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Oral history interview with Dennis Adams, 2009 April 24-May 15

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Dennis Adams on April 24 – May 15, 2009. The interview took place at Adams's home and studio in New York, New York, and was conducted by Avis Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's U.S. General Service Administration, Design Excellence and the Arts oral history project.

Dennis Adams and Avis Berman reviewed the transcript in 2021. Their 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

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman interviewing Dennis Adams for the Archives of American Art GSA Oral History Project, on April 24, 2009, in his loft in Manhattan.

And I begin this way with everyone: Would you please state your full name and date of birth.

DENNIS ADAMS: Dennis Paul Adams, November 15, 1948.

AVIS BERMAN: Thank you. And you grew up—you were born and grew up in Des Moines, Iowa?

DENNIS ADAMS: I was born and grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And what kind of family were you—what were the family dynamics? What kind of a household was it?

DENNIS ADAMS: Parents divorced when I was about three, and I grew up—I had two older sisters but was principally raised by my mother and the younger of my two sisters. The other one was older and married and left when I was very young. So I grew up in a house of women.

AVIS BERMAN: And so the two—so the eldest sister, there was a great age difference then?

DENNIS ADAMS: Eighteen years difference between me and my older sister; nine years difference between me and my younger sister.

AVIS BERMAN: And what were your sisters' names?

DENNIS ADAMS: Nancy and Patricia: Nancy being the youngest, Patricia the oldest.

AVIS BERMAN: And your mother's name?

DENNIS ADAMS: My mother's name was Stella Vernita.

AVIS BERMAN: How would you spell—? V-E-R—?

DENNIS ADAMS: N-I-T-A. Sometimes pronounced Verneeta.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. And that was her maiden name?

DENNIS ADAMS: No.

AVIS BERMAN: That was her middle name.

DENNIS ADAMS: That was her middle name. But she went by Vernita. But it was her middle name. It's quite beautiful.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, it is. Yes. The only other person I've ever met who had that name was an artist here, Vernita Nemec.

DENNIS ADAMS: I've met her.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Now so your mother had to fend for herself or did she have to support you or what was—?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, she didn't support me—I mean, she did support me.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, she was a single mom.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, she was a single mom. But my mother did not work. There was some money probably coming in from my father and money that she'd gotten during the divorce from my father. I saw my father about once a year throughout my teen years.

AVIS BERMAN: Were you ever close to your father?

DENNIS ADAMS: Fascinated with him. He was a gangster type. He was colorful. He was everything I wanted to be identified with. But for me my father was not the—he was the other. And I felt much closer—and I've always felt closer—to women in all regards. I'm comfortable with women because I was raised by them, I guess.

AVIS BERMAN: So your father was sort of—had the glamour of also not being around, not being the disciplinarian. And the glamour of probably being the transgressive?

DENNIS ADAMS: The transgressive, absolutely. He was transgressive, I think, on every front. And I love that. And it was also my way out of Des Moines, Iowa, because he was—you know, he lived in different places. And when I did go to see him, there was always travel involved, and that dislocation I think was very important for me. I would never want to come from a whole family.

AVIS BERMAN: Now that's a fascinating—Of course, you never had one, so that was your childhood anyway.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But why do you say that? Because you feel being from a divorced family offered wider opportunities?

DENNIS ADAMS: Absolutely. You know, Al Gore talked a little bit about this—not that I identify with Al Gore. He'd be the last person I could probably identify with. [Berman laughs.] But I liked very much that he was talking about that displacement from his life back in Tennessee and his life in Washington [D.C.] because his father was a senator. And he spoke a little bit about that in relation to his own existential identity. You know, that displacement—where, you're able from the time you're young to see yourself and to see your surroundings, and I think to conceptualize the world more through this displacement.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And step outside. And then when you come back, you're watching it, you're observing it.

DENNIS ADAMS: You're absolutely watching it when you come back. And I'm a melancholy kind of person that watches and observes. And it's probably rooted in that from my childhood.

AVIS BERMAN: Where were some of the places your father lived?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, originally he was—he was always around water. So it started with little lakes around Iowa. And eventually spiraled into lakes in Illinois. And then spiraled out—and he ended up living in Florida. So he was always around water.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that also would've been pleasant if you're from a landlocked state as well.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. Exactly.

AVIS BERMAN: And if you're from a cold winter state, Florida would have been just fine.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: On spring break or wherever. Now, this is a semi ridiculous question because Adams is a common name, but do you go back to the New England Adams Family at all to your knowledge?

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, I think—

AVIS BERMAN: Hi! Let's just pause this. [Audio break.] I was asking you if you were from the famous New England Adams Family—if you knew that at all.

DENNIS ADAMS: That's possible. I think maybe—I don't really know.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. I just have to ask. Did you have any contact, did you know either set of grandparents?

DENNIS ADAMS: I knew—well, I knew my mother's father and my mother's mother. And I knew my father's mother. And I never knew my father's father. I suspect he might have been Native American or part Native American. There's a little bit of a blackout on that story. More than a blackout. Basically there's no photographs, no record, no mention for the most part, even as a child when I inquired. And my father—it's a guess; I never really and totally researched it—my father looked Native American. I don't at all, I don't think. But, you know, it's romantic speculation. But, you know, I think it's probably the case. I mean, [laughs] my father really looked Native American.

AVIS BERMAN: And do you think he was subjected to prejudice just on his looks?

DENNIS ADAMS: He said he was. Although he never mentioned being mistaken for or mistaken or identified as a Native American, he had mentioned to me that he had been mistaken for a Black man on numerous occasions, especially when he went south. But maybe he only mentioned that two or three times to me.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. So as you say, that plus the blackout, it does sound as if there were something—

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. There was something going on there. We can only hope so.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. I was going to say now that you would value and want to claim. And that was probably—was that something you could ever find out as you grew up?

DENNIS ADAMS: I'm the kind of person that could be very interested in a story like that because my work deals with research.

AVIS BERMAN: Exactly. And things that—

DENNIS ADAMS: But I fear it a little bit, not what I would find out, that I would get too much in it, it would consume too much time. And I don't think I have enough time left—I have so many things I want to do. But maybe when I get older, I'll get into it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. Or someone in the family. No, because it's perfect because it's

about making the invisible or supposedly the shame or the unjust visible. So, more than usual, to have it within your own family. But that again, that whole idea does feed into the mix of what you have done later on.

DENNIS ADAMS: And artists are responsible to invent their biography. I don't really believe in genealogy. I mean, if you pick up a book and you read something and you find something in it, you're related to that person, no? That's your father and your mother really at the end of the day. So I'm always looking for that larger family out there. And probably was always disappointed in many ways with my native family. I woke up in the wrong fucking place. I was born in Des Moines, Iowa. That's in the middle of goddamn nowhere. Okay?

AVIS BERMAN: And were they all from Des Moines themselves?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, my mother, I think, was born in Colorado. My father came from Kansas City. My mother was, from what I know, my mother was the daughter of a housemaid. And my father, from what I know, grew up homeless on the streets of Kansas City. He was—I think a grandmother had—he'd been left with a grandmother, and she passed away. And in those days I guess, boys just took to the streets like in Brazil. And so he was a pretty tough character.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, especially then during the Depression. All of those things that you tell me make me think he was either Native American or part African American, something.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: Because he was so left to fend for himself.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's for sure. And, yes. But he met my mother in Des Moines, Iowa; that I do know. And that was actually—my parents went to Chicago. They eloped to Chicago, and they were around 18 years old. Something like that. And I did do a little bit of research when I was in Chicago on a project once about that. And I found out where they lived. And they lived there for about three years. They rode the rails into Chicago. They were that poor. I think the rails are the axles under the train. My mother said that to me, I said, "Jesus Christ! I mean, what about the boxcars in movies? Wouldn't that have been more comfortable?" And she said, "No. Your dad had me on the rails." And I'm a little—I don't know exactly what that means completely, but I think it's the axles.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that poor, that young, that brave, they thought they were immortal. They got married that young, so it probably was, it was hormones and a mistake of youth. I guess it lasted a while before they were divorced.

DENNIS ADAMS: They were married over 20 years. So, yeah, it did.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, when you—what kind of a kid were you?

DENNIS ADAMS: I was a mama's boy. I was fortunate enough that my mother married a very violent alcoholic, at age 11. And this helped me grow up a lot.

AVIS BERMAN: This is your mother's second husband.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. It's hard to believe that all these things that are dark for most people I love. I always—anytime you could get another character into the house, it was good. I had been saturated by women up to the age of 11. My mother was older when she had me; she was in menopause. So she was—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, not quite.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, no, not when she had me. Right.

AVIS BERMAN: But afterwards.

DENNIS ADAMS: But from the time I can remember, she was always hysterical in menopause, and I had a sister who was very beautiful. I think she was the most beautiful girl in town. And of course she was coming out sexually as my mother was going the other way.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: And I was caught in the goddamn crap crossfire of these two women. And it was intense, and they fought like cats and dogs. They were in opposition in their sexual moments in their lives. So it was a relief when my mother married this horrible, violent alcoholic just because, again, he was a very, you know, traditional and—traditional not interesting masculinity. But let's say of the ready-made type.

AVIS BERMAN: The domineering. Now was his name Adams?

DENNIS ADAMS: No. His name was not Adams. I never took his name. His name was MacGregor.

AVIS BERMAN: And so this came into the house.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, there was still a lot of growing-up probably that I did around that—at that point, having two—I think probably in my youth I was always looking for men to identify with. And of course there wasn't much in Des Moines. Everybody was a war veteran, I remember. And I would meet the fathers of boys, you know, from the hometown, and I think I became prejudiced against men because they weren't, for the most part, very interesting. Or they never seemed as interesting as my father anyway. So I began to think that my father was effeminate because he was more interesting. And these other guys represented some kind of masculinity. That was probably my take at around age eight or nine.

AVIS BERMAN: Plus those guys, that generation, they never talked much anyway.

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh!

AVIS BERMAN: If anything.

DENNIS ADAMS: No. And they always had their feet up on these footstools in the house. They never moved, and they never said a word. And they never had a fucking idea. Whether they worked for the Ford Motor plant or whatever the hell they did. It was pretty debased, yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: And were you drawing or looking at things by then? I mean—

DENNIS ADAMS: I was obsessed from a very early age with drawing. My sisters tell me that it was really an obsession very, very early. And of course I remember a lot of it. But they have reiterated that that was in fact true. And I've probably not made a big enough case for it. They said I was always with sketchbooks from the time they could remember.

AVIS BERMAN: So that would've been four, five, or six with some sort of pad or pencil?

DENNIS ADAMS: I think it started around age three. I became obsessed with drawing, and I loved to make images.

AVIS BERMAN: And were you drawing people or animals or what—I mean, do you remember what sorts of things interested you?

DENNIS ADAMS: The only thing I can remember is being fascinated as a child with some kind of Mexican get-up. Some kind of a Mexican in an outfit that was very colorful. And I have a drawing of that around age three. But there was a lot of probably, you know, fantasy [inaudible]. There was a lot of cowboys and Indians type of stuff going on. But it became serious as I got older. That was—I had a lot of hobbies. I'm a dilettante. I was interested in everything as a kid. Everything! Except the drawing was the only consistent thing. Everything else would drop away.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, and were you encouraged to draw?

DENNIS ADAMS: No. I would say I was not discouraged from drawing. But I was, you know, it was something I did on my own. But I must admit as I got older, my mother accommodated that in certain ways.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, how about in school? Were there any teachers that thought you had ability or talent and encouraged it?

DENNIS ADAMS: I don't remember much. I remember drawing mostly through school because I didn't—I never really liked school at all. So I mostly drew pictures from, I think, first grade through my senior year in high school; I simply drew. It's too bad because as I got

older, I had a real interest in literature and other things. There were no books in my home. I never saw people—I never saw people read as part of their upbringing. I mean, I associated books with school, and I didn't like school. But I became a voracious reader, of course, by probably around the age of 17 or 18. But I'm always playing catch-up.

AVIS BERMAN: And was there anyone that you met who did read who you saw as a model or anything there?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, I had a—there was a story that my great-grandfather had been extremely well-read. They made fun of him a little bit. And of course he had died I think in the 1940s sometime. But that the entire house had been filled with books. And I held onto that story. It was important to me. Whether it's true or not, I don't really know. I'm assuming it is true, but they said he had thousands and thousands of books in the house. And was a kind of self-taught scholar. And then other than that it was quite frankly—all these debased families that I grew up with, it seemed like, there was no culture, nothing anywhere, with the exception of a Jewish family or two in Des Moines that I gravitated to in my youth because I think by age six or seven, I realized that those kids were being raised better. And, you know, I think my whole life I craved being Jewish, from the day I was six. Maybe I am Jewish somewhere. I mean, the first time I went into a Jewish home, I thought, oh, it's so strange. I mean, everything seems strange. But I couldn't believe the attention the children got. And there were books in the house and things. And that made a big impression on me. It didn't matter that the father only ran—owned—a camera store or something. It didn't matter. The father was totally committed to the children's education. And the mother, too. You know, they would—they didn't just yell go do your homework. They said, "Here, let's do your homework—we'll do it together." Right? So that made an enormous impression on me.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Whether all Jewish families or not. You saw a couple of them—but the books. But, yes, the emphasis on education and encouragement.

DENNIS ADAMS: At least in the first Jewish families I encountered. That held up over the course of my life. I'm sorry. I'm going to counter that. I always ran into good Jewish families. I fell in love with some wonderful Jewish women along the way—probably for their families. So I was fortunate enough to only have been exposed to the best of Jewish families my whole life. And I don't know why. There may be some white trash Jewish families, but I never encountered them.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Well, I have to say it's true. A friend of mine who's Irish Catholic said that the reason he got such a good education, because his father was illiterate, and they lived in a Jewish neighborhood. And his mother saw what was happening. And she read that—she modeled herself on that. And that's why he got out of the—his father was an illiterate longshoreman. And that's why he went on to get a Ph.D.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: So it's true. It's one of those clichés that has a very large kernel of truth to it, is there's a great premium on education. And there usually is a close family life.

DENNIS ADAMS: Close family life. And just a—what I would witness is a great deal of care. Now I know there's a lot of neurosis that comes from that. But that's also exciting because it's nuanced, that neurosis. You see, I knew physical violence in the house. But to understand real family dynamics where people were talking, you know, and probably doing damaging psychological things to one another was fascinating for me.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it's true because you do talk about it. It makes you articulate if nothing else.

DENNIS ADAMS: Sure. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: So that's certainly—it's certainly true. But somehow, though, as a child you did study painting and drawing at the Des Moines Art Center. How did that happen?

DENNIS ADAMS: I think because I was obsessed with drawing, my mother just one day took me over there. But I lived near there, and there's a beautiful little park there, Greenwood Park, that I used to play in as a boy. So it was natural for me to just wander in there. And I loved that place. I was alone there. There was nobody else interested in art for the most part. I mean, there were Saturday classes and all the stupid little things they do. But you

would be alone in that museum. And today I've been back once or twice, almost never, but you could shoot a cannon through there. Nobody's in there. So it's just you with the paintings. And so I had a—and even though they were mostly second-rate works—quite honestly it's just but 100 percent second-rate works—nevertheless they were masterpieces for me. And they always will be masterpieces.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I think the whole building, as you say, represents again the other for you or a different kind of life in which you could be yourself or the person you needed to be. Do you remember if there were any works of art that you embraced the most or meant something to you there?

DENNIS ADAMS: In my mind I could probably do a walk-through and come up with many. But there were certain—there was a landscape by Courbet and I think in my mind it stays as a very important painting to me. It had a—I don't know. I think it had qualities. I've seen it since, and I think I was correct. There's a Goya in the collection that is literally terrible. I could make a painting better than that Goya at age 13. I can't even believe it's Goya. It's a terrible painting, and I knew it as a child. There's a beautiful little Renoir that—And other things. It was the first time I'd seen abstract paintings. There was a Ray Parker there, which was a challenge because it was simply two dots, as I remember. It's a kind of—or two blobs, like a pink and an orange blob. I loved the manifesto quality of something like that. There were a lot of—kinds of manifesto type sort of abstract works that I saw as a child that I was impressed with. And they got me thinking. And there was a library there. And I went in, and I read everything I could. Of course, like all little boys, I was very interested in Winslow Homer and later Edward Hopper and things, you know, like that. But, yes. But I was also studying and conceptualizing those paintings. I found drawings I did in my youth where I was filling in the names of colors in relation to form. I think I was working very, very hard. [Laughs] I don't remember it completely, but I was working at it. Okay.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you have the true artist as disposition, at school. I mean, you didn't do the things—you didn't pay attention—to the things you weren't interested in. And everything you were interested in, you went into very deeply.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And—

DENNIS ADAMS: But it's unfortunate I think, I had no good—I didn't have good teachers really. I think because I was somebody that—not that I'm an intellectual; to say one is an intellectual, that's, my God, what the hell does that mean? That's such an important thing to be. I wish—I've been struggling to be an intellectual my whole life—and I wish that had been cultivated in my youth by better teachers. I put a lot of stake in teaching at this moment in my life, I think, because of that, you know. It's important that people be exposed. You know, I was exposed to a bunch of losers basically that didn't know their subject well, had no passion for it, I think, for the most part. You know, that's the way public schools were, I guess—or are.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, just—what were the ages that you were studying at the art center?

DENNIS ADAMS: I don't remember the first time I went in there—probably at around age, certainly by the age of ten, I had been in there on some level. No, probably eight actually in some kind of little class. But then there were other things that happened beyond the Des Moines Art Center. My mother put me—there was a painter in town who was from Eastern Europe that did realistic painting.

AVIS BERMAN: Was that Jules Kirschenbaum?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, it was not. This was before Jules Kirschenbaum. His name was Dimitar; and I believe the name was like Dimitar Krustev or something like that. We could find this out. And he was—he had been trained in the old academic traditions. And I went there, and I studied life drawing with him maybe at around the age of 12. And he was a disciplinarian. He was also extremely handsome. All the nude models were in love with him. He was—I was impressed with his flair, his femininity, and his masculinity, his complexity. He was a rogue, and I loved him somehow. And he seemed to have passion, right? Of course eventually I would grow out of his passions. But I loved him a little bit in my youth.

AVIS BERMAN: How did you feel, [about] the chance to do life drawing? I mean, before you

go wow! This is a nude. Before you, kind of, get used to it. Or did you get used to it because you were 12?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, it's always difficult when you're a 12-year-old boy and your sexuality's budding and you're drawing nude models. But I made that jump real quick. I wanted to learn to draw. And this man, I remember him, I have a memory of him, and I'm around age 12, and he's lecturing me about reflective light, highlight, shadow, cast shadow. And he was lecturing me to such a degree that nobody'd ever talked to me like that. He talked to me—I mean, he talked down to me a little bit. I mean, he scolded me about those things. And I remember I teared up. And I thought, wow, this guy really knows a lot. It was a great moment. It was an epiphany for me.

AVIS BERMAN: Even though he may have been scolding you, on the other hand, he was treating you professionally.

DENNIS ADAMS: He was treating me professionally, yes. It was a great moment. And I probably hung around there for, you know, maybe, I don't know, maybe two or three years. I hung around that guy. I even traveled with him a little bit because he took some of the students. And I was the only, I think, young student as I remember that. The rest were, you know, older women that were just terrible artists and went back to study, you know, because he was handsome, and they wanted something to do on a Saturday probably.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: Although there was one or two of them that were—they treated me very sweetly; I have nice memories of them. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: When did you start thinking, I've got to get out of here?

DENNIS ADAMS: I think almost from the time I was born. [Laughs] I think I woke up in the wrong place. I often thought a lot about feeling a little bit displaced, like where the hell am I? What kind of family is this, and who are these people? And so, I'd cling to any kind of—When I was very little, I'd cling to tropical legends because that was the farthest away you could get. But slowly those tropical legends became urban legends. I don't know how I made that shift. Maybe it wasn't until I saw *West Side Story* [1961] as a teenager that I really realized I could give over all the tropical legends—I loved the Puerto Ricans—for the urban legend.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I don't know. Maybe also you realized most art is made in urban areas. I mean, someone might move out to do a landscape.

DENNIS ADAMS: I mean, I probably realized that by the time I was a teenager, but not as a child.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, you went to Drake [University, Des Moines, IA]. Did you have to go there for financial reasons or because your grades were bad? I mean, only because it was there.

DENNIS ADAMS: I had aspirations to go to the Kansas City Art Institute [Kansas City, MO]. And my senior year my girlfriend popped up pregnant. And, you know, all bets were off. We hooked up—were married briefly. And we had a child in Des Moines, and I had no option but to go to school locally. And I did so. There was a man who taught there by the name of Jules Kirschenbaum that I became close with; although I knew him already when I was about 15. I met him at the Des Moines Art Center. And this man was an enormous influence on me because he was—and he passed away a few years ago. But he was a Magic Realist, and he—I remember, I must have been about 15, I was invited to his home. And the entire home was, the entire house was, seemed to be studio. He had this enormous house, and it was all—It was the first time I realized that one didn't have to have a sofa. Or maybe there was a sofa somewhere, but it was all—the whole world was given over to art production. And that made an enormous impression on me. He talked like a saint. He was incredibly rigorous, and he—and to this day, I know the work well because I recently looked at a retrospective catalog of his—he was somebody that tried to incorporate everything he knew, thought about and dreamed of in each work that he made. So if he was reading something at that moment in his life, it would be incorporated in that painting in terms of text. It was exactly what you would tell students not to do, you know.

He was dense. He was—he created these massive compositions of information. Rigorously

intellectual. And profoundly an artist. Whether you like the work or not, it doesn't matter. He was a great role model. And I carry a lot of that man in me today somehow. To my detriment. Because all the things that I learned from him, you have to be a genius to do those things. And I'm not. You would have to be James Joyce to do what he wanted to do, you know. And I've struggled with that my whole life, you know. He laid a trip on me that was so fucking heavy, and we know today you can do very slight things, you know. I wouldn't want to—You know, one can construct their life like Chuck Close, but that would be tragic.

AVIS BERMAN: You can go for the Joyce model. But then you can go for the [Samuel] Beckett model, too.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, Beckett—although it is a great love of mine, of course.

AVIS BERMAN: I could see it in the work. I definitely see it.

DENNIS ADAMS: But what I want to leave with here is that this was a man who I came away from understanding that art was totally integrated with life; that it was serious business; and it was not just making things. It was intellectual business. And it was about enlightenment. Okay? It has nothing to do with just having some fucking exhibition and making a group of pieces. But it has to do with a total enlightenment of the human spirit. And it's a process. And he left me with that. The thing is that in the end he was more honest with that than I was. I think he performed it better than I did. Meaning that for me it was—I always had to struggle against that a little bit, that thing that he gave me. And I was probably somewhere—I was someone else under that. But nevertheless, that mask is there, and I live with it.

AVIS BERMAN: But you don't know what he struggled against. He may have had—

DENNIS ADAMS: He had his own demons.

AVIS BERMAN: His own what he was or wasn't.

DENNIS ADAMS: But he was a more honest character than I am. I'm a little more of a dilettante. I'm a little more of a—I'm a—I can't be domesticated the way he could. He was a man that allowed himself to be domesticated around his fucking ideas. I create a scandal around myself, and I always want to leave, become something else. Struggle in another place. I'm more transient.

AVIS BERMAN: And again, we don't know him. But you have a sense of consciousness that—But that makes you, all that you are telling me, what makes you an artist, I think. That sense of discontent.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Restlessness. Whatever we're talking about.

DENNIS ADAMS: And melancholy, which I hate. I was given the spirit of melancholy. I come out of the tradition of maybe a little bit of Edgar Alan Poe or a little bit of André Breton, I realize as I've gotten older that I'm connected to the Surrealist spirit and the whole birth of modernity, and the whole moment of modernity around the development of that spirit. And I curse that in many ways; it's a curse. I should have been born earlier perhaps. I'm a little bit out of sync with my time. I'm a little bit of probably a leftover from another kind of thinking. Maybe, I'm a 19th century man.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I think you're someone who—maybe you're like Maholy-Nagy or want to be, because he could operate freely in so many sorts of [inaudible] back and forth.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And I don't know if that's—or do you feel you're melancholy because you're falling short of in what you want to do?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, melancholy because I feel, as I get older, that I've—while I'm interested in so many things, I think I'm more of an auteur than I realized. I think, I only have one story to tell. And I think, it's a very personal and limited story. In the way that Alfred Hitchcock had one story to tell. You know? He just told the story about a blonde over and over again. And I sense that in myself sometimes. So even though my work has been expansive, it's been public, it's been social, I've worked all over the world, I've related, you know, to different

contexts, I think behind all that there's been a very, very personal vision. And I think that connects to a kind of melancholy perspective.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I don't know if you'd ever call Duchamp melancholy, but he always said, you know, an artist just has—if you're lucky you have one or two good ideas, and then you start repeating yourself. So how much you want to live with that is the question.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right, right.

AVIS BERMAN: And I don't think it's—but if the idea's big enough, you're permuting it.

DENNIS ADAMS: But the difference is Duchamp was an aristocrat; and so was, even though Breton was born as a kind of middle-class kid, he was also an aristocrat. I'm not an aristocrat. I'm more generous than either one of those characters. And I would separate myself from them. I was fascinated with Duchamp when I was young, but today his aristocratic following bores me a little bit, even though I learned a lot. Maybe I'm a little more fascinated with Breton.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I'm going to move us back to Drake.

DENNIS ADAMS: [Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: So you studied painting, drawing.

DENNIS ADAMS: I studied painting and drawing and worked principally with Jules Kirschenbaum. Of course, there were other characters I ran into there, and some lovely figures. And mostly I started to run into three or four people that, you know, that at least had some intensity. You know, because I was—you know, as a child growing up, I always felt I was inadequate. And then once I got older, I realized I'm just in another place. And as I get older, I realize that now I've turned 60 that I'm—I think, I was too hard on myself. I think I was—and I don't mean this egotistically, just truthfully in terms of evaluation—I think I was smarter and more aware than most of the people I was growing up around, you know, in the environment I was in. So anyway, going back to Drake though, this moment of linking up with some like figures for the first time, even in some kind of maybe miniature form, whatever that was, I loved that.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you didn't feel you were alone.

DENNIS ADAMS: I didn't feel I was alone for the first time.

AVIS BERMAN: Or a mutant.

DENNIS ADAMS: Or a mutant. My trouble is as a kid I-wanting to hook up with people intellectually and poetically, I would hook up with the criminal element. I got into a lot of trouble as a kid. I was kind of a bad boy because I sensed in the transgressiveness in the kind of criminal elements, that there was—I mean, I never would say this—but there was a kind of poetics to them that attracted me. And later I realized, jeez, you can be a criminal artist. You don't have to be a real criminal. [They laugh.]

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Yes. Absolutely. But you escaped—you stopped being a juvenile delinquent or whatever—or hooligan or whatever you were.

DENNIS ADAMS: A hooligan, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Or just a little bit, you know, a troublemaker.

DENNIS ADAMS: And found like characters. And those were lovely and very important first encounters.

AVIS BERMAN: Would that have been people like [Esteban] Vicente or Stephen Greene or—

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, those people were—No, those were teachers.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: Those were all teachers.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: But they were important figures. And Stephen Greene was a very, very important figure for me. I studied briefly with Jimmy Ernst as well, and others. But Stephen Greene, I probably met him in around age 18 or something like that. He came to Des Moines. And again, my identification with Jewish men. I loved him. Kirschenbaum, as well. That was important. They had been raised correctly, I always thought, and I hadn't. But he was a wild guy, this Stephen Greene. He was a poet himself, a Symbolist painter. But he was spunky. He hated what he did. And he always projected a bigger idea about creating a manifesto that young people should really, really kick ass and do something above and beyond their own limitations—what he used to call "your own myths." Get out of your own myths. And he was an enormous influence on me. He also said very tough things, frightening things to me about my talent or my lack of talent. And he was very challenging, and he was lovely. And I kept in contact with him until he died. A very important figure. He'd been a teacher of Frank Stella. I'd be anxious to hear what Stella has to say about him.

AVIS BERMAN: At Princeton you mean?

DENNIS ADAMS: I didn't meet him at Princeton. I met him in Iowa.

AVIS BERMAN: No, no.

DENNIS ADAMS: No, Stella studied with him at Princeton.

AVIS BERMAN: At Princeton, right.

