East didn't have Laguna Clay mixers or Seattle Ceramic Supplier, people to buy their clay from, they used what was available, what was underneath them. Sometimes under the rice paddies would be great clay deposits, but each clay would differ from each area, so that in Bizen, for example, the clay was so tight you didn't have to glaze it, and the clay from other places had their own either attributes or problems.

The problem with Shigaraki clay turned out to be it was so short you couldn't do much with it in terms of shape. Therefore, a very simple tea bowl shape, rather than having lots of elaborate handles and loops and things, the clay just wouldn't do it. So they not only honored the clay, better yet, they just did what the clay was good at, and that happened to be the look that we called Shigaraki clay.

And then I realized that in the United States we come at everything from such an intellectual, kind of conceptual point of view that we make the idea first, and then we find clay that makes it work or that will do what we want it to do, instead of working from the clay and utilizing that. So that that, then, answered a lot of questions that I had as I started out the discussion, even the difference between their love of asymmetry and our love of symmetry, and it carried all the way through the gardens.

You never see a path going straight down through the garden in Japan like you do at the White House. It always meanders around and finds its way very naturally. Gardens are not like Versailles, of geometric circles, you take a compass and draw it and have water spouting out of the center. They'd be more like a trickling mountain stream with rocks that would hinder its progress and then would let it go again.

Even the tea house, which is very simple but elegant, and designed with an asymmetrical look, I guess it was-well, it was [Piet] Mondrian, the Dutch painter, that was so profoundly influenced with Japanese asymmetry,

even though he came from Europe; it totally changed his work and if you think about his work, starting with the square or rectangular canvas, the first line was the most important, and it never came down the middle. I don't think-I'd have to research that, but I think that always the first line was off to one side, and then all the other squares and the colors and so forth were a way to bring this asymmetrical beginning back to a harmonious balance, but it was never symmetrical.

I didn't react to that that quickly, in a positive sense. I found I was hanging onto the Western idea of symmetrical balance for many, many years. My big floor pots were all very symmetrically balanced. It was only after I got into raku and had that confrontation-not confrontation, but the enlightenment, with Kanishiga that I opened my eyes to other possibilities, which then began to affect and influence my work without my even knowing it.

Then later on, I guess I became more aware of things like Zen, the importance of accidents and lack of control, acceptance of things not quite planned and then also the Shinto understanding and appreciation of naturalness and the beauty of nature, of the organic appreciation, organic. Now I can look at my work and say, oh, this maybe subconsciously I was influenced, I was affected by that.

So it was a kind of a conversion from the Western insistence on everything being perfect to a more exciting exploration of what else can you do.

Even my interest and love in bonsai relates to that, because, though it's possible to have a very vertical, symmetrical bonsai, it's seldom that we appreciate it. The main appreciation seems to be for bonsais that seemed to have struggled, reflected in movement, asymmetrical balance of the root system and the trunk and the leaves and how it-but at the same time it's very beautiful how it reflects its environment, if it was growing in the rocks and the mountain, and the roots couldn't go anywhere, the top didn't go anywhere, but it became-it develops a lot of character to grow up in that sort of a situation.

So I think that was, for me, a big breakthrough, the appreciation of the asymmetrical and appreciation of the ruggedness of the organic qualities rather than a refinement, say, of Scandinavian modern or most European and Western pottery. It's not to say one is better than the other; it's just where your interest is.

And I think I tell audiences-when I'm doing workshops, they want to know what influences my work-I very often say, well, a Japanese love of asymmetry is probably the most important thing at this point, so that I try to, when I make work, keep that in mind and try to initially make it asymmetrical or even unbalanced. But the challenge then is to bring it back to some sort of symmetry.

Just like a kid on a teeter-totter, if the pivot is directly in the middle and there are two kids exactly the same weight, well that's Western architecture, Western philosophy, Western religion. If you move that pivot sideways, as Mondrian did, that sets up a whole new creative, not question, not even a problem, but it's different and it's a different composition. To bring that back to a harmonious balance, which is different than a symmetrical balance, as Mondrian did, that I think is what underlies my interest right now in what I'm doing.

