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Oral history interview with Robert Barry,
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Contact Information

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview with Robert Barry on 2010 May 14-25. The interview took place at Yvon Lambert Gallery in New York, NY, and was conducted by Judith Olch Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding for this interview was provided by a grant from the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Judith Olch Richards has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JUDITH RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Barry on May 14, 2010 in New York City, at Yvon Lambert Gallery, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one.

I wanted to start by asking you about your family background, as far back as you want to go. Certainly with your grandparents – where they came from, where they were born, what they did.

ROBERT BARRY: I didn't know my grandparents. They were – my grandfather – my maternal grandfather died when I was five. I have very little memory of him. All my other grandparents were dead by the time I was of any age to remember anything.

MS. RICHARDS: Did they live in the U.S.?

MR. BARRY: On my mother's side, they were Italian. In fact, my mother was born in Italy.

MS. RICHARDS: What was their name?

MR. BARRY: Her name was Frances Benenati.

MS. RICHARDS: Could you spell that?

MR. BARRY: Oh boy. B-E-N-E-N-A-T-I, I think. But she came over with her sisters and her brothers when they were very young. I have to say, I'm not someone who's really big into my family history – never really was very curious about it. The only thing I know about it is what I picked up from my aunts and parents –

MS. RICHARDS: Like what part of Italy they came from?

MR. BARRY: Yes, they came from Sicily, from Catania, from a small town there. But they seemed to have spread out into various cities. There were Benenatis in Napoli, there were Benenatis in Rome. They – the family was quite large and from what I gather, they had interest in politics and things like that. I really don't know a lot about them.

The only memory I have is of my grandfather, who was dying of cancer – even at that time. I remember – have vague memories of going to his funeral at a church in the Bronx. And I remember his speaking with a very heavy Italian accent. In fact, my mother had no accent but I think she was really a very young girl when she came over from Italy.

But there was always an accent with my aunts – I had an Aunt Mary and an Aunt Rose and an Uncle Joe. And Uncle Joe was the oldest and he spoke with an Italian accent. And of course, it was – an Italian. They married Italian men – the aunts all married Italian men. My mother did not. My father – Barry's an Irish name, in fact. And so I'm sort of part – half-Italian and half-Irish. [Laughs.]

On my father's side, there is a picture of me with my grandmother, Susan Barry and I guess when I was about two or so at the time, but I have no memory of her at all. On my father's side, they were lifelong New York Democrats, very involved in the Democratic Party. My grandmother raised one, two, three, four sons. In fact, there was a daughter who, I guess, died from cancer before I was born. I think her name was Jean. I have some picture of her. She was dead by the time I was born. My father was the youngest of them all.

MS. RICHARDS: What did your grandfather do for a living?

MR. BARRY: They worked for the city, from what I understand. They – he – my memory is very vague on that, but from what I gather, he was a kind of a garbage man, but I think that they also – he also was one of these guys that went around changing light bulbs in the city – streetlights, something like that. I never knew him.

There was one or two photographs of him, but I have no real memory of him.

MS. RICHARDS: How did your parents meet?

MR. BARRY: I'm not really sure. I think they met at a dance. My father was five years older than my mother. His name is John - John Arthur Barry. And I believe they met at a dance and of course, the story is that at some point, she became pregnant. She was a young girl at the time, probably in her mid-teens. And they did eventually get married.

There are some letters between the two of them before the marriage, when he was working, I think for Western Electric at that time, but he wasn't working in New York. And so they corresponded. And all of this is discussed in these letters about her pregnancy. Eventually, they got married and my sense is that he did it rather reluctantly. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: They were both living in what part of the city?

MR. BARRY: Bronx, the Bronx - they were all Bronx sites. [Laughs.] I was born in a hospital in the Bronx.

MS. RICHARDS: What year was it that they got married?

MR. BARRY: Well, I'm not really sure when that was, probably around '29, something like that. The thing about it is, there's no wedding pictures and it was something that wasn't really discussed.

MS. RICHARDS: Because she was pregnant?

MR. BARRY: Because she was pregnant, yes, and the idea in the Italian family of not having a big wedding was just something that wasn't - just something that didn't happen. But over the years, it just sort of came out and all of this whole story, about her pregnancy, and my brother, John, by the way, who was nine years older than I was.

And in those days, they told her that for some reason, she couldn't have any more children until I came along. [Laughs.] And you know, we're talking about the '20s, late '20s and early '30s. That was a very different world, I assume in those days. And anyway, she - she had my brother, John. And - but there wasn't any wedding picture. From what I gather, they probably went to city hall and got married.

MS. RICHARDS: Had your father been to college?

MR. BARRY: No, in fact, he never finished high school, which I think was quite common in those days. And he worked for Western Electric. He got a job there in the '20s and just hauling the wire and doing heavy labor, putting up a telephone line. And he always said this was not a job that he wanted to do.

He said when he left school - and I think he left high school, which was a common thing in those days, he had a few years of high school and he told me once that one of the first jobs he had was actually cleaning up in the evenings at the 42nd Street library. He would go there at nighttime and that was a job he got.

And whether or not his mother got that job from some political connection or something, it's not really clear. I do know that they did use their political connections - they were very close to the representative from that district of the Bronx. I think his name was Buckley. And they always had their finger in Democratic New York City politics. This was something that was very common.

MS. RICHARDS: This this is where you were born? What neighborhood in the Bronx?

MR. BARRY: It's a Fordham Road area of the Bronx - around that area. Fordham Road, Grand Concourse, that sort of thing. I went to Our Lady of Mercy, parochial school and I started Fordham Prep, but that only lasted about a year and then I - to me, it was like going to some kind of concentration camp. I was not very happy. And I only went there because that's where my brother went, really.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to - that's high school right? Fordham Prep?

MR. BARRY: Yes, that's high school.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to earlier childhood, so you were born in the Bronx.

MR. BARRY: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: What - what kind of student were you in elementary school? Did you enjoy school?

MR. BARRY: No, I didn't enjoy school at all. I was the kind of student that got by with a B. I was good at art - always good at art.

MS. RICHARDS: The teacher recognized that?

MR. BARRY: Yes, but in those, I was taught by nuns, of course. It was a very strict Catholic upbringing. And all my teachers were nuns except on Friday morning, a layperson, a woman, would come in and she would make a drawing in the front of the blackboard and we would all make the same drawing, you know, still life.

And she would show us how to make an apple out of a circle and things like that. And I used to do things like mix my colors and things like that. So - but there was a nun who sort of recognized this as something and I remember one time her calling my mother in. And my mother was very nervous coming into school and we weren't really sure why.

And she said that she would - wanted to know if she could keep a couple of my drawings that I had done, believe it or not. And of course, of course, keep them if you want. [Laughs.] But it was - that was the one thing that I really looked forward to. And of course, the nuns were very strict and if anybody talked or if anyone broke any rules, well, she would just put a sign on the classroom door, no art that day.

And so the art teacher would come around for one period - one hour - see, and this one teacher would visit all the classes on that day. And it's an all-boys school, by the way. Well, I shouldn't say that, but the school was divided into two halves. On one side were all boys taught by the Dominican nuns and then the other half was all girls taught by a different order, the Ursuline nuns. And so it was basically an all-boys school.

And never was that line ever crossed, by the way. And even at mass on Sunday, there was that strict line down the middle. Boys were on one side, the girls were on the other side. But I'm not really sure the Dominicans and the Ursulines really got along with one another at all. I never saw any kind of interactions between the two. They were two really very different systems in one building.

MS. RICHARDS: What were your favorite activities after school?

MR. BARRY: Oh, playing stickball. You know, hanging out, just doing what boys do.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember being aware of museums and art museums just before high school?

MR. BARRY: Yes, my father took me - my father was an interesting man. He, as I said, he never finished high school, but he was a kind of an - [inaudible] - traveler. He subscribed to the *National Geographic*. He brought home *LIFE Magazine* every week, which was always fascinating. And he would bring different papers home. I mean, he, you know, he read all the newspapers and things like that. So he was an interesting man. We didn't live that far from the botanical gardens in the Bronx. We went there quite often on Sundays.

MS. RICHARDS: The whole family?

MR. BARRY: I remember he was interested - no, not really. My mother stayed home and cooked. My mother was not one to go out very much. Me, mostly, he took and sometimes my sister. I have a younger sister. She's a young - she's about a year -

MS. RICHARDS: And your older brother was already out of the house?

MR. BARRY: My older brother was nine years older, so he was with a different crowd. He was just in a whole different situation and he - he went in the army, first of all. He was in the army during World War II. So he was away for a long time. And I had the bedroom to myself. [Laughs.]

And I got kind of used to that and then he came home and we had to share it. When he came home, he was already in college. He went in the army, I think, after his freshman year in college. He studied electrical engineering. And so - we sort of had a share in that. But I mean he was easygoing. I mean he lived a totally different life, had different friends, hung out on a different street, even.

In those days, you had neighborhood groups and he was - he played for a local baseball team, I think they were called the Decatur Cardinals, had uniforms and things like that. He was a very smart guy. He was like - won the - the math medal at Fordham Prep [Fordham Preparatory School, Bronx] and he was extremely well regarded, good looking guy, very popular.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that hard to go in after, with teachers thinking -

MR. BARRY: No, I didn't care at all about that.

MS. RICHARDS: – okay, John’s brother.

MR. BARRY: I really – no, the only problem was going to Fordham Prep and following him. I mean I was taken into the dean of discipline, Father Matthew, who I was totally terrified of and he told me how wonderful John was and we hope you know, we all remember John and how wonderful he was and we hope that you will follow in his footsteps, which I absolutely did not. I had no interest in anything there, certainly not Latin. That was always a terrible problem for me.

MS. RICHARDS: You started there in eighth grade or sixth grade?

MR. BARRY: No, I graduated –

MS. RICHARDS: Fordham Prep.

MR. BARRY: I graduated Our Lady of Mercy, which was eighth grade, went to the eighth grade and then I started freshman at Fordham Prep.

MS. RICHARDS: When we talked about museums, and you said that your father –

MR. BARRY: I’m surprised they let me into Fordham Prep. I think maybe – I’m not sure even why they let me in there because I had to take a test and I didn’t really want to even going there, to tell you the truth. I really wanted to go to Mount Saint Michael or Cardinal Hayes or something like that, where a lot of my friends were going, by the way. None of my neighborhood friends went to Fordham Prep, none of them.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it considered a better school, academically?

MR. BARRY: Yes, it was considered a better school. All right, a lot of the – my brother went to school with the son of the borough president, whose name was Burns and they were close friends. I mean it was this – it was a step higher –

MS. RICHARDS: Have you ever spoken to Vito Acconci?

MR. BARRY: It was run by the – yes, I know, Vito went to Our Lady of Mercy, also. He was a couple of years after me. But – now, I lost my train of thought.

MS. RICHARDS: You were saying the borough president – your brother went to school –

MR. BARRY: His name was Burns, yeah. It was that kind of a situation, where there was a slightly higher level of –

MS. RICHARDS: Did that seem

MR. BARRY: It was a Jesuit school by the way, so that your academics were very important. The big competition was Xavier High School – those were the two teams – the two football teams and scholars and –

MS. RICHARDS: Xavier in Manhattan?

MR. BARRY: Xavier in Manhattan, yes, that was the big rival, was Xavier. So you really had to be up there with your Latin and your math and all that stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: Does that show that your parents had a high regard for your intellectual capabilities and were ambitious for you?

MR. BARRY: I think my parents – my parents were very hands-off, quite liberal in terms of their – they really – they did encourage me, but they never really pushed me into anything, really.

MS. RICHARDS: But you said you didn’t really want to go to that high school.

MR. BARRY: I did want to go there and I’m not exactly sure why I did. I think it just – one thing just followed another. It was just sort of assumed that I would go there.

MS. RICHARDS: Before you went to high school –

MR. BARRY: I didn’t want to go there – I didn’t know what I was letting myself in for. First of all, I could walk there from my house, which was nice. And it had this beautiful campus, you know, which was really nice, which I liked, although the campus was devoted to the university – for the university, but the prep was one of the buildings on the Fordham University campus. It was really nice and I could walk there.

To go to Cardinal Hayes [High School, Bronx] or to go Mount Saint Michael's [Academy, Bronx], I would have to take a subway or a bus or it would have been a longer trip to get there. So it was partly out of just, I don't know, laziness, convenience, whatever. I really didn't know what I was getting myself into, going to Fordham Prep. And the only reason I wanted to go to the other schools was that's where all my buddies were going, my friends from the neighborhood.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about going to the botanical gardens.

MR. BARRY: My father, on Sundays, after church – after church – I was in the choir at Our Lady of Mercy, by the way, and we went to the children's mass, which was like at 9 o'clock in the morning and then there was the high mass, which was like, I don't know, 11, something like that. And that was a long thing with three priests and the church was full. There was a choir.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there also an organ?

MR. BARRY: Yes. It was quite a – it was a real serious, major production in those days. This – the whole area was mainly Italian, Irish Catholic. This was a big area in the Bronx at that time. So you'd get – high mass was filled with – I mean it was jammed with people standing outside and there was an adult choir and there was the boys' choir.

So we had – we sang the Gregorian chants and all that stuff. There were certain privileges and sometimes, we could get out of class or we made trips to various places and things like that. So my father attended that mass and then afterwards, we would – Sundays was a kind of ritual. We would go someplace.

Sometimes, we would go see my brother play baseball with his team and they had uniforms and they played – there were a couple of different baseball teams in the area and they had their own fields. There was one called Frisch Field –

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

MR. BARRY: Hmm?

MS. RICHARDS: How do you think you spell that? Frisch?

MR. BARRY: Frisch, well, it was named after a very famous baseball player called Frankie Frisch, who I think, F-R-I-S-C-H. And he – he played, probably, I think he played for the Giants – I'm not an expert on this, but I think he went to Fordham University and then played for the New York Giants. He was one of the few professional ball players.

In those days, you have to remember that Fordham University had a serious football team. They played, you know, Columbia [University, New York City]. I mean, this was – this was college football in those days was a major event. You know, army-navy game, things like that, [University of] Notre Dame [South Bend, IN], these were big deals – [laughs] – at that time.

And Fordham University, when their football team played, this was a big deal – and the baseball team and so forth. So we would go there and – or we might go to the Bronx Botanical Gardens to see some flower show or go to – we'd go to into hothouse there, greenhouse. My father was interested in all of that and he also – sometimes, we would, in those days, you can actually drive into the city and park the car.

And we would park at the Metropolitan Museum and occasionally, we did that. I sometimes went with my father. He worked for the Western Electric, which doesn't really exist anymore. But there is a big Western Electric building down in SoHo, where he worked, and sometimes, he would take me there and I would – sometimes, we would go inside.

Sometimes, I would just sit in the car outside. He might have to go in for an hour or something like that on a weekend during the war for whatever business he had to take care of, I don't know. And there were times –

MS. RICHARDS: We forgot to talk about the date of your birth –

MR. BARRY: This would be in the '40s.

MS. RICHARDS: For the record –

MR. BARRY: I can't remember the year –

MS. RICHARDS: No, when you were born, sorry –

MR. BARRY: Nineteen thirty-six.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. So you were eight, nine.

MR. BARRY: Yes, around that age. And so he – we would go places on Sunday. He would take me along. My mother stayed home. My sister didn't sing in the choir, so she was home. My brother was away and my mother prepared dinner, Sunday dinner. And these were the days when we were at home.

Every so often, we would go to one of her sisters' house, like Aunt Mary, who lived in Long Island. We would go there for Sunday dinner, or we might go to her other sister, Rose, and we'd have a big Sunday dinner. But most of the time, dinner was at home. And she would prepare a dinner and that was an all-day affair. My mother worked really hard when I think back in those days.

MS. RICHARDS: When you went to the Metropolitan [Museum of Art], do you remember what areas were your favorites?

MR. BARRY: Yes. Well, my father was interested in things like the knights in armor, things like that, you know. He had an interest in many things. I think I remember going because there was this hall where the knights were sitting on these horses and he would look at the different kinds of bows and arrows or whatever, the shields, you know.

He had an interest in all of this and all of the – and we would go to the cloisters, for instance, and sometimes – all of these were really not far. We could drive there in literally a few minutes. It wasn't a long trip to get there, as I remember. And he was interested in all of this – sort of old, medieval stuff and things like that. Maybe he read about it in the *National Geographic* and things like that. So he was a man who was very curious about many things.

He was an electrical engineer. He built the first television set that we ever had in the late '40s. He took me down to a place called Radio Row, which is where the World Trade Center was, in fact, before it was the World Trade Center. It was like an extension of Chambers Street or something. And he liked to go there and visit these stores where you could – where they had radio tubes and radios and short-wave radios and things and the first television sets, in fact, black-and-white, little screen, huge cabinets. It was the first place where I saw that.

But he could build radios. He built a radio transmitter for my brother when he was in high school. And my brother would play records at night and he was a disc jockey and the signal could be transmitted throughout the neighborhood and his friends could listen to my brother playing records.

You know, it was probably illegal because I don't think they had a license for I don't know, but my brother would broadcast for an hour or so in the evenings, playing some record. And he worked in a record shop, in fact, where he could buy these records – and I'm talking about 78 wax records – [inaudible].

So my father was a very fascinating man who had a lot of interests. He built an FM radio for me. He built – he built those radio transmitters. My art – those radio wave pieces for me, he's the one who made them and he was interested in all of that stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: Were your mother and father supportive of your interest in art?

MR. BARRY: Yes. My father was fascinated by it – fascinated.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were in high school –

MR. BARRY: He hung up my paintings around the room –

MS. RICHARDS: There was very little art in high school right?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, they didn't have it in high school.

MS. RICHARDS: But did you do it yourself on the weekends or –

MR. BARRY: I filled my – I was the guy who made the posters for the football team. And as soon as I made some drawings for them, the guy – there was one priest who was sort of in charge of it. I forget if he was the coach or who he was – I don't know. He just always said, "Okay, you got the job."

And so I did cartoons for the newspaper and stuff like that. I filled my books with drawings and textbooks. I used to make little flip movies, flipping the pages of my textbook. At the end of the year, you would sell your textbooks to the next class, okay? They would have this big meeting where the freshmen would come in and you would sell your textbooks. And I couldn't sell mine because they were all filled with drawings.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.] I thought you were going to say people treasured your textbooks.

MR. BARRY: No, not in those days. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: When you went to the Metropolitan and other museums, what were you interested in seeing, in addition to what your father was interested in?

MR. BARRY: I didn't really have an interest in the beginning. But we would walk around and look at the old masters and we, you know, they had Raphael and he would walk around – it was really hard for me to say what interested him. I became fascinated – and I've said this before – with Vermeer – this woman pouring the pitcher – I don't know why – but I was just, I think, naturally drawn to it. I don't know why.

And – but other things too. I mean there was this – El Greco – *The View of Toledo* [1597]. Different things over – Rembrandt [van Rijn] portraits, I mean the Old Masters, really, things like that. I really can't say why, it was just something that I found interesting. To me, it was like a magical place to go there – this huge hall and palms and all of these different things, just fascinated me.

MS. RICHARDS: During the years of growing up in the Bronx, did you and your family do something special every summer?

MR. BARRY: Yes, we would go – we went different places – within a driving distance. The farthest drive, I think, was New Hampshire. We went to Lake Winnepesaukee one time. And then my mother's girlfriend, Molly, was married to a Greek – married into a Greek family and they had a beach in Throggs Neck called Nikos [ph]. Nikos Beach it was called and we go – we went there during the summer. Almost every evening, we'd go there and hang out. And I would walk around the beach and my sister and I would, you know, sometimes one of the brothers would take us out in a rowboat.

MS. RICHARDS: Which brothers do you mean?

MR. BARRY: They were brothers – these Greek brothers, the Nikos brothers and they were Siro [ph] and Louis [ph] and Andy.

MS. RICHARDS: Those were your cousins?

MR. BARRY: No, they're my stepmother's in-laws. [Laughs.] It gets a little complicated, okay?

MS. RICHARDS: Your stepmother?

MR. BARRY: My stepmother was Molly Nikos, who was my mother's best friend, okay?

MS. RICHARDS: So your grandfather remarried a younger woman.

MR. BARRY: No, no. It had nothing to – my grandfather died. He was dead a long time ago.

MS. RICHARDS: That's what I thought. [They laugh.]

MR. BARRY: Am I jumping around too much? Hard to follow all of this?

MS. RICHARDS: No, no, I just was trying to think of who your stepmother –

MR. BARRY: My stepmother was a woman called Molly. And she was my mother's best friend from childhood. And I think she was Italian. But she was probably closer to my mother than any of her sisters, okay? And she married into a Greek family, the Nikos family, who was, best of my memory, was a whole bunch of Greek guys.

They were all brothers, okay? And the family owned a beach, believe it or not, and a restaurant and a bar, called Nikos Beach. And it was in Throggs Neck, which is part of the Bronx shoreline, I guess. I don't know – I would have to look it up. And during the summer, we would go there.

In the evenings, we'd just drive over. It's not a long drive. It's in the Bronx. We would drive over – it wasn't far. And they were interesting. We would hang out and you know, there were other children there, by the way. You know, they had families, these brothers had families. They were no – not family relatives, just friends.

MS. RICHARDS: During the years in high school, when you thought about –

MR. BARRY: Well, first of all, I was only at Fordham for a year. That's all. And then I just got out.

MS. RICHARDS: Everything we talked about, being the cartoonist and all of this – all happened in one year?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, that was all within one year, exactly right.

MS. RICHARDS: That was ninth grade?

MR. BARRY: That was ninth grade, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. Then what happened?

MR. BARRY: And then I left. I got sick. I hated it. I can't tell you how much I hated it. I started playing hooky and there was a friend of mine called James Callahan. Two friends and another one called Robert Hughes [ph], who, by the way, was the son of an assistant district attorney. [Laughs.] And James Callahan's father was a cameraman for something like Movietone News, believe it or not. These were my two buddies.

And we used to play hooky a lot. And we used to go down to 42nd Street and go to movies down there and hang out. I just hated it. That was it. And so they told my mother and they said, listen, you know, his grades are terrible and if he wants to stay here, he can't play hooky anymore. So of course, my mother was called in and so forth.

And she got all upset about it and so he said, "He's going to have to go to summer school to make up for all of this and then he can come back." And I said, "I don't want to summer school. Number one, I hate it. I don't want to go back. I want to go someplace else." So we went to DeWitt Clinton High School, which wasn't far. And I loved it. It was great. They had art classes and the guys were terrific. I fell in with a bunch of guys that I liked very much.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that still in the place it is now?

MR. BARRY: I guess so.

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, was it?

MR. BARRY: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: It's up above Bronx Science?

MR. BARRY: Yes, right, right. It's up there - it's like at the end of the Grand Concourse and Marshall Parkway and all of that. I liked it very much. I had a good time. And suddenly, my grades took off. I went from being a kind of C student to B-plus and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: So ultimately, then, your parents were okay with this.

MR. BARRY: Oh yeah, no, no, they were very - they never - my parents were extremely passive in that regard. I don't know. I sort of got away with a lot when I think my brother and my sister didn't. I'm not really sure. Shortly after I was born, my sister was born like a year later. And girls were a very rare commodity in the Barry family, believe it or not. I mean - I'm talking about all my cousins were men and boys.

The Barrys didn't produce a lot of girls. And so - when my sister was born, she was just - my mother was just, you know, and my father - were just really thrilled to have this girl. My father was - loved her. I mean my sister was really her daddy's girl, you know, always. And my mother used to like to dress her up and all of that business. So I was kind of left on my own, which was perfectly fine with me. I had a fine time.

MS. RICHARDS: So your major interest in school at DeWitt Clinton was art?

MR. BARRY: No. I took art courses, only in the sense that I was able to - I took art classes, which were fun, which I liked, but it was a - just a kind of a general education that I got, a regular academic - academic diploma, but I kind of had the feeling that art was something that I really liked the most but I wasn't really sure that that was it.

I was also a good writer, by the way. My, you know, my English teacher and writing teacher loved my writing. You know, I wrote short stories and things like that. And they liked them very much. So it was a kind of - I was torn between that and writing.

I was also very interested in music. I used to hang out in jazz joints, you know, the Five Spot and so forth when I was, you know, a senior, really, when I was a little bit older. And I thought, well, maybe I could, you know, work with music. I can't play at all.

MS. RICHARDS: You were in the chorus, but you didn't play any instruments.

MR. BARRY: That's right. No, I was singing. But I loved music. Music was a big thing and so I started collecting records. I had a large collection of jazz records and that was something else I used to listen to. At night, there was a - what the heck was his name? There was a famous - Jazzbo Collins, I used to listen to at night, and some other guys.

I was never that big a rock-and-roll, rock guy. I really preferred jazz, you know, that kind of thing. And I thought that maybe - so I had a number of different interests, in fact, in high school, that I was interested in. And I made some very close friends there, who I liked very much.

MS. RICHARDS: When it was getting near graduation, what were your thoughts about what you'd do next?

MR. BARRY: I went on to college because first of all, Hunter, which is now called Lehman - in those days, it was called Hunter. It was part of Hunter. The Bronx campus was called Hunter in those days. And okay, why did I go there? Number one, it was all girls, which I was very interested in at that time.

MS. RICHARDS: It wasn't literally all girls. You mean they just opened it to coed education?

MR. BARRY: Yes, they had just opened it, like one or two years before. Before that, it was all girls. And I remember going there and there were girls protesting, when I went to, sort of, register. They had opened up the girls - they had opened it up to co-ed in the Bronx division, but I remember having to go to the Park Avenue campus at some point.

And I remember walking in there and there were just girls with tables and posters saying, you know, keep the men out - [Laughs] - and all of that. And there was also some of that, still, in the Bronx campus.

But there were men there; there were some men there. But I have to say, very few. I would say it was still - when I went there, I would say it was about 70 percent, still. All girls, and the upper classes were girls. The only men, I think, were - the junior and sophomore classes had men in them. After that, it was all girls.

I didn't know anything about their art department. I knew nothing about it, so it had really not that much to do - it had more to do with just finding a good school that didn't cost anything. And in those days it was - and since I had passed the test to get in. I mean, I could have gone to any one of the other schools, but I kind of liked it because it looked nice. It was a beautiful campus.

MS. RICHARDS: And at that point, you didn't know what you'd be majoring in.

MR. BARRY: No.

MS. RICHARDS: So as you started then, how did -

MR. BARRY: Well, you had to take a required art class. And I remember there was this guy, who was an artist, who actually showed - I can't remember his name now - one of my first classes. And he gave various kinds of assignments. You know, make three-dimensional abstractions, stuff like that. And I had taken some classes at DeWitt Clinton, art classes there.

MS. RICHARDS: How would you describe the work you did in high school, the artwork. Did you sense that you were mostly -

MR. BARRY: Oh, it was mainly realistic art, not abstract - figurative, mostly. How would I describe it?

MS. RICHARDS: The art you felt was really personal, not just an assignment.

MR. BARRY: Scenes from my knowledge of the city, I would say. Back alleys, things like that.

MS. RICHARDS: From memory?

MR. BARRY: All from memory. Yes, all from memory. There would be figures. I'm trying to think. Sometimes they would give an assignment, which I would do. I didn't always get along with my teachers. They didn't really, kind of - I remember once doing a scene of a cemetery with gravestones. And I put the names of some teachers on the gravestones.

And I think - what was her name? Mrs. Somebody, I can't remember now. A very attractive woman, I remember, and I really wanted her to like me. She was tall, blond, a very attractive woman. And for some reason, she just didn't like me. I don't know why. She gave me a B. But I thought I was the most imaginative one there. But she really didn't have any imagination, so it didn't register with her.

Then there was a guy called Bernard Kasso, who actually showed work. He was a watercolorist. And I

remember seeing, a little while later, an ad in *ARTnews* with his name, Bernard Kassoy, watercolors.

MS. RICHARDS: How would you spell Kassoy?

MR. BARRY: K-A-S-S-O-Y, something like that. And his first name was Bernard. And I'm sure if you go back over old issues of *ARTnews* from the '50s, you might find something there, you know? And he actually made work. He actually spent time in front of the class painting while we were painting. And I kind of liked him. He was sort of an influence in those days, in fact.

And he would set up, he would set up a piece of – a watercolor paper there, on a table – you know, elevated – and he would actually make a painting while we were making our paintings. And he would stop and walk around and make comments and so forth. We would all start with a pencil drawing.

MS. RICHARDS: So it gave you a sense of what a real artist was?

MR. BARRY: Yes. I was very lucky, in that sense. He was a real artist, yes. He was a guy who was teaching, but I think he really considered himself an artist. And this is something that's important later on at Hunter because they had real artists there, teaching, but first of all, they were artists. And that was very important to me, very important.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were talking about the first class you took at Hunter, the first art class.

MR. BARRY: Yes, there was a guy. And I can't remember his name, but he was an artist and he showed us his work, in fact. He showed us some small abstract paintings – colors very muted, geometric, as my memory serves. And I have to say, it was really the first time I ever made abstract art. I never thought about art, making abstract art. Everything was, sort of, realistic.

MS. RICHARDS: Had you studied [Piet] Mondrian or any other, earlier abstract –

MR. BARRY: No, even when I went to the Met. I never went to MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York City] in those days. The Metropolitan, I think – maybe I went to the Frick. I'm not really sure. But art, for me, was realistic art.

But this guy was abstract and first I, sort of, started doing these three-dimensional perspective studies – things like that, he had us doing – but abstract. I had learned perspective in elementary school, where the teacher put the horizon line, a little dot. I forget what they call it. And then you would have to draw the lines out –

MS. RICHARDS: One-point perspective?

MR. BARRY: And then you'd have to draw the lines out and draw a railroad track.

MS. RICHARDS: One-point perspective.

MR. BARRY: One-point perspective, right. And that was something we had to do, step by step, with the art teacher at Our Lady of Mercy. But this was really large-scale stuff, you know? Then I took a course with Doris Kennedy, who later became the chairman of the department, in fact, but she was young at that time. And her thing was fashion design and textile design, but she taught freshman art classes.

But that first guy, he was the one who encouraged me, by the way. He said, have you thought about doing an art major? And I said, well, you know, maybe. I don't know. Everything was here or there. I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do. He said, well, you should think about it. He was the first guy – and I can't even remember his name – who really said I should think about doing art. Kennedy was more into a commercial approach to art and textile design, things like that.

MS. RICHARDS: When you thought about being an art major, did you worry about how would you support yourself?

MR. BARRY: No. [Laughs.] It never dawned on me. I had always worked. I always had part-time jobs.

MS. RICHARDS: What kind of jobs did you have?

MR. BARRY: Oh, I used to deliver clothes for Litt-Chinitz.

MS. RICHARDS: For what?

MR. BARRY: Litt-Chinitz. Litt-Chinitz was a –

MS. RICHARDS: L-I-T?

MR. BARRY: L-I-T-T-C-H-I-N-I-T-Z. And that was a famous men's clothing store in the Bronx, on Fordham Road. I had a lot of jobs.

MS. RICHARDS: Through high school?

MR. BARRY: High school, even into elementary school. The first job I ever had was mowing Dr. O'Connor's lawn. Clarence O'Connor was one of my brother's best friends. And I don't know how it came about, but my brother said, listen, you want to make a couple of bucks? I said yeah, so he said, well, Clarence's father, Dr. O'Connor -

MS. RICHARDS: So you figured that you'd always had a way of making money, that it was something that wasn't worrisome.

MR. BARRY: Yeah. I always made money. The best summer jobs I ever had, which started when I was in high school and then I did it again after my freshman - the summer between my freshman and sophomore year - was working down in the Garment District.

My mother's sister was a big deal in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. She was a union representative. And we used to go to the dinners. What was his name? Dubinsky was the big union leader. I'm telling you, they were very - these were extremely political, liberal, Democrat, union people, who had connections all around the place.

And I worked for Marietta Fashions [ph], which was one of those workshops down in the Garment District, in the 30s, or something. I forget where it was. And it was make-work. They made work for me, you know.

And it was a couple of - three brothers who ran this place. And they always seemed to be screaming at each other, for some reason. One guy did the business. One guy, the oldest brother, ran the business. Then there was the guy who was in charge of the shop, right, with the cutters and the women sewing. And then there was the salesman, the youngest. And he always had a flashy tie and everything else.

And he was having an affair with Linda, by the way. He was married, with kids, but he was having an affair with this secretary, the receptionist - Linda, her name was.

MS. RICHARDS: You noted all of this, of course, as a high-school student.

MR. BARRY: Well, I can tell you some stories about Linda and me. Anyway, Linda also worked as a kind of a model. I mean, these buyers would come in, you know. This was not high fashion, as you can imagine. And Linda would sometimes model some of the clothes they made, you know. Or sometimes they had models who would come in, if it was something special that they wanted to do. And they had a kind of showroom situation there.

And my job was basically running to get coffee, or you know, it was make-work. They had make-work. A lot of the time, I just, sort of, sat there and did little odd jobs, clean up, whatever it was that they wanted done. I was a, kind of, a kid and I was, I think, 17 at the time. And anyway, that was by far the best job I ever had, those two summers. And Aunt Mary got me that job.

So I never had trouble getting work or working or doing - I always worked. I worked when I went to college. I worked after school. I delivered clothes for this dry cleaner, Mr. Frytag [ph]. I delivered clothes around the neighborhood, on the Grand Concourse, things like that. I delivered clothes for Litt-Chinitz.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were at -

MR. BARRY: I was a stock boy at Litt-Chinitz.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were going to Hunter, you were still living at home?

MR. BARRY: Yes, I was still living at home.

MS. RICHARDS: So after that first teacher who encouraged you to be an art major, did you then make that decision?

MR. BARRY: I took it seriously, but also -

MS. RICHARDS: I mean, you were also interested in writing, you said.

MR. BARRY: I was encouraged to – I was encouraged to be a writer, also. I had a Ms. Katz, who liked what I wrote. And we would read our stories and things like that. I think she had published something someplace, a short story, somewhere. I'm not really sure. She was a published writer, a couple of things.

And she also encouraged me to write, to be a writer. She said, you know, if you're interested in this, you should pursue it. And then I had my other interests, of course. I was doing a lot of different kinds of things.

MS. RICHARDS: How long did it take at Hunter before you decided to make art your major?

MR. BARRY: When I was in college. I would say when I moved, really –

MS. RICHARDS: I was asking, at what point during your time at Hunter, as an undergraduate, did you decide to major in art?

MR. BARRY: I would say after the first two years in the Bronx campus. First of all, I was loaded with academics that I had to take to start off with. So you know, I took all my math and writing and blah, blah, blah. All that stuff. By the time I got to Park Avenue, I think, probably at some point I decided that art was going to be what I was going to focus on.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, so the second two years took place –

MR. BARRY: Was at the Park Avenue campus, yes, right. And I had to take the subway every morning to the Park Avenue campus. But sometimes, some of the teachers from Park Avenue had to make the trip to the Bronx, okay? So some of the teachers were teaching in both places. [Laughs.] We're talking about the '50s.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, you were born in '36, so you started there in '54?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, right. And I remember there were a couple – Richard Lippold – I don't know if you know who Richard Lippold was. Richard Lippold taught a class there and he was very interesting. Richard Lippold was a very famous sculptor at one point. If you go to Lincoln Center, for instance, and you see these bars of gold or something hanging in the Philharmonic, that's his piece. He had a big piece called *The Sun*, which was installed at the Metropolitan Museum.

