Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Tommy Simpson, 2004 May 6-July 2

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 recorded interview with Tommy Simpson on May 6 and July 2, 2004. The interview took place in Washington, Connecticut, and was conducted by Edward Cooke, Jr., 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.

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

Interview

EDWARD COOKE: This is Ned Cooke interviewing Tommy Simpson at his home in Washington, Connecticut, on May 6, 2004. This is disc number one.

So, Tommy, I thought we would start off just talking a little bit about your background growing up in the upper Midwest. Maybe just talk about where you grew up, the relationship with the farm, some of those early experiences about the environment, your family, people in the town.

TOMMY SIMPSON: Yes, I could also refer you to the *Two Looks to Home* book [Tommy Simpson. *Two Looks to Home: The Art of Tommy Simpson*. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1999], which has a lot of, sort of, remembrances as a kid. But basically the town was about 2,500 people in the Midwest—northwest sort of outside of Chicago about 60, 90 miles, sort of the same distance I am now from New York. And it's a little town—Victorian, with a river running down the middle. My family are from there, my mother's family. And it was the kind of place where in the spring, in the fall, you know, 20 percent of the kids were missing, because they were planting or harvesting.

MR. COOKE: So still an agricultural community.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, it was very much so, as well as it was the last rung of wealth out of Chicago, so there were some really—people with a great deal of wealth that had farms. So it was a mix between just blue collar and some really wealthy people, and then a lot of farmers. And the world of arts was, you know, something you'd look at in a book—didn't really exist in the community.

MR. COOKE: So you spent a lot of time—did your family have a farm then?

MR. SIMPSON: My mother's family had farms, but by the time I came around, they were all sold. I have memorabilia stuff from some of the farms.

MR. COOKE: Right. But at that point you were more living in town and not necessarily tied into the agricultural rhythms?

MR. SIMPSON: I was living in the family house. My grandmother was born in the house kind of thing. And the family died in the house, so like five generations had it—it was my mother's house. My dad was from Peoria, and so the family had—Carpentersville was next door; it was named after my cousin and that kind of thing. My grandfather had a store downtown, a department store. And his father had started the business, and he was named Charlie. They called him "Cheap Charlie," because he went around in a wagon and sold cheaper than anybody else, that kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: So it was a hardware store that was the family business?

MR. SIMPSON: It was a mercantile—or you know, it's got a little bit—clothes as well—

MR. COOKE: Dry goods—

MR. SIMPSON: Dry goods and all that kind of thing. So it was a kind of quiet place. I mean, you could walk down the middle of Main Street, down the hill, you know, during the day, and hardly any cars would come by kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: And did your grandmother live with you?

MR. SIMPSON: I lived with my grandmother and my two great aunts and my mother during the war—because I was born in '39. I didn't really know my dad until I was about six years old. He was gone most of the time during

the Second World War. We lived out in California for a while, and then when we came back; we lived with my grandmother until she built a house—my parents built a house—and then we moved out. And then when my aunt died, we moved back into town in the family house. It was a block from Main Street downtown.

MR. COOKE: I remember you talked a bit about your grandmother being a very important influence on you.

MR. SIMPSON: Yes, they all were, mainly because there weren't any men around. Oh, there was one guy, Ernest, who was a handyman for my aunt, mowed the lawn and did handiwork kind of stuff. But basically I was brought up with three women, four women.

MR. COOKE: And they're the ones who brought the world of art to you in some ways?

MR. SIMPSON: No, they had no presence of art, you know. I didn't start till I was about 19. I was a junior in college when I started realizing what I had been doing all these years was art.

MR. COOKE: So what were you doing before then?

MR. SIMPSON: Just making stuff.

MR. COOKE: And when did that start? Did that start sort of—

MR. SIMPSON: Well, I think I—I don't remember ever not making something. So as far as I can remember, I made things.

MR. COOKE: What sort of things were you making when you were younger?

MR. SIMPSON: Paintings, guns, radio cabinets, scooters—you know, soapbox things.

MR. COOKE: And just innovating with random materials? It's not like you're buying kits or reading *Popular Mechanics* or anything like that—

MR. SIMPSON: Right.

MR. COOKE: You're just, sort of, outside and picking up things and—

MR. SIMPSON: —making stuff. And you know, there were a lot of men, when I was younger, that came off the farm. They had like six kids, and they'd go to eighth grade, and then they would become a carpenter or an auto mechanic. In a sense, they were intelligent people; they just didn't have an education—a university education. But they knew all sorts of—it's like you're going to put a nail in hardwood. They'd say, "Well, take it and blunt the end of it so it pushes the wood as you go instead of splitting it—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —and it won't crack on you." That practical kind of—

MR. COOKE: Real important knowledge.

MR. SIMPSON: "If you're going to put it there, you've got to grease it," or, "wait till tonight and I'll bring one back from the factory," you know, whatever.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: Because that's what you need, a wheel, you know, or something.

MR. COOKE: So that was just you going around sort of learning bits and pieces from all these people around this town?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, from all my friends. I feel I was pretty lucky. I sort of grew up like Tom Sawyer. You know, I had free rein—the community I lived in, and there wasn't a lot of this sort of—apprehensive about the community.

MR. COOKE: Letting your child out of the house, right? [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. A friend of mine, John Sutfin, and I, we used to camp—we'd get a canoe, the Boy Scout canoes, and we'd go up the river and camp out overnight and then come back. We were like 12, 13 years old. I wouldn't let a kid of mine do that.

MR. COOKE: Right. Different world.

MR. SIMPSON: And like the worst thing ever happened is somebody would get drunk and fall asleep in the woods. You know?

MR. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. SIMPSON: That kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: When you made this stuff, was it just for yourself? It was never for anybody else or for competitions or anything like that? It was just sort of this self-exploration?

MR. SIMPSON: More likely, although I have—I did a poster for the American Legion, you know, the poppy posters that kids used to do.

MR. COOKE: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And I found a clipping recently that I won the first prize, because I had no recollection of ever doing that.

MR. COOKE: [Laughs.] Right.

MR. SIMPSON: There was an auto mechanic guy I worked for when I was—must have been like 14 or something, leaded cars, ground down stuff.

MR. COOKE: So you even had jobs that were sort of geared towards this sort of keeping busy?

MR. SIMPSON: Working with your hands, yeah.

MR. COOKE: And in all media obviously, too.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, well, the object was that you wanted it to work when it got finished.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: Which is the motif that—I want it to come to life; that's the idea; who cares what material, whatever it is. You learn enough about it so that you can make it work for you instead of against you. And so that's the approach I take. It doesn't make any difference what material it is as long as it's, you know, fulfilling, something that comes to life for you.

MR. COOKE: Because you can manipulate it and get those desired results.

MR. SIMPSON: And if you say, I don't know how to do it—I mean, you go in a crowd of people and you say, "I don't know how to do this," somebody's going to raise their hands and say, "here, let me show you."

MR. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And you thought that you had a resource pool to draw on there—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: —to really be able to do that.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: Was there any encouragement of this in school, or this was just totally on your own time and—

MR. SIMPSON: I don't recall ever—well, I took art classes in eighth grade. And I enjoyed that, but it was like taking gym or taking English or—

MR. COOKE: Right, it's a requirement.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, it's, like, requirement. And in high school I never took it, because it was a dumping ground for, you know, the idiots. That's what they—they weren't necessarily idiots, but that's sort of the motif of how they approached the arts. And I was 19, 20 years old; I knew van Gogh and I've seen Japanese prints—that's it.

MR. COOKE: How did you get to know those?

MR. SIMPSON: I can't even remember how I got to know those.

MR. COOKE: But as you said, it's not as if you thought of what you were doing as art or furniture or anything. It was just sort of problem solving and making things.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: I mean, people would say you're fooling around with materials.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, or if a kid's—you know, he's out in the barn and don't bother him because we'll get a break for an hour or two. He's out there doodling around.

MR. COOKE: He's thinking. [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: He's busy. But the art aspect of it—living around the greater New York area, people are very conscious of the arts and the kids taking this and that and that sort of thing. My brother tap danced. I took tap dancing lessons. In the summer time you'd have a camp and you'd learn ballroom dancing. That aspect of the arts—that it was very relaxed and sort of didn't mean anything. It would be fun for you kids to do this kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: It never was good or bad. It was like, well, they did it this afternoon; it filled in the time, and so what.

MR. COOKE: Right. So then what happened when you were 19? You said all of a sudden you were in college and the light bulb goes off?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, my family were all in the medical profession, and that was where I was geared for. So I did a lot of—

MR. COOKE: So your father was in medical—

MR. SIMPSON: My dad was an ophthalmologist, did cataracts and that kind of stuff, fitted glasses. My grandfather—

MR. COOKE: Did your dad have any interest in making things or—

MR. SIMPSON: My dad had an interest—well, his hobby was antique cars. So when I was all through high school, I worked on antique cars. I'd rather be going out with girls, but—

MR. COOKE: He made you work on cars.

MR. SIMPSON: Worked on cars with him, because whatever he wanted me to do, I could do. So I was the designated helper. And I enjoyed it because I learned a lot about cars, to the point where I don't want to deal with them anymore. [Laughs.] But he had no—I mean, he never went to a movie. He had no interest in the arts. What he was really interested in was creating things. There is the art world, which is just an illusion kind of thing. It's like, this week it's red paintings that are squares, and next year it's something else. And it's got nothing to do with creation—and he wouldn't have anything to do with the arts. But he was definitely interested in creation.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: His idea of fun would be to get an old car, take the radiator out that's broken, take it and find out how you could get it fixed and who would fix it, and then go get it fixed, and then get it back and then have it running. So it was like the beginning, middle, and end of something, and it's nonexistent, and now it is.

MR. COOKE: But he didn't have an interest himself, in the satisfaction of working on it himself. It was more finding out the people who could help him out?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, but it was like a director creating this thing, and that's what he really loved doing. It's like, I'm not interested in the arts. And he never was. He didn't go to the movies; he wouldn't go to the theater. My mother would drag him to the theater.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: But he liked this kind of thing, and so I did a lot of that. You find a basket, you find a chest of drawers and it's missing wood legs, so we'd go get—I would make the leg and we'd put it back together. And he'd have that. And then after that, he would treat himself. Every Saturday and Sunday we'd go out and do things like this, and then we'd go to his club, the Anvil Club [Dundee, IL], have a drink and dinner. So he did this, and after he'd gotten it all done, and you got to do it right kind of thing, then you could like treat yourself.

MR. COOKE: Then that was accomplishment.

MR. SIMPSON: That was your reward, yeah.

MR. COOKE: Right, exactly.

MR. SIMPSON: Which was really sort of Pavlovian. You work hard, you do it right, and then you get a treat kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: That was sort of an interesting twist on the arts. But the art thing was never—I don't remember any of my friends, I don't remember anybody. There was one guy that was an upholsterer in town. His brother painted pictures of like Dundee, the Main Street, and things like that. I'd just watch him once in a while because he would be out sort of plein air painting. But it was just not in my consciousness that way. And I was—so I went to the University of Illinois, and I took all like, you know—

MR. COOKE: Were you thinking pre-med at that point or something like that?

MR. SIMPSON: That's the thing I was doing, and then after a semester, I was taking zoology and I was sitting there falling asleep. I thought, now this doesn't really make a lot of sense if I'm going to do this for the rest of my life and it's not of interest to me—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —other than it's sort of the abstraction of learning something. So I went in and wrote my name on all my finals and left, handed in blank finals and everything. So they flunked me out of school.

MR. COOKE: Bit of rebellion. [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: Well, it's sort of like end of the question. I didn't have to argue the point. So then I went into the business and did that for—I went to Northern Illinois University [DeKalb, IL]—I went to about six universities. I went to Northern Illinois University and I was taking business classes there. Because I always did well in school, that kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And then—

MR. COOKE: Because you were results-oriented. [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: And so then my junior year they had an elective, so I took a calligraphy class. And that seemed like a lot of fun. I enjoyed doing it even though it wasn't calculus; it wasn't like brain trust type information. But I enjoyed that, so I took a printmaking class in the art school.

MR. COOKE: This is at Northern Illinois?

MR. SIMPSON: At Northern Illinois University. And so then I realized—I had a teacher, Keith Baker, who was the print teacher, and I realized that I was an artist, whether I liked it or not.

MR. COOKE: And this is the thing that gave you satisfaction.

MR. SIMPSON: This is what I was good at, and this is what meant something to—

MR. COOKE: Did they encourage you right from the start, in terms of saying you've got something?

MR. SIMPSON: Pretty much so. A lot of it—I could look at things and just go do them.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And I took my first painting the first semester. The teacher I had, when I painted, his first comment was, "You're not supposed to be painting like that; this is your first semester." I went to the University of Iowa and I was in the graduate department in painting, and he said, "I don't know what to tell you." I went to Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI] and graduated M.F.A. in painting. He said not one word about my painting the whole year and a half I was there.

MR. COOKE: Really.

What was Cranbrook like at that time?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, Zoltan Sepeshy was the head of it. He was the head of the school and also my teacher. And it was very much a feudal system more than it was a university.

MR. COOKE: By medium. You were associated with one person and one medium and one shop basically, right?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, they had two painting teachers and they each had 12 or 13 students. And I was in Sepeshy—he was the—that was the head thing. And then they had another one who taught a lot of the other students. And I don't know how they determined who was where, but I was in the Sepeshy studio after the first year. Then the second year I had a fellowship to teach other people painting, the other people who majored in other—like ceramics; they'd taking painting as a minor, and I would teach them.

But it grew out of the fact that—the Booths [George and Ellen Scripps] had brought over these artists from Europe and gave them studios, and they worked. And then they slowly got apprentices, and then people said, "Well, I'd like to be an apprentice too," and it slowly grew into a school. I think Sepeshy was the second president. And he ran it like whatever he wanted to do; that's how the school ran.

MR. COOKE: But there wasn't a lot of crossover between media; originally, Booth had it set up weaving and ceramics and some painting. There was sort of that idea of the fertile mix, I guess, in some ways.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, it was more of a graduate school. If you were there, you knew this is what you wanted to do. It wasn't like undergraduate work, where you have 100 students and four of them are going to end up as artists and the rest are going to be enriched by their experience, but they're not going to do this—their life work. But more—higher percentage—[Eero] Saarinen taught there, and the Eameses [Charles and Ray] came from there, and lots of others.

MR. COOKE: [Harry] Bertoia.

MR. SIMPSON: Bertoia, the whole string of people that came out of there. Jack Larsen—

MR. COOKE: And Majia Grotell teaching ceramics.

MR. SIMPSON: She was teaching there when I went to school there, Majia Grotell was. She was still there.

MR. COOKE: Because it seemed like it was such a place for intermixing between different people sort of in the '40s and early '50s. Sounds like it was a different climate in some respects.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, it was an open wood shop; that's when I started doing woodworking. And you could go in there and use the equipment.

MR. COOKE: But no one there to necessarily instruct you; it was just a resource?

MR. SIMPSON: There was a guy there to help if you wanted help.

When I went to Northern Illinois and University of Iowa, all those were under industrial arts. You couldn't do that unless you were an industrial arts major. They wouldn't allow you in the shop.

MR. COOKE: So you were interested in doing wood at that point, or furniture, but there was no access to shop prior to Cranbrook?

MR. SIMPSON: I did things sort of off and on with friends who had equipment, but Cranbrook, I sort of taught myself from—as well as what I had learned before. And some of the work looked like that.

MR. COOKE: So what did the people in painting think of what you were doing?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, like Sepeshy never said anything about my painting. He'd come in and look at it, scratch his head.

MR. COOKE: Either a painting on canvas or what you were doing with wood?

MR. SIMPSON: The wood, one night I was doing a toy chest, and I had made it in the wood shop, and I brought it over and I was carving on it—[demonstrates]—you know, on the chisel.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And this was—I can't remember—10:00 at night. So I hear the studio door open, and he used to have shoes that he didn't put shoestrings in, so it would be clup, clup, clup. So I hear the clup, clup, clup, so I knew he was coming.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: He comes around the corner, and my studio—it's a little cubicle—everybody had a cubicle this size, kind of—and so he said, "You know, this is the painting studio. You're not supposed to be doing this kind of work in here." So I said, "Okay." So he turns around and he walks back, clup, clup, clup. And so I start pounding again. And then I could hear the—him, clup, clup, and open the door and leave. And the way he taught, in a sense, was if somebody's going to come in and tell you you can't do that, and you stop, you're never going to be an artist. If he tells you you can't do it, and you still do it, he knows that you're serious about—

MR. COOKE: It's a drive, right.

MR. SIMPSON: And that's the way he taught more than, you know, change the color, or you're on the right track, or that kind of thing, as far as your painting went.

MR. COOKE: So what sort of stuff were you making at that point? That was a toy chest that was carved and painted?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, it had sort of a Kandinsky-like—early Kandinsky-like imagery on it, carved in relief and then painted. And a lot of it was, in a sense, something's not so different in terms of spirit from what I'm doing on some of the things. And some of the paintings that were in the wood shop were paintings I did then.

MR. COOKE: Were any other students encouraging or interested in what you were doing? Or were you feeling like you were sort of doing this on your own?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, now it's almost 50 years later, and how many people are doing what I'm doing?

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: So 50 years ago nobody ever said anything. The kind of comments, like, from family, "When are you going to start making something that somebody can use?" Or, "When are you going to make something somebody likes?"

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: So it was a particular world that I was inventing of my own interest, and a lot of it was based in idea more than it was the traditional utility of how a chair or chest of drawers or something, and a lot of the imagery came out of the paintings, and back and forth.

MR. COOKE: And colors—

MR. SIMPSON: And the colors.

I remember I liked German and Scandinavian painted furniture, sort of folk things, Northwest Indians.

MR. COOKE: How had you been conscious of this stuff all of a sudden if that wasn't part of your growing up? If at age 19 you knew van Gogh and—

MR. SIMPSON: I think the best part of it was is I had no compunction about—or prejudice or bias about any of it. Like you saw a Northwest Indian mask, you thought, hey, this is great.

MR. COOKE: Right. You don't fit it into a hierarchical taxonomy or whatever—

MR. SIMPSON: You hadn't gone to school to tell you that these are made by primitives or natives.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: It's like, hey, this is really a good idea. The same with African or Indonesian or Chinese, whatever. There are great, wonderful, inventive ideas all over the place. So I just went sort of in that direction more than a schooled approach to something.

MR. COOKE: Did Cranbrook—they weren't encouraging that kind of—that was simply on your own time in many ways, right?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, I went to University of Illinois, and when I was in high school I went to Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago for English—taking English things, and reading, and things like that.

So then I went to University of Illinois, which I flunked myself out of. The only good thing is five years later they hired me as a faculty. So then I went to Northern Illinois University, which I graduated from, and when I was

there, I went to Elgin Community College at night and took some art courses that I couldn't get during—

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And then I went to the University of Iowa for a semester. And while I was at Northern Illinois University, I went to University of London for a summer and studied English culture. And then I went to University of Iowa, and then I went to Cranbrook and graduated from there.

MR. COOKE: When did you graduate from Cranbrook?

MR. SIMPSON: I think it was in '63. When I was at Northern—it's like I know nothing about this, and all of a sudden, I've got five guys telling me what art is, and none of them are the same. It's like who do you believe kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: So then I went to another school, and you've got three or four other people telling you this is what art is, and that's not the same as the others.

MR. COOKE: That's the other five, right.

MR. SIMPSON: Then I got to the University of Iowa, and they were telling me what art was about. And so I realized, what the hell, I'm just going to do what I think art is, or create things that I like to create and I'll just pay the price for it.

MR. COOKE: So that was your feeling coming out of Cranbrook.

MR. SIMPSON: I do what I do, and what I do is the best because the nature of the quality comes in the fact that you're involved in, immersed in this, versus an educated theory that you paint from. You could see it—10,000 landscapes with cows in it that were theoretical—this is what art is, we'll teach you to do this.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: None of them come to life. None of them are really creative. They're just paintings, which is all right, but that's not what I wanted to do. So that's the approach I take, and still do.