I try to move that pivot out and then try to solve the harmonious composition from that point on. First, it's almost like not destroying it but creating something like almost a puzzle; what do you do with it now that you've moved that pivot off center? What are you going to do? And that involves everything from size of other pieces to colors and heavy colors like red or light colors like yellow; they all enter in and it just becomes more complicated, and that's what I like. Now I find the Western concept rather simple, pretty easy to do.

So let's see, what was the other thing that was connected with that? The religious basis that I think underlies the difference between East and West.

MS. RIEDEL: And your own religious background?

MR. SOLDNER: My own religious background, it's been more of a fight than anything else to get away from it, because we tend to be in later years what we were when we were young. There's no doubt about that. I think that's one of the big problems with parenting, that parents forget that when they were teenagers, their ideas, their values were in opposition to their parents and there was always a problem, and they forget that when their own children-also their teenagers need to assert their own independence in a different direction, at least for a while. Eventually they can work it out and come back together.

But, you know, like music, see, I grew up in high school with Glenn Miller, Sammy Kaye, Blue Baron, Dorsey Brothers, so to me they still sound great. And it's one of the difficulties is then saying, well, that's the only good thing, the only good music. It's not necessarily true or helpful. When the Beatles came along, I had to make some adjustments, because kids were playing it all the time in the classroom, and at first I thought, "This is music?" Then Presley came in with his rock-and-roll gyrations, and you make some more adjustments. I think I've made lots of adjustments through the years. I have to be honest and say I have not been able to get excited

about rap because I don't think it's music. It will last awhile, I'm afraid.

But anyhow, the important thing, I guess, was-that I was talking about-was the possibility and sometimes the necessity to change and to grow with whatever it is that you're involved with, anything from religion to beliefs to music, likes, dislikes.

I'm a big lover of all those old singers, like Rosemary Clooney and more recently Linda Ronstadt, but I listen to everything else.

MS. RIEDEL: This sounds like it's an interesting parallel with how you're working, an interesting parallel to how your working process has changed over time. It seems you could have been speaking about that as well.

MR. SOLDNER: Right. Yeah, in the beginning you're more controlling, and now I'm far more accepting, and actually I'm inviting, not accidents, but surprises. I don't think we talk enough about the importance of elements of surprise and playfulness and those things like energy in the work. We tend to analyze everything down to design fundamentals, texture, negative space, positive space, rather than the emotional qualities.

Sometimes I think about my work in comparison to music, and if I think of Bach, a Bach chorale, sometimes it's so beautiful you're moved to tears and I wonder if Bach had that in mind. I doubt it. I don't even think he did it for any therapy for himself. But it is therapy at this point for me and partly because of the beauty.

And so I question sometimes is it possible in a visual world to ever move people with your work in that emotional intense level. I don't know. Everybody is different, of course, and some people do get more excited about little things like a sunset than others. And yet it's quite a challenge to think beyond the box of competent pottery-making, we'll say, or sculpture, to something that transcends just the mechanics or the technique or the firing or whatever to where it moves somebody. And I guess you never really know if that happens or not.

As we talked earlier, not even collectors sometimes are on that wavelength. They're looking at the bottom line, where I'd much rather somebody not be buying the work, appreciate it because it has in some way or another touched something that I think art should do. I'm not sure-or maybe I shouldn't use the word "should," but art could do.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you say there's an element of play in your work?

MR. SOLDNER: I love play, yeah. I think my first recognition of that in the Western art world would be Matisse, with his playful silhouettes and cutouts and just throwing them around. You could analyze the rightness or the wrongness, but above that it was always sort of a playfulness.

Or even Chagall, with his floating figures; they might have a spiritual meaning, but they're also playful, and obviously surrealist people, though they're deadly serious with what they're doing, they're also very much involved with playfulness.

And without sometimes even thinking about it, making art is more play than it is work, and if it comes through as a playfulness, what's wrong with that?

[END TAPE 4 SIDE A.]

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

Has there been a community that's been important to you in your work, either been supporting it or supporting you or inspiring ideas for the work? I know you've been to all sorts of different workshops, and you're certainly always working and usually working in some kind of community, or at least observers.

