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Oral history interview with Robert Adams, 2010 July 20

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Robert Adams on 2010 July 20. The interview took place in Astoria, OR, and was conducted by Toby Jurovics for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Toby Jurovics reviewed the transcript with Robert Adams. Their emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

TOBY JUROVICS: This is Toby Jurovics, curator of photography at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. And I'm sitting here with Robert Adams at his kitchen in Astoria, Oregon. It is July 20, 2010.

You agree to these facts as they are stated. [Laughs.]

ROBERT ADAMS: All right. All right. I won't back out.

TOBY JUROVICS: Well, why don't we just start by going a little bit over biography. You were born in Orange, New Jersey. Is that—

ROBERT ADAMS: That's true. My father always told me I was born across the street from Tony Galento's saloon, who was apparently a major gangster of the New Jersey scene. That's my only claim to fame—[they laugh]—unless you figure that it's not too far from Hoboken [NJ], where all kinds of good photographic history occurs.

TOBY JUROVICS: And have you—have you gone back?

ROBERT ADAMS: A long time ago. Let's see, it was probably in the '70s maybe. I went back to Madison, New Jersey, which is where I spent most of my growing-up years until I was about 10. And the surprising thing was that it had changed less than Colorado, where I was living. We lived in a house on a hill, both what was then, perhaps still is, called a great swamp. And we had open fields to two sides of the house, and they were still there, and the Lackawanna railroad still had much the same appearance that I remembered when I was a little kid going into Manhattan. So—

TOBY JUROVICS: Then it had already—all the—all the development had already happened by the—in that period, by—

ROBERT ADAMS: It seemed to.

TOBY JUROVICS: It had had a kind of 200-year run at that point to fill up, I guess.

ROBERT ADAMS: It could. And also, of course, in the East, things are nicely masked by trees. So I didn't—you know, it can hide a lot.

TOBY JUROVICS: And you moved to Wisconsin.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah, when I was—let's see, it would have been about 10 to age 14 or so. And that was a jolt, but not a bad place once I got used to it.

TOBY JUROVICS: In what way?

ROBERT ADAMS: I've written about this. But there was something about leaving the East, which I—which I found—it wasn't just leaving one's childhood friends. But there was something about the landscape itself that I missed. And I missed it enough so that I kept looking for it and accidentally pretty much came on a few reproductions of Hopper paintings. And they recalled for me a landscape that I really recognized and realized I loved more than I knew when I was there.

TOBY JUROVICS: Yeah, there's a—there's a kind of imprinting about your sort of home terrain, yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: I think so, yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: And you—after that your family moved to Denver in the early '50s, and I know you've written that it seemed desolate at first, this place that—

ROBERT ADAMS: It did. It's—I couldn't recognize the changing of the seasons very dramatically, and it just seemed empty. And of course, I came to believe it was anything but empty, but for the first year or two until I began to walk—and I'd always walked—one of my first memories was with my father in New Jersey. I was on his shoulders. And he worked in Manhattan five days a week. And—but on Sunday afternoon he always took me out, and we walked in the woods, or he carried me in the woods at first. But similarly, in Wisconsin and in Denver, my primary companion was my father. And as we began to get into the mountains, primarily in Colorado, why, things began to seem, of course, wonderful.

TOBY JUROVICS: And we were in—is it Wheat Ridge [CO]—was that sort of south of—south of Denver?

ROBERT ADAMS: It was a—it was a suburb between Denver and the edge of the foothills. It was a truck-gardening suburb at that time. You know, there were a few developments, but not very much.

TOBY JUROVICS: And what brought your family there?

ROBERT ADAMS: My father was an actuary, which—he—it's—I'm not sure I can even define it well, but he basically worked with probabilities for insurance companies and for pension plans, figuring out basically how much to charge. And he worked on Manhattan for the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company and then for a small insurance company in Wisconsin and then for an independent group of, I think, three actuaries in Denver for a small insurance company. So he was basically a mathematician.

TOBY JUROVICS: And so during your—during your summers you had started to work with the Forest Service on trail crews, and did this really come from this relationship with your father? I mean, this desire to be outdoors and—

ROBERT ADAMS: It certainly—he was—he was—he was a farm kid in Missouri. And so some of the earliest, best lessons I ever had were to—for example, he—down in the big swamp, down the hill from our house in New Jersey, one of the first lessons I had was if you sit still long enough, you will begin to see remarkable things. And he was absolutely right. But it was one of many, many lessons about how to chop wood, pitch tents, do stuff outside. So that was—that was part of it.

I'm sure part of it also was the fact that when I was 12 I had polio. And I was lucky, basically. It got me in the hand, arm and back, but it—you're never the same afterwards. There's nothing like it when you're a kid suddenly to be the last one chosen for a baseball team, for example. So like everybody with polio, you set out to prove that you're going to—you know, you're going to manage. And so very soon after we got to Colorado, I began to climb, hunt, fish, run rivers, spend time outside. So by the time I was 21 or [2]2 I had spent over a year of my life either sleeping in the open or under canvas. So—but my father was sort of the—one of the people who led me in that direction.

TOBY JUROVICS: Did—and I suppose this is a bit of a question that should come up later, but did—what did your—what did your father think of—how well did he know your photographs? What did he think of becoming a landscape photographer? Was this—was the actuary in him concerned about this? [They laugh.]

ROBERT ADAMS: No, he was—by the time I made that decision, he was very supportive. Like everybody, his arc—or life had an arc to it, and it was complicated. And like, I suppose, everybody for a while, I rebelled against it. He was a Republican and—as I was in high school.

And I had a very interesting high school experience. It was a small school, about 400 kids. But peculiarly, there were eight guys in the class that I was in, eight people who sort of made it their business not to conform to the—to the expectations of this, basically, almost rural school. And one of them went on to be a surgeon. Another went on to be the president of the American Chemical Society. Another became an astrophysicist. Another took charge of tracing the progression of AIDS around the world at Los Alamos [National Lab, Los Alamos, NM]—really interesting people.

And so in high school, strangely, all these guys took it upon themselves not to be like their parents, not to be Republicans, not to—well, it became an adventure to learn what art was, what music was and so on. And so—God, how did we get onto this? I can't remember.

TOBY JUROVICS: What your father thought of—

ROBERT ADAMS: Oh, yeah, what—so we had a—we had a period where I told him that I didn't believe his worldview, and of course, he was not happy about that. But interestingly, the way we began a reconciliation was we began to run rivers before that was a common practice. And somehow or other, all those things kind of fade away when you're deep in some canyon.

So—and then interestingly enough, my dad became a socialist eventually and very civically active. So we had a

—we had many good, happy years of later life where we really enjoyed each other's company. And he and my mother gave Kerstin and me—at that time it was about—I suppose about 2[,000], 3[,000], $4,000 a year, which was just enough to let us break away part-time from teaching and go into photography. So he was—they were—I was totally lucky at that time.

TOBY JUROVICS: You—after you—well, I guess one question—you said that this group of students was sort of—this eight or so people were—realized that there might have been a broader world. Where did you—here did you look for that in Wheat Ridge? Were you going into Denver? Were you going to the museum?

ROBERT ADAMS: Yes. Yes. I owe more than I can ever put into words to the Denver Art Museum, strangely, a museum which had not started. It started after the Second World War, but by the time I got to it, I don't think at that time they even allowed a photograph in the museum. The original director had made that a policy decision. There would be no photographs in the museum. But my sister and I on Saturday afternoons often went into the art museum. And it was—I mean, I think we maybe had one picture on the wall in our house. And it was, you know, nothing you'd want to spend time with.

TOBY JUROVICS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT ADAMS: But the Denver Art Museum had the Kress Collection, which was an historical view. It had a pretty good collection of Western material and Native American material, of course, pre-Columbian, and a few things from Europe that will always mean something to me. There was an Etruscan helmet, for example. I think it was Etruscan. Anyway, it was [inaudible] helmet, and I can—I mean, it just seemed to be coming from a world I knew nothing about, but which was enormously exciting and liberating to realize that the world had horizons on it I had never dreamed of.

And at that time the museum was completely free. And I can't tell you—if they had charged 25 cents to get in, we wouldn't have gone. So it was a—it was just transforming. I also had two or three good literature teachers in high school, not as—not as remarkable as I had as an undergraduate, but important. So as I was saying, I was very fortunate. I had both the opportunity to be outside a lot, but I also had some paths to follow out of that rural context.

TOBY JUROVICS: And that argument that we always like to make about museums, that they can actually have a transformative experience—

ROBERT ADAMS: It's—you had a believer here, I'll tell you.

TOBY JUROVICS: And you started college at the University of Colorado in Boulder, and you began as an English—

ROBERT ADAMS: I didn't know what the heck I was doing the year I was in Boulder, frankly. I had—my English teacher was the son of John Crowe Ransom, believe it or not. And he was very nice. But I honestly didn't read much of anything until about my second year in college. And then somebody handed me a copy of *Grapes of Wrath*, and I thought, gee, you know, this is—this is hypnotic, and it's important. And I was off at that point. And then I had two of the most remarkable teachers ever on the face of the planet in this small, out-of-the-way Baptist college [University of Redlands, Redlands, CA].

TOBY JUROVICS: And this was in Redlands? Was that—

ROBERT ADAMS: This was in Redlands, yeah. And I had gone there because I found the university in Boulder to be lonely, and I didn't know what I was doing. And so my parents had some friends whose daughter was going to Redlands. She sent back glowing reports of this very small place, just about a thousand students at that time. So I went out there. I found—again I found moving to the geography very troubling. But the—soon I met two teachers of literature who were—who were as exciting as anything that had happened to me in my life. So that's where that went.

TOBY JUROVICS: And you've written about this yourself, but at that time you were—your intention was to become a minister?

ROBERT ADAMS: It was, briefly. In Colorado—I don't know, you know, why does—why do we hold the worldviews we do? When I was—I was raised in a family of Methodists. My mother was very ardent, and that meant, in the Methodist church, being very socially conscious. But when I was three or four, by my parents' testimony, we were out in the backyard in our victory garden there in New Jersey, and it was a hot morning, and apparently, when I was—as I say, I was three to four years old—I looked up at the sky and shouted at the sun, "God, make the sun go under a cloud!"

TOBY JUROVICS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT ADAMS: And that's just kind of who I was, I think, from the start. There was something there that was concerned with those kind of orientation—anyway, in—

TOBY JUROVICS: You kind of saw that structure in how the world—how the world worked, yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah, I mean, it just seemed to be—and then we had—in Wisconsin, we had a very remarkable Methodist minister, who was cited by the McCarthy investigation. But he was—he was articulate and decent. And his son became my best friend at that point. And our primary interest was in fireworks and other somewhat unserious things. [They laugh.] But anyway, the—by the time I was in high school, it seemed like that was—the ministry was a direction. But it took only about six months at this Baptist college to make me realize that I wanted nothing to do with that, and probably it would have been the worst—I was totally unsuited for it.

TOBY JUROVICS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT ADAMS: I mean, I'm impatient and—you know, I can't imagine I would last three months in any congregation that I know of. And since that time I haven't been a churchgoer. So it was a brief, intense—but the emphasis is on "brief"—commitment to that idea. [They laugh.]

TOBY JUROVICS: But there is always that kind of structure or undercurrent to what you've done since that—I mean, that kind of foundation, it seems, has never—you've never gone too far from that.

ROBERT ADAMS: I'm stumbling for words here, but I think that—I'm trying to remember who it was said this recently; I just came on it again—that art lost a very important driving mechanism when it was separated from worship. And so as you might imagine, I'm deeply discouraged by a lot that has happened in the visual arts, particularly in the last 30 or 40 years. It seems to me that the goal of art as has been enunciated over and over again for centuries is to instruct and delight. And as we have backed off from the "instruct" part of it, the whole thing has become pretty shallow. If you—if you don't require that art somehow relate to and validate and help us affirm life, finally, while being honest, hopefully, art becomes a kind of a minor activity.

So yeah, I mean, if I'm to tell you the artists that mattered to me, they will often—not always, but often have a—I suppose, a religious element to them. Rembrandt is a great figure to me as an etcher and a draftsman. Kenneth Clark said somewhere that all major art engages great themes. And I'm not sure I agree with that quite in as narrow a sense as he meant that, but I do think he's onto something.

TOBY JUROVICS: Well, I'm going to—since we've sort of started down this road, I've got—wanted to actually talk about that issue. And I—we'd agreed we wouldn't use any names and point any fingers, but I was at a—at—a photographer was giving a lecture at Princeton and was talking about what he—what he saw as his sort of moral responsibility. He had been photographing refugee communities, and a prominent member of the faculty stormed out of the talk and later said that there was no room in—there was no place in art for morality. And what always interested me about that is that this person was also—this professor was also very religious but was just—felt like they existed in completely separate. There was a divide between the two and that they had no business sort of commingling. And obviously, you've—anybody who's even passingly familiar with your work knows you feel, I think, the opposite.