DENNIS ADAMS: And Philip Guston had been his teacher. But he was lovely, but he was also a great draftsman. And I remember—well, maybe these stories don't matter—but, you know, there're epiphanies you have. It's like, he was a buffoon, Stephen Greene. He kind of fell over his own feet. He was socially awkward. He was a curious—the other students used to laugh at him a lot. And then one day I went to his home. He lived in Valley Cottage, New York. And inside of his home he seemed to be some kind of a prince. I realized he was a monster in his own home, a wonderful—he became a genius in his own home. It was the first time I understood what a home could mean to somebody, where somebody could have a split personality between. And I sensed when he was there near his studio and his things, he was a genius. And outside of that he had no hold on the world; he was lost. And therefore he might, you know—He was always—He loved Frank Stella. He loved what Frank Stella had become. He loved this idea of—but he was so in opposition to those things. And I think when he went back to his studio, he would probably spit on all of that. He was a divided man, and I love that.

AVIS BERMAN: You can like work that's very different from your own.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: So I should say—

DENNIS ADAMS: But he emulated it in some ways. He knew in the real world he had to be like Frank Stella. You knew you couldn't be like him. But somewhere—he was a real artist. He was an artist's artist. And he was serious. And I don't know.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I have some letters. We corresponded on something many years ago. He was lovely in that. You know, beautiful letters, too.

DENNIS ADAMS: Beautiful letters.

AVIS BERMAN: Here was someone who was pretty much a stranger asking, you know, if—He sent back full, articulate letters. He took time.

DENNIS ADAMS: He took time, yes. And I remember I used to drive him in my car to the Commodore Hotel in Des Moines. And we would have wonderful talks. And when I came east, he was the one that basically took care of me, made sure I got into graduate school. I mean, he was kind of there for me. He did a lot.

AVIS BERMAN: So when you were saying "other like characters," you meant other students that you—

DENNIS ADAMS: They were other students at the time.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: You know, just it was nice to meet people for the first time that were my age and that I shared an interest.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And that had an intensity for some of the same subjects.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: So you—so Stephen Greene got you to Tyler [School of Art], is that correct?

DENNIS ADAMS: He did. He did, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Were there any other schools? I mean, you had decided you wanted to go on and be an artist and get an M.F.A.. Or was that his idea or yours? In other words, how did—

DENNIS ADAMS: I don't remember. I don't think I knew what the hell an M.F.A. was. He just said, he said, "I'm about to leave Princeton. Why don't you come with me?"

AVIS BERMAN: And he went to Tyler?

DENNIS ADAMS: And he went to Tyler exactly at that moment. And he said, "I'll bring you there." And I thought at the time, well, I should keep my options open. So I applied to other places, and I think I got into just about every place with my work. Even Yale, as I remember. But he—I had money, and, you know, he made sure I had money there, I don't know, a teaching assistantship [inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: So you were—you were unmarried by then, by the time you got there?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, I came there with—she was briefly there. But that marriage dissolved probably around age 20, something like that. Yes. But we were together two or three years, and we have—I have a child from that marriage who I still see. I'm still in contact with him.

AVIS BERMAN: And what is his name?

DENNIS ADAMS: His name is Todd.

AVIS BERMAN: So you were—so this—was this your first time on the East Coast?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, it was not my first time, but just about my first time on the East Coast. I hitchhiked. The first time I really came—the first time I'd ever seen New York City, I left on December 2, 1968, and I hitchhiked to New York City with 25 bucks in my pocket.

AVIS BERMAN: And when you say—I mean, what did you do? What did you think? Where did you go?

DENNIS ADAMS: I only knew the Museum of Modern Art. I went to see a Francis Bacon show. I went to MoMA, and I went to Tiffany's because of Audrey Hepburn. You know, we had a few iconic moments in Iowa that, you know, would've been passed on to me at some point. So I replicated what I knew. And then I was kind of [inaudible], and I just—you know, I spent some time in the city, and, you know, I was living in Central Park, and it was pretty grim.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Especially in the wintertime.

DENNIS ADAMS: It was stupid of me to have done that. I just had a light jacket. I did it on a dare one night at a bar. I left in the middle of the night. And I got out on I-80 in a snowstorm and hitchhiked east. That was the first time I saw New York. I came in through the Holland Tunnel. And I loved everything I saw. Yes. Nineteen. I wish I had a photograph of that. I don't have one.

AVIS BERMAN: No. Well, you probably—well, you wouldn't have been exactly carrying around a camera in the bar in the middle of the night anyway.

DENNIS ADAMS: No. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: So you got to Tyler, and Philadelphia was—

DENNIS ADAMS: I actually got to Tyler in Philadelphia, and I studied there with Stephen Greene and also with David Pease and Italo Scanga, among others. But those three figures were important to me in different ways.

AVIS BERMAN: You would've arrived as a painting student then.

DENNIS ADAMS: I was a painting student.

AVIS BERMAN: And when you left, what was your work like? Or what kind of work were you—

DENNIS ADAMS: I was thinking of abstract paintings primarily. Clear and simple: abstract paintings. Yes, that's probably what I got accepted with. And of course I continued to study with Stephen there. But I almost no sooner got to Philadelphia than I got involved in Duchamp. Of course the collection is there.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right.

DENNIS ADAMS: I was transformed. Also, Italo Scanga. I don't know if you know this character. But he was—he'd been Bruce Nauman's teacher. He was probably making the best work of his own life during that moment. And there was a lot of energy around him. He was a romantic figure, a little—maybe the closest thing we had to Joseph Beuys in those days. And he could be ruthlessly honest. He was sexually wild, this guy. In today's world, you know, the feminists would kill him. [They laugh.] He was of another order. He was like Harpo Marx chasing women around and things. But he was—he was brilliant. And he had a way with materials that was—And he knew people. People like Vito Acconci and Franz Erhard Walther and others. I can't remember exactly who. Maybe, Dan Graham. So I met a lot of—I met some people through him. He seemed connected to the New York avant-garde more than Stephen, who was connected to maybe an older avant-garde.

And then there was this character David Pease. And Pease, who later became the dean at Yale, he was a pop painter who did big research projects. And he had a whole other way of looking at the world. And I liked it very much because he did a painting of the Sharon Tate murder while I was there. And I thought, Oh, my God! I've never thought of something like that as the subject matter for a work of art. And he kept huge files, and he did clippings. He was a real—he was a Pop artist in the best sense. Not in the iconic sense, but in really doing a research project about emerging news and how that could be incorporated into a painting. And he was very well-spoken. He was very generous with his time, with his intellect, and I liked him very much. And he was an influence. Maybe he sparked a little bit of the research in me, although I didn't know it then.

AVIS BERMAN: What fascinated you about Duchamp at the time?

DENNIS ADAMS: Just how little there was of it. Because again, coming from where I'd come from, I thought art was a much bigger story than that and how he pared it all down. And of course there's a lot of density we know in Duchamp, intellectual density. But there were just a handful of artifacts that were there. And there was so much legacy built around it, and so much thinking that went into it. And of course maybe then again in *The Large Glass* [*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, 1915-23] I found this density that I—On the one hand, there's the ready-mades, which are very abbreviated. But then there's the density of *The Large Glass*. He talked in a way that I found in—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: —that I found probably in line with my own sensibilities to some degree. But Duchamp was in the air then. I can't take credit for Duchamp. Except, I was in Philadelphia.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. So that [inaudible]. But also Duchamp had just died recently, too.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. That's right.

AVIS BERMAN: So it wasn't—He had still been a presence.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. But, you know, other students were talking about him. The thing I did is the—by the time I got interested in him, I knew more about him than anybody, I think, in Philadelphia. Probably even the curators. I read everything. And I remember running off to Paris maybe at 20 and reading Octavio Paz's book on Marcel Duchamp [*Marcel Duchamp or*

The Castle of Purity, Octavio Paz; Cape Goliard Press, London in Association with Grossman Publishers, New York, 1970]. You know, I didn't even have a place to sleep. I think I was living in the back of a VW or something. And I remember reading that book; it was very impressive to hear one great man—I love books where one great man talks about another, or one great woman talks about another, although nothing comes to mind there. I'm sure there are things like that. But let's just say where one great artist talks about another.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: Like I was incredibly influenced by Sartre's book, on Genet, *Saint Genet, [Actor and Martyr*, translated from the French by Bernard Frechtman; New York, New American Library: 1963]. Because here is one just major historical figure talking about another major historical figure, you know. An homage from one to the other.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. You know, I don't know if he's your cup of tea, but it's just like when Henry James looks at another writer, when he talks about Hawthorne or something like that. But it is that—one's sensibility unpacking another in a different way.

DENNIS ADAMS: It's a beautiful story. I love when there's a crossover. And of course Octavio Paz really understood Duchamp's poetry; he was capable of understanding his poetry, beyond just his manifestos.

AVIS BERMAN: That's why some of the best art critics—I would say most of the best art criticism is always by another artist.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Because it also displays his own personality, too.

DENNIS ADAMS: I would agree, yes. A clash of sensibilities or coming together of sensibilities, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And probably Baudelaire was the greatest art critic.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. I love Baudelaire. One of my first works was called *A Box for Baudelaire*. I did it in Rome at age 20.

AVIS BERMAN: Was that a—When you say *A Box for Baudelaire*—

DENNIS ADAMS: It was just a little box that folded that has his name on it. It was a drawing.

AVIS BERMAN: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: And it was just called *A Box for Baudelaire*. It was a homage of sorts.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I don't want to get ahead of myself. But I see these—I see your Bus Shelters as enlarged boxes.

DENNIS ADAMS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVIS BERMAN: Especially when people sit in them. It's almost like a living diorama. I was going to ask you if you made boxes before that.

DENNIS ADAMS: No. Those were—no. But I had been—I was gravitating to—Again, you cannot take credit for ideas that belong to your generation. I emerged in a generation of Arte Povera, where so many people were interested in materials. And I got caught up in that spirit. People were interested in ideas and materials and were turning away from painting and things like that.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Yes, it was the times, the '70s, the dematerialization of the object. Minimalism—I mean, they made objects, but yet there was a distain for the object. And you were also meeting—if you met Acconci and Dan Graham, you were also meeting artists for whom art was not a painting with a heavy gold frame.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: As for most of your other generation. So you must have really begun—you

arrived as a painting student. And you began to maybe rethink what you wanted to do, or what an artist meant at that point at Tyler?

DENNIS ADAMS: Absolutely. And I remember being incredibly influenced by Franz Erhard Walther, who not only was a visiting artist, but he came and performed some of his work. This is a German artist from—I believe who is still alive—who teaches, a professor at Hamburg [University] today. Who did these beautiful social works around these very minimal forms that were for the most part nomadic. And there was a new time base to them. Everything—it had a social dimension. I didn't know what. I remember the other professors thinking it was bullshit and most of the students. And I sat there mesmerized. I thought, who is this young man? Young? He was probably eight years older than I was. And I thought, wow, there's something here. Although, it crept into my own sensibility probably slowly. It was an enormous influence on me—to see that first performance.

AVIS BERMAN: And how did your work begin to evolve when you were at Tyler in terms of—? I mean, would the—Tyler allow a non-painting—

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, yeah, it was totally open. Everything was explosive then. It was, you know, it was the end of the '60s, early '70s. So you could get away with anything and—and I always had a—people always liked me because I was a fair-haired boy from Iowa. I got away with murder, you know. I think I could totally fuck up, and people thought it was okay. It's just the luck of the draw. Some people are born handsome; some people are born with—You know, you're born with just a few things. But people, I think again, I kind of had a fair-haired-boy personality at that age that was—it was very useful. And it got me through my early years, although by age 30 I wanted to kill that. I wanted to kill it because I think it also held me back in a lot of ways. It was, you know, at one point you just—you want to shed things like that. But anyway it was operative for a while.

AVIS BERMAN: So was this when you began to study photography there?

DENNIS ADAMS: Did I study photography there? No. I don't really remember making photography there. It was mostly object-making and word pieces. It was also—I came in contact with two artists that I won't mention—or two or three artists I can mention that were—the two artists that were ahead of me at Tyler: There was a character by the name of Bill Beckley, conceptual artist.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: And an artist by the name of Ree Morton.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, of course.

DENNIS ADAMS: And both were very interesting figures. They were both—Beckley probably only a couple of years older than me; Ree was probably ten years. She had been married. She may have been 33 years old or something. She could have been 15 years older than me almost or something at that moment. But both of those figures probably have come a little bit under the spell of Italo Scanga. And were connected to New York in various ways. And both were making what I would call some very serious work, even at Tyler. And I was happy that they were there. They were intellectually modeled, and their work was expansive at that point. I don't want to say I was directly influenced; but I was happy they were there. And it was important because Ree was, maybe that was a moment—I mean, I wouldn't—I didn't think of it—You know, I shouldn't even say this. I can now in retrospect make some kind of feminist—create that as a kind of feminist moment in history.

But you know what? That's bullshit because I never had—It wasn't like that was the first time that—I had no trouble respecting her as an artist because she was a woman; even at that age and at that moment. I think maybe there were people, and I read in retrospect there were people like that. But it just seemed natural. She was a—And I'd also seen the work of Eva Hesse, right? And I knew the moment I'd seen that work that she was—she was important. That was the first time I'd ever understood scale in sculpture when I saw her work. I said I don't know what the hell I'm looking at here, but this person understands scale. But Ree Morton had a kind of magic to her. She was sexual, she was charming, she was fun. She used to loan me her car. I came to love everything about her actually. She was—she meant a lot to me.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, she also seemed free, I guess.

DENNIS ADAMS: She seemed free somehow. But I knew there was trauma in her background, too. I think she'd had a hard marriage to some Marine type. I don't know what it was. But I loved everything about her. Bill Beckley was more of a cryptic character, a real mystery figure. He used to drive a Bentley and carried all his work in his front seat. And he made little works on—that say like "imagine the Atlantic Ocean as little tombstones" and things. Lovely, little pieces. I run into him from time to time. I think he's a real artist's artist. I don't know exactly what he does today. But I'm sure it's important.

AVIS BERMAN: And while you were in Philadelphia, were you making trips up to New York?

DENNIS ADAMS: I did. I made trips to New York regularly.

AVIS BERMAN: And were you meeting people? I mean, were you getting involved with other artists? Was that possible for you then?

DENNIS ADAMS: A little bit through Italo Scanga; 112 Green Street, I've been up there.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, right, right. So that's—

DENNIS ADAMS: There was a little bit of that. But you have to remember I was younger than most of those people. I was—I think I was out of graduate school by age 21 or something. I went through the system very quickly. And I was—at that point in my life, I was always the youngest. And so I was a little bit shy; I was from the Midwest. And I always felt everyone knew more than me. And, you know, so I would've been maybe standing back a little bit, too, and watching.

AVIS BERMAN: So you got a teaching job when you graduated.

DENNIS ADAMS: I did. I taught at Temple University in Philadelphia.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, that's kind of interesting. I mean, seeing it was the '70s, you know, it was hard to get a job then in the arts. But I guess not for you.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, it wasn't hard because that was through Tyler, you know, being connected.

AVIS BERMAN: I see.

DENNIS ADAMS: Again, I was kind of the fair-haired boy there, and people liked me, and I had a little bit of gift for gab if I could get over my shyness. And I'd been a teaching assistant there, and I think I did a pretty good job of that. I remember the first day walking in the door of class. I arrived there, I was age—I think I'd just turned 20. I know I couldn't drink. And I was given my first freshman class I taught at age 20. And I didn't know what to do. You know, I didn't know what to say. I wasn't any older than those kids. They were 18. So I remember I went in, and then—

AVIS BERMAN: This was as a TA, as a teaching assistant?

DENNIS ADAMS: No.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, this is at Temple.

DENNIS ADAMS: In those days, no, no, no. A TA in those days, I was given my own freshman class. I was not assisting a professor. I should have been. That would have been the learning curve that they should have set up, but they didn't. They just threw me to the wolves. And I went out, and I watched—I remember leaving the class; I don't think I said a word to those kids. And I went and watched one of the older professors. And I went in and I sat in on his class to watch what he did. And this man was very generous. And he started at the beginning of the story, and he told everything he knew. And I thought what a great method that is! And I went back, and I told everything I knew. I didn't know much more than they knew. But I knew a little bit more. And I just started at the beginning. And that's how I teach today. And you know what? Most teachers today are not good teachers because they don't start at the beginning. They start in the middle. They're wrapped up in their own stories, you know. I tried to really go back and start—we know the beginning is an illusion. But at least try to get there somehow and tell the story from the beginning, middle and end. Then they'll learn it and make sense of it. Explain yourself, right?

AVIS BERMAN: So this was a lecture course you taught that first semester?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, no. It was a drawing course. But, you know, I lectured, I showed slides, I did everything. Took them on fieldtrips. Age 20, it was hard not to fall in love with the young women in the class.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: My God! They were beautiful. That's all I remember. The young men were beautiful, too, although I wasn't interested in young men. But—and I still run into a few of those characters out there.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you have—So in other words you had a number who were—who became serious artists?

DENNIS ADAMS: From Tyler, there were a few, yes. [Laughs] The only one I remember in the first class I ever taught was a young man by the name of Peter Wallach, who went on to be an animator. And he's the son of Eli Wallach.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh!

DENNIS ADAMS: And all I remember is one night going over—I remember one night going over with him to the dormitory, and we watched *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* with his dad in it. I didn't know people could have movie stars as parents.

AVIS BERMAN: Exactly.

DENNIS ADAMS: But, yes, I think they were good students.

AVIS BERMAN: And you were—and you actually had a show at this point in Philadelphia?

DENNIS ADAMS: I did a little show at the Philadelphia Art Alliance [1971].

AVIS BERMAN: But that must have been meaningful to you at the time.

DENNIS ADAMS: I was excited to do it at the time. I think it was a pretty terrible show. It was very conceptual, kind of Duchampian, a lot of text. And I don't know. It was silly. And there was an older woman [Edna Andrade —DA]—I wish I could remember her name—who taught at P.C.A. [Philadelphia College of Art —DA] And I was so scared. She came to help me install the work. She was a professor there, and she seemed to know a whole lot. I was very intimidated that I would make a mistake. [They laugh.] Under her eyes.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, at this point, are you thinking, in terms of these objects, about the relationship between the object or the artist and the viewer to the degree that it developed—I mean, when does this begin to really develop in your work, do you think?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, I don't think I thought that. At that point I was not thinking a lot about reception. And I think I—I don't know today that I think a lot about reception. Okay? I'm not a master of reception. I think I understand its history. I've studied it, and I know there are a lot of artists that were very much—heavily geared their work in relation to various kinds of reception. But that was not the case with me. The reason my work became public was simply because I was—I was very influenced by my personal perceptions of the street in relation to my thinking, like an old flâneur from the 19th century. The street for me was a free zone. And it still is. It's a place where I think through things.

AVIS BERMAN: And was that happening in Philadelphia?

DENNIS ADAMS: I think it did. It probably was always happening even in Des Moines. I just didn't know it. But certainly I had lived in Germantown [PA] a little bit, and I loved—I believe there were trolley cars. There were sounds I was hearing that I hadn't heard before, and there were more people on the street. And there were people of more races, I remember, than I grew up with. And I loved—I love this clash of different ethnicities. I love—the more voices, the more languages, the more of everything, I was interested in. And it helped me to think. And so—

AVIS BERMAN: And were you looking at advertising and media images at that point?

DENNIS ADAMS: I was. And I was probably more as part of the urban culture or the urban environment, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Was Warhol an artist you were interested in?

DENNIS ADAMS: I wish I'd been more interested in Warhol. I probably—I mean, I certainly would have known Warhol's work very well. But I don't think he was somebody I was emulating in any way.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. One can certainly say that Johns or Rauschenberg were Duchamp's heirs. But Warhol was more of the trickster artist like Duchamp and more of the messenger of the future about society.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right. He certainly was. And I, you know, I regret maybe not being more influenced by Warhol. I think I had a—at least it was probably naïve—but I would've imagined that Warhol wouldn't have been dense enough for my own vision. Where somebody like Jasper Johns would have been. And Robert Rauschenberg I found too flaky. Too much talent and too much generosity in the work. I like the work of Johns; it was dark, and it was dense. And it had the complexity I like. So Warhol, I wouldn't have probably understood all of his cultural dimensions in the way that I would today. I mean, I think he—his complexity was played out in society—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: —in terms of reception. And I don't think I would have had a handle on that early on. I was still looking at the art object probably.

AVIS BERMAN: I guess—when was the sense of when you began, if not reception, a sense of wanting to separate yourself from the regulation art world?

DENNIS ADAMS: From the regulation? You mean, from the museum, gallery world?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. I guess so.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, that was never a ploy of mine other than—I simply early on, because I had been very involved in urban—In other words, urban culture became a springboard for my thinking. And there was just a—at one point it just became more tidy to imagine that somehow I could lay something out there in that environment that would be in the same spirit of that environment, right?

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: And bypass the gallery/museum system. There was no dissent there. I had no problem with the gallery/museum system that I can remember—other than maybe I was a little bored with it. And it was just something that I didn't need at that point maybe. Also when I first arrived in New York, there was no place for young artists. There were a couple of galleries and things. There was John Gibson Gallery [New York City, NY] and Holly Solomon [New York City, NY]. Those were the two galleries that showed young artists. And you either did 30-by-40-inch conceptual photography and showed with John Gibson. Or you did decorative painting and showed with Holly Solomon.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, were you interested—I mean, were there any artist groups you—Were you ever interested in anything like getting [into —AB] something like Colab [Collaborative Projects, New York City, NY] or anything like that?

DENNIS ADAMS: I was never too involved with artists' groups, although I think I identified a little bit with the group around John Gibson Gallery when I first arrived in New York. When, I mean, I first moved here permanently, which was in '75.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: James Collins and Mac Adams, and Bill Beckley were part of that group. I at least identified with that work. And that was kind of narrative conceptual photography. Storytelling.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. And you were also—you went back and you taught in Ohio for, you know, a couple of years.

DENNIS ADAMS: I taught at Ohio University for three years in my youth, yeah. Right after I left Temple University.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And was there anything there that you found of great benefit or that—

DENNIS ADAMS: I made a few lasting friends there for life—a couple. It was a wild place. It was a place that was coming off—it was one of those university towns that was very invested in alternative culture. And everybody, when I arrived, was on Quaaludes, and they were coming out of the '60s. And I found it very refreshing. Yet there was still—I remember there were 33 or 34 go-go bars on Main Street, on one street. I mean, it was a crazy environment with a lot of drugs and alternative culture. And I had a pretty good time there. And I met some figures there that were interesting. And I crafted a little life there, although secretly hated it all the time because it was in the middle of goddamn nowhere. And I was just biding my time until I would get back to the East Coast. I'm sorry I stayed there three years, frankly. But I left. I would've had tenure there. I could've stayed. They liked me. I was the fair-haired boy. I had a good reception there. But I left. I remember writing a letter from New York; I'd moved here. I took a leave-of—ABsence, and I was here about a month. And I remember I wrote the dean a letter. I ran into it the other day somewhere.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, how were you going to support yourself once you—I mean, you moved downtown—or where were you living at that point?

DENNIS ADAMS: Right here.

AVIS BERMAN: You found this place.

DENNIS ADAMS: I've lived here ever since.

AVIS BERMAN: Since 1975.

DENNIS ADAMS: And I have no family money. I never had a dime from my family. I mean, not a dime. I was on my own from about seventeen. I was always a little bit in the straits financially. I was always struggling. And unfortunately I never married a rich woman. That was the biggest mistake of my life. If I had to do it over again, I would've married somebody very young, intelligent, and beautiful. I could've done that. But I always fell in love with working-class girls. Working-class Jewish girls. [Laughs] You know, you can't help who you fall in love with, right?

AVIS BERMAN: Correct.

DENNIS ADAMS: But I wish I'd done it differently.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I don't know. Well it's true, but I always say that people who marry for money tend to earn every penny of it.

DENNIS ADAMS: Ah! Maybe.

AVIS BERMAN: Because you really have to pay attention to that person. [Laughs]

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, I know people, I know a lot of people that maybe they didn't marry for money, but they married into it. And you're right, they've pay heavily for that. And I can see it.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you know, you pay without money, too. It's a different kind of price.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yeah. But I could've used a little bit of help. I wish I'd had a drunken uncle or somebody that was—

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And you hadn't gotten into—you hadn't gotten any grants or any awards yet; that hadn't happened.

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, I don't—I can't imagine that I had them in my early 20s.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: I must have won something somewhere along the line. But I don't remember it now. But I know.

AVIS BERMAN: You just seem so precocious.

DENNIS ADAMS: I was struggling, you know. I got right to New York, and I started up—I started making 16 mm films at the Collective for Living Cinema [Manhattan, NY]. I was just trying to keep busy. I wanted to become—All of a sudden I wanted to become—I wanted to give up—I didn't want to be a teacher or anything anymore. I just wanted to be an artist. And I wanted to shed all that stuff. And if I had to clean toilets to do it, I would do it. And, you know, and I just took odd jobs here in the city.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, probably you if—you probably could do things like, you know, sheetrocking or construction or whatever artists—

DENNIS ADAMS: I did that.

AVIS BERMAN: A lot of people did carpentry.

DENNIS ADAMS: I did carpentry and all that stuff. But I'll tell you, as I moved through the art world, I realized most people were on family money, even those that said they weren't. And I must admit that was my first—I hated that. Everyone I ran into in New York was connected in some way—whether it was to a little bit of money or a piece of intellectual history, everybody had connections except for me. And I seemed on my own. And I was a little bit envious and jealous of that. You know, they either came from a good family where they got a piece of intellectual history, or they got a piece of money if they didn't come from a good family. But, you know, I had none of that. So, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, usually it takes at least a year to attain New York. But I would say after probably a couple of years, you had some connections, too, or something or other.

DENNIS ADAMS: I was slow to get connections. I wasn't socially gregarious. I didn't probably go to a lot of openings and things that maybe young people should do. Nor was I a collective personality. I have never been. Of course, the way artists should, if they want to have some success, they should probably situate themselves in groups or collectives and do things on their own. That's what I tell my students today. That's how history and generations. But I didn't. I was a loner, a lone wolf. And maybe it was my arrogance. I always—well, not always—but I often found the collective discussions among young artists pretty much a waste of time. I had belonged to a couple of reading groups and small collectives for a short time, and I burned out on them because I frankly always felt at the end of the day those people didn't—they didn't come away with much. I wanted to get to my work, whatever that meant.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: Stupid.

AVIS BERMAN: No. Well, also some of those things in which you're supposed to be collective or anonymous, it's not possible for very long because you're collective and anonymous, but I'm presenting it. So someone will see my name. [Laugh]

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, perhaps. Yes. So it was slow for me, in other words. I did not flash through—I was not a flash in the pan in the art world. I moved slowly—I moved slowly. And I'm not a person that—I never took my slides around. I never did—and I don't brag about this because it's nothing to brag about—as my ex-wife said, "Don't tell that story. You should be ashamed of it." But I never sold myself—meaning, I never promoted myself. Whether I didn't know how or—it wasn't that I didn't know how. I think I was just—I didn't think that that's—I thought somebody should just run into you and something should happen. I don't know. I didn't believe in that.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it had happened for you a little bit at Drake and then Tyler, you know. So—

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, at school! Everybody wants to find a good student. I don't consider that being successful.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: I think that's the easiest thing in the world, to be a good student. You know, there's all these depressed teachers just waiting for somebody like me, right? And anybody

can act that out. You know, anyone that steps up to the plate and does one little thing, everyone goes, “Ah! It’s so wonderful.” But in fact it isn’t wonderful for the most part at all.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you’re an experienced teacher, I’m not. So I’m going to take—

DENNIS ADAMS: That’s the folly of youth, you know, that you can step into those shoes if you want to. But I think it’s much more difficult to make something significant as an artist that somebody takes notice of. That’s a bigger struggle.

AVIS BERMAN: And at this point in New York, do you look back at what you’ve done, are you happy with your older work? I mean, what is your state of mind in terms of what kinds of things you want to make or keep going with or develop?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, in terms of the early work, I need to learn to be easier on myself as I get older, and I’m trying to do that. I used to be embarrassed by everything I had done. I mean, my behavior, my work, my thinking, my reading. I was right across the board embarrassed about it all. And I now realize there’s nothing to be embarrassed about. It’s who I was, and it’s what I did. And I go back, and I think there were some good and bad moments in all of that, you know. Some things I—I’ve never used the word proud, and I don’t think there’s anything—I hear my fellow artists sometimes saying, “I’m proud of that work.” I’ve never said that. I wish there was something I was truly proud of. That’s what I’m working on now, to imagine that there’s something back there that I’m proud of. But I think there are some good works back there, and there are some terrible things. You know, it’s like every artist. At the end of your life you maybe do—if you’re lucky—you do five to ten interesting things. That’s what it boils down to. And the rest is something else: process or—

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Process or getting to the other things.