MR. SOLDNER: I'm not sure that it is-well, I guess I'd have to live without it to find out how important it is. I do know that Voulkos, especially in the last couple years, would say, "I need an audience; I need the stimulation of people out there, someone to joke to and have them watch me," and there is an element of that, I suppose, in any workshop; if you're comfortable with it, that can actually be useful in at least helping you get the work to a point where it's not so serious and dead that it loses energy.

It's kind of like in pottery, when you take a class, the first thing they want to do is to teach you how to center clay, and too many times teachers will tell you, well, you have to get the clay on dead center before I'll allow you to make a pot. So you have to prove to me that you can make it dead center, which simply means that there's no aberration or erroneous movement. And yet if you look at professional people like Shoji Hamada and I mentioned Kanishiga and Voulkos and people who throw a lot of clay, it's never dead center; it's always on center; it's always moving.

And I used to teach my students, I'd say, you know, don't worry so much about dead center. I'm more interested

in a live center. A live center is one where the whole thing is alive, and it may not look like it's on center. Which reminds me of one of Pete Voulkos's best jokes. People would ask him, when he was doing a workshop and he was centering the clay, and they'd say, "Mr. Voulkos, is that on center?" And he'd say, "Oh, yes it is, but I'm not."

And the other great one was when he was teaching kids how to center clay, he'd say, "No, don't forget; the center is already there, right in the middle of the wheel; all you have to do is pile clay up around it." And it's a constant; it's perfect. You can get more intellectual about it, but that was it. The center is already there.

MS. RIEDEL: I know you do most of your work now when you're traveling. You say you don't really have a studio here anymore. Maybe you do some work perhaps in Aspen, but most of your work happens on the road when you're doing workshops. So how has that changed your work and how have those ever-evolving working conditions changed your work over time?

MR. SOLDNER: I really don't think that the travel of the different locations is as important as you might think. I tend to think pretty much within certain perimeters, pretty much approach each piece, each sculpture from a similar point of view. That's not to say I know how it's going to turn out. How it turns out is hopefully a surprise to me, but the audience doesn't affect that too much. Partly I don't allow them to.

A few years ago I invited a young kid to come up and hold the clay while I was working on it. Before I knew it, he was pushing clay into the piece, and later he was telling me what I should do or not do, and so I decided I'll never ask another person for advice.

And whenever I'm working, I usually work with an assistant, a muse, and I always tell her up front, if she doesn't already know it, you have no-I have no interest in what you think about what I'm doing; it's my problem. You're simply here to help me, so shut up. Some people like Kathy, I never have to even say that; she just knows it, because she's an artist and she knows it.

Unless you are trying to collaborate, which I think is compromise, unfortunately, then it's really the artist alone who has the say on what the result is and should never listen to anybody else.

MS. RIEDEL: Actually, have you ever done any commissions?

MR. SOLDNER: I hate commissions. I did one for Millard Sheets, and I think it was the last one.

I'll tell you why. There's only one way I will do a commission now, and that is if a person or a couple would come to me and say they want me-want to commission me to make something, I'll say, "Well, I'm going to make whatever I want to make and you're going to have to pay me for it before we start, in full." Most commissions hold back; they'll give you an advance of maybe 25 percent, enough to buy your materials and then maybe 50 percent when you're half finished with it, and then theoretically at the end you get the rest of it. But it's that pressure of not finishing it that gives them the-almost gives them the permission to enter into acceptance or rejection of your idea. They might say, "Well, it's not quite the same color as we had talked about," or "It doesn't quite move me." Well, then they shouldn't have bought it in the first place.

So I don't do commissions and I actually don't do collaboration. I did one chair with Kathy and she was thrilled by it and said, "Boy, we can go on the road doing collaboration," and I squelched that right away. I said, "No. You're the artist, I'm the artist, and this was fun to do once, but not again."

One day Pete was tired, I think. He'd been working on some plates and he had one left over. And all of a sudden he yelled over at me; he said, "Hey, Soldner, why don't you finish this?" And I looked at it and I said, "Pete, you never collaborate with anybody." "Yeah, I know, but," he said, "go ahead and do something to it," which is the nearest I've ever gotten to collaborate with Pete or anyone else. It turned out to be okay. It's not a Voulkos. I have it.