He was one of the most famous architectural sculptors in the country at one point. He did a piece at this big restaurant, these gold bars. There's little gold wires that hang over the bar at the Four Seasons. He was very, very well-known in those days and he became even more well-known with architects. He worked with very famous architects of the time.

And he was an interesting guy to talk to. I remember one of my teachers said, I want you to interview a person whom you admire and write down your thoughts about it. I think she was, like, my psych teacher or something like that. And I asked – I spoke to him.

[END CARD 1.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards, interviewing Robert Barry on May 14, 2010 in New York City for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc two.

You were talking about one of your teachers, Richard Lippold.

MR. BARRY: Well, Lippold is an interesting guy and I think he kind of liked my work. By that time, he gave assignments – you know, it was kind of like a design class or something like that. And Lippold gave assignments – it was there that I started learning about Mondrian, by the way, and more geometric things.

MS. RICHARDS: Bauhaus?

MR. BARRY: Yes, things like that. And he liked my designs and he, sort of, encouraged me. And I think Lippold confided in me about his family and stuff like that. He had two kids. He was married. But I have to say – I don't know how far you want to go with this interview, about certain personal things.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure.

MR. BARRY: It's okay?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. BARRY: He was a homosexual. He was a closeted homosexual. He eventually left his family, but then – and I'm not at all. I was completely not a homosexual. But it became very obvious to me what he was

interested in. Can I put it that way? But still, he said – you know, he invited me to come to his studio and to work on some of his projects.

And in fact, at one point, I did go to the Philharmonic Hall when it was being built at Lincoln Center. And he had the scaffolding set up for this big piece that was hanging from the ceiling there, you know? And he wanted me to be his assistant and I was going to help him put it up and, you know, work with the guys and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: At the same time as you were going to school?

MR. BARRY: Yes, I don't think I was in his class at that time, but I still – you know, he was a kind of advisor, shall we say. But then it, sort of, became very clear to me what his motivations were, okay? I didn't really know anything about that at that time. I didn't know there was such a thing as a homosexual. [Laughs.] But it kind of became – but I, sort of, started learning about it, you know?

But in our talks, it became clear that, anyway, art was something that I was really interested in, probably more so than writing or anything else. And so I decided that I would transfer to the Park Avenue branch. And he said, well, that's where really the good teachers are. And you know. And he told me about Robert Motherwell and Baziotes and some of these famous painters who were working there. And he said, you should really talk with these artists and take some of their classes and things like that. So I decided that I would transfer to the Park Avenue branch. And I did. I went to the Park Avenue and signed up for some of these classes.

MS. RICHARDS: Who did you study with?

MR. BARRY: Well, he mentioned William Baziotes, whom I signed up with. And he taught watercolor. And he mentioned Ray Parker, who in those days was a young painter – Parker, a charming guy. And they were very good teachers. And they were artists, painters.

And just talking to them – Baziotes, I don't know if he ever taught me anything, but he would spend the class talking about his days hanging out with Mondrian, when Mondrian came to New York, or hanging out with [Robert] Motherwell, or all of these guys that he knew, these abstract expressionists, whom I'd learned about.

MS. RICHARDS: You started going to see their shows in the galleries?

MR. BARRY: Yes, absolutely, and seeing his show. He was a famous artist exhibiting in well-known, like Sidney Janis Gallery, or something like that. And being down there, I was in the middle of the art scene. There was a gallery very close by called Martha Jackson. And there was Sam Koontz Gallery, which is where Ray Parker showed. And that's when I really learned about the New York art world, hanging out in these galleries and going around there. And I felt comfortable there.

And going to MoMA, going to the Museum of Modern Art, which I'd never been to; going to the Whitney [Museum of American Art], which was much smaller in those days, and meeting them. And then also, by the way, at Hunter, you had art historians like – Bill Rubin was an instructor at Hunter, teaching Impressionism, Postimpressionism and 20th-century art. So you could major with that –

MS. RICHARDS: You took his class?

MR. BARRY: He was an extremely dynamic lecturer. And then you had a wonderful Renaissance teacher. What the heck was his name? Shit, I can't remember. There were people who taught Renaissance and things like that. I took classes with them.

MS. RICHARDS: Was your work continuing to evolve toward abstraction?

MR. BARRY: Yes, I worked mostly – first, I turned into a real, basically, an abstract painter, color painter. Parker was a very intuitive – Parker was more of an intuitive-type painter. That is, he would look at – I mean, I knew what his paintings looked like, so I, sort of, made paintings look a little bit like his.

And the whole thing was, well, this color goes with that color. This is very beautiful, the way I've used these colors. But these two don't really go well together. You have too much of this, you know.

It was all this, kind of, formalistic, totally intuitive – what your taste is about – kind of art, you know? And I loved the guy and I thought he was terrific. And I learned a lot about applying paint and using color and overlap and all of that, sort of, using the space of the canvas. But I didn't really get any hard-nosed stuff.

Baziotes was interesting because he just – he would set up a still-life, believe it or not, and he would – and then you could either, you would start either drawing from it and go as far, as abstract as you want to go. And there were those that were trying to paint it very close. And he was very patient with everybody.

He was just a very sweet man, but he loved to talk about anything. And he would talk about the Sugar Ray Robinson fight, or he was very interested in the fights, you know? What fights were on that Friday night on television, or baseball, or all this stuff that he was interested in. Or he would talk about hanging out with Mondrian, going to a dance and how Mondrian used to like – he was married to a beautiful woman and Mondrian used to like to dance with her. And he and Motherwell had these beautiful wives.

And what their life was like, or what – it was hanging out at the Cedar Bar, or – you know, he was filled with endless anecdotes about life and sports and stuff like that. And every once in a while, he could come over and look at it, you know, and make some kind of a suggestion here or there, or whatever. You know?

And their idea of teaching was essentially using what they knew and applying it to what you were doing. But of course, the students are really unformed, in terms of their ideas, in terms of where they want to go, or anything like that.

MS. RICHARDS: But you had a sense that abstraction was intuitively the direction that you wanted to go.

MR. BARRY: Yeah, it seemed to me this was where the most interesting work was.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there any other artists – whose work you could see in galleries that was most inspiring to you at that point?

MR. BARRY: Well, I was really – in those days, I was very interested in – well, of course, [Willem] de Kooning was very important. I thought he was really powerful. And of course, [Jackson] Pollock; Pollock was really important. Pollock died when I was in college and Baziotes talked a lot about Pollock.

I really, kind of, learned a lot about what Pollock was about from Baziotes. And also, Parker spoke about Pollock a lot. That's really where I learned – so my first introduction to Pollock was quite positive. I never was in a situation where I didn't really like him, or I didn't understand him.

And they had opinions, you know. They didn't like Adolph Gottlieb, for instance. They weren't wholly accepting of everybody. They didn't really – they didn't really care that much – I think even Parker had problems with de Kooning. So you could have a very critical discussion with them about these things. So you know, it was really interesting. It wasn't just hero worship, but they were – they could be critical of their contemporaries, which I liked very much. And there was a printmaker named Gabor Peterdi. I don't know if you know his name.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, yes.

MR. BARRY: Okay. And he taught printmaking there. And he showed; he did shows. And the thing about it was that they didn't like Gabor Peterdi's painting very much. You know, we would go to the show and then we'd go back to the class and they would be very critical of his work. And this was really kind of interesting to me, to learn how to be critical of other artists' work. And by being critical, you also develop your own style of what you like, what direction you want to move.

Developing your own style became something very interesting, very important to me. I was never really – I have to say, I loved Baziotes and I loved the way he spoke and the way he taught. And he had enormous knowledge. But I was never a great fan of his work. I always thought the work was always too surrealistic, or maybe too suggestive. I think I was really more into – maybe even more abstract, less surrealistic.

But I remember Ray Parker talking about [Paul] Cezanne, for instance. He brought some pictures in, talking about the empty spots in his painting, how the canvas would show through. And I could see that, of course, in Ray's painting, absolutely: how that was important, how the canvas was a very interesting space in – you know, how that could be exciting in terms of the brush stroke and so on.

So these guys, I felt, really knew what they were talking about. And you know, they gave me a lot to think about.

MS. RICHARDS: And you studied with Motherwell at some point, then?

MR. BARRY: Motherwell was later. Motherwell –

MS. RICHARDS: Still in undergraduate school?

MR. BARRY: Yes, yes. We're talking about – Motherwell was the second year. I took a course with Motherwell, which was a lecture course where we – it was a course that he devised, but it was about writing and we would – it was not – he didn't critique painting, but it was about various – he would assign writings, either by artists or anybody that he thought would be interesting and that would be discussed in the class.

He had a philosophical background. I think he self-studied philosophy. And there was one Spanish philosopher that he was particularly interested in. I can't think of his name now. And he said that not a lot of philosophers wrote about art, but this guy did. And he was curious to know why the great thinkers of his time didn't understand artists like Picasso and Matisse and Mondrian and so forth.

But there was this one philosopher, famous philosopher, Spanish. And he had us read a book he wrote about it and we discussed it in class. But that was all talk. And then I said, oh, man. He's the one. And then I really decided that I would complete my B.F.A. and he was going to be my advisor, if I could get him. And he agreed to do it.

And I remember, at a certain point you didn't take painting classes anymore. You worked on your own. You had your own studio. It was Hunter College -

MS. RICHARDS: On campus?

MR. BARRY: Well, there was the building, the new building on Park Avenue. Then across and on the corner was an old, 19th-century elementary school that was completely empty, deserted.

MS. RICHARDS: On Lexington?

MR. BARRY: It was on Lexington and, like, 69th. It doesn't exist anymore. It was torn down. But in those days, there were some offices there on the ground floor. And then upstairs there were big, empty rooms - old, dusty classrooms, deserted. And they were used by the art department as studios. Some of the students could use them and I used them. And that was like being a real artist.

And Motherwell would come and look at the work. And I'll never forget the first time he came and he looked at all this work that I'd been doing with Ray Parker and Baziotis and he totally tore it apart, absolutely. He said, this has nothing to do with anything. You're playing games; you're just flitting around with colors. You don't know what the hell you're even doing. You know, he just ripped it apart. And I was so -

MS. RICHARDS: Were you devastated?

MR. BARRY: I went down and I went to Ray Parker and said - and Ray said, what did Motherwell think of your work? Because Motherwell was held in this high esteem by these guys, you know? He was kind of like a god, I suppose. And I wasn't that aware of his reputation.

I knew he was a big deal and he was so smart. He just knew everything there was to know about everything. Probably, at that time, he was the smartest guy I ever met, and certainly in terms of art. And he had this, kind of, offhand way of speaking. You know, kind of, with the cigarette dangling.

At the time, I didn't know he was having an affair with, what's her name, [Helen] Frankenthaler? And sometimes he wouldn't show up for the meetings and I had his home phone number and would call. And his wife would pick up and then I could hear her screaming, you've got a student on the phone. You know, I could tell there was some shit going on at the home, at the house. And he would come and he was, like, raving about her paintings sometimes. He would just go on about these paintings.

MS. RICHARDS: About Frankenthaler's?

MR. BARRY: Frankenthaler's paintings, yeah. I think he kind of liked the idea of spilling paint and smearing it around and all that sort of thing, you know. It was not something I was interested in, though.

But he would go on about what a terrific painter she was. [Laughs.] But anyway, so it was fascinating, though. He would show up and obviously he'd been drinking a little bit. He would, kind of - but that didn't affect his thinking at all. And he was really tough on my work. Really, really, he didn't give an inch. And it was very good and I'm very glad that he did that.

After the first meeting with him, you know, I went to Ray Parker because Ray was always raving about what I was doing. He thought I was fabulous. Of course, I was working in his style, essentially. And Ray was really, sort of, shocked at what Motherwell had said to me. He didn't quite know how to handle that. But anyway, I stuck with Motherwell and in the long run, he really had a lot to say.

And eventually, he kind of came around to what I was doing. And I, sort of, developed this style which was more - well, I also have to say, I was looking more at guys like Ad Reinhardt and Rothko and Newman. Newman was not so well-known then. Newman had kind of dropped out. But I found some photographs and things. And I was doing these, sort of, like, big, very minimal kind of things.

MS. RICHARDS: You were always using oil at that point, right?

MR. BARRY: Oh, acrylic hadn't been invented at that point.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MR. BARRY: So I was working in this very, sort of, minimal – sometimes bright colors, dark colors. And I didn't realize it at the time, but it was also something similar to what Motherwell was doing, where he would fill all these huge canvases with one color and then maybe make a gesture or something like that. So I could see how he was, sort of, relating to it, but I wasn't aware of that at the time. Anyway, you know, I finished up there and got my B.F.A. Then got a job selling –

MS. RICHARDS: You were 22?

MR. BARRY: I graduated in '57.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were only 21, yeah.

MR. BARRY: Then I got a job, a part-time job. I actually stayed in that studio; I didn't leave. I mean, it seemed to be totally unsupervised, by the way, that building. And there were five floors of – they were basically old classrooms, really. And I just, sort of, stayed in one of the classrooms. Nobody said anything; nobody bothered. I never gave the key back and I just hung out there. I would go there on Sundays.

MS. RICHARDS: You were still living in the Bronx at home.

MR. BARRY: I lived in the Bronx until I got married. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: So you were, even though you had finished, got your B.F.A., you kept that studio?

MR. BARRY: I did. Nobody knew about it.

MS. RICHARDS: Except the other students.

MR. BARRY: Yeah. They didn't care. Nobody cared. I was pretty easygoing. They knew somebody was there, but there were people coming and going all the time with their art. But it was a big place; it was a big school. I mean, it was like four floors, or five floors? But also, I have to tell you, in my senior year, I met my wife.

MS. RICHARDS: Was she a student also?

MR. BARRY: She was the editor of the literary magazine.

MS. RICHARDS: Tell me her name.

MR. BARRY: Julia.

MS. RICHARDS: And last name?

MR. BARRY: Her maiden name? Brassil, B-R-A-S-S-I-L. And it was my senior year and she – I had a friend named Danny Soskin, who was –

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell Soskin?

MR. BARRY: Oh, my God. S-O-S-K-I-N, I guess. I don't know. And he had a thing for her. And one day he says, come on, I want you to meet this gal. I really like her a lot. She's real smart. She's very beautiful, which she was. Still is. And you know, so okay, he drags me into the – I think the magazine was called The Echo, or something like that. It was the literary magazine of Hunter College. And they had offices on the ground floor there.

And I went in there and there was this redhead, beautiful white-skinned redhead girl sitting there with her legs crossed. I wonder if – she wore high heels and a short skirt, I remember. For that time, it would seem very short. And I said, "Hello, how are you?" Blah, blah, blah. And then we left and he said, "What do you think?" I said, "Oh, she's really nice." And he says, "Okay, I'm going to ask her out." And so forth and so on. And Danny was, I think, he was doing some work there also on the magazine. I'm not really sure.

So he went away. I turned around and went back into the office and I started talking with her. And it was a sneaky thing to do, but she was really nice-looking, so I decided that I was going to make a play. And she, sort of, went along with it. And then we started hanging out together and a couple of years later, we got married. [Laughs.] She was too good-looking to let go, too good-looking.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you graduated with your B.F.A., you kept the studio there because you felt you were an artist. You were living –

MR. BARRY: She was living with her folks on 83rd Street, between Second and Third. And then at some point, she took an apartment – not far, also in Yorktown. And in those days, you could get an apartment for, like, \$90 a month, okay?

It was a very different situation. Her girlfriend Helen – she had a girlfriend Helen, her best friend – they decided to take an apartment themselves. She moved out of her mother's house. And I mean, eventually, at some point – you know, but I was working. I was selling Christmas cards.

MS. RICHARDS: What were you doing for work?

MR. BARRY: I was selling – the first job I got was selling Christmas cards at Georg Jensen. And I had that job for a few months. And then they kept me on a little bit after that, but then they let me go.

Georg Jensen was this, sort of, like, very fancy shop on Fifth Avenue – you know, kind of an equivalent of Tiffany's or something like that. I was not very happy there, but I liked the woman that I worked for. She was an old show-biz woman who – and old-type, show-business woman who had a comedy act, in fact. And she was the one in charge of the Christmas cards. And I loved her; she was a very funny lady.

What was my next job? Oh, in those days you could get – I was reading in the newspapers – it was a newspaper called the *World Telegraph* and it was kind of like a teacher's union newspaper. And you could get a job as a substitute teacher in New York just by taking, like, six education credits or something like that, something very small.

Go to summer school, take a couple of classes, take a test, pass it and you could get a job teaching in New York City schools, which paid a decent amount of money. You know, more than selling Christmas cards. So I decided to do it. And I went back to Hunter. I took some ed courses, which were really stupid, took the test and got a job.

And they sent me to this junior high school in the South Bronx. And I remember going there the first day and there was some – way up high, somewhere, someone had gotten up there on the fourth floor, outside. You know, it was the name of some gang: the devils, or God knows what it was. "Fuck you," all in spray paint. How the hell he got up there to do it, I have no idea.

But if you went to the neighborhood and you saw what it was like – and that was an experience, teaching. And I did teach there. I was there for, like, a year. It was Junior High School 55, it was called. And I remember once taking the subway – and this is absolutely true. I took the subway one night to parent-teacher night, okay? And I got off the subway and I'm walking to the school. And this is like 7:00 at night in maybe the worst neighborhood in the world.

And there was one of my students standing outside – a girl standing outside and she couldn't have been – maybe 13 or 14, something like that – standing there, with some black guys standing around her, outside of a bar. And you know, they were selling her, essentially, is what it was. And she was a very sweet girl and I liked her. And I went over to her and I said, come on with me. You know, come out. We'll go to the school. It's parent-teacher night.

And she said, oh, Mr. Barry, what are you doing here? You know, she was shocked to see me. And I said, come on. You can come with me. It's teachers' night. I need somebody to help me out. Can you come with me? And she, sort of, looked at these guys and they looked at each other. And I just took her with me. That's the kind of neighborhood it was, you know. I got along pretty well there. I think I was pretty successful, considering the situation.

MS. RICHARDS: What subject did you teach?

MR. BARRY: Art. Yeah, I taught art.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, that's nice. So you got to do that.

MR. BARRY: And I have to say, the first class I ever had – first of all, I started – they started the term with like 16 unfilled positions, at the beginning of the term. There was a principal called Mr. Glassman [ph], who never came out of his office. Never. There were a couple of really tough assistant principals who tried to maintain order. There were a couple of black teachers who were pretty smart, knew their way around. I got to know them pretty well, pretty fast.

The first class I ever taught, I never really got under control, I have to say. They always gave me problems for

the whole time that I was there. But I think after that, I picked up very quickly the discipline. And I managed to survive there, pretty well, for a year. Eventually, I was drafted into the Army. I had to go in the Army, in which I served for two years.

MS. RICHARDS: What –

MR. BARRY: Infantry.

MS. RICHARDS: Infantry?

MR. BARRY: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: That was after the Korean War, though, right?

MR. BARRY: No, it was really around the time of – yes, I'm sorry. It was after the Korean War. The big thing at that time was the – I went in when [Dwight D.] Eisenhower was still president. When I was in there –

MS. RICHARDS: So it's the late '50 that you –

MR. BARRY: No, it was – let's see, '58, '59, something like that?

MS. RICHARDS: Wait, in '58 you were 22. So maybe '59?

MR. BARRY: Maybe that was it. Fifty-nine, yes. Fifty-nine. That would be around then. Because I'll tell you, it was – when I was in, there was the [Richard] Nixon-[John] Kennedy election.

MS. RICHARDS: He became president in '60.

MR. BARRY: In '60; well, the election was when, '59? And when you go in there, you have to take – you take these tests. The first few days, before your basic training, you take tests.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it a big shock to you, disturbing, to be drafted? Or was it something you just knew was going to happen?

MR. BARRY: Oh, I knew it was going to happen. Oh, no. Everybody was in those days. There was no way out of it, you know. I think I avoided it because of college or something. For some reason, I managed to avoid it.

MS. RICHARDS: Where were you stationed?

MR. BARRY: I never left Fort Dix, believe it or not.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.] Lucky? Did you consider that lucky?

MR. BARRY: Yes, I was very lucky. And I took a test and after the test – you know, the first few days that you're there, you take a battery of tests, literally. Before you start the physical stuff, you take tests: IQ test, reading test, all kinds of test.

And then some guy calls you in – lieutenant or something – and he says, well, would you like to go to OCS, officers' candidate school? No. So I guess I did pretty well on my tests. So I said, no. And they said, well, you want to be – well, then, we don't want to put you – your last choice will be infantry. If that's what you really want, you can do that, but we feel you could better serve somewhere else.

MS. RICHARDS: Plus you already had a college degree.

MR. BARRY: Oh, yes. I had a college degree and I obviously did pretty well on these tests. So the various choices were that, or I could go become, like – a secretarial school, something like that; cook's school – I had various options – or you know, there's artillery; there's the tank corps, all this stuff. So I said, I'd like to become a cook – [Laughs] – which, in fact, I did. I was an assistant cook.

But I was an assistant cook, but they didn't send me to cook's school. I went to cook's school – which was there, by the way – but for a very short time. And then they said, would you like to do OJT, on-job training. I said, yeah, sure. So they put me working in the kitchen at the hospital. It was Walson Army Hospital at Fort Dix [NJ], believe it or no. And I worked at Walson Army Hospital, in the kitchen –

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell Walson?

MR. BARRY: I guess it's W-A-L-S-O-N. Maybe it still is there. I don't know. And it was Walson Army Hospital. And there was a hospital for servicemen. I don't know. Whenever anybody got sick, they went there. It was a

big hospital. And also, some of the Army wives who got pregnant – you know, they were there too. And whatever –

MS. RICHARDS: The kids?

MR. BARRY: Yes, whatever; it served the military in that area. And, of course, the recruits. Fort Dix was a huge recruiting, training center there, so they had a lot of people who got injured and so forth. So my job was to prepare diets. In the mornings, I would go and my commanding officer was a woman, major. And so you'd go in there, salute and all that stuff. She was very spit-and-polish, all of that. And I wore white. I never wore a uniform. After basic, I never wore a uniform. I would wear cook's whites.

And you slept in the barracks with all of the other people who work in the hospital: the cooks and so forth. If you didn't want to live off-base, you lived there and you slept in a special barracks. You didn't have to do reveille in the morning. And so it was a pretty – considering the kind of work that you did in the Army, it was considered a pretty good job.

And of course, the sergeants, they would call down to the kitchen and say, where's my coffee and donuts? You know, blah, blah, blah. They would want their breakfast served, so – and if you had it and you brought it down for the sergeants who were in charge on the floors, you had it made because they're – sergeants are essentially in charge of your life. Forget the officers. They don't mean anything. It's the sergeants who are in charge of our lives.

So if you can satisfy the sergeants – bring them the kind of coffee they want, their donuts, their orange juice – whatever they wanted, you had it made. So it was a fantastic job. And also, after breakfast you had a couple of hours free because there was time before you prepared lunch. But I would prepare – you would get the menus from the dietician, who was essentially my commanding officer – this woman – and she would prepare the menus. And you had 1600-calorie menus, liquid menus, blah, blah, blah.

And you basically had there – you know, I had like a half-dozen of these – oh, what do they call up? These machines that – blenders. And the cooks would prepare stuff and would bring it to us. My job was essentially to assemble it all on these different trays and put it on the carts. And they would be taken up on to the floors by the – you know, not interns, but the people that worked on the floors.

Occasionally, I would have to go up onto the floors to serve it. I mean, there was the contagious floor, where people had, you know, TB and stuff like that. That was tricky. I had to wear a mask and everything else like that, so you wouldn't get stuff. But then they had this great thing, where they had this crew – there were two crews with a movie projector. And Hollywood would send them the latest films in 16-millimeter.

And they would go up onto the floors – a different floor every day, or you know, the morning, the afternoon, or whatever, in the evening – so they would rotate all these different floors and wards and things like that. And they would set up a screen and show these movies. And if you knew where you had the schedule and you wanted to see the latest Hollywood film, during your free time you just simply disappeared.

You don't want to hang around the kitchen because people would find work for you to do. There was no need for you to be there, really. So you learned very quickly to get out of there. You only were there when you had work to do. So you would run up on the floor, you know, just, kind of, sit in the corner and watch a movie.

And there were two of these crews that went around, so you had two different films every week showing in the hospital. And then they would change them. Every week, they would change them. And they were the latest films.

MS. RICHARDS: Had you been really interested in the movies when you were a kid?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, I was always – I was a movie nut. I lived in the movies, really.

MS. RICHARDS: Being so close to New York, when you had leave, you could come – obviously, see your girlfriend, but also keep up with the art world.

MR. BARRY: I did, yeah. Right, we'd take the bus in. And sometimes she came. She would come up. You know, she took the bus up if I was free on a weekend. She would come up. And they had these places where you could go and spend the night together, believe it or not. Yes, they were kind of like cabins there. And you'd go to the mess –

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to say –

MR. BARRY: And do work there. But I had a lot of – I got ahead of a lot of stuff, I have to tell you. There was, during the Nixon-Kennedy election, they had to have a write-in ballot. And what they needed – they asked me.

They said, "Barry, you have an art degree. You have fine arts. Is that right?" "Yes." "Do you know how to draw?" "Yeah, I can draw anything you want."

"Okay, we need you to make a write-in ballot for the soldiers." I had to make a big, two giant write-in ballots for them so they could tell them how to fill in the write-in ballot for the election. So I made these big mockups of a write-in ballot - lettering, everything on it, you know, carefully. I remember doing the captain's name on his office door. He had - [inaudible] - and we wanted his name on the door, so I did that for him.

And if you do these things, you know, then they kind of get to like you and you, sort of, get out of doing your normal work. Another thing was that they had the Big Deuce. The Big Deuce was a huge mess hall, an enormous place, where they would serve, like, 2,000 meals in one setting. Okay?

You can't imagine the size of this place or the size of the kitchen. The recruits would march in. They would sit down and they would bring the food for them. It was called the Big Deuce and it was mess hall number two; it's why they called it that. And they would do that three times a day. You had breakfast, lunch and dinner.

And then the recruits would take their trays, go outside. It was an early form of recycling. And you would have these garbage cans lined up outside. And you would have metals, food, papers, plastic. And you would separate these on your tray and dump the various things into these different garbage cans. And you would stack your tray at the end, you know.

Any case, in the Big Deuce there was a huge mural. And in fact, when you entered Fort Dix, there was a big sculpture of an infantryman with his rifle going over the top. And the title of it was called *The Ultimate Weapon*. The ultimate weapon was the infantryman. And in the Big Deuce, some officer or something decided they were going to do a mural called *The Ultimate Weapon*. And over the years, I suppose, art majors had worked on this thing, finishing it up, or working on it. I don't know.

But there was this huge painting called *The Ultimate Weapon*. And there were soldiers, sort of, going over the top, holding their rifles. And you had foliage and mud and, God knows, explosions in the sky and all that sort of thing. And there were some parts of it that needed to be finished up, I suppose - some foliage and things, some boots. And they said, do you think you could work on this for a while? And I said, sure, I can do that. What the hell.

So at some point, I managed to get out of more work by working on the Big Deuce. And if any sergeant said anything, I'd just go, well, you know, Lt. So-and-So or Capt. So-and-So asked me to do, so you know, got to do it. Sorry, Sarge. Or you'd just tell the sergeant. You never would leave without telling the sergeant. You had to tell me. Sir, captain asked me to go over there. Captain who? You know, you'd look at him and he'd say, all right. Get out of here.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that still there?

MR. BARRY: I have no idea. [Laughs.] I don't even know if Fort Dix is still there. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you sign your name?

MR. BARRY: You know, I may have, as a matter - of course, there were a lot of initials. A lot of people had worked on it, so there were a lot - I remember a lot of - I may have. I don't know. I don't remember now. I didn't work on it that much. You know, there wasn't that much left to do, but there were certain things that had to be done on it, so I worked on that. So my experience in the army wasn't really that bad.

The big thing that happened was when Kennedy was finally elected, the big number was the Cuban Missile Crisis [1962]. And the sergeants were running around saying, well, you'd better get everything cleaned up. You know, we're going to assign you a weapon. It's a weapon, by the way. That's what you have. You don't have a gun or a rifle; it's a weapon. You're going to be assigned weapons.

We're going to be going off and fighting. We're going to be going to Cuba. You know, everybody was talking about how this was the big thing. We were going to war with Russia. You know, all of that business. That was the talk. And that was pretty scary, I have to say, when I was there at that time. That was the big talk at the time. Everybody was afraid that we were going to go to war with Russia. How, or what we would do, I have no idea.

MS. RICHARDS: Once you were finished in the military, did you decide that you'd go back to graduate school?

MR. BARRY: Yes. As soon as I came out, I decided I was going to get a master's degree. And this was something Motherwell said, by the way. You know, he said, "It's very good to get a master's degree. It's good to finish up," he said. And the point of it was because it would be a lot easier to get a college teaching job, or

get a teaching job. "They won't hire you if you don't have a master's degree, you know.

So he kind of encouraged that. That was one of the things he felt was, sort of, an important thing to do, to get a master's degree - which turned out to be fantastic, by the way. My two years as a graduate student were wonderful.

MS. RICHARDS: And you already knew you wanted to go to Hunter?

MR. BARRY: I went back to Hunter, yes. I went back there. And I thought I was going to have the same - there was a woman called Edna Wells Lutz, who was the chairman of the department when I was an undergraduate. And she was the one that hired all these abstract expressionists and people like that. I mean, she was very hip to what was the art world at that time. Edna Wells Lutz, a fantastic woman - a fascinating woman.

And you know, she hired Bill Rubin and she hired Motherwell. She's the one who brought them all there - [Laughs] - but by the time I got out of the Army, she was gone. She had retired and it was a completely different group of people. Gene Goossen had taken over.

And Motherwell was gone, really. Parker was still around teaching undergraduate. And so I signed up for a course with this guy called Tony Smith. He taught design and he turned out to be this fantastic guy. I don't know if you know him or ever met him or anything.

MS. RICHARDS: I've never met him, but I knew of him.

MR. BARRY: Probably the most influential teacher I ever had, I will have to say. And he eventually wound up being my graduate advisor, also. And he also was probably the one - I know he was the one that got me my job teaching at Hunter. He's the one who recommended me for that.

MS. RICHARDS: Just curious: During the two years you were in the military, did you have time, or were you in the right frame of mind, to continue your own work?

MR. BARRY: I did a little bit, not a lot. Not physically; I thought about it. When I went in, the last show I saw - there was a big Mondrian - a big [Henri] Matisse show. I think it was, like, at French & Co, something like that. There were some really big shows that, kind of, I thought about when I went in. There was an artist who was a friend of Ray Parker, called Bradley Walker -

MS. RICHARDS: Tomlin.

MR. BARRY: Tomlin, yeah. And I thought he was really a terrific artist. He's almost forgotten about now. Nobody really thinks about him. But he seemed to be more than just abstract colors, you know, more than just formalism. And I really kind of liked his work a lot. I think he died young.

He was a very good friend of - in fact, he was a friend with Parker and I think they shared a studio at some point. I never met him, but I think Parker told me about it. He's the one who told me about him and I went to look at his work. And he was an artist I liked very much.

MS. RICHARDS: When you started Hunter again as an M.F.A. student - M.A. student -

MR. BARRY: M.A. They didn't have an M.F.A. then.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you go back to living with your parents, or did you get your own apartment?

MR. BARRY: I went right back to living - I never moved out until my wife and I got married.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yeah, you mentioned that.

MR. BARRY: And then we took an apartment. We took an apartment - our very first apartment, in fact, was in the Bronx. These friends of ours were moving out of their apartment. We took over their lease. It was very, you know, very cheap. We had no money, zero money.

MS. RICHARDS: What street was that on?

MR. BARRY: Oh, it was, in fact, not - it was on Pelham Parkway, in fact. And we -

MS. RICHARDS: Was that while you were at graduate school?

MR. BARRY: Yes. I was in graduate school then.

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. You were talking about studying with Tony Smith and you were saying that he was a

fantastic teacher. What made him such an important teacher for you?

MR. BARRY: Oh, he was full of ideas that I had not really encountered before, mainly. I think that was the main thing. Ways of thinking about art – I mean, he could go on – I'd never really heard about Agnes Martin before and he went on about her. I hadn't really thought a lot about Kenneth Noland before or Ad Reinhardt. And he just had ways of talking about them. Of course, he was very close buddies with Barnett Newman. In fact, I met Barnett Newman through him, and [Mark] Rothko.

And he just had ways of talking about them. He had ways of analyzing my work. I started moving in a more, shall I say, conceptual, geometric way – more minimal, getting even more and more minimal in my work. And I think by the time I finally left there – in fact, in my last show here, I showed a painting that I made in 1962, while he was still my advisor. I thought it was a really good painting and good enough to show in a show here.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that –

MR. BARRY: And in fact, somebody wanted to buy it. A very important person wanted to buy that painting.

MS. RICHARDS: And did they?

MR. BARRY: I didn't sell it. I would say she didn't want to buy it; she wanted to have traded it for one of her works.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that painting in a final exhibition you had, a thesis show?

MR. BARRY: Yes, it was like that, right. You had to make a kind of a show.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there other influential teachers during your master's years?

MR. BARRY: At that time, I would say – I'm trying to think of who else I had. My memory is gone. I had, well – Leo Steinberg, certainly, was influential. I mean, one of the great art historians – one of the most analytical, brilliant guys you could ever want to meet. And I had him as an art history advisor, or teacher. He was a teacher. And he did the Impressionists, the Postimpressionists. I did my thesis on Cezanne, which he raved about. He thought it was fantastic.

And he recommended me for the job. When I graduated, I got two recommendations to teach. Gene Goossen was looking for people that he could hire on. The art department was growing. As he said, in the old days, they all wanted to play guitars like Elvis Presley. Now, they all want to be artists. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Sounds familiar.

MR. BARRY: So there was a big influx of students wanting to study art, for some reason. I don't know why. Anyway, Tony asked me if I would like to; I said sure, you know. And he invited Gene in, one day, to my master's thesis show. And he said, "Come on, you know, I want to show you this work." And I think he's pretty smart. You ought to bring him on as an instructor. And I'll never forget what Goossen said.

Goossen came in, you know, and I knew Goossen. I actually hadn't taken a course with him, though. He didn't really teach that much. He just, kind of, was the chairman, but he didn't really teach that much. I never took a course with him, but I, sort of, knew him a little bit. And the first thing he says was, "Does this guy know what he's doing?" [Laughs.] So you know, Tony said, yeah, of course he knows what he's doing. Because he saw all these really extreme, minimal things. And in any case, I got the job.

But then I found out – and also, when I went in to see Gene – he interviewed me – he said, you know, you also got a strong recommendation from Leo Steinberg. He would like you to teach some of our freshman introductory art history courses. He thought that might be good for you. Are you interested in art history? I said, wow, that's fantastic. But I really, I think I feel much more at home in studio.