MR. COOKE: So when you graduated, where did you go? Did you have a job?

MR. SIMPSON: So when I graduated, there was a woman named Dione Guffey [Kenzer], who was the head of this gallery in New York, who came through, for what reason I'm not really sure.

MR. COOKE: Came through Cranbrook—

MR. SIMPSON: —and saw my work and liked it and gave me a show in New York when I was out of graduate school.

MR. COOKE: And the name of the gallery was?

MR. SIMPSON: I think it was the World Gallery, they called it. It was part of J. Walter Thompson, the advertising—

MR. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. SIMPSON: And so at that time I was married; I had two kids.

MR. COOKE: That had happened while you were at Cranbrook, or before Cranbrook?

MR. SIMPSON: Before Cranbrook—which could be a wonderful thing and it also can be a foolish—

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And so in the meantime, my grandmother had died, which was one of those things that, you know, like two years later you start walking towards her house and you realize she died two years ago.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: So, and she left—I think it was like $4,000 she left me. And so because of the show in New York, I came and rented a place over in Plymouth, and part of the house—

MR. COOKE: In Plymouth, Connecticut?

MR. SIMPSON: In Plymouth, Connecticut. And it had a big room that I turned into a studio.

MR. COOKE: So what brought you to Plymouth?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, it was close to New York.

MR. COOKE: So your thought was, leaving Cranbrook, you wanted to be near New York but you wanted to be not in the city but in a rural area?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, well, the city is—you needed money—I mean, with a wife and two kids and $4,000, you're going live in New York for a year?

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And so for a year I took off, and that's what I lived on for that year. And I did that show and the other show at this PVI Gallery [New York].

MR. COOKE: What was PVI standing for?

MR. SIMPSON: That stood for Pat Van Ingen who was—I think she was Dutch, and she had a gallery.

MR. COOKE: Were they showing other furniture makers or what kind of—

MR. SIMPSON: All kinds of art pieces.

MR. COOKE: What kind of—

MR. SIMPSON: There weren't any furniture makers.

MR. COOKE: Who were you associated with in terms of some of these shows?

MR. SIMPSON: Betty Johnson I think her name was; she made puzzles, big puzzles; Anna Copley, C-O-P-E-Y [sic]—Copley—makes paintings of sort of doll-like figures. And Bill Accorsi I think may have showed there. It was a lot of, sort of, young New York kind of people doing not necessarily traditional things, because traditional things then were Abstract Expressionism.

MR. COOKE: Right, it had become mainstream at that point.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. If you did figurative work, forget it. You were—

MR. COOKE: —way back there.

MR. SIMPSON: If you did photography, you'd get a dollar and a half for a photograph, which has totally changed now, but—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And she lasted a couple years, and I think she went back to Holland or something. I'm not quite sure. But she ran a—

MR. COOKE: It wasn't like a craft gallery; it wasn't an art gallery. It was sort of a variety of different things, or—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, it was a variety of different art.

MR. COOKE: It wasn't a title like craft or art, but it was just a gallery?

MR. SIMPSON: It was just a standard gallery. And in the new catalogue, there's a little letter that I got from Betty Furness to say that she liked my work and that—but right now it's too expensive, you know. And it was like $150 for a piece. I thought that was kind of a fun thing. But it was a different ball game then. They took you on as people more than objects—you know, merchandise—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —kind of thing. And she'd give me—I remember she gave me a thing in there where—of the people who bought it and their names, where they lived, and a brief thing of their collection—who they had in their collection and what they collected—she gave to all the artists.

MR. COOKE: Make you more informed about where it was going, in case there was a follow-up or something like that, as well.

MR. SIMPSON: And then my parents said they would—I think they missed the grandchildren and that whole routine, so they said they would help me if I came back to Illinois. And they wouldn't help me out here.

MR. COOKE: And you would have preferred to have stayed in Plymouth perhaps.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, just because New York is where everything gets sold, you know.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: That's what I wanted to do versus—so I went back to Illinois till 1970. So it must have been about five years.

MR. COOKE: Because if you graduated in '63, you were in Plymouth from '63, '64.

MR. SIMPSON: For a year. And so I still made stuff. I went back there and I shingled people's houses, I made wine racks for people, anything to make money.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: I had varieties of studios, and I also started a business which was called Silliman's Grocery Store on Slop Hill, which was an area of Elgin, Illinois. So I started a key club, and it had two or three apartments—three apartments, then two or three stores—sort of a little complex, the '60s kind of thing, sort of poster shop and that kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Right, a little bit of everything—counterculture.

MR. SIMPSON: Right, and so my parents would help me do things like that financially. But they wouldn't help me to do things that would involve—because they had no clue what the art thing was about.

MR. COOKE: Right, exactly.

MR. SIMPSON: And so I did that for a couple years, and my idea was that I put this corporation together. And my idea was to get this key club going. And then I had six or eight partners—we made this little corporation, and I would sell my share—sell everything out to the corporation. So that was the big plan. And so I did this for a couple years, helped fix this whole place up and told them I wanted to sell my share. So they said sure. It was like on a Wednesday—I sold it for four, five times what it was worth, which was great. And then on Friday Nixon announced that the prime rate was being frozen and dropped, which everybody thought, God, we're going into the Depression. Nobody had a—you said the prime rate and people would say, what the hell is the prime rate?

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: I mean, people were clueless, including myself. And so the banks froze everything—nobody could get mortgage—

MR. COOKE: What year was that? 1970?

MR. SIMPSON: No, it's like '68 or somewhere in there. So then they couldn't get a mortgage to buy it. So I sat on it for another year and then sold it and got my money out, what I had invested, but I didn't make a dime.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: So it was like—didn't think this was the right idea for me to try to make money somewhere else. I mean, it was bad luck in one sense, but maybe it was good that I didn't make money on it, because I might have done it again.

MR. COOKE: Right—been tempted.

MR. SIMPSON: So then my dad bought a grocery store over on the other side of Elgin, and so I rented from him for a couple years. And then I got divorced and left.

MR. COOKE: Knowing that you wanted to get back to New York?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, yeah. I came out to Hartford and got a teaching job for a year. And I brought the kids and my wife out, and then I went back to Illinois for a couple weeks to do some work to make money, and when I got back here, they were gone; they were out there. She just packed the kids up and left. So I got divorced then.

MR. COOKE: So what year was that about?

MR. SIMPSON: That was around 1970, ‘71 or something like—’70.

MR. COOKE: Let’s talk a little bit about the 1960s, because you had some of your work in those two New York shows, and then it seems like you got picked up with the American Craft Museum [now the Museum of Arts & Design], with “Fantasy Furniture”—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, that was a major show, the “Fantasy Furniture” one—’68, I think—

MR. COOKE: So how did that evolve?

MR. SIMPSON: Sixty-six.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: That came out of—well, Paul Smith was at the museum, and I met him in the early ‘60s. And originally he was hired to do the display.

MR. COOKE: He was doing the installation. He was the exhibition designer.

MR. SIMPSON: And they had a director—Mrs. [Aileen Osborne] Webb was still around. And the director died suddenly, a heart attack or something, after a couple years. And so Paul just filled in till they found somebody, and they finally didn’t find anybody, so he just took it over. And that was just when I first met them. I think the museum was only three or four years old at that time.

MR. COOKE: It got reinstalled in like ‘56.

MR. SIMPSON: Fifty-six?

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: It was in a brownstone right next to the Modern [Museum of Modern Art] on that same—the north side of the street.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And Mrs. Webb had the America House, which was across the street. And the America House was going then, and—

MR. COOKE: What was your impression of that operation at that point? I mean, since here you were, coming from Cranbrook and having some of your work in these other galleries.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, the good thing was that it was a good, active, and available place, because the gallery business hasn’t changed in the sense that, you know, they’re interested in paying the rent. So if you’re doing something different, who are they going to sell it to? They want somebody who is doing whatever is current and hot, so that’s kind of routine. And so if you were doing something other than Abstract Expressionism, they wouldn’t even look at you.

MR. COOKE: Right. So the safety of what’s current.

MR. SIMPSON: What’s current—and Paul came to a show, the show at the PVI Gallery, and asked me to be in a show called “Amusements Is,” which was pre the wood show, the “Fantasy Furniture” thing—was a couple years beforehand or something. And so then he put this “Fantasy Furniture” show together [Museum of Contemporary Crafts, now the Museum of Arts & Design, New York, January 21 - March 13, 1966], which Wendell [Castle] was in, and an Italian guy and Pedro Friedberg from Mexico. And they got a tremendous splash out of this, because everything else was, you know, in the Tage Frid school—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And so they got a lot of PR out of it.

MR. COOKE: And you’d done rabbit chairs for that, right?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, and a clock. There was a clock with sort of a farm scene on it, cows and stuff. And I had a desk. I can’t remember exactly. I’d have to go look exactly what was in that show. There was a catalogue from that. And that got a lot of PR, all over the country, just because it was something new kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: So different. Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And so, in that sense, the museum was a fledgling kind of thing, and a lot of artist-craftsmen-type people who came to their openings—there was a lot of networking and that kind of thing. And they had a lot of fun-type shows, versus the serious power stuff.

MR. COOKE: And you were talking a lot about how she would remember your name—Mrs. Webb would remember your name and introduce you, and there was a personal element to this whole circle of those openings.

MR. SIMPSON: And there were genuine people. They weren't like automatons or administrators that sort of look at you and tell you nothing.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: They were real people. Doris was one that—she was a registrar. I'd come to town and I'd say, "Okay, Doris, tell me what's happening." She'd tell me all the gossip's going and that sort of thing. So you could sort of keep track of what was happening, and you could talk to Mrs. Webb and ask her—she'd ask you what you were doing and, you know, you felt like you were a part of something.

MR. COOKE: So you didn't feel like she was also judgmental — I mean, she wasn't close-minded, because she started with a certain notion of what American craft comprised, and yet she supported this sort of turn—

MR. SIMPSON: She was very sweet and very genteel, reminded me of my grandmother.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: Was always interested in what you were doing—

MR. COOKE: Never asking, "What are you doing?" [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. "What the hell is that?"

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: Versus when I had the show at PVI Gallery, Ivan Karp, who also came to it, whether he remembers or not—so he was at Castelli [Leo Castelli Gallery, New York, NY]. So he asked me to come over to talk to him. And his comment was, "I've never seen anything like this before; we should do something." So I'm like 25, or 24, something like that. So I go over to Castelli and see Ivan Karp, and he sits down. He wanted to have some kind of show. I had no idea who Castelli Gallery was—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: Just another place. So he took me over, up a few blocks to another gallery, which I can't really remember. It was like Scarabini. It was an Italian name or something like that, which is where Andy Warhol first showed the flocked fruit and the soup can. He did a grocery store theme.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And I remember going in the gallery and they had the soup can and the flocked pears and other kinds of stuff. And they had a connection with that gallery, and they were sort of like trying people out. And if it worked, then they would bring them over to the other one and they would tell the newspapers that they—not telling them that they also were part of the other gallery.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And they were doing that to several galleries. And so that, you know, sort of Victorian-WASPy kind of thing didn't sound right to me. And then he said, "Okay, this is the show, what we want you to make. You can make a chair and have a pyramid on the seat that you can't sit on, and we can do this, we can do that, and don't worry about; we've got people that will manufacture all this stuff." And they were telling me what—

MR. COOKE: So what was your response to this?

MR. SIMPSON: I said, "I can't do it." One, I thought, I'm too young to have people telling me what to do.

MR. COOKE: Right. Let alone dish off the work to somebody else.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: It seems like that's antithetical to the way you were brought up as well.

MR. SIMPSON: As well as the essence of what I'm doing is not—I'm adapting to the world. I'm trying to build my own world.

MR. COOKE: So did you—

MR. SIMPSON: That just didn't gel. But it was probably a mistake in a career way, but not for me personally.

MR. COOKE: So this is the point at which you really got to be friends with Wendell, was the "Fantasy Furniture" show?

MR. SIMPSON: He wasn't married to Nancy then.

MR. COOKE: You hadn't heard his name before? This was a whole new world to you in some ways?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, I didn't know anybody. I was 20—

MR. COOKE: And Paul Smith was the one who brought you all together.

MR. SIMPSON: That activity of the museum brought lots of people, because a lot of the other places—

MR. COOKE: And that was your entrée into the museum.

MR. SIMPSON: —a lot of other ones were locked out. You'd have to do an eight by 10 abstract painting if you wanted to go in a gallery. Otherwise they wouldn't take you.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And I had conversations with other galleries about that. I had no compunction. I went to the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York] to see about a show, and their answer was, are you alive or dead? It makes a difference.

MR. COOKE: Last I checked, right.

MR. SIMPSON: And so I was just going around. I mean, I just had no compunction. Well, it's like, I was 21 and I was married and had the kids and I went to England for a summer. I went down to Land's End [St. Ives, England], where the artists' colony is.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And I went to sleep, got up in the morning, and then the water had disappeared out of the bay. They have a real shallow—I never saw a tide before.

MR. COOKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MR. SIMPSON: When we were first married, my first wife, we went around Europe. We left Paris, went southwest; we see the steeple, and you went into the church; we thought, oh, this is the church. So we went around and looked at it; said, oh, this is really kind of interesting. I wonder why nobody knows about this. That's Chartres Cathedral. So that was sort of, you know, my experience in the arts.

MR. COOKE: That shows you how sophisticated you are, right.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, it was totally—it's the blank canvas, you know.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: So I'd go around—I talked to Sidney Janis, showed them my work and if he was interested. He was sort of interested, but he had [Josef] Albers on the wall. I said, "A square on a square on a square; you've got three colors; it's going to do something whether you want it to or not." I mean, you just can't not have it not do something.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: I said, "Isn't he bored doing this?" And he was kind of like, yeah, "I'm sort of bored doing this." Then you go up Madison and his son's wife—had Wendy in it, like a kid's store. And I made some hangers with little hearts on them because I wanted to sell them. I'd make 10 of them and say, for $50 you can have these—trying to make money.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And so, she said, “Oh, I can’t afford $50.” “I’ll give you two bucks a piece.” I said, “Okay.” “And a teddy bear; you give me a teddy bear.” I said, “Okay.” So then, like a month later, another person shows up from a magazine that had seen the hangers that she was selling for like $20 apiece. And this is your learning experience with the art world.

MR. COOKE: Right. But the craft world was different then—

MR. SIMPSON: And then the woman who bought them for 20 bucks apiece took them to Pennsylvania and had somebody else make them and they put them in her shop. And she said, “Well, Tommy designed those.” She said, “Well, he wasn’t doing anything with them.” That was her approach to it.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: Ripping you off.

MR. COOKE: A true entrepreneur, right?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: So did you and Wendell hit it off right away?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, we’ve always been friends—I mean, we’re very different in a lot of ways. But we both respect what each other does.

MR. COOKE: Right. It’s interesting how you’re both working away from New York but then coming down into New York and participating in that scene and, sort of, not being part of that familiar crowd in some ways.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, it’s tougher, because you have to be more sociable, but you don’t get as much work done.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: You have to be part of the scene and available—I could do 10 things for two that they do in New York—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —and I’d rather make the 10, because it takes 10 to get two really good ones.

MR. COOKE: So you really see the trade-off of staying in New York, that you don’t have to be sociable, that you could go in only on your own terms for the Craft Museum openings or different things like that.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, New York is much more of a head job. Your head leads your way versus your heart or your body—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —your hands or something, because it’s logistically harder to do that in New York with your hands and your heart. But if you’re smart, and you can talk—you’re very facile—it’s a good place. But that’s not what I wanted to do. I like to do a variety of things, because they all sort of feed each other and they build a world other than you market yourself—you do a better mousetrap, and that’s what you do for 40 years.

MR. COOKE: Right. So at this point, you’re making furniture, you’re still painting; you’re still doing all these different things.

MR. SIMPSON: Right. It’s more creating something than it is making art—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —or making—well, I guess you have to pay attention to career or something. But it’s sort of a different approach to it, which is not necessarily the best for business.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: Or a steady—it’s not an even line of growth going on.

MR. COOKE: And people like Sam Maloof—I mean, he’s done the same rocker for years. So a lot more people, a

lot of people know about it, and they appreciate it, and it's sort of like a whole other kind of thing. It's the name-brand recognition.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: Right. From the "Fantasy Furniture" show, then you did the book. There's a catalogue for the exhibition, and then you ended up writing a book?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, *Fantasy Furniture* [New York: Reinhold Book Corp., 1968].

MR. COOKE: How did that come about?

MR. SIMPSON: There was a guy, Sterling McElhaney, who worked for Van Nostrand, who was an editor then, and he came to me and asked me if I wanted to do this book. And so I said, "Sure, I'm game for anything." And it was in a series of books—

MR. COOKE: I was going to say, Van Nostrand did a whole series—they did Wendell's book on lamination [*The Wendell Castle Book of Wood Lamination*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1980]. They were interested in the craft—

MR. SIMPSON: And they did Norman Laliberté, and they did a lot that, I think, sourced out of what was the activity of the Craft Museum then.

MR. COOKE: There must have been a close connection—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, I don't know exactly—I don't know if they'd go to each show and they'd say, is this applicable, you know. But Sterling, I think, was a little offbeat, as I remember, comparatively, at that time. He came, like, in a suit but wore shoes, like boots, which was, like, not New York.

MR. COOKE: Right, not at that time.

MR. SIMPSON: But he fell off the subway platform and got hit by the train. It didn't kill him, but it did brain damage. So that sort of ended that.

MR. COOKE: So was that at the end of the '60s or—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, somewhere there—and also—then Reinhold, he got—

MR. COOKE: Got bought out?

MR. SIMPSON: —got bought out by Reinhold, so it was Reinhold Van Nostrand.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And I thought well, I should update this. So I got an agent, took out one of the agents there, and found out that I got the rights back to it and the photographs. But they were—well, skimming money off all of the things, you know, for something—I don't know what it was.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And so the guy who had the three martinis at lunch said, well, from what I understand, from the books I've done, it's like the hardest thing is to get accounting for stuff. You just have no idea—they send you these sheets, and you look at it and you think, I can't understand any of this.

MR. COOKE: Right, the spreadsheet doesn't make any sense.

So was that fun writing the book, then?

MR. SIMPSON: It was—yeah. Well, the first book, *Fantasy Furniture*, got written in like two weeks.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: You know, there wasn't a lot of—

MR. COOKE: That was just building off of the show—the same people giving a little bit more breadth to it.

MR. SIMPSON: It was sort of already made for you.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: A lot of it was going around collecting photographs and trying to get things that sort of present the idea, like antique things. In the book it has northwestern stuff and Egyptian, sort of, painted things and a little bit of, where the source is from all this. People have been doing it for 3,000 years, you know.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And then they had my work in the middle, and then at the end they had some of the people that were in that "Fantasy Furniture" show. The best part of it was—I think I could buy them for like $3.30 or something a book. And if you wanted a set of slides, it would cost me $20. So it was cheaper to buy a book and give—

MR. COOKE: And it's impressive to somebody, thinking that you wrote a book and you're in a book.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, and the book part—somebody said, well, what do you do? And you hand them a book, and they say, "Oh, this is great." But they never opened the book up—because it was blank pages, you know—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: It's sort of that reality thing. It's like what I did, the stamp, the U.S. stamp. People say, "Well, that's great." It's like a hokey, you know, carney stamp.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: But it's like real America. It sort of gives you credibility, which artists always lack kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: So did Paul [Smith] keep coming back to you in terms of other exhibitions? You showed in the bed show, too?

MR. SIMPSON: The bed show, and there was a mask show. There was "Objects: USA" kind of thing. There was—must have been about five or—I just gave my last resume away. I've shown there 10 times in different shows.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, so like—

MR. SIMPSON: Different themes.