MS. RIEDEL: You have it?

MR. SOLDNER: I have it. It's interesting. I can't remember; I don't think he signed it. Maybe we did.

MS. RIEDEL: So did he-he started it and you finished it or he -

MR. SOLDNER: He threw it. He had a big plate thrown; someone else had thrown it and then he finished it, which was the way he always approached his wall pieces. They would start it and then he would come in at the end and shape it. And then he would tear it apart or add to it or take away or whatever, and that's what he was doing. And he'd done, I guess, enough of them that day, and he was just sick and tired of it and said, "Hey, Soldner, why don't you finish this."

And I didn't know initially if he was serious or not. I guess it turned out he was serious enough that he didn't

seem upset when I took over and added some things to it that I'd been working on and turned it partly my direction. It still looks like a Voulkos. People come to the house and they look at it and say, "Did Pete make that?" Sure, Pete was involved, but it's something that's not Pete.

And maybe that's another problem with collaboration. I remember years ago there was a-not a movie, but a radio/TV station that would go around to different campuses and photograph the art department. And they came to Scripps College and they decided they were going to photograph the faculty at work. So they looked at everybody's work and they finally decided, well, Paul Soldner makes pottery or sculpture, and Paul Darrow makes drawing and prints, so why don't we have Soldner throw a plate and then Darrow decorate it. And I said, "Yeah, if I get to finish his painting." That stopped that.

MS. RIEDEL: So there was one commission, and that's the way it stayed.

MR. SOLDNER: That was it, yeah. Well, the commission -

MS. RIEDEL: One collaboration.

MR. SOLDNER: On the commission I did for Sheets, he showed me a sketch, a watercolor sketch of tiles, that he wanted to put on the bank of Home Savings and Loan. And there were strange colors, you know, because he was a watercolorist and he liked avocado green and some sort of interesting burnt orange and some blue or something. They weren't glazes that I normally worked with or colors that I normally worked with, so I asked Pete, I said, "Well, what do we do about this?" He said, "Well, we go to the fucking glaze master, glaze supply house, and they've got bottles of this stuff and you can just pick out what you want." So I did, and I finished the commission, and as far as I can remember it worked out okay; it was acceptable, but I was sick and tired of the whole process. It just wasn't where I was interested in working, low-fire colored glazes.

So I was throwing them away, and Pete said, "You're going to throw those out?" And I said, "Yeah." "Well, can I have them?" And so, "Sure, you can have them." Well, now if you look at the Marer collection, there's a figure down there called *The Walking Man* [1957]-

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, I know it.

MR. SOLDNER: -which started as a playful putting together of pieces left over from trimming some pots; when we were just sitting having coffee, Pete started pushing stuff together and ended up with this figure, pretty abstract. And after I told him he could have those glazes, he used them to glaze that piece. And I don't know if he ever knew, or ever remembered, that I think that was the first time he used bright-colored glazes.

And interesting now, it has become, you know, almost like a myth. Historians and so forth, critics have relegated that to be the beginning of the funk movement, which is totally wrong. Pete never was a funk artist.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. SOLDNER: In the sense that funk artists were thumbing their nose at conventions and so on. He was just playing, as I would imagine Picasso would if someone's stuff was in front of him, like picking up a fishbone, you know, and making-inking it up and making a print out of it. Sure, it ends up being serious work, because they are artists, but in the process they're not thinking, "I'm making high art now." It becomes that only because they are able to do that.

And the playfulness that I remember Pete doing a lot was one of the most important things I got from him. He'd sit there sometimes by the hour and just cutting out a stencil or playing with this or playing with that. You could always see his mind clicking, but it was more play than it was struggle. And I think it comes through the work.

I don't know if you know a lot of his early wall pieces that were really early wall pieces in the '50s. They were flat and two-dimensional, mostly with figures, slips over them, and then a glaze over that. Not many left, but there's a few. I think there's a couple in the Marer collection. Arthur Engs, who taught at Los Angeles Art Institute, had a whole wall of them up here in Claremont, but they were stuccoed in, so I doubt if they've ever been chiseled out.