DENNIS ADAMS: Of getting to the other things. Yes. So the archive, looking back on all of that work, is a big story. I’m doing a little bit of that now. I’m trying to organize my archive, and it’s difficult to confront a lot of that early stuff because you also want to get on with it. You want to reinvent yourself. It’s also a different artist that makes that work. You look back, and that’s a different person. You’re really looking at somebody else and somebody else’s work. And, yes, that’s all very complicated. The reinvention, that’s—you know, I’m 60. It’s the illusion of every 60-year-old that they can reinvent themselves. You know, Fitzgerald’s old line that “There’s no second acts in American lives.” Well, fuck that guy. You know, I can’t go on like that and hang onto something like that. There may have been no second act for him. But there is for me. Because if I don’t believe that, what am I going to do tomorrow?

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, there was a second and third act for him posthumously. But he didn’t—

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, yes. He wasn’t around to—

AVIS BERMAN: It’s like Bizet. *Carmen* was a total flop, and he died thinking he was a failure, you know.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: So. But you began—but photography seems to be something you took up here or that you—

DENNIS ADAMS: I did. And that had started in Ohio. I did photographs I made at Ohio University in my very early 20s. Conceptual photographs. And I hate to use that word because it had no meaning then, and it has no meaning today. It’s just a buzz word. But then when I moved to New York here, I set up—it’s no longer there because I ripped it out—but I built a darkroom here. And my first prints that I printed myself were 30-by-40 inches. Big!

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: And I thought I was not going to be associated with the small traditions of photography with, you know, Ansel Adams and Walker Evans and all that crap. Although I love Evans today a lot, Ansel Adams I could care less for. But I wanted to be—I knew if photography had a future, it had to be big like painting. Or it had to have an impact as a kind of object. So I began immediately printing large-scale—And I taught myself photographic practices right here in this place. I read Ansel Adams’s zone technique book.

AVIS BERMAN: And Minor White probably.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, all that stuff. I learned it very quickly. I had such cheap equipment because I had no money that I had to hook the enlarger to the ceiling with a long dowel rod to adjust the focus, and get on my hands and knees to look through the lens to see if the print was in focus. I made enormous darkroom trays that I rocked on old diner tables. You know, when you always go to these old diners, you know, they always have to put matches under them to shim them up.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, to shim them.

DENNIS ADAMS: That's how I figured out how I could agitate. I figured out, well, I'm going to get those diner tables, because those things are never level. And it worked perfect. You could move them with one finger, and I could agitate those prints. And I had a lot of fun. I couldn't—There were points when this entire loft was covered with work: photographs hanging from every square inch of it. And I was working pretty goddamned hard in those days. I was working. I worked hard, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you know, you were young, too. You had the energy, you had the focus. Also you were in New York. You had to sort of earn it, I guess, or feel you were—I mean, I'm a New York artist now; this is it.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. And I loved being here in this old loft, and that was very important to me.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Let me just check the time here because what I really want to get into is first the Patricia Hearst piece [*Patricia Hearst: A Second Reading*, 1978, Ten Windows on 8th Avenue, New York City, NY]. Do you have a few more minutes?

DENNIS ADAMS: Sure. We're fine.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Because that I think is really important in that to me that's the first kind of, you know, public piece, street piece. And then what happened.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: Which was—very imaginable then and not so imaginable now—but in terms of destroying it.

DENNIS ADAMS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Oh, you mean, the—

AVIS BERMAN: The windows. I mean, that—

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, right. I'd forgotten all about that.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay. Well, I thought that that was actually—I thought that was maybe your first street piece in New York?

DENNIS ADAMS: I think it was my first street piece. You're correct. That's true. That's true.

AVIS BERMAN: In other words, you wanted to show your work in a different kind of way. Or how did you decide—how did you get that gig or the whole thing?

DENNIS ADAMS: Probably came through some young friends as I remember. It was not a real gig. I mean, it was, you know, they were windows kind of on the side of a parking project. It was pretty primitive. But they were very public. So that was good, and I enjoyed that, the public quality of that. I'd never had anything in a public space. So that was important for me. But they disappeared immediately. So there was—I couldn't savor the victory too long.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, but it got written up in the press.

DENNIS ADAMS: It was written up in the press.

AVIS BERMAN: And that's—I wondered if you felt that even though your work was destroyed, there was obviously—I mean, one does not like that. And I don't know if you felt you could recreate it or wanted to recreate it. But usually that sort of—to say that *succès scandale* is very helpful to an artist's career. And I wondered if it brought you attention or if it was

useful. What was the aftermath?

DENNIS ADAMS: It was a little bit helpful. But of course what I didn't like is all the information about the work was only about the scandal, not about the work.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, of course.

DENNIS ADAMS: And that's really what, for the most part, art criticism is. It's just about the scandal around the work. It's never about the work. That would be true of almost everything. And of course it's more exaggerated in the journalistic context. But it's everywhere. And that's been the disappointment of my life. And I first experienced there. But I did parlay that into an exhibition at Artists Space [New York City, NY]. Meaning that because of that scandal, I think they had asked me to do something there. And I was happy to have that little gig because it was kind of a legitimate gig. There were a lot of people, people that would become very important artists of the next generation that were around Artists Space at the moment. Almost everybody.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: You know Cindy Sherman, Haim Steinbach, Bernard Tschumi, in the world of art, architecture, I mean, the list would go on and on. I couldn't even begin to name all the players. So it was—that was an interesting moment. I mean, I think maybe—maybe Allan McCollum. I'm not even sure. I would have to fact-check that. But there was just a lot of stuff going on there.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, let's talk about that piece. I mean, how did you arrive at the idea of Patricia Hearst and the research? What went into that if we can—

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, I was interested in the discrepancy between photography and language. I was interested in all kinds of discrepancies, okay? And complexities. But let's begin now with the discrepancy between text and language. I envisioned myself at that point that I was going to create a new kind of literature. I had childhood fantasies, probably like everybody at that moment, and I probably shared that with a thousand other people. But I imagined that there would be a kind of—that I would produce a novel where text and image would totally not be in correspondence in any way. And there would be a third site emerging out of that. Where, in other words, text would not describe the image; or image would not illustrate text. They would be working against each other. And I would produce something in the way Joyce had produced something. I was kind of—I had literary visions. But it never seemed to get off the palette. So they just turned out to be these little stupid conceptual shows where I showed photographs with text. I always imagined they would have a larger book format or something. And I thought, oh, the idea is so right, that the art world—that everyone will run away with this before I do. I thought I'm on the verge of something here. And I thought even the publishing industry would pick it up. Nobody would read novels anymore the way they used to. That was passé, I thought. Today, the publishing industry's just the same, only the designs are a little worse than it was 30 or 40 years ago. The literary worlds the most conservative place. I've been so disappointed in that. Nobody took that over. I think I could pick it up again today. Maybe the graphic novel in some way.

AVIS BERMAN: But that flies over the idea of cartoons and other things. If you put what you put in there, it probably wouldn't fly.

DENNIS ADAMS: It wouldn't fly. But what I envisioned never happened. So that's odd. So anyway, it played out in my own work in smaller ways. I think I wasn't—I wasn't a major enough artist to really make it happen. I'm a minor figure, and I want—by definition, by default, I'm a minor figure, and I love what that represents. I'm not ashamed of that. I cultivate it, too. I want to be a minor figure.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, what does minor figure mean to you?

DENNIS ADAMS: Minor figure means to be a little bit of a dilettante, to tinker with things, to be able to switch my research subjects at will. Not to have a kind of dominating—not to just be held in place by a sensibility.

AVIS BERMAN: Or have a signature image that you can't change.

DENNIS ADAMS: I don't want a signature image. Although unfortunately I probably do, by

definition—or by default—have some kind of signature image. But, yes, that's what a minor—but beyond that, being a minor figure is a great responsibility because you put your finger on things that are minor. [Laughs] But you have to do something in that little space. It's a condensed space. And so I've never become an important minor figure even. I mean, at the end of the day I'm disappointed with that. I put a lot of stake in that, and I hope at the end of my life to have created some very important minor works, and I don't know if I've achieved it yet. But I would like to. Maybe I still will or maybe I have, and I don't know it.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Because I think—I mean, clearly this whole idea of major and minor, that's pretty fluid. And nobody lives to see what does or doesn't. El Greco was a minor figure who became a major figure in art. You know, the artists usually elevate [inaudible].

DENNIS ADAMS: He's neither, neither minor nor major. He's a hack.

AVIS BERMAN: [Laughs] So. But I'm just saying that opinions fluctuate.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, opinion. But I was talking about from my own perspective.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: I don't care about opinions; I can't worry about that. It's hard enough to figure out my own opinion, right? But I love this idea of a minor artist, whatever that means. And you can say, well, who is a minor artist? Then, well, maybe in criticism it was someone like Roland Barthes, you know, who was very important to me at one point in my life. I think he was to other people [inaudible]. But he's a minor figure. That's so beautiful, so precise. He puts his—he doesn't take on the big subjects of the world, you know. He writes about wrestling or some little incidental thing. And it's done with such respect and vigor and such depth and concentration. Goddamn it! To be a minor figure is the most important thing in the world. I envy that in him. You know, that focus that it takes.

AVIS BERMAN: So anyway, Patricia Hearst?

DENNIS ADAMS: Okay, Patricia Hearst. Okay. So beyond this complexity of text and image, I grabbed onto her because she was somebody, as an image, that stood between a lot of different kinds of representation. We didn't have the word postmodern then. Maybe they had it in—maybe it was already floating around in architecture or in some kind of post-structuralist rhetoric. I don't know when I first heard the word. But certainly she was for me, in the current definition of the word, a postmodern figure. Meaning that she—there was just many—she was being represented in many different ways. You couldn't hold onto a single identity. There were multiple identities that we were witnessing: both identities that she was creating and identities that were being created through the media, through lawyers, psychiatrists, people around her, her parents.

And I liked all of those things. She was a complicated figure, very layered. And I identified with her. I was her. See, I never said that before. I was her; it was as simple as that. Hannah Wilke called me up one day and said, "You can't work with that image. That's a woman," you know, and "she's-" Actually I liked Hannah Wilke, what little I knew of her, and I like her work. But she screamed at me on the phone. I can't remember exactly what she said, but I hung up on her. She was mad about that, probably because I was treading on the image of a woman.

But I'm sorry; I identified with her. I was as weak as she was. I was as vulnerable. And because of my youth, you know, there's a complexity in all the false starts that you go through. You go through different image banks to find yourself. And I was moving through all of those very quickly. And I looked at her, and she was me, and I saw my face in her. And I was slowly falling in love a little bit, looking at her images, with myself. It was narcissism. But her images at one point were everything here.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: You know, had the—

AVIS BERMAN: With the writer, [inaudible], right. Absolutely.

DENNIS ADAMS: Had the police come by, I would've been arrested. I actually had some of those images with me when I was out in Antioch for a short time. And I hung them in my

apartment. And my landlord—they were hanging everywhere—and my landlord over a place called Deaton's Hardware Store in Antioch, he said, "Son, I don't know what the hell you're up to." But he said, "I want you out of here." He said, "I never saw anything like what I saw going on up in your apartment." [Laughs] You know, here was this terror splashed all over there. And there were so-called terrorists flashed all over the news. And I had these huge photographs, I mean, everywhere. I don't mean hundreds; I mean, maybe thousands by clotheslines and [inaudible]. It was pretty crazy. I would've thrown me out, too.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, yes. This is—You were a subversive there. I knew Hannah. I mean, Hannah was nuts. [Laughs] Let's put it kindly. Not that she wasn't an artist, but—

DENNIS ADAMS: A good artist, I think.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: I have—the more and more I look back on the figure, I have a lot of respect for her. She must have been through a helluva lot, too, doing the kind of work she was. And then, you know, from a feminist perspective, I—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, she was but I mean, talk about narcissism. I mean, this is a woman who began to talk—always talking about losing her looks, although that was part of her art, and was really considering plastic surgery.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Not as a gesture like that woman I can't remember who was having all these operations to look like some ideal woman or the *Mona Lisa*, wherever she was doing. But really to—

DENNIS ADAMS: I can't think of her name. A Frenchwoman [ORLAN —DA].

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, right. But to keep looking good. I mean, she would've made a subject of her art. But then unfortunately the cancer intervened, and that was over.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right, right.

AVIS BERMAN: And other things. And she was always complaining about various things. So no matter what—So, I guess, I respect her art, but my sense of her motives—I guess, because when you know someone, sometimes they're a little bit more earthbound. [Laughs]

DENNIS ADAMS: A little bit more earthbound, yes. Well, nevertheless, anyone that could've gone through what she went through during the time she went through it, I—And when I look back at all these kind of theoretical feminists, I'll take my hat off to her first.

AVIS BERMAN: No, she was brave. There's no doubt about it.

DENNIS ADAMS: She was brave, and she was out there. And so you can take a whole slew of people that followed her that theorized it and, you know, put it in a little more comfortable place. But, you know, she played it on all fronts.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And she did—and she was early. So that's—

DENNIS ADAMS: And she's a dark figure, no doubt.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: A dark figure.

AVIS BERMAN: It's true.

DENNIS ADAMS: And earthbound, you're right. But she scared the hell out of me the first time I met her. I was—but anyway.

AVIS BERMAN: It's that sense of actions have consequences. But then to have some artist call up and scream at you is like almost not worse, but someone again you might respect is like going on—

DENNIS ADAMS: I don't know who gave her my number. I think it was my lawyer. I had a lawyer because of the Hearst thing, at one point. He was working for me for free. Maybe he consulted her or something. I can't remember how it transpired.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. But, I mean, it's also outrageous that someone got some government figure, Hearst called up the powers that be. Probably confirmed all your creative paranoia when it was taken down.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah. I'm not—yeah, paranoia. I'm interested in paranoia, but I'm not —Yes. I don't really—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, of course you're not paranoid if it comes true.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But, you know what I mean: One's darkest suspicions about the government or how things work or that—

DENNIS ADAMS: William Burroughs: "Paranoia is getting all the facts straight." ["Sometimes paranoia's just having all the facts."] I always loved that line.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, that's terrific. No, I hadn't heard that before.

DENNIS ADAMS: It was an important line for me years ago.

AVIS BERMAN: Absolutely. Well, now how—shall we stop for today?

DENNIS ADAMS: We're fine. If you want to go longer, if you want to stop, whatever you want to do.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I'm just checking with your schedule. So it's fine with me. Why don't we talk about one other thing because I think it's rather unusual, and then we'll—I want to get into the early '80s then since you do have a little time, which is—because it seems to be an anomaly or you stopped going in that direction, which is *Shifting Cinema for* [*a*] *Red, White, and Blue* M*ovie* [1980].

DENNIS ADAMS: Uh huh. [Affirmative.]

AVIS BERMAN: Because I know you were, as you said, you were shooting Super 8s and you made this movie. It seemed—I mean, you were certainly exploring. But it seems to me an avenue you didn't pursue. Or am I wrong?

DENNIS ADAMS: No. It led right into the Bus Shelters. I was interested in this idea of architecture. I became interested in this idea of a three-dimensional space that would create the fragmentation between text and image that I was looking for. Since the book hadn't worked out for me—and I don't know why exactly—I thought I could enlarge upon that in these kind of three-dimensional installations where I could reconfigure the space in a way that the receiver could gather information in kind of fragmented zones. And that they had to put it together slowly, over time and space. Simple as that. But that was an important piece for me. It was an epiphany for me. I did that piece, and I was—you know, you have a few pieces, and you do them, and you're never the same afterwards. It was a good fucking piece, it was. Whenever I did something that I thought worked out, I knew it right away. And I look back at it—I mean, right away I turned around after it was done, and I looked at it. And I said, okay, that's something. And it's looking back at me, and it's bigger than me, and it's bigger than my ideas. That's what a work is. It goes beyond your intentions and who you are. And it speaks back to you and says: "Listen, you little mother fucker, you know, you're going to have to do something to be better than me." You know? You rarely get that. [They laugh.] Usually you look at these things, and they're pathetic. But that piece looked back, and it had something. It worked. It did everything I wanted it to do. I was drunk for days after that.

AVIS BERMAN: [Laughs] And are you now thinking about really working in more of this street, the public arena almost exclusively at this point?

DENNIS ADAMS: No. Right now I'm retreating a little bit to my private world, although I still have—I have invitations. I've always had invitations. I have public invitations. But I'm just at a point now where I'm not so interested in official invitations anymore.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I'm sorry! I meant—

DENNIS ADAMS: You [inaudible] a jump, it's a big jump.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Oh, I meant in 19—No, after—I just meant after you did the *Shifting Cinema for a Red, White, and Blue Movie* [1980, Miami University, Oxford, Ohio]. What I meant now. I'm sorry, I meant now at this point.

DENNIS ADAMS: Okay, that point. All right.

AVIS BERMAN: I'm sorry. I wasn't clear.

DENNIS ADAMS: You mean, did that open up—? Well, certainly this idea of your work, receivership, or maybe my work, this idea of what that particular piece opened up, I thought that was a kind of public—? You know, what does—? Public space doesn't mean just outdoors. I mean, you know, a museum is a public space obviously. But that certainly opened up this idea of a moving body in space in terms of accumulating information; not just standing like some dumb idiot in front of a painting. And so I was interested in that kind of movement. And that went back to the Russian Constructivists that I was very interested in and their idea of the moving body in relation to information. And I was very invested in that. I probably at that point in my life—very little was known about Russian Constructivism. But I probably knew more than anybody. I was researching it right and left, whatever I could get a hold of primarily because of that activation. And I wanted to find a historical moment that had—that might say something to me because I knew they were maybe at a similar point.

AVIS BERMAN: So you were also thinking about the art in relation to your body and moving around because the art would look different.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right. And that there was liberation there. You see, I wanted to liberate the viewer from—what is art at the end of the day? For me art is all about liberation. It's about my freedom, the freedom I can offer the viewer so they can experience the world maybe in a way that they haven't. I mean, that sounds very basic. But that's all that art is at the end of the day. It's about liberation. It's about—you know, what I love? The thing that I most love is a little story that Roland Barthes told about releasing the prisoners, you know, in this game as a child called Prisoner's Base [a version of tag]. You know, where all the kids are supposed to capture the prisoner.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: And he said what he loved is to release them. And that's what I love, too.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: I share that with Roland Barthes. And all of my work is about releasing the prisoners—the prisoners of language and the prisoners of photography, the prisoners of advertising, the prisoners of the street. That's what I do. I release the prisoners. And that's an important game, and one that I'm probably not intelligent or talented enough to fully accommodate. But it's one that I'm struggling to accommodate. And, yes. I don't want to be didactic.

AVIS BERMAN: But I just want to ask you in your thinking then or even now, was a piece of public art, was it because of its location? Was it because of its essence? Or—this is the wrong word for you because of maybe the patron or the sponsor, because you seem to be pretty much your own sponsor most of the time.

DENNIS ADAMS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Are we now—you're referring now to the moment of doing something in an outdoor public space?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: Are we moving toward the Bus Shelters or are we still at the Hearst work?

AVIS BERMAN: We're moving toward the Bus Shelters.

DENNIS ADAMS: That was simply because I wanted to put—I was used to moving around the city being influenced by, again, this kind of flâneur thing. And the Bus Shelters were a way of creating a zone for that. They were also not site-specific.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: They were determined by the transit system. And I liked that. I did not determine the location. I hated all of this stuff at that moment of—you know, whether it was Richard Serra or Robert Irwin and all of these. The whole notion of the site-specific. Oh, my God! That seemed really very tied to the physical world. And I was tied to the physical world as it represents the mental world. And I thought somehow this idea of little intervals or transacted moments that were not inscribed in space, you know, reflecting back on that space, commenting on it, but were something simply like a little waiting zone, a little moment between things. Something more fragile, more existential, more lonely, more—

AVIS BERMAN: Fugitive?

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, more fugitive. Not as historically tied to the monument, public space, to the plaza. All of those things. The museum. They were in-between places, right?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Yes, well, I think that was also what was happening at that time, is that public art began to evolve from the monument on the plaza, something plunked in from somebody's studio, and certain artists were also interested in enhancing neighborhoods and planting things. You know, there were whole other—a lot of responses to that. I mean, even before the early '80s there, you know, well before Serra, *Tilted Arc* [1981], or any of that.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But people were—I think there were a lot of different responses that people were looking at.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And I just wondered how you began to research that?

DENNIS ADAMS: I never had interest in enhancement strategies. I don't want to enhance anything, nor do I want to commemorate anything. Nor do I want to make community-based art. Everything I read in books on public art I'm not interested in. I'm so sorry for the period I had to live through. Richard Serra for me is still probably the best public artist there is. *Tilted Arc* is the best work of public art. The worst work is the *Vietnam* [*Veterans*] *Memorial* [Washington, D.C., 1982]. I have radical views on public art. I like what Carl Andre said. He's the only one that ever said anything good about public art that was intelligent. And I think it goes something like this: I don't believe a country deserves public art that can't provide public restrooms for its citizens. [They laugh.] I always thought that's a pretty good and pretty interesting notion. But I'm interested in public space for its mental capacity, for its ability to liberate the mind, to be in place and out of place simultaneously. So this idea of work that integrates with the community and the neighborhood and the feel-good and the enhancement strategies. Hell! I'll take Richard Serra's brutality. At least it's a statement, and it's an individual statement. He's an important figure and a major artist. I would take my hat off to him. I have no interest in his work at all. But he's a major figure.

AVIS BERMAN: And so why is *Tilted Arc* the best for you of them?

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh. For everything he wanted to do, it absolutely did it. It was site-responsive. It was perfectly situated in history and time. All the right dissent. And, you know, of course, it unleashed this other movement of enhancement—You know, it unleashed a lot of other community-based projects. It started this whole alternative public world. And, of course, none of that world then was half as interesting as Serra's world. The one who asks the first question is the only one to get his shit out at the end of the day. And he asked the right question, the *Tilted Arc*; it's a masterpiece. I went to the trials, right? And the day I came out after, you know, all the complainers and whiners and, you know, those people, they have miserable lives that work for the government. I feel for them, honestly I do. But, you know, as they got up and told their tragic stories about him taking their plaza, they didn't think about the government stealing their lives. But I walked out that day, and the sun was hitting Serra's *Tilted Arc* at an angle. And I was totally destabilized for a moment. And I thought, my God! He's freed me from this plaza. I thought really—this is a brilliant artist and a brilliant work of art. And I thought I only wished I'd done it. Although I never would because—[they laugh]—I have no capacity to make major statements like that. But, you know, he's important. Let's give that man his due. And all that other crap that followed in the wake of it that I lived through, and they were all part of my generation. And I was

associated with all of those people. I'm in books with them and articles and wow! Some of them loved me, some of them hated me. I have no interest in most of them for the most part. There're a few characters in there that were perverse enough to be interesting. Maybe Siah Armajani a little bit.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Oh, and Vito [Acconci].

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, and certainly Vito. But Vito, of course, it's his own—you know, Vito is interesting on so many levels. And Dan Graham. And there were others.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, speaking of Dan Graham, do you feel that looking at the Bus Shelter and your use of it was some sort of—could be related to or any kind of response to his Pavilions? I mean, is the Bus Shelter your Pavilion?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, Dan has mentioned my Bus Shelter. And I think he thought—I think he wanted to tag that as being influenced by him. I wish it had been influenced by him. I had met him and only knew the early work. I didn't really—when I did those Bus Shelters, the first one was designed in '81. I don't know when he did Pavilions. He might have done them before. I don't really know. But I didn't know of them. Certainly once I did them, and I got to know Dan then in another context later through those Bus Shelters, there was certainly a dialog between. And maybe we—I would share certain existential kind of ingredients with Dan Graham. I think his fascination with Eisenhower and the '50s I share. And I think what's amazing about Dan Graham—and what I love very much about him—is that he, and probably other people do as well, is that he was able to mix the residue of the Enlightenment, whatever leftovers there were from utopian culture, he was able to mix those up with Pop iconography in a way. That was very smart.

Anytime an artist can tell two stories simultaneously in their work and get away with it, I take my hat off to them. I've tried to do that with my own work in different ways. And Dan I think pulled that off very well. And he was first at that maybe. And he has to be acknowledged as a very important player. But, yes, the Pavilions. I think of Dan—Dan's Pavilions are much more sited around the end of modernism. My Bus Shelters are much more urbanistic. Dan eventually found that he could put those Pavilions in corporate settings or in gardens and things. You see, in the end they were about the end of utopia, the last look of utopia. And for me, no. Mine were a kind of collision with the street advertising culture and maybe a little bit of talking back. It was different. They were different in spirit. But they shared a scale. And somewhere there are traces of the Eisenhower Administration in both Dan's work and my work. [They laugh.] Growing up under the Eisenhower Administration, whatever that means.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. I think that we will stop because I need to—I want to read—

DENNIS ADAMS: Okay. There's too much here. I think I said nothing today.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, nonsense! Well, thank you very much.

[END OF TRACK 1.]

MS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman interviewing Dennis Adams in his studio in New York City on May 8, 2009, for the Archives of American Art GSA Project.

When we stopped the last time, we had talked about the Patty Hearst project and *Shifting Cinema for* [*a*] *Red, White, and Blue Movie* at Miami University [Oxford, OH]. And we were about to embark on talking about the Bus Shelters. We did a little bit, but not too much. And I'm just looking at something in a chronology here for this catalog, and I realize you're not responsible for everything that they write. But I wondered if you could elaborate on this or what it really means; this was about '81 or '82. "Begins researching methodologies of public address." [They laugh.]

DENNIS ADAMS: I think what that means is that I was trying to rethink everything.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: Probably I had said that to somebody, and that's how it came out.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right.

DENNIS ADAMS: But I think it's probably not inaccurate in the sense that I was—I was shedding certain things at that moment, and I was looking to hook up with the city streets as a kind of sounding board for my thinking.

AVIS BERMAN: Was there a sense of research or were you only walking around? I mean, were you looking at, say, street furniture or thinking of a place, kinds of places that you wanted to temporarily make a mark on?

DENNIS ADAMS: I was thinking of this idea of the street as the site that was generating my ideas. Meaning that I was, you know, through long walks in the city, it's basically where the ideas were coming from. Then I was working I think at that time primarily with photography. So it was a matter then of coming back to the studio and producing things and that felt artificial to me. And so the notion was that I wanted to display the work, or put the work in the same site or on the same kind of site, that was generated here. It was a way of kind of just being clear about my thinking. And so, yes, I was out on the streets, and I was looking, I was looking for some kind of—I was thinking of this idea of some kind of station, some kind of urban station. It probably didn't start with the bus shelters. But I was thinking of this kind of momentary pause in a city, where something might be framed. And of course again as I think I mentioned before, I had sheded this idea of being site-specific that many people of my generation were involved in.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: So this idea that something connected to the city could be anywhere, in a sense. It was more open-ended, less site-specific, more—I think the word I used was "clairvoyant" at the time. Or I was thinking about a certain kind of clairvoyance the way something kind of comes to you. You can be dislocated and located simultaneously. Not a sense of placeness.

AVIS BERMAN: Because certainly the photographs on the West Side bus shelter [*Bus Shelter I*, 1983, Broadway and 66th Street, New York City, NY], which I remember because I lived near there and I remember going—they didn't have to go there at all. Just as I'm not sure that the Rosenberg photographs had to go to 14th Street [*Bus Shelter II*, 1986, 14th Street and Third Avenue, New York City, NY] Maybe you did think about it. But I think that they were both very effective. And I can remember from seeing the West Side one I kind of gave a double take because I—what is that?—at first. And then I realized it was purposeful. Because at first when you think, oh, is that some ad for Lincoln Center at first, because it's not that far.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: And you begin to figure it out. But I wonder if—how did you figure out in this if you reached an audience or not? Because it was all, in other words there wasn't going to be any kind of feedback as there is with more traditional pieces.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, I knew I would reach an audience because, you know, probably 10,000 people were passing it every day.

AVIS BERMAN: Absolutely.

DENNIS ADAMS: But it was—I think, I very much at the time—I didn't know about that kind of an audience. I'd never really—I'd had very limited experience with performing in a public space. So I think my—what happened was is that I often went up there to repair those shelters, where I had to fix something. So there was—I didn't really sit around and watch people or wait for responses. But sometimes in those little moments I saw interactions, or when I was photographing them or things. And I begin to very much respect—too strong a word; I hate that word respect—I began to be a little bit fascinated with the open-endedness of readings, the different kinds of receptions, the kind of collisions that could happen there around something that was not framed within a program somewhere like a museum setting or something, where people come with a certain kind of expectation. And those works were all about breaking down those expectations. But also even the expectations of the street itself if we're talking about advertising culture, if we're talking about waiting, if we're talking about public transportation, bus shelters and all of that, the idea was to have a certain kind of decoy effect so it felt like kind of part of the urban landscape. It felt like it might have been authored by the authorities. But on another level it was not authorized. You knew something was up, right?