MR. COOKE: —once a year basically it seemed like, and they were thematic and, sort of, of the moment.

MR. SIMPSON: And he had a lot of thematic shows, and I was always a good one to count on to actually make something—

MR. COOKE: You'd deliver. And it would be different.

MR. SIMPSON: —versus a lot of people who wouldn't deliver. They'd say they would, and they, "Oh, I can't, you know; the truck broke down and I can't"—

MR. COOKE: Was the bed show more conservative than "Fantasy Furniture"? I mean, that's where Sam put his cradle hutch, and you had *Daphne's Bed* and—

MR. SIMPSON: Well, the "Fantasy Furniture" one—there wasn't Fantasy Furniture—the term, I don't recall before that.

MR. COOKE: Right. I mean, that was out there—

MR. SIMPSON: And so that was good copy, you know? The bed show, they had beer cans stacked up, as well as sort of the thing I made, as well as Sam's. And they had a real range.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: The furniture still had the biggest bust because—well, the first furniture like that I made was some doors. That was like 1959, and there was nobody doing anything—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —even in the '60s there was nobody really doing anything.

MR. COOKE: Pretty singular voice.

MR. SIMPSON: And I can't even remember when I remember seeing—well, the biggest change I remember when—after I was at PIA [Program in Artisanry, Boston University]—

MR. COOKE: We'll get there.

MR. SIMPSON: —then it became a little more—

MR. COOKE: Mainstream.

MR. SIMPSON: —mainstreamed.

MR. COOKE: But at that point, even looking at "Objects: USA," when you were included in that, in '69, you're still a single voice in what you were doing in terms of carved, painted furniture.

MR. SIMPSON: Right. After all these years it's like that—I hate to say whimsical, but it's sort of a playful aspect—which you find if you look even at Etruscan ceramics and you'll see little—funny little guys running around—it has a very—

MR. COOKE: Yeah, there's a light touch to it.

MR. SIMPSON: —a light—that sort of air to your heart. It's been through centuries of—just nobody's focused on that kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Did you get a lot of attention from "Objects: USA"? Do you remember any repercussions off of that? Was that sort of the end of the moment, the beginning of something different, or—

MR. SIMPSON: "Objects: USA," when was that?

MR. COOKE: Sixty-nine.

MR. SIMPSON: I don't remember getting—

MR. COOKE: Of course, you had the rabbit chairs, I think, in there, as well. I mean, they came on over from the "Fantasy Furniture" show.

MR. SIMPSON: I was out in Illinois then, so I didn't have the same sort of input with what was going in the city. I came back, in a sense, because I sold a piece to somebody that I found out was like five miles from where I lived in Illinois. They came to New York, they bought it, and they took it back to—five—they could have gone five miles and bought—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: I thought, something's not right here. But the "Objects," I don't recall too much from that. It was the kind of stuff that I got good copy, but it was hard to sell, because they would sell something more conservative and they'd use this to interest people.

MR. COOKE: That's what I got a sense—it's kind of curious to think of what you and Wendell went through when you were pushing the boundaries in the late '60s, mid-'60s, late '60s. I'm thinking about what he did with his plastic chairs and some of the—

MR. SIMPSON: George [Beylerian]—

MR. COOKE: —painted versions and things like that. And then, all of a sudden it seems like both of you end up sort of disappearing in some way from that forward-moving sort of work. And he retreats into more, sort of, fine furniture, starting around '71 or '72, and you, sort of, were no longer part of the New York scene.

MR. SIMPSON: I'm trying to remember how the—well, in the early—

MR. COOKE: Is that part of your moving back to Illinois and then coming back to New York and sort of being to and fro?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, there was sort of a three- or four-year period in there, but I started showing at the Fairtree Gallery [New York] in the early '70s, and then I showed at the [Theo] Portnoy Gallery [New York] in the late '70s and '80s.

MR. COOKE: And what sort of a stable are Fairtree and Portnoy?

MR. SIMPSON: Portnoy was an art gallery, so to speak, and the Fairtree was more craft in them. They did mugs

as well as art pieces. And a lot of—like Ferne Jacobs and Carol Anthony showed there, and Dan Jackson—

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And Mark Lindquist and Norman Laliberté, I think, showed some stuff. I'm trying to think of some quilt people. A lot of early glass people. Marvin Lipofsky, I think, showed there, and Laura Wilensky—you know her ceramics a little.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And—

MR. COOKE: I never realized Fairtree had that much.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, they showed a tremendous amount of people.

MR. COOKE: And they did well?

MR. SIMPSON: And John Cederquist used to show there. Well, it was—the Fairtree is from Sheinbaum; it's a translation from Sheinbaum. And she was a Warner Brothers daughter [Betty Warner Sheinbaum, daughter of Harry Warner, founder of Warner Brothers Studios]. She was married to Stanley Sheinbaum. And he was one of the people involved with the Pentagon—Pentagon Papers—with that going on in Washington and the guy exposed these papers, and Stanley, I think, helped him or something. He was involved in politics. And she was—did weaving and, I think, sculpture.

So she started this Fairtree Gallery with Stan Reifel, the director. He was from Santa Barbara, Stan was. He did furniture and stuff. And her philosophy was, they did it as fine art institute instead of like a gallery, which means they had to—somehow they had to make money. And she wanted not necessarily the star system, which a lot of galleries are—you know, she was sort of against that.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: She was trying to put forth as many people as you could.

MR. COOKE: Have an impact on the field—you know, encouragement.

MR. SIMPSON: I think Lee Nordness had a gallery [Lee Nordness Gallery, New York], which he had Wendell in and some other people, and there may have been another one. But there wasn't any real gallery like in New York like the Fairtree.

MR. COOKE: Right. When did she first approach you?

MR. SIMPSON: Stan did. I can't remember how we got together.

MR. COOKE: Was it still while you were doing work with the Craft Museum, or was it even later than—was it late '60s, or early '70s?

MR. SIMPSON: It was the late—because I started working there—this is about '72, or something like that. I was their artist in residence.

MR. COOKE: At Fairtree.

MR. SIMPSON: At Fairtree. I think I worked like one or two days a week. And then I helped Stan install all the shows.

MR. COOKE: And that was when, early on in their existence?

MR. SIMPSON: And they did it for five years, and then they closed shop. They'd have like 200 people in a show; we'd put it up on a weekend—you know, install it. And that was sort of their philosophy. And then they would have—I had a one-person show there; so did Carol Anthony; and Bob Ebendorf used to show there.

MR. COOKE: I wonder whether any papers or anything that survived from Fairtree—I mean, that sounds like it would be a fabulous—if Stan is still alive or—

MR. SIMPSON: Stan? Yeah, he married Dana Boussard. Do you know her work?

MR. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. SIMPSON: Those big tapestries. They live in Arlee, north Montana, out near the—what's the university city in the—the university. He's got apartments there now. And Betty still lives—well, she lives across the street from O.J. Simpson, where he used to live.

MR. COOKE: Out in Los Angeles.

MR. SIMPSON: And she's still there. She may have stuff. I'd have to ask Stan if he's got all the—

MR. COOKE: I'm curious.

MR. SIMPSON: —he would know. So she would have a show, and then they would have—I'd have a show there, and I'd sell 20 things. Well, she wouldn't give me another show because that's like the star system.

MR. COOKE: Right. Pulls back.

MR. SIMPSON: And so it confused the public in the sense that they would come and they'd see something they really liked and then they couldn't find it there again, you know. But she had lots of people who went through that, showed there.

MR. COOKE: Where was it?

MR. SIMPSON: It was up on 73rd and Madison across—if you went—if you walked out of the Whitney [Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY], and you walked, like, across the block and four stores down, that's where it was.

MR. COOKE: Good spot.

MR. SIMPSON: And the Fairtree name was made in ceramics, and Stan got it from the Moravian Tile Works down —

MR. COOKE: Down in Doylestown [PA].

MR. SIMPSON: They were just rehabbing that, restarting it up, and one of the faculty from one of the universities there—it was empty and derelict.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And he got them to fire "Fairtree" from those kilns down there.

MR. COOKE: Great idea.

MR. SIMPSON: And so there were lots of people who went through there. I met all kinds of people. Al [Albert] Paley showed there. He had a piece stolen out of one of the shows. It didn't have a lot of precious stuff in it, but a lot of work in it.

MR. COOKE: That's why he went big. It was when he was doing jewelry, right? [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: He was doing—when he first started in jewelry, yeah.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And so he had this show there, and it was in a locked case. They'd picked the lock. It was probably two or three people. One would pick it, and then they'd walk on. And somebody else would come—and so I asked Al, did you ever hear—and he said, 20 years—a week after 20 years is the statute of limitations. One week afterward he got a letter from some gallery in New York saying they had a necklace of his, if he was interested in an older necklace.

MR. COOKE: Amazing.

MR. SIMPSON: And he said could he have a picture. So they sent it, and it was that stolen piece. And so he said, this was stolen 20 years ago.

MR. COOKE: Amazing.

MR. SIMPSON: And they said, "Well, yeah, 20 years ago and one week," or something like that. "And if you want it, it's going to cost you"—whatever. I don't know what he paid for it. He bought it back.

MR. COOKE: When—I'm just thinking—because you were—

MR. SIMPSON: So Stan—they closed it down after five years because—

MR. COOKE: So that would have been ‘70—

MR. SIMPSON: Four or five, something like that.

MR. COOKE: Okay.

MR. SIMPSON: Because Stan wanted to invest the money in politics, and I think Stan Rifle was getting divorced, and so it was—you know, maybe it was more work—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —than they had anticipated, or maybe their interests changed or whatever. But—

MR. COOKE: Where were you living at that point when you were involved with Fairtree?

MR. SIMPSON: I was living in Dobbs Ferry, which is up the Hudson.

MR. COOKE: Okay, you were in Plymouth for a year, then you go back to Elgin?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: And then—

MR. SIMPSON: Then to Dundee. I was living in Dundee and Elgin, and various places.

MR. COOKE: And then when did you go to Hartford?

MR. SIMPSON: Then in 1970 I took a job at the University of Hartford.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: For a year. It was I think a year. And they had a dean there at this art school who was a ghastly person.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: I shouldn’t mention his name, but he was a ghastly person. And he hired like six or seven people, and he just did stuff that—like sold drugs to the students and stuff like that. He liked to be outrageous, you know.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And so at the end of the year he—I wasn’t going to go back anyway, because it was easier for me to move and get a paycheck in two weeks than it was to come out and look around for money.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And so he—at the faculty meetings I remember he’d say stuff and we’d all, like, snicker, because it was so ridiculous. So he fired all six of them the next year.

MR. COOKE: So you left.

MR. SIMPSON: So I left and went on unemployment, because they had no reason to fire me.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: They couldn’t give a reason.

MR. COOKE: So when you were at Hartford, where were you living?

MR. SIMPSON: I was living in Bloomfield for a while, and then I moved out to Collinsville, which is west of—there were buildings, factory buildings, and I had a building there I moved into. And then I moved in another little house and rented that.

MR. COOKE: And then went to Dobbs Ferry?

MR. SIMPSON: Then got this job in New York. So I moved to Dobbs Ferry.

MR. COOKE: What kind of job was that?

MR. SIMPSON: That's the one at the Fairtree.

MR. COOKE: Okay. Installer and—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, I did installation for the—because it was a big job, the two of us. I mean, you'd install 200 people's work in two days. We worked late, that kind of thing. But it freed me up.

So then I had a little studio in an apartment downstairs in the basement. And so I worked there, and then I met Carol—Carol Anthony, who was an artist. She was living in Dobbs Ferry. And she had a show there. And then she had an apartment in Dobbs Ferry. So she bought a house over in Greenwich, in Byram Shore, and had a house, a big green house, and a five-car garage. So she talked me into going over there, and I converted the five-car garage into an apartment and studio. So I lived there for a number of years.

MR. COOKE: Sounds like one of your first real studios. I mean, up until this point—

MR. SIMPSON: Well, when I was in Elgin I had a big studio.

MR. COOKE: Okay.

MR. SIMPSON: I've had really good studios, and I've had places like this—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —in basements and attics and places you can just store in or just sleep in.

MR. COOKE: So you were in Greenwich for five years, and that gave you stability that you could then start generating some work at that point?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. Well, I work a lot and I produce a lot.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: I mean, there are times to think about it and times to just do it. And a lot of things I solve in my head and then just execute them. And some things you just—as I was trying to explain, where the—that sort of pyramid of things behind you that—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: So I can—it's been about five weeks. So I've made three chairs. I made three of these boxes. And I've made six rug designs and three other paintings and a quilt.

MR. COOKE: Productivity has never been a problem for you, right?

MR. SIMPSON: No.

MR. COOKE: That's the sense I get, is that it's that constant sort of business that—the brain's always going, the hands are always going and—

MR. SIMPSON: So I've been pretty good at that sort of thing—not necessarily all the—

MR. COOKE: And that's been consistent most of your career?

MR. SIMPSON: There are times in my life where I've paced off and spent more time on the beach running around and things like that, but usually I'm pretty—I let it become what it is. A lot of times they're not as good; other ones are better than other ones. But I don't fight it. I don't have that task, you know, like Newman, where you can just picture him making the drawings, planning it all out, doing the thing—which is wonderful—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —but it's not my personality.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And he takes a lot of time to make sure it's exactly what he wants, while I'll make five things and then take the two of them I think work best and two—yeah, I think it's more spontaneous, and it generates more ideas. It's not so much, sort of, the engineering task, the logistics of actually putting it together.

MR. COOKE: That's a much freer form of creativity. It just is spontaneous and—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: —the equivalent of design-build. [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: And to me, that seems much more natural, and I think a lot of people do that, but they don't have a model to get it out.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: A lot of people take notes and write books and other things, but a lot of people have a lot of different ideas, but they just go in the wind, you know. They just sort of go through them. We just put them into another form as they come through.

MR. COOKE: Right. You're able to realize them more quickly.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: I'm going to stop here; I'm right near the end of this disc.

[Audio break.]

This is Ned Cooke interviewing Tommy Simpson at his home in Washington, Connecticut, on May 6, 2004, for the Archives of American Art. And this is disc number two.

So we were just plunked down sort of—

MR. SIMPSON: The Fairtree.

MR. COOKE: The Fairtree, and your, sort of, shifting down at Greenwich, working down there. And one of the things that I was always curious about at this point is you seem to—the proportion of your furniture starts to decline a little bit. You're doing more of panels and gizmo toys and—

MR. SIMPSON: And folk arty kind of things.

MR. COOKE: —things like that.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: What was going on there? Is it external pressure? Is it what's inside your own head?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, I think some of it was a place to do it, having the equipment, you know, and place to store it. A lot of times you build stuff you got—

MR. COOKE: For furniture, you're talking about—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: —is space intensive.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. And so I remember, like in the '60s—in the '50s—as I said, the Abstract Expressionism and the figurative things, and illustrative things and narrative things were, like, on the wane—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: It's like they milked that cow till it was dry sort of thing. And then they got into, I think it was pop art, and then that was in the '70s, I think, the late '60s. And looking back on it, that was like four years. Then they got Op Art and deconstructionist, and then it, like, exploded. Every new one lasted like—

MR. COOKE: Anything goes.

MR. SIMPSON: —20 minutes.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And then it just like—anything goes.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: You know, which was good. It was much better than in the early ‘60s, where it was really rigid.

MR. COOKE: So you felt there was a lot more freedom, and that was one of the reasons why you could—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, and I was—

MR. COOKE: —play with those—

MR. SIMPSON: —play with those things—and some of the little apartments, if I made big paintings and stuff—that’s when I started making little paintings, because I could make them and do this versus huge ones that would become logistically a problem unless you’ve got someplace to store it or move it. Life was too insecure with paying child support and—

MR. COOKE: So it’s a lot of lifestyle issues in terms of where you were as well as the marketplace that you’re juggling, and then—

MR. SIMPSON: And nobody in the market. They didn’t know what they could sell kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Did you feel a disconnect from the furniture field? You weren’t really central—

MR. SIMPSON: I never felt connected.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, exactly, other than, sort of, the receptions at the Craft Museum and places like that.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, I love furniture and I love what other people make. But they’re brown boxes—it’s like houses are rectangles with holes poked in them—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And they always face the road. It’s like, why, you know? But that’s the way they do it.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: So that part I don’t mind. That’s the way they do it. But I never felt what I was doing had any sort of relationship, other than using the same methods and techniques—

MR. COOKE: And materials—

MR. SIMPSON: —and materials. And sometimes I lean more that way than not, and—

MR. COOKE: Well, it’s obvious that you’re always doing all these different things. To me, it’s always—it’s curious to see proportions at different times start to shift a little bit.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. And some of it during that was, you know, you’d have $18 in the bank. It’s hard to buy lumber with $18.

MR. COOKE: So what was your reentrance into furniture? Because all of a sudden, you started making more or showing more—

MR. SIMPSON: Well, some of it was—if you took 1959, I mean, there wasn’t anything.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: You take 1995 and you’ve got Pritam & Eames [East Hampton, NY], and you’ve got Kaplan [Leo Kaplan Modern, New York], and you’ve got schools all over the place making the stuff. It was like now that people knew what you were doing—

MR. COOKE: But you were invited back to teach at the Program in Artisanry, right? Weren’t you up there as a guest instructor for a semester?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, Ed Zucca and I took over Alphonse [Mattia]’s thing for a semester.

MR. COOKE: How did that come about?

MR. SIMPSON: If I worked by myself my whole life, I haven’t got a clue what’s out there, you know. So why they picked me I don’t know. The only thing I could think of is both Ed and I weren’t teaching and we could do six weeks or eight weeks, split a semester.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And we were available kind of thing. And maybe they thought I added something different than what they were doing already.

MR. COOKE: Had you been showing some furniture more recently?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, I've always shown furniture of sorts someplace, somewhere.

MR. COOKE: Okay.

MR. SIMPSON: I can't remember a period that I wasn't—or else a mixed show.

MR. COOKE: Because I was just curious, once Fairtree closed, where were you showing some of your work?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, then I went over to a thing called Portnoy Gallery. Theo Portnoy was on—was between Fifth and Sixth Avenue, near Sixth Avenue on the south side of the street. And she showed — is it Panski—it was pottery-made, ceramic garbage cans and stuff like that.

MR. COOKE: I don't know who that is.

MR. SIMPSON: Who else? She used to have a gallery in Scarsdale and showed—and then she opened up a gallery in New York. And she showed there—I showed with her after the Fairtree—

MR. COOKE: The late '70s then.

MR. SIMPSON: Late '70s. And furniture, in terms of everything I do, furniture has a bigger audience. You know, six people out of 10 will buy furniture, and like two will buy sculpture.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: That kind of thing. And depends on who's pushing it and how, and so there's a lot more, sort of, furniture activity. And then they had—you know, Bernice [Wollman] and Warren [Rubin], down there on *32nd* Street.

MR. COOKE: The Workbench [Gallery, New York].

MR. SIMPSON: The Workbench. And they got the ball rolling in a way, again. I mean, there were lots of people around, but they got all that PIA group, because when PIA died, a lot of those people died with it.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: Alphonse and Tim and Dunnigan, all those guys had nowhere to go for a few years.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And then they picked it up, and that, sort of, I think inspired people. And they helped out, giving them shows and—

MR. COOKE: And doing thematic shows and things like that.

MR. SIMPSON: —and commissioned stuff. Gary [Knox Bennett] did a lot of commission work with them, which was great for all that—the Peter Joseph [Gallery, New York] put a lot more money into it.

MR. COOKE: But you never showed at Workbench or Peter Joseph?

MR. SIMPSON: I showed at Workbench once.

MR. COOKE: Once.

MR. SIMPSON: There were several pieces, and I think it was—I can't remember if it was two or three people that showed. That's where I met Bernice and—

MR. COOKE: Was that a successful venue for you?

MR. SIMPSON: That was okay. I think I showed a few pieces.