But they were an early Pete, going from pottery to a different direction. And, again, they remind me of the influence of Matisse or Munekata had on him, using stencils and figures that, in lieu of drawings, they were that indirect technique of stenciling or making it without the control of a brush or pattern or something.

And they're always just playfully juxtaposed, so that it was a composition, not a story. It wasn't meant to prove anything but the composition work, and the same thing then when he put color on it. Color was more than just to be pretty; it was, again, to resolve some of the complexities that he created in the original piece, and then how do you resolve that using color or how do you destroy it.

Maybe that's what he was so good at, the ability to, even when he's playing, make a statement. Make an object

of importance.

There were times when Kenny Price, I remember, would tease Pete; he would come in and Pete would be working on a piece, and Kenny would come look over his shoulder with another piece in his hand. "Oh, what's the master doing now? Let me see. Well, I guess what I have to do is," and he would duplicate what Pete just did, but it was all in jest.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you think of yourself as part of a particular tradition, a West Coast or international tradition at all?

MR. SOLDNER: I guess I am, but I'm not sure that I think that way. I think maybe it's not so much a East or West Coast difference; it's more if I am different it's just what interests I have in the thing in front of me and at that moment.

Now, it's hard to deny that you're influenced by East or West and so forth. You've never-have you ever seen my slide presentation?

MS. RIEDEL: No. You talked about it.

MR. SOLDNER: Well -

MS. RIEDEL: You'd have two projectors going at the same time, and one would be showing your work and one showing things that had inspired it.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Nature or -

MR. SOLDNER: Well, that's not my plan, but they're just things that I like and some of them are nature and some are dogs and cats and some are naked women and some of them are mountains and clouds, and just whatever I happened to see and I'd photograph.

But in terms of influences, then I see more of that subconscious influence from what's around me than I do a conscious acceptance or rebellion of anything. And I'm not even aware of it at the time; it's when I look at the slides and I say, "Wow, look at that mountain down in the canyon lands." And the next slide comes up, and it's a pot that's exactly the same beige, burnt-cliff color and even some of the shapes and I have to say, yeah, I'm influenced.

MS. RIEDEL: I've heard that said, that landscape at Aspen, that oftentimes people can see signs of that in your work.

MR. SOLDNER: Well, things like the Western landscape is more orange than it is green so why do I like orange; maybe that's it, but it's not a declaration. If I were in New York City, would I make black? Maybe.

MS. RIEDEL: You make black now.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah. But I mean, would that be the influence? Because it's always, maybe not New York, more like Newark, a blackness about everything and everybody that's so gray and people are dressed that way and kind of act that way. That kind of thing probably influences one, an artist, more than whether you're from the East or West in the United States.

MS. RIEDEL: The actual environment in which one works.

MR. SOLDNER: I think so.

Now, go back 40 years to Otis, and, yes, I think without anybody fundamentally wanting to make it different, there was a difference. Alfred, for example, was already established, an old, old college, and there was the Alfred look. It was kind of a tank-shaped pot. You saw it, and you'd say right away, that person went to Alfred.

Compared to what we were doing, you could say, well, we weren't from Alfred. That's not to say anyone could say we were from Los Angeles County Art Institute, but others who would then say, well, there is a difference between the Western potters and the Eastern, from New York in particular, and you could analyze it with everything from a looser handling of clay, a little more spontaneous acceptance of, instead of insisting on it being just a certain way. We never worked from mock-ups or drawings, and so there was a whole different approach to it. And I wouldn't say it was because it was an East and a West; it was it just was; they were East and we were West.

So we were more reflecting the gurus, I think, and if you were in the East at the time you were involved with Daniel Rhodes and Bob [Robert] Turner and Val Cushing, and they all had a similar direction, or if you were at Kansas City Art Institute, it was Ken Ferguson and Victor Babu, and I forget the other guy who made raku. Or if you were studying with Patti Warashina and-oh, what was his name, he died of AIDS-Kottler, Cutler-Howard Kottler?

MS. RIEDEL: Howard Kottler, yeah.