I really wasn't about to get a Ph.D. in art history, you know, which you'd absolutely needed. And that was not something I wanted. And I loved art history, but not that way. But anyway, I did my thing on Cezanne. And then, Howard Davis was a wonderful art history teacher there, also. And I took Howard Davis and he was a teacher at Columbia, in fact. And he was pretty well-known. People knew who he was, a famous scholar.

And I did my paper. You had to do two, you know – one on contemporary and then one on the old masters. And I did mine on El Greco and the Mannerists. I was fascinated by the Mannerist painters, the ones that came after Michelangelo, so I did mine on the Mannerists and their influence on El Greco, how he was influenced by them. So it was, really, almost half on the Mannerists.

And Howard Davis liked that, also, very much. He liked my presentation. I liked him. Who else was painting in those days? I had this guy –

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have a sense, and did the other students and teachers have a sense, that you were really pushing boundaries, that you had an ambition to break new ground?

MR. BARRY: At that time, first of all, people – one of my fellow students was Bob Morris, first of all. Then I had people like Doug Ohlson. These were very ambitious artists, guys. Their careers haven't really – of course, Morris – I don't know what he's doing now. You don't really see his work very much, anymore, but he was –

MS. RICHARDS: He has a show up right now, of new work.

MR. BARRY: Does he? Really? Oh, okay.

[END CARD 2.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Barry on May 14, 2010, in New York City for the Archives of American Art Smithsonian Institution, disc three.

You were talking about the other students. You mentioned Doug Ohlson, Bob Morris.

MR. BARRY: Some of the students that I knew there, yes, hung out with and –

MS. RICHARDS: So if you were challenging current thinking and trying to push boundaries, you didn't feel that you were alone in doing that, that you –

MR. BARRY: No.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there in fact a kind of competition?

MR. BARRY: I felt I was pretty much at home there and, in fact, I think it was the kind of work that I was doing helped me get my job there. I think Goossen was very – he was very sympathetic to it and he put me in a couple of shows. Goossen organized a show called "Eight Young Artists" [1962], first time Carl Andre ever showed any place, where I met Carl. And in it were mostly were the guys who were the – guys and Pat Johanson, was a girlfriend at the time. But it was Milkowski, Ohlson, [Robert] Huot.

MS. RICHARDS: Who did you say at first?

MR. BARRY: There was a Tony Milkowski. He was a sculptor.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, Milkowski.

MR. BARRY: Milkowski, yeah. Some others. Couple I didn't know, but mostly I think mostly students, graduate students there. And it was called "Eight Young Artists" and –

MS. RICHARDS: That was right after you had graduated.

MR. BARRY: Right after I graduated.

MS. RICHARDS: That was while you were teaching?

MR. BARRY: No, right after I graduated. Yes, when I – I had started as an instructor in the evenings, teaching one or two classes basically.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that what you were doing to support yourself, the teaching?

MR. BARRY: Yes, basically. But my wife was –

MS. RICHARDS: And you had already gotten married?

MR. BARRY: My wife was working, you know, and she –

MS. RICHARDS: What was she doing?

MR. BARRY: She worked as a kind of – well, first of all, she was a humanities major and English literature major. So she tried teaching, which did not work out for her, junior high school or something like that. Didn't work and she couldn't cut it.

But then she got a job working at the Equitable Life Assurance Company as a kind of – not a secretary, but someone who – I don't know what she did, some kind of middle-level, lower-middle-level officer there. I think she did handle policies and things like that, you know, which she hated by the way. She really didn't like that

job at all and I think was very happy to finally get out when I got a more full-time teaching job. I was able to make a little bit more money.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were –

MR. BARRY: But then of course she got pregnant and then we had our first kid, I think she just – [inaudible, cross talk].

MS. RICHARDS: What year was that?

MR. BARRY: When was Robert born? Oh, he's 40 – let me think, God, what is he? Forty-seven or 48, something like that?

MS. RICHARDS: So that's –

MR. BARRY: Sixty-four, '65, something around that time.

MS. RICHARDS: Sixty-four?

MR. BARRY: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you were teaching, you were living in the Bronx on Pelham Parkway.

MR. BARRY: No – yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Or you moved –

MR. BARRY: When we were first married, lived there not long because we got that apartment on a sublease, but we weren't – it was really kind of out of the way. So then her mother – they were living on East 83rd Street between Second and Third. And an apartment opened up across the street, one of those railroad-type apartments. So we moved into that apartment, you know, maybe after a year-and-a-half or two years. And we stayed there a while.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have a studio there or did you have a studio –

MR. BARRY: The front room of the apartment was my studio. It was what they call a railroad-type apartment. I don't know if you know –

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. BARRY: One room behind the other, that kind of thing. The front room was my studio. So that's what I used. There's like five rooms or something. There was plenty of room for us at that time.

MS. RICHARDS: How long did you stay in that place?

MR. BARRY: A few years. A pretty long time, I'd say. We were there a pretty long time and then I think the woman who owned the building died and then the family wanted to sell it off and I remember going through some whole thing with a lawyer, fighting it because we were paying very low rent. And at that time also I took a studio down on – a second studio, a painting studio down in the Bowery.

MS. RICHARDS: On Bowery?

MR. BARRY: Not on the Bowery, but it was right across from the Bowery Savings Bank and a block off the Bowery, like on – not Broome Street. I can't remember – maybe it was Broome Street. I'm not really sure. One of those streets –

MS. RICHARDS: You took it to have more space?

MR. BARRY: Yes. It opened up. A friend of mine told me about it. He had a studio there, a guy named Al Hollingsworth. And he was a black guy, black artist, was pretty well-known at that time. And he asked me if I wanted it. It was unheated, by the way. [Laughs.] There was a wood-burning stove in the middle of the space. And if you wanted heat in the winter, you had to, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Were there other artists?

MR. BARRY: Oh yes. Every floor had an artist. There was a sculptor. I think he was a figurative guy.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you meet the other artists?

MR. BARRY: Yeah. I knew them a little bit. Yeah, I knew them a little bit. You had to know each other, sort of take care of each other, you know, when you weren't around or so forth. I didn't live there. I used to take the bus. I would catch the bus, like at Third Avenue, and just take it all the way down to the studio.

MS. RICHARDS: What year was it that you got that studio?

MR. BARRY: Oh, god. I just can't - I don't know. Right off the top of my head, I can't remember - [inaudible, cross talk].

MS. RICHARDS: After a few years of teaching in Hunter?

MR. BARRY: I would say yeah, probably. Yeah. I could afford it, first of all. Yeah. It must have been - you know, in the days you could get a space like that for, like, I don't know, I can't even remember, \$70 a month or something like that.

MS. RICHARDS: So this is like something like the mid-'60s?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, I would say something like that.

MS. RICHARDS: You started teaching at Hunter in '63.

MR. BARRY: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Late '60s. And how long were you -

MR. BARRY: I was at Hunter till '79, when I left.

MS. RICHARDS: How long did you have that studio in the Bowery?

MR. BARRY: I had that studio for a number of years until there was a flood. I had that studio up through till I -

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yes. I wanted to ask you about the flood.

MR. BARRY: I remember it was when I had - by that time I had met [Seth] Siegelau and [Lawrence] Weiner. And I remember going there, there was a huge, like, hurricane hit New York and -

MS. RICHARDS: So this was after '69.

MR. BARRY: Now you're getting me - no, you were just confused here. Let's see.

MS. RICHARDS: Siegelau. You had a show in '68 -

MR. BARRY: I knew Siegelau in like '67, '66. Something like that. And Weiner and then it must have been around '67 sometime I remember there was a big hurricane. I went to the studio and the ceiling leaked all over everything. Everything was a disaster. Paintings, huge paintings, minimal paintings, where I had very little marks on just raw canvas, big brown streaks. The walls just leaked. It was horrendous. And I didn't know what to do. I really just freaked out. I just said, I got to get out of here. All the big paintings were pretty much - the really big paintings were destroyed.

MS. RICHARDS: I'm not familiar with any really big paintings of yours.

MR. BARRY: If you go back, there were some photographs published in *Artforum* when Goossen did that show. Goossen published an article and there were some other things. But I have photographs. But I would say most of the big paintings were really damaged or really destroyed.

Not everything. Some - there was one or other two were out. I mean, there was some still in the apartment at East 83rd. But it was really, really bad. I had a beautiful reproduction of *The Big Diptych* [year?]. It was like 12 feet by six feet, something like that. And they were edged with orange edges. This is before Jo Baer and any of those.

MS. RICHARDS: You said you had a reproduction?

MR. BARRY: In *Artforum*, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, in *Artforum*.

MR. BARRY: In *Artforum*. I had - [inaudible, cross talk].

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you about Jo Baer. Do you think she saw your work?

MR. BARRY: I have no idea. I didn't know her really at all. I met her a couple of times, but I didn't - I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: She painted just on the edge of the canvas.

MR. BARRY: This was before that.

MS. RICHARDS: But yes, after yours.

MR. BARRY: Exactly. And mine were much more minimal. Canvasses, no painting on the canvas and the only paint was at the edges. I had a painting in one of the first big shows I ever did, that "Systemic Painting" show [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1966], as a matter of fact, which was reproduced in the catalogue and then also reproduced - they reproduced it, I think, when there was a review in *ARTnews* and they reproduced it all in black and white. And I think it may - it was mentioned by a critic at that time, a well-known woman critic at the Herald Tribune. I forget her name now. She mentioned my work in particular from that *Systemic Painting* show. Anyway, that's later.

MS. RICHARDS: During those years in the '60s when you were teaching at Hunter and had the studio, what was the hangout that you most often went to? What was the social scene like?

MR. BARRY: Are we talking about -

MS. RICHARDS: The '60s.

MR. BARRY: The '60s?

MS. RICHARDS: Where did you and your friends -

MR. BARRY: Oh, after I left - after I graduated?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. BARRY: Oh, well, Max's Kansas City was a big one. That was probably the main hangout. There were these things called "loft parties" - [Laughs] - which seemed to pop up all the time. A couple of them were at my place. I had a big one at that studio before the leak, by the way, and invited a lot of people. The hangout, I would say, would be Max's mainly. That in my memory is a little bit later. Between the time I left graduate school and the time I met [Seth] Siegelaub, I think - I don't remember a single hangout. I think it was mainly visiting other artists' studios. I think that would be the main thing.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there anyone you were particularly close to that you exchanged studio visits with on a -

MR. BARRY: Bob Huot was very close with me. We were pretty much very good friends.

MS. RICHARDS: His studio was near yours?

MR. BARRY: No, no. He was on Franklin Street. That's where he met Twyla Tharp. She was his girlfriend then. And I became the official photographer, by the way, of the Twyla Tharp Dance -

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, I was going to ask you. I noted that you, in fact, were the photographer and you made films, right?

MR. BARRY: Yes. That's right. She would usually get grants for those films. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: How did that come about?

MR. BARRY: I was a filmmaker. I made movies. I made films. And I always took photos and made films, always from the beginning. And we got her her first performance called *Tank Dive* [1965] was at the Hunter College, the auditorium at Hunter College. In the art department at Hunter in those days, there was a little auditorium, a kind of lecture hall that wasn't really used much.

And we asked if she was interested in doing that and she had been - I think she was a dancer at Paul Taylor when I first met her. And then she quit that and just decided she wanted to do her own choreography. If you know Twyla, you know she's a very independent-minded woman, very direct - [Laughs] - what she wants to do.

So Bob, I mean, there was somebody who made costumes for her such as they were. And Bob was very handy

with a saw and tools. And I made films. And Hollis Frampton –

MS. RICHARDS: How did you learn how to make films?

MR. BARRY: I made films from the – when I was a little kid, my father bought me a movie camera. I just wanted to. I don't know how. You just learn, you just do it. You just do it.

MS. RICHARDS: What you were doing was documenting the dances?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, family, stuff like that. Yes, right. The first one, we documented *Tank Dive*. And then we made one together where she choreographed it specifically for the film. And we went up on the roof of Brooklyn Tech, in fact – Brooklyn Technical High School in Brooklyn – and filmed it there. I don't even remember the name of the film now.

And you know where we edited it? We edited it – one of the dancer's boyfriends was a guy called Michael Wadleigh, who later became the guy who later – who had just gotten out of the New York – NYU [New York University] film school. And they had an apartment over in Yorkville, like in the East 90s or something. And he had some editing, splicing equipment.

And he was the guy who made this famous film, *Woodstock* [1970], if you remember. And he also made a couple of other films. I don't know whatever happened to him. He made some films. He did another documentary about climbing up Everest. And then he made a, kind of a mystery film. Now I have no idea what he does. And that was Mike Wadleigh.

But his girlfriend was one of Twyla's dancers and we used his editing equipment to make that film. Twyla and I sat there and we figured out how to edit stuff. And by the way, after that I edited my films, I eventually did it at home.

But I really learned how to edit from Hollis Frampton, who was also very friendly with Bob and taught at Hunter, by the way. He was another teacher at Hunter in those days. And Hollis was – he was very good friends with Carl and – you know, I mean, everybody sort of knew everybody. So it was one of those things and so we just hung out at each other's place or they came to your place or whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: During the '60s, can you talk about the development of your work[...] – the drawing and the painting – from the flat, relatively flat color with a kind of a grid of points defining the space, gradually evolved to not being an actual physical painting.

MR. BARRY: Working like that is basically insights. I've always said my biggest influence is my, just, the last work I did, the last piece I made. It just seemed to me that this was the natural direction that I was moving in. And I just felt that this was the direction I wanted my work to go to be as minimal and as intense as I could get it to be, take as much out of it as possible.

And these ideas weren't my ideas, you know. I mean, I got them from picking up from guys like Smith or just looking at the work of some of these artists, like Agnes Martin. Agnes Martin is a big influence in my work actually, when I first saw her, these fine grids.

MS. RICHARDS: She was living in Manhattan at that time.

MR. BARRY: She was living in Manhattan. I didn't know her, of course. And in fact, when I finally did meet her, I was not really very impressed by her. [Laughs.] I liked the art, not necessarily the person. She was friendly with Smith, Tony Smith, you know. She was showing at a gallery called Robert Elkon Gallery, which I think was like on Madison Avenue or something. And anyway, I would say, she was certainly a big influence and then artists like Mondrian and so forth, were very important.

MS. RICHARDS: Could you describe –

MR. BARRY: Ad Reinhardt, of course. And Ad Reinhardt, I knew, by the way. I met him. You know, I knew Ad briefly before he died. In fact, he was teaching. He taught a course at Hunter – not a painting course. He was a big teacher. He taught a lot. But he taught a course at Hunter. Goossen hired him on to teach a course in Near Eastern art. It was a lecture course, in which he was a kind of expert. He had traveled around India, I guess, and so forth. And he knew all of this stuff.

And I sat in on a couple. I had free time and I sat in on a couple of the lectures, which were kind of boring, in fact. They were basically slide shows. He would show one slide after another, all of which he took himself. He had obviously traveled a great deal. And he would say, well, this one isn't very good; it's 19th century. Can you tell the difference between this one and an early one from the 14th century? You know, it was like that. You know, he would just sort of go through these things.

Of course, talking to him in person was a completely different experience. He was an extremely critical guy, which I like very much, very tough guy to talk to. He sounded like he was an old – when he talked, he kind of talked in a kind of tough way, like a tough old sailor or merchant marine. He was in the Navy and he kind of had a tough way about talking. He was incredibly smart and he always said, I'm not going to bed until I've answered every question and every – you know, he was always like the last one to leave – [inaudible]. And he had sort of worn down everybody else. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have a chance to talk to him one-on-one about his work, about your work?

MR. BARRY: Oh yes, right. Oh, and I'll tell you, it's another story – [inaudible] – I still have the photograph. We went to this place called Belmont, which was – oh –

MS. RICHARDS: Oh yeah.

MR. BARRY: Yeah, well, he was there at Belmont. He died that summer.

MS. RICHARDS: What was Belmont? And I think the Whitney ran this program?

MR. BARRY: What was Belmont? Belmont was a kind of retreat for artists and teachers.

MS. RICHARDS: Run by the Whitney?

MR. BARRY: Yes, run by the Whitney. Belmont was an old horse farm for pacers. You know – [inaudible, cross talk].

MS. RICHARDS: There's a racetrack, yeah.

MR. BARRY: Racetrack horses. And they were raised there by some family. And I think they loaned it. They donated the property – the barns and everything, the house, big house, big old house – they donated it to the Smithsonian.

MS. RICHARDS: That's in upstate New York?

MR. BARRY: No, it's near Baltimore. It's in Maryland. I remember we used to drive into Baltimore often just to go to a restaurant. Something like that. It's kind of between Baltimore and Washington.

MS. RICHARDS: How long was the stay that you –

MR. BARRY: It was for the summer. It was something like four weeks or five weeks, something like that. It was a retreat. They actually paid us money to go there, believe it or not. And then somehow I knew somebody who was associated with it. And they asked me – Joel Shapiro – that's where I met Joel; he was involved in it and he was married to – his wife was Amy Shapiro at that time. Who else? A couple of other people – I can't – there were artists who – I can't, I don't know whatever happened to them. [Inaudible] – disappeared.

MS. RICHARDS: And Reinhardt was there?

MR. BARRY: Yes, we had people like Ad. Ad Reinhardt came, yes. And Barnett Newman. There were kind of like guest celebrities. They would come for a week or a few days. Harold Rosenberg came. And they would talk to all these young, eager artists. Somebody had this idea at the Whitney and got a grant for it, god knows – [inaudible, cross talk] –

MS. RICHARDS: Were you all painters?

MR. BARRY: Painters and sculptors. And filmmakers too. There was a filmmaker. A guy who made film. And yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have studio space there, too?

MR. BARRY: Yes, we had studio space. Well, they had these old horse barns, in fact, which they had cleaned out and that was the studio space, really. That was what it was. And I was in a sort of in-between place, where I was making paintings, but I really didn't want to make paintings there. And that was where I started doing my string sculptures, in fact, spanning –

MS. RICHARDS: From what I understand, the first things you did there – and I don't know how they connected with what you were doing in the city – was cubes that you put in outdoors –

MR. BARRY: Yes, that's right. I made a sculpture.

MS. RICHARDS: - to define space.

MR. BARRY: That's right.

MS. RICHARDS: How were they related to what you had been doing in the city?

MR. BARRY: Yes. I did the paintings. There were these panel paintings, the red paintings on the [corners ?].

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, of course, yes. So is this the first time you took it outdoors?

MR. BARRY: Yes. I made a sculpture. I went there mainly, I wanted to make sculpture. I wanted to do sculpture. I wanted - because I hadn't made any sculpture since I was an undergraduate. I hadn't even done a sculpture. And I thought, well, this is the place because they had saws and wood and stuff like that.

And I thought that somehow if I sat there and talked to people and did all this stuff and hung out that, you know, I would make sculpture, could make sculptures and - which I did. And I made some good sculpture there too. Of course, it was all lost eventually. I mean, I just walked away from it all.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you first envision that this would be outdoors? What was it you were looking forward to?

MR. BARRY: Oh yeah. No, they showed us slides and it was a pamphlet or a booklet or something. So I knew what it was all about. They had printed information. I knew it was.

MS. RICHARDS: After you did the piece or pieces where you put plaster or painted squares in the landscape -

MR. BARRY: Yes, cubes. White cubes. And well, they had this big open space and every day, horses would come. A few horses, only three or four horses would come and graze there all day, all afternoon. And there was a big open field, fenced in. And it was a big sort of rectangular field, a square field of just flat grass. And you would just see these little horses there. And I just - the idea of making these white cubes in the four corners - I mean, it was just sort of like a natural extension it seemed to me.

MS. RICHARDS: It came directly from the works that you were doing on the wall.

MR. BARRY: Absolutely. Yeah, it wasn't a big leap. And I made some small boxes too. I mean, it wasn't just the big ones.

MS. RICHARDS: They were also outside?

MR. BARRY: No, they were wood.

MS. RICHARDS: And they were inside.

MR. BARRY: They had a whole - like - they had a shop set up for welding. They had a woodshop. There was a guy there who was like the carpenter, who was like an expert who could help you if you wanted to make things. And a guy who did welding, who could show you how to do welding if that's what you wanted to do, who has an expert welder. I forget who else there was there.

MS. RICHARDS: I know that the previous paintings, where you're doing small squares and triangles that went on a wall, defined a space, and they were colored. When you put the pieces in the field and indoors -

MR. BARRY: They were white. They were painted white.

MS. RICHARDS: - they were all white. Did you think about adding color to those?

MR. BARRY: Well, they looked good against the green basically. They were just something that was not nature. But of course, you had the white wall. So it was just kind of like reversing that idea. But of the colors - I never really thought about any other color but white.

MS. RICHARDS: Why didn't you continue to do those and instead started doing the wire and string pieces?

MR. BARRY: Oh, I just liked the wire, spanning space. It was just - it seemed to me a much more interesting direction.

MS. RICHARDS: How did the idea of using that material come to your mind?

MR. BARRY: How does any idea come to your mind? I don't know. I'm not really sure how it came to mind. I don't know. It was just something -

MS. RICHARDS: You didn't bring a bag of string with you in your suitcase and think - [Laughs].

MR. BARRY: No, no. I made a piece, which I thought was a pretty nice piece, up there, where I suspended a string or a monofilament. I can't really remember what it was. And at the ends, a little kind of flashlight.

MS. RICHARDS: I think it was a string.

MR. BARRY: I think the first piece - now that I think about it I wanted to do a light -

MS. RICHARDS: Or a rope.

MR. BARRY: It was sort of like - and maybe it came out of the idea of projection. But I found this little flashlight, very simple cylindrical tube. The simplest flashlight, there was nothing to it, just like an aluminum tube with a little hook at the end, one of those little flip-out hooks.

And I just had this idea of somehow projecting a circle of light on the floor and then I suspended it from a string from the ceiling and it just made - and it just was like, I don't know, maybe this far. I did a couple of them, one which was very close and then one which was like this.

MS. RICHARDS: In other words, a flashlight is hanging from the string down to -

MR. BARRY: Yes. Right. I may even have a photograph of it that I took at the time.

MS. RICHARDS: - within above four inches from the floor or 12 inches from the floor.

MR. BARRY: Something like that. Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So that this circle of light is changing as it's -

MR. BARRY: Yes. That's right. Yes. And that was probably the first string piece that I did. And that led to a series of what I call pendulum pieces, where there was a weight at the end. The first one sat on the floor. Then there were some that were slightly above the floor.

MS. RICHARDS: Without light

MR. BARRY: Without the flashlight. Right. Without the flashlight.

MS. RICHARDS: And after that, you started defining a space with the string?

MR. BARRY: Yes. From ceiling to floor, wall to wall.

MS. RICHARDS: You also talked at one point about -

MR. BARRY: But so did the red squares define the space too, but it was a flat wall. The idea of incorporating the situation, the space that the work was in was an idea that I had been working on for a while already. It was already a couple years old by the time I did that.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you also purposefully want to bring things up off the floor?

MR. BARRY: It was interesting, the space between the floor and the - the space - well, I had always spoken about the space between the art object and the person looking at it as this dynamic space, which I referred to over and over. So the idea of the space between two things was sort of interesting to me.

But also the idea of, say, the compressed space between the floor and the object hanging over it and then the long space between the object and the ceiling was a kind of interesting idea for me - the idea of compressing and expanding. That was an idea that I worked with, which you could only do sculpturally. You can't really do with a painting on the wall.

MS. RICHARDS: Some of these small paintings that had a variable dimension came off the wall a bit. They had a kind of quasi-sculptural quality to them. That was a stepping stone toward actually doing the pieces in the field.

MR. BARRY: Well, I was certainly aware of that. In fact, as you know, I painted the edges of the paintings as they sort of came out of the wall, so that it would sort of suggest that the painting sort of continued into this kind of nebulous space, this kind of aesthetic space - [Laughs] - that the wall represented.

But then also there was this idea about moving works from one place to another - moving a painting. When you put a painting up, doesn't necessarily mean it's going to be there forever. So that there was always that suggestion of the invisible space that the painting represented that could be incorporated as part of the artwork

itself. And then there's a realization that any artwork is part of something larger, grander and, you know, the situation that it's in is very important.

So you know, when I was in graduate school, I met Barnett Newman. He was very good friends with Tony Smith. And one day Tony came over to my studio on East 83rd Street and he was sitting there looking at my work. I forget what I was showing him at the time.

MS. RICHARDS: A painting?

MR. BARRY: A paintings. Yeah, I had done some paintings. And this would be '62. And I think they looked like checkerboard or something - things like that. Or the spots arranged around in a grid-like form. And he said - you know, and Tony had probably had a drink or two, as usually he did - and he said, let me call up Barney and see what he's doing. I'd like him to see these.

He calls up Barnett Newman. And Newman - he's on the phone and Newman is going to the opera. And so Tony says, listen, get in a cab. Have the cab wait downstairs. It's not that far from where you are. Run upstairs. Well, Newman didn't run, but it was only like two flights up. And I want you to see these works.

MS. RICHARDS: Was this a really exciting moment for you?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, I would say so. I was a little bit nervous about it. So it was about an hour later or so or whatever, a taxi pulls up downstairs and Annalee or something, his wife, she's in the cab downstairs waiting. He gets out, I run down, bring him upstairs. And he comes upstairs. He was like, "Totally, I'm pissed," you know, and doing it as a big favor to his old friend Tony Smith who was a little bit drunk.

And Newman himself was drunk all the time also, you know. I mean, he would just sip vodka all day long. So he was always a little bit drunk. I don't understand that - they just - I guess they just started sipping this stuff in the morning and just kept sipping, so they were always a little bit loaded all the time.

And anyway, so he comes up and he looks and, you know, I don't think he was all that impressed. You know, his mind really was on other things. You know, he didn't really look at it so much. And in fact, he said, "Come on, Tony, I'll give you a lift. Where are you going? You know, take the taxi down." And that's where - but that's when he said, you know, "I want my paintings to look in the gallery - I want my paintings to look as close as possible in the gallery - In the gallery I want my paintings to look as close as possible as they do in the studio."

And after they left, it just seemed to me, I said, "That's impossible, really." You know, they just aren't going to be that way. And the lighting is just different and they're just going to look different. And I could see how he could be very sensitive about that in terms of these big areas of color which are very light sensitive. How he could expect them - I was never in his studio, so I don't know what that looked like. But it just seemed to me this was sort of impossible. And if you're fighting this - if this is something that you're fighting all your life, you're going to lose.

So it sort of dawned on me that you have to build into your work the fact that it's going to be shown in different kinds of places and different kinds of light. And the fact that the surroundings and where you're going to be shown is always changing, so that should really not affect the meaning of the work. It should be part of what the work is about. So I would say that was - that visit and thinking about that was - and with Tony and I think that was something that was very important to me.

And that, of course, leads you into this whole thing about incorporating the situation and the area and all of that into the work, so -

MS. RICHARDS: Breaking up the pieces.

MR. BARRY: Breaking up the space and using the space, using the length of the space, the height of it, whatever, the light, all of those things. But discovering that and working it out through your art isn't something that you come across easily. It's something that you have to kind of slowly recognize in your work and develop over years of making work.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have a sense that it was important to read critical texts or art theorists or philosophers to both support the ideas you were developing on your own, and to help understand what other ideas were working on? How much did those ideas affect the development of your ideas?

MR. BARRY: No, they never influenced me. But if I did read, say, [Maurice] Merleau-Ponty, for instance, it always seemed to me that the parts that I understood in what he was talking about - and I read him because - well, he wrote a book, well, the *Phenomenology of Perception* [New York: Humanities Press, 1962]. And it seemed to me that perception had a lot do with how we take in art. But it's a very analytic book, but there are

parts of it that are wonderful.

He also wrote a book, what is it, called *The Visible and the Invisible* [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968], something like that. I think it's his last book. The title intrigued me enormously because I felt that I was – the invisible aspect of art is, certainly is at least as important as the visible part and maybe even more important. But then, you know, even a guy like Martin Heidegger, who now it turns out was this terrible Nazi.

But you know, when I was teaching at Hunter and if I went out, say, with Goossen. For instance, if I went out with Goossen to lunch – and he was one of these two or three martini guys. I don't know how he did it. I mean, one martini and I was out. But if you went out with him for lunch if he was – if you stopped by his office, say, "Come on, let's go out to lunch." Let's say you go to lunch with him at some restaurant close by, you would invariably run into some colleagues from other departments.

And I did meet some people from the philosophy department. And one of them – I think it was a woman or somebody – had actually worked on Heidegger's *Being and Time* [New York: Harper, 1962]. And I think they were maybe an editor of it or something, had something to do with the publication of the English version. And they were kind of like experts on Martin Heidegger.

So that kind of led me to reading some things of his, which were sort of interesting. You know, *What is a Thing?* [Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1968] or, you know, different books. *Being and Time* is very difficult. But there are some other things which are a little bit easier to read. But I can't say that anything that they said really influenced what I did. Maybe I was just reading them and they just kind of like reinforced what I was already doing. Certainly [Ludwig] Wittgenstein and people like that who were very popular at the time and I tried to introduce some of it into my teaching. I would have – sometimes my students, I would point out an excerpt from it.

But in my own work, I don't think that anything that they said really had anything to do with the way I was work – using language. I was kind of like operating in a different area from what they were talking about. So I can't really say that anything that I ever read from them – and I read them mainly because it was the thing to do. I mean, everybody was sort of like talking about that kind of thing, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. BARRY: And then that French – what was that, that French anthropologist? What's his name? I forget his name. [Inaudible.] I forget. There was another one who studied ancient, you know, these different cultures. The idea of the culture that you live in determining meaning in your art, though, is a very important aspect of what art would be about. But that had more to do with the kind of general understanding of what the hell you're doing, you know. What is this activity you're engaged in and obsessed by? You know, and why do people look at it?

MS. RICHARDS: What about the question of what kind of expectations you had of the viewer and how they would approach the work.

MR. BARRY: I kind of gave up on that, to tell you the truth. I thought that what I was doing was pretty smart, was pretty good stuff, you know, pretty advanced, pretty out there all the time. But sometimes you get reactions in some of the early printed – I generally got good criticism.

Most of the criticism of my work was pretty good, but occasionally it would not be. And I just sort of felt that they absolutely didn't get what I was doing. It was their limitations on what they thought art should be or what they thought my work should be in relation to earlier work or whatever.

One thing you have to develop as an artist is a confidence in what you're doing and that you're right about it. And I relied mainly on other artists, who I think are smarter than critics, any critics or curators or anybody like that. They really know. If you want to know about what's good in art, you should talk to an artist.

MS. RICHARDS: I think it was 1967 that [Sol] LeWitt wrote something and used the term "conceptual art."

MR. BARRY: Well, that term was used long before that. If you go back to Goossen's old text about – from '63, he uses the term "concept art." The word "concept art" was around in the "Systemic" show and it was used by – negatively – by critics who felt that some of this Minimal painting, what was called "idea art" or "one-idea art" and –

MS. RICHARDS: That sounds derogatory. [Laughs.]

MR. BARRY: It was meant to be. And in a sense, not conceptual but they called it "concept art" or something like that. So if you look at the text that Goossen wrote for the catalogue for his show back in '63 of "Eight Young

Artists," he uses the term "concept art." If you look at the texts that - what's the name of the guy - I think he did that show. Oh, god, what's his name now?

MS. RICHARDS: I don't have that list here.

MR. BARRY: The "Systemic Painting" show. I remember when he died - [inaudible] - what's his name? He uses the term "conceptual art" in that catalogue. He refers to that kind of art as conceptual art. So Sol was not the first one. And I think Sol afterwards, you know, when I spoke, when I would talk to him, I don't know, I think he would kind of brush it off. You know, he was almost sorry he did that, tell you the truth.

People keep going back to that, those phrases as some kind of a hope to grab onto to try and understand what was going on. They're looking for something and instead of looking at the art, they look at what people write or some ideas that they express in their writings, rather than looking at the art and trying to deal with that directly.

And I have a feeling that Sol later - I mean, there are two versions of those sentences. And I think Sol made - he would never really directly admit it, but he did admit it to me - [Laughs] - that, you know - he would sort of brush it off as just something he did a long time ago and no one really paid any serious attention to anymore.

MS. RICHARDS: When that term was used, at least in a positive sense, did you think, yeah, that's what I'm doing? That pretty well defines -

MR. BARRY: No, I hated the term and I still dislike it. I always thought there was a - even in the most, quote, "conceptual art," there is always a physical aspect to it. I never knew what the term meant. And when you see artists like Donald Judd and so forth being referred to as conceptual, what the hell does that mean? It's a totally meaningless term.

And as I once sat on a panel, I said, "The only good thing about it is that it - whenever somebody has an idea for an exhibition about conceptual art, they ask you to put work in it, so you get work out there." [They laugh.] But that's the only benefit it has for me. But it's a completely meaningless term.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean, in the sense that all art has ideas.

MR. BARRY: Of course. If there was one thing that the artists of that time - the so-called conceptual artists are - and I don't know who they are - I think it was - people focus on the use of language, which I think is probably a mistake. I think that there was really more of a sensitivity about the function of art in the society and in the culture in which it's made, that art as a result of that culture.

That that was what was emphasized, that art had evolved to a certain point at that time that the invisible aspect of it, the idea surrounding it might be the primary thing regarding the work, rather than its visual aspect. And this was just something that a lot of people had difficulty and still have difficulty dealing with.

MS. RICHARDS: When you were -

MR. BARRY: If you're going to call it the visual arts, then if you make art that isn't primarily - where the main, the first impulse isn't visual but, shall we say, conceptual, then maybe that term has some validity to it.

MS. RICHARDS: It seemed that one of the ideas that goes through the work at that time is a sense of freedom, that the viewer is free, that you're free to redefine what art is and your approach to it and your -

MR. BARRY: Oh yeah. Did you read any of those old interviews from - ?

MS. RICHARDS: Some. Some. [Laughs.]

MR. BARRY: Oh, my God. When I read them, I wonder who is this guy? I wish I had that freedom, that guts.

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.] At that time we're talking about, '67, '68, the whole cultural and political moment talking about racial freedom and drugs and the kind of personal freedoms that people were after, how did all that affect you?

MR. BARRY: Well, freedom is one thing, but actually doing something serious is another. What do you do with that? And in a sense you're not really free because you're stuck with this direction that you're moving and you're stuck with the ideas. So you're operating within a structure.

You may not understand that structure completely, but you know you're operating in a structure. You can't just suddenly change gears and reverse yourself or go to the left or the right because there is no left or right. There's always a certain direction that you're moving in. It may appear to people outside to be some kind of

wild discovery of something new.

And I do think there was something new going on, as against some of my contemporaries who felt there was nothing, anything new. I do think there was a new way of looking at things, yes. But all of this is – it was hard for discovery and realization and understanding of the ideas about art at that time. What does freedom mean, you know?

MS. RICHARDS: I didn't mean to put too much of an emphasis on that word, but what I meant to say is, how did the whole cultural moment of the late '60s affect you in your work, and maybe those around you?

MR. BARRY: You mean the war in Vietnam and all of that?