ROBERT ADAMS: The tricky part about this is that—is the mixture and the balance and the way they relate to each other. I've just been reading some wonderful essays by Wendell Berry, and he—like I am, he is anguished in a way I had not understood until I heard him on the radio. And I heard him say, you know, "This is—it's gotten to the point where I've got to say this: Art at times has to be didactic." Well, that's—boy, that's real heresy. And in part, it's—I think it's forced on us by the extremity of the crisis that we're in. But I also think that it's—it is and it has been true a long time.

The problem is you have to arrive at this mixture of instructing and delighting carefully, and it's a very complicated issue. And of course, it's always—the issue is always answered one work at a time. I don't like propaganda, and—nobody does. And so what is it that art is really instructing us in? My own feeling is that it's helping us find a stasis, a calm, a sense of wholeness, of cohesion, of meaning, finally, in life that helps us get up in the morning and re-engage with—whether it's as here in Astoria with a campaign to stop the importation of liquefied natural gas and ships or whether it's trying to get the country out of Afghanistan or whatever.

So I'm very leery of art that addresses specific issues too directly without doing anything else. You sometimes can get away with doing a couple of things at once, which is what I think makes, for example, the work of Lewis Hine so remarkable is that you simultaneously realize that there's an awful moral problem here with child labor, and you also realize, though, that these kids, however put upon, have about them a beauty which is timeless, really, and beyond—in a certain way, in a certain desperate way, beyond our harm.

So the question of art's part in issues of social importance is really tough. I mean, on the one hand, you've got somebody like Sue Coe, who does painting that is on subjects that mean a lot to Kerstin and to me, animal

rights, for example. But I have to admit that I don't think I want those paintings on my wall. And maybe—well, I don't know. It's—I certainly—I'm glad she's doing those paintings, but I am uncomfortable with the—with the sense of dismay that remains as—insofar as I've seen them, unresolved in the paintings. Every once in a while, somebody brings it off, like Goya, who—you know, it's horrible, but I can't resist—I mean, they just sort of—they're great, and they're unresolved, and they're—and they're art. [Laughs.]

TOBY JUROVICS: But in Sue Coe's paintings, there's a sort of concentration of suffering in them that I think that's why you couldn't have this is in your—you know, sort of sitting over your—over the living room couch. This is not something you could face every day.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah, and I'm not sure that it's fair for me to hold that as my only standard.

TOBY JUROVICS: Right. [Laughs.]

ROBERT ADAMS: I mean, you know, there's got to be stuff for other walls besides over the couch.

TOBY JUROVICS: [Laughs.] Right. No, no, I mean—being—

ROBERT ADAMS: So I—you know, I did admire her for what she's doing.

TOBY JUROVICS: You—and just—we're speaking here with a degree of familiarity, but you said that the—that the state of the crisis is so severe that at this point, art has to be instructive. What—for—can you just talk about what you see this crisis as? I mean, to describe just for the people who are less familiar with the—

ROBERT ADAMS: Well, certainly in part, clearly, it's an environmental crisis. And it's a big topic, which I assume we don't want to get into more than just to mention it. But Kerstin and I believe that the questions of nuclear armaments and overpopulation and climate change really probably constitute a perfect storm, unless we're going to get right on it.

As an American, it seems to me part of the crisis—and it's not totally unrelated, but part of the crisis is the—is the failure of our—of our country. My own belief is that somewhere down the line it's going to be written, if there is a "down the line," that the political system was destroyed by the economic system. And I think, as Ross Macdonald, a detective novelist who was great for metaphor,—he said—I—at one point in a novel I can't remember, he said, "The sky is dark with chickens coming home to roost." And that's where we are, I think. We've got—we've got a government that doesn't work. We've got runaway corporate power. So that's—those are the—at the center of the crisis.

TOBY JUROVICS: I think—I think we first met face to face—I think it was in 1997. It was the summer you were leaving Longmont [CO]. And we sort of went down this path. And I think after an hour everybody was severely depressed.

ROBERT ADAMS: Depressed. [They laugh.]

TOBY JUROVICS: You know, we shook hands, and I stumbled back to [my] rental car. And I remember that day what was in the—on the front page of the *Denver Post* was that they had detected that more plutonium was, in fact, leaking from Rocky Flats [Plant, Golden, CO] and entering the water system.

ROBERT ADAMS: From the Rocky Flats, yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: And I was feeling—you know, kind of left there feeling this was sort of—well, it's just—it was rather—we left on a rather gloomy note. And I drove that afternoon up along the western flank of the Medicine Bows [Mountains]. And it was a—just a kind of spectacular day. And I remember stopping and just making a snapshot. And I sent it back to you, and I said, you know, it isn't all completely—you know, we're not—we're not all completely sunk and that we had some exchange about that. And I think at the time it felt like you could find that there were these moments that were—you know, sort of individualized moments where there was this sort of sense of—that there was some perfection, or there was sense of—you know, that you could still touch this landscape that I think we both care about.

And 20 years later, it seems like when you find those moments, rather than giving this sense of relief or hope, that they become indicative and in some ways it's become—they've become depressing because of the sense that the problems that we're facing are so large. And I'm speaking mainly personally here, but I sense that kind of shift in your work as well. Is that a fair—

ROBERT ADAMS: Yes and no. Toby, I—what will probably be the last book that I do is now done. There are two little paperbacks that Yale is going to do, one called *Sea Stories* and another called *This Day*. And they're both

about the moments that you just spoke of. So they're still the things that keep us going, and I do think they're still to be found. But I also think you're right that—and maybe it's partly getting old; I don't know; I'm sure that happens, that as you get older, you—your list calamities lengthens to the point where you can't carry it around anymore.

But it is true that since we moved to the Northwest—I think partly because of events in the country and the world, partly because of our age, but partly because of what we've seen here in the Northwest—that my own view has darkened.

In Colorado a lot could be rescued by the light. And there is remarkable light here, but it's of a less certain kind. And it wasn't but about three years after we moved here that I sat down and I said, "What is the important story here that maybe hasn't been faced that I might be able to—one person—bring a little voice to?"

And we started driving as we had not done in the years we're been here before. Before we'd usually come down the Columbia River, which we enjoyed, and then come to the coast, and we looked out and enjoyed the ocean in the summer. But after about three years we decided to look inland, and what we discovered was so daunting to us that we decided we would spend a few years trying to say something about it. And we committed about five years to making little forays into what is basically now an unrelieved landscape along the coast range of clear-cuts.

And when I—in 1989, when I had a mid-life show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, [*To Make it Home: Photographs of the American West, 1965–1986*, Philadelphia Museum of Art, February 19–April 16, 1989] I gave a little talk, and I described two landscapes that I thought were characteristic of what I had tried to focus upon up to that point. And they were both landscapes that had suffered some change, but that were not, it seemed to me, irredeemable. And they were landscapes to which I had repeatedly voluntarily gone back to, over and over again, for the pleasure of it.

If I were to choose two landscapes to—and I've thought a little bit about this, since, if I have to—if I get cornered into having to make remarks in connection with the Yale retrospective, the two landscapes I think that have figured prominently since we left Colorado and since that mid-life show—the two landscapes would be the interior here of the destroyed rainforest and probably the beach up—mainly up north here, in a peninsula where we go to see migrating birds in the spring.

The distinguishing part, the distinguishing thing between the first two landscapes that I talked about in Philadelphia and these two landscapes is that one of the landscapes here Kerstin and I will never go back to. We hiked it for about—pieces of three years, photographing, and we have never been back since. We can see them from our—from our—the windows of our house in three directions, but it is so calamitous and such a total moral failure and so ominous in its implications that to be up close and in it is just more than the spirit can bear. So even though we live 10, 15 miles from it, and even though you would think walking in a forest—in this case —a forest only by the most narrow definition, but it is quiet, anyway, which is a value we cherish—you'd think we would go back. But all I can say is that it has such bleak implications that we've never done it and probably never will.

TOBY JUROVICS: It is—going back to the first time that we met in Denver—and as I—or in Longmont—as mentioned, you were at that point packing the house and preparing to move to Astoria. And I asked you why you were leaving, and you said that you—it was difficult to look outside at the—at the mountains in the—in the same way.

ROBERT ADAMS: That's true. You know, as you know, we haven't been back to Colorado since we moved here. But it isn't because we haven't wanted to. It's because Amtrak discontinued a train. The very month we moved here, they discontinued the connection.

So—yes, no, it's tough everywhere and—

TOBY JUROVICS: And it seems that—I mean, the thing just in spending a day here—that you—I think you filter out—you know, we'd at least—when I come here as a visitor and then go home—is that the clear-cuts are—

ROBERT ADAMS: Are hidden, basically. Right now, for example, you don't feel the weight of what you're looking at because all it takes is a six-foot-high brush to turn green, and the mountain looks green. And it does that within a year. When you really know what you're looking at is—for example, the few times when we get snow here, and you will see what's happened. The brush doesn't cut it then. And so, you know, it's like everything in life. It's all relative.

All I can say is that walking a mountain where every green thing has been taken off a foot or two above the ground and then marinated in chemicals is—my sister is just facing a diagnosis of ALS, and her neurologist, when pressed about her thoughts about the probable cause, says most research now suggests it's pesticides.

And this makes all kinds of sense to me, because—well, let me tell you a story. About 15 to 20 years ago, a friend of ours here in Oregon said, "You know, I just saw the most wonderful place. Let me tell you how to find it." And he gave us directions. It's about 15 miles east. He said, "Walk up on what is called Wickiup Ridge." And we found the head of this small road, and we walked for probably three, four miles and eventually came out onto the most astonishing ridge top we had ever seen here. It—we—the walk was through a forest, but when we came out onto this ridge top, below us was a rolling—a meadow. And in—sparsely placed through the meadow were the remains of an ancient apple orchard, which was still bearing fruit. And beyond the meadow, beyond the apple orchard, you could see clear to the river mouth and the Pacific. And we spent a whole afternoon just sitting in that magic place.

We then went back. We were there for only a few weeks, so we just went the once.

Then we moved here about—it would have been whatever—10, 15 years later. And one day we decided we've got to go to Wickiup Ridge. We drove to what would have been the head of the road up through the forest. We could not find the remains of the road, although the entire mountain was nuked. And the only thing that was remaining was a sign indicating that this was the watershed for Astoria.

So it's that that has given me a sense that what's going on here is more long-lasting and deeper into the bone of human beings than what went on in Colorado and continues to go in Colorado.

TOBY JUROVICS: This is that it's—this is not just about cutting trees but there is an entire—

ROBERT ADAMS: It's about people's mindset toward the forest and I think, finally—it's a very complicated question. Almost everybody here in town—when we came, we became part of a—every few years there's an effort to stop clear-cutting. And the first one that occurred when we moved here, we joined. It was an initiative trying to get signatures. We had a sign in our yard. It turned out we were the only people in town who had a sign in our yard supporting this initiative. And slowly we began to realize that almost everybody owned 10 acres out somewhere that was going to be part of the financing of their children's education or their brother worked a skidder out in Weyerhaeuser's property somewhere. Whatever. It's deeply into the culture.

But I am convinced that if you look at eco-side every day and smell the chemicals and see the threat of disease, if you look at that every day, you slowly flirt with a kind of nihilism. It's almost the only conclusion a sane person can come to, that the—there's—that your job is to destroy the earth and possibly to destroy yourself. So I—and I think you hear this nihilism thinly disguised in some of the defenses that are offered for what's going on now.

So anyway, all that's to say that that's the crisis, and that's why it's different here than it was in Colorado for us, together with the fact, as I say, that I'm old.

TOBY JUROVICS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT ADAMS: You know, you begin to wear out after a while, and I admit that. That's what I heard in Wendell Berry's voice, too. He's old, and he's seen the same thing.

He told a wonderful story. He said he went to a meeting which—and we've been to thousands of them here, maybe hundreds, but more than I wish to count—anyway, it was a meeting where people stood up and testified against some new threat—I forget what it was—in his region, and an old man got up and all he could do, apparently, was just say, "You sons of bitches." And he just repeated this over and over again. And Berry said after he sat down he got—he, Berry, went over and tried to comfort the old man, and all this man could say was just "You sons of bitches."

And I think that's the danger, really, of—not only of living here but of living in the United States right now. I—that's why it's desperate. That's why art has to—has to matter more. It has to get back to its complicated job of engaging with life and simultaneously telling the truth and somehow working in alchemy so that you can find something gold to affirm, even despite the truth.

TOBY JUROVICS: I—I'll apologize in advance for disagreeing with you about something on tape.

ROBERT ADAMS: Well, sure. Sure. Sure.

TOBY JUROVICS: But what struck me yesterday in just—in just spending a few hours driving down the coast is that it actually isn't—these clear-cuts aren't that well hidden.

ROBERT ADAMS: Well, that's true.

TOBY JUROVICS: And that's—and to me—I mean, you used the word—said it was a sort of sign of nihilism, and I think in some ways, to me, it struck me as a sort of shamelessness, because I—obviously we've all had this experience where you're driving down a road and it looks like you're in an old growth or second growth forest,

and when you look more closely you realize it's this sort of 20-foot—

ROBERT ADAMS: Screen.

TOBY JUROVICS: —screen.

ROBERT ADAMS: Beauty screen. Yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: And then behind it everything is cut down. There's at least some—you know, some sense that this needs to be—you know, do not look behind the curtain.