MR. SOLDNER: -if you were studying with them, you were definitely going to be making sarcastic funk work. And if you were studying with Arneson, it also is going to reflect-so it wasn't so much East and West, I think; it was the guru who was the mentor.

That brings up the big question today, what's going to happen since we no longer have mentors?

MS. RIEDEL: I was going to ask you if you saw any future direction for contemporary ceramics?

MR. SOLDNER: Boy, the pat answer is, if I knew it, I'd be doing it.

But in some ways at the college level it's getting more and more dismal every year, because economics, they're using economics to force the departments to close, or they cut down and only use adjuncts a couple times a week, so there's very little that you can learn or very little to inspire you. They can talk all they want and they can be sincere, but it's not like a one-on-one relationship with a Daniel Rhodes or Voulkos or anybody else.

So I think we're missing something now, and I don't know if it can ever be brought back, unless we decide that it's bad enough we don't need to go to college anymore; we need to find a guru; we need to find a person whose work excites us and someone who is skillful enough to teach us what you hope to get, but in a more inspiring way than a pedantic approach.

So much of the work now is from teaching-I think reflects the necessity to seem to be an important teacher and not-or I should maybe say not an important teacher but an important administrator of art-than a real practicing, hot-blooded, creative artist.

One of the big complaints you hear if you start talking to teachers, "I don't even have time anymore to do my own work," and they have all sorts of excuses, but the main excuse is the schools have changed. I mean, you don't have freedom to conduct your class easily and happily and without structure. Some schools even demand, you know, a syllabus that the whole state uses, and the supervisor can walk in any one of the schools within the system and that day everybody is studying the same thing.

That's really bad but it's going downhill, I think, fast. Where it's going to go, I have no idea. I'm optimistic, usually, that humans, being humans, will not necessarily follow that. They may temporarily, because it takes awhile before-and it's like a drunk takes awhile before you admit you're really an alcoholic before you can do anything about it, and sometimes I think it's true that schools are going to continue, as long as it's economically feasible, to hire a lesser person, that they will continue to do that rather than fire them and look for somebody better.

You know, it's interesting-schools don't do that; the business world does that. If you don't perform in the business world, you're out. Schools are just the opposite. As long as you're not raping your students in the back room, you can get away with anything and there's hardly any interest in what you're doing or teaching. How many times have you seen the dean or the president of a school come into your classroom? Never. No. And yet they trust, they give all the trust-to these part-time people to take the place of a full-time person who has experience and knowledge and wisdom and all that kind of stuff.

So I see it in a pessimistic way, on the one hand, and then saying, well, if it gets bad enough, it will evolve. And I don't know where it's going to evolve, but it may go back to the old concept of working with an artist if you want to learn how to make art, instead of getting a degree-

MS. RIEDEL: I'm sorry.

MR. SOLDNER: -instead of going just for the degree.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like sometimes they're hiring-certain universities are hiring part-time faculty, who then want time to pursue their work as well, and so they are working part-time in order to maintain that balance. Whether that's really successful or not, I don't know. I think it's more recent and also cuts down on a whole lot of others.

MR. SOLDNER: I can only say I've seen people here in Claremont and Pomona who are part-time, and they're on a Ferris wheel or what do you call it -

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, a Ferris wheel.

MR. SOLDNER: Treadmill.

MS. RIEDEL: Treadmill.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah, running from one school to the other, and it's not that they get any time to do their work at all; in fact, they probably get less. And most of them would never bring themselves to work in a classroom. In some schools that's hanky-panky; they're not even allowed to make work for yourself using school facilities.

MS. RIEDEL: That's true.

MR. SOLDNER: There's the same sort of a problem with the coach, you know, who would make the players all go to his sports store to buy their uniforms. So I don't know. It's more of a question than I have an answer.

All I can say in a real optimistic sense is that you can't really quiet a true creative spirit, and a really creative spirit may or may not even be involved in an academic situation. Just like those printed drawings out there in the kitchen had nothing to do with the glory of an art school or being a professor of art or having to work with those people. I think that's the creative spirit that underlies the real change and growth.

There was an interesting one about five years ago, I think it was in an article published so I can talk about it, in *Ceramics Monthly*, on a potter called [Neil] Tetkowski, who had a lot of ability to throw big stuff and move clay around; the title of it was-it was "Tetkowski, the New Peter Voulkos."