AVIS BERMAN: Right. As I said, it took me—it certainly took me a time or two to figure that out because at first I just wasn't—Oh, well, that's interesting. Eventually I realized some one individual had made this just because of the way it was.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, your language of double take is pretty much—I think it's very correct in terms of vibes that you had.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And then eventually you have the Aha moment and realize that, oh, this is something that is—was, as you said, not done by the authorities, or not, and was therefore—And it was great because it was there for quite a while. So it seemed, you know, to fit in but not fit in.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. At the time there was, I don't know if I recounted this before to you, but I had a friend who was connected, I think, with—God! I can't remember the person's name; we'll get it for the transcript. Who was the person connected, I think, with *Penthouse* magazine, Guccione?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, Bob Guccione.

DENNIS ADAMS: Guccione. It was something coming from his—A rumor had circulated through somebody I knew that was connected to him, that maybe his ad people had become fascinated with the structure, because they thought something would be revealed there: a product would be revealed. And of course we know, in the history of advertising, there was this idea that you could—it was probably more slighted in the beginning—that you could suspend the introduction of the product. I think probably in like, you know, the 1900s the ideas that the product probably had to be really foregrounded. But as advertising culture became more sophisticated, more and more, there could be a lot of foreplay before you get to the product, right?

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: And I was very much, I think in terms of advertising culture, fascinated with that notion of foreplay and extending that foreplay beyond the limits of where advertising would go. And it was a dialog with, you know, in my mind—and when we go back to this idea of research—I say I was researching. And those Bus Shelters were also kind of—the first Bus Shelter was certainly a part of that first research. I was trying to put a lot of those things together. You know, I wanted to step into the frame of advertising culture and play with that as opposed to going out and making some kind of street action, kind of guerrilla action that would appear, I guess, the people could dismiss or my thinking at that time. Although I think I've changed on that. But my thinking at that time was that if something could be dismissed, it could not be socially or politically or existentially effective. You know, if I—you know, no matter how strong the statement is, if I see this graffiti, you know, it's framed as graffiti. And therefore it can be dismissed. So I was looking for something more complicated in terms of reception.

AVIS BERMAN: How were you able to work with the bus shelters? What was the bureaucratic authority? Or how did that come about?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, I was helped a little bit by the Public Art Fund [New York City, NY] at the time. But they were in their infancy. So it seemed to me, from my memory, although they were very spirited and lovely people—Jenny Dixon was the director of that.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: And Susan—Oh, God, Susan—Help me. Susan was the president of the Public Art. Anyway, we can get it for the transcript.

AVIS BERMAN: It wasn't Susan Henshaw Jones, was it?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, no, no, no. She's still the president of Public Art Fund. Susie Freedman. You know, Susie Freedman's mother had [inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: Doris Freedman, right. Okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: So Susie was a kid, and she had—I mean, a kid; she was in her 20s—and she had pretty much inherited her mother's legacy. And, you know, had to step into those

shoes which were, I think, then, you know, defined—I don't know a lot. But I'm assuming it had been defined around the art of her mother's generation and her interests along that line. And Susie was probably somehow also maybe beginning to reach out to a newer generation to some degree. Although none of that was—you know, how intentional that was, I don't know. But, yes, the Public Art Fund. But I'll tell you, they were so—it was so primitive in those days compared to what these places would be like today—that I think it was unclear whether they were leading me through the bureaucratic jungle or I was leading them through the bureaucratic jungle. Because the ball would just stopped at one point, and they would get kinda bogged down. And then I would pick it up and, you know. We were trading off.

AVIS BERMAN: So you became adept at dealing with the city agencies?

DENNIS ADAMS: To some degree. There was a man—and I'll get for the transcript, I'll get his name—Frank [Addeo], I can't remember his name. I think he was the ombudsman for the Department of Transportation. And he was a lovely man. I hate bureaucrats of every kind. And by God I ran into every one of them in the kind of work that I do. But he was also—I guess, everybody was a little bit innocent in those days. He was kind of innocent. It was all new to him. He had no art expertise. But he was very open, and he, you know—Today everything is about litigation; everybody's afraid of what's going to happen. And there're a lot of predictions of doom and apocalypse, you know, around things that artists want to do. But in those days, no. It wasn't in place yet. And I'm happy that I shared that moment with him and the Public Art Fund.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. No, before, you know, there seemed to be so much to lose or something as the city got richer and more and more of these things happened.

DENNIS ADAMS: But let me just add to that—I spent a lot of time, almost a year, I think, in that process of figuring out how to get that thing on the street. And it was a series, as I remember, of permissions. I have, I think, two huge folders of that: letters going back and forth, a lot of unanswered letters. And what it turned out to be was that eventually it seemed like you could only get some permissions in place, not all of them. And so eventually you just go to the site, and you break ground. And if you're stopped, you show the permits you have. And maybe the person who asks hopefully doesn't know the permits you don't have. I mean, I remember I'd go out with illegal workers to break the ground. A beautiful old man and his crew from Harlem came in. But they had none of the—probably—insurance and all of the things that you would need to open—I mean, you know, obviously somewhere they could open the streets; they have the technology. They just use an old jackhammer. But they just—they didn't have the right permits in place. So I got what I could. I had a standard street opening permit. But they probably didn't—I know they didn't have their stuff.

AVIS BERMAN: I'm sure they didn't have like these million-dollar certificates of insurance, right?

DENNIS ADAMS: And all that stuff. And they were cheap. And they were brutal. You know, they were brutal men, you know, real workers. No saw-cutting, you know. I don't know if you know what that is. But when they cut these beautiful lines in the street and peel the concrete up, nothing like that. They just chopped it up [inaudible]. And we never got the permission to hook into this, into the [streetlight —DA] to get electricity. That permission never came. So we broke into the streetlamps, and those were just hotwired on the systems.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Well, those are always being hotwired. They're always pulled out, you know. People are always going in those to this day.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, you can look down. You never get too near those a lot of times because there's piles of wires around them, and every once in a while someone goes around.

DENNIS ADAMS: I remember the demonstrations in Tompkins Square Park. There was a couple that had built one of those little houses. That's around '89 I guess. And they had hot-wired their TV into it. So in the little house they built in Tompkins Square Park, they could watch television [inaudible]. I have a photo of that actually.

AVIS BERMAN: But eventually, since you did do, I guess, four of them in the city, four

different ones, it became something that was accepted on some level they liked it.

DENNIS ADAMS: Only three were done in New York City. Three in New York City, and there were more done other places. But, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. And you were for a while with Group Material. Is that correct?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, I probably—no. I'm very friendly with those people. One of them is my colleague, Doug Ashford. We're good friends, and we work together on a weekly basis at Cooper Union. But at that time I would've only been very, very incidentally connected; meaning that I got a phone call occasionally to be in some kind of shenanigan or exhibition. And, you know, they probably just called anybody that they thought was a little bit on the Left that was doing something on the street, and brought them into the mix. It was pretty loosey-goosey.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Because I saw that, and I was wondering also if you knew how it was founded, if you were in [inaudible].

DENNIS ADAMS: No, I was not a part of any of that. I probably had met Doug Ashford and some of the others around The Kitchen sometime in the mid-'80s. But it wasn't until really I came to Cooper Union in 2001 that I got to know Doug Ashford well. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And you made at the last—Actually I should say—I want to push one more question here about it, I guess, is how can you judge, you know, the pieces that are on the street, shall we say the effectiveness of a piece?

DENNIS ADAMS: The effectiveness of a piece. Well, we're speaking now about the Bus Shelters. Or the effectiveness of any piece on the street.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I want to ask about the Bus Shelters. Then I would go on and ask some of the other ones that you do later. Both the effectiveness for you and the effectiveness you talked a little bit of what you observed, but maybe the effectiveness—

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, first of all, they had use value. People could sit in them, and they could even get out of the rain. And again, that was not an attempt to provide, you know, to provide something for the community. For me that was a kind of decoy that brought people into the work. It framed them in a way, and allowed them to enter into a dialog with something that they were familiar with. But it was no more than that. And there was never enough shelter to really keep out of the rain. And a bench would appear on the backside where it did not protect.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: So those kind of things where I was not there to provide comfort of any kind. I was there to create a symbol of comfort and utility to start a dialog about something else. But now your question about effectiveness. Again, it was—I know they were effective because I watched people move in and around and through them. I watched people kind of stop and stare. I'm convinced in retrospect they were extremely effective. And of course I was their first audience. I remember after I put the last bolt in, I walked away from *Bus Shelter I* and I looked back. I just looked back like I hadn't made it. [Laughs] And it just appeared on the street. And it looked pretty goddamn good to me! I thought that's—You know what? I thought that piece is again bigger than—it had more potential that I imagined. And that was on first glance after I saw it, and I think that proved to be true.

AVIS BERMAN: Because in the city then they didn't have real shelters. They just had posts. And it was like a lean—I mean, I know—

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, no, there were real shelters. There just weren't a lot of them.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. No, there weren't a lot of them. Not like those glass ones or whatever they are.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: But I can remember circling it. And people would circle it.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, they'd circle.

AVIS BERMAN: You know, to see what was going on.

DENNIS ADAMS: The only ones that didn't circle it were the ballet dancers. They were always—and I remember. They were the only ones that never—and I saw many of them because, I guess, there's a—what is it?

AVIS BERMAN: Lincoln Center, right. Well, New York City Ballet was there.

DENNIS ADAMS: New York City Ballet. So there were many ballerinas that would pass it. And I don't know why I remember this, but those ballerinas never paid any attention to it. And I realized—and I liked that disconnect. They were the only ones. Everyone else did. They were in their own world. They were walking on air and would walk by it. They were the aristocrats of the city, and I was in love.

AVIS BERMAN: Also the carriage that they have. The straight back. They have the perfect posture. So if they're looking at anything, it's almost more—It's a different world. Last time you made a comment which I really would like to go into at the moment because it begins to happen now in the mid-'80s, as you said. You said, "My whole career has been in Europe."

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, that was, I think, that was a statement that I made, and I probably—it would've been more true had I said it in 2001, which I probably did. But a lot of the things, important things that happened to me, happened in Europe first. [. . . —DA]

AVIS BERMAN: Why do you think that either the curators or the people, why do you think that they've been more responsive there, mostly in Continental Europe?

DENNIS ADAMS: Yeah, in Continental Europe. Well, I think they had longer traditions there of artists working on temporary projects that were, you know, especially working in the cities in some kind of urbanistic way. But most of the things in America, for the most part—not completely because there were also a lot of happenings and street performances here, and Fluxus and other things—but I still think for the most part, that happened in Europe. So there were traditions for them. And then I got lucky maybe a little bit on that front. It was a moment when probably a lot of—well, maybe it's always been true. There seemed to be a lot of international people sniffing around at that moment. There was a lot of circulation. Somehow in the '80s, it felt more of an international moment than the '70s. The '70s was very, very turned down maybe because the city was broke, and the market had faltered. And, you know, people were probably looking elsewhere, although I can't really diagnose it now. But in the '80s, again, everything was turned up. And curators and people were looking again and traveling. And of course I was there on the front lines. And I then told some people that appeared what I was doing was a new kind of urban performance. Or at least—

AVIS BERMAN: Or also looking at, you know, the underside of history. I also thought it was at the time that Fernand Braudel was beginning to publish the kind of history which wasn't about the great men. But it's much harder to categorize the history of—people, is the wrong word—but larger masses of the population because so many people don't leave documents behind. But I think at that time the new—different readings of history that people in other disciplines perhaps adopted. I mean, he's just the person I think of because I remember his books were interesting.

DENNIS ADAMS: He wrote this book on capitalism [*Civilization & Capitalism 15th-18th Century*, Fernand Braudel; New York, Harper & Row: 1982], right?

AVIS BERMAN: Right. But also on various like—

DENNIS ADAMS: It was a trilogy that he wrote, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. And there's also a history, you know, his history of France but by people, the populace, not necessarily the kings and, you know, not the Napoleon. But what was happening—

DENNIS ADAMS: History of everyday life.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, that was it. It was like what was happening to farmers, what was happening to, you know, miners, what was happening—that. Which I think was—Because also in France you have—in several projects, you focused on Algeria: an old wound, an old sore. Did you feel that French artists were looking at that?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, no. When I arrived in France, and I don't remember when I had my—Well, it would've been in the late '80s when I first arrived in France. But I arrived in France with—I don't want to say a big bang—but I had a lot of offers to do things all of a sudden in France. I mean, really. I was, well, Centre de Georges Pompidou, the Musée d'Art Moderne. Everybody—I was talking to everybody in France at that moment.

[Background conversation.]

AVIS BERMAN: I'll just pause this for a second.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, just pause it for a second. We'll get back to that question.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

[Audio break.]

Okay. You were just saying you had arrived in France, and you were having museum shows. People were talking to you.

DENNIS ADAMS: I probably saw—yes. So I had a lot happening in France, and I was drawn a little bit into French culture in terms of—meaning I met a lot of artists. Or at least a few of the better-known or kind of emerging artists in France at that moment. And interestingly enough, none of them were interested in the things that I was interested in. And I think that's probably still true to some degree today in France. Artists are very interested in kind of fashion culture, design culture, and spectacle culture. And you know the work is just—it's they're lighter souls than at least I was at that moment. I couldn't figure out what the hell those people were doing. They seemed to be making very, very slick work. I met people like IFP, which stands for Information, Fiction, and Publicity [Publicite]. Those were three figures that were collaborating. I became friendly with all three. And we had a lot of fun. We ran around for a while together. But our work was diametrically opposed. But I liked them, and they were smart. They were smart fellows.

But I always thought you could never make—this is a gross generalization—but that one could never make great art living in Paris. I always felt it was just—it's a museum city. It doesn't have the grit of New York. It's a beautiful city. Again, a city to go and have a great meal and make love and, you know, do something else. But it was difficult. And I spent a lot of time during those years off and on in Paris. And it was hard for me to really produce there. I could bring things there. And I did some big shows there. But it was difficult.

AVIS BERMAN: And then you were in the "Magiciens de la Terre, [1992, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France]," too.

DENNIS ADAMS: That's right. [Adams exhibited *Algerian Folie*, 1992.]

AVIS BERMAN: You know, looking back on that, what did you—You know, did you think with—

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, looking back, I'm shocked to say that show's become a kind of monument in the history of postwar art. I even understand now a book or two is being written about it, and you know, things are starting to break on that. At the time, it seemed very silly to me. I'd been invited in that show by Jean—Hubert Martin, a lovely man. And the premise at the time just seemed—I mean, I know it was this attempt to bring the First and Third Worlds together in a way around. Just let's go out and find the best people making contemporary art, and, you know, bring them in from all over. But it did not seem to acknowledge that polemic, other than just let's be generous. And there was something also very suspicious about it in that it was all being drawn back to Paris. You see, maybe it should've been elsewhere. That was my take at that time. I'd have to rethink that today. But I remember Daniel Buren doing an interview with me for that because he was in that show. And I think there was some discussion of that maybe between me and him at the time. I can't quite remember. But anyway, it felt funny to me, this show, and I was not—I was not so excited to be in it other than I was interested in really making a comment about Algeria as a colony of France. So for me I could play into that hand. And I assumed that more people would be doing it. But other than maybe Alfredo Jaar, Jeff Wall, and a couple of others, there weren't many people playing that card.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And they're not French either.

DENNIS ADAMS: And they were not French. That's right. One was from Chile and one was from Canada. So it was—and there were others probably. But it just seemed basically to bring art, no matter what an artist was doing. In other words, it meant that the artists were not working on that, on that polemic. But they were simply from someplace else.

AVIS BERMAN: Tell me, in your experience in working in France, because you certainly examined Algeria several different times, are there any Algerian artists that you met in France proper, in Paris? Or was there any sense of looking for a place where Algerian artists showed? Or if that was any part of the [inaudible]?

DENNIS ADAMS: It wasn't something that I remember. There was in this show that was done at the Musée d'Art Moderne that I did with Alfredo and Jeff—and now I have to think of the artist. It was a French artist, and he had worked a little bit on the subject of Algeria. I don't know, remember whether he had Algerian—whether he was from Algeria; I think maybe not. Or maybe he was part—I don't remember that story really. But certainly he—I remember him having a strong interest in my work. And he was the only one that actually wanted to talk about those issues. But I don't remember much. Nor did I really become friendly with him [Louis Jammes —DA].

AVIS BERMAN: You know, I find it astonishing because, of course, I'm just looking back, that you would just see it as such an obvious sort of thing, the way, you know, racism is in our—against African-Americans and other groups. And I'm just asking, did you—were there any political demonstrations or, if not the right wing or some other places, that here you are this American—I'm caricaturing this at the moment—parachuting in, dealing, picking a their issue. And, there was racism at home, or you were a stranger. As opposed to seeing it in a fresh way, that—you know, what I'm talking about.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. Well, of course that word "parachuting in" was seen to be coming in on the pallet of language of that moment. I remember being accused of parachuting into many places. But, of course, that's what the transmission of culture is. We all parachute in, and we should. The problem is not that there should be less parachuting in, there should be more. We should all be parachuting into each other's cultures and trying to rethink it and, sharing information and commentary. You know, I hate this notion that every, that we start to—First of all, we invest in the illusion of the native. And I believe, I mean, I believe it is—both the concept of the stranger and the native is a kind of an illusion that we all play with. And, I guess, maybe living in New York for a long time I've really learned that that's an illusion. You know, when do we begin our native moment? [Laughs] I'm still waiting for mine in New York in some ways. I still never have felt like a native here. Or that I can really comment on the politics of the city or something.

Also there is oftentimes the ability of strangers to see something, you know, for the first time, and to respond. And there's a freshness to fresh eyes on the street, right? Just as the native can be very tired, perceptually. But I would say both are an illusion. And the other way of looking at it is simply like, well, I can just, you know, bring my wares to Paris, bring my abstract paintings to Paris, that I make in my New York studio; but isn't it more respectful to go to a place and study and research and invest in the context of the place a little bit, and try to make a response even if it's naive? No? You see, I can see that as more—the other's more problematic to me. Me parachuting in with my, you know, my Mark Rothko paintings, you know, into Paris in 1950 or something. That might be, you know, the kind of colonization of Europe with Abstract Expressionism. That would be more problematic, I think. But, you know, I don't want to point fingers either. That was a different generation. I'm just trying to create a polemic now.

But, you know, yeah, there were all of those issues. But I like the politics of being a stranger. I want to remain a stranger in my own land and a stranger in other lands. Whatever my own land is. I don't have a land, I guess. But I'm interested in that for all of its benefits and limitations. And I would—you know, what more can I say? It's been a good learning curve for me. I think I transmitted some ideas to others, and I've learned a great deal. And isn't that what culture's about?

AVIS BERMAN: And when you went there, had the idea of Algeria germinated here? Or when you went there, what began to happen?

DENNIS ADAMS: I didn't know when I stepped into Algeria that it was such an enormous site. Meaning that I was—I knew a little bit about it from my reading. But I didn't know what a

taboo subject it was in France. And it was truly taboo. What I had proposed, a project for the Musée d'Art Moderne, working on Algeria—and I'm about to accuse them of something—they conveniently lost all the drawings for that installation and did not want to go through with it. Of which I quickly produced a second set of drawings. And I can never prove that, you know—They truly could have been—No, the thing is the drawings had been stolen from the curatorial offices.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that's good; if someone wants to steal them, that shows that there was reaction.

DENNIS ADAMS: There was reaction. Who knows? You know, I can't be sure. But there was certainly resistance to that.

AVIS BERMAN: So if there was resistance, you must have known you were on the right track.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, yes. But the other thing is, was that, what I don't—what I've never liked—is that if you pick a scandalous topic, it is only diagnosed in terms of the scandal, the journalistic read. Because I'm not interested in the journalistic read on my work. And of course, you know, the kind of work I did, it had journalistic moments. But I was always interested in something more nuanced, that looked at it from, you know, a deeper, a more philosophical or artistic perspective. And of course there would be journalistic windows within that way.

AVIS BERMAN: But they are more subtle than some other works I've seen. As a matter of fact, I should ask you: I have seen in the literature that your name is occasionally coupled with Hans Haacke. How do you feel about that?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, I would consider that—I'm a very different kind of artist. But I would consider it an honor. He's a very dear friend, and we've been friends for a number of years. But the sensibilities are completely different. He is—I mean, Hans is much, much more—flat-footed than I am and when I say "flat-footed," that's not a critical comment.

AVIS BERMAN: No, no.

DENNIS ADAMS: He's wonderfully flat-footed. Normally if I say flat-footed, it would be critical. But with Hans it's his flat-footedness that I adore. He's the most flat-footed character I ever met. He's got his feet firmly planted on the ground. And I think he's done some great work. I interviewed him about a year and a half ago at the CAA [College Art Association]. I did an interview with him. And in doing that interview, I had to research the work again and look back at it. And I respect a lot of it so much. Especially that work where he just went in and researched a topic and just retold the story; and in retelling it, you know, as he takes one painting and analyzed who owned it—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: —that it reveals this idea of layering and kind of, you know, what we might call the glazes, you know, that are over the painting that he undoes. And it's just absolutely brilliant. So simple, the idea of [inaudible].

AVIS BERMAN: Or was it at the Whitney that he took or the Phillips Collection and who all the people were and all the trustees and their connections?

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: That was just deceptively simple. But, hey, try doing it. It doesn't get done in an hour or two.

DENNIS ADAMS: And he's one of a kind. And I think he kind of thinks that he chose; although in my interview with him, I could not get him—I wanted to take him off his political topics and reveal that he's in fact a master of storytelling. Meaning, that he picks the right symbols to uncover. That he picks this chocolate master in Cologne—we'll need to come up with a name for the interview. I'm having a blank. But that the man made his money with chocolate. You see something that is so rich, so extraordinary, so embodied with taste.

AVIS BERMAN: Are we talking about Peter Ludwig?

DENNIS ADAMS: Peter Ludwig.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. And you see—and what I had asked Hans at the time was, would you have gone after the person that had given all of his paintings to the collection if that person had sold dreck. And of course he said he would. But he's very, very shrewd about—the right metaphors are kind of connected to these sites that he opens. And I think he's brilliant at that, really brilliant at that. And he's also one of the most humble and pure figures that I've met in the art world. He's a lovely man.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I wonder, do you feel that he's had any impact on your work?

DENNIS ADAMS: I wish he had more. Okay? There would certainly be some overlays. And there were probably a trick or two that I learned from him. But I would say that I'm much more of a—I'm much more all over the place, and I'm much more probably tied to an old-fashioned existential practice. I'm probably much closer to Hitchcock than Haacke. [Berman laughs.] Okay?

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: Although, you know, for the art world's sake, they would like to throw everybody into the same can. But at the end of everyone's life, and you really start to decipher things, all those groupings of artists and things, they don't make much sense at the end of the day. You know, they each had unique qualities, right?

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Or what happens is a group exhibits together, and then they're looked as a group for the rest of their lives, even though it was a brief moment, because it's easier. Or because someone, as you say—

DENNIS ADAMS: But I think I was more associated probably with [inaudible] and Alfredo Jaar than I was Haacke because Haacke would have been identified as a kind of earlier generation, at least that would be my take. Although there were times when both—or all of us—were probably, you know, thrown in with Haacke.

AVIS BERMAN: And do you think you had any influence or impact on his work or his sensibilities?

DENNIS ADAMS: No. I would say no. Hans is his own—Hans is clearly his own man. You know, he's probably 15 years older than I am, and he was the first at so many things, including ecological art. Hans is a first. He's an original. And he has a lot of—there's a lot of dimension to his works. I'm much more of, again, of a kind of a loose poetic figure that—my research topics don't necessarily lead to the, you know, just the facts, ma'am. It goes down another kind of a path.

AVIS BERMAN: And there's an atmosphere—I think, you try to create an atmosphere. Maybe I'm wrong. But I get the sense.

DENNIS ADAMS: I like that word.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: That's a good word. I've never heard that used to describe my work. Atmosphere. I could buy into that, yes. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, you need to create it to go back and look at something in a new way that—of the kinds of questions you're dealing with. Because they're never cut and dried to begin with. So I don't know. You have to enter it, that's all I can tell you of that. I mean, that's my feeling. Now you had said that it was hard to do work in Paris. And you got a grant from DAAD [Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst-German Academic Exchange Services], from the German Academy. So you were in Berlin for a year. So was the situation different? It should be. But what was it like to work in Berlin, and what kind of work did you produce?

DENNIS ADAMS: I arrived in January 1989. The [Berlin] Wall would be down by the fall of that year.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, you witnessed that?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, no I did not because the day the Wall came down I'd flown back because I was doing something at the Whitney. [Berman laughs.] And was also in those day someone on the move a lot. I had a lot of work. And I was living in Berlin, but I was not always there. Berlin, when I arrived in January of 1989, it was absolutely—and I guarantee—it was the saddest place. It rained and it rained. And you know the weather's terrible there in the winter. And I lived right along the Wall in Kreuzberg. They encouraged me to go to Kreuzberg because they promised me—or not promised me—but they thought that I would be drawn to what they called the multiculturalism of Berlin which would be more centered at Kreuzberg.

AVIS BERMAN: Is that still a Turkish neighborhood there?

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. But there was nothing multicultural about it at all. They were simply Turks and anarchists. It was bicultural and divided by my apartment. It set right along The Wall. And in the backyard were anarchists—squatters—young people; a lot of them heroin addicts and some of them—Well, I don't know. But they were involved in a lot of stuff. A wild group with some pretty mean dogs. And in the front yard, because there was a medical clinic down below me, there was a Turkish community, where the men and women were very separate, and they were burning effigies of Salman Rushdie on my front yard. And so if I went into the living room and I looked out my window—and I had big windows—I was immersed in the Turkish community. If I went back to the bedrooms or the bathrooms, I was looking literally down into the anarchists, literally watching people shooting heroin day and night there.

So there was the Wall. There was the squatters. And then I was another wall. And the Turks were on the other side. And I must admit I learned a lot about living in that kind of—in the world of the double. And it was at that moment that I began playing with all of these doubles in my works. A kind of *Rorschach idea. You know, kind of folding the paper and seeing the other side of something. And that ran through the work for the next year or two. And that all came out of Berlin. You know, the border crossings, the Wall, the—I don't know. It affected my thinking a lot.*

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I know, to be plunged into that environment, you couldn't have made it up.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. And I was there with some wonderful people. I was there was Ilya Kabakov and I was there with Susan Sontag. I was there with—oh, God, I need to think of his name—Micha Ullman from Israel, the artist that did this beautiful monument in Berlin about the book burning. His daughter was actually dating my son for a while. So we—it was a wonderful moment. And, oh—And the most important thing was is I met Ed Kienholz, whom I became very good friends with. There was no—At that moment there was no—Pretty much, at least from my perspective all the culture that was happening would be happening around the DAAD. I mean, that's why it was there to bring artists into this island, you know. To make culture in this place where there probably was very little. Although, maybe that's an illusion. Maybe that's from my own misunderstanding. But I was at a party one night organized by the DAAD. And Ed Kienholz, I remember he walked across—I don't think I knew who he was or what he looked like. I remember seeing a photograph in Life Magazine when I was a kid, I think. He looked like Burl Ives.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, that would've been from the Ferus Gallery [Los Angeles] days, you know, 20 years earlier or so.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, it would've been. But he was still, I think, always a little overweight, but got fat. But this man walked across this vast room kind of towards me. And he came up and he said something kind of negative. Maybe that this was—nobody was interesting at this party. He said, "I saw you across the room. And I want to meet you." Or something. It was very odd. Then he invited me to—the next day, it was a Sunday, I believe, and he invited me to have buttermilk at some little Turkish restaurant in Kreuzberg where we used to hang out. And I used to meet him singlely or sometimes with Nancy on Sundays in Berlin. And he took me in his car, and he drove me around Berlin. And he took me to the studios of younger artists. And he did try to open up this kind of local culture to me. And the wonderful thing was he had no—or at least he didn't let on that he had any—sense of quality. He showed me the worst things and presented them as wonderful. They were abysmal. I saw some of the worst art produced by young people that I've ever seen. And he loved and supported every moment of it. He was a great man, and a helluva lot more generous than I was or than I am

today. He was a lovely man.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, he sounds—well, he was patient with all of them, I guess.

DENNIS ADAMS: He was patient. Yes. But that was fun. And it was Ed Kienholz that taught me about black money. I remember one day he gave me—I started to make a lot of money. Not a lot.