MS. RICHARDS: And the changes that were happening in contemporary culture – music, drugs –

MR. BARRY: Well, I was very engaged in that, but that was separate from my work. None of that ever got into my art. I didn't like art like that. I didn't like anti-Vietnam War art. I didn't like feminist art. I thought it was heavy-handed and stupid – as art. Okay? I can sympathize, obviously sympathize with the politics of it and was in demonstrations and all of that stuff. But artistically, my art I kept very separate from my political beliefs, deliberately and very, very rarely would I allow that kind of thing into it. I can't really even think of any right now. They weren't allowed to creep into the work itself.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know Hans Haacke who was in New York?

MR. BARRY: Of course I know Hans Haacke. I know him now.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you know him in the early '60s – I mean, in the mid '60s, late '60s when he was there?

MR. BARRY: Sure.

MS. RICHARDS: And the work he was doing with very ephemeral materials-water and –

MR. BARRY: Yeah and the balloons.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, and the balloons. Yeah, and the air.

MR. BARRY: Yes. Absolutely. The boxes and all that. Sure.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have occasion to talk about your work with him?

MR. BARRY: He invited me once to Cooper Union when he was teaching there. And I lectured to some of his students. I think we were involved in some political things with Lucille Pard [sp] and some anti-Vietnam things. I don't think we ever sat down and spoke about our work in any kind of serious detail. Probably the closest ever was when I lectured to some of his students about my work at Cooper Union [for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York City]. He invited me to come there. But I knew Hans, yeah, sure. Still know him. I still see him. [They laugh.]

MS. RICHARDS: Shortly after you did the films with the documenting Twyla Tharp's work, you continued making films, I believe. You were making other films in '66?

MR. BARRY: No, I really – I would say in the late '60s, I really – I started doing slide projections.

MS. RICHARDS: Before that, though, did you know Fred Sandback and his early works?

MR. BARRY: I knew him briefly a little bit when he first came up. He was, I think, a student of Judd. I was a little upset with the wire pieces because I had been doing them when we first saw them at John Weber Gallery. I never really liked John Weber much as a person. And when I finally met Fred, he turned out to be a wonderful person and we were friends. And I moved on to other things anyway.

I was a little bit upset when I first saw the work because I felt it was a kind of takeoff on mine. But Fred turned out to be a good friend. And you know, so I was just – in the very beginning, I didn't really know him well. I only knew him through Weber, who was showing his work and who had pretty much dismissed me, dismissed my string pieces and wire pieces and those things.

Of course, what Fred was doing was very different. He was kind of defining solids just using the edges and was using colored wire, not just string and so forth. And really was sort of following in the steps of Judd, I think, just using the edges of Judd, not all the material inside. And it was Judd who was pushing him and, of course, Judd was extremely influential with Weber certainly at that time. But you know, it's nothing serious.

[END CARD 3.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Barry on May 15, 2010, in New York City for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one.

I think we left off around 1968, and I wanted to ask you about the project you did – or projects – at Windham College in Putney, Vermont.

MR. BARRY: Windham was a school that was organized by Seth Siegelau, who, at that time, had closed his gallery – had – the idea was, he was branching out. He wanted to do shows in locations other than in his apartment, shall we say. Not that he ever really did a show in his apartment, but he showed work there and he had these – sometimes, he would invite people over for, kind of, Sunday afternoon cocktails and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: Where was his apartment?

MR. BARRY: It was on Madison Avenue in the East 80s – in fact, not far from where we were living at the time. We were living on East 83rd Street, and it was really not a long walk from – I don't remember exactly, but it was Madison Avenue. He had an apartment on Madison – very nice apartment.

And he had work up on the walls and he would invite people over – collectors, people like that – to deal with them privately. And then he would have these cocktail parties sometimes, on Sunday afternoon and invite people over. And that's where I met Lawrence Weiner, in fact, for the first time, in one of those cocktail soirees.

MS. RICHARDS: It seems like he was an absolutely crucial –

MR. BARRY: Absolutely crucial, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: – person, in terms of the kind of work you were doing, and having it seen and discussed.

MR. BARRY: It had nothing to do with the kind of work I was doing, but it had to do with him promoting my work. And he was really my first real – well, of course, the deal from the Westerly Gallery – my first show.

MS. RICHARDS: Where was the Westerly Gallery?

MR. BARRY: The Westerly Gallery was on 56th. I forget the number or whatever. And Siegelau had a gallery, in fact – Seth Siegelau – down the block, further west. I forget what two streets, but it was, you know, like, around Madison and 56th Street. It was a good location. And Siegelau had his gallery a few doors down on 56th, and the woman who ran Westerly Gallery knew Seth and recommended – said why don't you go down and talk to him, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember her name?

MR. BARRY: It may come to me sometime, I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Why did she recommend you go there?

MR. BARRY: She knew him. I think he was a young gallerist and she thought that I might be interested in seeing him or meeting him or something like that. I can't exactly remember why. Maybe we were both from the Bronx or something, I don't know. I really don't know. But she seemed to know him.

MS. RICHARDS: So Seth had something to do with the Windham College project?

MR. BARRY: He organized it. I first met Seth, like, in '63. I have to remember that. And Windham was some years later. I knew Seth and his gallery, and in fact, I recommended an artist for his gallery, who he didn't take up – a friend of mine named James Umland, who was sort of around the scene – a very interesting, sort of, minimal painter.

MS. RICHARDS: Could you tell me his last name again?

MR. BARRY: U-M-L-A-N-D. And he was a buddy of mine and I thought that he might fit in, in Seth's gallery a little bit. I kind of got to know Seth a little bit. We sort of hit it off a little bit when I went in to just say hello. He was relatively conservative at that time. The most interesting artist, I think, he was showing was Larry, but Larry was showing paintings – those sort of propeller paintings. Other than that, the artists are kind of forgettable today. I don't think you'd know their names. I don't remember their names, anyway.

MS. RICHARDS: So he approached Windham College to do this?

MR. BARRY: Oh, no. There was a couple of artists who worked there in the art department. One was a sculptor named Chuck [Charles] Ginnever, whom you may know. He's kind of a well-known sculptor. And he was working there at the time. And Chuck was a friend. He was in New York a lot. And he was very friendly with Lawrence. And Seth, I guess, was talking to him and asked about various venues, and Chuck offered Windham College, which, at that time, was very new and was still under construction, really.

And we went up there - we drove up. Seth drove us up. I didn't drive in those days. Neither did Lawrence. I mean, you know, we were city guys and we didn't really need a car. We just never left the city. I was just always in the city. I didn't drive. I never got my license till my mid-30s. Seth drove us up there and we looked over the place, and with Carl [Andre]. Carl was part of that group.

MS. RICHARDS: Was there anyone else who was part of the group?

MR. BARRY: Well, he was showing several people at the time, but the show. I'm trying to remember. The show was just Weiner, myself and Carl. I can't remember if there was another artist there. I don't think so. It was outdoor work. The idea was that it was going to be an outdoor show. And we sort of sized up the situation over one weekend, I guess, and we drove back, planned our pieces. And there was virtually no budget. I mean, it was, you know, like a no-budget show, basically.

MS. RICHARDS: And you did two pieces?

MR. BARRY: No, just one. I did a - there was a kind of big, open space between two main buildings. I think one was like a students' union where students hung out and I think there was another identical building. I forget what it was, maybe an administration building. I'm not really sure. The people - the art department and the chairman of the art department was very enthusiastic about the show, I remember.

It was a new school, and maybe they thought that it might bring some attention to it. I'm not sure. And these two identical buildings, and I just decided it was really to do one of those wire pieces or string pieces, but of course, the strings, to - we had to use very cheap material. I think Carl used hay bales, which he got from some farmer. Lawrence used string and pegs, which he drove into the ground - made a kind of grid.

And I used this sort of shiny nylon rope.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that what has been called monofilament, in your work?

MR. BARRY: No, this is really before the monofilament. Monofilament would have been too thin to stretch. I needed something heavier. Because it was a big space. It was like that - maybe 50 yards or 80 - you know, like the size of a football field. It was really a good-sized space - not 100 yards, but maybe 50 yards between the two buildings. And underneath, you know, students were passing by. But there were still some construction materials and it hadn't really been seeded so the ground was still a little bit rough. If you look at photos of the piece, you can see. It's a little bit rough there. And I just tied the two buildings together with four of these nylon ropes. And I - and you know, it was part of my thinking in those days about using these strings and nylon cords as my material for sculpture. It was about as close to invisibility as I could get, and yet, still use visibility. The thing I liked about the nylon was that it was sort of shiny and you had to sort of look up at the sky. The other two guys - you kind of had to look down on the ground. So I sort of sized up the situation there and decided that my work was going to deal with the sky. To see it, you had to look up. And so combining these nylon cords, it kind of looked like these, oh, you know, high-tension wires, you know, that sort of thing, except that the white nylon was quite reflective and it really turned out quite beautifully. On a bright, sunny day, they virtually disappeared into the blue sky, but then at sunset, they really took on a kind of orangey look, so you had these sort of orange lines in the sky - very beautiful. And when we photographed them and, you know, they stayed there a day or two, they looked really beautiful. Then Chuck said that later, the nylon started to stretch and it was sagging, so I told them to - he said, is that part of it? I said, no, you know, tighten it up. Go up on the roof and pull it tight. They were attached to the roof, you know. And pull it - keep it straight. I kind of like it straight, rather than sort of hanging. So they had to maintain the sculpture throughout its life, however long it was up. I don't remember how long they kept it up.

MS. RICHARDS: What was your approach to documenting that project?

MR. BARRY: I just took photos.

MS. RICHARDS: And wrote any text?

MR. BARRY: No text. I believe there may have been a - I don't know if there was a panel discussion. There may have been, with the students. There was some interaction with the students. I remember that.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you like the fact that there might have been some ambiguity, since it was a quasi-

construction site and a piece of string could be something that a construction site was using – that people would have to look at that twice?

MR. BARRY: I never thought about that. No, this was something separate from the construction. I wanted it up above – away from the construction and the school so that you really had to look up to see it.

MS. RICHARDS: I read someplace that you did a piece at a private residence in Mamaroneck that was also a string piece.

MR. BARRY: Yes. In Mamaroneck? Yes, that's right.

MS. RICHARDS: Could you talk about that piece? Was that the first time you did a private commission – a piece at a private residence?

MR. BARRY: It was in '68?

MS. RICHARDS: Correct. At least, that's what has been carried down –

MR. BARRY: And it was also a – yes, it was – that may have been a nylon monofilament, in fact, which is fishing line, essentially. It's fishing line. You buy it in a fishing supply store. That's true. That was for an exhibition. That was for the January show. It was one of the pieces from the January show, also organized by Seth.

MS. RICHARDS: The January '69 show.

MR. BARRY: January '69 show, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: So it was a piece in Mamaroneck, that was seen in a photograph in the January show?

MR. BARRY: Except – yeah, there's a photograph of the house, but you can't really see the piece because it's pretty invisible. I think I strung a nylon monofilament from the house – I attached it to the house in some way – to a couple of trees outside.

MS. RICHARDS: Who commissioned that?

MR. BARRY: There was a collector – can't quite remember his name right now. He had a collection. Seth was friendly with a dealer called Manny Greer, and his brother – Manuel Greer, I think his name was, and his brother. The Greer Gallery, it was called. I forget where it was. And there were two brothers, if I remember correctly. Manny Greer was the guy, I think, who arranged it.

Manny was much more adventurous in his taste in art than the brother. The brother was older. And when I went to visit the gallery, it was one of these god-awful galleries that sells, you know, stuff to rich people that don't know anything about art, so you know, like – you know, landscapes and just awful stuff. You know, completely forgettable-type art, but stuff for rich people to decorate their apartments and houses in Mamaroneck, Westchester County.

But Manny said, forget that. This has nothing to do with that. We have a collector. He's bought a lot of stuff from us. And he wants to do something a little bit more adventurous and he's willing to buy some work. And whatever the arrangement was, I don't know. It was between Seth, Manny, this collector. And whatever you do, the work has to be able to be installed in one afternoon. And then Seth was going to sell it to this guy. All the work had to be sold. Seth wanted everything sold before the show opened. That was his idea. I don't know why. That was what he wanted.

And so this guy – we drove up there on a Sunday and this guy's wife, his family and kids, you know – it was a very nice house. And it was filled with all this kind of art from the Greer Gallery – I mean, all these sort of pseudo-primitive things and landscapes and painting – portraits of his kids, you know – I mean, just all of this sort of kitschy crap, really totally forgettable stuff. And the house was filled with this stuff, you know. That was his client.

We kind of looked at each other – what the heck is this guy doing with this work, you know? And we had to get it up and out before the Giants football game started in the afternoon. That's the kind of situation – these are the kind of people we were dealing with, here. So we just sort of looked at each other. And I think – I'm trying to remember what some of the other works were. I'm not really sure. I can't remember whether [Douglas] Heubel was with us or –

MS. RICHARDS: To do pieces at the same man's house?

MR. BARRY: Yes, installations at this man's house. I'm not sure what work he bought, or –

MS. RICHARDS: Was that the first time you had to deal with a private individual buying that kind of work, which has such little physical substance, that he may want to redo it in another residence? Did you construct some kind of agreement?

MR. BARRY: It's hard to say whether it was the first time. I mean, I'm not really sure because I was doing things in different places. There was - it's hard for me to remember all - I did a piece at Seth's house, for instance - a wire piece at his house. And I -

MS. RICHARDS: When you did the piece at Belmont and the piece at Windham, they were still yours. You weren't selling them to anyone; you were putting on an exhibition. But -

MR. BARRY: And you know, there was this idea that - look, the ones that - we didn't sell that piece, but the point was that you would show what a piece like that would look like within a private place or a public place. Of course, it would be different because the space would be different, but the idea was still, create something similar to that, using a similar material, and do it there.

But Seth had different collectors - like Jack Wendler, for instance, who had an apartment off Park Avenue.

MS. RICHARDS: Wendler?

MR. BARRY: Wendler - W-E-N-D-L-E-R. And he was one of Seth's backers. He bought a lot of work from Seth. And he - I did a string piece in his dining room.

MS. RICHARDS: So did you, or did Seth come up with some kind of contract that would spell out the future of this piece?

MR. BARRY: Yes, we worked out - there was a contract. It wasn't so much a contract in those days. I did a kind of a basic format drawing on graph paper, where I would draw out the basic format. For instance, in Wendler's, it was a kind of crosspiece up above eye level so that you wouldn't walk into it, and between - wall to wall - so that there would be a cross in the middle and there would be, like, a half-inch space between the lines when they criss-crossed in the middle of the room.

I did a piece at Larry Weiner's. I mean, Weiner and I traded works over time. Which was just a ceiling-to-floor - in those days, I didn't just work with monofilament, but I worked with black thread or string - simple string, cotton string. And you could go down to Canal Street and they had these wonderful, sort of, hardware stores, you know. And they had these different kinds of colored plastic cord - yellow and black - very thin copper wire, which would stretch.

MS. RICHARDS: So when you did these pieces, you had a kind of a letter of agreement outlining your expectations, your requirements that it should be installed a certain way.

MR. BARRY: Yeah, I would give them a drawing.

MS. RICHARDS: If they moved, they had the right to reinstall?

MR. BARRY: Oh, yes, the pieces could all be remade.

MS. RICHARDS: And if they were selling it, they would be selling the instructions, basically.

MR. BARRY: They would sell the drawing, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Has that remained your method of selling these kinds of works?

MR. BARRY: The basic idea is you - it depends on the work that I'm doing. But even today, the idea of arranging words on a wall and so forth - there are certain basic formats that I use.

MS. RICHARDS: Right after you did the piece at Windham College - was that when you did that book, *One Million Dots* [1962]?

MR. BARRY: I think the date on that is '68, isn't it?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, same year.

MR. BARRY: That was another Siegelau idea. I had been using - I was teaching and I was using the Xerox machine at Hunter on the weekends. I taught a class, I think, on Saturday morning, or something like that. And there was a copy room there with Xerox machines. Xerography was sort of new in those days. It was kind of this magical process. So I just made Xerox copies of all these things as a kind of -

[Audio break.]

MR. BARRY: What was I talking about? Xerox. The Xerox copy room, right. And Seth sort of liked that idea. I gave him copies. He said he would -

MS. RICHARDS: So you had the concept of making a book.

MR. BARRY: No, it was Siegelau's idea to make the book. And he wanted copies of these drawings of string sculptures, okay. And I had all kinds of ideas - strings across the Grand Canyon or whatever, you know - all these different basic formats: ceiling-to-floor, right angles, you know, all kinds of formats that I had devised.

And his idea was, if I Xeroxed these drawings - made several copies - he could give them out to collectors when they came by, instead of making photos or anything like that. So I gave him a whole bunch of these things and - [inaudible] - have this done? Where did you do it? I said, in the copy room at Hunter. They can knock these things out quickly. So he came across this idea of using a Xerox machine to - as a kind of medium for the artist to work with.

And in those days, also, I mean, you didn't use the copy room at Hunter, but there were Xerox copy shops all over the place. I think it was like a nickel a copy or a penny a copy - something like that. In those days, the price was ridiculously low.

MS. RICHARDS: So that was what was called *The Xerox Book* [**New York, NY: Seth Siegelau and John W. Wendler, 1968**]?

MR. BARRY: It's called *The Xerox Book*. It wasn't really called that in the beginning. There were certainly complications, though, with that. So the idea would be that each artist would be given 25 pages - you make a project that takes up 25 pages in the book.

And each artist would be given 25 pages to do with as they want. Also at that time, Seth was inviting corporate heads, or people who would be the head of some kind of company or corporation that could supply material to artists at a low price to make art. That was one of his ideas at that time.

MS. RICHARDS: The corporate people would make art?

MR. BARRY: The corporate people would supply the material and the means for an artist to make art, okay? Like if some sculptor needed some steel, he would invite some guy who ran a steel mill - whatever that idea was. So the artist would say, well, we need something - I need some steel or I need some - I think Carl got some Styrofoam - something like that. And Carl used metal all the time.

So it didn't really apply to me very much so I wasn't really involved in that. But so whatever some company or corporation could supply that would help one of his artists get work made, Seth would try and work it out with these people. So he went to the head of the Xerox Company in New York and we had a discussion. I went there. And I went twice. I went once with Seth. Then I went again with Joseph, in fact.

MS. RICHARDS: Kosuth?

MR. BARRY: Kosuth, yes. And talked - but it turned out, technically, it wasn't a good idea, because in those days, you didn't have - to do the number of books that Seth wanted to do and to use a copying machine to actually make the pages for the book just wasn't feasible. The machines could not produce pages fast enough.

MS. RICHARDS: It was cheaper to just stick to offset.

MR. BARRY: Yeah, exactly. So the idea was, they gave us access to their copy machines, whatever that meant. It wasn't really - and so you could use the machine to make your work, in one way or another, however you did it, but the final results had to be printed on a traditional printing press. So the book is actually not printed on the Xerox machines. The words were made on a Xerox machine, but then handed over to a printer to reproduce it in the book.

MS. RICHARDS: So your 25 pages were variations -

MR. BARRY: My 25 pages was - I presented a couple of possibilities for Seth, and one was a cross, which I ran through 25 times. And eventually, the image breaks down, and so you get this, kind of, like abstract breakdown of little, black dots after 25 pages, which I thought was pretty good. And I still have that piece. But the one that I like the most was sort of getting into high numbers and infinity and things like that.

And I was thinking about a million dots and 25 - that was the thing. So there was a specific space and time and number that I was dealing with. So I said, well, if I have 25 pages and I want to have a million dots, that's

40,000 dots on every page. How do you get 40,000 dots on a page? Well, I was using PressType at that time and PressType made these pages of dots.

So if you countdown, if you have, say, an 8-by-10 page and you count the numbers across the top and the numbers down the side, you can figure out 40,000 dots – what 40,000 dots – how many they would be, without having to count every dot. So I said, if I make one page with 40,000 dots and then every 25, you stick that 25, you have a million. So every – or a lot of 25 – so it just seemed to me that was the logical way to go in that project.

And it was working with the situation, with the restrictions and with the material I had to work with. So it seemed to me a perfect match.

MS. RICHARDS: What attracted you to the idea of having 40,000 dots times 25 – a million dots? What was it about that?

MR. BARRY: Well, as I said, it fit the situation perfectly. It just worked.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it the same time you also did 25 volumes?

MR. BARRY: Not at the same time. It was later.

MS. RICHARDS: *One Million Dots* – a book called –

MR. BARRY: So I had a deal with Gian Enzo Sperone, who printed books, by the way. He was really into artists' books.

MS. RICHARDS: This was in 1971.

MR. BARRY: Yes, but the idea goes back to '68. And we weren't able to get it made until '71 or '72, something like that.

MS. RICHARDS: A description I read of that book talked about degrees – 360 degrees, one degree on each page.

MR. BARRY: Right, that's another book. There was a wonderful shop in New York called Kuffel and Esser, which doesn't exist anymore –

MS. RICHARDS: Kuffel?

MR. BARRY: Kuffel – I think K-U-F-F-E-L and Esser – E-S-S-E-R. It was down near City Hall in that area – [inaudible]. And it was a magical place that a lot of artists used – Carl, I think, was the one who told me about it. And you went in there, and what they made was graph paper of every conceivable kind you could imagine, but beautifully produced in different – you could even get them in different colors. I mean, just looking at these papers, they were beautiful things to look at.

And what these graph papers did was – they were used to plot time. So you would have a special kind of graph that had to do with time graphs and calculus. And then there were these sort of circular, where there were circles inside of circles inside of circles. And the degree would be broken down various ways. And you could get a kind of paper that would be invisible to a Xerox copy machine. So you could plot out something, use the graph paper, and then when you made a photocopy of it, the lines would disappear.

MS. RICHARDS: Because the lines were some kind of light blue?

MR. BARRY: Yes, right. But it was beautiful in itself, if you didn't – I used it for a lot of things. Then there were the sort of, like, three-dimensional graphs. Like, you had a cube drawn on with – [phone rings] – is that me?

[Break.]

MS. RICHARDS: How did that

MR. BARRY: Well, anyway, it seemed to me that was an interesting thing for ideas. In fact, I made some of my three-dimensional string drawings using those sort of cube perspective – there were different kinds of perspective papers and it was just a wonderful place to go and look at all these different papers. And it was great for science and – remember, this is before the age of computers and, you know, cell phones and things like that. So a lot of this was drawn out.

And I was a little bit familiar with some of these things. My brother was an electrical engineering student. He student electrical engineering, in any case. That was his degree. So I was sort of familiar with his instruments that he used to calculate his designs and stuff like that. So it was all really very fascinating to me. And they

were just beautiful things to look at.

So I bought a lot of these 360-degree-circle graph papers and made variations on that, where I would just draw a line from the center out to the first degree. And then the next one was number one – you know, one degree, two degrees – so that you would have a book of 360 degrees and each page would be a piece of graph paper with the line moving one degree. And then I did others, where the line would move, say, 10 degrees – shorter ones.

MS. RICHARDS: Did all those books get printed in an edition of one?

MR. BARRY: No, they were handmade. These weren't printed. They were handmade. The only one that was printed in an edition of one was the billion dots. And I used the same paper that I used on the 40,000-dot page and gave it to the printer in Italy. In fact, it was printed in – I don't know if it was printed in Torino. It was printed by Gian Enzo Sperone, okay? He was my dealer at that time in Italy. And yeah, his gallery was in Torino and I'm not really sure where he had it printed.

MS. RICHARDS: Shortly after that, you did the Carrier Wavepieces. And I wanted to ask you then about a piece you did in Central Park, where you buried some radioactive material.

MR. BARRY: Radioactive material, right.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you go from what you were doing before, the strings and the books?

MR. BARRY: Invisible, in turn, getting more and more visible.

MS. RICHARDS: Why did you pick what you did, the –

MR. BARRY: When I was in high school, I remember, like in physics class or something, we were learning about the inert gases, which seemed to me kind of interesting.

MS. RICHARDS: So after you did the Carrier Wave and the radiation, then you did that whole series of inert gases?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, but I was kind of interested in using invisible material. Remember, my father was an electrical – he never finished high school, but I shouldn't say that because he went back later and finished high school.

He got his degree later, as an older man. But he worked with radio waves. In the evenings, after my mother cleared the table, after dinner, he would set up a little shop there and he made a TV set in the late '40s. He made an FM radio for me and my friend, Dick Reed. He made an FM radio for him.

MS. RICHARDS: Dick Reed?

MR. BARRY: He was a friend of mine from college.

MS. RICHARDS: So the idea of these invisible waves of energy was something that you'd always –

MR. BARRY: It was something I knew about. I remember he made that transmitter for my brother, to be a disc jockey and play records and make comments for a couple of hours, every evening, to our friends in the neighborhood. And I mean, he was into this – why do they call this, kind of, shortwave radio. He had a shortwave radio. When we would turn it on, to me, it was a magical thing.

He had a shortwave radio and you could hear broadcasts from Moscow and things like that, you know. You could hear radio broadcasts from England, all over the world – Nazi Germany, you know, all of this stuff. And my father was into this. You know, he was very fascinated by it. He did work – and I think it's one reason why my brother went into electrical engineering, to tell you the truth, although he never really worked at it. He went into something else.

MS. RICHARDS: When you did the inert gas pieces, that was in the Southern California area. Why was it in that area? What brought you there?

MR. BARRY: Siegelau. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: He said, come here?

MR. BARRY: Siegelau had a backer – had somebody who was – the Grinsteins. I don't know if you know about the Grinsteins, Stanley and Elyse Grinstein. He had been out there with Weiner, I think. And he knew a dealer –

oh, what was her name? You know, I'm really bad at names. I'm getting older now and I can't really remember. Anyway, he had some connections out there.

And Seth wanted to do something in Los Angeles with me. I had never been. Also, Huebler, I think, had approached about doing some coast-to-coast pieces, switching sand and things like that. He proposed me devising something that I could do in L.A. If I needed a space, he would find space; whatever.

And the thing was financed by Stanley Grinstein. He had become quite friendly with Grinstein when he was out there originally. Grinstein offered his house, finances, credit card for the company. Grinstein was also associated with that Gemini GEL. And he was just a very easygoing, friendly guy, his wife Elyse. He was into the California art scene very, very much. He loaned us his Mercedes convertible, so we drove around.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have a driver's license by then?

MR. BARRY: Seth drove. He did all the driving.

MS. RICHARDS: So how did you pick the exact gases, the exact locations and the quantity?

MR. BARRY: I knew about the inert gases. I had worked with them before, in fact. You can buy them.

MS. RICHARDS: As an artist, you'd worked with them?

MR. BARRY: Yeah. I knew about them. Inert gases are used in electricity, in fact. They're used for special kinds of lighting: That's xenon, for instance, and neon, of course, neon.

MS. RICHARDS: So you can buy them in some kind of supply store?

MR. BARRY: Absolutely, you can buy them. There was a scientific warehouse that you could buy them by mail. I had a catalog, I remember, and you could buy these things. You could buy radioactive material.

I went to the physics department. I knew some of my colleagues at Hunter – for instance, I hung out with this – I didn't hang out; I would say we had a few conversations – with this woman, I think it was, who worked on the Martin Heidegger book. I knew some people from the physics department.

I went there and talked to them about radioactive material because I knew that they had it there. And they told me where you could buy it and they would even send it to you by mail. You got a little brown box through the mail with one of those yellow stickers and a red star on it, you know? But it would be shipped by mail. It basically looked – what you got in the mail was a little glass vial with what looked like water in it.

And the only way you could tell it was anything was to put it up against a Geiger counter, which they had in the physics department. I went there and talked to the people. You know, I talked to them about radio waves: How do you make radio waves? I got a whole lot of information from my colleagues in the physics department. I had taken physics in high school, so I knew a little bit about it, and biology.

And I just introduced myself and we sort of hung out. There was a bar that everybody went to. And we'd go for dinner, have hamburgers and a beer. And they said, "Oh, come, stop by. We'll show you how a Geiger counter works." And they had all that stuff there – where you buy it, where you get it, how schools acquire all of things – so it's very easy to get.

And that's the material – I ordered barium-133 because it sounded like Barry. I didn't know what you could get. You know, they explained to me all about half lives and zero time and, you know, I got a very basic primer on how you buy these things and how they work and how you handled them and so forth and so on.

MS. RICHARDS: When you made the inert gases pieces in Southern California, how did you pick the geographic locations?

MR. BARRY: I looked at a map of L.A. and where we could drive to within driving distance. There were certain other things. First of all, Stanley's business was the forklift business. He built and reconditioned forklifts. And so he had a company credit card, which he gave us.

So we looked up this scientific warehouse place in L.A. It was kind of a big shop, you know, like a big warehouse place where you could buy all kinds of great stuff. And they sold all the inert gases except radon, which is radioactive. You couldn't buy that, but they had all of the others.

And the way they showed some of them was, they would have a beaker with a little electronic connection. And you would flip the switch and the beaker would light up orange or red or something like that because it was filled with a certain kind of neon, or a certain kind of inert gas. And they were quite common. The stuff wasn't, you

know, wasn't something that was hard to come by.

And in fact, they use these gases. Sometimes at night, when you're driving, the lights – you know, you have this sort of orange light on the road. That's an inert gas. That's a bulb filled with an inert gas. And they use them because these last forever; they don't burn out. The light isn't very good. It kind of hurts your eyes after a while. But it's not going to burn out for many, many years, so they don't have to replace them all the time. It was quite easy to come by.

MS. RICHARDS: Those pieces were made outdoors. The string pieces were made outdoors. You talked about looking at the sky when you did the string piece. So there seems to be, from the earliest work, an interest in connecting to nature.–

MR. BARRY: Yes, the infinite aspect of nature, but not in any kind of really romantic way. But also, ideas about time and space. You asked earlier about how these locations were chosen. Well, we were just – it was my first time in L.A. I'd never been there before. We flew over. And in was in March and the city was gray and cold and rainy and not very pleasant. We landed in L.A. and it was beautiful, warm and fabulous, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean New York was gray and cold?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, right. L.A. was completely the opposite and we just loved it. So we looked at a map of L.A. We got a – we asked Stanley and Stanley was really very generous with his time and help and all of that. We looked at a map. And you know, where were we going to go? Well, the Mojave Desert. I mean, it's very romantic and we'll go there.

Then we will go to the road going to Tehachapi because one of my favorite films, with Humphrey Bogart, Tehachapi – there's a line in the film about Tehachapi, where – I guess it's a prison. It's *The Maltese Falcon* [1941], the movie *The Maltese Falcon*.

And he has this great bit of philosophy at the end, where he has to turn in his girlfriend – you know, because she's the one who's murdered his best friend – so he says, "I have to do something. He was my best friend; you killed him. So I'm going to turn you in." And she's crying and trying to talk him out of it, Mary Astor. And he says, "It's okay. You'll get 20 years in Tehachapi, but it's all right. I'll be waiting for you when you come out."

So I saw this road sign, the road to Tehachapi, and I said, "We have to go there. You know, we can't go to Tehachapi. It's too far. But we'll do something on the side of the road." And I liked the idea of doing something on the side of the road, okay? And then we went to a place which was a –

MS. RICHARDS: Because it's a nondescript kind of place?

MR. BARRY: Yes, if you look at the photo, the documentation, I mean, it's just a kind of a road.

MS. RICHARDS: It could be anywhere.

MR. BARRY: It could be anywhere. And the only way you know about it – it could be anywhere in Los Angeles or the Los Angeles area. And we had to go to the Beverly Hills Hotel, you know, and get that neon sign there. The ocean, we had to go to the ocean at one point. And then we did, we went to – the Grinsteins, of course, had a pool, like everybody in L.A., so we did a piece by his poolside, you know?

And all of these places were just chosen. And then the address – we needed an address in L.A., which was – of course, they weren't going to do a gallery show. There was no gallery. But there was an address on the poster and the address was – and it had to be on Sunset Boulevard, some address on Sunset Boulevard.

And we found this – because I mean, Sunset Boulevard, you know? It had to be that. It was the movie and the whole idea of it. And we went to this place which was a kind of a mail drop and telephone answering service. You know, you had these women sitting at a desk, taking telephone calls.

MS. RICHARDS: With earphones.

MR. BARRY: Earphones and, you know, plugging in and out. And this is the place; this is it. And the address was something, Sunset Boulevard. And we took a mailbox there and the answering service, which was – and that was the address at the bottom of the poster that we sent out. I designed a poster for the show.

MS. RICHARDS: And then you stopped. You didn't make any more inert gas pieces, right?

MR. BARRY: That was pretty much – yeah, after that, I think –

MS. RICHARDS: You did the *Telepathic* [Piece, 1969]?

MR. BARRY: There was *Telepathic*, or radio wave – let’s see. They were all kind of done around the same time. Then came the *Telepathic*, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And then you started getting into the typed-text pieces. Did you envision that those pieces would – let me back up. Why did you go in that direction, to the typed-text pieces, not back to painting, not –

MR. BARRY: You know, when you answer a question like that, it’s just –

MS. RICHARDS: Because they were ephemeral?

MR. BARRY: Sure, all of that. And it just seemed the next step after what I was working on. The *Telepathic Piece* was a little bit of a joke. And it was kind of like a takeoff on conceptual art, okay? Weiner had said that it can be made or not made, all being equal and consistent and so on, so on. And so, okay.

MS. RICHARDS: You had already said it could be invisible.

MR. BARRY: It can be invisible. But I mean, I certainly don’t believe that people can read other people’s minds. The idea of the *Telepathic Piece* – on 57th Street, the galleries on 57th Street – most of the galleries in those days were on 57th Street. There really was no SoHo.

MS. RICHARDS: Madison Avenue, too.

MR. BARRY: Madison and 57th, in and around that area. And I remember there was a gallery, a quite well-known gallery. I forget which one it was. It was one of the big galleries at the time. Down the hall, there was, like, the telepathic center, you know? This organization that sponsored telepathy, okay.

And if you went in there, they had a library, in fact and there were all these books there about telepathy. And I went in there and looked at some of the books and so forth. It was a small, maybe twice the size of this – there were some tables – and a very small library like this, not much more. A few things, some publications and a lady sitting there.

And it all just, sort of, came together then about generating thoughts in your mind. And the mind actually does generate electrical currents – very weak ones and not necessarily ones that can be picked up by anyone else. But there were also these, sort of, phenomenological questions of, how do you know what someone else – how do you communicate with someone else? How do you communicate with another being?

How do you read – what is communication between people? What is that about? What signs and besides just language, how do we interpret what other people are trying to communicate to us? And it was this whole thing that I was interested in at that time. And it seemed to me this was an interesting sort of way to go.

I did some performances with my wife and also just by myself, where I would sit at a table. I did one, I remember – there was a place called Franklin Furnace, which, I think, was on Franklin Street, but I don’t think it exists there anymore. And this woman ran it, Martha Wilson, and she invited me. She invited me to do a show there. She invited me to do a – she was doing performances in the evenings.

And the idea of performance was that I would sit there and say, “I’m trying to telepathically transmit an idea to you.” And I would just sit there in silence like this, you know, and the people out there would be silent. And I’d say, “If anybody’s getting anything, you know, just raise your hand.” And people raised their hands to tell me what they were thinking. I’m saying, “And this is a thought that cannot be expressed in words, so let me know what you’re getting.”