ROBERT ADAMS: [Laughs.]

TOBY JUROVICS: But when you're—and I'm forgetting the—I need to look at a map here—the name of the river across, but when you look back into this valley and that there's no attempt to hide this patchwork of the clear-cuts. And it seems—I mean, it reminds me also what we're sort of in the middle of right now in this interview is the oil leak in the Gulf and that kind of shamelessness on the part of BP that they don't want to tell us what's going on—

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: —they don't want to—you know, it's almost like it's not our business, and it seems like in this—in—they've sort of gotten over the attempt to, you know, cover up what's happening with the—with this.

ROBERT ADAMS: They're so powerful. I mean, they don't have to. They've got all the cards, you know. It's—that's—unless we—unless we wrest back some of that power, they're going to be just that arrogant. You're absolutely right.

You know that these timber companies hire landscape architects to map out these beauty screens and also to shape clear-cuts so that they may look like, you know, landslides or whatever. So it's a very sophisticated effort they're making to hide things.

But you're right. The effort is so weak as to be contemptuous. At the end of—if you can believe it, at the end of the Astoria Bridge on the—god, what was it? It was the bicentennial of—the bicentennial of the town is next year. This was—I can't remember what. It was a—just a very—three, four years ago. And the town had been—and the county had been doing all of this preparation for the celebration [to,] you know, bring visitors. They opened up a huge clear-cut right at the edge of the bridge. So you're going down this causeway for three and some miles, looking directly at a clear-cut. That's their idea of—anyway, enough.

TOBY JUROVICS: The—

ROBERT ADAMS: On the photography.

TOBY JUROVICS: Well, I'll ask you one more and—one more question about this. I—in 1975 you started the project that became *From the Missouri West* [*From the Missouri West: Photographs*], and you were working your way from Denver to the coast. And it ends with images from two places, and one was Southern California and the other was the Oregon coast here. And what I was struck by in looking at those pictures and then looking at the photographs in *Turning Back* [*Turning Back: A Photographic Journal of Re-exploration*], which was the project you've been talking about, that the profile of the topography here is so distinctive, these—the ridge—of the headlands and then along the—along the Columbia, and in *From the Missouri West*, you were really—you know, you—there was—you're photographing these clear-cuts, but there's a real distance. And then when you get to 20 years later, when you're—when you made the photographs in *Turning Back* and you're in these forests and there was a—there's a brutality to those photographs that I've never seen in your work before.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah, it is. It's a—it's a one and only, frankly. I—once we had walked some of these areas, it seemed to me that it was—it would be like being a combat photographer and deciding to make beautiful scenes out of it. And of course that's remained ever since Smith, you know—Eugene Smith said something about that, I think, way back, that he discovered in some South Pacific island, that he had been composing pictures with dead Americans on the sand, and he said he was so shocked that he vowed never to do it again.

But of course he continued to do it because everybody who makes pictures has to put them together in some way so that they—at the bare minimum, they focus your attention as powerfully as you can on the subject.

But one of the things that I decided pretty early on with the pictures that became the book *Turning Back* was that I was not going to include, as sometimes occurs—sometimes clear-cuts fill up with foxglove, which are beautiful stalks of purple flowers. And I said I'd—I'm not going to do that. I'm also—most importantly, I'm not going to photograph when there are—and it's a rather rare occurrence here, but when there are days when the

sky has beautiful clouds in them—I'm not going to use that. I'm just going to show this for the bad condition it is.

So when we speak of trying to balance, you know, truth telling and enjoyment, this is the one case in my life where I just decided the only right thing to do was to bore in on what is terminally wrong here. And as you know from the construction of *Turning Back*, what I decided—because I do believe that art's burden, finally, is to—is to help people reach a yes. But the way I tried to do that, it was—who knows whether it even partially achieved it, but was to—and it's a sign of the desperation I felt, but the only real affirmation in the book is when I turn away from these scenes and go somewhere else, which is in eastern Oregon.

TOBY JUROVICS: And it's those—that last group of images of the—

ROBERT ADAMS: That last—scenes. It isn't that that place also wasn't actually logged out. It's a place called Pine Valley, and all the pines are gone. But it's at the edge of the desert, which begins to have of course great light again, and so—but that's a measure of how desperate I felt. And I didn't want to make a good—an encouraging message out of this, because I don't feel it myself, and I took pains not to.

TOBY JUROVICS: And it's—you—and this is often quoted, but you talked in the introduction to *The New West*, which was published in 1975, about—and when you first started photographing the subdivisions on the—along the Front Range, that what kept you going was the light and that even in the—

ROBERT ADAMS: Mm-hmm. You bet.

TOBY JUROVICS: —in the face of this rather—

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah. And I—you know, I'm sure if I had been born up here, I might— I might know this light well enough that I could celebrate it too. I think Terry Toedtemeier did that, and I'm grateful for it.

It doesn't—having known high-altitude light in Colorado, it's hard for me to find it here. I find I put together pictures here more in terms of shape and the redemption that you can find in that more often than I do of the light, although if you're photographing along the edge of the sea, of course, sometimes the light is fantastic. But it's much more forgiving as a black-and-white photographer. You can print that picture a whole variety of ways and it'll still be believable because if you stand at the edge of the ocean, it's like somebody's fiddling with rheostat all day.

TOBY JUROVICS: [Laughs.] Yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: It's just—you know, the light's changing, soft—in soft ways all the time. But in Colorado, there ain't no clouds a lot of times, and you've got just one way to make the print if you're going to square with it, with the fact of the landscape.

TOBY JUROVICS: And there's a—and this was in an interview that—with Thomas Weski where you talked about a day that—and I just want to repeat this, because it was such a wonderful statement—that you had been photographing for so long, you could barely lift the camera anymore—

ROBERT ADAMS: Sure.

TOBY JUROVICS: —but you were worried that the light would never—

ROBERT ADAMS: Never be that way again.

TOBY JUROVICS: —be that way.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, it's—those are some of the most intense experiences in my life. That particular evening, you know, it was just—I just could not get the film in and out of the camera fast enough. And that can happen here too. I've—when I was photographing out by the jetties here, I would go out sometimes with 15 or 20 rolls of film, and I would tell myself when I'd get there—I would say, "Now look, you got the whole day. This is heaven. Be measured about this, and it'll keep changing, and—but by 11:00 or 11:30 in the morning, it'll all be gone."

So it's—that's of course the great joy of being a photographer.

TOBY JUROVICS: And was some of that—I mean, those are the photographs that were in *West*—

ROBERT ADAMS: In *West from the Columbia* [*West from the Columbia: Views at the River Mouth*], yeah, and a book that was subsequently printed—unfortunately, not very well, so you can't feel the force of the light as well, but—called *Time Passes*. But—

TOBY JUROVICS: And was some of this sort of excitement—was it about finding that kind of—that kind of light again?

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah. I mean, it wasn't the same kind of light at all. It was—it was a much—much different light. But it was—it was the light in combination with the constantly moving sea. And it's—I still believe that you can never go to one of the jetties here and find the same thing twice. I mean, it's you—I don't care if you go 10 minutes from now or two days from now; it may—the sky may look the same, but you combine the moving sea and light, and it's everlastingly fresh.

TOBY JUROVICS: And one last question about *Turning Back*: You said that you and Kerstin decided that you were going to—this was the project that you were going to embark on. And can you talk about the nature of your collaboration and—

ROBERT ADAMS: It's—it is just that. And it has been from the beginning to the degree that our—that our economic survival permitted us to collaborate.

And I had no idea, when we were married, that her—Kerstin's folks were savvy visually. I knew—in fact they taught me a lot about design. They were reporters from Scandinavia, of Scandinavian modern stuff. But I had no idea that I was marrying somebody who really knew how to edit pictures and knew how they went together. That was just a piece of totally just major good fortune.

But in the early stages of my photographic life, whenever she could, Kerstin went with me, and that usually was on weekends, because she worked as a full-time librarian. But we traveled the prairie—Colorado prairie and also down into northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. So she was very much a part of many times just of handing me film holders, and oftentimes she took care of bystanders, which allowed me to work, because, you know, everybody wants to know what's happening underneath the dark cloth, and if you take time to tell them, why, it doesn't happen. So she's always been important that way.

But what's become over the years critical is that she is the one editor that really does understand what I'm after, has been to these places and cares as much as I do about being honest about them and being—I don't know. The word, I guess, I'm trying to avoid here in this conversation, but it's unavoidable and it's the word—being reverent toward them. And she feels that, just as I do, in that. So almost all of the books have been put together with her over weeks and months, editing, re-editing, sometimes—more times than I can remember.

And she also does all the editing of text for me. And it's interesting, because English isn't her native language. She's not a comfortable person writing English at any length, but she is unfailing in recognizing when I'm not clear. And so—

TOBY JUROVICS: It's got to be difficult to have in your own home. [Laughs.]

ROBERT ADAMS: It's—yeah, it's—so I'm very impatient, of course, and I always go through a stage where—particularly with writing, where I've put in days and then she tells me, "Gee, I don't understand what this means." But she's—I've learned it's at my peril to not pay attention, because she's almost always right.

So the nature of the collaboration is—well, I just don't know—

TOBY JUROVICS: And it—

ROBERT ADAMS: —whether I would be, you know, the same person, frankly, if I didn't have that trusted relationship.

TOBY JUROVICS: And when you made *Perfect Times, Perfect Places*, that was really a—it seems to—

ROBERT ADAMS: Kind of a—

TOBY JUROVICS: —honor that—

ROBERT ADAMS: It was—it was about one of the best places we've had occasion to walk. And I hope it's going to be—somewhere down the line I hope that I have a chance to reformulate it, because it was cut in half by Michael Hoffman, who really didn't want to do it. And he said, "All right, I'll do this if you'll do the—mid-career retrospective book." And so that was the bargain. But it changed. It was much more going to be a—almost a diary about what it was like to walk the grasslands. And he and, I think, maybe Arthur M. Bullowa [President of the Aperture Foundation, 1967–1980 –TJ] , who was the chairman of—and a very good friend of ours—Arthur told me years later, he said, "But that—that wasn't a book." And of course, we just differed on that. So anyway, sometime I hope it gets put back in its mooring in the way it was intended.

TOBY JUROVICS: And you have always been fortunate in publishing. You have had the opportunity, whether it

was through the efforts of [John] Szarkowski at the beginning or Hoffman, to publish a lot. Now you're at a point where you've been going back and reprinting certain early—earlier books. And this is, of course, the relationship with the Yale University Art Gallery. What is—can you talk a little bit about going back and revisiting that work? I mean, I guess the first time, in some ways, that happened was with *What We Bought [What We Bought: The New World / Scenes from the Denver Metropolitan Area 1970–1974*]—that was to create what you're talking about here, this sort of fuller picture of what you were trying to—

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah. Yeah. No, I—the work that came out in *What We Bought* was the result of Guggenheim [Memorial Foundation Fellowship, 1973]. And for a year, boy, it was—you know, I thought, man, I can do wonders here. And of course, what I did was completely over-reach.

[Audio break.]

TOBY JUROVICS: This is disc two with Robert Adams on July 20, 2010.

And you were talking about the year that you had had the Guggenheim that became the—

ROBERT ADAMS: Oh, that became—yeah. So—and you had asked about reprinting of the books. And what happened was that I began that year thinking that I would just document the whole Denver area, inside and out. Why be small about it? And so I initially, I arranged with the Colorado Historical Society to sort of sponsor it. And that didn't work out for a variety of reasons—not for anybody's intended failure; it just didn't work.

But when it came time to do the book for it, I had—I could really only get a tiny sample of what I intended to suggest to—and the problem was confounded by the fact that I didn't have a clue about how to make a book. The other one I had edited all right and solved a few problems, but the design of it had actually been done by a man down in Flagstaff [AZ]. So this thing I completely mis-designed—I thought I could do it myself—included a lot of blank pages, which had the effect of—I don't know, the finished product was kind of like a piece of Swiss cheese, with all mysterious kinds of holes in it. And then the printing, I didn't really know how to tell the press people what I wanted. It was duotone, but it was a very—it was an unsuccessful version of that.

So the great bulk of the work from that year and the work—I shot about 450 rolls of film, all up and down the Front Range, mostly in the Denver area, though. And the work from that sat under—I printed it all and mounted every print, but it sat under my work table for about—whatever it was—I mean, like 20-some years—until I happened to win a prize in Germany, and the prize was they would do a book of any sort that I wanted. And I said, "Well, gee, I—about time to try to get this—"

TOBY JUROVICS: Got one here waiting for you. [Laughs.]

ROBERT ADAMS: [Laughs.] "I've got one here." And Thomas Weski, who was a—really a visionary, and became a good friend, saw to it that it was produced in a way that really did match what I was after. So—but there were only a couple of thousand copies printed. And the economics and practice of distribution are so strange that I don't know how many actually came to the United States, but they were quickly gone. Andrew Roth bought up a slug of them, I guess.