MR. COOKE: That would have been early '80s, probably.

MR. SIMPSON: But the disadvantage of doing your own thing is that a lot of people don't know where to put you. If you do ceramics and you make utilitarian ceramics, they know what to do with you. Or if you make furniture, they know what to do—where you fit. But if one week you're making furniture, the next week you're doing a painting, they're never sure exactly what you're doing.

MR. COOKE: How to classify you.

I see within your work, from the '60s on into the '80s, this movement from painted furniture to using lots of different types of wood, almost using the palette of wood. Can you talk a little bit about that, and what might have been an impetus to that or—

MR. SIMPSON: Well, some of it is I like to do that.

MR. COOKE: But in the '60s you were mainly painting—

MR. SIMPSON: Mainly painting. Yeah, like training of sorts—

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And I love color and composition and the furniture was sort of—using the ideas of furniture more than it was actually making—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: Some of it was practical. I mean, a lot of people like the work, but if it's painted in that sort of fanciful way, a playful way, it's harder to place it into people's homes. They have to pick a piece of sculpture, you know.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: A lot of times it's a big piece of sculpture.

MR. COOKE: [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: So it's, like, more demanding; not necessarily any better, it's just more demanding as to how they're going to deal with it.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And the natural woods, people don't seem to have that hang up.

MR. COOKE: It's remarkable that you can see this real dividing line. The same aesthetic is at play, but you're just using the raw materials. And I was always curious whether there's also a sense of, you got more comfortable with your joinery and thought, okay, I don't need to disguise some of those things in terms of cobbling together your poplar or pine carcasses that you could then just paint over the outside and, okay, I feel a little bit more comfortable; I can be expressive within the natural wood—whether that was part of it as well.

MR. SIMPSON: That's probably part of it. You know, I think it wasn't a single thing. I think it was sort of a mix—and some of it is doing shows of painted furniture, and then I thought—a lot of people said they really liked my work—but I don't like painted furniture, you know. So I said, well, I'll just do a show of unpainted stuff.

MR. COOKE: It's almost too personal in some way.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: Can you think of your first piece that you did that was moving in that direction?

MR. SIMPSON: I'll have to go back and look at photographs—I'm trying to remember what the—

[Audio break.]

—something for myself, like a dining room table or something like that, just because I needed one.

MR. COOKE: Just personal use and—

MR. SIMPSON: Just personal use. And I think that's probably what—something very practical that way, just because I needed a table and that kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Right. I was just curious, because it seemed like for a while there you were almost doing exclusively natural woods, and then you sort of came back together, you know, with graining and painting and different woods and started to pull all that together, because the graining wasn't there before either.

MR. SIMPSON: No.

MR. COOKE: And all of a sudden you got interested in that, as well.

MR. SIMPSON: And some of them I've done, like natural posts and then painted the rest of the bed—the flat parts—sort of mix things. I've done a lot of those little sculptural kind of folksy things.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And some of that was natural wood, instead of painting them. I did a show of those at Portnoy, I think.

MR. COOKE: The little ladders and—

MR. SIMPSON: The little ladders and things—

MR. COOKE: —sculptural things, yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And then I was in the Carlyn Gallery, too. That was—which I did some natural wood pieces. And so I like, in a sense, doing all of them. I'd have to go back and look when I may have actually done the first, sort of, not painted ones. But it was hard to sell the painted things in the '60s.

MR. COOKE: —people now like looking back at them in some ways. It's really—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, it's the sort of thing where you weren't an artist in 1960, but you're an artist now, kind of, because they could see a history of—and kids that were two years old, as far as they knew, now that they're 30, you've been an artist their whole life. So you're an artist, you know—

MR. COOKE: Right. Therefore you're real. [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: So you get some of that.

MR. COOKE: So you said Workbench ended up not really doing that much for sales or visibility or—

MR. SIMPSON: Well Vanessa, when she died, sort of, took, I think—and Judy Cody was involved—

MR. COOKE: She left.

MR. SIMPSON: And she left. And a lot of galleries don't last that long. People lose interest, despite the fact of the fun and the joy and that sort of invention and a whole new thing. It's also that everyday, you know, you've got to do the books and clean the floor and all that stuff.

MR. COOKE: It's business.

MR. SIMPSON: It's a business. And a lot of times you don't need the business, you're making money somewhere else. That's why so many galleries come and go.

MR. COOKE: What was your sense of teaching? You had an unfortunate experience in Hartford for the one year. You taught at PIA for half of a semester, whatever.

MR. SIMPSON: And I taught at University of Illinois for a semester. I taught at Cranbrook for a semester. And I've done workshops.

MR. COOKE: Do you get impatient, just given your sense of wanting to do things and—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, it's almost a spectator sport. I'd rather do it than teach it.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And somewhat is—I feel an internal conflict of my way of teaching versus university life. You know, you can't push somebody up against the wall, tell them they're a stupid idiot, they should be doing this for themselves, you know.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And there's a lot of things—this person needs that you can't do. And also, there's 20 people, and two or three are really interested, and two or three are totally uninterested; they just happen to be in school for whatever reason.

MR. COOKE: So you've never derived satisfaction from it?

MR. SIMPSON: Right.

MR. COOKE: You never have had a need for it for income, or your whole interest is much more in the shop and then in galleries and exhibitions.

MR. SIMPSON: Galleries—yeah, there wasn't a teaching position for me necessarily when I started out. And I didn't like particularly the politics or—the university's there for the university.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: I was at RISD [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI] and I taught a foundation class. And so I had to collect the lab fee. I don't know what it was, $10 a student or something like that. So halfway through the class I went to the administration and said, you know, I need stuff for the lab fee, and they look at me like, "Are you nuts?" I said, "Well, what happened to the lab fee?" "Well, that went into the general coffers." There was no—you know, they were losing out on what they had paid money for—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —and then you realize it's not for them. It's to keep the lawn mowed—

MR. COOKE: It's for something else, right.

MR. SIMPSON: —yeah, and the furnace going. That's what it was for, and I just didn't like—I always liked working for myself. I worked since I was like 12 because that's what everybody did. And you realize you're out in construction and you're getting a dollar and a quarter an hour, and then you go to the client somewhere and he mentions I'm paying you guys $5.00 an hour. And you realize the guy who's hired you is making twice what you're making and doing nothing.

MR. COOKE: Very little. Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And so a lot of the university I found, it was just—if you're good at it, and some people are bent that way, it's like it can't get any better.

MR. COOKE: But you just will take it on when you're asked occasionally, not something that you are desperate for or—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. If they want it, I can give them a real practical way of surviving in this.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: From how to think about it, how to keep yourself alive, how to keep interested in doing it, a lot of that kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Staying busy.

MR. SIMPSON: Staying busy. How do you think about yourself, what you shouldn't do, and all those kind of things, if you really want to do this.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And the other part, showing them how to run tools and things like that, I just get too impatient.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And when I taught at Hartford, I remember one night I came in and some girl had a piece of rebar. She was just about ready to put it through the table saw. And I thought, whooo. It's like you hit that saw and something's going to—

MR. COOKE: Do you find that a lot of the academic side of the furniture business, with all these programs up and running now, that there isn't a value placed on—I don't know, it's not necessarily efficiency, but it's just getting about business that there's too much of that reflective—too much of the mental gyrations, the planning and designing and things like that? Or do you think it's actually a field that's got a lot of different types of people

attracted to it?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, it has a lot of different types of people attracted to—in the university setup, you've got to have a course. You got to teach a class that 20 people can understand, but you can't go too high or too low because you're going to bore—and you got to have a thing they can grade. And that's mentally putting something versus telling somebody, get in the car and drive until the gas runs out, and then get yourself back here.

MR. COOKE: [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: And then you've got, you know, have ingenuity in how they're going to do—some people need that kind of education versus the other kind.

MR. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] But you find the workshops more in tune with what you're trying to do, if you do a one-week or two-week summer workshop?

MR. SIMPSON: I don't know. I don't know what effectiveness that has. I don't know what I actually give them. I try to give them some kind of practicality, but I'm doing what I do because I find I'm good at doing that versus something else I can do. But that's a lot of work for me to do it, because I have to think about it a lot.

MR. COOKE: Okay. I was just thinking, after going through your shop and seeing all the buckets of parts and just sort of accumulated things when you've been busy, and stockpiling things that you could then go back and play with, how someone could learn from you. And obviously it's going to take a certain type of person, but it's almost as if they'd have to just watch you in motion, in essence. And it's not necessarily a formal sort of instruction, but it's an exemplary way of going through an organization of a shop.

MR. SIMPSON: My conflict is most universities—I've been at six of them, talking in several of them—is that "this is the way it is, we're going to teach this to you, and then you're going to regurgitate this to me." And that's a plan that works, and it works well in most cases. I take the approach that you do what you do, and then I'll tell you how to make it—to improve on what you're doing.

MR. COOKE: Right. I'll watch and make some suggestions.

MR. SIMPSON: And that takes time and energy that won't fit into a university program. If I tell you to make 10 paintings and I'll come back, you're going to know a lot about your own painting by making the 10. If I'm going to sit and talk to you about one, the other nine don't get made and you don't learn for yourself. You'll know when I tell you, well, that makes sense because I did it 10 times and now I can see that's the—but it's a model that doesn't work in a university because there are too many people and too short a time to make that work right.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And so a lot of people just never get to themselves. They never get enough work done or push hard enough for something that they actually find out who they are and how they operate.

MR. COOKE: Exactly. It's all artificial constructions and environments in some ways.

MR. SIMPSON: And you sort of have to think your way. You know, it's like, well, what did that textbook say or what did that someone say how I can get out of this versus me knowing intuitively how I'm going to do this, how I can get through this thing.

MR. COOKE: What's your annual output in terms of numbers of things, since you can't categorize any of this stuff? I'm just sort of curious.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, I generally—I probably end up making something every week, so that's like at least 52 things a year.

MR. COOKE: And that's anything from panels to paintings to chairs to carcasses to beds to—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. So like a bed's a big thing, but this chair would take as long to make. It depends on the aesthetic of it. If you wanted it more polished or precise, it would take a little longer. Or some things you get halfway through and you can't solve them; you know, you've, like, made a big mistake somewhere along. And so it sits for six months or two weeks, and then you can figure out what you can do to it. And by doing a different thing, sometimes the softness or lightness of one thing might be the answer for something else. So if you have a lot of things around, you can see that.

It's just like a family, with Carol or your kids. You're thinking through something and they mention something. It

had no context to what you're doing, but just the way they approached that made sense. But it evaporates on you because it's a different sort of materials. But if you're dealing with materials, it doesn't evaporate. I can go back and look at it. So it's just using that, being aware that it exists.

And so it helps me a lot to have the variety of things like that. It doesn't make you any smarter in a way; it's just that you're making them—you put a model in front of you that works better for you than—

MR. COOKE: Right. In some ways what you do is you avoid writer's block, because you've got all these different things going on and you always have been engaged in something.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. So in writing, if I—told me I was going to write something when I was young, I would tell them they were nuts. But in all the writing I've done, I find that if I write about my personal experience or what I feel about something, it goes well; if I have to give a moral lesson or teach you something, it's a total struggle to try to—you know, and I rewrite it 50 times and it's never right.

MR. COOKE: [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: So I don't even—like writing an essay about something. I just—

MR. COOKE: —avoid it.

MR. SIMPSON: —avoid it because I know I just couldn't do it. I mean, I could do it, but I'd look at it and I'd think this is pretentious or arrogant or stupid or that kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Let's go back to the '80s or so in terms of thinking that it's a period after which you've shown at Portnoy and Workbench and has started to give some visibility. I mean, you've got the furniture somehow getting out there more visibly. What was your perspective on what was going on, and describe some of those benchmarks of things that were going on at that point.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, it started out to me very like Tage Frid, sort of very Scandinavian, very sort of manufactured design feel about it. And because of the '60s and like the pop and op and all those kind of things, it got a little bit wilder. But furniture was still industrial art, and there were only a handful of people sort of experimenting a little bit.

But then, after PIA—was that the late '70s?

MR. COOKE: That started in '75 and the heyday was, I don't know, late '70s on into the early '80s.

MR. SIMPSON: And California School of Arts and Crafts [now the California College of the Arts] and sort of down in Philadelphia [The University of the Arts] with that. I think a lot of the people were young in the '60s. And in the late '70s I think it sort of had—were five people, now there are 15—and we're starting teaching school, and it sort of had a gelling in that late '70s and '80s. And I think a lot of people thought, well, geez, I could do all kinds of things. I mean, my head wasn't there, but I know Wendy has told me that, well, if he can make that, I can do anything.

MR. COOKE: Right. Wendy Maruyama was looking at you and saying, he's doing all this painted stuff—

MR. SIMPSON: Why can't I?

And so there was a period where that sort of gelled, and I think then it became in the craft shows and it came and people became aware of a sort of bigger world of people making handmade—what they call studio furniture now. And then it mushroomed from there, and now it's in—probably every university has it.

MR. COOKE: Did you feel all of a sudden a sense of place that comfort, that it changed sufficiently that that was a universe you didn't mind plugging into at times?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, it was a lot easier. Nobody would come up and go—

MR. COOKE: [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: I mean, they had an education in them, so it made things a lot easier, I think, for everybody. Which I'm not working to be exclusive, because whatever I do, they're going to do what I do anyway. And the more people that are out there doing quality good, wonderful things, the better it is for everybody because it makes awareness a lot more and people get interested and they get educated. And it's a lot easier—

MR. COOKE: —than a single individual sort of fighting that battle.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: So part of it was numbers, I mean, just sheer numbers of people—

MR. SIMPSON: Just sheer numbers.

MR. COOKE: —who are coming out and making things or responding to fine woodworking or any number of things. It's not even just the schools; it's people in general deciding this is something that they want to do.

MR. SIMPSON: Because where I grew up, there was nowhere, in essence, to—I mean, Stickley became sort of mission. I mean, that was the only thing that was new-ish versus Victorian furniture. The idea that somebody was actually making furniture—I didn't even know anybody who was making furniture until I got to New York. I mean, people would do cabinets in a bar, or somebody's home, Quaker-made or something like that. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: [Laughs] Right.

MR. SIMPSON: But the other aspect didn't exist. I guess there are a few probably early people, but there was—also there wasn't the university system after the Second World War and there wasn't the mass media that there is today.

MR. COOKE: Oh, magazines and—

MR. SIMPSON: TV and magazines and—

MR. COOKE: How-to videotapes and all these things.

MR. SIMPSON: There was *Craft Horizons,* and that was it.

MR. COOKE: Did you ever pay any attention to that? Did you ever read *Craft Horizons*?

MR. SIMPSON: I think I got that; yes, a subscription to that, mainly because that was the only magazine—

MR. COOKE: —that was the only thing that was around.

MR. SIMPSON: And there was *Art News* and *Art in America*, maybe, and their subscription rates were like 14,000 or something versus *Woman's Day*'s eight million or something.

But there wasn't a lot around. It was very segmented and there were sort of groups, but you didn't know about them. And now there's enough networking that puts a bigger picture on it.

MR. COOKE: So in some ways would you say one of the differences from the 1960s, when you're there at an opening of the craft museum and all of a sudden realizing that Mrs. Webb's making a big deal and you're sort of this smaller circle, now the networks are that much bigger, do you think?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, it got bigger.

MR. COOKE: That was a fairly intimate group, from what I understand, sort of the Craft Museum openings.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. Well, I also met—Paul was married to Terry Capuaua then, and so I met Terry. I used to stay at their apartment when I came to town. And—

MR. COOKE: Just like a big family in some ways.

MR. SIMPSON: It was sort of like a big family. And a lot of people that I'd meet in New York—it was much more relaxed. But one of the big mistakes is they kept it that way, because Mrs. Webb would—if there was a red at the end of the year, she'd write a check for it, and they didn't take any time to build up a constituency of any kind. So when she didn't write checks, it's like we're out here on the street.

MR. COOKE: Now what do we do? Right.

MR. SIMPSON: Which I thought was a mistake. But the magazine got more circulation, there were more people involved in the—people go to parks and there would be blankets and no bra and, you know, like sandals out of tire treads. And you'd see something. God, there's a piece of glass. I haven't seen anybody make glass. I've never seen anybody make glass before. Now it's in every—and now they're selling stuff for $700,000 and it used to be $70—two months rent, you know?

MR. COOKE: Did you ever go to any of the Rhinebeck fairs?

MR. SIMPSON: Once I went.

MR. COOKE: As an exhibitor, or—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, once.

MR. COOKE: What was that like?

MR. SIMPSON: The guy across from me was making little figures out of cut nails, welding them together, and he had a line of people buying his stuff. And I think I sold one piece or something like that. I forget.

MR. COOKE: And what were you showing?

MR. SIMPSON: Little toys and mixed kind of—I can't remember.

MR. COOKE: Some of your little sculptural things?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, sculptural things and—

MR. COOKE: So that was in the '70s, mid-'70s or so?

MR. SIMPSON: I think it was the early '70s. I used to go to the fairs because I knew a lot of the people and I would get, you know, the nut breads because they'd be sitting there all day long, and they weren't—it's like you bring your lunch or you don't eat, kind of thing. So I figured this was not the place for me.

And then more shops opened up, they wanted to be able to repeat business, and I didn't do multiples. I mean, I have done multiple things and stuff like that just to see, but sometimes the aesthetic which I deal with, it's either you got to go to the bottom or you got to go to the top, one or the other.

MR. COOKE: [Laughs.] There's no in-between.

MR. SIMPSON: There's no in-between.

MR. COOKE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] So what's the bottom?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, I've done many of the bottom—you know, women's clubs and malls and anyplace, anybody, where there's more than two people and you can sell something. Or doing a little bit of fancy work for somebody's roof or something like that. But—so it didn't seem like a good place. Plus the nature of it, because a lot of times they do renditions of something and they have a line, which is what I didn't want to do. Some of it is if you're never going to make money this way—

MR. COOKE: —why get into a rut and do the same thing over and over again?

MR. SIMPSON: Even hate yourself. Make no money and hate yourself. At least this way you can like yourself and make no money kind of routine. So yeah, I never found that it worked for me. It didn't seem like my sort of thing. So I think that was—I have never done craft shows. And the gallery business is not the best, but it's—

MR. COOKE: But you've done okay by it?

MR. SIMPSON: I've done okay by it. They help build credibility, and if they're kept good, they can raise the importance of your work. You can't say that, gee, I have this wonderful thing. You have to have a third person tell them how much, and at a craft fair you can't do that. I mean, you can, but people think you're—you know. A lot of times you fight the total insanity of it all, and then you sort of give into—you're trying to play the game the best you can with any contacts to yourself.

MR. COOKE: So over the last, say, with the development of some of these galleries, and even Peter Joseph Gallery, has this been an easier climate for you the last 15 years?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: The economy helps, but also these different venues certainly take some of that pressure—you can just basically keep making stuff, and Leo Kaplan and various other people are more than happy to take your stuff and show them.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, it used to be much more regimented. I remember people talk about fine art versus—there's another word than fine art. Like, you're not doing fine art, but there's another term for it that's much more biased.

MR. COOKE: High art.

MR. SIMPSON: High art, that's it. And it was much more rigid in terms of all those sort of things. It's like if you talk about painting. I showed people a carved panel. They've painted on wood for centuries. People would—

MR. COOKE: And you're using gesso, you're using tempera—[laughs].

MR. SIMPSON: And people would look at the carved panel and they'd say, "When did you stop painting?" Because painting to them was oil on canvas, which is like 300 or 350 years old. And so it was much more categorized, you know. And after that, out popped all those categories that just got swallowed, as far as all of a sudden people just sort of gave up on it.

MR. COOKE: Right, thankfully.

MR. SIMPSON: If they like it, they buy it. And if they don't like it—I mean, you still have the high art people, but people look sort of like an antique or something, talking that way.