AVIS BERMAN: Comparatively.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, all of a sudden, you know, I'd have $50,000 in cash coming in from something I sold. You know, all of a sudden—I never thought an artist could make money. I seemed to be making money. And I mentioned this to Ed, and he said, "Well, you know, you've got to make sure it's off the books." [They laugh.]

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, that's what he meant by "black money."

DENNIS ADAMS: By black money. And then he, of course, you know—and of course I'm from Iowa, so I do everything on the books because I'm kind of a nerd. But I remember talking about that, and he had beautiful stories about pistols and Idaho. And I don't remember all ways of getting it and ways of defending it. And it was just ah! They were beautiful stories.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. If nothing else—I suppose—I think, your work in Europe is tax-free anyway.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But it is interesting that he had figured out what to do. Maybe he had a Swiss bank account. Who knows?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, it was—stuff was going through Switzerland. I remember him talking about Switzerland somehow. Something was going on there. You could leave cash with these people in Switzerland in boxes or something like that.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, my God! Kienholz had enough money to have a box of cash? [Laughs]

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. So anyway, he was a very fun guy. And very, very spirited. He was living both in Berlin and in Idaho. And he was, you know, he was buying things in the flea markets. And I even went to the flea market with him a few days. But he became a little bit of a companion in Berlin. More than others. Although I knew Micha Ullman a little bit, too. And just briefly Kabakov and his wife I knew a little bit.

AVIS BERMAN: Does sound like a good group of people.

DENNIS ADAMS: And Kabakov totally charmed me—what a charming man.

AVIS BERMAN: It would seem to me that I think the Turks still aren't integrated into Germany to this day. That that would be kind of an [inaudible] split in the society.

DENNIS ADAMS: And I played with that in one work that I did at Hamburg. I used a big photograph of two Turkish women looking at this architectural model. And it's a scandal at the time. I think this idea of parachuting in, I put some of that at this time. And I wanted to put—Well, the story is quite simple. I had this—I'd been invited to this [inaudible], this place called Art; in other words it had been a museum in Hamburg, and now it was going to become a cultural center. And the name was Kunstinsel, which means "art island." And I love the title. And I thought, okay, "art island." Let's isolate ourselves from the world in this kind of art island. what I proposed, and what was built, was I proposed that the model for that be re-photographed with two Turkish women looking at it [Kunstinel, 1989, Hamburg, Germany]. That's all. No more than that. Simple. Well, it wasn't so simple because we had to get Turkish women.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: And at first I thought, well, I live in a Turkish community. And I contacted some people to make inroads there, and it seemed to be more difficult. And then somebody said, Well, you know, let's go to a modeling agency, and let's contact the Turkish community through those people that are interested in posing for photographs and submit a portfolio

and things. There must be some. And sure enough, there were all of these Turkish women that were connected to this. Okay. And I liked that idea because I thought I don't want a picture of these old-fashioned Turkish women, you know, in their schmattas, their scarves, and all that. It could be kind of a cliché. Why not picture two young perky Turkish women that are being liberated from all of that. Maybe that would be—it would be a little hipper and less, you know, like the stranger kind of coming in.

AVIS BERMAN: And it would be less exploitative because they were people who wanted to do it. They weren't being dragooned into doing it.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. Yes. Perhaps there was that as well. But nevertheless, all those women who showed up—and there was thirteen or fourteen—they were extraordinarily beautiful, these young Turkish women. I thought, my God! My heart was throbbing as they walk in. They all brought their mothers. And what happened was—And I ended up using two women with scarves because—And I posed—I still have those photographs somewhere. But the two —What happened was on the break, there was a break where we went to get some coffee or something for everybody. And two of those Turkish mothers recognized one another. They hadn't seen each other in a long time. And they were just happily sitting by the model, and they were talking over it. You know, they didn't look at it, like they didn't give a shit. And I saw it out of the corner of my eye, and I told the guy that was on the camera, I said, "Hit that." And he shot it. And that was the photograph that stood for what we did. So all the clichés I was trying to avoid ended up being there. But there's something liberating about those two women. They were in their own world. It's a real moment.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. But also they were oblivious to it so—

DENNIS ADAMS: They were oblivious.

AVIS BERMAN: So it seems like even better.

DENNIS ADAMS: It was even better. So in the end we used it. But you would not find Turks in advertising at that time. They were not part of advertising culture. They were certainly not part of political culture. And so it was very radical to see them on a billboard. And all it said was *Kunstinsel* and it became the ad for the new building. And I like that piece.

AVIS BERMAN: Now when I mentioned the Wall before, you had said, you had—you missed it because you were back in—you were at the Whitney. Is that when you were installing that *Ticket Booth*, [1989, Lobby, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, NY] there?

DENNIS ADAMS: I came back to install it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. [. . . —DA]

DENNIS ADAMS: It was for—yes, "Image World," another horrible show that the Whitney probably did. But Dara Birnbaum who was there working on a piece, she walked up to me in the Whitney Museum and said the Berlin Wall is coming down. I'll never forget that. And I didn't know. I mean, it must have, you know—I don't know why I didn't hear it through the media. I'd just gotten back, and she told me. She was the messenger. And I don't know if I should blame the messenger.

AVIS BERMAN: And you thought, oh, my God, I'm missing this? Or—

DENNIS ADAMS: I thought—yes. And I thought immediately I should get the hell out of the Whitney and fly back there. I still had my house there. But I can't explain it, I did not. And it's been—And in some ways I love having, you know, you end up—There are very few times in history, in your own personal history, do you get to be part of history. And I would've absolutely—I was in the right place at the right time with my camera ready and my soul ready for that. And I ended up here. And I now think that that was motivated by the angels. I wasn't meant to—I love it. I think I literally left the day before or something, you know. I mean, it's unbelievable, right? It's a total scandal. But anyway, it is what it is. *Coitus interruptus*. [Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Exactly. Or here's another reason to rail against the Whitney? Who knows?

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But you must have—But clearly you had planned that piece for a while. And you proposed—Of course not; it's usual not being in the main arena. But being on the side or dealing with the—I remember that so well with, you know, the homeless men and the—That was in the—Was that the Giuliani—?

DENNIS ADAMS: It was shot at Tompkins Square Park, what was going on at that time.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: So they were shot there, and they were brought into that moment.

AVIS BERMAN: Was that Giuliani or pre-Giuliani? No matter.

DENNIS ADAMS: There was lot of—there was a lot of—I got a lot of flak for that. But anyway—it is what it is.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, from the museum or from—

DENNIS ADAMS: No, it was basically some kind of article in *Art in America* ["Ticket Booth," *Art in America*, v. 78, February 1990: 126-7]. And then, of course, you know, they don't know—but yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But you had been doing these—

DENNIS ADAMS: People said that museum guards—that the article in *Art in America*, which was not true, and I wrote a rebuttal—was that the museum guards took offense to me because of this. Because it was a depiction of Black Americans, and there were Black guards. But that was not true. That did not happen because I called the Whitney and found out if that had happened. And it did not. And so I wrote a very, I think, good rebuttal to [*The Critical Frame* —DA] *Art in America* [April 1990:73]. And, you know, the guy was looking to—he might have had a point, I mean, in what he said, you know. Maybe it was true. But, you know, I mean, not that it was true that the guards said that. But that he was trying to make the case, and it was the wrong thing to do, this exploitive—Or whatever it was. But the fact that he used information that was not true to support his thesis.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, first of all, not all the guards at the Whitney were Black. Not all Black guards at the Whitney might think alike. And maybe some of the White guards—I mean, there's no way that everyone there—

DENNIS ADAMS: That's probably in the article; I don't remember, but it's probable. Yes. [Inaudible.] But it was a time where everything was monolithic. It was a time where people were divided. The cultural wars were in place. And, you know, if you were this kind of person, you could do this; and if you were another kind of person, you couldn't do this, so you didn't. It's really a moment of being very politically correct. And—

AVIS BERMAN: I guess part of the issue was supposed to be, oh, you were white and taking the picture of a Black person.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, that was the issue.

AVIS BERMAN: But you had also been doing up to this point cash transaction pieces, too.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: You would've—I mean, it was part of your ongoing work at this time.

DENNIS ADAMS: It was part of my ongoing work. And I was interested in that idea of—kind of as an extension out of the Bus Shelters, that it was a place of transaction.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: Or something else went on. There was a kind of utility buried into that, the story, a kind of decoy.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Money was changing hands.

DENNIS ADAMS: But I had a helluva time with the Whitney because of the control issues

around the money, protecting the money in that booth. Oh, that was enormous! Forget the other story in *Art in America*. That was the bigger story. And with the guy who was in charge of that at the Whitney there were huge discussions, there were meetings, there were fights about my design and whether somebody could bring their hand over to get, you know, something.

AVIS BERMAN: That should've been printed out as part of what was going on. Now would that have been like John Murray, the head of security, or maybe Palmer Wald, the administrator?

DENNIS ADAMS: Wow! You know, the names of these people!

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I wrote a history of the Whitney Museum. So I was in there for ten—but more when it was on Eighth Street, the early history when it was on Eighth Street. But I was there researching in those archives for ten years. So I know everybody there.

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, It was probably all of those people. But I don't remember their names. Yes. There was a lot of discussion.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. I can't believe Tom Armstrong would've [inaudible] that kind of—

DENNIS ADAMS: Lisa—

AVIS BERMAN: Phillips.

DENNIS ADAMS: Phillips was there then.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. She was. It's hard to believe that most people paying for a museum ticket are thinking this is the way to go, that grand theft was high on the list. I mean, when you think that someone's going to steal something from a museum, it would be art. Actually what happened at the Whitney some years ago was that they found that all this money had been stolen from the admissions. But it was someone inside the museum embezzling.

DENNIS ADAMS: It's always an inside job.

AVIS BERMAN: You know, a ticket taker there, yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Let me see what I want to do.

DENNIS ADAMS: Kafka talked a lot about ticket takers. I love that about Kafka.

AVIS BERMAN: I just got some photocopies of things, of some of the pieces that you did during this time. Because while we're still in the '80s and '90s, we might look at some specific works here, if you want to comment on them. Oh, and here—yes. This was—Oh, this was a question I forgot to ask you on the *Bus Shelter I*. How did you feel about it being paired with a piece, you know, with Jenny Holzer's piece?

DENNIS ADAMS: I did that.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, you did that!

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, sure. That had nothing to do with anybody else but me.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: I wrote those texts. I was changing the photographs and the text. And at one point I—Jenny Holzer was just kind of emerging at the same moment. And I asked her if she would construct one of the texts.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: That's all. And I went over to her place, and she was eating a vanilla ice cream cone. [Berman laughs.] That's all I remember. And she had a little drawing for me. And she had created the orientation in the wrong way in that drawing. And she tried to do a

very neat job of it, and I quickly told her it was the wrong orientation. And she kind of giggled, ate her ice cream, and I said, “Okay. I’ll rework it.” And that’s how it started. You know, I was—I’ve only seen her like about three times in my life. I don’t really know Jenny. But that was the first time I’d ever met her.

AVIS BERMAN: And you had—yes. You could get another artist, and you didn’t have to go through the bureaucracy or anything?

DENNIS ADAMS: My piece.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: I never asked.

AVIS BERMAN: Because I didn’t know how much you collaborated, I guess, that’s my—

DENNIS ADAMS: With the public art. No, it was loosey-goosey. Today it would all be a mixed kettle. And already by the time of *Bus Shelter II* [1986], which there was a little, of which they were connected to that as well, there was some—they were already trying to manage those images a little bit. It had already started there. And that’s this time in the mid-’80s. But, you know—

AVIS BERMAN: That was ‘86 when it was installed at 14th Street and Third Avenue.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: The Rosenbergs [photographs].

DENNIS ADAMS: But you had said earlier, you know, and I had made the claim, that they were not site-specific. But in fact there was some idea on my part that that would be near 14th Street, you know, where all the demonstrations had taken place around the Rosenbergs. The Rosenbergs’ children ended up in that shelter somehow. There was something about that.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, the Meeropols [Robert and Michael Rosenberg, adopted by Abel and Anne Meeropol -Ed.]

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And did you hear from them?

DENNIS ADAMS: No. But there was some, you know, something filtered down, you know. There’s always stuff being filtered through something. But, no, I never spoke to them. But they certainly knew about that.

AVIS BERMAN: You know, they—

DENNIS ADAMS: But, you know, that’s Jenny.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. I’m supposed to interview her eventually, too. And this is, to me, a really fascinating piece which was called *Ba(b)el* [1984, maquette for an unrelated project —DA], and in the catalog I have, it was never realized. Is it still not a work?

DENNIS ADAMS: It was never realized, no.

AVIS BERMAN: Did you—

DENNIS ADAMS: I don’t know what to say about this. It was a model that I built about ten or eleven feet tall. It was built, and eventually I think we constructed it as a multiple, as a way of maybe raising money for some other pieces. But I don’t think that whole story worked out to well. But it would’ve—it was an attempt to situate a speaker between a series of photographs. And eventually Bertolt Brecht ended up in it. And, you know, at that moment—when I look back on this, I would never do anything like this today. But at that moment it was very much connected to—I had been very influenced by the Russian Constructivists. Or not maybe directly influenced, but thinking a lot about them. And of course the speaker’s podium had been part of their—you know, had been part of the vernacular of the—what do I want to call it?—the icons or the structures that they used. So that one is probably clearly,

you know, when the Bus Shelters were clearly my own, although they would have also referenced their kiosks that they built for the street. This probably was more of a throwback.

AVIS BERMAN: To a tower, yes. Well, one thing, because you certainly showed it with Patricia Hearst and then you see it with *Babel*, is that you certainly would use—and maybe it was the format you chose—you really began to use serial repetition a lot.

DENNIS ADAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVIS BERMAN: It certainly makes something effective. I mean, there's nothing like serial repetition for impact.

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, like a doubling up.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you see a series of images.

DENNIS ADAMS: A series of images.

AVIS BERMAN: Sometimes the same, sometimes different—with *Patricia Hearst* [*A thru Z*, 1991] in rows. I would challenge you to say that even though—I think what you always—You certainly never wanted monumentality. You wanted anti-monumentality. But that certainly that sensibility gives a piece, monumentality.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right. It's true. I think when I was younger, I had more of a sense of monumentality than I do today. I think if left to my own instincts in my 30s, I could've produced a monument or two. I don't know why. Today I'm on the other side of the scale of that. And I'm very critical of it. But there was an attempt in the architecture that I built, that it would be small, it would be intimate, and that it would be fragmented in ways that were anti-monumental. So I would argue that even within the context of architecture that you're describing, to the degree that all built form has a monumental cast to it, mine had arguing against it in the ways that it could and still remain—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that's true certainly because it was an open structure. That certainly helped. I mean, so it was intimate. But the image repeated. Again, a Warhol—Warholian among other devices, you know, repeating an image over and over, is very powerful—yes, from TV and other sorts of things.

DENNIS ADAMS: But the *Patricia Hearst* really had to do with this idea of multiple identities. And so that—Like, for example, if you go back to the Warhol analogy, if we take *Ethel Scull* [1963]—I don't know how many times he—Warhol did it, 36 times or something—that's not like doing Patricia Hearst 36 times.

AVIS BERMAN: No.

DENNIS ADAMS: There's a big difference there. I was—my gesture was very Joyceian. It was really the opposite of Warhol. It wasn't this idea of a kind of framing the idea of the multiple as a kind of formal device that represented consumer culture. But this idea of a multiple to represent multiplicity of personality.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. And your pictures—those images were all, were different ones. His were always the same. If you have 32 *Soup Cans* [Andy Warhol, *Cambell's Soup Cans*, 1962] different flavors, but it's—

DENNIS ADAMS: If you have 36 *Ethel Scull*, they're all Ethel Scull. All of my images of Patricia Hearst were Patricia Heart as this, Patricia Hearst as that, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. I'm going to move a little bit away from some of the Bus Shelters, unless you want to talk about the one in Toronto [*Bus Shelter VIII*, 1988, Queen and Bay Street, Toronto, Canada], which we haven't discussed.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, we can if you want. I don't know. It's the best one for my money. It's the most successful.

AVIS BERMAN: Because?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, it was the most successful because it was the most trimmed-down architecturally. It was basically not designed. It was dead on arrival. I made two readymade

bus shelters pretty much. They had glass-enclosed bus shelters there at that time because it was cold in Toronto. And not that I duplicated what they had on the street, but I created a kind of generic version. There were several versions that they had on the street, as I remember. So it was just to create a glass container where somebody could go under and get warm. And then create another container where you couldn't enter it. It was a dead space; it was a void. And a void that would somehow play with this idea of history and memory. Long before Liebeskind's idea of the void that would appear in Berlin. Not long before, but before. Not that I necessarily would—you know, he had this big historical idea of the void. But I was playing with this idea of void in terms of memory. So a space of utility and a space of non-utility.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: Okay? And then one became a projector, and one became a screen. And the two got kinda—and trapped between literally the double take, you know, between two like or very similar structures, right? That was a sweet piece. And also with this piece here, with the second shelter, there was no architectural placement for it. I simply told the crane [operator—DA] to lower it into place and bolt it down. And I said, "Put it near." And wherever it came down, I told my assistants to bolt it into place. I didn't want any of that goddamn, you know, like some artist sitting back making some kind of compositional decision. I wanted to be arbitrary on the street. That was a lot of fun. And it was fucking cold when we bolted that down. Jesus Christ! I think the wrenches froze to the hands of my assistants. It was the—I think, the coldest day they had on record. We could hardly move. Anyway—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. And this was in—this was accepted to have outsiders.

DENNIS ADAMS: That was a press shot, but a press shot that I liked very much. It reminded me of—well, what did it remind me of at the time? I can't even think of. But it was—it was just this—it was an actual protest that had taken place on the street.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: So it was reframed, an existing protest. But I liked it very much. It was a photograph that seemed to have a lot of magic in it in terms of the psychology between the figures and things.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, certainly it's got action. And then this guy on the right here. It's like the, this [inaudible].

DENNIS ADAMS: I can't remember it now. I haven't looked at it in years. Oh, no, they formed a circle. That's it. It looked a little bit like Matisse's *Dance I*. There was something very beautiful about it. Not to reduce it to aesthetics. But I like that circle in the foreground and the police line in the background.

AVIS BERMAN: I don't know—because certainly, as you say, it depicts something. Whereas you [inaudible] the other, some of the other, one of the other great difficulties in Canada, the ones who do not live in Quebec, know that speaking French is a political act. And they're very much against it. But I don't know if you could do anything except having signs that were English and French or something. I mean, I don't know how that would be something. And of course later on they were trying to secede.

DENNIS ADAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVIS BERMAN: That's a natural, too.

DENNIS ADAMS: I worked in Montreal a couple of times.

AVIS BERMAN: And this was one—and this was different and not, you know—This piece which is in—that you did for the gallery in Brussels.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: "Public Access." [1989]

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. That was a piece that I drew in Berlin. I did a very beautiful set of drawings and presented that piece. I remember it was my first moment of concentration in Berlin. I sat down, and I drew that piece. I sent the plans to those—to the gallerist there, and

that was all blindly constructed. Meaning I was not present when it was constructed. But I believed in those people. They seemed very—they seemed quite rigorous in terms of what they were doing. And it's a very good gallery—it still is. Now it's called Galerie Greta Meert. But it was called [Galerie] Meert-Rihoux in those days. And when I came to see that piece, I came for the opening. And, of course, why I hadn't come for the installation, I don't remember now. But when I got there, and I saw that piece, I'll tell you, that was something. It had things that I never imagined. One was the reflection in the windows. It played with inside and outside, between a basketball court outside the gallery. I simply rebuilt a section of that inside. And I placed—it was in an immigrant neighborhood, and I placed a group of male figures; so it's a kind of a saturated male space, both on the outside group and inside. And then you had the reflections on the windows. It was—

AVIS BERMAN: It looks good. I mean, I just picked it out because even from the photograph, you can see how many zones there are in that.

DENNIS ADAMS: There were so many spatial zones between—It was the first time I really learned about public and private. And I knew now that I can work in interior spaces that in time can telescope out into public spaces. They did a beautiful job. It was so—I was so pleased at that opening. I'll never forget. It was the only time I ever walked in and I thought, Oh, my God! I'd really done something. That may be one of my best pieces I ever did actually. And it was—I think that piece will stand. You know, I hate so much of what I've done. But that was brilliant. And again, it's one of these things where because of the phenomenology of the reflections, the glass, the day, the night, you get a lot of things happen that you can't imagine on paper. Also because this is—the back of the hoop where the photograph is installed, it's the same here as it is out here. But there's a shift in terrain. So this is at regulation height out here. And this is lower. And all of those little nuances, the shifts in terms of the physicality was fantastic. At that moment in time, I was very—and probably still am; now I'm getting excited. Maybe I'm not enough anymore. But I was very interested in the idea of the physical form, structure of a piece in terms of generating the imagery and the meanings. In other words it was a total work of art for me, this thing, you know. I was really trying to make all of that work.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. No, I think it's amazing because you've got this blatant-looking gate or prison, and then all of these little subtle movements [inaudible] spatial zones. And you've got these heights or these risers or whatever these are. You know, you're making horizontal—all sorts of natural horizontals and verticals, too. I mean, formally it seems to really work as well as thematically.

DENNIS ADAMS: They turned it into a scandal, that piece. The neighborhood came and said that you did not get permission to hook that to the back of our basketball hoop. I didn't know that they didn't get permission. And there were negotiations with the community. And I don't remember now if the piece came down, if they had to take it down, early. Maybe they did. But the gallerists, who were lovely people but were primarily invested in Minimalist—Robert Mangold and others—high-end, lower high-end blue-chip people. And I think the gallery's still directed in that way. They had stepped out of their territory. And they were called upon now to speak to the community that surrounded them. And they were very wealthy people from the other side of town. I mean, you know, it was just—lovely people actually. Very supportive. And they'd done a fine job. They were professionals. But nevertheless, they were out of their element. And they'll probably never forgive me for that.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, they just didn't—probably just didn't realize it was going to happen.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. [. . . —AB]

DENNIS ADAMS: I requested that all the names of the contractors be added here as there were—as they got further along with the project [refers to *Kunstinsel*, 1989, Hamburg —DA].

AVIS BERMAN: Did that make a difference to the contractors? Did they appreciate it?

DENNIS ADAMS: I don't know. I don't know that. I mean, that's why those plaques are there. This was a standard—it's, you know, a standard kind of construction sign, the way they were built then.

AVIS BERMAN: Why did you say you hated most of the things you've made?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, not—I'm somebody that just has a lot of doubt about what I do. And I

have a lot of doubt about what other people do. I'm a critic, and I can't help it; it's my nature. I have a stinger.

AVIS BERMAN: [Laughs] Well, do you think it's more, you know, just being always discontented with one's work because you think you can do it better? Or if you look back, you think you could do it differently or better?

DENNIS ADAMS: Ah. Yes, I think if you're an artist, there's always a sense that, yes, it can be better. I'm sure it's true. I've never talked to a lot of artists about it. People must be doubtful. I think if you're not doubtful, there would be a big problem. Right.

AVIS BERMAN: Of course. No, I do not think contentment is a concept that one can accept for oneself.

DENNIS ADAMS: No, no. I mean, what would that mean? Although, there is the great-just the circumstance, that a work, as I've said, can step beyond your intentions. And if that happens, there's a bit of luck in that. It could have to do with the details. With any number of things, right? And then, again, it looks back at you, and it makes you feel small. That would be the hope. But, you know, you're only going to get that a few times.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. No, it's true. I mean, you can think—because I think most people would think, okay, once in a while I've made a contribution or whatever those words are. I mean, even Duchamp said, you know, if you have six or seven ideas in your life, you're really lucky.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. Carl Andre said one.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: He said, one life isn't enough for one idea.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I guess if the idea is big enough.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. And I know there was a lot of flak about Carl Andre. But I'll tell you, his thinking and his work is—he's a very good artist. I can't think of anyone better. That's a real artist for me—for my money. And his new book—there's a new book out on his writings that's absolutely, absolutely brilliant.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, what people say about him has nothing to do with the art. I mean, you know, that was a terrible tragedy.

DENNIS ADAMS: And I don't want to analyze it. I don't know a thing about it.

AVIS BERMAN: No, no.

DENNIS ADAMS: So I just stay out of it.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, it had nothing to do with him. But obviously it scarred the rest of his career, whether it had to do with it or not.

DENNIS ADAMS: I had dinner with him one night [in Münster, Germany —DA]—a couple of nights. And he was so humble about art and expressed a lot of humor and a lot of doubt. I must admit I liked him every much.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, many years ago before his wife died, I worked on the Addison Gallery of American Art Permanent Collection Catalog [*Addison Gallery of American Art,* Susan Faxon, et al; New York, Addison Gallery of American Art: 1996]. And he was from Quincy [MA], as you know.

DENNIS ADAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVIS BERMAN: And he had gone there and been nurtured there. And his works about Massachusetts, Quincy, and all of that and what he felt and his letters, they were just—they were wonderful.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: They were really—he was a true artist—as a teenager and on. And was very grateful to that art environment there. Taking this working-class kid and accepting him and letting him be free and do what he wanted. You know, all of this, these people said.

DENNIS ADAMS: You know, I have just immense respect for his work. It sometimes gets a little off the radar if I don't think about it. But if I start to think about him again, I can get very excited.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: And even the writings. You know, years ago I saw something in Paula Cooper [Gallery], you know—I want to call it concrete poetry for lack of a better word. I'm sure there's some better way of categorizing it. But it was one of the most beautiful shows I've ever seen. Just like [inaudible]. Beautiful.

AVIS BERMAN: Now this is—this is the book that I am giving back to you [*Dennis Adams/Transactions*, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, 1994 (catalogue)] because you—

DENNIS ADAMS: Okay. You can hold it longer if you need it.

AVIS BERMAN: No, I don't because I—

DENNIS ADAMS: Okay.

AVIS BERMAN: —I'm mainly; what was great is I marked three pieces that I thought were especially wonderful. And one of them was "Public Access." So we've already done that one. But I just thought—And maybe you could talk about it again because these are completely—One thing I like about these is they really open up—I mean, they're certainly built on the idea—some of them are built on the idea of the Bus Shelter. But they really open up into the landscape. And I think this piece, *Derry*, [1990] is absolutely terrific. Maybe you could talk about this and how it came about and what you did.

DENNIS ADAMS: It was a pretty successful piece. Now, all the things I said about being site-specific are no longer true when I speak about this piece. To the degree I was moving away from that, as I found myself moving more and more into kind of contested territories to work, you cannot—there is no space in a place like Derry in Northern Ireland that is not site-specific. Okay? [They laugh.] Because it's either owned or operated or relates symbolically to one community or the other. So the possibility of the clairvoyance I was speaking about earlier is impossible on a site like this. So one has to be site-specific. So, you know, one puts their feet in the shit, and they operate there, right? But I had a hard time there. I was invited to Derry by Declan McGonagle who's one of the most intelligent and loveliest human beings I ever worked with. When the angels ask me to recall, he'll be one of those characters that I was happy to have met in my life. And he knew every—he was not only culturally, you know, a very intelligent guy in the art community, I mean, he was kind of the central figure at that moment and probably still is in some way. But he also—he came from Derry, you see. He had a foot in the local community. And so he really knew all the fault lines between the Protestants and the Catholics. I guess, everyone who lived there would. But he, you know, he had a mind for it, and he really thought through it. And he was the one that did the walk throughs with me. He was a great guy.

AVIS BERMAN: And his name was again?

DENNIS ADAMS: Declan McGonagle.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: So had it not been for Declan, the piece would not have been so successful, I think. He gave me good orientation. The piece is quite simply built on the fault line between the Protestant community, which at that point was associated with kind of the interior of the city, and the Catholic community, on the bog side. And it was a soccer goalpost, a Gaelic goalpost used by the Catholics. You know, there were slight differences, I guess, in the armature of the two games. But this was clearly a symbol of Catholicism. And then I put that building where you would kick the ball through. I mean, it's actually quite—it's a strong piece. You know, that piece is actually in the book today on the history of contemporary art in Ireland, which is mostly Irish artists. And I'm happy to be drawn into

that history. It was also paint-bombed by the British Army. And I felt it was a total scandal they'd paint-bombed my work. And Declan I remember calling me and saying, "That means it struck and has been drawn into the symbolism. You're part of the urban landscape now. Dennis, you know this is great." And I said, "Yes!" [Laughs] You know.

AVIS BERMAN: And did you get photographs with the paint stains?

DENNIS ADAMS: I have photographs of the paint splattered over it, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And how did—The army was—Was this official or was this just sort of sanctioned, look-the-other-way vandalism by the army?