So anyway, it went OP [out-of-print] very quickly. And so that's why it was nice to have it reprinted—and it was reprinted beautifully—at Yale. And then, they reprinted the first book, *Denver* [*Denver: A Photographic Survey of the Metropolitan Area*], which had just a few pictures in it, but it gave me an opportunity to get rid of all those blank pages which disrupted the flow of the book, and it gave me an opportunity to add a few which I had subsequently found. And it really did help. So that little book really got improved. And the printing, again, was by this very unusual method called stochastic printing, which is a random dot—very difficult to control, but since all the pictures were rather similar, it was controllable. And they did a wonderful job. So that's how that happened.

TOBY JUROVICS: One of the things that has always seemed to me a problem about interpreting not just your work but a lot of work that was made in the—in the '70s, was the technology of book reproduction, or the lack thereof, or the lack of funding; and in particular, thinking about the photographers and *The New Topographics*, where there were critics and reviewers writing about the desperate nature of these photographs. And in a—in a poor reproduction, it all seems pretty lost and desperate. And what you never got was that—

ROBERT ADAMS: Sense of light.

TOBY JUROVICS: The sense—yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah. That's absolutely right. Years later, John Szarkowski did an introduction to *The New West* [*The New West: Landscapes along the Colorado Front Range*] for me, which was great—and probably saved the

day. But he remarked to me casually, he said, "They didn't get it, did they?" [Referring to Rappaport Publishing, Inc., New York, NY –TJ], the printing company that did it. And Rappaport did, I think, the best they could do, but he was right. They didn't get it—if by "it," you mean the redemptive half of the picture.

TOBY JUROVICS: And it does seem, when you open the new edition of *Denver* that just pours off the page.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah. It really, really helps. The pictures, of course, in *Denver,* in *What We Bought,* are inherently grimmer, so it doesn't quite pour off the page, even of a new printing, the way it does in *The New West*, because most of the pictures were taken up in Denver where there was a lot of air pollution, as opposed to mostly down in Colorado Springs, where it hadn't quite reached the levels it had northward.

TOBY JUROVICS: Do you—I suppose we're going to bounce back and forth a little in terms of chronology, but since we're talking about—talking about those particular images, can you talk a little bit about your printing? I think that, in particular this year, there's been a lot of interest, renewed interest, in *The New Topographics*. And I'm sure it's something that everybody who was in the show is absolutely sick of talking about at this point. But there was a very particular palette that you developed to print with. And also, I think that in particular Frank Gohlke, many of his early images have a similar feel, and also Lewis Baltz. And it's very kind of—I'm going to call it kind of high key and kind of dry feeling; certainly against the prevailing aesthetic, which would have been a sort of, at this point, third or fourth generation sort of baroque f/64 style.

How did—how did you develop that, and what was your—was there a lot of interaction with Lewis or with Frank or with other people? I mean, you all kind of came to work with a very similar feel at the same time.

ROBERT ADAMS: In answer to the latter part of that question, no, I didn't—I didn't feel I was working with them in terms of solving a technical problem there. The thing that drove me, frankly, and always drives me, is the subject. The burden and the attraction and the hope that I carry with me as a photographer is the subject. And I had—you know, I walked a lot of wheat fields and I climbed a lot of mountains. And I just knew that this light was something other than what Ansel Adams was working with, and I loved it and I wanted to tell people about it. So that's what brought me to it. And I assume that Frank found that in Texas, and Lewis in a somewhat related way found it in California.

Let's see, what was the other part of your question?

TOBY JUROVICS: [Laughs.] Now I've got to remember.

ROBERT ADAMS: Well, the—just the—

TOBY JUROVICS: That—you know, and what's always struck me—and there's a—there's a photograph in particular. It's a new home under construction and you—when you're looking at this print you almost have to squint, because the light coming off that siding is so—is so bright. [Referring to *Newly Completed Tract House, Colorado Springs, Colorado,* 1968; in *The New West: Landscapes along the Colorado Front Range,* With a foreward by John Szarkowski, Boulder: Colorado Associated University Press, 1974, page 28 –TJ]

ROBERT ADAMS: Which is—which is exactly what I wanted. And it depended on—obviously, on getting the right negatives, which took me a while. But it also depended on having the right paper, which I had until 1973, and then suddenly it was unavailable for several years because of the sequence of the oil crisis, which translated into the Hunts [Nelson Bunker Hunt and William Herbert Hunt] trying to corner all the silver, and that translated into Agfa [AgfaPhoto GmbH, Germany –TJ] taking all the silver out of their paper; so that what had been glorious Brovira—Agfa Brovira paper, became something just a shade better than a Xerox sheet. And so—but the struggle was to get those things in line.

But then the printing was as exacting as I've ever done in my life. It was not unusual to drop 10 or 15 sheets of paper right into the trash basket, to get something that was—seemed right. So that was—that was—that was—[inaudible]—

TOBY JUROVICS: And how did you—you know, now we know how you become a photographer: you get an M.F.A. You worked some with Myron Wood in Colorado. Is that—how—

ROBERT ADAMS: How did I—how did I do it?

TOBY JUROVICS: How'd you do it?

ROBERT ADAMS: You know, I thought I was going to be an English teacher, and so I went to school and suffered a lot, and went through the indignities of graduate school and hated every minute of it—and liked teaching, actually; although I was mercilessly hard. But what began to frighten me about teaching was, as I looked at my colleagues who had been there—40s and 50s, and I began to see how burnt-out they were and how abused they

were in many ways. It's a very cruel profession: You get older; you get tired. The kids never get old; they just stay kind of, you know—they're innocent, of course, but they're intense and they're always on you. And I looked at my colleagues and I thought, "Man, do I want to end up at—this way at age 55, and another 10 years go to?"

So on the one hand, I became increasingly dissatisfied with teaching. And this was, of course, during the Vietnam War, so the nature of the students was changing. And my sympathies were with the students, but—and congruent with that, I had a friend from college who came back—he'd been in the service in Korea, and he came back and he had a little 35 millimeter camera, and he said, "You know, Bob, this is really fun." He said, "You ought to try this." And I'd taken pictures just while we were out hiking, but never with any serious intent.

So I bought a sort of a grade-B, 35 millimeter, single-lens reflex called a Miranda—which was actually, you know, an okay camera—and began taking pictures. I found it very interesting. And coordinate with that, Friday afternoons when I was done teaching, I went over to the Colorado Springs Arts Center, which is an unusual place which has a wonderful library. At that time, nobody used it. And I discovered that they had a complete run of *Aperture* and a complete run of *Camera Work*, and I could just sit there and go through. And it simply opened up what seemed to me just a fantastic, thrilling kind of world. And so I spent my Friday afternoons learning photo history from that library, and glorying in those two publications.

And then I—you know, I just blindly stumbled. I taught myself to , you know, get the film on a plastic reel, and I darkened up our dining room and went into a closet to load film and, you know, the whole nine yards. And then somewhere along the line I found out that in town there was one other guy who was doing interesting photographic work. His name was Myron Wood. And he had studied a little bit under [Edward] Weston. He had been a—he was a vet in World War II and had been hit by a burst of machine gun fire and put out of action that way and—but had recovered. And he'd gone out to study a little bit, or at least hang around Carmel, and then had come to Colorado and had become enamored of a 35-millimeter—of Leica. And he just—was a remarkable man. And he set himself a vaguely defined but very real goal of just telling affectionately every story he could find about the state of Colorado: about the people, about the landscape, its history.

So I started hanging around his house. He was a very generous—eccentric, but generous man. And he lived in a big house with a remarkable wife who was a writer and taking care of all of the business end of things for him. And he had four children. So he had this kind of boiling artistic household, and a big house. And I just watched him develop and I looked at his prints, which were pretty much full-scale. They weren't Ansel Adams, but they were—they were Ansel Adams sort of modified by the reportage tradition.

And I came to admire the spirit of the guy as much as anything. He knew some about the art world, but he didn't care a whole hell of a lot for it. And it left him free to explore in a way that seemed to me to be really admirable and exciting. So we—and he also introduced me to what photo publishing there was being done at that time. He had a modest library.

So from that point, as I began to discover how much fun it was and the fact that I could engage the—well, I should back up and say that as people who were teaching saw that I was doing this mysterious thing, it made no sense: I was throwing away my career, a safe—at that point, I was—you know, I was—I could have had that job for the rest of my life—

TOBY JUROVICS: And you had—at this point, you'd finished your Ph.D. at the University of Southern California?

ROBERT ADAMS: In 1965, I wrote the paper. I taught for three years before I finished the paper, and I got it done. And so at that point—

TOBY JUROVICS: And you were at college—just go back a second. When you were talking about teaching, you were—at this point, you were at Colorado College?

ROBERT ADAMS: Colorado College. It's the only place I ever taught.

TOBY JUROVICS: Right. Okay.

ROBERT ADAMS: And I got the job just by accident. I'd taken my prelims at USC and was getting set to just go. We were going to go to Colorado, and I was going to sit down and write my paper and get over with it. I had already decided I would take some dumb subject so I could just get it done in a year and get out. So that was my plan, and as I was packing up, I saw on the department bulletin board a notice that the dean of Colorado College was going to be there that afternoon. They were looking—and it was very late—looking for a teacher. I thought, "Well, might as well stop in and say howdy." And so I did, and they hired me. So that's how I got the job. But it did then take me three years, combined with teaching, to write the book-length paper.

But by the time I got the paper done, I was really keen for photography. And so I went to USC to take my exam on the paper. And then I had ordered to have a Sinar View camera in San Francisco, together with three lenses

and a tripod and so on—which I had no idea how to use. It was really comic. I didn't realize that you could turn the back on the camera. I thought you had to hold the whole camera over on its side to do it.

TOBY JUROVICS: Hold the—[laughs].

ROBERT ADAMS: But anyway, so it was a chaotic—

TOBY JUROVICS: So you were starting from scratch. [Laughs.]

ROBERT ADAMS: I was really very innocent about the whole thing.

TOBY JUROVICS: We can take that part out.

ROBERT ADAMS: No—

TOBY JUROVICS: We can say you were intuitive from the beginning, yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah, absolutely. It came to me by divine intervention.

TOBY JUROVICS: "I saw it all." [Laughs.]

ROBERT ADAMS: It was bad and good at the same time. I made a lot of foolish mistakes. I lived in terror of buying the wrong equipment, because we had no money.

TOBY JUROVICS: That would have been a very substantial purchase at that point—

ROBERT ADAMS: It was. It was.

TOBY JUROVICS: —a Sinar camera and—

ROBERT ADAMS: I was earning—as a teacher, I was earning $6,000 a year, which even then was—I learned later that about a third of the faculty, it seemed to me, were "dollar a year" guys. So there was no sense of being able to pressure anybody; I was just a kind of rented slave, basically.

So when it came to putting down a thousand dollars for a complete rig, that was a major thing. So sometimes I would lie awake for nights, worrying about whether I was going to be hit by a bus, and here people would ask what kind of an idiot was this who had this strange stuff, expensive stuff, and mymy wife, not—not earning much either. So, anyway—

TOBY JUROVICS: And once you finished your degree and have this teaching job, you're not supposed to go off and at that point then do something else.

ROBERT ADAMS: That's right. I mean, obviously, I've asked myself many times: If I'd known then what the odds are against having been able to stay with this, would I have done it? And I probably wouldn't have.

TOBY JUROVICS: It's a good thing you didn't know.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah. I mean, God protects the—innocent, I guess, for a while.

TOBY JUROVICS: [Laughs.] It is—you were talking earlier before we began recording about the frustration of watching many of your colleagues struggle. And I think that we've all seen that, that there are people who we all feel deserve more than they've been able to get. And the only answer I ever have is that it just—the most deserving don't always—it doesn't always work out that way. It is a great frustration.

ROBERT ADAMS: It's very, very tormenting, frankly. And that's why somebody—some outfit like the Guggenheim Foundation is important. I wish the Guggenheim Foundation weren't quite as locked down in the grip of academics as it seems to be. But to be able to give somebody just a year sometimes can make or break the whole thing.

TOBY JUROVICS: And at that point—and we've talked about this a bit in the past—but when you stopped teaching, you were living primarily on Kerstin's income?

ROBERT ADAMS: Well, we did—when I stopped teaching, my parents were going to be gone for a year. They lived in Denver. So they said, "Why don't you come and house-sit in the house?" And then, Kerstin went to library school, which was at that time the library school at the University of Denver. So she got her master's in library science. And then, following that year, we moved to Longmont [CO], where she got a job as the senior reference librarian. She later went on to become a middle-management figure—which, of course, we all know is the key to grief. But also, it's money.