So that's been good. That's been better. And I don't know if you're older sometimes—I mean, when you're 23, they think, well, give him a few years and maybe he'll still be doing it. But if you're 63, then they think, well, you've been doing that for a long time, so—

MR. COOKE: You must be okay, right.

MR. SIMPSON: Right. You've survived doing it for 40 years, so you must be that kind—I don't know if that helps or not; it's hard to tell. You'd have [Alexander] Calder and Paul Klee and [Wassily] Kandinsky and [Joan] Miro and—I mean, even like [Sandro] Botticelli. If you look at it, there's a real lifelike, you know, likeness to it, a real joy in the work—well, there's also still a strain of mutilated things, obvious outrageousness—fornicating dogs, all this kind of thing. It's always good for eight or 10 seconds, and then you never want to see it again.

MR. COOKE: Chuckles and move on, right?

MR. SIMPSON: And there's always this heavy, serious—like a brush stroke that goes down—you get a brush that's wide, and that's, like, important design.

MR. COOKE: [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: High art.

MR. COOKE: Right.

When did you move up to Washington [CT]? Did you go from Greenwich to Washington, then?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. No, I went from Greenwich to Hartsdale. And a dealer friend of mine had a house that he bought, and then left a house that was for sale, so I rented the house from him. And I was looking to buy a place in that period. He's been a friend, Alan Brown. He had a gallery in Hartsdale. Now he just deals privately.

And so with Carol Anthony, when I rented her space there, I helped her fix her house up and she made, I don't know, two or $300,000 selling it, of which I got nothing, you know. So Carol said, "If I ever get in a situation where I can get you something, I'll do it." So she moved out, sold her place in Greenwich and made money. So she bid on a house up here in—up on Nickles Hill Road, the one right down from us, and got it. One of those bank bids, you know; you sealed the bid kind of thing. So she said that she'll make me an offer I can't refuse, so she offered me that land for practically nothing, which was very generous of her to do that. So that's how I moved up here.

MR. COOKE: This is the longest you've been in one place, now?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, I've been here 20—from '82, '92, you know. And it's great because it's quiet and it's still accessible to New York to do business.

MR. COOKE: Or quiet enough to get work done.

MR. SIMPSON: And you can get work done.

MR. COOKE: In some ways it seems like it's recreating where you grew up, in terms of being out in the countryside and having all that around, but you also can get into the city if you have to.

MR. SIMPSON: I heard some statistic once that most people, later in life, you know, if they'd look around, it's

very similar. If you grew up in a big house, you end up in a big one after. If you grew up in a little town, you end up in a little town, that kind of thing. I don't know how true that is, but they said statistically it works itself out most of the time.

MR. COOKE: Looking back over your career, which do you consider your most important pieces? Are there things that stick out in terms of something you made a breakthrough on or something that you really felt like you nailed or something that spoke of the moment?

MR. SIMPSON: I don't know if I could answer you that right now.

I think there was—somewhat on Cranbrook, when I started making painted furniture there, because I had an opportunity to actually do that. And that seemed to be important. And I think making some of these little paintings seems like an important thing to do. And actually when I did the book—

MR. COOKE: The *Fantasy Furniture*?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, more the *Two Looks to Home* [*Two Looks to Home: The Art of Tommy Simpson*. New York: Little, Brown & Company, 1999].

MR. COOKE: *Two Looks to Home*.

MR. SIMPSON: Up to that point, I don't think I did a lot of reflection on a lot of things. There were a lot of things I didn't use, but a lot of things that seemed important; when you sat down and started writing about it, you realized they weren't really important. And then other things that seemed unimportant influenced your life, like when I talk about my grandmother and the flowers and things like that that seemed matter-of-fact when I did this, you know. But when you start thinking about all the use of the flower motifs in landscapes and stuff that you—it's a major part of my imagery of sorts and how important that really is.

MR. COOKE: Right. Okay. I'm curious whether there were overrated objects and pivotal objects, I mean, where something like the rabbit chairs that ended up being in "Fantasy Furniture," and then—

MR. SIMPSON: I was very naive about a lot of that stuff.

MR. COOKE: Were those important or were those—they receded to the background? Or some of your—*LBJ Clock* or *Pie Safes* and—

MR. SIMPSON: I tend to think those things would be less involved with objects and more involved with people and events. I lived with a woman, she—very intense, for a long time, like nine years, and she wanted explanations for things. And I was 30-something and I grew up in like Midwest—like the Yankee kind of Victorian—

MR. COOKE: Silence, right.

MR. SIMPSON: Or it's like you kick the dirt, "Yeah, it's a nice day today," you know.

MR. COOKE: [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: And any kind of internal introspection, you know, just didn't involve anybody in a conversation: "Oh, you're getting married? Oh, that's great. When's the wedding?" Are you in love or do you have any money or are you nuts or—nobody ever said anything like—you know. And so it's like in your thirties and then she wanted answers to stuff. And I had answers for things; it just never occurred to me that you'd actually talk to somebody about them—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —because nobody did that, you know? I thought that was—seems to me, looking back, was an important—otherwise I wouldn't be talking here today. She got me, you know, to talk about things. It was important to her and never occurred to me. It wasn't like people would—

MR. COOKE: Oh, like I would be interested, or—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, so things like that are, I think, the more pivotal in terms of—I think going to Europe, too, when I was young, like 21, for three months, traveling around was an eye-opener to me—you think where you live is beautiful and then you go—Yugoslavia, they're fighting and stuff, and you fly to Yugoslavia and you go out in the woods and it's just as beautiful. It's like, who would want to leave this place, you know?

MR. COOKE: Right, exactly. What are people upset about?

MR. SIMPSON: And so, events like that were, I think, were more pivotal than particular—I think working in a variety of things, the more you make, the more I think you understand yourself of how you work and how you solve things, where you're weakest, where your strengths are, you know, as a methodology, how you grow, where your growth is, how do you want to live your life.

MR. COOKE: But it's not for everybody. As you say, talking about Richard Newman, that there are ways in which —there may be people—

MR. SIMPSON: Maybe you get that somewhere else. And I find it in doing a lot of—well, all these rug designs, they're all different. One's based on water. One's based on textiles.

MR. COOKE: When did you start doing rugs?

MR. SIMPSON: Must be about five years ago.

MR. COOKE: Because there was the show that you had at the Craft Museum where you did the whole interior.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: That seemed like a pivotal exhibition for you in terms of your chance to get messy with the idea of an exhibition, of trying to put a lot of different ideas together with one view of your own mindset. Was that really the first time you had the chance to do that?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, I've done that, but it's—to have a mindset or building your own little world, it comes to life, you know.

MR. COOKE: Your own stuff, right.

MR. SIMPSON: It's not necessarily I find a popular or viable marketing thing. People shy away from that.

MR. COOKE: Well, it depends.

MR. SIMPSON: It's too personal—

MR. COOKE: Well, it depends whether you're marketing yourself as a furniture maker, or are you an installation artist, because in some respects that's what you're doing.

MR. SIMPSON: It's creating your own world, which a lot of people don't have sympathy for because they're creating their own world. They don't want to go about yours, you know. But if you only have little bits and pieces and things that they can then adapt into theirs, it's fine. But if it's—

MR. COOKE: So was there a bad response to the show?

MR. SIMPSON: No. Usually everybody likes it but the diehard academic and the critic part of it, because they want the world to be like they see it, you know.

MR. COOKE: Right. You disagree, so therefore you're wrong, right?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. And they want the art world to be as it is, that you've got high art and you've got painting and you've got this stuff, and you mix it all together with something. I mean, they don't get the picture a lot of times. They come with their own bias and prejudice, and a lot of times doing a whole variety of things—well, a lot of gallery says it confuses people.

The last show at Kaplan, they had a chest. I did a big house, and on it it's got "House of Joy" in French. And it says, "House of Joy. Be mysterious, be loving, and you'll be happy." And so the critic from the [*New York*] *Times* said that—I wrote on a lot of the furniture and stuff, and he thought that was interesting until after a while it got kind of corny. And this was an example of it. This house with these French words seemed very corny to him. And in fact, those were words that Paul Gauguin wrote on his surround that went around his house in Tahiti. And the reason it's a house shape is because it was a house in Tahiti. And the "House of Joy" in French is like sort of a slang thing for a prostitute. He thought it needed more, you know, undertone. It was too sweet, kind of. So he had no idea what this was about.

MR. COOKE: No sophistication, right.

MR. SIMPSON: He had no—which is kind of funny. And the best part is the next show I'm going to write him a note and send him the thing and say please come and I'll be happy to talk to you. I like what you wrote, other than the fact that I won't tell your editor that you didn't know that this was Paul Gauguin and this was what he

wrote.

MR. COOKE: Right, exactly. I'll have to spend more time with you now.

MR. SIMPSON: And maybe he'll actually ask me a question, and I can make it work.

Anyway, now I forgot what the question was that you were asking—

MR. COOKE: Oh, it was just important pieces that you can think of—sort of benchmarks. And then after that I was just asking about the total installations in terms of your movement into rugs and metalwork and—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, the rugs. Well, I was—I like the home. This is basically what we're doing it for, is people in their home in their environments. We're making stuff for them. And so I don't mind making the total picture, because I can't relate to a lot of things. If you look at a lot of things and you think, you know, Sears doesn't make what I want, you know, and other things, so I have to make what I want kind of thing. And making rugs is fun.

If I do this painting, people come up, and they won't look at it, but they'll scratch their head. They won't comment, because they've been indoctrinated about painting. I could take that composition and put it on the floor in a rug form and they'll talk about it for a half an hour, about how they like it.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, they'll spend time with it.

MR. SIMPSON: And they'll spend time with it. And it's like they don't have the indoctrination about the rug, which is very curious, you know.

MR. COOKE: It's the advantage of what I always think about, since I work in the minor arts. [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: The people will actually talk to you about it.

MR. COOKE: They're open-minded.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And things that work—you know, I can take the colors that are the most muted color in that painting, put it on the floor, and it looks totally bright. And so there are a lot of psychological switches that go that way, which I enjoy because it's sort of fun to see that things will actually do—

MR. COOKE: With your interest in joy, home—these are themes that are prevalent throughout your work. Just describing it as humor doesn't do it justice. There's something about joy and home in a domestic environment. Thinking that you show a lot in galleries, are you removed from that—in some ways, it's the ultimate satisfaction? Or you do a number of commissions as well, and that's your way of sort of keeping active within that kind of fulfillment service.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, you are removed in that whole process of all the selling in the galleries and stuff. If you look at Paul Klee's stuff, I mean, all of the paintings are—they're all made for a house. They're not made for a museum that has 7,000 square feet, and this painting at the bend. And you sort of lose track of that, you know. People do because now he's like an authority or a god or a master or something. And also working by yourself all the time, you never see people and you sort of lose that track of—that's why I like to show a whole variety of things, sort of get the picture of a person and an environment and a point of view and an attitude which—

MR. COOKE: Do people who then go on to commission you to do things, are they interested in tapping into all of it?

MR. SIMPSON: People have gone in a variety of ways. After they see a lot, then I think they understand who you are, so when they commission something, they know what they want out of it, versus just getting the orange one or the blue one or something.

MR. COOKE: What is your view about commissions, because some people have a hard time with it. I mean, there are some people who—Judy McKie ends up thinking that she is doing fewer and fewer commissions, doesn't really want to do those, and only show galleries or then the occasional public art thing. But she just feels like it simplifies her life a little bit.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, it does.

MR. COOKE: That you don't have that to-ing and fro-ing and—

MR. SIMPSON: Well, there's goods and bads about the commission.

MR. COOKE: So what's your take on—

MR. SIMPSON: I can do a certain number of commissions a year and it doesn't get to me. If you do too many, it gets to you. The downside is that if they see something they like and want you to—they usually want you to reproduce what they liked. And so you're not stretching it, usually. You can't do something new because they'll be, "What the hell are you doing," you know. And so that's a bad part. A good part is sometimes commissions require new materials that you haven't worked with before, which can be fun.

MR. COOKE: Like what?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, they might want it out of a piece of bronze or they might want this part brass or the knobs have to be glass or something like that. So you might be doing something you haven't tried before.

And another downside is that the people may be wonderful or, you know, ghastly, you know. Oh, I'm—it's going to be six months before you get it. And then, two weeks later, "Is it done?" They call you on the phone.

MR. COOKE: They forgot. [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: That kind of thing.

And the good side is a lot of the times when you get it finished, you get paid, versus the real world of the art galleries, where you never know if you're even going to get paid or when it will be.

MR. COOKE: Right. Total speculation, yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: Kind of thing. And so it has good and bad.

And the hard part, I know, for a lot of people I've talked to, on the commissioned stuff is you're trying to—you want to make them happy and please them, you know, and it's like trying to make your kid happy. One day you give him a chocolate cookie and it's the greatest thing; the next day the same chocolate cookie and they hate you for it.

MR. COOKE: Right, it's thrown back at you. [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: So—yeah. So it adds that extra little thing that makes your life complicated and—

MR. COOKE: Varied.

MR. SIMPSON: And it depends on—if you're feeling good and your health's good and everything, you don't mind, if you feel—if you just broke your foot, you don't want to do a commission, you know? And then also, with your spirit sometimes the flow of things—the best thing to do is the things that you're interested in and love doing. That shows in the work. And if you're bored and you're doing it out of drudgery, it shows in the work. It's very subtle, but it shows.

MR. COOKE: Right. So it seems like you've found that proper balance that pretty much works for you.

MR. SIMPSON: So if I do a commission and I just am not into it, I can't make it, because it will just—the person won't want it.

And in a sense, you're partaking of your own spirit in that, which is a very nebulous, ephemeral kind of thing to explain. But if you took five furniture people and gave us all the same wood, the same design, if we all made exactly the same thing, I bet you if you could find Garry's [Garry Knox Bennett] and mine and Judy's [Judy Kensley McKie]—just a little—it would be the proportion, the way it's—there's some little thing about it.

MR. COOKE: There will always be something different, yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And you want that to be in the work, because it will show up. So if you're really—do this of your great design and just go make it, it shows in the work. It's much fresher as a spontaneity and you're really tied to it. It's like going over to a cocktail party with some guys you haven't seen in a long time; you really love seeing and talking to them. It just flows, you know? Somebody else, you're pulling nails.

MR. COOKE: It just takes forever.

MR. SIMPSON: If I didn't have to do any commissions, it would be great. But the reality of making a living—

MR. COOKE: But it's financial then?

MR. SIMPSON: And sometimes people have bought five things and you can't say no to them.

MR. COOKE: Right. But it also seems like there's a part of you that likes to be in a specific home, to get some of your pieces into specific contexts.

MR. SIMPSON: I mean, it's nice to be appreciated. Sometimes it's good for PR things, stuff like that. It's hard to tell sometimes. I know less about what I do career-wise than the gallery or other people, because you're so far away from some of the people. But some of the people are really wonderful people. You know—

MR. COOKE: The commissioners.

MR. SIMPSON: Commissioners have helped you out, and I've had people where I—when I was in Greenwich, I remember I called a guy who bought some stuff. I said, "I'm broke, I need money, come and buy something."

MR. COOKE: Sort of shameless. [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: So he got in his limo, came over, and bought a few things. You know, and I thought that was very generous of him to do that. He could have said a "screw you" kind of thing. And so when he wants something—you know, 10 years later he wanted me to repair something, so I just fixed it for him.

MR. COOKE: Do you think the people with whom you deal, either as commissioners or gallery people or anything, do you think there's a higher degree of education about the field, about furniture or what you're doing? Do people seem more knowledgeable now? I'm just thinking, with all the literature that exists, exhibitions, you know, can you see an effect on the field?

MR. SIMPSON: I don't know. I find some people are very astute and others—

MR. COOKE: —still the same old—

MR. SIMPSON: They could be the director of the Met. You know, they like what they like, and they haven't got a clue.

MR. COOKE: They're not going to change it.

MR. SIMPSON: And a lot of people in the arts are electrical engineers or they grew up in advertising and, you know, they just—they like what they like, and they think that's art. I don't blame them, but it's to me a little more subtle and a different picture than that.

And then there's people that are very astute and have studied it and have a lot of subtleties and know, you know—have a much bigger picture of what it's all about. That doesn't necessarily have to be directly involved. Like a lot of critics haven't got a clue what they're talking about.

I had a perfect—where the hell did I put that? A clipping. I've got it here—let me think about that. It's two shows out of New York and they're advertising it in the *Times*. And you read these things and you think it's all art-speak, you know, and big-syllable words, and what they're telling you is this person made this work and they're hanging it on the gallery wall. That's the content when all is said and done. That's all they said. There's a lot of that kind of stuff and a lot of things that over the years I tend to get cynical about—or realistic about it. Most of them, they have—

MR. COOKE: —too much experience.

MR. SIMPSON: —they have a gallery, they have enough money, and they like what they like and they put in the gallery what they like, and there's 10 or 15 people who buy from them who will keep the doors open, and they like what he likes or she likes. It has nothing to do with art quality, good, bad, or indifferent. And they use all those terms of we're dealing in high art, and you look at some of the stuff and you think, this is awful; there's nothing there. But that's what they like, and they can afford to put ads in this and so and so and such and such. And so that's the reality of that. And there are a few people that actually transcend that.

MR. COOKE: So my hope that things have changed a little bit just doesn't play out at all?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, there are a lot more people that have a lot more awareness of different things. If you talk to them about aesthetics or—they like bright colors.

MR. COOKE: Right. That's as far as you get.

MR. SIMPSON: Or, you know, you can always tell the best work an artist does because he puts the most expensive frame on it. “These people are my suppliers.” You know, “This is just merchandise.” These are the kind of terms I hear all the time. Well, that’s the last thing—”I deal with art all day long. That’s the last thing I want to deal with when I go home.” But on the other hand, there’s the other people who know their field and have studied it and can put frameworks on—you know, make sense out of things.

MR. COOKE: So I keep hoping that we’re able to do a little bit within this field as we keep pushing it forward and raising the level of knowledge and consciousness.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, it seems to me in the last 40 years it’s grown tremendously that way, a lot more people. In the ‘60s I’ve been on TV and different—and they didn’t even know what to call that, or never seen it before, kind of. So it’s like you’re trying to do an interview with somebody, you know, like, how old are you and where do you get your wood supplies from, and—

MR. COOKE: What glue do you use?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. They don’t know what to tell you about the work because they don’t know—where a lot of the time people ask better questions now.

[Audio break, tape change.]

MR. COOKE: That’s helpful.

MR. SIMPSON: But it’s much more singular. You know, there’s a thousand women and two are wonderful. I just didn’t happen to run across them in my life. Or there’s a thousand guys and two are wonderful, and the rest get the same old story kind of thing, which is why I’m building my own world, for survival or something.

MR. COOKE: You often are building your own world, right?

MR. SIMPSON: Yes. That’s hopefully my next project, if I live long enough, to build a house. I’m going to do the rugs, the furniture, the paintings, the silverware, the china, the quilts.

MR. COOKE: Sort of taking the Washington house and going the next step.

MR. SIMPSON: Sort of doing the whole thing just out of curiosity, sort of.

MR. COOKE: The womb. [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: The womb. Well, William Morris did stuff like that, and so did Frank Lloyd Wright. There’s been a lot of other people who have done that sort of thing. It’s less frequent than a lot of things. Stickley tried to do some of that—

MR. COOKE: Well, a little bit, but in a commercial way in some respects. He was motivated that way. It’s probably Morris that’s closest, thinking about an alternative world and being hands-on in terms of wanting to know the processes and then getting out and integrating all those together.