DENNIS ADAMS: I can't remember the whole story now. I think it was—That was the story that I heard on how that's done or—I think it's obvious it can't be official. The army wouldn't have paint-bombed such things, I wouldn't think. And I saw this, you know, this was now used as a kind of prison cell where you would look down into the Catholic community. It had a lot of layers to it, this piece.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. Exactly. Well, it seems to me that if you had—it seems to be a natural outgrowth of the "Public Access" piece in Brussels.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yeah. It was done about the same time. I was on a roll. But this time now playing with inside and outside between two communities, and really—But now what I did wrong there—not that I did anything wrong; I think this piece operated there and worked. But if I were to do it again today, I would do something of—if I could go back to that moment. And one of the regrets I have made—and you asked me about criticism—I realize it was too monumental. I wish I'd had something smaller. Jimmie Durham had built a piece in Derry before I got there. And he built a little surveillance camera hammered out of wood, and just put it in the middle of the field, not too far from here. It was so incidental, so ad hoc, and so hammered together, it will remain one of the great works of public art of the postwar era. It's never recorded in many of the books because, you know, these people aren't intelligent enough to know that it should be there. But it was a phenomenal work, and it's a better work than mine. My work was very instrumental. It was in the right place at the right time. It had the right scale. It spoke, it was a strong piece. But I like the trimmed-down quality of his. I think in an environment that's overloaded socially and politically, the idea is to do a small gesture. And have the small gesture drawn into the larger debate. Not to try to stand as erect as the debate itself.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, also maybe you're thinking the small piece is still there. Whereas yours is—

DENNIS ADAMS: No, I don't care about that.

AVIS BERMAN: No, no. Okay. Because you were just saying if maybe nobody noticed it, it would stay on longer.

DENNIS ADAMS: No, no. I didn't mean—When I mean stay on longer, I mean, stay in the symbolic imagination. I don't care how long a piece is on site. All you care about is if a piece lingers in another way. But this piece was in—I did a lot of very good research on this piece. And a lot of things came together quickly. I was shooting from the hip at that time. I was young. I had a—and I was also multitasking, something I would not be able to do today. I don't like to multitask. I prefer to be one, you know, one project at a time, one topic, and putting everything into it. A lot can be lost in multitasking, especially with works that are attempting to relate to a social sphere that is as loaded as this. You've got to know what the hell you're doing. But nevertheless I was probably young enough to multitask a little bit. And there was one project that was spilling into another a little bit. And when I look back today, it wasn't so bad, you know. Although, I couldn't do that today.

AVIS BERMAN: And so that was just, you know, that was a blown-up photograph. Was there paint on it or anything else like that before the paint-bomb? It's just a little hard to tell.

DENNIS ADAMS: No, no, no. There's no paint on it. That's a blown-up photograph. And that was a social housing project that had been removed because the Catholics used to throw Molotov cocktails and things from the roof down at the police. So they removed it. But again, you see all this Rorschach-ing that's going on. Remember I was talking about Berlin?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: I'm Rorschach-ing in a lot of these images here. And that's the double image. And, you know, I had never thought about that much that I was doing that. But, you know, see here: Bertolt Brecht and Rorschach again. But it was Thomas McEvilley who brought that to my attention. He was a respondent. I went with Hans Haacke and him—we were the Americans in part of a larger conference. Well, Hans is German, but we came from America. We went there for a large conference, and Thomas was a respondent to my work. You know, I showed my work, and he responded to it. He got up there and said things about my work that were just absolutely brilliant. I have them in a book somewhere. But he was talking about this idea of doubling, the Rorschach, and memory, and, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: It's true the Turkish piece, *Kunstinsel, that's another Rorschach. It's amazing that they fell into nearly identical poses. I mean, talk about, as you say, luck.*

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, I got lucky there.

AVIS BERMAN: So that is, whether it happened. But the fact that you saw it and loved it, and that was what you were going to use. You selected it.

DENNIS ADAMS: But it was Thomas McEvilley that made me conscious of that a little bit. He narrated it in a pretty smart way.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: You know that name?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I've met him once or twice. But I certainly know—I certainly respect—excuse me, I'm using this word respect—admire his writings tremendously.

DENNIS ADAMS: He's gotten quite known.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. No, I always admire people who do all sorts of things that I couldn't do at all.

DENNIS ADAMS: And it's deep; it's not art speak, you know. He's a classicist, and it comes from—it really has a broad base as well.

AVIS BERMAN: And, certainly your reputation was known by Declan McGonagle. But since you were based in Germany at the time, was it easier for other people in Europe to have you come? I mean, were you almost local for a while?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, no. I mean, I was probably from anywhere. I guess we can call Europe, Northern Europe, kind of local. But I was moving around there a lot.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: From one project to the next.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: And I did another piece with Declan, these little Bus Shelters—I think they're in that book—they are attached to a housing project.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, this one I was going to ask you about in the Netherlands, which since you certainly had several projects there. But this is kind of, shall we say, the bus shelters on steroids here in terms of—?

DENNIS ADAMS: I had all those Bus Shelters brought to site and installed there.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: But you know what? Everybody loved this piece. Hell, I'd let it go today. It was a little too spectacular for me. It really started to be a little bit over the top. Although visually, I mean, it was absolutely stunning. I don't know. It's not a piece that I feel as connected to probably conceptually. But it was sure beautiful. It was beautifully done. The organizers did it beautifully. I worked with a guy in the Netherlands. But it's a piece I'm not—

you know, as I mentioned, I [inaudible] there's a the piece that of course everybody loved; and here's the piece that everybody has forgotten about. You see, nobody gives a shit about this. You know, that never got reproduced and never will. And that's one of my favorite pieces.

AVIS BERMAN: That's Gateshead [Foyers, 1990, Gateshead, England], right?

DENNIS ADAMS: And that's Gateshead. And that I did with Declan as well. And why Declan was in England at that point, I don't remember. But he brought me there, and those were just little bus shelters that I took from the street and attached them to the social housing project, so they functioned as foyers you had to pass through. They were re-functionalized in relation to these workers' houses. I thought—And recently these little—the factories in that area had closed; there was a lot of unemployment, a lot of people were now contained in their homes. There was no place to go. There were no worksites. So this was really a kind of collapse of the worksites, the transit site, and the domestic site.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And then it looks like some grim piece of housing behind it, too, a high-rise or something.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, that was some kind of social housing. But those bus shelters fit perfectly. This was a piece—this may be one of my favorite, very favorite pieces. It was so sweet. It was so complicated. Of course, and because it was complicated, it will never stand out, you know. Truly for a work to have any symbolic value, it has to—in the long run it has to be very simple, you know? This had too many ideas in it. But, you know, that's the way the world is. But that's not the way I am. I can't help who I am.

AVIS BERMAN: But that's yours. That's the one that you're keeping after.

DENNIS ADAMS: So—

AVIS BERMAN: What I have to comment on because, number one because I remember it; but I thought it was hilarious. [. . . —AB] Is that when you did that piece [solo exhibition] for MoMA called "[Dennis Adams]: Road to Victory," [1991]—

DENNIS ADAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVIS BERMAN: Because I don't know if you researched Steichen himself or—

DENNIS ADAMS: I did, of course, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: He was so grandiose. And you caught that quality in that piece. You know, that when he came back, everybody had to call him "Captain Steichen."

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And the rest. Now who approached you at MoMA about doing a piece, and how did that come about? Because I think—was that your first like real installation at MoMA.

DENNIS ADAMS: I've only done—You mean--? I mean, I think they own a piece or something that I installed sometime. But, yes, that was the first time I ever—that was made for MoMA.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: And, yes, it's made for MoMA.

AVIS BERMAN: Absolutely.

DENNIS ADAMS: It was made for MoMA, and I own the piece, but it will always belong—it has only one site. And, yes, I did a lot of research at that moment.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, did you go into the permanent collection? I mean, was that supposed to be a project or part of the [inaudible] artists or what?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, that was part of the projects series. And for me that was, you know, probably I'd bad-mouthed the Whitney too much. Because MoMA was the first New York museum I ever saw. And there are so many things in their collection that I connected to spiritually and existentially. That's probably true of [inaudible]. But somehow MoMA was first.

It was the primal scene of my indoctrination into New York. No matter how bad they become and how corporate and all the complaints, I will always love it. One always loves the primal scene, right?

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: So for me the honor of stepping into MoMA, even though, I guess, today it's probably not much of an honor as it once was, but at least at that moment it was very important. And I tried to honor that by being respectful. And it was also the first time I was starting to think, okay, if I'm not on a public site that has a lot of a kind of back story, at least at MoMA there's a back story. It's not just another museum. It's MoMA, right? And there are probably a lot of back stories there. And that's a very good back story. And I began researching that. I met Steichen's mistress. His mistress was on-site.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, that was not Johanna, the wife, or Grace Mayer or—

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, I was told she was the mistress.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: As I remember.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: I don't think I was told she was the wife.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. Okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: Maybe that was the rumor.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Who knows? Well, there may have been—

DENNIS ADAMS: But she was very old, in her 90s.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, oh, that was probably Grace Mayer, who was a photography curator.

DENNIS ADAMS: But she was more than that.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: I hope she was more because I was told mistress.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, definitely. Oh, yes, yes. She was dumped for a much younger wife.

DENNIS ADAMS: Okay. I was totally excited that she had been captured physically and spiritually.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, no. She was his total acolyte for years and years and years. And he had had another wife who died. And he said he was getting married again, and everyone thought, Oh, Grace—he's finally going to marry Grace?

DENNIS ADAMS: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: And then he said, "Oh, no." And when he was in the hospital, he met some 26-year-old and married her. And that was Johanna.

DENNIS ADAMS: Okay. Well, you know more than I do. I didn't know that whole story. But I had to go up and meet this woman.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, that was—she was. She was a devotee.

DENNIS ADAMS: She fell asleep during the interview. And I came out to get somebody in the museum. And I said, "I think we have to call an ambulance. I think she's stopped—she's either very sick or she's died, and she's not moving." And they said, "Oh, no, she falls asleep all the time." She was 90-something. I don't know what.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Did she have narcolepsy or was it just age?

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, no, she was very old. She was very old.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, no, she was very—You're absolutely right. She was the mistress, she was the devoted acolyte. She would do all the scut work. She had also worked at the Museum of the City of New York. She had written books. She was very intelligent, and she was writing a book on Steichen, too. But I don't know if it ever came out because she was doing it for years and years.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right.

AVIS BERMAN: I don't know whether Johanna blocked it, or it just became too difficult for her. You know, she was—

DENNIS ADAMS: She was very nice, she was very forthcoming. But what happened was is that the Museum of Modern Art balked about using those images, which you may know. Did you ever read that?

AVIS BERMAN: You mean, the "Road to Victory" images? [Steichen organized an exhibition for MoMA entitled "Road to Victory" in 1942. -Ed.] No, because—

DENNIS ADAMS: They blocked the—No. They blocked the use of the reconnaissance photographs of Steichen. Okay? Which were in their permanent collection, because Steichen had called them artworks. He had selected a few. This is as I remember. He had selected a few out of the reconnaissance photographs. And he'd given them. And, I guess, from their visual appeal, he like a ready-made, I think—he kind of some way, clarified them or framed them as an artistic artifact. And I remember the Museum of Modern Art, although I don't remember who told me: We do not believe in appropriation. And they said this is part of our collection. You do your own work. You do your own work. And at the time they said: And we don't even—we're not interested in the work of Sherrie Levine, I remember them saying. Strange. I mean, I would've thought at that moment they might have had a showing of Sherrie Levine—actually I never checked it. But I remember somebody saying that. So this idea, all of a sudden appropriation, which seemed to be an old Duchampian idea or somebody going way back, all of a sudden the Museum of Modern Art was being questioned. And they said, No, you can't have those photographs. You'll have to come up with another idea.

So I went out with a friend of mine that night, a very entrepreneurial guy, who doesn't know anything about art. And I told him this story. And I said, "Well, I guess that's the end of the deal. I can't, you know—They invite me, the client. And the client owns them, and the client's suddenly not going to let me do the work." And this guy said, "Well, tell me a little more of the story." I said, "Well, you know, Steichen had taken them during the war." Blah blah blah. He came back and blah blah. And this guy said to me, he said, "Well, if Steichen took those photographs during the war, they belong to the United States military." And Steichen basically was a thief. He was working for the military. And for him to take and give those to the Museum of Modern Art, that can't be right. That's not the case. They cannot have ownership to those. He said, "Did you ever check to see if the United States military or the United States government owns those works?" Right? And I said, "Jesus! I never thought of it." Simple idea, right? So I called, I guess, the National Archives in Washington. And sure enough they had a whole file of reconnaissance photographs of Steichen.

AVIS BERMAN: You could get them from them.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yeah. The only difference was theirs were in perfect shape. The only other person whose name had ever signed out on them was Christopher Phillips. And so I then—And, you know, they're in the public domain.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right. So I went back and told them at MoMA, I'm sorry but, you know, as a citizen I have the right to those photos from the public domain. And I intend to use them in my installation. And when there was no—they couldn't argue that.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, they probably, you know, they were probably trying to see if they could get away with it. Because they would've known perfectly well that, for example, the Farm Security Administration photos, in the Library of Congress belong to us. So they would've known that. But they probably just weren't going to inform you of that.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, maybe they did. They were trying to get out of that—that story.

AVIS BERMAN: I think so. Or didn't want you to use—or wanted you to do something else. I mean, you were completely by the way focused on photography. You didn't look at paintings or sculptures first or any other part of the collection, by the way?

DENNIS ADAMS: No. I wasn't asked to respond to the collection. I was asked to make a work by Dennis Adams. That's all I was asked. I wasn't asked to respond to the collection. That was not part of the deal.

AVIS BERMAN: It was just something you chose to do.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. But I wanted to be responsive to the history of the museum.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: And I did that. And I built those vitrines. Of course I had known this article that was written by Allan Sekula on Steichen early in Artforum. [Allan Sekula,"The Instrumental Image; Steichen at War," Artforum, vol. 14, Dec. 1975: 26-35] I'd remembered that although I didn't have—I had to cut back to that. I mean, it was kind of an ancient memory. But I cut back to that and looked at that. And there was also, I think, maybe Paul Virilio even mentioned something about it at the time. [Paul Virilio, "Une Guerre Subjective: Edward Steichen, Cecil Beaton," L'autre Journal, vol. 6, 1985: 18] I can't—He had certainly made the connection with Steichen because, you know, he was analyzing the Steichen reconnaissance photography and all this kind of stuff. So, you know, maybe a lot of that was in the air at the moment. But besides that, who cares? My point was to build vitrines; they were very much like the Bus Shelters. They would come in decoys. There was nothing in those vitrines. They were empty. And then of course the reflections of the Steichen's [photographs] were underneath. So they were to function as afterthoughts. And at that moment I was tired of this idea of multitasking. And I remember I decided I was going to come back into my studio in New York, and I would build that work with my own hands. I decided no more assistants. I would draw it, design it, I would build all the metal cases for it; I would do everything here. And I built the entire thing with my hands. My assistant today tells me it's a B-grade work in terms of construction technology, and I'm happy that it is because it's my work, you know.

And the scale of it is quite beautiful. It's really a—it was scaled properly, you know. I worked hard on it. There were some things I would've changed [inaudible], but nevertheless it was—And it worked beautiful in this space. And—and the night that it opened, the glass was too dark. Somehow I imagined that you would be able to see through—there would be more, the kind of phenomenology that I hoped the piece would kind of open up didn't quite happen the way I wanted it to. But it snowed that night. And in the sculpture garden—There was a huge snowstorm. And the light was reflecting everywhere up off the ground and up through the vitrines. So for the night of the opening they were—they looked fucking perfect! After that, not so perfect.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, during the daytime they might've. Well, what about the—

DENNIS ADAMS: No, it was that snow. There was [inaudible] everywhere.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, that would be the magic. I just—But in terms of the lighting, you must have had special lighting or something you wanted for this.

DENNIS ADAMS: We probably did. Yes. But we hit it that night, and it was a beautiful night. I remember it was a gorgeous snowstorm, and we all walked back to a beautiful after-party down in the Village somewhere because you couldn't catch a cab, it was such a snowstorm. It was a magical night.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Are you ambivalent about using or having assistants?

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, I would be. What I've learned, and I think this—I haven't discussed it with other artists, but what I've learned is that the best assistants—if we say best assistants are people who are the best craftspeople who use it in the most basic way. The best craftspeople come with a lot of personality. They have more turned-up personalities than artists. They're very temperamental. And all the good assistants I've worked with over the years, they all were temperamental. And the better they were, the more temperamental.

And they're difficult to work with, you know. My assistant now that I use is a very temperamental guy. But it's that temperamental quality that, of course, makes them demanding. Right? And there will be a struggle sometimes. So it's difficult for me. I would rather build a little gnarly thing sometimes by myself in the studio. But then again, if I think it needs real hands on it and somebody else can truly do it better, and, you know, with the right tools and all, I would give that out today, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: And when you say craftspeople, have they ever been younger artists who need a job, or are they absolute trade or craftspeople?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, they usually start as the younger artist looking for work, but it depends where they go with their lives. I've certainly employ a lot of young artists. And one, many years ago, that when he arrived here and he practically lived here, but he was not so good when he arrived. And within a year he was one of the best I've ever seen. Far superior skills than I would ever have the rest of my life if I worked every day at it. He was a natural. And he had a mind like Leonardo [da Vinci]. He also had an engineering mind, and he could think of things. And he could craft and put things together very fast. And his constructions had karma. They had energy above and beyond my own energy that went into the designing of these things. And when we popped some crates open—I had a retrospective in Antwerp—we popped some crates open, and his models, things that he built, were jumping out of the crates. He was a dark figure, and he put a lot of dark energy into the work. And that energy remained in the work in the physical making of it. But artists who say they can simply turn something over to assistants and have it fabricated—things happen there. Okay?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, because their hands are on it.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yeah. And there's differences, and there's things to be lost and things to be gained. And you'd better know what those things are as an artist because there's a tenderness to the prototype, to the first of something. Let's say if you make a rough model by the artist in the studio, and then you pass on for a higher grade of construction. And it may come back looking like God made it. But we really don't want God to make things. God belongs in heaven, right? We want hands-on things. And, you know, so each craftsperson has a sensibility. And the artist who comes up with the idea, there may be—you know, this can be debated—but there's probably a link between that intellect and those hands that are on something. And as I get older, I realize that over the years there were things lost in my work because they were fabricated. That would be one of the things that I would regret. Not that I could have fabricated them even. They were beyond my skill. But I see the fault lines, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Because other people, no matter what, even though it's, quote, unquote, craft or fabricating, they are making decisions.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, they're making decisions.

AVIS BERMAN: They're making intellectual and visual decisions.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. And God is in the details. And you do, you know—if an assistant crafts a detail and it's not quite your detail, you know, things change.

AVIS BERMAN: But I would assume if it wasn't your detail and you didn't like it, you'd have the assistant do it again.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, it would depend where you are in the construction phase, what the timeline is, and how important that detail is. Usually those details are something that no, let's say, no historian or curator, if we consider them specialists, would notice. But believe me, I notice it. For example, I argue all the time: I don't want a mitered joint. And anything that I build, I do not want one fucking minor, 45-degree joint that looks like it's in a frame, okay? That's signifies Mommy and Poppy to me. It signifies this domestic moment. It's part of my symbolism. I like a good butt joint; it looks very industrial. My assistants have their moments [inaudible] for the 45, you know, and he will explain all of those moments to me for construction purposes. And even possibly in terms of looks. But I—

AVIS BERMAN: No, it's not just domestic. But it's also an art frame. It's like you're thinking about art as a painting in a frame.

DENNIS ADAMS: It always feels like a frame to me. And he'll go, "But we're framing." And I'll

go, “I don’t care. You know, I don’t want it to look like that.” I mean, I think in the end, from your childhood you take a lot of—I’ve never said this before—you take a lot of symbolism from your childhood that you work with the rest of your life. And yet at the same time you’re trying to kill all the forms of your childhood. You take the content, and you kill the forms. I think that’s a recipe, and it might play out in other artists’ work as well. It certainly plays out in mine. Meaning that you try to kill the scale, the proportions, everything you grew up with. But the iconography of it stays with you.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you can’t escape it even if you wanted to.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, yes. But part of being an artist is to challenge all those notions of scale, you know, and proportion and move from, you know, domestic kind of Victorian space that we all grow up with, or suburban space to an open plan, and, you know, what all those things mean. Throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it’s always said that a writer’s capital is his or her childhood. And usually if the person can survive it, the unhappier, the better for the work.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. But I’m no writer.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, it translates into other artists as well certainly.

DENNIS ADAMS: But I think you’re right. You’re absolutely right. It’s more on the literary side. It would be more true of those artists with a kind of literary side to them.

AVIS BERMAN: Correct.

DENNIS ADAMS: Which is a melancholy side. Was it Guy Debord that said something—did Guy Debord say something about, or did he quote somebody that said something?—that the plastic arts are opposed to the melancholic. And I think there’s truth to that. Once you start building, something, especially once it transcends your own scale, you have to hold a couple of boards up, you know, you’ve left the melancholic moment. That’s why literature, writing, the little notebook and the small drawing which—the Surrealists are melancholic because, you know, the Surrealists, they didn’t invent much. They were limited figures in history. They kept at small scales that were tied to the domesticity of the houses they grew up in.

AVIS BERMAN: They were the most literary.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, they were the most literary.

AVIS BERMAN: Absolutely the most.

DENNIS ADAMS: Now I criticize them, but I want to be part of them because at the end of the day, I’m a Surrealist. And that’s my tradition.

AVIS BERMAN: Since you mentioned [them] before—and clearly you’re extremely widely read—but did you have anything to do with the Situationists?

DENNIS ADAMS: You mean—No, I wouldn’t be old enough.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, I meant in terms of—well, their heritage or incorporating any of it; not, not old enough. But were they important to you in your thinking? I guess, I should l say. And also when you went to France, if you had met some of them, the older ones. That’s all.

DENNIS ADAMS: No, I never—not to my knowledge. Although I might’ve. But I don’t remember them. But certainly I’ve read all the key texts, and I know them, I would say, front-wards and backwards. That history has been a little bit probably overblown in recent years, almost too many books on it. Guy Debord, I find him to be—I’ve just recently come to love him more because he’s written this book that he wrote at the end of his life, this autobiography of sorts. And it’s a beautiful work. And he went way up in my estimation. In the end he was a melancholic. He was not a political figure like Marx. But, you know, you would imagine that in the ‘50s, that he was playing it that way. I think he was not an original thinker in terms of—he’s not a big—If somebody’s going to position him like Karl Marx, that would be a big mistake. He’s a minor figure. Then in a surge of consumerism in the postwar era, he went back to Marx, and he tried to, I think, reposition this idea of the spectacle—consumer culture within the emergence of spectacle culture and most of all youth culture, which was being born in the moment that he came of age.

You see, because Karl Marx had never theorized youth culture. He never knew how youth culture—of course it hadn't happened yet—but he never imagined that youth culture would —youth culture equals consumer culture. And by the '50s and '60s that becomes the case. They're one and the same. And Guy Debord, I think, began to grapple with that. And that was a new theoretical component. There were probably others, and I probably, you know, beyond that. But I think that's the key thing there. And Guy Debord, you know, he was—Also he was smart enough to surround himself with artists and people a lot more creative than himself. He was a guy that knew that you had to be with people that are smarter than you are and that can do things that you can't do. And I think that. He was a very clever guy.

AVIS BERMAN: To borrow my favorite Reggie Jackson saying, he was the straw the stirred the drink.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, for sure. He stirred the drink. But this last work of his is a touching work. It will remain one of the principal documents on my shelf, and I'll throw all those early Situationist texts away. It's a great work by a man that in the end was probably a greater man than I imagined. But he has horrible little hands. I can't look at his hands in photographs. That started to turn me off. Whenever he was pictured and I looked at his little hands, I realized he was incapable of touching the world. [They laugh.] I look to people's hands as being somewhat important. And he had the worst hands ever in photographs. Of course, I never saw them personally. It sounds like an odd detail. But these horrible little pudgy hands that are not very important. He was a guy in his head. [Laughs]

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: But, yes. And of course my students are very—you know, I inform my students about the Situationist practices. And then again it's so sad in America when immediately the Situationists were only—once it came out onto the table into America, I guess, in the late '80s or mid-'80s or whenever it really became kind of a fad, the Americans immediately related it to their favorites in the museum world: Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: Rather than relating it to the artists that were actually working within the urban field. Again, one of the many limitations of America: Always take it back to the marketplace, right? Not there's anything wrong with either one of those artists; both are interesting artists. But it's just—it's a scandal. It's a scandal that happens here, you know. Why would those—you know, why wouldn't it be taken back more to people like Krzysztof Wodiczko, you know, the figures that were really playing with Guy Debord, and were really working on the ideas.

AVIS BERMAN: Well—

DENNIS ADAMS: Cindy just liked to dress up.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: And she did it very well. But it was—you know, she was brilliant. But it had nothing to do with Guy Debord.

AVIS BERMAN: No. Well, I think—I don't want to say you don't understand how critics or writers or journalists operate, but this is this great school. It is the marketplace. But I look around, and like, what am I supposed to say about this person? Oh, there's this—I can apply this to this.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Because people, some people, always need a theory to hang—you know, it's the coat hanger and the coat. It's true—it does come back to the marketplace. But it's—try to give an intellectual legitimacy to something that—you really don't' understand it, and you've got to find something that's been accepted, I think. But I mean, it all comes back to what you say. But, oh, this is a way in.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: This is a way to understand this.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. But you don't go very deep.

AVIS BERMAN: No.

DENNIS ADAMS: You know, in terms of their sources.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: Shallow sources. And you can't be a Situationist and sell a work for three million dollars.

AVIS BERMAN: No, you can't.

DENNIS ADAMS: Like Richard Prince—I'm sorry.

AVIS BERMAN: You can't. It's true, it's taking a fresh new, to them, approach or philosophy and, as you say, slapping it on. But it's something—because people are always looking for new ways to interpret things.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: So some of it is—it's not as dastardly.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But it just—it's a shortcut. Maybe it's that. A journalistic or literary shortcut sometimes. Because it's true; it's not studied well. It's not the true meat of it. It's the mannerism of it.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yeah, yeah. And then, you know, getting back to Guy Debord, when you go back to the moment and you find out that he was critical of Godard, you know. There's always these things as history—when you go back and you realize that there's wars between these people. And yet there would seem to be so much camaraderie in what they were doing. And, of course, it's probably on Guy Debord's part jealousy because—I mean, Jean-Luc Godard is both a theorist and an artist. I mean, he's a total—he's everything. And ultimately a more important figure than Guy Debord.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, my goodness! I would say one of the most important figures of postwar France.

DENNIS ADAMS: In postwar anywhere. [They laugh.] He's an important figure. He did so much. And it's so wonderfully experimental. And he put his money where his mouth was.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: And he worked hard, and he worked fast. And he tried a lot of stuff. It doesn't matter whether it's good or bad or you like it or you don't. It's there.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, in some of it's irrelevant whether it's bad or not because he didn't try to be ingratiating.

DENNIS ADAMS: No. Not all. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, I'm not saying that Debord did. But his was just—I mean, when you're making movies, and it's so collaborative, and you have to get other people's money, it's brave.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. And if you see Guy Debord's the Society of the Spectacle, [Detroit, Black and Red: 1977] it's so kind of heavy-handed, you know. There are some brilliant moments in it, but it's heavy-handed work. And it's really, other than his maps, it's his only work. But, you know, other than his writings. The maps are quite beautiful, though, that he did. [Inaudible.] He was a good artist.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you think we should stop for this week?

DENNIS ADAMS: Whatever you want to do.

AVIS BERMAN: Let's see what—

DENNIS ADAMS: It's whatever you feel like—you're the professional, I'm the amateur.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, no, no, it's not that. It's just that I like to—

DENNIS ADAMS: Have it spaced.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Well, I think we'll stop now.

[END OF TRACK 2.]

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman interviewing Dennis Adams for the Archives of American Art GSA Project, on May 15, 2009, in his studio in New York.

And I'm just going to pick up on a couple of things we discussed last week. And then we'll go into some more recent work and commissions. Now, I want to clarify: Last time we talked about the Toronto bus stop. And one thing that you had said, that [with] the first unit or component, you let the construction workers pretty much put it or drop it where it was so it wouldn't be too artistic to set. Is that correct?

DENNIS ADAMS: It would not be compositional.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And you were using chance a little bit there.

DENNIS ADAMS: A little bit, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But the second unit, though, had to be—in other words, that could not be based on chance. That had to be measured and—that would've been parallel?