MS. RICHARDS: How many minutes did your performance –

MR. BARRY: It was part of several things that I did, so it was 20 minutes, whatever. It was like 30 minutes, something like that. I did something with my wife – it was called *It Is, It Isn’t* [Paris : Yvon Lambert, 1972] – where I would say, “It is perfect.” And then she would say, “It is not perfect.” And then I would say, “It is round” and she would say, “It is square.”

And that sort of thing, you know, kind of a male-female thing. And in fact, that piece is going to be shown by Jan Mot [ph] at the Basel Art Fair [Switzerland] . And Yvon printed the book of it; it was called *It Is, It Isn’t* – the script, he printed it as a book. In fact, using it as – [inaudible] – one of his old books, he printed it.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did that lead to, maybe not directly, the piece you did that was, simply, the gallery closed. Just a sign, I believe, was mounted at three different galleries – one gallery after the next?

MR. BARRY: Yes. All the statements were different, though. You know, “during the exhibition, the gallery will be closed.” “The gallery will be closed for the exhibition.” Each one had a different statement on the door.

MS. RICHARDS: Why was that?

MR. BARRY: I just didn't want them to be the same. They were three different pieces, essentially. But when I sold it, I sold it to the Vogels as one three-part piece.

MS. RICHARDS: What was it about that gesture that intrigued you?

MR. BARRY: And I really want that it's closed. I mean, closed was closed. That door was closed and locked. It wasn't that it was just empty, but it was closed. And they said, well, can we do some office work in the back? And I said, yes, okay. You can go in the back entrance. But the only thing would be that sign on the door, saying, "For the exhibition, the gallery will be closed."

MS. RICHARDS: And what was it about that idea that made it interesting to you?

MR. BARRY: Just the negativity of it, or just the - I did a series of works in those days. You know, we're talking about a lot of things happening within a very short period of time.

MS. RICHARDS: That's right.

MR. BARRY: And I was a very busy guy in those days. I did a series of works where - and one thing didn't follow another, necessarily. A lot of these things were done depending on if somebody asked me to do a show, or what the -

MS. RICHARDS: They weren't done in the order that the ideas came to you?

MR. BARRY: No, not at all. I was doing a number of things where I wanted to use the materials of the art world itself as the medium for my art. For instance, using the gallery, using a gallery, using a mailer - there's the famous mailer piece that goes around in a circle. If somebody invited me to be in an exhibition, my piece would be to invite someone else to be in that exhibition. My piece is to invite, you know, James Umland to be in that show. Another piece, another time, was to present as my piece a couple of invitations to future exhibitions that I was going to do.

[END CARD 4.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Barry on May 15, 2010, in New York City for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc five.

MR. BARRY: The Lucy Lippard piece, for instance, which is a rather famous work. And I think it was one of the - it was my first one-man show at Yvon's gallery in Paris, in fact. I had showed a few things there before and he had asked me for a show. And so I decided to show the work of Lucy Lippard, which was a kind of reverse - she showed the work of artists, so I'm an artist showing the work of a critic/curator, so there was that kind of funny, sort of reverse role there. And that was part of that series of things that I was doing at that time.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it an important moment for you to be in the exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* -

MR. BARRY: Well, I was invited -

MS. RICHARDS: - that was so influential?

MR. BARRY: Hmm?

MS. RICHARDS: This exhibition that was so influential, came to be so influential, in 1969.

MR. BARRY: I mean, it was sort of - I guess I was in it. I don't even remember what piece I put in it. I'm not really sure.

MS. RICHARDS: You talked about an invitation piece. Did you mean the piece for which you had different galleries sending invitations to a show of yours at a different galley?

MR. BARRY: Yes, that's the *Invitation Piece* [1972-73], yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And did you do that just once?

MR. BARRY: Yes. [Affirmative.] Remember, that piece took almost a year to make, so I was doing other things at that time.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah. Was that piece meant to be shown at any of those galleries or it just went through the - [inaudible, cross talk].

MR. BARRY: Yes, each gallery got a copy of the piece. It's essentially a multiple, really.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you produce it with Seth Siegelaub or just on your own?

MR. BARRY: No, I did that on my own. And of course, the galleries – the galleries printed the mail-orders.

MS. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] At that point you were, I think, fully engaged in using language, words. How did you decide on which words to use and what they would look like – the typeface, the placement on the page?

MR. BARRY: The way they looked – you're jumping ahead when I'm working with individual words.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, I was thinking about the type-written page, *Artwork with 20 Qualities*, that was in 1970. You had a list of 20 words. So thinking about that piece, how did you select those particular words?

MR. BARRY: Oh, I just went through lists of adjectives and things like that and just – it was an intuitive selection, nothing special. There were several pieces like that where I used different descriptive terms to try and define something that didn't really exist physically, that were simply made-up adjectives. I mean, there really wasn't any particular – things were kind of a metaphysical way of thinking about making objects.

The question is, then, it's really about the nature of existence and the nature of confronting something like that and how we – dealing with it. It's a lot of responsibility on the viewer and the person to try and deal with something like that.

And I guess those works were about as close to the so-called definition of conceptual art that – if there is such a thing, which there isn't; it's an empty and useless term, essentially. But it only takes on some kind of meaning when you use works like that and refer to them as conceptual art. Then it becomes to have some – the term "conceptual art" seems to have some kind of definition.

But that's what it really was about. It's engaging the viewer more and more into it; creating intangible, almost unimaginable things to deal with. Heidegger wrote a book called *Was Ist Das Ding – What Is a Thing?* which was kind of interesting and influential to me, as a matter of fact. It's a small paperback, which I read. It's about the nature of thingness; what is it? It's a very penetrating analysis of that, and I think a rather influential book. I know other artists who have read it and come up with it.

The notion of a thing, materiality, was something that I think was something very in peoples' minds when they were dealing with earth and metal and different kinds of metals and the interaction of different sorts of material. So the idea of thingness was an idea that was current then, thinking about.

And of course, I dealt with it in a very much more metaphysical, conceptual way because I wasn't really interested in tangible material that you could hold in your hand because material – I consider radio waves and inert gas. Materials, much materials, anything else. But even, I wanted to move away from that in fact because those things could be measured, they could be analyzed.

One of the things about inert gas, by the way – you asked me why I used that. There's a kind of poetic aspect to inert gas. And remember, first of all, they were completely unknown a hundred years earlier. We just didn't know about them. And then when they were discovered in the atmosphere, the idea that this is a material that would breathe in and exhale and becomes part of us for a while made it even more intriguing. The names, the Greek names, are interesting, too – if you translate neon, xenon and so forth are kind of interesting. And that they're tasteless –

MS. RICHARDS: Odorless.

MR. BARRY: Odorless, undetectable by the senses. And all that was completely fascinating to me.

MS. RICHARDS: Something that was completely invisible actually existed.

MR. BARRY: Yes. It existed and it would breathe in and breathe out. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: And had energy.

MR. BARRY: In a sense we need really. It's part of our environment.

MS. RICHARDS: So those words that you were picking are descriptions of a thing – varied, flexible, durable.

MR. BARRY: Well, with a new definition of what a thing is, what constitutes a thing.

MS. RICHARDS: Around the same time you also did spoken sound pieces.

MR. BARRY: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Correct me if I'm wrong – they didn't exist in writing on paper. They only existed –

MR. BARRY: Oh yes. There were scripts.

MS. RICHARDS: Were the scripts works of art?

MR. BARRY: They would be used as the – well, what is a work of art? A work of art would be the tape and the script, which I would sign if anybody ever bought one. I'm not even sure anybody ever bought one of those. I think one or two collectors bought them.

MS. RICHARDS: The Vogels [Dorothy and Herbert Vogel] must have bought one. [Laughs.]

MR. BARRY: No. Not at all. The Vogels were quite strict in what they acquired. They never acquired a projection. They never acquired a sound piece. They were never big on photos that much, unless it was photos documenting something. They had some limitations into what they bought.

MS. RICHARDS: So as you – then you moved to the [inaudible, cross talk].

MR. BARRY: Well, the sound was something – I mean, you know, the sound pieces were something quite physical. I mean, they were meant to be played. Have you heard a sound piece?

MS. RICHARDS: Not recently.

MR. BARRY: Okay. What you have is, say, one word being spoken, say, every 30 seconds with 30 seconds of silence. And there really isn't anything in the room other than that. And so each word becomes a kind of object in itself once you become aware that this word is being spoken or is in the room.

MS. RICHARDS: Like an inert gas.

MR. BARRY: Well, different. It's a different kind of experience because it's a more physical experience. The MoMA has just showed one, in fact, as part of that Amsterdam show some months ago. They had one going and it was great. It's, you know, you walk into the gallery and suddenly a word is spoken in a normal human voice.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you use your own voice?

MR. BARRY: I used my own voice about half the time. I used my wife's voice. I kind of like different voices. Sometimes I used some of my students.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you use different voices in the same piece?

MR. BARRY: Yes, I used some where I had a group of students together and I got them together and they would speak a word, so you're going to have a male, female, male, so forth. I did that I guess. The point is there was this – first there was this emptiness, this space, just the sound around. Whatever ambient sounds going on. And then a word would just suddenly materialize orally in the space.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it important to control the ambient sound?

MR. BARRY: No. There was no way to control it.

MS. RICHARDS: Didn't matter.

MR. BARRY: In fact, the first time I showed them at Julian Pretto's gallery – he had a gallery on Hudson Street called the Fine Arts Building, which was an old office building he took over and turned into a kind of exhibition space for a couple of years there. And I showed it there and I showed one at P.S.1 also. And I spent a lot of time adjusting the sound before the opening, getting the sound just right so you –

MS. RICHARDS: Not too loud, not too –

MR. BARRY: Not too loud, not too – like a person sitting in the room speaking. And then, of course, at the opening a hundred people showed up and they're all talking and you couldn't hear anything. So I immediately ran to the volume and turned it up, which didn't really work very well. And I decided that wasn't – I'm not going to do that. So when I showed it at P.S.1, I just kind of left it that way. And you could hear it or not hear it. And the best way to hear it was to just sort of be alone in the room or maybe two or three people. And once you realized this, this thing coming, things get very quiet and you anticipate –

MS. RICHARDS: Did it take some –

MR. BARRY: Anticipation was a very important part of the piece. Once you know that something is going on and you wait for the next one to come. And these were tape loops, by the way, so there was no real beginning or end. You could sit there for five minutes or an hour for that matter.

MS. RICHARDS: Did it take you a while to calibrate the length of that silence between words?

MR. BARRY: It did to get it right and sometimes – the longest would be 30 seconds, but sometimes I did a piece on the radio where that seemed to – the people at BAI – I was on BAI – got really, really nervous. You can't have silence on the radio; people will turn away from the station. So we cut it down I think to 10 or 15 seconds.

MS. RICHARDS: That's a long time on the radio.

MR. BARRY: That is also considered a very long time on the radio. Yes. I know that. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: What was your thinking that led you to the carousel slide projection pieces from the sound pieces?

MR. BARRY: I had always taken photos – always, always taken photos, made movies. And the idea of light, the words just existing and light on the wall. Remember the first ones were done in '69, the first slide projections – with just words – which I made myself, by the way. I typed the words out on a Selectric at Leo Castelli Gallery. He had one of those Selectric type writers, so you could change the ball, get the typeface I wanted. I would type them out on an index card, then take them home and I got a light stand with a camera, so I would photograph the word and then take the negative and put it in a slide.

MS. RICHARDS: You used slide film?

MR. BARRY: Black and white.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh.

MR. BARRY: No. Then I learned about high contrast copy film, where you don't have a gradation of grays and it's really black and white and the black is very opaque. So that would sort of block out the light – because when I first showed them, you would sort of see the rectangle – the black wasn't really black; it kind of looked sort of gray there. And then you would see the word in the middle.

Then I found somebody in New York who did this kind of work really, who could typeset the words more professionally so they didn't look like a typewriter and print them on a special kind of film, large sheets of film where the black is really, really opaque, very dense. And it was used in advertising and layout and I sort of found out about that. People suggested things to me. And so I started using them and I had them make up the words for me. So it got a little bit slicker, more professional looking. And the typeface was more –

MS. RICHARDS: You were basically doing this with an 80-slot carousel,

MR. BARRY: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: So filling an 80-slot carousel.

MR. BARRY: The original ones really were 80 slides long. And I said, that's an awful – that's a lot. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: But you did a bigger one I think, too?

MR. BARRY: There were some 120-slot ones. But that was really a little bit too much. But what I did was when I – I kind of – the first ones were really sentences, like something with 20 qualities or something like that. And the first slide would say – a work with 80 qualities – or "It is" and then there would be a word with a comma and a word with a comma and so forth and so on.

And I quickly learned that you could put a blank slide between each one, so there were some that were 20 – 40 words long. And then I realized I you could put ones with two slides – [Laughs] – so you could have – or you could have one piece that's 20 words long, like for instance, a piece with 20 qualities – and I think I actually made a projection out of that – and then he would do – make it up four times. So we would have a piece repeated over and over again in an 80-slide carousel.

I liked the carousels, by the way, because they just went around and around and it was essentially like a tape loop or a film loop. And there was no beginning or end and they just operated. They were a universal product. They had them all over. No matter where you went there was a Kodak carousel projector. The European ones

were much better, in fact, than the American ones. They were very heavy and you'd have to test on them.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you actually, in fact, have to make different slide formats for those other projectors?

MR. BARRY: No, they all carried over.

MS. RICHARDS: The glass –

MR. BARRY: Yes. Right. They all carried over. And it was pretty much a universal product. So it was a great product to use. I didn't have to carry around my own carousels. And they sold pretty well. I mean, you know, Panza [Count Giuseppe Panza di Buomo] bought a whole bunch of them and some of the big collectors of Sperone and Castelli and so forth. I did a whole show of carousels at Leo Castelli gallery. I showed like three – I had them divide that big room up into different rooms. One of the first pieces I showed at Leo's was a projection.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you recognize that those were influential? Might have led other artists to do carousel pieces as well?

MR. BARRY: No, I didn't think about that at all. I was thinking about time. I liked the idea – [inaudible, cross talk].

MS. RICHARDS: No, I mean afterward.

MR. BARRY: No. I was just thinking of making works of art that moved in time. I was interested in works that moved in time. And I kind of liked the blackness – the blackness between the words kind of was similar to the silence between the words in the sound pieces. And also when the word clicks off, you have that sort of after image and that sort of fades away. Then another one comes and takes it place. I liked the clicking of the – it was kind of like a clock ticking away.

So there were all these elements of light. You had the word in light that was so ephemeral. I mean, you could just – it was so temporary. You would have to focus on it. Then it would go away and you could – and then you'd have to deal with the next idea. I called them, "word ideas" at that time. They were certainly words, but they were also ideas that one could relate to or engage with.

People ask me why I use words and the reason, of course, is that words talk to you. I mean, they're something that are generated inside of you and that you can relate to you. Even though you're reading something, it's as though that person who wrote it is speaking to you. It's a form of conversation, really.

MS. RICHARDS: When the viewer comes into the gallery, were you thinking of the fact that with the carousel pieces, they're feeling that sense of time in the sense that they need to wait, they have the expectation, they're –

MR. BARRY: Hopefully. Hopefully.

MS. RICHARDS: Hopefully they're staying for the entire piece – or a series of words

MR. BARRY: If they want. They don't have to.

MS. RICHARDS: They might be less connected than when they just look at a list of words on the wall, which they could speed through and walk away.

MR. BARRY: When you present works of art, one thing I've learned is that if you're lucky – [Laughs] – there will be those few people who, shall we say, get it? Really become engaged, become moved by it in their own way. You cannot control what other people are going to think about it.

Kind of like your children. I don't know if you have children, but you know that when they grow up, they go into areas you never would have predicted when they were young. So you can never really predict how people are going to react, what they're going to think about, whether they care.

You can't make somebody care about what you're doing. Either they get it, either there's that connection – or they don't. And it's not something – I try to create a kind of dynamic thing that hopefully some people will become interested in. And what they do with it after that is sort of up to them. But it's a specific item, it's a specific thing that I've done. And what they do with it is their problem. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: Speaking of kids, I've noted that in '74 you left New York City. You had two kids by then? Am I correct?

MR. BARRY: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Two boys?

MR. BARRY: Two boys, yes. We had two sons.

MS. RICHARDS: What precipitated your leaving Manhattan?

MR. BARRY: Ah, that's a good question.

MS. RICHARDS: You were still living up in the 80s, east 80s?

MR. BARRY: No. We moved to a house in the Bronx. We got a whole house to ourselves.

MS. RICHARDS: You had your studio there?

MR. BARRY: The Upper Bronx, in my old neighborhood in fact. A big private house. And it was - we decided to move there.

MS. RICHARDS: When was that?

MR. BARRY: Well, certainly before - we moved - for a while we moved out of the city. The apartment - I think I mentioned to you earlier we got into a lot of problems with the landlord. The woman that owned the apartment was a lovely woman and she died. And suddenly her family or some other people, a lawyer came around and they wanted to divide these big old apartments up into little apartments and sublet and do this and that. And we fought them. We got a lawyer - some of the tenants got a lawyer but then they offered some money and so forth. The whole thing just sort of became obscene, really.

My parents were still living in the Bronx. And this house, they said, you know, there's this great house down the block, a neighborhood - a grand old house that looked from the '20s and it looked like something by Frank Lloyd Wright or something - it was just - and it's a house I always loved when I was a kid. So we sort of moved into it and we stayed there for a while.

MS. RICHARDS: Rented?

MR. BARRY: We rented it. Yes. Although the landlord owned - he was a landlord. He owned several properties. His main business was he was a jeweler. [Laughs.] He owned a jewelry shop on Fordham Road or something like that - a very fancy one. But he was a nice guy. And he kept wanting to get us to buy the damn house.

MS. RICHARDS: What street was that on?

MR. BARRY: Marion Avenue.

MS. RICHARDS: Marion?

MR. BARRY: Marion. Just off Fordham Road. Marion Avenue, Fordham Road. Around 193rd Street. Very close to where - very close to Fordham Avenue. You know, Fordham University and all that. It was still a nice area in those days. We lived there for a while. And then we decided to move upstate to Monroe. A lot of our friends - I don't know why. I guess the schools - we didn't really care for the schools. For some reason we decided to buy a house in upstate, up in Monroe, which is about an hour's drive north of the city.

MS. RICHARDS: What county is that in?

MR. BARRY: It's like Orange County. The Mengels [sp] had bought a place up there. Friends of ours were buying property upstate - [Laughs] - you know, Jerry Ordovery, a lawyer, Leo's lawyer. And Bob Hewitt, a friend of mine, painter, bought a place up there with Twyla. I kept the studio. I had a studio on 14th Street.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh. Fourteenth and what?

MR. BARRY: Fourteenth - right across from this big RKO theater, which later became this big disco, the Palladium. It was across the street from there.

MS. RICHARDS: So 14th between Broadway and Irving Place.

MR. BARRY: Yeah, like that. Like that. I had a studio there. It was a great studio.

MS. RICHARDS: Right between Fourth Avenue and Irving Place.

MR. BARRY: Something like that. Yeah. On 14th Street. This was before the Palladium though.

[....]

MR. BARRY: Anyway, right next to me was a X-rated movie theater, a porno movie theater. And on that floor, I knew about it. Seth knew this guy – there was an artist called Sam Goodman and his wife – I think her name was Eva, something like that – it was his studio before. Sam died. He's completely unknown today. Nobody knows his work. And Sam died. And his wife offered it up. Seth knew about it and Seth said, you know, "There's this great studio. And if you want it, you can get it real cheap."

So I took it at that time – under the condition that his wife paid half the rent, in fact, because part of the studio was used to sort of keep his work. And that became kind of like there was one big area that was sort of fenced off or walled off and his work – she kept it there, stored there. And I had the rest of the studio.

It was interesting because in the front – when you went in the front – it was on the first floor – you went in the front, the studio was in the back. But in the front rooms was a newspaper office and it was one of those underground newspapers. I don't know if you remember in those days, there were papers called, like, *The Rat Press* or something like that. And people would sell them on the streets. It was a kind of underground hippie sort of newspaper, antiestablishment sort of stuff. [Laughs.] And their office was in the front and kind of went by their office to get to my studio in the back.

And it was a great studio, in fact, and at some point it was used as a kind of a religious revival hall because up high around – near the ceiling were these quotations from the Bible which were made out of Styrofoam letters which were glued to the wall, but they were really up high, very close to the ceiling. And they had been painted over so they were the same color – they were white – same color as the wall. I guess Sam had painted them over in there. But they were still there. You could see them in relief. [Laughs.] So it was kind of funny.

And then the back windows led out, I guess, on the next street there's a convent, nun's convent. And the nuns would sit out there at night – you could open the windows. There was a lovely little kind of patio garden and you could look across to the nuns. And they would sit there playing cards – I remember – and fighting with each other about – you know, they played something like bridge or something like that and they would argue.

You could hear them: "Sister." "Oh, Sister. That's a terrible bid. You shouldn't bid that." [Laughs.] Or, "Don't you know? I have spades." Or something – you know, they would sit there bickering with one another. I remember I would listen to that in the summer and they would be there.

MS. RICHARDS: At that point, you were doing such ephemeral work, what was in your studio?

MR. BARRY: Ah, that's a good question. Not a lot, in fact. [Laughs.] It was storage for paintings. Some of my old paintings were there. Some of the wire pieces – I have photographs of some of the wire pieces – would be set up. I used the studio to photograph. The back wall – the windows, in fact. And then underneath I used a caption saying, "This space occupied by such-and-such radio waves," or things like that. I really didn't use it for that much, really.

MS. RICHARDS: Was it partly psychological that you had a studio?

MR. BARRY: Yes. You know who used it more than I did? Seth Siegelau. He used it for openings. He used it for Doug Huebler's opening catalogue show. He used it for all kinds of stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: Did he pay rent? [Laughs.]

MR. BARRY: No, he didn't pay rent. But he – I remember him setting up a jukebox once for something, some one of his projects, for openings and things like that. He really used it more. I used it. I went there and I worked. I did things there, but it became pretty clear pretty soon – I kept it because it was great and it was very cheap. And I liked going there sometimes.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you move to Monroe?

MR. BARRY: Oh, and I showed work there when people would come over. And you know, I would show some of those little square paintings. I could put them up on the wall. I remember Paula Cooper coming. She came and looked at some things. She was interested because I had done – I was in the first show she ever did, you know, when she opened her gallery on Prince Street in SoHo.

She was the first gallery to be in [Prince ?] and I was in that show. I did a string piece, in fact. It was called – what was it called? *One by Four* [correct? date?] or something like that. It went up the wall and then went across to the other wall. And the size of it was determined by the length. So it was four times this one up. And then later she did a show on the anti-Vietnam, I think. Another show that I was in. I forget what I showed then.

MS. RICHARDS: A political piece?

MR. BARRY: No. No. I didn't do political.

MS. RICHARDS: No, you said it was a show –

MR. BARRY: It was an electric wave piece, in fact. I strung wires around the gallery – [Laughs] – and turned on a generator so there was actually an electrical field in the gallery. It was invisible, but there were wires going around the gallery. [Laughs.] I think that was the second piece I showed there. She offered me a show. She asked me if I was interested in doing a show there.

And I said – and this was in '68 – and she was this very attractive young gallery person whom I knew. She was always very friendly, very sweet. And she asked me if I – you know, she wanted to see my work. And the problem is I working with Seth Siegelau at that time. I thought they were friends. I thought they were buddies. They were always friendly when they talked to each other. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: But you had the sense that if you showed with her, he would not be pleased?

MR. BARRY: Well, I didn't have that sense. She came, she looked at it and she offered me a show. Okay? And I went and I told Seth. And he blew his tack. [Laughs.] He went completely nuts. And he said, "I've been working on this January show. We're trying to work together, you know, the group and so forth. And you're going to do a show."

And I said, "It's going to be after the January show. It's not – one has nothing to do with the other, you know?" And I tried to talk him out of it. He wouldn't listen. He didn't want to hear about it: "I've spent all this time and energy and money on this. And here you're doing this." So I said, "Okay. Okay, okay."

And I went – I remember going to see Paula. It was like a Saturday morning and it was raining and gray. I said, "Oh, you know, I spoke to Seth. And he got really upset about it, so I don't think I can do that show now." And she just said, "Oh, okay." [Laughs.] She didn't seem bothered by it or anything. She was so totally cool and just, it was like nothing, you know. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: You wish she had put up more of a – [inaudible, cross talk].

MR. BARRY: I didn't know why. You know, we're still friends. I mean, we're very good friends. But I just – and I have shown. You know, I've done – I'll have to tell you: On the 20th anniversary of the opening of her gallery – or the 25th anniversary – she did a show when she was still in SoHo – you know, what street was that? Like Greene Street or something? She had that gallery.

MS. RICHARDS: Wooster.

MR. BARRY: Wooster. Whatever.

MR. BARRY: And she did a show where she invited the same artists back for her opening show. Okay? But all showing new work, okay? And I showed one of my paintings. And it was like the 25th anniversary of the opening or the 20th – whatever. It was something like that. And she sold the damn painting. They sold the painting. And the director, this guy called me and he said, "You know, we just sold your painting." He said, "Are you interested in – you know, I'd like to talk to you. Do you have more paintings? Can I see these paintings? And you know, can you think about doing a show?"

And a week before Holly Solomon had asked me, had called me up and asked me if she could look at some paintings and bought like a half dozen paintings as a gesture of good will. She called me and invited me to do an exhibition in her gallery. And she bought these works. So I said, "You know, I just kind of obligated myself to Holly. So you know." [Laughs.] So twice I was offered an exhibition with Paula and twice I had to turn – I turned it down. [Laughs.] It's just a silly anecdote, but it's true.

MS. RICHARDS: I want to talk about galleries and all that in a while. So you did many carousel pieces.

MR. BARRY: Yeah. Carousel projections. Slide projections, I call them.

MS. RICHARDS: And you started introducing images as well as words.

MR. BARRY: Say that again?

MS. RICHARDS: You began using images as well as words.

MR. BARRY: I did use images. I wanted – I just –

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, I'm sorry. I left off – did you move to Monroe?

MR. BARRY: We moved to Monroe like in '70 or something like that. I don't know.

MS. RICHARDS: Keeping the studio on 14th Street?

MR. BARRY: Yes. I kept that studio.

MS. RICHARDS: And then after that you moved to –

MR. BARRY: Remember, I was teaching at Hunter.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

MR. BARRY: And I used to drive in. You know, I had like classes three days a week, something like that. And I was also on the program committee, so I could sort of organize my programs so it was fairly convenient for me.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you have tenure or were you adjunct?

MR. BARRY: I was an adjunct. I never got tenure, never had it. I was a professor, though. But I never got tenure. I never really wanted tenure, to tell you the truth. Really wasn't – the guys who got – the tenured people were some of, like, the least interesting. And they were people I didn't really like very much anyway. But anyway, that's beside the point. I was working there.

My time at Hunter was fine so long as Goossen was the chairman. I always had a good time with him. When he decided that he didn't want to be chairman anymore and just teach, this woman took over, who in fact turned – it was like one of the first teachers I had. Her name was Doris Kennedy. And she just really I don't think had a real feeling.

In fact, when I sat down and spoke to her one time, she just said, you know, we have too many of these artistic superstars on the staff. All of the sudden this sort of resentment seemed to be coming out about some of the people who were working there. She just seemed really kind of negative. And she didn't really last as chairman very long. But she was the chairman when I was – my last few years that I was there.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you enjoy teaching or just do it because it was a –

MR. BARRY: I liked the students very much. I'm a natural sort of bullshit artist, ham [ph], you know, and I liked working with them and talking with them. I liked some of my colleagues. I met some interesting people there. And I liked sometimes hanging out.

Teaching I realized took up a lot of my time. I was a kind of a teacher that spent time with students, spoke to them after class, tried to help them out. I'd talk with them personally about their work and try to get out of them what they were thinking about, forcing them to thinking seriously and not just falling back on all the ideas that they had picked up someplace. And so I took my job teaching very seriously and that – as a result, it took up a lot of time.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you teach undergraduate or graduates?

MR. BARRY: Both. I taught both. And I was also a graduate advisor. I was one of the teachers that advised graduate students.

MS. RICHARDS: So you were – while you didn't have tenure, you were full time.

MR. BARRY: I was full time. I was full time for a long time.

MS. RICHARDS: And what classes did you teach?

MR. BARRY: Oh, something called Mixed Media, which was pretty much – which could be anything really. People were starting to work with video and film and sculptural works – also paintings, painting installation work. The students were doing all sorts of different kinds of things. Whatever kind of media they would have felt at home with.

I worked – I did that. That was my graduate class. And then undergraduate I taught design. Over the years I taught almost everything. The first class I ever taught was life drawing; I had a nude model – [Laughs] – that I work with. You know, I tried to teach them how to think about things.

MS. RICHARDS: Could you have –

MR. BARRY: Drawing. Drawing was something I taught.

MS. RICHARDS: Could you have reduced your schedule to make it more manageable?

MR. BARRY: No. They increased it, in fact. There was a big budget problem and everybody had to teach an extra class at one point.

MS. RICHARDS: For the same pay?

MR. BARRY: Wow, 15 hours. Same pay. I had to take an extra class. I remember that. I think when I started, we were teaching like 12 hours a week and then it was increased to 15. And they just kept it at 15. But then as the budgetary problems got more and more, they started looking to dump people. Tenure became more difficult. Tenure was very easy to get when I first went there. It was very easy to get. Everybody was being tenured. And I just – I never really thought about it.

I never really – the way I was thinking in those days, I never – when I first started, I didn't want to sell work. I didn't want to deal with dealers. I liked Seth because he was sort of a nice guy. But I really liked the independence. I never took income from Leo Castelli. Larry Weiner, for instance, took out a monthly stipend from him against work that was sold, but he wasn't selling anything. Larry was sort of bragging that he was into Leo for \$60,000 or something like that. And I said, "What the hell? You know, what do you want to do that for?"

I mean, I had a pretty good income teaching, which was considered a good income in those days. But I really kind of liked the fluidity and not really being tied down. I saw the kind of people that were tenured and what happened to them there and I thought it was kind of death, really. I did start taking it seriously later.

But what happened was I won a National Endowment grant – \$12,000 in '76 or so – something like that. And I asked for a leave of absence for a year. Before that, I was having problems, in fact, because I was doing a lot of shows in Europe and I was having people come in my classes in fact, which they didn't like.

Kennedy especially didn't like. Goossen didn't care. You know, he was friends with artists and he knew artists and he was a curator mostly and a critic and so forth. He was a very smart guy. And he didn't really give a damn. She was one of these more academic types. Her thing was really fashion and design, although she never really worked in the fashion industry, never really did anything serious. She was someone who taught fashion but didn't really – hadn't really been in the business and had just sort of been there so long that people sort of got to know her.

And since nobody wanted to be chairman, she just sort of got it by default I think. And people quickly realized this was not – she didn't stay there very long. Unfortunately she was there for the years – my final years. But I don't think she had a real sympathy for artists. And I think the first year she was there she shot the whole budget on a big kiln which she built, had built down in the basement for her ceramics class. She hired a woman – a very lovely woman, very nice woman – to teach ceramics. You know, well, okay.

Anyway, she wanted to sort of change things around to make it more practical, more practical art and things like that. Well, she didn't stay there very long really and somebody else came in and took over. This was not the style of the department.

MS. RICHARDS: You took a leave because of the grant?

MR. BARRY: I took a leave. I won a National Endowment grant, in fact. There were a dozen of us in the country who won it. And I was surprised. I mean, and you know, I applied, but I never dreamed that I would get it. But I did get it. And I guess it was just lucky that the people on the committee knew what I was about.

And anyway, I took a year off and I showed like crazy, I traveled, I did – remember I was associated with Leo Castelli, which was the number-one gallery, although the work I was showing there was completely misunderstood and not understood at all by my fellow faculty members. They really didn't get it at all, except Tony Smith. Tony was always very open to a lot of things.

And I did shows in Germany and Italy. You know, so I used that year and it was incredible. It was really the first time that I ever really was a full-time artist, actually. And I found out what that was really like, that, you know, the freedom of working and as much as I enjoyed teaching, I didn't have to do it.

My mind was just focused on work and putting up shows and doing things like that – and doing pretty well. And also our sons were getting older. My wife went to nursing school. So she finished nursing school and she was like at the top of her class or something and she got – she was very –

MS. RICHARDS: This is living in Monroe? Or had you moved – I think you moved to New Jersey in '74?

MR. BARRY: This was '74, yeah. We decided we didn't like Monroe. It was too far away, too isolated. We had fallen in with this idea of buying a place in the city. We weren't happy with the schools our sons were in. It was close to where the Mengels were. The Mengels were like the next town up. And we never saw them. You know, it was one of those things.

We fell in love with this house. You can't imagine, this beautiful stone house built by Italian craftsman around the turn of the century, two acres of property with huge pine trees. Across the road was this grand old estate with beautiful gardens and a lovely little town. In those days, Monroe was a beautiful little town. The building was fabulous. We had these friends who had decided to move to the country also. Huot moved out, bought up this huge farm. It just seemed that people were sort of getting out of the city.

And when I came into the city, of course, I slept in the studio. I had a bunk bed – [inaudible]. Or sometimes I slept at her father's place, her parents, you know, they had an apartment in Yorkville. So I slept there. If I had to stay overnight or if I was teaching one day at Hunter, then having another class the next morning. And then when I was done with classes I would drive up. It was about an hour's drive from the city, I would say. Not that far. You know, something that was doable.

My wife was not happy. She really never learned how to drive. She tried – [inaudible] – but she just was one of those people like Sol LeWitt. You know, there are some people who just don't – that cannot get comfortable behind the wheel of a car and always sort of think they're going to kill somebody. And she just couldn't do it. So she was kind of isolated in the house. She couldn't walk into town.

But it really wasn't that interesting for her. She's really a city girl who was born and raised in Manhattan of all places. So you know, she was used to the buzz of the city and her friends and going to – taking the subway or the bus or a taxi someplace. And there was always something for her to do. And up there, she was just isolated.

We didn't stay that long. We were only there like a year-and-a-half. Then we decided to come back to New York. There were two possibilities: There was a woman sculptor who had a studio, finished studio in the 20s. It was like, I'm thinking like in the – very close to the flower district there, you know where they sell – ? And the price was about the same; it was like \$50,000 and it was a completely finished studio. I mean, it was beautiful. Bathroom and the toilets, everything. And she was selling it.

And then there was this house in Teaneck, which was eight minutes from the bridge with beautiful gardens and a corner house with trees, old pine trees. And the house was built in the '30s; it has some sort of art deco touches to it – for the same price. And the schools were very famous in those days, the Teaneck schools. We had these two young sons. So we took the house. And the schools – we were very sensitive about schools for our kids, so we weren't sure. We didn't have enough money for private school, so public schools, we had to consider that.