MR. SIMPSON: They’ve done that in other—like Disney did it in characters, and probably people in business have put companies together in a way that was unique to their own personality, and it’s just another way of doing that with the idea that—I mean, educationally that you may not like what I did, but here’s a model that you can do the same thing, but with your own whatever thing. And the American crafts movement in some ways hasn’t got the benefit of really good PR. There’s a lot of, you know, wonderful people making great stuff, but—

MR. COOKE: Do you think it’s PR? Do you think it’s education? Do you think it—I mean, it’s kind of curious because it is pretty diffuse in terms of the awareness. There’s no central—either the Craft Museum or the Renwick [Renwick Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC] hasn’t necessarily kept the pressure on, at least in some ways.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. You’ve got our history, which are either farmers or artisans, you know, and all our ancestors. And a lot of these people making stuff, I mean, they’re ecologically sound. They’re not hurting other people. They’re working hard. They’re being inventive. They’re doing all sorts of things that we would think value-wise is a benefit to the culture, and as well as make beautiful things and useful things. It’s like, how come these aren’t the model Americans?

MR. COOKE: It’s a win-win situation, right.

MR. SIMPSON: Some guy that screwed everybody has made $100 million and blew it on broads and crappy cars, you know, and a big house on Palm Beach or something.

MR. COOKE: Or reality TV or something like that.

MR. SIMPSON: And how come this isn't a good story that everybody knows? It's like, we wear these clothes every day, you know, and you need somebody in a high place that will like say, well, these are good, wonderful people. We should, like—

MR. COOKE: —pay attention.

MR. SIMPSON: —pay attention and be respectful and help them, because they're helping you in your life.

MR. COOKE: So true. And it's tangible.

MR. SIMPSON: That's like, why isn't this a good story? Why can't the Craft Museum promote this? Or why can't somebody in the White House or someplace—the bully pulpit, as they say, for the—

MR. COOKE: Yes, that's true.

MR. SIMPSON: And there's plenty to show. You go to SOFA [Sculptural Objects & Functional Arts Exposition] now in Chicago; they have 35,000 people go through there in three days. It's not like people don't like it.

MR. COOKE: So what do you think about the role of furniture at SOFA?

MR. SIMPSON: It's almost nonexistent.

MR. COOKE: Why do you suppose that is?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, somewhat is, if you go back to the gallery part, they pay so much for that booth, they're going to cram up as much crap in there as they can get for the highest amount of money, which is going to be glass, and that's why.

MR. COOKE: Glass goes quickly.

MR. SIMPSON: And they can pack 10 of them in there for $100,000, and this much—in like four-foot space. And they can only put one cabinet there for $8,000, and they have to tote it.

MR. COOKE: It may not be done in time. [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

Well, the Furniture Society, if they had a booth, if they could find some way—like it cost them $10,000 to do this.

MR. COOKE: They've actually done that. They did it at SOFA a year ago. They were able to get some pieces from an exhibition and get the space contributed, I think.

MR. SIMPSON: So maybe they could do that every year—

MR. COOKE: If they did that every year, that would help.

MR. SIMPSON: —find some way that they could get the $10,000. They have an auction of 10 pieces of something —

MR. COOKE: A subsidy that allows them to do that.

MR. SIMPSON: I don't know how they make their money, but something like that might help. Scott [Jacobsen] shows some stuff sometimes because he can berate them to do it.

MR. COOKE: Right. But it's always struck me as pretty much for glass and ceramics, and furniture just—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: There's not enough quantity. There's quantity of makers now, but there's not necessarily quantity of production, of work. A lot of it is just folk work that goes right to somebody.

MR. SIMPSON: Yes, and the Philadelphia furniture thing and stuff, I've never been to them. I would like to go sometime.

MR. COOKE: I know Providence is doing one, too.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. They asked me but they keep asking people who have shown there, but I don't do it unless I have to, exactly.

MR. COOKE: Right, because you've got enough here. People are waiting for this commissioned work.

MR. SIMPSON: I don't know. Somewhere along the line you'd think is somebody in the news that's got power—movie stars, this kind of thing—that will get behind some kind of movement. Or a museum. Take the Chicago Art Institute. Now, look at their contemporary parts. It's like probably nonexistent, practically.

MR. COOKE: They've got bits and pieces, but nothing sustained.

MR. SIMPSON: You know, and the same with the Met. It's got nothing particularly. Or the Modern's got—the Craft Museum had no—you could go into the building, see a Swedish ceramic show, and come out and you wouldn't know what contemporary crafts was about, because there was nothing to see.

MR. COOKE: Exactly, because the permanent collection isn't there.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, you guys started there, but I don't know if they just didn't have enough room or if all of a sudden if like the next president, you know, redid his—the White House in a lot of contemporary American crafts and he was seen as a contemporary—at SOFA, you know, all of a sudden—

MR. COOKE: There's a buzz, right.

MR. SIMPSON: All of a sudden the MFA [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston] would find space for the stuff you collected—and maybe it's going to take 100 years before they—

MR. COOKE: Did you ever get any feedback from "The Maker's Hand" ["The Maker's Hand: American Studio Furniture 1940-1990," November 12, 2003 - February 8, 2004] in terms of a show that tried to put together some sort of a narrative?

MR. SIMPSON: You mean the last one up there?

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: No, I haven't heard anything.

MR. COOKE: It's an awfully quiet sort of response and waiting for it.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. I talked to—I don't know whether it was Fitzgerald or—

MR. COOKE: Oscar Fitzgerald?

MR. SIMPSON: I don't know if it was Oscar or—yeah, I think so. And they said they tried to send it around, but it was an expensive show to—

MR. COOKE: It's a shame. They're trying to sell the show ahead of time, and they put a large price tag on it because it's complex in numbers of crates and—and it's not like saying, "Oh, will you take an Impressionist show?" "Sure, yeah," no matter what. But here it's sort of this hands-off. So both the topic being not well-known, plus the cost and the complexity, ends up making it really hard to sell these shows.

MR. SIMPSON: Yes. Well, my thought is that either you get a really good PR person in like the Craft Museum or Arts and Design that can really promote it or get some that are—several people that have more money than they'll ever know what to do with that have purchased stuff in the arts and crafts. And there must be some way of formulating—I mean, I had ideas to formulating a foundation. My idea was to go out in New York state someplace, have them buy 100 acres, and then get five craftspeople, one in each media, to get five acres and they can build a house and studio. And then have a—build a house—

[Audio break.]

—make it a nonprofit foundation kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: This is Ned Cooke interviewing Tommy Simpson at his place in Washington, Connecticut. It's May 6, 2004, and it's an interview for the Smithsonian program and for the Archives of American Art.

And we were just talking about Tommy's idea of buying acreage in New York and getting different people working in different media together and allowing them to construct and fit out a house that's representative of this particular constellation of makers. And so—

MR. SIMPSON: It also is a foundation kind of nonprofit where somebody like yourself that could live there and also promote in all sorts—somebody would get paid and they'd send things to the—not necessarily those five, but just the whole field, make people aware of it and all kinds of things.

MR. COOKE: Think it would have to be near New York City so it would be easy access?

MR. SIMPSON: That's what I'm thinking, but I could be wrong. But some of these people have $500 million, and they would do a tremendous advantage to promoting the American crafts as an idea, be useful, you know. And it seems like something like that might help.

MR. COOKE: Do you get bothered by the term "crafts," I mean, with the Craft Museum changing its name to the Museum of Arts and Design?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, I'm sort of mixed on that. A lot of people like the word "craft." The problem with "craft" is that it goes from pot holders to, you know, million-dollar extravaganzas. It's sort of a hard definition for people to get their—

MR. COOKE: It's become meaningless, almost?

MR. SIMPSON: It's like a hamburger. It could be anything, you know?

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: So people don't know what to say, and they're trying to narrow it down a little bit. Part of it is that nobody's taken on the word "craft" and really tried to define it and educate with it so that people know what you're talking about. Because there's craft in writing, there's craft in teaching, there's craft in everything, painting. And to try to—and this is a good thing that we should all be doing. They've dumbed it down in a way. So that's what they're trying to avoid.

MR. COOKE: Right. Rather than try to be specific and create a real workable definition, they just toss it out in some ways.

MR. SIMPSON: So it's sort of a mixed bag that way. It would help if once they get the museum, if they have a whole floor with the work in it. Then people will know what they're talking about instead of something in their head they can't really touch or see; it's just an idea.

You suffer from crafts. That's the reality of the word. If you call it "craft," it's $10. You call it "art" and it's $20. If I make it out of wood, it's $5. If I make the same thing out of bronze, it's $50. If I make it out of glass, it's $500.

MR. COOKE: That's the new hierarchy.

MR. SIMPSON: It's that kind of idea. You know, people have all these biases.

I don't really draw a connection. I know some things are very utilitarian; I usually try to make them beautiful. And other things, the idea of it is the spiritual part; it functions for delight and education and entertainment. It has no utility.

MR. COOKE: It seems to me that the path that you're walking is oftentimes—I mean, I see three different themes in your work. I see joy, I see memory, and I see function, and it's not always all three are there together. Joy is probably there more than the others, or memory is oftentimes so strong. But it seems like that's the constellation of ideas within which you triangulate yourself.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, it tends to come out that way. If you look at, say, the old high art—if you take Botticelli—*La Primavera*. And you can see the painting—it's totally joyful, the actual standing in front of that painting. You can't help but feel, this is really a wonderful thing. And it seems like a real value.

MR. COOKE: Right. And it's palpable, it's visible, understandable.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. And I think necessary.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: Versus making a monument of soldiers of bronze, you know, with guns and—it's another part of people's personality. I wouldn't glean towards that kind of thing. I wouldn't think I'd be very good at it.

MR. COOKE: No, but I was describing memory. Oftentimes there are some personal memories that you've tended to have in there, embedded in some of your objects.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, I think it gives a—bringing something to life is different than making something. And so you want it to take a breath, and so a lot of times it's the organic aspect of your own life or what's around you—nature's the model. What's the design of the tree to make it breathe and keep living?

MR. COOKE: That's a good notion about bringing an object to life, because I think that's, in essence, what you're striving to do.

MR. SIMPSON: And so you go around and you can look at stuff that doesn't come to life; it's well done and executed, but it's dead.

MR. COOKE: Cold; it's impersonal or whatever, yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. And you can imagine how they bent the metal like that, but then what's the point of it?

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: There's no nature in it. There's no organicness to make it come to life. And that seems—I mean, if you have a relationship, you want your kids to come to life for you. You kiss your wife; you want it to come to life. You want to feel the blood surging, that kind of thing. It seems that's what's important in life, that they have that feeling. So that's what I strive for and a lot of times hopefully get there. And a lot of times it doesn't quite work, but maybe the next time it will, which is true of all relationships, it seems like.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: So the point of view is much different than, like, making furniture or making a painting or making ceramics. It's the intent. It's like you kissed your daughter and you kissed your mother and you kissed your wife. And it's all of the same action; it all looks the same, but the intent was totally different.

MR. COOKE: Right, yeah. It's a different relationship, you know, if you think about it.

MR. SIMPSON: You're giving love to your daughter in a different way than you want love from your mother and getting love from your wife. And it's a very subtle kind of thing, and hopefully you can see it in the piece.

MR. COOKE: That's an interesting idea to describe an object much more as a realization of a relationship than as an object.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, it seems like there are a lot of objects, the stainless steel bowl to eat cereal and mix an egg in or something.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: But that's more of a guiding thing than any of the rules and regulations of what we think the art world's about.

MR. COOKE: Right. And it's again one of those ways in which—why you are drawn to working in different media or doing entire ensembles in some ways. It's talking about a series of relationships. It's talking about a population.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, and it makes more sense when you get up what you're going to do. If you get up and you have to make this thing—

MR. COOKE: An object.

MR. SIMPSON: —it's a mental thing. And after a while you don't want to do that. It's like an obligation, like schoolwork or something like that. But if you get up and you know you're going to have a relationship and you just want to make the best kind of relationship you can for that day, then it's a lot easier to keep making and doing things.

MR. COOKE: Well, I'm also curious. Can you describe a little bit on the tape about your working process? When we were walking around your shop, of that same sort of thing, of getting in there and cut up some parts some day and they don't quite work out, they go into a filing system. And talk a little bit about—

MR. SIMPSON: Well, it's somewhat like if you're talking to someone, you're telling them things, you're listening, but you're also not telling them things. If you take a board and you cut it, a circle out of a square, you not only have a circle but you have a square with a circle in it. And if you don't become biased by it or—you're doing both of them. So you have two pieces and not just making the circle. Usually you're taught you're making the circle and you throw the other away. So if you just sort of look at it, what it is, not think about it but look at it, then you

save the other part and use that in something else, which has already been partly designed, because you cut a hole in the middle of it.

MR. COOKE: Do you go into your shop in the morning thinking, I want to do this, or do you just sort of see something in one of your bins and pick it up and start going with it?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, a lot of times I leave the shop at night and have—this is sort of simplistic—knowing a little bit of what I want to do tomorrow. So when I first get there, I'll do that; like I'll make three legs and I know I have to make the fourth, so I won't make it that day. It's sort of like priming the pump to get there. And then sometimes you'll look over and you'll see something you haven't finished and you know how to finish it, so you'll stop everything and go finish that and then come back to what you were doing. And sometimes while you're gluing something up, you'll cut out a chair seat and put that away till—so that, in effect, you're always working but not sometimes thinking. You're going with the zone or the flow. It's like in basketball, you're in the zone, and that's the state you want to be in, because a lot of times all of yourself is telling you what to do.

MR. COOKE: Are you ever driven by the fact that boards get delivered and all of a sudden you've got this piece—like that burl cherry board. Has that been starting you off, or is that just sort of something that has to sit around for a little while and—

MR. SIMPSON: Both. Sometimes you go and you think, oh, I know exactly what to do with it, so I'm going to do it right now before I forget it, or isn't this a great thing, I've just got to put this together. And like the other day, I was cleaning out and there was a piece of claro walnut. You know, and I'm looking at it and I thought, well, I could make something out of that. So I looked at it and it has sort of a diagonal check through it. So I took a chisel and cracked it open, glued it up, and clamped it back together. So normally you'd throw that away; so I've got now a piece that I can make something out of. It's going to have a glue thing in it. It takes, you know, five minutes to do that and I can glue it up at 5:00 or at 9:00 at night when I'm leaving, and then in the morning it will be—

MR. COOKE: —ready to go.

MR. SIMPSON: I could take it out of the clamps and then I'm working, you know, sort of getting myself going. So doing tricks like that. We call it a trick.

MR. COOKE: Well, actually I think it would be hard if you had to keep tactile and mental contact with all these things that keep piling up over here.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, some of these I'd write notes and sketches and stuff. Some of it is how much money do you have in the bank. Do you have to get this thing out by Thursday kind of routine. I try to get as much I'm really interested in doing this and doing it then is to postpone the interest. I try to get as close to that as you can.

MR. COOKE: But there's no typical day for you; it's just the fact that it's busy.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, it's busy.

MR. COOKE: You're moving in many different directions.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. I might start a chair and get it mostly. Then I've got it laid out what I want, and then I'll go in and I'll work on one of those boxes and paint that that day and let the chair just sit there, because I sort of know what I want to do. And then, three days later, after doing a couple of those, I might go back and finish the chair off. And then I might take the chair and I would put it all together. I'd put all this chair together and then not glue it up, and then I'll shellac it; take it all apart and then glue it up because then the cleanup on the glue is a lot easier. And so you might do that sometime when you got two hours, you know, that you got to go someplace.

MR. COOKE: Right, for this amount of time. But a lot of that is probably you've developed that sense of rhythm over your career.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: It wasn't always that easy.

MR. SIMPSON: No. I think a lot of it—if you're stationary and have a lot of stuff around and you allow it to happen, it'll happen kind of thing. The worst of it is when you start thinking too much about it. Usually I find you can do lots of stuff just doing it and then take five minutes to think about it, you know, like eight hours later instead of thinking about it before and worrying and all this kind of stuff. And you know you can get yourself out of it.

MR. COOKE: Confidence with experience, right?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. You'd know you can get yourself out of it. You can go to school and you teach at Yale. Whatever you do, you know you can get yourself out of it.

MR. COOKE: Right. You're not going to be in a pickle, so—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. There's always an answer and there's always some way of remedying it. And I don't know if that just comes from the experience of doing it, you know.

MR. COOKE: I think it comes from experience. It comes from a cumulative repertoire, as it were. It's the same thing in the shop.

MR. SIMPSON: So, you know, that works for you. I'm working on a couple of kids' books that I work back and forth. And I'm working on another book that's in my head that, when I go to China now, I'm going to write for it, which will be an easy thing, because that'll be just a flow. It's like a sketchbook kind of thing, where you put notes and write things and draw pictures, something I do all the time.

They want, like, some sort of moral in it. It's just—totally struggling with it because I want it to be nonsensical and mysterious, which—nobody in the book business wants it to be that. They all want it to make sense and have the right rhyme to it and have a moral and a teaching thing to it, you know. And that's just the last thing I want to deal with, so it's a real conflict.

MR. COOKE: Last thing on your mind.

MR. SIMPSON: So what I'll probably end up doing is just writing what I want. I'll just say, here it is; you like it or you don't like it. And you get the book editor or the agent and stuff, like, it's exceedingly charming but doesn't scan. It's exceedingly charming; what do you care if it scans or not?

MR. COOKE: Yeah. What's the big deal?

MR. SIMPSON: So I'm trying to make it scan, whatever that is. Like I put down this creature as an alphabet guy, and they asked me what that was, which was a literary person, would be another way of saying that. But "alphabet guy" was very confusing, which I like, but—

MR. COOKE: Yeah, get people to stop and think.

MR. SIMPSON: But I can do that visually.

MR. COOKE: It's like *The Phantom Tollbooth* [1970].

MR. SIMPSON: But I can do that pictorially, which people will accept, but verbally it's a different thing. I don't know where this gets me, but anyway. But it helps me think through sometimes visual things to—

MR. COOKE: Right, you're just changing venues in some respects, and problem solving comes in lots of different ways.

MR. SIMPSON: Right.

MR. COOKE: It's the style that works best for you.

MR. SIMPSON: And that's, well, university teaching and the arts, a lot of it's skill-oriented because you have to learn that, the highs and lows of all the—you know, the materials as well as the tools, probably cut your finger off or something.

MR. COOKE: Right. What do you think is going on within the field? If you had to step back and put on your prognosticator view and—I mean, the '60s was a time of a fair amount of growth in the field; the '70s, there was some contraction, just thinking about visibility, sales. The '70s was a time some of the school programs were growing, but by and large the boom that occurs in the late '70s and '80s was a time of prolific growth and expansion of the field, and the '90s was another point of contraction. Where do you suppose some of this is going to go now? Is there growth now? Is there broad-based sort of activity?

MR. SIMPSON: I don't know. I get that *Woodshop News*. Do you get that?

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: There seems to be lots of people making custom furniture. It seems a lot more than I ever

remember. It doesn't seem particularly interesting, but I don't know if that's really their goal. I think they're just servicing people by making it better or constructing it better. Well, it's in a recession now. One thing I've noticed, it seems to me that I'm more aware. If you've watched TV—like I turn it on at night and things like that—is that there's so much media around now. Every night it's, like, how many people get killed, you know, and you think that must wear on people. I can't remember when I saw anything that's wonderful or interesting on TV.

MR. COOKE: [Laughs.] So true.

MR. SIMPSON: Or the shows they put up; it's like what miserable kind of thing can they shock you with, like the Whitney does. It's like they're trying to shock you with something or get—I don't know if shocking is, but they're trying to tweak people. And I can't remember a show in which the essence is, we want something that could be really interesting and beautiful. That seems to be sort of on the wane.

MR. COOKE: Missing.

MR. SIMPSON: Missing. Something you'd really—well, the wood show, people were trying to make beautiful things versus making some kind of political statement or something like that, which is okay in its own sense. I'm not against that, but it seemed to me there could be a balance of having a show that's really, really wonderful, beautiful things that would help people understand their life a little better or make their life a little nicer or something of that nature. I mean, it's a balance.

MR. COOKE: A pleasurable breeze.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. And also that you wouldn't mind being around for a while versus something that, okay, they're making a point and I get it and now I don't want to see it again.