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, no. Actually, what it was is, that I bolted the first unit into place. And the second unit I told them simply to put it near the first. So it didn't come down in any parallel—you know, it just came down on the crane. And it kind of fell near there within a few feet, and we bolted it into place.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: And of course what was scandalous about that is I didn't know how the—because one shelter is a transmitter, and the second one is a receiver. I did not know how it would receive the image through reflection. But it worked out perfectly.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh. Okay. Good. I just wanted to clarify that. And then we talked about Berlin last time, and you talked about how sad the city was. And you weighed that out in terms of what you saw at your front window and in the back window in terms of the drug addicts and the Turks. But we didn't talk about Berlin as maybe a larger fertile ground for you. I mean, if you're talking about collective amnesia and all of the things that are left out, you know Berlin would seem to be the Ur City for you.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And just if you took advantage or looked at or if other sorts of—you know, what else interested you outside your neighborhood.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, of course again that presence of that wall was very important, which I lived on. And I walked, you know, I went into East Berlin. With Doug Walla we did some research on John Heartfield; he came, my gallerist from New York. And he was working on a book and an exhibition on Heartfield. And we spent some time there researching Heartfield. And then I did long kind of involved walks through the city and into the east, long walks. I have photographs of that period and all. But it was—and again, this idea of the kind of, I think, this divided consciousness that the city had was interesting for me. It's strange to say something binary is monolithic. [Laughs] But it was in fact that double consciousness was very monolithic. But nevertheless, it had a strong influence on my work at that particular moment. And I was probably doing a lot of, again, these kinds of binary gestures in my work.

And I was also very interested at that moment in the border. I was interested in the border from a lot of different standpoints. Berlin was a very inscribed border. But nevertheless, just the whole—I loved crossing into East Berlin. I loved the, you know—I'm a romantic. I loved

just all that process of that checking through the border.

AVIS BERMAN: Checkpoint Charlie.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, Checkpoint Charlie, who I went through many, many, many times. And, you know, I'm interested in all of those layers. And to the degree that the border represents a kind of shift of consciousness. I think one could have a great idea crossing the border. Okay? It's maybe the only place where one can have a great idea. At the moment when one thing is taken away and something else is given, you know, and you're in that kind of transition point, I think it's a great place to have an epiphany—at least that's the romance.

AVIS BERMAN: Or see if there is any difference. I don't know if you've ever gone through that tunnel between southwestern France and the Pyrenees; but it is amazing because when you come out and you're in Spain on the other side, everything is completely different.

DENNIS ADAMS: I remember it, but it was many, many years ago. I have been through it, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: That I thought was one of the most astonishing feelings because you're still in the—Everything was—I mean, it wasn't just about stores or people. But the geography, the climate, the attitude—it was instant!

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, that's true of New York, too, to some degree, and other great cities, is that you can kind of step from one neighborhood to another, and the other can be a shift in consciousness.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: And I think maybe I mentioned, but living on the border of Chinatown here has been very important to me. I love that. And yet the Chinese border is constantly fluid. It's moving and shifting.

AVIS BERMAN: And usually it's bigger, I mean, just in terms of—[I think —AB] near you. I think it's the most wonderful place, that little Courtlandt Alley there.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Because that is the way so much of the city was for so long. And you see the old warehouse windows. If Berenice Abbott had taken a picture of that, it would be the same today.

DENNIS ADAMS: Probably, yes. That's true. It's a checkpoint of memory in that sense. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I know. And luckily, because there's no light there and it's narrow, nobody can gentrify. Nobody can, quote, unquote, fix it.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right. But it is—it has appeared in a lot of films. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Because people still need places, dark alleys.

DENNIS ADAMS: They still need dark alleys to beat somebody up or—

AVIS BERMAN: Right. That was old. Yes. No, you've got a little film noir corner right outside.

DENNIS ADAMS: Exactly.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Then let me see. You mentioned last week the artist Alfredo Jaar. Now have you had any kind of professional or personal relationship with him in terms of working together or doing anything?

DENNIS ADAMS: We never did a project together. We were friends. And we were at many exhibitions together. And our names were associated. I don't think probably today so much, but at one point. Certainly in the late '80s we were part of, we would be part of a—if somebody was talking about a certain kind of work, they would be two names that would be mentioned in the same sentence probably.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: Along with others.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Along with Jeff Wall as well.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, to some degree, Jeff. But probably more with Krzysztof Wodiczko. Maybe Antoni Muntadas. A little bit of Graham. Sometimes Hans Haacke.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: But it was probably, in terms of a kind of triptych, it would have been myself, Alfredo Jaar, and Wodiczko. And just because we did so many shows together. And they were also both friends.

AVIS BERMAN: Do you like to collaborate with other artists? Or have you done much?

DENNIS ADAMS: I did a few things. I would not be opposed to it, but I'm not a collaborative person. In fact, it's funny you would mention that. I was thinking about it last night because I'm working on a project now, and I —no, I'm not interested in it at all. And as I get older, I would be very interested in doing something that was totally on my back. Meaning that I would have to—you know, if it was something heavy, I would have to carry it like a goddamn cross, you know? I want it all to be there on me somehow. I don't know if that's aging or what it is. I think it's important for an artist. I think I love those things in history where artists made great single gestures. Joseph Beuys. You know, I will walk—I will walk! Or maybe it says Dürer Maybe he starts addressing it to Dürer. I can't remember. Durer: I will personally walk or take Baader Meinhoff through Documenta. [Joseph Beuys, Dürer, I will personally guide Baader + Meinhof through Documenta V, 1972]

See, for me that's a great singular gesture, and I love that. Or again, Mierle Ukeles going out and shaking the hands of 8,000 garbage workers [Touch Sanitation, 1979-80]. It's a single—it's a single act. Or Philippe Petit, the man who crossed the World Trade [Center, on a high-wire -Ed.]. It's a singular act. And what happened to his collaborators at the end of that act? They were all left behind. He went and made love with a new girlfriend. And basically those old friendships were gone. Because once you've made the walk, there's no room for collaboration anymore. Nietzsche did not have collaborators.

AVIS BERMAN: You also said something very interesting last time when I had asked you about French artists working on Algeria. And you had said, no, they hadn't done; a lot of French artists, you felt their work was about fashion or style. And I was trying to think if there was any catalog in French photography to someone like Jacob Riis. Because I wasn't sure if there was that kind of tradition of social responsibility except in film.

DENNIS ADAMS: I can't answer that question. I would need to do some more research.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: And clearly when I said France, I meant Paris.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: You have to clarify that. Paris is the center of France, and it's a world unto itself—just like New York is here.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Because you certainly worked a lot on Algeria. And so I want to pick up —I think this is, this exhibition and this book [*Dennis Adams*]*Double Feature* [Dennis Adams and Kent Fine Art, Inc; New York, Kent: 2008], which I think is really wonderful. And it works on so many levels. It's connected, it's disconnected.

DENNIS ADAMS: The little book is kind of gnarly compared to the exhibition itself [*Double Feature*, 2008]. It was meant to be—it's meant to look like one of those little shitty film books from the '60s.

AVIS BERMAN: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: That I love so much. So the reproductions and everything in it. But anyway, it is what it is. But I like the book, and I like the pieces as well in it.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Did you ever communicate with Godard?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, I've never communicated with him. Although I understand he picks his phone up. I've been told.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: That he answers his own phone. So I guess it would not be difficult.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: There was no reason to ever—

AVIS BERMAN: No, I didn't know if you had tried to see him.

DENNIS ADAMS: You mean, in terms of copyright.

AVIS BERMAN: No. Sending him the book or ever tried to meet him while you were in Paris or anything?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, I never did. Maybe somebody could have set it up. I always think of Godard as somebody who is kind of singularly probably narcissistic, involved in some project. I don't think he's a person that one would go out like that.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I also want to ask you, with Jean Seberg, of course she's from Iowa. So is she a stand-in or an alter-ego for you in this project?

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, she was. She was. Not because she's from Iowa.

AVIS BERMAN: No.

DENNIS ADAMS: But a lot of the characters that I touched on in the various projects were—I don't think I realized that in the beginning when I was working, that certain figures were kind of stand-ins for me. But clearly—I mean, that's a late project, 2008. And I was very aware that that's me walking through—that's me, you know. And, you know, I'm interested in this idea of the walk and narrating the city and all those kinds of things. And I was struggling, though, with—I struggled with that project a lot to get it into sync. I couldn't. And then it just came to me, you know; it happened. I don't whether it will—I don't know whether the—I don't know whether it's a major work for me. But it's certainly a very good, I think—well, I don't know if it's good. But what is, is it's—I did what I wanted to do. And I think it's effective.

You know, I'm very interested in this idea of—or I have been from time to time—in telling two stories at once. And it's difficult. I would love to tell two stories that were totally unrelated that only I can bring together. And I haven't done it yet. I haven't done it there, but I started to do it there. The problem with that project is it's too smart. I think there's something very smart about it. It looks like somebody really calibrated it, and I did. I wish sometimes I could be a little looser and do something maybe just slightly crazy. Because I think she—she really belongs in Algiers at that moment, right?

AVIS BERMAN: Well, and certainly her biography later on is an undercurrent, in which she had sympathy with this. And, you know, also it's just funny is who is the other here, and she is; in other words, here we are the Americans. Or the Algerians are the other, but not here.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. Right.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, I actually think this one—I think, the reason, maybe because I'm literary, it also appeals to me so much because I see this as so archetypal. I see this as Henry James brought up to date.

DENNIS ADAMS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVIS BERMAN: You know, the American so-called innocent who is wandering through and doesn't know what she's creating or the trouble she's causing. And there's a very knowing Europe and an American who eventually wakes up, but it's too late.

DENNIS ADAMS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] I wish you'd write about it. It seems like you have a lot to say.

I was thinking more of André Breton *Nadja* [New York, Grove Press:1960] which it's clearly a

homage to that work. Of course more political in a lot of ways, more—less vague, less romantic, sharper than André Breton's work. But it's clearly a homage to it. Also to—Well, anyway. [Inaudible] and some other things that I was thinking about. But it also stands outside of those works because I think it's very—it's a clear-headed work. And I had a helluva lot of fun. Also she's so—her innocence and her sexuality, I love putting her in Algiers. And I, you know, I did it all first with scissors. You know, later it's all done on the computer. But because I'm only semi-computer literate, you know, I really can't do Photoshop and all of that stuff as well as I should, I simply sat down, and I just, with thousands, literally thousands of photographs, and I just began cutting and putting her in at different scales.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: And, you know, it was a lot of work, a lot of fun. I don't know. For two—I did it in about two months, I did those cutouts. I'd just sit in here, and I'd cut and I'd cut and I'd paste them. And sometimes I felt her sexuality overriding what was going on in Algiers. [Adams pasted images of Seberg from the movie *Breathless,* 1960 onto scenes from *The Battle of Algiers*, 1966. —Ed.] There was a war going on there with her innocence, her sexuality, and her kind of aura in that battlefield. And I loved that. I wanted to bring them together. And at one point there's a young Algerian boy, Ali la Pointe, who I bring in close to her. And I'm just going to grab that here and show that now in two years we'll know that we're talking about this one. Where, you know, I tried to get him in as close to her as [Jean-Paul] Belmondo; and he slightly looked like Belmondo. And I love that. I mean, at one point I wanted that crowd and those people to literally come in on her in a sexual way. You know, I was just—you know, so there was—it's like push/pull; I was pulling her in, pulling her out. And, you know, I know her face. Believe me, I know her image more than anyone probably in the world. I know a lot about Jean Seberg. And I did a lot of follow-up pieces, which are not represented in this book, that deal with her real life. You know, all the real-life stuff that went on with the Black Panthers and all. And some other video pieces I've done.

A follow-up piece that I did that I liked very much—there are several pieces. But I think the best is a little piece that I did where she—it's from *Breathless*. There's a little moment where in an apartment, she steps out onto a little—I guess, the word is mezzanine. She's in a high place; probably Belmondo is somewhere down below, I can't exactly remember. But it's a beautiful moment where she—some kind of sexual expression. It looks like something Jean Seberg did on her own without Godard's—I mean, it looks like something where she just took it. But she throws her skirt up over the balcony. And there in the video I take that scene, I crop it, and I do a slow motion of it. But under her skirt, I write—I write on the wall: "They can see our women; we can't see theirs." And that was from graffiti that appeared on the streets of Algiers, written by the French. And it's beautiful. I spent two weeks in the studio here trying to get the handwriting. I just wrote it over and over. I probably spent a thousand dollars on paper. I was writing it and writing it until I got the handwriting just right in French so it looked like graffiti on the wall. And then I, with my guy that helps me with all this stuff, we put it in the film. And her dress just falls over. It's a sweet little piece.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Now when you were thinking about this, in other words, did you think I'm going to use *Breathless* first, or did you think about I'm going to use Algiers first? I mean this is a two—

DENNIS ADAMS: Hell if I know. I can't remember where it all started. Seberg was always an image that was—she goes way back. Before my interest in Algeria, I was tied to Seberg in my thinking. I was also connected to Margia Kramer who's an old friend who did—who brought out the FBI files on Jean Seberg in the 1970's [In 1981, Kramer exhibited a multi-media installation at MoMA entitled "The Media Matrix and the Jean Seberg Story. —Ed.] So I was there at the beginning with an interest in Seberg. Margia and I had had shows almost back-to-back at Artists Space. I was working on Patty Hearst, and she was working on Seberg. But there was a lot of relationship between those two figures in some ways.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, yes!

DENNIS ADAMS: Not things that I can carve out now—

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Exactly.

DENNIS ADAMS: —on this beautiful day.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. They became sort of accidental, you know, figures of what they were.

You know. Obviously Hearst having been kidnapped.

DENNIS ADAMS: And chameleons of sorts.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Exactly.

DENNIS ADAMS: Wonderful chameleons.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, I would say in Seberg's case more, chameleon is good. But what happened with her, I mean, she had a Svengali figure more than—well maybe Hearst did temporarily. But someone like Preminger was—

DENNIS ADAMS: Right. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Although she, you know, was picked out, so she wanted to do it. You know, she thought, Oh, to be a movie star. That'll be great.

DENNIS ADAMS: But I don't know if you caught this little quote in the book. Let's read it because it should be in the interview. It's one of the most—It's a quote that I love so much because it's—now that I've said that I hope I can find it now. It's right at the beginning, I quote—Here we are. [Laughs] It's curious [inaudible]. Okay. It doesn't matter. I know the quote. I think it's in the book here somewhere.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, you tell me what it is.

DENNIS ADAMS: It's a quote. It's a quote that I love. It's a quote that Jean Seberg said. I forget who was interviewing her, and they—and she said it in relation to herself; somebody was inquiring about her relationship to the Black Panthers, who should become probably the crossovers with her film life and, you know, all of those kinds of—the complexity of all of that, of all this role-playing. If we can call it that. And she said, and I think I quote exactly, "You know the old story of the chameleon. You put him on green, he turns green. You put him on black, he turns black. But if you put him on plaid, he explodes." And I think that stands for me and my work that quote. I'll accept it as if I said it. It's my favorite quote of all time. And I will always love her for that quote. It's better than anything Nietzsche said. It's fantastic. Put it on plaid: It's that idea of just that complexity that you'd like—all that density that you'd like to put into a work. And I'm on the side of that density. But of course she did it with her persona. And unlike her, I don't want to become a victim of my own myths, right?

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: I have to be free of that. She wasn't. You know, she died being a chameleon, right? Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: I don't know if I told you this: I brought—I showed in 2007, maybe 2007, before this, some other Seberg-related work. And I went and visited the gravesite. Took flowers. And it was a beautiful afternoon in Paris, and I just decided to go. And there was somebody there at the gravesite mourning her, kind of in tears. But somebody that couldn't have known her; somebody that was younger, looked to be in his 30s. Kind of a little, fat nerdy guy. Must have been a fan. But she's in this beautiful cemetery where Sartre and Beckett and Susan Sontag is buried. And even Belmondo's father, the sculptor Paul Belmondo, is buried there. It was one of the great days of my life to go out and visit that gravesite. Just me and her. That's what I mean by one on one. Now I wouldn't want to—I don't want to collaborate with anybody. It would've been horrible had somebody been with her that day, you know. That's a real pilgrimage, you know, and a single act. Right? I consider that an artwork, you know, in the best sense. Just a kind of a one-on-one piece of communication like that. Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Are there any other figures in the film world that you've felt this strongly about or you have wanted to work on?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, I'm flirting now, although I know it's difficult because there's a lot of artists that I think have touched on the subject but nobody went very deep. I would love to do something with Jane Fonda. Well, one because we share—you know, my life has been shared with her in some ways. She's moved in and out of things. She's also a kind of

chameleon figure. From Hanoi Jane to God knows what.

AVIS BERMAN: Mrs. Ted Turner, exercise queen.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, exercise queen. She had a lot of personas. Right.

AVIS BERMAN: She always—she changes with the period.

DENNIS ADAMS: She changes with the period. But if I could bring all of those changes to bear on another story that I can tie her in with, maybe something she wasn't involved with.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, now she's a real committed Christian.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, I know that.

AVIS BERMAN: So now that—It really does—

DENNIS ADAMS: It's really complicated.

AVIS BERMAN: And now she's acting again.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, yes. And I'm fascinated because I'm not—I would especially like—One of the reasons I would like to do it, if I could do it, and I don't know that I can—It may be something that I will be playing with this summer. But I'm not sexually attracted to her at all. I feel even the early Jane Fonda—at all stages for me, she was totally other. I didn't connect to her as man to woman, that way. And that always fascinated me a little bit. She was somebody that I would not have—would not gravitate to.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. In the early—there was the Vadim—Barbarella stage.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right, the Barbarella stage.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, at the Tom Hayden stage.

DENNIS ADAMS: The Tom Hayden stage. But I think, if one went through all of her films, and really tried to extract—what I would be interested in, is really extracting her and building a kind of personality bank that would transcend anything we know about her, that would somehow represent the time that I lived through. This may be a dream. It may be a fantasy. It may never get off the drawing board. But I'm working on it now; I'm doing a lot of research on her.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, she's in New York now.

DENNIS ADAMS: She's in New York, yes. Maybe I'll go up and see the play.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Would it be too distracting to meet someone like that? Or is it—

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, no, I think I would love to.

AVIS BERMAN: Because, you know, she's just weird enough she might just—I mean, who knows if she would talk to an artist about that. I think, you know, maybe you weren't so attracted to her because she was a cartoon figure for so long. No?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, there's just something that, you know, not to put it in terms of, you know, in terms of male-female interest.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: But it's just curious. It would mean if she had been a woman out there in the world, it would've been somebody—And I would never have—had a type as a woman. I went out and I dated a lot of different kinds of women. I was interested in all kinds of women. But I would never have been interested in her. And I don't know why. I used to think about it. Why does everyone find this woman so attracting and interesting? I mean, this really—I mean, it was just I don't know.

AVIS BERMAN: But you're right. Because she's been through so much and keeps reemerging, she would be a very useful—barometer is the wrong word. But, you know, you can certainly—there are tick-off parts of the age that we've lived in. I mean, it's funny. I don't know. Did

Warhol ever do anything with her? Because she's perfect.

DENNIS ADAMS: No, I don't believe so. And, again, you know, Warhol was interested in—the beauty of Warhol is it's the shallow read. I'd like to go all the way into the image. I would like to really find—there are facial moments between the frames of her movies where you could identify a different Jane Fonda that nobody's ever seen. That's where I would want to go. I started it with Seberg. And it turned into this. I started with portraits of her, extracting her from some different films where she was also between the frames. Meaning that she had a look on her face that was not Seberg-esque, you know. I was looking for those kinds of true moments of crisis of identity.

AVIS BERMAN: Almost when the actress thinks the camera is not on her.

DENNIS ADAMS: Perhaps. Or when the camera begins to act as a character itself and doesn't care about the actress. You know, there's a lot of relationships with a camera. Or, yes, just a kind of blur between two frames.

AVIS BERMAN: I saw Elizabeth Taylor once in a play, and not that she's any great actress; but the most interesting thing is she was, you know, she's totally a film actress. So whenever her part was done, it was like the camera was off. And then she just stopped, and she just kind of went out of, you know—She didn't react, she didn't—Since she was not a stage actress, she didn't really stay—it was like a lighthouse, you know: When it was her part, she was on. And then she really just changed because she was so used to doing it the movie way. When your scene is over or your speech is over, the camera's not on you, you, you know, you can relax. So it was very bizarre. I mean, it was interesting, but—

DENNIS ADAMS: I had a friend, an expert in the theater, who knew her and Richard Burton. And he told me that Liz Taylor could not sustain dialog, which made—I don't know if it has anything to do with what you're saying. He said the following: He said that she could deliver dialog in small fragments brilliantly. And why she was so good with somebody like Richard Burton is that he could sustain dialog; he could go on forever.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: He could control the entire space. Everybody around him could get cues. I mean, he apparently—he was a master of another order. But she had—and he knew how to draw out and position those brilliant moments. You know, it was a duo.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Exactly. Which is why the movies were her medium.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And also she'd been trained in that way. If she had been trained another way, it could be different.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But anyway, I'm getting off the subject, whatever the subject is.

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, beautiful. I love to get off every subject.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. Well—

DENNIS ADAMS: [Inaudible.]

AVIS BERMAN: I'm going to—Actually what I wanted to ask you also about was this—Another exhibition, which was a little bit earlier, which was, seems to be a very unusual and interesting exhibition, really these airborne photos that you made ["Airborne," 2002, Kent Gallery, New York City, NY]. Because I guess, first of all, these were your own photos, right?

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And this is sort of the detritus that was flying through the air in New York City after 9/11. And this seems to be a completely different modus operandi for you. So I'd like you to talk about it. If it's not—

DENNIS ADAMS: No, it's—I don't know if it's completely different. But it was, you know, yes,

it was hatched after 9/11. And, you know, everybody was studying the sky in New York. But I began photographing the sky. You know, I set a big camera with a long range on the roof. And I began shooting debris that was floating over the city. Now, it wasn't just the moment after 9/11. But I continued for about a year or more.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: Or more. To just kind of shoot that debris. It wasn't the first time. I'd noticed the debris when I first arrived in New York in '75. I moved into this building. I used to lay on the roof because I had nothing going for me. And I'd just go up there with friends and drink. And because of the windy corner here, because of the slot effect of these buildings, there's an enormous updraft on the AT&T Building that draws things up into the sky. On a windy March day, you could find sometimes as much as a 100 to 150 pieces of debris flying over this building at different levels. And so I just began photographing those things, not knowing exactly what I was going to do with it. But then I began to see that I could read headlines, that there were details, and that I would just keep shooting. So there are in that series—I probably came up with about 25 decent photographs. I narrowed it down to 14. And I showed those 14. But I had probably shot over 10,000 to get those. I mean, I was shooting constantly. Not with a digital camera but an analog camera. And, you know, just firing because, you know, paper would turn around, and then all of a sudden that word would appear. Jesus! This is one of the few bodies of work I ever made money on. You can show that thing, and they just buy it off the walls. It's unbelievable why it was so appealing to people. I thought of it as rather frightening.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: But everybody who ever saw it wanted one. And this is not good reproductions in this catalog. They're deeper than this. In fact, this catalog is washed out. But I, for whatever they were, they were the most well-received—one of the most well-received—groups of works that I ever did. And they will remain in the series now. I also wrote an essay. I wrote an essay on these, a long essay, and it was published in Spain; it's been translated [*Historias: "Sky Writing."* VII Edicion del Festival Internacional de Fotografia y Artes Visales PhotoEspaña Catalogue. Madrid: 2004]. And these photographs had a lot of—they had reception all over the world. They traveled around, and they were exhibited all over. They're in a lot of collections today. And, yes, but it's something I don't think I can really go on with. [They laugh.] Here it was just a moment in time. But what I liked about it is it connects a lot with this idea of—I just like the way that the city's distributing this information on its own. It's totally about freedom again, releasing the prisoners of, you know, these horror stories in the newspaper, and there're just released there. You know, they're just released in a new way. I love this *Liar, Liar*, [2002].

AVIS BERMAN: No, it's—

DENNIS ADAMS: I saw that the day I shot it in the camera goddamn it! I had my eye on it. And it was flying around. And I saw that *Liar, Liar,* and I started to hit it. And there was a gray sky that day. This sky's darker than the original. And I saw it when it rolled into that position, and I hit it. It hovered for just a second. And I knew I'd gotten it, and I knew that photograph would stand. And it does stand. It may be the best of the series. The others I hardly remember.

AVIS BERMAN: There was one, *Traitor*, [2002] that was amazing, too.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, yes, *Traitor*. This one—see they're a little bleached out here. But this one, I hang it very low in the gallery; it just says *I'm Sorry,* [2002] And it kind of bends like folding hands praying, you know. So I got, you know, I kind of got into a lot of that stuff. But I was also shooting bags and any kind of debris.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. So you would just be up there for hours every—You couldn't use a film camera at all. I mean, like a movie camera.

DENNIS ADAMS: I could've. I could've. My wife still thinks they should've been moving images, and maybe they should have been. But they are what they are. And it was wonderful, though. I needed after 9/11 to be up in that space and just—you know, everyone else was afraid of breathing the air, I was excited about breathing it. It was the first time it had ever been, you know—everything in the press, of course, is a lie. It was the first time the air had ever been totally clean down here because of the Holland Tunnel; they cut it off.

[Berman laughs.] So it was the first time you could actually breathe. So we've been much healthier since 9/11; quite the opposite of what the media would have you believe. The air was fresh, and it was wonderful. And I took advantage of it. Yes.

But I—you know, I'm not getting to the point. What this is about was about also the displacement of everything that was happening. I think it's—and you'll remember this—it was a moment where all of us read the newspapers in ways that we didn't read them before. We read them more in-depth. We even picked them up off our stoop differently, you know. Everybody wanted to get those—at least I did—wanted to get their hands on those newspapers. And it was the first time that the *New York Times* stepped up to the plate and really had great photography, you know, representing the war and all the hell that was going on in the world at that moment. There was a journalistic surge that crafted what I would say is the best moment in the history of the *New York Times*. There was really—it was the first time that photography was brought to the level of great painting. You know, there was just—things were happening. And I was—in a way, I was fascinated by all of that, and in the other hand I couldn't read about it anymore. So this was a kind of—this place with all of that ambivalence I had about the news, you know. And for me this work will stand because it was very real at the moment, you know.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. And it had to be tabloids because they would give you the headlines.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. And of course it's always the [New York] *Daily News* or the [*New York*] *Post* that goes up the side of the AT&T here. They go right up, and then they fly out.

AVIS BERMAN: I had never—Well, that was what I was going to ask you, is I had no idea that it was that building that was doing that. Because most of the time you see things flying around, and then they go to the ground. They're not up—To be high enough to see them flying on your roof is really astonishing.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. Sometimes they're thousands of feet up in the air. You really need a high-powered camera. And I was at that point also very interested in—this was the first time in my life I not only had to shed the news, but I had to shed all the hardware that I've created around my own work, too. All the large-scale installations. There was something very ephemeral about that that I needed. It's perfect work because it's totally—it was totally therapeutic in every way. I was a person that just had to shed their life at that moment. And it was all about that shedding. And I was reading anything that had to do with air and space. And I was just—I don't know. I was just becoming, you know, I'd done this—I don't know if we talked—Did we talk about *Outtake*, this piece I did called *Outtake* that I did in Berlin in 1998?

AVIS BERMAN: No.

DENNIS ADAMS: I don't remember.

AVIS BERMAN: No, no, we didn't.

DENNIS ADAMS: Did we do the film stills?

AVIS BERMAN: No, we didn't talk about that.

DENNIS ADAMS: Okay. That's my favorite piece that I ever made. It's from 1998. And in a lot of ways it led to this. It's a piece where I take a film, a section of a film by Ulrike Meinhof, that Ulrike Meinhof made—from a film she made called *Bambule* [c. 1970] . It was a film that was never distributed, a film that had been censored in Germany. I think the film had been censored for almost 25 years; they didn't allow it to be shown. And I took a detail of that film, one scene, and I distributed it on the streets of Berlin; and it took two and a half hours, frame by frame, as I re-shot it. For me that's my single best work that I ever did. I didn't do anything that good before, and I haven't done anything that good since. And I knew it when I did it. That piece will at least, you know, that could sum up everything I wanted to do. But that piece was a lot about letting go of this idea of site. You know, I was distributing it to anyone that would take it. Again, in some ways it's a homage to Mierle Ukeles. Of course I'm not shaking people's hands. I'm handing things out. But I know that work of hers was in the back of my mind a little bit.