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. SOLDNER: Yeah. Well, we're still waiting on that one.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it seems a bit-the drawings you were talking about seem to go back to those two critical points that you've made throughout, which is, first, your curiosity and, second, the courage to pursue that.

MR. SOLDNER: You've got to do it. Don't put it off. Don't find excuses. And it's so easy, especially with overburden of teaching and administrative stuff, you have to get involved with.

It's easy to say, well, I don't have time or-but, see, that was one of the strengths of people like Voulkos. He did it anyhow, even though the school was banging away.

I started reading one of these files that I was just going to give you, and then I started reading it. I said, oh my God, Soldner, I didn't realize that you were a thorn in the flesh at Scripps College. You had to defend your teaching philosophy. You had to explain why you think your part-time teaching is better than full-time, a whole bunch of that stuff I had forgotten that there were problems. I always thought it was easy and I had no problem at all. But I'm going to xerox those, because I might even put those in my collection, you know, letters to the dean, to the chairman. And you go through a lot of chairmen, and you go through a lot of deans, over a period of years, and then you usually have to respond to each one, because they have their own agenda and their own ideas.

I really was chuckling, you know, when I finally realized, well, gee, I guess I do remember I had to-they called me on the carpet, or one of them was they wanted me to teach a freshman course in, I don't know, some humanities program, and I wrote back and I said, "You've got the wrong guy. I was hired to teach ceramics and you're asking me to teach philosophy of humanity or something like that. Why don't you get Alistair Cooke? He'd be perfect." That's what they wanted but, see, it's so ridiculous. Colleges may seem to be important in hiring you for a job like a potter or a painter, but as soon as you get in there, they're going to give you something else to do that you may or may not be qualified for.

I have a lot of my former students who never were sculptors; they were potters; they'd go to school where they want to combine the two, so all of a sudden they're called a sculptor. And the school doesn't really care and it's just the finances, if they can get somebody to teach something, whether they're qualified or not, and it's actually the same thing with a lot of colleges, Alfred University being one of the major ones that used graduate students to teach undergraduates. Well, they can justify it on the grounds that they're giving them teaching experience, but if you look at it, wouldn't it be-one of the things I loved about Scripps College is they never allowed-well, let's put it the other way. They insisted that the student have the full attention and teaching of the professor. Now, they might have a TA, a technical assistant; they're not a teaching assistant. They said, we're charging enough money that the parents are entitled to a child having the full attention of a professor, not the associate or the assistant or the beginner, and certainly not a graduate student.

But Alfred does it for economic reasons. They don't have to hire as many teachers, and, of course, the graduates love it, because they get a stipend or reduction of fees and they put on their curriculum vitae before they even

graduate that they taught at Alfred University. So it's a win-win situation for both the college and the kids, but I still question the value to the student.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: Well, we're probably just about done, unless there's anything you wanted to add. I mean, the one thing that strikes me as the constant through all your series, through all your teaching experience, and through Soldner pottery equipment, in your own work is the innovation, that there was constantly something new being generated, be it from an accident or an idea or a curiosity.

MR. SOLDNER: I hope so. Yeah, I do. And I guess you could probably say, well, what could you say, if I've been talking about it all the time. But I like that. I hope that.

Maybe teaching should be more organic anyhow, more-well, teaching and working should be more organic and really involved with doing rather than talking. I guess I still love the old Abstract Expressionistic period, when you'd have an exhibit, and someone would want to ask you what you're doing, and you'd say, well, look at it; it's on the wall. Nowadays we don't do that. Now we have hours of explanation. That's the one reason I show my slides the way I do, because I don't think it's necessary to talk endlessly about a piece in terms of how it was made, where it was made, when it was made, who owns it, and all that stuff, because the next slide has probably got the same information, and the next one does, too.

So by not talking about it at all, by only showing these moving, dissolving images, people get it, and they say, boy, I got it; you didn't have to say anything.

Glass of wine?

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you very much.

MR. SOLDNER: Bread?

MS. RIEDEL: A pleasure. That concludes this.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...July 7, 2006