MR. COOKE: Let me create—

MR. SIMPSON: Right, because their composition stinks, they can't draw anything, their color sense is terrible, you know.

MR. COOKE: So do you think, in spite of the recession, and because of the climate we're in now, there's still a need for what you're doing? And it seems like you're still busy.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, it's a need for me to do it. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, a lot of people recently have said they really—a lot of times they like it because it makes them happy. They don't tell you much about the piece, but they said whatever it's giving off is making them happy versus miserable, which seemed interesting. And I was over in France, and of course you go over there with some collectors that I'm making stuff for, and they have no artists, for instance. Of course, you're, you know, the great American artist. Of course, they don't know what you are in America, but over there, when you're there, you are.

MR. COOKE: Change of venue.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. And I show them the book and stuff, and a lot of the comments were that I was in a world of my own kind of thing, which you don't get that comment here too often. But being a foreigner coming there, I don't know if it's more in their consciousness—

MR. COOKE: It might be.

MR. SIMPSON: —than it is here. And a lot of it—sometimes it's a long discussion about the motivation of things. A lot of it's what they're selling and the glitz and the big money and the show business and entertainment. You know, it's that kind of thing versus when was the last time you saw a really interesting scientist on TV, so-and-so scientist getting out of a hotel room, going into a limo. [Laughs.]

MR. COOKE: It's in *People* magazine all the time.

MR. SIMPSON: Right, so a lot of the stuff's geared that way, entertainment. It's hard—some of it is I'm not that attuned to what's going on that way. If you're making it all the time, it's hard to be on the playing end of it.

MR. COOKE: Right, on the reception side of things.

MR. SIMPSON: You're probably in a better position to see the field sometimes than I am because you see more people.

MR. COOKE: It's curious to try to see it from all the different angles.

MR. SIMPSON: Nobody seems to be pushing the dream, you know what I mean?

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: There are not too many people who say, I have this dream and this is what I'm—I want to do poetry with my work. It's how much something costs and can so-and-so get—

MR. COOKE: Unfortunately that's the way we place value, assign value.

MR. SIMPSON: And so I haven't heard, in the field, too many people talking that way, they'd like to do this really big show or—like the show coming up in November is an important show for me because it's going to have a little of everything. It's more like who I am than it is stuff for sale.

MR. COOKE: Right, it's more of a personal retrospective.

MR. SIMPSON: And whether or not I can get other museums. Director's going to say, "Well, we'd like to put on a show like this;" not only myself, but maybe somebody else's. But it's a different look at what it is we're doing than just known for a particular thing and then that's it.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, exactly.

MR. SIMPSON: And then they show that and you—

MR. COOKE: You—that represents you, then.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: That's the way you're remembered.

MR. SIMPSON: So I don't know; I'm going to try to promote it and push the show that way to see if there's any interest. It seems to me personally with people, they like that. Whether the organized art world does, that's another thing.

MR. COOKE: I'm curious to see what happens.

Okay. Let's—

MR. SIMPSON: Should we quit for a—

[Audio break.]

MR. COOKE: So this is Ned Cooke interviewing Tommy Simpson in my office in New Haven, Connecticut, on July 2, 2004, for the Archives of American Art. This is disc number four, the first disc of the new session, session number two, but it's disc four in the series.

And, Tommy, I'd like to start off today talking a little bit about the type of work that you're doing that's split between the commissioned work as well as speculative work for exhibition and how you perceive that in terms of decisions that you're making and how you balance it out, and how does each impact the other, I guess.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, usually on the commissions, since I do, quote, fine arts, as well as implied arts or decorative arts, usually it's been my experience that six out of 10 people will buy decorative arts because they can get their hands around it and sit on it and [it] doesn't bring the baggage that the fine art kind of thing does. So you get more people as participants. If you're making a painting, you're going to get like two or 10 people interested because of its baggage, because you put it on the wall and you think about it; you can't sit on it and roll on it and beat it and that sort of thing.

So I get more income from the decorative arts than I do from the fine arts, without playing the art game. You know, I'm just sort of in the marketplace.

MR. COOKE: But you don't really think of this as a division. This is just part of—you do this work and—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. You do it; it comes out of your hand, heart, and head—this is what you are, this is what you're making—then you just play the game after that. Whether you want to or not, you've got to be part of things in some way. Either you reject the game or you use it to your advantage, or—

MR. COOKE: Do you ever find that the commissioners either get too involved, or are people coming to you

because they have responded to your work and trust you?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, there's all the bests and all the worsts. Some of it's they're going to get it cheaper from you than in the gallery business, and they have fewer people to deal with—going both ways. Usually your commission means somebody knows your work and they want you to repeat something that you've done before. Usually they don't want you to experiment on them, on their time kind of thing. And so if you do a lot of commissions that means your growth, your interests, are put to the side for a while. So I try to manage it that I don't do too many commissions, because the other part of it's the most interesting to me. As long as I'm not making money at it, I might as well do something interesting.

And the advantage of a commission is you usually get paid right away. You finish and you bring it to them and they pay you. That's the plus part. The other times usually it's—sometimes you're working with materials as a request that you've never used before, and that can be, you know, plastic or metal or a scale, or it's outside or inside. And so I prefer making everything myself, and then if they like it, fine, and if they don't that's fine, too.

MR. COOKE: So there's no real understanding—I mean, no detailed drawing. They just say they want a—[inaudible]—or they want a set of chairs or they want an entire room, because you've done a couple of those as well.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, they usually know what I do, and I usually make drawings for them. I stick fairly close to it, but I never take any money until it's finished. And I say if they don't like it, they don't have to take it; somebody else will buy it. We'll make another one.

MR. COOKE: By and large, most people are satisfied, though?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. I've never had anybody reject it.

MR. COOKE: Sort of takes the pressure off, right?

MR. SIMPSON: Takes the pressure off everybody, because if they don't put any money down, in a sense, then they're not bugging you. They think, oh, well, he's an idiot and he's never going to do it, so forget about it; it didn't cost us anything.

MR. COOKE: And people do seek you out. It's obvious that your stuff gets seen. And certainly I've been aware of the fact that there has been a lot of commissioned work for you, you know, back in the '80s on. I don't know about whether you were doing commissions earlier on, in the '60s and '70s as much.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, I think I've always done a few commissions. Some years are better—there are more of it than other years depending on—the art world goes up and down.

MR. COOKE: And do you find there's the gallery structure and then there's the individual commission structure? Do you see a tension between those two different worlds, or does each help the other in some ways?

MR. SIMPSON: You mean for myself or for the—

MR. COOKE: For yourself.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, all the different materials, in a sense, sometimes demand different ideas, and some ideas demand different materials, if that makes any sense, so that painting can be much more cerebral. It's more exhausting that way than—making a chest of drawers is physically more demanding, but intellectually it's pretty — it can be difficult or it can be easy, depending on the engineering part of it and so on and so forth.

So a lot of them, working in different materials, fit your moods, fit your interests at the time, fit your pocketbook. It's cheaper sometimes to make a drawing than it is to make a piece of furniture, because your outlay is cheaper.

MR. COOKE: Right. But you never felt that galleries would be upset with you when you were showing in New York but then you would also be doing commissioned work?

MR. SIMPSON: Galleries are always upset about everything. They generally are—I'm making a big generalization, but most of them have no idea what art or creation is. They're running a business and they're interested in paying the rent at the end of the month. And as one gallery owner said, my suppliers—and if they can make money on you, they want you there; you're good art. And if they can't make money on you, you're not good art. And generally the awareness and sophistication or the love of what art is very seldom found in the art world. Sometimes more you could find a real understanding in academia because they don't have to pay the rent with it. So they can enjoy it without any costs.

And so most of the galleries I know, it's the guy who's running it, this is what he thinks art is. And there are eight other or 10 other people that think this is what art is and that's the way he makes his living. Then you go to another guy and he thinks this is what art is.

MR. COOKE: Right. But how does that impact on you in your own work? I mean, it seems like you straddle it pretty successfully.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, some—well, I create sort of things that engage myself in my body and my mind and my heart, and whatever comes out, some are good, some are bad; some are growing and some are retrospective. And that's what I do, and I just go around and see who, in a sense, responds to that and then try to make a living from—

MR. COOKE: I mean, have you always consciously thought about trying to be in an art gallery and being shown with some degree of frequency, or is it just, if it works out, it works out?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, that is the business. I mean, you could be a great baseball player, but if you're not on a team, no one knows it. The difference is that baseball evaporates on you as you play it, and I can make 50 or 1,000 paintings and store them in a warehouse.

[Audio break, tape change.]

There is also the reality of our own existences—what we do—and then there's the business of getting by in it. I mean, you're at Yale and you've got to contend with all the input of what that means in your life. Some people are better at it than others. Some people are—

MR. COOKE: It's always curious because it seems like there are people in the furniture field who are able to balance out the idea of galleries, to be able to show work, to do the speculative work, or to just to put some things out there and have—then that informs commissions just as much — it gets people coming directly to you just as much as people who see the commissions then start looking for you in galleries and will buy things there as well. Often they do mutually support one another.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, they do, yeah. Yes, and I've been around a long time, which helps. I could be making awful stuff for a long time, but the fact you've been around a long time, people know—

MR. COOKE: You've got longevity and a body of work, right?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. And also I do things that are—I'm not pushing the egocentric end of it in terms of the cost. I'm not charging $85,000 for a piece. I want to keep making things at a priced so that people can afford them and I can keep working, which is more my motif than anything else.

MR. COOKE: Sounds like just a business in in some ways more than anything else because you're truly somebody who's a maker, who's constantly engaged with the materials and turning in lots of different ways. Just going through the shop and, you know, you're doing all these different genres, and it just seems like that's what you're interested in—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: —getting in the shop and start making things.

MR. SIMPSON: So—and the art world gives credibility where I can't do it for myself. There's all sorts of business aspects, and it almost is a two-part business. It helps a lot in that sense. You're more visible and people can be honest with the gallery when—where they're timid about telling you about something.

MR. COOKE: That having an intermediary can be helpful?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: Do you feel like your work has been understood right from the start, or do you see times at which it has struck a chord, when the context of the moment is more favorable for you?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, when it first came out in the early '60s, it was a novelty, so it got a lot of PR because of that and a lot over the years. There's been a novel aspect to it, which usually is—in this realm you don't get any money for it. I mean, you can be novel in show business and get money for it. So a lot of times you have shows at galleries, which they would use it for PR, and then they would sell more traditional things. I think that the most successful painting is, like, a landscape with animals in it. Globally, 75 percent of all artwork is that.

MR. COOKE: Which has been the most successful part of your work that has sort of hit home, both furniture as

well as some of the other objects? Are there certain things that just, sort of, you hit a home run? We'll keep using baseball analogies here.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, furniture has been the bread and butter, probably. And people seem to like the rugs.

MR. COOKE: The rugs are something relatively new.

MR. SIMPSON: That's like six years old or something.

MR. COOKE: But it's also different because you're not actually doing the physical work on them.

MR. SIMPSON: Right.

MR. COOKE: Do you see a complex there in terms of you turn into a designer in that case rather than maker?

MR. SIMPSON: No, no.

MR. COOKE: But that's sort of a nighttime activity, it seems like.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: You know, you go back and putt around and—

MR. SIMPSON: —make drawings for the rugs. No, those two things—if you hand somebody a baseball, they like it because they know they can do something with it. You know, they feel more a part of it. If I hand them a painting, for whatever reason, people are much shyer. They've been taught to be—they're put on the spot, like say something funny: this guy's really smart; why don't you say something smart?

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: They've got that feeling in their—you can see it in their eyes, you know. I could handle a painting. Like the painting on the wall over there, hand it to them, and they don't know what to say—good or bad or I like the blues—not enough weight at the bottom of the picture. You know, they don't know what to say.

You take the same painting and have a rug made and put it on the floor, and they'll talk for half an hour about how they like the blue and the yellow goes—because they don't have all that.

MR. COOKE: It's a different point of reference.

MR. SIMPSON: In a sense, visually, it's the same, almost.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: I mean, other than—it isn't, but it is.

MR. COOKE: Vertical and horizontal planes.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. But it's taking it all into a whole other context.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: So the paintings seem to be the hardest for people, some of it because it has been out of step all these years with whatever is current in that marketing of painting.

MR. COOKE: How about your carved, constructed, and painted panels?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, those—people haven't got a clue, a lot of times.

MR. COOKE: [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: They ask me when I stopped painting.

MR. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] But those have been a constant, pretty much—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: —and just as much as the little whirligig toy type of things. I mean, those have been a constant. Or do people understand those as well?

MR. SIMPSON: No, I don't think so. I—

MR. COOKE: Do you think—

MR. SIMPSON: It's very difficult—you say it's the art—to get people to ever respond, because a lot of our education is not geared that way.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: We've got verbal with psychological terms, other kinds of areas of thought other than visual words and expressions. So if people don't have the vocabulary, it's not their fault. They just have not been taught. So it's much more difficult to have a conversation about that.

MR. COOKE: I sort of detected—tell me if this is right—that somehow that whole "Poetry of the Physical" exhibition [American Craft Museum, New York, 1987] was one place that you all of a sudden got a lot of public attention. Seemed like '86, right in there, and then all of a sudden people started looking to you for your furniture. And whether it's the rocking chairs and then the pie safes that came afterwards and then—is that right, that those sort of became those known objects people really pursued from you, or am I off-date?

MR. SIMPSON: Yes, it's—no, not so much. It's hard to tell with some of it, because if I show in galleries, I don't really see the public.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: Seldom. I don't know who the people are buying it, and I don't know what they're doing or thinking about it.

MR. COOKE: I'm just thinking about your phone all of a sudden starting to ring or getting letters, people wanting these objects

MR. SIMPSON: Well, in the '60s, there are people making, quote, artifacts in the realm of furniture that were scattered around the country. And, say, there were five of them.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: *Art News* had a circulation of 14,000 or something, you know, and *Craft Horizons* was sort of all New York City—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —and it didn't get much farther than that.

MR. COOKE: And even then they didn't pay much attention to furniture.

MR. SIMPSON: Or furniture, or any of it. It's like some ceramics and occasionally some jewelry—

MR. COOKE: Fiber.

MR. SIMPSON: And so the media was almost nonexistent. And up through the next 20 years—and people would have craft shows, so it would be out on the lawn with—you know, braless and flip-flops on—

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: —with tire treads—and over the last 40 years, it's now a multimillion-dollar business, people with galleries, and it's like a whole other kind of picture.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And in that process, the media got a lot more sophisticated, and magazines and a lot more communication. Now, if you're a jeweler, you probably know the whole country—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —and what's going on and what's new and where—before it never really existed.

MR. COOKE: A network with so much more defined and available.

MR. SIMPSON: And out of the Second World War, in the '40s and in the '50s, you had a lot of GIs going back to

school. You had a lot of older people, and then the art programs and the craft programs—a lot of the craft programs didn't exist—maybe ceramics at Alfred; I don't know when they started—and now it's a major, you know, part of a university to have these things.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: It's totally different. And so where before you'd say handmade this, people would—glazed; they didn't have any idea. Now there's a huge cadre of educated people who know what you're talking about.

MR. COOKE: One of the things I was really struck by was the whole way in which in the 1980s all of a sudden the field became colored. So much of the images pre-1980 were black and white.

MR. SIMPSON: Right, and brown.

MR. COOKE: And all of a sudden there was this explosion of color. It was more than furniture, Italian design and things like that. It seems like part of it was also media driven. They started photographing it. I was thinking about "Poetry of the Physical" because that catalogue is the first high-gloss, really dedicated to color images, and how much that did for someone like you and Garry Knox Bennett, whose work really needs to be represented in color.

MR. SIMPSON: Right, but the quality of production in a lot of this stuff was much better. If you look at really early *Craft Horizons*, it's all black and white.

MR. COOKE: Or even "Objects: USA".

MR. SIMPSON: And out of focus, you know.

MR. COOKE: "Objects USA" looks like it's been screened. It's all fuzzy black and white. They have a couple of color images; they're mushy and there's no definition at all.

MR. SIMPSON: Yes. And I think there was a period in there of a gelling, you know? Even when you did the show up at Boston that made people aware, and Peter Joseph, when he was—that never happened in the '60s much. It was a little bit there, a little bit there. Nothing came together. And if there's 500 people making furniture, it's better than five.

MR. COOKE: That's because there's more out there. Critical mass.

MR. SIMPSON: And you need that. Like the Windsor chair, everybody made one, so they had a lot of them, so it got popular. There are other chairs that are just as nice but they only made two or three, you know? Nobody knows about those types that never got known.

MR. COOKE: Do you think part of it was not just the media; do you think it's the academic society, the proliferation of some of the schools that started to knit what were regional or very isolated people, started to bring the East Coast and the West Coast together?

You started talking about the fact that you went up with Ed Zucca to teach at PIA, so that gave you some introduction there. And then there are people on the West Coast who all of a sudden saw what you did and thought, well, if he can do that—you know? I think Wendy Maruyama was one who said she saw your work and all of a sudden thought, well, if he can do that, anything goes—you find that sharing of ideas, almost the academic system, and how people who are teaching and people who are students start moving around and sort of bring all this together.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. I don't know when that gelling actually happened, but '80s seems like a good time.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: We got a lot more consciousness—the Craft Museum would have shows of which they would have one for the press and collectors, which originally they only had one opening, because there weren't enough—

MR. COOKE: They didn't want to spread the audience too thin.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, right. Much more aware that there's a craft movement in this country, more so than anywhere else in the world, it seems to me. Western—or Europe hasn't had that sort of conglomeration of all the crafts in one kind of thing. Everybody—you talk to people and they're not particularly aware of it.

MR. COOKE: Right. We've still got a ways to go here.

You taught at places like Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME]. What do you think was the role of the summer programs within the larger constellation of the craft world?

MR. SIMPSON: I think they're usually vacation entertainment.

MR. COOKE: So you had basically sort of more amateur dilettantes?

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, or people just come there every year, and it's not worth teaching them because they're not interested in learning anything.

MR. COOKE: So it's a pilgrimage to the sites?

MR. SIMPSON: They just want to do it and they enjoy it and it's like a vacation for them, or to get out of where they are, sort of a break from what they are normally doing. I'm not a big—although I went to so damn many schools, I'm not a big fan that kind of, this is the only kind of education—go to school. For thousands of years they made art with no schools.

MR. COOKE: But in some ways you're an anomaly that way, because most of the time people will say, you go to school and you produce art furniture, and that if you are self-taught and are more interested in just working, then oftentimes you're considered a custom furniture maker who really works by traditional forms for function, for commission. And you're actually more like the latter, because the forms aren't what you anticipated. You're really all over the map.

MR. SIMPSON: Right. Well, I don't know if it's an advantage, but when I started making things, which was probably the late '50s, there wasn't, in a sense, the art scene. People were doing Abstract Expressionism. If you didn't do that—if you did figurative stuff, forget it, you know. It was passé.

MR. COOKE: Well, just that you're a dedicated maker.

MR. SIMPSON: Oh, yeah. I know—

MR. COOKE: Almost within the self-taught realm. And ordinarily that sort of profile, if you just were talking about background, if you're talking about what excites you, it's—the fact that you do commissions. One would expect, if you were blindfolded and had this description, lift the blindfold and you expect to see fairly traditional-looking furniture: Scandinavian modern, colonial revival, whatever.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, I would say when I was starting—today a lot of students have a big arena of information to them. This is what the art furniture world's about, and that didn't exist when I did that. So I did things, like the guy in the hometown who had one arm. He washed windows, so he carried a ladder around all over town, washing windows for people. So I would think, well, how would you make a ladder that a guy with one arm could carry and put up. Okay, I'll design that. And this is the source for making things or creating something, other than I have to make something for the art world. So a lot of it's sourcing of all the information from a different source than perhaps it is today, and in that it maybe has a different aesthetic and look than would some other person's approach to it. You look from that period, you know, like Wendell and—everybody had sort of their own much more individualistic than today.