But I wanted to re-shoot this film. And that's literally what I do in the video. I could give a shit about the performance. The video is in fact the work. But I just re-film that take from the film

as I'm handing it out. So it moves in a new time base. So 17 seconds a film becomes two and a half hours of film. And that distribution system, that kind of distribution system that I've always been looking for, I found at that moment. And it's something that would connect with not only Mierle Ukeles; it might connect a little bit with Felix Gonzalez Torres's, work. And others. I mean, there were—it's just always what I wanted to do, and I caught it. So I'm still probably trying to run on that thread a little bit and get that stuff going. Now the problem with a work like *Double Feature*, it's not a problem because I think in terms of still photograph it works very well.

But the distribution system is still conventional. It's still a bunch of fucking photographs on the wall, right? It is not radical in the end. You may say, Dennis, you picked a great subject. You put it together. It's constructed well. Or you may not. But for my money, I think the task of the artist is to rethink the entire system of distribution and reception. Okay? And nobody in the art world takes that up, very few people. A bunch of lazy bastards. A bunch of people that want to hide out in the gallery/museum system, and, you know, hang their wares. And that includes these relational aesthetics people that have just been drawn back into the gallery/museum system. But this idea of thinking of a new methodology. I tried it with the Bus Shelters. You know, I've been trying that all along. This idea that we could distribute information by reinventing the vehicles of distribution and rethinking that. That's an artistic task. It's something that the Constructivists took up. I think it was taken up again in the '60s by certain figures. And anyway, I'm on the side of that. I want to be part of that story at the end of the day. Not just some other, you know, gallery/museum artist with some photos.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, now I want to shift to your GSA commission.

DENNIS ADAMS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVIS BERMAN: Which in principle should—although it's not about the fit—should have been a good fit. Because as far as I understand, you were working on a border—a point of entry. Is that—

DENNIS ADAMS: It's a point of entry.

AVIS BERMAN: It's at Champlain, New York?

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. It's a port of entry between Canada and the United States. Basically, I guess, if you're going city to city, you'd be going from Montreal to New York.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: With a lot of points in between. But it's that major—I think it's the major crossing between the United States and Canada.

AVIS BERMAN: And when did this start? How did it begin or when? And all that.

DENNIS ADAMS: You know, you get a phone call from these people, and you're selected basically. That's how it works. You don't compete for this.

AVIS BERMAN: Which is, I guess, the good thing.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. I like that part of it very much. I don't trust competitions. The committee will always pick the worst work—guaranteed. And I have been picked many times in commissions, and I can only assume my work was the worst, for being picked.

AVIS BERMAN: I always think it's the most—it isn't even the worst. I always think it's the one in the middle, the mediocre.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, perhaps. Whatever.

AVIS BERMAN: I'm not trying to insult you, but you know what I mean. [They laugh.]

DENNIS ADAMS: It's never the best project. But anyway, that part of the commission was very good. They give you a green light on that. The contract is formulated that says basically you still have to pass the—you know, you still have to pass the test of presenting a project that is accepted. And it has to be accepted on a lot of fronts. It has to be accepted in Washington by all kinds of people within the agency that discuss it. It has to be accepted by critics, outside experts. And it has to be accepted by the people on site that man the border

station. So three tiers.

AVIS BERMAN: So you had a—I assume that you had to make a design.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: In other words you had to show them something.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And then did the panel, did the Washington people on the panel pass it? I mean, where did the—because I know that you had a couple of plans or projects, schemes rejected. So I'm trying to find out where the—

DENNIS ADAMS: The rejection always came from the same place. The rejection always came from the people on site. In other words, again, there's—and I happened to run into that difficult period of being in the post-9/11 era. And so all of the paranoia around the border is turned way up. The volume on that is blaring. Basically, those people that man the stations have probably—I mean, I don't know for certain; but we can only imagine that they've been given a mandate to turn up the whole field of observation. You know, it was new border station, so new technologies, all of this kind of stuff. So it's hyper, hyper police work. Very utilitarian, very functional. And at the end of the day, I think the idea of putting anything into that border station has no interest [inaudible]. I didn't know that as I went through the process. But that became clearer and clearer. In Washington it would be filtered through a lot of people that worked at the GSA, and then there would be a kind of panel review of outside experts along with those people. But always when they were present, and they were not always present, the people at the border would be hesitant.

And then it turned into this—I thought I was being commissioned by the GSA. I don't think I really understood the extent to which they have a client relationship with those people at the border. You know, at the end of the day, it's government money, and they want everyone to be happy. And, you know, basically, they shouldn't have picked me if they wanted that. Because I'm not there to make people happy. Nor do I want to be involved in that. I can't make art that pleases. I can make art that responds. And they were very excited, I think, in Washington about the various projects. But it kept meeting resistance after resistance after resistance. Until finally the last word that I've heard is that they want—they don't want art at the border. That's what they're saying. So I've been commissioned into a situation in which I wish they'd asked that question earlier.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, so this was a new border station?

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: And you would've been on the beginning because there is a percent for art in it. So there has to be something there. What do the people at the border want? Did they express to you we'd like to have—

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, yes. They have all kinds of ideas. And I got to know them pretty well because I was up there a lot. And, you know, and even met with a lot of them individually. But, of course, at the end of the day, that's just research. At the end of the day, you still have to do a project. And, of course, what they would like—oh, are all kinds of things. They would—First of all, they're angry, you know. After all these kinds of rejections that I had up there, and now the building's built and they hate a lot of things about the building and the architect and things like that. So that negativity is also spinning. It's a frightening place. You know, it's—And the other question I have to ask myself—I don't know. Why would anybody want anything there? It's a horrific place. Those people live in a zone where in the winter—In the summer it's really, really hot, melting up there. And in the winter, these huge snowstorms. And it's grisly, and they're isolated out there. And it's a tough place. I feel for the people at the border station.

Nevertheless, when you ask them what they want, well, we'd like some little Adirondack scenes. Well, you know, I'm not in the Adirondack scene business. And I thought the GSA would—I thought they were stronger in the commissioning process. It's their building, right? And I thought in the end they would—there would be some consultation, but these people up there would be, there would be some, I don't know. More of an educational process, and there wasn't really any.

AVIS BERMAN: So what happens is the, shall we say, the best part of the GSA process is in the beginning where they pick the artist and let you proposed something. But then you have to go up there, be the only one in the room with all the local people, and there isn't anyone else there to—

DENNIS ADAMS: No, the GSA would be there with you for it.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, did they protect? So they didn't protect you? Or they didn't say this is what we—

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, I think they're—it's ambivalent who has the authority there and how much they want to push that. And the last time, when I met with all the people in Washington, there was nobody that directed—there was a representative from the [Department of] Homeland Security, but not the one tied to that station. And it just—so, you know, you're put through a lot of hoops, you know. And of course everyone in Washington and all the art experts and everybody love it. But if the people that are not even in the room that will make the decision—you know, they wouldn't even end up in the room. They would cancel the appointments, and they didn't want to be there. I don't know.

AVIS BERMAN: But still it's very difficult because you're also put in the position of being forced on them by Washington, which is something that they—

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, it's a real colonial thing, you know. Exactly.

AVIS BERMAN: What was, say, the first proposal that everybody loved and accepted it? What had you hoped to do?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, I was coupling a lot of adjectives with the word America under an enormous billboard as you cross the border. And what it turned out was, of course, those adjectives could read a lot of different ways. It was meant to create a lot of ambiguity about how America could be described, both positively, negatively, and in a neutral way; even in a patriotic way. "Red America, Blue America." It started like that. "White America, Off-White America," you know. So it took people through a series of statements. It was beautiful. I mean, it was simple. Because, remember, people are driving by. They have a lot of anxiety. You don't have time to reflect on the whole thing. You're not waiting in a bus. You're, you know, trying to get through a station and show your passport. And the people up at the border station looked at that, and they did not like what they said. They said, "Well, some of this stuff could be misread."

AVIS BERMAN: [Laughs] Precisely.

DENNIS ADAMS: Precisely. And what it turned out was is that they did not like the concept of misreading, you see. But they couldn't articulate that at first. So at first I said, "Well, why don't you add a few adjectives, see what you could do." I turned it back on them. They didn't want to go near that because they don't want to be responsible for connecting—their jobs could be in jeopardy if it was perceived that they'd probably connect an adjective to the word "America," and somebody above them didn't like it. I can understand that. But then they didn't, you know, they just—And they finally were honest about it, thank God. They said, "Look, we just can't tolerate ambiguity." Now that person has since left who was the head up there, who was the head of the facility. But now the new person has reconfirmed that and in stronger language that they cannot accept any kind of ambiguity because it's against what they do. And they just can't accept it. And they now believe—they now believe, because of me probably—that all art is ambiguous. And they simply don't really want it. At least I've been told they've said, "We don't really want art at the border."

AVIS BERMAN: And then after you did this, they rejected the first proposal, you made a second one?

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, yes, there were many. I think I did five.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay. Can you tell me about some of the others?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, yes. I can tell you the one that was rejected in Washington.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

DENNIS ADAMS: That's always interesting because Washington seemed to love everything I did, you know. But the one that was rejected in Washington was that I—This was after many others had been rejected up there.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: And some of the people in Washington liked it. I think it was the guy at the top that didn't like it. And I understand; he was afraid of what, I think, the way the media might use it later if it was done. What I had proposed was that underwear be constructed for all 300 employees. I would have it made by the finest seamstresses in New York. And each one could pick an alter identity, and we would monogram on theirs. Keep them warm in winter because they're going in and out a lot, and it's really cold up there. And that was my idea. It would be—I would present 300 pairs of these beautiful long underwear for every employee. And it would cut across the institution. Everybody, whether you were the deputy or the chief or you cleaned he bathrooms, everybody would have their long underwear. And they would pick their own kind of alter ego under it, of course, which nobody would see but them. So it was an invisible project, completely invisible. Nobody would see it. Because they didn't want anything to be seen.

So I turned to that one; I thought that's brilliant. And they like utility and functionality. Keep all the employees warm. And I'll even bring the community into them and give them some decision-making here about who they want to be. You know, they can want to be Batman or they want to be Patty Hearst or they can want to be one of the people that have been arrested at the border that they—You know, they could be anybody they wanted, and nobody would know who they were except them. In Washington, of course, they were fascinated by it, I think. And they understood it conceptually. But they thought it's the kind of thing that probably the media would say, well, here's $270,000, and here's an artist who's just giving underwear with federal money. You can see how they were reading it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, right. Yes, would be spent on underwear. Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: You know.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. We could do this better with Fruit of the Loom. I could see that.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, you know, you can imagine all of that. So they were projecting that. But that proposal was never seen by anyone up there. So I don't know how it would've been taken. I think they might have gone for it, strangely enough. I think they might have gone for it. There was a deputy or two up there that had given me some indicators that maybe something along those lines could kind of work. And he said, "If there's some way of getting the employees involved." You know. But anyway, that was one of them. And then there were projects that I—I did two very beautiful projects. Maybe not beautiful. But I think sharp projects about *The Invisible Man* because every time I was up there, that's all I could think about is that beautiful movie, 1933, *The Invisible Man*, with Claude Raines.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, Claude Raines. Right. Not the Ralph Ellison book.

DENNIS ADAMS: No, no, no, no. And so I did—I proposed a series of film stills for the interior of the building, which was rejected because they said that *The Invisible Man* was not a good person. I said, "Well, he's not a bad person. He's just invisible. And when, you know, he's going mad because, you know, anyone-"

AVIS BERMAN: He's not a person. He's a fictional—

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, he's fictional. They don't get that.

AVIS BERMAN: It's just—yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: And then I just—At one point there was that proposal. And then there was—I took two stories: the one about the Eskimos' words for snow; that's a myth, by the way, that the Eskimos have 300 words for snow. We all know that. Or maybe you've heard that. Or you remember that from—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Or—yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: You know. It's part of that whole anthropological stuff in the '60s or '70s,

where they were trying to show the relativity of language and everything, right? But it was in fact reported by Franz Boas that the Eskimos had multiple words for snow. And that got—that legend was carried out, you know, through the media. And it eventually ended up 300. But I produced a big neon sign that would run over the whole facility. And what it said was: "A thousand words for snow falling on the Invisible Man." Okay? That's all. [They laugh.] So it kind of took this idea of invisibility; and, you know, that was all about snow, too, in that film. Remember that's he's caught. Remember they're waiting for him to leave footprints.

AVIS BERMAN: Footprints, right.

DENNIS ADAMS: At the beginning it starts, and there's snow on him. And, you know, so it's all about this idea. So I just collapsed those two things with what I thought was a very beautiful kind of literary text: a thousand words for snow. That seemed to sum up everything that those people do. It's all about this looking and studying in huge snowstorms. And it would've just lit up and run across the façade of the building. And then just thought—it's too ambiguous. They didn't know what it meant exactly. They said, "The customers would have too many questions about it. People would be looking at this."

AVIS BERMAN: Horrors!

DENNIS ADAMS: And of course that's what I'm commissioned to do. But my feeling is that the GSA does not really—at the end of the day, they have no spine, I'm sorry to say. I feel that they don't really—And I don't, you know, I don't know how I would do it differently. But I think there's no—there's no vehicle there for that negotiation. And they just back off. The minute they hear a negative word, they just say: It's over, Dennis. And I go, but wait! Nobody was even at the meeting. And they said, well—And then, you know, they'll say stuff like, "Yes, but we sent them an explanation of it by email." So I'm not even there to present it, you see. It's that kind of stuff.

AVIS BERMAN: So do you feel that this—I mean, are you trying to salvage this? Or do you really think it's over?

DENNIS ADAMS: I would imagine it's probably over. But they know that I submitted—and I told them along—I will also find ways salvage it because I always will have a new idea. I've offered now a book that I would develop some kind of book project that could be given to all the employees.

AVIS BERMAN: That's a good idea.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. But I never hear back from them, you know. Eventually I have to call them.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, but besides the idea of no spine, do you think, although, they really want to try to work with different artists, that maybe they're only really set up or the communities are set up because the people there only think of art as a painting or a sculpture; an easel painting, a mural, or a sculpture. It's maybe there needs to be—

DENNIS ADAMS: You mean, the people up at the border?

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. In other words—or the people in the community maybe need to understand. In other words, there has to be an understanding of a wider basis of what art is. And the GSA is pretty much only—they're not set up on art education. So even though they want—that's what they're used to handling, is traditional genres of traditional media.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. But I think the people up there understood the ambiguity in my work, and that's what ultimately—

AVIS BERMAN: That was what was so disturbing.

DENNIS ADAMS: That was disturbing to them, this ambiguity. People would have to think or that people would ask questions. We're trying to get people through this station. We don't want anybody questioning anything. Right? We ask the questions.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. They just want people through as soon as possible. They don't want people hesitating and looking.

DENNIS ADAMS: No, but that's my charge from the GSA.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: So it is a mixed message. Okay? And, you know, they can say, Well, Dennis, but you're paid handsomely for your time and your proposals. And it's true. They pay well. But at this point in my life I don't need any more money. And I don't care about money. All I care about is producing interesting work. And I told them that. I don't give a shit about all this stuff. I just want to, you know, get the work done. [Laughs]

AVIS BERMAN: And that would also be very different for you because, well, at this point who knows? But those have an aspect of permanence to them.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Although who knows? Maybe they take it down in 20 years. Or who knows? But there was the promise of having it not be temporary.

DENNIS ADAMS: And there was the promise of having it not be temporary. And I think probably those projects that work best are the artists that jump in with the architect immediately. Come up with some collaborative thing that is a bit formal. It's disguised in the architecture like [James] Turrell, who did a very beautiful project. And I've heard Ann Hamilton is working on something now. But it's basically things that will probably end up being kind of disguised as part of the building. So it doesn't look like art—So it has no probably direct symbolic value as being contradictory to the architecture; it's more a part of it. That's the smart way to go.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Where was the architect in all of this for you?

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, I was there before the building was built. So I could've—But there again, this is Henry—

AVIS BERMAN: Cobb?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, no, no. Henry Smith-Miller, Henry—Laurie Hawkinson and Henry—I can't even think of Henry's last name. Smith. Henry Smith-Miller. Henry Smith blah blah. Okay. We'll get it. I'm trying to forget it. He basically—you know, he believed he was creating a great piece of architecture, I think. And he was one of those guys that I think—supportive as long as I didn't touch his fucking building. You know what I mean?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: There was a double message going on there. So I think had he been a little more—I don't want to blame him because, you know, he is who he is. He's an eccentric guy. He was okay. And I don't know that I want to be drawn into the politics of the building, the visuality of the building. I would like to do something a little more representative of—something that had a little more flair, which, you know—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, a lot of the architects never like having the artist around anyway. I mean, some of them are subtle, some of them are more primitive about communicating that unless they can get the artist to do—But a lot of times that's a source of friction or undermining.

DENNIS ADAMS: Right. Robert—you know, like the Robert Irwin/Richard Meier story—would've been an example of that. But, you know, I've taught in architecture schools. I know their language very well. I mean, I teach—I taught—I was in the architecture school at MIT for 11 years.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: So I understand that language, and it is a different language. I had to learn that language because at MIT I had to work with those people. And I was the underdog. And the underdog always has to learn the language of the master, right? And so I learned their language, but they were never willing to learn mine. And today I've just separated myself a lot from that, that story. All the hope of artists and architects collaborating I would say, so what? And what has really been produced for the most part? I think it's a lot of flim-flam. It sounds good in a meeting. But art—we have a different mission, artists and architects, completely different mission. And the mission of—for my money, and it doesn't represent all

artists; but I'll just speak for myself—my mission is to provoke, to ask questions, right? Not to sit down and die in relation to some formal, you know, in some formal relationship of architecture, to sit nicely with a building, to decorate, to embellish it, or to tint it, or whatever I'm doing. I don't want to be part of that. It can happen.

AVIS BERMAN: [Laughs] What I would have guessed would have been a more, shall we say, problematic client is that you did a piece [*Tributaries*, 1995] for the New York City School System, I think in Long Island City. Is that right?

DENNIS ADAMS: Yeah, they were a problematic client as well. Although the project went ahead fine, and it worked very, very well. All the obstacles were—fell to the wayside. And it's a success. I think, it's not a project that I, you know, when the angels ask me to recall, I don't, you know—But I think within the context of the public school—They're satisfied with it. They really like it. I think they consider it one of their best. But there again, I'd forgotten all about it.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that was—it's also something that the students would look at and hold onto it.

DENNIS ADAMS: No, I think in terms of the community and all of that, it was very, very effective. And the students were lovely. I went out and spoke to students. Believe it or not, it was the faculty that were—or some of the faculty—that were resistant.

AVIS BERMAN: Because?

DENNIS ADAMS: They were resistant because there was ambiguity, okay? Same story. And they were resistant—And one in particular, who was trying to drum up business to perhaps reject the project among his colleagues—I think he was an English teacher—he said that the Civil Rights Movement would be too specific of a thing to present in a high school as a subject for students. It would be too specific, were his words. It would have to be something more general. I assume something more like the Civil War; I mean, you know, something so buried in time that it would have little relevance anymore. I don't know what he meant exactly, but I'm assuming that's what he wanted. And I don't know what his politics were. But he was pretty adamant about not having that proposal. But the students out-voiced him that day. And the project turned out very well. And, you know, they're rebuilding it now. It weathered over 14 or 15 years after the kids, you know, worked it; and just a normal course of deterioration and all. And I think they consider it one of the most successful projects. They're having it all redone.

AVIS BERMAN: That's terrific.

DENNIS ADAMS: As we speak. I had an email about it this morning. I'm going out to proof new photos and everything.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, that's great.

DENNIS ADAMS: So they—they like it. I mean, it appears in all of these big books on the school system.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, I saw it in the public art book and everything. And I saw it's on the Internet and all of that sort of thing. You know, it's—they like it.

DENNIS ADAMS: They like it. It was well received.

AVIS BERMAN: Because I just wondered if, you know, in terms of any other things to take into consideration when the government is your client. [Laughs]

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: You'd think the border station, you know, they thought, oh, great fit for you.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But because of its mission, it's almost—You know, maybe they only could get an Adirondack scene there because they're so afraid.

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, there's another artist who worked on the site, and that's basically

what he gave them: photographs of the Adirondacks. But they don't really like it. I was at the meeting the day he presented, and I could not believe that the GSA let them get away with this. Basically they said, Okay, we can have landscapes of around the—Just landscapes.

AVIS BERMAN: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: You know, a little scene. And at one point they said, Oooh, that's a little bit—it's not pretty enough. It's a little bit—maybe there's too much mud in the photograph. And the GSA pretends to listen to that kind of stuff. At one point I just—I'm sorry. You know, you can only bend over so far. Basically the rule of thumb here is the first time you bend over, you just keep bending over. So you take a stand somewhere along the line. And, you know, I respect the context and the places and the people I'm working for. I do a lot of research, I do a lot of homework, and I try to give it my all. But in the end, it's my vision. That's what I've been asked to do: I've been asked to produce a work of art; I've not been asked to, you know, create a work of utility or—

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. It's also surprising that GSA doesn't assign someone like a project manager to be your advocate and stay with it once they like it. That's—

DENNIS ADAMS: Well, you do have a project manager. They do have somebody that you're assigned to that stays on it. But it just—I feel the GSA just—they backed down around the client. And I think probably in an earlier period, where there wasn't all that paranoia around the border stations, things might have been different. I mean, it's also a little bit—I don't want to blame them entirely—it's also a little bit circumstantial.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: It may change under Obama.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. Because you started doing this in—[George W.] Bush

DENNIS ADAMS: Oh, yes. It was [inaudible]. And also during the moment I was doing that, that person who rang the border station was called on the chopping block because I think somebody with tuberculosis or something had gotten through. And so there was—so probably all the people in Washington were on him. And, you know, that just translates into God! We've got to—we can't bother to go to some meeting about an art object on the site, you know. And I understand that they're very conscious about what they're doing. But then the GSA needs to speak up for the public that passes through. The other thing is what always happens is that one or two people pretend to represent all of these people: our public won't like it. Our employees won't like it. But there're no employees there. You see what I'm saying?

AVIS BERMAN: Right. It's only one or two talking—it's no one.

DENNIS ADAMS: And the GSA could at least break that down. They could say, Okay, well, let's go to the employees.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. I mean, because if you have 300 employees there or 50, someone saying—no one is going to be monolithic.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. But, you know, this is how it's passed down the pike. I would say it's—it's not handled right. [Inaudible.] I liked everybody I worked with at the GSA. Everybody was fine. There's no good and evil here. Again, it's part circumstance. [Inaudible.] But at the end of the day, I think somehow their mission is not fulfilled. There's a lot of things that just die in between the cracks of all the bureaucratic moments that take place.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, yes. Because you need something when you're, say, in a room with ten people up there. There's got to be a little bit more sticking up. Because, you know, they've invested in the project. And then to let it die like this for these kinds of reasons. Then as you say, if they wanted—or they should have investigated before picking you; maybe talking to someone up there and saying, This is the kind of artist he is.

DENNIS ADAMS: Maybe they did that. I wouldn't know.

AVIS BERMAN: I wouldn't know either.

DENNIS ADAMS: I told them from day one I would prefer to work at a justice center because

at least I know that I'll get justice. Or there's some—there's something in place there about justice, and I can appeal to that justice in the process. But to appeal to policemen at a border station, you know, I mean, the last place in the world that I want to do work is a police station. Basically it's a police station.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: And, you know, my role in life is to let the prisoners go. I said that—I've said that at meetings sometimes. I said, "I hope you understand that in the broadest way possible." You know, that's what poetry, that's what art is, right? It's to release the prisoners of language and meaning and form.

AVIS BERMAN: Shelley: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. And, well, anyway.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. That would be much too threatening.

DENNIS ADAMS: Much too threatening, yes. But I would continue to work with them, but I think it's a dead—I think we're at the point of turning their last invoice [inaudible]. But we'll see.

AVIS BERMAN: We'll see. We'll see. As you say, maybe a book is an interesting idea, that would be manageable for them.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: But it would have to be something that you would feel good about.

DENNIS ADAMS: They could walk around the project and figure out another way for me to work with them, okay? Absolutely. They could do that in Washington. But why they won't—they keep coming back to this idea: But we've got to have something permanent, on the site, attached to the building. You see, they come back to a very conservative attitude. These people say they don't want those things attached to their building, you see? So now it's up to them to recreate the distribution system, the form for the work of art. I said, we'll walk on that together. I said, I'm a master at that. That I can do. And I proposed a book a long time ago to get us out of this project—this problem. A book that can be distributed to all the employees. It could be there for people at the border, you know, that were coming through where they had to wait, you know, there. They could look through it, like a doctor's office or something. And I said, we could distribute it to all the stations along the border on the whole U.S.-Canadian border. And it would be a new type of work, right? That maybe would, you know, would not be in your face. But something, you know, more casual and picked up and reflected on. And some of them liked it. But ultimately the head of the GSA said that's not what we do.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, it's too much like publishing, I suppose.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, is there something you could do on the interior of the station?

DENNIS ADAMS: No, I already tried—I've already been there.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, excuse me.

DENNIS ADAMS: No, no, that's all right. No, no, I had a beautiful idea there. Totally democratic. I was taking stills, very poignant stills, from *The Invisible Man*, from the film itself. Moments that represented his disappearance in the film; where he's not present, but there's a sense of his presence. And I would distribute hundreds of those film stills throughout all of the rooms, the various rooms and agencies, at the border station. So it'd be totally democratic. It would cut through. So you would find them—again, it would be in the chief's office, it would be in the janitor's closet, it would be in the cafeteria. So it would be this idea of the artist doing almost nothing but a little photograph. And the entire weight of the project would be not in what you're looking at because there's nothing to look at. [They laugh.] Here's the Invisible Man. These little cards, these little—they were actually little round vignettes—they would just be distributed through the entire system. So it was about the distribution system.

AVIS BERMAN: And if someone went to seek them—

DENNIS ADAMS: You could look for them, or you would run into them.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: Or you would find that—People could have them in their individual cubbyholes. I said that we could put them on people's desks if they wanted them. Or they could be hung. And they would go everywhere. And they would be totally democratic, cut through all the hierarchies of the police network. And it was a beautiful, poetic little idea. And there were people—There were people—There was somebody that was not part of the police force at that border station but had worked a lot on site there, and he loved that. He loved it. He thought it was wonderful. And it would also—they could kind of build a story around it, you know, because there's nothing there.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

DENNIS ADAMS: So they kind of had to build their own stories around this invisible man. And maybe they're the invisible men, you know. I don't know.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes. And it's great because it's about evasion.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. It had all the metaphors. But again, it goes back to that idea of distribution. You know, even the drinking fountain piece you were referring to at the school that was also about not being site-specific. All I did was, I said, "Where are the drinking fountains going?" And they said, "Well, they're all here. There'll all programmed." And I go, "That's where I'll be working." You see. Because I don't want to make decisions about site. I want to cut through a site in the way Proust would. You can find anything anywhere. This kind of memory [inaudible]. Images come at you not frontally, not where you expect them, but from the side. And I'm on the side, in fact.

AVIS BERMAN: And everybody goes to the drinking fountain.

DENNIS ADAMS: And everybody goes there to exchange something, you know. I love them in school. You remember, right?

AVIS BERMAN: Of course. Yes.

DENNIS ADAMS: You could even fall in love at the drinking fountain, right?

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, you had your favorite ones because none of them ever worked right all the time. So you knew which ones worked and which ones didn't.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: Or which ones the other kids you were interested in hung around it. So there you go. They were their little gathering—they were like little mini-villages.

DENNIS ADAMS: Yes. I did an enormous public project in Munich. Maybe a couple million dollars at this place where I cut through the entire network of the institution and built all of these benches that reflect images on different surfaces. Very successful project. There again, this was after *Outtake*. You see *Outtake* changed everything for me. I knew I wanted to be everywhere simultaneously. That was the new condition of site—displaced.

AVIS BERMAN: Or multi-placed.

DENNIS ADAMS: Or multi-placed. Or situated democratically in the purest sense of the word.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, we're kind of back to where we were in the beginning. And really that Germany was a rich experience for you on many levels and how it permeated to this—how it diffused really over the years.

DENNIS ADAMS: Perhaps, yeah. Perhaps. But certainly this idea of historical memory.

AVIS BERMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DENNIS ADAMS: The idea of memory brought me to a lot of those ideas. And of course I—

and more central to the work is still, I guess, this place of memory.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Well, I think that’s it. Thank you very much. This was splendid.

DENNIS ADAMS: Okay. All right. I hope we have something there. We’ll get something.

AVIS BERMAN: We definitely have something.

[END OF TRACK 3.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]