And the house was great. It was very close to the city and of course more private. You know, the neighborhood was really nice. And we found out about, in fact, through some colleagues, some people I knew at Hunter and friends and down the block was some professor at City College and next to us was some musicologist who taught at some place or other on one side. And our neighbors next door were – he worked for, oh, like some publishing company or something. And he wrote – he was a movie critic.

So the neighbors were really fabulous and across the street was an old vaudeville guy who had bought the house originally in 1930. And he used to travel the borscht circuit – [Laughs] – as an old-time comedian and his wife. And it was a wonderful neighborhood. We really just loved the people there and those trees. Teaneck was a beautiful town, in fact. We took the house. And we were very happy. They didn't have a – [inaudible] – I don't know, it was in '73 or something.

MS. RICHARDS: In '74, yeah. And you kept the studio on 14th Street.

MR. BARRY: I did for a while, yes. I kept that. Right. I kept that. I worked there.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to the teaching, you said that when you got the grant, you took a sabbatical.

MR. BARRY: I took a year off.

MS. RICHARDS: And then you came back in –

MR. BARRY: And then I came back and was really involved in galleries and working. And I asked for another six months and they refused. And so I said, how about, like, part time? And I had this long talk with Kennedy and

she said, look, first of all, I don't like you turning your class over. You're getting paid. You know, she laid the law down.

You know, you can't have students cover your classes. I don't care how famous your friends are. I used to – Baldessari came in and taught classes for me. Or you know, I had people come in and teach as guest artists and cover classes. And my student assistants, who was a friend of Louise Lawler, in fact. And I first met Louise when she was – because she'd cover.

And she said, look, you're a teacher. You're supposed to be there for your classes. No, we're not going to give you another half term off. And I expect you to be there teaching your classes. No more traveling. You want to do your traveling? Do it in the summer. Do it on weekends. But you are supposed to be there teaching your class.

And I didn't like her attitude. And at that time I was showing and working and my wife, in fact, finished nursing school and she had gotten a job at Holy Name hospital in town, so she was working as a nurse. And I always had a fairly decent income, coming in just from the art. So I did teach there I think one more year. I left in '79. And then I just – I left.

MS. RICHARDS: Never looked back. [Laughs.]

MR. BARRY: Never looked back. Right.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you done guest lecturing or guest teaching anyplace?

MR. BARRY: Yes, I've done a lot of that. In fact, I've taught all over. I was a guest at CalArts. John Baldessari invited me out a few times. I've been there. I've been in Pasadena, taught out at Boulder, University of Colorado. And I've taught in Europe. I've lectured and taught. I've taught at the *école des Beaux-Arts in Nigne* [*sp*]. *I was there for a couple of weeks, I was there. I've taught all over – in Switzerland, Germany.*

MS. RICHARDS: *Those are gratifying experiences?*

MR. BARRY: *Yes, I like it. I like going in there, saying what I have to say, dealing with the students and then leaving. I've been in Nice at Villa Arson, that famous art school there. I've been there several times, in fact. I've lectured at the Sorbonne. I've lectured in many, many places, in fact. And taught at Cooper Union with – Hans Haacke invited me to teach. [Laughs.]*

So I've taught, if I go down – I've even stopped listing all the places that I've – I used to include them in my biography, but I don't do that anymore. There's just too many places, too many things.

[END CARD 5.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Barry on May 15, 2010 in New York City for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc six.

I wanted to ask you about the Carousel pieces in which you had words as well as images. For example, *Famous Paintings*, which you did in 1974, but there were many of those works. That seemed to be an unusual one, *Famous Paintings*.

MR. BARRY: Yeah, that was unusual.

MS. RICHARDS: Maybe it's not the best one to talk about because it's so different?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, it's not typical because I did use those found, those are found slides.

MS. RICHARDS: I thought so.

MR. BARRY: Sort of these old scratchy slides.

MS. RICHARDS: All brown.

MR. BARRY: Right, which is why I used them, by the way.

MS. RICHARDS: But typically, there were different kinds of images.

MR. BARRY: Typically, I'd use my own photos.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah. Was the criterion for selecting the photos different than the approach you took for selecting the words?

MR. BARRY: No. In fact, they were quite close. The photos were another way of capturing or relating to reality, as a word is, for instance. A word refers to something in the real world and so, in a way, does a photo. It's not the thing itself, but it's a kind of suggestion of where you might look for that thing.

Or, you know, it kind of suggests something – a place or feeling or mood or something like that. And of course, the photos were a little bit more specific than the words, though I kind of liked that. But the idea of words and photos was something that appealed to me. And I did that, by the way in Belmont. I made a book. That actually was – that's a projection; that's a slide piece.

MS. RICHARDS: In Belmont back in 1967?

MR. BARRY: Belmont of the photos was taken in '67. In fact, it's called *Belmont '67*, but it was made 10 years later, in '77. And in fact, a lot of those photos were – there was, sometimes there was a theme. There were these friends of ours who had a place in the country, the McClanahans [Preston McClanahan]. And he was a teacher at – he was a teacher at Rhode Island School of Design –

MS. RICHARDS: What was his first name?

MR. BARRY: Which is another place where I taught, by the way.

MS. RICHARDS: What was his first name, McClanahan?

MR. BARRY: Preston. And he was a friend. He was friendly with – he was a designer, artist. He did, kind of, like, light boxes and stuff like that. He was an artist who showed at Howard Wise Gallery. I got to know him. He was a nice guy, very smart. But he was also a kind of designer. He designed record album covers and he designed the – he was very friendly with that famous woman anthropologist. I forget.

MS. RICHARDS: You mean, who lived with the apes?

MR. BARRY: No, this was before that. Anyway, he designed her hall at the Museum of Natural History. By the way, another place I went to often with my father, the Museum of Natural History. We went there often.

I spoke about going to the Metropolitan, but actually, we went to the Museum of Natural History more times, and to that planetarium, you know? We went there a lot. I went there with him. But Pete worked there and he taught at Rhode Island School of Design [Providence], also. He was a design teacher there.

MS. RICHARDS: You said you taught at RISD for one semester, or guest –

MR. BARRY: No, I was a guest artist. You know, I spoke to the students about their work and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: So these Carouselpieces you did with the photographs is –

MR. BARRY: Well, anyway, what I'm saying – I was talking about a piece, a specific idea. And running through his property, by the way, was a stream. And I made a photographic documentation of the source of that stream and followed it through his property and into another property, where it emptied into some river – like, the Mohawk River, or something like that. So in the photos, what you see is following this line, following the stream into this river.

There were a number of pieces like that. I documented the – there's a piece – I think it's in the Stedelijk Museum [Amsterdam] now – where it was about the documentation of Jackson Pollock's death. We took a place out in the Hamptons one summer and out there you have where he died, you know – where he lived, his house – and this was before it became the kind of museum which it is now – his grave, which is there, this big boulder, the tree.

Ray Parker, by the way, Ray was one of fellow teachers. Ray had been living out there for quite a while and Ray had a house there. And Ray knew all these people. He was friends with de Kooning, for instance. He took me over to see de Kooning and I spoke to him. He knew Ibram Lassaw – remember that sculptor? He lived there. We went there. And Lassaw took us to the tree where the car crashed and we looked around to see if there was any broken glass left.

But I photographed that and all of these things that had to do with Pollock's life and death out on Long Island. And I made a piece out of it. You know, you don't know that when you look at it. You look at the trees and you see the road, the curve in the road, where the car went off the road. And you just, sort of, see these scenes. You're not exactly – this house and this gravestone – or, it's not a gravestone; it's a boulder.

MS. RICHARDS: It's unusual that – the specificity of that subject is unusual for you.

MR. BARRY: Right. It's unusual but, you know, I try different things. [Laughs.] I, sort of, look at what I'm doing - sometimes, I would look at what I'm doing and say, well, I'm just going to do the opposite. I'm going to do something different.

That was about painting. I didn't paint for 20 years and then I just decided that, okay, I'm going to go back to painting - making paintings, anyway. I'm painting things on the wall. I'm painting things on paper. So I'm going to make paintings on paper - it was, sort of, at the end of the '80s.

MS. RICHARDS: I was going to - when you're finished talking about - I was going to ask, talk to you about the time when you started painting on the wall. I think it was in the mid-'70s, or late.

MR. BARRY: Yes, drawing on the wall.

MS. RICHARDS: So how did that, how did you decide to do that, going from the experience of looking at the slides and the blanks and the temporality of it and the darkness -

MR. BARRY: Slides are always in one place in the middle of a dark wall.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. BARRY: When you put the words in pencil on the wall, which I - the first ones were pencil. And this, I think, was before, really, I discovered press-type or plastic letters. You know, vinyl letters - this was really before that. I don't even think they existed yet, where you would, you know, design it on the computer and then they would make it in vinyl. This was really before that.

And I used these, sort of, like, plastic lettering-guide stencils to guide my hand, to do that. That's how I made those letters. I mean, they're not used - pencil was kind of faint and for larger words, I used magic markers - you know, light gray and then, sometimes, a color or - felt-tip, felt-tip pens.

MS. RICHARDS: And starting out with a solid - that's straight on the white wall, but there are also pieces that were solid color, on top of which -

MR. BARRY: Well, that's right. Sometimes I would paint the wall a solid color. And I also used Cray-Pas, oil-based crayon.

MS. RICHARDS: What were the issues that you were considering when you were deciding which of those mediums to use and whether to -

MR. BARRY: Big, dramatic presentation. Using the whole space, the whole wall. And I would try - there were some pieces, like *Love To*, or *Love to Love*, things like that, where I really just wanted to use the whole wall, make something big and dramatic, yet still operate within the confines of the space.

Sometimes the words would be arranged in a circle on the wall. Sort of, the top word would be touching, almost touching the ceiling; the bottom word almost touching the floor - or work it out in some way so that the space itself was, what -

MS. RICHARDS: Was dictating the dimensions?

MR. BARRY: Was dictating the size of the words and so forth. Colors, of course, are arbitrary. You can just pretty much choose what you want.

MS. RICHARDS: They were mostly primary colors?

MR. BARRY: Yes, usually primary. And colors that were, you know, wall-paint colors, not acrylic painting. But you know, I'd go down to Canal Street or something and - you know, they have a paint shop next to the art-supply shop for wall painters. And they had beautiful colors there. I mean, you could just pick out the wall paints that painters use and roll the color on, which you couldn't really do with acrylics, which were much more expensive. And you know, you need lots of acrylic paint to cover the whole wall.

MS. RICHARDS: And there'd be no point because it would be destroyed.

MR. BARRY: Yeah, and a lot of these walls were temporary, anyway. I mean, they were just up for the length of the show, you know. I did a whole show at Leo Castelli, where I -

MS. RICHARDS: The one in '83?

MR. BARRY: It's the one where I painted the whole gallery blue.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, I think it's –

MR. BARRY: And then made these big wall drawings using red crayon.

MS. RICHARDS: Going back to the words and the images, which –

MR. BARRY: And the projections, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: We talked about the selection of words a little bit – that ultimately, and I don't know if this was the concept initially or it evolved to this, you ended up with a group of a couple hundred words which you pulled from. Did that also apply to the images, the photographs, or were they continually new images?

MR. BARRY: Both ways. I always took photographs. I photographed a lot of trees, by the way, which is another image I used often in my work, the tree image.

MS. RICHARDS: Is it correct that you had a group of a couple hundred words?

MR. BARRY: Yes, that is true. I still have word lists, right.

MS. RICHARDS: How did those word lists come to be –

MR. BARRY: Oh, it was just intuitive.

MS. RICHARDS: And how did it get limited, in a sense, and become a kind of vocabulary of words?

MR. BARRY: It's intuitive. I just eliminate words, specific, like table, chair, or wall, something like that. Words which, sort of –

MS. RICHARDS: You eliminated nouns, more or less?

MR. BARRY: Nouns, mostly, words that had more to do with states of mind, or more suggestive or things like that. I can't really say why. If I'm reading something and a word pops up, or I just catch it, I try to mark it off and then, later, write it down on a piece of paper and add it to my list.

I still do that. And now, in fact, my paintings and wall pieces are what I call word lists, where I just – if you've seen the recent work, you can see it. Instead of arranging them randomly on a wall, trying to design something, I just line them up on the wall.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you find that you keep changing the relationships between the words that you're using, or do you go back to certain rhythms or series of words? These four words always seem to go together, or this word always seems to fall after that one.

MR. BARRY: It has, sort of, gotten to that point. And I'm going to have to, sort of, look at it. I keep using the same, seemingly the same words over and over. Every once in a while a new one comes in. But once you put together this long list of words, some just seem to be appropriate all the time. They just seem to work together. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's, you know, why – in different combinations, of course, and with different looks. I don't know why.

I mean, maybe it's, why did Cezanne keep painting apples? I don't know. They just seemed to work for him and they just, kind of, seem very appropriate to me. They seem to say what I want to say better than anything else. And after a while, you just pare things down more and more and more, until you get to certain basic things which just – basic ideas which just seem to work for you over and over again.

MS. RICHARDS: You've talked about how it's absolutely not poetry.

MR. BARRY: No.

MS. RICHARDS: Or concrete poetry or anything of that sort.

MR. BARRY: No. [Negative.]

MS. RICHARDS: But you do put a lot of attention into how the words are placed on the paper or the wall.

MR. BARRY: Sure. [Affirmative.]

MS. RICHARDS: So aesthetic issues matter a great deal.

MR. BARRY: Yes, visual look – sure, words are objects of a color and a size and a form and a shape. And there are certain – there's a certain typeface which I like to use, very simple, geometric. And where they're placed

and what color they are, the size – all of that is important to my work.

MS. RICHARDS: From the beginning, did you always specify, if something was being printed, exactly what typeface it would be?

MR. BARRY: No. There was a point – for instance, a good example would be the *Invitation Piece* – where I left the typeface up to the dealer. The dealers have their own style, their own look to their mailers, the kind of typeface they like to use. It's their sort of signature look. And I left it up to them. I said, you use the typeface that you normally use. It's your decision to use it. And just make sure that what it says – the content is my content.

But whatever typeface you use in your normal mailers that you send out or whatever typeface you're using in a catalog – if it's going to be used in a catalog – use that for conveying the information for my piece. And then, in those days, I chose not to do it; not to impose my tastes on it. Now I do because the look of it is more important. I've settled into a kind of signature style of my own, in fact, which is this kind of simple, geometric look, which I find works very well in lots of different kinds of situations, especially architectural situations. If you have a wall or a room or a ceiling or a floor, you can kind of manipulate those geometric letter forms around corners and all sorts of tight spaces that work very well.

MS. RICHARDS: If you redo the same piece, it's obviously in a different place -do you try to approximate the same relationships and proportions between – [inaudible, cross talk].

MR. BARRY: Yes, if a dealer – if a collector – mainly, it's the collectors that buy a piece, and then they kind of like to keep the same sort of proportions, same colors –

MS. RICHARDS: If you did it initially on a 10-foot wall and then you were going to do it on a 20-foot wall –

MR. BARRY: If you change the scale, it depends. A lot of the – lately, I've been doing pieces which are cut out of metal and the size can't be changed. So the point would be to shift that. But that's something the collector understands when they purchase a piece. And often, some of these collectors, Italian collectors, they love to do big pieces of furniture in front of a wall or a big canvas stick or something, or some sculpture that they own. My piece becomes part of the background, which is oaky.

MS. RICHARDS: You're okay with that?

MR. BARRY: Sure. It's there all the time. I'm used to being the background. I'm used to having work that only lasts for a little while. I'm used to being – working in the real world, where real things are.

MS. RICHARDS: So the light can be very – [inaudible, cross talk] –

MR. BARRY: Yeah, I'm not – that's the way the real world is.

MS. RICHARDS: And in fact, sometimes, the words are a little difficult –

MR. BARRY: And I kind of like it if you have to see something – you have to look behind a piece of furniture to see it.

MS. RICHARDS: Does that relate to also the idea that you sometimes put words in a kind of a backward-forward-sideways format. You have to crimp your neck to –

MR. BARRY: I'm doing a piece in Germany and it's a big room which has a – it's a conference room and both walls are glass. And there are corridors outside and the words will be on both sides of the glass. So from the inside, certain words are going to look backwards, but when you look from the outside, the inside words will look backwards.

MS. RICHARDS: It reminds me of flipping slides. Did you ever try to flip slides?

MR. BARRY: I never did that, no. Also, in my videos, I've tried working with words, moving them, and it just doesn't work for me. And the words may move from the bottom to the top and I've never been able to do it where I'm happy. So I always keep the words in the middle. It just doesn't seem to work for me. I haven't figured out how to do it so that it looks good. If I somehow work it out so that it does, then I'll try it sometime. It's not that I haven't tried. It's just that it seems to work in some situations but not in others.

MS. RICHARDS: Early on, you were talking about the 25 pages that you did in the book that Seth Siegelraub put together. And in it, there were variations of the string pieces. Do you keep a sketchbook? Have you always or never?

MR. BARRY: No, I don't.

MS. RICHARDS: So if you're going through ideas in your mind, it's just in your mind, or do they -

MR. BARRY: Yes. [Affirmative.] I don't keep a sketchbook.

MS. RICHARDS: Or do sketches that don't turn out to be -

MR. BARRY: Sometimes, I jot down notes, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you kept journals or any other record of your -

MR. BARRY: No, I don't keep them.

MS. RICHARDS: When you have been developing ideas, do you do preparatory drawings? I guess the bigger question is what part does drawing play in the development of your ideas and as finished works of art?

MR. BARRY: I consider drawings finished works of art, first of all. However, the ideas can be something that can be developed into something larger. I don't make so many drawings anymore since I'm working with language. I used to make more when I worked with sculptural things, especially the wire pieces. I sometimes made small sketches of paintings when I was painting.

I do make some drawings for wall pieces. I do work out some ideas for large-scale wall pieces where I have to organize words or get proportions right. I do keep them in my files. Not an exhibit or a show; just as part of my records, my archives.

The drawings that I show - the drawings that I present to people are finished works in themselves. They're meant to be thought of that way and not necessarily lead to larger pieces or anything like that. And that's the way I work now.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you always been very specific about how those pieces on paper would be framed and presented, or not framed?

MR. BARRY: I do think about how they're framed, yes. How they're presented. And when any work of art is presented, it's very important. And I do like certain kinds of frames for work. That's important.

I did a series of paintings, in fact - small paintings. Mostly the portraits, what I did where I painted photos. And there, I kind of developed this style where they were mounted in a kind of black box. Maybe something similar to what Ad Reinhardt was doing. And I kind of liked the way they looked with this black background and this frame around it.

And Holly Solomon used to frame them up that way. That's the way she had them framed. And I just kind of liked the way those portraits looked in that sort of black-box frame. I think they looked good that way. But the way something is framed is - I think is very important. Usually, I try to keep the frames extremely simple.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you specify when you finish a work, how it should be framed?

MR. BARRY: Yes. When it is framed, the gallery usually does the framing. And they ask what kind of frame I want. I usually let them know, something very, very simple in a frame. I don't care for mats - [inaudible]. I like the work hanging free in the frame. I don't like too much frame around it but I like a little breathing space around the piece. Unless it's something special, something designed to be - something, I can't think of anything right now.

MS. RICHARDS: When you moved to Teaneck, your studio was in your house?

MR. BARRY: Yes, I used my house. I used the garage, first of all; we finished the garage. There's a driveway where I put the car. But the garage was finished off as a kind - we put a floor in and lights. And then I finished the garage off as a studio. But I wasn't really painting that much.

MS. RICHARDS: A studio in the sense that we talked about before? A place to show your work or to keep it?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, right. [Affirmative.] I did have another studio, in fact. There was a building in Teaneck, not far, which was - there's a kind of a warehouse area in Teaneck, in fact, where there are car shops and things like that. It's a small area near railroad tracks, which is sort of industrial. And there was a building which was - in the front was a Cadillac repair shop and then the back of the building was just empty, deserted. I'd say the back third of this one-story building - brown-brick building. And it was a relatively low rent in those days - very low rent. And I needed a place to store work and also to work on paintings, and I had started making paintings.

So I used that for a while but then we finished off – well, what I did was I finished the garage off as a studio. Put lights in there. And then I finished off the basement as well. The basement was unfinished. So in fact, I finished the basement off first. That was the easiest to do. But the ceilings weren't very high. But I was able to work there. I set up some large tables. And could work flat there.

Getting the work out of the basement – large paintings out of the basement turned out to be a problem. The stairs weren't good. So we finished off the garage as a studio; closed it off, walled it off, put a floor in. And I used that and I still use it today, in fact. The studio, the garage, I also used as a painting studio because I felt I needed something larger. But that became more – going there – I never really finished it off. I kind of plugged in some lights, some spotlights and things like that to get lighting in there.

But I never really spent a lot of time there. It was rented, first of all. It was quiet. There was kind of a smell of gasoline all the time. It wasn't the most pleasant place. At night, it was a little bit spooky to go there because it was a kind of deserted part of town; not the best. But I used it. And I used it a lot for storage; keeping things there that I couldn't keep in the house. When our sons got older and moved out – now, basically, I use almost the whole house, really, as a studio.

Eventually, the owner, who lived in Florida, sold that and the garage guy moved out and I had to move out and it stood there empty with a “for rent” sign on it for years. I was never really quite sure what that was about; why he decided he wanted to sell it and raise the rent or something. And the agent that took it over raised the rent. The building doesn't exist now, in fact. It was torn down and it's part of a parking lot, believe it or not. So anyway, that was the studio that I had in Teaneck.

But now, basically, I use the garage, I use the basement and I use – in the house, there is what they used to call the mother's room, or the maid's room, which has its own small shower and a toilet with a sink. But that's on the ground floor. It has its own entrance, in fact. It's one of those kinds of houses. And I use that as my office. But I also have a big drawing table set up there. I mean, I use my drawing table and desk as a – this nice light comes in –

MS. RICHARDS: Do you prefer to have images of or actual earlier work in the studio or recent work in the studio, as you're working on newer pieces?

MR. BARRY: I don't have a lot of work in the studio. I kept some old paintings which I have turned to the wall.

MS. RICHARDS: So if we were in the studio, would we see the walls blank? Do you have other things on –

MR. BARRY: Yes, there's a big wall which is blank, yes, which I – I haven't made any paintings for a while. Really, I haven't made any paintings since my last show just last year. I'm really busy working on commissions now. Video – I'm doing a number of large installations.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, I want to get to what you're doing now in a little while. Have you always finished a piece, moved it away, out of sight, before you started a new piece?

MR. BARRY: I'm fortunate in one respect; that I don't have a lot of work in my studio. Most of it's out, gone; either sold or in galleries. I work with a lot of galleries.

MS. RICHARDS: I know. [Laughs.] I want to get to that, too.

MR. BARRY: Yeah, so they have a lot of work in storage or around, you know. Every once in a while, some work comes back to me. When – [inaudible] – project closed, they shipped back everything; I didn't unpack it for years. I have to say, I haven't unpacked stuff that I got back from Leo Castelli, okay? It's still wrapped up, leaning against the wall in my studio –

MS. RICHARDS: Occasionally, in my experience, when someone would go to pick up work from an artist's studio, work in crates that they hadn't opened up, it would turn out that they got the wrong work back.

MR. BARRY: Well, that's possible.

MS. RICHARDS: Even someone else's work.

MR. BARRY: That's never happened to me. I don't – no, that's not true. I have gotten back – I got back someone else's work from Holly Solomon when she died and closed her gallery. First she closed her gallery and she shipped stuff back and then she took this little funny room at the Chelsea Hotel which was a kind of exhibition room. A little sort of apartment she took at the Chelsea and those were her last years there.

But she did send some things back to me that were not mine. Whoever did it somehow –

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, that's what I'm talking about.

[Cross talk.]

MR. BARRY: Not an artist, not interesting. I brought it back. I mean, I gave it back to her. I have things I got back that I've never opened.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you ever had times where you -

MR. BARRY: When I finish something, I'm kind of finished with it and I move on. And I really don't look back on any kind -

MS. RICHARDS: You're working on one project at a time.

MR. BARRY: Yeah, and I don't even like going back to old work. People are fascinated now by all these typewriter pieces. And the gallery is just - they love them because they can sell them here. And for some reason, after all these years, the collectors now are looking for old typewriter pieces from the '70s. They all ask for them and I can't sell them fast enough.

And I have some left but I just don't want to let them go. And I really don't like going back over these old things. A lot of them are sort of unfinished or they were put aside because they weren't particularly good or you know, I mean -

MS. RICHARDS: Do you feel like putting an X through them or -

MR. BARRY: I've sort of recycled some old ideas where I take an old statement and present it in a new way. Do it up in brightly colored vinyl letters and put them on the wall, you know? This is what I did with those telepathic pieces here, or the piece that I put on the window if I thought it was appropriate. So I've been doing that; kind of updating some of these old works.

MS. RICHARDS: Are you worried that if you keep pieces that you don't really think were finished or were good enough that someone at some point will show them eventually?

MR. BARRY: If they get out? If they're allowed out? I do try to finish up things. For instance, these index-card pieces which I did a lot of - never showed them. A lot of them were just the index cards that I typed up for the projections, in fact. But they're pieces in themselves. They exist as index cards.

I started showing one or two at Gasser & Grunert. They were looking for some typewriter pieces here and there. And I said, "I don't have any that I want to go. I have a few left but I want to keep them for myself. But I do have a whole bunch of these index-card pieces." So I showed them, they loved them, they framed them up, they sold them.

I brought a piece in and somebody said, "Well, this has two endings, and also, some of the words are kind of covered." I realized it was an unfinished piece I brought in. I hadn't looked at it very closely. And I hadn't really sorted it out. I had just put it aside and left it. So I said, "I have to take this back. I have to decide which cards are actually part of the piece; which ending." It's a long sentence and then it said "and" - finished. But there were two "ands" continuing or something. I hadn't decided which ending I wanted to put on it. So I had to take the piece back.

And there are a number of these where you have a big stack of index cards, they're in a brown envelope. And I started going through it and I realized that I hadn't really sorted out the ones I want to keep and the ones I was going to discard or whatever. So that's a project I have to work on; to go back to those old works from the early '70s and decide - you know, tighten them up and really finish them up because it seems there is some kind of market for them, I suppose. And it's good to get things out. I mean, I don't like - I shouldn't keep things in that studio. People should have them - have them out in the world.

MS. RICHARDS: You said that you wanted to keep some things. The typewriter pieces you wanted to keep.

MR. BARRY: I want to keep them because I don't have any left. And yes, there are things I want to keep, that I like around me - especially when there's very little left. I just want to keep those little bits of reminders of my past. There are certain drawings from the '60s; certain little paintings from the '60s that I keep.

MS. RICHARDS: Because they're -

MR. BARRY: I don't need the money right now, fortunately. I don't really need it. I don't have to do it. If

someday I become impoverished or anything like that or you know, something like that, then maybe I might consider it. Right now, I'd rather hold onto them for a while. At least, for now.

MS. RICHARDS: You did a print at Crown Point Press in the late '70s but I'm not aware of other prints.

MR. BARRY: Oh, I've done a lot of prints.

MS. RICHARDS: You were invited to Crown Point Press to do a print?

MR. BARRY: Kathan Brown invited me, yeah. You are invited by her. Somehow she knew about it; I don't know where or how.

MS. RICHARDS: The print you did involved two pieces of paper, I believe. A translucent piece on top of a -

MR. BARRY: No, that was for another - that was for another studio on - what was that from - Wassernon [ph]? I did a print which had two pieces, one over the other, overlapping. That was for a gallery or a print shop in Munich, if I remember correctly.

MS. RICHARDS: So you have periodically done prints.

MR. BARRY: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And is that prompted because someone invites you or because you think this is an idea that I'd like to explore in a print, and then you seek out an opportunity to do that?

MR. BARRY: Well, I have ideas that I would like to do. I was invited to do something when I was last in Paris a few weeks ago. There was a - I have several ideas for prints cooking in my head. Or maybe I should say, multiples. Might be better. And this guy approached me and he runs - [inaudible]. He publishes; he's a publisher. He publishes prints. Quite elaborate. He's done things with quite a number of artists. He brought some things at my friend's flat where I stay in Paris and he brought them there. They're beautiful. Some beautiful things with Weiner and some things with - a lot of European artists. So I'd be in very good company working with them.

And he's going to be back in New York I think in June or July and we're going to - in fact, working on something right now.

MS. RICHARDS: What's his name?

[Pause.]

MS. RICHARDS: [Laughs.] Okay. I want to go -

MR. BARRY: I only met him once. Of course, I have it down. I have all the literature he gave me. He has printed books and stuff like that.

MS. RICHARDS: Speaking of commissions, I wanted to ask you a few questions in that regard. In 1979, you did a piece - well, you've done many - there's one piece called *Sky Piece*. And from an image I saw, it was commissioned by a collector, Friedrich Rensselaer, for his house, I believe. And so I wanted to know how you approached doing that piece on his house. It was outdoors, I think. And so was the placement totally your choice? Was the text totally - did he collaborate, in a sense?

MR. BARRY: He wanted an installation for his house. He's a big collector. He was one of Paul Maenz's big collectors. And, well, just by coincidence, Monday, I'm going to see Rensselaer. He runs Rensselaer Biotech, a pharmaceutical - used to be pharmaceutical company. They made vitamins and aspirins and stuff like that; different medicines. Friedrich Rensselaer is retired. His son, Nikolaus, has taken over the business. And they built a big new headquarters in Laupheim.

MS. RICHARDS: In where?

MR. BARRY: Laupheim. It's a small town near Ulm. Not far from Ulm. It's about an hour-drive from Munich.

MS. RICHARDS: How do you spell Laupheim?

MR. BARRY: L-A-U-P-H-E-I-M. And in fact, when I go there, I'm making a piece for the new headquarters. I mentioned about the colored letters inside and outside the doors? That's the son - Nikolaus Rensselaer has commissioned me to do this piece for the new headquarters. He also turns out to be something of a collector.

Rensselaer has one of the great collections, by the way, of contemporary art. Not all of it is my taste, I have to say, but a lot of the Italians – Cucchi and Clemente. A lot of the German guys – you know, those kind of neo – [pause] – unfortunately. But he has incredible pieces by the minimalists; by [Donald] Judd and LeWitt and, you know, Weiner and all of those guys from the '70s. Really very good pieces. Beautiful [Dan] Flavins. Things like that.

MS. RICHARDS: When you did this piece, did you particularly look forward to the opportunity to do a piece outside? I don't know if you had done a piece outside –

MR. BARRY: Well, I was – it's in his house. The piece goes around the outside of the house. There was kind of a space below the roof. The house is a beautiful, modern house. It's done by a student of some well-known German architect. I can't remember now.

But there's a kind of flowing line around the house; a flat space between the roof and where the wall begins which completely encircles the house. And next to the house, there are beautiful grounds around. I mean, the house is isolated within this beautiful setting. There are some sculptures out. He has a big Serra out of this green field. There's a tingly water fountain. Stuff like that, you know?

And the pool. The pool has this sort of beautiful blue bottom to it, you know. A kind of rich blue, sky-blue color. And if you look up, you see the beautiful sky around you. You're completely surrounded by trees and things like that; flowers. They're very into flowers. His wife loves them.

So I said, can you get some of that blue pool paint that you use and we're going to paint the words around so you completely encircle your house.

MS. RICHARDS: Did he have anything to do with which words would be used?

MR. BARRY: No, nothing. He's completely open. I can't say his son is the same. [Laughs.] His son had certain specific words that he wanted to use, which have to do with the company. You know, put them upside-down and kind of out of the way.

MS. RICHARDS: You cooperated?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, it doesn't really matter. They're perfectly usable words. I mean, it's not propaganda for the company. In the context, it works okay. There are like more than 30 words, so adding an additional five aren't that bad. They sort of work together. It's okay.

MS. RICHARDS: So with this commission around the outside of the house, you drew up some kind of an agreement. And if, for some reason, they were to sell the house, could they then choose to pass on the ownership of the piece to the next owner who would be obliged to –

MR. BARRY: I doubt if he would do that. I mean, Friedrich is a pretty hip collector. He really knows the situation. I think he – there may be a drawing someplace of the piece. Whether or not he can move it to another place or not, I don't know if he would want to do it.

MS. RICHARDS: Because it's site-specific.

MR. BARRY: It's really site-specific, yeah. Absolutely.

MS. RICHARDS: So it's as if you had put a fresco –

MR. BARRY: To reproduce it somewhere – this is a piece that will be there for him to enjoy so long as he's still living in the house, they still live in the same house. And he owns a number of wonderful works of mine, I'll tell you. He bought up some of the best works that I showed in Germany. I had a great dealer in Germany called Paul Maenz, who was one of the great dealers. And he sold a lot of work for me. He's still around. He doesn't deal anymore but he's a kind of legendary dealer in Germany.

MS. RICHARDS: Hmm. Since we're talking about commissions, have you ever entered competitions for commissions?

MR. BARRY: I have been in competitions for commissions. I've won most and lost some. Mostly, I've won.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, that's a great record.

MR. BARRY: I was in a competition for the ceiling at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris. There was a room at the museum that was one of the old rooms, original rooms. The ceiling was never finished, in fact.

MS. RICHARDS: It was never finished when it was a railroad station?

MR. BARRY: That's right. It was not finished. It was called the Salon de Fumoir. In other words, the -

MS. RICHARDS: - smoking room.

MR. BARRY: Smoking room, exactly. And for some reason, it hadn't been finished. There's a border around it but the center was flat. And Serge Lemoine was the director at that time. Really, in fact, he's just retired a couple of years ago. Wanted to commission an artist to do something on the ceiling. And he invited several - and you have to do that if it's a public building. You have to make it a competition, you know. Some kind of rule. And he invited me. He's always been a fan of my work; he always liked it. And he knew very well. And so he invited me and I think Niele Toroni and who else - a woman artist, I can't remember who. Anyway, there were three or four others. And I won the competition.

My proposal was - I had discovered this place in Germany that could cut very precise letters out of mirror. So when you look at the letter, you see yourself. When you look at the word, you see yourself and the word. And because the room itself was really kind of 19th-century imitation of a 17th-century salon, there were a lot of mirrors around on the walls. The walls were all mirrors.

And you had these kind of, like, also, decorative work around and the rug and everything. And it opens with these real fantastic French doors that open out on one wall that opens out to the plaza in front of the museum. And then over here, you have the Seine and you have this beautiful building across the way. I mean, it's spectacular views. And on this wall, you have the little beautiful side street. And on the back, you have the mirror walls, of course, and the entrance to the room.

And the room opens into this - I don't know if you know the Musée d'Orsay, the wonderful - you know that restaurant there? It's right next to the restaurant. If you go into the restaurant, you have all of this kind of frilly, painterly stuff, which was never touched. This was the original restaurant. It wasn't modernized like the galleries were. So it's the original. And there are rooms in the museum which were not really redesigned. They were kept originally. So it's just to the left of the restaurant. If you go to the restaurant, you can go into see this -

MS. RICHARDS: This was relatively recently?

MR. BARRY: It's about five years. Something like that. So the words went on the ceiling but they're mirrors. So when you look up, you see yourself looking up and you see the mirrors reflected and the rug is reflected in the outside. So you have this wonderful - I can show you photos if you want.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you find it more gratifying or not to do commissions for public spaces versus private homes?