MR. COOKE: So who do you think belonged to your cadre in the '60s? There was Wendell, there was you. Who else did you—

MR. SIMPSON: Well, I didn't necessarily think of it as a, you know, art. To me I'm still a painter, and so I was just using furniture as subject matter instead of as an end result. That's the way I started out. Instead of using a model or buildings or a landscape or still life, I just took a chest of drawers, a chair, and stuff. I thought of it in those terms.

I liked [H.C.] Westermann and a lot of the artists in Paris between the wars, [Marc] Chagall and Miro and [Henri] Matisse, Paul Klee and [Pablo] Picasso. So this is more of a source than the furniture. Furniture per se was never an end goal, to be a furniture maker.

MR. COOKE: But your identity remains artist to this day. Do you feel uncomfortable when people call you a furniture maker?

MR. SIMPSON: Uncomfortable in the fact that it's a misnomer. I make furniture. You eat hamburgers, so that they can come up and say, "Ned, the hamburger eater," and you think, well, yeah, I am, but that doesn't make much sense. I'm Ned Cooke, you know. And so it's uncomfortable, because you feel the lacking of what they're coming with more so than me personally. And I have people that have known me for 35 years, curators who still think—and they know I paint; they're just not interested in painting, so they don't call you that.

MR. COOKE: Right, but there is that category. Sometimes I'll even just talk about people who are makers.

MR. SIMPSON: Makers and artists. In a certain realm I'm an artist, but in other realms I like to think of myself as somebody who makes things.

MR. COOKE: Because it sounds like, coming from your childhood, that's the constant, is sort of this—it's not true. I think it's a sense of being creatively busy and always in motion.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, if you go to writers, you call them writers and not artists, that kind of thing. And the making I like, because if you study composition, you can apply that to anything: writing a book, making a painting, doing furniture, making jewelry. They all possess some part of a composition you have to consider. So I like to think of it that way. And New York is sort of—which is where most of my career has been.

MR. COOKE: Right, or oriented towards.

MR. SIMPSON: Oriented towards. It is very much a marketing kind of society; this is what's hot this year and you buy it, and then this is what's hot. Now let me tell you how to do it. If you can do it for yourself, it will cost $5; if I tell you how to do it, it's going to cost you $25. And they want the $25, so they spend all their time letting you know what you don't know and how much I know, because it makes for more money.

MR. COOKE: Do you then get concerned if on a show about studio furniture makers all of a sudden you're lumped into that? Are you comfortable with it, or is that—it's a convenient one from a marketing point of view where it captures some part of you?

MR. SIMPSON: It captures some part of you and it's sometimes the camaraderie, or you see a show, sometimes you find things in there that you would learn from. If nothing else, you see the status quo of what's acceptable now, that sort of thing. There's lots of different ways of coming at it. I think they're important for myself, for the public in general to know and see.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, very much so.

MR. SIMPSON: Because a lot of times—I mean, I've worked for the Fairtree Gallery and people come in and buy a mug, a straight cylinder with a handle. The next time they buy a purple mug, a straight cylinder. Next time they add a little shape to it. Next time—and after a year or two they're buying wild things, so to speak.

MR. COOKE: Right. They work through it.

MR. SIMPSON: And so the more exposure there are for stuff—people are going to come at it with a different kind of education, and I've seen that over 40 years, and it's much, I think, healthier and better, even though you like less and so on and so forth. There's a lot more going on and there's a lot more—people are a lot more educated about it.

It makes my life much easier than when they have to first educate them, then make the piece, and then talk them into it. So at least some of that first step is gone. I don't have to do that anymore; I can make it and see whether they liked it or not. But a lot of stuff I do has a joyfulness in it, which is not necessarily the vogue.

MR. COOKE: Right. It goes in and out.

MR. SIMPSON: It goes in and out. People like angst better.

MR. COOKE: Only in New York. [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: In New York, yeah.

And my theory is it's more prevalent because it's a lot easier. You can get a rise out of—it's a lot easier with something nasty than something nice, or curious.

MR. COOKE: Right. Do you ever get discouraged? What I really see is this—you know, the promise. There's always this optimism or a positive leaning. You talk about joy a lot, but I think it's evident within the work, too.

MR. SIMPSON: No, I don't think I get—working in varieties of medium, there are always sort of, new playing field, a new sort of way. And the more you vary it—you know, it's sort of like friendships. You have four or five people that are friends, and when one person is blue, the other person is happy, and you can sort of manage all these dialogues to keep yourself going along.

I've never been discouraged about the artwork. The only thing is, the aesthetic I'm dealing with, because a lot of people are not in that sort of museum world. Historically, they've been somewhere else.

MR. COOKE: The historical references are lost—because it is a big part of your work.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah.

MR. COOKE: Subtle and not-so-subtle references.

MR. SIMPSON: And there's the whole history, from [Giuseppe] Arcimboldo, who did the vegetable things, and Etruscan ceramics; there's little funny characters, and even on—the red-and-black painted—

MR. COOKE: Greek vases.

MR. SIMPSON: —Greek vases. If you took that as a theme, you can find it all through history, in Miro and Paul Klee. You can tell that they love and delight in something in the world. If they don't have it in their life, they're going to make—this is the only place they've got it.

MR. COOKE: A sanctuary.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. And so there's a history that's never really exposed or really done a sort of academic thing on that point.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And I think it's an archetypal feeling we all have. A lot of it comes out in the theater, in movies and other sorts of, you might say, entertainment, not so much visually—but it's there.

MR. COOKE: It's got three-dimensional entertainment.

MR. SIMPSON: Right. But I would get more, probably, disappointed or discouraged in more human relations than with the artwork. Expectations. We expect people to be so and so.

MR. COOKE: Well, you can control the material world; you can't—

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. That's one reason to do it.

MR. COOKE: It seems to be one of the subtexts that came through the last time when I was talking to you, the idea that you could create and contain an environment at a point where sometimes you feel like your own environment is just falling apart. A lot of these have taken place with you, just as you had personal real destructions, and then to see this energy poured into the built environment, your own built environment.

MR. SIMPSON: If you look historically, there are many people who are painters and sculptors and stuff, but never artists, in a way. They just rendered what was acceptable at the time and learned the skills to do it. And then there's a whole group of people that are part of — their activity was this creating another world, an acceptable world or an understandable world to themselves.

MR. COOKE: Right. Seeking solace, escape, whatever.

MR. SIMPSON: Right, whatever you want to call it, in that thing, and were God-bent on doing this thing just to keep their own sanity. And those are the ones you remember, because it's an alternative world visually.

MR. COOKE: And so it's an outpouring of emotion into that world.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah, where maybe there was no receptacle for it somewhere else in their life.

MR. COOKE: You raised an interesting question when you talked about some of the skilled draftsmen or skilled sculptors. So, what you were thinking about in the mid- to late '70s, where all of a sudden fine woodworking comes out—and I'm just thinking about your relationship to the furniture world—and you've got all these people who are priding themselves on how many dovetails they can cut and using all these exotic woods and really trying to prove your technical prowess and your command of the materials. How did some of those people view your work and vice versa?

MR. SIMPSON: I don't know how they viewed my work. They don't talk to me, so they probably either are embarrassed or afraid, one or the other—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —because they don't have anything nice to say, or are afraid to say anything. And I appreciate their skills. It's just not where I am at kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And also, there is a thing called furniture, which has a utilitarian aspect to it that has nothing to do with good design or nothing to do with anything, but fulfills a need, which a lot of people do, which is fine. I'm not against that. It's, you know, some people like oranges, some people like apples kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: So I think over the years some of them have been surprised that I appreciate what they do, thinking that I wouldn't, because I don't do that.

MR. COOKE: Just because on aesthetics they think that you're in a different world—

MR. SIMPSON: Yes.

MR. COOKE: —when in fact you're broad-minded, you're open-minded.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. Some people make stuff I know I never could make, just because I don't have the personality to do that. But I admire them doing it.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: It's like you look at it and you think, what else can you do to it? I couldn't tell them, make another dovetail.

And there's that Holy Grail of, as you were saying, dovetails and 440 sandpaper and exotic woods and—

MR. COOKE: And some kind of lamination in there.

MR. SIMPSON: Something that takes more than just putting a nail in it, like making a jig or a form that you have to put over it, so it takes more time.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And it looks like it was tedious and took time is admired, you know, versus a good idea.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And the other ones are attainable. You just have to set down and do them. A good idea is much harder to come by.

MR. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Let's say instead of being able to create a whole new installation, the way you're going to be doing this fall, all of a sudden you were given the task of picking five to 10 pieces to represent who you are as this broad maker. I know it's hard, given the volume, but are there certain things or types of things that you would want in there?

MR. SIMPSON: I'd probably put a painting and a piece of furniture and maybe a box or object and maybe, you know, a little—I'd put a mix of things in a—more than just one category—

There are sort of two paths I'm going down, one with each foot, and one that's sort of a painted—using my own vocabulary, and the other one is somewhat traditional forms and folksy versus the power furniture end—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —like Newport highboys, which are—I mean, they're emphasizing money and power.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: If you can afford it, you're—you know, it's a Cadillac or it's a Rolls Royce or something. Which has nothing to do with any beautiful—they can be, but they don't have to be.

MR. COOKE: And often don't. Right.

MR. SIMPSON: They're just a thing we all know costs money.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And then there's the other one, much more tied to the person and the earth. You could really see

it when I went to China this one time. There was a great many people who are—there was nothing between them and the earth in any form or another. It was raw, and it was like, you get hungry every day; that's a problem—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —versus you get hungry maybe once a month and you know you're going to eat all the other—there was that path, and then there's the path when you come back here and you see how many mechanical devices there are between us and the world, like the air conditioners. And we have cars and all this kind of stuff, and it's just the rawness of the earth is going to hit you every two minutes doesn't exist.

MR. COOKE: Right. What earth? [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: We could float for months and never even know that we're living on earth. And so I preferred the one closer to earth, which is sort of the folksy kind of things, because there's more information that feeds me than there is in the mechanical world, in the moneyed kind of thing. The other one has lots of glitz and a certain amount of power with the money, but it's sort of vacuous than some other form.

MR. COOKE: Talk a little bit—you'd just come back from China, from five weeks in China. And my question to you, when you had to show your slides at a school there, was what's the response? You had some very pointed comments about some frames of reference, I guess, in some ways.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, they don't have art furniture there, so to speak. They're much more traditionally oriented, at least at the moment, but they're changing quickly. And like a lot of the students, who are 19—like college students but they seem like they're 12 or 13; they're very naive and they're very sweet. And if there's five people waiting in line every place you go in front of you, you don't realize you're the only guy in town, you know. And so being a student and learning is an avenue from—it's either that or sweeping the streets.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And so they're very aggressive and interested in their education. So they take things much—sort of real serious—they want to learn.

MR. COOKE: But on the other hand, their furniture is—it's not about joy, it's not about the emotional content that you talk about, but it's, when you make a chair, this is what you do; when you make a table, this is—you were saying that they don't deviate, in some respects, from the type.

MR. SIMPSON: Yes, not as much. Yeah. I think they're starting to. They're Westernizing in a rush. They're like a big wind in from the East, you know, and—or West, and it's coming at them. So they're preparing, you know.

MR. COOKE: Were their sketchbooks active while you were talking?

MR. SIMPSON: Well, it's hard to tell because you—well, the bad part of it is that everything has to be translated.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And so the subtleties and finesses of language don't get—you have to be very specific and narrow, just so they can translate it. For example, when I first got there, you thank the institution and the teachers and all this kind of stuff.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: So that went for five minutes. And I'd look at the translator, and they'd said two words. [Laughs.] You wonder what happened to all that other stuff. What is it—what happened?

MR. COOKE: Was he paying attention? [Laughs.]

MR. SIMPSON: So there's a lot of that kind of—right at the moment.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: They have a big program to learn English. All the kids are learning English in school. But they have a lot of traditional painting and traditional calligraphy and ceramics and stuff like that. And so that's the big bulk of what I saw.

MR. COOKE: Do you think you might be inspired by anything you saw? I mean, it's too early to tell—

MR. SIMPSON: Too early to tell. I'm sure that some of it—and Katmandu was a pretty wild place. But it made me realize what a bubble we live in here—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —of sorts. And it's—I'm sure it'll end up somewhere. I'll use some of the motifs and that kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Right. Not necessarily forms, but more motifs and—

MR. SIMPSON: Motifs and attitudes and—it's like you got your apartment, and you're working on it, and if you bought that as a condominium, if you want to get a mortgage, you're going to have to—it's got to be turnkey, as they say. And in China over there, when you've got a condominium, you'll get four walls and electricity to the building—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —no floor, cement floor, cement walls, no kitchen, no bathroom, a hole in the wall.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: And that's the way you buy it. Then you can do anything you want, but they wouldn't sell you the building here doing that, unless it was all there and you were going to gut it and take it all out again.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: So there's a whole other sort of perspective on—so there's lots of different perspectives that way. And also, I mean, the food is so different.

MR. COOKE: Right. I was just curious of the response that they—

MR. SIMPSON: And Lazy Susans.

MR. COOKE: —the makers and how one negotiates that world and what things get shared at which time, who's likely to go and absorb other ideas, not just the straightforward, visual ones.

MR. SIMPSON: And while the college girls were very sweet and innocent, which was sort of a whole different experience—I mean, a lot of them wanted to go with us, the faculty and the students, because we spoke English and they were English students. So they wanted to hear—

MR. COOKE: Want practice.

MR. SIMPSON: Practice.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: So they want to go everywhere with you so they could practice their English. And different idioms—they loved the different idioms that we have—all the little sayings and phrases and all that sort of thing we have. They like to hear those. You'd go someplace and you wanted to buy—I can't remember what it was, some candles or something—a student would negotiate, you know. And then you'd give them the money and they'd buy the candles for the party or something. And they would carry them. They would automatically carry them. They would take them; they wouldn't let you carry them—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —that kind of thing, which is—I could see a college student here saying, no, I'm going to carry this for you; it's like—

MR. COOKE: Right. Forget it.

MR. SIMPSON: —they'd walk away without even—leave it on the table.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: Little kinds of different things—how people position themselves suggests different motifs, different pieces to make. If you're making a painting, you might use a cobalt blue, but if it was naïve, you might tint it up.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: So the painting, you might end up with, like the color in your shirt, which is much softer—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —it's not as intense—that kind of thing is what influences your work more so than just a particular Chinese character.

MR. COOKE: Sensibility—

MR. SIMPSON: In the same way, if you went there, you would find things in the school and the way they thought about art and the different people or foods you ate that might suggest—well, now I know why—everything over there is red because red means happiness to them. So that's why they have red lanterns and red this and everything's red, is because that's what it means to them.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: To me it means red, you know, and you go over there and you think why do they have everything damn red?

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: So that kind of thing. And then you go back and you study Chinese painting, or whatever it is, and you see everything, red means something totally different now. If somebody didn't make it red, then you'd wonder what the hell they were—

MR. COOKE: What's going on—

MR. SIMPSON: So that's the fun part of it.

MR. COOKE: We've gone through most everything that I was going to bring up. Is there anything that you think I've forgotten?

MR. SIMPSON: I don't think so. Well, it seems to me that one of the important things of the whole thing is that it changed tremendously in the last 50 years—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —it has grown —

MR. COOKE: From a small—

MR. SIMPSON: Little—

MR. COOKE: —circle and many people who were sort of isolated, in some respects, not knowing what else is going on, into—

MR. SIMPSON: —to thousands of people doing it and having a whole world of this now—like, SOFA could have never existed.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: They couldn't have found the people. They couldn't find 50 galleries. You know, there wasn't any.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: I think that's a profound change.

MR. COOKE: And I think it's driven both by the academy as well as people who are taking advantage of some of the magazines and tapes—videotapes of how-to, and workshops, and all sorts of things that just explore.

MR. SIMPSON: And the sad part about that is that it's an activity that engages you body-wise and your brain and your heart, which seems to me a good thing for humanity, which is not exploited. A lot of activities, they can be a politician and it's all your brain working. Your body's sort of nonexistent and your heart is dubious, you know.

MR. COOKE: [Laughs.] Recently, yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: And so it's really an unbalanced, lopsided kind of thing, and I think that's intuitively why people have—it's grown because people have the sensibilities that this is a good thing for them. They feel better when they do it. And that hasn't really been, I don't think, explored much. Instead of being a stockbroker, being a baseball player, which might have a lot of body, but not too much—

MR. COOKE: Right, brain.

MR. SIMPSON: And it's one of those activities; so it's a good lifetime activity that you can go and move in different directions or take advantage of one of those three things—

[Audio break, tape change.]

—more at one time than another. It has a lot of flexibility in it, and that hasn't really been exploited to the point where it makes the craftsperson's life a little easier. It keeps getting better kind of thing.

MR. COOKE: Right, so it's still elusive in terms of value being placed on this.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. You have places like—the museums don't necessarily push that. Or I don't know if there is really a PR for craft movement.

MR. COOKE: Not really. Ostensibly the museum in New York, the Renwick, is supposed to be educating and bringing people to consciousness, but it doesn't necessarily happen.

MR. SIMPSON: Or the ACC [American Craft Council]. But there are this sort of elite, I don't know, call it shooting star or comet. And then there's this whole big trail behind it of people making things—needlepointing and—just because they like the activity, like my mother needlepoints. She's 93 and still does needlepoint.

MR. COOKE: Still staying busy.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. It activates something and—

MR. COOKE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. SIMPSON: That's the only other thing I could think of at the moment.

MR. COOKE: Over your different interviews you've really talked about some of those changes. Obviously it's a change that is not necessarily perfect, and the idea is that it will continue to—people will be more informed, educated—consumers, purchasers, as well as the continuation of various ideas among makers.

MR. SIMPSON: Well, years ago, the object was the important thing, and then the more it becomes sophisticated and a business, stuff becomes more personality-driven.

MR. COOKE: Yeah, which is interesting.

MR. SIMPSON: You have to have a personality to go with your work, otherwise they're not going to take you—because they like the entertainment of who you are.

MR. COOKE: The idea of the humanity as the maker was big in the '60s, that this was somebody who consciously chose to drop out, so it was the idea of the personal act. And then through into the '70s you got this period of the object. And now it is the personality—it's not enough to be a living person and to try to buy a piece because of a connection to what they were doing with it. The person has to project their personality into the marketplace—

MR. SIMPSON: Right, yeah.

MR. COOKE: —marketing their reputation, in some respects.

MR. SIMPSON: That's when you get to New York and the art world—it's like *People* magazine and *Who's Who*—

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: —and the work is secondary, usually. But that's the way it's built on. That's where they—

MR. COOKE: I'm curious to see what happens next, how long this plays out.

MR. SIMPSON: I think it will go for—because if I make it and it's the thing, this one piece that involves me and the thing, if I become a personality, that involves lots of people.

MR. COOKE: Right. That's true. It's a growth business. [Laughs.] So it's handlers and PR people.

MR. SIMPSON: Yeah. They’re going to want to do that, because then eight people are involved.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: A PR person, the gallery—it gives people occupations and jobs and something to think about. So that’s what they want to happen.

MR. COOKE: Right.

MR. SIMPSON: Otherwise, it eliminates them. Years ago you could go to a museum—I’d have a show and it would be some little museum, the Ella Sharp Museum. It would say, Tommy Simpson has new works, curated by Bill Johnson. And now it’s, Bill Johnson presents Tommy Simpson.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: It just flip-flopped the last—it seems to me it’s changed in the last 40 years.

MR. COOKE: Yeah.

MR. SIMPSON: Which is okay, but it just shows you the way it’s altered itself, because one is show business and the other one is just interesting things to look at.

MR. COOKE: Right.

Good. Thank you very much.

MR. SIMPSON: Yes. Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]