So, yes, the way it finally evolved was that periodically, through the first—well throughout my life, really, but periodically I would earn or be given a significant amount of money. "Given" means either fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, or from the Guggenheim Foundation [1973, 1980 –TJ], or occasionally a prize. I got $25,000 from—oh, I should remember this. A widow of a photographer, set up a foundation and gave a prize annually and I should look that up and we should insert it, because it was important. [Charles Pratt Memorial Award, 1987 –TJ] John Gossage, really, is responsible, I think, for having gotten me on the track there. So there was some of that and then—but the thing that evened it out was that Kerstin earned a steady income. So that, for example, to give you an idea of how hair-raising this would have been without it, Lewis Baltz helped me very substantially make contact with both Fraenkel Gallery [San Francisco] and with [Leo] Castelli Gallery in New York. And once I was represented by Castelli, I had a guaranteed income of a thousand dollars a month against sales—which is a brave thing of Leo and Toiny [Antoinette Castelli] to do. So good things like that happened, but then eventually for reasons that are complicated, but I withdrew from Castelli Gallery. And Reagan was elected, and in the year that Reagan was elected I went from an income of about $25,000 a year to an income of $2,500 a year; because most of my clients were museums, and funding for that was cut off the minute Reagan came in, and so I had no income.

So Kerstin's work really saved us in many ways. It slowly, slowly changed. In the mid-80s, for complicated reasons, I began to sell again. And then, of course, the big thing that changed for me was I got a MacArthur [Foundation Fellowship, 1994], and that gave me five years of freedom, which was glorious. But it also had a synergistic effect, I'm sure.

TOBY JUROVICS: What year was that?

ROBERT ADAMS: Oh, lordy, that was something like '94, '93, something, that it began, but it was like in '71 or something, when I went back and saw John Szarkowski and they bought four pictures at the Modern [Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY]. There is something about people seeing that on your resume and they think, "Well, if they can do it, I can take the risk." And the MacArthur had the same effect. It shouldn't, but it does. It's just the way the world works.

So we haven't had to worry since that happened. And another major factor, I have to add, has been the long-term loyalty of Fraenkel Gallery. We became affiliated with them a year after they opened. And for a good many years, the amount we sold there was negligible, but they stuck with us just like any good gallery should; but it doesn't often happen that way. And in the long run, it has turned out to be very, very useful and has been expanded by our—the other thing that's been very useful to have is a representative in New York, because not everybody goes to San Francisco. And so the other half of our support system is Matthew Marks [Gallery, New York, NY]. And they too have done a really serious, kind job. Over the course of years, we've been represented by many galleries, and it's in the nature of the business: It's hard to do enough record-keeping, for example, to avoid problems. And like everybody in photography, we've had a few. But both of our two major galleries are run by human beings, and they're both scrupulously honest. So we've been just very lucky.

TOBY JUROVICS: And it seems that it's easy to look at any gallery as simply a business. But they've really—

ROBERT ADAMS: It can happen that way. You have to—

TOBY JUROVICS: You really relied on what they were able to—

ROBERT ADAMS: Yes. Yeah. And they've gone—in both cases, they've been party to major publishing efforts which wouldn't have happened without them. Publishing—I know it looks like, because we've published over 30 titles, that it's got to somehow have become easy. But it's never easy, and it always is financially a losing proposition.

TOBY JUROVICS: Yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: It just—that's, I mean—

TOBY JUROVICS: And you've never had a—and I think this is not just you, but any photographer—you would never have a book that makes any income.

ROBERT ADAMS: That's right.

TOBY JUROVICS: This is always—

ROBERT ADAMS: It's always—your income is always indirectly benefitted by publishing, but it's never—unless you're, I assume, Richard Avedon or somebody, books are not directly profitable. So Matthew Marks and Fraenkel Gallery went together, for example, to publish *Turning Back*, which was an enormous expenditure of money. It's a huge book, and it was done right—credits—

TOBY JUROVICS: And a difficult book that I think a commercial publisher would have—

ROBERT ADAMS: Would have run screaming from. So, yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: And you said something to me many years ago about Leo Castelli. You said when you were there—and you mentioned this—that you were on this sort of monthly stipend. And you said, "My photographs were selling for $300 a print, and they weren't selling."

ROBERT ADAMS: That's right. That's right.

TOBY JUROVICS: And yet, you were able to—

ROBERT ADAMS: And he did it.

TOBY JUROVICS: You were able to keep—

ROBERT ADAMS: And it was—as you know from—I'm sure you read the profile in the *New Yorker* not too long ago of Leo—I don't want to pretend to something I didn't experience; I did not know him well. We were invited to his home and as I think back on it, it's kind of charming. I'm sure he racked his brain to try to figure out how to bridge a Grand Canyon-sized gulf between the two of us. But we ended up watching a baseball game with me sitting on their bed and him sitting in a chair or something, and Toiny bringing us tea or something—I don't know what it was. But, yes it was a brave thing to do. And he did it, I think, routinely with painters but, working by analogy, rather innocently—[laughs]—he extended it to us.

TOBY JUROVICS: And you mentioned that when MoMA bought your photographs it sort of—and I think this does happen that, "Well, if John would buy them, then it's okay for us to do that." The first time you went back, traveled east to show prints, that was in 1969, I think that was the date in the—

ROBERT ADAMS: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

TOBY JUROVICS: And was it specifically to meet Szarkowski, or—

ROBERT ADAMS: It's an interesting but kind of embarrassing story, but I'll tell you.

The person that I knew, by having read his work, was Beaumont Newhall, so I wrote to the Eastman House [George Eastman House / International Museum of Photography and Film, Rochester, NY] and I asked him if he would look at prints. And he said yes, and I also wrote to the Museum of Modern Art, just general, and I said, "Would you look at prints?" Because I had one book at that point, with highlights from the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, and that had become a much beloved book for me. But I knew nothing about John. And you would think that somebody who was trained in researching literature would have the brains to go and research things in photography, but something never transferred and I didn't do it.

So I went, and it was a hard trip. We went by train and by coach and stayed at cheap places. But we went first to Rochester and I went up to talk to Beaumont Newhall up in his office on the top floor. The ceiling was coved over, kind of an attic almost. And he was very nice, and kind of an Olympian figure, slightly distant, I felt. But anyway, I could see he just didn't respond to them, which is everybody's right. And he suggested I use stronger filters and—

TOBY JUROVICS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT ADAMS: —a couple of other things.

So then we took the train down to New York and stayed at the Y [YMCA]. And I phoned from a phone booth outside of the Y and phoned up to the department, which is what they had told me to do. They said, "Give us a ring when you're in town." And I'd sent pictures ahead, and they said, "Let us know when you're here and we'll tell you whether we want to see you or not."

And I got the secretary, and I told her who I was. And there was a little pause, and she said, "Oh, Mr. Adams." She said, "Are you the one who takes those little, tiny pictures? I think John likes those." And it was one of the great moments of my life, because of course I felt like I was not, at least, going to drown immediately in New York City.

So we made an appointment and I went up and we had a fairly long conversation in his office. A lot of it was not about photography. A lot of it was about the American landscape. And, I don't know, I don't think it was entirely just to set me at ease. I think one of the things that I really loved about the man was he really cared about the place. And if he had a second life, I think we'd have all been richer if he'd been able to get out and be in the place.

So it was nice. And it wasn't long before he wrote and said, "Can we buy four pictures for $25 apiece?" which was humble, but welcome. And then it wasn't too long before Peter [Bunnell] phoned and said something about —[telephone rings]. And they proposed doing a joint show with Emmet [Gowin]. I never really have known whether that was because of a cancellation or what. It was on fairly short notice. Do you know?

TOBY JUROVICS: Well, you know, it's funny. I called Peter last week just to ask him about that. And we're talking about Peter Bunnell, who was a curator at MoMA, I think from 1966 until about 1971. And just quickly, was that the first museum to buy your photographs?

ROBERT ADAMS: It was practically the first place —except for a little gallery out in Newport [I think this may be Newport Beach, CA, not Rhode Island –TJ], where Lewis [Baltz] had arranged for three of my pictures to be shown in a group show, and a show down at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, the show at MoMA was the first public anything I'd ever had. [*Photographs by Robert Adams and Emmet Gowin,* Museum of Modern Art, New York, December 15, 1971–February 29, 1972].

TOBY JUROVICS: That's not bad. It's all downhill from there, right? [Laughs.]

ROBERT ADAMS: It was, I think I probably already told you this, but it was a mixed experience, as you may know. The *New York Times* unleashed one of the most venomous, ignorant reviews of which I know. It was written by a guy who had a reputation for this, so it wasn't entirely awful to live through, but he apparently looked at my vita and saw I was a Ph.D., and he assumed that it was in art, apparently, and so he used it as an occasion to lambast what he saw as a lamentable tendency to link up the art academic world with museums. And so it was great because there was a picture of mine out in a vitrine, out on the street, for heaven's sakes. I mean, what more could you ask? But it was a mixed thing. [Referring to Gene Thornton, "Lifeless with or without People," *The New York Times*, January 9, 1972, page D31. –TJ]

TOBY JUROVICS: His name escapes me now. We can either look it up or ignore [laughs], the critic.

ROBERT ADAMS: Oh, the critic? It begins with "T." I've suppressed it, I guess.

TOBY JUROVICS: I think that the—I don't remember if this was the headline or not, but the line that came from it was, "the photographs were lifeless, with people or without."

ROBERT ADAMS: Yes. Yeah. Right. And actually it gave me a wonderful story, though, that thing, which I've always enjoyed in retrospect. I spent some time looking at my pictures on the wall trying to figure out if this was me or not, and, of course, kind of sneaking a look at other people in the gallery.

And one of the all-time best experiences I've ever had in that regard was a young guy and his girlfriend came in and—I suppose they were in college—and they had read the review, obviously. And they started and they went around both Emmet's and my work, around the room. And it seemed to me, in front of almost every one of my pictures they would say some variant of "cold," "dry," "dead," "lifeless," and this little litany really became the more remarkable as it was extended, until they got to the very end, and then I forget which one of them said—I think it was the guy—said, "It's just like Denver!"

TOBY JUROVICS: [Laughs.]

ROBERT ADAMS: So, then, well, all right. If we're going—

TOBY JUROVICS: So he had—

ROBERT ADAMS: He had got it, even despite himself, I guess. So.

TOBY JUROVICS: There was a—I'm not sure I've ever shared this with you, but we did—I think it was in 1998—a small show of your work at Princeton [*To the Mouth of the Columbia: Photographs by Robert Adams*, Princeton University Art Museum, NJ, February 3—March 22, 1998], and on one wall there were a group of the photographs from Colorado Springs. And I had walked in there after lunch, just to see what people might be saying. There was a woman and her friend standing in front of it and she said, "You know, if he'd just moved to the left, the house wouldn't have been in the way of the mountains. "

ROBERT ADAMS: [Laughs.]

TOBY JUROVICS: And it was one of those moments where you feel you completely failed as a curator.

ROBERT ADAMS: [Laughs.] There's a place for a wall label [ph]—.

TOBY JUROVICS: Yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: [Laughs.]

TOBY JUROVICS: Yeah. "Here, let me hand you the brochure."

What interested me about the show that Peter organized that you're talking about—it was with you and Emmet Gowin, and it comes up because of what you said about John, that you felt like he was talking to you about the landscape because it was something that was of deep concern to him. And what always surprised me about Peter is that those pictures seem so far from his experience. And I think that Peter—

ROBERT ADAMS: I think he did—I don't know what he told you, but I think he did have a really difficult time hanging the show, because he said afterwards he—did he go to Mexico or somewhere? He said, "I just felt like I had to get away." [They laugh.]

TOBY JUROVICS: I remember one day he and I were looking at a group of the Colorado Springs pictures together, and this would have been in the early '90s. And he turned to me and said, "You know, no place actually looks like this." And I said, "Well, have you been there?" And he said, "No." And I said, "Well, it actually does." And I think he was a bit taken aback. But—

ROBERT ADAMS: It's a legitimate point, though. Josh Chuang, one of the things that has impressed me about him is that he's driven to quite a number of these places. And I think it sort of helped. But, the picture is always simultaneously less and more than—

TOBY JUROVICS: Yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: You go the place and you think, this is nothing.

TOBY JUROVICS: Nothing.

ROBERT ADAMS: But in a way, of course, if you stand there a while, it's way better than the picture. So you vacillate between those two poles, but both of them are valid, in a way.

TOBY JUROVICS: I think that Peter's real strength and, I think, his gift to the people that he's worked with is that I think more so—and while, of course, he has a sort of sense of what he sees as the progression of the medium, but it really, for him, is always about individuals. And I think that that—it's about even what might have been unfamiliarity or discomfort with the subject matter, recognized he's always been very explicit about doing monographic shows.

ROBERT ADAMS: Good for him. Boy. That's a great failure, I think, of museums right now, is that we've now got a whole generation of curators who are anxious to make their name, and the way they're going to do that primarily is with group shows. And it's become—I think it's become just vastly harder to get an individual show now than it was when I started. And I'm really sad about it. Because three or four pictures are not enough to—I just saw some great, great pictures by a man named Ken Abbott. I don't know if you've met him. He's a Yale graduate way back when, but he used to be the head staff photographer for the University of Colorado. But all the while he was doing that, he was taking landscapes.

And he's now down in Asheville, North Carolina, and he's trying to get time to take pictures of an area where they're doing mountaintop removal. But the pictures he's taken of the people who are—he attended some demonstrations of people who are living right below a dam that traps waste, but right below the dam, there's a school. It's just lunatic. But the portraits he's made are wonderful, but they're 10 times more wonderful if you see a run of them.