MR. BARRY: Public space is very gratifying. You see this thing up there and it's going to be there a long time. It's really - I really like those large-scale projects that people can really sort of get into; very public. I mean, it's really - both are nice but there's just something special about putting up a large-scale work like that. And if it works, it can be very gratifying.

MS. RICHARDS: One quick question on - I don't know if it relates -

MR. BARRY: There have been other competitions also by the way, which I won, which are very nice stories, too. In Germany, in Munich, for a big company - LHI. I was up with two quite well-known German artists. And I had to speak before the committee, in fact.

MS. RICHARDS: Which one is this for?

MR. BARRY: It's a company called LHI. And I think they sort of finance -

MS. RICHARDS: Three letters, L-H-I?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, and it stands for something in German. God knows. And they put up a new building. It was an old building but the insides were all new and it was all glass walls in the office. And there were four floors of glass walls and so forth. I didn't think I would get it because there was a very good German artist. I knew them both; I know them both. They're very friendly. And they gave their presentations before me and the guy who spoke, they all applauded him at the end. I mean, I was, sort of, like waiting downstairs.

MS. RICHARDS: And you could hear the applause?

MR. BARRY: I could hear the applause. And obviously, they were tired. I went into this room to make my presentation. And there was one of these women who set it up. She was - you know, one of these people that

acts as a kind of agent, who sells work, commissions artists to sell work to companies and things like that – one of those people. And I thought, oh, okay, I'll go through my routine and, you know. And they all spoke in German, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: When you do this, do you go back and really try to explain who you are as an artist?

MR. BARRY: Sure, that's the whole idea of it.

MS. RICHARDS: And then bring it to the present work.

MR. BARRY: Yeah. You have to show them old work and talk to them about what you would like to do in this place, in this space.

MS. RICHARDS: So you assume they have very little knowledge of your work.

MR. BARRY: I assume they have none at all. Usually, these people don't know anything about art, really. They just happen to be some of the officers of the company.

MS. RICHARDS: So you heard all this applause and you thought, well, you were just going to go through the motions.

MR. BARRY: Right. That's exactly right. I said, oh, okay, I'll go through the motions. And in fact, it wasn't at the building. The building was under construction. It was at a hotel in Munich. And I was waiting downstairs in my room and then I was called up and I just arrived at the end of this presentation. And he was laughing and shaking hands with everybody and all talking German.

And the room – it looked like they had had it for the day, this group, and it was hot and sweaty inside. And it looked like they were just, okay, they were going to go through the motions with me. And I made my presentation; I did it very quickly. And I told them what I wanted to do.

And it turns out, I said one thing which got me the commission – which, by the way, was a huge commission – and that was that I wanted to have a meeting with the workers and have them participate in the work and choose the kind of words that they would like to see up on these windows. Because look, folks, you're going to be living with this if you choose me. You're going to living with this for a long time, so long as you work for this company. So I want you to be part of it, to think that, okay, that's my part.

That's what I did. That's the selling point. So we went down and they said, "Okay, we'll make our decision." We all went downstairs and these two guys were downstairs in the bar. And we're sitting there and talking and they're waiting to catch their train back to whatever city they were. Of course, it was very close to the Bahnhof – you know, the train station. And so anyway, she comes down and she says, "Well, Robert, you got it."

So wow, that's fantastic. And she said the thing was that you engaged them. You said that they will participate in actually making this. They can actually point to something there and say that that's my contribution, you know? That's the thing that got it for me. But I've been through some. Some I got; some I didn't.

And I can think of a few that – I presented one to the – you know the veterans' memorial, the Vietnam – what is it, World War II veterans' memorial in Washington? And my idea was just, you know, an open field of green and then with certain words in white stone just laid out, so people could walk through it. And maybe there would be a place with some names. But you know, that's like a half million names or so.

So I made this presentation. And well, in any case, you know what they chose, this sort of semifascist building, you know – this, sort of, really ugly kind of thing. But the – oh, are you all out of the –

MS. RICHARDS: Right now. For the day.

MR. BARRY: Oh, okay. Right.

[END CARD 6.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Barry in New York City on May 25, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc seven.

In the '80s, possibly before – you introduced an image of a tree in your work.

MR. BARRY: Before that.

MS. RICHARDS: Before that?

MR. BARRY: Oh, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: So I wanted to ask about the imagery and the selection of the tree.

MR. BARRY: The first images were trees. I was looking for something to break up the words. I just got tired of using words. I wanted something else.

MS. RICHARDS: This was in the '70s then?

MR. BARRY: Yeah. And the first were really photos of trees, which I had been taking for a while and incorporated some of them into my projections. I really wanted something besides just the words. And I had been doing some – using old photographs as the background for drawings. I used my house I was living in. In fact, Paul Maenz used that picture – picture of my house, which was a little house with big tall pine trees around it. So it was a little house in the middle of big high trees, twice the height of the house. He liked that photo very much and he used it for one of my mailers for a show once.

And I just thought it incorporated – the first ones were drawings of trees. I did the tree wire pieces.

MS. RICHARDS: When you first started doing drawings of trees and incorporating trees in drawings, where did that particular tree come from? Did it come from your imagination or –

MR. BARRY: It was a kind of – it was something that stands tall and changes with the seasons, incorporated time. It is a kind of conduit. You get the sun and so forth, the air coming in through the leaves, then going through the roots and then the energy comes up through the roots. So it is a kind of conduit of the sky and underneath, the land –

MS. RICHARDS: What about as a representation of nature next to the words and the cultural –

MR. BARRY: That, too. Yeah, sure, nature. But not in any kind of romantic landscape way, not at all. That is not what I was interested in.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you invent the tree form or did you draw it from a manual or some –

MR. BARRY: The first drawings of trees, the actual drawings of trees were in the '60s, when I did the tree sculptures where I used the monofilament from tree to tree, you know. Oh, one would be a broken line in the forest and making a circle in the forest. And on the graph paper, I made these little sort of cartoony-type trees representing trees. And they were probably the first drawings of trees that I did.

MS. RICHARDS: And those were more abstracted?

MR. BARRY: They were really abstracted, yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: When you come to 1980, you are doing an image of a tree. There is a painting called *Blue Skies*.

MR. BARRY: Yes. When you say tree, it sort of evolved. After I did the drawings of trees combining them with words, I started doing – I did that for a very short time. Then it kind of – that sort of evolved into just showing the branches of a tree coming down into the trunk and then going into the root system. So I showed both the branches and the roots of a tree, which were about equal. There is as much going on under the ground as is going on above the ground, which you can see.

And I kind of liked that idea of energy and time change. And then I started making the trees red because they also looked like veins in your hand, you know. Veins sort of branch out into veins and arteries and things like that. So there was this sort of a double image. They became a double image of blood as a kind of life force flowing through your body and then trees as also kind of life force for nature, where the energy of the sun and the earth sort of come together in the tree. And I kind of liked that very general sort of symbolic thing, which is sort of represented. I think maybe an idea about art and an idea about time and change, which were ideas which I incorporated into my work very early on. And – [inaudible].

MS. RICHARDS: In fact, I read a quote in which you said time may be the most important element in my work.

MR. BARRY: Yeah, that could be. Maybe at that time it was. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: When –

MR. BARRY: Certainly with the projections and the temporary works, the works that were just done on the wall for an exhibition and then painted over. All of those things had to do with time, time as a kind of destructive force, but also as a kind of creative force. And I mentioned that image – that projection of the river, you know.

MS. RICHARDS: What piece was that?

MR. BARRY: It was a projection where I – up in Massachusetts, where I photographed this stream from the source through to where it emptied into some river. I forget. The Mohawk River, something like that. And it ran through the property of this friend of mine up when I was teaching briefly – lecturing, I should say, up at RISD in Rhode Island. And just saw this stream and I started photographing it.

And that stream, of course, is a symbol of time moving along. It has been used by various philosophers talking about time as this sort of moving stream that we are part of. So that kind of interested me as a sort of – as a good image to use to try and get across those ideas. And this was before I started actually using photos, in fact. And also, the press type, you know, the press type that I used to make the words, in fact, had these architectural symbols that you could buy of trees. [Inaudible.]

But all kinds of things, in fact, people, little cartoon figures and things like that, which I could press down – they were black images on white – and then shoot the negatives and use them as part of my projections. And I like these sort of ready-made tree images that you could buy from – and you can buy trees in winter, trees in summer, so forth and so on, all kinds of trees that architects would use in their large architectural drawings. Of course, all this was before computers took over. You can't even buy press type anymore. [Inaudible.] It is no longer – none of that stuff is available because some of those old drawings, you know, the press type has sort of come loose. Letters would pop off. And I am trying to find some that I can use to repair them and I can't find them. Unfortunately.

MS. RICHARDS: Probably if you check eBay.

MR. BARRY: That is what I did. I did do it. And there are some things, but not – I use very specific things that I want, you know. And you can buy fancy kinds of curlicue type old English style letters and things like that. But the images that I am looking for just really don't exist. I haven't found them anyway.

MS. RICHARDS: Talking about the tree image a bit more, you did a major installation at Castelli in 1983.

MR. BARRY: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: In which you painted the whole gallery –

MR. BARRY: Whole gallery blue.

MS. RICHARDS: There are a lot of questions I have about painting the tree, the decision to create a kind of a wheel image with the words. Could you talk about that installation and how it fit into the progression of your ideas at that point, and about deciding to paint the entire gallery blue?

MR. BARRY: Something no one else had ever done, I don't think anyway, and incorporate – I think there were four works – four works in one. There was – is it one piece, four pieces? It posed a lot of questions in terms of the space itself. It totally transformed the gallery into something else. It was a very temporary thing. It involved drawing and painting and all those ideas. The trees, by the way, were red. But they were sort of tree vein double images and a couple of different things going on there.

And so the images were ambiguous. The words were also ambiguous. I used different colored words. The words were – I don't think all the trees were red. Some might have been black, so they looked more like shadow.

MS. RICHARDS: And some of them were practically invisible because you painted over them.

MR. BARRY: I painted over them, yes. Some were more visible than others.

MS. RICHARDS: How much planning did you do before you began that installation?

MR. BARRY: Not a lot, not a lot. The biggest planning was really making the drawings, little kind of mockups of what the various pieces would look like on paper, which is something Leo could sell, in other words. I think he sold one to Panza.

MS. RICHARDS: Was that an issue? Did you have to convince him to do this show in which there would not be much to sell?

MR. BARRY: No, Leo was not like that. No, I did not – he was – in many ways, you know, he has this reputation – there is a book out on him. I saw a review. And from the review, I think whoever wrote it didn't get it right at all, especially about the late – his later career. Leo – she did get it right in the sense that he loved art. That is what it was about, as does Yvon. You know, he has not a dissimilar reputation. But ultimately, these guys really

love art. They loved art and they loved the ideas that would generate it. And he really didn't give a damn whether he sold it.

I mean, he had – he was one of these people that had enough money, so he didn't really care about the money. But I have to say I liked Leo a lot. We had a good relationship. And he was open to anything, literally anything. And I never went to him for an idea for a show. He would say, "Robert, you know, it is time we did a show together. Yes, why don't you plan something, you know? Tell me what you want to do, anything you want to do." That was how it was, you know. He just – I don't know. Maybe he was going down his calendar, you know, and he had an empty space in there and Jasper had done his job and Roy and, you know, Andy had done all theirs. So he needed this time.

But he really liked the work. He enjoyed it very much. I could never support the gallery and what he sold, but he did sell. He sold things. He got my European dealers angry because virtually all of it was sold to European collectors, you know. Panza was the one that bought from him. There were a couple of things were sold in the States, a few things, you know. MoMA was something out of a show once. They never showed it until just like a year ago. It sat there in the museum storage for 20 years.

MS. RICHARDS: When you did this piece and you were planning it, how did you approach selecting the words when you were using the tree image?

MR. BARRY: That is intuitive really. The big thing is I try not to repeat.

MS. RICHARDS: You use certain words when you are using the tree image and you put them in a kind of a pinwheel. Do the words relate to that physical form?

MR. BARRY: No, they don't really relate to each other. They can in people's minds. The idea behind that is that I put together a group of words that I think work. They may counter. There is a lot of reasons for a word. I may want a word with some Os in it, okay? So I go down my list. I may want a word that is counter to something else.

MS. RICHARDS: Sorry, the Os for the visual effect or for the audio?

MR. BARRY: Both, yeah. I think you say the word in your mind anyway, you know. When you look at a word, you say it. How do words work with us? How do they work with us? So I think words speak to us even though they may be written on a wall. So we hear them in our mind. We say it to ourselves. But they are also visual things. You draw them. They are designed. They are colored. They have a certain size. I put them in a certain place. So they are objects that have to be – artistic decisions have to be made in terms of the color and the size and the line and whatever.

So there are all of those things. But I did want – but they have a history. I mean, there is a sort of a meaning surrounding them, although it is not really specific because they are not part of a text. A text makes the word more specific. It really kind of defines it within the context in which it is being used. If it is just taken out of a context and presented as a sort of object, which is what – you know, which is a contemporary art idea, you know. It is like an old surrealist idea or an old cubist idea to take something out of context and put it in a completely different context. And it sort of gives it a different meaning and creates another world, another kind of world in which we enter.

So the idea of doing that is an old modern art strategy, only I did it with words, not objects. And why a certain group of words would be used within one piece, I don't have one reason why. It is just that I would start with a couple of words, look over what I have and then see where I would go with that. What works with this in my mind – when you are working with words that way, you begin to think that way. A writer who is writing a narrative thinks in a certain way. And that is their style, so they operate within a style.

Well, that is my style of using words. And you just begin to think of how you combine words that don't usually go together or don't go together in a text. What word goes with this? What looks good upside down or what sounds right or what would look good next to this one? So that was just the way I work. That was my style of work. And style, by the way, is a very important thing. It is like your signature, your handwriting or it is something that you develop that is your way of presenting yourself and also your way of looking at what art – of how to make art.

So I wanted my style to be very recognizable. It was my way of doing something. And when you are operating within your style, which is your world, which you operate in, then it also would make sense to you. Now, whether it makes sense to anybody outside is besides the point really. You just do it and then you find that other people kind of begin to relate to it and allow themselves to get into your way of thinking about things. I just thought it was a very refreshing way of using words because words have very potent meanings and people read them and they react to them personally. They are very suggestive in terms of your life and things like that.

So I just thought it was a great subject to work with on many, many levels.

MS. RICHARDS: When you are saying subject in terms of that installation, what is this subject that you are talking about?

MR. BARRY: The ultimate subject?

MS. RICHARDS: Of that particular installation.

MR. BARRY: Oh, that particular installation. Well, it is all about life and death and energy and time and change. You know, then the subject is how people deal with it when they enter into this blue world with all these shadows of trees and veins and words kind of organized in this sort of circular way. I don't know if they were all circular. I think some of them may have been organized in crosses. I can't remember now. I would have to go back and look at the photos.

MS. RICHARDS: When you thought about covering all the walls with blue paint, did you -

MR. BARRY: For the first coat.

MS. RICHARDS: What were the subsequent coats?

MR. BARRY: The subsequent coats were a painting over - the first time I made the drawings and then we painted over them and some came through. And then some we painted twice. So they were hidden deeper. I wanted the images to be hidden in the paint, you know. It is like an old idea of glazing, say, you know. The old masters used to do that. And it kind of creates a different kind of space within the space of the gallery.

The gallery space was a very specific kind of space. And also if you remember the old 420 [West Broadway] Leo Castelli Gallery, one wall was just windows. So the light came in and sort of penetrated through these layers of paint to the images below. The words sort of sat on top, if I remember correctly. I don't think I painted over the words. But also, it was kind of like the skin over your veins, you know. So when you paint over the trees, you have this different - this sort of sense of space. It may be very small, but when you look at it, there is that sense of space and time. That paint was applied, then a drawing was made, then more paint was applied and all that.

And then, of course, the trees went up into the ceiling and down into the floor. So you have a direction that way. So you have a vertical, horizontal. You have depth idea, you have the words going around in circles. You have - I think there were some cross arrangements. Some were done in pencil. Some were done in silver. And it was all done in crayon, by the way. This was crayon. This wasn't - the only thing that was painted were the walls. Everything else was drawn with crayon.

MS. RICHARDS: Were you concerned about the texture of the paint, or the look of matteness or shininess -

MR. BARRY: No - [inaudible].

MS. RICHARDS: It was brushed on or rolled on?

MR. BARRY: Rolled on. It was rolled on.

MS. RICHARDS: Just commercial paint?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, it was funny because the first coat went on and it was like a starry night. There had been so many layers of paint. I made a comment at the time that the gallery was like a cemetery because underneath all those layers of paint, there must be these great shows, things that people have done. But the paint had gotten so thick, the white paint on the walls that it had become pitted. You don't see it here. It looks smooth. But when you rub your hand on it, you can see thousands of shows over the year -

MS. RICHARDS: Every imperfection magnified by all the layers.

MR. BARRY: Yeah, so when you roll the paint over it, the paint didn't get into the little indentations - millions of little indentations there. So the first coat - blue was blue, but it looked like stars. It was beautiful, in fact. I could just stop here. This is fantastic. But that wasn't my idea. And I had to go through with my idea.

Then we got different rollers. Actually the first coat may have taken a couple of coats before everything got covered up. And then I understand they had a horrible time installing the next show because they couldn't paint over mine. And it was funny because they had to put so many layers of white paint over my blue paint to cover the crayon underneath because that wax - it was oil Cray-Pas, something like that, a soft crayon. And the oil would penetrate the layers of water-based paint. And if you look very closely - I don't know who came in after me, but if you look really close, you can see a faint, faint outline of the tree coming through. Eventually the oil

would work its way through, which I thought was a fabulous idea. [Laughs.]

You know, the workers in the gallery, the guys who actually had to do the painting pointed that out to me. They were afraid to tell Leo – or maybe Leo knew, but Leo didn't care. Leo was so sophisticated and worldly. You know, he probably thought it was a good idea.

MS. RICHARDS: When you saw it finished, did you feel a bit regretful that this was going to have to be destroyed or – [inaudible]?

MR. BARRY: No, I knew. No, no, no, no, no, no. It was made to be destroyed.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you image redoing it somewhere else?

MR. BARRY: It was a part of its soul. It was so temporary looking. It was meant to be that way. That was the whole idea of it. But it is like a kind of jazz concert or a kind of play, performance that you only – you have to be there and then when it is over, it is over. And that is something beautiful. There is a kind of nothingness afterwards and nothing is very important. The idea of nothingness is very important so that when you are there, you really have to sort of focus intently on dealing with it then because you know that if you come back a month later, it is going to be gone. So you have to deal with it now. So there is this nowness about it that I felt was an important part of it.

The fact that everybody knew they were going to have to change the color was part of the whole idea that this was a temporary – I did that a few times. It was really one of the first times that I really worked on that scale, you know, taking the whole space. And when I presented it to Leo, he was perfectly fine with it. There was no question at all about doing it – painting the gallery blue. You know, he came in one day and he started, “Oh, it is very beautiful.” Nothing had been put up. It was just blue, you know. And he just thought it was beautiful, the idea. I said, “Well, this is just the first step, Leo.” “Oh, okay, okay.” He was just totally agreeable to everything. Nothing fazed him. [Laughs.]

MS. RICHARDS: You also did pieces where you had text on glass, so you could see through it.

MR. BARRY: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: There was an installation in –

MR. BARRY: Well, that was what I did here in Germany just now.

MS. RICHARDS: I am thinking of a piece in 1982 called *Window Piece*. Was it the first time you did letters on glass? That was at documenta.

MR. BARRY: Yes, it was at documenta. Was that the first time? That might be a good question. I did a show in Ulm in the old Kunsthalle there, in fact, where the old Kunsthalle sort of looked out on the old cathedral. And I did a word piece there. I would have to go back and look at my – to see where the first one was.

MS. RICHARDS: How did the idea –

MR. BARRY: But it obviously an early –

MS. RICHARDS: How did the idea come to your mind to work on the outside on the glass to have it viewed from two directions?

MR. BARRY: It was just a natural extension –

MS. RICHARDS: Did you say you want to do that or did somebody say, would you like to –

MR. BARRY: I liked the idea of the words floating in space and the space behind it moving all the time, ever changing.

MS. RICHARDS: The light –

MR. BARRY: I mean, there is no specific reason. You just – like I said, if you are operating in a certain way and you are thinking in a certain direction, suddenly opportunities arise. And if you are open to it, if you are not locked into your style too much or to what you think works. I just try things and whether people like it or if I find it successful or not, I just do it. I am a very lucky artist in the sense that I have had all my life a lot of opportunities to do what I want to do.

I said if somebody gives me a chance to do something, I am going to use that space, that time, that light, that

whatever it is and try and work with it. Now, Coosje van Bruggen, in fact, documenta, too, was one of the [curated?]. And they were big supporters of my work, okay. They were, you know – I knew Coosje very well and Rudi [Fuchs] was – you know, he gave me a big show – museum and all that stuff. So I could pretty much do whatever the hell I wanted to do. And Coosje – the first time I went there, Coosje showed me the space. She said, “This is your room.”

Rudi’s idea originally was to take each artist’s work and mix them all up around so that an artist could have a painting in one part of the show and another painting in another part of the show and so on. And Coosje said to me – she said, “Listen, why don’t you – I fought for you and I think Anselmo, who is a big fan –

MS. RICHARDS: Anselmo?

MR. BARRY: The Italian, the great Italian Arte Povera artist, Giovanni Anselmo, very dear person, dear friend of mine. And she said – and I thought it would be better instead of spreading your work all over, she gave me a gallery. Basically I had my own gallery. And one wall was just these windows. It was just the window, so all the natural light came in. So I said, “Well, I am going to work on this wall and I am going to work on the window,” which I did.

It just seemed a natural thing to me. And the window opened onto a kind of a parking lot anyway, so cars were coming and going. It wasn’t a great view. But I felt this is kind of a changing landscape. And, of course, at night –

MS. RICHARDS: Would people walk by?

MR. BARRY: Oh, yes, right.

MS. RICHARDS: Did that possibility of people walking by who wouldn’t necessarily be going to documenta see your work,-

MR. BARRY: It was a documenta parking lot.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, okay. So it didn’t affect –

MR. BARRY: If they were there, they would – so you have people inside looking out and then people outside looking in.

MS. RICHARDS: If it is the same audience you are addressing, it wouldn’t be an issue.

MR. BARRY: Yeah, it was the same. Somebody, you know – it was about documenta. The whole building is documenta.

MS. RICHARDS: In that case, you used words in German?

MR. BARRY: No, in English. I asked about that, but they said no because it is an international show, you know. So the words were in English. Later I used translations. I did some pieces with German and different languages, French and so forth, Italian. But I stopped that some years ago because of the problems with translation and sometimes that worked, sometimes that could be fun, especially with the Germans.

MS. RICHARDS: In what way would it be fun?

MR. BARRY: Oh, because you come up with different words. There may not be an equivalent word in German for the English word. So I would have to sit down with the translator and work out something and you may come up with something that means something in German, but there is no equivalent single word in English. You may have to write a whole paragraph to describe what this word really means. But it could be very interesting.

So it was like working with someone to come up with other kinds of ideas. The words represent ideas first of all. That is something you have to understand. I mean, it is not just an object, but it is an object with a history and it is loaded with all kinds of implications and ideas. They exist in the world in a very special way. So they kind of represent some aspect of the world that we perceive, as do photographs, as do drawings of trees or whatever. And they are not a one to one. They are not the world, but they kind of refer to the world and they also exist in the world. And we live in a kind of realm of language and words and so forth. So we can sort of relate to them. They don’t exist without us. We create words.

They come out of us. And I really didn’t want to do text. Text was the sort of easy way out. I know a lot of artists who were using text. And in those days, there was a kind of confusion with poetry – not a poet in any way.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you feel, though, a kind of kinship as it were with other artists who used text?

MR. BARRY: No, not really, no. They are fine. I mean, I love some of their work, some of my favorite artists. But I am not a text person. I have to be very clear about that. I don't use text. After the beginning, after the first year - of course, in the beginning I did using those typewriter pieces and so forth. But when I moved to just individual words, then I didn't use text. I go back sometimes and reuse some of the old text pieces that I used.

MS. RICHARDS: You were talking about Castelli and I wanted to spend a little time talking about the whole subject of your relationship to galleries. You have shown in many galleries, had many long-term relationships with galleries, so it is complicated, relatively speaking, compared to other artists. A general question, what has been your approach to looking for gallery representation?

MR. BARRY: I don't look. They come to me. The only time I ever assumed that a gallerist who wanted to do a show - I don't know if I should mention names or anything.

MS. RICHARDS: Sure, if you don't -

MR. BARRY: Anny De Decker had a gallery in Antwerp. And she was in New York -

MS. RICHARDS: Anny?

MR. BARRY: Anny De Decker, Belgian dealer, famous, famous, Wide White Space Gallery, very famous gallery, especially in the - you know, for many years. And she was in New York. She hung out. Larry Weiner had seen her. And he said, "Oh, she really loves her work." We had dinner in Max's Kansas City, her and her husband. And -

MS. RICHARDS: This is in the '60s?

MR. BARRY: Late '60s, yes. She was in New York. Maybe it was her first trip to New York. I don't know. Maybe '68 or something like that. I can't remember. I just assumed she liked my work from everything that I could say. So I went to - I was invited on a project and Sperone and some others to do shows in Europe. And I made kind of a grand tour. I was teaching. I was a professor at the time. So I couldn't really just leave. So I went kind of over the Christmas holidays, a little before, a little bit after. January I tried to try in so that galleries would be open and I would have the free time when I wasn't teaching.

I went to Antwerp and I just called her and said, "Hi, I am here." You know, we talked. And she sounded very strange, kind of distant. In any case, I just sort of went. And there was a wonderful Marcel Broodthaers show. And she was just like totally different, very cold, removed. She was having lunch, didn't offer me anything. Marcel came in with his wife, Maria. And we started to talk. I had never met him before. He didn't speak English. I had never met him. I wasn't really that familiar with his work. Maria spoke English very well, so we were able to communicate. We spoke about some of my work and Marcel said, "Oh, that sounds wonderful. Oh, you know, we would love to see some of that."

I said, "Oh, yeah." And the more I sort of got on with Marcel, the more Anny just seemed to get more and more distant and cold. I wasn't sure what the hell was going on to tell you the truth. And finally, I just said, "Listen, can you -." I was sort of staying with the Adriaan and Geert in Amsterdam.

MS. RICHARDS: Adrian?

MR. BARRY: You know, the two guys that ran on Art and Project.

MS. RICHARDS: Geert?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, Geert and Adrian.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember the last name?

MR. BARRY: Geert van Beijeren and Adriaan van Ravensteijn. Anyway - and I was staying at their place, in fact. And so, can you just get me a train back to Amsterdam? I need to get out of here. You know, this is not working out. This is like a totally different person. So whatever her problem was. That was the only time I ever actually just sort of assumed that somebody wanted to do something based on previous meetings. And after that, I never ever approached a dealer. I have always been approached by dealers or curators or whatever.

MS. RICHARDS: That is a charmed life. [Laughs.]

MR. BARRY: It is not charmed. I mean, I just never did really from the very beginning. The gal who ran the first gallery, Westerly Gallery, was a graduate of Bennington College, you know. She was a young gal who had

money and she was a student of Tony Smith and she knew Gene Goossen. And so she asked me if she could see my paintings. I had a studio in New York in those days because she was - you know, she went to them and asked them, "Do you know any good artists?" And Tony gave them my name. I was, you know - like I had just finished getting my master's.

MS. RICHARDS: That is Tony -

MR. BARRY: Smith, Anthony Smith, sculptor. And so she said, "Do you know any artists that are good? I am opening this gallery." And so that is how that started.

MS. RICHARDS: It looks from my -

MR. BARRY: And then Larry Weiner, I was in the next - she did a Christmas show of works on paper. And Weiner actually went to the show. I didn't know Larry in those days. He went to the show. And he was showing with Seth Siegelau. And he said there is this great drawing by this guy, Barry. I didn't know him. He didn't know me. I knew his work from when Siegelau had his gallery earlier. But then Seth closed his gallery and then kind of went back into the business. I think he had to go in the Army or something. I am not sure. He opened his business up in his apartment on Madison Avenue.

Anyway, he was looking for art and Weiner mentioned my name. And Seth called me and he came and looked at my work and so forth and so on. And that led - and then once Seth got going and he started introducing my work to Sperone and Lambert and people. And I met [Daniel] Buren in New York. You know, artists know artists. And [Jan] Dibbets was in New York in the late '60s. Daniel was still friendly with Lambert.

MS. RICHARDS: Daniel?

MR. BARRY: Buren.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, yeah.

MR. BARRY: You know, and then I just - you know, artists know artists and that is how it works, you know. So the word sort of begins to get out. He was at their studio and he was at their studio.

MS. RICHARDS: What about the issue - when I look at your bio, it looks like you had early shows in 1971, at several galleries. There is Castelli. There is Art and Project. There is Yvon Lambert. There is Paul Maenz.

MR. BARRY: My first show was in '64 at Westerly Gallery.

MS. RICHARDS: Right. But, I mean, in '71, for example, you had first shows at many galleries.

MR. BARRY: [Inaudible.]

MS. RICHARDS: So when they approached you to show your work, was it understood or did you have to negotiate that it wasn't going to be an exclusive relationship?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, I did say that. Saul [LeWitt] said that he -

MS. RICHARDS: Why would you say that?

MR. BARRY: They didn't really ask. The only gallery that asked for an exclusive relationship was at Lambert in '69. And I said - he said, "Look, you know, I will show your work. And the only thing I ask is that you don't show work at other galleries in France." And I never did and I still don't. He was really - I really don't think any other gallery even asked me that to tell you the truth. Sperone was very happy to ship my work off to other galleries because he would get a percentage of the sale. So he was very happy to - in fact, he organized shows in other places in Italy.

Who else was I - Art and Project. They just never - there were no other galleries in Amsterdam anyway.

MS. RICHARDS: If you have a relationship with half a dozen galleries at once and you have a finite amount of work that you are producing, how do you decide which gallery gets it?

MR. BARRY: It is a question of scheduling really. If they say we want to do a show, I will say okay, but I can't do anything for maybe a year, you know. I am an artist who works very well under pressure, in fact. I like to have deadlines. I work with deadlines. It is terrible to be an artist where you are just producing work and nobody gives a damn. Nobody wants to show it.

MS. RICHARDS: So are you mainly producing work for a show? I mean, not commissioned, but when you were

working on all these shows -

MR. BARRY: I am always producing work, but there is always a sort of deadline where you have to finish work. I don't do it for a show. In other words, I am not like a fashion designer where I have a, you know - I have to put out the full line or I have to put out the summer line like that.

MS. RICHARDS: I was thinking more in terms of the context of the space. If you thought, okay, I am having a show at Paul Maenz. I know his space.

MR. BARRY: I have a lot of ideas for art. And it is really - I don't really have time to do them all. So I have never had a shortage of ideas for shows. I always just do them and the gallerists don't - they stopped long ago trying to tell me what I should show in their gallery. They just don't even do it. I show whatever I want to show. They are very happy and as far as I know, they have always been very pleased with whatever I have shown, even if it is nothing to sell. I will say well, I don't have anything to sell or it is very hard to sell. And right now I have slight - [inaudible] - with Jan Mot who is a very nice dealer from Brussels, but I have one of the great galleries in Brussels. Greta Meert, she is also a very good friend of mine.

MS. RICHARDS: Greta -

MR. BARRY: Meert. And I did a - I recreated an old performance piece at his gallery with Greta. Greta came. I just did it. I didn't ask Greta because it is a performance. It was an old thing. And Greta came. She is very good that way. And there was nothing for sale. I mean, how do you sell a performance, you know? And he does a lot of performances in his space. Now he just me an e-mail. I just got an e-mail when I came back. And he said I would like to recreate that performance at the Basel Art Fair. Okay, fine, no problem. That would be great. He is doing a series of performances. Ian Wilson is doing something.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you remember the title of that performance?

MR. BARRY: There were two separate pieces. One was called *It Is, It Isn't - It Is..., It Isn't...* with a man and a woman speaking. The other is two pieces also for a man and woman.

MS. RICHARDS: What date were those first created?

MR. BARRY: Oh, like '70, '71, something like that. They were originally done with my wife at a place I don't think exists - I am not sure - Franklin Furnace.

MS. RICHARDS: Yes -

MR. BARRY: On Franklin Street. Yeah, I did them - we did them there.

MS. RICHARDS: Did you feel any connection to Fluxus in the performance pieces -

MR. BARRY: I didn't really know much about Fluxus to tell you the truth. No, I didn't feel any connection. I didn't feel any connection with anybody and really sort of knew about it later, found out about it. But I just sort of see opportunities and things turn out, possibilities arise and I try to work with the possibility. I just got an offer. I mean, people asked me to do things for the show in Glasgow. I mean, you know, usually you have a year or a year-and-a-half to think about what you are going to do. I always come up with something.

MS. RICHARDS: When you begin a relationship with a gallery or to maintain it, what is your usual involvement besides doing the work? Do you, for example, talk about the announcement card, the way it is going to look?

MR. BARRY: Yes, I always - I always do. It is usually based on the style. There is usually some format size they have.

MS. RICHARDS: And what about issues of who is going to be offered the work to buy?

MR. BARRY: I generally don't - that is their business. They are the ones. Here, for instance, I like them to try and place work in the States because so much of my work is in Europe. They understand that. Besides, they have got a ton of work in the Paris gallery anyway. Over the years, they have got a lot of work that they can sell. Other than that, I really don't. My deal is right now I have - more than just dealers, they are friends, they are people I work with on a very friendly continuing basis. I know them all very well. And I know their families. In Germany, I have a show opening the end of this week in Hamburg. I am not going to the opening. There is no reason for me to go. I am trying to cut back on my travels. And also, there is a lot of stuff I have to do here.

Her daughter, the dealer's daughter, Andree's [ph] daughter, Lara [sp] -

MS. RICHARDS: Andree what?

MR. BARRY: Andree Sfeir-Semler. Her daughter is an architect. And Laura contacted me. She is 30 now.

MS. RICHARDS: That is in Hamburg, you said?

MR. BARRY: The dealer is in Hamburg. Sfeir-Semler is in Hamburg. Laura lives with her husband in Zurich. And they came to Ulm to see me and asked if I would contribute an idea for this project that they are working in Zurich, which is a kind of redesign of a beach park on the lake – on Zurich Lake. And they were asked to present proposals – other architect firms were asked, I guess. And they asked me if I had any ideas and I did. I had no idea what the project was until they came and had lunch. Then we sat at the table and we talked about what they were doing. I came up with this idea for this restaurant that they are designing, which will be in the park, in fact.

And so I came up with this idea that the restaurant is really more of a kind of fast food restaurant. It is not really what people go inside and sit down. But there are tables and, you know, umbrellas and stuff outside. So they will have to make as part of the restaurant – [inaudible] – place, concrete or stone patio-like affair where lots of people can sit and eat their sausages or whatever they buy there – I don't know – in Zurich, their French fries.