TOBY JUROVICS: Yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: And you've got to have a monographic show to do that. And I hope somehow or other—my real hope is for small museums now, more than big museums, where they're a little bit less under the gun for massive gates. Anyway.

TOBY JUROVICS: Well, if we go down that road, it's going to be dark before we finish, but—

ROBERT ADAMS: Okay.

TOBY JUROVICS: I want to—maybe [inaudible] just bring up one more thing and then maybe take a break for a bit if you like. Just going back to Peter. And I thought I would call him and ask him why he organized that show. And oddly enough, working in an office half the size of your kitchen with him for 13 years, I never turned to him and said, "So, what was that about?" And he said that to him that your pictures and Emmet's felt very similar

formally.

ROBERT ADAMS: Hmm. Interesting.

TOBY JUROVICS: And that part of it was also that neither of you had shown in New York—

ROBERT ADAMS: That's true.

TOBY JUROVICS: —and he felt that that was important, that it was creating an opportunity that way.

ROBERT ADAMS: But did you ask him did they have a schedule opening that suddenly opened for this? Now, you might as well be talking into three, four, five years in the future to do anything.

TOBY JUROVICS: I think it was faster and looser back then. I mean, and there were no—one of the things I think Peter's always talked about from period is that there weren't publications with every show. So I think that he told me they did 30 or 40 exhibitions in that gallery that there's really no record of. And I think that that happens in a lot of—I think it's just the nature of the—do you want to—

ROBERT ADAMS: Do you want to take a break?

[Audio break.]

TOBY JUROVICS: I think we're back on here.

Just to change subjects a little, one of the things that's always interested me about *New Topographics* [*New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*," George Eastman House, 1975]**,** is that when people point to the legacy of the exhibition, the needle always seems to land in Dusseldorf, and—I suppose this is a larger conversation—it seems like that work is missing a kind of fundamental component of what was expressed in your work and in Frank [Gohlke's] and others. What I was wondering is, who do you think are the photographers that have followed in the tradition of—or who were kind of kindred spirits, if you will, of that work? Or where do you think that that's gone in terms of American photography?

ROBERT ADAMS: Hmm. That's an interesting question. There are a few people who send me work occasionally, and to be fair, I'd have to go and check for their names, but they're all in their 20s—who are taking pictures that are very directly related to things I did. They put the pictures together the same way, pretty much. They're almost always in color.

I haven't seen anybody really press the issue to the point where they get major books out of it. The German stuff—I think you're right, it's kind of a stretch, in a way. And the Vancouver stuff is a different kettle of fish. I'm not fully sure I understand the motives there. Sometimes I see pictures that seem to me to record suburban scenes with attention to what I think is important.

Actually, the real thing I think [Szarkowski? –TJ] is skirting is something I think is terribly important, and I don't know that he realizes it. But a lot of his work seems to me to be concerned with population. And so I welcome it, because I think it's just there as plain as day. But I don't know. Frankly, I think it's very hard to take the pictures I took back in the late '60s and early '70s, because people were so guarded and nervous, and I think it would be much harder now. And young kids have said that ruefully to me many times, and I think they're right.

I several times had rather tense confrontations with people, and my method was designed to try to minimize it. I kept moving all the time, quickly, and I worked, where I could, from the middle of the street. But, man, I was out of there before most people knew I was doing anything. Even though I was—

TOBY JUROVICS: You were working with the Hasselblad?

ROBERT ADAMS: With a Hasselblad and from the sidewalk, basically, or from the street. But when I was working at night, I was stopped repeatedly by the police. And I just know I would not now, given the whole—I have an acquaintance here who was stopped taking pictures of the Portland Library from the middle of the street, and he was hassled by two rent-a-cops. He's a big, blustery kind of guy, this friend. So I just know it would be very unpleasant to try to do what I did now. So I'm not too surprised that there isn't a direct continuation on.

TOBY JUROVICS: I guess it's touching on two issues, and one is the subject and one is the style. And I do think that the difference with –[where] European photographers are kind of placed in the tradition. It's not the fact that the pictures are substantially larger or that they're in color; it's that they—I think the part of the early work

that they didn't pick up on was that affection and concern for the landscape that underlies all of that, that the cool sort of surface seemed to come through—

ROBERT ADAMS: But the affection was not recognized widely. But that seems to me to be a difference between America and Europe. There are obviously beautiful places to look at in Europe, but the subject isn't there, I don't think. I think it would be very boring to be a European photographer, in many ways. I don't think I would ever have done it. It's America that was so beautiful and in such transition and had such space. Without space, I'm not real interested, somehow.

TOBY JUROVICS: And it seems that—and I haven't traveled extensively on the continent, but I was recently visiting Thomas [Joshua] Cooper and taking the train down from Glasgow, and you're passing these forests, and they're planted in perfect grids. And you get the sense that the landscape itself is so many centuries back—

ROBERT ADAMS: It's so many—and it's so crowded. I think England is a nightmare, the population density in that place—I couldn't stand it. We heard an interview with an author, had a great book title, something about the unwanted noise of all the things we want. And just the question of sound is—anyway, I think if you're a European photographer, you've got a whole different set of priorities, almost inevitably, than we do here. But that's just me. I'm an American, and that's where I come from.

TOBY JUROVICS: The sort of way of looking at—understanding the landscape, it reminds me—I guess one thing that I think has changed in—or maybe a difference between where you were in the late '60s and early '70s making this work, and some of, say, the following generation is that there's less of a sense of criticism about the condition of the landscape; that it's not even resignation, I think. It's more about acceptance. That the landscape is this—there sort of is this cultural tableau, and that whatever happens there is a sort of valid representation and it's approached nonjudgmentally. And I would—I don't know how that sits with you.

ROBERT ADAMS: It doesn't sit well at all, or at least it's a point of great sadness. But I think it's also traceable to one's life experience. I had the opportunity to, when I was 15, spend a whole summer working for a camp packing horses into the Rockies. When I was 19, I spent the whole summer in the San Juan Mountains [CO] working for the Forest Service. The next summer, I worked in the Canadian Rockies, or in the Glacier [National Park]. And you can't get those jobs anymore. And I think there's a profound impact that comes from that.

If you—there's a great song—and I'm sorry, I don't know the title of it, but the lyrics of the song are—a guy is out herding cows at night and he's thinking—he's got a letter in his pocket that asks why are you staying out there in the West, and why don't you come back East, where your girlfriend is, and get married and get a job? And the refrain is a series of questions and observations, one of which you've never seen spring hit the Great Divide. ["Night Rider's Lament" by Jerry Jeff Walker –TJ]

And if you've never seen spring hit the Great Divide, the world is going to be a different world. And I feel sad about this because, of course, it makes me realize that there's never going to be any way I'm going to be able to talk to these people, in a way. It's going to be also the reason why Ansel Adams' pictures are—if they don't already, they just don't seem to have any relevance, because nobody ever saw—living now—what Ansel saw there in Yosemite [National Park, CA], a kind of purity.

TOBY JUROVICS: I think part of it is that you still believe in this idea of just wilderness. And—

ROBERT ADAMS: That's right, wilderness and America. That's the strange part.

I had an interesting experience when I—god, what was it. I got some award, and Kerstin and I decided that we would give the prize to Human Rights Watch. And so we hadn't anticipated it, but we then had to do some PR stuff for Human Rights Watch about this. And Frish Brandt, the director of Fraenkel Gallery—bless her heart—said, "Well, let me help you. You tell me what you want to say, and I'll type it into the Internet and then everything will be sent." So I did a rough draft, and I spoke about—in some passage my reference point was America.

And I said it, and I realized somehow or other that it wasn't going over. And then Frish, who was younger and better attuned, she's got a teenage son, said, "Why don't you make the reference to world citizenship rather than American citizenship?" And I thought, that's it, that's the difference right there. I haven't been able to quite give up on America yet. It does seem to me we ought to have a higher standard on some of these things, like torture. But I think that's one of the things that's changed.

TOBY JUROVICS: I think that I've noticed as we've been talking today that your concerns are very specifically about conditions that pertain specifically to the West. For instance, how do you—you can only care about the things that you care about or that are closest to you or that— we don't pick what we respond to.

ROBERT ADAMS: Well, that's—yeah. And I think just like Wendell Berry talks a lot about—I mean, he talks about

Kentucky all the time. And at some point I think each one of us really is obliged to talk first about Oregon, Colorado, Kentucky, wherever, because if you don't start there, it's going to get kind of windy and flabby out there when we're talking about wider stuff. But it's obviously in flux, and so—.

TOBY JUROVICS: [Telephone rings]. In an article you wrote in *Aperture*—I think it was around 1978—you said that what photography must do is reconcile us to the idea of half-wilderness. [Robert Adams, "Inhabited Nature," *Aperture* 81 (1978): 28-32 –TJ] And I think at that point, that was a very radical statement. We were still looking at Ansel Adams—one of the things that I noticed is that *Yosemite and the Range of Light*, which was Ansel's alpha and omega of his Sierra pictures, was published in 1979, which is five years after *The New West*, but it's still—that view of Ansel's was still culturally the predominant one at least through the '90s, if not now.

How do you feel about that statement? I mean, it seems like that—

ROBERT ADAMS: It's a little behind the curve somehow, for me anyway. I know we're going to have to get reconciled to half-wilderness, but I want at least my half to remain—to remain wilderness. Bill Stafford, the poet laureate of Oregon and one-time Librarian of Congress, has some phrase in a poem to the effect that "the score is thousands to nothing." And that's kind of the way I'm beginning—Kerstin and I are beginning to feel now, the score is thousands to nothing. And back in '79, I didn't quite realize how bad the tally was.

TOBY JUROVICS: I think that idea about reconciliation suggests that it's sort of two parties working towards the center. And it's exactly what you're saying, that there is nothing coming back from the other side on this.

ROBERT ADAMS: That's exactly right. And of course, that's frequently spoken of regretfully by conservationists and preservationists, is that—

[Audio break]

—the oil companies for example, all they need to do is win once up in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge, but we need to keep winning over and over and over again. And so, yeah, I don't know. Part of our life for the last 10 years has been fighting four different corporations here who want to import liquefied natural gas into the Columbia River mouth. And it's exceedingly dangerous. It's crazy in many ways. The whole town has really been disfigured by this struggle. We now have a library that doesn't work. We have school systems that are broken. All kinds of civic things have failed because every waking hour of citizens' time has had to go into fighting off these energy corporations.

But it is a serious time, and it's a time when people are worn out. And as I say, my last book is going to be called *This Day* [*This Day: Photographs from Twenty-Five Years, The Northwest Coast*], and it's about brief moments over a period of 10 years when that particular day held a redemptive insight into life and seen in longer perspective.

TOBY JUROVICS: And it seems like one of the sort of cultural problems about this is when landscape became an academic discipline and that there is— I was reading recently in Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, which everybody has read twice. But there's a paragraph in there where he just says, we all know that landscape is a cultural object and it didn't exist before we defined it. And I think that that sense, that that idea has really overtaken our thinking that the world is only defined through our perception of it.

ROBERT ADAMS: You could say that and still not end quite where they do, I think. I'm not even sure I buy that idea entirely. I mean, if you look at Chinese painting for example, they had an idea of landscape which was way before a lot of chit-chat started about it.

TOBY JUROVICS: I think it was in *Desert Solitaire* [*Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*] where Ed Abbey said once those people start talking to you, he said, pick up a rock and throw it at them; and if they duck, you know they don't really believe it. [They laugh.]

ROBERT ADAMS: All right, there you go.

TOBY JUROVICS: But I think that one of the things you brought up Ansel Adams, and I remember in one of our first correspondence, as I talked about, as somebody who came from Southern California and Ansel's work really was my introduction to photography. And it was specifically—

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah, mine too, really, yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: Because I started going to the Sierras, and so he bought this book.

ROBERT ADAMS: Sure, sure.

TOBY JUROVICS: And I had written about the sort of struggle that I had had coming to understand your work.

And you wrote back—and I was very surprised by this—you said, well, you had just been in a bookstore and you were looking at Cedric Wright's book, *Words of the Earth*, and that it reminded you of what it used to look like when the air was clear.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: And I think there's been a sort of misconception—I don't know specifically about your work, but about work from that period, that it was a rejection of this idea of wilderness or—and you certainly don't—

ROBERT ADAMS: I mean, it would be great if we had it, but there's a very interesting piece in *The New York Review of Books* last issue about a person—scientist basically proposing that because large carnivores are dependent on having large areas to roam, and because large carnivores are items that set all the elements of ecology all the way down, that we need large areas set aside so we cannot have large carnivores run afoul of people.

The only problem is that the book apparently ends with the conclusion that what we need, that all conservation issues like that and related life expectancy issues for human beings, that the author ends by saying, "This is a people-management problem." And where I differ with that is, at some point it seems to me it's a people number problem. And at some point you can manage the heck out of people and you've still got too many. And all I can say is, when I walk in the West, I'm meeting people in a way that destroys the primary values that the landscape has to give: of space, and silence, and focus. So you can't compromise it. Somebody is either there with his motorbike or he isn't. I don't know.

TOBY JUROVICS: I have a colleague, Joann Brennan, who photographs primarily wildlife research. And most of the projects she's been working at the Forest Service research center in Fort Collins is about controlling populations.

ROBERT ADAMS: Of animals.

TOBY JUROVICS: Of animals, and that what the scientists are working with her are saying is that there is no such thing as a wild animal anymore; that whatever we're considering that way, that it's completely managed at this point.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah, absolutely, it is.

TOBY JUROVICS: And I think that the article you're talking about, I think that that scientist [is] Michal Soulé. I know he was at least one of the people behind that idea. I don't know that we'd ever have the generosity to—

ROBERT ADAMS: He or she says right out front that the national parks as we have them right now are too small, which they are. But the thought of having larger areas is really transparently hopeless, I think, unless you begin to not only talk about controlling human population but even reducing it.

TOBY JUROVICS: It's an unfair question: what would you do? I don't know how to—

ROBERT ADAMS: Well, it's a matter of first deciding as a society that we want that.

TOBY JUROVICS: Yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: Or, less extremely, you can form tax policies that don't encourage large families. You can do a lot of things, but you have to decide first you want to do them. And that seems to be where we're not making much progress.

TOBY JUROVICS: Going back a little bit to the *New Topographics* photographs, one of the things that Eric Paddock said to me once—and Eric is a friend of yours and a colleague, and he was the photography curator at the Colorado Historical Society for 25 years and now the Denver Art Museum, and also a photographer. And he said that, after The *New West*, nobody was going to dare go out and take a square picture of the Front Range. [They laugh.]

ROBERT ADAMS: It is a constricting format. And I've never been very tempted to use it for any similar subject since. It's a way to get a kind of stability, which I wanted, and still want, but it's—yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: And I think you've talked about this elsewhere, that you talk about the kind of rigor of the four borders of the image.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: And that's probably amplified in that format.

ROBERT ADAMS: With a square, yeah, yeah. No, it's not a tempting thing. I have used it once while taking pictures of people, but the plan was—and I had fun with it—to crop heavily. So I haven't done much with it.

TOBY JUROVICS: Well, actually, the context that Eric made that comment we were talking about *From the Missouri West*. And I think that a lot of critics and historians and curators have pointed to *The New West* as the project that redefined how photographers were looking at that landscape. But Eric said it wasn't that book, it was *From the Missouri West*. And he said that that to him it was the project that—he said it was almost like you were giving everybody permission to go out and make landscape pictures again.

And what in subsequent conversations, two other people brought that up, and one of them was Bill [William] Wiley, and also Ed Ranney mentioned this.

ROBERT ADAMS: All those guys are good photographers. They don't need permission to do anything. They really are. They all take pictures that kind of surprise me. And so I really don't—they're doing their own thing. I really do believe that.

TOBY JUROVICS: Well, I think that what I found interesting is how frequently they pointed to those—that particular body of work as being influential. And I mean, to me, I think part of it is that—is that it touched on what I think is the sort of fundamental dialogue in American landscape photography, which is not necessarily looking from the '70s or back towards Ansel and Edward West and people like that but was really leap-frogging over that, further back to the 19th century.

ROBERT ADAMS: To the 19th century. Yeah, yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: Yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: That's very true and—or at least it was for me. I don't think it had to be for them. But as you know, Toby, one of the best moments in my early photographic life was going into the Denver Public Libray—the Western history section, finding [Timothy H.] O'Sullivan's name and turning in my little request, and out came a box of wonderful [inaudible] prints just in this old Safeway box. And so I could just sit there. And it was important.

I think not only was O'Sullivan important as he taught us how to work with Western space and its empty center, for lack of a better word, but that he was important to me personally because of what he did best with was a place that I had a personal connection with, frankly.

The pictures that I first loved were down in—would it be Arizona, I guess. But subsequently, where it really got close was that here were wonderful pictures from a place where my father and I had spent parts of repeated summers in. And it just struck me as astonishing that you could get a picture worthy of Cézanne in a place where I had actually—from perhaps the very rock where I had stood. And at that point it was a place where we had met no one in five days. And now of course it's possible to drive into Harpers Corner, Dinosaur [National Monument, CO]—I don't know, you get in there in 20 minutes or something. [Adams is referring to O'Sullivan's photographs from the Green River in 1872 while photographer for the King Survey. –TJ]

But when we were first there, it took us half a day to get out along that road, and it was very unclear a couple of times that we were going to make it out that day. We actually, as I look back on it, it was comical. More than once, we got out—we'd been given a rough map by a guy named Bus Hatch who was the first to do river running in there. And he said, "You take our truck out." That was the agreement. And he was going on down [inaudible]. And he drew us this pathetic little map. And my father and my uncle and I more than once got out and studied it, a "Y" of little dusty tracks in the midst of sheep country, trying to figure out which was the true road.

So anyway, that country, to have been there in that country and loved it deeply and then to find somebody who had transformed it into great art was just a knock-out for me. So the pictures of the confluence of the—the Yampa [River] and the Green [River]—I hadn't seen them all, incidentally, until I saw your book. They're just amazing, powerful pictures.

TOBY JUROVICS: It does seem—I think that those stand out in his work. I think it's a place where he went out of his way to make them as complicated as possible.

ROBERT ADAMS: They are just—yes, exactly.

TOBY JUROVICS: And I haven't run the river there, but I've been through Dinosaur, and there's a spot where you can get a view of the—

ROBERT ADAMS: Harpers Course; it overlooks Echo Park.

TOBY JUROVICS: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: And if what you want to do is describe what that looks like, his pictures don't do it. They're talking about something else entirely. It's not a topographic—

ROBERT ADAMS: That's right. That's right. You could of course say the same thing for a lot of views that O'Sullivan made.

TOBY JUROVICS: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: He is not making things any—these are not textbook illustrations, in other words, as you well know.

TOBY JUROVICS: And I think that they do—I mean, to me, I think that the reason those pictures are so—and in particular those are so powerful is that he had—those are from 1872, and the year before he had gone to work for [Lt. George M.] Wheeler. And then he comes back to [Clarence] King for that one year and I think that there was a different dialogue with King about what the landscape looked like and how it was formed. And it was something that Wheeler didn't want; I mean, it doesn't show up in the [inaudible] pictures he makes [for Wheeler –TJ]. And I think it was this opportunity for him to—

ROBERT ADAMS: To be the artist that he wants.

TOBY JUROVICS: Yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah, yeah.

[Audio break]

—crashes at that point. And you really feel them when you come out of the Yampa, and you appear to be just headed right into a wall. And so it's not that the pictures are untrue. It's just that they're true in a nonscientific way, I think. Anyway, sometime I'll have to chase down the other ones because that was really interesting to me. I'd seen, I think, only two or maybe three.

TOBY JUROVICS: Oh, it's—I think it's a place that—he got a lot of good pictures out of that stretch of river.

ROBERT ADAMS: He really —yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: And you—obviously, you ran that before the dam came in at—

ROBERT ADAMS: Well, we ran it just as they were proposing to put a dam in just below Echo Park. And so the only people, actually, curiously, that we did meet the first time we went down were the baloney boat with Sierra Club people in it. And that was their first fight—and [Wallace] Stegner was putting together the book—I forget it was—*This is Dinosaur* [*This is Dinosaur: Echo Park Country and its Magic Views*], I think it was—but anyway, it's a great place.

It has changed a little bit just above the junction on the Yampa at a place called Warm Springs. They had some kind of storm after we quit running it, and it washed huge boulders into it, so made it—what was only a minor rapids -- into quite a dangerous place. So geology continues to exert its—

TOBY JUROVICS: [Laughs.] And so most of what you knew of 19th century photography then came from the collection at the library at that point?

ROBERT ADAMS: Oh, book publishing was so different. So when I think of what I knew of O'Sullivan, it was kind of pathetic compared to what your book gives us now. But I started out, and I treasured for a long time a tiny little paperback, almost no bigger than a pamphlet. But Beaumont Newhall put together a little cutout stereo shape on the front. And that was my only key to O'Sullivan. [Beaumont Newhall and Nancy Newhall, *T.H. O'Sullivan: Photographer*, Rochester, NY: George Eastman House, 1966 –TJ] And then I finally—Rick—

TOBY JUROVICS: Rick Dingus.

ROBERT ADAMS: —Dingus did a book, and that gave me a little more. [Rick Dingus: *The Photographic Artifacts of Timothy O'Sullivan,* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982 –TJ] And so I've— and then the highlight of my early life was in Dave Gardner's dining room. Dave Gardner ran a big printing outfit called—

TOBY JUROVICS: Gardner/Fulmer Lithograph, yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: —Gardner Lithograph, something like that. And he had bought from Jeff [probably Jeffrey

Fraenkel –TJ] three spectacular O'Sullivans from the lower river—Colorado. And so those were the first pictures I ever saw. And fortunately, they were so beautiful. It just makes you weep.

TOBY JUROVICS: And I think it's something that, looking at it from a contemporary perspective, we forget, is that this work wasn't very accessible. And now if you want to look at Carleton Watkins, there were four or five Watkins books. There's a Russell book. There's a couple—

ROBERT ADAMS: That's right, yeah. None of this was really available. And you'd sort of—back then, I wonder what would I have been if it had been available? I've never really responded very much to Watkins. He seems a little too smooth, a little too together somehow for my taste. But maybe if we'd had these big, gorgeous books, I would have been converted earlier.

TOBY JUROVICS: [Laughs.] I'm sure that some would argue with me, but I think he had the much easier job. It's not tough to show up in Yosemite Valley and make it look appealing.

ROBERT ADAMS: [Laughs.] Yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: And I think that—one of the things that you've said, and it's in the essay in the *Framing the West* catalogue, and I'm forgetting the exact words now, but what was so appealing to me about O'Sullivan is that he was the most honest about disagreeable fact. [Referring to Toby Jurovics, et. al., *Framing the West: The Survey Photographs of Timothy H. O'Sullivan*, Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress and Smithsonian American Art Museum; New Haven [Conn.] : Yale University Press, 2010, page 11. –TJ] And—

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah, exactly. You really feel the roughness of the West. It just wasn't picturesque inherently.

TOBY JUROVICS: The thing that's always interested me—or one of the things that's interested me about those pictures is that it really does seem that O'Sullivan figured this out right away, that when he—

ROBERT ADAMS: It's interesting, isn't it?

TOBY JUROVICS: — many of the pictures that you have written about, about that ability to kind of codify that emptiness, those were the first pictures that he made. And he comes across the Sierra, and he finds himself in the Great Basin. And that's got to be the toughest place to photograph—and he kind of arrives knowing how to do this or figures it out very quickly.

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah, it's amazing, I think. He clearly had a gift. It's that bald, I think.

TOBY JUROVICS: Well, and I think we're not supposed to say this anymore, but some photographers are better than others at that.

ROBERT ADAMS: I think so, too. [They laugh.] Absolutely, yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: And I've got a—I know I have a bias, but I think if you dropped A.J. Russell or [Charles Roscoe] Savage in there or Watkins, they would have made a very different picture or not made a picture. And I think that's what's always struck me is that I think a lot of other people wouldn't have even bothered to coat the plate because they wouldn't have known what to do there.

ROBERT ADAMS: That's right. That's right. You're much more conversant with this than I am, but the other figure who interests me—and I haven't had a chance really to learn much—but is Jack Hillers, who seems also to have had a kind of rough-edged quality to him.

TOBY JUROVICS: And I wonder if that's not also in some way because of the conditions under which he learned to make those pictures, where he was—he started out just as a boatman for [John Wesley] Powell and learns to make photographs while on the river. And that's got to—

ROBERT ADAMS: Got to free you from fancy-pants ideas, yes.

TOBY JUROVICS: [Laughs.] So it's—well, it's interesting. One of the things that I didn't know until recently and that Glen Williamson pointed out is that [Andrew Joseph] Russell started out as a topographic landscape painter. And when you go back and look at the paintings, the—his photographs suddenly all make sense, and if this is the way you are trained to structure something, you're going to have a harder time making sense of the Carson Sink [NV].

ROBERT ADAMS: Making a photograph, I think, of—yeah. Good, sure.

TOBY JUROVICS: Yeah, and I think that there are—that it's clear who wanted to be there and who didn't. I mean, maybe that's reading too much into things.

One of the—let's see —I have completely forgotten what question I was going to ask you. So we'll just go on to something else. One of the things that—when you went to Los Angeles, went to college there in the '50s, you had a sort of immediate dislike for LA. And I think it's a period that, being a Southern Californian, we look back on as being kind of Edenic. What was it that you recognized that—

ROBERT ADAMS: I'm not sure I recognized anything except that it wasn't Colorado. And leaving Colorado was a vividly melancholy experience for me over and over again. I can still remember a flight out one Christmas at the end of the day and—as we crossed over into western Colorado, seeing little tiny spots broken open in the clouds and the last light and snow on the ground, an occasional light. So it was one of the saddest things I'd ever beheld. And I had that happen over and over again. There was something that just seemed to me—well, it's just part of responding to the landscape, I think.