And so I suggested that they could make these words in the concrete, you know, kind of words all around and the children can run around and point to the words and read the words. And because with concrete, you can make different kinds, it was all – you can do anything with concrete these days. It is gray, but the words are white or you can make the words colored. There is colored concrete, whatever. You could work out the details later. And it has to be a space large enough to hold at least 280 people.

It is a big park. It is 1500 meters long and 400 meters wide. It is on the beach.

MS. RICHARDS: When you get involved in these kind of proposals and commissions, do they go through any of your dealers or do you do them completely on your own?

MR. BARRY: Both. I work independently. This piece I did for Rensselaer Biotechnologie. It doesn't involve a dealer. I work sometimes with dealers and sometimes people just come to me. A lot of the commissions, they just know me. They have seen something and they just approach me.

MS. RICHARDS: So none of your dealers feels possessive in the sense of needing to get some money out of a commission.

MR. BARRY: How they feel – I consider their feelings. I have to because I have a personal relationship with all of them. But so far, I haven't run into any serious problems.

MS. RICHARDS: When you are selling your work –

MR. BARRY: And besides, I am very generous with my dealers in terms of the art that they have of mine. They all have a very good selection of work that they can work with. And it is up to them to find the dealers. I don't interfere with their selling.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you have an agreement that you have worked out over the years that a buyer –

MR. BARRY: I never had a signed contract.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, not with the gallery – with a buyer – in terms of the installation or reinstallation of the pieces and –

MR. BARRY: They understand.

MS. RICHARDS: And the freedom to lend them to shows that they agree to or do you need to be consulted?

MR. BARRY: Right. We sort of talked about that, you know, before the sale and what they can do if they want to lend it out. I am very easy. I like to have my work out. I am not restrictive about any of that. It is the collectors that are possessive, not me, not me. The only problems I sometimes have is if I ask for a piece for a group show, if I ask for a piece – I would like to put it into a show, sometimes the collectors get possessive about it and don't want to let something happen. Say you get full credit, you know. You give them your name, the catalog and it always enhances the value of the piece, you know, the more shows it is in, blah, blah, blah. Give them that song and dance.

And usually it works. I haven't had that much trouble.

MS. RICHARDS: Since you have so many dealers, do you keep your own archive that includes everything? Or do they all –

MR. BARRY: They all have a folder on my desk more or less jam packed with whatever correspondence and whatever works I have sent and whatever works they do. A lot of my work is fabricated, by the way, especially in recent – in later years. I sent them the designs and they fabricate these pieces for me.

MS. RICHARDS: And they cover the costs and then it is deducted when it sells?

MR. BARRY: They cover the costs, yes. Yeah, we share the cost if it is sold.

MS. RICHARDS: Going to issues of criticism, I think we talked about this a little before. Do positive or negative reviews affect you?

MR. BARRY: No. I am good in the fact that most of my reviews have been very positive really. I get pretty good reviews. There have been some that aren't – critical. I think they are extremely – the people that wrote them really don't understand what they are looking at quite frankly or have a very preconceived notion of what conceptual art should be or where I am at or the fact that I may change what I have done from what I did 20 years ago. But there is always some reason that they just sort of get it wrong. And so it certainly doesn't affect my work.

And I may feel a little bit – I don't know – not thrilled, but it doesn't – [inaudible] – maybe for a few minutes.

[END CARD 7.]

MS. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Robert Barry in New York City, on May 25, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, disc eight.

One last question about criticism, have you ever felt strongly enough about something that's been written that described your work in error that you wrote or called the critic?

MR. BARRY: No, no, I don't do that.

MS. RICHARDS: And is there anything you'd want to correct?

MR. BARRY: I don't care what they have to say. Oh, there are – sometimes there are certain facts but I've never really – sometimes I – I have if I run into them, I have. If there's a misstatement of something and the opportunity comes up, I'll tell them what's wrong and even critics that are favorable, you know, like Benjamin Buchloh for instance.

He wrote something that was not I felt accurate and misunderstood what was going on and he was perfectly agreeable. He understood and I think I cleared the matter up with him, Benjamin. But usually I don't really care and then it's so rare. I can't even think of any real instances, maybe one or two times that anything like that has come up. It's just not an important issue.

Sometimes in books people may write something, some text in a book. Someone may write something and it could be just like a historical thing and it's positive. It's not being critical. It's just sort of describing some – [inaudible] – history that I was involved in.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

MR. BARRY: And they tend to get it wrong somehow. I don't know why. They just do and then maybe if I run into them or something like that – if it's really serious – I think maybe on one or two occasions I might have just said just, "If there's a reprint, you should clear it up."

MS. RICHARDS: A new edition.

MR. BARRY: That's about it. That's about the only thing really, just to get the record straight.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. BARRY: Other than that, I really don't at all.

MS. RICHARDS: In your studio you talked about the folders you have for each gallery.

MR. BARRY: In my office really.

MS. RICHARDS: In the office, the archive of your work.

MR. BARRY: Not an archive. My archives are in brown paper boxes stacked up in a corner of my studio or in the basement of my house. No, I'm talking about the correspondence folders, letters, things like that between the

various dealers that I work with.

MS. RICHARDS: Your office and studio are two distinct places?

MR. BARRY: No, the office is separate from the studio. It's not – the studio is something else. The office is an office.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, in the studio, a question about the environment of your studio. Have you always liked to work in salience? Have you always wanted to listen to music?

MR. BARRY: No, I always have the radio on.

MS. RICHARDS: Talk radio or music?

MR. BARRY: Mostly music. I prefer music but sometimes if there's on talk radio – someone might be on that I like. I listen to the old – to "Air America," down at the – liberal talk shows and things like that I find kind of nice, their criticizing the conservatives. I find that quite relaxing, entertaining, but music, a lot of music.

MS. RICHARDS: What kind of music do you usually listen to?

MR. BARRY: Oh, classical music and jazz really, that's about it.

MS. RICHARDS: At some point you mentioned –

MR. BARRY: And some pop music but mostly I would say – it's mostly classical – classical music stations or CDs.

MS. RICHARDS: Is there a particular music that's been, if not influential, then inspirational in some way?

MR. BARRY: No, not really, not influential, no. Unfortunately a lot of it is just sort of in the background. I'm not – I have to admit the only time I really sit down and listen, maybe if I'm just sort of sitting in my living room and put some music on to listen to. But my head is really – you know, I never stop thinking about what I have to do. Let's put it that way. The only thing that takes me out of that is probably a film. I watch a lot of movies.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there certain genres of films that you prefer?

MR. BARRY: I like a lot of good European films, good – anything really. I'm a big fan of Netflix and I get films from them all the time. If I hear about something that I don't know, that I haven't seen, forgot about, I immediately jot it down and add it to my Netflix list or if there's a film that's available that I haven't seen for many years, I get that.

That's the only thing that really takes my mind off the usual bullshit. But normally my head is always filled with art ideas and things that I have to do, deadlines that I have to meet.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you keep any kind of regular routine in terms of the time you go and spend in the studio?

MR. BARRY: More or less regular. I like working late at night and then going into the house and sitting down and watching a movie and then going to sleep. But I work – lately I haven't been doing a lot of studio work because I'm doing so many installations and designing projects to be fabricated, a lot of them in Europe. That involves a lot of computer time and –

MS. RICHARDS: In terms of creating the specs?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, that's about it. I would say this project, for instance in – [inaudible] – is I would say 85 percent computer time really.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you have an assistant or have you ever had an assistant and if so what would that person do?

MR. BARRY: I have in the past; not for many years. I do it all myself. If I run into a glitch, I call my grandson. He's a computer whiz. He knows all there is to know it seems to me and he usually helps me through. You can scan a drawing. I make drawings and I scan them and then I just basically – everybody knows the typeface I use right now, so that's not a big problem.

MS. RICHARDS: Which is what?

MR. BARRY: It's a combination. It's a very geometric kind of thing that I worked out with the people over here at Atomic.

MS. RICHARDS: Atomic what?

MR. BARRY: Atomic Signs it's called on 26th Street. Everybody uses them, okay, all the galleries.

MS. RICHARDS: On West 26th?

MR. BARRY: Yeah. All the galleries, whenever you see typeface stuck up there, vinyl letters, it's probably done by Atomic. Weiner used them. I use them. They're very arty, art prone. They're used to working with artists. They're used to working with - I know the guy now, John Ruggirello.

MS. RICHARDS: What's his last name?

MR. BARRY: Ruggirello, John R. they call him, R-U-G-G-E-R-I-L-L - something like that. He's the boss and you see him. He pops up at openings and things like that. He's kind of into the art scene and he works with certain clients, like I think he does work for some big companies like Calvin Klein or something.

Whenever they need words stuck up on a wall someplace, he probably does it and he's about as good and reasonably prices and Yvon Lambert uses them whenever they need - or any of that text you see, the front or any of that stuff on glass, chances are he's done it.

MS. RICHARDS: I want to move up chronologically a bit to ask you about the video films that you've made recently, well, 2002, 2003 - and the video projections. What goes into planning those pieces and determining all the elements and the time span that would be -

MR. BARRY: I shoot a lot of video, first of all, whatever I think is interesting, just my travels; hard to say why. If something looks good, I take a picture or try to shoot it.

MS. RICHARDS: More than still photography or in addition?

MR. BARRY: I don't really use still photography very much anymore except to document my work.

MS. RICHARDS: So in your travels you're using video?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, I would say, anything that looks interesting or I haven't done before or that I might be able to use. When I was in Madrid, I made a video of the bus trip between the hotel and ARCO in fact. It was about a 20-minute - and the bus would leave 10 minutes after the hour every hour on the hour from the hotel where artists and dealers and so forth were staying and it was just one afternoon.

I had a meeting there and I got in the bus. There was no one else in the bus. I had my camera. I was thinking about doing it. I had taken the trip a few times and I didn't realize I had been the only one in the bus and I guess the bus would leave if there was nobody there. It was at sort of an odd time, sort of late afternoon, 4:00 or 5:00. Everybody was there.

So I guess the fair closed at 7:00 or 8:00 or something. So it was an odd time when everybody was not yet moving and I made a great video. I mean, it turned out really great. I shot out the window nice shots of Madrid going out to where ARCO is which is near the airport in fact. It's a big - so whenever the opportunity presents -

Then I work with my - sometimes I shoot in black and white, sometimes color, sometimes if it looks good I shoot out the window of the airplanes or whatever, anything that - sometimes I secretly take secret photos, shoot video of people on the plane if it's not too crowded. I don't know, whatever comes up.

MS. RICHARDS: It's all very intuitive.

MR. BARRY: Hmm?

MS. RICHARDS: It's all intuitive what is interesting.

MR. BARRY: It's all intuitive, yeah, absolutely.

MS. RICHARDS: Why would you use black and white?

MR. BARRY: I just like the look of it, that's all, and I like contrasting between black and white and color. One of the last videos I made is my friend Bill Anastasi playing the piano badly but with great flourish and he's playing like [Johann Sebastian] Bach and [Frédéric] Chopin on this old standup piano like something out of a bar, which he has in his studio, and I know he plays it as kind of a relaxation and I made a video of it and -

MS. RICHARDS: Did he mind?

MR. BARRY: Of course he didn't mind. He agreed to it. He was very happy to do it.

MS. RICHARDS: The fact that he's not a professional pianist.

MR. BARRY: No, he said - well, he was a great friend of John Cage, you know. So he would stop and start and Cage said, "There are no mistakes. It is what it is." So as far as he's concerned, there were no mistakes. Whatever came out came out. That was it. That's what you live with. If you don't like it, that's your problem.

So he played this music and also he played some Jerome Kern and in fact I titled the video *Words in Music* [2010] which is the title of this terrible old '50s Hollywood biography of Jerome Kern. Anyway, so and I shot in black and white and you just sort of see his back playing this piano and you hear this sort of echoey sound of the piano and I just held the camera, sat in a chair and held the camera.

I didn't put it on a tripod but it's just one long take, 20 minutes, 25 minutes, whatever. But over that I had words changing in color. But in the words there were images. So I can't - it's hard to describe but you see him in black and white but then a word will come up slowly and you'll see there's something going on inside the word.

It isn't just a color but it's something happening and slowly you begin to realize - I shot some video outside of a TGV going between Brussels and Paris where you see these images speeding by.

MS. RICHARDS: What's TGV? Sorry, what's TGV?

MR. BARRY: The very fast train, the French railroad that go at like 200 miles an hour and so I shot a lot of stuff out the window. So you see trees and houses speeding by and signs. But they're going through the word while he's playing and that's in color.

MS. RICHARDS: Obviously you've learned the software, the filmmaking software.

MR. BARRY: That's - oh, you asked for an assistant. I have an assistant who does all that for me. Her name is Pascale Alibert and she lives in Paris. So it's always a great excuse to go to Paris.

MS. RICHARDS: What's her last name?

MR. BARRY: Alibert, A-L-I-B-E-R-T, and Pascale and I have been working together now, I don't even know, more than 12 years.

MS. RICHARDS: So you tell her the size of the text that you want?

MR. BARRY: I tell her what I want. I sit next to her. I go there. She has a studio.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah.

MR. BARRY: She's also an editor. She works in films and she works in documentaries and different things like that. So now I have to catch her when she's not busy working.

MS. RICHARDS: So you take all the footage, the files, the digital files?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, we work together on it.

MS. RICHARDS: And you bring them with you?

MR. BARRY: I have an idea what I want to do. The next video I want to make - and I didn't realize that, but Bill's wife, Dove, sings. I didn't realize she was a singer.

MS. RICHARDS: What's her last name?

MR. BARRY: Bradshaw.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. BARRY: She's an artist and Dove - now, whether Bill is bullshitting me or he's pulling a joke on Dove, I don't know. I have to call her. I haven't had a chance to call her since I got back from - [inaudible] - and if I can make a video of her singing and I said, "What is she singing?" He said, "Oh, I don't know. She sings Jerome Kern. She sings 'Smoke Gets In Your Eyes'".

I said, "Will she sit still and sing and I make a video of her doing it?" He said, "Yeah, sure." He's talking for her. She's a totally independent woman. I mean, whether or not he's pulling my leg or not, I don't know and whether

she'll do it in front of video I don't know. I'm going to ask her and see.

MS. RICHARDS: Have you finished the piece with Bill playing the piano?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, that's all done.

MS. RICHARDS: What's the title of that piece?

MR. BARRY: I said *Words in Music*.

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, sorry.

MR. BARRY: And it's going to be the title of my show in Glasgow at The Common Guild.

MS. RICHARDS: Thinking about a piece called *Details*, a video that - in 2006 -

MR. BARRY: Yes, it's a multiple I did with Michèle Didier.

MS. RICHARDS: How did you decide what would be the images that you see through the letters, the words that are on the screen?

MR. BARRY: Once again, just from my - just from my - what's available. I wanted them to be separate as the words are separate. In other words, one image doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the other image.

MS. RICHARDS: And the image doesn't have anything to do with the word?

MR. BARRY: Unless you make a relation in your mind.

MS. RICHARDS: Would you say it's arbitrary or would you say it's kind of a nonverbal association?

MR. BARRY: No, it seemed to work for me when I did it. It always has to work for me when I do it based on the way I think about things, okay, and I can't explain it. I may have had a specific reason when I did it but I don't remember. So you have all that sort of together.

Well, first the thing we do is download all these scenes I've shot, Pascale and I, into her computer and you have these sort of little square screens. You've got them all lined up. You know how it works and then we just sort of put it together. I bring a list of words that I might want to use and we just kind of like work together on that and she can just click away and I forget the program she uses. I don't know what the name of it is but it's a common editing program.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you have a preconceived idea in your mind of how long you want the piece to be?

MR. BARRY: The only thing I have is a general idea about how it will look, if it's going to be words against a black background with scenes in them, if I want to mix black and white with color or if I want an image and the words will appear over the image.

If I have something that I photograph where I have maybe a 30-minute take, then I might want to keep that and just put words over it one way or another. But the details of it and the timing especially, what word follows the other word is all worked out with Pascale and me in her studio.

MS. RICHARDS: So you don't have a concept of how long you expect someone to stand or sit and watch the video and therefore it should be a certain length?

MR. BARRY: No, no, no, no. I mean, my videos rarely run longer than 20 minutes. They're made for private viewing in your home or specifically either that or for a gallery situation where you sit and look.

MS. RICHARDS: In the home, they're meant for a screen, a normal -

MR. BARRY: Oh yeah, you can play them on a regular TV set.

MS. RICHARDS: And in the gallery, could you either -

MR. BARRY: It could be both. I've used both.

MS. RICHARDS: It could either be projected or -

MR. BARRY: I really liked - I tell you, I didn't make videos for a long time because I hated the look of TV sets. I didn't think they just looked very good and then when projectors came along I thought that was a really good

idea. So the first videos were specifically for video projection because before that, I made slide pieces and then before that I made films, which were projected.

So the first were for projection. Then when I started thinking about it, especially when these big flat screens came out, I thought that was a pretty good idea and you can get a certain blackness with these flat screens and a clarity that is really quite nice. So I liked that and so my original prejudices about TV sets I've kind of put aside and -

[Cross talk.]

MS. RICHARDS: Are the films generally a loop so that it doesn't really matter -

MR. BARRY: Yeah, they're meant to run continuously, yes.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, in 2000 -

MR. BARRY: I don't mean narrative Hollywood movies, in other words, with a beginning, an end and all of that. That's not what it's about at all. It's very different from that, as I don't write poetry. I don't use words for text or anything like that.

I make videos which are works of art in themselves which have nothing to do with Hollywood movies or anything along those lines and I like videos because they deal with light and dark and time and change and they're just another kind of medium that I can get into and work with when I choose to other than, say, doing something on the wall or a window.

I just like to change off and it just makes life interesting. That's it and it's always a challenge. I like challenge. I like to be put into a situation which I haven't done before. Something new presents itself and I see if I can somehow finagle it into making a work of art out of it.

MS. RICHARDS: There's a piece you did called *Art and War*, a video in 2007.

MR. BARRY: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: And I haven't seen it myself but I read that there are faint voices.

MR. BARRY: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: The sound of American survivors of war.

MR. BARRY: What it is, is okay -

MS. RICHARDS: And the question -

MR. BARRY: I did a series of videos - yeah, okay.

MS. RICHARDS: About not only the piece, which I wanted to hear about, but also this relatively unique instance where politics, when real world issues enter your work.

MR. BARRY: Yeah, right, yeah, it has to do with personal feelings about things. I did a series of works where I photographed people at my openings looking at things and you're not really sure what they're looking at. Every once in a while a little corner of one of my pieces may pop up but people are sort of looking around talking, interacting with each other, usually almost always I think in black and white and they were friends. You may recognize friends' faces or other artists and so forth.

It's a kind of mix of people talking and whatever they do at openings and I did a series of works where words - where they would be - where words would be - the faces would be in the words against the black background and you would just hear the kind of drone or the mix of voices. You couldn't hear anything. There were people talking but you couldn't make out anything really and it just looked like the sort of prissy nonsense that openings are but I used it as a subject for my work, for these series of works that I did.

MS. RICHARDS: Does the series have a title or is it an actual -

MR. BARRY: Hmm?

MS. RICHARDS: Is it an actual series with a title?

MR. BARRY: No, they're not. No, they're all quite different from each other. But sometimes I would show one in a gallery using the video that I shot from a previous shot and edited it, put some words over it and I also used

the – I liked this idea of people at an opening but putting another kind of text over it and there is this Pulitzer Prize-winning scientist who in fact just has a novel out now. He’s an old guy. But his specialty is ants.

MS. RICHARDS: What’s his name? [E.O. Wilson]

MR. BARRY: I don’t know. I’m so bad at names. I can get it for you if you want. And so he’s talking about ants. He gave a lecture in New York. It’s like at Borders or Doubleday. Oh, I forget.

And I made a tape of it and he’s talking about ants and ant colonies and the relationship between ants and human beings, how they’re so much alike really, ant society and human society and it’s very funny, very informative in fact and he’s an expert on ants and all thousands of different kinds of ants all over the world and so he’s talking about these ants and he does it in a very witty and kind of knowing way.

So I did this video where you see people at the openings walking around talking, laughing, drinking, doing whatever and over that I put his lecture about ants, which I thought was kind of funny, and so I was looking for another subject and if you go to on the – I forget where – there’s a website.

It’s called Vietnam – no, the Iraqi War Memorial, something like that, and what it is, it’s a special website set up for families to talk about their loved ones who were killed in Iraq. So this totally useless war and I felt very strongly about it. I was a big antiwar Vietnam guy. There’s pictures of me demonstrating in front of MoMA holding up signs and all that stuff.

So anyway, the whole website is really just people who had to say something about a brother that was killed or a wife talking about her husband or the father of her kids and what she knew – what happened when they come to the door and they knock on the door and they open it up and there are these two soldiers and what it’s like and she didn’t – like, “I couldn’t go the door, I didn’t want to go, I knew what it was,” so forth and so on.

Anyway, so you have all these testimonials there and what they do is they put pictures up and it’s a way for them to sort of put it on the Internet and get it off their chest.

And so I took a lot of this text from off the Internet of these people talking and I superimposed it over pictures of people at art openings, at my art openings, and so you have these people giving their testimonials but what you see are people in the gallery looking at art and there’s this sort of contrast between real life and death, the absurdity of life and death and art, whatever that means. I don’t know. But I thought that it made a nice kind of contrast and it’s called *Art and War* and that’s what it’s about.

MS. RICHARDS: Is that in fact the first time you’ve brought that kind of subject matter into your work?

MR. BARRY: No, I’ve done it a few times before; rarely, rarely, rarely, rarely.

MS. RICHARDS: Is it something you’d like to do again if you had the impetus?

MR. BARRY: If the opportunity comes up, but it has to be something I feel very, very, very strongly about. I may have a lot of political opinions but it doesn’t necessarily come into my work. I keep the two worlds separate. But this was more than just the war. It’s about loss, the absurdity of that situation, the contrast between different aspects of life, the variety of things that life is from one kind of feeling to another.

MS. RICHARDS: At the same time as you’re making these videos which, as you said, you’re continually doing, you’re also engaged in thinking about commissions and other works for shows. Does one kind of work at this moment in your life have a priority over another?

MR. BARRY: No, whatever comes up comes up. It’s all – it depends on the commission. There’s lots of kinds of commissions. There are commissions from collectors who want a piece for their living room wall or the ceiling in their dining room or God knows what and then I try to do something interesting with them.

Usually they’ve seen my work. They’ve been to an exhibition. They know what it’s about but maybe the installation that I’ve done in the gallery is not suitable for the privacy of their home or the space or whatever. So either if I have an opportunity to go there and see what it is –

MS. RICHARDS: Isn’t that necessary before you think about it?

MR. BARRY: Not really, no. I mean, a picture of a wall in a room, I get a sense of it. I can do pretty well with that. When you’ve done so many, as I have, you just kind of get the feel of it. There’s not that much difference between one room in a living and another – between one wall in a living room and another wall in somebody’s living room. There really isn’t.

So you can get a kind of sense of what you can do. But also I ask. I said, “What do they want. Do they want the

letters cut out of steel or aluminum? Do they want color? What sort of appealed to them?"

MS. RICHARDS: Your last show here at Yvon Lambert in '09, you had fabricated letters.

MR. BARRY: Yes.

MS. RICHARDS: How does that differ for you in terms of the way that those words will come into people's minds when they're physical letters on the floor versus typeface on the wall versus on glass?

MR. BARRY: I don't know how they deal with that.

MS. RICHARDS: So it's a compositional question?

MR. BARRY: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: What you choose to make the letters out of.

MR. BARRY: Well, the interest is both in the placement, the color, everything about it. There are things you can do if you make sculptural things. I wanted to make sculpture, first of all. How do you make sculpture without - but keeping it within my style and keeping that.

The space between things is important to me. The projections, that darkness between the words or the images is very important. The space between these sculptural object words, their thinness, they were bright red here but they were silver color, like mirrors in the show in Paris.

I did a big yellow piece in Brussels and then I did a multicolored piece in Brussels in another gallery in Brussels, in another room at the same gallery I should say, at Greta Meert. So they're all different way of handling it using different colors, reflecting. I've done pieces which have been just bare metal out of cast aluminum.

MS. RICHARDS: Do you have a philosophical position about whether each of these pieces should be unique or if they can always be created in a small edition? When do you make those kinds of decisions?

MR. BARRY: Yeah, I've done editions, a lot of editions.

MS. RICHARDS: Are the pieces - we're talking about the sculptural work - usually editions?

MR. BARRY: The big ones, no. They're too expensive to make. You can't really. They cost a fortune to make those things. It's not practical to do them as an edition. However, the son of Greta did do an edition of one word and about the general - the same size as those words that you saw here. But it's one word done in a kind of dark beautiful plum color which he did up in an edition of, I forget, 10 maybe, very nice box, all of that. That's about the only edition. But it's just a single word.

MS. RICHARDS: I was thinking more of, let's say those red letters on the floor, and if it could be made up to three times, for example, and not that you would actually make them all at once -

MR. BARRY: Yeah, but I don't. I know some artists have done that - [inaudible] - and so forth.

MS. RICHARDS: But you decide they're unique.

MR. BARRY: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: And what about the films, the video? Those are always an edition?

MR. BARRY: No, those are done usually - they say an edition of three. Okay, so they're all done in three. The most I've ever sold of any one is one and not a lot. Videos don't sell. Mine don't. I do them for love, not money, and I know that they're not going to sell and I work with Pascale so I don't have a lot of expenses, a lot of studio expense and so forth. To edit here in New York in a studio would cost a fortune.

But working with Pascale on her computer in her house in Paris, in a little apartment, she can do everything anyway. I mean, she works with professional equipment. I think she's working on a film as an assistant editor and sometimes editor. She's worked on some documentaries as an editor and some other things, fashion videos, which she hates. She really doesn't like working on fashion. I guess there's money in it.

MS. RICHARDS: Are you interested in other artists who make video work in particular?

MR. BARRY: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: That goes to the bigger question - do you go to see exhibitions, museum shows, gallery shows, living here in New York?

MR. BARRY: Yeah.

MS. RICHARDS: Are there certain artists whose work you can say is of particular interest or a certain earlier work that you look at?

MR. BARRY: Well, I always look. When I was in Madrid, I spent the day in the Prado. I mean, it's one of the greatest days in my life. I told everybody that. It's amazing to go there and see it again. I hadn't been there for many years and it was - it's all kind of redone and modernized and cleaned up and it just was absolutely fabulous and I discovered this Rogier van der Weyden crucifixion with the head turned. I hadn't really seen that before and I just couldn't get over that.

Of course I went back and looked at *Las Meninas* [1656] and all the great [Diego] Velázquez, the Goyas and they are magnificent. It was great to back and see them again and really spend a lot of time with them. Fortunately, the museum was not crowded so I could be there without having to worry about a lot of people. I find it very inspiring and I'm always looking for relations between my work and the old masters.

I mean, part of the justification for art is art history, the fact that you're part of this tradition. You can't really operate outside of it. So looking for what this work is really about, if I look at Velázquez, if I look at *Las Meninas* or *The Tapestry Weavers* [1657] or something and really study it and try to figure out what that painting is really about, then I find relationships between what I'm trying to do and what he was doing.

There are these universal ideas about time and movement and space and all of that and the nature of the brushstroke and all of that. So I find all that very moving. I can relate to it all.

MS. RICHARDS: When you're in New York, do you go to gallery shows on a regular basis?

MR. BARRY: I love the Met. That's one of the greatest buildings. I always have. It's the best place to go in New York as far as I'm concerned; MoMA second and then it depends on what's going on at the Guggenheim or the Whitney or something, whatever. I'm a museum person.

I'm not a person - and my wife also - we don't really go to the beach or anything like that. We go to cities. We spend a lot of time in the [Musée du] Louvre if we're in Paris or the National Gallery [of Art, Washington, D.C.]. The first place I try to go when I have free time is the museums. I'm a big museum person. I was at one point thinking about being an art historian, when I was in school. And not being an artist, but I decided I was going to be an artist but I'm really mad for art history and the masters mostly.

MS. RICHARDS: When you go into the Met, do you usually go to the same departments?

MR. BARRY: They have changing shows there all the time. There's always something new and yeah, I go back to certain things, to Vermeer and certain of the painters that I like.

MS. RICHARDS: Mainly to the paintings? In the Western and the European departments?

MR. BARRY: Yes, I would say - I'm getting more and more into Chinese art and Japanese, some of those scroll paintings are amazing. You follow the change of the seasons. It's really something. These guys were great masters and of course the use of space.

Their lines and the detail and delicacy - I have no idea how they made some of those images, what they must have gone through to make them. I have no idea what their mentality was, the kind of mentality it takes, what their world must have been like, what their values must have been like to spend all of this time doing this kind of work, this detailed work and the old Flemish masters especially. I try to see what kind of mentality it was that had them operate in this style, how they saw the world in those days and try to relate to it through their work.

MS. RICHARDS: What projects do you hope to do in the future?

MR. BARRY: Well, a big thing I'm thinking about now is this show in Glasgow. I'm really thrilled about that. The *Words in Music* video is part of it. In fact, that's the title of the show, *Words in Music*, and I haven't been there but I've seen - they've sent me a lot of photos of the space, this beautiful old townhouse.

MS. RICHARDS: What institution is it?

MR. BARRY: It's called The Common Guild and so I'm going to do a big installation throughout the whole place and then when you go in, you - it's going to be a little bit like *Art and War* which was in this gallery in a kind of apartment over here a couple blocks away on 10th Avenue, this old apartment, this old New York-type,

railroad flats - [inaudible] - little rooms and everything.

So when you go in, in *Art and War*, you heard people talking. You didn't really quite know what it was. You went up the stairs and the words were all in this kind of silver chrome around the walls and stairs and all around. So you sort of saw yourself reflected a little bit in the words and then you heard the sound, these people talking. What are they talking about?

And finally you would find this flat screen TV in the corner of one of the rooms and then you'd see what it was about. But all the other rooms just had these words floating around the ceilings, the floor - not the floor, but the walls, but reflecting the light. It's this sort of silver chrome vinyl, which is like a mirror, like that, and so I'm going to do something similar in *The Common Guild* but it will be Anastasi playing a piano.

So when you go in, you hear this music, what is this music, where is it, and then eventually when you move upstairs and into one of the rooms, which are these sort of beautiful old 19th century rooms, very beautiful, so you sort of hear this music and eventually you find this big flat screen TV in the corner of one of the rooms.

MS. RICHARDS: Why not a projection?

MR. BARRY: I just kind of like the light. To have a projection, you have to have the lights off and if you can plop this object, this flat screen into this 19th century world with all these letters kind of reflecting.

And then the words and the video changing colors and images in the word and the black and white of the man playing the piano and the sound of the piano reverberating throughout the whole space, I think it could be a very effective kind of space, environmental space that you could really get into and kind of think about and move through and move away from.

And also I kind of - I'm now beginning to like this idea of the central point in space where everything sort of radiates out of it, sort of ties it all together. So you have the video moving. You have the light changing, the light coming in, changing off the walls, the light in the video, light coming off the screen. You have a lot of these things.

You have a lot of different elements working together and so I think it could be kind of an interesting installation and you can do it in a situation like that because it's not a place where they have to sell anything; total freedom to do whatever you want and you don't have to worry about them trying to pay the rent. So I like situations like that.

Even when I do an installation in a gallery, they always say, "Robert, don't you have any drawings, any works on paper we can show the collectors?" There's always that and of course I do but I like working on paper. But I have to admit, I haven't done any of that now for a long time, some months. I really don't have that much to sell unless somebody wants to buy an installation.

MS. RICHARDS: What would you say is your biggest challenge now as an artist and is there a dream project that you would love to do that you've been thinking about but haven't done yet?

MR. BARRY: No, I don't have a dream project. I don't really think in those terms, to tell you the truth.

MS. RICHARDS: It sounds like you feed off of the surprise, in a sense, of new proposals coming up.

MR. BARRY: I make my own surprises and I'm always surprised to see what I do, to see it when it's finished and the biggest challenge is once I finish it, it's not a failure. It's not a flop. I'm my own worst critic. I mean, I know what's wrong with everything that I've done.

But I'm not going to tell you because then that would be the first thing you think about when you see it. So I keep it to myself. Everything could be a lot better than it is, all right? I know where the mistakes are. Nothing is perfect and I understand that. But people seem to like it and that's good. That's important. Most people seem to like it. There's always criticism. Nobody's ever satisfied or has trouble relating.

But that's their own limitations. People who look at art don't really - don't go with the artist. They don't sort of accept what he or she has done and kind of go with it. There are always - either there's too much color or not enough color, either it's not conceptual enough or it's too conceptual. In other words, most criticism isn't what the viewer expected that it would do based on what they think you have done and that's good as far as I'm concerned.

I don't want them to expect what's happening next. I really don't. I don't want them to know what the next thing is going to be. So the people that really support my work understand that and they're always - mostly what I do, people are very pleased, even commissions. I just did this big commission. They had no idea what I

was going to do. They really didn't.

MS. RICHARDS: The one in Rensselaer?

MR. BARRY: And I wasn't even sure how it would look when I got there.

MS. RICHARDS: The one for Rensselaer?

MR. BARRY: Rensselaer, yeah. They just trusted me and this is what I like and I never let them down. Everybody is always satisfied with what I do. I don't know of any situation. Sometimes there may be some workers in a company that don't get it completely and I know that. I find out about it later if I talk to people.

But nobody really hates it and they all sort of like it and eventually they sort of learn to live with it and they may not love it, but they don't - I've never had anything destroyed or really write upon or damaged in any way. I went - I did a piece in Naples for the metro station there. I did a metro station. Accera was the station.

MS. RICHARDS: Tell me again.

MR. BARRY: A-C-E-R-R-A. It's the Neapolitan metro system. It's new. It's not - and Accera is the last station at the end of the line of one of the metro lines in Naples and we did it. Okay, I did it and I went back. It was like last year. I did a show in Naples. I did a piece in the museum there in the lobby called *Golden Words* [2009]. The words were all gold and then I did an exhibition at the gallery and we took the metro out to Accera.

I wanted to see how it looked now. I hadn't seen it for a couple of years and I went out there and it was absolutely spotless. No one had touched it. There was no graffiti, nothing. I made some video of it, shot some photos.

Of course, when I left, the line hadn't been finished. I hadn't really seen a train pull into the station yet. The station was still being finished. The track was still being laid. They hadn't had the opening ceremony yet.

So when I went back, I could take the train out there and see it and it's a kind of suburb, a working class suburb of Naples and it was just - it looked wonderful. I thought it looked fantastic and worked with the signage that they had put up, the directional signals and all that stuff.

MS. RICHARDS: IS there anything else you'd like to say before we end?

MR. BARRY: No. I mean, it's just - it's up to you, what - any questions that you have. I usually, if I give a talk, I don't usually prepare anything. I just say - you know, I may stop talking by showing some video or slides of what I do but mainly I try to respond to what problems people have with my work.

MS. RICHARDS: That's great. Well, thank you very much.

MR. BARRY: Yeah, okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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