It took me a long time to feel anything but disoriented there. My first fall, within a couple of weeks I remember standing on the campus and looking toward the San Bernardino Mountains. And there was such a huge fire burning. You could see when it came to houses there would be a kind of explosion as it hit the house. And I just thought, wow, this is—and of course all the wonderful things in Southern California, which I came to love, they just seemed as wacky as could be. There were seeds crunching under your feet everywhere on the sidewalk, and there were all these different kinds of trees that—it just didn't mean anything to me.

TOBY JUROVICS: Well, you can tell that you're not from there because you used the word "fall," and that's something that no one in Los Angeles has any idea what you're talking about. [They laugh.]

ROBERT ADAMS: [Inaudible.] Yeah, and of course—but there is a fall, really. And of course, you begin to appreciate times of rain, which do occur even out in the edge of the desert, and the Santa Ana blows. Even that, ghostly and sort of haunting as it is, becomes a deeply emotionally involving experience.

So eventually, as I hope is apparent in the pictures that I finally made when I went back, I came to love it. There were aspects of the troubled social situation which remain, even in memory, disturbing. But the trees themselves are just spectacular. And there's something about the mixture of death and life in the Southern California landscape, which I found nowhere else. It's the most haunting kind of light. The smog, as John [Szarkowski] said one time when he was looking at a print of mine—he said, "Well," he said, "Bob, it is awful, but it sure is beautiful, isn't it?" [They laugh.]

TOBY JUROVICS: Well, I think that—well, two things—that LA is unusual for a city of that size. And I think maybe the only other place that's similar is Denver in that you're so aware of the topography around you, that if you were in the San Fernando Valley, you've got a 10,000-foot-high mountain range enclosing that basin—

ROBERT ADAMS: That's for sure.

TOBY JUROVICS: —or on the west side, you're on the coast, and that even as developed as it is, you can't help but be a little bit more in contact than if you were in—

ROBERT ADAMS: Absolutely. Yeah, the campus of the college where I went, the axis of the quadrangle entered right into some of the high San Bernardino Mountains. It's almost like where I taught in Colorado College, where the quad is almost on axis with Pike's Peak. So every hour of every day you feel the landscape.

TOBY JUROVICS: You were mentioning that—what John just said about the smog. And one of the—I do think that the photographs that were in *Los Angeles Spring*, I think, almost everybody would agree are one of your most successful projects. The thing that's always struck me is that —when I've seen them— installed them in a museum is that people respond to them very immediately and very, I think, differently than some other images. I think part of that is the scale. They were certainly larger prints than you had made before.

ROBERT ADAMS: They were intended to be 16x20s, although there are a lot of 11x14s out there.

TOBY JUROVICS: Did you—and tonally, they're very different. And was there—I mean, they do look like smog. I mean, was that an intentional—

ROBERT ADAMS: Yes. Yeah, and that's why I can't print them anymore is because they relied on, God bless it, on Agfa Portriga. And when they stopped that, it became almost impossible to do much with those negatives.

TOBY JUROVICS: I was talking to Frank Gohlke, and I said if there was some—someone can invent a process to scrape all the bad pictures off Portriga so that we can reuse it. [They laugh.] But then we've got to decide which those are. I've got a list. [Laughs.] It's interesting that you're referring to—in talking about those pictures, about your sort of affection for Los Angeles, because they do seem, in some ways, very oppressive, those photographs. And so—

ROBERT ADAMS: I don't know. The flap copy for one of the Yale books refers to them as having a grave beauty. And I do—there is a kind of a somber quality to them. But that's the way it is. There's nothing—it seems like—in the fall and in winter, anyway, it seems like dusk begins about 1:00 in the afternoon and just slowly, slowly thickens. But it's very moving to be there. It seems to have something tragic about it, and the tragedy, as we all know, is a complex affair with some gravitas about it. And that what grows there in the light has that, I think.

TOBY JUROVICS: If you take the books that you've published and kind of put them chronologically on the bookshelf, it seems like there are times when there becomes a cadence to them, from *Los Angeles Spring* to *Perfect Times* [*Perfect Times, Perfect Places*] that there's a very different emotional feel between those, or looking at *Listening to the River* [*Listening to the River: Seasons in the American West*] and then *West from the Columbia*, or *Turning Back* [*Turning Back: A Photographic Journal of Re-exploration*] and then going to *Pine Valley*. Is that a deliberate sort of—are you deliberately trying to kind of create a balance? Or is it more just about an opportunity?

ROBERT ADAMS: It's trying to find a life, to tell you the honest truth. Somebody said of Joni Mitchell's songs that she wasn't like—I forget who they were likening or contrasting Joni with, but—who they were comparing her with, but the commentator said that for Joni Mitchell to write a song, she had to live a chapter in her life in order to write the song. And that's really what's—I think, what you're talking about. When I came back from work in California—which was quite hard to do in many ways. It was really dangerous, and living—

TOBY JUROVICS: Just in terms of some of the neighborhoods you were in and—

ROBERT ADAMS: Neighborhoods and the—when I was walking in the chaparral, you could never tell who the heck you were going to meet out there. I more than once met long lines of people with their faces painted up and carrying automatic weapons. And I mean, it was—and—

TOBY JUROVICS: Even in—now, this was the early '80s?

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah.

TOBY JUROVICS: Yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: And when I was working along the Santa Ana Wash, I was often running into people who were obviously illegal immigrants who were sometimes bathing, washing clothing in the river. I couldn't help but feel, here I've got this camera, which must look like a thousand dollars or something. And it'd be mighty easy to take it or attack me to get it.

But so what was I onto here. I was telling you it was hard to do. But what was I saying before that? I can't remember.

TOBY JUROVICS: It is—

ROBERT ADAMS: Oh, I know. We were talking about the pacing of these various projects. And so when I got back from that, I was really sort of worn down. And so it seemed natural to go, and it was wonderful to go and take pictures for what then became *Listening to the River*, these vertical pictures in sequence, which are probably the most enjoyable pictures I ever took because they referenced back to my whole life in Colorado, and they were the most—seemed to me, anyway, to be among the most affirmative pictures I had ever taken. And it was just the most fun to be there instead of risking my life out amidst pairs of Dobermans if I was walking on the street or whatever in the chaparral, I was in a relatively safe place and talking about things that I had loved ever since I was a boy.

So there is a kind of a back-and-forth. And let's face it. I think yes, photography is a calling, but it's also your health, your rescue, your whatever. It's what keeps you from going nuts. And so if you look at the long history of the pictures, it really is an autobiography of a person trying to find their—as I wrote about O'Sullivan, a person trying to find their proper silence.

TOBY JUROVICS: Well, I'm going to—on a number of occasions, both in past conversations and you brought it up earlier today—the idea that, particularly in the face of the severity of the environmental crisis we're looking at, that photographs have an obligation to be as forthright and descriptive as possible. And I know in the past you've expressed some frustration with images that you felt were not—were trying to do a job, but were not doing it in a way that was—that would be easily accessible. At the same time—and we're certainly in a very different point now in 2010 than in 1975—but your photographs have not always been, I think, easy for a general audience to understand. And how have you wrestled with that, or what are your thoughts?

ROBERT ADAMS: It's frustrating. And I think the problem, for any serious photographer, has gotten worse because of the dumbing down of public radio, public television, museums. They've all assumed a lower and

lower level in their audience. And at some point you begin to enlarge your audience, but also lose your—perhaps a very important part of the population. So I don't know what the answer is. The same problem faces a writer or musician or just about anybody. And it seems to me to be woven deeply into the whole notion of democracy, and also the question of what kind of educational system you have to have to keep a democracy alive. And I'm very, very worried about this. I think our schools are failing, and so I think our democracy will fail.

And so it does—every day it raises the question: What right do you have as an artist to say something complex or shaded or to—maybe the only thing you have the right to do is to speak in sound bites and do comic book-level stuff.

TOBY JUROVICS: And I think it's something that has—I think it is something that has changed for the better, in the sense that—again, I may have had the recorder off when I was relating the story of this museum visitor who was frustrated that you had to move 10 steps to the right to get the house out of the way of the mountains, and that 20 years ago, even that recently, that this sort of paradigm that Ansel had set up or had established was still seen as what people wanted to see in landscape photography. And I think that in the last 10 years there has been a real shift in audiences, in the—I think, perhaps as a reflection that the world has changed so greatly.

ROBERT ADAMS: I have to say I hope you're right, but I don't think so. And I can only cite my own experience, but when Kerstin and I did *Turning Back*, we sent a total of three copies of that book to the *Oregonian*, which is the main state newspaper. We sent it to the local paper, which is actually not a bad paper. And I knew the main reviewer in the *Oregonian* personally. He'd been sitting here at this table. We netted one brief paragraph in a column about general arts going-ons. That was the whole notice given this enormous book here within Oregon.

So my sense is, frankly, that on many topics, that although we don't have political censorship, we have economic censorship just as extreme as political censorship and that people —as in part in consequence have remained either innocent of or resistant to large areas that should be investigated by writers, by photographers. And if they turn to them, they're doing so with terrible odds.

TOBY JUROVICS: And do you think in that particular instance, it was about what—the story you were relating to me earlier, that almost everybody in this town—

ROBERT ADAMS: Yeah, no, it's—

TOBY JUROVICS: —has some kind of investment in the logging industry. Do you think it was a sort of deliberate —

ROBERT ADAMS: Sure. Well, it's 10 times worse than that. The entire school system in the state of Oregon is directly tied to taxation of timber. So anything that suggests anything but maximizing the take out of the forest is interpreted as an attack on children.

TOBY JUROVICS: You've got to give them credit for at least thinking that all the way through. [Laughs.] I mean, it's perfectly evil.

ROBERT ADAMS: Connecting A to B, it's just not getting on to C and D that—no, I don't know. I guess what I find, just based on my experience, is that it seems to me to try to talk to a great number of people in this society, if you have a way to do it, and many—I'm not sure I could, but if you could figure out a way, that by the time the message or the thing gets out there, it's been filtered so many times by self-interest and by economics that—I mean, if you watch Oregon public television, for example, you will basically never see anything to do with the real issues like overfishing, dams, pollution, timbering. The silence is deafening. Instead, we have Antiques Roadshow and Lawrence Welk and all the rest of it. [They laugh.]

TOBY JUROVICS: They're still showing that on—

ROBERT ADAMS: Yes.

TOBY JUROVICS: And I think it is a frustration, I mean, in the sense that your photographs—the audience for your photographs has primarily been through museums. As somebody who's spent 20 years doing landscape shows in museums, and again, having, I think, a similar—I have certain areas where we have a similar agenda, you realize that you're reaching a very small percentage of your audience.

ROBERT ADAMS: Absolutely.

TOBY JUROVICS: And you know, if this is what we were trying to do, maybe we all should have gone and become lawyers for the Sierra Club.

ROBERT ADAMS: That's right. That's right. And what is the answer? I must say, I—many times I feel like the analogy here for artists in America now is to the Soviet Union 25 years ago, where you worked basically in

conversation with fellow poets or whatever, and the outreach was pretty close to zip.

TOBY JUROVICS: And I will—one thing, at the same time, when *Turning Back* was shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and then at Matthew Marks Gallery in New York, and the gallery was full, on the weekends, of people coming to—

ROBERT ADAMS: And—that's right, and the credit for that goes to some courageous individuals who bucked their institutions and the whole climate of the place and—I shouldn't say "bucked the institution," but I'm sure that Sandy Philips had to present some pretty long rationales for showing that show. And I assume that since Matthew Marks [Gallery] is —we hope—a money-making institution—[they laugh]—that they had to—although that's the wonderful thing. Matthew Marks has a long history of doing that, and Sandy does, too. But it isn't easy. I used to be very frustrated about it. Just think what they could do. But I'm now more inclined to be amazed at what they have done.

TOBY JUROVICS: Let me ask you a final question. And in 1989—or was it '88 or '89—you had a midcareer retrospective, *To Make It Home*. [*To Make it Home: Photographs of the American West*] This was what you mentioned earlier, organized by Michael Hoffman at Philadelphia [The Philadelphia Museum of Art]. And this year you're opening another large retrospective organized by Yale. And the essay in "To Make It Home," which was one of the first books that really had a substantial text that you'd written, the title of that essay was "Is Hope Possible in the American West?" And sitting here—

ROBERT ADAMS: You want to know what I think about that now 20 years later?

TOBY JUROVICS: Yeah, I want to—yeah.

ROBERT ADAMS: I think I'll take it one picture at a time. I think that's the only way I'm capable of answering that question. So yeah, I can still take pictures that are honestly hopeful. I can also take a bunch that aren't. So to me, I'm not going to see the answer to this question, nor are you. So I'm still—you know what Pete Seeger talks about on that bumper sticker. There is no hope, but I may be wrong. [They laugh.] So anyway, life is a very mysterious thing. And I think that's one of the great lessons of it is that anybody who thinks it isn't mysterious is clearly just wrong and unobservant.

So to the degree that you and I can walk out and see some migrating plovers and know that some of those are still going to make it to the North Slope of Alaska or wherever, or shearwaters that are going to make a figure-8 through the Pacific covering 40,000 miles in one year, who's to say there isn't hope?

[END OF INTERVIEW.]